

***NATURE, SOCIETY AND POLITICS
IN THE MODERN HISTORY OF SOUTHEAST EUROPE***

– summary of the habilitation thesis in history –

*Ionel Stelu Șerban,
Institute of South East European Studies,
Romanian Academy*

Romanian Academy
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As part of this habilitation thesis, **section I** consists of two chapters that shed light on the evolution of my research activity since obtaining the doctoral thesis in 2004. The first chapter is a synthesis of a series of articles, book chapters and edited books that develop the theme of the relationship between migration and ethnicity in the context of the social history of South-Eastern Europe, starting from the case of a representative region, namely the Lower Danube Valley. The region is significant for South-Eastern Europe primarily because it has the Danube River as its axis, for a long time throughout history one cultural and geopolitical frontier of the entire European continent. With the end of the 19th century the southeastern European part of the Danube became the state border between Romania and Bulgaria, but its academic research is equally challenging and fertile.

The research of migration, ethnicity and South East European social history is closely linked to the activity at the Institute of South East European Studies, where I specialized in Bulgarian studies. Learning Bulgarian and researching in libraries and archives in Bulgaria added to my previous experience on the same topics in Romania, which allowed me to build a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. To the latter dimension also contributed the field research carried out from the perspective of cultural studies done in different regions of Romania and subsequently, starting with 2003, in regions in northern Bulgaria. No less important and happy was Professor Paul H. Stahl's suggestion that the area for research case studies to be the Lower Danube Valley. I must also mention that in terms of logistical support, most of this research was carried out with grant funding both from the country, the grants of the Romanian Academy and the Romanian Government, as well as from abroad (CEU Budapest, Research Support Scheme, Prague).

The first chapter of this section represents a synthesis of several materials already published, of which I mention five titles that are among the 10 published works attached to the habilitation file. These are:

1. Stelu Șerban, „Migration and development models in Dobrudja 1880-1913. Contributions to the study of the topic”, în *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 9 (4), 2009, pp. 609 - 620.
2. Stelu Șerban, “Subjectivity and migration: Adventists in Northern Dobroudja”, în Petko Hristov (ed.), **Migration and Identity. Historical, Cultural, and Linguistic Dimensions of Mobility in the Balkans**, Paradigma, Sofia, 2012, pp.246-260.

3. Stelu Șerban, "Hidden identities in Southeast Europe. Aromanians in Romania", în Petko Hristov et al (eds.), **Contextualizing changes. Migrations, shifting borders, and new identities in Eastern Europe**, Paradigma, Sofia, pp. 455-476, 2015.
4. Stelu Șerban, "From Forced Migration to New Patterns of Social Life: Bulgarian Refugees in Teleorman County, Romania, in the Nineteenth century", în *Hungarian Historical Review*, 6(3), pp. 3-25, 2017.
5. Stelu Șerban, "Whose minority? The resistant identity of the Moldavian Csangos", în *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 69(4), 2021, pp. 483-505, doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0036

Starting from these references and completing the other related articles mentioned in the list of publications, I present in the first chapter the cases of Teleorman and Dobrogea. Placed in a comparative framework, they highlight two different ways in which the Bulgarian-speaking population of the Lower Danube Valley and at the Romanian-Bulgarian border formed its ethnicity in relation both to their native places south of the Danube and to the majority Romanian population of the host society. The main concepts of comparative analysis are those of cultural ecology (Eric C. Wolf, John W. Cole, Julian Steward), ethnicity (Fredrik Barth) and cultural area (Adolf Bastian, Alfred Kroeber, Julian Steward).

