From the Romanian "Codru" to the Soviet Forest: Identity Transformations of the Bessarabian Forest Landscape[*]

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In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the forest landscape of Bessarabia was more than a natural setting or an economic resource. For local communities, it served as a meaningful point of reference, shaping everyday practices and broader forms of collective identification. The forest articulated a complex relationship between people, nature, and political authority, one that cannot be understood solely through the lens of material resource exploitation[1]. Alongside its economic role, the forest fund was embedded in cultural, social, and symbolic frameworks that contributed to the formation of collective identity and to the preservation of regional historical memory[2]. Environmental history has consistently demonstrated that natural spaces cannot be analyzed solely from ecological or economic perspectives. They must instead be understood as cultural landscapes, shaped by the interaction between the natural environment, human practices, political discourses, and symbolic representations. From this perspective, the forests of Bessarabia constitute a relevant case study for understanding how nature is shaped not only by ecological factors, but also by political and ideological change.

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[1] Aureliu Eliescu, *Politica noastră forestieră*, în „Revista Pădurilor", an 34, București, 1922, p. 43.

[2] Constantin C. Giurescu, *Istoria pădurii românești din cele mai vechi timpuri pînă astăzi*, București, Editura Ceres, 1975, p. 116.

Beyond its symbolic and discursive dimensions, the forest fund of Bessarabia can also be examined through quantitative indicators, which reveal both continuities and ruptures in the relationship between the state and nature. During the interwar period, following Bessarabia's integration into Greater Romania, the forested area of the province was estimated at approximately 430,000–450,000 hectares, accounting for about 9–11 percent of the total territory[3]. Recorded in official state statistics and forestry administration documents, these figures indicate a region with a lower level of forest cover than the national average, yet one in which forests retained considerable symbolic and economic importance for local communities. Following the establishment of Soviet administration, the forest fund of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was reassessed and reclassified within the statistical and administrative framework of the Soviet Union. According to data employed by Soviet authorities in the postwar years, the forested area of the republic amounted to approximately 450,000 hectares, with variations resulting from new inventory criteria, the inclusion of forest plantations, and state-driven afforestation policies. Although the proportion of forest cover registered a slight increase compared to the interwar period, this development did not signify continuity in traditional relations with the forest. Rather, it reflected a structural transformation in both the management and perception of forest resources, subordinated to the logic of centralized planning.

The successive transformations of political regimes brought about profound changes in the relationship between community, state, and nature, shaping both the administration of forest resources and their social perception. Over time, the forest became a space of negotiation between tradition and modernity, between symbol and resource, and between the autonomy of local communities and the expanding control exercised by the state. The political regime changes that marked Bessarabia's transition to the Tsarist administration, integration into the Romanian state during the interwar period, and subsequent Sovietization produced structural shifts in the organization and management of the forest fund. Each stage introduced a distinct set of administrative practices and ideological frameworks, which in turn redefined the status of the forest within society.

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[3] Nicolae Boboc, *Considerații cu privire la legitățile de repartiție spațială a peisajelor silvice în Republica Moldova*, în „Mediul Ambiant", nr. 4, 2008, pp. 1–3.

The Romanian "Codru" Forest and Identity

In the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the forest occupied a central place in the lives of rural communities in Bessarabia, being perceived not only as a source of material resources but also as a space of historical continuity and communal belonging. The term *codru*, frequently used in Romanian cultural tradition, referred to more than a simple vegetative formation, expressing a deeply symbolic relationship between humans and nature[4]. Associated with ideas of refuge, protection, and permanence, the *codru* was embedded in the collective imagination as a defining element of local cultural identity[5].

This symbolic dimension was grounded in concrete material realities. From a quantitative perspective, the forest fund of Bessarabia was characterized by a relatively modest extent in relation to the size of the territory[6]. Estimates from the late nineteenth century and the interwar period indicate a forested area of approximately 400,000 to 450,000 hectares, representing around 9–11 percent of the province's total surface[7]. Although this level of forest cover was lower than the average in other regions of the Romanian space, forests played a major role in the rural economy and in the organization of community life, being directly integrated into everyday village practices[8]. Within this framework, the relationship between community and forest was mediated by customary norms and by a local economy adapted to natural rhythms, characteristic of pre-industrial societies. Forest use was generally extensive and local in character, oriented toward meeting the immediate needs of communities such as firewood, construction materials, and forest grazing rather than toward systematic exploitation for national or external markets[9]. The forest was perceived as a common good, passed down from one generation to the next, and this mode of engagement endowed it with a distinct identity dimension that went beyond the strict logic of private property or economic valorization[10].

