



Negotiating Periphery

Southeastern Europe across and after Empires



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Book of Abstracts

Panel 1: Peripheral Communities across Empires

Lena Sadovski

The Periphery of European Catholicism? The Eastern Balkans (Bulgaria, Wallachia, Moldavia) as a Trans-Imperial Space within the Early Modern Catholic Missionary Structure

In 1644, the Catholic Archbishops of Marcianopolis (today Devnya in eastern Bulgaria) and Sofia agreed to divide the responsibilities of their respective dioceses: the diocese of Sofia would encompass also Wallachia, while the diocese of Marcianopolis would include Moldavia. In Moldavia, Catholic ecclesiastical jurisdiction was additionally contested by the simultaneous claims of the Polish king to the right of appointing the local bishop of Bacău as well as the year-long rivalry between the Italian Conventuals and the Bulgarian Observants of the Franciscan Order. The talk will thus analyse the Catholic communities of the eastern Balkans and their connections across the political borders of the Ottoman Empire, the Wallachian and Moldavian principalities. The aim is to establish in how far Rome considered this space as a unit in the organization of the Catholic missionary structure, which role political borders played for that conceptualization, and which consequences this had for the local Catholic communities. By studying the connections of the eastern Balkan Catholic communities among one another as well as to Poland, the Habsburg Empire, Venice, Ragusa, various actors in Constantinople, and of course Rome, the talk questions their peripheral status within early modern Catholicism, while also addressing the role that especially the Bulgarian Catholics (supposedly) played in processes of nation-building.

Dana Caciur-Andreescu & Ovidiu Olar

Pietro Cedulini's Informants in the Eastern Balkans: The Case of Benedetto da Gagliano

In the early 1580s, Pope Gregory XIII dispatched Pietro Cedulini, Bishop of Nona, together with other apostolic visitors such as Boniface of Ragusa, to assess the condition of Catholic communities under Ottoman rule in the Eastern Balkans and Constantinople. Their mission formed part of a broader post-Tridentine effort to consolidate Roman oversight in frontier regions. Drawing on the visitation dossier preserved in the Vatican State Archives, this paper reconstructs the network of local informants who enabled Cedulini to gather detailed information across the Ottoman territories. Particular attention is given to Benedetto da Gagliano, a merchant active in Wallachia, Bulgaria, and Venice, and a prominent mem-

ber of the Latin Catholic (Perot) community in Constantinople. As administrator of the financial and institutional affairs of the Catholic churches in the Ottoman capital, Benedetto provided first-hand intelligence on the Ragusan community of Silistra, the court of the Wallachian prince Mihnea II “the Turned-Turk,” and Catholic groups in regions connected to his commercial operations. By analysing these archival materials, the paper argues that the effectiveness of Roman visitation strategies relied heavily on local commercial and diasporic intermediaries. Reconsidering Benedetto's role allows us to reassess how information circulated between the Ottoman frontier and Rome, and how “Global Catholicism” was shaped not only by centralized directives but also by embedded local agents operating across political and confessional boundaries.

Mária Pakucs

The Lutheran Community in Bucharest at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century: A Node between Empires

The history of the Lutheran community in Phanariot Wallachia is still largely unknown to the scholarly community, albeit its foundation and existence during the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century is an excellent example for how the pastors and the community navigated their marginality. While they were subjects of the Habsburg monarchy, they also enjoyed the protection and support of the Swedish consul in Istanbul. Furthermore, the Phanariot princes gave the Lutherans privileges for tax exemptions and the right to build a church. Through the archives of pastor Johann Klokner from the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, I intend to examine the discourse (in letters and other types of communication) and the activity of Klokner concerning his interactions with the other political actors of Phanariot Bucharest: the prince, the court officials, as well as the consular agents of the Austrian and Russian empires.

