# Between Empire, Nation and Plan: Forest Administration in Bessarabia (1812–1950) A Comparative Perspective

**Cătălina FRANGOPOL***

**Abstract**

*This study examines the historical development of forest administration in Bessarabia between 1812 and 1950. Adopting a comparative perspective, it highlights the coexistence of institutional rupture and long-term administrative continuity within the broader context of forestry policies in Eastern Europe. As a frontier region shaped by successive political regimes, Bessarabia moved from imperial governance under the Russian Empire to national administration within Greater Romania and subsequently to a centrally planned Soviet system. Each transition introduced new institutional arrangements and regulatory frameworks while simultaneously preserving certain administrative practices inherited from earlier periods. The article argues that forest administration in Bessarabia should not be interpreted solely as a technical activity but rather as part of wider processes of state formation, territorial integration, and economic transformation. Forestry policies reflected changing political priorities, ranging from imperial resource supervision to national consolidation and later to socialist economic planning. At the same time, regional socio-economic conditions influenced the implementation of these administrative models, producing patterns of institutional adaptation rather than complete administrative rupture. By situating Bessarabia within a comparative East European perspective, the article demonstrates how forest governance became closely connected to shifting structures of political authority and broader modernization projects during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

**Keywords**: *forest administration; borderland regions; administrative unification; Bessarabia; Eastern Europe*

* PhD in progress, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, Corresponding author: frangopol.catalina@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-5864-9521

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Forest administration has historically functioned as an instrument of public authority, linking natural resource management to territorial control, fiscal considerations, and economic development. In Eastern Europe, where borders and political regimes changed repeatedly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the administration of forests offers an important analytical perspective on broader processes of institutional transformation. Bessarabia represents a particularly instructive case. Between 1812 and 1950, the region experienced three distinct political regimes: imperial, national, and Soviet, each embedding forest administration within a different administrative and political framework.

After 1812, Bessarabia was incorporated into the Russian imperial system, where forests were regulated within a centralized bureaucratic structure oriented toward supervision and the protection of state interests. Following 1918, the province entered the institutional framework of Greater Romania, where administrative unification and legislative standardization became central state priorities. These objectives were pursued through the extension of national legal frameworks and administrative reforms to newly integrated provinces (Codul silvic, 1910/1919–1923; Legea pentru unificarea administrativă, 1925). After 1940 and, more definitively, after 1944, Soviet governance introduced a centrally planned model grounded in state ownership and production targets, fundamentally redefining the institutional role of forestry within a planned economic system.

The article develops two closely related arguments. First, forest administration in Bessarabia reflected regime change not only through formal institutional redesign but also through shifting relationships between law, property regimes, and economic objectives. Second, despite significant ideological transformations, important administrative continuities persisted across regimes, particularly hierarchical supervision, territorial division of administrative units, and the reliance on professional forestry expertise.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative administrative perspective, combining institutional analysis with a concise statistical overview of forest coverage and exploitation trends within the Romanian space in order to situate policy changes within broader material constraints (Giurescu, 1975; Drăcea, 2018).

Romanian scholarship on forests has frequently examined administrative change through the analysis of legislation, institutional reforms, and long-term transformations of the forest domain (Giurescu, 1975). The interwar period is particularly relevant for administrative history, given the Romanian state's explicit commitment to standardizing public administration and harmonizing sectoral

regulations across newly integrated territories. This process was anchored in major reforms such as the administrative unification framework of 1925 (Legea pentru unificarea administrativă, 1925) and subsequent legislative adjustments affecting forestry administration (Mohorea, 2016).

In Moldovan historiography, environmental and historical studies have increasingly emphasized the relationship between governance models and resource exploitation, particularly in discussions concerning Soviet economic transformation and ecological change (Capcelea, 2024; Frangopol, 2024). While much of this scholarship has focused primarily on patterns of exploitation and environmental consequences, an administrative perspective highlights the role of the state's regulatory capacity, including institutional hierarchy, legislative instruments, supervisory mechanisms, and the organization of professional forestry services.

In the context of this article, forest administration refers to the institutional arrangements through which public authorities regulate ownership categories, authorize and supervise exploitation, maintain systems of control (including forest guards, inspections, and sanctions), and implement planning or management instruments. The comparative perspective adopted here treats Bessarabia as a borderland region[1] in which externally introduced administrative models interacted with local socio-economic structures and ecological conditions, generating processes of adaptation rather than simple institutional replacement.

## Forest Administration under the Russian Empire (1812–1917)

The incorporation of Bessarabia into the Russian Empire in 1812 initiated a gradual process of integration into imperial administrative structures. Forest regulation reflected typical imperial priorities, including bureaucratic supervision, fiscal interests, and the protection of state resources rather than ecological conservation in the modern sense.