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[4] Constantin C. Giurescu, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

[5] „Anuarul Statistic al României", 1937–1938, București, Imprimeria Națională, 1938, p. 68.

[6] Iosif Leahu, *Amenajarea pădurilor*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2001, p. 36.

[7] Vasile Sabău, *Statistica pădurilor din România pe anul 1929*, în „Bucovina Forestieră", XVI, nr. 1, 2016, pp. 120–122.

[8] Dumitru Ivănescu, *Din istoria silviculturii românești*, București, Editura Ceres, 1972, p. 112.

[9] Gabriel Duduman, Marian Drăgoi, *Amenajarea pădurilor: Organizare spațio-temporală*, Suceava, Editura Universității „Ștefan cel Mare", 2019, pp. 28–34.

[10] Arcadie Capcelea, *Istoria ecologică a Republicii Moldova. Evoluția interacțiunilor omului și naturii*, vol. 2, Chișinău, [S.n.], Bons Offices, 2024, pp. 89–120.

The structure of forest ownership further contributed to the persistence of this traditional relationship. A significant share of forested land was administered by rural communities, monasteries, or small landholders, while forests under direct state control accounted for a relatively limited proportion[11]. This fragmentation of ownership encouraged the continuity of local exploitation practices and reinforced the perception of the forest as a space of communal belonging rather than as a resource subject to centralized control. From a compositional standpoint, the forest fund of Bessarabia was dominated by deciduous forests, particularly oak, hornbeam, and beech, species well-suited to the needs of the traditional rural economy. The absence of extensive coniferous massifs and of a developed industrial infrastructure limited the emergence of a modern forest industry, contributing to the maintenance of a local and relatively balanced pattern of forest use. Even under Tsarist administration, state control over the forest fund in Bessarabia remained relatively limited, especially in relation to local realities. Although attempts were made to regulate and inventory forest resources, the available data point more toward continuity in forested areas than toward major structural transformations. Imperial intervention did not succeed in fully replacing the traditional relationship between communities and the forest, and the symbolic dimension of the *codru* continued to persist, albeit partially affected by administrative policies of the Russian Empire. In collective perception, the forest remained an essential element of local identity and a marker of cultural continuity.

The Soviet Forest Ideologization and Instrumentalization

The radical change of political regime that occurred after 1940 brought about a profound transformation in the status of the forest in Bessarabia, both institutionally and symbolically. The integration of the territory into the Soviet system entailed not only an administrative reorganization of the forest fund, but also a redefinition of the relationship between humans and nature in accordance with the new ideological imperatives of the socialist state.

From a quantitative standpoint, Soviet authorities undertook a reassessment of the republic's forest fund within a new system of land inventory and classification. According to data employed in the early postwar years, the forested area of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic amounted, in broad terms, to

[11] Aureliu Eliescu, *Politica noastră forestieră*, în „Revista Pădurilor", an 34, București, 1922, p. 43.

approximately 450,000 hectares, representing around 12–13 percent[12] of the republic's total territory. This modest increase in the proportion of forest cover compared to the interwar period reflected primarily changes in statistical criteria and the inclusion of forest plantations and shelterbelts, rather than continuity in traditional relationships between communities and the forest. Within the framework of the planned economy, the forest was gradually detached from its traditional identity-based significance and incorporated into an official discourse centered on productivity, control, and economic utility. The forest fund became an integral component of the Soviet state-building process[13], subordinated to broader objectives of industrialization and the intensive exploitation of natural resources. Five-year plans established clear quantitative targets, specifying both the volumes of timber to be harvested annually and the areas designated for regeneration or afforestation.

