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*Pontica Magna* Program  
and  
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2020-2021

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

This collection contains the papers of the Fellows from the *Pontica Magna* and the *Gerda Henkel* Fellowship Programs. Both are aimed at researchers from Eastern Europe: the first focuses primarily on the Black Sea region, the second on the countries of the former Soviet Union.

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## **NARGIZA ARJEVANIDZE**

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# WAR AS AN EMBODIED AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE: STORIES OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN FROM ABKHAZIA

## Abstract

This chapter focuses on the experiences of war and forced displacement in the stories of women internally displaced within Georgia, as a result of the armed conflict at the beginning of 1990s in Abkhazia. Based on the ethnographic research and life-story interviews with internally displaced women, this analysis seeks to understand how the IDPs have experienced the violent event, as well as its aftermath. Being consistent with scholars who reject the mind-body dichotomy and acknowledge embodied subjectivities of individuals affected by wars, this chapter argues that dramatic turning points in the lives of individuals affected by armed conflicts are experienced through emotions and feelings, as well as through bodies and bodily sensations reciprocally and in relation to each other.

**Keywords:** forced displacement, armed conflict, embodied experiences, emotions, affects, war, gendered experiences, bodies.

## Introduction

There have been several waves of forced displacements in Georgia since gaining its independence in 1991. As a result of armed conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s, thousands of ethnic Georgians were forced to leave their homes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They started rebuilding their lives from scratch in their new, 'temporary' homes in different locations within the territory of Georgia. Armed conflicts have cost thousands of lives and many families on both sides lost their loved ones to the war. Thousands of combatants, as well as civilians were killed, wounded or went missing during the war. Looting, torture, and pillaging were also documented on both sides (ICRC, 1999; HRW, 1995; Buck et al., 2000).

The total number of IDPs has increased as a result Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, after which the Russian Federation recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Overall, internally

displaced persons represent about 6 percent of the entire population of Georgia, some of the world's highest numbers of internal displacements relative to the overall population. As for the demographic composition, 55 percent of IDPs are women, 9 percent are children under the age of 18, and 13 percent are persons over 65 years old. (World Bank, 2016)

According to the estimates provided by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, there are approximately 289,000 conflict-induced IDPs in Georgia (IDMC 2018). According to more recent figures provided by the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia, there are 286, 811 registered IDPs in Georgia, which represents 90 614 households.<sup>1</sup> 90 percent of IDPs are from Abkhazia, while the remaining 10 percent – from South Ossetia. IDPs have been resettled across the country, though the majority of displaced households reside in Tbilisi, as well as the Samegrelo, Imereti and Shida Karti regions. In general, it is hard to determine the exact number of IDPs, insofar as not all IDPs go through the registration process and, additionally, some IDP households reside outside Georgia (Chankvetadze and Bendeliani, 2021). Ethnically Georgian IDPs are not allowed to return to their homes, except to the Lower and Upper Gali districts, where de facto authorities have allowed some returns, but those who have returned “are subject to precarious situations such as intimidation and threats resulting from ethnic tensions in the region” (World Bank, 2016).

The displaced population is commonly described as part of different “waves” or “caseloads” of displacements. Those originating both from the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic and the Tskhinvali Region-South Ossetia, were displaced at the beginning of the 1990s and have now been living in the forced displacement for almost 30 years. These IDPs are commonly referred to as “old” IDPs, since they comprise the first wave of displacement. The August 2008 war produced another caseload of IDPs, they are described as “new” IDPs (Rekhviashvili, 2015; World Bank, 2016); IDPs continue to live in a situation of protracted displacement, since Abkhazia is not recognized under international law as an independent state, and the conflict remains unresolved.

Although the experience of forced displacement has been the same for both “new” and “old” IDPs, the circumstances, needs and resources have differed depending on the type of accommodation and on the resettlement locations. For example, the Georgian government has managed to provide more durable settlement solution to the new cohort of IDPs forcefully displaced after the 2008 war, which have been placed

in newly constructed rural settlements with the support of international donors. In contrast to the way the government has handled the “new” wave of IDPs, it was unable to provide housing for the displaced population that originated in the 1990s; thus, resettlement was handled in a much more chaotic way. They were allowed to settle in abandoned public buildings, such as in former kindergartens, Soviet-era hotels and sanatoriums, schools, former hospital buildings, etc. These buildings were transformed into living spaces which were seen as temporary living spaces for IDPs; a considerable part of displaced households continue to live in the above-listed spaces, the so-called collective centers, since early the 1990s; Conditions are deteriorating and inadequate for living (Chankvetadze and Bendeliani, 2020; Sartania, 2020; Rekhviashvili, 2012; Buck, 2002; World Bank, 2016). The other part of IDPs managed to find temporary dwelling either in the private sector (in accommodations temporarily provided by their relatives), or in accommodations, either rented or owned. It must pointed out that up until 2007, the focus of the political discourse was more on the return of IDPs, rather than on providing durable solutions in the areas of resettlement, dignified living conditions and local integration. In 2007, a nationwide strategy of resettlement was adopted<sup>2</sup> and the government started handling the issue of IDPs in a more systematic manner. As a result of this change in the political discourse and policy, about 45 percent of the displaced population has been provided with some kind of accommodation through different programs initiated by the government. The remaining 55 percent of displaced households have been caught up in a process of continuous waiting since the early 1990s and continue to live in the harsh living conditions of “collective centers”. Different studies have shown that after almost three decades of forced displacement, the internally displaced population remains more disadvantaged and vulnerable to poverty, as compared to the general population in Georgia (Chankvetadze and Bendeliani, 2020; Sartania, 2020; Rekhviashvili, 2015).

### **My Research: Life Stories and Intimate Ethnography**

The following paper is part of my doctoral research project<sup>3</sup> which is based on the in-depth interviews with women displaced from Abkhazia at the beginning of the 1990s. It focuses on women’s experiences of forced displacement and its aftermath. The main aim of the research

project is to explore how displaced women reflect on their lives before and during the armed conflict; how they experienced, remember and describe the violent events that took place almost 30 years ago, how they reflect on their lives in the aftermath – in the protracted displacement. This chapter pays particular attention to how the violent events of war and forced displacement create embodied experiences which intertwine with emotional experiences.

Between 2015 and 2021, I conducted in-depth interviews, participant observation and had follow-up conversations with 20 women overall. All informants in this study are ethnically Georgian, and all were displaced from Abkhazia in 1992-1993 as a result of the armed conflict. The women range in age from fifty-five to seventy years old. I met the research participants for interviews and follow-up conversations either in their own, privately owned apartments or in collective centers.

Since I am a native researcher and belong to the group that I research – I am also an ethnic Georgian displaced as a result of the armed conflict at the beginning of the 1990s, I have close relations with some of the women in my study. I first conducted several interviews with my mother, as well as other women from my close circle of relatives, family friends and former neighbors from Abkhazia (Arjevanidze, 2017; Arjevanidze, 2020).

Feminist research methodologies allow a researcher to access the marginalized voices in the society. It makes women's specific and diverse realities the center of inquiry. During in-depth interviews, feminist researchers ask questions that explore the issues of particular concern to women's lives (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This analysis of collected data is based on life stories and *intimate ethnography*. The life-story approach has been extensively used by feminist scholars as a successful medium for collecting women's stories and the often hidden lived experiences of women, as well as numerous mundane tasks women perform daily, which are examples of women's specific experiences (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Anthropologists Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer developed *intimate ethnography* to "enter a deeply private and interior place as ethnographers" (p. 405), to create an intimate connection between themselves and their subjects. Like myself, Waterston and Rylko-Bauer also had intimate connections with their informants – Waterston's father and Rylko-Bauer's mother (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer, 2006). This approach enabled me to learn about the respondents' lives from their own perspectives, it deepened my understanding of the way they make



sense of their lives and what they deem important (Arjevanidze, 2017; Arjevanidze, 2020).

In what follows I elaborate on experiences of the war and forced displacement based on the stories of women in my study. I follow the scholars who view the war as an experience that entails both physical and emotional experiences and their manifestations reciprocally, in relation rather than distanced from each other. Furthermore, this chapter investigates how the different stages of displacement were experienced in terms of feelings, perceptions, emotions. I adopt Christine Sylvester's conceptualization of war as a social institution and elaborate on different constitutive elements of war, as they create specific experiences of war. To elaborate on the indefinite period of waiting in the aftermath of war, in protracted displacement, I start by introducing the concept of *liminality* conceptualized by Victor Turner (1967) and further expanded by Vincent Crapansano (2004). Then I offer an overview of studies focusing on emotions, affects, feelings which are intertwined with bodily experiences of war. In the last section I investigate the multifaceted experiences of war based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with women in my study.

## **The *Liminality* of Protracted Displacement**

Life in situations of protracted displacement has become a chronic condition for most displaced persons in Georgia, which can be characterized as an experience of continuous waiting and can be conceptualized as a never-ending *crisis*. According to the social anthropologist Henrik Vigh, crisis understood this way is a kind constant condition of abnormality under which increasingly many people in the world continue to live. He suggests to understand such *crisis* not as a temporary experience of rupture caused by a wide array of traumatic events, but rather as a constant state of affairs in which “the chronically ill, the structurally violated, socially marginalized and poor” continue to live and try to manage their lives (Vigh 2008, p. 7).

The *crisis* viewed as a context rather than a temporary phenomenon can also be described as the condition of the *limbo* in the *aftermath* that never ends. Informants in my study have reflected on their lives in displacement as if being trapped in an unending process of waiting. Under the circumstances of unresolved conflict and prolonged displacement they feel caught up between their lost homes, present “temporary” homes and imagined future homes (Kabachnik et al., 2010, Arjevanidze, 2020).

I draw on conceptualizations of *liminality* by Victor Turner and Vincent Crapanzano to describe the process of transition from the “known to the unknown”, as well as the condition of the limbo in which the displaced individuals have been caught up for up to three decades by now. I find this concept useful for analyzing the state of uncertainty that the protracted nature of the forced displacement creates.

In his 1967 book *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Turner focuses on the nature and characteristics of the initiation rites, or transition, by focusing on the liminal period in the rites of passage, which he refers to as the “interstructural situation”. Turner differentiates between the *state*, a *condition* and the *process* of the transition and notes that by *state* he refers to “a relatively fixed or stable condition”, while “*transition* is a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation” (p. 94). Turner draws on Van Gennep’s conceptualization of the rites of passage, the process that may accompany any change from one state to another, such as “every change of place, state, social position and age” (p. 94). The model developed by Gennep includes three phases: The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior separation, which signifies the detachment of the initiate (or the group) from the earlier fixed point in social life; the margin – the ambiguous, “betwixt and between” realm that “has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state”, and the passage ends at third phase – the aggregation, when the ritual subject, the “passenger” enters into a new achieved status and “is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type” (p. 94).

Turner describes the “initiates” as invisible and “structurally indefinable transitional beings”, who in the liminal period of transition are “no longer classified and not yet classified” (p. 96). They symbolically are associated with physical processes that have a negative connotation (such as death, decomposition, catabolism, menstruation); the essential feature of these symbolizations is that the “initiates”, or “neophytes”, are “neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another... [...] the dead, or the un-dead” (p. 97). Despite this condition of ambiguity, paradox, and confusion, Turner at one point states that “liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (p. 97). Turner draws on the concept of pollution developed by Mary Douglas to further explore how the initiates, having occupied this unclear,

contradictory, ambiguous space, and by virtue of not yet being classified or defined, tend to be viewed as (ritually)unclean and polluting; they are “neither here nor there, or maybe even nowhere and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’ all the recognized fixed points in the space-time or cultural classification”, always and everywhere regarded as “polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, « inoculated » against them [...]” (p. 97). Because the transitional beings are “structurally invisible” and regarded as polluting, they are commonly secluded, they need to be hidden “in another place”, inasmuch as they have physical, but not the social reality and represent a paradox.

After describing the above structurally negative characteristics of the liminal phase, Turner turns to some positive features which accompany the negative aspects of liminality, such as “growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns” (p. 99).<sup>4</sup> The final phase of the rites of passage in Turner’s analysis is essential in understanding the change and the transition from one state to another in relation to experiences of forced displacement in my research as well. For Turner, the passivity of initiates, their malleability, is a sign of the process by which they are “endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life”. These new powers generate the new capacities to successfully deal with the new reality once they enter a new world. This is how the process of transition and transformation can be regarded as a “growth”. Turner notes that this is not a mere mechanical process of change (from one state to another), but rather a process that fosters acquisition of knowledge; through passivity and malleability, the transitional being absorbs the powers and acquire the knowledge “which will become active after his social status has been redefined in the aggregation rites”, i.e. in the final phase (106-108).

In his book *Imaginative Horizons* (2004), anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano further expands the concept of liminality and analyzes the liminal state in relation to the imagination and imaginative possibilities. He is particularly interested in “the dangers crossing the threshold [...] the punctuation of the liminal—its internal disjunctions—and how it effects and is affected by the final, defining moment of transition” (p. 60). He notes that Turner is more concerned with *liminality* as the *process and becoming* rather than with the dangers and the risks the crossing entails. He focuses on these moments as they signify the change of the status in participants of the rites; at these defining moments, participants are in suspension, on-hold and trapped in-between: “there is always a moment

in which one is neither on one side nor on the other, neither what one was, nor what one will be" (p. 62). He is particularly interested in the ambiguity and uncertainty, which he views as the most dramatic for the liminal personae with the "*nonstatus*", insofar as they cannot even define these moments - there is no crossing, they are on hold. The change and the moment of transition he further elaborates on, the transition from one experiential register to another, from the *nonstatus* to ambiguous status does occur in an instant, the instant which for Crapansano always contains risk and danger<sup>5</sup> (p. 62). Like Turner, Crapansano does emphasize the dramatic quality of these moments but he goes further to stress and explore the intensity with which these moments have prepared the ground for the "ultimately inarticulatable moment of passage" (p. 63). Furthermore, he is particularly concerned with the anxiety and dread they evoke. In his words, the liminal "suggests imaginative possibilities that are not necessarily available to us in everyday life". The liminal offers us "a view of the world to which we are normally blinded by the usual structures of social and cultural life" (p. 64).

Crapansano seems to agree with Turner that the liminality can be viewed "as a realm of pure possibility", but unlike Turner, he underscores that the liminal may also impose constraints: "The liminal may encourage invention but, if only through negation, it also affirms tradition". He suggests that ambiguity, paradox, contradiction and danger embedded in the moments of crossing, that is always approaching but never actually connecting, emerge as the "source of our unending social and cultural creativity—or its cessation—through repetition and the declaration of that repetition as ultimate truth" (p. 64).

If we extend the model of rites of passage, as Van Gennep and others did, from individual life crises to the crises of the communities, which is to say, to any process that accompanies the change of place, state, social position, i.e. the change from one state to another, then the relocation of forcefully displaced communities can also be understood as the process of "crossing a threshold", which, on the one hand includes dangers, risks, dreads and fears, and on the other hand (and probably simultaneously at times), after experiencing these dramatic turning points and bearing a witness to violent events, this transition may have a transformative power, it can be likened to cathartic moments which may signify the start of a new world, with a new status of a "newborn". In my study, the complex experiences (experience understood as a combination of both – physical and emotional) of such dramatic moments entail fear, dread, danger,

shame, suffering, which become intertwined with hope, optimism, courage, resilience, pride, i.e. are experienced simultaneously. Put this way, these dramatic moments may create the condition in which the IDPs are both resilient and vulnerable, tragic and full of hope, insofar as the memory and the pain of loss, the trauma has never disappeared (Arjevanidze, 2020); In the words of Veena Das, this memory and experience of witnessing the violent event, becomes an inseparable part of the everyday; Through “mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary” it enters the everyday as “a poisonous knowledge” (Das, 2006, p.76). In the following section I will offer a sketch of how scholars in different fields have made efforts to investigate a wide range of emotions, perceptions, affects, feelings as inseparable experiences in such dramatic moments and processes.

### **Emotions, Feelings, Affects**

The interest to study emotions in social sciences has flourished in the last 40 years; these studies have emphasized the role of emotions in social life as crucial to many aspects of society. The scholarship on emotions in sociology has been dealing with questions such as “how do historically and culturally specific norms influence the experience and expression of emotion and to what degree are emotions structured by one’s position within groups, organizations, and social hierarchies” (Lively and Weed, 2016, p. 66). There are two main theoretical paradigms – cultural and structural – used by sociologists to study emotions. The sociological definition of emotion assumes that emotions are inherently social. For example, Hochschild compares emotions to senses “that signal what is personally relevant about surrounding social events” (p. 66). According to the sociological approach, the components of emotional experience (such as emotional arousal, cognitive appraisals, expressions, and language) are constrained by both culture and structure (Lively and Weed, 2016).

There has been a tendency in contemporary readings to make a sharp distinction and conceptual division between *emotions* – to refer to cultural and social expressions and *affects*, considered as mainly biological and physiological in nature. The feminist scholars have turned to and explored the concepts of affect and affectivity in a wide range of fields, such as philosophy, history, literature, cinema studies, art history, media, cultural studies, etc. to conceptualize “the subject of feminism as embodied, located and relational” (Koivunen, 2010, p. 8). As pointed

out by film and gender studies scholar Anu Koivunen in her essay *An Affective Turn? Reimagining the Subject of Feminist Theory*, an affective turn “can be viewed as a broad range of criticisms of the linguistic turn and its effects on feminist research”; this turn also “entails refining and complementing constructionist models and reworking the relations of the subjective and the social” (Koivunen, 2010, p. 10).

According to Koivunen, the above-mentioned division between the use of either *affects* or *emotions* could be detected in terms of disciplinary preferences as well; for example, the study of “emotions” has been prevalent in the scholarship of social sciences and the humanities, which has explored cognition and social interpretation of cultures; while the sciences mainly focusing on the study of the brain and the body, have preferred “affect” as a term. Despite this divide, the scholars have not been able to agree on consistent definitions of affect, emotions, feelings and at times these definitions have been contradictory. Some scholars have been able to avoid dichotomous conceptualizations of *either* affect *or* emotion and tend to use both terms interchangeably “to highlight the fluidity of the conceptual boundaries” (p. 11).

In some accounts, both affects and emotions are viewed as two constitutive components of the same phenomenon: “emotion, thus, being a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect is affect, [...] or emotion referring to the social expression of affect, and affect in turn is the biological and physiological experience of it” (pp. 10-12). For some scholars the notion of *feeling* entails all experiences that can be categorized as *emotions* and is a useful umbrella term in this sense to describe both affects (as physiological sensations) and emotions (as psychological states). As illustrated by Koivunen, there is, no conceptual consensus uniting “the turn”. This conceptual multitude of the term affect has historical roots, since, according to Koivunen, until the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Latin word *affectus* used to be translated in a number of synonymous ways: as affect, passion, desire and emotion (pp. 10-12).

As regards the field of anthropology, up until recently, anthropological work has not been concerned with the affect. The study of emotions or of feelings considered emotions mainly from a cross-cultural or cultural-relativist perspective, and focused on the culture and the self. In the 1980s and 1990s, the goal was to study the ways in which emotions were culturally constructed, which was in opposition to the earlier, Western conceptualizations of emotions as either biological or psychological.

Emotions thus became divorced from psychological disciplines and as result of the turn to the outside, emotions were “interpreted in terms of the different cultural contexts through which they were put into discourse” (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p. 25). For social anthropologist, Yael Navaro-Yashin the key limitation of this approach is “a singular association of the emotions with human beings, ‘culture’ being construed as a context, base, domain, or background produced by humans” (p. 24). Navaro-Yashin manages to overcome the above described tensions over conceptualizations of affect in her recent work *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (2012). Her account of war, displacement and political authoritarianism is based on ethnographic work in an unrecognized state – the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. She introduces the concept and an analytical category of the make-believe that in her words, “challenges the opposition between these two approaches—the social constructionist and the new materialist—conceptualizing the phantasmatic and the tangible in unison by privileging neither one nor the other” (p. 5). Drawing on Spinoza’s conceptualization of the notion of “affect (*affectus*)”, Navaro-Yashin proposes an anthropological approach that questions the sharp divide between the interiority and exteriority, the subjective and the objective, and studies the affect and subjectivity in tandem; As she further notes, rather than privileging one over the other, her approach suggests to maintain the balance that “merges the inside and the outside, making them indistinguishable”. Navaro-Yashin calls this perspective the affect-subjectivity continuum in post-war environment, “one that attends to the embroilment of inner and outer worlds, to their codependence and co-determination” (p. 24).

## **Embodied Experiences of War and Violence**

Apart from sociology and social anthropology, scholars in feminist studies of war, and recently in fields such as international relations, have been increasingly paying attention to the everyday people’s experiences of war and violence (Sylvester, 2013; Crawford, 2000; Enloe, 2010). They have emphasized that it is impossible to apprehend the war unless we sufficiently explore the aspects of experiencing the war and the violent event, such as emotions, suffering, pain, bodily physical experiences, as well as social experiences of armed conflicts and generalized violence. The earlier studies in IR excluded these aspects from the traditional

analysis and studies of the war; these issues had been relegated behind the discussions of “high politics”, militarization, war strategies, weapons systems and national security interest (Sylvester, 2013). In the recent decade, the definitions of war and peace have been challenged by scholars in the fields exploring the nature of wars and their increasing effects on civilians in war-affected societies. As a result of explorations of meanings, as well as of experiences of war in war-affected individuals, these studies have included bodily and emotional experiences and thus were able to achieve a much broader, fuller picture of the war itself.

I draw on the conceptualization of war as a social institution and “politics of injury” proposed by Christine Sylvester, a scholar in political science and women’s studies. Sylvester has contributed to the field of International Relations with her significant work on experiences of war in which she broadens the definitions of war, as well as of the experiences of war. By drawing on key works in feminist theory, in her recent book *War as Experience* (2013) she challenges the traditional theories of war in international relations and explores the multiple, complex ways in which war is experienced emotionally and bodily.

Instead of treating the generalized violence of war only as a “mere” fact, she encourages us to attempt to understand the nature of war itself. As Sylvester puts it, that war is a “politics of injury”:

Everything about war aims to injure people and/or their social surroundings as a way of resolving disagreement or, in some cases, encouraging disagreement if it is profitable to do so. As part of that mission, many will endeavor to protect themselves from injuries by fleeing the war zone, donning protective clothing, hiding, or looking away from war scenes on the television news; [...] injury is the content of war not the consequence of it (p. 4).

Her second provision is to study war as a social institution, which she calls the “transhistorical and transcultural social institution of war in its various particularities” (p. 4). She goes on to elaborate on the social institution, as a “a system matrix of war” with a wide range of constitutive elements and components, such as “heroic myths and stories about battles for freedom and tragic losses; memories of war passed from generation to generation; the workings of defense departments and militaries; the production of war accepting or -glorifying masculinities [...] video games, TV shows, advertisements, pop songs, and fashion design...”(p. 4). When suggesting to approach the war as a social institution, she puts an



emphasis on the everyday people and their experiences, since they are the participants of wars – wars, as social institutions and as “political injuries”; the everyday people, along with “important” people, are those who affect and are affected by generalized violence; hence, the everyday people play a wide array of roles, not only as combatants, but also “as mourners, protesters, enthusiasts, computer specialists, medical personnel, weapons designers, artists, novelists, journalists, refugees, parents, clergy, child soldiers, and school children – all of them having different connections to the war, and in the meantime rather tacitly supporting the activities of violent politics”(p. 5).

The question relevant for my study is then where is the place of experiences of war in such an analysis? I find her elaboration on how exactly the war is experienced, as well as of her definition of experience, most useful in describing experiences of war and forced displacement of informants in my study. By rejecting the Cartesian mind-body dualism, Sylvester puts a special emphasis on the body as a source and location of emotions. For her, the body is a biopolitical fact of war and central in the analysis of war, insofar as war is experienced through the body, “a unit that has agency to target and injure others in war and is also a target of war’s capabilities”. Moreover, “the body is also a contested and diverse entity that comes with gender, race, class, generational, cultural, and locational markings that affect and are affected by social experiences” (p. 5). For her, the body is central and therefore, Sylvester’s key claim is that the experience of war entails both “physical and emotional connections with war that people live – with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances” (p. 5). What she specifically means is that “the body can experience war physically – through wounds and attending to wounds, through running, firing, falling, having buildings fall on it, writing about war, filming moments of war, photographing war, feeling hungry or sick during war and so on” (p. 5). She considers it important to place the body in the center of experiencing the war in its differentiated manifestations and not necessarily in relation to, for instance, actual fighting; in addition to bodily experiences, the war is also experienced through emotions, not separately, but simultaneously with bodily experiences. Sylvester denies the mind-body dualism, considering that the mind is not separate from the body.<sup>6</sup> Despite writing about the body and war in “physical” and then “emotional” terms, in isolation and distanced from each other, Sylvester thus proposes to think about the “reciprocities of body and mind, relays, and comminglings” (p. 6).

In a similar vein, when exploring the emotional experiences of war, the scholar in international relations and political science Neta Crawford proposes a definition of emotions that locates emotions in the body, but at the same time she does not deny the embeddedness of the body in social relations; As Crawford puts it, emotions are “the inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings, and those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioral states and changes; [...] Feelings are internally experienced, but the meaning attached to those feelings, the behaviors associated with them, and the recognition of emotions in others are cognitively and culturally construed and constructed” (Crawford, 2000, p. 25). In other words, emotions are socially constructed and bodily based, but the way Crawford articulates experiences is inclusive of all the terms used to describe a wide array of experiences (on the spectrum, which differ in intensity- feelings, perceptions, affects and so on). As illustrated above, Sylvester and Crawford, when addressing emotions in relation to war experiences, elaborate on different mental states – feelings, cognition, emotions, perceptions, affect – and tend to use these terms interchangeably.

Since the acts of violent events in armed conflicts are inflicted upon the bodies and can be experienced in a wide range of ways as described by Sylvester, the theoretical attention in feminist scholarship focusing on the connections between gender and conflict has been increasingly concerned with the embodied dimension of conflicts. Contributors to the volume edited by Frerks, König and Ypeij – entitled *Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices* (2014) – provide nuanced accounts of the dynamic relations between the three conceptual pillars – discourses, embodiments and symbolic practices. By acknowledging the subjectivity and agency of the people affected by acts of violence, and recognizing the embodied nature of subjectivity, authors in this volume pay particular attention to the body and to diverse forms of embodiments. Frerks, König and Ypeij draw on Rosi Braidotti’s conceptualization of the body, in which she stresses the materiality of the body as a location for subjectivity. For Braidotti, the body “is not a form of an anatomical destiny, but one’s primary location in the world, one’s primary situation in reality” (Frerks, König and Ypeij, 2014, p.8. The concept of embodied subjectivity and agency acknowledges that “bodies are abled, shaped and constrained by their social surroundings” (p. 7). Moreover, “people can feel at ease with these social environments or emotionally experience them as unpleasant. These feelings feed their

agency. It is not only the mind, separated from any bodily tastes, emotions and feelings, that determines how people relate to their social environment. Their bodies play a part in this too" (p. 8). Put this way, the concept of embodied subjectivity elaborated by Frerks, König and Ypeij deals with bodily experiences, or the lived experiences of the body ("lived body") as self (p. 8). Similarly, medical anthropologists Scheper-Hughes and Lock consider the mind-body division to be based on a "false dichotomy between cultural sentiments and natural passions" and emphasize the power of emotions and feelings in human life (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1986, p. 219). As they point out, since "emotions entail both feelings and cognitive orientations, public morality, and cultural ideology, [...] they provide an important 'missing link' capable of bridging mind and body, individual, society, and body politic" (p. 219). They perceive the body as a "mindful body" and focus on the role of emotions in the ways the illness and pain are experienced.

Thus, as illustrated above, scholars in different areas of social sciences increasingly allow for incorporating feelings, experiences, affects, emotions and perceptions in social theory. Similarly, to better apprehend informants' own sense of their experiences of war, in my analysis I find it essential to explore the ways informants in my study articulate, describe, reflect on their own emotions and experiences of war and displacement. In other words, drawing on Sylvester's approach to the experiences of war, in this paper I refer to experiences that are concomitantly bodily and emotional, physical and cognitive, reciprocal and in relation to each other. I use the terms emotions and feelings interchangeably to describe all range of perceptions and experiences informants in my study reflect.

## **Levels of Engagement with the War**

Informants in my study have different connections to the war. They have been affected differently, or in the words of Christine Sylvester, they "felt the war touch" at different degrees. Useful for this analysis is the concept of *spectator* to the globalized war, or within the system of "the matrix of war" in which almost anyone can have some kind of relation to the war – either directly or through news reports, books, visual representations, discussions, or through relation to someone who has been affected by the war. Sylvester identifies at least three different levels of engagement with the war which she calls "the spectator degrees of overlapping separation

from war as an immediate body-injuring set of practices” (Sylvester, 2013, p. 100). The first category of the degree of separation entails those who have been directly affected by war, or “close to war but behind the lines”, such as medics, military caterers, relief workers, locals at short distance from war zones, who can hear the war sounds, those who are forced to flee in search for a safer place, family members of combatants. This is the category with the most immediate and direct connection to war zones and armed activities.

People who have a more distant engagement with the war (e.g. those responsible for the production of war material, war researchers and writers, politicians, war protesters, etc.) have a second degree of separation from the war in Sylvester’s classification. And the farthest physically distanced degree involves those spectators who have no connection to the war in their daily lives or activities, except for the moments when they read the news in the media or hear about the wars on television, i.e. have rare moments of exposure to the war content through different media. Sylvester notes that despite being the farthest removed category from war, individuals under this category can still have their own emotional experiences of war. Understood this way, a parallel can be drawn between Cynthia Enloe’s description of the militarization of the everyday (Enloe, 2000) and Sylvester’s characterization of degrees of engagement with the war.

The concept of *sufferer* is also relevant when describing how the physical bodies can be affected in armed conflicts. The individuals can suffer in wars through injuries, but also through the need to physically flee away from the direct threat of armed conflict, through freezing, starvation or dehydration either when in war zones or in the flight (on the road) when trying to reach a safe shelter. Sylvester describes how these bodily experiences intertwine with emotions and create suffering from “phobias, depression, psychosomatic illnesses, haunting dreads and anxieties, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and memories” (p. 101). Under different circumstances, a sufferer can simultaneously be a spectator, for example in refugee camps. Besides, it is important to note that even in cases when the bodily, physical suffering might end after armed events, the social suffering persists in the aftermath of wars, in post-conflict situations and prolonged displacement.

Keeping in mind the above classification of levels of engagement with the war, informants in my study belong to the group that has the most immediate connection to and experience of the war, which have

varied at different degrees throughout their experiences of war and forced displacement. In their lifetimes, they have moved from one spectator level to another, they have been spectators and sufferers at the same time and have occupied all the above-described three degrees of separation and engagement with the war, hence the intensity of their experiences of war has fluctuated. Those being caught up during actual fighting in the armed conflict have now been trapped in forced displacement for almost three decades.

In the next section I will introduce stories of three women in my study that had the most immediate connections to the war. By these stories I will attempt to illustrate how the bodily experiences, intertwined with emotions, have created specific experiences of war and forced displacement. In this section, every research participant is given a pseudonym. All participants are ethnically Georgian, displaced from Abkhazia in the beginning of the 1990s.

## **From Flight to Rebuilding Lives: Stories of Forced Displacement**

### ***The Story of Nini***

Nini is a 60-year old woman. She is half Abkhazian on her mother's side. She worked as an accountant in the service industry in Sokhumi. Nini had a carefree life and in her words, she was happy there. She was 31 when the fighting began. Her brother, who was 27 years old at the time, took part and was killed in the fighting; she tells me that "he could not do otherwise, he was defending his homeland". She tells me that her brother was awarded the hero medal in his lifetime and his name is included in the memorial of heroes, a monument to honor those who died in the war. Nini remembers that day quite vividly. She tells me that twice a year, on the day of his death and on Memorial Day, she always gets emotional and restless, she still grieves over the loss of her brother and feels pain, this is why in recent years she has stopped visiting the memorial. She blames herself for not being in the same city with him when he died. It was the first time she left her hometown during the war and in those 5 days of absence, she received the news about her brother's death. She returned back immediately to bury him. She returns to that tragic passage of her life in her mind, over and over again, blaming herself for something she can hardly put into words. She lists all the other dates when her close relatives

died in the war: “my grandparents lost their two grandsons in the war. They were both fighting against each other, one on the Georgian side, and another on the Abkhazian side, this is what happened, isn’t it horrible?”

Generally, internally displaced ethnically Georgians are not allowed to return to their homes, since the conflict is still unresolved, but those from the mixed ethnic background can go back if they want. Having an Abkhazian mother and relatives of Abkhaz background still living in Abkhazia, grants Nini the possibility to travel back and forth and most importantly, to visit her brother’s grave. Her mother, who is in her eighties now, has refused to go back to the place where her son was killed, as a sign of a protest. She never returned back. Nini thinks this is the anger towards Abkhazians (while herself being of Abkhazian origin) which she cannot let go, even if it would mean visiting her son’s grave. Besides, she refuses to go back unless all ethnically Georgians can also return.

I find it interesting how Nini recollects her first encounter with her home in Abkhazia, where she had spent her life before she was forced to flee:

I visited my hometown but I saw my house only from distance, it was in 1995. We did not take anything from the house so I knew it was robbed, that no one lived there and everything we owned had been taken away by neighbors. I looked at the house from a distance, I was not able to come closer. It was the day I visited the graves of my brother and relatives who also died during the war. When I saw my house from the road, to be honest, I had no desire to go closer. I could only see the front yard, pieces of broken plates, pieces of clothes scattered everywhere, it was completely wrecked, destroyed. The road leading to the house was so bad that you could not reach the house by car; you could maybe notice one car in an hour that would pass that road. It had become an abandoned place. All is bad, very bad there.., time has stopped as if it is not even the 90s, when we left, it feels as if it is still the 80s.

Nini avoids revisiting the days of flight from her hometown. Nini, together with her relatives had to leave and walk for a few days through the mountains to reach a safe location. She gives a detailed account of how they relocated from one destination to another, on some days freezing in cold weather, on others spending nights either in a car, or outside near the fire they would build in the woods, or in any house that would provide a shelter for that night, sometimes in the tents arranged by IDPs they would encounter on the road.

The fear of hunger and cold is the theme that often reappears in the stories of my informants. Hunger is an important part of the displacement experience for all IDPs who had to take that road. The fear that they would again feel hunger in the future resurfaces in Nini's story when she describes her life in the years of prolonged displacement. One of the achievements she is proud of is her ability to provide for her family, including her elderly parents, so that they would never feel hungry again.

Examples of solidarity and compassion are recurring aspects in stories shared by informants. Nini recalls the solidarity from the recipient community in the village she settled in after the displacement, she tells me that the solidarity and help from total strangers was enormous, for which she always feels grateful:

When we first settled in Akhaltsikhe, we didn't know anyone there. Each day we would hear someone knocking at the door, complete strangers, bringing products, throughout the winter. They were holding boxes full of products – fruits, potatoes, canned food, everything... this is how we survived the winter. When the spring came, I had already started growing my own tomatoes, potatoes... so that we would never feel hungry again.

Re-starting a meaningful life while being confronted with the painful experiences of the past is one of the central issues each of them had to face. Moving from one place to another required them to reorganize their lives and adapt to an unfamiliar new world. In this sense, Sara Ahmed's elaboration on the process of disorientation or reorientation in terms of migrant bodies is useful to describe what it meant for IDPs to get used to previously unfamiliar space: "[...] it is more that we only notice the arrival of those who appear 'out of space'. Those who are 'in place' also must arrive; they must get 'here'. The disorientation of the sense of home, as the 'out of space' or 'out of line' effects of unsettling arrivals [...]. The orientation might be described as the lived experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home" (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 9-10).

In the similar vein, there is always a sense of disorientation and alienation in informants' stories in relation to their present homes: "I cannot get used to the idea that this is my home. This home still feels like a temporary dwelling. If there was a possibility of return, I would leave everything here and return. I think all IDPs think like me" – says Nini. Even if she treats her home as a temporary one, and despite having difficulties

accepting her present home as her own, there is the feeling of contentment and pride when she revisits each step of turning that space into her new home. The pride also comes from her ability to work and the resilience that helped her achieve a certain degree of security and sustainability.