Panel 2: Politics Re-discovered in the Ottoman Empire

Michael Portmann

Taxation, Protection, and Statehood in the Sandžak of Smederevo (1791–1839). An Ottoman History

During the long 19th century, six “nation-states” emerged in the Balkans from the territorial losses of the Ottoman Empire: Greece (1828/1830), Serbia (1833/1878), Romania (1859/1866/1878), Montenegro (1852/1878), Bulgaria (1878), and finally Albania (1912) emerged as the “winners” from the fiercely contested process of state formation and state-building in the region. Such an outcome was neither entirely contingent nor completely predetermined. The major European powers played a decisive role in the comparative-

ly turbulent state-founding process in the region: it was largely up to them to determine whether a new state should be created at all, where its borders would be drawn, whether the state should be autonomous or sovereign, and which European dynasty would rule the emerging state. The success of revolts against the Ottoman Empire or local Ottoman warlords depended on the willingness of the international community (or at least one of the “big players”) to support the Christian rebels (or revolutionaries) and to bring about and promote a change of power and loyalties. In doing so, the major powers acted (more or less intentionally) both as gravediggers of the Ottoman Empire and as midwives for the new Christian states in the Balkans.

This study aims to link the slow but, in retrospect, seemingly unstoppable retreat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans with the state building in the region that, from the 1830s onward, became known as the “Principality of Serbia”. In short, it examines the transformation of an Ottoman imperial border region into a (at least in principle) modern nation-state. While this process has been well-researched in some areas, there is a significant gap: the Ottoman perspective is generally neglected in the study of 19th-century Southeast European history. For this presentation, in addition to sources from Vienna and Belgrade, more than 300 relevant documents from the Ottoman archives in Istanbul were selected, transcribed, and translated. This is a first, modest attempt to understand and write the history of the Balkans also as Ottoman history.

Constanta Vintila

Between Imperial Protection and National Becoming: Sudiți and the Politics of the Periphery in Southeastern Europe

In 1826, Ioniță Sandu Sturdza, Prince of Moldavia, submitted a petition to the Ottoman Sultan requesting a solution to the phenomenon of sudiți (foreign subjects) and protected individuals residing in the principality. In his petition, he argued that these groups represented a significant economic threat to Moldavia and posed a danger to regional stability through the ideas they disseminated within society. Similar accusations can be found across the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the aftermath of the Greek War of Independence, during which foreign subjects and protégés played an important role.

Building on these observations, this paper analyses the group of sudiți and protected individuals in Wallachia and Moldavia and examines their role in disseminating revolutionary ideas or fostering the knowledge necessary for the forging of a national identity. While often portrayed primarily as economic actors benefiting from extraterritorial privileges, these individuals also functioned as important vectors of intellectual exchange. They transmitted political concepts, commercial practices, and models of governance circulating throughout Southeastern Europe.

The study will rely on a series of previously unexamined archival sources preserved in the archives of the Departments for Foreign Affairs (Logofețiile Pricinilor Străine), institutions

specifically created to monitor and regulate the phenomenon of foreign protection. In addition, consular archives will be consulted, as they contain valuable information regarding the interactions between foreign subjects and local inhabitants, revealing how knowledge, political awareness, and new forms of collective identity were shaped at the intersection of imperial authority and emerging national movements.

By reassessing the socio-political role of sudiți and protected individuals, the presentation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how trans-imperial networks facilitated the circulation of revolutionary ideas. It also examines the gradual articulation of national consciousness in the Danubian Principalities during the early nineteenth century.

Dimitra Grigoriou

From Analogue to Digital: Digital Editions at the Institute of Habsburg and Balkan Studies

At the Institute of Habsburg and Balkan Studies, two major projects include a digital component: “Digital Scholarly Edition of Habsburg-Ottoman Diplomatic Sources 1500–1918” and “Minutes of the Austrian Council of Ministers”. This presentation will showcase these two projects and demonstrate their distinctive features (such as language, format types, etc.). In particular, we will illustrate how users can access the documents and their functionalities (such as identified entities, bibliographical resources, etc.), as well as how they may benefit from the available resources. Furthermore, we will highlight the challenges encountered during the transformation process from analogue to digital and open the floor for discussion on how to promote the broader availability of historical resources online.

Panel 3: Contested Identities and Spaces

Andrei Cușco

Southern Bessarabia from the Crimean War to World War I (1856-1914): Romanian Nation-Building and Russian Imperial Policies in a Contested Borderland

After the Crimean War, in 1856, a part of Southern Bessarabia entered the new (and modernizing) Romanian nation-state, thus temporarily becoming an object of Romanian nation-building discourses and practices, mainly at the interconnected levels of the management of multi-ethnicity, institution-building, educational designs, and church-related policies. However, after barely two decades, in the context of a brief but consequential Russian-Romanian diplomatic controversy and following the settlement reached by the Great Powers at the Berlin Congress, this region was re-annexed by the Russian Empire. The reintegration of the three Southern Bessarabian districts into the Russian Empire in 1878 not only represented a high point of the Russian-Romanian symbolic competition for Bessarabia,

but also led to the creation of an ‘administrative aberration’ within the Russian Empire. The former Romanian territories, merged into the new Ismail district, preserved their institutional and legal peculiarities for almost four decades. Thus, the modern structures of an emerging nation-state were transferred into the Russian imperial context.

