

Responses to the Challenges of Perestroika and the Collapse of the Soviet Union in Moldova's Russian-speaking cities

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Abstract

Much of the academic discussion surrounding experiences of minorities during the collapse of Soviet power in Moldova centres around Transnistria and Gagauzia. However, a significant portion of Moldova's Russian-speaking population lived outside these regions. There is yet to be a study that addresses how Russian speakers from outside Transnistria and Gagauzia responded to the challenges of *perestroika*. This article¹ shows that the Russian-speakers in three towns, Bălți, Ocnița and Basarabasca, held similar opinions to those in Transnistria and Gagauzia. However, I argue that conflict was avoided in Bălți, Ocnița, and Basarabasca due to proactive measures taken by local elites, who worked hard to placate citizens in their respective towns.

Keywords: Moldova, mobilisation, minorities, local elites.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a tumultuous period for the Republic of Moldova. In the early 1990s, the fledging republic was confronted by not one, but two separatist movements, the Gagauz in the South, and Transnistria in the East. Unsurprisingly, much of the historiography on Moldova focuses on the issue of the separatist movements that emerged in these regions.² In regard to Transnistria, both scholars and politicians have been quick to criticise those who label it as an ethnic conflict. One of the primary reasons given for this criticism is the fact that most of Moldova's ethnic Russians and Ukrainians

¹ Research for this article was conducted with financial assistance offered by the National University of Ireland, Maynooth University, and the University of Tartu.

² Pal Kolstø and Andrei Malgin, "The Transnistrian Republic: A Case of Politicized Regionalism," *Nationalities Papers* 26, no. 1 (1998): 103-127; Jeff Chinn and Steven D. Roper, "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," *Nationalities Papers* 26, no. 1 (1998): 87-101; Steven D Roper, "Regionalism in Moldova: The Case of Transnistria and Gagauzia," *Regional & Federal Studies* 11, no. 3 (2001): 101-122; Marcin Kosienkowski, "The Gagauz Republic: Internal Dynamics of De Facto Statehood," *Annales Universitatis Mariae Alexander Bell, sectio K - Political Science* 24, no 1 (2018): 116-113; Stuart J. Kaufman, "Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses, and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (1996): 108-38; Stuart J. Kaufman, Stephen R. Bowers, "Transnational dimensions of the Transnistrian conflict," *Nationalities Papers* 26, no 1 (1998): 129-146.



live outside Transnistria.³ However, scholars working in the field have not yet explored how these minorities reacted to the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent Moldovan independence. Were they wholly supportive of the government in Chişinău? Or did they have their reservations? This paper will address these questions, and fill in the gaps in the historiography, with reference to three multi-ethnic cities and towns in the Bessarabian portion of Moldova: Bălţi, Ocniţa, and Basarabeasca.

In the late Soviet era, Moldova's legislature adopted a series of laws that the inhabitants of Gagauzia and Transnistria cited as discriminatory and used to justify their secession. These included the language laws that made Moldovan the sole official language of the republic (August 1989), the law on state symbols which adopted a new republican tricolour similar to Romania's (April 1990), and the banning of the referendum on the Union treaty (March 1991). This article investigates how the citizens of Bălţi, Ocniţa, and Basarabeasca reacted to these laws. It highlights that just like the inhabitants of Transnistria and the Gagauz in the South, the Russian-speaking inhabitants of these cities also had their reservations about the policies adopted by the Moldovan government. They, too, protested the implementation of the language laws, were hostile toward the Moldovan Popular Front (MPF) and supported the Union Treaty and Moldova's ascension to a renewed Soviet Federation. In essence, the sentiments of Moldova's Russian and Ukrainian minorities residing elsewhere in the republic were remarkably similar to those who resided in Transnistria and Gagauzia. This raises the question, why was conflict avoided in Bălţi, Ocniţa, and Basarabeasca, but not Gagauzia or Transnistria?

This article argues that further mobilisation, and even conflict, was prevented thanks to proactive measures taken by local elites. During the late *perestroika* era, deputies in Bălţi, Ocniţa, and Basarabeasca actively engaged with aggrieved minorities and sought to placate them. They used their control over local resources, such as the press, not to incite divisions, but to encourage unity. For example, the local newspapers in all three regions regularly highlighted the

³ "Telegramma rukovodstva Respubliki Moldova vnimaniiu: Prezidenta RF Borisa El'tsina, Predsedatelia Verkhovnogo Soveta RF R. Xosbulatova, rukovoditelei stran SNG, predsedatelei parlamentov stran SNG", *Nezavisimoi Moldovy*, 8 aprilia 1992 g. ("The telegram of the leadership of the republic of Moldova to the attention of: the president of RF, Boris Yeltsin, Chairman of the Supreme Council of RF- R.Hosbulatov, leaders of CIS countries, chairmen of parliaments of CIS countries," *Independent Moldova*, April 8, 1992, 2), Charles King, "Eurasia Letter: Moldova with a Russian Face," *Foreign Policy*, no. 97 (Winter 1994), 114; Pal Kolstø, Andrei Edemsky, and Natalya Kalashnikova, "The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 6 (1993), 975.

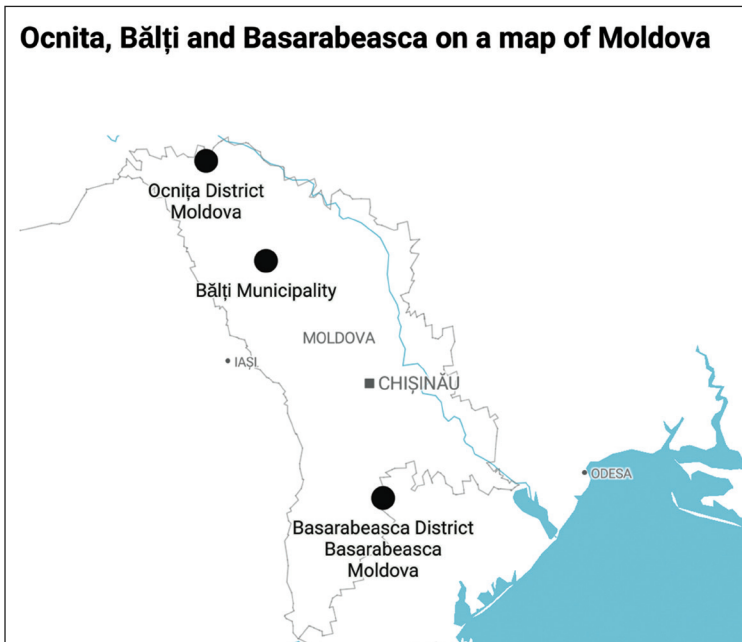


Figure 1: Map showing the location Ocnîța, Bălți, and Basarabeasca in Moldova. Map-authors creation

positive steps taken by the republican authorities towards improving relations with ethnic minorities, such as the opening of minority language schools, newspapers, and other cultural institutions. When tensions were particularly high, local deputies would often meet with protestors, listen to their grievances, and attempt to alleviate their concerns. This was in stark contrast to both Transnistria and Gagauzia. While it is undeniable that the Russian Fourteenth Army played an important role in the Transnistrian War, it is also impossible to overlook the role played by local elites in both Transnistria and Gagauzia in stoking hostility towards Chișinău.⁴ Essentially, this article argues that were it not for the proactive steps taken by local elites in Bălți, Ocnîța, and Basarabeasca, these regions may well have been the site of further conflict.

