

THE ROMANIAN-BULGARIAN BORDER (1878–1940): SOUTHERN DOBRUJA OR THE NEED FOR A STRATEGIC FRONTIER

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The present study addresses the issue of the Romanian-Bulgarian border from the end of the nineteenth century until 1940 (when the currently existing frontier was established). The author gives an analysis of the developments occurring in this particular period, starting out from the specific evolutions of the late-nineteenth century (largely determined in the Balkan region by the Congress of Berlin of 1878) and continuing with the border reconfiguration at the end of the Balkan wars, the regional evolutions in the Balkans during World War One, and the rearrangement of the Balkan puzzle after the Peace Conference. The article focuses on the evolution of tensions and disagreements between Romania and Bulgaria, and on proposals and solutions put forward by the two parties.

Keywords: Romania; Bulgaria; Dobruja; Great Powers; Carol I; border

The issue of the Romanian-Bulgarian border elicited many points of view and approaches in the period tackled in this study; additionally, it was largely the main cause of tension between the two states in the interwar period, culminating with the Treaty of Craiova signed on 7 September 1940, in which the parties declared, “solemnly, that the border established between them was final and perpetual.”¹

The Treaty of Berlin, which was the major event of the late-nineteenth century in terms of frontiers, traced new borders in the Balkan Peninsula. For Bulgaria,² a principality under Ottoman suzerainty, the treaty defined new frontiers with the autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia (Article 14), with independent Romania (the Romanian-Bulgarian border in Dobruja was, de facto, the Romanian-Ottoman border, given the subordination of the Principality of Bulgaria to the

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¹ *Tratat între România și Bulgaria semnat la Craiova, 7 septembrie 1940* (Bucharest: Imprimeria Centrală, 1940), “Appendix II,” 1–2.

² Bulgaria had lost many of the territories gained by the Treaty of San Stefano of March 1878. In fact, the Treaty of San Stefano seems to have enabled Bulgaria to achieve almost all its national goals, being granted most of the eastern territory of the Balkan Peninsula between the Danube and the Aegean Sea, including Macedonia.

Ottoman Empire), and with independent Serbia. The northern border was in fact the old eastern border of Serbia dating back to 1833, whereas the southern border was newly delineated along the Niš-Pirot and Berkovica-Bosilegrad line.

Without any doubt, Bulgaria had had the most to lose at the Congress of Berlin. Its San Stefano dream of a greater Bulgaria, stretching from the Adriatic to the Black Sea and Lake Ohrid, and encompassing Macedonia, had been shattered.³ The initial borders of the autonomous Principality of Bulgaria had been traced according to Article 19 of the Treaty of San Stefano of 3/15 March 1878, so that the northern Bulgarian border should follow “the right bank of the Danube River, from the old border with Serbia to a point to be established by a European commission east of Silistra, and from there on to the Black Sea, south of Mangalia, which was annexed to the Romanian territory” (*la rive droite du Danube depuis l’ancienne frontière de Serbie jusqu’à un point à déterminer par une commission européenne à l’est de Silistrie et, de là, se dirige vers la mer Noire au sud de Mangalia, qui est rattaché au territoire roumain*).⁴ Subsequently, the Congress of Berlin re-discussed many of the issues tackled at San Stefano, Romania being even offered a larger share of the Dobrujan territory and of the region south of the Danube, under the circumstances in which the Romanian political elite refused to turn over southern Bessarabia. Additionally, an international technical commission was to be set up, with the purpose of establishing the Bulgarian-Romanian border.⁵

The argument over the Romanian-Bulgarian border continued, and the divergent points of view of the two parties were included in the Protocol of London of 29 January 1913. So that the relations between Romania and Bulgaria could be strengthened in the future, the Romanian party insisted on a border rectification along the Turtucaia (present-day Tutrakan)-Balchik line, “which would be a guarantee and a certification in the future of the truthfulness of the reciprocal feelings of friendship.” On the other hand, the Bulgarian delegate was only willing to admit a slight rectification of the border, which would give Romania “the two triangles lying in the middle of the borderline, which penetrate Romanian Dobruja,” and another triangle, with “a line five to six kilometers long, starting out from the present border,”⁶ along the Black Sea shore as its base. The Bulgarian

³ A point of view strongly defended by Count Ignatyev, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, who was considering placing Bulgaria under the influence of the Russian Empire.

⁴ For the text, see B. Stambler, *Les Roumains et les Bulgares: Le traité de Bucarest* (Paris: Jouve, 1914), 58–59.

⁵ George Danielopol, *Rectificarea graniței noastre la sud* (Bucharest: Imprimeriile Independența, 1913), 6–8.