This presentation will focus, first, on the attitude of several Russian observers and officials towards the 1856 – 1878 Romanian administration, with a special emphasis on mutual perceptions and the foreign policy dimension. Second, the presentation will deal with the polemics concerning the alternative strategies for integrating this region within the empire. The Russian bureaucracy was divided on the issue, oscillating between a centralizing approach and a more pragmatic attitude, which allowed for the continued existence of the Romanian institutions. The discourse displayed by the Russian officials on this occasion is a curious amalgam of flexible pragmatism, modern rationality, bureaucratic inertia, centralizing impulses, and foreign policy considerations. The inconsistency and lack of coherence of the Russian policies on the Southern Bessarabian periphery point to the contested and fragmented nature of the imperial discourse regarding the alternative models of institutional organization and political legitimacy.

Emanuel Plopeanu

The Inferiority of the Others: The Image of the non-Romanian Communities from Dobruja after 1878

The incorporation of Dobruja into the Romanian state following the Russo-Romanian-Ottoman War and the resolutions of the 1878 Congress of Berlin generated not only significant geopolitical and economic opportunities but also a complex demographic challenge. As a region shaped by more than four and a half centuries of Ottoman rule, Dobruja developed a distinctive socio-ethnic profile, characterised by ethnic plurality. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Romanian authorities identified no fewer than seventeen ethnic groups in the province, an exceptional level of diversity unmatched in other former Ottoman territories incorporated into the newly established Balkan states before and after the First World War. The demographic structure - marked by the presence of a relative Muslim majority - prompted the Romanian state to articulate strategies aimed at reshaping the ethnic balance in favour of the Romanian population. This objective was pursued through the adoption of a special legal framework and the establishment of a differentiated administrative status.

Romanian minority policy in Dobruja during this period was characterised by a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, the state recognised certain ethnic identities and acknowledged their historical presence. On the other hand, economic measures - particularly land redistribution - generated significant discontent among non-Romanian inhabitants. Many members of these communities perceived state policies as instruments designed to favour Romanian colonisation and to engineer demographic transformation. Although this

dissatisfaction did not culminate in overt resistance, it often resulted in voluntary emigration to the Ottoman Empire, which functioned as an alternative political and cultural space for disaffected groups, especially Muslims (but not only).

Local and national press (and other publications) largely perceived non-Romanian communities as a burden rather than a cultural asset. Ethnic minorities were considered incapable of absorbing Romanian (i.e., Western) civilisation, were suspected of disloyalty to the Romanian state, and blamed with lacking education. Generally, Romanian public opinion approached these population groups with a hierarchical, colonial mindset.

Camelia Zavarache

Drafting the New Curricula for Normal Schools in Romania during the 1920s: Political Stakes, Cultural Identity and Teachers’ Reactions

This presentation analyses the process of drafting and debating over the 1925 curricula for normal schools. After passing the 1924 law on primary and normal education, the Liberal government appointed a special commission to draft the new curricula for such schools. By reviewing the courses and their contents, one can notice these education tools sought to explicitly define the “authentic” Romanian. Thus, history, agronomy along with manual activities for boys and girls provided the definition of the Romanian peasant as it was perceived by central school authorities: living in the countryside, working the field and wearing the traditional folk costume, typical of the region of origin. Were the features identified in alignment with the school policies voted at the end of the war, which granted rural children access to secondary and especially normal schools? That is, did they reflect the commitment that the political class displayed towards the rural space as one of the main beneficiaries of its post-war school and cultural policies? Or were they infused with traits connected to the Sămănătorist ideology, enforcing a curated ethnic identity to rural communities during the process of making children literate, thus a mechanism of ethno-nationalism? In trying to answer these questions, I analyse the activity of professionals appointed to write the curricula, the reactions of teachers and principals from normal schools toward the draft law, as well as the debates at the General Council of Instruction.