Methodology

This article focuses on three settlements in Moldova, the city of Bălți, and the towns of Ocnîța, and Basarabeasca. These three regions were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, they are outside of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Secondly, like many cities and towns in Transnistria, and Gagauzia, Bălți,

⁴ Keith Harrington, "Exploring the Local Dynamics of the Transnistrian Separatist Movement, 1989-1992" (PhD diss., Maynooth University, 2023), 170-179.



Ocnița, and Basarabeasca all had a non-Moldovan majority during the late Soviet period. In Bălți, Russians and Ukrainians collectively made up fifty percent of the local population, while ethnic Moldovans accounted for forty percent.⁵ In Ocnița, Ukrainians and Russians made up forty nine percent of the local population.⁶ Finally, In Basarabeasca, Moldovans made up thirty six percent of the local population, whilst Russians, Ukrainians, as well as Gagauz and Bulgarians, collectively made up the remaining sixty four percent.⁷ The ethnic breakdown of each city is important, as we would expect disgruntled non-Moldovans to be more willing to protest or voice their opinions if they are in the majority.

This article is supported by primary source research conducted between 2019 and early 2021, and utilises newspapers and periodicals published in the regions between 1989 and 1991. As Bălți is the largest city covered in this study, and the third largest city in Moldova, it has the most numerous and engaging publications. These included the press organ of city authorities, *Communist*, as well as others such as *Ray*, *The Voice of Bălți*, and *The Position*. Ocnița had two newspapers from this time, *The Dawn*, and *New Path*. As Basarabeasca is a small town in southern Moldova, there was a limited number of available publications, and for covering this region, I rely mostly on the local newspaper *Slava*. I chose these local newspapers as the primary mode of reference because the national Moldovan press rarely covered developments in these regions, as it was more preoccupied with the conflicts in Gagauzia and Transnistria.

Of course, there are some potential issues with using the local press from this time. Most newspapers were controlled by the local party, and hence could be subject to censorship by elites or used to redirect the narrative. Nevertheless, between 1989 and 1991, the Moldovan press was rather open and engaging, particularly on a local level.⁸ Each newspaper referenced in this study featured articles written by those with competing views, with the MPF receiving just as much attention as more conservative pro-Soviet figures. Both Moldovans and non-Moldovans alike were typically allowed

⁵ “Skol’ko nas?,” *Kommunist*, maia 26, 1990, 1 (“How Many of Us?,” *Communist*, May 26, 1990, 1).

⁶ “Ukrainskim detiam - ukrainskie shkoly,” *Novyi Put*, oktiabria 14, 1989, 1-2. (“To the Ukrainian Children- Ukrainian Schools,” *New Path*, October 14, 1989, 1-2).

⁷ “Obsuzhdenie zakona o iazykakh,” *Slava*, maia 27, 1989, 2 (“Discussing the law on languages,” *Slava*, May 27, 1989, 2).

⁸ During the past number of years, I have read local newspapers from 20 of the MSSR’s districts between 1989-1991 and found them to be mostly engaging with limited bias.

to air their grievances. Even in instances where these newspapers display potential bias, they offer important insights into how local elites perceived the unfolding situation and the message they wished to convey to the local population. When possible, this article also utilises archival documents, including accounts of meetings between local elites and representatives of the republican government.

Reactions from Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians in Bălți, Ocnîța, and Basarabeasca to the changes of *Perestroika*

Due to resistance from the predominantly conservative leadership of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova (CPM), *perestroika* arrived to the MSSR comparatively late. However, tensions began to rise considerably in the summer of 1989, when certain elements of the MPF began campaign heavily in favour of reform, and members of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet came closer to finalising language laws that would make Moldovan the sole official language of the republic.⁹ During this period, the inhabitants of all three regions made their opposition to MPF's platform and the proposed laws known. In Bălți, most people supported the language laws, once Russian was made the language of interethnic communication, but rejected the MPF's agenda and accused it of being an 'anti-Soviet organisation'.¹⁰ Anti-MPF rallies began to be organised in July 1989, after the MPF disrupted a parade commemorating the anniversary of Bessarabia's annexation by the Soviet Union.¹¹ Many people were also critical of the MPF's decision to disrupt a rally organised by the pro-Soviet group *Interdvizhenie* (Unity) on July 9, 1989. Protestors criticised the MPF for their anti-Soviet stance and labelled them as extremists given their supposed inability to accept other points of view, as demonstrated by their attack on Unity.¹² Opposition to the proposed language laws and the MPF was, however, not unique to Bălți.

⁹ The Supreme Soviet was the name given to the main legislative body in each republic during the Soviet period. Additionally, every town, district, and city, had their own Soviet which was tasked with implementing the directives of the centre at the local level.

¹⁰ "Osnovnoi iazyk – moldavskii," *Luch*, iunia 28, 1989, 1 ("Main Language Should be Moldovan," *Ray*, June 28, 1989, 1).

¹¹ "V èti dni mnogie predpriiatiia v Bel'tsakh provodiat mitingi," *Kommunist*, iulia 29, 1989, 2 ("These days many enterprises from Balti are organising meetings," *Communist*, July 29, 1989, 2).

¹² "Net èkstreimizmu," *Kommunist*, iulia 20, 1989, 1 ("No to Extremism," *Communist*, July 20, 1989, 1).



The proposed laws were met with almost universal condemnation from Basarabeasca's non-Moldovan population. From as early as April 1989, residents of the multi-ethnic southern town wrote dozens of letters to the local newspaper, *Slava*, criticising the proposed language laws. Most commentators supported Moldovan becoming the state language but feared that the exclusion of Russian would result in discrimination against minorities. These commentators often pointed out that Moldovans were in the minority in the town, claiming that such laws would give them undue influence in local affairs. One commentator even claimed that if the laws were adopted, an autonomous republic should be formed in the south of the MSSR, which would have Russian as a second official language.¹³ Nevertheless, there were quite a few people, mostly Moldovans, who wrote to the newspaper in support of the language laws. One writer claimed that Russian had been given preferential treatment in the town for decades, and believed it was only fair that Moldovan become the sole official language of the republic. However, even those who took this position, still argued that Russian should be made the language of interethnic communication.¹⁴ According to some residents, Russian was not the only language that should receive official status, and some argued that Ukrainian should also be made an official language.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, this position was supported by many inhabitants in Ocnîța.

Local Ukrainian commentators in Ocnîța felt that the proposed laws disadvantaged the Ukrainian population the most, as they would be required to learn three languages: Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian. Local scholars argued that the laws would not result in the revival of the Ukrainian language, as the Supreme Soviet claimed. Instead, they argued it would lead to further Russification, as many would be unwilling or unable to learn so many languages. This led to calls by some local intellectuals for Ukrainian to be given official status also.¹⁶ Fears that the laws would lead to further Russification were not unfounded. Ocnîța town, and the surrounding district, were already heavily Russified. There was not a single Ukrainian language school in the entire

¹³ "Obsuzhdenie zakonov o iazykakh: zachem iskat' l'goty?," *Slava*, maia 9, 1989, 2 ("Discussing the laws on languages: why search for benefits?," *Slava*, May 9, 1989, 2).