⁶ For the text of the Protocol of London of 16/29 January 1913 sent by the Romanian Legation in London, letter no. 612/1913, see *Documente diplomatice: Evenimentele din*

party also offered to dismantle the fortifications around Silistra and, given that Romania would preserve its right to fortify the eastern border of Dobruja, the Bulgarian party believed that this could give Romania “the state of absolute security it wished to attain.”⁷

Under the strained circumstances in which Romania was receiving negative signals about a possible intervention to solve its border dispute with Bulgaria, new bilateral diplomatic negotiations began in Sofia between Dimitrie Ghica, representing the Romanian party, and S. Danev and A. Sarafov, representing Bulgaria. The negotiations focused mainly on border delimitation, since the issue of the Macedonian Romanians was considered to be settled. No progress was made though, as the Bulgarians remained adamant about admitting only an insignificant territorial change, whereas Romania insisted on the previously made proposals and claimed Silistra as a starting point for the negotiations. In fact, the Romanian government was beginning to take a firmer stand, rejecting any further delay and insisting on “a final solution to be reached as soon as possible.” At the core of the Romanian position in the negotiations lay a Silistra-Balchik borderline and the annexation of both towns to Romania, a point of view also expressed in a circular by Minister of Foreign Affairs Titu Maiorescu.⁸

Given the impasse in the negotiations, Romania decided to accept mediation⁹ by the six Great Powers, based on the Hague Convention of 18 October 1907.¹⁰ In view of the international mediation, Romania sent out on 15/28 February 1913 to the chancelleries of the six Great Powers a memoir with the Romanian stand on the modification of the border with Bulgaria, showing the circumstances having led to the establishment of an unjust frontier in the southern parts of Dobruja after the Congress of Berlin and the evolution of the Romanian-Bulgarian negotiations on

Peninsula Balcanică: Acțiunea României (septembrie 1912 – august 1913): Cartea Verde: Textul Tratatului de Pace de la București 1913 (Bucharest: Editura Institutului de Arte Grafice – Editura Minerva, 1913), 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63. This Bulgarian proposal also hinged on “the final establishment of the new southern border of Bulgaria.”

⁸ The most to be expected was a Turtucaia-Balchik line. For more details, see the text of the telegram in *Documente diplomatice*, 71.

⁹ However, the meeting of Saint Petersburg took eventually the form of genuine arbitration, as the head of the Russian diplomatic corps did not allow the delegates of the two parties to participate, but only admitted their respective memoranda, in which the Bulgarian and the Romanian points of view were being defended.

¹⁰ The decision was taken during the government meeting of 21 February 1913. However, Romania rejected international arbitration in the Romanian-Bulgarian issue, as it would have entailed the obligation to accept the decision of the Great Powers.

the border issue.¹¹ The memoir also spoke of the threats more or less clearly made in official Bulgarian documents, which were “still taking into account a possible annexation of Dobruja to Bulgaria.”¹²

Soon after the memoir was sent, it became apparent that the great European chancelleries, despite supporting the de-fortification of Silistra, expected the town to remain under Bulgarian control, which caused great discontent among the Romanians. Nonetheless, the Conference of Saint Petersburg, where the ambassadors of the Great Powers had gathered in order to solve the disagreement between the Bulgarian and the Romanian governments over the southern border of Dobruja, decided that the town of Silistra would be given to Romania, and that the new Romanian-Bulgarian border would start out from a “point on the Danube approximately 3 km away from the outskirts of Silistra,” cross “the road to Shumla, then the road to Varna, approximately 3 km away from the outskirts of the town again,” and eventually reach the existing border.¹³

A protocol was handed to the Romanian and Bulgarian representatives, namely Constantin Nanu and Simeon Bobcev. This Protocol was to remain secret, at the request of the Bulgarian party, until the end of the negotiations in London. The exact delimitation of the border was to be made by a joint Romanian-Bulgarian Commission within three months from the signature of the Protocol. The document was ratified in both chambers of the Romanian Parliament, and the newly created Romanian-Bulgarian Commission, which had the additional task of solving some military issues, held a first meeting at Silistra on 7/20 June 1913, on board the ship Ștefan cel Mare.

