

Builders and Martyrs of the Unification of Bessarabia with Romania



Elena Alistar

(1873-1955)

Military physician, member of the Country Council,
the first female politician in the entire Romanian space

Elena Alistar was a well-known physician, pedagogue, politician, animator of the cultural life in Bessarabia, whose activity remained in the memory of the people of Bessarabia as extremely important for the cultivation of national consciousness and for the formation of a coherent identity of Moldovan Romanians. She was the only female deputy in the

Country Council.

She stood out on Bessarabia's political scene in an extremely difficult moment, characterised by great military confrontations and political-diplomatic tensions generated by WWI. At that time, the democratic regime was hardly established, and women's rights were not as yet enshrined in the legal and judicial life of society.

She had a life full of ups and downs and tribulations, but she managed to accept and transform them into new challenges and incentives helping her achieve her goals. Strong personality, she perceived the evolution of historical events in their whole depth. Elena Alistar's permanent preoccupation, even before 1918, was the awakening of national consciousness, for which she fought throughout several decades in all the positions she filled.

One of the methods she would use to promote national values, besides direct action and involvement in various social programmes, were the articles she wrote in which he pleaded for the unification of Bessarabia with Romania – one of the most risky actions one could assume during the Tsarist rule domination.

Elena Alistar was born on June 1, 1873 in the village of Vaisal, in Ismail County, in the family of Priest Vasile and Elisaveta Balan. As in the great majority of ecclesiastical families of Romanians living in Bessarabia, the family used to speak Romanian and would foster the love of the people and of the authentic Romanian culture grafted on the national traditions jealously preserved in these regions.

She began her studies at the primary school in her native village, continuing them in the Diocesan School for Girls in Kishinev, where she was admitted in 1882 and which she graduated in 1890. After graduation she worked as a teacher in the villages of Văleni (1890-1891), Roșu (1891-1893), Zărnești (1893-1897) of Cahul County. She married priest Dimitrie Alistar, a parish priest at the Church of Archangels Mihail and Gavriil, and in 1898, they settled in the village of Rezeni, in Kishinev County, her father, Vasile Balan, was also a priest. Elena Alistar worked as a school teacher in this village between 1904 and 1916.

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She initiated in this village a series of courses of Romanian language for adults, she would read to and with the villagers, promoting Romanian values and making them aware of their roots and of the attitude they should have as to their origins, how they should cherish them relentlessly. Ion Pelivan would also participate in some of these actions.

In 1909, after the death of her husband, she left the village, remaining in the memory of the villagers only as a good priest's wife. Still, some of them would also remember her courses she had held, the conversations she had with the villagers, and the national spirit she had promoted.

Helped by Constantine Stere, one of the most ardent supporters of the inhabitants of Bessarabia, in 1909 she came to Iași where she was admitted as a student at the Faculty of Medicine, which she graduated in 1916. Her studies were financed by a scholarship granted by the National League for the Unification of All Romanians, the Iasi branch, founded by Vasile Stroescu. At the university, she had among others the following professors: C. Stere, M. Manicatide, N. Bacaloglu. She defended her dissertation on a theme related to the innocent movement in Bessarabia, with C. Parhon as scientific coordinator.

She continued to militate for the awakening of the national consciousness of the Romanians living in Bessarabia, and her actions resulted in the formation of a large number of people who spread national ideas in rural areas. These actions were all the more important in the uncertain European context, marked by a multitude of changes in the social and political circumstances generated by the formation of the political-military blocs and the beginning of the First World War. On August 19, 1914, while she was visiting her parents in Rezeni, Elena Alistar was arrested by the Tsarist authorities. The initial accusations brought to her were those of pro-Romanian propaganda. She was put to jail for 45 days in the Kishinev penitentiary, then she was accused of spying in favour of Romania, one of the typical charges authoritarian regimes used to have recourse to. Because her guilt was not proven, Elena Alistar was released on the 5th of October. She returned to Iasi, where she continued her studies.

On August 16, 1916, during the First World War, she enrolled as physician with the rank of second lieutenant in a hospital of Iasi. During this period of fierce battles, it was necessary to mobilise all available doctors. Elena Alistar showed a great abnegation in treating the wounded. As a physician, she supported and comforted the health and morals of the soldiers and injured officers. She participated in operations and treatments, saving the lives of many injured on the Romanian Front. During her spare time together with patriotic officers she would visit military units, where there were also Moldovan soldiers, urging them to national awakening and revolutionary activity. In October 1917 she moved to the Costiujeni Hospital, where she worked until December 1, 1918. She consulted as a doctor, the Bessarabian soldiers from military units, promoting the national ideas of independence and emancipation of Bessarabia.

As a person already involved in politics, Elena Alistar participated in the foundation of the National Moldavian Party, April 1917. She was therefore among the founding members of this movement.

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In 1917 she founded Făclia (the Torch) a Cultural Society of Women Students in Medicine and the Cultural League of Women of Bessarabia. She was also president of this Cultural League until 1937.

In October 1917, she was delegated to Bessarabia's first democratic forum. Thus, at the age of 42, she became a deputy in the Country Council, as representative of the Cultural League of Women. She fulfilled her deputy office for the entire period of activity of the Country Council, between 21 November 1917 and 27 November 1918. She was part of the Moldovan Bloc, one of the two most important factions of the Parliament of the Moldovan Democratic Republic.

She worked in the editorial and educational commissions of Bessarabia's Parliament. Being the only female Member of this Parliament, of all the elected delegates of various organisations, she acquired a special importance, with almost a symbolic value – she was a symbol of the Bessarabian woman.