### ***The Story of Ana***

Ana is a 70-year old woman from Sokhumi. She didn't leave the city and had been a witness to the continuous shelling of the city during the war. She was the only woman among the men in her neighborhood that stayed during the war. Ana tells me that she refused to leave, and as she often stresses, that she did so because she was fearless. Others would hide out in the underground bunkers during bombings, but she would not. She would cross herself and wait it out. She has shared with me how she helped bury her neighbors' dead bodies left lying in the streets.

I remember we heard that our neighbor had been killed and no one was there to take care of the dead body. Only later did his relative, a woman, show up and asked me to help her bury him. Together we carried the dead body to the backyard, dug out a hole in the ground as deep as we could, not very deep though, he was a huge man and we could hardly carry his body on the sheet, we dropped the body a few times while carrying him, it was hard ... but no one was there, how could we leave this body unattended<sup>7</sup> there? So, we dug out the ground, wrapped the body in the sheet and buried him.

She recalls several such burials in which she herself participated. But one such image she still sees vividly in front of her eyes, the image of dead bodies of young men being eaten by the pigs in the street. She tells me that from that day on, she has lost the ability to cry, as if her tears have dried up. The trauma of that day is always with her, and in front of her eyes: "I have never cried at funerals since that day. I have seen with my own eyes how the bodies of killed, young soldiers were being eaten by pigs... I think no one cries at the funerals anymore. We have gone through and endured so much suffering, that we do not have tears anymore" (Ana, 70).

This passage from her war experience and her act of witnessing the violent event has entered Ana's life, to use the words of Veena Das, as a kind of embodied "poisonous knowledge", that cannot easily be erased (Das, 2000).



This is how Ana recalls the flight from the city and the route she had to take to reach a safe place:

The road was horrible. We were walking, it was snowing, and raining, we were freezing; during the nights we would build a fire to warm up and then spend the nights in tents. When we were hungry, we would heat up the big stone found on the road, and bake the bread with the flour that we bought in one village. This bread was all we would eat during those days of walking... there were a lot of dead bodies on the road. I would turn them around to make sure it was not someone I knew. Once, I remember me and my sister getting lost on that road, it was getting darker ...we started screaming loudly for help, we were scared, we screamed for quite a while... we were afraid that we would be eaten by the beasts during the night, and were considering climbing up the tree and spending that night in the tree. But fortunately, we saw a fire from the distance and heard someone calling us, so we moved in the direction of that fire.

Ana reflects on how she and her family started rebuilding their lives after displacement with a feeling of contentment and pride. She revisits the days when at the initial stage of displacement, she had to spend nights in an abandoned, tiny photo-booth, at the central station until someone let her live in his empty apartment. In her words, after so much suffering, experiencing hunger, freezing in the cold weather and homelessness during displacement, through her hard work and resilience, she has managed to start “from the empty floor” to rebuild her life. She tells me she is proud to be a displaced person and she is not ashamed of her status as an IDP. She shows me around her current home with the sense of dignity, pride and contentment.

Like Nini’s story, Ana’s story is also full of examples of solidarity and compassion from people of different ethnicities, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Kurds. Ana shares with me that from the time she managed to get back on her feet, she was able to help others who were in need.

### ***The Story of Nino***

Nino’s story is filled with pain, both physical and emotional. During the war she refused to leave her husband alone. She was separated from her children, for their safety, who stayed with relatives in another city. The family reunited and separated several times during the war. Nino’s husband had occupied high positions before the war started and they had

a carefree, secure, happy life. After displacement he was unable to find a job, but Nino could and she became a breadwinner for her family. Nino was engaged in different jobs to help her family survive:

When I first started working in a small kiosk to sell different products, they used to pay me 3 Lari. I worked from early in the morning till late at night. I would eat at home in the morning and then, I would spend an entire day without any food, I was hungry and thirsty until I would get back home after 9 at night. I had to pay 20 Tetri for the plain bun, but I could not afford it, it had to be taken from my pay – 3 Lari that my family needed next day. I had to leave 3 Lari next morning at home for expenses. The metro was free for IDPs, I didn't have to pay for the transport. It meant that I would bring 3 Lari without spending any Tetri from it. Sometimes a woman I worked with would tell me to eat one bun from the shelf and to lie, saying it got wasted... and I did it once or twice.

Now, being relatively well off and supported by her children, who received high education and are all employed, she recalls the past years with pain and tears in her eyes. During those years Nino was engaged in different jobs after displacement as a baker, a kitchen-maid, a salesperson, a nurse, she had continuous migraines and other chronic illnesses, but she worked 7 days a week, sometimes without any days-off for almost 10 years, because the survival of her family largely depended on the money she earned. Her health condition deteriorated, the chronic pain got worse with time because of all the years of hard, physical work, but Nino tells me that she does not regret any moment of it. She is proud of her resilience and of supporting her family during the years they needed it most.

When reflecting on the years of hardship she recalls that despite her husband's numerous attempts he was unable to find a paid job. Earlier he had a highly paid job and held high positions, but during the first years of displacement he became financially dependent on his wife. Nino recalls this passage with compassion towards her husband: "He would not join his friends and neighbors who would invite him over for drinks, he did not feel comfortable not being able to treat them back as well." She recalls that earlier, he would always wear expensive clothes for his job. When they had to leave, Nino somehow managed to take his clothes from home, but he refused to wear them for almost 18 years because, he thought, considering the hardship everyone around them was experiencing, it was a shame to wear those expensive clothes, it would seem inadequate and

out of the place; only after he started earning his own money and they finally got back on their feet, he started wearing his old clothes.

Nino recalls the moments when she used to hide from her neighbors while working in a kiosk as a salesperson. For her, in contrast to her previous affluent life, being engaged in such lowly jobs was associated with the sense of shame.

In my earlier work I elaborated on displaced women's ability to improvise and come up with different survival tactics that helped them adapt to new circumstances much better, as compared to men. I have described how the process of developing these tactics was accompanied by complex emotions and feelings such as guilt, regret, anger, uneasiness, humiliation, fear, pride (Arjevanidze 2020). Overall, the stigma and the shame informants in my study often refer to was associated either with their social status of displaced persons, or with the changed status in the society. I consider that the pride women in this study frequently emphasize in relation to their accomplishments, hard work and resilience, can be read in the context, and in contrast to the stigma and shame they have experienced because of being IDPs, i.e. destitute and in constant need of help from someone.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on scholars who reject the mind-body dichotomy and acknowledge embodied subjectivities of individuals being affected by acts of violence, I argue that individuals feel different social environments through a wide range of bodily sensations, emotions and feelings, which determine how they relate to their social environments; their experiences of war entail both, physical and emotional connections with the war. Thus, in this paper I argue that the war is an embodied experience, which involves emotions and the bodily experiences reciprocally. War and its aftermath, the forced displacement, are experienced through the body that is a diverse entity, which comes with gender, race, class, cultural, and locational markings. Following Christine Sylvester, I conceptualize war as a social institution with a multitude of constitutive components, different layers of engagement, as well as separation to the war.

Based on the stories of forced displacement of internally displaced women from Abkhazia, I have attempted to illustrate how informants in my study articulate, describe, reflect on their emotions and experiences

of war and displacement. Women in my study had the most immediate and direct connection to war zones and armed activities. Their family members were combatants who died during the fighting, they were caught up either in war zones, or at a short distance from acts of violence, they witnessed the bombing, the shelling of their hometowns, they buried the bodies of dead soldiers themselves. They had to flee in search for a safe place, their physical bodies affected through freezing, starvation and dehydration. Their bodily, physical suffering, as well as social suffering has persisted in the aftermath of the war, in situations of prolonged displacement. Moreover, the stories of IDPs in my study that have experienced dramatic turning points in their lives and witnessed violent acts, are filled with complex feelings, emotions, perceptions such as fear, dread, danger, shame, suffering, intertwined with hope, optimism, courage, resilience, and pride. These dramatic moments in their lives have created the condition in which they are both tragic and full of hope, resilient and vulnerable, insofar as the memory and the pain of loss, the trauma has never disappeared.

In order to fully grasp the experiences of war, as well as situations of prolonged displacements, I find it important to investigate such aspects of experiencing the violent event, as emotions, suffering, pain, bodily physical experiences, as well as social experiences of armed conflicts and generalized violence.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia.  
Statistics of IDPs <http://mra.gov.ge/geo/static/55>
- <sup>2</sup> State Strategy of Internal Displacement, 2007.  
<http://mra.gov.ge/res/docs/2013111918201884212.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Part of the research was funded by the Swedish Institute (SI) Scholarship Programme for Ph.D. studies (2016-2017) and the ASCN scholarship Programme (2016); the following paper is the outcome of a research within a *Pontica Magna* Fellowship at the New Europe College (October 2020-February 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Turner notes that when the liminal beings are not concealed, they are often disguised in masks and costumes. He points out that what distinguishes the initiates from others is that they have *nothing*: “They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows. Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty” (pp. 98-99). He suggests that “this coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal; that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (p. 99). One more positive aspect of the liminal phase pointed out by Turner is that there are no hierarchies, distinctions or gradations among the transitional beings – they all are equal.
- <sup>5</sup> Crapansano further notes that these moments of transitions on the one hand, are brief, their state of liminality is short-lived, but “often embedded in a protracted liminality in which the final transition is, as it were, rehearsed in a series of mini-transitions. [...] they are characterized by multiple repetitions in various registers. These repetitions of-mini transitions turn the moments of dramatic crossings into extended passages of liminality” (p. 63).
- <sup>6</sup> seen as the interpreter of feelings or the ‘sensing center of affect, those psychological and physiological intensities (affects) that become emotions when they are given socially conditioned meaning’. Sylvester states that social determinist tendency in the study of emotions is not wrong, but can be reductionist. For her, the role of the body is essential as a source or even realistic locus of emotions. She emphasizes that the body is the unit that senses, feels and thinks about its surroundings. The body is not out of the picture when it comes to diverse emotional activities, including war activities. (Sylvester 2013).
- <sup>7</sup> She uses the Georgian word “უპატრონო”/romanized as “upatrono”; English translation would be “without the owner”, i.e. was left without the possibility to be taken care of from anyone in that moment.

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# DRAMATURGY OF POPULISM: POST-ELECTORAL PROTEST IDEOLOGIES IN BELARUS

## Abstract

This paper analyzes the ideologies accompanying the political crisis that occurred in Belarus between August 2020 and late December 2020. In that year, Belarus saw the largest wave of mass protest mobilization that happened in this country since it proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This protest wave was in many ways exceptional in comparison with other countries in the post-Soviet area. Scholars are still struggling to explain the reasons for this exceptional mobilization, and this paper contributes to this effort by looking at the ideational factors behind the pre- and post-electoral protests in Belarus. According to the central hypothesis of this paper, the 2020 protests were triggered by the breakdown of the protesters' identification with the image of 'the people' as projected by the dominant populist discourse, and the development of the protests was accompanied by a struggle over redefinition of who 'the people' are. More broadly, by turning to the discursive theory of populism, this paper assesses an ambiguous democratization potential of populist mobilizations in an authoritarian polity.

**Keywords:** Belarus, populism, electoral politics, discourse analysis, social movements

## 1. Introduction

The political protests that occurred in Belarus between August and late December 2020 were the largest wave of mass protest mobilization in this country since it proclaimed independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Scholars and experts compare them to electoral protests in Russia and the so-called colored revolutions in post-Soviet countries, notably the Maidan protests in Ukraine (2013-2014) (Ishchenko 2020; Bildt 2020). However, as I demonstrate in this article, this protest wave was exceptional in its scale, diversity of the participants and ideological orientation with

regard to previous mass mobilizations in Belarus and in other post-Soviet societies. Scholars are still struggling to explain the unexpected scale of the 2020 protests, and this paper aims at contributing to this effort by looking at the ideational factors behind the pre- and post-electoral mobilizations that happened in Belarusian throughout 2020. The central hypothesis of this paper claims that the 2020 protests in Belarus were triggered by the breakdown of the protesters' identification with the image of 'the people' as projected by the dominant populist discourse, and the development of the protests was accompanied by a struggle over redefinition of who 'the people' are. More broadly, by turning to the discursive theory of populism, this paper assesses a democratization potential of populist mobilizations in an authoritarian polity.

Based on the discursive approach in populism studies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), I construct a dynamic theory of populist discourse as a 'thin ideology,' that comprises the notions of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' (Artiukh 2020a). I claim that the social and political imagination of both the ruling elite and the protesters in Belarus have been dominated by these categories. Thus, the political crisis of 2020 can be described as a struggle for the redefinition of the mentioned populist vocabulary. In exploring this hypothesis, I have collected a database of documents attributed to the incumbent leadership, the opposition leadership, and the rank-and-file protesters active throughout the 2020 political crisis. I have performed a discourse analysis of these three sets of documents with an aim of tracing changes in the meaning of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' as well as relationships among these terms in the dominant and the opposition discourses involved in the electoral crisis.

This paper is structured as follows: in the second section I identify distinguishing features of the 2020 protests as compared to previous political mobilizations in Belarus. Thus, I arrive at the conclusion that they exhibit more similarities with the social protests of the last decade than with the 'regime change' attempts characteristic of the opposition political mobilizations since Lukashenka came to power in Belarus in 1994. The third section is dedicated to developing the theoretical framework for a dynamic analysis of populist discourses and the discussion of its application for the case of Belarusian political protests. The last two sections present an analysis of the empirical findings: mutations in the content of the categories of 'the people,' 'the elite,' and 'the other' as they appear in the documents of the acting Belarusian authorities, the opposition leadership, and the rank-and-file participants of the protests.

In the Conclusions, I offer a discussion of the implications of my findings for the studies of social movements and authoritarian polities.

## **2. The 2020 Protests in a Comparative Perspective**

As the year 2020 started, a hydrocarbon dispute with Russia and the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to absorb everyone's energy in Belarus. Therefore, the results of the elections planned for August looked predictable: a secure victory of Aliaksandr Lukashenka who has been in power in Belarus since 1994. However, the incumbent president's initial challengers were unexpected: provincial video blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, former top manager at Belgazprombank Viktor Babaryka, and an ex-diplomat and head of an IT park, Valeri Tsepkala. The last two were renegades from Belarus' top elite circles, a revolt not seen for 20 years. In a succession of quick pre-emptive moves, Tsikhanouski and Babaryka were arrested and Tsepkala fled the country, while the partners of the three candidates - Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Veranika Tsepkala and Maryia Kalesnikava - now stood in for them as a united team, leading their supporters under the slogan "I/We are 97%". They gathered large crowds of supporters all over the country, and their largest rally in Minsk on July 30 gathered over 60 000 people (*Radio Svoboda* 2020), which was already larger than any political mobilization over the previous two decades.

On the election day of August 9 observers reported numerous irregularities at polling stations; pro-government exit polls gave Lukashenka 80% of the vote, while Tsikhanovskaya was awarded short of 7%. The data drawn from the opposition count and the survey of Chatham House suggested that Tsikhanouskaia won with 48-55% (Wilson 2021, 284-86). This unleashed a week of large-scale street protests in large and small towns and an unprecedentedly violent police response with scores of injured and thousands detained. The first post-election week already surpassed any political mobilization that happened in the country since Lukashenka took power in 1994 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Political protests during Lukashenka's presidency<sup>1</sup>**

Year	1996	2000	2006	2010	2015	2020
Event	Against the union with Russia	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud	Against electoral fraud and police violence
Highest number of participants <sup>2</sup>	30,000	15,000	20,000	60,000	200	200,000

Active street mobilization in protest against the official results of the August elections lasted until December, gradually subsiding due to state repressions. This mobilization wave can be divided into several stages (see Figure 2). First, the post-election three days of large-scale spontaneous protests that were met with police violence (including fatalities among the protesters) and mass detentions with alleged torture (over 6,700 detainees). In the second stage, August 12 to August 25, workers from large industrial enterprises and employees of state-owned establishments voiced their protest in local gatherings, marches, and attempts at wild-cat strikes. This came as a response to the preceding police violence and caused some disorientation among the authorities. At this time the opposition leaders established an organizational infrastructure centered around the Coordination Council (established on August 14), while the labor unrest gave birth to strike committees (Artiukh 2021). In parallel, street protests have been coordinated through various social networks and messengers, the most prominent being the Polish-based NEXTA Telegram-channel. The fourth stage gained traction in mid-August and lasted until November; it was marked by more orderly 'scheduled' demonstrations, regularly held on weekends. They were met with less police violence, although city center access and mobile/internet connection were routinely blocked. The incumbent authorities tried to mobilize their supporters for counter-rallies, and the police resorted to targeted detentions. After the "People's Ultimatum", which Tsikhanouskaia announced on October 25 to force the Belarusian president to resign, failed to rally enough supporters for a nation-wide strike, the protest wave started subsiding. At this last stage, the state ramped up repressions; by this time the opposition leaders have either been arrested or fled the country.

**Figure 2. Development of the post-election protests in August-December 2020**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Character of the protests</b>	<b>Level of coordination</b>	<b>State response</b>
August 9-12	Mass street protests	Social networks	Police violence
August 12-24	Street and workplace demonstrations	Social networks, strike committees	Sporadic detentions
August-November	‘Scheduled’ demonstrations	Social networks, local groups, Coordination council	Targeted detentions
November-December	‘Scheduled’ demonstrations	Social networks, local groups, Coordination council	Targeted detentions, dismissals

For the purpose of this research, I limit myself to the period between June and late December 2020 and draw only occasionally on the data before July and from January 2021 onwards. The time after the petering out of the protests in the beginning of 2021 can be described as systematic and increasingly repressive reaction of the state authorities against the opposition and its supporters. No significant street protests have been possible in 2021, and even expressions of dissatisfaction in social media have increasingly been met with detentions and long jail sentences.

In addition to the sheer numbers of the protesters on the streets, the August-December events exhibited a series of significant features that allow me to set them apart from previous political protests in Belarus. I will briefly review these distinguishing features below and highlight possible causal mobilization factors.

In term of their geography, the 2020 political protest mobilization wave was exceptionally diverse as compared to the previous protest episodes. As opposed to the political mobilizations of 1991-2010, the 2020 protest wave was unprecedentedly geographically dispersed. Large demonstrations happened not only in Minsk, but also in large and small towns and even in the countryside, in all provinces of Belarus. This is significant as it shows the breakdown of the traditional rural support base of the ruling elite and the formation of country-wide mobilization and communication networks.

The geographical diversity already suggests an accompanying social diversity, since the previous capital-city centered protest events tended to be limited to a small number of politicized groups, primarily the youth and intelligentsia. Indeed, scholars have noted that the protest was attended not only by the core of highly skilled urban professionals, primarily IT-specialists, but also by pensioners, employees of the state-funded service sectors such as healthcare and education, as well as entrepreneurs, and industrial workers, a large/significant part among them being women (Artiukh 2021; Gapova 2021, 47–49; Paulovich 2021).

A notable feature of the 2020 protest wave was a significant participation of industrial workers in the first month of the protests. The labor mobilization component of the general protest wave constituted in itself an episode of labor unrest in the country that can only be compared to the workers' strikes and protests in April 1991 (Artiukh 2021). This fact is significant, since Belarusian labor has been a part of the 'social contract' with the authorities (Gaiduk and Chubrik 2009), which was supposed to make them docile and dependent on the government and the management of state-owned companies (the main employer in the country) (Danilovich 2016).

The 2020 protests have been dispersed and spontaneous, significantly less linked to the established political parties or non-government organizations than the mass mobilizations of 1991-2010. The so-called 'old opposition' appeared to be disoriented and unable to lead the people willing to go to the streets. NGOs also played a minor role in providing organizational resources to the masses of protesters, possibly because of being corrupted by the history of enforced and encouraged marginalization (Minchenia 2020). The protests, instead, have been coordinated by local groups and through social networks (Gabowitsch 2021).

Finally, the lack or at least a comparatively weak geopolitical or ethnic dimension of the protest movement distinguished what happened in Belarus in 2020 from the pattern of 'color revolutions' in other post-Soviet countries. Diverse political and cultural symbols that were used in culture wars of the previous opposition campaigns (Bekus 2010) have been mixed and cross-fertilized during the protest rallies (Bekus 2021).

To sum up, the 2020 post-electoral mobilization demonstrated an ensemble of features that set them apart from the political protests that Belarus saw throughout its post-Soviet history and that resembled 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan: geographical and social diversity as opposed to capital-city based minority mobilization;



participation of industrial workers who were passive before; absence of traditional political opposition groups and NGOs as coordinators, lack of ethnic or geopolitical claims and symbols. The specificity of the 2020 electoral protests as a political mobilization, however, does not mean that they did not have precursors in other types of protests. Indeed, the 2020 political protests share all the above features except the attendance numbers with the wave of social protests that swept Belarus since the currency crisis of 2011.

While studying labor organizations in Belarus for my previous project, I stumbled upon an unexpected challenge to Belarusian authoritarianism. In the course of my research in 2015-2017, I encountered participants of the largest social upheavals that have shaken Belarus since the crisis of 2011: the wave of labor unrest in 2012-2013 and the protests of February and March 2017 against the tax on unemployment. As I demonstrated in one of my previous articles (Artiukh 2020a), the winter and spring social protests of 2017 were the first wave of spontaneous mass demonstrations with social demands since the early 1990s. They exhibit characteristics that set them apart from any protests that had been happening under Lukashenka's presidency (i.e. since 1994): geographic and social diversity, spontaneity and dispersed coordination, participation of trade unions and the lack of geopolitical or ethnic claims. This similarity prompts me to categorize the 2020 post-electoral protests together with post-2011 social protests rather than with the previous political protest mobilizations.

**Figure 3. Changing character of mass protests in Belarus**

Periods	1991-2003	2004-2016	2017-2021
Geography	Diverse	Capital city	Diverse +
Composition	Political parties Labor organizations Some spontaneous	Political parties	Spontaneous Citizens Workers Politicians
Agenda	Social Political Cultural	Political Cultural	Political Social

This similarity of the social and political protests in Belarus between 2017 and 2020 suggests similar factors behind popular mobilization. I analyzed these factors in my previous article (Artiukh 2020a), where I concluded that the protesters rejected the government's measures using the very populist framing utilized by the government itself. This forced the government to retreat on its policies and enter a dialogue with the disgruntled population. Thus, social protests without any explicit anti-authoritarian agenda resulted in more democratization than explicitly political protests. In this article I propose and explore a hypothesis that stems from my previous research in Belarusian social movements: what lead to the 2020 protest mobilization was the breakdown of the hitherto dominant populist mode of legitimation and the rise of populism from below.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: The Dramaturgy of Populism**

In order to explore this hypothesis, I will resort to a discursive-rhetorical approach to populism (Brubaker 2017) that has only scarcely been applied to Belarusian politics (Artiukh 2020a; 2020c; 2021). I claim that this approach expands the explanatory and predictive power of the alternative approaches that have been prevalent in discussions of post-Soviet protests, specifically in Belarus.

Neither the 2017 social anti-tax protest, nor the 2020 electoral protests were anticipated by scholars who specialize in the region. These developments came as a surprise for the dominant scholarship and expertise on Belarusian society, framed as 'the last European dictatorship' (Wilson 2011). In this tradition Lukashenka's authoritarian populism has been described as relying primarily on coercion (Goujon 2002; Eke and Kuzio 2000; Rouda 2019), and Belarusian society has been diagnosed as lacking national consciousness (Marples 1999), acquiescent to the terms of a 'social contract' with the ruling elite (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009). Additionally, Belarusian opposition has been characterized as corrupted and lacking support among the broad population (Minchenia 2020; Pikulik and Bedford 2019). The explanations of recent social and political protests stemming from this approach (Merzlou 2019; Mudrov 2021; Ishchenko 2020) do not account for their timing, their mobilization and coordination outcomes, or their capacity to impact the decisions of the authorities.

Conversely, focusing on ‘populism’ rather than ‘authoritarianism’ in Lukashenka’s regime illuminates its vulnerability to protests. Lacking a substantial dominant ideology (as opposed to the formally declared ‘ideology of the state’), Belarusian populism is not contaminated by an ethnically exclusive discourse and is not in competition with serious challengers from the right or the left. Relying on the core populist opposition between ‘the corrupt elite’ and ‘the pure people’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6), Belarusian political leadership has successfully marginalized its liberal and nationalist opposition, but had to take into account the social and economic interests of the population (Balmaceda 2014). Thus, the most threatening challenges to the government in Belarus came from popular protests with social and populist demands rather than from ‘regime change’ attempts with a substantial liberal-nationalist ideology, from the labor protests of 1991 through the union-led mobilization of the early 2000s, to the social protests of 2012-2017.

In order to understand the dynamics of populism and its contestation, I construct the ‘dramaturgy of populism’ as a dynamic model of the populist ideology building on a discursive approach to populism (Brubaker 2017, 360). According to this model, populism constructs a certain moral image of ‘the people,’ which is not immediately identifiable with the empirically given population (Müller 2014, 485). Morally pure, the image of ‘the people’ is then rhetorically opposed to the negatively charged trope of ‘the elite’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 5–6). This opposition has an implicit vertical dimension that sets ‘the people’ against its ‘other,’ a parasitical remainder (Brubaker 2017, 362).

A populist leader acquires legitimacy by ‘extracting the people from within the people’ (Lefort 1988, 88) and presenting the extracted image to the actual people. This procedure may either succeed and lead to a stable period of populist governance or fail and lead to protests. The success or failure depends on whether the target audience identifies with the projected image of ‘the people.’ This ‘extraction’ is a dynamic process contingent on the extra-rhetorical context. A regime that uses a populist rhetorical repertoire does not have to be static and rely rigidly on one ideology. My working hypothesis is that the protest mobilizations in Belarus since 2011 and the 2020 protests specifically were motivated by the demise of Lukashenka’s populism and the rise of populism from below.

The evidence from Belarus allows me to intervene in broader debates on populism and their ambivalence towards democracy. Margaret Canovan famously wrote that when the ‘two faces’ of democracy, the pragmatic and

the redemptive, fail to work together, it opens an opportunity for a populist movement (Canovan 1999). The crack between these ‘faces’ widened after the crisis of 2008 and opened the door for various forms of populism. Scholars have variously identified the origins of Eastern-European populism in the grievances of those left behind by the post-socialist transformation (Kalb 2019), or in the failures of democratic political representation (Ost 2005), and warned of the populist forces’ anti-democratic potential (Müller 2014). Like democracy itself, populist rhetoric is Janus-faced, as it serves both to demand the return of the redemptive face of democracy, and to justify the dismantling of its pragmatic liberal form. Most of the debate, however, turns around the cases of populism constituted as a protest movement in response to the failure of the pragmatic liberal democracy or an outright ‘illiberal’ government (Kalb 2018). The recent examples of anti-authoritarian populist movements, from Russian protests of 2011-12 (Magun 2014) to Alexei Navalnyi’s mediatised populism (Glazunova 2020; Pain and Fediunin 2019), point to the democratizing potential of populist movements.

In light of this theoretical approach, I can reformulate the above hypothesis as follows. The ruling power’s failure to impose a new image of the people as normative, the population’s refusal to identify with it and its willingness to identify with the ‘other,’ motivated the protest mobilization in the post-crisis period. The ideological dynamics of the protest consists in asserting an alternative populist discourse that entails a redefinition of the category of ‘the people.’

### ***Methodology***

To address these questions, I have compiled a database of protest events and documents related to them. I gauge the ruling elite’s and the protesters’ interpretations of the core concepts of the aforementioned ‘dramaturgy of populism’, focusing on their dissonances. This analysis informs the coding of the protest documents in the database. While analyzing the database, I aimed to assess the efficiency of these interpretations by discerning those idioms of the dominant discourse that face popular resistance and those idioms of the resistance discourse that lead to the increase of street or virtual mobilization.

The database includes 60 speeches, social media posts, images and videos that have programmatic or mobilizing functions. Most of the evidence stems from the period between July and December 2020,

although some of the programmatic statements of the leaders and participants of the protests appeared earlier or later. I have included evidence from outside this timeframe if they concern the motivations and framing of the August-December protests. The documents are subdivided into three categories defined by authorship. The first set of documents come from the Belarusian authorities and are mostly attributed to the Belarusian president Lukashenka. This set of evidence forms a coherent whole due to the close ideological alignment of all state agencies that are supposed to adhere to the official 'ideology of the Belarusian state.' The second set of evidence is attributed to the leadership of the political opposition: the presidential candidate team (Tsinkhanouskaia, Kalesnikava, Tsepalo) of the united opposition and the Coordination council. The third set of evidence belongs to rank-and-file protesters, opposition cultural agents and situational leaders. This evidence is drawn from social media, videos from the protests, and media publications.

The database has been analyzed with NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Coding was performed manually. Consistent with the theoretical framework, coding aimed at identifying the context of and relations among the three main categories of the dramaturgy of populism: 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and 'the other.'

#### **4. The Struggle to Redefine 'the People'**

Ever since Lukashenka was elected president of Belarus in 1994, he grounded his legitimacy in a claim for an unmediated connection between his personality and the body of 'the people,' thus turning Belarus into an 'island of populism' among the surrounding nominally democratic states (Matsuzato 2004). The nature of this unmediated relation has gone through a substantial mutation with the development of the global economic and political conjuncture: having started as an unreformed 'command economy without planning' (Nuti 2000), Belarus had to adjust to the more pragmatic market-based approach of the Russian Federation (Balmaceda 2014), its main economic partners, and Eastern Europe, its second-largest export market. Some scholars noted a concomitant evolution of the 'social contract' between the Belarusian state and various social strata (Gaiduk, Rakova, and Silitski 2009). The notion of 'the people,' projected by the populist rhetoric of Belarusian authorities centered around the presidential

administration shifted from the stress on unconditional social rights of citizens to an emphasis on the need to deserve certain social privileges.

Since the crisis of 2011, Belarusian official ideology has fashioned 'the people' as self-responsible and entrepreneurial subjects rather than having unconditional social rights in exchange of political docility (Artiukh 2020a). This change in the dominant populist discourse followed the pro-business shift of the Belarus state policies, and the new image of 'the people' as entrepreneurial subjects was summed up in a famous injunction by president Lukashenka to 'get undressed and work' instead of waiting for the state's mercy like the undeserving 'social parasites.' Essentially, the 2017 protests were a mobilization against a neoliberal inflection of state populism (similar to the cases analysed by Kurt Weyland (1999)). The populist response of the protesters in 2017 implied a more inclusive concept of 'the people' who deserve respect and social rights by the very fact of their citizenship, as if holding the state responsible for it previous promises.

The neoliberal inflection of the dominant state populism persisted in the following years and has been aggravated by the new coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The country's statistics of Covid-related deaths is almost certainly manipulated, but Belarus seems to have coped relatively well with the first wave of the pandemic due to a fast rollout of its medical resources. It has not been so much the epidemiological situation, as its economic and ideological consequences that have fuelled the current popular discontent. Although the authorities avoided a lockdown, economic support measures were introduced late into the pandemic, which put the main burden of the economic hardships onto workers (Artiukh 2020b). While businesses were offered deferrals on interest payments and other mitigating measures, not only were there no additional payments to supplement falling wages of the workers, but employers were given the right to temporarily transfer them to other jobs or to another employer on short notice. People's incomes also suffered from forced part-time work and forced vacations.

Throughout this pandemic conjuncture, which coincided with the presidential campaign, the discourse of the incumbent authorities sounded dismissive of the constituency. President Lukashenka followed the rhetoric of his right-wing populist colleague Bolsonaro in downplaying the dangers of the novel coronavirus, trivializing the work of the healthcare services and even blaming the victims of the Covid-19 (Schipani et al. 2020). The incumbent president's trusted representative dismissed the economic fallout of the pandemic aggravated by the insufficient economic support

measures: 'A man (*muzhyk*) must earn money. If one job is not enough, take one and a half, if this is not enough take two or three jobs' (*Vechernii Bobruisk* 2020).

By mid-June, after extremely successful campaigns of the opposition candidates, the incumbent president's rhetoric shifted. During a briefing on current political issues,<sup>3</sup> he used the phrase 'these bourgeois need to be brought to their senses,' allegedly referring to private employers threatening to fire their workers if they don't sign up in support of an opposition leader. This sounded as if the president was speaking a long-forgotten language – the language of his first presidential term, when he was still treating 'the people' as unconditionally deserving social rights. Prime minister Halouchanka visited one of the largest car factories, MAZ, and promised to support industrial production. An idea of the affordable rental housing has been revitalized after 7 years of talks. The president started touring the country together with Kachanava, a former head of the presidential administration and the current speaker of the parliament, and meeting local officials, workers' collectives, and even selected opposition-minded activists.<sup>4</sup>

This was a start of the electoral race under the theme of the 'socialist' mid-90s. However, this nostalgic coalition-building did not guarantee a secure victory if the votes were to be counted fairly: state-owned enterprises and farms could provide 30% of the votes at best, while those employed in trade and services as well as the half a million 'social parasites', who were the most affected by the pandemic, were not expected to be so easily mobilized to vote for the incumbent. President Lukashenka's actual election program, which appeared too late into the campaign and seemed to be written carelessly, was the ultimate signal that he lost his original populist skills. The only welfare innovation was an initiative to speed up rental housing construction, although this idea had first been launched in 2013. Most of the program consisted in what the president would not do: no shock therapy, no medical reform, keep affordable (but not free) education.

As the positive ideological content of the president's populist discourse dissipated, the content of who counted as 'the people' started shrinking. After the first weeks of the protests the president started to increasingly appeal to the special police forces and the army as the most deserving elements of 'the people'. After his failed visit to MZKT vehicle factory,<sup>5</sup> where he was booed by the workers, he started appearing more often accompanied by the special police forces. The culmination of this

securitization of 'the people' was his arrival on a helicopter to his palace during one of the protests. He appeared in military uniform carrying a rifle and, instead of addressing the protesting crowd that gathered outside his residence, whom he called 'rats,' he greeted and thanked the riot police.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, if Belarus' traditional opposition failed to appropriate the populist demands of the 2017 protests, the newly emergent candidates' electoral campaign of the summer 2020 had a clear imprint of that 'people's populism' from 2017. The presidential candidate and a former blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, whose wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia became the face of the opposition after he had been imprisoned, continued the activity of his fellow social media activist Maksim Filipovich,<sup>7</sup> who gave voice to the protesters against the 'social parasitism' tax in 2017. Tsikhanouski's Youtube channel '*Strana dl'a zhizni*'<sup>8</sup> ('A country to live in') featured videos of himself touring Belarus and meeting the 'simple people' from all walks of life: individual entrepreneurs, opposition politicians, pensioners, and workers. Himself a small entrepreneur who started in the 'wild capitalist' 1990s, he articulated the popular grievances in a characteristically rude and macho language that was supposed to convey how average Belarusians would express their discontent with the policies of the powers that be.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, he avoided the divisive rhetoric of the traditional nationalist opposition that led to their political marginalization: he spoke Russian and had business ties in the Russian Federation, which led to conspiracy theories accusing him of promoting foreign interests.

The main themes of the 2017 protests, the demands of dignity and economic inclusion, thus entered the narratives of the opposition during the electoral campaign. These narratives picked up on Lukashenka's disdain for his voters, his derogatory phrases about 'a lazy, spoiled people' (Govsha 2019), and asserted an inter-class popular unity under the banner of the 'I/We are the 97%' slogan.<sup>10</sup> Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia's talk on the national TV<sup>11</sup> re-enacted these themes: she said her husband listened to 'simple people' who live in dire conditions while their bosses drive expensive cars, and that's why he was put in jail. In this address Tsikhanouskaia portrayed the Belarusian authorities as an abusive husband who 'spent all your money while you were working, and then demands praise for it.' After complaints about the closure of enterprises and contracting economy, she presented an image of a better country with higher wages, better jobs, and decent pensions.

It sounded as if the challenger had returned to the incumbent's electoral programme from 1994 and pledged to deliver on his promises.