During the negotiations, the parties took different stands, with the Bulgarians trying to gain some advantage from the method of setting the point from where the three kilometers established by the Protocol would be measured. As no real

¹¹ The Romanian officials argued that Romania’s claims over Silistra were fair and entitled, as Silistra “lies in front of the only natural means of communications of Romania across the Danube over an area of 130 km, is the only point through which communications will not be affected when navigation is suspended, is the only appropriate location for a bridge linking the two shores.” See for instance, “Memoriul Guvernului Român asupra diferendului român-bulgar,” presented confidentially to the governments of the six Great Powers and to their representatives in Bucharest, London and Saint Petersburg, Bucharest, 15/28 February 1913, in *Documente diplomatice*, 93–104.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97. The Bulgarian official documents included a study by the Bulgarian General Headquarters “Romania and Its Army,” and a “Handbook for the Use of the Bulgarian Military of All Arms,” in which on a map of “indivisible Bulgaria” Dobruja was included in the “parts of Bulgaria still under occupation.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133, “Protocolul de la St. Petersburg,” 26 April/9 May 1913.

progress was being made¹⁴ – there was some additional disagreement over the three fortifications near the village of Kalipetrovo –, and given the outbreak of the second Balkan war (on 17/30 June 1913, Bulgaria launched an attack on its former allies in the Balkan League), the works of the Romanian-Bulgarian Commission were suspended.

The Balkan conflict, whose outbreak was caused by a Bulgarian attack on the Greek and Serbian military units posted on the demarcation lines, created a great deal of confusion, as despite clashes in various sectors no declaration of war had been issued.¹⁵ Given these circumstances, Romania could no longer remain indifferent. The position of neutrality suited no longer its interests, especially as the Romanian public opinion was more and more in favor of a military intervention. The general call-up order issued by King Carol I on 20 June/3 July 1913 and published in *Monitorul oficial* as the High Decree no. 4809 caused no surprise, even if the Bulgarian party, through the offices of Prime Minister S. Danev, had tried in early June to obtain guarantees of neutrality from Romania.¹⁶ It was quite clear that Romania's decision to get involved in the second Balkan war was attributable to the issue of the Quadrilateral (Southern Dobruja).

Subsequently, during the Peace Conference of Bucharest, the issue of the Romanian-Bulgarian border was approached using as a starting point a map made by experts from the Romanian Institute of Geography and handed in to the Bulgarian delegation, whose members could hardly make any objections, given the position of Bulgaria in the theatre of operations. One should mention that even before the beginning of the conference, in a speech by General Hârjeu¹⁷ before the Council of Ministers, the minister of War had established exactly Romania's expectations about the border with Bulgaria, the aforementioned line which included 14–18 kilometers west of Turtucaia and south of Bazargic (present-day Dobrich)-Balchik being considered even by Prime Minister Titu Maiorescu “a little too much.”¹⁸

¹⁴ The impasse in the delimitation of the border was especially due to the fact that the members of the two commissions had different views on the point (described in the text of the Protocol as “the outskirts of Silistra”) from where the three kilometers stipulated in Article 1 of the Protocol were to be measured.

¹⁵ Antonello F. M. Biagini, *L'Italia e le guerre balcaniche* (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 1990), 166–168.

¹⁶ No less true is that Bulgaria also counted on the influence of Austria-Hungary. Indeed, the latter would put pressure on Romania in an effort to dissuade the Romanian officials from entering the war.

¹⁷ General Constantin Hârjeu, minister of War in the Titu Maiorescu government, 14 October 1912 – 31 December 1913.

¹⁸ Titu Maiorescu, *România, Războaiele balcanice și Cadrilaterul*, ed. Stelian Neagoe (Bucharest: Editura Machiavelli, 1995), 148.

Despite its unfavorable position, the Bulgarian delegation managed to wrest from the Romanian party a rectification of a territorial segment from the initial proposal, so that the new Bulgarian border would include a small territory lying south of Ecrene (present-day Kranevo), which was under dispute as it belonged to the Crown.¹⁹ The task of delineating the Romanian-Bulgarian border exactly was devolved upon a joint commission of Romanian-Bulgarian officers, in several meetings held between 18/31 July and 21 July/3 August. It was decided that the borderline would start on the Danube, 15 kilometers west of Turtucaia, at the village of Turski-Smil, would run south of Turtucaia and 12 kilometers south of Bazargic, and would reach the Black Sea approximately 8 kilometers away from Ecrene. The territory thus delimited, which made a total of about 7,500 sq km,²⁰ was to be incorporated into Romania. The document became an Appendix to Article 2 in the future treaty, and a decision was added that Bulgaria would tear down the existing fortifications within two years at the most, and never built new ones at Rusciuk, at Shumla, or within a radius of 20 km of Balchik.²¹

