BULGARIAN LANDOWNERS AND THE ROMANIAN ADMINISTRATION IN SOUTHERN DOBRUDJA (1918–1940)

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The final accession of Southern Dobrudja to the Romanian state after 1918 put the local Bulgarian elites in an extremely difficult and delicate position. This caused many of the Dobrudja *chiflikchii* – large landowners – to occupy various political positions in an attempt to preserve their influence and wealth. Some joined Romanian political parties and tried to balance their new political networks with their patriotic feelings. Others had more radical positions - some emigrated to Bulgaria and lost their property in Dobrudja, others joined the communist party and took the path of class struggle, regardless of their origin. Loyalties were rarely clear-cut and interests often were often intertwined, as was the history of interwar South Dobrudja.

Keywords: Dobrudja, interwar period, chifliks, large land estates, Bulgaria, Romania, elites

Up until the Balkan wars and WW1, Dobrudja was a borderland province of, initially, limited importance (compared to other territories with Romanian and Bulgarian populations). But after that it quickly turned into one of the most crucial focal points that played a major role in the nation-building strategies of both Romanians and Bulgarians. Both countries mobilized armies of historians, journalists, writers, diplomats, lawyers and all sorts of activists to defend their respective national causes.[1] The two countries approached the Dobrudjan dispute with similar arguments, with mutual stereotypes, mistrust and a sense of superiority, which in turn undermined the already small desire for understanding within Dobrudja itself.

As the Dobrudja activist Hristo Kapitanov noted in his diary: "With the high shamelessness of the ignorant, the Romanians present us in the blackest colors and mostly always get annoyed with our barbarism." Deprived of ethnic arguments, the Romanian propaganda often saw their county as a civilizer and a representative of Western Europe, while the Bulgarians as primitive Balkans.[2]

[1] A. Kurkina, "Words and Wits: A Territorial Debate and the Creation of an Epistemic Community in Interwar Dobrudja (1913–1940)", *East European Quarterly*, 44, 1–2, March–June 2016, p. 53–76.

[2] Б. Нягулов, "Малцинственото движение на добруджанските българи в Румъния (1919–1940)", in А. Кузманова, П. Тодоров (ред.), *История на Добруджа*, Т. IV, Фабер, Велико Търново, 2007, с. 434.

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In “The annals of Dobrudja”, for example, I.N. Roman referred to the Bulgarians in general, summing up all the negative traits they had been supposed to possess: absolute barbarity, uncivilized character, ferocity, cruelty, and brutality. Bulgarians were generally presented as an opposite to Romanians: the degree of radicalism of these “descriptions” varied depending on the author’s writing style. The Bulgarian counterparts of Roman adopted a very similar strategy of portraying Romanians and, conversely, they had to face the same dilemma of destroying the remains of neutral and positive images of the preceding periods. In 1921, for instance, Stiliyan Chilingirov wrote about his impressions of Romania and its inhabitants: “Romania is the least cultivated country in the whole of the Balkan peninsula. She seems to be a vulgar and dressed-up prostitute, who eats *mamaliga* while she does not even bother to put on a blouse under the corset of her dress”.[3]

But apart from official propaganda, on a local level, identities were much more complex. The re-annexation of Southern Dobrudja by Romania after the end of the First World War was logically accepted as a national catastrophe by the majority of the Dobruja Bulgarian population. Bulgarian cultural and educational organizations and churches were closed, a Romanian administration was installed, and colonists began to arrive quickly. However, Romania recognized the existence of a Bulgarian minority, unlike Yugoslavia or Greece, and quickly included Bulgarians as representatives in Romanian parties.

The most influential Romanian party at the time, the National Liberal Party (NLP), included two Bulgarians in its lists as early as 1919. One of them was the big landowner haji Vasil Holevich who was elected senator. In his analysis of the Bulgarians, participants in Romanian political parties, Blagovest Nyagulov points out that they can most often be called “the conservatives in the Bulgarian minority movement in Dobrudja” because they come from the wealthiest strata of Bulgarian society.[4]

Exactly such a representative was the mentioned haji Vasil Holevich, owner of a large chiflik farm near Kavarna. Among the other Bulgarians who have participated in the Romanian parliament over the years were the brothers Hristo, Boris and Matei Stefanovi, owners of Holevich’s neighboring farm in the village of Duranlar/Belgun, the large landowner from Dobrich Tsonko Penkov and the Kavarna farmer and merchant Jordan Mahalnishki. Actually 1/3 of all 17 Bulgarian members of Parliament, at least from those whose biographies I managed to find, were big landowners.