Panel 4: The First World War and Irresolute Aftermaths

Ana-Maria Milčić

At the Edge of Empire: Avant-Garde Art in Fiume from the Habsburgs to Fascism

This paper examines the work and writings of two Fiume-based figures, the painter Rómolo Wnoucek (later Venucci) and the art critic, editor and photographer Francesco Dre-

nig, whose lives and careers spanned the city's shift from a semi-autonomous port within Austria-Hungary until 1918 to annexation by Fascist Italy in 1924. Their artistic and cultural work reveals identities that moved across Italian, Hungarian and Slavic spheres and remained flexible and shaped by the shifting sovereignty of their hometown. Scholarship on Fiume's historical avant-gardes has divided into two strands: surveys of local artists and writers in art history and literary studies, and accounts of the Italian Futurists' brief presence between 1919 and 1921, focused primarily on politics and writing. Scholars of the avant-garde encounter Fiume almost exclusively through the latter strand, which rests on an Italy-centred, nation-matrix frame. This perspective pushes the city and its inhabitants out of view while allowing the Futurists' own mythologising accounts to stand in for lived experience in one of the most heavily disputed territories of the post-war talks. By juxtaposing the work of local figures such as Venucci and Drenig with the activities of the Italian Futurists, the paper challenges the familiar image of Fiume as an exciting avant-garde laboratory. Instead, by restoring local voices, it reveals the city as a contested borderland caught in a chaotic post-Habsburg transition. To do so, the paper examines Fiuman modernist and avant-garde magazines, including Delta, edited by Drenig, Futurist publications such as La testa di ferro, and paintings and collages by Venucci and Italian Futurists to ask what borderland perspectives reveal those national narratives obscure. Taking a transnational and multilingual approach, the paper treats the borderland itself as an active historical force rather than simply the multicultural backdrop against which Fiuman avant-garde art occurred.

Gabriela Dristaru

Cowardice or Impotence? Examining Desertion in the Romanian Army during World War

Data from the Military Justice Service under the Ministry of War indicate that, at the end of World War I, approximately 65% of cases brought before over thirty Courts Martial convened during the conflict were related to desertion and associated offenses. At present, comprehensive research on the issue of desertion within the Romanian army during World War I remains limited. Scholarly attention has predominantly focused on narratives emphasizing Romania's achievement of its national aspirations after the war.

Drawing on sources from both national archives and lesser-known military archives, my presentation will explore military justice from two angles: institutionally, by looking at how military and civilian authorities used it for control and punishment; and socially, by considering the reasons—both political and social—for which soldiers abandoned their posts, with a distinctive focus on the relationships between soldiers and officers.

Radu Tudorancea

From Mistrust to Animosity and Hate. Foreigners and Ethnic Minorities in First World War Romania

This paper tackles a mostly neglected topic among the vast area of research focusing on the First World War: Romanian society's perceptions and reactions regarding the ethnic minorities and foreigners in the context of the ongoing conflagration. The presentation will explore these issues both during the years of neutrality and after Romania joined the Great War. During the two years of neutrality, Romanian society, or at least some significant segments of it, seemed increasingly dominated by the interventionist current, which flowed across party lines and politicians. This trend grew in intensity particularly among intellectual circles across the country, with more and more street demonstrations and meetings in the major cities, displaying a pro-Entente orientation.

Later on, after Romania joined the War, the public opinion started to distinguish between the "Germanophile people of good faith" who have devoted their actions to the Romanian war effort, and other Germanophiles considered to have maintained their allegiance to German and Austro-Hungarian interests. Apart from the already existing fears, mistrust and concerns, or even traces of xenophobia regarding the presence and activities of certain ethnic groups and/or foreigners on Romanian soil (from Germans and Austrians to the members of the Jewish community), once with the Romanian intervention into the conflict (and, to a certain extent, even before that moment), given various events such as the advance of foreign troops on Romanian soil, the abuses and mistreatment of civilian population and/or the mistreatment of Romanian POW's in various prisoner camps belonging to the Central Powers entities, all of the above have fuelled anger and/or hate towards various ethnic minorities and foreign subjects. Presentation will examine this process based on archival documents and various other sources.