Similarly to Navalnyi, who has been challenging Putin's authority by a populist reordering of the dominant stability discourse (Lassila 2016), Tsikhanouskaia challenged the Belarusian leader on his terrain of the 'social contract.' A week after Tsikhanouskaia's televised address, the rally in support of the joint opposition team gathered a record-breaking audience of 25,000 to 63,000 people according to different estimates. This was the largest opposition event since the late nineties and the largest electoral rally ever, given that the incumbent president abstained from organizing rallies in his support up until a week after the election day – and even then he managed to gather only 7,000-15,000 supporters.<sup>12</sup> Opposition rallies have been happening in various regional locations, surpassing the geographic scale of the 'non-parasite' protests of 2017. The crowd seems to be diverse ideologically and socially, united by the sheer protest mood, also reminding of the protests of three years ago. And this was despite the recent detention of the Russian mercenaries allegedly on their way to destabilize the country. Opposition supporters held banners in solidarity with the anti-governmental protesters in Khabarovsk, Russia. There was a certain similarity between these two protests, as both of them were ideologically fluid, motivated by the rejection of the central authorities, and united around former members of the ruling elite with a clear populist appeal. Official and unofficial flags of Belarus were held together, a rare sight in the opposition rallies before 2017.

Commentators sympathetic to the opposition cause have noted this rhetorical symmetry. An exiled politician and former Belarusian MP sensed the same popular enthusiasm for Tsikhanouskaia as he witnessed during Lukashenka's first victorious electoral campaign in 1994: "The last time such activity was present in 1994: [...] people marched and marched, wearing festive clothes, [chanting] 'For our Sasha!'" <sup>13</sup> Another opposition member from the old generation, chief editor of *Salidarnasts'* online newspaper, compared Tsikhanouskaia to Lukashenka in the context of post-electoral protests, noting that both of them 'live in worlds of their own': Lukashenka believes he has 80% support and Tsikhanouskaia believes she only 'voiced what Belarusian people were asking for' (Starikevich 2020). Echoing this assessment, Ihar Liashchenia, the first Belarusian diplomat to support the electoral protests, said in an interview that Tsikhanouskaia's team was exaggerating the popular support, which reminded him of Lukashenka's administration's alleged detachment from reality (Nasha Niva and Lishchenia 2020). Finally, philosopher Viacheslav Bobrovich, summing up the year 2020, defined the political gist of it as

‘appropriation of the people’: ‘In general, if in the past the authorities tried to appropriate the people, this year both parts of Belarusian society are increasingly doing this.’<sup>14</sup>

After the contested election results were announced on August 9, Tsikhanouskaia positioned herself as a place-holder that condensed the will of the people before they make a substantial decision in free and fair elections. She denied being a politician on numerous occasions, as if shunning this role out of fear of being associated with the discredited ‘political class,’ which is typical of the populist discourse (Müller 2014, 43). She, similarly to Lukashenka, represented herself as a reluctant leader chosen by the fate to lead ‘the people’ in exceptional times. In an interview to the *New Yorker*, she summarized her populist message succinctly:

I write [describing myself] ‘leader of democratic Belarus.’ I’ve decided not to identify myself as the President-elect, because I feel that I don’t have the moral authority to do so. [...] My role is no more and no less important than that of any Belarusian today—it’s just that the Belarusian people have given me the right to speak for them on the world stage and to make certain decisions. We keep in constant touch with people in Belarus—students, teachers, factory workers, doctors and nurses—to ensure that we know what they are feeling and what they want.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Tsikhanouskaia appeared simultaneously as one of the average Belarusians (‘I would like to fry meatballs’) and a provisional leader not needing any mediation, representing ‘the people’ both to themselves and outside the country. Indeed, Tsikhaouskaia was perceived as an interim leader by the population: an online-based poll conducted in January 2021 showed that only 4% of the surveyed thought she would make the best president, far behind Lukashenka or a number of other opposition candidates, although over half of the surveyed voted for her in the elections.<sup>16</sup> Although the opposition committed to restoring legitimacy of the government and introducing rules-based order in the country, this liberal-democratic agenda was indefinitely postponed to the times after the victory over the ‘regime.’

This underdog populist appeal of the united opposition’s leader had a broad resonance among the disgruntled population. Researchers have noted that the 2020 mobilizations, rather than following the established division between the official and the alternative memory cultures, have combined idioms and visual references from both, thereby re-appropriating

selected official symbolism (Bekus 2021). In doing this, the protest culture has mirrored a post-2014 trend in the official cultural policies that appropriated elements of the nationalist narrative (Kazharski 2021, 4–5).

Examples of these are the re-appropriation of the white-red-white flag and borrowing the elements of the Great Patriotic War narrative in support of the protest cause. Since the first protest demos took place around the Stella monument in Minsk, which is dedicated to the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the opposition movement started using WWII-related imagery to signify themselves as ‘the people’. The Great Patriotic War as the ‘People’s War’ has been a central pillar of the official populism since 1995. This is the most evident case where ‘the people’ have been contested on the terrain of the official memory politics. Thus, one of the leaders of the protest, Maryia Kalesnikava, has been portrayed as ‘the Motherland’ from the famous WWII banner. Protesters referred to themselves as ‘partisans’ even before the elections, but this metaphor gained a broad currency during the post-electoral demonstrations. ‘*Belaruskiy kiberpartisan*’ (Belarusian cyber-partisan) was the name of a telegram channel involved in the hacking of the websites of Belarusian authorities.

An illustration to this populist moment was the lyrics of the song titled “We are not the ‘little people,’” that appeared on the peak of the protests and encapsulated this popular-populist re-appropriation:

We are not cattle, herd, and cowards,  
We are living people, Belarusians,  
With faith in our hearts, we keep our ranks closed,  
The flag of freedom is over our heads.<sup>17</sup>

However, the song that became emblematic of the 2020 protests was ‘*Peremen*’ (‘Changes’) by the Soviet-era rock-star Viktor Tsoi. It was an excellent soundtrack for a populist ‘thin ideology,’ without a clear political message and references to divisive cultural or nationalist symbolism and with a truly popular appeal: it has been adored for decades in poor provincial neighborhoods as well as among metropolitan intellectuals. Tsoi himself refused to interpret this composition as a protest anthem: it was, he said, rather about psychological internal transformation. In the 1980s, however, it was perceived as a clear political message. Gorbachev even mentioned Tsoi’s song in a positive manner in one of his interviews in 1985. People remember hearing it during the putsch attempt in 1991, and since 2008 the song has become an unofficial anthem of several

Russian opposition groups. 'Changes, that's what our hearts demand' was heard during the opposition protests of 2011-2012; it quickly spread to Belarus in 2011, where it was performed during the 'silent protests' of 2011. It was even heard in Ukraine's Maidan in 2014, although the song was more popular among anti-Maidan and pro-Russian protesters. It is reported that the song was appropriated both by the pro-government and various anti-government groups, including communists. It was also performed by various pop-artists along with becoming a staple song for self-taught working class youth.

## 5. In Search of 'The Other'

Authoritarian populism that has secured legitimacy to president Lukashenka since he was first elected in 1994 depended on the designation of the political and social 'other,' from whom 'the people' needed to be protected. In a classical case of populist electoral campaign, Lukashenka gained an overwhelming majority of the votes in 1994 due to his strong anti-corruption rhetoric. Since then, the populist slot of the 'corrupt elites' has expanded to include supposedly foreign-funded opposition politicians, disloyal bureaucrats and businesspeople who have been put in jail on corruption charges. Besides, as shown above, the president's rhetoric has been successfully 'othering' the elements of the very 'pure people,' starting with the 'lazybones' and the 'social parasites' in 2011-2017 and sizably expanding in 2020.

In parallel, if the opposition rhetoric imitated the core elements of the dominant authoritarian populism in a struggle to reappropriate 'the people,' this opposition populism could not have avoided their own othering move. Even though the protest movement and its aspiring political leaders may have talked about representing the totality of the people, their self-identification also depends on appointing 'the other' at the bottom, not only the corrupt politicians at the top. Throughout the political crisis of 2020, the struggle for who 'the pure people' are hinged on the procedures of purification amply demonstrated by both the Belarusian authorities and the opposition.

The incumbent president stressed his purification procedure shortly before the election day. In an interview with a Ukrainian journalist, Lukashenka revealed his own version of the sociology of the protests against him. According to him, 20-21% of the population or

300,000 – 500,000 people never voted for him. The pandemic-related measures have exacerbated the situation. He mentioned separate categories: 6,000-7,000 entrepreneurs in Brest who “live in luxurious houses [...] travel to Poland to sell something, and now with coronavirus they can’t.” Individual entrepreneurs who cannot bring stuff from Russia and now don’t want to get jobs. 60,000 guest workers who have returned and now “they sit and wait for something”.<sup>18</sup>

This designation of several categories of the country’s population as ‘internal others’ continue the previous trend of looking for ‘social parasites’ that started in Belarus in 2015. Around this time, the president tossed the number 300,000 as the quantity of those who are not willing to work officially and pay taxes. This category accrued a moral dimension in addition to the purely economic one, as the ‘social parasites’ were thrown out from the social contract as undeserving citizens. It is precisely the moral dimension that persisted throughout the 2020 protests as new categories were added to people who could not be accused of not working or paying taxes.

In the first weeks of August the authorities referred to the protesters as alcoholics, hooligans, drug addicts, prostitutes, and loafers. One of the first casualties of the police violence, Taraikovsky, was described by a high-ranking police officer as “a drunkard and an idiot.”<sup>19</sup> However, as new social groups became visible in street demonstrations – among them those who were deemed ‘the deserving ones’ by the dominant populist ideology: medical workers, pensioners, athletes, teachers – the official discourse turned from moral condemnation to securitization. Not only were the participants being represented as marginals, but also as pawns guided by the West, primarily from Lithuania and Poland.

The ideologized historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War was mobilized to characterize the protesters as both morally corrupt and politically alien. The red-white-red flag, which was the official flag of Belarus between 1991 and 1995, was designated as a fascist symbol, first ideologically and later legally. In the latest stage of the protests, in November-December 2021, the political leadership of the protests was labelled a criminal organization and many protesters were charged with terrorism.

The process of ‘othering’ was also going on among those dissatisfied with the authorities. As it was shown in an analysis of the Ukrainian Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014, the self-description of Maidan protesters as representatives of an inclusive civil nation without regional

or ethnic divisions nevertheless implied a series of discursive procedures to exclude the passive, Soviet-nostalgic, uneducated and regionally defined Others (Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020, 235–39). However, if this ‘thin’ civic-nationalist ideology was ‘thickened’ by the ethnic-nationalist symbols and narratives (Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020, 234), Belarusian protest movement exhibited a different vector of othering.

In response to the official narrative that equated the protesters with Nazi collaborationists, the 2020 protesters turned the accusation against the authorities. Security agencies involved in the dispersal and detention of the protesters were called ‘punishers’ (*karateli*, *karniki*) in reference to anti-partisan fascist reprisals during WWII. Administrators of the NEXTA Telegram channel admitted to consciously introducing this language in their coverage of the protest activities. This usage spread to most other widely used opposition Telegram channels (Kazharski 2021, 8).

The main designations of ‘the other’ among the protesters are not of ethnic or regional character, but can be identified at the intersection between the ‘corrupt political’ figure and the realm of civic society. The main figures of ‘the other’ acquired the labels of ‘*pykorytniki*’ and ‘*iabat’ki*’. The trope of ‘*pykorytniki*’ (those close to the trough) gained traction during the vote counting procedure. Members of the electoral commissions who were suspected of committing fraud were called like this. Further on, this category expanded to cover civil servants loyal to the authorities in power.

A separate subtype of ‘*pykorytniki*’ was ‘*siloviki*’ (security officers). They reportedly received bonuses and were totally loyal to those in power. Their personal details have been disclosed on opposition telegram channels, which led to campaigns of harassment against the law enforcement officers and sometimes their relatives. The rhetoric on ‘*siloviki*’ draws heavily on the appropriation of the Great Patriotic War narrative, where Belarusian present-day riot police is equated with the Nazi punishers (*karateli*, *karniki*) active in Belarus during the WWII (see previous chapter).

‘*iabat’ki*’ joined the protest lexicon after the alleged Russian PR specialists arrived in Minsk to help boost the president’s authority. Several large gatherings in support of the president happened under the slogan ‘*Ia/My Bat’ka*’ (‘I/We are Daddy’). The awkward design of the campaign logo made the slogan appear similar to a popular swearword. This connotation was inscribed in the slur ‘*iabat’ki*’ that designated rather more a willful supporter of the Belarusian president than someone who participates in

the distribution of benefits from the patron-client channels. The moral connotations of *'iabat'ki'* were not dissimilar to those used by the official discourse to characterize the participants of the protests: lazy, backward, corrupt.

Thus, as the protests petered out and the authorities launched a powerful counter-offensive, Belarusian society emerged as deeply split. I have observed an asymmetry in the populist-ideological directionality of the authorities and the protesters. If in the initial stages of the political crisis it was the Belarusian authorities who started with the discourse of othering while the protesters stressed unity in an attempt to appropriate the signifier of 'the people,' during the months of the political reaction the populism of the opposition lost its unifying drive and gave way to the divisive 'othering.' This coincided with the objective and subjective demobilization of the protest activity, including in the social media. In addition to the immense repressive apparatus of the state, the fading of the initial unifying populist idioms of the opposition movement contributed to its demise.

## Conclusions

The six-month mass protest mobilization sparked by the dissatisfaction with the results of the Belarusian presidential elections in August 2020 was the largest wave of political protests that the country saw since it gained independence in 1991. Despite its resemblance to similar electoral political protests in other post-Soviet countries (often referred to as 'color revolutions'), the 2020 Belarusian protests exhibited a series of distinguishing features that set them apart. The protests were not concentrated in one geographical/historical area or restricted to one social group, they were not sponsored by particular political or business interests groups, and lacked a coherent leadership, they did not ground themselves in a particular ethnic or linguistic identity.

These distinguishing features suggest that the 2020 political protests bear similarities with those social protests that happened in Belarus during the period of economic stagnation in 2011-2017. The largest of the latter, the mass mobilization in protest against the law of social parasitism, happened in 2017 and was motivated by the dissatisfaction of the population with the social policies of the government. The ideological framing of this social protest could be characterized as grassroots populism

that challenges the official populist ideology. I have argued in this article that the 2020 political protests were similarly motivated, and carried by grassroot populist protest against the official authoritarian populism in its neoliberal inflexion. This, as I have argued, accounts for the record numbers and social diversity of the protest, as opposed to the previous three decades of political protest activity.

It is true that the 2020 protests started with a legal claim regarding the integrity of the voter count and was initially framed in liberal-democratic terms. Thus, one may object to the populist nature of the protest movement. However, the analysis of the documents issued by the opposition leaders and the rank-and-file participants in the protests attest to the primary importance of the struggle over the redefinition of the categories of 'the people,' 'the corrupt elite,' and the internal 'other.' The liberal-democratic and legalistic goals of the 2020 protest movement are indefinitely postponed until after the victory of 'the pure people' over the 'corrupt elite' and the purging of 'the other,' who are defined as the morally corrupt '*prykorytniki*,' the criminal '*karateli*,' and the marginal '*iabat'ki*.'

The dominant theories of democratization in the post-Soviet countries that focus on the patron-client networks of the ruling elites and set their hopes in the liberal-democratic strivings of the civil society may benefit from a closer look at the ambivalent nature of populism as a 'thin ideology.' The struggle for the redefinition of the people is a powerful impetus behind the movements in favour of substantive democracy, but it is fraught with dangerous potentialities of a prolonged civil conflict.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The most numerous political protests are included; data for 1996-2006 are taken from (Bulhakaŭ 2011), data for 2010-2020 are author's calculations based on media reports.
- <sup>2</sup> Upper estimate of participants in a single event in the capital city
- <sup>3</sup> Reported by the Belarusian state information agency Belta, June 10, 2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/nikomune-dolzny-pozvolit-obidet-prostogo-cheloveka-lukashenko-poruchil-proverit-prichiny-uvolnenij-v-394179-2020/>, accessed November 14, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Reported in *Nasha Niva*, June 18, 2020, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=253764>, accessed November 14, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> President Lukashenka arrived at the Minsk Wheeled Motor Traction Vehicle Plant (MZKT) on August 17, after a week of labour unrest here and in several other large plants. He descended onto the inner courtyard in a helicopter and started his speech with threats to fire those who protested. At some point he heard people shouting from the crowd 'Go away!' (his full speech is available on Zerkalo's youtube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7mWrLV7K70>, accessed July 10, 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> Reported by RIA Novosti, August 24, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200824/1576229889.html>, accessed August 25, 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> Curiously, Fillipovich commented on the opposition activity with scepticism. In his regular Youtube blogs he expresses suspicion that people are lured into protests in order to get detained. True to his populist style, he spread bits and pieces of a conspiracy theory according to which Belarusian authorities are behind the opposition.
- <sup>8</sup> Tsikhanouski's Youtube-channel was set up in March 2019. At this moment, 'Strana dlia zhizni' is run by a team of his collaborators based abroad and mostly features interviews with opposition politicians and experts. As of July 10, 2021 it is accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFPC7r3tWWXWzUIROLx46mg>.
- <sup>9</sup> At the start of his campaign, Tsikhanouski came up with the slogan 'Stop the cockroach!', comparing the president with an insect in a reference to Korney Chukosvki's children's poem. The literary reference was lost on many, while the visual dehumanizing depiction dominated the first months of opposition campaigns.
- <sup>10</sup> This slogan stems from several internet-surveys conducted by non-governmental media in May 2020. According to the surveys by a popular internet-portal Onliner.by and an opposition-minded online magazine 'Nasha Niva', the incumbent president Lukashenka was supported by 3% of the audience. Although these media outlets did not claim that these surveys were representative of the whole population, being instead heavily biased towards the supporters of the opposition candidates, the National Academy

- of Sciences of Belarus declared them 'political surveys' that required a state authorization to be conducted and published. Among the supporters of the opposition candidates, this quasi-sociological result turned into a tongue-in-cheek meme 'Sasha 3%', referring to the presidents' Aliaksandr 'Sasha' Lukashenka low support levels. By the logic of creating a populist discursive cleavage, the opposition supporters called themselves the 97%, possibly with a reference to the 'We are the 99%' of the Occupy Movement.
- <sup>11</sup> As a presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia was offered airtime on the national TV channel 'Belarus 1'. Her second address, which I am referring to in this article, was broadcast on July 21, 2020, but has been subsequently removed from the TV channel's Youtube profile. As of July 10, 2021, it is accessible on the Youtube-channel of the opposition think-tank Reform.by at the following address: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_LyuTI-05w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_LyuTI-05w).
- <sup>12</sup> These are the estimates of the journalists. The attendance announced by the authorities was 65000 (according to *Versia*, August 17, 2020, <https://versia.ru/miting-v-podderzhku-lukashenko-ne-smog-obognat-po-chislennosti-mnogotysyachnuyu-akciyu-ego-protivnikov-u-stely-v-minske>).
- <sup>13</sup> From the facebook page of Siarhey Navumchyk, Facebook/Siarhiey Navumchyk, August 9, 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> From the facebook page of Viacheslav Bobrovich, Facebook.com/vbobrovich, January 2, 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> Gessen, Masha. "Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia is overcoming her fears," *The New Yorker*, December 13, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya-is-overcoming-her-fears>, accessed January 20, 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> The survey was conducted between 14 and 20 January 2021 using the Computer Assisted Web Interview method among 926 participants representing the urban population in Belarus. The survey sample may be biased towards the supporters of the political opposition. The presentation of the results can be found here <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f48Bx2sal1VpWDhSGPdqnfrqhddrw6x/view> (accessed July 10, 2021).
- <sup>17</sup> Tor Band, "My – ne 'narodets'" ('We are not little people'), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rai9tQCrRsQ>, accessed on November 10, 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> 'V gostiakh u Gordona', August 6, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5UmsPFMUaw>, accessed November 10, 2020.
- <sup>19</sup> From an alleged audio intercepted by opposition activists, reported in *Mediazona-Belarus*, January 15, 2021, <https://mediazona.by/article/2021/01/15/karpenkov>, accessed February 2, 2021.

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# MANUFACTURING CONSENT: THE IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY AND SENATORIAL REPRESENTATION IN THE MAXENTIAN PERIOD (306–312 CE)

## Abstract

The role of senatorial elites under the tetrarchic and Maxentian rule has received modest attention from historians. The exclusion from military service and government of provinces and the abandonment by emperors of the ideology of ‘republican monarchy’ destabilized the place of the senate in the structures of the empire. This article aims to investigate aristocratic involvement in the political change in Rome under Maxentius. It assesses the self-image of the senatorial aristocracy juxtaposed with that of the emperor in honorific inscriptions which reveal the shifting role of leading resident families of Rome in imperial power structures, challenged by the rapid advancement and consolidation of equestrian imperial elites. This article seeks to engage aristocratic self-representation together with the imperial one reinstated in the same historical context.

**Keywords:** late antiquity, tetrarchy, epigraphy, senate, aristocracy, government, statues, Maxentius, *damnatio memoriae*

Scholars tend to treat the episode of Constantine’s refusal to ascend the Roman Capitol offering sacrifices to Jupiter as a defining moment, pointing not only to a subsequent religious conflict between pagans and Christians, but also to a senatorial ‘opposition’ to the Christian emperor. Since the debate on Constantine’s religion occupied the foreground in the scholarship, the imperial (self-)representation(s) has also attracted most of scholarly interest. The role of the imperial elites swiftly rising to prominence from the early fourth century onwards, however, remains understudied. The late antique aristocratic self-representation, especially in the eastern part of the empire, is still scarcely scrutinized. This article

seeks to reconstruct aristocratic involvement in the political and cultural change in the early fourth century CE, in particular in the part of the empire under the rule of Maxentius (r. 306-312). Concentrating on epigraphic and visual sources, I argue that the shift of focus to the senatorial aristocracy suggests a fresh view on the communication between imperial and elite ideological representation.

This article, first, outlines the historical context and the current state of the field with regard to the period and the topic of senatorial representation. It provides an overview of primary sources and of scholarly debates. It deals with issues of methodology and provides a broad characterization of the main groups of primary sources. The article also proposes a case study on the aristocratic representation in the Maxentian period. This case study deals with a comparison between Maxentian self-representation and that of the senatorial aristocracy under his rule, at the intersection of art, politics, and ideology. First, I examine epigraphic monuments set up by senatorial aristocrats, to trace imperial representation. Second, I turn to the senatorial self-representation revealed by the honorific dedications erected under the brief reign of Maxentius. Correspondingly, my research focuses on the early fourth-century western part of the Roman Empire, revisiting social and cultural innovations from the time of tetrarchy. The empire, albeit divided among the tetrarchs, was perceived as an ideological unity in the imaginary representations and legal formulations of the time, which was one of the constitutive principles of imperial and elite imagery.

My objective is to engage elite representation through artistic and epigraphic media in an interdisciplinary approach combining visual with narrative sources in order to achieve an understanding of how imperial ideology shaped the production of distinctions among diversified groups of the senatorial elite in the early fourth-century Roman Empire. It is beyond doubt that imperial elite representation, whether civilian or military, mediated in multiple forms of imagery, was designed to convey inextricably aestheticized political messages through visual and material media to various audiences, primarily including competing members of the aristocracy themselves. Either as a projection, or a counterpart, or even an opposition to the self-representation of the emperors, the image(s) of various members of the whole range of senatorial elites accommodated diverse purposes vis-à-vis the people and the emperor, but most importantly other competing members of the resident senatorial aristocracy of Rome. They are means through which the senatorial order would contribute to the development of new representational patterns

available for its members. My contention is that without scrutinizing the economical, political, and ideological context of elite image production and appropriation, particularly that emerging in the early fourth-century in the Roman Empire, the role of the senatorial aristocracy as a social stratum will remain only partially appreciated.

## Methodological Considerations

As the case study of the aristocratic representation under Maxentius will demonstrate, much attention has to be paid to the historical context of the fourth-century Roman Empire in order to arrive at an understanding of the social uses of art and culture by imperial elites. Primary sources for this time comprise various types of literary documents, archeological materials, epigraphy, numismatics, and legislation. The prosopography of the period has already received due attention and is invaluable for contextualization (*PLRE* I). Epigraphy is a rich and less explored source which details social and cultural activities of the late antique elites. Equally important are the numismatic experiments and innovations of the mints initiated by fourth-century emperors and 'usurpers' who came mainly from the military circles, but appealed to the conservative elites (*RIC* VI-X). Literary documents supply the most significant information on the senatorial self-representation, such as, for instance, the public orations and private correspondence of Symmachus. The now-larger corpus of visual material includes honorific sculpture and dedicatory inscriptions, building and restoration projects, mosaics and paintings, sarcophagi and funerary dedications, etc.

The mode of expression characteristic of a cultural production depends on the context in which it is offered and relates the representations of the elite to their social conditions. The fourth-century Roman imperial ideology structured the perception of the social world and designated objects of distinction. Sociology endeavors to establish the conditions under which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, striving at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating those objects that are regarded at particular moments as works of art, and the social conditions constituting the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate (Bourdieu 1984).

Next, characteristics that the fourth-century senatorial elites had in common should be examined in order to understand their cultural

practices as mainly connected to education and offices, when compared to the social background. Since art and cultural practices are to fulfill – consciously and deliberately or not – a social function of legitimating social differences, elites as social subjects, stratified by their classifications, differentiate themselves by distinctions they make based on social origin and educational capital (Bourdieu 1984). Their representation is inevitably defined by social importance. For example, elites, as every group, tend to set up the means of perpetuating themselves, and in order to do so they establish a whole set of mechanisms, such as representation and symbolization, which ensure their proliferation. *Dignitas non moritur*: their means of escaping from disappearance include visual representation, a portrait statue which immortalizes the person represented (sometimes, by a sort of pleonasm, in their own lifetime); a tombstone or a sarcophagus, a written word and in particular historical writing, which gives a place in legitimate history, and commemorative ceremonies in which the group offers tributes of homage and gratitude to the dead, affirming social privileges.

Ultimately, to contextualize selected fourth-century architectural monuments within their local and imperial contexts is to recognize what these buildings were meant to convey about their *euergetai*, i.e. their builders (commissioners) or restorers. I will use established epigraphic databases as a supplement to their contemporary literary texts, extensive use of which has already been made. Consulting a large corpus of archeological and numismatic evidence of the fourth century, which provide the most important material remains from this period, is indispensable.

A series of questions may be posed regarding the topic of senatorial representation. What was the position of the senatorial aristocracy in the ‘class’ topography in early late antiquity? What were senators’ resources beyond economic capital, and how did they influence the senatorial position within their stratum? What kinds of symbolic representation (or self-representation) were produced within elite culture? What kinds of representation did produce distinctions of variegated senatorial elites in the fourth-century Roman Empire? In what milieus did this imagery circulate and to what audience was it addressed? One needs to pay close attention to the extent this representation negotiated the ways in which the self-image was politically engaged by senatorial elites so as to distinguish themselves within the imperial socio-political order, and the extent to which fourth-century artistic changes present a break from the

previous cultural tradition or show a continuation of it. This article offers a glimpse of how the senatorial elite in the early fourth century publicized their status by means of honorific inscriptions. It searches for conceptual parallels that can be established between the elite representation by means of visual strategies and an imperial ideology, in their interaction. Was the former a reaction to the latter? Did the elite representation fully coalesce with an ideology of the tetrarchy?

## The Historical Context

The so-called third-century crisis caused a rapid decline in the political influence of the old Roman and Italian elites, not least due to the successive militarization of the empire. The rise of *virī militares* challenged the civilian elites at a time when Roman senators were *de facto* or *de iure* gradually excluded from military command in favor of *novi homines* from the provinces. In the mid-third-century emperor Gallienus was the first to exclude senators from the military. Diocletian's reforms separated civilian and military expertise. This process was completed under Constantine.

The fourth century witnessed a revival of the civilian elites as a consequence of the enlargement of the government and its "greater intervention" in the lives of the subjects (Matthews 2000, 436). The Constantinian legislation aimed to remove restrictions applied to members of the Roman senatorial class and expand the *ordo* by cooptation of equestrians and members of municipal aristocracies. The central government's purpose was to broaden and consolidate the definition of the elites of the Roman Empire in response to the great political changes that had taken place, as well as to a new social situation that had emerged since the time of the early empire. Constantine sought an "overall redefinition of the Roman political elite" and "a reworking of the notion of imperial elite" (McGinn 1999, 60-1).

This opposition was not a mere renegotiation of the boundaries of privilege within a homogeneous imperial ruling class, but the appearance of a new elite and the emergence of a new system of values that defined it differently. The result of these and other changes is that 'elite society' – seen in the great number of elites encountered – became more complex, while the political power structure, being ever more centered on the emperor, became simpler (Matthews 2000, 439). Correspondingly, Roman political theology was defined by the essential view of the elites that the supreme

deity (or God) appoints the emperor. This structural relation between the emperor and the divine realm was mirrored on yet another level in the relationship between the emperor and his elites. On their side of this equilibrium, they must have trusted the emperor to ensure that justice is done in the state; they expected generosity and philanthropy from him, which in turn bound them with obligations of loyalty. In effect, these were constantly recreated hierarchical relations of a constitutive asymmetry of dominance and obedience.

These civilian and military elites should therefore be seen within the framework of the imperial ideology. I aim to discuss the senatorial elites in the context of ideological production and representation. With three thousand new senatorial positions bestowing the rank of *clarissimus* created in each part of the empire, and some ten thousand jobs *per generation* available to the inhabitants of each half, the ‘already rich and powerful’ of the Roman world found themselves locked into a system of politically determined status (Heather 1998, 196). Aristocracy and elite are defined as members of the senatorial order by virtue of having attained the lowest senatorial rank, the *clarissimate*, by holding an office that conferred senatorial rank, or by being born into the senatorial order (Salzman 2002, 23). The definition of ‘what is an aristocrat’ explicitly reveals an intrinsic social contradiction within the greater *ordo senatorius* re-established and enlarged through Constantine’s reforms.

For the purposes of this study, the ‘already rich and powerful’ are classified in the early fourth century at the upper end of the scale as members of the political and civic elite of a definable sort: senators or *clarissimi/λαμπρότατοι*, *perfectissimi/διασημότατοι* (men of equestrian rank), but also *duumviri* (municipal magistrates), *quinquennales* (census officials, also magistrates), *flaminii* and *sacerdotes* (holders of civic priesthoods). Later in the fourth century, by the time of Valentinian I and Gratian three distinguishing ranks had been developed for senators: the highest being *illustis* (*ἰλλούστριος*), followed by *spectabilis* (*περιβλεπτος*) and the lowest *clarissimus* (*λαμπρότατος*), which had been added by aristocrats to their titles as early as the reign of Constantius II in order to publicize their distinguished status (Slootjes 2006: 23; Salzman 2002, 14, 38). Further, the substantial intermediate layers between the extremes of the top and the bottom strata of civic society were ordinary free men below curial rank. Below senators and equestrians, the inner elite of the curial order were the *principales viri*, local men who held office and performed significant public functions (Matthews 2000, 434).

I define the senatorial elite as a 'stratum', in Weberian terms, within the broader social 'class' of (normally) landowning aristocracy. The idea that the aristocracy abandoned the cities for the countryside is untenable, since it is challenged by the archaeological evidence of continued urban vitality (Banaji 2002, 16). Jairus Banaji has classified 'social types' and 'social groups' of Roman landholders (Banaji 2002, 101-2). On the upper scale these were senators and equestrians who had held magistracies and priesthoods and had been distinguished by public office, by insignia that would identify them in their cities, but also wealthy members of the municipal elites – all co-opted to the *ordo senatorius* by Constantine. Senators, equestrians, *curiales*, court-based nobles as well as the Christian ecclesiastical elite (including aristocratic bishops) and the military elite emerging in the last decades of the fourth century, rewarded with a senatorial rank, constituted the diverse groups of imperial elite and distinct bodies of senators. In contrast to the neighboring polities of Armenia or Iran, whose aristocrats claimed to depend on blood alone, the late Roman order deliberately imposed upon its civilian elites "a double disjuncture between the quasi-automatic claims of birth and inherited wealth, and the 'true' nobility associated with education and office" (Brown 2000, 331-2).

Chronologically, my proposed research runs from the so-called Constantinian to the Theodosian 'turn': the period from the third tetrarchy and the accession to power of both Constantine and Maxentius in 306 to the death of Theodosius I, and the division of the Roman state in 395. Comparable to the political changes, a new period in art history starts at the same time as the tetrarchic experiments, when some portraitists and their customers began to object to lifelike representations (Veyne 2005, 821). By no means, however, does it manifest a distinction between 'pagan' and Christian art (Cameron 2011, 691-742). In the fourth century Christianity had not yet consolidated its content or its modes of expression. It was only toward the end of the fifth century that symbolism surrounding the imperial power was definitely and comprehensively Christianized. Art, as the elite classes of the Roman Empire understood it, aimed at promoting imperial power, and it remains a fundamental part of the picture in this period, overshadowing what is called religious art (Lazaridou 2011, 18). Imperial ideology as exemplified by the emperor's face on the coin obverse comprises a reverse side occasionally featuring the representation of the Roman Senate. The variegated images of the senatorial elites at their intersection with the emperor's likeness as involved in the orbit of imperial ideology are precisely the subject of my study. This imperial ideology, the

dream of a unified empire, is such insofar as it produces the 'empire' as an ideal, and I will examine how images of the senatorial elites became involved in its orbit, and the new empire of elites was constituted at the end of the fourth century.

With the division of the Roman Empire begun by Diocletian, the West, dominated by a seemingly immobile traditional aristocracy, and the Greek East, with the more vigorous world of the new elite, will be considered together. A generation of scholars attempted to analyze the Western aristocracies by region, career, social position, resources, and other characteristics, yet only a few have been interested in considering the imperial elites as a cohesive unified (not least ideologically) stratum, looking at both eastern and western parts of the Roman Mediterranean *oikumene*. Similarly to the well-studied western counterpart, the imperial elites in the East, largely ignored by scholars, exercised tremendous impact on political, social, and cultural life in the later empire and thus deserve equal attention.

## Historiographical Debates

Following the inspiration of Sir Ronald Syme among historians of ancient history, modern scholarship on elites in the later Roman state has been primarily an application of insights that were initially developed in the historiography of the early empire. With Syme's compelling narrative of the Augustan reign, and since Augustus was a significant presence during the fourth century, modern research on late Roman emperors and aristocrats followed the lead of Augustus' most powerful modern interpreter (Van Dam 2007, 5).

Werner Eck's fundamental study on the self-representation of the senatorial elite in Rome of the Augustan period (Eck 1984, 129-67) extended to the later empire. Only recently did scholarship assess the changing interrelation between the senatorial aristocracies and the centers of political power reflected in changing patterns of the representation (Niquet 2000; Gehn 2012; Machado 2019), and gradually became perceptive to the wider economical and social contexts of the transformation of elites in late antiquity (Banaji 2002; Haldon 2004; Sarris 2009). What is on the other hand abundantly clear regarding the financial position of Rome's senatorial aristocracy is that the immense wealth they managed to accumulate in their hands appears simply unparalleled by



possessions of the relatively unpretentious Augustan elites. The wealth of the resident senatorial families exceedingly increased at the beginning of the fourth century as they profited during the period of the so-called third-century crisis. Comparative studies juxtaposing senatorial elites of the early, high, and late Roman Empire are yet to be written.

A. H. M. Jones in his monumental *The Later Roman Empire* suggested that while Roman society was static in the second and early third centuries, this stable society was profoundly shaken by the impact of the prolonged crisis of the mid-third century. For a variety of reasons, all classes became dissatisfied with their hereditary social positions, and the conditions of the time gave opportunities for change and the rise of *novi homines* (Jones 1964), e.g., the newly formed senate of Constantinople. When Jones wrote this, 'upward mobility' was positively charged in Britain, as was the continuity between Classical culture and Christianity in earlier, 'more conservative', decades. Similarly, Keith Hopkins emphasized the social dimension, providing evidence for extensive upward mobility through education in terms of conflict among the emperor, the bureaucracy, and the traditional landholding elites (Hopkins 1965). Obviously a modern projection, it was 'trendy' to observe that this process had happened in late antiquity as well (Brown 2000, 326-31).