It is logical that the desire to preserve property and wealth should have been a strong motive for the cooperation of those landowners with the Romanian parties and for the compromises they made with the Romanian authorities. Capital has no nationality, something we can see well in today's conditions of globalization, and logically Bulgarian landowners could relatively easily integrate into the power circles in Romania not only because of their material status, but also because of their social mobility, their cultural and social capital, etc. So although in the status

[3] A. Kurkina, “Words and Wits...”, p. 67–68

[4] Б. Нягулов, “Малцинственото движение на добруджанските българи в Румъния…”, с. 440.

of a national minority, the big landowners were able to quite easily join the class of the Romanian already predominantly Moshier elite.

A good example about this is haji Vasil Holevich's son – Zachari. During WW1 he was a part of the Romanian army and was involved in the major battles in the defense of Oituz and Argeş from the armies of Gen. Mackenzen, as in the Romanian offensive 1917 at Mărăşeşti. Holevich later received a "Romanian Star" medal for his participation in the victory, as well as with commemorative crosses from Mărăşeşti, the Carpathians and Oituz.[5]

As a war hero, he was well respected by the Romanian authorities when he returned to Dobrudja. In the 1920s, Zachari became a member of the Tax Commission for the region Kavarna and Shabla, as well as the Temporary District Commission, which approved the administrative Kaliakra County budget. As a war veteran, Holevich also served on the recruiting committee in Kaliakra County.

From 1925 Zachari also participated in the diocesan assembly of Constanţa Eparchy and as its member he was summoned in 1926 in Bucharest for the Electoral College for the election of bishops and archbishops.[6]

So, there was undoubtedly a line of compromise in the behavior of some Bulgarian landowners. For this reason, Bulgarians who had become part of Romanian parties were often criticized by their compatriots in Dobrudja and by emigrant activists for betraying national interests and serving their personal causes. This became one of the reasons for the apparent conflict in the Bulgarian circles in the 1920s between the so-called "Party members" (participating in Romanian parties) and the "minoritari", i.e. supporters of the idea of an independent Bulgarian party, which was eventually founded in 1928, but without much success.[7]

But while "minoritari"'s criticism often sounded reasonable, beyond political confrontation, the reality was much more complex. The inclusion of Bulgarians in Romanian parties was not only an attempt to adapt to the system, but was also a tactic recommended by the Bulgarian legation in Bucharest, which had maintained active contact with all prominent Bulgarian political figures in Dobrudja.[8] In this sense, I would try to emphasize the far more complex and nuanced role that Bulgarian landowners had in the period, which was certainly not limited to class cooperation with the Romanian elite.

I think that the case of the whole Stefanovi family is indicative of the very diverse roles that landowners played in the period. Related to Holevich, Stefanovi were among the most influential Bulgarian politicians in the period.

The older brother, Matei Stefanov used to be a member of the Democratic Party in Bulgaria, then director of a bank branch. When Dobrudja came under

[5] Holevich Archive (unpublished), undated letter by Zachary Holevich to the Romian Minister of Agriculture.

[6] Holevich Archive (unpublished), Zachary Holevich`s tax record, Bazargic, Dobrich, 23 february 1924.

[7] Б. Нягулов, "Партийци" и/или „миноритари" – единство и разединение на българските малцинствени дейци в Добруджа", *Добруджа*, 13, 1996, с. 93

[8] Б. Нягулов, "Висшия съвет на българите в Румъния 1927–1929", *Векове*, 1990, бр. 4, с. 27–28.

Romanian rule, Stefanov was on the editorial board of the Bulgarian newspaper *Kurier*/Courier (1927) and then on *Dobrudjanski glas* / Dobrudjan Voice (1935–1938). In 1928 he entered the Romanian parliament as a member of the National Peasants' party, where he tried to wage a serious struggle against the Law on New Dobrudja from 1924. As an MP, he lobbied for the sending of Bulgarian representatives to the Congress of European National Minorities in 1929 as a way to gain support "from outside" against the law.[9] Subsequently, he was chairman of the Bulgarian Cultural Society in Dobrich.[10]

