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BESSARABIA IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN–AUSTRIAN COMMERCIAL RELATIONS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Anastasia GUȚU,
Moldova State University

The article aims to reveal Bessarabia's place in Russian-Austrian commercial relations of the first half of XIX century after its annexation by Russian Empire (in 1812). It focuses on how the trade structure customs rules and turnovers were changed in order to integrate region into empire. Special attention is paid to Russian tariff policy and shifting of traditional routes. The article based on archive documents, legislative acts and statistical data of the time reveals Bessarabia's role as transit and export territory between Russian and Austrian markets. The article also researches imperial customs system's impact on trades, goods productions and goods exchange in the region periphery.

Keywords: *Bessarabia, Russian Empire, Austrian Empire, economic relations, customs policy, economic integration, XIX century*.

BASARABIA ÎN CONTEXTUL RELAȚIILOR COMERCIALE RUSO–AUSTRIECE ÎN PRIMA JUMĂTATE A SECOLULUI AL XIX-LEA

Acest articol examinează rolul Basarabiei în relațiile economice ruso-austriece din prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea, după anexarea sa la Imperiul Rus (în 1812). Acesta examinează modul în care structurile comerciale, reglementările vamale și volumul tranzacțiilor comerciale s-au schimbat pentru a integra teritoriul în imperiu. O atenție deosebită este acordată politicii tarifare a Rusiei și schimbărilor rutelor comerciale tradiționale. Pe baza documentelor de arhivă, a actelor legislative și a datelor statistice din epocă, articolul demonstrează rolul Basarabiei ca teritoriu de tranzit și export între piețele rusă și austriacă. De asemenea, examinează impactul sistemului vamal imperial asupra comercianților, producției de mărfuri și volumului tranzacțiilor comerciale din interiorul teritoriului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Basarabia, Imperiul Rus, Imperiul Austriac, relații comerciale, politică vamală, integrare economică, secolul al XIX-lea.*

Introduction

Bessarabia became part of the Russian Empire as a result of the Russo-Turkish War through the Treaty of Bucharest in 1812. This changed the political and trade structure of the Lower Danube [22, p. 51]. The region referred to as Bessarabia was located between the rivers Prut and Dniester [4, p. 53–60] along old trade routes connecting the Black Sea with Central European markets [4, p. 10–35]. As of 1812 [16, p. 72–78] those routes were slowly redirected as part of the Russian Empire's trade policies, but with direct connections to their Austro-Hungarian neighbours, specifically Galicia and Bukovina. Until late in its tenure as part of Russia, Bessarabia maintained some trade idiosyncrasies [10, p. 189–193]. Russia allowed for a period of adjustment as they slowly integrated Bessarabia into their empire. During this time, it maintained some tax and administration idiosyncrasies which played a role in border trade with its western neighbour, the Austrian Empire. Primary exports included grain [18, p. 95-110], animal husbandry products, wine, salt and raw materials.

In return goods produced in Austria found their way into Bessarabia markets. This trade was impacted by customs changes such as the free-trade tariff of 1819 [6, p. 34–37] and the protectionist tariff of 1822 [2, p. 112–118]. This sea trade was facilitated by the Danubian and Black Sea ports, following the emergence of Odessa [4, p. 53–60] as a hub of exportation. Bordering Austrian lands led to both regular commerce and informal trans-border circulation of goods – again demonstrating the mismatch between imperial fiscal prerogatives and regional economic activity. Bessarabia, however, was affected directly by these processes as a space of production whose goods were increasingly exported.

Taken together, the first decades of the nineteenth century were a time when Bessarabia existed both as a borderland of the Russian Empire and as an inter-imperial contact zone [8, p. 139–145]. Viewing Russo-Austrian commercial relations from the perspective of Bessarabia can help to better conceptualize the interaction between imperial trade policies, diplomatic agreements and regional agency in Eastern Europe.

In this regard, the current article builds on existing research by taking a multi-angular approach to Russo-Austrian commerce from the perspective of Bessarabia. By making use of Austrian source material, namely the publications of the k. k. Statistische Zentralkommission [11], it is possible to view trade from outside of the Russian Empire and to reconstruct dynamics of exchange. From this vantage point, we can reassess how Bessarabia functioned not only in the Russian imperial context but in the larger system of interactions between the two monarchies.