At the same time, Ramsay MacMullen drew attention to elements in the elite culture of Late Antiquity that grew out of 'popular' cultures long suppressed by classical Rome, namely, non-Greek and non-Roman elements (MacMullen 1964). For him, they did much to explain the decay of the late Roman governing class in the course of the fourth century. In the same decade Peter Brown's early articles and *World of Late Antiquity* (1971) pioneered in treating the rise and establishment of Christianity in the Mediterranean world as a central aspect. Holy men were, for him, the spiritual analogs of the vigorous *novi homines*, and in a series of studies he revealed further aspects of the flexibility and staying power of the eastern Roman world (Brown 1961, 1971). Through the eyes of Symmachus, a representative of the traditional aristocracy of Rome whose economic capital came before the Constantinian monetary reform, Brown has recently investigated transmission of patrimonial property through senatorial strategies of marriages as well as the patronage system necessary to maintain the glory of the most ancient state offices. Ambrose is yet another model of senatorial strategies of wealth conversion, serving to consolidate the bishop's leadership in a new 'Christian capital' of the

empire, and taking inspiration from an ideology that would long endure (Brown 2012, 93-119, 120-34).

John Matthews, comprehensively analyzing the world of the later Roman governing classes in his suggestive *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court* (1975), further differed not only from his predecessors, but also from such contemporary scholars as M. T. W. Arnheim, in that he was not primarily concerned to account for the 'decline and fall' of the Western Roman Empire (Arnheim 1972). In contrast, in that decade the study of western senatorial aristocracy, although excluding the East, was closely linked to the problem of the continuity between late antique and medieval Western Europe (Wormald 1976).

In contrast, Peter Heather has examined the proliferation of the less researched senatorial order in the Eastern Roman Empire in a manner that significantly balances the impression of unexpected mobility first conveyed in Jones, whose image was that of an eastern Roman society that had lost traditional restraints. Heather saw it not as an expansion of 'new men', but as mobilizing the loyalties of those already wealthy and dominant. The aristocracy grew over the course of the fourth century and turned out to be increasingly differentiated (Heather 1994, 1998). For recent studies of the same process in the West, one might cite Michele Salzman, who envisaged it not as the end of the senate as such, but as the decline of pagan aristocracy in relation to their rising Christian counterparts. These aristocrats exercised multiple elitist strategies; abandoning the pagan, they retained the aristocratic, and in due course, acquired a new designation as a Christian senatorial elite (Salzman 1989, 2000, 2002).

In general, accounts of the relations between the emperor and the senatorial aristocracy in late antique Rome started from an implicit assumption. According to this assumption the senatorial elite and the emperor with his entourage form two discrete groups which, although interacting with each other in various ways, exist as two separate and often antagonistic 'entities'. Scholars have tended to treat the Constantinian change as a defining moment in a religious conflict between Christians and pagans (Alföldi 1948, 1952) and exaggerated the velocity of Christianization of the senatorial elite (Barnes 1994, 1995). The most recent contributions to the debate on Christianization of the senatorial aristocracy and so-called 'pagan resistance' were Alan Cameron's *The Last Pagans of Rome* (2011) and Stéphane Ratti's *Polémiques entre païens et chrétiens* (2012). With the reassessment of a more complex political and social landscape of the fourth-century Roman Empire than has been

previously recognized, examining aristocratic representation jointly with the imperial image, which my study intends to reinstate in the same historical and ideological context, one can witness the dynamic social world of Rome and Constantinople as well as that of the provinces, and approach questioning the authority of the 'pagan/Christian' model. A new scholarly discourse that is not based on religious categories may thereby emerge on the imperial elites of later Roman Empire.

Apart from the abovementioned Anglo-American scholarship, German (Haehling 1978; Näf 1995; Witschel 2007, 2012), French (Chastagnol 1960, 1962), and Italian (Lizzi Testa 2004, 2006, 2011) researchers contributed to an investigation of particular aspects of the senatorial elites in early late antiquity. The recent decade saw increasing attention paid especially to the epigraphic and archaeological evidence of the senatorial representation. A young generation (Machado 2010, 2012, 2019; Chenault 2008, 2012) of scholars has recently attempted a reconstruction of the aristocratic representation in the Roman Fora in late antiquity, analyzing ideological motivations expressed in the commemorative senatorial monuments.

While it appears that the published works devoted to imperial elites have a tendency to be purely historical, the best treatments of the appropriate art historical and archaeological/epigraphical sources frequently come out without connection to this topic, mainly in books dedicated to Roman art and architecture, articles and entries to exhibition catalogs. Textual studies on late Roman aristocracies appear to be mostly detached from similar works based on inscriptions or archaeological material as primary sources. A few studies on late antique economy and the role of senatorial elites in it equally follow their special direction of research. This historiographical survey draws attention to the fact that both historians' and arthistorians' insights are not mutually exclusive and that each of them might portray different possible aspects in the study of elites. Almost no correlation of this sort has been made, and some scattered articles only scratch the surface of the issue due to the fact that the link between the social stratification of elites, imperial ideology, and artistic industry in the late antique context has remained virtually disregarded.

I propose to consider both archaeological and historical evidence. Not many serious endeavors have been devoted to bringing together these two types of evidence, visual and narrative, which are seldom discussed side by side, and to combining them with an analysis of complementary epigraphic and numismatic sources that are of equal importance in a

study of the imperial elite's representation and ideology. I am convinced that such juxtapositions will add a new dimension to the most polemical issues – such as the scale of Christianization of the aristocracy in the different parts of the fourth century – and that it would equally benefit both sides. Apart from the comprehensive yet separate treatment of these two related types of evidence, little attention has also been paid to the common background of their emergence, which is supposed to be within a field shared between cultural history and the sociology of art. I propose to examine the self-representation of the imperial elite within the relations between the universe of social conditions and the universe of culture and the way of life which was put forward there.

### The Imperial Representation: A Case Study of Maxentius

The year 306 marked the beginning of the third tetrarchy and the accession to power of both Maxentius and Constantine. Maxentius was a popular ruler supported in central and southern Italy, Sicily, and Africa, yet declared an enemy of the Roman state (*hostis*) at the council of Carnuntum in 308. After Constantine had defeated his army in the battle at the Milvian bridge in 312, the corpse of his foe was recovered from the Tiber and the head of the 'usurper' was paraded through the streets of Rome in an act of punishment after death (*poena post mortem*) (Omissi 2014). The senatorial aristocracy denounced Maxentius as a tyrant (*tyrannus*)<sup>1</sup> and hailed Constantine. Yet, although Maxentius' memory suffered a *damnatio*, he was posthumously deified.

I begin with the imperial representation juxtaposed with the senatorial one. Maxentius is known to have erected a statue of Mars and the founders of the city (Romulus and Remus) in the Roman Forum sometime during the six years of his reign. The inscription in six lines reads as follows:

To unconquered Mars, [our] father, and the founders of his eternal City,  
our lord, the em[[peror Maxentius, pious, fortunate]], unconquered  
Augustus. Dedicated on the eleventh day before the Kalends of May by  
Furius Octavianus, of *clarissimus* rank, the curator of the sacred temples  
(trans. C. Machado).<sup>2</sup>

The name of Maxentius, in line 5, was erased when his memory suffered the *damnatio* in 312. The text records a dedication to the god Mars and

the founders of Rome. The statue was dedicated on the birthday of the city (*natalis urbis*), the 21st of April. The celebration of the founders of Rome was part of the Maxentian ideological program focusing on the eternal city (Cullhed 1994, 55). While the early fourth-century imperial court was continually itinerant, chiefly due to the military campaigns of the tetrarchic emperors, Maxentius, who was bound to Rome, constitutes a significant exception.

In defiance of the tetrarchic ideology, Maxentius overtly pursued a dynastic policy. His son Valerius Romulus, who bore the title *clarissimus puer* in his youth, became consul in 308 and 309 and had been titled *nobilissimus vir* by the time he died and was deified, in 309.<sup>3</sup> No longer a member as a new emperor in the tetrarchy when Maximian had already abdicated, but simply a private citizen, Maxentius appears to have identified himself with the senate at Rome (Van Dam 2011). As an emperor residing at Rome, Maxentius claimed priority over the other emperors, benefiting from the symbolic capital of the city (Leppin 2007). The dedication honoring Mars and his sons, Romulus and Remus, precisely on the anniversary of Rome's foundation, was set up at the west end of the Forum Romanum, adjacent to the Black Stone marking the legendary site of Romulus' grave.

While the emperor acted as an awarder, the dedication of the statue was carried out by the *curator* of the sacred temples (*curator aedium sacrarum*) Furius Octavianus, who was of the highest senatorial rank (*clarissimus*).<sup>4</sup> Statues formed a remarkable cultural heritage, and they were therefore placed under the supervision of officials: *curator aedium sacrarum*, later *curator* of statues (*curator statuarum*) (ND Occ. IV. 14). *Curatores* were responsible for setting up statues for both emperors and high senatorial office-holders. *Curatellae* in Rome whose holders bore the senatorial rank are attested epigraphically in the tetrarchic and Constantinian period. The office of *curator aedium sacrarum* would be abolished by imperial decision in 331. When Constantine eliminated the position of *curator* of the sacred temples, some of the responsibilities of the latter shifted to the newly formed office of *curator statuarum*.

Emperor Maxentius is celebrated in the inscription as "our master" (*DN, dominus noster*), a new honorific title sanctioned by imperial courts that used to be previously avoided by commissioners of honorific dedications (Weisweiler 2016, 194-95). He is rendered as "pious, fortunate, unvanquished Augustus" (*p(ius), f(elix), invictus Aug(ustus)*), values reinforced here by the dedication to the god of war. The new

honorific language renders Maxentius an invincible ruler (Alföldi 1970). Notably, it does not contain any elements of the traditional titulature, which used to exhibit an array of Republican offices held by the emperor as conferred on him by the senate.

Importantly, the base was found in front of the senate house. The new Curia Senatus, rebuilt and integrated within the Forum of Caesar around 300, signified the power of Rome's aristocracy in late antiquity. The senate-house stood for the longevity of senatorial traditions providing "ample space to foster cohesion among the members of Rome's elite" (Kalas 2015, 141-65). It embodied the authority of the senate in the city of Rome, but primarily in the Roman Forum, where a cluster of statue dedications was set up by the resident senatorial aristocracy (Kalas 2015, 141). The area around the Curia Senatus specifically epitomized the senatorial authority, in which imperial statues were erected commemorating the relationship between senators and emperors.

Senators acted as statue awarders both in their official and non-official roles. They dedicated statues to deities *ex officio*, as in the case of Furius Octavianus and other *curatores aedium sacrarum*. Ordinarily, in cases of imperial functionaries acting in office, little can be inferred about their religious beliefs. In their non-official role, senators could showcase personal religious allegiances, however. Thus, Aradius Rufinus, consul of Maxentius in Rome from September 311, is possibly identical with, or a descendant of consul Q. Aradius Rufinus, who made two votive dedications to Sol and Luna.<sup>5</sup>

A lost inscription, possibly recording a statue of an emperor, was dedicated in Rome by Hierocles Perpetuus, *vir clarissimus*, perhaps *curator operum publicorum* or *aedium sacrarum* in the early fourth century.<sup>6</sup> *Curatores operum* (ND Occ. IV 12, 13) are also called *curatores operum publicorum*, *consulares operum publicorum*, and *curatores operum maximorum*. The inscription records works carried out, possibly at the Sacra Via, in the Roman Forum, on the command of an unknown emperor (Il.1-2). Although it is not explicitly a dedication, since the imperial titles do not appear in the dative case, the fragmentary state of the text and the presence of an imperial official in the nominative case suggests that this was associated with a statue monument of an emperor. If so, Maxentius and Constantine are the best candidates for the inscription, with *CIL* favoring Constantine.<sup>7</sup> In line 6, '*cur[ator operum publicorum]*' is the most likely supplement,<sup>8</sup> but it might also refer to '*cur[ator aedium sacrarum]*'.<sup>9</sup> Perpetuus apparently carried out renovations in, or near the Via Sacra as

*curator* in the early fourth century, as it accords with the titles used for the emperor.

The senate of Rome acted as an awarder of honorific statuary to emperors and the imperial family as proof of loyalty. A symbolic language of imperial dedications was part of political communication between the senate and the emperors. Thus, one dedication to Constantine and to another emperor, probably on a statue base, was made by the senate and people in the Roman Forum in 313.<sup>10</sup> The inscription celebrates imperial victories over tyrants, perhaps by Constantine and Licinius, who enjoyed a short period of peace after having defeated Maxentius and Maximinus Daia respectively. The monument was discovered in the Forum, between the Curia and the Basilica Aemilia.

Besides the iconographic program, in all the inscriptions on the arch the senate and people of Rome claim responsibility for the dedication of the monument to Emperor Constantine. The same text is displayed on both sides of the arch (Grünwald 1990, 63-92),<sup>11</sup> on the attic. The reference to '*instinctu divinitatis*' is a senatorial interpretation of the battle at the Milvian bridge (Lenski 2014). The inscription refers explicitly to the victory over Maxentius (*tyrannus*, l.5) and his faction, perhaps his supporters in Rome. Besides the attic inscriptions, two other inscriptions (Chastagnol 1988, 13-26)<sup>12</sup> refer to the *decennalia* being celebrated and the *vicennalia* that was then expected, and for which a vow was taken. Two more short inscriptions on the central archway, '*liberatori urbis*' and '*fundatori quietis*', celebrate Constantine as presented by the Roman senate (Bardill 2012, 222-37). The arch was placed on the triumphal procession route, highlighting its celebratory function. It is firmly dated on grounds of the inscriptions referring to the celebration of the *decennalia* and the vows for the *vicennalia* (Chastagnol 1988, 22 n.26).

Almost concurrently with the arch, Constantine dedicated his own statue to the senate and people of Rome as a symbol of his power, by which he overcame the 'usurper' (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.11) (Lenski 2014, 196; Bardill 2012, 203-17). The colossal marble statue of Constantine from the Basilica of Maxentius in the Forum Romanum conveys a sense of great antipathy towards Maxentius, stigmatized as a tyrant. Born of a political disappointment, the Conservatori statue could be a re-used portrait of Maxentius. Its wide-open spiritual eyes seem to have been directly borrowed from the Maxentian representational vocabulary. Maxentius' portraits are characterized by the large, emphatically marked eyes outlined by the lower lids (Evers 1992).<sup>13</sup>

If so, the portrait of Maxentius-Constantine suggests not merely a resurgence of the political practice of intentional mutilation that provided an ideologically distinct alternative to re-carving, in which images of 'bad emperors' were defaced and thus transformed from celebratory monuments into graphic reminders of the overthrow and posthumous disgrace. They functioned also as a warning for the senators who had chosen the wrong side, reminding them of the punishment for disgraced officials. Yet it also signaled the specific nature of Constantine's appropriation of Maxentius' portrait as an extension of the emperor's power over his major buildings – the Basilica, the circus complex on the Via Appia, and the imperial Baths on the Quirinal. The portrait of Constantine in sculpture and on coins, which is introduced after his triumph over Maxentius, is an emulation of that of the first emperor Augustus (Bodnaruk 2013), albeit bearing fresh traces of appropriation of the Maxentian face.

## The Senatorial Representation under Maxentius

Now I turn to the senatorial representation proper as revealed in the honorific dedications. Under the tetrarchy, praetorian prefects did not reside in Rome, so it was common to make the prefect of the *annona* a representative of the prefects in the city (Porena 2003, 142-43; *contra* Chastagnol 1987, 333). Prefects of this period seem to be close to the Augusti, especially during the wars. Therefore, as far as statue dedications are concerned, prefects awarded individually only monuments that celebrated their respective Augustus (or Caesar) in cities in the part of the empire controlled by their emperor.

Caius Ceionius Rufius Volusianus, praetorian prefect of Maxentius in 310, when he participated in the expedition against the African 'usurper' L. Domitius Alexander, was the first senatorial prefect (Porena 2003, 268-70).<sup>14</sup> Although several honorific inscriptions dedicated to and by him survived, his prefecture is not recorded epigraphically, as he was interested in deliberately silencing it (Porena 2003, 265-67).<sup>15</sup> Volusianus, consul in 314, features as an awarder of the statue to Emperor Constantine as his city prefect and consul.<sup>16</sup> The mention of Constantine's father, the deified (*divus*) Constantius I in the dedicatory inscription, acknowledges the legitimacy of his rule. Volusianus held the offices of urban prefect and consul on two occasions. Under Maxentius, he was urban prefect in 310, and consul in 311. The statue to Constantine was set up during his



second term as urban prefect, from December 313 to August 315, more specifically, in the year of his second consulship. The inscription does not mention that Volusianus was holding these offices for the second time, as they had been held under an emperor denounced as a tyrant by the new Constantinian regime.

With regard to senators as honorands, most of the honorific inscriptions for senatorial officials were set up for consuls. The consulship, a source of great pride, sometimes features even in the inscriptions erected for family members. It increased the prestige of male descendants, sons or grandsons of the former consul. Thus, Volusianus, consul of 311 under Maxentius and again in 314 under Constantine is styled *bis ordinarius consul*, as recorded in the public honorific inscription for his son set up on the Capitoline Hill,<sup>17</sup> but not in the *fasti*, evidently to make it clear that he was not counting a devalued suffect consulship. Volusianus received another statue in Rome in the year of his second consulship, while in office as prefect of the city.<sup>18</sup>

Volusianus was *proconsul Africae* before Maxentius acquired Africa. His *cursus honorum*, in so far as it was recognized in the early years of Constantine I, is given in an inscription dated 314.<sup>19</sup> Porena hypothesizes that when Maxentius' usurpation surprised Volusianus at Carthage where he had been appointed proconsul of Africa by Maximian or Constantius I, he accepted – as also did the urban prefect Annius Anullinus – the accession of the new emperor (Porena 2003, 263 n.167).<sup>20</sup> Another fragmentary inscription contains his *cursus* including perhaps the African proconsulship.<sup>21</sup> In the West, Constantine's *clementia* after his victory in 312 meant an amnesty to Maxentius' former supporters, and it is thus that the former praetorian prefect Volusianus received again both his urban prefecture and his consulship under the new regime.

However, minor offices held during the rule of the 'usurper' could still be mentioned in the public inscriptions under Constantine. A dedication to Caius Vettius Cossinius Rufinus was erected at Atina in Campania in 315, recording his office as *curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum Sacrae Urbis*, possibly held under Maxentius, at any rate before 312.<sup>22</sup> The precise provenance of the base is uncertain. The offices are probably given in descending order in the inscription: Rufinus was thus *curator alvei Tiberis et cloacarum Sacrae Urbis* after serving as *curator viae Flaminiae*. Rufinus was *curator viarum* before 312, possibly under Maxentius. This is one of the last such collections of *curatela*e. The inscription honors Rufinus as prefect of Rome, former governor of Campania and patron of Atina. This

is a unique instance of the proconsulship of Achaëa occurring before *curatelaë* and provincial governorships.

Other dedications for senatorial honorands come from the semi-public or domestic space. A bronze statue of Attius Insteius Tertullus, prefect of the city, was erected in Rome in 307-310.<sup>23</sup> The statue was erected to its patron by the guild of wholesale dealers (*magnarii*). The inscription reads:

To a distinguished man who surpassed the diligence of all earlier prefects, Attius Insteius Tertullus, quaestor (*quaestor kandidatus*), praetor (*praetor kandidatus*), suffect consul, governor (*corrector*) of Venetia et Histria, supervisor of the workshops (?), governor (*proconsul*) of Africa (?), prefect of the City of Rome. On account of the care which he took, with attention to their misery and with incomparable diligence, when they had brought the danger into the open, so that their fortunes, struck by grave poverty, might grow strong, restored and fostered to their former force, and might receive eternal vigour; and [on account] of his outstanding deeds and singular munificence towards it, the guild of wholesale dealers (*corpus magnariorum*), freed from fear and crisis, has set up [this] fine statue in bronze to him, under the supervision of Flavius Respectus Panckarius Sabinianus Palassius and Flavius Florentius, men of *perfectissimus* rank, supervisors of the guild of wholesale dealers, to a deserving patron (trans. C. Machado).<sup>24</sup>

Tertullus had a successful career during the tetrarchy and the reign of Maxentius. He was prefect of the city in 307-308, which is the most likely date for this dedication. It was probably a private dedication erected by his clients. The base was found in the gardens behind the Basilica of Maxentius. Another base, dedicated to a relative of the city prefect, was found in the same location, suggesting that this could be the site of the *domus* of Tertullus (Guidobaldi 1995, 186-87).<sup>25</sup> The guild as a commissioner of the statue suggests that it was put up in a domestic space.

Statue dedications to senatorial patrons of the guilds in Rome are not uncommon. In the early fourth century *cursus* inscriptions still recorded quaestorship (*quaestor kandidatus*), praetorship (*praetor kandidatus*), suffect consulship, all of which became rarely mentioned in epigraphy after the mid-century. Senators by birth, who needed to hold specific magistracies to confirm their status, pursue the office of quaestor, which conferred actual participatory membership in the senate. Tertullus then served as governor (*corrector*) of Venetia and Histria, governor (*proconsul*) of Africa, and urban prefect of Rome. Both his entry magistracies of the

senate and top posts of the imperial state define Tertullus' *nobilitas* by virtue of office-holding, and not of the antiquity claimed by resident senatorial families.

Prefects were praised for specific deeds and for their munificence towards corporations. Tertullus is honored as 'a distinguished man who surpassed in diligence all earlier prefects' (*i[n]lu[stri] viro et omnium retro praefecto[rum i]ndustriam supergresso*) and a 'deserving patron' (*digno pat(rono)*) of the guild of wholesale dealers, for 'the care which he took' (*[ob curam quam egit]*), 'with incomparable diligence' (*incomparabili [industria]*), when he restored the guild to its former strength, and for 'his outstanding deeds and singular munificence towards it' (*eius aegregia (sic) facta et in se munificentiam singularem*).<sup>26</sup> The prefect is thus lauded for his *cura*, *industria*, and *munificentia* towards the city guild.

To conclude, few correspondences can be established between the imperial and senatorial representation. The honorific inscriptions of the Maxentian period commissioned by the senatorial office-holders for the emperor reveal a change in the public image of the ruler. He is no longer presented as a magistrate of the Republic elected by the Roman senate and people, but as a *dominus*, "master," glorified as such by the highest stratum of the imperial aristocracy. The new honorific language employed by the senatorial awarders titles him "unvanquished Augustus," alluding to his military achievements, upon which imperial legitimation rests. However, Maxentius, just like Constantine, derived his legitimacy primarily from the dynastic principle, discarding the tetrarchic ideology. In dedications to his son and to Romulus, the dynastic legitimacy and the ties to the city of Rome and its traditional institutions, such as the senate, are highlighted as pillars of Maxentius' self-presentation, in blatant disregard of the tetrarchic ideology.

As the military emperors of the third and early fourth centuries limited the economic and social privileges of the senatorial aristocracy, they also exerted an influence on its self-perception. The offspring of the noble families of the resident aristocrats of Rome began to present themselves as subjects to the absolute authority of the divine ruler. If the emperor appears as divine and the new imperial titulature spotlights the emperor's absolute power (*domino nostro*), the members of the later Roman aristocracy in turn exhibit their self-image as monarchical subjects, in accordance with the new style of the imperial representation. The traditional senatorial nobility of Rome took extreme pride in holding offices – glorified in the *cursus* inscriptions – viewing the late Roman senate as an institution

of the office-holding aristocracy. Since even the rank of the scions of ancient *nobilis* families was defined by the state offices they held, it was indispensable to partake in the imperial government by forming part of the aristocracy of service, where the status was defined by the offices conferred on the senators by the emperor. In return for the benefits of office-holding, the metropolitan senatorial aristocracy was consenting and conforming to the shifts in the late Roman imperial ideology.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> CIL 6 1139=ILS 694.
- <sup>2</sup> CIL 6 33856=LSA-1388: *Marti Invicto, patri, / et aeternae Urbis suae / conditoribus, / dominus noster / [[Imp(erator) Maxent[iu]s, p(ius), f(elix)]], / invictus Aug(ustus). // Dedicata die(s) XI kal(endas) Maias / per Furium Octavianum v(irum) c(larissimum) / cur(atorem) aed(ium) sacr(arum)*. Maxentius adopted the appellation of *propagator* (extender) of the empire, introduced as a standard imperial title by Septimius Severus and revived by Diocletian, but extended it to Mars, see RIC VI 402 n.12: *MARTI PROPAG(atori) IMP(erii) AVG(usti) N(ostri)*.
- <sup>3</sup> PLRE I, 772 Valerius Romulus 6. ILS 672; CIL 6 1138, cfr. pp. 3778, 4327=ILS 673.
- <sup>4</sup> PLRE I, 638 Octavianus 4.
- <sup>5</sup> CIL 8 14688=ILS 3937; CIL 8 14689=ILS 3938. PIR<sup>2</sup> A 1017.
- <sup>6</sup> CIL 6 1223=LSA-1319. In line 1, '*conservator militum et provincialium*' is common in milestones, especially dedicated to Magnentius or later, see CIL 11 6643 to Magnentius and CIL 5 8061 to Julian. CIL 6, p. 4336 suggests '*conservator[em totius orbis]*', observing that it was used for Constantine, see LSA-2228. In l.3, CIL suggests '*sacram viam*'. The restoration of such an important street would have deserved a proper celebration, as in the grandiloquent language of the inscription. PLRE I, 689 (Hie)rocles Perpetuus 4.
- <sup>7</sup> CIL 6, p. 4336, suggesting Constantine.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> PLRE I, 689 Perpetuus 4.
- <sup>10</sup> CIL 6 40768=LSA-1430.
- <sup>11</sup> CIL 6 1139=LSA-2669.
- <sup>12</sup> Above the lateral archway, on the western side.
- <sup>13</sup> LSA-2662, see also LSA-896.
- <sup>14</sup> PLRE I, 976-978 Volusianus 4.
- <sup>15</sup> AE 2003, 207=LSA-1573; CIL 6 1708=ILS 1222.
- <sup>16</sup> CIL 6 1140=ILS 692=LSA-837.
- <sup>17</sup> CIL 6 41318=ILS 1222=LSA-1416.
- <sup>18</sup> CIL 6 1707=LSA-1415.
- <sup>19</sup> CIL 6 1707=ILS 1213=LSA-1415. His next three offices were held under Maxentius and are omitted from the inscription.
- <sup>20</sup> Porena suggests that the proconsulship of Volusianus may have coincided with the critical passage of Africa Proconsularis from previous legitimate control to that of Maxentius. It is witnessed by the highly prestigious posts that Volusianus held under the 'usurper': praetorian and urban prefecture, and an ordinary consulship of 311. The fact that the proconsulship of Africa appears in the *cursus honorum* written after Constantine's victory at the

Milvian bridge, where the Maxentian offices are not mentioned, is explained by the appointment of Volusianus before the usurpation.

21 CIL 6 41319=LSA 1573.

22 CIL 10 5061=ILS 1217=AE 2005, 90=LSA-1978. PLRE I, 777 Rufinus 15.

23 PLRE I, 883-884 Tertullus 6.

24 CIL 6 1696=LSA-1401: *[In]lu[st]ri viro et omnium retro praefecto/[rum i]ndustriam supergresso, Attio Insteio Tertullo, / [quaestori k(andidato)], praetori k(andidato), consuli, correctori / [Venetiae et Hist]riae, praeposito fabri/[cas(?), proco(n)s(uli) Africae(?), praefecto ur]bis Romae, / [ob curam quam egit, ut fortunae eorum] / inopia ing[enti afflictæ sollicitudine eius] / miseriae atque incomparabili [industria, cum in] / apertum periculum proruebant, recrea/tae atque confotæ redditis pristinis / viribus, convalerent et aeternum robur / acciperent, atque (ob) eius aegregia (!) facta et in se / munificentiam singularem, corpus magna/riorum gravi, metu et discrimine liberatum, / ei statuam aere insignem locavit, / curantibus / Flaviis Respecto Panckario Sabiniano Palass(io?) / et Florentino, v(iris) p(erfectissimis), p(rae)p(ositis) corp(or)is mag(nariorum), digno pat(rono).*  
 25 LSA-1402.

26 Franz Mithof in CIL 6, p. 4736, has inferred that the troubles alluded to in the inscription (ll.7-10) could refer to the crisis in the supply of Rome in 310.

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# SEASONAL MIGRATION AS LOCAL PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE: HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN RURAL SOVIET TRANSCARPATHIA (1940S–1960S)

## Abstract

Transnational labor migration from the western border regions of Ukraine is often explained by macro-economic factors: the unemployment that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and generally low wages. In this paper I argue for a more complex, culturally informed and historicized understanding of labor migration. I show that in Transcarpathia, labor migration has a history of at least one to one and a half centuries, from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to this day. I especially focus on the “translation” of the local traditionalized practices of mobility into the Soviet system in the late 1940s and early 1950s, following Transcarpathia’s annexation by the USSR. Understanding seasonal migration as a historically shaped competence of local communities and conceptually framing it in terms of “local practical knowledge” and “cultural reserve” allows to question the deterministic impact of macro-political factors and instead pay due attention to the grassroots knowledge and agency.

**Keywords:** Transcarpathia, seasonal labor migration, Soviet Union, Ukraine

## Introduction

Since Ukraine gained independence and opened its borders for international movement, the population of Transcarpathia,<sup>1</sup> a mountainous border region in the west of Ukraine, became actively involved in transnational labor migration. In the 1990s, Transcarpathians searched for jobs in the neighboring countries to the west from the border—in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, while some also kept migrating eastward—to other regions in Ukraine, and to Russia. In the early 2000s, the list of migrant workers’ destinations extended further to the west,

as they started exploring job opportunities in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece.<sup>2</sup> Scholars emphasize economic factors when explaining the upsurge in labor migration from Transcarpathia, in particular the rise in unemployment in the region during the economic crisis that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and low wages in the existing workplaces, combined with the legalization of the border crossing.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will show that labor migration was not a spontaneous response to changes in labor market during the recent period of politico-economic “transitions”, but that this social phenomenon had a consistent history in Transcarpathia, starting at least from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that Transcarpathia’s rural population’s involvement in a variety of migration practices in Austria-Hungary and during the interwar period informed the shaping of a local knowledge that was mobilized when facing Sovietization in the late 1940s. During the Soviet period, the practice of seasonal migration did not cease to exist, on the contrary, it thrived despite the official administrative restrictions on internal mobility.

Scholars who study labor migration in the former Soviet spaces tend to either ignore or deny the existence of seasonal labor migration in the USSR after Stalin’s rise to power. It is maintained that the specific political and legal environment of the Soviet Union prevented individuals, especially members of collective farms, to move freely around the country, as they were not entitled to internal passports until 1974. In such a restrictive setting, how could independent decisions about the directions of labor migration and choices of the place of employment be made? Moreover, how could labor migration exist in the form of a self-organized enterprise that would involve large groups of people? In the Imperial Russia, labor migration, or “*otkhodnichestvo*”, was an economic practice aimed at supplementing rural subsistence farming with additional income earned, primarily, in the cities.<sup>4</sup> The passport system introduced in 1932 had allegedly curbed rural out-migration, severing autonomous mobility for the part of population that was traditionally engaged in *otkhod*—the majority of rural inhabitants – therefore rendering the very possibility of maintaining the practice of seasonal migration unviable.<sup>5</sup>

However, in practice, the absence of a passport did not always mean an absolute ban on movement. As western scholars have shown back in the 1980s, the passport and residence permit system (passport/*propiska* system), put in place by the Soviet authorities to manage population and facilitate labor planning, was not, in fact, a real obstacle to migration.<sup>6</sup> The increasing pressure of labor shortages, combined with a prolific

culture of informality, allowed for various schemes to circumvent the administrative restrictions on mobility.<sup>7</sup> The rural out-migration was also much less affected than the Soviet policy makers assumed it would be.<sup>8</sup> The uninterrupted movement of seasonal workers during late Soviet socialism around the vast territories of the country also testifies to the limits of administrative control over mobility.

Without downplaying the importance of economic factors, I argue for a more complex perspective on seasonal migration. In particular, I want to bring to the fore the culturally embedded local practical knowledge of seasonal migration, and emphasize its historical importance for the rural communities of Transcarpathia. Local practical knowledge, a concept forged by James Scott, refers to certain social groups' "from below", cultural competences that predate more technically advanced forms of economy advocated by "high modernist" states, such as the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> When discussing the role of transhumance in the economic adaptation strategies of the communities of the Georgian highland region Tusheti to economic disruptions like collectivization or post-socialist transformations, Florian Mühlfried suggested the concept "appropriation culture" that captures the idea that "...in times of radical political change, the populations are able to transform breaks into continuities by applying culturally developed micro-techniques."<sup>10</sup> He claims that spatial mobility has especially valuable potential for the "appropriation culture". Mühlfried also uses the concept of "cultural reserve", which he does not develop, but which I see as theoretically productive if used in tandem with Scott's idea of "local practical knowledge". The concept of "cultural reserve", understood as historically transmitted competence in social practices, such as labor migration, helps to question the deterministic impact of macro-political factors and instead pay due attention to the grassroots knowledge and agency.

I argue that seasonal migration was an instance of local practical knowledge and a "cultural reserve", which was proactively mobilized by the Transcarpathian population as an adaptive response to a crisis (such as collectivization) and an "appropriation of ... new (physical and social) spaces".<sup>11</sup> I also make use of the concept of "translation" to emphasize that the adaptation process was dynamic, creative and reflexive. Thus, in what follows I will trace the translation of pre-Soviet seasonal migration practices of Transcarpathian peasants into the Soviet system using sources from the Ukrainian central and local archives and oral interviews with seasonal workers who were working in forestry and agriculture during

the late 1950s and up to the 1990s. I will show that state policies and initiatives “from below” overlapped in the process of creation of a certain type of seasonal worker—the Soviet *zarobitchanyn* (literally—the one who leaves his home for earnings).

## **Austro-Hungarian and Czechoslovak Periods**

The historical region of Carpathian Rus', a part of the Hungarian Kingdom, was overwhelmingly rural. There was limited potential for the development of local industries, and the region's inhabitants supported themselves by subsistence farming and animal husbandry. The 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers used to lament the poverty and overall “backwardness” of Carpathian Rus', and this narrative was later reproduced by the Soviet Marxist historians who sought to emphasize the colonial oppression of the ethnically Slavic Carpatho-Rusyn population by Magyar and Austrian elites. Indeed, the Hungarian Kingdom itself, together with Austrian Galicia, were the least industrialized parts of the Habsburg Dual Monarchy,<sup>12</sup> and within this context the Carpathian Rus' was even more “peripheral” and disadvantaged. Even though in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian and Hungarian governments made some effort to incentivize industrialization by encouraging private investors to open more enterprises in the region, it did not result in a significant growth of the number of jobs. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the salt mines, traditional for the local economy since the Middle Ages, the scanty metallurgy and metalwork plants, as well as forestry enterprises, sawmills and lumber-dependent chemical plants, and some smaller industries, provided stable employment for only 15,600 workers. Together with a similar amount of part-time workers they made only 12 percent of the region's total workforce.<sup>13</sup> More than half of the industrial enterprises of the region were located in large cities and towns.<sup>14</sup> This meant that the available jobs were not nearly sufficient to provide the majority of locals with an alternative to subsistence farming.