¹⁴ "Obsuzhdaia zakon o iazykakh: ot teni k svetu," *Slava*, aprelia 18, 1989, 2 ("Discussing the law on languages: from the shade to the light," *Slava*, April 18, 1989, 2).

¹⁵ "Obsuzhdaem zakon o iazykakh: davaïte vmeste reshat' trudnosti!," *Slava*, maia 27, 1989, 2 ("Discussing the law on languages: let's solve out the difficulties together!," *Slava*, May 27, 1989, 2).

¹⁶ I. Grek, "Neobkhodim paritet," *Novyi Put'*, iunია 6, 1989, 3-4 (I. Grek, "Parity Needed," *New Path*, June 6, 1989, 3-4).

district, even though Ukrainians accounted for over eighty percent of the local population in twelve villages.¹⁷ According to Ocnîța's local newspaper, *New Time*, the city's library did not have a single Ukrainian book.¹⁸

The negative reaction to the language laws amongst Moldova's minorities was well known, with Russian speakers from across the republic claiming they were discriminatory. However, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet remained undeterred. On August 16, 1989, members of the Presidium gathered in Chișinău to review the final drafts of the language laws. These drafts not only made Moldovan the sole official language of the republic, but also made it the language of interethnic communication. This was particularly concerning for Russian speakers, as Russian traditionally served as the language of interethnic communication in the region, particularly in urban centres, since the Tsar's annexation of Bessarabia in the early 1800s.¹⁹ Moreover, many Russophones from outside Transnistria were vocal about their willingness to accept Moldovan as the sole official language once Russian remained the language of interethnic communication. For many, the Presidium's decision to ignore this request was seen as an insult. Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mircea Snegur, claimed there was no need to make Russian the language of interethnic communication, and argued that Moldovan would naturally fill that role as well.²⁰ The Presidium approved the final drafts and decided that they would be deliberated upon at the thirteenth session of the Supreme Soviet, scheduled for August 29, 1989.²¹

In general, the fiercest resistance to the language laws came from Transnistria. Industrial elites from Tiraspol, Bender, and Rîbnița, formed a group known as the Union of Joint Labour Collectives (Russian acronym OSTK), which functioned as an umbrella organisation, intended to coordinate industrial action against the language laws.²² From the regions in our study, the

¹⁷ "Ukrainskim detiam - ukrainskie shkoly», (Interv'iu s kompetentnym chelovekom)", *Novyi Put'*, oktiabria 14, 1989, 1-2. ("To the Ukrainian Children- Ukrainian Schools," *New Path*, October 14, 1989, 1-2).

¹⁸ "Budem chitat' po ukrainski (Interv'iu s kompetentnym chelovekom)," *Novyi Put'*, oktiabria 7, 1989, 1 i 3 ("We will read Ukrainian (Interview with a competent person) ," *New Path*, October 7, 1989, 1 & 3).

¹⁹ Thomas J. Hegarty, "The Politics of Language in Moldova," in *Language, Ethnicity, and the State, Volume 2.*, ed. Camille C. O'Reilly (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 126.

²⁰ "Despre modificările aduse legilor," *Moldova Socialistă*, august 22, 1989, 1 ("On the Changes to the Laws," *Socialist Moldova*, August 22, 1989).

²¹ "Zakony o iazykakh priniaty," *Leninskoe znamia*, avgusta 17, 1989, 1 ("Laws Approved," *Lenin's Banner*, August 17, 1989, 1).

²² *Nasha Platforma!* Avgusta 21, 1989 (*Our Platform!* August 21, 1989) (Pamphlet produced by the OSTK at the beginning of the strikes).



stiffest opposition came from Bălți. On August 19, 1989, representatives from 168 Russian speaking labour collectives, including twenty from Bălți, gathered in Chişinău to condemn the laws. To combat the “rising Moldovan chauvinism”, those in attendance created the Union of Workers of Moldova.²³

The strikes began in Tiraspol on August 21, 1989, when the Kirov and Electromash factories declared an indefinite strike against the language laws. The following day, they were joined by a further thirty-eight enterprises from Tiraspol. As the thirteenth session of the Supreme Soviet drew closer, more enterprises from outside Transnistria began to join the strike. On August 29, 1989, when the thirteenth session began, five enterprises in Bălți declared their participation in the strike. In the days that followed, more factories from Bălți joined. By September 10, 1989, there were a total 189 enterprises from across the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) on strike.²⁴ In early September 1989, the OSTK boasted about how the locomotive depots in Bender, Bălți, and Basarabeasca had joined the strike, which would halt republican trade with Ukraine and effectively cripple the economy. However, in an interview with *Slava*, the director of the depot at Basarabeasca firmly rejected these allegations and claimed that while some workers opposed the language laws, they continued to work.²⁵

While the strikes would last until September 23, 1989, workers in Bălți returned to work on September 13.²⁶ Of all the Bessarabian cities that participated in the strikes, the OSTK were most impressed with the people of Bălți and praised them for partaking in the struggle against “nationalism”.²⁷

²³ “Provozglashen Soiuz Rabochikh Moldovy,” *Vechernii Kishinev*, avgusta 22, 1989, 3 (“The Union of Workers of Moldova was proclaimed,” *Evening Chişinău*, August 22, 1989, 3.); Alla Skvortsova, “The Cultural and Social Makeup of Moldova,” in *National Integration and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Societies the Cases of Estonia and Moldova*, ed. in Pål Kolstø (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 184; John Alan Mason, “Mobilizing the left: The Moldovan internationalist countermovement and the origins of the Moldovan Civil War” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010), 66-67; John Alan Mason, “Internationalist Mobilization during the Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Moldovan Elections of 1990,” *Nationalities Papers* 37, no2 (March: 2009): 162.

²⁴ *Informatsionnyi biulleten' №5*, 31 avgusta 1989 (*Information Bulletin No 5*, August 31, 1989); *Rabochego komiteta, gorod Bendery*, sentiabria 15, 1989, (*News of the working committee, Bendery city*, September 15, 1989).

²⁵ “Interv’iu s Moldavskoï zheleznoï dorogoi,” *Slava*, sentiabria 15, 1989, 2 (“Interview with the Moldovan railroad chairman,” *Glory*, September 15, 1989, 2).

²⁶ “Rabota vozobnovitsia,” *Kommunist*, sentiabria 5, 1989, 1 (“Work will resume,” *Communist*, September 5, 1989, 1).

²⁷ “Nuzhna li avtonomiia?” *Rybnitskii vestnik*, sentiabria 27, 1989, 1 (“Is autonomy needed?” *Rîbnița Herald*, September 27, 1989, 1).