We can observe the overall structure of exports and imports, the prevalence of cross-border exchange, and analyse how Bessarabia fit into larger patterns of economic exchange between the two powers. In addition, by pushing the chronological scope of this study past the early decades after the region's incorporation into Russia, we can examine commercial development on a longer timeline and contextualize the effect that modifications to the customs regime had on trade.

Bessarabia within the system of Russian imperial trade policy after 1812

As defined by articles of the Peace Treaty of Bucharest of 28 May 1812, the Prut River became the border between the Russian and Ottoman Empires. The territory situated between the Prut and the Dniester rivers became part of the Russian Empire [12, nr. 25115]. At that time, the newly annexed territory was formally incorporated into the empire as the Bessarabian Region (Bessarabskaia oblast') [10, p. 177]. The institutional restructuring of the territory had implications for commerce as it began the process of formally integrating the region into the Russian fiscal and customs regime.

From 1812 to 1818, Bessarabia existed as a province with provisional status. Many of its prior legal and fiscal institutions were preserved, particularly with regard to civil law and municipal governance, as a means to incentivize the loyalty of the regional nobility [3, p. 25–28]. During this time period, commercial relations continued to operate with a high degree of continuity from the period before annexation.

Upon publication of the Statute of 1818 [13, nr. 27357], Bessarabia received an administrative governance structure. Officially, the Bessarabian Regional Government included both imperial officials and a High Council made up from representatives of the landed elite. Despite appearances of local inclusion, both legislative and executive control were firmly in the grasp of central authorities such as the Governing Senate [8, p. 139-145]. The Statute provided an administrative foundation on which commercial relations could be regulated through mechanisms such as taxation, customs enforcement, and oversight.

During the course of the nineteenth century, many of the initial compromises made to the region were rescinded. For example, many provisions of the Statute of 1818, which had granted the region considerable administrative autonomy, were overturned or modified such that the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintained closer supervision of provincial governance [15, p. 83-87]. By mid-century, most of the distinguishing features of provincial administration had been eliminated through the application of standard provincial governance and all-Imperial laws to the region [14, p. 87-92]. The centralization of provincial administration went hand in hand with the restructuring of fiscal and customs regulations.

Incorporation into the Empire subjected Bessarabia to Russian customs policies. From 1812 onward, cross-border trade with Ottoman territory and, by extension, external trade was subject to Russian fiscal legislation and levy [12, nr. 25115]. Prior to this shift in sovereignty, trade was oriented towards Moldavia, Ottoman outlets along the Danube, and commercial centres in Austrian Galicia [10, p. 165-172]. Following the Russian annexation of 1812, cross-border trade along the Prut was brought under the purview of Russian customs regulations [8, p. 139-142]. Export commodities became liable to fulfill tariff requirements and were taxed in accordance with Russian law. In this sense, Bessarabia was integrated into a larger southern grain-producing region which served as a source of raw materials for both domestic consumption and export.

The conquest of Bessarabia did not lead to an immediate shift in commercial practices. During the initial years of Russian rule, regional producers continued to engage in production based on grain agriculture, ani-

mal husbandry, viticulture, and salt distribution. Grain served as the dominant export commodity throughout this period [16, p. 88–95]. Both livestock and wine were frequently exported to neighbouring regions, including Austrian Bukovina [6, p. 34-42]. In addition to these exports, finished goods produced in Austrian territory flowed into Bessarabia and remained present in local markets [18, p. 95–110].

Russian rule and tariffs began to have a more pronounced effect following the extension of imperial tariff legislation to Bessarabia. In 1819, a new tariff was passed which reconfigured rates throughout the empire [21, p. 48-52]. As a result of this legislation, foreign cloth and manufactured goods entering the empire from Austrian territory faced higher costs. This tendency was reinforced in 1822 when further tariff revisions were passed increasing the duties levied on several categories of imported manufactured goods and expanding the list of prohibited commodities [17, p. 105]. These changes to the tariff rate altered the composition and profitability of commerce between Austrian territories and Bessarabia.

