

Between Symbolic Geography and Alterity: Emmanuel de Martonne's Vision of the Identity Construction of Bessarabia

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Abstract

Annexed to the Russian Empire in 1812, Bessarabia became a frontier space subjected to systematic policies of denationalisation and Russification, intended to diminish the Romanian element and integrate the province into the new imperial framework. The succession of political changes in the 19th-20th centuries, its incorporation into Russia, union with Romania in 1918, and later incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940, generated structural instability and divergent pressures on the region's identity construction. Thus, Bessarabia became an "identity laboratory," where competing political and cultural projects (Russian, Romanian, Soviet) shaped the population's loyalty. Its geographical position at the confluence of Romanian and Slavic spaces, between Central Europe and the Orient, conferred on Bessarabia the status of a geopolitical and cultural frontier. The region's identity was built through reference to alterity: Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian, through the overlap of different identity discourses. In this context, French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne's 1919 visit during the Paris Peace Conference offered a decisive external perspective on Bessarabia's identity trajectory.

Through his observations and the application of the concept of "symbolic geography," Bessarabia was represented as an integral part of Romanian unity. Geography, reinterpreted, became an instrument of political and cultural legitimisation. The study shows that collective imagination and external perceptions were essential to identity construction in Bessarabia.

Keywords: Bessarabia, symbolic geography, collective identity, alterity, Emmanuel de Martonne.

Introduction

After the annexation of Bessarabia to the Russian Empire through the Treaty of Bucharest (May 16, 1812)¹ the Romanian province between the Prut and Dniester rivers entered a complex, systematic process of political and cultural transformation. The Tsarist authorities promoted an intense

¹ The name *Bessarabia*, initially attributed to the eastern Moldavian territory annexed by the Russian Empire in 1812, originally designated the Budjak region, a narrow area north of the Danube estuary that had been under Ottoman rule. Subsequently, the name was extended to encompass the entire territory between the Dniester and Prut rivers.



policy of denationalisation, encouraging the colonisation of the province with foreign populations and strengthening mechanisms of Russification through administration, education, and the church. These measures aimed to diminish the Romanian element and integrate the region into an imperial framework of ethnic, social, and cultural homogenisation, with lasting effects on the construction of collective identities.

Thus, from a historical perspective, Bessarabia emerged as a contested Romanian province throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, passing through successive stages of annexation and integration: incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1812, union with Romania in 1918, and later incorporation into the Soviet Union after 1940. These political, social, and cultural transformations gave the region structural instability, subjecting collective identity to divergent pressures. From this standpoint, Bessarabia can be viewed as an “*identity laboratory*,” where different political and cultural projects – Russian, Romanian, and Soviet – competed for the loyalty of the population.

These particularities are complemented by another defining aspect of Bessarabia: its geographical position, which decisively shaped the region’s political and cultural evolution. Situated at the confluence of Romanian and Slavic spaces, between Central Europe and the Orient, Bessarabia was perceived as both a marginal territory and a zone of contact. This location made it a geopolitical and cultural frontier, where encounters between civilisations generated tensions, challenges, and opportunities for identity redefinition.

Beyond its visible borders, Bessarabia also represented an invisible frontier in terms of identity, marked by cultural and symbolic demarcations. Local identity was constructed in relation to the alterity of its immediate neighbours: Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian, and through the overlapping of various local identity discourses that, over time, sought to legitimise the region’s belonging to different political and cultural spaces, thereby justifying diverse political projects.²

Therefore, the region’s symbolic geography is not limited to maps or territories; it becomes an instrument of legitimisation and identity negotiation, a field of confrontation between national and imperial projects.

Alternative identity scenarios in Bessarabia oscillated between an uncertain Romanian identity, marked by the difficulty of asserting itself in a hostile geopolitical context, and various forms of ethnic mobilisation. At the same

² For a deeper analysis, see the author’s studies: Lucia Sava, “Chișinăul interbelic – o reconstrucție între identitate națională și memorie urbană,” in *Chișinăul interbelic: luminile și umbrele unei epoci: istorie, educație, cultură și transformări sociale* (Chișinău, 2026), 11–17; Lucia Sava, “Politici și transformări etno-demografice în Basarabia țaristă pe parcursul secolului al XIX-lea,” in *În oglinda istoriei: de la medieval la contemporan. În onoare profesor Valentin Tomuleț* (Chișinău: Biblioteca Științifică “Andrei Lupan,” USM, 2022), 447–461; Lucia Sava, “O imagine a alterității. Chișinău în viziunea contelui Serghei D. Urusov,” in *Identitățile Chișinăului*, 4th ed., 2017 (Chișinău, 2018), 195–201; Lucia Sava, “Străzile Chișinăului țarist: de la spațiu public la modelarea identității (sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea – începutul secolului al XX-lea),” in *Identitățile Chișinăului*, 2nd ed. (Chișinău, 2015), 128–136, etc.

time, local projects of distinct affirmation emerged, through which communities sought to preserve their cultural specificity and construct their own “Moldovan”³ identity, distinct from both Romanian and Russian identities. This plurality of options reflected the complexity of a frontier space, where belonging was never definitive but constantly negotiated.

Bessarabia also functioned as a political and cultural experiment, in which the local elites oscillated between two major directions: integration into the Romanian space, with an emphasis on the values of Latinity and the European tradition, and adaptation to Russian or Soviet influence, which promoted a different model of social and cultural organisation. This oscillation generated dual loyalty and permanent tension between competing identity projects, reflected in public discourse, education, and cultural life.

Nevertheless, in Bessarabia's identity construction, foreign travellers' reflections also played a significant role, as visitors captured the region's particularities through their own eyes. Their testimonies not only provide an image of everyday realities but also help shape a collective imaginary in which alterity is perceived and reinterpreted. According to Gilbert Durand⁴, imagination is an integral part of the imaginary and can be understood as a psychic process of forming perceptions, born from memories or from the awareness of what is possible. This perspective lets us interpret the accounts of foreign travellers and visitors not merely as descriptions, but as filters through which local communities rediscover or contest their own identity. In the case of Bessarabia, these external testimonies helped shape a complex image, where alterity became a constitutive element of identity discourse.

A relevant example is the French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne, who visited Bessarabia in the summer of 1919 and made direct observations of the region's geography and population, contributing to the delineation of Greater Romania's borders. His writings go beyond physical description, capturing aspects highly significant for our research on the region's symbolic dimension, seen as both a “margin” and a “gateway” between Central Europe and the Orient. Through maps, articles, and analyses, de Martonne transformed geography into an instrument of political and cultural legitimisation, helping to consolidate the image of Bessarabia as an integral part of Romanian unity.

At the same time, as we can also observe from other studies⁵, Emmanuel de Martonne's work provides valuable information about Bessarabia's identity

³ Anatol Petrencu, “Limba română – <identitate civică moldovenească>,” in *Latinitate, Românită, Românită*, 7th ed., November 2–4, 2023 (Chişinău: CEP USM, 2023), 77.

⁴ Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 2016; first published Paris, 1960); Gilbert Durand, *L'imagination symbolique* (Paris: PUF, 1964).

⁵ Svetlana Suveică, *Basarabia în primul deceniu interbelic (1918–1928): Modernizare prin reforme* (Chişinău: Pontos, 2010); Vasile-George Ursu, “Geograful francez Emmanuel de Martonne în Chişinăul anului 1919,” in *Identitățile Chişinăului: Oraşul interbelic*, 5th ed., November 1–2, 2018 (Chişinău, 2020), 52–64; Nicolae Enciu, “Emmanuel de Martonne şi Basarabia,” *Confluenţe bibliografice: Revista de biblioteconomie şi ştiinţele informării*, nos. 1–2 (2007): 113–116.



construction, as it illustrates how the external perception of foreign travellers intersected with internal aspirations and the self-perception of the Bessarabians. In this sense, symbolic geography becomes a methodological framework for understanding how Bessarabia, as a borderland, was transformed into an identity laboratory: a disputed territory, yet also a place of cultural and political projection. Thus, the imaginary and foreigners' observations constitute important historical sources and active elements in defining and negotiating Bessarabian identity.

Building on the points above, our research aims to show how geographical representations and external perceptions, articulated through the views of the French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne, helped define Bessarabia's collective identity in the aftermath of the First World War. The analysis focuses on the symbolic dimension of geography, understood not merely as the physical description of space, but as an instrument of political and cultural legitimisation of a historical region disputed in political, identity, and cultural terms.