From late September onward, various figures inside Transnistria began to advocate for the creation of a Transnistrian Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Perhaps surprisingly, many supported the idea that Bălți be included in the proposed unit. Moreover, deputies from the Rîbnița City Soviet publicly encouraged their counterparts in Bălți to organise a referendum. Such explicit calls were not made for any other region in this study to join the proposed unit. However, some claimed that districts in the south could also join, which presumably would have included Basarabeasca.²⁸

The Supreme Soviet's decision to adopt a new state flag in April 1990 did not elicit a negative response from the residents of Bălți or Ocnița. On the contrary, in Transnistria and Gagauzia, local elites condemned the flag as a fascist symbol, claiming Romanian occupying forces had flown it during the Great Patriotic War.²⁹ This position was supported by most Gagauz, as well as the inhabitants of Transnistria's industrial cities. In contrast, many Russian speakers outside these regions were indifferent towards the flag. In Bălți, most stated that they supported the tricolour as a symbol of the republic's revival and were sceptical of linkage the Transnistrians and Gagauz made between it and fascism. The only place the previous Moldovan flag was still flown was at the city's fourteenth army base.³⁰ In Ocnița, two village soviets initially refused to fly the flag but were quickly reprimanded by the district authorities.³¹ In Basarabeasca, the flag's adoption caused local protest, and some even attempted to remove the tricolour from outside the town Soviet.³² In comparison to Transnistria, however, opposition was limited, and most non-Moldovans stated they were willing to support their government's decision.³³

²⁸ "Sozdat' TMASSR?" *Leninskoe znamia*, sentiabria 14, 1989, 2 (*Lenin's Banner*, September 14, 1989, 2); *Xronika zabastovki*, sentiabr' 13, 1989 (*Chronical of the Strike*, September 13, 1989).

²⁹ "Resheniia o trikolore," *znamia pobedy*, maia 12, 1990, 1 ("Decisions on the tricolor," *Victory Banner*, May 12, 1990, 1).

³⁰ "K voprosu o trikolore," *Luch*, iunia 26, 1990, 2 ("To the Question of the Tricolour," *Ray*, June 26, 1990, 2); "Moldova byla odnoi iz pervykh respublik, pozhelavshikh sformirovat' sobstvennuu armiiu, no do sikh por ne priniat dazhe zakon ob oborone," *Nezavisimaia Moldova*, marta 18, 1992, 2 ("Moldova was among the first republics willing to form its own army but by now even the law on defence has not been adopted," *Independent Moldova*, March 18, 1992, 2).

³¹ "Izuchaetsia li gosudarstvennyi iazyk," *Novyi put'*, avgusta 25, 1990, 2 ("Is the State Language Being Studied?" *New Path*, August 25, 1990, 2).

³² "Referendum 17 marta za i protiv," *Slava*, marta 12, 1991, 1. ("17th March Referendum, pros and cons," *Slava*, March 12, 1991, 1).

³³ "Mneniia vokrug problem," *Slava*, iulia 24, 1990, 2 ("Opinions and Problems," *Slava*, July 24, 1990, 2).



Despite their willingness to support the Moldovan government, many still felt a deep attachment to the Soviet Union, and the MSSR's decision to boycott the referendum on the new Union Treaty caused tensions to once again reignite. Moldova's future relationship with the Soviet Union was a contentious issue. In late 1990, Gorbachev proposed transforming the Union into a loose confederation of sovereign states and scheduled a countrywide referendum for March 17, 1991. However, the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR invoked Moldova's Declaration of Sovereignty and decreed that polling stations could not be opened in the republic.³⁴ This displeased many of the inhabitants of Bălți, Ocnița, and Basarabeasca, with many openly expressing their desire to participate in the referendum.

On January 5, 1991, representatives from the Bălți's branch of the CPM and local enterprises met to discuss the proposed Union Treaty. Most of those in attendance were critical of the Moldovan Supreme Soviet's decision to outlaw the referendum and reiterated their support for Moldova's inclusion in the newly reformed Union of Soviet Sovereign Republics. At the end of the meeting, both groups issued a joint declaration calling upon the Moldovan Supreme Soviet to reconsider its position.³⁵ The following month, deputies convened for the eighth session of the Bălți City Soviet, to decide whether to defy the Supreme Soviet's ruling and organise a referendum. Unsurprisingly, the majority of deputies voted that a referendum on the Union Treaty would be organised on March 17, 1991.³⁶

Most labour collectives in Bălți supported the city soviet's decision to organise a referendum. The city's newspaper, *Voice*, was inundated with letters from various labour collectives, expressing their support for the decision and calling on people to exercise their 'democratic rights and participate in the voting'.³⁷ In fact, the only labour collective that openly opposed the referendum

³⁴ "Redaktoru gazety «Slava» organu regional'nogo soveta Basarabiaska, Ivanu Mitrofanovu," *Slava*, marta 3, 1991, 1 ("To Ivan Mitrofanov, the chef editor of Slava newspaper, the organ of Basarabeasca regional council of the people's deputies," *Slava*, March 3, 1991, 1).

³⁵ "Rezoliutsiia sobraniia partiinogo aktiva i predstavitelei trudovykh kollektivov goroda Belts' ot 05 ianvaria 1991," *Golos*, ianvaria 17, 1991, 2 ("Resolution of the meeting of party activists and representatives of labor collectives of the city of Balti from 05.01.1991," *Voice*, January 17, 1991, 2).

³⁶ "Pust' skazhet narod «vneocherednaia VIII sessiia Beltskogo gorodskogo soveta narodnykh deputatov," *Golos*, fevral 26, 1991, 1 ("Let the people say, "the extraordinary VIII session of the Balti town Council of People's Deputies," *Voice*, February 26, 1991, 1).

³⁷ "Prizyv zavodchan. Otkrytoe pis'mo proizvodstvennogo ob"edineniia imeni V.I.Lenina k truzhenikam goroda," *Golos*, marta 2, 1991, 2. ("The call of the factory workers. An open letter of the production association named after V.I. Lenin to the workers of the city," *The*

was the Bălți Pedagogical Institute.³⁸ This was to be expected, as some of the most ardent supporters of the MPF worked in the various pedagogical institutes scattered across the republic. Bălți was no exception, as most of those that worked in the institute were either sympathetic to the MPF or card-carrying members.³⁹ The MPF also condemned the city soviet's decision and vowed to organise rallies in the city on the day of the vote. They also issued a call addressed specifically to the city's non-Moldovan population, requesting that they do not participate.⁴⁰ Much of the city's Moldovan population complied with the MPF's request and abstained from voting. On the other hand, much of Bălți's Russian and Ukrainian population chose to participate. The city's electoral commission reported that sixty-five percent of the local population participated in the referendum and that ninety-eight percent voted in favour of the Union Treaty.⁴¹

The Ukrainian inhabitants of Ocnîța were also supportive of the proposed Union Treaty. One of the town's local newspapers, *Dawn*, regularly featured letters sent to the editor from locals who believed that the "Union Treaty is a great document" that "gives new possibilities for the social-economic, and cultural development" of Moldova.⁴² Despite the fact that many locals supported the Union Treaty, the district authorities refrained from organising any illegal referendums. However, not everyone was of the same opinion. One week before the referendum was due to take place, workers from several labour collectives in Ocnîța town stated their intention to organise a referendum on the Union Treaty on March 17. In addition to this, several village soviets, all of which had a Ukrainian majority, also stated their intention to organise a referendum.⁴³ The decision of the village deputies and labour collectives was

Voice, March 2, 1991, 2.); "Budem blagorazumny!", *Golos*, 7 marta 1991, 1 ("Let's be Prudent," *The Voice*, March 7, 1991, 1.)