Changes to trade flows were further induced by a reorientation of Bessarabian exports toward outlets on the Black Sea. During the 1820s-1830s, Odessa emerged as one of the primary outlets for grain exports from southern provinces [4, p. 53–60]. Russian control over exports funnelled a large proportion of grain exports through Odessa and tied Bessarabia into longer-distance trade with the Mediterranean and Western Europe. Local commerce with Austrian territories did not cease, but existed alongside maritime trade.

Custom posts began operating on the Prut in the 1820s. However, traders continued to export Austrian textiles and other goods to Bessarabia [3, p. 28-32]. In other words, along with the construction of customs posts on the border began concurrent development of tariff evasion and smuggling. Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century Bessarabia was within the Russian customs zone and had active trade with the provinces of Austria proper. Most goods were exported via maritime ports in the south of the country, but significant trade continued overland across the western border. Overall, this constituted the trade geography of the region in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Russia’s and Austria’s bilateral trade relations in the first half of the nineteenth century took place in the context of shifting alliances after the Napoleonic Wars. The Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) settled territorial disputes after the defeat of Napoleon’s Empire and put both Austria and Russia in positions of restoring legitimate monarchies across Europe [5, p. 12–30; 15, p. 760–789]. As such they formed the core of the Holy Alliance, becoming partners in maintaining the European status quo. This did not end competition between the two empires but did place limitations on conflicts between them, including along their common border.

Relations between Russia and Austria were relatively stable in the 1820s. Both governments cooperated to prevent further revolutions and the fall of monarchies [6, p. 34–38]. However, Austrian industrial production increasingly sought eastern markets while Russia began moving toward protectionism after the tariff reform of 1822 [1]. This created divergence in Russo-Austrian trade relations. Austrian manufactured goods still moved into markets along the Russian western border, including textiles into Moldavia and greater demand for these goods in Bessarabia.Russia’s acquisition of Bessarabia in 1812 changed the power dynamics in eastern Danubia. The Prut River formed the new border between Russia and Austria’s province of Bukovina [9, p. 85–89] Accordingly, it became necessary to establish protocols for dealing with border concerns between Russia and Austria This included managing customs points, transportation routes that crossed the border, and goods that entered one empire from another.

From 1802-1804 annual grain exports averaged just over 2-3 million chetverts (russian unit equivalent to approximately 209 liters) via Russian Black Sea ports [7, p. 331–334]. In the 1820s this rate increased to just over 6 million chetverts of grain, with peaks above 8 million in multiple years of the 1830s. Thus, Russia was beginning to more heavily incorporate its southern agricultural provinces into the export economy by way of ports along the Black Sea.

Odessa was the main driver of this trade. In 1816 Odessa served as the port for approximately 37% of all grain exported from Russian Black Sea ports. By the mid-1830s Odessa’s share of Russian grain exports exceeded 50% [4, p. 58–61]. Correspondingly, Odessa saw an increase in merchant ships from under 200 annually in the early 1810s to over 600 ships annually by the late 1830s [4, p. 62–64]. Along with this we see increases in production of grain in border provinces, including Bessarabia which saw a rise in the

amount of land dedicated to cereal cultivation. Due to its southern location Bessarabia likely contributed significantly to this increase.

We see evidence of this in customs records as well. The new tariff of 1822 placed duties on foreign cotton textiles ranging from 25-40% ad valorem [20, p. 96]. Higher import duties made textiles less competitive in Russia's western border districts. These districts included parts of Bessarabia leading to dips in recorded imports into the region in the mid-1820s.

Repeated confiscations of smuggled cloth and metalwares on the Prut border during the 1820s suggest that customs inspections became more stringent in response to higher tariff rates. [18, p. 95-110]. In some years border district authorities collected over 10,000 silver rubles worth of seized commodities during periods of heightened inspections [19, p. 148-160]. These sources confirm ongoing demand across the border as well as the imperfect application of tariff policies in border economies like Bessarabia.

