

BULGARIA AND ROMANIA THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF BORDER STUDIES

Abstract: The current report seeks to investigate the Bulgarian-Romanian relationship through the paradigm of border studies. Revising their shared historical development with accent on the Communist past, globalization and European integration, it could be concluded that the common border is not opened to a steady unambiguous de-bordering, although significant positive changes have occurred.

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Introduction

The development of the border regions studies led to a whole change of its core concept. As simply put by Sendhardt the basic problem of such investigations, being previously the borders, is the process of „bordering”, putting more stress on social constructions rather than physical realities. Citing Anderson (1996) and van Houtum / van Naerssen (2002), he draws a two dimensional framework for approaching the problems of bordering based on institutions and „social practices of spatial differentiation” [1].

In that respect his attention to the region of Central and Eastern Europe is described by the lag of that new understanding of borders. The processes of globalisation such as migration, trade, etc. that have changed the West European edges started to affect the East as well [1]. The newly acquired national sovereignty, undermined by the Soviet influence and the Marxist ideology, posed some additional problems to that part of Europe. Re-emerging historical tensions over territory and minorities played a more significant role. In that context, the problems of nation state and sovereignty of the nation which were put with a lag across New Europe in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th, are also to be mentioned.

However, globalization and Europeanization also affected the region. The deteriorated borderlands became also a part of a new perception. As Batt [2] points, what people were mainly concerned about in a negative way during the Communist times was the lack of travel opportunities, shown by opinion polls. Thus trans-border cooperation, stimulated by the European policies, programs and funding, gained popular support. That created a controversial mixture of positive and negative effects for the shared territory, of processes of „re- and de-bordering”.

In that respect, an analysis of the situation between Bulgaria and Romania would be of special importance. Situated on the brink of the Balkan peninsula, their common existence was unusually

marked with low degrees of ethnic, religious and national tensions. However, in the last 100 years they tended to have some low points. Their shared experience of socialistic dictatorship and as the least reformed countries of the entire Eastern part of the European Union, bring some extra considerations. The geographical position of the shared border across the Danube and a tiny strip of land to the Black Sea is still an obstacle to the cooperation. As both countries are member states of the European Union, their possible positive experience could be extrapolated to a benchmark on the whole of the Balkans in regard to the future European enlargement.

Some consideration over historical determination of the border region

With the mass migration of Bulgarians to the Balkan region in the 7th century, a state was created that incorporated a substantial part of the populations that later formed the Romanian nation. There is a lack of historic or archaeological evidence that any tensions between the two peoples occurred as it would later happen with the incorporation of Serbia or the Greek-speaking minorities in Thrace into the new state for example.

Another factor that opposes the idea of strong historical demarcation between Bulgarian and Romanians was the introduction and use of one language written and spoken with the Christianisation of the Bulgarian Khanate in the 9th century. The state which included the modern Romanian territories introduced the south Slavonic dialect, spoken within its boundaries. The Cyrillic writing norm was used until 1860 in the state affairs and until 1890 in the church affairs across Romania [3]. The Christianisation also brought the same religion – East Orthodox Christianity to the both peoples. A further remark should be made also on the point that Bulgaria was called a Vlaho-Bulgarian Tzardom during the 11th-12th centuries.

A major cultural separation occurred with the conquering of Bulgaria by the Ottoman Turks while the principalities of Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia were put under vassal position that enabled mass Turkish popular and cultural influence. Further, during the Ottoman rule, Wallachia and Banat, later Romania, were a preferred location for Bulgarian émigrés [4]. In comparison to the situation of exiles in Serbia, there are no significant traces of political and ethnic tensions.

However, situation changed with re-instating the Bulgarian political entity into the form of the Principality of Bulgaria in 1878. Romania was „bullied” by the Russian Empire to switch its possessions in Bessarabia for parts of Dobrudja (Bulgarian: Добруджа, Romanian: Dobrogea) which created a land border with the new principality. In terms of the paradigm of the late nineteenth century about nation states and identity the region was difficult, as it was multiethnic, comprised of both Bulgarian and Romanian populations, but being overwhelmingly Islamic, including Tatars, Turks and Circassians (Burnea, 1930 as cited by Negoita, 2014) [5].