In this regard, Emmanuel de Martonne's writings on Bessarabia, complemented by relevant historical sources and interpreted through the concepts of symbolic geography and historical imagology, provide a solid methodological framework for understanding how this territory was perceived and represented. His analysis does not confine itself to the strictly geographical dimension but reveals how Bessarabia could be transformed into a symbolic space, defined by identity discourses and by the relationship between "Us" and "Others."

This research is grounded in the idea that identity is not constructed exclusively from within a community, but is also shaped through reference to alterity, through the perceptions and symbolic projections of external observers. These representations, though subjective, become part of the collective imaginary and contribute to the broader identity narrative. In the case of Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne's visit in the summer of 1919 and his direct observations of the region's geography and population, later presented at the Paris Peace Conference, constitute a striking example of the intersection between foreign perception and local aspirations. Geography, thus reinterpreted, becomes an identity discourse that shapes political and cultural legitimisation.

The study shows that symbolic geography and the collective imaginary were essential to identity consolidation in Bessarabia. By analysing these elements, it becomes clear how the borderland became an "identity laboratory," where external and internal representations overlapped, generating a complex identity construction. This approach allows both an understanding of the region's historical and cultural dynamics and an explanation of how Bessarabia was perceived and integrated into the era's political and cultural discourses.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

Symbolic geography, a field of scientific research related to cultural geography and anthropology, provides an essential theoretical framework for historians to understand how space transcends its physical dimension and becomes a bearer of

cultural and political meanings⁶. It examines the representations that transform territory into an element of identity narratives through maps, names, myths, and images. Thus, space is no longer simply an object of geographical description, but becomes a symbolic construct, imbued with values and collective perceptions.

Henri Lefebvre strongly argues that space should not be reduced to a mere physical object, empty of meaning, but must be understood as a lived, socially created spatiality. This perspective shifts the emphasis from the material (geographical) dimension to the symbolic and cultural one, underscoring that space is historically produced through a complex process in which everyday practices, symbolic representations, and a society's collective imaginary intertwine. From a methodological perspective, Lefebvre distinguishes between two complementary levels: on the one hand, "representations of space" – that is, conceived and abstract space, expressed through maps, technical plans, reports, or official discourses, which reflect relations of production and the ways in which they are imposed in society; on the other hand, "spaces of representation" – that is, lived space, directly experienced by individuals, imbued with symbols and images⁷. This interaction between conceived space and lived space highlights the fact that geography is not merely a descriptive domain, but a field of identity and cultural negotiation, where material reality overlaps with the social imaginary.

Another researcher, Michel Foucault⁸, extends the discussion toward the political and social dimension, arguing that space is not merely a neutral framework of existence but a product of power relations and of the discourses that structure society. In his view, space is inseparable from how knowledge and power are exercised, shaped by institutions, norms, and social practices. Foucault analyses "discursive space" as a form of control and organisation of reality, where each spatial configuration reflects an order of things and a hierarchy of subjects. For him, analysing space means understanding how society produces its own forms of visibility and exclusion through architectures, institutions, and discourses.

At the same time, without entering an exhaustive analysis, it must be emphasised that in the specialised literature the term space is frequently correlated with that of place to highlight the difference between the physical and the symbolic dimension. Space, as an abstract entity, becomes place when it is endowed with meaning through naming, through association with experiences and symbols. In this sense, place is not reduced to a mere geographical coordinate but is transformed into a space laden with meanings, which underpins identity consciousness. According to researchers Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, "spaces become places through their naming, and place is the space to which meaning has been attributed."⁹

⁶ Carmen Andraş, *Geografiile simbolice ale diferenței ideologice* (Iași: Institutul European, 2008), 7.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974), 17.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 328.

⁹ Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), xii.



This distinction is essential for identity studies, since places become landmarks of *collective memory*¹⁰ and belonging through symbolic and physical associations that consolidate cultural and social identity. In this way, analysing the difference between *space* and *place* allows us to understand how symbolic geography intersects with the collective imaginary, transforming territories into supports of identity and alterity.

Therefore, situated at the intersection of several socio-humanistic disciplines (such as history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, etc.), symbolic geography offers a transdisciplinary research perspective and provides an essential conceptual and methodological foundation for multidimensional analysis of a community or geographical region (in our case, Bessarabia). It applies both to real spaces and to imagined or invented ones, providing a framework for interpreting the ways in which society constructs and negotiates its identity¹¹.

In an extended formulation, *symbolic geography* can be understood as an interdisciplinary approach that recognises an imaginary division of the world beyond strictly physical spatial separation. Unlike material, fixed, and cartographic boundaries, symbolic separation is fluid and constantly transforming, being closely linked to history and to the dynamics of political, economic, social, or cultural processes. This perspective highlights that space is a cultural and identity construct, perceived differently from one era to another depending on dominant discourses and the collective imaginary, and that it serves as a landmark of memory and belonging, carrying values and symbols.

From a methodological perspective, the field of *symbolic geography* is closely connected with *historical imagology*, that is, the study of the representation of the *Other* and of the space inhabited by them, together with the meanings attributed to them. External perceptions, stereotypes, and cultural discourses shape and reshape collective identities, showing that space is not merely a physical reality but also a symbolic construct. The central argument of symbolic geography is that collective perception and the cultural discourse associated with geographical space play a decisive role in consolidating a community's identity. Through these representations, communities affirm their belonging, justify their claims, and delineate their alterity. In this way, symbolic geography becomes not only an instrument of political and cultural legitimisation but also a means of fixing collective memory¹².

¹⁰The concept of *lieu de mémoire* was developed by the French historian Pierre Nora, who argued that collective memory no longer relies exclusively on living traditions and direct transmission, but becomes fixed in symbolic places such as monuments, archives, rituals, texts, or spaces, which serve as privileged landmarks of identity. These "sites of memory" are not merely material realities but also cultural constructions, imbued with meaning, functioning as points of condensation of the past and as instruments of social cohesion. See Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).

¹¹ Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000), xii.

¹² This approach is confirmed by the research gathered in *Geografii identitare – identități culturale*, ed. Pavel Pușcaș, Valentin Trifescu, Simion Molnar, and Vali Ilyes (Cluj-Na-

In addition, Maurice Halbwachs emphasises that individual memory is inseparable from the social frameworks that form and reactivate it¹³. Memories do not exist in a vacuum; social groups structure them by providing reference points for interpreting the past. This perspective confirms that collective memory and the social imaginary are essential for understanding how geographical spaces become places imbued with meaning.

Moreover, Gilbert Durand emphasises in his works on the imaginary that imagination is not a mere secondary mechanism of the psyche, but a fundamental process in shaping collective representations. He shows that the imaginary is regenerated through memory, experiences, fantasies, and symbols, becoming a complex system of meanings that influences both individual and group behaviour. In Durand's view, the imaginary has its own dynamic, capable of creating symbolic structures that give meaning to reality and shape perceptions of space and time¹⁴.

Lucian Boia supports this idea, arguing that the imaginary "constitutes an independent reality, possessing its own structures and its own dynamics, and can be used as a very sensitive barometer of historical evolution."¹⁵ This statement underscores that the imaginary is not merely a secondary reflection of reality, but an autonomous system of representations that can shape how communities perceive their past and project their future. In this sense, the imaginary becomes an instrument for interpreting history, revealing not only objective facts but also the perceptions, myths, and symbols that accompany them.

Thus, *historical imagology* and *symbolic geography* complement and articulate one another, since both disciplines analyse the relationship between space, representation, and identity. While symbolic geography emphasises the transformation of physical space into places imbued with meaning, imagology reveals how these places are interpreted and re-signified through the eyes of the *Other*. Together, these two lines of research provide a transdisciplinary methodological framework for understanding identity dynamics, showing that collective memory and the social imaginary are constructed through a continuous dialogue between internal and external perceptions.

Methodological applications of these fields show that geographical space can be studied as a cultural and identity construct, transformed through discourses, symbols, and representations. Thus, in terms of the identity construction of Bessarabia, the territory becomes an integral part of the national narrative (for

poca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2014), which underscores the concept's transdisciplinary relevance in the cultural analysis of communities.