Administrative authority was organized through hierarchical structures designed to oversee forest exploitation while accommodating diverse forms of property ownership, including state, private, and communal forests. Provincial authorities operated within a broader imperial regulatory framework that emphasized

[1] In historical scholarship, borderland regions are typically understood as territories situated at the intersection of multiple political, cultural, or administrative systems, where institutional models originating from different states interact and produce hybrid forms of governance.

supervision, reporting, and the maintenance of administrative control over natural resources.

Romanian forestry historiography indicates that forest coverage in the broader Romanian lands during the nineteenth century fluctuated around 25–30 percent of the total territory, although regional variations were considerable (Giurescu, 1975). Bessarabia generally displayed lower levels of forest coverage than mountainous provinces such as Transylvania or parts of the Carpathian region, largely due to agricultural expansion and demographic growth.

Within the imperial system, forest administration relied on district-level supervision and the gradual professionalization of forestry personnel[1] responsible for monitoring exploitation. Although the imperial model prioritized administrative control rather than conservation, it introduced institutional mechanisms such as territorial management units, supervision procedures, and early forms of forest inventory. These administrative practices would later provide an institutional foundation upon which subsequent regimes built their own governance systems.

## Forest Governance in Greater Romania (1918–1940)

The incorporation of Bessarabia into Greater Romania in 1918 initiated a new phase in the evolution of forest administration, characterized by legislative unification and administrative standardization. Romanian authorities sought to integrate newly acquired provinces into a unified institutional framework capable of ensuring consistent governance across the national territory.

The Romanian forestry system was anchored in codified legislation and a professional forestry corps that had developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Giurescu, 1975). The Forest Code of 1910, subsequently modified in the postwar period (Codul silvic, 1910/1919–1923), formed the legal foundation for the administration of forests within Greater Romania. Administrative unification was further reinforced through the 1925 law on administrative unification (Legea pentru unificarea administrativă, 1925), which aimed to harmonize governance structures throughout the state. In the forestry sector, these reforms translated into the reorganization of forest districts, the alignment of

[1] The development of professional forestry services in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century was closely connected to the emergence of modern forestry education and the institutionalization of forest administration.

supervisory procedures, and the integration of regional forestry personnel into the national administrative hierarchy.

Institutional reforms during the interwar period also affected the administration of state forests. The establishment and development of institutions such as the Casa Autonomă a Pădurilor Statului reflected the Romanian state's effort to strengthen the management of public forest resources[1] and to consolidate administrative oversight (Arhivele Naţionale ale României, 2020).

Although Bessarabia remained less forested than other Romanian regions, interwar reforms sought to ensure that forestry governance in the province operated according to the same legislative and administrative principles applied throughout the national territory. In this context, the Romanian period represented a significant step toward the institutional integration of Bessarabia within the administrative structures of the modern Romanian state.

The Soviet occupation of Bessarabia introduced the most radical transformation in the governance of forest resources during the period under study. The defining characteristic of the Soviet system was the introduction of exclusive state ownership of forests and the subordination of forest administration to centralized economic planning. Within the Soviet administrative structure, forestry institutions were reorganized into vertically coordinated structures integrated into republican and union-level planning mechanisms. Forest resources were no longer governed primarily through regulatory supervision but rather through planning directives that established production targets and resource allocation priorities.

Despite this ideological transformation, certain administrative practices persisted. Hierarchical supervision, territorial management units, and the use of specialized forestry personnel remained central elements of the administrative system. These institutional continuities illustrate how Soviet authorities adapted existing administrative practices to new economic and ideological objectives.

Research in Moldovan historiography has emphasized the ways in which Soviet economic governance integrated natural resource sectors into broader state development strategies, particularly in the context of postwar reconstruction and

[1] The Casa Autonomă a Pădurilor Statului was created as a specialized institution responsible for the administration and economic management of state forests during the interwar period (Arhivele Naţionale ale României, 1930–1949).

industrial supply needs (Capcelea, 2024; Frangopol, 2024). In this context, forest administration became an important instrument of socialist economic planning.

## Comparative Administrative Analysis

A comparative perspective allows us to observe both institutional rupture and long-term administrative continuity. Although the political regimes governing Bessarabia between 1812 and 1950 differed significantly in ideological orientation and legal foundations, forest administration across these periods relied on several structurally similar mechanisms of governance.

Under the Russian Empire, forest administration functioned primarily as a bureaucratic instrument of imperial supervision designed to regulate exploitation and protect state interests. In contrast, the interwar Romanian administration emphasized legislative unification and administrative integration as part of a broader state-building project aimed at strengthening territorial cohesion (Codul silvic, 1910/1919–1923; Legea pentru unificarea administrativă, 1925). The Soviet period introduced the most pronounced transformation in administrative logic. Forest resources became part of a centralized system of state ownership, and forestry institutions were subordinated to economic planning mechanisms designed to meet production targets.