At the same time, seasonal or temporary workers were in higher demand than permanent employees.<sup>15</sup> Transport networks were expanding and they therefore attracted local construction workers. The biggest lumber industry in the region was dependent on the season, and this conditioned the fluctuating demand for workers throughout the year. Moreover, lumbermen and construction workers from Carpathian Rus' were eager to travel further away from home and work in Galicia, Bukovina, Transylvania, and other



parts of the Hungarian Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> In the 1870–1880s, the yearly number of workers employed in logging and rafting reached 20,000–30,000.<sup>17</sup> In 1890, in the four counties that constituted Carpathian Rus', there were almost 60,000 seasonal workers.<sup>18</sup>

Migration for agricultural works had intensified after 1848. It was accumulating further force throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within and outside of the region, in the more agriculturally productive Hungarian plain, on the medium-sized and large manors additional workers were required each year for planting and especially harvesting seasons. Susan Zimmermann refers to the two-volume publication on Hungarian peasantry, edited by István Szabó and published in 1965, specifically relying on the chapter written by Zoltán Sárközi when describing the organization of labor of *summás* (seasonal workers) in the years between 1848 and the beginning of World War I:

The *summás* workers often worked for a lump sum or were paid monthly; at times accomplishment-related elements, and so on, were added. *Summás* work was organized as 'gang' labor, often building on ties between families and relatives with contracts signed well in advance, by the always male leader. Over time, recruitment could also take on a more commercialized character, involving independent professionals.<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century the recruitment of agricultural workers was institutionalized. Local administrations were mediating between the workers in rural districts and Hungarian landlords by organizing annual drafts on the basis of the filed requests. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of contracted workers grew annually.<sup>20</sup> Each year these intermediaries recruited and directed large cohorts of contracted laborers from Carpathian Rus' to the state and private farms in Hungary. In 1905 this agency alone hired 7,158 workers, in 1906—11,550, in 1907—10,782, in 1910—5,090.<sup>21</sup> The preliminary contracts for summer work were made with the peasants during winter. In 1913, the demand for workers allegedly grew so much that the local administration had to inform some employers that they would not be able to hire agricultural workers for the upcoming year because the available ones were already booked earlier that autumn.<sup>22</sup>

Seasonal workers accepted payment both in money and in kind. For instance, in Ung county (one of the four counties of the Carpathian Rus'), a worker received 32 kronen, 62 measures of grains, 2 kilos of salt and 8 litres

of palinka for his work from the 15<sup>th</sup> of May until the end of September.<sup>23</sup> Mowers used to receive a set percentage of hay, which varied from county to county, as well as daily food.<sup>24</sup> In 1901, a Hungarian landlord from Nitra county hired 80 workers from the Carpathian Rus' to crop 497 holds of land ( $\approx 214.5$  ha). For their work they received 6 kronen from a hold,<sup>25</sup> and also grains, 160 kronen for palinka, 20 kronen for vinegar and 160 kronen for other food stuffs.<sup>26</sup> Following Sárközi, Zimmermann maintains that contracts with *summás* were written in great detail, specifying the number of workers, wages and supplements, but also revealing that gender and age played an important part in assessing the value of workers' labor and needs – women, sometimes together with children, used to be labelled "halfhands" and were entitled only to a portion of what men earned, for instance, "a half-allotment of wine and a reduced allotment of food."<sup>27</sup>

By the 1890s, *summás*' impact on local economic and social relations became noticeable. They created pressure on the agrarian workforce in the places of destination, leading to an increase in demand for more unpaid labor performed by local workers, and were used by the employers to break harvest strikes.<sup>28</sup> In their home localities, seasonal workers provoked the rise of pay rates for agricultural hired labor by deserting Carpathian Rus' for other Hungarian counties, where the payment for similar work was higher.<sup>29</sup> Coupled with transatlantic migration, seasonal outflow of workers added to local demand.

Under the Czechoslovak government (1919–1939), centralized recruitment of seasonal workers was also set in place. In the beginning of the 1920s, three employment offices were established in the cities of Uzhhorod, Mukachevo and Khust.<sup>30</sup> They were functioning under the supervision of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Agriculture and the central office of seasonal labor in Prague. Until 1939, these institutions facilitated the drafting seasonal workers for agriculture and forestry within and outside of Czechoslovakia.<sup>31</sup> In 1939–1944, when the territory of Carpathian Rus' was under Hungarian occupation, legal institutions functioned to supervise contracts between local agricultural seasonal labor and Hungarian employers.<sup>32</sup> Forestry enterprises also continued employing seasonal workers.<sup>33</sup>

Through seasonal labor migration, economic connections were set in place which supported the local family households in Carpathian Rus'. The payment that migrants received in money and in kind were no small contribution. With their earnings they supported the households they left behind, and, in turn, benefited from the families' farming activities in which they themselves might or might not have participated. The

time of their yearly leave did not exceed several months and, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer Iurii Zhatkovych observed, seasonal migrants tried to postpone their moment of departure until they had finished their work in their fields to return in time for their own harvest.<sup>34</sup> Even when their absence from home was prolonged and they had to miss collective agricultural work on their own land, it did not sever their ties with the farm as they economically depended on their families. The economic interdependence between migrating and non-migrating family members, forged by seasonal migration, informed the adjustment to the idea of temporarily split families. The large number of Transcarpathian peasants engaged in seasonal migration suggested that this arrangement, which emerged as a local communities' response to the unsustainability of small-hold farming, hereditary land partitioning against the backdrop of land hunger experienced by the peasantry,<sup>35</sup> and scarce jobs in local industries, gained wide acceptance.

Thus, in the late nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century seasonal migration firmly entered the economic and social life of Transcarpathian peasants. During almost one hundred years between 1848 and Transcarpathia's inclusion into the borders of the Ukrainian SSR, seasonal migration had become a habitual local practice that not only supported the peasants economically, but was also integrated into the social life of communities.

### **Soviet Migration Policies during Post-war Reconstruction**

The establishment of the Soviet rule over Transcarpathia in the aftermath of World War II brought drastic transformations to the local economic and social life. The radical restructuring of agriculture through collectivization irrevocably disrupted the lives of local peasantry. With regards to migration, the arrival of Soviet rule was accompanied by ideas of population redistribution and management. After World War II, in the context of post-war economic devastation and the need for reconstruction, these ideas gained reinvigorated validity and were taken as a basis for governmental policies directed at various regions of the country depending on their perceived economic significance. State-led migration was put to service of economic recovery. It was supposed to ensure a steady inflow of workers to the areas and enterprises where they were most needed.

The idea that ethnic groups, families and individuals could and should be mobilized and, if deemed necessary, spatially relocated in order to achieve economic goals, was at the core of the state-led migration policies crafted for overwhelmingly rural Western Ukraine and Transcarpathia. With regular drafts of workers for various Soviet industries and rural population resettlement campaigns, the post-war migration policies introduced new directions in migration. In the immediate post-war years, labor recruitment was often accompanied by coercion. At the same time, previously known migration routes and channels of economic support through labor migration were permanently interrupted when the international borders were demarcated and sealed.

Shortly after the war Soviet authorities embarked on a full-fledged mobilization of the local population to participate in the project of post-war economic reconstruction. The state's vision of the effective use of these regions' labor reserves was quite specific. While the local economies were being restored and the collective farms either rebuilt or established from scratch, western regions of Ukraine, and among them Transcarpathia, were approached as possessing significant labor reserves in the form of "surplus" population in the rural areas. The agricultural initiatives of the late 1940s–1950s created a demand for large numbers of agricultural workers, so the Soviet state came up with the resettlement program that was mainly oriented towards utilizing the labor reserves of these "overpopulated" rural regions.

The main direction for resettlement within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR) were its Southern oblasts, which suffered from depopulation that resulted from deportations and human losses in the war, but which by the early 1950s became a site of active agricultural development reinforced by the construction of irrigation systems. A centralized campaign of peasant resettlement, which was supposed to augment the human reserves of this economically prioritized region, was launched in the summer of 1949. Soviet discussions about agrarian "overpopulation", which dated back to the 1920s and 1930s, generated a perspective that resettlement was an efficient measure to solve the problem of "overpopulation" and at the same time develop natural resources and build industries in the sparsely populated regions of the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> In the late 1945, 77.2 per cent of the estimated total of 791,9 thousands of Transcarpathia's population were peasants.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, only slightly over 20 percent of the regions' land was suitable for agricultural cultivation, while almost half of its territory was covered with forests. From

the outset of the resettlement campaign, the conclusions about whether a region was overpopulated were based on a schematic calculation of the ratio between the available arable lands and the number of able-bodied workers. With the ratio of 0.91 ha per able-bodied person, Transcarpathia was at the top of the list of Ukrainian “overpopulated” regions.<sup>38</sup> Thus, western regions of Ukraine were assigned an important part in the Soviet authorities’ aspirations regarding the replenishing of the regions and territories that were lacking in labor power.<sup>39</sup>

Another Soviet labor mobilization policy was known as organized recruitment of workers (*orgnabor*). The Soviet central planning agencies drafted plan targets for selected industries and plants, and then regional and district offices sought to meet those targets by allocating or relocating workers from around the USSR. As Western Ukrainian oblasts and Transcarpathia fell under the Soviet rule, they, like other Ukrainian oblasts, were assigned quotas for drafting youth for professional training and workers for the mining industries in Donbas, a vital region for the Soviet post-war industrial reconstruction.<sup>40</sup> Since the founding of the agency in 1931, organized recruitment was focused on facilitating contracts between enterprises and the residents of the rural areas which were assessed as having labor surpluses. The *orgnabor* system continued recruiting workers long after the reconstruction goals were achieved, although the numbers of the recruits were steadily diminishing over time together with its part in labor recruitment in the USSR.

### **Seasonal Forestry Workers in the 1940s–1960s**

While state-led, “from above” migration regimes (resettlement campaign and organized recruitment) are well documented, until the second half of the 1950s there is virtually no mentioning of seasonal labor migration from Transcarpathia. This is a telling omission. It reflects the post-war Soviet state’s simplified vision of society as manageable and predictable in its responses to governmental policies. Collections at the state archives reflect this vision, representing predominantly the intentions and operations of the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses via plans, reports on recruiting and transportation, settlement and reception in the places of destination. While these sources allow to some extent to reconstruct actions and motivations of the actors involved, including those of drafted workers and resettled peasants, these documents deny,

however, access to social groups that are not perceived as significant or important, and whose presence, therefore, is not reflected in the state-produced documentation.

In the 1950s, Transcarpathian seasonal workers constitute such an “invisible” group, their practices and economic life being, in Scott’s terms, “illegible” to the state. Regarding collectivization, a radical state offensive onto peasantry, Scott observed that “the officials who directed this massive change ... were operating in relative ignorance of the ecological, social, and economic arrangements that underwrote the rural economy. They were flying blind”.<sup>41</sup> This started changing in the mid-1960s, a point in the Soviet history that signified a paradigmatic shift in the authorities’ approach to population management in the face of economic challenges, the accumulation of statistical data, and expert sociological knowledge.

Despite the scarcity of the archival sources on the peasants’ seasonal movements in the 1950s, I argue that historical continuity of seasonal migration from Transcarpathia was not disrupted by collectivization. Oral histories provide some evidence that this pre-Soviet practice was revived shortly after the region was annexed by the USSR. Seasonal migrants whom I interviewed during my field trips to Transcarpathia in 2014–2019 and who started their own migration endeavors in mid- to late 1950s, acknowledged that the previous generation, which is no longer around to share their memories, also explored the possibilities for short-term work around the Ukrainian SSR and the Soviet Union. Just like before World War II, they assembled work teams and traveled away from their region to find temporary jobs.

Unlike late Habsburg Hungary and interwar Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union did not have a unified institution specifically dedicated to contracting seasonal workers. These functions were divided between different ministries and agencies. Recruitment of seasonal workers into forestry was the most institutionally structured among all the types of seasonal employment. It was conducted through *orgnabor* system. Through its republican branch, Ukrainian *orgnabor* offices enlisted and sent thousands of lumbermen to the enterprises chosen by the central office of State Planning Committee of the Soviet Union (Gosplan) in Moscow. The agency ensured signing the contracts and was responsible for the transportation of the workers to the place of work.

During the period of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1946–1950), which was primarily directed at the post-war reconstruction of the Soviet economy, organized recruitment of permanent and seasonal forestry workers inside

the Ukrainian SSR was conducted exclusively for the internal needs of the republic. In the late 1940s, in Transcarpathia and in the USSR in general, forestry was still largely relying on seasonal manual labor and animal-drawn transport, which was also operated by seasonal workers. In January 1947, the Council of Ministers of the USSR sent a telegram signed by Joseph Stalin to the Council of Ministers in Kyiv. The telegram contained criticism regarding the nonfulfillment of the delivery plans of timber by Ukraine, and stated that the reason for that was the insufficiency of seasonal workers in particular.<sup>42</sup> According to the telegram, at the beginning of 1947 the Ukrainian forestry was operated by 12,892 seasonal workers, roughly one third of the labor force envisioned by the plans.<sup>43</sup> However, according to Vasyl' Mishchanyin, the gradual mechanization of labor and infrastructural changes within the industry led to lowering the number of seasonal workers in Transcarpathian forestry to 15 percent by 1950.<sup>44</sup>

The regional offices of *orgnabor* were established in Transcarpathia and other oblasts of Western Ukraine in 1950.<sup>45</sup> In the preceding years the recruiters (*verbovshchiki*) delegated by various ministries, enterprises and farms arrived to these regions and searched for volunteers without the support of locally based labor recruitment agency.<sup>46</sup> Thanks to the records of these regional *orgnabor* centers, it is now easier to trace the recruitment into forestry in any given region and in the Ukrainian SSR in general.

By the end of the 1950s, the majority of Soviet timber harvesting was relocated to the North of the European part of the Soviet Union, as well as the Urals, Siberia, Karelia and the Far East. Labor drafting was mirroring this trend already in the early 1950s. In 1952, the Soviet government demanded of the Ukrainian authorities to send 35,930 workers to the forestry enterprises outside of the republic, but only 21,372 workers signed contracts.<sup>47</sup> The following year the quotas increased to 58,695 permanent workers and additional 18,500 seasonal workers.<sup>48</sup> With great difficulty, the *orgnabor* recruiters managed to enlist 42,506 permanent and 15,895 seasonal workers from the Ukrainian SSR.<sup>49</sup> The vast majority were sent to the timber enterprises outside of Ukraine.<sup>50</sup> In 1954, the quotas for seasonal workers in forestry reached the record 49,200, but by early December that year *orgnabor* managed to satisfy this request only by 62.7 percent.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, in the early 1950s, the official direction of managed labor migration of Ukrainian forestry workers shifted towards a number of wood-producing areas in Russia, and this direction remained steady for decades to come. Official and unofficial agents recruited rural residents from Ukraine to work at the forestry enterprises in the Arkhangelsk

region, Karelia, Siberia and the Far East. The *orgnabor* system, however, very soon fell out of favor among the potential volunteers. The receiving enterprises more often than not failed to provide satisfactory conditions of life and work, and the disappointed workers blamed the recruitment agency, as it was the one making promises in the first place. They wrote letters of complaints to the central, republican and regional Soviet and party organization and also to their relatives, in which they described the miserable circumstances they had to face. Many enterprises did not have facilities to accommodate *orgnabor* workers at all, so they were placed in “damp dugouts”.<sup>52</sup> Some waited to be picked up at the train stations for many days, others were freezing for two months in harsh Siberian temperatures before they received workwear, yet others had to share beds and live without electricity.<sup>53</sup> The workers were often badly paid.<sup>54</sup> It is not surprising then that in spite of the authorities’ wishes, on average only 5–10 percent of the workers who signed contracts with the Siberian forestry enterprises through *orgnabor* remained in permanent positions.

These and many other distressing stories, told in letters and in person, had a critical effect. Already in 1953, *orgnabor* officials reported that the recruits who broke their contracts with the northern forestry enterprises and returned home “t[old] about the workers’ condition at the logging enterprises, and it is the reason why kolkhoz members and non-working city population refuse to sign contracts and work in forestry. In the Ukrainian oblasts, the refusal to work in forestry acquired mass scales”.<sup>55</sup> Because of bad publicity and frequent changes in drafting destinations and increases in quotas for forestry in this period, *orgnabor* was failing even in the “overpopulated” regions. In Transcarpathia, for instance, by October 1953 the *orgnabor* yearly plan was fulfilled by only 41.7 percent, while the region possessed significant labor reserves.<sup>56</sup> It was not much that *orgnabor* officials could do, so the plans remained unfulfilled, and the heads of some recently created regional departments of *orgnabor* were released from their duties.<sup>57</sup>

Given its reputation, *orgnabor* was treated with mistrust by workers and enterprise managers alike. And yet, Ukraine continued receiving labor recruitment plans for Russian forestry, while constantly struggling to keep up. In the 1960s, the Ukrainian quotas decreased compared to the previous decade—they could amount to 15–20,000 workers depending on the year, including both permanent (one year or longer) and seasonal (up to six months) contracts.<sup>58</sup> Within these plans, Transcarpathia usually had a share of around 3,500 workers.



At the same time, as statistical surveys undertaken in the mid-1960s revealed, a large number of people from Transcarpathia were migrating for earning, but sidestepping *orgnabor*. In 1966, there were over 66,000 seasonal workers in Transcarpathia. This number comprised both “organized” and “unorganized”, self-managed migration, and the number of independent workers was 12 times higher.<sup>59</sup> According to A. I. Bereziuk, around 12,000 of these seasonal workers were labor migrants in forestry.<sup>60</sup> These numbers suggest that workers in Transcarpathia were very responsive to the opportunities of seasonal work, but reluctant to make contracts through the system of organized recruitment. They preferred to make contracts directly with the managers of forestry enterprises, as in this way they could negotiate over pay rates and work conditions.<sup>61</sup>

In effect, by the mid-1960s, mobile woodcutting brigades from Transcarpathia migrated to nearly 30 forest areas outside their native region.<sup>62</sup> It is clear from the interviews and the official data that by this time *orgnabor*’s role in locating places for seasonal work was insignificant. People started relying on personal connections and word of mouth when searching for better options of employment and pay. The informal component of job search was so strong that it influenced the “specialization” profile of entire villages. For instance, the residents of Krychevo village in Tiachiv raion of Transcarpathia, one of my two fieldwork locations, predominantly specialized in timber rafting. By contrast, seasonal workers from Keretski village in Svaliava raion were overwhelmingly involved in felling.

The survey from 1966 also showed that in comparison with other Ukrainian oblasts, the population of Transcarpathia was the most active in seasonal labor migration of various types—there were agricultural workers, construction workers and lumbermen in the region. Given the discrepancy in the number of seasonal workers, it was hardly *orgnabor* that set in motion seasonal migration from Transcarpathian villages. Should *orgnabor* have had a decisive influence, the trend of migration, managed or independent, to the northern forestry enterprises would have appeared in other Ukrainian regions too, since at times forestry workers were drafted simultaneously in 20 Ukrainian oblasts.<sup>63</sup> Rather, it was a strong tradition of labor migration in pre-Soviet Transcarpathia, paired with the lack of employment options in the region in the 1940s-1960s that informed the enthusiastic acceptance of opportunities of seasonal work in the Soviet context. The local knowledge of seasonal crafts and the historically shaped acceptance of the concession that such life required was Transcarpathian

rural populations' "cultural reserve", which they introduced into a new economic and political environment of the Soviet state.

And yet, organized recruitment played its part in laying routes for migrants in this early stage of "translation" of the practices of seasonal work into Soviet context. The workers who returned home from the Russian forestry enterprises, regardless of whether they had good or (more likely) bad experiences, became familiar with the geographical locations of forestry enterprises; they acquired insiders' knowledge of the functioning of the industry, awareness of the labor shortages in forestry, immediate knowledge of labor practices; they had new skills, and possibly even established contacts with potential employers. Thus, *orgnabor* recruits from Transcarpathia could have explored the initial directions and set the stage for independent seasonal migrants in forestry, which was slowly becoming a profitable, if physically taxing and risky, enterprise.

### **Seasonal Workers in Agriculture, 1950s–1970s**

In contrast to the well-regulated, if marginally effective, recruitment of seasonal workers for forestry, hiring of seasonal help for agricultural works in the late Soviet Union did not have such an institutional backing as *orgnabor*. As agriculture recovered, though, it was clear that seasonal workers were needed at many collective and state farms in the south and east of Ukraine, since resettlement did not entirely solve the issue of labor shortages. In fact, in the mid-1950s, the state started assisting the collective farms that were short of manpower in employing additional workers for the harvesting period.<sup>64</sup> Based on the requests of regional Soviet and party organs, the Council of Ministers of Ukraine issued decrees that allowed farms in certain regions of Ukraine to hire seasonal help. These decrees also specified the number of workers allowed for hiring and the oblasts in which seasonal help ought to have been enlisted. For example, in the summer of 1956, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR issued a decree that allowed the farms in Kherson, Kharkiv and Voroshylovhrad to hire a total of 10,000 seasonal workers in Transcarpathia alone to do harvesting.<sup>65</sup> These farms, however, were entirely responsible for finding the workers and signing contracts with them. Supplying agriculture with seasonal labor was not considered by the Soviet authorities as crucial a task as delivering workers to industry, so the

apparatus of *orgnabor*, which was notoriously short on staff, was spared from dealing with seasonal workers for agriculture.

The decree also specified pay rates for seasonal workers. The workers were paid by workdays, like regular collective farmers, but their payment was guaranteed regardless of the pay rates of the collective farms at which they worked—they were to receive 2 kilograms of wheat and 4 rubles per workday. In case the workday rates in kind were higher at a collective farm than the ones envisioned by the decree, the workers should have been paid according to the rates of the farm.<sup>66</sup>

The archival sources suggest that Transcarpathian peasants showed significantly stronger interest in opportunities in seasonal work than in permanent resettlement. In 1953, following a similar governmental decree, 3,500 collective farmers from Transcarpathia were enlisted to help with the harvesting in other regions of Ukraine.<sup>67</sup> The following year, seasonal migration was mentioned at a republican meeting of the Department of Resettlement and Evacuation of the Ukrainian SSR as a disturbing fact that was interfering with the resettlement campaign: "...they [Transcarpathian collective farm members, or *kolkhozniks*] leave for three months, earn a lot of wheat and provide a year supply of bread for the family. It is very difficult to convince these people [to resettle]".<sup>68</sup>

In the mid-1960s, more than half of all seasonal workers from Transcarpathia worked in agriculture. The agricultural seasonal workers' wages were certainly welcome, but the in-kind bonuses were arguably the most lucrative part of this particular deal. In three to five months of seasonal labor, migrants earned more in-kind produce than their colleagues earned in a year while working for local collective farms. While earning similar amounts of grains locally was impossible due to the limited capacity of Transcarpathian farms, and considering that there was no official fodder market open for individual consumers, the in-kind bonuses were indispensable for rural dwellers who kept livestock. Their wheat bonuses provided the necessary fodder for their cattle, and increased the possibilities for sustaining and enlarging local individual farming, despite the constraints of the Soviet legal framework.

The gap between what one could earn as a *kolkhoz* member and as a seasonal worker meant that *kolkhozniks* had little incentive, if at all, to work for their collective farms. The flaws of Soviet agricultural management were prominent in Transcarpathia: given the seasonal fluctuations in labor demand, 55 percent of working-age *kolkhozniks* were left uninvolved in collective farms' activities during the winter months,<sup>69</sup>

while the delays in wage payments further discouraged them from active participation in the collective households.<sup>70</sup> However, being a member of a collective farm brought a number of benefits, which rural dwellers were not willing to lose, such as the right to keep a private plot, and tax breaks. Therefore, they did not abandon *kolkhozes*, but instead avoided investing too much effort in them. Transcarpathia was a republican leader in the number of collective farmers who did not deliver the minimum number of workdays. In 1965, 22,600 local *kolkhozniks* did not participate in agricultural production at all.<sup>71</sup> This tendency triggered the vicious circle of shortages, which meant that some collective farms were forced to employ seasonal help to compensate for the local workers who simply refused to turn up.<sup>72</sup> Such manifestations of “non-rational labor organization” became a systematic problem of the Soviet labor process in agriculture, which was only exacerbated with time.

The majority of Transcarpathia’s migrants were departing from the rural areas.<sup>73</sup> It is here, thus, where reliance on seasonal earning has modified the lives of the communities the most. The strong preference for seasonal occupation<sup>74</sup> was frequently combined with higher-than-average dedication to private plot tending on behalf of the non-migrating family members, and lower than average participation in *kolkhoz* economy. In Transcarpathia, the number of people found to be involved in private household and individual farming was the highest in the Ukrainian SSR. While in Ukraine the number of non-working people was at 13.9 percent in 1968, in Transcarpathia it was 34 percent, and in some districts, it reached 44 percent.<sup>75</sup> Only 26.8 percent of the Transcarpathian working-age rural population was involved in agriculture in 1965.<sup>76</sup> Yet, it was not only that the local agricultural sector was unable to absorb all the countryside work force—the argument that was usually presented as a proof of “overpopulation” in Transcarpathia. More importantly, the low wages made employment at collective farms unattractive and uneconomical in comparison with the earnings in money and in kind that seasonal migration made possible. Similar to pre-Soviet times, earnings from seasonal work complemented individual farming.

The rates of Transcarpathian peasants’ involvement in seasonal migration suggested that it was an important component of the region’s economy and an enterprise pursued by men and women alike. According to the survey taken in 1974, 23 percent of 42,700 Transcarpathian seasonal workers were women.<sup>77</sup> In agriculture women workers were most welcome. In the beginning of 1960s, it became illegal to hire women for

works in forestry, and even earlier forestry enterprises were reluctant to accept female *orgnabor* recruits or workers with families.<sup>78</sup> Women from Transcarpathia were sometimes employed as cooks by the migrant forestry brigades from their villages. In agriculture, on the contrary, women's participation was prominent, and it was often women who acted in the capacity of work team leaders who made contracts with farm managers.

The crisis of the Soviet agriculture further sharpened in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, when rural out-migration, combined with decrease in birth rates, deprived Ukrainian farms of kolkhoz workers. Labor shortages became ever more pressing. By the end of the 1970s, over 90 percent of the Ukrainian rural districts experienced yearly labor shortages of over 1.5 million workers.<sup>79</sup> As the decades of failed attempts to instigate change from above have shown, there was no structural solution to seasonal labor. In the late 1980s, the harvest labor demand across the Soviet Union grew by five million workers, as compared to the average yearly demand.<sup>80</sup> Hiring seasonal help was one of the options to alleviate the situation. The farm managers notoriously broke the rules and regulations by admitting workers without proper permits and by agreeing to much higher rates than those recommended by the Soviet laws. With cheap transport and the farm managers turning a blind eye to the administrative requirements for workers to have a passport or a local registration, the movement and employment was easy for those who were willing to spend several months working intensively away from home. Seasonal employment, which usually included some forms of informal bargaining, became a profitable endeavor, whether the workers received their payments in money or in kind.

The post-Khrushchev decades of late Soviet socialism were marked by a re-evaluation of the state's approach to population management. Economic challenges of rural out-migration, uneven regional development, and the lack of desired outcomes from the state migration policies resulted in the realization that the instruments of governing should be changed. In order to govern more effectively, the authorities wanted to know more about the country's population – something that had not been a priority during Stalin's or even Khrushchev's rule. Migration became one of the points of state interest and a strand of intensive academic research. In the new discourse, forged by the combined efforts of scientists and the Party, seasonal migration was an undesirable, ideologically and economically suspicious phenomenon, which had to be limited and put under administrative control. It was proclaimed destructive for the economies of

the regions of departure, since it allegedly diverted people from permanent jobs and disrupted the state's production plans. However, state measures failed to curb or put seasonal migration entirely under control, since it became entrenched in both local and all-union economies. Seasonal migration became an indispensable condition for the Soviet economic system to function. And, as I have shown, Transcarpathian rural dwellers filled this niche *en masse*.

## Conclusions

In this paper I argue for a cultural history of seasonal labor migration in the Soviet context. I suggest that seasonal migration could be understood as a cultural reserve, shaped historically, that was mobilized by local rural dwellers as a response to the external economic demands and internal economic needs. Seasonal migration played a role as an adaptation practice when Transcarpathian peasantry faced yet another historical challenge—political and economic transformations that altered their lives in ways no other reform did before. The Soviet state arrived to Transcarpathia with its own blueprints for principles of social and economic organization, which it started implementing shortly after securing its power over the region. However, Transcarpathia's cultural background informed the ways in which peasants reacted to the rapid changes, and from where they borrowed the tactics that made socialism livable for them.

Seasonal migration's "success" in the region was a combined outcome of economic and cultural circumstances. The know-how of informal self-organization and teamwork combined with the Soviet structural propensity to labor shortages and the lack of satisfactory job options in the region strengthened the inclination of Transcarpathian rural dwellers to favor the option of seasonal employment, as they were weighing comparatively high earnings over the precarious nature of seasonal work and the insecurities of informal employment. As earnings in money and in kind were flowing regularly into the region, seasonal migration continued to be an important part of the economy of the local households and the region in general until the dissolution of the Soviet Union and after.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The region used to have many names in different historical periods and languages, but I use the commonly accepted term Transcarpathia for the Soviet period and the period of Ukrainian independence, and Carpathian Rus' for the periods when the region was a part of Austro-Hungarian Empire and Czechoslovakia.
- <sup>2</sup> Oksana Kychak, *Trudova mihratsiia ukraiintsiv Zakarpattia na pochatku XXI stolittia ta ii kul'turno-pobutovi naslidky* (Uzhhorod, Hrazhda, 2012), 69.
- <sup>3</sup> Kychak, 73–74; V. P. Miklovda, M. I. Pitiulych, "Trudova mihratsiia naselennia Zakarpattia v umovakh pohlyblennia ievrointehratsiinykh ptotsesiv", *Sotsial'no-ekonomichni problem suchasnoho periodu Ukrainy*, no. 3 (2013): 325.
- <sup>4</sup> On *otkhodnichestvo* in Imperial Russia see: Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861–1905* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> Iu. M. Pliusnin, A. A. Pozanenko, N. N. Zhydekovich, "Otkhodnichestvo kak novyi factor obshchestvennoi zhizni", *Mir Rossii*, no. 1 (2015): 42.
- <sup>6</sup> See R. A. Lewis and R. H. Rowlands, *Population Redistribution in the USSR: Its Impact on Society, 1877–1977* (New York: Praeger, 1979); Peter Grandstaff, *Interregional Migration in the USSR: Economic Aspects, 1959–1970* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1980); Basile Kerblay, *Modern Soviet Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 223; Cynthia Buckley, "The Myth of Managed Migration", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 1995, 896-916.
- <sup>7</sup> Buckley, "The Myth of Managed Migration", 905.
- <sup>8</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Great Departure. Rural-Urban Migration in the Soviet Union, 1929-1933," in William G. Rosenberg & Lewis H. Siegelbaum, eds, *Social Dimentions of Soviet Industrialization* (Bloomington, 1993), 15-40.
- <sup>9</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).
- <sup>10</sup> Florian Mühlfried, "Did Communism Matter? Settlement Policies from Above and Below in Highland Georgia", in Tsitsishvili, Nino (ed.), *Cultural Paradigms and Political Change in Caucasus*, Sarbrücken, Lambert, 2010, 190.
- <sup>11</sup> Mühlfried, "Did Communism Matter?", 190.
- <sup>12</sup> Paul Robert Magocsi, *With Their Backs to the Mountains: A History of Carpathian Rus' and Carpatho-Rusyns* (Central European University Press, 2015), 144.
- <sup>13</sup> Magocsi, *With Their Backs to the Mountains*, 148.
- <sup>14</sup> *Narysy istorii Zakarpattia*, Vol. 1, I. Grynchak, ed. (Uzhhorod, 1993), 322.
- <sup>15</sup> In order to keep this paper focused on short-distance migration, I intentionally omit the large-scale pre-World War I wave of transatlantic migration to

the Northern America from Aurstia-Hungary and Western Europe, which Carpatho-Rusyn peasants from Transcarpathia also joined.

16 *Narysy istorii Zakarpattia*, 330.

17 M. P. Tyvodar, *Etnografiia Zakarpattia: istoryko-etnografichni narysy* (Uzhhorod: Hrazhda, 2011), 149.

18 *Narysy istorii Zakarpattia*, 300.

19 Susan Zimmermann, "The agrarian working class put somewhat centre stage: an often-neglected group of workers in the historiography of labor in state-socialist Hungary," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 25:1 (2018), 84.

20 *Narysy istorii Zakarpattia*, 330.

21 V. I. Il'ko, *Zakarpats'ke selo na pochatku XX stolittia (1900-1919)* (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo un-tu, 1973), 80.

22 Il'ko, *Zakarpats'ke selo*, 78.

23 Il'ko, 74.

24 Il'ko, 75.

25 Hold – Hungarian unit of area measurement. 1 hold = 0.57 ha = 1.0665 acre.

26 Il'ko, *Zakarpats'ke selo*, 76.

27 Zimmermann, "The agrarian working class put somewhat centre stage," 84.

28 Zimmermann, 85.

29 Il'ko, *Zakarpats'ke selo*, 81.

30 I use the Ukrainian version of the cities' names.

31 *Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats'koi oblasti. Putivnyk. Tom 1. Fondy doradians'koho period* (Uzhhorod, 2018), 321. The collections of documents pertaining to the organization of seasonal labor under Czechoslovak rule, which are housed at the State archive of Zakarpattia oblast', need further examination. This period, not being central to this research and scarcely represented in the available to me secondary literature on seasonal labor, did not, regretfully, receive the attention it deserves.

32 *Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats'koi oblasti. Putivnyk*, 462.

33 *Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats'koi oblasti. Putivnyk*, 442.

34 Yu. Zhatkovych, "Zamitky etnografichni z Ugors'koi Rusy", *Etnografichni zbirnyk* 2 (1896). Accessed 02.07.2021 at <http://litopys.org.ua/rizne/etno02.htm>.

35 In 1895, 71.6 percent of land plots in Transcarpathia were smaller than 5,7 hectares. The abolition of serfdom triggered a social diversification of the peasants, but the number of middle-size households (up to 57 hectares) only reached 27.6 percent, while most of the land in the region — over 45 percent of the total size — belonged to the large land owners (less than 1 percent of land holders). See: V. P. Kopchak, S. I. Kopchak, *Naselenie*



- Zakarpat'ya za 100 let: Statistiko-demograficheskoie issledovaniie* (L'vov: Vyshcha shkola, 1970), 16.
- 36 Susanne Heim, Ulrike Schaz, *Berechnung und Beschwörung: Überbevölkerung – Kritik einer Debatte* (Berlin 1996), 80.
- 37 State Archive of Zakarpattia oblast (Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats'koi oblasti – DAZO), fond 4, opys 1, sprava 142, arkush 6.
- 38 Central State Archives of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine (Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukrainy – TSDAVOU), f. 4626, op. 1, spr. 125, ark. 15.
- 39 Central and Northern regions of Ukraine were also assigned quotas for agrarian resettlement, but the quotas for western regions were on average higher due to their perceived overpopulation combined with industrial underdevelopment.
- 40 M. A. Alfiorov, "Sotsialistychne zmahannia i zovnishni migratsii nasellennia v Donbas u 1943 – na pochatku 1950-kh rr.: vzaiemozviazok i vzaiemovplyvy", *Visnyk Natsional'noho pedahohichnoho universytetu im. Tarasa Shevchenka*, No. 8 (88) (2015), 5-12; Kateryna Zhbanova, "Orhanizovanyi nabir robitnykiv u vidbudovi Donbasu", *Siverianskyi litopys*, No. 1 (2015), 174-181.
- 41 Scott, 202.
- 42 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 16, ark. 3–5.
- 43 The difficulties in drafting workers were perhaps linked to the famine of 1946–1947, which especially affected Ukraine.
- 44 V. V. Mishchanyn, "Promyslovyyi rozvytok Zakarpattia 1944-1950 rr.: Perekhid na sotsialistychnu ekonomiku", *Rusyn*, No. 4 (30) (2012), 115.
- 45 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 56, ark. 57.
- 46 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 16, ark. 147. Before the departments of *orgnabor* were organized at the regional executive committees of western oblasts and some other regions that did not use to have these structural units, the heads of the executive committees of these regions were expected to assist the delegates with the drafting of workers.
- 47 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 63, ark. 22.
- 48 With these quotas, forestry was at the top of the list of industries for which *orgnabor* was hiring workers in 1953. It was followed at a considerable distance by coalmining industry (33,230 workers) and construction (26,680 workers).
- 49 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 63, ark. 30.
- 50 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 63, ark. 70.
- 51 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 96, ark. 91, 113.
- 52 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 92, ark. 131.
- 53 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 75, ark. 77; spr. 96, ark. 131, 137.
- 54 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 96, ark. 115.