¹³ Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925; réédité par Presses universitaires de France, 1952), consulté le 26 mai 2026. https://classiques.uqam.ca/classiques/Halbwachs_maurice/cadres_soc_memoire/cadres_sociaux_memoire.pdf

¹⁴ Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Paris: Dunod, 2016; first published Paris, 1960), <https://excerpts.numilog.com/books/9782100737796.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2026).

¹⁵ Lucian Boia, *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului* (București: Humanitas, 2000), 11.



example, Bessarabia is sometimes viewed as the “edge of Europe” or the “gateway to the Orient”), while from the perspective of political legitimisation, symbolic geography is employed to justify territorial claims.

Emmanuel de Martonne (1873–1955) – An Intellectual Profile

Louis Eugène Emmanuel de Martonne, born on April 1, 1873, in Chabris, France, into a family of local magistrates, became one of the most important geographers of the twentieth century. Coming from an intellectual environment, with his father being an archivist¹⁶, he benefited from a solid foundation for his academic training, and his rigorous education directed him toward the study of geography. In 1892, Emmanuel de Martonne was admitted by competitive examination to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris, Letters Section, where he studied under Paul Vidal de la Blache, the founder of modern French geography and of the French school of geopolitics, whom he faithfully followed throughout his professional career.



Photo no. 1. Emmanuel de Martonne
Source: *Épistémologie et histoire de la géographie*

This encounter proved decisive for his intellectual formation, providing not only an elite academic framework but also a model of integrative geographical thought. He graduated in 1895 with the title of *agrégé* in history and geography¹⁷, which qualified him to teach and marked the beginning of a successful academic career.

Emmanuel de Martonne’s intellectual profile is defined by his rejection of traditional descriptive geography, which dominated at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather than offering superficial regional descriptions, he sought to deepen understanding of the essence of geographical processes and phenomena, integrating modern methods and interdisciplinary influences. This orientation toward explanation and causality placed him at the forefront of European geography.

A key factor in the complexity of Emmanuel de Martonne’s intellectual

¹⁶ Christophe Charle, “73. de Martonne (Emmanuel, Louis, Eugène),” in *Les professeurs de la faculté des lettres de Paris – Dictionnaire biographique 1909–1939*, Publications de l’Institut national de recherche pédagogique 2, no. 2 (Paris: Institut national de recherche pédagogique, 1986), 148–150 [biographical note].

https://www.persee.fr/doc/inrp_0298-5632_1986_ant_2_2_2766 (accessed May 30, 2026)

¹⁷ Victor Tufescu, Gheorghe Niculescu, and Șerban Dragomirescu, eds., Emmanuel de Martonne, *Lucrări geografice despre România*, vol. 2 (București: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1981–1985).

formation was his German and Austrian experience. Between 1897 and 1898, supported by a scholarship, he studied in Berlin under leading figures such as Ferdinand von Richthofen and Albrecht Penck, and in Vienna he attended the courses of Julius Hann. Direct contact with the German geographical school, renowned for its methodological advances, strengthened his focus on physical geography and the analysis of landform formation and evolution. This stage completed an exceptionally complex scientific training for the time, transforming him into a pioneer of applied research and the integration of field observation into theoretical construction.¹⁸

As V. Mihăilescu emphasises, one of Emmanuel de Martonne's essential ideas was that theoretical geography (general geography) and descriptive geography are reversibly related. The field geographer cannot remain merely an empirical observer; the theoretician must complement the field geographer by integrating observations into a conceptual framework. At the same time, the theoretician cannot construct valid models without intuition and direct experience of the terrain.¹⁹ This vision is reflected in the definition of the purpose of modern geography, which de Martonne described as follows: "*Modern geography considers the distribution on the surface of the globe of physical, biological, and human phenomena, the causes of this distribution, and the local relationships of these phenomena.*"²⁰ Thus, the author emphasises geography's integrative and explanatory character, which does not limit itself to describing phenomena but highlights the balance between empirical observation and theoretical grounding. This balance gave his research lasting value both scientifically and in applied contexts.

Another important element of his intellectual profile is his orientation toward interdisciplinarity. Alongside his work as an agrégé professor, de Martonne took courses in geology and biology and deepened his knowledge of meteorology and climatology. This openness to the natural sciences enabled him to develop an integrative vision of geography, in which the analysis of space was not limited to describing landforms but also included climatic, biological, and geological processes. His attainment of a second degree in science in 1897 confirms this orientation toward a "*total geography*," capable of explaining the interdependencies between nature and society²¹.

The defining moment of his intellectual profile was likely his first visit to

¹⁸ Victor Tufescu, "Emmanuel de Martonne, făuritor al geografiei moderne și rolul său în formarea geografiei românești," Emmanuel de Martonne, *Lucrări geografice despre România*, vol. 1, *Cercetări asupra evoluției morfologice a Alpilor Transilvaniei (Carpații Meridionali)*, ed. V. Tufescu, Gh. Niculescu, and Ș. Dragomirescu, trans. and annotated by Gh. Niculescu (București: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1981).

¹⁹ Vintilă Mihăilescu, "Emmanuel de Martonne," *Analele Științifice ale Universității «Al. I. Cuza» – Iași* (serie nouă), sec. 2, Științe naturale, b) Geologie-Geografie 8 (1962): 11–15.

²⁰ Emmanuel de Martonne, *Traité de géographie physique: Climat, Hydrographie, Relief du sol, Biogéographie* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1909).

²¹ Jean Bastié, "Emmanuel de Martonne – Géographe fondateur de la géographie générale moderne et de la géographie régionale," *FIGinfos: Festival International de Géographie de Saint-Dié-des-Vosges*, 18th ed., October 4–7, 2007 (Saint-Dié-des-Vosges Cedex, 2007), theme: "La Planète en mal d'énergies," guest country: "La Roumanie."



Romania in 1897, at the invitation of his friend and colleague Pompiliu Eliade²². This initial visit opened a field of research for Emmanuel de Martonne that would shape his subsequent activity. The Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic space became a genuine geographical and cultural laboratory, where he could apply the interdisciplinary methods he had acquired during his academic training. This openness to applied research in Eastern Europe complemented the rigorous preparation of the French school, shaping an intellectual profile characterised by a balance between theoretical foundations and practical application.

His impact extended beyond the scientific sphere, with direct consequences for geopolitics and identity formation. In one of his works, de Martonne emphasised that geography's progress does not depend on political circumstances, but on constant effort and the slow maturation of research: "The progress of the Geography of living beings has nothing to do with political circumstances. It is the result of persistent and continuous effort and appears rather like a fruit that ripens slowly."²³ This reflection faithfully expresses his intellectual ethos: a geography understood as a science of duration, built through perseverance and the integration of natural and cultural dimensions, relevant both to academic knowledge and to understanding historical and identity dynamics.

In 1899, his appointment as *chargé de cours* (assistant professor) at the University of Rennes marked the beginning of geography's affirmation as a scientific discipline in France. There he developed a geographical research laboratory and initiated the first interuniversity field excursions, introducing direct field observation as an essential tool in student training. Applying William Morris Davis's theory of landform levelling through fluvial erosion, he studied Brittany's peneplained Hercynian relief, demonstrating his ability to integrate theory with practice²⁴.

At the same time, Emmanuel de Martonne did not neglect human and regional geography, publishing fundamental works such as *La Valachie. Essai de monographie géographique* (his first doctoral thesis in Letters, 1902)²⁵, a major

²² Tufescu, "Emmanuel de Martonne, făuritor al geografiei moderne și rolul său în formarea geografiei românești" (București, 1981).

²³ Emmanuel de Martonne, *Traité de géographie physique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1951), ix.