The new Soviet paradigm redefined the forest as an element of "socialist property," subject to a strictly centralized planning regime. Administrative records indicate a significant increase in planned extraction volumes, which, during the 1950s, reached several hundred thousand cubic meters annually in certain periods, depending on centrally defined objectives. The language employed in these documents clearly reflects the shift in paradigm: concepts such as *"plan"*, *"norm"*, *"fulfillment of targets"*, and *"full utilization of resources"* gradually replaced traditional terminology, contributing to a semantic redefinition of the forest as a technical and economic object. This orientation is illustrated particularly clearly in the documents of the Forestry Directorate within the Ministry of the Forest Industry of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, preserved in archival fond R–2346, *Ministry of the Forest Industry of the MSSR* (1944–1956)[14]. These records reveal the criteria of centralized planning, the hierarchical structure of the forestry administration, and the strict subordination of forest exploitation to state economic objectives. The transformation was not merely administrative but profoundly ideological. As Stephen Brain has shown, Soviet forestry policy pursued not only the intensive exploitation of natural resources, but also the reshaping of the natural landscape in accordance with the ideological goals of the socialist state. The forest thus became a

[12] Nicolae Boboc, *Considerații cu privire la legitățile de repartiție spațială a peisajelor silvice în Republica Moldova*, în „Mediul Ambiant", nr. 4, 2008, pp. 1–3.

[13] Boris Vizer, *Economia și starea socială a populației din Moldova în anii 40–80 ai secolului XX*, Chișinău, Editura Știința, 2012, pp. 12–13.

[14] Agenția Națională a Arhivelor din Republica Moldova (ANRM), Fond R–2346, *Ministerul Industriei Forestiere al RSSM*, 1944 – 1956, Inventar 1, pp. 4–58.

site of political experimentation, where the principles of the planned economy were applied to the natural environment in order to demonstrate the state's capacity to control and transform nature.

In this context, the traditional relationship between communities and the forest was deeply affected. Access by local communities to forest resources was restricted, and customary economic practices were replaced by a rigid bureaucratic system regulated by central institutions. The forest no longer functioned as a space of belonging or collective memory, but rather as a production unit integrated into a centralized administrative apparatus. This technocratic approach contributed to the erosion of the forest's symbolic dimension and to the deepening of the rupture between communities and the forest landscape.

From Local Heritage to State Resource

The transition from the Romanian *codru* to the Soviet forest illustrates a profound identity shift, driven by changes in political regimes and the ideological discourses associated with them. The forest moved from the status of local heritage, embedded in the lives of rural communities and in the collective imagination, to that of a strategic state resource, assessed almost exclusively through the lens of economic utility and productive efficiency.

This shift involved not only a transformation of administrative practices but also a redefinition of the meaning of the forest in social consciousness. The symbolic dimension traditionally associated with continuity, refuge, and identity was gradually marginalized and replaced by a utilitarian vision in which nature was perceived as an object of planning and institutional control. In this respect, the Bessarabian case confirms broader observations within environmental history, according to which modernity and centralized states tend to transform nature into a domain of technocratic intervention. In Bessarabia, this transformation acquired a distinct identity dimension, affecting collective memory and symbolic relationships with the forest landscape[15]. The Soviet forest no longer functioned as a marker of local identity, but as an element of a broader ideological project aimed at redefining the relationship between society and nature in socialist terms. The forest landscape thus emerges as a relevant indicator of the identity transformations produced under the Soviet regime, reflecting not only economic or administrative changes, but also profound shifts in the symbolic structure of society.

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[15] Constantin C. Giurescu, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

Conclusions

The analysis of identity transformations in the forest landscape of Bessarabia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries highlights the role of the forest as a relevant indicator of the political, administrative, and ideological changes that shaped this region. The transition from the Romanian *codru*, embedded in the everyday life of local communities and invested with rich symbolic meanings, to the Soviet forest, subject to centralized planning and economic instrumentalization, reflects profound shifts in the relationship between the state, communities, and nature[16]. These shifts are visible both at the level of discourse and in the administrative and quantitative structure of the forest fund.

The study has shown that the transformation of the forest landscape was not a linear process, but rather the result of the overlap of distinct paradigms of forest management and representation. While in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century the forest functioned as an identity reference and a space of collective memory, administrative modernization and, subsequently, Sovietization led to a radical redefinition of its status. The introduction of quantitative criteria, centralized planning, and standardized exploitation norms contributed to the gradual marginalization of the forest's symbolic dimension and to its reconfiguration as an object of bureaucratic control and economic planning.

From this perspective, the forest cannot be reduced to a mere natural resource but must be analyzed as an integral component of cultural and identity heritage. The integration of statistical data with symbolic analysis enables a more nuanced understanding of how the natural landscape becomes a space of memory, power, and identity. The forest landscape thus emerges as a social and political construct in which relations of domination, strategies of state legitimation, and the identity transformations of local communities are reflected.

[16] Gabriel Duduman, Marian Drăgoi, *op. cit.*, 2019, pp. 28–34.