- 55 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 74, ark. 62.
- 56 It was assessed that in 1953, 32,130 collective farm members did not deliver the minimum of workdays, and another 14,375 did not contribute to collective farming at all. [TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 75, ark. 110, 55].
- 57 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 75, ark. 30–31.
- 58 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 349, ark. 31; spr. 357, ark. 17; spr. 766, ark. 101.
- 59 A. I. Bereziuk, *Sezonnaia migratsiia sel'skogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei USSR i puti ieiie uporiadocheniia*, [Dissertation manuscript], (Lvov, 1968), 126.
- 60 Bereziuk, *Sezonnaia migratsiia sel'skogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei USSR*, 184.
- 61 I discussed work contracts between forestry enterprises and Transcarpathian seasonal workers elsewhere. See: Kateryna Burkush. "On the Forest Front: Labor Relations and Seasonal Migration in 1960s–1980s", *Labor History* 59 (2018), 295–315.
- 62 Bereziuk, *Sezonnaia migratsiia sel'skogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei USSR*, 187.
- 63 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 2, spr. 92, ark. 11.
- 64 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 129, ark. 7.
- 65 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 79, ark. 63.
- 66 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 79, ark. 61–62.
- 67 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 1, spr. 208, ark. 175.
- 68 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 243, ark. 13.
- 69 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 213, ark. 20.
- 70 Bereziuk, *Sezonnaia migratsiia sel'skogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei USSR*, 135.
- 71 Bereziuk, 128.
- 72 Bereziuk, 191.
- 73 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 213, ark. 20.
- 74 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 379, ark. 138.
- 75 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 854, ark. 80.
- 76 Bereziuk, *Sezonnaia migratsiia sel'skogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei USSR*, 126.
- 77 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 769, ark. 117.
- 78 DAZO, f. R-1546, op. 1, spr. 141, ark. 31, spr. 113, ark. 82.
- 79 TsDAVOU, f. 4626, op. 3, spr. 1031, ark. 119.
- 80 D. D. Moskvina, *Naseleniie SSSR: voprosy migratsii: ekonomiko-statisticheskii obzor tendentsiy 60-80-kh gg.* (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1991), 47.

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# LINE OF MIRACLE OR CONTAMINATION? SFÂNTA PARASCHEVA AS A CONTESTED PILGRIMAGE AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC 2020

## Abstract

Examining the largest pilgrimage in contemporary Romania, this article expands our knowledge of Christian pilgrimage in post-communist Eastern Europe. Ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2020 produces a thick description and analysis of the pilgrimage to Sfânta (Saint) Parascheva, Romania's most important female saint in the Orthodox tradition, held annually in the country's second city, Iași. The unexpected COVID-19 outbreak of 2020 produced a major shift in the pilgrimage. The article also shows how far-right groups, which, through public protest, sought to win mind-space and political legitimacy, exploited COVID-19 public health regulations imposed on the pilgrims. While the basic, well-regulated elements of the pilgrimage remained the same, these unexpected social actors introduced a new chaotic intensity with their contradictory narratives of protest. At Sfânta Parascheva in 2020, religious, nationalist and secular standpoints could be observed, turning the pilgrimage into a polysemic site of competing discourses.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, Saint Parascheva, COVID-19, Iași, Romania.

## Introduction

There is a wealth of academic research on the pilgrimage traditions of Christian Europe, covering a range of substantive areas and adopting varying disciplinary approaches. Much work has been done of course on the history of pilgrimages, on hagiography and theology and the development of routes to sites of veneration as well as on changes in the pilgrimages themselves. At another level, there is a growing body of socio-anthropological work on pilgrimages and their place in broader belief systems, urban sites and landscape. However, despite the abundance

of research on pilgrimage in the Christian world, there are few studies examining pilgrimage in Eastern Europe – at least in the English-language literature. As a researcher interested in the phenomenon of pilgrimage globally, I was struck by this lacuna, particularly as I was aware both that pilgrimage had undergone a revival in Romania since the 1990s, and that there was a lack of anthropological research on this shift in the wider Balkan region. This was the starting point for my research on the annual autumn pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva in north-east Romania, a project which took an unexpected new direction under the unusual conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It is clear now that the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, the largest in Romania, is like many other major pilgrimages inextricably caught in a nexus of new sanitary measures and shifts in political and social discourses and material realities. It is these changes which I seek to recount and analyze in the present paper. As the pandemic develops (and ultimately fades), practices and discourses will certainly continue to shift.

In terms of religious revival, Romania would seem to be exceptional in Eastern Europe (Stahl, 2013). In the first decade of the post-Communist transition, the country of which 85% of the population are in one way or another part of the Orthodox faith saw a significant revival of its religious traditions. After the fall of the Communist regime, restrictions imposed on religious practice were lifted, new religious movements arose and new monasteries were built and old ones restored. Historic pilgrimages regained the place they had once occupied in Romanian life. In recent years, the Patriarchate of the Romanian Orthodox Church has developed pilgrimage centers, improving logistics and general facilities in a country where the religious-minded had been used to organizing things in their own way. Going on pilgrimages has become an important part of religious practice again. Furthermore, private commercial travel agencies are constantly increasing the number of religious destinations on offer. In Bucharest, the Romanian Patriarchate established its own pilgrimage agency, Basilica Travel, in 2007 (Bogan et al, 2019; Ibanescu et al, 2018; Mădălina-Cristiana Giușcă et al, 2018).

It would seem then that Romania with its pilgrimage revival is a special case in the European Union (Bănică, 2014; Stahl, 2013). While in other East European nations the process of secularization gained increased momentum after the fall of Communism, in Romania, “as a response to the increasing insecurity of a changing society”, the predominantly orthodox population turned towards the “supernatural for help and support” (Stahl,



2013). At another level, the relationship between State and Church became one of strong inter-dependence: the State helps and supports the Church in its projects, and in exchange, the clergy support the State's policies. For the researcher interested in religious beliefs and practices, this leads to reflection as to how Church practices and discourse as a whole may be taken to reflect society with its complex mechanisms and dynamics, with its fears and responses to changes, which have produced feelings of insecurity among the population. Some researchers have developed the concept of "coping religion" (Stringer, 2011), practiced in countries where people consider organised religion, faith and related practices as a means of dealing with the difficulties of everyday life. Pilgrimage therefore makes a good object of study in order to try to observe something of the mechanisms at work and the issues at stake in a time of social change.

### ***Method and data collection***

Based on ethnographic and archival work, this article started with a view to examining pilgrimage to one of Romania's most important female saints, Sfânta Parascheva, the object of one of the biggest pilgrimages in the country and probably in Eastern Europe. For this specific context of devotion, I aimed to develop an understanding of the interface between pilgrims and the various authorities along with places and practices involved, by using interpretative frames including imagined community, narrative, performance and ritual. Based on the premise that pilgrimage is a cultural construct which emerges from a specific social world, this piece also has a strong diachronic dimension. Not only does it capture the nature of the cult of Sfânta Parascheva as it stood in late 2020, but through interviews and analysis of audio-visual, press and social-media coverage, it also examines how the pilgrimage has shifted in focus and scale in recent years. Chance would have it that the last phase of my research coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, an event which added a completely unexpected dimension to the project and, in the end, enriched my work considerably. This factor, plus the rarity of academic work on pilgrimage in Romania, means that I hope to make an interesting contribution to the culturally charged topic of travel motivated by faith – in a time of national and global crisis.

The article is divided into two main parts. First, I provide an overview of the pre- COVID-19 pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, performed every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> October in Iași, a town located close to Romania's border

with Moldova. Secondly, thanks to fieldwork, I explore the pilgrimage as it took place in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting and analyzing points of tension and even open conflict against the backdrop of the multiple discourses and interests present.

Since 2017, I have come to know Iași and Sfânta Parascheva well. I participated in the pilgrimage for four consecutive years (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), trying to establish a 'cultural intimacy'<sup>1</sup> with other pilgrims, all the better to observe and render both their experience and mine. Through this immersive approach, I hoped to be able to capture the multiple aspects of a phenomenon, which had been little studied, at least with an anthropological eye. The challenge was to 'translate' the pilgrimage into research, acknowledging and dealing with the numerous difficulties which any researcher of my type would have. I now have a certain experience of pilgrimage research, having worked on the annual shared pilgrimages to the shrines of Saint George (Aya Yorgi) on Büyükada (Istanbul) and Mar Jirjis at Sarba (Jouineh, Lebanon) for my doctorate and subsequently on the equally mixed pilgrimage to Saint George in Lod/Lydd (Israel/Palestine).

At Iași in 2020, I talked to pilgrims, clergy, protesters, local people and souvenir sellers. Such conversations were possible thanks to my skills in Romanian. I recorded their answers to my questions whenever possible. Essentially, my approach was to put open-ended questions to eventual informants, probing wherever necessary (and if possible) to obtain data which often emerged to be useful for my research. Informal conversational interviews were typical of my 'ongoing' participant observation fieldwork. Over the years, I have also worked hard to capture the feast day of Sfânta Parascheva through photography and filming. In addition, alongside television and print-media reports, social websites have provided valuable data; I have searched for information on websites, before, during and after the feast days to gain a sense of how the phenomenon was covered. The material accumulated enabled me to develop an overview of the discourse circulated via different media. However, during the 2020 pilgrimage, COVID-19 had a profound impact on ethnographic fieldwork as a whole, obliging researchers to be less ambitious regarding their data collection. Long-planned visits to the field and face-to-face interviews suddenly became uncertain. As was the case for many other researchers, with the use of masks and face-shields, hand sanitizer and tissues, fieldwork became possible, if a little stressful. With appropriate physical distancing,

I managed to attend the main events of the pilgrimage and conduct a good number of interviews.

## **1. The Pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva: Background and Key Elements**

The annual pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva is one of the largest in Romania and one of the most important in Eastern Europe. Structured by the Romanian Orthodox Church (and certainly not chaotic before the pandemic), this event involves a broad range of practices. Every 14<sup>th</sup> October, thousands of Orthodox Romanians participate, coming from villages and towns from all parts of the country and even from the Romanian diaspora. Pilgrims travel to Iași using different means of transport, both individual and collective. Apart from the official tour operators, there are numerous independent religious-tourist guides organizing transport by specially hired minibuses. This type of pilgrimage is called *pelerinaj cu autocar* ('coach pilgrimage') in tourist jargon and the Romanian mass media (Banica, 2016). In 2019, approximately one hundred and fifty coaches were estimated to have brought pilgrims to Iași.<sup>2</sup> Some municipalities provide free transport for their residents.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the CFR Călători, the Romanian national railway company ensures the rail transport between the main cities of the country and Iași, adding supplementary wagons during the pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> Hotels and pensions are the most convenient accommodation (*cazare*) in the city for those with means, although the Iași Archdiocese also provides free but limited places to stay in the dormitories of parish churches. I also met quite a few pilgrims who were housed by relatives or friends resident in Iași. Less fortunate pilgrims with no accommodation spend their time on pilgrimage outside, in the vicinity of Sfânta Parascheva, waiting and participating in prayer. In general, they eat food brought from home and drink tea offered by the church, sleeping wrapped in blankets also brought from home (see figure 3). Thousands of other devotees of the saint just come to Iași for the feast day, standing in line for hours before they reach the relics and return home.

The whole pilgrimage lasts for three to four days. The schedule of events is generally published towards the end of September. A few days before the feast day, the relics of Sfânta Parascheva are brought out and displayed in front of the Cathedral under a special baldachin, beautifully decorated

with flowers (see figure 14). For three days and nights, the pilgrims line up to reach the relics and show their devotion before them. On the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> October, the feast ends with an impressive procession or *alay* called *Calea Sfinților* or *Saints' Way*. In this procession, the relics of Sfânta Parascheva are taken out and carried on the shoulders of over a hundred priests and soldiers. Several thousand believers follow the procession with candles in their hands, walking for an hour and a half through the streets of Iași before the relics are returned to their place under the canopy (see figures 4 and 5).

### **1.1. The Saint herself: Sfânta Parascheva of Romania and the cult of her relics (Moaștele)**

The name Paraskevi, from the Greek Παρασκευή, literally '(day of) preparation' (Friday, for the sabbath), is used officially for three women saints recognized by the Orthodox Church, as they were all born on a Friday, the day of Christ's passion and hence one of the holiest days in Christianity. The earliest is the great martyr Saint Paraskevi of Rome (feast day 26<sup>th</sup> July), who was put to the sword during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus (second century C.E.). The second was Paraskevi of Ikonium (28<sup>th</sup> October), anchorite and missionary, who was decapitated under Diocletian (third to fourth centuries C.E.). The third was Paraskevi of Epivates (14<sup>th</sup> October), who was born and died in Epivates (now Selimpaşa on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, west of Istanbul) in the eleventh century. This article examines the contemporary cult of this third Paraskevi, also known as Sfânta Parascheva by Romanians, Sveta Petka by speakers of Slavic languages in the Balkan region, and Shën e Premtja or Veneranda by Albanians (Elsie, 2000). Though she died young, Sfânta Parascheva's popularity is due to her life of travel as well as to the dynamic dissemination of her relics and the varied ways in which she is venerated (see figure 2). According to her hagiographies, Sfânta Parascheva was born into a wealthy, pious family from Epivates. She left her family to follow a path of asceticism, migrating eventually to Jerusalem. Sfânta Parascheva can definitely be considered a 'migrant saint' as both she and her relics travelled or have been moved continuously. She first escaped from Epivates to Constantinople on a pilgrimage. After spending time in Chalcedon and Heracleia Pontica, she went to Jerusalem, subsequently settling in the desert near Jordan to live an ascetic life. Eventually, she returned to her hometown where she died. Subsequently, her uncorrupted

body was discovered. Her relics were taken from Epivates to Tarnovo in modern Bulgaria, sometime between 1204 and 1230. When Tarnovo was invaded by Ottoman forces in July 1393, the relics were again moved, to Vidin, and then to Belgrade. There they stayed until 1521 when the Ottoman army took that city, too. From Belgrade, they were brought to Constantinople, where they remained until 1641 (Stefanova, 2017). In the mid-seventeenth century, the relics were taken to Iași from Constantinople by the Moldovan ruler Vasile Lupu and were placed in the Three Hierarchs' Church before being moved to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași in 1889 to be displayed in full sight for the believers that they might honour her and pray before her (Vasiliu, 2008).

After two centuries of local veneration, on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1950, the Holy Synod, the highest canonical authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church, took some unprecedented decisions. The cult of six saints,<sup>5</sup> including Sfânta Parascheva, was 'generalised' (expanded) to the entire Romanian church. Previously canonized by other Orthodox churches or patriarchates, these six saints had each been the object of great veneration in their specific region, as their relics had been in the country for several centuries (BOR, 1950 cited in Stahl, 2014). These were the first formal canonizations undertaken by Biserica Ortodoxă Română (BOR or Romanian Orthodox Church) in over four centuries and the first ever by the autonomous Romanian Orthodox Church. Given the difficult political circumstances, these actions showed that the church was resolved to continue to carry out its canonical duties under the atheist regime.

Romanian national saints are "saints whose cult arose on the territory of a national, autocephalous Church", either before or after it acquired its autonomy. The saints venerated by Romanians as their own had become Romanians by assimilation, so their ethnic origins are considered irrelevant and are certainly not the object of discussion. According to Orthodox tradition, canonization does not consist in the creation of a cult, but rather in the formal recognition of a cult that is already established. This is why the process is also called "canonization by popular devotion" (*canonizare prin evlavie populară*). This means that ecclesiastical officials only acknowledge figures already venerated by the people, recognizing them as saints and officializing their cult by solemn proclamation. Thus, pre-existing popular devotion is a crucial pre-condition with a view to canonization, and the spread of popular devotion is crucial for the 'generalization' of the cult. Consequently, both acts (canonization and generalization) actually certify the existence of faith. This canonization

also gave Sfânta Parascheva a territorial label. She began to be referred to as Sfânta Parascheva de la Iași (Saint Parascheva from Iași) (Stan, 1968).

The generalization of the cult of Saint Parascheva in 1950 and its proclamation in 1955 were highly significant events for the Church, which was under much pressure from the new Communist régime. According to some rumors, in the years 1950-1954 the Communist Party wanted to see the relics of Sfânta Parascheva buried in order to remove any physical focus of devotion for the believers who came to worship daily. However, the measure was never carried out.<sup>6</sup>

In the archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, there are chronologically classified files entitled “Feast of the Pious Parascheva”. These files deserve attention because they bring a better understanding of the atmosphere of church life during the Communist era, containing as they do data about the ceremonies and the feast days organized by the church. While there is no significant information for the years 1956-1964 regarding the feast of Sfânta Parascheva, the files for the period from 1965 to 1989 give detailed information about preparations, logistics and the duties of those involved in organizing the feast day. Despite certain restrictions, apart from the public processions the feast day celebrations always took place. Regardless of the tight State control, the Orthodox Church was not always a “victim” under the rule of the Romanian Communist Party. According to the testimony of the priests, during the Communist period even major figures in the Communist Party visited Sfânta Parascheva, seeking solace and requesting help with their unsurmountable health problems (Vicovan, 2011). After the December Revolution of 1989, the feast day of Sfânta Parascheva turned from being a celebration of local and regional importance into a national and even international event. Iași became even more of a pilgrimage centre. The procession of the Saint’s relics through the city’s streets, a forbidden ritual under the Communist régime, was revived. Another element, the practice of ‘inviting’ another important saint to the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva, was incorporated into the programme of celebrations. This invitation, referred to as *Sfinți Prieteni* (Saint Friends) consolidates the reputation of Sfânta Parascheva with the import and display of other famous sacred relics brought by major official representatives of foreign orthodox churches. This invented tradition first started in 1992, when a fragment of the wood of the Holy Cross was brought from the Xiropotamu Monastery in Greece. Further saints’ relics were brought to Iași for veneration alongside those of Sfânta Parascheva, including those of Saint Andrew (1996), Saint George (2000),

Saint Nactarios (2006), Saint Thecla (2017), Saint Ecaterina (2018) and Saint Spiridon (2019).

The current Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church Daniel has contributed significantly to the popularization and the development of the pilgrimage's reputation. In 1999, when he was the archbishop of Moldova and Bukovina, Daniel announced that Iași would be one of the five international pilgrimage cities of the year 2000 and one of the spiritual centers of the world included in the Pilgrimage 2000 project, along with Thessaloniki (Greece), Trondheim (Norway), Glastonbury (the UK) and Prague (Czech Republic).<sup>7</sup>

In his article "De ce o iubesc românii pe Sfânta Parascheva?"<sup>8</sup> ("Why do Romanians love Saint Parascheva?"), the Archimandrite Mihail Daniliuc gives us insights into the importance of Sfânta Parascheva in the religious and the historical geography of Romania. He points out the place of her in Romanian patriotism, explaining the nationalization (Romanization) process of their female saint. According to Daniliuc, throughout history, Sfânta Parascheva has protected the Romanians, comforting them in their sufferings and giving them hope of redemption. She inspired the clergy to introduce the Romanian language into the liturgy, through religious books, thereby strengthening national feeling. Along with the other female saints referred to as 'the housewives of God' (*casnice ale lui Dumnezeu*), she took the prayers of the Transylvanians to God to heal their deep and bleeding wounds, giving them the strength to endure countless crucifixions with everlasting hope in the Resurrection. Seeing the harsh occupation of Bessarabia and Bukovina, Sfânta Parascheva was said to have filled the people's souls with the courage to persevere with/in their desire to return to the motherland. Daniliuc also adds that Sfânta Parascheva experienced both the tears of joy of the Romanians who celebrated the Union of the Danubian Principalities on January 24, 1859, as well as the pain of the endless wounds caused by the War of Integration. From within the walls of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, she was to bless the great event of 1918<sup>9</sup> and heal the wounds left by the Second World War. During Romania's near fifty years of atheist totalitarianism, Sfânta Parascheva, "planted in the souls of the Romanians not only faith in redemption, but also in the long perseverance of enduring so many crucifixions. After so many significant historical moments spent with the Romanian people, Saint Parascheva became Romanian" (as noted earlier, she was of Greek origin).

That is why Romanians love her so much, not only Moldovans, but also Muntenians, Transylvanians, Banatians or Oltenians. That is why, every year, for over three centuries, they have come together around the shrine with her holy relics, as in a choir of faith, love and unity. The pilgrimage from Iași is not only for everyone's personal needs, but it also represents the expression of national unity.

In the Orthodox tradition, relics are defined as “the imperishable bodies of God’s saints, the remains of their bodies or their bones, through which God has shown and continues to show His almightiness” (Mircea 1986, 847). Relics (*moaște*) are held to accomplish miracles, and thus to help people in need. They are a proof of God’s continuous work through his saints. Through relics, the saints continue to help those in need long after their death, continuing the work of their lifetimes. In fact, relics even multiply good works, as they are moveable. Some authors write of a process of “sacred contagion”,<sup>10</sup> the belief that spiritual properties within an object, place, or person may be passed to another object, place, or person, usually by direct contact or physical proximity (Durkheim, 2001). Touching establishes physical contact, which is present in many ritual gestures. People want to connect with the sacred and the touch is considered a sign of meeting (Barna, 2007). In Romania, sick people have said that they feel a sudden heat in the afflicted part of the body while being in physical contact with a saint’s relics (Stahl, 2013). People also bring objects to touch the saint’s body. It is believed that such objects become imbued with the aura of the saint and that hence ill people will be cured touching them. In this way, people experience separation from the real world, a sensation that is heightened even more during the actual pilgrimage. It is in this separation between the real and the sacred world, in this ‘liminality’, a dangerous place that the human being, cut off very briefly from the profane, may experience purity, the devotion given through the contact with the sacred (Turner and Turner, 1978; Cailliois, 1959). Touching the saint’s relics has become a usual practice, an essential part of the pilgrimage to “our saint”, a cult which has flourished so impressively since the fall of communism in Romania (see figures 10, 11 and 12).

The bones of Sfânta Parascheva are dressed in specially designed vestments that are changed to honor and beautify the saint five times a year, as follows: 1. An evening before the pilgrimage in October; 2. After the pilgrimage when the clothes are changed primarily because they get dirty; 3. At Christmas the Saint receives a new garment; 4. at the beginning



of Lent (vestments of a darker shade, to emphasize the meaning of Lent), and finally 5. On the eve of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ the garment is replaced again with a white one (which remains in place until after Pentecost). After the saint has been clothed in the new garments, she is placed in a coffin for veneration by the faithful after a long-established ceremony, attended by only a few of the minister priests of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, has been performed. During this special evening ritual, the church is closed to outsiders. It takes place in the evening, after the end of the worship in the Cathedral, generally after 10 p.m. To return to the clothes, made of a special material or embroidered velvet, they are cut in the shape of a cross, 2.50 metres long and one metre wide, the length of the arms being 1.50 metres. On the saint's head a beautiful crown is placed, actually covering the neck and face. This holds the garment in place (Vicovan, 2011 p. 240-248).

### **1.2. The line of waiting (Rând)**

Pilgrims to Sfânta Parascheva generally queue for hours before they reach the relics. Such queues may be several kilometres in length. The line in which people stand while waiting to 'encounter' the saint can be said to be the defining feature of the contemporary pilgrimage. According to Bănică (2014), the queue is a way in which profane time is annihilated and replaced, not with sacred time, but with 'resource' time, required for the construction of pilgrim identity. It is impressive how, regardless of the weather conditions, whether rain, wind or cold, the pilgrims find the strength to bear so many hours of waiting before they are able to touch the relics. What gives people such strength? Is it belief in miracles, is it their desire to honour the saint or just the need to be a part of such a massive and silent group of believers? Waiting in line (*rând*) in order to receive graces from the relics of Sfânta Parascheva can be considered a religious-public performance, a clear example of how religious practices can be manifested in the public sphere and urban environments. Such a kilometres-long line also reflects a very clear desire to render faith (*credință*) visible in public. During the pilgrimage, certain urban spaces in Iași, secular the rest of the year, become multi-layered spaces for religious acts through their temporary but 'legitimated' appropriation. Together with the gendarmes, the Municipality of Iași adapts streets in the city to accommodate the long queues of pilgrims. Hundreds of iron barriers are placed temporarily along the edges of the pavements by the gendarmerie to

define a route for pilgrims heading for the reliquary-canopy in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral (see figures 6 to 9). This “sacred waiting” is by no means static. It is a ritual parade, a strong performance of community. It is a means to display pilgrims’ unity of purpose on a public stage. The routes along which the pilgrims are channeled are full of commercial activity. Dozens of souvenir stalls spring up along the route, selling a wide variety of religious objects and providing the pilgrims with “sanctified shopping”, helping them to pass the time they must spend waiting.

### **1.3. Ritual food**

The offering of food in and around the *rând* (queue) is one of the aspects that I consider most important in the mechanisms of the pilgrimage. Of course, food (*hrana*) is a major component of many religious rituals and some of them, especially in Romania, are related to the cult of the dead. In such contexts, the physical substance of food takes on meanings beyond the merely nutritional, becoming a mode of interaction with the spiritual or transcendent. Food offerings (*pomana*) are dedicated to the souls of those who are no longer with us, the living, and by drawing down God’s mercy, the practice of offering is held to absolve some of the sins the absent deceased may have committed during his or her lifetime. Many Romanians believe that warm steaming food mediates better between the two worlds of the living and the dead. Warm soup, boiled rice, fish, chicken, *cozonac* (a sort of Romanian *brioche* which can be served warm or cold) and *sarmale* a sort of savory cabbage-leaf wrapped roll, usually filled with minced meat) are among the most prominent food offerings. A traditional dish emblematic of Romania, *sarmale* is eaten on special occasions: celebrations, religious and popular holidays, and on receiving guests. (The word *sarmale* derives from the Turkish *sarmak*, ‘to fold’ or ‘to wrap’). Therefore, this practice of distributing food along the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage queue is a sign of consideration and honour towards both saint and participants. People are clearly happy to cook and offer *sarmale* to pilgrims. Both charitable individuals and the Municipality also give *sarmale* as an act of charity. The line of waiting thus stands outside ordinary time, providing a fulfilling experience for pilgrims and other participants, both those who give and those who receive. Sharing the same food obviously creates a certain level of unity and togetherness (see figure 13).

#### ***1.4. Gender: The feminine (in)visibility at pilgrimage***

As is the case at many other pilgrimages worldwide, women are far more present than men. Sfânta Parascheva is no exception to this pattern (see figures 10,11). Academics writing on this gendered aspect of pilgrimage have noted that women are far more likely to be devotees of religious shrines than men though the saint they visit is likely to be a man. (Dubisch, 1995). However, in Europe, Mary and other female saints are three times more often the primary subjects of devotion than male saints (Gemzöe, 2009). Today, women are the main devotees of the cult of Mary and the saints; they are far more likely than men to make pilgrimages to sacred sites such as the shrine of Our Lady of Fátima in Portugal. Women also make more vows to Mary and the saints than men do (Yel, 2005). Feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1977) have argued pilgrimage can reinforce dominant gender patterns by upholding ideals of femininity, providing opportunities for women to improve their power position and to change gender inequalities. Moreover, as child-bearers, mothers and caregivers, women are the first to deal with the suffering caused by illnesses. Healing is therefore a central theme in women's religious practice and has been seen as an integral part of their domestic duties in both male and female-dominated religions. For this reason, women are more likely to go on pilgrimages, especially to thaumaturgical saints to beg for healing for their beloved ones (Sered 1996:103). In contrast with male-dominated religions, women's religious experience tends to relate to motherhood and to physical and social vulnerability (Diktaş, 2018). Not only does the religious experience of women differ from that of men, but women's devotional practices are also different (Bowie, 2000).

Gender stereotypes and demarcations are highly evident in the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva. While the saint herself is a woman and the pilgrims are overwhelmingly women too, it is notable that the site officials, the priests who lead the devotions and the clerical and secular decision makers are all men. Power and authority are under the strict control of men. There are no nuns in the management council, and they do not act as ritual/religious leaders or as senior administrators. One can observe women working at the shrine but generally in the role of 'motherly caregivers': women decorate the baldachin with colorful flowers and women cleaners ensure the toilet facilities are spotless. The volunteers who provide food, tea and water to the pilgrims and the candle sellers are all women. And it is nuns who clean the glass surface of the coffin, as shown in figure 1.

The written accounts of the miracles worked by Sfânta Parascheva are a central element of her cult. Frequent worshipers and pilgrims may put their testimonies in a wooden box in the Metropolitan Cathedral. Over the years, the Diocese of Iași has assembled the most noteworthy ones. Drawing on these accounts, the protosinghel Valerian Radu put together a three-volume work entitled *Binefacerile Sfantei Cuvioase Parascheva: Mărturii ale închinătorilor* (*The Benefits/Good Deeds of the Pious Saint Parascheva: Worshipers' Testimonies*), published in 2017. Rather than use the term *miracol* in the title, Radu preferred the term 'benefits'/good deeds (*binefacerile*) to designate the works wrought by the saint. While reinforcing popular piety, this rich compilation of miracle stories produced by the church authorities also promotes the shrine. The wonders done by Parascheva are diverse, numerous, impressive and never ending. For this reason, in the *Akathist*<sup>11</sup> (or hymn sung standing) to Sfânta Parascheva, she is usually referred to as *multfolositoare* ('most useful, bountiful one'). Each *ichos*<sup>12</sup> ends with the words: *Bucura-te Sfânta Parascheva, multfolositoare* ('Rejoice Saint Parascheva, very/most useful one'). The "benefits" which worshippers have received from her range from improved health to complete recovery from an illness and from finding a good job to a cure for infertility. The miracles documented are reported to have occurred as a result of the pilgrims' touching of the actual relics. The fact that great majority of miracles involved some kind of contact with or proximity to the saint's relics highlights their importance in the development of the saint's cult and their role as the focal point of pilgrimage. My study of the miracle accounts in the third volume of *Binefacerile* revealed that beneficiaries were overwhelmingly female. Of 424 miracle receivers, 337 were women and 87 were men.

### ***1.5. Consumption and vernacular practices***

Pilgrimages and pilgrims also provide a rich area for the study of symbolic, spiritual and material consumption. Unsurprisingly given its scale, the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva brings major economic benefits to the residents of Iași with commercial activity intensifying during the pilgrimage season. Hotels are fully booked and restaurants packed. Shops are crowded. Every year, during pilgrimage time, a special fair for the retail of religious items is set up near the Cathedral, in a small square nearby as well as in the streets behind the cathedral where the pilgrims queue. According to a news report from 2019,<sup>13</sup> during the pilgrimage, the

200,000 or so pilgrims who came to show their devotion to Holy Pious Parascheva spent over 1.5 million euros in the city. In Iași, hotels, pensions, and guesthouses, in total, have 2,700 beds and almost all of them fully occupied during the three days of the pilgrimage. Iași Municipality also generates revenue from the rental of public space in central areas to small vendors for their stalls. In 2019, 155 traders rented 3,200 square metres for six days. The minimum rental fee of 30 lei per square metre produced a total sum of around 100,000 lei for the city. The news report provided a rough estimate of the overall income generated by the pilgrimage, as follows. If 200,000 pilgrims each spent 30 lei on *pomelnice* – charity, candles, icons, food – the income produced was 6,000,000 lei; visitor accommodation, with some 2,250 beds occupied (90% of 2500) at 150 lei / bed-night x 3 nights generated 1,012,500 lei; stall 'rent was significant too, with 156 traders renting 3,200 m<sup>2</sup> at 30 lei / m<sup>2</sup> generating a not inconsiderable 96,000 lei. Taken together, accommodation, the rental of retail space and money given by the pilgrims as *pomelnice* and food exceeded 7 million lei, i.e. over 1,500,000 euros [but not all this went to the city: the money for *pomelnice*, e.g., would have gone to the church].

Pilgrimages are sites where exploration of the relationship between religion, spirituality and consumption can be undertaken. The experiential character of pilgrimage creates the demand for objects and images embodying a memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to the visit to the sacred site (Pinto, 2007: 110). *Ex-votos* (votive offerings) or souvenirs may be considered to come within the category of "sacred consumption". Close to the Metropolitan Cathedral is an alley specializing in the retail of objects related to our pilgrimage (see figure 15). After standing for so many hours in the line, pilgrims are keen to purchase souvenirs of various kinds, which will eventually serve to remind them of their powerful encounter with the saint. They have a 'memorial' function (Freedberg, 1989). Votive offerings at Sfânta Parascheva take two main forms: (a) *ex-votos* consisting of actions or material things that are vowed to the saint for her intercession with the divine, in return for a hoped-for miracle, i.e. *pomelnice* and financial donations; (b) *ex-votos* offered in thanksgiving for prayers already answered. This again includes financial donations to the Church, as well as flowers.

### 1.5.1. Flowers

The Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage is enhanced by the presence of flowers in huge quantities, used to express thanks for miraculous cures or rescues and generally accompanied by a promise or vow. Pilgrims take different kinds of flowers to the shrine to offer them to Sfânta Parascheva and sometimes leave them in the church. However, they may also touch the relics – or at least the case containing them – with flowers and take them home. This unusual use of flowers, a fragile expression of beauty, has a dramatic, rhapsodic quality, reinforcing the pilgrims' public display of devotion. Aromatic basil (*busuioc*) and chrysanthemums are the most widely used flowers, the former providing an olfactory reminder of the pilgrimage (see figure 37). Flowers are also considered as gifts to be placed in the saint's vicinity. Obtaining a more or less permanent place in the sacred space, they extend and reinforce the relationship formed between devotees and saint. Obviously, the flower market is at its most active during the pilgrimage. In fact, the relatively small city of Iași has fifteen active florists. During the feast day, tens of flower vendors can be seen in the streets. In 2020, people unable to participate in the pilgrimage also brought flowers to the saint, some sending them via online florist services. These flowers were received by the pilgrimage volunteers and taken inside the church. On the first day of the pilgrimage, the floor of the cathedral was covered with thousands of flowers, the overall effect being rather like a traditional Moldovan carpet, characterized by strong and colourful floral designs. Thousands more bouquets were left at the main entrance to the cathedral (see figures 36 to 39). Such floral offerings have an ambiguous nature. While charged with a religious, moral, or emotional value on the one hand, at the same time they come to be a kind of leftover of the pilgrimage, making them a form of 'sacred' waste. Before they wilt, most cut flowers are given to pilgrims as a gift after their encounter with the saint. The rest, fully wilted, are put in waste bins designated for the 'clean' garbage along with the remains of candles, candle oil and paper towels.

### 1.5.2. Gypsy-Roma

Gypsy-Roma (*tigani*) are an important component of Romanian society and Sfânta Parascheva receives a considerable number of Roma pilgrims from different parts of the country each year. Female Christian saints have a significant place in the religious worldview of Gypsy-Roma people in Europe. Gypsy-Roma in Greece for example, collectively, pay

votive visits to the church of Virgin Mary on the Feast of Assumption every 15<sup>th</sup> August on the Island of Tinos (Haland, 2012). Moreover, the internationally famous pilgrimage to Saint Sara in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in France receives huge numbers of Roma pilgrims on 24<sup>th</sup> May (Badon, 2008, Petersen, 2014). At Sfânta Parascheva, Gypsy-Roma are quite visible, and notably the women with their distinctive clothing. For the great occasion, Roma women wear colourful, often sparkly clothes with many accessories including big gold earrings and necklaces. From the limited information that I obtained from Roma pilgrims, the pilgrimage has also a social function: they take advantage of it for seeing Roma from elsewhere in Romania, undertaking business transactions and making marriage arrangements for their children (see figure 16, 18).

Roma pilgrims have created rituals of their own within the specific tradition that has developed around Sfânta Parascheva. Although I did not personally observe it in the pilgrimages in which I participated between 2017 and 2020, Romanian anthropologist Mirel /Bănică (2014) describes one particular, vernacular religious practice performed by the Roma referred to as a *face haram*. Bringing carpets to the coffin of Sfânta Parascheva on her feast day, they touch the relics with the carpets, subsequently donating them to the cathedral or churches and monasteries, an offering based on the belief that a bountiful and prosperous year will ensue because of this *haram* gesture. Though I have observed Roma carrying large framed icons with which to touch the relics, I have yet to see a Roma doing a carpet *haram*.