²⁴ Gaëlle Hallair, *Le géographe Emmanuel de Martonne et l'Europe centrale*, Grafigéo: Mémoires et documents de l'UMR PRODIG, no. 148 (UMR PRODIG, UMR Géographie-cités, 2007), Jean-Marie Théodat, ISSN 1281-6477, HAL identifier hal-00282068.

https://hal.science/hal-00282068/file/Grafigeo_Gaëlle_decembre2007.pdf (accessed May 30, 2026)

²⁵ The geographical exploration of the Romanian territory represents one of the constant directions of Emmanuel de Martonne's activity, reflected in numerous fundamental studies, such as Emmanuel de Martonne, "Sur les terrasses des rivières karpatiques en Roumanie" and "Sur l'évolution de la zone des dépressions subcarpatiques en Roumanie," *C.R. Académie des sciences* (Paris, 1898): 226–227, 316–318; Emmanuel de Martonne, "Sur l'histoire de la vallée du Jiu," *C.R. des Séances de l'Acad. des Sc.* 129 (Paris, 1899): 978–980; Emmanuel de Martonne, *La Roumanie: géographie physique, géologie, climat, biogéographie politique* (Paris: Société Anonyme de la Grande Encyclopédie, 1900), 5; Emmanuel de Martonne, "Sur les mouvements du sol et la

contribution regarded as a model of complex geographical analysis. In this study, the author addresses multiple aspects of the natural environment: he delineates the Subcarpathians as a distinct relief unit, explains the formation of the Danube's transversal sector through river capture, describes the evolution of the Jiu Valley, analyses the glacial relief of the Southern Carpathians, as well as the karst forms of the Mehedinți Plateau, the Rucăr-Bran Corridor, and the Bucegi Massif.

In 1907, Emmanuel de Martonne published his second doctoral thesis in science, entitled *Recherches sur l'évolution morphologique des Alpes de Transylvanie (Karpates Méridionales)*²⁶. It was a landmark work that became the starting point for all subsequent geomorphological research. Structured into nine chapters, the thesis stands out for its rigorous methodological organisation: from presenting the methods and principles underpinning the research to analysing the geological premises and describing the component relief units. The author did not limit himself to the mountain space proper but extended his observations to areas in close functional dependence on it, investigating the evolution of the hydrographic network as far as the Romanian Plain and the Transylvanian Plateau. Thus, the work stands out as a model of integrated geographical research, combining relief analysis with the study of hydrographic dynamics and interactions among different landscape units. Both works enjoyed success in the French academic environment. They had a considerable impact on Romanian science, helping develop geography in the spirit of modern European scholarship and training young Romanian geographers in the first half of the twentieth century, who laid the foundations of the geographical schools of Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, and Cernăuți.

Another argument for his prestige is his involvement in the academic and editorial spheres: he was elected secretary of the French Geological Society and, later, editor of the journal *Annales de Géographie*.²⁷ Through these roles, he helped institutionalise geography as a scientific discipline, consolidate academic networks, and promote modern research standards.

During the First World War (1914–1918), Emmanuel de Martonne served as an *attaché* in the Cartographic Service of the French Army, where he demonstrated his competence in applying morphological research to the strategic needs of the war. This experience strengthened his reputation as a geographer who could turn scientific analysis into practical tools for military and political decision-making.

At the end of the war, as Secretary General of the Committee of Studies established for the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), Emmanuel de Martonne played an essential role in preparing the dossiers for determining Romania's

formation des vallées en Valachie," *Bulletin of the Society of Sciences* (Bucharest, 1901): 499–502.

²⁶ Emmanuel de Margerie, "L'évolution morphologique des Alpes de Transylvanie (Karpates Méridionales), d'après Mr de Martonne," *Annales de Géographie* 17, no. 96 (1908): 404–412, https://www.persee.fr/doc/geo_0003-4010_1908_num_17_96_18251 (accessed May 30, 2026).

²⁷ André Cholley, "Emmanuel de Martonne," *Annales de Géographie* 65, no. 347 (1956): 1–14, https://www.persee.fr/doc/geo_0003-4010_1956_num_65_347_14339 (accessed May 30, 2026).



borders. This committee included leading figures of the time: historians such as Ernest Lavisse (president), Ernest Denis, Charles Seignobos, and Eugène Babelon, as well as geographers including Paul Vidal de la Blache (vice-president), Lucien Gallois, Albert Bernard, Albert Demangeon, Jean Brunhes, and Georges Chabot. In front of the representatives of the Great Powers, who themselves had experts (the American geographer Douglas Johnson of Columbia University, historian Charles Seymour and economist Clive Day of Yale, along with British specialists), the geographical arguments presented by Emmanuel de Martonne stood out for their rigour and clarity, decisively influencing the decisions regarding the delineation of borders. In the geopolitical context of the period, Emmanuel de Martonne did not limit himself to describing geographical spaces but transformed his observations into identity and political constructs. His participation in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 demonstrates his role as an expert, where he employed geographical and ethnographic criteria to support the delineation of Greater Romania's borders.²⁸ Likewise, through works such as *La Roumanie* (1919), in which he described the geographical and identity unity of the Romanian space, de Martonne reinforced the image of Romania's geographical and cultural cohesion.

In his studies and research on the Romanian space, Emmanuel de Martonne is often evoked as "a friend of Greater Romania" for his decisive contribution to establishing its borders through geographical and ethnographic criteria. Beyond his academic activity, he published articles in the French press, through which he supported the Romanian cause before Western public opinion, contributing to the consolidation of the international legitimacy of the Romanian national project. In this sense, the geographer considered Romania not merely a name on the map, but a profound geographical and historical reality worthy of detailed study.²⁹

His deep knowledge of Romanian space, and of the language and psychology of the Romanian people, gained over more than fifteen years of field research, enabled him to understand both the natural realities and the human structures on either side of the Carpathians. This expertise led him to intervene firmly

²⁸On this subject, a multitude of scientific contributions have been produced and published, such as Ion Conea, "Un prieten al României: profesorul de Martonne," *Adevărul*, year 39, no. 13/156, Friday, November 5, 1926 (București, 1926); George Vâlsan, "Reprezentanții științei franceze la noi: Emmanuel de Martonne," in G. Vâlsan, *Opere Alese*, ed. Tiberiu Morariu, with Tiberiu Morariu, Nicolae Popp, Ion Conea, Teodor Onișor, and Alexandru Savu (București: Științifică, 1971); Anda Raicu, "Galeria înfăptuitorilor României Mari: Emmanuel de Martonne," *România Pitorească*, no. 492 (1/2018) (București, 2018); Alexandre Davier, "Emmanuel de Martonne și România Mare," *Magazin Istoric*, serie nouă, year 34, no. 8 (413), August 2001 (București, 2010), 22; Vasile-George Ursu, "De pe malul Senei pe crestele Carpaților: Geograful francez Emmanuel de Martonne și recunoașterea academică românească," *Akadosmos – Revistă de știință, inovare, cultură și artă*, no. 53 (2/2019) (Chișinău, 2019); Vasile-George Ursu, "Emmanuel de Martonne și consacrarea României Mari" (PhD diss., 2024); Gavin Bowd, *Un géographe français et la Roumanie. Emmanuel de Martonne (1873–1955)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), and many others.

²⁹ Alexandre Davier, "Emmanuel de Martonne și România Mare," *Magazin Istoric*, serie nouă, year 34, no. 8 (413), August 2001 (București: Fundația Culturală "Magazin Istoric," 2010), 22.

in Romania's favour at the Paris Peace Conference, fully supporting the documents submitted by the Romanian delegation, headed by Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu.

In 1919, his contributions were published in *Travaux du Comité d'études*, vol. II, in the section *Questions européennes*³⁰, where he presented his scientific analyses of each Romanian province: Banat, Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Dobruja. Emmanuel de Martonne's principal contribution was a highly valuable map, included among the annexes of the official documentation, entitled *Répartition des nationalités dans les Pays où dominent les Roumains*³¹ (see Photo no. 3 below).

His research methodology was based on a fundamental principle: the map had to reflect, in a real and precise manner, the mixture of nationalities, using numerical data as the primary reference. Through this approach, de Martonne provided an objective and convincing image of ethnic distribution, avoiding geopolitical simplifications or distortions. Thus, through his professionalism, well-reasoned presentation, and scientific and strategic arguments, Emmanuel de Martonne established himself as a persuasive researcher and diplomat, decisively influencing decisions on the delineation of Greater Romania's borders.

Symbolic Geography and National Identity in Emmanuel de Martonne's Studies on Bessarabia

In the summer of 1919, Emmanuel de Martonne undertook a study visit to Bessarabia, during which he made direct observations of the province's geography and population³². This journey formed part of the final stage of the French university delegation's programme, aimed at investigating the social and political realities of Transylvania, Banat, and Bessarabia directly in the field and providing an objective picture of the situation in these regions for the Paris Peace Conference.