³⁸ "Reshenie konferentsii trudovogo kollektiva BGPI imeni A.Russo," *Golos*, marta 16, 1991, 3. ("The Decision of the Conference of the Labor Collective of the A. Russo Balti State Pedagogical Institute," *The Voice*, March 16, 1991, 3.)

³⁹ Even in Tiraspol, the local Pedagogical Institute were supporters of the Popular Front. More info on this can be found in their newspaper *Lumina* (*Light*).

⁴⁰ "Est' vopros," *Golos*, marta 21, 1991, 1 ("There is a question," *The Voice*, March 21, 1991, 1).

⁴¹ "Protokol okružnoi komissii referendumu SSSR o rezul'tatakh gosovaniia po Bêltskomu okružgu," *Golos*, marta 26, 1991, 1 ("Protocol of the Regional Commission of the USSR referendum," *The Voice*, March 21, 1991, 1.).

⁴² "Chto my думаем о Союзном соглашении," *Zaria*, dekabria 15, 1990, 2 ("What We Think of the Union Agreement," *Dawn*, December 15, 1990, 2).

⁴³ "Trudovoi kollektiv vybor sdelał," *Novyi Put'*, marta 12, 1991, 1 ("The Work Collective Made a Choice," *New Path*, March 12, 1991, 1).



criticised by both the district authorities and the Ocnița branch of the MPF.⁴⁴ Despite the criticism, voting went ahead, with many local Ukrainians and Russians participating.⁴⁵

Some members of Basarabeasca's District Soviet were vocal about their support for the Union Treaty and their intention to open polling stations. This position was supported by the workers at the locomotive depot, who published an appeal in *Slava* encouraging all residents to participate in the voting.⁴⁶ In response, Basarabeasca's local prosecutor, B. Poiata wrote a letter to the newspaper, reprimanding the editor for publishing such an inflammatory piece. In his letter, Poiata reminded citizens and deputies alike that the organisation of such a referendum would be a direct violation of MSSR's constitution.⁴⁷ However, Poiata's intervention did not discourage all Basarabeasca's inhabitants from supporting the referendum.

The local authorities decided to organise discussion groups on the topic of organising a referendum. These discussions revealed that opinions were mostly divided along ethnic lines. Basarabeasca's Moldovan population, especially those that resided in the villages outside of the town, were categorically against the organisation of a referendum. In the town, Russians and Ukrainians were divided on the issue, with most supporting the Union Treaty but reluctant to violate Moldova's constitution by participating in a referendum.⁴⁸ Basarabeasca's Gagauz population did, however, support the organisation of a referendum. This was to be expected, as the *Gagauz Halky* also endorsed it.⁴⁹ When March 17 came, polls were only opened in the villages where Gagauz predominated.⁵⁰

This portion of the article has examined how Russians and Ukrainians in Bălți, Ocnița, and Basarabeasca reacted to the changes brought about by

⁴⁴ "Sanktsionirovannyi miting," *Novyi Put'*, dekabria 15, 1990, 2 ("Authorised Meeting," *New Path*, December 15, 1990, 2).

⁴⁵ "Referendumu- reshitel'noe net," *Novyi Put'*, marta 23, 1991, 3 ("No Referendum," *New Path*, March 23, 1991, 3).

⁴⁶ "Obrashchenie kommunistov refrizheratornogo depo," *Slava*, 26 fevralia 1991, 3 ("The refrigerated Depot Communists," *Slava*, February 26, 1991, 3).

⁴⁷ "Redaktoru gazety «slava» organu regional'nogo soveta Basarabiaska, Ivanu Mitrofanovu," *Slava*, marta 3, 1991, 1 ("To Ivan Mitrofanov, the chef editor of *Slava* newspaper, the organ of Basarabeasca regional council of the people's deputies," *Slava*, March 3, 1991, 1)

⁴⁸ "Referendum 17 marta za i protiv," *Slava*, marta 8, 1991, 1 ("Referendum on March 17, pro-and-cons," *Slava*, March 8, 1991, 1).

⁴⁹ "Referendum 17 marta za i protiv," *Slava*, marta 12, 1991, 1 ("17th March Referendum, pro and cons," *Slava*, March 12, 1991, 1).

⁵⁰ "Referendum proshel, chto dal'she?" *Slava*, marta 18, 1991, 1 ("The Referendum has passed, what's next?" *Slava*, March 18, 1991, 1).

the onset of *perestroika*. It has shown that reactions in these regions were not dissimilar to those from Transnistria and Gagauzia; most protested the language laws, opposed the MPF's agenda, and supported the Union Treaty. Nevertheless, conflict never manifested in these regions, and no efforts were made to secure local autonomy. This raises the question, why did no autonomist movements emerge? and how was further conflict avoided? It is not unreasonable to believe that these regions could have pushed for autonomy. Bălți was invited to join Transnistria and since 2014 is even referred to by some as the potential "Donetsk" of Moldova.⁵¹ The Ocnîța branch of the MPF were also concerned that local Ukrainians might demand autonomy, while Basarabeasca unwillingly found itself within the borders of the self-proclaimed Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.⁵² Yet, the inhabitants of these regions respected Moldova's territorial integrity. The next section will address these questions, demonstrating that a combination of pro-active local deputies, and various other local factors, allowed elites to prevent further conflict from emerging.

How Was Further Conflict Avoided?

The avoidance of conflict in these regions was not a foregone conclusion. In reality, it was because local elites in Bălți, Ocnîța, and Basarabeasca worked hard to placate the sceptical masses and marginalise those who sought to use the social and political unrest to incite inter-ethnic tensions or push for autonomy. In each region, local elites used their control over mobilizational resources to highlight the positive impacts of the *perestroika* reforms. For example, the local media reported the opening of minority language schools and the local soviets organised minority cultural days. The local press also focused on the Gagauz and Transnistrian conflict, highlighting the widespread unrest in the south and the horrors of war in the east.⁵³

Local deputies in Bălți worked particularly hard to stave off conflict. Following the commencement of the strikes, prominent local figures, such as the chairman of the city soviet, regularly visited the striking factories and listened to workers' grievances. Unlike in Transnistria and Gagauzia, most workers in Bălți did not expect Russian to become the second official language of the republic, and instead claimed that it should be recognised as the language

⁵¹ Marcin Kosienkowski, and William Schreiber, "Moldova's National Minorities: Why Are They Euroskeptical", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 82 (November 2014): 15.

⁵² "Obrashchenie ko vsem liudiam dobroï voli raïona," *Novyi Put'*, avgusta 31, 1990, 1 ("Appeal to all people of Goodwill in the Region," *New Path*, August 31, 1990, 1).