Flavius Solomon

Toward a Civilizational Hierarchy of "National Priorities": The Romanian Left and the Germanophile Movement in the Old Kingdom

This paper proposes a less explored perspective on the history of the Romanian Left before and during World War I. It focuses on the participation of the Left in the political and intellectual debate regarding "national priorities" raging in the Old Kingdom. Discussed in Romanian historiography primarily in the context of the neutrality policy adopted during the years 1914–1916, but with roots stretching back to the decades preceding the Great War, the stance of Romania's political and cultural elites toward the Romanians living in the Habsburg Empire and in Tsarist Russia ultimately determined Romania's decision, in August 1916, to join the Entente powers. For the most part, the Marxist left-wing activists

in the Old Kingdom (Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Cristian Racovski) or those hailing from the tradition of Russian Populism (Zamfir Ralli-Arbore, Constantin Stere) embraced views and opinions attuned to the Germanophile tendency. They advocated for an attitude of benevolent neutrality toward the Central Powers or even entering the war on their side. The main ideologues of the Left (the most characteristic case being Dobrogeanu-Gherea) analysed the situation of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia as parts of Austria-Hungary and Russia, respectively, by emphasizing the social realities on the ground. However, many writings of those years also reveal a constant concern for the contemporary debates regarding the alleged “civilizational antagonism” between the German and the Russian worlds. While arguing for and supporting the urgent need to modernize Romania, including through its alignment with the “civilized West” (usually equated, in these works, with Germany), as an antithesis to “backward Russia,” the Romanian left formulated a revised hierarchy of “national priorities”: Bessarabia took precedence over Transylvania or Bukovina.

Panel 5: Sovereignty, Socialism, and Post-1989 Legacies

Idrit Idrizi and Bogdan C Iacob

Reframing Socialist Defiance: Albania, Romania and Global Circulations of Sovereignty (1960–1964)

The presentation reframes Albania’s and Romania’s defiance of the Soviet Union by situating it within global debates about sovereignty. We use the latter as an umbrella term that encompasses concepts such as equality in international relations, economic self-reliance and self-determination against hegemony. During the 1950s and 1960s, these notions gained popularity across the globe because of decolonization, non-alignment and the dynamics of dissent within world communism. The article argues that the regimes in Tirana and Bucharest employed these concepts to assert autonomy and legitimacy within the Cold War order. The discourses and actions of Albanian and Romanian party elites were not isolated expressions of national dissent, and instead, were shaped by and actively contributed to transnational debates that were catalysed by anti-colonial emancipation. We compare Albania and Romania by juxtaposing each party-state’s transnational projections of sovereignty in relations with the Soviet Union, China, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, as well as post-colonial countries. The article highlights that from the vantage point of the margins of Eastern Europe, focusing on sovereignty brings the impact of decolonization upon the pluralization of state socialist identities during the 1960s into focus.

Lucian Jinga

Romania’s Military Aid for the Global South (1960s-1980s)

From the 1960s onwards, Romania provided military assistance to newly independent states and liberation movements in Africa and Asia. This support ranged from weapons and military equipment to training, technical expertise and medical treatment. Based on documents from Romanian party, diplomatic and security archives, the presentation discusses several examples that illustrate how this policy worked in practice.

Romanian authorities described military aid as part of their support for decolonization and the struggle against imperialism. Their decisions, however, were not determined by ideological solidarity alone. Political prestige, bilateral relations and economic considerations were equally important. Bucharest also paid close attention to the involvement of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, whose offers could compete with or influence its own.

The presentation will focus on the negotiations surrounding aid and on the gap between political commitments and Romania’s actual capacity to fulfil them. Limited resources, transport difficulties and disagreements between the institutions involved often affected the delivery of assistance. The experiences of foreign military trainees in Romania offer another perspective on these relations. Although officially designated as representatives of friendly states and movements, they were closely monitored and judged according to Romanian political and social norms.

These cases show that Romania’s military engagement with the Global South combined political solidarity with pragmatic interests and remained closely connected to the practices of supervision and control that shaped the socialist state at home.

Robert Pichler

Social Development, Migration, and Ethnic Conflict in (Post-)Socialist Macedonia: Findings from a Comparative Ethnographic Village Study

Divergent patterns of social development in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia played a decisive role in the outbreak of ethnic conflict. While, on the Macedonian side, processes of social transformation were accompanied by nation-building and increasing societal integration, delayed processes of social transformation among the Albanian population led to marginalization and ethnic polarization.

Based on a comparative ethnographic study of two villages, this presentation examines the underlying dynamics of these ethnically differentiated developments and highlights the particular role of migration as a key factor shaping them.