Moreover, in an interview given to the newspaper *Adevărul*, Emmanuel de Martonne admitted that "he was very interested in understanding the state of affairs in Transylvania, which he had only seen in passing." Still, he was especially concerned with discovering Bessarabia, which interested him as "language,

³⁰ Emmanuelle Boulineau, "Un géographe traceur de frontières: Emmanuel de Martonne et la Roumanie," *L'Espace géographique*, no. 4 (2001): 367–368.

<https://shs.cairn.info/revue-espace-geographique-2001-4-page-358?lang=fr> (accessed May 30, 2026)

Gavin Bowd, "Emmanuel de Martonne et la naissance de la Grande Roumanie," *Revue Roumaine de Géographie* 55, no. 2 (2011): 216, etc.

³¹ The map was published in 1919 by the Army Geographic Service in *L'Atlas du Comité*, and again in 1920 in an article by Emmanuel de Martonne that appeared in *Annales de Géographie* (cf. Hallair, *Le géographe Emmanuel de Martonne et l'Europe centrale*, 43).

³² See also Nicolae Enciu and Vasile-George Ursu, "Basarabia în preocupările științifice ale marelui geograf francez Emmanuel de Martonne," *Revista de Istorie a Moldovei* (Chișinău, January–March 2018), and many others.



Romanian soul, and social movement.”³³ For him, Bessarabia was not merely a territory of study but a borderland where geography, geopolitics, and identity overlapped, and where natural realities intertwined with cultural and political ones. In his analyses, Emmanuel de Martonne emphasised the importance of Bessarabia’s natural and cultural unity in relation to Romania, arguing that this territory could not be understood in isolation but only as an integral part of the Romanian space. His observations played an essential role in strengthening the dossiers presented at the Paris Peace Conference, contributing to the international recognition of Bessarabia’s belonging to Romania.

As historian Svetlana Suveică observes, Emmanuel de Martonne stands out as an emblematic figure of European geography who succeeded in transforming scientific knowledge into an instrument of political and diplomatic influence. In her analysis, Suveică highlights the way in which de Martonne combined science, politics, and propaganda in the context of redefining the borders of Eastern Europe after the First World War, playing a decisive role in the debates concerning the status of Bessarabia.³⁴ During his visit, Emmanuel de Martonne made direct observations on Bessarabia’s geography and population, viewing it as a territory organically linked to Romania through the natural unity of its relief, its hydrographic network, and the continuity of its cultural and ethnic life. This perspective underpinned the arguments presented at the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), where his geographical expertise formed the basis for international recognition of Bessarabia’s belonging to Romania.

During his study visit to Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne was accompanied by his friend, the Romanian geographer and geologist Gheorghe Munteanu-Murgoci (1872–1925), who knew the territory well from earlier geological research in the region. Munteanu-Murgoci’s expertise included field observations and statistical and economic studies on Bessarabia, which were made available to the Paris Peace Conference. These contributions complemented the materials prepared by Emmanuel de Martonne – texts and maps – thus strengthening the dossier presented by the French delegation³⁵. Moreover, in his memoirs, the writer N. Dunăreanu (1881–1973) notes that Gheorghe Munteanu-Murgoci contributed, to a great extent, to the recognition of this province by the “Peace Commission” as an integral part of the Kingdom of Romania, since “... the land of

³³ Ana-Maria Stan, “Vizita misiunii universitare franceze în România (iunie 1919) și semnificațiile sale,” in *Biserică, Societatea, Identitate. În onoare Nicolae Bocușan* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007), 696.

³⁴ Svetlana Suveică, “Between Science, Politics and Propaganda: Emmanuel de Martonne and the debates on the status of Bessarabia (1919–1920),” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 58, no. 4 (2017): 589–614.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26615924> (accessed May 30, 2026)

³⁵ Ursu, “Geograful francez Emmanuel de Martonne în Chișinăul anului 1919,” in *Identitățile Chișinăului: Orașul interbelic*, 5th ed., November 1–2, 2018 (Chișinău, 2020), 54.

the country was entirely familiar to him, not only as a geologist, but also through its customs, faith, and soul.”³⁶

Starting from the southern part of the province, after crossing the Prut River at Galați, Emmanuel de Martonne visited the towns of Bolgrad and Cahul, as well as various Romanian, Bulgarian, German, Gagauz, Russian, and Armenian communities. In each locality, the French geographer recorded the inhabitants' opinions, capturing them with almost photographic precision. In this way, he conveyed not only the ethnic diversity but also the communities' perceptions of identity and belonging. A central moment of his itinerary was his visit to Chișinău, where local leaders and the Bessarabian intellectual Paul Gore warmly received him.³⁷ Later, he would describe his impressions of Bessarabia as follows: the province “... is inhabited by a motley population, where interethnic marriages must be frequent, and the notion of race (nationality) has an indistinct meaning, since a person declaring himself Gagauz resembled more a Little Russian, a Bulgarian resembled a Romanian from Muntenia, and a self-declared Russian was nothing more than someone whose father was Moldavian and mother Bulgarian...”³⁸

On July 7, 1919, during the proceedings of the Paris Peace Conference³⁹, Emmanuel de Martonne presented a “Note on Bessarabia” in which he defended the legitimacy of the March 27, 1918 vote on the union of the province with Romania. In his argumentation, the French geographer asserted that Bessarabia ranked among the most evidently Romanian territories of the historical domain of Romania, emphasising the predominantly Romanian character of its population: “Of all the provinces that make up the historical domain of Romania, Bessarabia is one of the most evidently Romanian...”⁴⁰

Emmanuel de Martonne observed that the great majority of Bessarabia's inhabitants were Moldavian peasants, speakers of a pure Romanian language, unaltered by external influences. In contrast, Russification was confined to urban elites and did not change the province's basic ethnic structure in rural areas. This observation reinforced the idea that Romanian identity was deeply rooted in everyday life and popular culture: “...the great majority of this territory was

³⁶ Nicolae Dunăreanu, *Nădejdi spulberate – Nuvele, schițe, amintiri* (Chișinău: Tipografia Eparhială “Cartea Românească,” 1928), 207, https://bp-soroca.md/soroca/Dun%C4%83reanu%20N.%20N%C4%83dejdi%20Spulberate_%20Nuvele%2C%20Schi%C8%9Be%2C%20Amin-tiri.%201928.pdf (accessed May 30, 2026).

³⁷ Nicolae Enciu and George V. Ursu, “Emmanuel de Martonne – Avocatul României în problema Basarabiei, la Conferința de Pace de la Paris din 1919–1920,” *GeoPolitica. Revistă de Geografie Politică, GeoPolitică și Geo Strategie* 17, no. 81 (4/2019) (București: TopForm – Asociația de Geopolitică “Ion Conea,” 2019): 164–178.

³⁸ Emmanuel de Martonne, *What I Have Seen in Bessarabia* (Paris: Imprimerie des Arts et des Sports, 1919), 9–10.

³⁹ Valeriu-Florin Dobrinescu, *Bătălia diplomatică pentru Basarabia. 1918–1940* (Iași: Junimea, 1991), 88–89.

⁴⁰ Gavin Bowd, *Un géographe français et la Roumanie. Emmanuel de Martonne (1873–1955)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012), 117.



inhabited by Moldavian peasants, who speak the purest Romanian language, only the upper strata of society being Russified ...”⁴¹

Through this analysis, the French geographer argued that the union of Bessarabia with Romania was not arbitrary, but a natural consequence of historical, geographical, and ethnic realities. In his view, the decision of March 27, 1918 confirmed an organic belonging, showing that Bessarabia was one of the most evidently Romanian regions of Romania’s historical domain. Thus, de Martonne’s observations became both a scientific and moral foundation for the international recognition of the union at the Paris Peace Conference.

Nevertheless, Emmanuel de Martonne remarked that the peasants of Bessarabia saw the province more as “Moldavian” than “Romanian,” because of the high level of illiteracy (approximately 95% of the population) and their lack of awareness of the national value of the language they spoke. This observation highlighted the region’s social and cultural shortcomings while also underscoring the need to keep Bessarabia out of foreign control, which would have exploited this ignorance to dominate the population more easily.

In his view, the natural solution was the incorporation of Bessarabia into Romania, in accordance with ethnic, historical, and geographical rights⁴². To support these ideas, Emmanuel de Martonne emphasised that the province fitted perfectly, from a geographical standpoint, into the natural unity of the Romanian space, being part of the geographical continuity of the hills of Moldavia and Western Wallachia. Thus, his argument combined social observation with geographical analysis and the ethnic and cultural construction of Bessarabia, showing that the union should be seen as the logical outcome of historical and natural realities.