To tackle this issue, both governments of Bulgaria and Romania started a process of dispossessing and driving away the Islamic majority and colonization of the newly acquired lands [5]. However, tensions were not so high, and a good example of that is the common struggle of the Bulgarian and Aromanian population in Macedonia for liberation from the Ottoman rule in the next years. An additional example of that is the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) leaders such as Pito Guli and others of Aromonian and Vlah ethnicity, although VMRO being predominantly Bulgarian.

According to the expansionism agenda of that era, Romania sought further acquisitions of landmass. Unable to pursue that politics towards territories populated by Romanian, as they were in possession of two empires - the Russian and the Habsburg Austro-Hungary. So, the wars of the Ottoman Succession of 1912-3 proved to be an opportunity for realization of such projects. The acquisition of Silistra in 1912 from Bulgaria was a step in that direction. During the war of 1913 the Romanian government launched an attack towards its southern neighbour, which at the end led to the annexation

of Southern Dobruđja (Romanian: Cuadrilatel). This event could very well be described as a compensation for the overextension of the Balkan counterparts, especially Bulgaria [6].

The effect of this border change on the shared region was devastating. Although there was not a significant grievance about the minority in Northern Dobruđja, the situation differed with the annexation of the Southern part, given the newly established Bulgarian majority there. The marginalisation attempts done in Northern Dobruđja were repeated in the south – no legal rights for minorities including private property, no civic engagement, etc. [7]. Thus the perception of the border region became one of violence, distrust and conflict.

Physically, the newly demarcated border region was highly hardened and even militarized. A Bulgarian government-backed insurgency groups called „comitadji” which additionally lead to rise in tensions and interrupted normal everyday life in the disputed area. After 1923 new organizations such as the VDRO (Internal Dobruđja Revolutionary Organization), DRO (Dobruđja Revolutionary Organization), etc. represented the mass internationalization of the problem representing Macedonian terrorists, Soviet spies, etc. that brought a new intensification to the internal dimension of the problem [8]. However, with the Craiova Agreement of 1940, Bulgaria took back the region of Southern Dobruđja from Romania, which prevented any future escalation of the problem.

The evaluation of the shared history of Bulgaria and Romania could be done in several conclusions. First, the medieval history led to common cultural and religious traits on the both sides of the border. Additionally, there were no accounts of conflicts, which is of crucial importance to the Balkans as atavistic sentiments play crucial role in common perception of history, nationhood and nationalism. In that respect, a shared understanding of history could play a positive role, presumably by the practice of creating common history textbooks.

Further conclusions on the role of history to the Bulgarian-Romanian relations and thus border region is that conflicts occurred with the introduction of nation states and the ideas of nationalism from Western Europe. The occupation of Southern Dobruđja or the Cadrilater by Romania between 1913 and 1940 created negative attitudes on both sides of the border. As being a recent event, this could very well turn out to be a problematic issue for de-bordering of the region.

The Soviet hegemony and the effect on the border region

Another process of bordering and de-bordering occurred shortly after the Soviet occupation, in both Romania and Bulgaria. Being allies and communist states, both sides attempted some cooperation as the building of the Bridge of Comradeship between Russe and Giurgiu. However, the structure of the regimes in Central and Eastern Europe was pretty affected by the Soviet Union. Although trying to tackle some of the problems of the border regions, mainly based on trust, the Soviet policy-makers imposed totalitarianism, which in addition raised the need of tough control and created a negative perception of the border [9]. Some developments such as „increased mobility of consumers” through „suitcase” trade (Van der Velde, 200 cited by Kennard 2004) [9] occurred, but they were not one-way positive. Being part of a semi-legal or illegal business it raised the problem of corruption which later imposed additional barriers to border-crossing and business.