During the rule of the National Peasants' Party, Stefanov participated together with Stefan Penkov in a commission appointed by the Minister of Agriculture, Ion Mihalache, which prepared amendments to the Law of 1924 on the agrarian reform in Southern Dobrudja. The two Bulgarian MPs were in constant contact with the Bulgarian Minister Plenipotentiary in Bucharest, Svetoslav Pomenov, and were trying to push the thesis that the "thirds" should be returned to the owners.[11] However, the Romanian majority in the commission did not accept the idea, and started considering paying the thirds to their former owners.[12] In 1931, Stefanov was expelled from the party together with Tsonko Penkov after internal scandals regarding the post of prefect of Kaliakra district. On the other side of the barricade stood another relative of Holevich, Simeon Nikolenko. He had strong pro-Romanian positions, evident even from the romanization of his surname.[13]

Matei Stefanov's case is I think indicative of the way landowners were participating in Romanian political life both as a way to protect their status, but also to achieve certain Bulgarian minority goals. This is even more obvious in the case of Matei's younger brother – Hristo. In 1927 he was elected chairman of the Chamber of Agriculture in Bazargic district. In 1928 he joined the National Ţaranist/Peasent Party and in 1930 he was elected a senator with the promise that he would work for the change of the Law on New Dobrudja from 1924, and also for the disarmament of the colonists and for the cultural and educational rights of the Bulgarian population. His choice was the result of a rare union between "party members" and "minoritari". However, only a cosmetic amendment to the Law on New Dobrudja was voted, there were new repression for cultural and educational organizations. So Stefanov was quickly criticized by the "minoritari", who saw it as a big mistake to trust him as a candidate instead of raising their own.[14]

[9] Б. Нягулов, "Добруджанските българи в конгресите на европейските национални малцинства", *Добруджа* 7, 1990, с. 94.

[10] G. Ungureanu, *Problema Cadrilaterului în contextul relaţiilor româno-bulgare (1919–1940)*, Brăila, Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, 2009, p. 147.

[11] The Law of 1924 stipulated that land owners in Southern Dobrudja had to give up one third of their landed property to the state.

[12] Б. Нягулов, "Добруджанските българи в румънския парламент (1919–1940)", *Studia Balcanica* 24, Изследвания в чест на професор Веселин Трайков, Sofia, 2003, с. 258.

[13] C. Tudor, *Administraţia românească în Cadrilater (1913–1940)*, Călăraşi, 2005, p. 230.

[14] Б. Нягулов, "Убийството на Христо Стефанов – лично отмъщение или политически атентат?," *Добруджа* 8, 1991, с. 200.

However, in 1931 Stefanov worked actively to hold a unifying congress of the Bulgarian minority in Dobrich, together with the minority activist Lyuben Stanchev, who was also from a family of wealthy landowners. However, on the eve of the congress, Stefanov was killed by the Aromanian colonist Ion Patoni. According to Blagovest Negulov, the Romanian nationalist organization Aktsiunya Rumyanaska had a role in the murder, as Hristo Stefanov was one of the few figures who could play a mediating role in relations between the disputing groups in the Bulgarian community. He was well accepted by the minoritari, and also showed sympathy for some leftist ideas.[15]

It was the social and economic capital of a big landowner that give him the opportunity to play such an intermediary role. And if this social mobility was usually a privilege, in times of crisis it could also be a curse − as it turned out in the case of Stefanov, killed at the age of 43. His family published a telling obituary in Bulgaria, which the Romanian authorities forbade to be distributed in Dobrudja. I quote from the obituary: "*His boundless devotion to his native land, his kindness, straightforwardness and strong-willed character showed him as a selfless servant and a zealous warrior against the unjust and the wicked, which is why his enemies, the Tsintsari [Aromanians], had long ago targeted him and, when he was most needed, they took him away from us. In front of your fresh grave, let us commit ourselves to the service of the ideal that consumed your life.*"[16]

Stefanov's death became a symbol of all the violence that the Bulgarian population suffered from the Romanian government. In 1941 a memorial plaque was placed at his place of death in Dobrich, and in 1942 the nearby village of Ayorman was renamed Stefanovo. His assassination was also particularly indicative of the fact that the landowners' strategy to participate in Romanian politics not only did not yield much result but could also have fatal consequences. Close or not to power, in an era of sharpened nationalism, families like Holevich and Stefanov were first perceived as representatives of the Bulgarians in Dobrogea, and only then as Romanian politicians.

The landowners' mediating role could also be seen in the Supreme Council of the Bulgarians in Romania, established between 1927 and 1929 in Bucharest. The Council was formed under the direct supervision of the Bulgarian legation and its founding memorandum stated that it continued to support "the practice of belonging to the various Romanian political parties of the more prominent Bulgarians, always maintaining a strict relationship between them and the council to achieve the possible maximum benefits in favor of the Bulgarian population ". The mentioned landowners Matei Stefanov and Zachari Vassilev Holevich, son of haji Vasil, entered the Council. The Supreme Council helped to legalize the Bulgarian school boards as Bulgarian Cultural Societies (*BKO*), and also dealt with the church issue. Gradually, the Cultural societies displaced the Supreme Council and it ceased to be active.[17]

[15] *Ibid.*, c. 202.