Taking into account the issue of the viability of geographical frontiers and the application of the principle of national self-determination formulated by President Woodrow Wilson⁴³, Emmanuel de Martonne integrated these ideas into a coherent vision of the Romanian space.

In Emmanuel de Martonne’s view, nationalities were “... groups of population highly mixed from an ethnic point of view, united by a set of traditions and practices in the material and moral sphere (...), which we generally admit to be the sign of nationality and of language ...”⁴⁴

He showed that delimiting frontiers cannot be reduced to mere political conventions, but must account for natural, economic, and social realities, as well as the ethnic structure of the population. In his final work, the geographer

⁴¹ De Martonne, *What I Have Seen in Bessarabia*, 9–10.

⁴² Taline Ter Minassian, “Les géographes français et la délimitation des frontières balkaniques à la Conférence de la Paix en 1919,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 44, no. 2 (1997): 252–286, https://www.persee.fr/doc/rhmc_0048-8003_1997_num_44_2_1864?q=Martonne%20Bessarabie. (accessed May 31, 2026)

⁴³ George Sofronie, *Principiul naționalităților în Tratatul de Pace din 1919–1920* (București: Albatros, 1999), 239.

⁴⁴ Boulineau, “Un géographe traceur de frontières,” 361. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-espace-geographique-2001-4-page-358?lang=fr> (accessed May 30, 2026)

discussed two cartographic systems used for representing populations: one “synthetic or geographic” and the other “analytic or statistical.” In this context, he returned to his own method of delimiting “natural regions,” which did not rely solely on physical criteria but also integrated economic and social factors. Unlike the “natural areas” previously used by other geographers, de Martonne applied this extended approach to the entirety of Romanian territories, offering a more complex and faithful image of reality.

His approach was radical. Whenever a nationality exceeded the 75% threshold in a region, it was represented exclusively on the map, with minorities no longer considered. Through this method, the map became not only an instrument for highlighting ethnic dominance but also a means of political legitimisation, since it visually simplified the relations between majority nations and ethnic minorities, accentuating the idea of national unity.⁴⁵

Referring to Greater Romania, Emmanuel de Martonne emphasised that it should not be regarded as an artificial state, created by the arbitrary will of diplomats, but as a natural and legitimate expression of the historical, ethnic, and geographical evolution of the Romanian people: “...from every point of view, the new Romania is new only by its extension, double that of the former Kingdom. It presents itself to us not as a state born of the diplomats’ imagination, nor as a state fabricated based on an abstract principle, but rather as the logical outcome of an evolution. (...) The state that perpetuates its name is considerably larger, better balanced. As close as possible to the national ideal, it brings together almost all Romanians within borders that are in some sense ideal, around that Carpathian citadel which has always been the heart of the Romanian nation...”⁴⁶

After returning to Paris and presenting his report before the Peace Conference, Emmanuel de Martonne did not limit himself to academic and diplomatic activity. He launched a broad press campaign to convey to the French public the conclusions of his observations in Bessarabia. Through articles and public interventions, the French geographer sought to promote the image of Bessarabia as an authentically Romanian space and to legitimise the union of 1918. Thus, for him, the press became a complementary instrument to scientific research, through which he transformed geographical and ethnographic arguments into political and cultural messages accessible to a wider audience.

As a result of his field research, Emmanuel de Martonne devoted three works to Bessarabia, published in 1919, each of major importance in supporting the geographical and political arguments for the province’s integration into Romania:

- 1) “En Bessarabie” is an article published in the *Journal des Débats* on July 19, 1919, with a predominantly journalistic character, through which Emmanuel de Martonne presented Bessarabia to the French public as an integral part of Romanian unity, emphasising its role as a borderland and the cultural and historical importance of its Romanian population.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Enciu and Ursu, “Emmanuel de Martonne – Avocatul României în problema Basarabiei,” 164–178.



- 2) “Choses vues en Bessarabie” is an article published in *Revue de Paris* in 1919, presented as a reflective text based on direct observations from the summer of 1919, in which Bessarabia is described as a territory where geography and identity overlap, and where social realities confirm its organic connection with Romania.
- 3) “La Bessarabie. Avec une Carte et un Appendice,” a scientific work published by *Imprimerie Nationale*, Paris, in 1919, constitutes a synthesis accompanied by a map and an appendix, prepared for the Commission of Experts at the Paris Peace Conference. It provides a rigorous scientific foundation through the geographical, historical, and ethnographic criteria the author uses to argue for Bessarabia’s integration into Romania. In this work, we can see the author’s perception of Bessarabia, which may be viewed as a margin, but “a margin that belongs to Romanian unity,” an idea that perfectly encapsulates the way Emmanuel de Martonne conceived the relationship between symbolic geography and national identity.⁴⁷

The author’s studies and reflections on Bessarabia provided both the Western public and the Commission of Experts at the Paris Peace Conference with a rigorous and convincing foundation for the province’s belonging to the Romanian space.

In his research on Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne used geographical elements to legitimise political claims. The positioning of Bessarabia as a borderland between Central Europe and the Orient, together with its relief and hydrographic network, was invoked to demonstrate its natural unity with Romania. The direct field observations he carried out during his 1919 visit enabled him to build an argument grounded in tangible realities, through which geography became an objective foundation for integrating Bessarabia into Romanian space.

Beyond the geographical dimension, de Martonne’s discourse also relied on symbolic elements intended to shape collective identity. Bessarabia was described as a peripheral region, yet also an integral part of the wider Romanian community. Through this representation, the geographer transformed the territory into a symbol of national unity, where geography intertwined with history, culture, and national identity.

Moreover, Emmanuel de Martonne’s opinion of Bessarabia as an authentically Romanian space is found in the article “En Bessarabie,” published in the *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires* on July 19, 1919 (Photo no. 2)⁴⁸. The text has a clear diplomatic dimension, being intended to convince French public opinion of the legitimacy of the province’s union with Romania and to reject the ideas of a plebiscite or of contesting the vote of March 27, 1918. To demonstrate Bessarabia’s organic belonging to the Romanian space, the French geographer emphasised the population’s predominantly Romanian character, relying on direct observations and ethnographic analysis.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel de Martonne, *La Bessarabie. Avec une Carte et un Appendice* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1919), 19 pp.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel de Martonne, “En Bessarabie,” *Journal des Débats*, July 19, 1919. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k489046v?lang=FR#> (accessed May 31, 2026)

He showed that the union was not arbitrary. It was the natural result of historical, geographical, and ethnic realities, highlighting the predominance of Moldavian peasants speaking a pure Romanian language, in contrast with the Russification limited to the urban elites. By applying the principle of “natural regions,” de Martonne demonstrated the territorial coherence of Greater Romania and argued that frontiers must reflect geographical and human realities, not merely contingent political decisions.

In this way, the article “En Bessarabie” transformed geography into an instrument of political and identity legitimisation and became one of the most influential French contributions to the international recognition of Bessarabia's union with Romania.

Photo no. 2. Emmanuel de Martonne, *En Bessarabie*, article published in *Journal des Débats*, July 19, 1919.