Dubisch (1995) points out how each pilgrimage site often has its own particular tradition, formed both by the history of the site and specific pilgrimage practices that have developed in relation to it. However, an essential feature of pilgrimage sites is the breadth of individual variation within the bounds of each tradition. As Dubisch writes, "... pilgrimage is an individual act, initiated, orchestrated and carried out by the pilgrims themselves," and "... it is this voluntary and 'creative' dimension of pilgrimage that gives it its particular form and power ..." (Dubisch 1995). Similarly, Victor Turner links some pilgrimage practices to both play and art, seeing them as characterized by creativity and enjoyment (Turner 1982, 55-59).

Roma pilgrims leave their mark on the pilgrimage line by turning, creatively, a stretch of possibly ancient or mediaeval wall into a picturesque votive corner. In the last one hundred metres of the queue, due to the topography of Iași, the route becomes steep and somewhat

difficult. On the right side of the slope, just before the turn towards the cathedral, the low stretch of wall in question, overhung by trees and shrubs, has been used by Roma pilgrims as a votive site. By lighting candles and placing them in the crannies and crevices of the masonry, they create a place of devotion. Candle smoke blackens the stones; melted wax has encrusted others, running over to make tiny stalactite formations. This informal site of devotion has a clear importance to Sfânta Parascheva's Roma visitors. By using a liturgical object – the candle – so central to the Christian tradition, they add their own particular place of meaning to the pilgrimage. To an outside observer, the rough stone masonry has the air of some sooty pagan altar. For those who know Jerusalem, it might be said to evoke the Wailing Wall (see figures 17 and 18).

## **2. Saint Parascheva, the “De-Covidizer”<sup>14</sup>**

The coronavirus labelled COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, Hubei, China, in December 2019. On 11<sup>th</sup> March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the disease a pandemic. The abrupt appearance of COVID-19 disease in humans in late December 2019, and its rapid global spread caught health authorities worldwide by surprise; global and national public health systems were not prepared to deal with the pandemic at all. Apart from generic prevention and control issues along with lockdown measures to limit the virus' spread, mass gatherings, including sporting and religious events came under scrutiny as potential sites for intensified contamination. COVID-19 has caused significant disruptions in the world's social, economic, political and religious life, of which pilgrimages are a part, for several reasons. During the first weeks, when the extent of the infection and its dangerousness were still not completely clear, high levels of infection occurred during certain pilgrimages. For example, in Iran, during the first days of March 2020, pilgrims in the Shiite holy city of Qom gathered in the sanctuaries and, showing their reverence for the saints buried there, kissed and licked the doors of the sanctuaries and the walls of the tombs, following an ancient custom.<sup>15</sup> During the days after the pilgrimage, Qom became one of the cities most severely affected by the epidemic, and Iran one of the countries with the highest levels of infection. In Italy, health authorities reported that the first five contagions recorded in Trentino in early March were related to a pilgrimage, since those infected had all travelled by bus to Assisi, together with a friar later



identified as the patient zero of the region.<sup>16</sup> Starting in late February 2020, growing numbers of international and national religious gatherings were cancelled, temporarily suspended or postponed. Many major religious pilgrimages were cancelled or saw the numbers of permitted attendees reduced in an effort to stop the virus' spread. Among the pilgrimages concerned were the Hajj,<sup>17</sup> a pillar of Islam for Muslims the world over; the Hindu pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Amarnath Yatra<sup>18</sup> high in the mountains of Kashmir, and pilgrimages to Lourdes in France.

The virus arrival in Romania was confirmed on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020,<sup>19</sup> when the first case in Gorj County was confirmed. As a response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Romanian authorities took several preventive measures, including a 14-day institutionalized quarantine for people travelling from affected regions in Italy (21<sup>st</sup> February), the ban of public gatherings and school closures (8–13 March), a 30-day state of emergency (from 16<sup>th</sup> March), national confinement (24<sup>th</sup> March) and a 30-day state of emergency extension (14<sup>th</sup> April).<sup>20</sup> In addition to school closures, the suspension of visa issues and a restriction on public gatherings, all religious services were banned.<sup>21</sup>

The state of emergency ended on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020. After consultation with the Romanian Government, the Romanian Patriarchate released guidelines for the re-opening of the country's Orthodox places of worship. The faithful wishing to enter a church had to respect social distancing rules with a minimum distance of two metres between individuals being prescribed; they had to wait for their turn for prayer or confession in a single line. Protective masks were obligatory for all participants in services, except for the priests and choir members. The Romanian Patriarchate also recommended that the elderly, people with major health problems, and those from high-risk groups not attend services. People in these categories were advised to go to church before or after services.

Sfânta Parascheva is the patron saint of the region of Moldova (*Ocrotitoarea Moldovei*). In an unprecedented measure in recent decades, during the worst days of the pandemic, on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 the relics of Sfânta Parascheva were taken on a "pilgrimage" for several hours to the main towns of the region, including Piatra Neamţ, Târgu Neamţ, Paşcani, Botoşani and Hârlău, in the belief that her healing presence and prayers would help people fight the coronavirus. The coffin with the holy relics was placed on a car adorned with flowers. Metropolitan Bishop Teofan, and Archimandrite Marian Timofte accompanied the vehicle. In addition to the aforementioned towns, the route included several monasteries and

parish churches. The trip was made without any stops for the veneration of the holy relics, without any form of gathering and without official services. Along the way, prayers were recited from the car for those infected with the new coronavirus, for the medical staff, for those who maintain public order, as well as for all Christians in need. The holy relics were greeted with church bells and then the relics passed briefly through the courtyards or in front of emergency hospitals and other medical units including those of Piatra Neamț County Emergency Clinical Hospital, the Sfântul Dimitrie City Hospital – Târgu Neamț, the Pașcani Municipal Emergency Hospital and the “Sfântul Spiridon” County Emergency Clinical Hospital in Iași (see figure 13).

On his return to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, Metropolitan Teofan declared that:

the Christian has two weapons in any situation, but especially in difficult situations. The first weapon is the human weapon. In our context, a three-edged sword: social distancing, hygiene and proper medical treatment. But the Christian also has another weapon, the divine weapon: Holy Mass, confession, divine Communion, the veneration of holy relics ... because the church is also a spiritual hospital. And the procession or, rather, the progress with the relics of Our Lady of Parascheva in Moldova today is testimony of this spiritual hospital to which we should turn all the time, but especially in difficult times like this.

The saint's progress through the countryside was remarkable because it was only the third time in history that she had left Iași. In almost 379 years, since the relics were brought to Iași by the Voivode Vasile Lupu (Lord of Moldova between 1634 and 1653), the coffin had left Iași only twice. In 1944, during the Second World War, the coffin with the holy relics was hidden in the south of the country in the Mănăstirea Samurcășești. Three years later, in the summer of 1947, the faithful asked the Metropolitan Church to bring out the relics of Sfânta Parascheva and take them in procession through the sun-scorched villages severely affected by the war.

### ***2.1. Ambiguities, politics, and contestations at Sfânta Parascheva Pilgrimage***

The key scholars in pilgrimage studies, Victor and Edith Turner suggest that the pilgrimage experience creates a sense of *communitas*, an idealized

state produced by the dissolving of social structures and boundaries and the formation of spontaneous and egalitarian interpersonal relations. By experiencing normative *communitas* pilgrims are separated from their usual social structure to become part of a liminal state in which they may experience different transformations. At the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, this experience was frequently evoked in many of the testimonies I heard from pilgrims. Through sharing the same food (*sarmale*) and waiting for hours in the same line (*rând*), a certain level of *communitas* emerges. Alongside their fellow pilgrims, individuals can temporarily transcend the hierarchical social roles that often serve to divide them in their everyday lives, irrespective of their usual social position, political or economic status or class affiliation. Despite social differences, all look the same during the pilgrimage.

Turner's theory has been applied by academics working in a number of countries, including certain Asian nation-states (Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka and parts of India including parts of the north) as well as Morocco and Peru. None of these studies confirms the Turnerian hypothesis. Leveling *communitas* is not always present, and in some cases, pilgrimage is a highly individualistic practice (Morinis 1992). Thus, the Turnerian approach has been criticized by some scholars from two angles: firstly, because pilgrimage is not an isolated process, and secondly, because pilgrims' usual social roles are not always equalized through *communitas*. To return to the first point, pilgrimage is a social, cultural and political phenomenon, dynamic and very much part of the world. Thus, it cannot be analyzed as a solitary process with universal characteristics to be described according to a three-stage formula (pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal). As Morinis (1992: 9) puts it, "Pilgrimage is too varied in content to be analyzed as if there were a single, recurrent, common, manifest factor". To turn to the second line of critique, *communitas* does not always equalize the status or roles of pilgrims. Furthermore, it does not necessarily produce bonds among them. Coleman and Elsner (1995) note that *communitas* is only an ideal, and that social division and conflict is an aspect of many pilgrimages, too.

Eade and Sallnow (2000), the main critics of Turner's paradigm, posit an alternative theory of pilgrimage, considering it as a realm of competing discourses. They propose a new paradigm that presents pilgrimage as a human activity with contested knowledge firmly present within any retelling of its undertaking. This knowledge might come from different groups: pilgrims, clerics, or heretics, and range from traditional

to innovative practices (2000: 53). The place, the sacred center, the shrine, builds up its 'religious capital' through the meaning and ideas projected onto the shrine by many social actors, including officials and clerics, pilgrims, and locals. Their meaning and ideas are shaped by their political and religious, national and regional, ethnic and class background. The shrine can be seen as a "religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and the capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses and able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires" (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15). Finally, they argue that Christian pilgrimage, far from producing unity among different social groups, was actually based on, and constructed through, acts of contestation (ibid: 5). On a different note, Simon Coleman rejects the classic binary between *communitas* and contestation in pilgrimage studies. He writes that "Neither *communitas* nor contestation should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition" (Coleman, 2002: 355).

In the light of my research at Sfânta Parascheva during the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020, I would concur with Coleman's view. His position offers a way to go beyond the classic theoretical tension, although a form of *communitas* does emerge there, notably with respect to the practices of queuing and sharing food. Yet during this pilgrimage, from my observations I became aware of contestation, protracted debates and conflict. Once deemed an 'organized' pilgrimage managed under the strict ecclesiastical authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Sfânta Parascheva in 2020 had turned into a somewhat chaotic pilgrimage, a site at which multiple conflicting discourses from the religious, nationalist and secular realms found expression.

In late September of 2020, it was announced by the Archdiocese of Iași that, given the epidemiological context and the COVID-19 prevention rules, believers would have one week to pray at the Saint's relics (instead of the usual three days, as in previous years).<sup>22</sup> Sfânta Parascheva's relics would be taken out of the Metropolitan Cathedral and placed in the building's courtyard on 8<sup>th</sup> October, remaining there until 15<sup>th</sup> October. *Calea /Sfinților* or Saints' Way, the religious procession during which the reliquary with the relics of St. Parascheva is carried by priests through the streets of Iași, was reformatted for 2020 in order to avoid large crowds gathering along the route. The relics were to be carried by car through the city's most important streets so that people could also watch the

procession from their windows and balconies. Volunteers at the entrance to the line of waiting would provide masks for the pilgrims. Along the pilgrims' route, there would be automatic dispensers with hand sanitizer. After the *închinarea* (encounter with the saint/bowing in front of the saint), each worshiper would receive a packet containing an icon, an akathist of Sfânta Parascheva and a small bottle of *aghiasma* (holy water), prepared according to strict hygiene rules. Neither inside the Metropolitan Cathedral, nor in the courtyard would it be possible to stay overnight, thus ensuring that people did not gather informally. Pilgrims were asked to make sure that they had a place to stay because for this year the Patriarchate would not be able to offer accommodation to those coming from different parts of the country. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (the actual feast day of Sfânta Parascheva), the service of Holy Mass was given from a podium located on the Boulevard Ștefan Cel Mare (Stephen the Great), near the Metropolitan Cathedral. The area would be arranged for those who wanted to participate in the service, with only a small number of people permitted to enter the specially reserved space, thereby maintaining conditions for physical distancing as recommended by the State authorities. It was also specified that for 2020 no other holy relics would be brought from abroad unlike previous years (For 2020, a Sfânt Prieten had been scheduled and in 2019 the relics of Saint Spiridon had 'visited' from Greece). Through this detailed declaration, the Archdiocese of Iași sought to demonstrate that the church would comply with State regulations.

However, unexpectedly, on 5<sup>th</sup> October, Romania's National Committee for Emergency Situations (CNSU) decided to limit the attendance at religious events and celebrations in the light of the growing number of COVID-19 cases. According to this decision, henceforth only local residents would be allowed to attend religious events held in Romania. The decision thus banned any long trips to holy places to attend religious events. The CNSU took this decision just several days before the start of the biggest pilgrimage in Romania, as noted, one which in a normal year brings tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians to Iași to venerate the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. However, it was unclear how the authorities would be able to implement this measure, given that there were no restrictions on free movement in place in Romania at that time. It was declared that the ban was going to run from 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> October. During this period, coaches with pilgrims would not be allowed into the city because, according to State secretary Raed Arafat, there would be major risks of infection not only during participation in the pilgrimage but also during coach rides to Iași and back home. Immediately

after this surprising decision, Marius Dangă, a councilor/member of the Council in Iași Prefecture, stated that the authorities were planning to monitor access to the city during the pilgrimage period, thereby showing his support for the national decision.

Reacting to the decision, the Orthodox Church called on the authorities to present “unambiguous evidence” about how some places or institutions were respecting the rules or not, implying that churches were complying with sanitary rules entirely, and that there was no need for new restrictions. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), through the Patriarch Daniel, expressed deep displeasure about what it referred to as these “excessively restrictive measures”, saying that they did not have a sound legal basis, adding that the ban on the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva was disproportionate and discriminatory. He added that the decision had been taken without prior consultation with the Romanian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Daniel stated that the decisions should have been justified in a transparent, reasoned manner. He urged co-responsibility and cooperation between the Church and the Romanian State and asked the secular authorities to reconsider the decision.<sup>23</sup>

The director of Romania FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief), Cătălin Raiu also expressed criticism. He claimed that the government had restricted pilgrimages in an unpredictable and non-consensual way between March 2020 and November 2020, without proposing appropriate legislation to the parliament. He asserted that these restrictions should be chronologically formulated, clear and concise, accessible to all as well as non-discriminatory in intent and application. Furthermore, Raiu implied that there was “no real need for the restrictions” despite the pandemic, considering the limitations as being both discriminatory and counter to the principle of the State’s neutrality. He said that the government had paid disproportionate attention to religious life by adding additional rules in the case of Sfânta Parascheva. FoRB Romania’s director said that the character of any State intervention in religious matters should be undertaken in a manner similar to its interventions in non-religious social life, remarking that:

... according to the same principle, if the police intervene in liturgical space because they have reasonable suspicions about the rules of physical distance, the wearing of masks, etc., they must operate with like measures in other private meetings of similar size and dynamics. Common sense tells us that the virus does not prefer religious spaces to secular ones (Raiu, 2020).

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, largish crowds unhappy with the new rules imposed by the authorities on the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva began to protest with prayers and hymns in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Iași. Carrying candles, icons as well as A4 sheets of paper on which were written declarations that religious freedom was guaranteed by the country's constitution, these people expressed their dissatisfaction that though they had come to the city on the pilgrimage, they were not even going to be allowed to see the coffin containing the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. Non-residents of Iași were not allowed to enter the courtyard of the Metropolitan Cathedral. Gendarmes were located at the entrances of the cathedral to check people's residence cards (see figures 25 and 26). The representatives of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova and Bukovina announced that they had nothing to do with this "spontaneous demonstration", asking those involved to remain calm and to avoid creating arguments with the police.

The Archdiocese of Iași considered the restrictions on the feast of Sfânta Parascheva as discriminatory, violating a number of legal provisions. The spokesperson for the Archdiocese said that it was one of the saddest periods in the history of Moldova and asked the authorities to reconsider the decision as it was hard to understand and accept.

Look at all the international standards. What is happening now is the biggest abuse since the 1990s on freedom of conscience ... it is not fair to discriminate against people on the basis of religion.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, an influential secular figure, the political commentator Cristian Tudor Popescu, took a more farsighted view and called for "political courage" for the complete ban of the pilgrimage. He regarded the Patriarch Daniel's request that the government "reconsider" the restrictions as a "strategic attempt" to balance between "customers" (believers) and the State, referring to it as a *Godporatie*, a portmanteau word combining *God* and *Corporatie*, (corporation). He noted that the Romanian Orthodox Church has always managed, rather hypocritically, in his opinion, to maintain good relations with the State without losing its "customers".<sup>25</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, amid all these conflicts, the mayor of Iași, Mihai Chirica, announced rather surprisingly that he was infected with coronavirus, having just tested positive.<sup>26</sup> He requested from those who were dissatisfied with the cancellation of the pilgrimage to be rational and to follow the rules. The Iași Emergency Situations Inspectorate sent an extreme alert message via Ro-Alert to the population of Iași.<sup>27</sup> The

Ro-Alert is a system that sends *cell broadcast* messages to GSM users to warn the population in emergencies where the lives and health of citizens are endangered. Situations under which such alerts are sent out include extreme weather events, the threat of floods and terrorist attacks. Since 2017, this alert tool has been used in Romania by the Ministry of the Interior via the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations.

The Archbishop of Moldova and Bucovina Teofan, spoke out, criticizing the measures taken by the authorities. He stressed that for “a true Christian believer” attending a pilgrimage is an act of faith increasing the believer’s resilience to disease:

There have been invasions, wars, plagues of all kinds, totalitarian regimes. The holy relics of Sfânta Parascheva have always been a source of relief, healing and strength, and people were allowed to approach them. Today, they have come to be considered a source of contamination ... this violates many legal provisions and international principles that protect freedom of religious expression.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite the Orthodox Church’s reassurance that sanitary measures during Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage would be fully respected, the secular authorities were worried that the thousands of people traveling to Iași might not respect social distancing and related rules at a time when Romania was seeing a rise in new coronavirus cases. Moreover, Iași was among the new COVID-19 hotspots in Romania, with 178 new cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the 14 days preceding the pilgrimage.<sup>29</sup> It was clear that hundreds of people touching or kissing the case with the holy relics would be a factor in spreading the virus, a scenario that the Church representatives admitted they could not control.

Amid such political tensions, an icon of a weeping Sfânta Parascheva began to circulate on social media over that week, especially in ultra-Orthodox circles. Several thousand users shared this picture of a mournful Parascheva with the tears rolling down her cheeks. It was claimed that the icon was from the Metropolitan Church of Iași. Even though the post went viral for a week and moved thousands of believers, the church refuted the existence of such an icon. Subsequently, it was revealed that the icon was from a monastery in Târgoviște and the image three years old. It had clearly been re-posted to manipulate the controversial pilgrimage week (see figure 22). Such weeping icons are a phenomenon in Orthodox Christianity that goes back to Byzantine times. Religious sites in the Orthodox world are



home to numerous weeping icons, with the “weeping persons” on the icons including the Mother of God, Christ, saints and monks. The particular time at which a given icon wept can also be of great significance. The monastery of Nicula in Cluj is home to the renowned icon of the Virgin Mary the Miracle Worker (*Maica Domnului Făcătoare de Minuni*). This icon is said to have wept between 15<sup>th</sup> February and 12<sup>th</sup> March 1669 during the persecutions against Orthodox Romanians by Catholics. It was remarkable how people were so quick to associate the restrictions on the Sfânta Parascheva with foreign occupation and resistance.

### **2.1.A. Closer look at the protestors**

Prior to arriving in Iași on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020, I had already been following the broadcasts on pilgrimage on Romanian television as well as monitoring the protests and the statements /issued by both secular and clerical authorities on social media. However, I was curious about the background of the protestors, as there was little information about them. Were those demonstrations really spontaneous? The protests were starting every evening around 5pm and such public demonstrations continued on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> October, with around thirty people booing and arguing with the riot police officers, accusing the gendarmes of preventing them from entering the church. I decided to try to find out who or which groups or institutions were behind the protests. After a short observation of one of the protests, it appeared to me that these people knew each other from elsewhere. Their level of familiarity was more than just a spontaneous expression of solidarity. The protestors I observed had an intra-group kind of acquaintance. Most had heavy backpacks which suggested clearly that they had been prepared and fully equipped in advance for this protest. They made intermittent appearances in ‘the protest zone’ (my term), circulating in the vicinity of the Metropolitan Church, discussing issues with serious, even grim faces (see figure 23). They resembled each other. The women were modestly dressed, some in Romanian blouses. Practically no member of this group was wearing hygiene-masks. There were male clerics among them, waving flags and carrying icons. They looked like a group of Right-wing conservative-minded individuals. One young man carrying a file filled with A4 papers was distributing flyers to passersby. I approached him and he gave me a paper which turned out to be the manifesto of a recently founded political party, the AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians). He was collecting signatures so that in the upcoming

December 2020 elections the AUR would be included in the ballot. My ultimate impression was that while at first sight the anti-restriction protests seemed spontaneous, there was nevertheless some sort of well-organised network operating behind the scenes. It could well be that at one level the demonstrators were representatives of an organized, financed campaign seeking to undermine pilgrimage restrictions and, at another, were attempting to gain mind-space for the birth of a political party.

According to the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR),<sup>30</sup> the Orban government was systematically and illegally discriminating against Christians, especially those of the Orthodox faith. Under the pretext of combating the coronavirus, the very latest in a series of abusive government measures was the prohibition of access by the faithful from outside the Municipality of Iași to the courtyard of the Metropolitan Cathedral and hence to the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. The AUR declared that it saw no basis for such a measure; on the contrary, they claimed that it was illegal, discriminatory and also represented an abuse of authority. According to article 29 of the Romanian Constitution, the freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the Romanian State. This freedom also consists in public manifestations of faith and participation in religious services in places of worship. Through the prohibition of public access in the Metropolitan Cathedral, the government was deemed to be misusing its constitutionally defined powers.

In fact, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) is an extremist,<sup>31</sup> right-wing political party, founded in Romania on 1 December 2019 (the Great Union Day of Romania) under the leadership of George Simon. Central to the AUR's credo is Article 1, item 1 of the Romanian Constitution, that "Romania is a national, sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible state". The party also claims that certain contemporary political actors have not respected this article, failing to uphold the sovereignty of Romania. Likewise, in reference to the territorial amputations which Romania was subject to after the Second World War, the AUR demands the annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to Romania's national territory. In the party's view, in the ideal Romanian state there would be no place for national minorities or migrants, a point emphasized with reference to Article 3, item 4 of the current Constitution, which specifies that "No foreign populations may settle or colonize the territory of the Romanian state" (see figure 33).

The doctrine of the AUR is based on four pillars, namely faith, liberty, family and the motherland. The party places strong emphasis on the

Christian faith, and on the moral vision inspired by that faith. *Nihil sine Deo* ("Nothing without God") is the party's motto, underscoring the principles guiding its political action. For the AUR, Christianity has been persecuted in Romania in recent decades. The party is also opposed to the denigration of the clergy and of religious symbols as well as any maligning of the faithful who dare to assume their Christian commitment publicly. Party members believe that Romania is still a strongly Christian nation, and want to maintain this situation. However, arguably the Church is now under growing pressure from left-wing forces of a Neo Marxist ideological bent seeking to implement a secularist agenda. In contrast, the AUR supports the traditional family and hence is opposed to homosexual marriage, euthanasia and medically assisted suicide, publicly funded trans-sexual surgery, and what it considers to be other "innovations" of Freudian-Marxist inspiration. Finally, party members are proud of being Romanian nationalists, considering that patriotic loyalty and the love of one's land are entirely natural feelings. Having experienced a "ruthless dictatorship", they are anti-communist, going so far as to say that they have developed specifically anti-totalitarian antibodies.

The AUR's extremist discourse relies heavily on conspiracy theories. (In many places, conspiracyist positions generated much material thanks to the uncertainty associated with the corona crisis). The AUR's members argued that the COVID death rate was being exaggerated to pave the way for a large-scale vaccination programme. They also objected very forcefully to the use of masks. The protestors from AUR chanted conspiracyist slogans against compulsory mask-wearing (*Jos masca! covid nu există!*, "Masks down! Covid does not exist!"). Some party members even denied the existence of coronavirus, going so far as to say that the wearing of anti-Covid protective masks had an "unknown" negative impact and that it constituted a tyrannous threat to personal liberties. The compulsory wearing of masks was dubbed a form of "medical dictatorship". Similar conspiracies are visible in the AUR's social media circles. One of the protestors whom I wanted to interview agreed to talk to me only on condition that I took off my mask. In fact, by summer 2020 masks had become an extremely heated point of contention in many areas of the world, with Romania being no exception. In September 2020, there were protests with the participation of several dozen people against the obligation to wear masks in provincial cities including Cluj, Timisoara or Oradea.<sup>32</sup> Despite the growing scientific consensus that masks had an important role to play in limiting the spread of the coronavirus, this

simple but extremely important public health measure remained intensely politicized.

A recent report from the Council of the European Union in May, 2020 notes attempts by right-wing extremists to exploit the pandemic to promote extremist ideologies and their political objectives.<sup>33</sup> This report also warned that right-wing extremists were taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to stigmatize minority groups and spread disinformation, noting that there was a risk that the pandemic could provide an easily accessible “weapon” which could be used to incite “their supporters to spread the virus deliberately among their enemies”. In addition, by playing on people’s health fears in such ways, the far right may be seen to be hoping to get its views widely accepted and make those of the political mainstream seem inadequate when it comes to explaining or resolving the crisis (Crawford,2020)

## ***2.2. Vrem la Cuvioasa! Ne furați sfinții! (“We want the Saint! You steal our Saints!!”)***

The initial position of the church in 2020 was that the relics would not be brought out from the church. However, when it was seen how many people had come up to the main entrance of the Cathedral, they decided that the epidemiological risk would be lower in the open air and decided to place the coffin outside. After the procession around the Metropolitan Cathedral, the casket with the relics of Sfânta Parascheva was placed under /a canopy specially set up in the metropolitan courtyard for worship, at 6.30 am on the feast day (14<sup>th</sup> October). The service, which began at 9.30 am, was conducted by a council of priests from a special podium set up on the Boulevard of Stephen the Great (Ștefan cel Mare). In front of the podium, chairs were placed at the required distance of two metres for the 50 guests of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova: representatives of local authorities, as well as figures from the worlds/fields of medicine, culture and education. For another 500 people, seats were placed on the Stephen the Great pedestrian road, also respecting the distancing requirements. There were two large screens on the Boulevard of Stephen the Great - one facing Union Square, the other facing the Palace of Culture. Holy Mass could also be watched from Unirii Square, where 250 seats, video screens and sound systems were located for those unable to enter the perimeter of the cathedral. This Holy Mass was broadcast live by Trinitas TV (see figures 34 and 35).

Early in the morning, the gendarmes began to check the pilgrims' papers again, blocking access to those who could not prove that they lived in Iași. Between 20 and 30 protestors started to gather behind the checkpoints. They were carrying A4-size pieces of paper with slogans, as described earlier. Several of them started to quarrel with the gendarmes, using the same legalistic arguments, showing them the handbook of the Romanian Constitution as evidence that such a residential ban was illegal (see figure 33). A man in his 50s took out his cellphone and, putting it on loud-speaker mode, dialed the number of the call centre of a courthouse and wanted everybody around, and especially the security forces, to listen to him talking. He complained about the ban at the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage. The person at the other end of the line was trying to explain the legitimacy of the interdiction. The man then hung up and started to yell at the gendarmes, saying that their job was to protect the "Romanian nation against its enemies, not vice versa". He was claiming that this decision was taken by a group of people who are not ethnically Romanian and Orthodox and who showed no respect for Romanian cultural and religious values. He was referring of course to Klaus Iohannis (the country's president), Ludovic Orban (the Prime Minister) and Raed Arafat (the head of the Department of Emergencies).

A young man in this late 20s from the AUR initiative who had come from Alexandria (a city in southern Romania) was very eager to "clarify" for me, a non-Romanian researcher, what exactly they were protesting about. His tone of voice was full of frustration and unsuppressed grudges:

Klaus Iohannis, our so-called president is not of Romanian descent. He is ethnically German. He is not Orthodox. He is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. We do not know what he believes in ... Our figurehead president Orban has Hungarian origins. An enemy of the Romanian people. Finally, there is this Raed Arafat. A Syrian Arab. He is not even Muslim. It is rumored that he is practicing Bahaism. That is modern Romania now. Non-Orthodox people decide on behalf of the Orthodox believers ... I am prepared for everything. If necessary, we are going to use force. I mean we will resist the gendarmes and enter the cathedral by force. After all, Sfânta Parascheva is our saint. Not theirs. "

A woman in her 40s from the southeastern city of Constanța (on the Black Sea coast), who had overheard our conversation had some conspiracy laden, xenophobic, anti-Semitic and partly Islamo-phobic comments to add to the young man's "clarifications":

They are all puppets (marionettes): Iohannis and Orban. *Arahat*<sup>34</sup> on the other hand. I hate him most. He is Arab and he is sentenced to death in his country of origin. He ran away from the shit (*rahat*) of his country in the 1980s. We as Romanians provided shelter for him. We gave him education and food. Now he is supposed to be my slave. I am not his slave. But who knows? He might be a MOSSAD spy. After all, Jews created this virus”.

Holy Mass started. Standing behind the gendarmerie’s barricades, the protestors were silent for a while, seemingly respecting the holy liturgy. Approximately an hour later, the crowd became restless again. A pleasant feeling of excitement and joy could be read on people’s faces. It seemed clear that an important figure was joining them as they craned their necks to try to see that person. A woman appeared with a number of people around her. Everyone applauded her as she entered the small crowd of demonstrators. I was curious to know who she might be, and in Romanian I asked the nearest person. She might have noticed my foreign accent and she answered in a hostile tone. “Nu contează cine este ea. Ea a venit aici din București pentru dreptul nostru. Cine ești tu? Ești Român?” (“It is not important who she is. She has come here from Bucharest for our rights. Who are you? Are you Romanian?”). Another woman who noticed my curiosity intervened and said “Ea este o doamnă avocată care vorbește la televizor. Știe multe despre constituție. Avem voie să intrăm la Catedrală” (“She is a lawyer who talks on TV. She knows a lot about the constitution. We have the right to enter the Cathedral”). People greeted and embraced her with love and admiration. She looked like a charismatic savior holding the key to salvation. She turned out to be Diana Șoșoacă, a lawyer from the Bucharest Bar Association. Madam Șoșoacă was a woman in her 40s, tall, strongly built, with light skin and blonde hair, wearing a Romanian folk dress: traditional blouse, skirt and headscarf. Furthermore, she had wrapped herself in a Romanian flag. She wore no make-up and looked like a real *fată din popor* (countryside girl). Her appearance, combined with the context she was in, reminded me of that goddess-like figure who is the focus of Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty leading the People*. Or perhaps a better reference would be Constantin Daniel Rosenthal’s *România Revoluționară* (“Revolutionary Romania”), a portrait of Maria Rosetti, militant for the Romanian national cause. In this painting from the 1850s, Rosetti, dressed in folk-costume and bearing the national flag, personifies the emerging Romanian nation. Using the same visual repertoire (blouse, headscarf and flag), Șoșoacă seemed an affectionate,

nurturing and motherly figure for the protestors, who were clearly in need of such symbolically powerful support. On the other hand, with her stern voice and aggressive tone, she looked set to challenge and even intimidate any representative of the authorities who had taken the decision to restrict the pilgrimage (see figure 20, 21).

Around ten protestors gathered round Şoşoacă, quarrelling with the gendarmes and somehow managing to enter the courtyard of the cathedral. However, the gendarmes did not allow them to join the pilgrims' queue (*coadă*). Having witnessed, at a distance, this apparently "victorious" entry, some of the local pilgrims who had the "right" to be in the line, applauded the protesters, showing their support. By refusing to wear facemasks in the courtyard, the protestors were clearly violating pilgrimage anti-COVID regulations (see figure 24). Some clergymen, together with the gendarmes, intervened and conducted the protestors out of the yard, saying that it was not correct to behave in that way during the Divine Liturgy. Later on the same day, Father Constantin Sturzu, spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Iaşi, stated that it was forbidden even in Christian Law to disturb prayers, and a true believer should by no means disturb Divine Liturgy. He said that while he understood the accumulated grief and pain of the protestors, these feelings could have been expressed differently.

The Archbishop Teofan announced from the podium where the liturgy was celebrated that it would not be possible to give communion to those attending the service. This proved to be the final straw. The protestors began to shout quite violently and booed. They started chanting provocative slogans: "Vrem la Cuvioasa!" ("We want the Pious"), "Ruşine!" ("Shame!") "Respectaţi Consituţia!" ("Respect the Constitution!") "Discriminaţ/re" ("Discrimination!") "Ne Furaţi Sfinţii" ("You steal our saints"), "Nu suntem Musulmani, suntem Creştini Ortodocşi" ("We are not Muslim, we are Orthodox Christians") and so on. I heard a man in a smart black suit exclaiming that he was ready to die for his faith (*credinţă*) just as Constantin Brâncoveanu<sup>35</sup> had died (see figure 30, 31, 32).

The gendarmes tried to calm the protestors down so that the service could continue in peace. However, as soon as the service was over, all the protestors forced the barricades and entered the zone designated for Iaşi locals. Şoşoacă appeared again among the crowd with her followers carrying Romanian flags. People started to gather around, expecting her to make a declaration or at least say something. In the manner of a practiced politician, she addressed the crowd:

...after three days of negotiation with the Archdiocese of Iași, they finally promised that the relics of Sfânta Parascheva would be taken out to be placed under the baldachin. I obtained this thing. I thank the Metropolitan of Iași from my heart because finally they have understood that they have to take the relics outside. Now, everybody, including the gendarmes realize that there is nothing standing in our way. There is not a decision to forbid public movement. There is no such a rule. And there is no ban on believing in God (Dumnezeu) ... Nobody in this world can forbid your prayers. Nobody can impose regulations about where you pray, /in which religion you believe in, on which days you pray... Now... Go, let's line up, ignore provocation. There are many provokers here. Today you saw what happened. Stop yourself. Because we are Orthodox Christians. We fight for our rights. .... The archbishop has promised us that everybody will be able to pray.

An angry mob of forty people, including several priests and led by Șoșoacă, started to march towards the Ștefan Cel Mare Boulevard. I joined them immediately, and we took the first right into the nearest street, which opens onto the rear exit of the cathedral, so that we could enter the line. We reached an alley where the gendarmes had sealed off the entrance with barricades. Șoșoacă told the officer that they had permission to join the line, but the officer was not convinced. This angry crowd might have intimidated him, as he swiftly took up his radio to call his superior to verify. However, in that moment, all of a sudden, Șoșoacă started to push the barriers over and we all entered like a flock that she was herding. A male gendarme pretended to stop us but he did not resist. On the contrary, I saw a strange happiness in his eyes. Running ahead, some protestors resentfully overturned the barriers defining the queue, all the while chanting slogans. As their aim was to reach the relics as quickly as possible, they jumped the line of people already waiting. In the crowd, I saw a woman punching one of the protestors. All by herself, she was standing up to the mob yelling: "Ce tipuri de Creștini sunteți?" ("What kind of Christians are you?") as they were unfairly getting ahead of those who had been waiting. Nevertheless, the protestors managed to cut into the line. Further on, however, the volunteers maintaining order closed the gate opening onto the Cathedral's courtyard. I withdrew from the crowd, all the better to observe from a distance. The mob had become even fiercer and was gathering in front of the gate. After a while, security gave in, opening the doors and letting everyone enter.