⁵³ "Bolgarskii tsentr v kishineve," *Slava*, sentiabria 27, 1990, 1 ("Bulgarian Centre in Chișinău," *Slava*, September 27, 1990, 1).



of interethnic communication.⁵⁴ After the Moldovan Supreme Soviet relented and made Russian the language of inter-ethnic communication, local elites in Bălți quickly informed the workers, which encouraged them to return to work on September 13, ten days before the strikes officially ended. Deputies also took the time to explain the provisions of the language laws to workers, highlighting that most would be unaffected by the laws and that all correspondence with the state could still be conducted in Russian.⁵⁵

The deputies in Bălți also worked hard to comply with the language laws in the months and years after their passing. Their hard work was recognised in January 1990, at a session of the Central Committee of the CPM. During a meeting between Snegur, and members of the Tiraspol City Soviet, the former criticised the latter for their slow implementation of the language laws and pointed to Bălți as a prime example of their effective application.⁵⁶ Bălți was the first city in the republic to organise widespread Moldovan language courses in most of its city's enterprises. These courses, which were widely praised by the republican authorities, were created with the help of the staff from the Alecu Russo Pedagogical Institute in the city. By July 1990, there were 177 adult classes ongoing across the city.⁵⁷

When the Moldovan Supreme Soviet announced the creation of an annual holiday called *Limba Noastră* (Our Language) to commemorate the passing of the language laws, the city authorities immediately declared their intention to participate in the festivities.⁵⁸ However, the city authorities in Bălți walked a fine line between supporting the central government and antagonising the local population.⁵⁹ Just because they embraced the language laws did not mean they supported all aspects of the national revival. This duality was most evident in the local authorities' relationship with the MPF.

At the MPF's Second Congress in July 1990, the group openly stated that its primary goal was for Moldova's reunification with Romania. Moreover,

⁵⁴ "Iazykam - razvivat'sia," *Luch*, iunია 21, 1989, 1 ("Languages-to develop," *Ray*, June 21, 1989, 1).

⁵⁵ "Vstrecha s rabochimi," *Kommunist*, sentiabria 5, 1989, 3. ("Meeting with Workers," *Communist*, September 5, 1989, 3.); Kaufman, "Spiralling," 126.

⁵⁶ Materialy k protokolu № 93. Zasedaniia biuro Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kompartii Moldavii ot „25” ianvaria 1990 g. Fond 51, Opis' 71, Delo 605 pp. 16-37 (Materials for Protocol No. 93. Meetings of the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova dated January 25, 1990, Fund 51, Inventory 71, Case 605 pp. 16-37).

⁵⁷ "Na nashei ulitse budet prazdnik," *Kommunist*, iulia 7, 1990, 3 ("There Will be a Holiday in Our Street," *Communist*, July 7, 1990, 3.).

⁵⁸ "Mudraia palitra prazdnika," *Kommunist*, sentiabria 4, 1990, 3 ("Wise Palette of the Holiday," *Communist*, September 4, 1990, 3.).

⁵⁹ "O registratsii sektsii Narodnogo fronta," *Kommunist*, sentiabria 6, 1990, 1 ("About the registration of the People's Front Section," *Communist*, September 6, 1990, 1).

the Moldovan press reported that the group also made irredentist claims against Ukraine, stating that Moldova should recapture the lands that Stalin had seceded to Kyiv in 1940 before reuniting with Romania. The Congress's declaration caused uproar amongst many ethnic minorities and provided ample propaganda material for the separatists in Gagauzia and Transnistria. In Bălți, several labour collectives wrote to the local soviet in protest. However, instead of using the declarations to create tensions, the local authorities called for calm, encouraging workers to disregard the declarations.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Bălți city authorities did acknowledge that the MPF could be a destabilising force within the city.

Like elsewhere in Moldova, the local branch of the MPF active in Bălți began to pursue its goals with more vigour in 1990. The local authorities were acutely aware of the tightrope they were walking and were worried the MPF's support for pan-Romanianism might incite inter-ethnic tensions in the city. In June 1990, a request by the local branch of the MPF in Bălți to organise a rally in the city was rejected by the presidium of the city soviet.⁶¹ This decision was unsurprising, as just a few days prior, a rally in the village of Varnița, near the city of Bender, resulted in violent clashes between workers from Tiraspol and supporters of the MPF.⁶² Nevertheless, the local branch of the MPF decided to organise a rally in Bălți.⁶³ This decision was met with an outcry of condemnation from locals, with dozens of labour collectives writing letters of complaint to the city authorities. In response, the city authorities decided to deregister the local branch of the MPF in July, citing their unsanctioned rally and how their actions could incite inter-ethnic violence.⁶⁴

The MPF was not a disruptive force in every district, and in some cases, served as a unifying one. Both the Ocnița branch of the MPF and the district authorities worked in tandem to prevent inter-ethnic conflict in the region. As noted above, local Ukrainians initially responded negatively to the language laws, believing it would require them to learn three languages. However,

⁶⁰ "Obrashchenie narodnykh deputatov Bêltskogo gorodskogo soveta k naseleniiu Bêlts," *Kommunist*, iulia 24, 1990, 1. ("The appeal of Balti town council of the people's deputies to the population of Balti," *Communist*, July 24, 1990, 1.)

⁶¹ "Po sledam odnoi vstrechi," *Kommunist*, iiunia 16, 1990, 1. ("On the Footsteps of One Meeting," *Communist*, June 16, 1990, 1.)

⁶² "Stolknovenie u Varnitsy," *Pobeda*, maia 26, 1990, 1 ("Clash at Varnița," *Victory*, May 26, 1990, 1).

⁶³ "Po sledam odnoi vstrechi," *Kommunist*, iiunia 16, 1990, 1. ("On the Footsteps of One Meeting," *Communist*, June 16, 1990, 1.)

⁶⁴ "O registratsii sektsii Narodnogo fronta," *Kommunist*, sentiabria 6, 1990, 1 ("About the registration of the People's Front Section," *Communist*, September 6, 1990, 1.)



local deputies worked hard to redirect this narrative. They capitalised on the provisions of the language laws and opened more Ukrainian ethnic institutions in the region. Already by October 1989, six new Ukrainian cultural clubs had opened in Ocnița and its surrounding villages.⁶⁵ The local authorities also used the *Limba Noastra* celebrations to highlight local diversity, and in 1991 began organising Ukrainian cultural days.⁶⁶ The local authorities and press also highlighted the positive steps taken by the Moldovan authorities to revive the Ukrainian language and culture. Snegur's decree on the development of Ukrainian culture, published in March 1991, was widely praised. The decree called for the opening of Ukrainian language schools and cultural centres in regions where Ukrainians predominated, as well as for the establishment of a Ukrainian language press.⁶⁷ A Ukrainian language newspaper that was subsequently founded, called *Enlightenment*, was also praised by local elites.⁶⁸

The local authorities in Ocnița, the government in Chișinău, and the local branch of the MPF all developed close relations with various bodies in Ukraine and used them to stave off conflict. The MPF in Ocnița developed close ties with the Ukrainian group, Rukh. In late 1990 the Ocnița branch of the MPF published a declaration issued by Rukh, calling on Ukrainians in Moldova to respect the republic's territorial integrity.⁶⁹ The local and republican governments also developed closer ties with the authorities in Ukraine, opening several schemes that allowed students and workers to travel to Ukraine to study or receive specialist training.⁷⁰

In Basarabeasca, the local authorities, the MPF, and other groups worked hard to discourage separatism and avoid interethnic conflict. This was

⁶⁵ T.Molokishan, "Pesnia-dusha naroda. (Interv'iu s kompetentnym chelovekom)," *Novyi put'*, oktiabria 24, 1989, 2. (T.Molokishan, "The song is the soul of the people. (Interview with a competent person)," *New Path*, October 24, 1989, 2).