Despite a minute description of the future Romanian-Bulgarian borderline, it became necessary to stipulate in the Protocol the specific settlements along this border to be attributed to Bulgaria and Romania respectively.²² One should mention in this respect the opinion among the Romanian political circles about the importance of settling the Dobrujan issue by means of a *strategic border* with Bulgaria. There were various points of view, ranging from sensible stands to exalted ones, advocating the incorporation of Southern Dobruja or rejecting it. Unsurprisingly, to Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea, one of the opponents, the incorporation of Southern Dobruja to Romania would have been “the annexation by force of a foreign province,” involving a change in the ethnical composition of Dobruja, an increase in military expenses or in expenses for the defense of Romania, and a serious threat to Romania’s own national claims in the future.²³

¹⁹ See C. N. Hârjeu, *Studii critice și militare: Din învățămintele războaielor din 1913 și 1916–1918* (Bucharest: Tipografia Gutenberg, 1921), 37–38.

²⁰ The resulting Protocol on the Romanian-Bulgarian borderline would be annexed to Article 2 of the Treaty of Bucharest. See for instance, the exact description of the Romanian-Bulgarian border in *Le traité de paix de Bucarest du 28 juillet (10 août) 1913, précédé des protocoles de la Conférence de Bucarest* (Bucharest: Imprimerie de l’État, 1913), 19–21, “Annexe au Protocole no. 5,” section 2, “Le tracé détaillé de la frontière.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17, “Annexe au Protocole no. 5, procès-verbal, séance du lundi, 22 juillet/4 août 1913.”

²² *Ibid.*, 18.

²³ See Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea, “Conflictul româno-bulgar,” *Viitorul social*, nos. 1–2 (March–April 1913): 5–32 (offprint: Bucharest: Tipografia Cooperativă Poporul, 1913).

The advocates of annexation included Vasile Stoica, who published in English, in the United States, a synthesis on Dobruja and its historical background. The text, written in a propagandistic tone, minimized the importance of the Bulgarian ethnical factor and exalted the role of Romania, which had taken up “*a civilizing work in Dobrogea,*” an “*unfortunate land,*” ravaged by acute poverty and decadence.²⁴

The new configuration of the Balkan states generated by the Peace Treaty of Bucharest consecrated on the one hand a considerable territorial expansion of Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro, whereas vanquished Bulgaria managed to gain, despite the unfavorable circumstances accompanying the Bulgarian delegation in Bucharest, some territories in the west of Thracia and in Macedonia.

The outcome of the Balkan wars, and implicitly the Peace Treaty of Bucharest, put an end, at least for the time being, to the Bulgarian age-old aspirations for a Greater Bulgaria (*Велика България*), which had stirred the Bulgarian political circles and intellectual elites after San Stefano. Bulgaria felt it had been wronged by the border reconfiguration of Bucharest, and this feeling was somewhat shared among the Great Powers by Austria-Hungary, its main advocate throughout the conference, to whom Bulgaria had tied its hopes for a revision of the status quo established in Bucharest.

The outbreak of World War One brought, besides the launch of military operations, an opportunity for the Balkan states to choose direction in their external policies, after analyzing the international background and according to their particular short-term and long-term strategic goals. At the end of World War One, the main objectives of the Balkan states were to secure the best possible position in the peace negotiations, and especially to fulfill their national aspirations, which were implicitly linked to some territorial issues. For the Balkan states in the winning camp, this was largely an acknowledgement of the de facto situation, already existing in the region during the negotiations. Bulgaria, which had relived the disaster of the end of the second Balkan war, could only hope to avoid or at least to limit some drastic territorial clauses. The end of the war brought back into discussion the issue of the Bulgarian-Romanian border. Basically, the approach to this issue was in direct relation to the position the two states had taken in the war, despite the fact that the American experts of the *Inquiry* group had suggested that the Romanian-Bulgarian border should be drawn up based on ethnic and geographic criteria, which would have led to a different frontier from the one established in 1913. Neither France nor Great Britain was in favor of any border revision. Moreover, even if considering some adjustment of the frontier with Bulgaria, it was difficult to make such a requirement to a state in the winning camp,

²⁴ See the aforementioned text, published at the end of World War One. Vasile Stoica, *The Dobrogea* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919), 23–30.

in favor of a state having belonged to the camp of the Central Powers. Even so, in a report of 6 April 1919, made by the Committee for the Study of Territorial Issues in relation to Romania and Yugoslavia and entitled “Romania’s borders,” the members of the committee, representing the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy, although admitting that the commission was not entitled to propose frontier modifications by which territories belonging to an Allied state would be ceded to an enemy state, noted that a border similar to the one of 1913, which would also include some rectification in favor of Bulgaria, would be quite fair, and would return to Bulgaria “some territories in which the Romanian population is a small minority in comparison with the Bulgarian population.”²⁵