Despite these differences, several administrative mechanisms remained consistent across regimes. Hierarchical authority, territorially organized administrative units, and reliance on specialized forestry personnel constituted durable institutional features that transcended political transformations. Viewed over the long term, the evolution of forest administration in Bessarabia illustrates how natural resource governance adapted to successive political projects while maintaining institutional practices that ensured administrative stability. In this sense, Bessarabia illustrates a broader pattern characteristic of East European borderland regions, where administrative institutions often displayed greater continuity than the political regimes that governed them.

A brief statistical perspective helps contextualize administrative change within broader ecological realities. Romanian forestry historiography generally estimates that forest coverage in the Romanian lands historically fluctuated between one quarter and one third of the total territory (Giurescu, 1975). However, regional disparities were considerable. Mountainous regions such as the Carpathian areas maintained significantly higher forest coverage, while agrarian zones such as

Bessarabia exhibited lower levels of woodland density. Agricultural expansion and demographic growth placed sustained pressure on forest resources throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Interwar analyses of the Romanian forest domain indicate that debates concerning deforestation, land reform, and administrative capacity were central to forestry policy discussions (Drăcea, 2018). In Bessarabia, the comparatively limited forest area made the regulation of exploitation particularly important. During the Soviet period, forestry administration became increasingly connected to economic planning priorities. Although forest coverage itself did not change dramatically in the immediate postwar years, exploitation patterns became more closely aligned with centralized economic objectives.

## Conclusions

The evolution of forest administration in Bessarabia between 1812 and 1950 demonstrates the close relationship between natural resource governance and political authority in Eastern European borderland regions. Each political regime: imperial, national, and Soviet introduced distinct administrative frameworks reflecting different political and economic priorities.

The Russian imperial system emphasized bureaucratic supervision and resource regulation. The interwar Romanian administration focused on legislative unification and territorial integration. The Soviet regime introduced centralized planning and exclusive state ownership of forest resources. Despite these transformations, important elements of administrative continuity remained. Hierarchical supervision, territorial organization, and professional forestry expertise continued to shape forest governance across successive political regimes.

By examining the evolution of forest administration from a comparative perspective, this study highlights the ways in which institutional practices adapted to changing political contexts while maintaining underlying administrative structures. The case of Bessarabia thus contributes to broader discussions concerning the relationship between state formation, administrative governance, and natural resource management in Eastern Europe.

## References

Arhivele Naţionale ale României/ The National Archives of Romania (1930–1949). *Inventar nr. 3453: Fond Casa Autonomă a Pădurilor Statului/ Inventory No. 3453: Autonomous Administration of State Forests Collection*. Retrieved from https://arhivelenationale.ro/site/download/inventare/Casa-Autonoma-a-Padurilor-Statului.-1930-1949.-Inv.-3453.pdf (accessed February 6, 2026).

Capcelea, I. (2024). *Istoria ecologică a Republicii Moldova: Evoluţia interacţiunilor omului şi naturii/ The Ecological History of the Republic of Moldova: The Evolution of Human-Nature Interactions*. Chişinău.

Codul silvic din 9 aprilie 1910, cu modificările din 1919, 1920, 1921 şi 1923, aplicabil în tot cuprinsul României întregite/ The Forestry Code of April 9, 1910, with the amendments of 1919, 1920, 1921, and 1923, applicable throughout the territory of Greater Romania. (2014). *Bucovina Forestieră/ Bucovina Forestry* 14(2). Retrieved from https://bucovina-forestiera.ro/BF%20old%20site/Bucovina%20forestiera/www.bucovina-forestiera.ro/arhiva/2014/14(2)/codul-silvic.pdf (accessed January 26, 2023).

Drăcea, M. (2018). Consideraţiuni asupra domeniului forestier al României/ Considerations Regarding Romania's Forest Sector. *Bucovina Forestieră/ Bucovina Forestry*, 18(1). Retrieved from https://www.bucovina-forestiera.ro/index.php/bf/issue/view/31 (accessed January 26, 2023).

Frangopol, C. (2024). Exploatarea fondului forestier în RASS Moldovenească (1924–1940)/ Exploitation of Forest Resources in the Moldavian ASSR (1924–1940). *Studia Universitatis Moldaviae (Seria Ştiinţe Umanistice)*, 10(200). Retrieved from https://humanities.studiamsu.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/07_Frangopol.pdf (accessed March 12, 2026).

Giurescu, C. C. (1975). *Istoria pădurii româneşti din cele mai vechi timpuri până astăzi/ The History of the Romanian Forest from Ancient Times to the Present Day*. Bucharest: Ceres.

Legea pentru unificarea administrative/ The Law on Administrative Unification (1925). *Legea nr. 95/1925/ Law No. 95/1925*. Retrieved from https://legislatie.just.ro/public/DetaliiDocument/107203 (accessed December 14, 2025).

Mohorea, R. (2016). Istoricul administraţiei şi legislaţiei silvice până la trecerea pădurilor în proprietatea publică a statului/ History of forestry administration and legislation up to the transfer of forests into state public ownership. *Proceedings of the Scientific Conference "New Challenges related to EU's Internal Security"*, Bucharest, Romania.