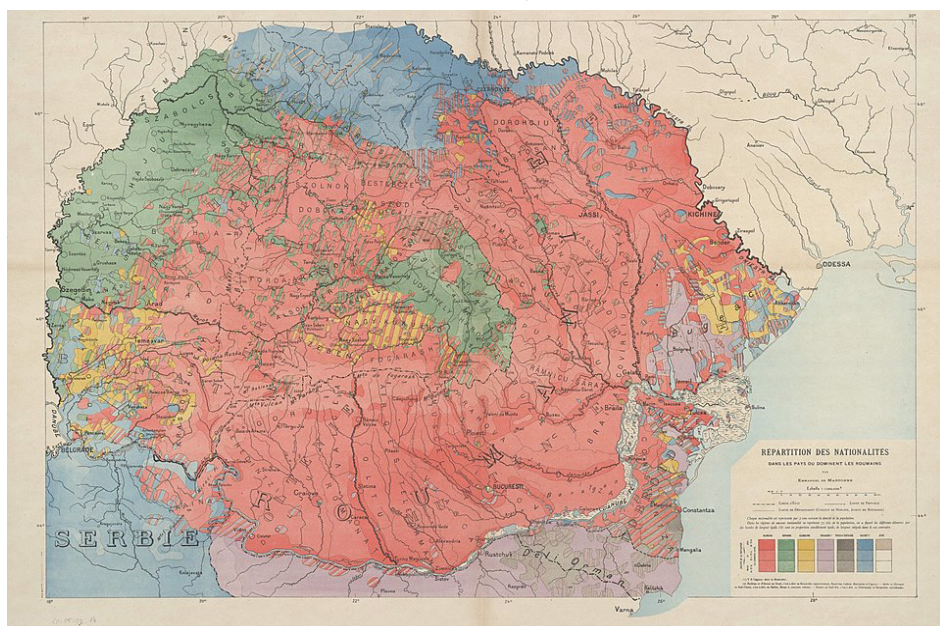


Source: National Library of France. Online access: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k489046v?lang=FR#>



Emmanuel de Martonne's vision of Bessarabia was grounded in a solid scientific and practical argumentation, built primarily on the idea of historical and ethnic rights, which he also presented in his other two works: "Choses vues en Bessarabie" (*Revue de Paris*, October 1, 1919) and "La Bessarabie" (Paris, 1919), published under the auspices of the Territorial Commission of the Paris Peace Conference. In this latter work, de Martonne offered a complex synthesis: the political history of the province, statistical data covering the entire territory, the geographical distribution of nationalities, the process of Russification, and the population's perceptions of agrarian, administrative, and educational policies, as well as of Bessarabia's autonomy and its union with Romania. The *ethnographic map* was intended to visualise the spatial distribution of ethnic groups and to support the idea of the continuity of the Romanian element in the region. At the same time, the *documentary appendix* supplemented the data and statistical sources to demonstrate the work's scientific rigour.

Figure no. 3. Map of the distribution of nationalities in the countries where Romanians predominate (*Répartition des nationalités dans les pays où dominent les Roumains*)



Source: National Library of France. Online access: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/>

At the same time, "Choses vues en Bessarabie" (also published in English as *What I Have Seen in Bessarabia*, Paris, Imprimerie des Arts et des Sports, 1919) is not merely a travel journal. It is also a geopolitical document intended to provide the French public and the Paris Commission with an authentic image of the province. Through field observations, social descriptions, and ethnographic arguments, Emmanuel de Martonne demonstrates that Bessarabia

is an authentically Romanian space, carefully presenting to the wider public his perception of the province's political situation:

"Having returned to Paris a few days ago from a journey I made in Bessarabia, I was surprised by the questions that were put to me. One asked for my impressions of the Bolsheviks, another worriedly inquired about the uprisings said to be provoked by Romanian abuses, yet another wanted to know whether it was true that Romanian is not spoken in Bessarabia. All of them asked whether it was indeed the case that the mass of the population wished to return to Russia."⁴⁹

To counter the erroneous perceptions circulating in the French press and public opinion about Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne drew upon his documentation in the region, noting that the province was under Romanian control and in a state of order and security, thereby contradicting the rumours of chaos and Bolshevik influence. In this context, he wrote:

"I did not encounter the slightest trace of Bolsheviks. If you have the travel permit required in the military zone, you can move about easily in Bessarabia. Perfect peace and order prevail there. Our troops have almost completely evacuated the lower Dniester; nevertheless, Romanian forces occupy the entire front, echeloned as far as Chişinău. I saw several Romanian battalions. The soldiers are well armed and have a martial bearing. The defence against Bolshevism is the most evident benefit of the Romanian occupation and makes the greatest impression upon the middle class."⁵⁰

To respond to rumours circulating in Paris about Bessarabia's instability, Emmanuel de Martonne compared the province's situation with that of Transylvania. He emphasised that, although Bessarabia was administered after the 1918 union vote like Transylvania, conditions were more delicate because of high illiteracy and the absence of Romanian cultural institutions. His observations stressed the necessity of education and the role of schools in awakening national consciousness. In this context, he wrote:

"The rumours circulating in Paris have no basis? The part of truth is as follows: Since the National Council in Chişinău voted for the unconditional union with Romania, Bessarabia has been administered in the same way as Transylvania, but the situation in the former is much more delicate. The foreign elements are not much more numerous than in Transylvania; in fact, they are somewhat more scattered. The Russians do not form compact groups anywhere, and precisely along the banks of the Dniester, the Romanians are more numerous, except in the North, in the Hotin area. However,

⁴⁹ Emmanuel de Martonne, "Choses vues en Bessarabie," *Revue de Paris*, year 26, vol. 5, October 1, 1919, 499–534.

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k17567h/f501.item> (accessed May 31, 2026)

⁵⁰ Ibid.



while Transylvania played an effective role in regenerating the Romanians, Bessarabia was systematically set aside. No Romanian book could cross the Prut; in Bessarabia there was not a single Romanian school. Among the Romanian peasants of Bessarabia, 90% are illiterate. The national consciousness of a people can only be awakened through school; a great activity is now unfolding in this field there; teachers must even be taught the Latin alphabet.”⁵¹

At the same time, in his descriptions of Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne did not limit himself to political or ethnographic observations; he also captured the province’s geographical and agricultural dimensions. Through detailed geographical analyses of Bessarabia’s landscapes, he offered a vivid image of the soil’s fertility and of its natural continuity with the Romanian space. This perspective reinforced the argument that Bessarabia was not merely a politically disputed territory, but an organically integrated space within Romania’s geographical and cultural unity. In this sense, he remarked:

“From North to South, the land is admirably cultivated: in the steppes of Budjak, with their boundless horizons, the grain waves as far as the eye can see, while the corn, delayed by the rain, forms strips of light green alternating with the black strips of freshly ploughed fields. The hills around Chişinău, Orhei, and Soroca are full of orchards that conceal peasant cottages, nestled at the foot of heights covered with beautiful oak forests. These orchards have yielded a rich harvest.”⁵²

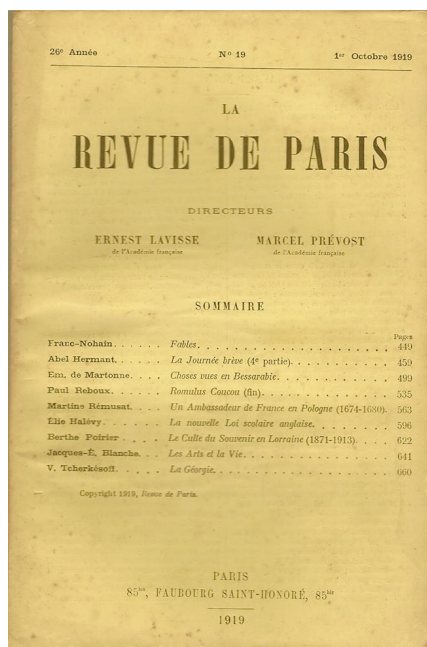


Photo no. 4. Emmanuel de Martonne, *Choses vues en Bessarabie*, *Revue de Paris*, October 1, 1919

Source: National Library of France. Online access: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k17567h/f501.item>

Another essential aspect Emmanuel de Martonne notes in Bessarabia is the question of identity, which he justified by combining geographical and historical observations with ethnographic and symbolic dimensions. The French geographer emphasised that the inhabitants defined themselves as “Moldavians,” yet they spoke a language identical to Romanian in the Carpathians, Wallachia, and Transylvania. In his descriptions, he captured the region’s cultural and geographical continuity, showing

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

that Romanian types, village layouts, and even house architecture confirmed Bessarabia's belonging to the Romanian space. In this context, he argued the following:

"All call themselves 'Moldavians.' However, the language they speak is identical to that which I observed in the Carpathians, in Wallachia, and in Transylvania. Although the Romanian costume has been abandoned – of which only the cap is still preserved – I found Romanian types as far as the gates of Chişinău. The very layout of the villages, the appearance of the houses, and the shingle roofs with fences enclosing the yards reminded me of the villages of Oltenia. This region of 'Codri' is just as purely Romanian as the hills south of the Carpathians. The Russian colonies established here have been assimilated. In many respects, I noted the inaccuracy of the old ethnographic maps, and I am certain that the proportion of Romanians is much greater than that indicated by the Russian census of 1897."⁵³

At the end of his observations, Emmanuel de Martonne sketched an optimistic and balanced image of Bessarabia as a space of great value for Romania, both for its natural wealth and its human potential. He described the province as "a wonderfully rich country, of inestimable value for Romania" [Fr.: "un pays merveilleusement riche, d'un prix inestimable pour la Roumanie"]⁵⁴, emphasising that, despite the ethnic mixture and the contrast between ignorant peasants and a Russified bourgeoisie, the process of definitive rallying to Romania was unfolding naturally, "in its natural course" [Fr.: "dans son cours naturel"]. Thus, de Martonne's conclusion expressed the conviction that Bessarabia's integration into the Romanian space was irreversible, based on geographical, economic, and cultural realities rather than merely political decisions.