Through the concept of cultural ecology I define the way the family economy / *kin-ordered mode of production* (Eric C. Wolf) adapts to the requirements of a modernizing state-type organization. In addition, the concept of cultural ecology introduces into the analysis data of local history and politics, which are worthwhile in analyzing social processes such as migration and adaptation. Cultural ecology relates to and determines the concept of ethnicity. Thus, ethnicity depends on the conditions in which a population group adapts its needs to the resources of the natural environment in which this people live. Ethnicity is therefore dependent on the variables of political economy, without excluding the processes of transmission and preservation of culture. The balance between the two groups of social processes, the adaptation to the ecological niche and the requirements of cultural transmission processes, lead to the emergence of an ethnic identity (Fredrik Barth). The concept of cultural area is also linked to that of cultural ecology. Thus, Julian Steward, one of the initiators of cultural ecology studies in the early 1950s, theorized the concept of ecological niche/conditions, starting from the cultural area theorized by Alfred Kroeber. The lineage of the concept takes root in the late 19th century in works of human geography and cultural morphology (such as those of Adolf Bastian). Later, what was called *Kulturkreis* was taken over by cultural anthropology as *culture/cultural area*.

In this theoretical framework I approach the migration process of the Bulgarian-speaking population from the two areas of southern Romania, Dobrogea and Teleorman. The period I am focusing on begins with the first decades of the 19th century and ends almost a hundred years later, before the Balkan Wars. The period was one of sustained political and economic transformation. There were, however, differences in rhythm, conditions, and political authority. Thus, if for Teleorman together with the two Romanian principalities, the date of 1829 can be accepted as the beginning of social and economic modernization through the support by the political and social elites of a political economy based on the exchange of products on the free, local and regional markets, and on production in large quantities destined primarily for economic exchange markets, for Dobrogea, part of the Ottoman Empire, this date is hard to define. The latter date can be placed in 1839 with the proclamation of the *hatisheriff* that triggered the reforming legislation of the Tanzimat by Sultan Abdul Medgid I, newly installed at the head of the empire. However, the absence of a political and social elite to take over this project, the much more complicated ethnic and confessional diversity of Dobrogea, and, perhaps most importantly, the instability given by the fact that the province had been the theater of the last two Ottoman-Tsarist wars, made that in 1878, when Dobrogea became part of Romania, the effects of Tanzimat to be significantly different from the rest of the province on the right side of the Danube.

The two parts of the chapter focus on the Bulgarian-speaking population of the two areas. In Teleorman, the Bulgarian-speaking population is widely present only at the end of the 18th century, when migrating from south of the Danube they superposed on a dense web of social and economic relations, given mainly by the vertical stratification of landowners and their workers, rural inhabitants, as well as by horizontal relations in the category of large landowners. Thus, the Bulgarian-speaking population falls both into the category of "ordinary people" employed as dependent small farmers and agricultural workers, as well as in land ownership relations, having in its composition especially in the 19th century landowners, who often employed local Bulgarian-speaking population or from beyond the Danube. In addition, the Bulgarian-speaking population, through its economic and social elite, became the main actor of urbanization projects of the region, such as Mavrodin, or more successful, Alexandria. Examples of these categories are given from the bibliography of special works, as well as from the publications of the time. An important part of this part of the chapter is devoted to the way later, in the second half of the 19th century, in the conditions of political evolution of local society, the Bulgarian-speaking population changed its

ethnicity. But precisely because the disputes between the two states, conflicts at international level, with governmental and diplomatic actors, are only fleetingly reflected in the local, "peripheral" society in Teleorman, the pressure of the national state on ethnicity was weak. The "Mihăileanu affair" or the conflicts regarding the border on the Danube, not yet established, both around 1900, are examples of this kind.