Journalist G. Tofan wrote about how she used to be received at the meetings of the Bessarabian Parliament: “The spokeswoman of the Moldovan Women's Cultural League, Mrs. Alistar, enjoys a vivid and warm welcome. Frequently applauded, the President of the League speaker who is a gifted speaker analyses in a beautiful Moldovan language, I was almost tempted to say the Romanian language, the programme and the goals pursued by the League.”

At the inaugural session of the Country Council, when Ion Inculeț was elected President, Elena Alistar, with a deeply symbolic gesture, put a tricolour cockade on the latter's chest.

Elena Alistar was active not only at the meetings of the Country Council, but she was also a constant presence in the pages of local newspapers, journalism being a practice she had started since the early days of her social and political activity. In her appeal entitled “Now or Never”, Elena Alistar addressed the hesitant and disoriented Bessarabians on February 11, 1918: “... We must unite. Every Moldovan, no matter how democratic he/she is, must understand this and make any sacrifice for the unification. We cannot live by ourselves; we are forced to unite with a neighbouring State. Russia is dead, and even if she is to be resurrected, then she will only live under a rule. Every Moldovan must now desire to unite with Romania and thus form a new Romania that will be new in every respect...”

In the speeches and periodicals of that time, Elena Alistar urged the political forces and the Bessarabian population to national unity. “To this must head both the nationalists and the Moldovan socialists, because any socialist realises that by raising the culture of each people the great thoughts of mankind can be fulfilled. If we do not unite now with our brethren, then it is not sure whether the future will bring us another such propitious moment, and we shall be cursed by our descendants who, when reading our history, will see that we could have achieved the act of union but we did not. I am afraid of this curse and cry with all my heart:

Let us unite!”

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Doctor Elena Alistar. Deputy in the Country Council. 11 February 1918 (in *Mișcarea națională în Basarabia, Chișinău*, 1930).

On 19 February 1918, Elena Alistar published another appeal to Bessarabia's Moldovans which included the following words:

“I address this letter to all of you, and it springs from the bottom of my heart, which beats in favour of the nation. Now let us all unite with love for our nation and let us work now as energetically as we can so that we produce with the power which lies in our hands a harvest as rich and beautiful as possible.”

On March 27, 1918, at the memorable sitting of the Country Council, she voted for the Union of Bessarabia with Romania.

She continued to publish articles meant to awaken the national consciousness, one of the most important of these texts being the letter of 13 October 1918 addressed to Bessarabian women.

After the Union, she was appointed headmaster of the Eparchial School of Girls in Kishinev, which she had graduated in 1890. She filled this position between 1918 and 1938. The educational institution she was leading became all this while an important incentive of Romanian culture and education which trained the future pedagogues and scholars who contributed to maintaining the Romanian spirituality on these lands.

In 1930, she published the brochure entitled “*Mișcarea națională în Basarabia*” (the National Movement in Bessarabia), an important memorial work for establishing the course the events had taken in the early twentieth century in the Tsarist Empire and the Romanian Kingdom.

Among the other important works signed by Elena Alistar let us cite: “Memoirs from 1917-18”, published in 1991 based on manuscript sources; “The Social and Political Physiognomy of the Country Council”, initially published in the *Life of Bessarabia*, 1933, number 4-5, and republished subsequently in the journal *Cugetul*, number 1 in 2006; a volume of “Memories”, of particular documentary importance, since it faithfully reflects a period of crossroads in the history of Bessarabia, which lay at the basis of several controversies.

Elena Alistar filled several minor positions in the justice of Bessarabia, at Bessarabia's Court of Appeal, the Kishinev Court of Appeal, more precisely as long as the Romanian justice functioned, i.e. from 1929 to 1940 and 1941-1944, until Bessarabia was occupied by the Soviets (Mihai Tașcă, *Timpul*, Chișinău, 2000).

Her activity was appreciated with several distinctions: The Order King Ferdinand I, the Medal of the Sanitary Merit, Class II, for cholera fighting, awarded in 1913, The Medal Manhood and Faith, awarded in 1913, The Medal Reward of Labour, 1st Class, 1922, for having encouraged the construction of schools.

On June 28, 1940, when the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia, the ideal for which Elena Alistar had fought for decades was shattered, and her life was put in peril. Leaving behind a people who admired and loved her, she crossed the Prut River, and took refuge initially in

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the city of Iasi, in the house of Isanos family, then in the village of Pucioasa, Dâmbovița County.

Elena Alistar departed this life in 1955. In her last days she had only three friends and relatives at her bedside: her sister, Eliza, her husband, the priest Balaur, and Mrs. Isanos. She was buried, with a discreet ceremony, in the village of Pucioasa. In 1963, her body was exhumed, brought to Bucharest, and then re-buried in the vault of the family Isanos in Serban Vodă cemetery (Bellu).

We shall end this short biographical sketch with Elena Alistar's memories of November 21, 1917, the day when the first meeting of the Country Council was convened: "... This holy day will remain forever in my memory. In the morning all the streets were full of people. (...) A solemn session was held at 12 o'clock under the chairmanship of Mr N.N. Alexandri, the eldest of the deputies. When he pronounced the words "I declare open the first sitting of the Country Council," he shed floods of tears alongside almost all the audience. (...) It is true that everyone felt then that God Himself entered his soul. (...) We were surrounded by the Russian Bolshevik army that could destroy us at any moment."

Author: col. (r), Associate Professor PhD. Anatol Munteanu,
Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists

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