The evidence presented above supports the contention that Bessarabia' trading position in the first half of the nineteenth century was determined by growth in overseas grain exports from Odessa in conjunction with restructuring imports to match the 1822 tariff rate structure. Examining trade patterns in the late 1820s and early 1830s, we can observe some of the effects of this policy landscape in quantitative data. Austrian sea-borne trade statistics from 1833-1834 paint a picture of bilateral exchange between the two empires that belies the effects of growing protectionism. While we cannot disaggregate these data by commodity or imperial district, Austrian trade with Russia was dominated by goods imported from Russian districts during this period. Given that Austrian ship manifests offer an outside view of bilateral trade flows, these data allow us to contextualize Russo-Austrian exchange. See Table I for summary statistics [11, p. 180–185].

Table I. Austro-Russian Maritime Trade via Trieste and Venice (1833–1834), in Gulden

Port	Year	Import from Russia	Export to Russia
Trieste	1833	2.821.049	292.207
Trieste	1834	1.819.574	288.852
Venice	1833	247.080	2.420
Venice	1834	not recorded	not recorded

Source: Österreich, K.K. Statistische Zentral-Kommission, Tafeln zur Statistik der Österreichischen Monarchie, Wien: Aus der k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1834, p. 182.

Quantitative data on Austro-Russian trade appear in Austrian customs records. Maritime statistics from the Austrian Empire indicate the volume and some features of structure of Austro-Russian trade in the early 1830s. Through the port of Trieste, goods imported from the Russian Empire were valued at 2.821.049 Gulden in 1833 and 1.819.574 Gulden in 1834; exports from Austria to Russia were only 292.207 Gulden in 1833 and 288.852 Gulden in 1834 [11, p. 180–185]. While these statistics do not distinguish Bessarabia specifically, they do offer insight from outside the province on the trade networks of which it was a part.

Two features stand out from these data. First, there is a pronounced imbalance in this maritime exchange. In 1834, for example, imports from Russia were worth more than six times as much as Austrian goods sent in the opposite direction. Second, we might interpret this fact with reference to the economic structure of the two empires in the first half of the nineteenth century. Other works on the Russian economy highlight its agricultural nature in the southern provinces (including areas like Odessa), an agriculture focused on grain and other "bulk commodities." At the same time, recent work on the Habsburg economy cautions that industry had already begun to account for an important fraction of overall domestic production by this date [6; 2]. The Austrian statistics mentioned above do not list commodities by category, but situated in the context of this general structure, we might venture an explanation for the asymmetry we observe. Southern agrarian regions like Bessarabia helped supply the export commodities which fueled such exchange.

Of course, there are limits to such interpretation. The Austrian maritime trade statistics include only overall value of imports and exports, with no ability to distinguish between categories of goods, nor the

origin of goods from within the Russian Empire. As such, these statistics cannot be used to point to the commodity structure of trade with Russia or identify the contribution of specific provinces.

We should therefore take care in stating that trade was “unequal” or that Austria sent manufactures in exchange for bulk commodities from Russia. Rather, we can say that such an interpretation is suggested by the nature of the exchange and is consistent with what we know of the broader economy of the two states from other works. Context and external data suggest… …the quantitative claim above becomes clearer. In 1833, imports from Russia to Venice were valued at 247,080 Gulden while only 2,420 Gulden worth of goods were exported to Russia. By 1834, trade with Russia through Venice had all but ceased to exist. Trieste was the hub of Austro-Russian exchange through the northern Adriatic [11, p. 182]. Bessarabia was not simply an agrarian periphery. It played a role in the agrarian economy centered on the port of Odessa, which in turn was linked to Mediterranean markets. By extension, Bessarabian agriculture was linked to the Adriatic through Black Sea trade.

Recall that Russian agriculture was oriented toward maritime export. Bessarabia’s role as part of this system should therefore be understood in light of larger patterns of Russian southern trade. The economy of Bessarabia was molded into the Russian agrarian export system following its integration into the empire in 1812. Grain production was increasingly drawn into market relationships centered on the port of Odessa [4, p. 10-18]. Odessa linked Russian producers to transnational circuits of trade, and by extension, allowed Russian commodities to reach Mediterranean and indirectly Adriatic markets [4, p. 78–82].

Austrian statistics for Trieste and Venice are used here, since they represent the major outlets of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to the Adriatic Sea and served as transit hubs for trade between Central Europe and the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. As such, exports from the southern provinces of the Russian Empire, including those from Bessarabia made their way into the Mediterranean Sea trade routes through the Black Sea ports like Odessa. Thus, Austrian statistics for Trieste allow us to estimate the directionality of Russian exports.