⁶⁶ "Den' ukrainskoï kul'tury," *Zaria*, iunია 6, 1991, 2 ("The Day of Ukrainian Culture," *Dawn*, June 6, 1991, 2); "Zasedanie koordinatsionnogo komiteta," *Novyi put'*, avgusta 9, 1990, 1. ("Coordination Committee Meeting," *New Path*, August 9, 1990, 1).

⁶⁷ "Ukaz Prezidenta SSR Moldova O merakh po obespecheniiu razvitiia ukrainskoï natsional'noi kul'tury v respublike," *Novyi Put'*, marta 12, 1991 g., str. 1. ("Decree of the President of the SSR Moldova on measures to ensure the development of Ukrainian national culture in the republic," *New Path*, March 12, 1991, 1).

⁶⁸ "ProsvetIta (Prosveshchenie) pervaiia ukrainskaia gazeta v Moldove," *Novyi Put'*, oktiabria 12, 1991, 1 ("Enlightenment the first Ukrainian newspaper in Moldova," *New Path*, October 12, 1991, 1).

⁶⁹ Ion Apostol, "Za tselostnost' respubliki," *Novyi put'*, noiabria 3, 1990, 2 (Ion Apostol, "For the integrity of the republic," *New Path*, November 3, 1990, 2.).

⁷⁰ "Poedut uchit'sia na Ukrainu," *Novyi put'*, iulia 13, 1991, 1 ("Will Go to Ukraine," *New Path*, July 13, 1991, 1).

especially difficult in Basarabeasca, as the town and surrounding district were included in the borders of the self-proclaimed Gagauz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in November 1989. Basarabeasca's inclusion in the Gagauz separatist project was rejected by the town's Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, and Bulgarian population. Collectively, these groups had little interest in joining a Gagauz-led separatist state and realised that the impoverished south was reliant on funding from Chişinău. Nevertheless, Basarabeasca had a considerable Gagauz minority, most of whom supported the separatists in Comrat.⁷¹

The local authorities found themselves fighting for Moldova's territorial integrity from as early as April 1989, when the Basarabeasca's Executive Committee refused to allow the group "*Budjak*" to organise a rally in the town. *Budjak*, which would become a notorious organisation in the south of Moldova, supported the *Gagauz Halky* and later advocated for forming an autonomous unit in the south of Moldova. The executive committee denied a permit to *Budjak* because the group "spread misinformation" and sought to undermine the republican authorities.⁷²

The local authorities in Basarabeasca paid little attention to the Gagauz declaration of autonomy in November 1989. The creation of the Gagauz Republic in August 1990 and the subsequent rise in tensions concerned local elites.⁷³ Articles began to appear in *Slava* criticising elites in Comrat for not consulting the people of Basarabeasca before including it in their separatist project. Many commentators acknowledged that the local Gagauz population supported the district's inclusion but argued this meant little, as they made up only fourteen percent of the population. In response, Basarabeasca's Executive Committee instructed all enterprises in the town and district to discuss the matter. Eighty percent of participants rejected the region's inclusion in the Gagauz Republic. Interestingly, sixty percent of participants affirmed their support for Moldova's territorial integrity and rejected the creation of any form of autonomous unit in the south of the republic.⁷⁴ It was apparent that most of Basarabeasca's local population rejected secession and local deputies worked hard to keep it that way.

⁷¹ I.Mitrofan, "Kogda raskol nepriemlem", *Slava*, noiabria 23, 1990, 2 (I.Mitrofan, "When the split is not acceptable," *Slava*, November 23, 1990, 2).

⁷² "V ispolkome oblsoveta narodnykh deputatov," *Slava*, aprelia 14, 1989, 1 ("In the Executive Committee of the Regional Council of the People's Deputies," *Slava*, April 14, 1989, 1).

⁷³ "Deklaratsiia sobraniia deputatov vsekh urovnei Basarabskogo, Vulkaneshtskogo, Komratskogo, Tarakliiskogo i Chadyr-Lunzhskikh okrugov," *Slava*, sentiabria 27, 1990, 2. ("Declaration of the meeting of all level deputies of Basarabeasca region, Vulcăneşti region, Comrat region, Taraclia region and Ceadir-Lunga region," *Slava*, September 27, 1990, 2).

⁷⁴ "I.Mitrofan, "Kogda raskol nepriemlem," *Slava*, noiabria 23, 1990, 2. (I.Mitrofan, "When the split is not acceptable," *Slava*, November 23, 1990, 2).



Local deputies in Basarabeasca carefully avoided any action that might incite interethnic tensions. Like in Ocnița, the *Limba Noastra* celebration was used to emphasise and celebrate the region's ethnic and linguistic diversity.⁷⁵ Similar to Ocnița, the local press continuously highlighted the positive steps taken by the republican authorities towards ethnic minorities: they covered the opening of the Bulgarian culture centre in Chișinău, Snegur's decree on the Ukrainian language, and the proposal to open a state university in Comrat.⁷⁶ To discourage violence, the local press also meticulously covered the conflict in the south of the republic and was quick to report on clashes. In most instances, journalists portrayed the Gagauz fighters as drunks or hooligans. The press was also especially critical of elites in Comrat, who they claimed turned the "south into a powder keg".⁷⁷

The local authorities in Basarabeasca were also supported by various groups active in the region. Many of the villages in the Basarabeasca district had their own branch of the MPF, the most active of which came from the Sadaclia. These branches campaigned on behalf of the government in Chișinău against the referendum on the Union Treaty and Gagauz separatism.⁷⁸ On the latter point, the MPF was supported by local Bulgarians. Although not supportive of pan-Romanianism or boycotting the Union Treaty referendum, the Bulgarians of Basarabeasca were, like many other Bulgarians elsewhere in the south of Moldova, opposed to Gagauz separatism.⁷⁹ A delegation of Bulgarians from Basarabeasca was sent to the First Bulgarian Congress in Bolhrad, Ukraine, where they, alongside their counterparts from elsewhere in Moldova, argued in favour of the republic's territorial integrity.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ "Prazdnik Limba Noastră," *Slava*, sentiabria 4, 1990, 1. ("Holiday Limba Noastra," *Slava*, September 4, 1990, 1).

⁷⁶ "Bolgarskiĭ tsentr v Kishineve," *Slava*, sentiabria 27, 1990, 1. ("Bulgarian Centre in Chișinău," *Slava*, September 27, 1990, 1); "Iazykovaia problema," *Slava*, iun' 23, 1991, 3. ("Language Problem," *Slava*, June 23, 1991, 3); "Byt' universitetu v Komrate." *Slava*, iulia 27, 1991, 1. ("Yes, to the University," *Slava*, July 27, 1991, 1).