The American view had its origin in the set of principles announced by President Wilson, to which others were added on 12 February 1919. At that precise moment, Woodrow Wilson had firmly stated in a speech, with reference to border delimitation, that “each solution should be given with fairness,” based “on the interest and to the benefit of the peoples involved,” so that their national aspirations should be fulfilled “in the simplest possible way.”²⁶ However, what prevailed subsequently was the argument founded on the stipulations of the treaty of 4/17 July 1916, by which Romania was given, in the first place, firm guarantees concerning its existing borders, beyond the promises of obtaining Transylvania and Bukovina. The United States had to abandon the initial stand which included a rectification of the border of 1913 to the benefit of Bulgaria, and Undersecretary of State J. Polk subscribed to the stipulations of Article 27 of the Treaty of Neuilly sur Seine, along which the Romanian-Bulgarian border was the one established at the Conference of Bucharest of 1913.²⁷

Not by chance, the Bulgarian-Romanian border remained a thorny issue in the interwar period, also owing to the rather revisionist approaches and activities of the Bulgarian minority. In addition to the colonization in Dobruja of Macedo-Romanian communities, Romania decided that communities from Muntenia would be given land (25 ha) in the Quadrilateral, especially in the area of Kaliakra, and loans in money. The settling of these new communities in southern Dobruja caused discontent among the Bulgarians in the region.

²⁵ For more details, see Mircea Chelaru and Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, “Unirea tuturor românilor în arhiva lui Leland Harrison,” in *România și Primul Război Mondial*, ed. Gh. Buzatu, Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, and Horia Dumitrescu (Focșani: Editura Empo, 1998), 430–432.

²⁶ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe, Bucharest (hereafter: AMAE), Fund Conferința Păcii, vol. 57, fol. 4.

²⁷ For more details, see V. V. Tilea, *Acțiunea diplomatică a României (noiembrie 1919 – martie 1920)* (Sibiu: Tipografia Poporului, 1925), *passim*.

Even so, more rights and liberties were granted to the Bulgarian minority in Romania, considering that in the Quadrilateral there were, at the end of the interwar period, ten journals in Bulgarian, seven primary schools with 1,062 pupils and 54 teachers, and seven secondary schools with 783 pupils and 88 teachers, some of these educational units being subsidized from the Romanian state budget. On the other hand, in Bulgaria there were only three Romanian educational units (a kindergarten, a primary school, and a secondary school), all operating within the Romanian Institute of Sofia and all financed entirely by the Romanian state. Moreover, they were constantly under threat of being closed or having their activity limited.²⁸

It is not by chance that the Bulgarian party admitted that some of the rights for the minorities stipulated by Articles 49–57 of the Treaty of Neuilly were not fully observed. Moreover, in a paper entitled “Today and Tomorrow,” published in *Mir*, a former Bulgarian minister of Public Education, T. Vlaikov, was noting that “the Romanians do not enjoy the same rights as the other minorities living in Bulgaria.”²⁹

The interwar decades illustrated the uninterrupted conflict between the advocates of the status quo and its opponents, who wanted a revision of the borders established in Paris. The outbreak of World War Two placed these old disputes over border configuration in a new context, aggravating tensions in the region.

Against the extremely difficult background³⁰ of the summer of 1940, the growing disagreement over the Romanian-Bulgarian border led to the Conference of Craiova (19 August – 7 September 1940), where the Romanian delegation agreed to hand over to Bulgaria the Quadrilateral and Silistra.³¹ The Romanian party had considered that giving in temporarily to the Bulgarian territorial claims over Southern Dobruja would strengthen Romania’s position in negotiations and give it a winning edge in relation to the Hungarian claims on Transylvania.

This decision marked the final stage in the Romanian-Bulgarian border disagreement dating back to 1878, despite the fact that the adopted solution had as

²⁸ AMAE, Fund 71, Conferința de la Craiova, vol. 1, 1940, note no. 57408/13 September 1939 of the Ministry of Minorities, fols. 54–55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. 49–50.

³⁰ Bulgaria’s attempts to reconsider the territorial status quo had already been encouraged by the signature of the Agreement of Salonika of 1938, in which the members of the Balkan Entente had pledged to renounce the application of the military, naval and air stipulations of the Treaty of Neuilly sur Seine and of the Convention concerning the border of Turkey, signed in Lausanne.

³¹ The Romanian delegation’s proposal to put the Balchik region under condominium would be rejected by Sofia.

consequence that the number of Romanians in the territory becoming Bulgarian was greater than the number of Bulgarian ethnics in the territory remaining under the control of the Romanian state.