The unsteady development the border region after the fall of Communism and the beginning of Europeanization

Europeanization as a policy sum of factors could be appreciated as beginning right after the dissolution of the Soviet hegemonic institutions across Eastern Europe as almost all of the countries presented willingness to join the European Union quite early. In that sense, the bilateral relations in terms of borders were backed politically by the European Commission and later by European policy instruments and funds that required additional border cooperation. The processes of opening the borders

draw also a different appreciation of the problems of regionalisation and globalisation, similar to what already has happened in West Europe [1].

The Bulgarian-Romanian relations and subsequently cross-border cooperation after the fall of Communism are not marked by any substantial political problems. A treaty regarding the utmost regulations about the borders was signed in 1992. The process of de-bordering was extremely eased with the common external policies – cooperation not only in regard to the European Union, but also on security, North Atlantic Treaty Organization entrance, shared regional policies. Another major external factor that challenged the Romanian-Bulgarian border to be mentioned is the ruining of the trade on the Danube because of the Serbian expansionist wars during the 1990`s [10]. Further loss of importance meant less connectivity by lesser interest in the region by the central administration.

However, the level of cooperation in regard to the border region was unsatisfactory compared to other bilateral relations across Central and Eastern Europe - agreements for readmission of criminals was signed only in 2000, on cross-border crime in 2002 and of easing border controls in 2003 [11].

Such lagging exploitation of the border region could be explained with the socialistic past and the unease trend of the reforms in both countries given the rest of New Europe. Additionally, the political de facto setting of strong centralization and weak or non-existing inner-party lobbies that could communicate their agenda adequately is further deepening such problems [2].

Minorities

As there are many border issues in the South Eastern Europe based on minorities, the Bulgarian-Romanian case is not an exception. The official vocation of the problems with minorities came out of the Romanian government. The Prime Minister Nastase stated that the Romanian population on the other side of the border was marginalized and lacked institutional backing. Other Romanian officials claimed that the Romanian minority would count for 150 000 although the statistics of the recent 2001 Bulgarian census stated 10 566 identify themselves as Vlachs and 1088 as Romanians [11]. This proved to be problematic as the Treaty for Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbour Relations of 1992 between the two states clearly mentions that these minorities would not be granted a status of national minority. Subsequently, possible granting of vast privileges such as public funding to Romanian schools, establishment of churches, and even parliamentary representative [11] to that minority would be a serious problem for the Bulgarian administration. Poor policies and their execution to the inclusion of other minorities such as the Roma population could back such evaluation. As for the calls for a Romanian representative in the Bulgarian National Assembly, an objective reasoning of constitutionality and legality of such an issue could be raised. The difference of the legal framework of statehood in both countries is limiting the reciprocity in minority statuses although there is a permanent place for a Bulgarian representative in the Romanian legislature.

Political parties and respective agendas

A problem that Europeanization could not oppose is the nationalism. Both Bulgaria and Romania have mainstream nationalistic parties that address issues of borders, territory and minorities in negative way. The historical problems of Dobrudja and minorities on both banks of the Danube are often raised. Thus they may very well influence policies as the example of the Romanian minority official claims, reflecting pressure from the ultra-nationalistic Romania Mare party [11].

The official claim about a change in the maritime border due to legal uncertainty that the Romanian Minister of Exterior Diakonescu raised in 2012 was backed by another questioning of the rights of the minorities in Bulgaria [12]. This act led to a major negative campaigns in the media and across the political spectre on both sides of the border [13] [14].

The most compact idea about the future development of the border region between the two countries could be found in the Operational Program Bulgaria-Romania 2007-2013. Its biggest impact

were the projects and the funding of creation or rehabilitation of border crossings, ferry connections over the Danube as the example of the erection of a second bridge over the Danube in 2013. The growing importance of transportation after the 2004 EU enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe over the Bulgarian-Romanian border region are diminishing the negative effects of the lesser role of the Danube.