[16] Holevich Archive (unpublished), Hristo Stefanov's obituary, 20 September 1931.

[17] Б. Нягулов, Висшия съвет на българите в Румъния 1927–1929, *Векове*, 1990, бр. 4, с. 27–28

In the 30s, it was the Cultural societies that organized Bulgarian school and cultural activity, and actually mediated between the Bulgarian state and the Romanian authorities. The landowners Matei Stefanov and Tsonko Penkov were leading figures in BKO Dobrich. The situation in Kavarna was quite similar − first Zachari Genov Holevich was chairman, and then Yordan Mahalnishki. Another landowner, Zachari Vassilev Holevich, the president's cousin, was among the members and donors, buying one of the buildings for the school in Kavarna. His son Vasil was a teacher and secretary in the school.[18]

Another school building was bought with money from Mahalnishki, and the landowners regularly invested personal funds to fill in the gaps in the BKO budget. Holevich and Mahalnishki successfully mediated with the local Romanian authorities so that the BKO could celebrate Bulgarian national holidays and could hold cultural events in Bulgarian.[19]

According to contemporaries, Holevich and Mahalnishki were extremely resourceful and tactful with the Romanian authorities and enjoyed great authority among them. Mahalnishki also served as mayor of Kavarna (1922–1925) and a senator from the NLP (1927). But like Hristo Stefanov, Mahalnishki also suffered from his position as a mediator. In 1940, all available grain from his mill and its warehouses was confiscated by the retreating Romanian government, and in 1945 he was sentenced to 15 years in prison by the new Bulgarian communist government.[20]

So far, I hope I have managed to illustrate two of the main lines of behavior of the Bulgarian landowners in the period – let's call them the line of adjustment and the line of compromise between personal and Bulgarian national interests. We must note that there was another, most radical position − the line of hard resistance. As its representatives we can point out figures such as Boris Stefanov, brother of Matei and Hristo, who, despite his origin as a wealthy landowner, followed the path of the communist idea.

Constantin Argetoianu, finance and then interior minister in Avarescu's government (1920–1921) and one of the staunchest enemies of communism in Romania, described Boris Stefanov in the following way, typical of the attitude of the Romanian elite towards the communists: "*a Bulgarian from Kadrilatera with the appearance of a butcher, a brutal fanatic with no pretense or compromise. You can't talk to him, not just because he doesn't know Romanian, but because there's nothing to understand from him [...] If Moscow gave the order, he would kill his mother and father.*"[21]

Boris Stefanov had an extremely curious biography that deserves a separate study. He studied at the men's high school in Varna, where he was greatly influenced by his older sister Anna, a member of the Bulgarian Social Democratic

[18] Holevich Archive (unpublished), Vasil Z. Holevich's memories, 1985.

[19] А. Каранфилов, *Истини и заблуди за българското културно общество в Каварна*, Контур, Варна, 2002, с. 44.

[20] А. Каранфилов, *Каварненските кметове някога и сега*, Варна, 2003, с. 72–75.

[21] G. Ungureanu, *Problema Cadrilaterului în contextul relaţiilor româno-bulgare (1919–1940)*, p. 127.

Party. Before the wars, Stefanov became close to Christian Rakovsky, as well as to Georgi Bakalov, prominent Bulgarian communist leaders. During the First World War he was mobilized in the Romanian army, but spent most of his time in officers' prisons and prison camps.[22]

In 1913, the demobilized Bulgarian soldiers returned to their homes in Dobruja suddenly as Romanian citizens. „That's how I became a Romanian citizen and that's where my political activity in the ranks of the Romanian socialists began," Stefanov wrote in his memoirs."[23]

In 1920, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Socialist Party. As a MP in the same year, he became one of the leaders of the general strike in Romania from October. Because of this, he was arrested and imprisoned in Jilava prison, where he remained until 1922. A trial took place, in which Stefanov was also accused of terrorist activity. After a reaction from European public opinion, a political amnesty was reached.[24]