While Austrian statistics do not break down Russian imports by province, the similarity between exports coming from southern Russia and Austrian imports allows us to assume that exported grain from the southern peripheries found its way into Austrian statistics for Trieste. Grain-dominated trade between Austria and Russia in the early 18th century reflects both the agricultural nature of the Russian south and its increasing integration with the export economy of the Black Sea region. Bessarabia fits within this grain economy, though its individual contribution to grain exports cannot be determined.

The borderland thus operated as a porous, yet controlled environment of trade between Russian/Bukovinian agrarian products and Austrian markets [8, p. 188-196]. Smuggling and inability to monitor trade along the border also remained problems for the imperial government. Bessarabia played a key role in this borderlands trade economy.

Cereal production increased throughout the region in the 1820s and 1830s, which corresponded with integration into overseas trade networks. [4, p. 45–55] Odessa opened the region up to trade through the Black Sea [9, p. 31] and Bessarabian goods found their way into the greater Russian market. Trade with the Austrian territories of Galicia and Bukovina continued into the West across the Prut [10, p. 276-282].

Russia’s tariff structure of 18 22 pushed Bessarabia further into this pattern of exporting agricultural goods and importing manufactured goods with increased tariffs. [17, p. 100-105] As a result, Bessarabia was inserted into an unequal system of exchange that funneled raw materials out and finished goods in.

Exports through the Black Sea linked the region to the Mediterranean [4, p. 56-63]. Trade with Austria through the Prut kept Bessarabia in circulation with Galicia and Bukovina to the West. Circulation of goods to and from Bessarabia therefore put it within regional and global exchange networks [4, p. 60–65].

Conclusion

Russia’s and Austria’s commercial ties during the first half of the nineteenth century resulted from imperial coordination, diplomatic agreements, and structural change. The addition of Bessarabia in 1812 and its slow introduction to the empire’s administrative and customs system expanded Russia’s customs border and reoriented the province’s foreign trade. The tariff reforms of 1819 and 1822 changed trade flows by modifying the ratio of legal trade to fiscal policy and smuggling.

Hard data confirms Austria's dependence on Russian trade and hints at the uneven character of Austro-Russian commerce. Austria's ship traffic with Russia from the 1833-1834 posted an import–export ratio of greater than six to one (i. e. Austrian imports from Russia were over six times greater than Austrian exports to Russia). While it is difficult to correlate given trade statistics with specific Russian regions, a ratio that high hints at a characteristic found in trades between agricultural exporters and diversified economies. Rural regions of imperial Russia, including those of Bessarabia, south of the Dniester, likely factored into the agrarian export economy implicit in Austrian ship traffic with Russia.

Bessarabia's incorporation into Russian customs and trade policy therefore fits into a larger pattern of continental commerce. This included the rerouting of agricultural production to ports like Odessa as well as continuity of formal and informal trade along the border with the Prut. As such, Bessarabia served as a contact zone between the export economies of the Black Sea and the markets of Central Europe. By its particular alignment with maritime commerce as well as continental trade, the province mediated these trade networks in a way befitting its economic position.

Taken together, the facts outlined above help to paint a picture of Bessarabia as enmeshed in the infrastructure of Russo-Austrian commerce on a local scale. If it was not the site of policy or trade decisions, Bessarabia was affected by their implementations. It fell under new trade routes, adjusted customs policies, and served as an avenue for licit and illicit exchange between the two empires. Putting Bessarabia into the context of Europe's post-Napoleonic trade shows how imperial borderlands facilitated commerce. Shifts in trade routes, adjustments in customs policies, and continuities in smuggling along imperial borders demonstrate not only how borderlands were brought within empires' spheres of control but also how borderlands maintained economic exchange between them.

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Data about author:
***Anastasia GUȚU*,** PhD student, 1st year (part-time) at the State University of Moldova, Doctoral School of Humanities and Education (History by Periods), Scientific Researcher, Institute of History, Moldova State University.
ORCID: 0009-0004-6224-4817
E-mail: i20gutu.anastasia@gmail.com

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