In Dobrogea, the Bulgarian-speaking population, although reported in previous sources of historical nature, becomes statistically significant also at the beginning of the 19th century. But the region is, if not empty of population, at least extremely unstable from this point of view. Therefore, there are no dense economic and social relations of traditional political economy, as in Teleorman. Modernization can thus become an easy program to achieve, at least at first glance, hence the proliferation of socio-political projects around 1850. Among the latter, some proved feasible, such as the establishment by Sultan Abdul Medgid I of Medgidia town or the construction of the Constanța – Cernavodă railway. Another part remained in the draft stage, such as the transformation of the region into an autonomous principality, either under the leadership of a part of the Wallachian-Moldavian boyars, or under the administration of Polish military guards, or even into an independent principality colonized by Bulgarian refugees. Their rationalizing aspect, comparable to the construction of towns in Teleorman in the same period, is extremely striking. Urbanization, with the rapid change of administrative and economic centers of the region, attention to transport routes, as well as the social and cultural effects that Tanzimat has in the region are analyzed in a separate part of the section. After 1878, the province becoming part of the Romanian state and without a social resistance comparable to that of Teleorman, the reforms of the Ottoman Tanzimat continued even more intensively. The new capitalist political economy already "experienced" on the left bank of the Danube is being applied, at least to its letter, rapidly. Examples are the restructuring of land ownership, passed from the traditional Ottoman property regime to the formalized one according to the French model of the Napoleonic code. This new political economy was one great opportunity for migrants in the province, mostly ethnic Romanians. The Bulgarian-speaking population also engaged in the new political economy, but unlike Teleorman, it preserves its ethnicity. The pressure of the nation state on them is much more intense in Dobrogea, hence the relative isolation of the Bulgarian-speaking population, on which the conflicts between the Romanian and Bulgarian states have a deeper repercussion.

At the end of the chapter, I highlight the existence within the Bulgarian-speaking population of southern Romania of two types of ethnic identities already visible at the end of the researched period. The two are the product of a set of different factors, from belonging to different areas of the cultural area of the lower Danube, to the cultural ecology of their adaptation during migration processes, more precisely to the political economy of the capitalist mode of production, which was the basis of the modernization program throughout the 19th century.

The second chapter of the first section of the habilitation thesis is the synthesis of several articles, book chapters and the volume *A New Ecological Order. Development and the Transformation of Nature in Eastern Europe*, which I edited together with Ștefan Dorondel and which appeared in 2022 at Pittsburgh University Press. Since 2012, besides my interest in developing themes of social history, migrations and ethnicity in South Eastern Europe, I have been involved in research projects related to the history of technology and the transformation of the environment. The starting point was the rich international academic bibliography in this field, but too little capitalized in the region of South-Eastern Europe. I have remained in the comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, trying to consolidate it by appealing to field research methodologies in which cultural studies enter into dialogue with natural sciences, such as geography and biology. The Lower Danube remained the same territory to explore, but starting from the rich international literature on the history of technology and environment, I approached topics related to the transformation of the great river in the context of technological development and consolidation of the two neighboring nation states, Romania and Bulgaria. Cooperation with academic institutions in Bulgaria has been deepened. I coordinated on behalf of the Institute of South East European Studies several joint projects with institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This facilitated my access to libraries and archives in Bulgaria, as well as organizing, together with my Bulgarian and Romanian colleagues from these projects, several conferences and round tables on Romanian-Bulgarian relations, particularly regarding the Danube. Logistically important was my participation in two field research projects, funded by UEFISCDI, the first between 2013 and 2016, on the topic of technological transformation of the Lower Danube from the mid-19th century until now, the second, carried out between 2020 and 2023, on the dynamics of the islands on the Romanian-Bulgarian Danube border since 1830 and also, until now. Both projects were carried out in multidisciplinary teams, in which I worked with fellow geographers and biologists.

The second chapter of this section represents a synthesis of several materials already published, of which I mention five titles that are in full, like the other five titles of the first chapter, among the 10 published works attached to the habilitation file. These are:

1. Stelu Șerban, „State, Technology and Environment on the Lower Danube: Bulgaria and Romania before the Balkan Wars”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21(2), pp. 204-221, 2019, doi: 10.1080/19448953.2018.1506279.
2. Ștefan Dorondel, Stelu Șerban, Daniel Cain “The Play of Islands: Danube Dynamics and Border Establishment in Modern Southeast Europe (1830-1900)”, *Environment and History*, 25(4), pp. 521-547, 2019, doi: 10.3197/096734018X15254461646413.
3. Stelu Șerban, ”Techno-Nationalizing the Levees on the Danube: Romania and Bulgaria after World War II”, *Nationalities Papers*, 48(2), pp. 373 - 387, 2020, doi:10.1017/nps.2018.77
4. Stelu Șerban, Ștefan Dorondel, ”The Economy of a Leashed River: State, Experts, and Politics along the Lower Danube, 1900–1940”, în Ștefan Dorondel, Stelu Șerban (eds.), **A New Ecological Order. Development and the Transformation of Nature in Eastern Europe**. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, pp. 109 – 129, 2022, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2dzzqnk.10.
5. Stelu Șerban, ”Slow ecology. Local knowledge and natural restoration on the Lower Danube”, în *Environmental Values*, on-line, 2023, doi: 10.1177/09632719231170511

Based on these works as well as those related in the list of publications, in this second chapter I present how Romania and Bulgaria tried to shape each other’s projects of technological modification of the two banks of the Danube to suit their own modernization processes from the 1880s to the middle of the socialist period, 1970s.

The central concept of the chapter is that of techno-nationalism, which in the literature is not at all a pejorative term. On the contrary, the concept of techno-nationalism sheds light on aspects that contribute both to the emergence and diffusion of technologies and to their impact on national modernization. At first glance, successful new technologies are emerging as a result of a high level of social innovation, scientific knowledge and social modernization. However, globalization is often associated with technology transfer based on the fact that successful technologies seem to easily cross national and continental borders. This explains why, even if apparently nations reclaim the invention of new technologies, the tangible effects in the economy and society are rather due to the ability to assimilate and spread technologies globally, that is, to technological sharing, use and adaptation (David Edgerton).

In the early 1880s in a position to elaborate without external interference their national development programs, Romania, as an independent state, and Bulgaria, with the status of an

autonomous principality, illustrate the efforts made by small European states to create cross-border infrastructures, which were later integrated into continental European networks. Bibliography on the subject is replete with citations of the efforts of powerful states such as Britain, France, Austria-Hungary and Germany, but there are far fewer examples of regional infrastructure built by smaller states such as those in Scandinavia.

As with other European rivers such as the Rhine, the Rhône or the Po, work to modify the Danube began massively in the mid-19th century. However, there were no major changes in the lower part of the Danube before the 1900s. Seen from this point of view, the Danube appears in the 19th and 20th centuries as a privileged case of technologies migrating globally transposed into significantly different historical, social, political and economic circumstances. In the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, projects to modify the Danube began at the end of the 19th century, but on a small scale. The dammed areas in Romania were insignificant, while neighbouring Bulgaria had only sketchy projects that were not implemented. However, the relevant technology has been imported by international co-management commissions such as the European Commission of the Danube or the Joint Commission of the Prut.

From the beginning, however, Romania exploited the opportunities for navigation and hydrotechnical construction on the Danube more consistently than Bulgaria. Moreover, against the background of a growing technical and intellectual elite, the Romanian state stimulated the emergence of a body of Romanian engineers. The fact that since the 1900s Romania had a network of governmental institutions with agencies charged with managing the Danube, such as *Romanian River Navigation* or the *Romanian Hydraulic Service*, allowed this elite to get involved in government projects aimed at technologically changing the Danube and its environment.

Later, in the interwar period, technological interventions along the Danube took place in different contexts on both sides of the Danube border. In Romania, the Danube was supposed to play a role in electrifying the country through state intervention schemes, which resulted in a consistent legislation inaugurated in the first half of the 1920s and later enriched including with the help of foreign experts. Thus, the state appears as a factor of technological rationalization through its bureaucracy and institutions. Also, the construction of levees has strictly economic purposes, the great dispute between Anghel Saligny and Grigore Antipa on this subject being mainly led with this type of arguments. In Bulgaria, interest in electrification is less intense, with

the state playing a minor role, while the construction of dams along the Danube took place in times of political turmoil, as an incomplete solution to the trauma of national refugees. The irrigation systems, that the water unions law of 1920 envisaged, were not connected to the Danube area. In addition, the type of associative organization in Bulgaria has hindered technological exchange at international level.