After his release from prison, he wrote the Romanian Communist Party's program on the agrarian question, in which he advocated the complete and immediate abolition of private land ownership and its distribution to the peasants. In 1924 he was again convicted and for 20 years he worked and lived illegally. In 1924–1925, he was a representative of the RCP in the Balkan Communist Federation in Vienna, but he lived in Moscow, and on several occasions illegally returned to Bulgaria and Romania. In 1926 he was arrested and tried for treason. In 1928, he was sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment, which made him famous for the international communist movement. In the same year, the Sixth Congress of the Communist International elected him in absentia as a member of the International Control Commission. The authorities moved him to five different prisons for his communist activities. In 1933, he was released from prison and went to live with his family in Moscow, where he worked together with Georgi Dimitrov as deputy head of the Balkan Secretariat of the Communist International under the pseudonym Ivan Draganov.

In 1934 he became general secretary of the RCP, remaining in the position until 1940. During the Second World War, his son Ivan Draganov (bearing the illegal name of Stefanov as a political emigrant) died as a Soviet partisan in the Medvedev's detachment. After the end of the war, Boris returned to Bulgaria together with his wife Penka Moralieva.[25]

Tinyo Hadjitinev, had a similar fate. He had a large chiflik and a mill in the present-day village of Tvarditsa, but advocated left-wing ideas, even as a member of BKO Kavarna. After the liberation of Dobrudja, he was arrested by the Bulgarian authorities for communist activities and relocated in the Vratsa region.[26]

[22] *Добруджанска трибуна,* 25 октомври 1983, XL, брой 124.

[23] Н. Димов, "Борис Стефанов и румънското революционно движение," *Исторически преглед*, 1983, бр. 5, с. 76.

[24] *Ibid.*, с. 78.

[25] *Работническо дело*, бр. 29825, октомври 1983.

[26] А. Каранфилов, Истини и заблуди за българското културно общество в Каварна, с. 102.

The cases of Boris Stefanov and Hadjitinev are yet another proof that Bulgarian landowners were far from reacting only in terms of their class affiliation with the Romanian government. Some balanced between class and their national identity. Others choose the political ideal and stood against their own material interest.

The case of Petar Gabe, the father of the famous Bulgarian poetess Dora Gabe, was interesting in that regard. Already after the Second Balkan War, Gabe proved to be an uncompromising opponent of the new Romanian government. Because of his book "Romania in Dobrudja (1913–1916). Survey" and other articles, the Romanian court sentenced Gabe to death in absentia, confiscated his large chiflik in South Dobrudja, his personal library and archives. Gabe never returned to his farm and ended his life in poverty in Sofia, from where he continued his activities against the Romanian government. In 1927 he was visited by a representative of the Romanian legation in Sofia, who offered him to stop writing against Romania, and in return his political and civil rights would be restored and his property returned. Gabe refuses.[27]

Peter Gabe's idealism was rare then, and it is also rare now. In most cases, choices were rarely black and white and single-layered. The Bulgarian landowners in Dobrudja were at the same time in a privileged position to be able to easily integrate into the Romanian state and participate in political life, but on the other hand they had to balance with their own national feelings, local patriotism, and older relations with the Bulgarian state. The whole complexity of the situation gave birth to different lines in their behavior, which often mixed and overflew into each other.

These lines of behaviour were often influenced by personal relationships, which logically made choosing a side difficult and called into question a number of loyalties. Such inter-ethnic relationships gave birth to one of the most popular love stories in Dobrudja in the period under investigation – between the mayor of Balchik Octavian Moşescu and a wealthy Bulgarian farmer's daughter Penka Dobreva. Their marriage became the inspiration for a popular Romanian novel, but also for a serious internal rift in the Bulgarian family, as Penka's two brothers were members of BKO Balchik.[28] The Craiova Treaty of 1940 put an end to the complex tangle of class, national and personal interests. In the case of people like Penca Moşescu, however, this necessitated a new life in Bucharest and a complete separation from her Bulgarian relatives and place of birth.

The "catastrophic age", as Eric Hobsbawm amply labeled the interwar period, left its mark on everything, including the rare cases of Bulgarian-Romanian cooperation and understanding.[29]

[27] Цв. Недков, Петър Габе – общественик и политик, *Добруджа*, 11, 1994, с. 189–190.

[28] The title of the novel is "Maica Domnului de la mare" by Emanoil Bucuța (1930), Л. Боя, *Балчик. Малкият рай на Велика Румъния*, София, 2014, с. 97; П. Тодоров, К. Пенчиков, *Извори за историята на гр. Балчик (1878–1941)*, Варна, 2003, с. 135.

[29] E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, London, 2001, p. 108.