Thus, his arguments for Bessarabia's return to the framework of Romanian culture and civilisation rested on scientific evidence and direct contact with the province's realities. Consequently, de Martonne's research on Bessarabia became both a political and diplomatic instrument for legitimising the Act of Union of 1918, and a model of academic rigour, through which applied geography became a means of supporting the international recognition of Bessarabia. In this way, geographical science, drawing on elements of symbolism, became an identity narrative that supported political and cultural consolidation and provided a lasting foundation for the unity of Greater Romania.

Conclusions

The identity construction of Bessarabia can be understood as a complex historical process carried out in several successive stages, each profoundly shaping the region's cultural and political evolution. Between 1812 and 1918, the province functioned as a frontier territory of the Russian Empire, where Romanian identity was systematically marginalised through policies of Russification, colonisation,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.



and institutional control. The local majority population's identity survived mainly in communal and traditional forms in rural areas, excluded from official political and administrative structures.

The integration of Bessarabia into Greater Romania during the period 1918–1940 generated a broad process of identity reconstruction, reinforced through policies based on education, culture, and administration. Nevertheless, this reintegration was partial and tense, facing local resistance and the legacy of decades of Russian domination. In this context, Bessarabia appears as both a frontier space and a space of alterity, where the regionalist Bessarabian mentality and Romanian identity asserted themselves in relation to external influences (imperial, Romanian, Soviet), but also as a laboratory of identity construction, in which symbolic geography and cultural policies contributed to consolidating its belonging to the Romanian unity.

As a broad and complex process, Bessarabia's identity construction cannot be understood solely through internal developments, but also through how the local community related to alterity. The reflection of "the Other," *whether Western or Eastern European*, became a fundamental element of the ethnic and social imaginary, since identity is defined not only by self-perception but also by contrast with the image of the foreigner. At the same time, contact with foreign visitors functioned as an external mirror through which Bessarabians recognised their differences, affirmed their particularities, and consolidated their identity discourse.

Symbolic geography and *historical imagology* provide this essential methodological framework: the territory is not merely a physical space, but a support for political, cultural, and identity narratives. Through descriptions, maps, and field observations, Bessarabia was represented as a frontier space where identity is constantly negotiated between "Us" and "Others." This perspective shows that identity construction cannot be reduced to a simple historical chronology; it must be understood as a dynamic interplay of symbols, perceptions, external views, and internal experiences, in which alterity plays a role as important as tradition.

These instruments become even more relevant in the context of the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), where the geographical borders of post-war Europe were drawn, and the collective identities of disputed provinces were redefined. As noted by N. Enciu and V. Ursu:

"The countries that emerged after 1918 were, among other things, the result of a reinterpretation of geography and its representation, of the overlapping of old maps with new methods of delineating cultural spaces. The peace treaties concluded after 1918 were based on several patterns of mental, political, physical, and ethnographic maps, which ultimately weighed most heavily in the final decisions of the political actors. Politics needed science, and intellectuals – especially historians and geographers – became political actors themselves by providing expertise for influential arguments and opinions..."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Nicolae Enciu and George V. Ursu, "Emmanuel de Martonne – Romania's Advocate in the Bessarabian Question at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–1920," *GeoPolitica. Journal of Political Geography, Geopolitics and Geo-Strategy* 17, no. 81 (4/2019) (Bucharest: TopForm Publishing – "Ion Conea" Association of Geopolitics, 2019): 164–178.

At the Paris Peace Conference, Emmanuel de Martonne formulated the principle of border viability, according to which frontier delimitation should not be based exclusively on geopolitical and ethnic criteria, but also on geographical factors such as relief, hydrographic networks, accessibility, and infrastructure. Through this approach, he opposed the more simplified vision of the American and British delegates. He contributed decisively to the delineation of European borders in the period 1918–1921, some of which, such as those between Romania, Serbia, and Hungary, remain in place to this day.

In the case of Bessarabia, Emmanuel de Martonne's contribution was essential: by providing a scientific foundation for its Romanian belonging, he transformed geography into a valuable diplomatic instrument, capable of legitimising political decisions intended to convince the Great Powers that Bessarabia was not an isolated margin of the Russian Empire, but an integral part of Romanian unity. In this way, symbolic geography intersected with international politics, confirming that border delimitation is not merely a technical act but also a process of identity and cultural construction.

Emmanuel de Martonne's endeavour went beyond academic research, becoming applied geography in the service of geopolitics. Through maps, ethnographic analyses, and comparative studies, he offered a coherent and persuasive image of Romanian space, transforming scientific argument into a legitimising discourse of national unity. In this sense, his work illustrates the tension between scientific objectivity and the political purpose of knowledge, showing how geographical expertise can become an instrument of identity and geopolitical construction.

Emmanuel de Martonne transformed Bessarabia into a narrative space, where the symbols of "margin" and "gate" became reference points for identity construction. Through geographical and ethnographic descriptions, he demonstrated that the province was not a peripheral territory detached from the centre, but a frontier zone organically integrated into Romanian unity. This perspective provided a framework for political and cultural legitimisation, showing how geography can serve as an instrument of identity construction.

Emmanuel de Martonne's ideas, both in his interventions at the Paris Peace Conference and in his studies of Bessarabia, profoundly shaped international perceptions of the region's history and future. His expertise consolidated the image of Bessarabia as an integral part of Greater Romania and directly influenced European political and diplomatic decisions. In this way, applied geography became an instrument of international legitimisation, capable of supporting the recognition of a disputed province and providing Romania with a solid foundation for integrating Bessarabia.

In conclusion, Emmanuel de Martonne remains not only one of the founders of modern geography, but also an architect of geopolitics and of the idea of Romanian unity, a scholar who succeeded in transforming geographical space analysis into an act of national and diplomatic affirmation. Through his use of maps,



field observations, and ethnographic arguments, he set a precedent: geography became an instrument of negotiation and legitimisation in international relations. His vision demonstrates that science – in this case, *geography* – can become an integral part of political negotiation and the construction of collective memory, providing a framework for identity interpretation and a durable foundation for historical decisions.

Rezumat

Anexată la Imperiul Rus în 1812, Basarabia a devenit un spațiu de frontieră supus unor politici sistematice de deznăționalizare și rusificare, menite să reducă elementul românesc și să o integreze în noul cadru imperial. Succesiunea schimbărilor politice din secolele XIX–XX – alipirea la Rusia, unirea cu România (1918) și încorporarea în Uniunea Sovietică (1940) – a generat instabilitate structurală și presiuni divergente asupra construcției identitare a regiunii. Astfel, Basarabia s-a transformat într-un „laborator identitar”, în care proiecte politice și culturale concurente (ruse, române, sovietice) au modelat loialitatea populației.

Poziția geografică, la confluența spațiului românesc și slav, între Europa Centrală și Orient, i-a conferit statutul de frontieră geopolitică și culturală. Identitatea Basarabiei s-a construit prin raportare la alteritate: rusă, ucraineană și românească, precum și prin suprapunerea unor discursuri identitare diferite. În acest context, vizita geografului francez Emmanuel de Martonne în 1919, în cadrul Conferinței de Pace de la Paris, a oferit o perspectivă externă decisivă asupra parcursului identitar al Basarabiei.

Prin observațiile sale și prin aplicarea conceptului de „geografie simbolică”, Basarabia a fost reprezentată ca parte integrantă a unității românești. Geografia, reinterpretată, a devenit un instrument de legitimare politică și culturală. Studiul demonstrează că imaginarul colectiv și percepțiile externe au fost factori esențiali în procesul de construire a identității Basarabiei.

Cuvinte-cheie: Basarabia, geografie simbolică, identitate colectivă, alteritate, Emmanuel de Martonne.

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