During the socialist period, after the first decade of harsh Soviet control, Romania challenged the unity of the socialist bloc and in the early 1960s initiated an ambitious program of national industrialization. Thus, the embankment of the Romanian side of the Danube was intertwined with the needs of a larger program of electrification and construction of the irrigation system. Techno-nationalism merged with a type of techno-statism that totalitarian seizure of political power facilitated. Technological exchange with Western countries, as well as the consolidation of a national technocracy capable of internalizing and implementing this import of technology were significant pillars in this process. In socialist Bulgaria, the Danube's links with electricity and irrigation networks were far weaker. The inherited from the interwar period were rebuilt and extended, but without this meaning a large-scale hydraulic construction. Moreover, technological cooperation on the Danube between Romania and Bulgaria has itself been affected by a series of obstacles, hesitations or lack of trust. Many projects started on the basis of cooperation between Romania and Bulgaria have been abandoned, such as plans for the Turnu Măgurele-Nikopol and Călărași-Silistra hydropower plants, dating back to the early 1960s.

Section II of the thesis contains the plans for the development of my research activity by continuing the two directions outlined in the first section of the thesis. The results of the second project on the ecological history of the Danube, carried out between 2020 and 2023 in a multidisciplinary team that also included PhD and postdoctoral students, are about to be completed. Two of them took final form, one, a book chapter entitled *Floods and affective state on the Bulgarian Lower Danube*, being included in the volume "Disturbance. River, Infrastructure, State", edited by Ș. Dorondel and L. Gătejel, volume accepted for publication at Purdue University Press (<https://www.press.purdue.edu>), the other, article entitled *Living with sediments. State border and islands on the lower Danube*, is under evaluation, submitted to **Political Geography** (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/political-geography>). I have included in my habilitation

thesis, in section II, a shorter version of the chapter of the volume for Purdue University Press (the summary is below).

By submitting this habilitation thesis, I aim to capitalize within the academic milieu in Romania, through the guidance of doctoral theses, also the experience gained in coordinating the works of my younger colleagues. In the mentioned team projects, especially in the two projects on the environmental history of the Danube, I worked successfully in archives, libraries and in the field, with younger colleagues who were in different stages of doctoral and postdoctoral studies. In fact, the Institute of South East European Studies submitted this year a funding documentation in the UEFISCDI competition of centers of excellence, as coordinating institution. I am part of the institute's team that also has 12 PhD and postdoctoral positions, which will work with senior researchers. The coordination of these works, as well as of others within the Doctoral School of the Romanian Academy, is also a direction that I intend to pursue in my future professional activity.

The summary of the chapter "Floods and affective state on the Bulgarian Lower Danube"

The work refers to the catastrophic floods of March 1942 in the Vidin region, on the Bulgarian bank of the Danube. The floods occurred as a result of the formation of a massive ice bridge that united the Bulgarian and Romanian shores around Bogdan Island, eight kilometers downstream Vidin. The hypothesis of the work is that, against the emotional background caused by this flood, the state appears for the first time as the main actor in restoring every daily life in the area affected by the catastrophe.

After the introduction, the chapter has a theoretical section, focused on the concept of affective state. In this section, I delimit the strictly imaginary representation of the state from the affective state complex that includes structural parts (infrastructure, bureaucracy, central government vs. local society). Two sections follow that present state interventions to restore infrastructure and help the groups affected by disaster. One of these two sections presents the support actions carried out through various bodies of local bureaucrats, an apparently neutral intervention, but which has left significant affective traces in the local memory. The other section focuses on the strictly affective presence of state representatives in the catastrophic context of the flood. The work is the result of field research supplemented with data from the state archives, Vidin

branch. The presence and affective influence of the state are discernible at the level of local memory, both oral and official, a fact highlighted in the conclusions of the chapter.