Tourism

With tourism being an important part of the Bulgarian economics, the growth of Romanian tourists from the beginning of 2007 after the EU accession is a substantial change to the understanding of the border region. The Romanians became and since 2013 are the biggest national group of foreign tourists. Additionally, they turn out to be the most interested into cultural activities (mostly historic related) and big cities (Ministry of Economics, Bulgaria and National Statistics Institute as cited by [15]). Thus more investments and positive impact would undoubtedly be put on the transportation infrastructure connecting both states. Romanian language could be seen in different parts in the border region on road signs, advertisements, etc. presenting the impact of tourism.

Environment

Further deepening of cross-border cooperation could be fostered on the grounds of environment. Sharing the same valley of the Danube, air and water pollution on the one side could easily affect the other. The same linkage could be drawn for the interdependence of eco-systems and so on, points stressed on by the Operational Program Bulgaria-Romania. Setting up joint task forces tackling such issues as a priority of the program would be helpful for a region struggling with a lag in the development of the capable administration [16].

However, such artificial backing of raising environmental awareness could also go the other way. Tensions over a single polluter on one side of the border could arise on the other. Example could be the pollution from the Romanian city of Turnu Magurele affecting the Bulgarian Nicopol. In that respect the plans of building a nuclear power plant on the border by the Bulgarian government could turn problematic.

The expected entrance of both countries into the Schengen Area, the Eurozone are increasingly raising that importance. However, the delays of both processes and the mass migration of illegal immigrants across Bulgaria are hindering the opportunity of fast and steady de-bordering.

Assessing Europeanization

The credibility of the economic „cure” of Europeanisation could be questioned on several grounds. One is based on the comparison with the Hungarian-Romanian relations that could hinder some processes of de-bordering. A second proposal for re-consideration could very well be the reciprocity of trade and investments between the two countries. Lacking the amount of inward investments from the other side as Bulgaria does, Romanian official attitude and interest groups could very well be less favourable if the situation changes.

Thus, the Operational Program Bulgaria – Romania mentions the lack of a common identity. The problem of the creation of common identity could be dealt with some obvious steps. First of all, the creation of common history textbooks on both sides of the banks of the Lower Danube that could deal with growing history-based nationalism. Additionally, a common administrative effort should be made for further empowering the national minorities that could become a bridge for cooperation, rather than an obstacle. The mentioning of the common employment market in the Operational Program Bulgaria-Romania would be difficult without language capabilities of the labour force.

However, some scholarly works on the issue of common identity argue that such is not always needed and further such could become counterproductive, as historically tested by the identities of nationhood [17]. Expanding on such critique, it could be implied that a creation of a common Bulgaria-Romanian border region identity could eventually hinder other cooperation projects by means of

overconcentration of the political agenda and/or administration capacity. Rephrasing the words of Assi Paasi (1994) as cited by Ann Kennard (2004) [9] – different generation could have different perception of the border region but after an objective change in its institutionalised determination.

Conclusion

Although the Bulgarians and Romanians were not involved in ethnic, religious conflicts with each other and most probably lacked any demarcation border with each other for centuries, the involvement into different political entities created a basis for negative self-determination. With the emergence of a situation of two neighbouring nation-states in the turbulent times of the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, more specifically total political invasion into the field of socially constructed ideas, problems occurred. The first and most obvious one was the creation of the border and its constant hardening. During the communist times total control over trans-border communication further deepened that problem.

However, as Europeanization occurred as a steady process, some of the issues were adequately regarded by the authorities on both sides of the border such as transportation, border-crossing, legal issues. Problematic for that process remain the radical nationalistic parties influence the mainstream politics into further political and cultural re-bordering. The effects of the all-European rise of nationalism and protectionism are yet to be examined. These factors call for further consideration of additional questioning of policies, of re-evaluation of European ones and finally to what extent could liberalised economic and political fend off the opposition of negative identities. However, the level to which Europeanization lead to softening of „social practices of spatial differentiation” between Bulgaria and Romania should further be examined.

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