⁷⁷ "O tom kak sozhgli Vulkaneshtskiĭ raĭotdel poltsii," *Slava*, Noiabr' 19, 1991, 1 ("How the Regional Police Department was Set on Fire," *Slava*, November 19, 1991, 1).

⁷⁸ "My ne dolzhny byt' vrazhdebny," *Slava*, iulia 7, 1990, 2. ("We shouldn't be at enmity," *Slava*, July 7, 1990, 2); "Referendumu -kategoricheskoe net," *Slava*, marta 8, 1991, 1 ("To the referendum - categorical No," *Slava*, March 8, 1991, 1).

⁷⁹ "V tvarditse formiruiutsia oboronitel'nye otriady," *Slava*, 12 dekabr' 1991, .3 ("In Tvardita the defence regiment is created," *Slava*, December 12, 1991, 3).

⁸⁰ "Chto skhod reshil," *Slava*, iunia 8, 1991, 1 ("What was Decided at the Gathering?" *Slava*, June 8, 1991, 1).

Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union inspired a wave of literature that focused on Moldova's path to independence. In most instances, this literature focused on the Gagauz and Transnistrian conflicts.⁸¹ Scholars often argued that the latter could not be considered as an ethnic conflict, as the majority of Moldova's Russian-speaking population live in other parts of the republic.⁸² Despite this widely recycled statement, those working in the field are yet to adequately explore the attitudes of these Russian-speakers towards reforms of *perestroika* and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. This article has sought to fill this gap in the historiography by examining how the inhabitants of Balti, Ocnița, and Basarabasca responded to these issues. This article has demonstrated that the inhabitants of these cities and towns harboured many of the same fears as their counterparts in Transnistria and the Gagauz: most were concerned about the language laws, sceptical of the MPF, and wished to remain within the Soviet Union. It was not a foregone conclusion that minorities in these regions would easily accept Moldovan independence, and many feared that they would push for autonomy. However, conflict was avoided, in large part, due to a proactive local elite that refrained from using inflammatory rhetoric and actively sought to engage and placate the masses, by discrediting separatist forces and explaining the various laws.

Bălți, which has been flagged as the potential "Donetsk of Moldova", had the most complicated relationship with the Moldovan authorities. The majority of the city's population were pro-Soviet, initially opposing the language laws and hostile towards Moldovan independence. However, the city also had a considerable Moldovan population, many of whom supported the reforms undertaken by the new government. This put the city authorities in a difficult position. Determined to avoid interethnic conflict, deputies walked a fine line between supporting Moldova's territorial integrity and undermining the central government's authority. They readily implemented the language laws, for which Snegur praised them. However, they also deregistered the local branch of the MPF for holding an unsanctioned rally. The gravest violation committed by the authorities in Bălți was sponsoring the organisation of a referendum on the Union Treaty. However, Bălți's disobedience stopped there, and the city's

⁸¹ Kolstø and Malgin. "The Transnistrian Republic," 103-127, Chinn and Roper. "Territorial Autonomy in Gagauzia," 87-101; Roper, "Regionalism in Moldova," 101-122; Kosienkowski, "The Gagauz Republic," 116-113.

⁸² King, "Eurasia Letter," 114; Kolstø, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova, "The Dniester Conflict", 975.



population and authorities readily accepted Moldova's sovereignty following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In Ocnița, many Ukrainians rejected the language laws, believing they would disadvantage them. However, local elites worked hard to redirect the narrative, with the local press regularly focusing on the opening of Ukrainian cultural institutions and other positive initiatives taken by the local and republican authorities. In addition, they cultivated relations with groups inside Ukraine that called for their compatriots to respect Moldova's territorial integrity. Finally, they also opened cross-border initiatives that created new opportunities for Ocnița's Ukrainians.

The authorities in Basarabeasca took a similar approach to their counterparts in Ocnița, using the press to highlight positive aspects of Chișinău's minority policy. They also used the *Limba Noastră* celebration to celebrate the region's diversity. Basarabeasca's Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, and Bulgarian populations also had an external factor that brought them together: the Gagauz Republic. Opinions may have been divided on the language laws, the tricolour, and the Union Treaty, but all the non-Gagauz ethnic groups agreed that they did not wish to become part of the Gagauz-led separatist republic. This was supported by Basarabeasca's authorities, who used the local newspaper, *Slava*, to highlight the horrors of the war.

The findings of this article have broader implications that go beyond filling in a historiographical gap. It reiterates the critical role local elites play in avoiding conflict and even secession, particularly in times of uncertainty such as regime change.⁸³ Their control over the local media allowed deputies to direct the narrative. Moreover, they could also register and deregister groups and sanction rallies of whatever organisation they wished. Much of the same scepticism in Gagauzia and Transnistria was also present in Bălți, Ocnița, and Basarabeasca. However, while elites in Tiraspol and Comrat chose to incite tensions, their counterparts in the city and towns of this study typically decided to support the authorities in Chișinău.

This study also opens numerous other avenues that are worthy of further exploration. A more nuanced comparison between the multi-ethnic cities and towns of Bessarabia, and those in Gagauzia and Transnistria could be made, with researchers questioning why elites in the former sought to placate the masses, while their counterparts in the latter sought to incite tensions. Given the similarities in their demographic makeup and level of industrialisation,

⁸³ Dmitry P. Gorenburg, *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

a comparison of Bălți and Tiraspol, or Basarabeasca and Comrat, could be made. An analysis of how the local media and elites reacted to the language laws, tricolour, Union Treaty, and other issues would likely yield fruitful results. There is also considerable scope to further explore the attitudes of Moldova's Ukrainian population towards the aforementioned issues. While this article has focused mainly on Ocnița, a significant number of Ukrainians also live in several other districts in Moldova. Moreover, they are also the second largest ethnic group in Moldova. In summation, there are a variety of different aspects of Moldova's path to independence that have been overshadowed by issues of separatism but are equally worthy of further attention and discussion.

Rezumat

O mare parte din discuțiile academice legate de experiențele minorităților în timpul prăbușirii puterii sovietice în Moldova se concentrează în jurul Transnistriei și Găgăuziei. Cu toate acestea, o parte semnificativă a populației vorbitoare de limbă rusă din Moldova a trăit în afara acestor regiuni. Nu există încă un studiu care să abordeze modul în care vorbitorii de limbă rusă din afara Transnistriei și Găgăuziei au răspuns provocărilor perestroikăi. Acest articol arată că vorbitorii de limbă rusă din trei orașe, Bălți, Ocnița, Basarabeasca, au avut opinii similare celor din Transnistria și Găgăuzia. Cu toate acestea, conflictul a fost evitat în Bălți, Ocnița și Basarabeasca datorită măsurilor proactive luate de elitele locale, care au depus eforturi pentru a calma stările de spirit ale cetățenilor din orașele respective.

Cuvinte-cheie: Republica Moldova, mobilizare, minorități, elite locale.

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