Following these vehement protests after the holy mass, between 12 and 6 pm, the restrictions were lifted temporarily. Their non-application constituted a failure to respect of the decisions of the National and County Committees for Emergency Situations. Now everybody could enter the cathedral regardless of his or her place of residence. The Minister for Internal Affairs, Marcel Vela, declared that the lifting of the ban was an “operational decision, in order to save a situation that could have degenerated”. The decision was taken in reaction to very real tensions, which might otherwise have had very serious consequences for those involved in the pilgrimage and possibly led to violence between pilgrims and security forces. Such violence might have affected the image of the country in both the national and international media. “So there was guilt or liability. It was an operational decision that complied with the law”.<sup>36</sup> Secretary of State Dr. Raed Arafat, on the other hand, stated bitterly that he did not know who had taken such a decision and called for all State and religious institutions to join with “them” in the observance of these rules and the provisions issued by CNSU or government.<sup>37</sup>

The spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Iași, Father Sturzu said that it was a rather difficult situation. In order to reduce tensions, they had allowed access to all those who had forced the entry. However, he asserted that those people who had forced their way in had come to Iași not so much for the pilgrimage, but with the intent to provoke and to incite others to disobedience. He condemned the attitude of those who caused this “scandal” during the service and pointed out that this was not the right attitude for a believer, but it was like “a black dot on a white sheet”, overshadowing the feast day. The church also refuted the statements of Șoșoacă that she negotiated with the church’s representatives. In fact, Father Sturzu said to me that “We have absolutely nothing to do with such negotiations. We saw what was going on. The coffin was not removed under anyone’s pressure or negotiation with anyone, but at the decision of the Metropolitan Church”.

Given this infringement of the CNSU anti-COVID rules, a secular civic group named RESET<sup>38</sup> filed a complaint against the organizers of the pilgrimage, targeting the Archdiocese of Iași, the Prefecture, the City Hall and the gendarmerie. The complaints concerned the failure to have the rules maintained and abuse of office during the pilgrimage. RESET wanted to know why the gendarmes had reversed the decision, given that it had been announced that access would be limited to Iași residents. They considered that the authorities were neither transparent nor coherent

in their decisions, and had failed to impose and maintain restrictions in these “delicate” times of pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

The authorities seemed to respond to the situation with a “seesaw approach”, as in the evening, after 6 pm, restrictions were reintroduced, with the gendarmes starting to monitor the pilgrims once more, refusing access to those who could not prove that they lived in Iași. Though not as fierce or crowded as previous day, relatively small group protests occurred on the final day of the pilgrimage (October 15) lasting until midnight, just in front of the cathedral.

As an event in the public sphere, pilgrimages can function as a stage for political campaigns or demonstrations. In earlier ethnographic fieldwork I have come across similar such demonstrations. For example, in 2015, during the feast day of Saint George on Büyükada, an island off Istanbul in the Sea of Marmara, I saw several political party candidates on the eve of parliamentary elections taking advantage of the presence of a large crowd of pilgrims to publicize their campaigns (Diktaş, 2018). Likewise, in November 2019 in Lod (Israel), on the feast day of Saint George, dozens of Christian Arabs protested against the Patriarch Theophilus III, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land, accusing him of selling Church land to Israeli private-sector investors (Diktaş, 2020). In this respect, Romanian pilgrimages do not seem to differ from the pilgrimage centers that I have observed before. Also working on Romania, Mihaela Simona Apostol (2011) notes that politicians often participate in pilgrimages in the hope of reinforcing their credibility and winning public support during election campaigns. During the presidential election campaigns of 1999, Ion Iliescu (President of Romania from 1989 to 1996, and subsequently from 2000 until his retirement in 2004), accompanied by the then-president Emil Constantinescu, attended the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva with several of his supporters, who even went so far as to chant slogans like “*Iliescu-president!*” after Holy Mass. In the same year (1999), again during the feast of Sfânta Parascheva, a group of nuns from Vladimirești Monastery (Galați) was reported to have protested against the then-Patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu, accusing him of collaboration with Securitate because he had served his first years as patriarch under the Romanian Communist regime.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, /Cătălin Dumitrescu tells us how in 2004, Social Democrat (PSD) parliamentary candidates and their wives turned the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva into a public relations success by distributing 60,000 cabbage rolls to the poor, together with 200,000 litres of wine and beer. In 2007, on the eve of the elections, PNL

(Partidul Național Liberal) leaders and the entire PSD staff in Iași, and also the president Traian Băsescu, were among the pilgrims (Cincu, 2007).

In 2020, Sfânta Parascheva provided a memorable platform for Diana Șoșoacă's rising stardom. After the scandalous "upheaval" she helped to create during the pilgrimage, she gained a particular fame among AUR members, becoming something of a political celebrity in social media. Thanks to the combination of COVID pandemic and the pilgrimage, she had achieved a political goal. The way she provided moral support for pilgrims who had allegedly been discriminated against, along with her self-assured stance and the aggressive tone of her statements helped to exacerbate the tensions at the 2020 pilgrimage, raising her visibility among the country's various right-wing groups. She did not explicitly declare her affiliation with the AUR during the protests and pretended to be an "ordinary believer", there only to combat the strictly secular authorities. The clear nexus between her and the party was revealed after the pilgrimage was over. A Facebook page titled "Susțin Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă - Senator de Iași" appeared on 20 October 2020. In a very short time, the page gained 13,000 followers openly endorsing her candidature as the AUR's candidate for senator for Iași. Finally, the AUR achieved an unexpected success in the Romanian parliamentary elections of 6 December 2020. Just a year after the party's creation in December 2019, the party entered the Parliament having won roughly 9 percent of the total votes for both houses. Diana Șoșoacă was elected senator for Iași. Tudor Popescu, a well-known secular political commentator, remarked that "AUR este partidul moaștelor" ("The AUR is the party of the relics") implying that it had benefited greatly from the controversies about restrictions on pilgrimage during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to Sfânta Parascheva, Șoșoacă and other leading AURist figures had made appearances with plenty of media coverage at other restricted pilgrimages, including those of Sfântul Dimitrie cel Nou in Bucharest (27 October 2020) and Sfântul Andrei in Constanța (30 November 2020).

However, it must be stressed that the vast majority of potential pilgrims and Iași residents neither questioned or protested against the ban. Hundreds of believers complied with the authorities' decisions. Non-residents of Iași who could not reach the relics brought flowers for the saint, a discreet sign marking their veneration. They gave the flowers, together with the *pomelnice* list, to the volunteer wardens to be taken inside the church. These volunteers stayed at the entrance of the cathedral

for the whole duration of the pilgrimage. Their duty was to receive the “unpermitted” pilgrims’ votive offerings: donations and flowers. Pilgrims put their *pomelnice* list together with the sum donated in an envelope and handed it over to a volunteer warden. While I was observing this exchange, I met an elegantly dressed woman in her late thirties carrying a bunch of beautiful flowers (see figure 38). Though working in Iași, she was living in a village outside the Metropolitan zone and thus was not eligible to enter the cathedral. Very calmly, she remarked to me that:

It does not mean that if I do not go to St. Parascheva this year, I give up faith in God. Pilgrimage, although desirable and an extraordinary form of faith, is not a dogma, not in Orthodoxy. Giving up the pilgrimage does not mean that I love Sfânta Parascheva less or that the Saint no longer loves us, on the contrary. Sometimes, if you no longer have access to the one you love, this love may increase. I understand the restrictions and respect them.

The narratives that I collected were multiple and in different forms. One of my respondents (not a pilgrim) in Iași, who defined himself as a “modest believer”, was against massive religious gatherings, and he did not hide his frustration with the pilgrims and pilgrimage in general.

I completely agree with these restrictions, the main cause of what is happening to us now is ignorance, not the restrictions that everyone complains about. It has been repeated again and again: mask, social distance, disinfection. They do not listen. You get the impression that it is a mass of manipulated people, a herd of cattle! This is not a simple flu. Each of these people is a blind killer. These pilgrims are guilty of killing people. Blind criminals! (*criminali orbi!*) Because they do not want to be open-minded (*minte deschisă*), they do not want to listen to common sense rules. They say that they want liberty but their religious liberty means my death. Even Jesus would not agree with this event in this critical period.

### ***2.3.Touching the relics: contagion or grace?***

Orthodox Christianity involves all five senses. People listen to prayers, hymns and the ringing of bells. Frescos and icons and fine vestments catch the eye. Incense, basil, or the fragrance of relics appeal to the sense of smell. Furthermore, people taste the communion wine, the ceremonial bread, the wheat cake for the dead (*colivă*) or holy water. Touch establishes the intimacy of physical contact through many ritual gestures as well as

the touching and kissing of icons and relics. All this connects worshippers to the sacred through the human sensorium. In other words, “touch is the sign of meeting in religion” (Barna 2007:12). Touch is also associated with miraculous healing in Christianity, a belief originating in the numerous Gospel stories of Jesus healing people by touching.

At Sfânta Parascheva, as in other church rituals of the Orthodox church, pilgrims touch the glass-covered icons and relics with their bare hands, their cheeks and foreheads; they kiss and embrace them. This is the received way to show respect and love to the saint. Pilgrims also bring various items, including shawls, handkerchiefs, necklaces, rings, wallets, cotton pieces, flowers, basil and clothes with which to touch the relics. This “sacred contagion” is believed to imbue the objects with both general, protective powers and the power to cure sickness. Embodied in these objects, the grace of the relics is extended in space and time. These vernacular practices, neither preached nor encouraged by the church, are rather silently tolerated. However, occasionally, the pilgrims are kindly warned by senior priests not to exaggerate and step outside the “right path” and enter a “magic, superstition and fetish zone”.<sup>41</sup>

Though COVID-19 spreads primarily through close contact with an infected person, one may get the virus by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching his or her/one’s own mouth, nose, or eyes.<sup>42</sup> For these reasons, some sensory rituals of Orthodox Christianity were questioned as public health measures were put into place in European countries, including Romania. There was much discussion as to whether the Eucharist (*Sfânta Împărtășanie*) should continue to be given with a single spoon (*Linguriță*). In addition, tactile practices such as embracing other worshippers at church services in a sign of peace, kissing crosses and icons and relics were also topics of often heated debate.<sup>43</sup>

The core element and the main ritual of the pilgrimage is venerating the relics (*să se închine moaștelor*) by touching (*atingere*) and kissing (*sărutare*). The authorities of the pilgrimage took a series of unprecedented hygiene measures. Masks were obligatory in both the queue and the cathedral. There were automatic dispensers of sanitizing gel every ten metres along the line. Regarding the actual touching of the relics – or rather the glass-topped coffin – the authorities’ position was less apparent. No direct statement was ever made by State authorities that the coffin with the relics might constitute a source of contagion. Attention was focused on any crowding that might occur during the pilgrimage and on the potential infringement of the physical distancing. The clerical authorities, on the

other hand, insisted that there was no way to tell pilgrims not to touch the relics. As “holy, relics cannot harm anyone”.

Sfânta Parascheva is not contagious... there is no wickedness, disease under her power. On the contrary. Sfânta Parascheva's relics are the source of healing and comfort. Not only today, yesterday, but for two millennia.<sup>44</sup>

One of the gendarmes whom I talked to made a witty comment on the religious authorities' statements regarding the risk of contagion:

They are right. The saint is not infectious, but we have not yet become saints, we have not reached this measure of holiness, so we do infect.

On the other had, the “legal” pilgrims, locals of Iași, did not show any signs of rebellion. Volunteers distributed masks to the pilgrims, starting with the end of the line. They had no hesitation in asking those who were failing to respect the rules on social distance to comply (see figures 27 to 29). Writing from a personal point of view, the most exciting part was to observe the moment of encounter with the saint's relics. None of the pilgrims showed any hesitation in touching, kissing or embracing the relics. The kisses were real as their lips and faces touched the surface of the coffin. They showed no sign of fear or abstention. After this veneration (*închinare*), the priest present anointed the pilgrims' wrists and foreheads, marking them with the sign of the cross. After every four or five pilgrims had performed their acts of veneration, a nun cleaned the glass cover of the coffin with a sanitizing substance.

## Conclusion

Pilgrimages are far from being monolithic occasions and they are certainly not all similar in character. They differ in terms of structure, setting and goals. In reaction to the earlier Turnerian characterizations of pilgrimage as a universal paradigm englobing *liminality*, *communitas*, and *transformation*, Eade and Shallnow (1991: 5) present pilgrimage as a capacious arena capable of accommodating many competing religious and secular discourses. As several anthropologists have pointed out, and as I hope to have shown in the present article on Sfânta Parascheva, rather than simply embodying core values, pilgrimages may come to

be an arena for contested meanings and popular protest. The Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, as it took place in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be seen as a realm of conflicting discourses of a multi-vocal, ambiguous character. Although it was deemed a structured and non-chaotic pilgrimage which had been running for years under the competent management of the ecclesiastical authorities, this situation was shaken in 2020: the physical sites of the pilgrimage and the main rituals stayed the same, the pilgrimage itself and the shrine turned into a place saturated with the conflicting polysemic narratives of different actors.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the pilgrimage honouring Sfânta Parascheva can be seen at three levels. Firstly, the decisions taken in an attempt to manage the pandemic had a major impact on the scale of the pilgrimage and made it necessary to address certain broad logistical questions. Secondly, the measures taken to combat the pandemic created tensions in the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the State which, broadly speaking, had been friendly and consensual since the end of the Communist régime. Finally, the pilgrimage, somewhat unexpectedly, became a site used by the far-right, historically an important force in Romanian politics, in its ongoing attempts to win the attention of the general public.

To begin with the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on general material and logistical questions, these were multifaceted. The traditional spectacular *Calea Sfinților* (Saints' Way) procession was cancelled in 2020. The Gypsy-Roma pilgrims were not as visible as they had been in previous years due to the mobility restrictions. No candles were lit on the wall used by the Roma pilgrims to practice their vernacular rituals (see figure 19).<sup>45</sup> The souvenir market was severely hit and donations dropped sharply, too. In 2020, the authorities gave a figure of a mere 25,200 pilgrims managing to pass in front of the saint's relics. (In 2019, the number of pilgrims had been around 200,000). In 2020, the pilgrims gave around 3 million lei as *pomelnice* (donations), a figure almost five times lower than that of 2019. Shared warm food, *sarmale* and wine, were also missing from the 2020 pilgrimage due to the hygiene regulations, hence dissolving the *communitas* of the event in the Turnerian sense of the term. The distribution of packed biscuits and bananas to the pilgrims was a very poor substitute. So while the pilgrimage was still held in 2020, essentially for local residents, it lacked its usual collective fervour and warmth.

Against this backdrop of a great annual event much reduced in tone and in quantitative terms, the pilgrimage, considered to belong to all

Romanian Orthodox believers, also generated conflict in public space and the media. Questions of access to the relics became unstable. Conflicts flared. In its attempt to manage the pandemic, the State “unexpectedly” and “abruptly” claimed authentic ownership and legitimate power over the practice of pilgrimage, taking decisions to exclude people from it in the name of rational public health measures. This seemingly “sole sovereignty” of the State over the pilgrimage led to unprecedented tension between the Romanian Orthodox Church (the BOR) and the State (current government). For the first time in thirty years, the Church was to use the term “discrimination” to designate the way it had been treated.

The very unusual nature of the situation in October 2020 comes into focus when we recall that since 1989, Church-State relations in Romania have been based essentially on a spirit of partnership. Given that 85% of Romania’s population belongs to the Orthodox Church, it is unsurprising that the discourse of Romanian identity essentially equates Romanian-ness with membership of that church. It has a highly privileged place in the life of the nation and can be a considerable source of strength and legitimacy for political actors. Having played an important role since the revolution of 1989, the Church is basically considered as an equal partner of the State (Dale-Harris, 2012; Stan and Turcescu 2007: 121). In the country’s religious marketplace, the Orthodox Church occupies a quasi-monopolistic position which the Romanian State maintains in a number of ways. From central government funds, the Church receives subsidies to cover priests’ salaries and the costs of the construction and renovation of church buildings. In institutional terms, the established Church and State structures are intertwined as well. The State Secretariat for Religious Denominations, for example, is virtually the representative of the Orthodox Church in the state apparatus with most official positions being occupied by Orthodox clergy. The situation in Romania does not, therefore, provide much evidence to support the imminent secularization thesis, one lens through which State-religion relations in Romania have been considered by certain recent writers (Stan and Turcescu 2007, Romocea 2011 and Spina 2016).

To return to the case of the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, the symbiotic relationship between State and Church can be illustrated by the following examples of events in 2020. By lifting the restriction for six hours on the feast day, the liberal government (PNL) led by Prime Minister Ludovic Orban seemed to have compromised on some points of discord, attempting to balance the needs of the conflicting parties. While



the compromise seemed to have produced a discreet agreement for a short time, it did not resolve problems underlying the organizational and emotional conflict associated with the disagreement over access to the Sfânta Parascheva's relics. As a result, further mutual dissatisfaction was expressed by actors from both Church and the State. Later in the month of October, a further pilgrimage was banned, that of Saint Dimitrie in Bucharest (27<sup>th</sup> October 2020), with potential pilgrims from other towns being forbidden to attend. The Romanian Orthodox Church Patriarchate criticized the government for this measure in harsh terms, with the Patriarch Daniel suggesting that "divine punishment" would ensue for those politicians who had banned pilgrimage. In a public statement, he resorted to quoting the words of Saint Paul ("God does not allow himself to be mocked!" "He is patient but he is also just" and "He sometimes uses bitter medicine to bring people back to the right path").<sup>46</sup>

As already mentioned, Sfânta Parascheva is Romania's most prominent national saint. During the COVID-19 pandemic, on the occasion of her pilgrimage in late 2020, the volatile politics of Romanian far-right groups and nationalist parties emerged in public space. As we have described earlier, one particular party, the AUR, exploited a situation in which poorly communicated decisions regarding the management of the pilgrimage had created some degree of discontent. They conducted what was essentially a pre-election communications campaign. However, these protests were misrepresented in both national and local media, being simplistically linked to the theme "grief among the pious pilgrims". The news coverage failed to explain the meaning and context of protest adequately, leading the audience to perceive these people as simply "furious pilgrims" or "discriminated" believers who had been pushed together under the pressure of the COVID-19 restrictions. Even the seemingly secular media underestimated the role of far-right actors on this unexpected politico-religious stage.

According to Cristina Ariza (2020) far-right groups in the USA and Europe are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to further their aims. Alongside other actors, they are actively seeking to discredit the effectiveness of the response by the public-health authorities in order to promote their ideological objectives. This is manifest in different ways: through public disinformation, the spread of conspiratorial thinking, with theories and campaigns targeting different ethnic or minority groups as enemies and lastly, in some instances, through targeted physical attacks. Certain of the COVID-19-related conspiracy theories are based on the belief that the virus

does not exist and is a hoax to impose a totalitarian state. Misinformation campaigns place blame for the pandemic and its consequences on the traditional targets of the far-right, including small ethnic groups and confessional minorities like Muslims, Jews and others. Since the beginning of the pandemic there has been a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents, in different local contexts and in different guises.

The findings of Ariza (2020) are similar to accounts given in the interviews I conducted in the field. Widening the frame, I would suggest that my analysis may show that the conspiracy stories circulated in the messages of far-right groups at the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage echo those circulated by more mainstream far-right movements in Europe. The AUR promoted its memorable?, often crude and generally weak narratives in the hope of expanding its network of supporters during the pilgrimage. Their key claim was that COVID-19 did not exist. The AUR also went so far as to attack other ethnic groups present in Romania by demonizing the country's ethnically German president Klaus Iohannis, the Prime Minister Orban whose father is said to be Hungarian, and the secretary of State of Syria-Palestinian origin, Raed Arafat. Their discourse constructs an argument blaming the liberal government (PNL) for failing to contain the pandemic because it comprised figures of various "non-Romanian" ethnic backgrounds. AUR members portrayed themselves as the "real patriots" telling the "truth" about the pandemic while at the same time promoting xenophobic sentiment by incorporating "enemy" rhetoric into their messaging. Although their discourse has an anti-authoritarian component, including slogans such as "Jos dictatura" ("Down with dictatorship"), "Libertate" and "Constituție", the party is actually rooted in authoritarianism. In fact, weaving as it does multiple strands of conspiratorial thinking, the party is clearly opposed to any form of State control of far-right groups.

To summarize my findings with respect to this third area in which COVID-19 had an impact on Sfânta Parascheva's feast days, like any socially constructed event, a pilgrimage can be a site of contest over its practices and meanings. Moreover, such contests can be blatantly political. In 2020, it was clearly the opportunities offered by the tensions created by COVID-19 pandemic which enabled certain political groups to exploit the pilgrimage for new ends. These groups /which emerged in conflict at Sfânta Parascheva in 2020 were operating at different scales, local and national, and from different political standpoints – religious fundamentalist, ethno-nationalist and secularist. During my research, I gathered material which,

when studied, clearly showed me that the meanings attributed to a saint like Sfânta Parascheva and her pilgrimage are not fixed but rather fluid, open to multiple interpretations and significations. Such meanings are ever open to change. Moreover, the power relations and conflicts which emerged in 2020 are much more complex than theorization focused on a classic sacred/secular dichotomy would suggest. ore work on the changes in process around Sfânta Parascheva at this crucial moment needs to be done. In conclusion, I note, however, that the vast majority of pilgrims to the Metropolitan Cathedral were spectators of the conflicts. As I was there to continue my long-term research project on the saint, I was more attuned to any exceptional developments like the protests which, in the bigger picture, may be taken as quite minor. Whether a saint present for hundreds of years in Iași – and perhaps others like her in the Balkans – will unwittingly continue to provide platforms for contemporary political trends remains to be seen.

## APPENDIX



Figure 1. An Orthodox nun wearing a mask for protection against the COVID-19 infection sprays disinfectant and wipes the glass cover of the casings said to contain holy remains of Saint Parascheva, Iași, Romania. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.



Figure 2. Icon of Sfanta Parascheva.  
Photo by the author, 20.11.2020.



Figure 3. Pilgrims staying overnight in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 4. Saints' Way (Calea Sfinților). Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.





Figure 5. Saints' Way (Calea Sfinților). Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 6. Pilgrims in a dense but orderly queue, waiting to visit the Saint.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 7. Pilgrims in the line. Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 8. Pilgrims queuing to see the Saint.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 9. Pilgrims in the line. Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 10. Women pilgrims touching the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. On the right, a priest supervises, ensuring that the flow of pilgrims is maintained.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.





Figure 11. Pilgrims touching the relics of Sfânta Parascheva.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 12. Pilgrims kissing the relics of Sfânta Parascheva.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 13. Plates of sarmale are distributed to pilgrims by volunteers.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2018.



Figure 14. Baldachin. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 15. A souvenir stall. Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.





Figure 16. Gypsy-Roma Pilgrims at Sfantă Parascheva.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 17. A Gypsy-Roma couple lighting votive candles to place in the niches of an old stone wall on the pilgrims route to the cathedral.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2019.





Figure 18 . A carpet of candles created by Gypsy-Roma pilgrims.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2019.



Figure 19. The section of a historic stone wall which the Gypsy-Roma faithful transform into a 'wall of light' with their candles during the pilgrimage.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 20. Diana Șoșoacă

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=4957620334256080&set=a.157820360902792>



Figure 21. Diana Șoșoacă with her supporters.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 22. Weeping icon of Sfânta Parascheva.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3620013078038428&set=pb.100000893133776.-2207520000..&type=3>

("This information circulates on the internet. It is not true, we do not have such an icon in the Metropolitan Cathedral or in the chapel. Maybe it is from somewhere else.")





Figure 23. An AURist pilgrim from the city of Focșani contemplates the cathedral he is not allowed to enter. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.



Figure 24. AURists under the leadership of Șoșoacă intruding the pilgrims' line.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.

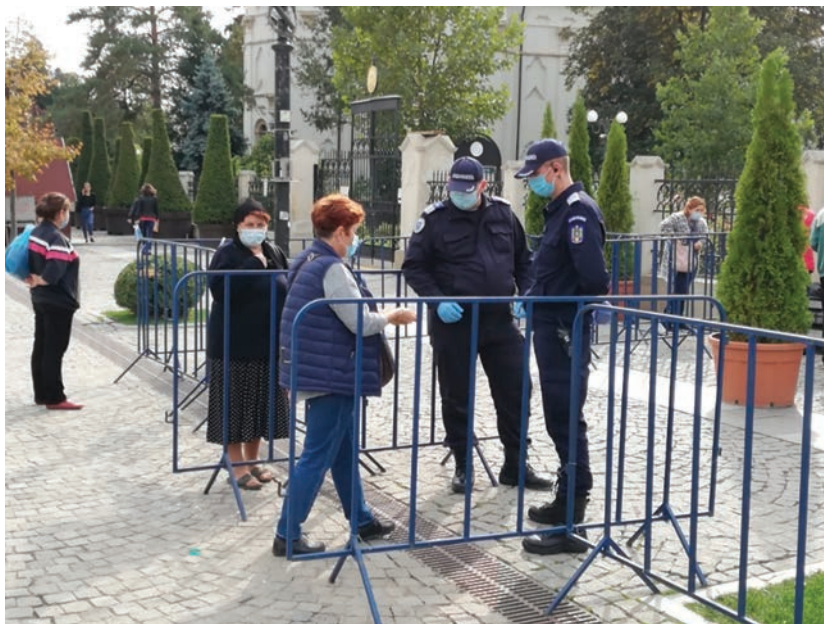


Figure 25. Gendarme checking the residence cards of the pilgrims.  
Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.



Figure 26. The entrance to the Cathedral of Iași. A gendarme checks pilgrims' residence cards. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020. Placard: "We urge you to comply: Wear masks, clean hands frequently, keep a distance of 1.5 metres".



Figure 27. Pilgrims with masks in the line. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.





Figure 28. Pilgrims in the line, under the surveillance of medical assistants from Red Cross. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 29. Pilgrims in the line respecting physical distancing. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 30. Far-Right (AUR) protestors in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020. ("Jos Dictatura" – "Down with the Dictatorship")



Figure 31. "You steal our Saints?! You steal our liberty!!"  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 32. Far-Right protestors in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. The slogan reads “Down with the Dictatorship!”. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 33. A woman protestor rebukes a gendarme, holding a copy of the Romanian Constitution. The book is upside-down. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.





Figure 34. Holy Mass with physical distancing designated for a limited number of people from Iași . Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 35. People from Iași, watching the Holy Mass on the giant screens installed for the 2020 pilgrimage in Uniri Square. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 36. Pots of chrysanthemums inside the cathedral, sent by the faithful unable to participate in the pilgrimage. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.





Figure 37. A woman pilgrim from Iași, taking a bunch of flowering busuioc (basil) to Sfânta Prascheva with which to touch the relics.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 38. A female pilgrim with flowers in her hand.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.





Figure 39. Massed flowers outside the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași during the 2020 pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, sent by the faithful unable to participate.  
Photo by the author, 15.10.2020.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cultural intimacy by means of breaking the codes of a culture (Herzfeld, M, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/peste-140-de-autocare-cele-mai-multe-din-voluntari-au-ajuns-la-iasi-la-pelerinajul-sfintei-parascheva-1199779>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://inroman.ro/2017/10/01/transport-gratuit-pentru-pelerinii-la-Sfanta-parascheva-30568/>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.cfrcalatori.ro/comunicate/cu-trenurile-cfr-calatori-in-pelerinaj-de-Sfanta-parascheva-3/>
- <sup>5</sup> Parascheva of Iași, Ioan the New of Suceava, Filofteia of Curtea de Argeș, Dimitrie the New of Bessarabia, Grigore of Decapolis and Nicodim the Holy of Tismana
- <sup>6</sup> According to a recent popular legend, the Communist authorities hired a couple of peasants to bury the relics. When they began to dig, the sky, which until then had been clear and sunny, started to be filled with big black clouds. A strong wind blew up, with rain and hailstones as big as pigeon's eggs falling, all accompanied by thunder and lightning. Terrified, people ran towards the Metropolitan Cathedral to pray to Sfânta Parascheva to intercede with God, so as not to ruin them. They called the priests and rang the bells. They prayed until late and finally the storm stopped and the Communists renounced their mission
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/iasi/sf-parascheva-l-a-adus-la-iasi-si-pe-viitorul-presedinte-al-romaniei-ni1280>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://doxologia.ro/de-ce-o-iubesc-romanii-pe-sfanta-parascheva>
- <sup>9</sup> On 1 December 1918, the Romanian National Assembly proclaimed the union of Transylvania and other territories with Romania
- <sup>10</sup> "The sacred is the source, the profane is the receiver, this is the only path, although in Christianity is to be found everywhere in the profane, due to the omnipresence of God. This 'contamination' with the sacred is a confirmation of God's power which will be enforced in wonders and miraculous healings which happen after physical contact with the sacred". Durkheim, Emile, 2001. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.229
- <sup>11</sup> An Akathist (Greek: Ἀκάθιστος Ὕμνος, "unseated hymn") is a type of hymn usually recited by Eastern Orthodox or Eastern Catholic Christians, dedicated to a saint, holy event, or one of the persons of the Holy Trinity.
- <sup>12</sup> The Greek word ἰχος (ichos), referring traditionally to one of the eight modes of the monophonic chant in the Orthodox Church.
- <sup>13</sup> <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/pelerinajul-sfintei-parascheva-la-final-cati-bani-aun-cheltuit-pelerinii.html>

- 14 To “de-covidize” is a neologism coined by a celebrity priest, one Father Constantin Necula. “Sfânta Parascheva «de-covidează» neputința de a ne iubi unii pe alții”.
- 15 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200302-pilgrims-in-irans-holy-cities-lick-shrines-to-defeat-coronavirus/>
- 16 <https://www.altoadige.it/cronaca/coronavirus-trentino-in-isolamento-43-pellegrini-e-15-operatori-sanitari-1.2280336>
- 17 <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-hajj-cancellation-spells-frustration-and-empty-pockets/a-54064035>
- 18 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/travel-news/amarnath-yatra-cancelled-in-light-of-covid-19-pandemic/as77104455.cms>
- 19 <https://stirioficiala.ro/informatii>
- 20 Romanian Government. 2020 Măsuri. (Internet) (cited 19 october 2020). See <https://gov.ro/ro/masuri>
- 21 <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/327776/romania-municipality-of-suceava-placed-under-quarantine-march-30-update-4>
- 22 <https://doxologia.ro/video-comunicat-de-presa-sarbatoarea-sfintei-cuvioase-parascheva-iasi-2020>
- 23 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhia-cere-ridicarea-masurii-excesive-de-interzicere-a-pelerinajului-de-la-iasi-1381990>
- 24 <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24343258-mitropolia-moldovei-despre-interzicerea-pelerinajului-iasi-intampla-acum-este-cel-mai-mare-abuz-din-90-incoace-asupra-libertatii-constiinta.htm>
- 25 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ctp-despre-cererea-patriarhului-de-a-se-renunta-la-interdictia-privind-pelerinajul-la-moaste-asa-e-la-godporatie-depinzi-de-clienti-1382101>
- 26 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/mihai-chirica-infestat-cu-coronavirus-cum-se-simte-primarul-municipiului-iasi-1381924>
- 27 Attention! In Iași County, the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is spreading a great speed. RESPECT the sanitary measures so as not to endanger your life, or the lives of those around you. In Iași county, it is compulsory to wear a mask in closed and open public spaces. Wear the MASK correctly, covering your nose and mouth. Keep a DISTANCE and avoid congestion. Maintain HAND HYGIENE and DISINFECT YOURSELF after touching objects, avoid contact with shared surfaces. WARN those close to you to follow the rules strictly!”, It is shown in the message signed by ISU Iași.
- 28 <https://www.agerpres.ro/culte/2020/10/08/mitropolitul-teofan-moldova-traieste-una-dintre-cele-mai-triste-perioade-din-istoria-sa--587652>
- 29 <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/coronavirus-4-octombrie-situatia-pe-judete-numarul-cazurilor-noi-a-crescut-in-bucuresti-inca-un-judet-in-care-situatia-este-la-fel-de-grava-lista-completa-19610379>
- 30 [https://www.partidulaur.ro/program\\_aur](https://www.partidulaur.ro/program_aur)

- 31 Extreme right has its roots from Iron Guard Garda de Fier an interwar period Romanian fascist organization that constituted a major social and political force between 1930 and 1941. In 1927 Corneliu Zelea Codreanu founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael (Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail), which later became known as the Legion or Legionary Movement; it was committed to the “Christian and racial” renovation of Romania and fed on anti-Semitism and mystical nationalism. Currently there are five extreme right parties in Romania: The Greater Romania Party, The New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (PNG-CD); The Party “Everything for the Country” (TPȚ) the New Right (ND) Movement and the Nationalist Party (Cinpoș, 2012)
- 32 <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/protest-anti-masca-in-scoli-la-cluj-napoca-vrem-sa-respiram-nu-sa-ne-mascam.html>
- 33 <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/jun/eu-council-ctc-terrorism-and-corona-note-7838-20.pdf>
- 34 Arahāt. This made-up word used by the woman in the crowd is a pun on the surname of Raed ARAFAT. She mixes it up with the similar-sounding Romanian word “RAHAT” (a vulgar word for excrement) by replacing the ‘r’ with an ‘h’. This rather vicious pun was produced in a poor attempt at humour.
- 35 Constantin Brâncoveanu (1654 –1714) Prince of Wallachia. He was deposed on account of his negotiations with anti-Ottoman forces in the Ottoman-Russian War of 1710, being subsequently beheaded together with his four sons by the Ottomans. He was declared a martyr and then canonized by Romanian Orthodox church under the name of Sfinții Mucenici Brâncoveni în 1992.
- 36 <https://www.agerpres.ro/social/2020/10/15/vela-ridicarea-restrictiilor-la-pelerinajul-de-la-iasi-o-decizie-operativa-pentru-a-salva-o-situatie-care-putea-degenera--591858>
- 37 <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24352533-restrictii-ridicate-pelerinajul-iasi-oamenilor-fost-permis-accesul-moastele-sfintei-parascheva-fara-buletin-reactia-lui-raed-arafat.htm>
- 38 According to their self-description on their official Facebook page: The Reset Platform Association (Reset) is a civic movement that has become an Association (though founded in Iași), open to all Romanian citizens who believe in freedom, integrity, competence, solidarity, responsibility and transparency. Reset aims to create and develop projects that promote and facilitate open and participatory governance, anti-corruption and community building projects. <https://www.facebook.com/ResetIasi>
- 39 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8nD6VrXOoc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8nD6VrXOoc)
- 40 <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/iasi/sf-parascheva-l-a-adus-la-iasi-si-pe-viitorul-presedinte-al-romaniei~ni128o>

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48 [parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
49 [moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
50 To date, there are no reliable figures for the Roma population in Romania as  
51 many Gypsy-Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity in official censuses  
52 for fear of discrimination. However, for the city of Iași the Roma population  
53 is estimated at around 1,376 according to a report published by the Iași  
54 Municipality.  
55 [https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)  
56 [lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)  
57 [regimul-a-cazut-1391554](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)

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# A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMERCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND PRACTICES IN THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES / ROMANIA AND BESSARABIA (1812-1918)

## **Abstract**

Starting from historiographical disputes, this study aims at comparing the economic progress of the Romanian Principalities / Romania and Bessarabia, as part of the Russian Empire, based on an analysis of the evolution of commercial institutions. We ascertain that institutional advantages offered to Bessarabia, after its annexation to the Russian Empire in 1812, surpassed those existing in the Romanian Principalities only in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the Union of the Romanian Principalities and the formation of Modern Romania, and especially after the gaining of independence in 1878, no real institutional advantages in trade favoured Bessarabia, which, in many respects, even remained behind.

**Keywords:** customs, border quarantines, trade courts, chamber of commerce, bourses, brokers, Commercial Code, trade firms.

## **Theoretical Background**

The main goal of this study is to understand whether the annexation of the territory between Prut and Dniester to the Russian Empire offered its population real economic advantages, in a period of transition from the Medieval to the Modern Era. Of course, there were great differences between Russia and the Romanian Principalities from a political perspective in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. The active foreign policy allowed Peter I to declare Russia an empire in 1721, which subsequently affirmed it as a great European power. On the other hand, the Romanian Principalities, being under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte, had great limitations

in both its foreign and domestic policy. Moreover, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Romanian Principalities became the territory of confrontation between the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, as the latter entered a political decline. Thus, not only was the unification of the Romanian territories hindered, but some of them were even lost, such as Bukowina (1775) and Bessarabia (1812).

The Russian Empire was eager to impose its institutional model in both Bessarabia and the Romanian Principalities. The Treaty of Adrianople (1829), which ended the Russian-Ottoman war of 1828-1829, brought about the declaration, at the Russian's insistence, of the freedom of trade on the Danube and the enacting of the *Organic Regulations* in the Romanian Principalities, which clearly showed that, in the long run, its expansionist policy targeted the entire Balkans. Only its defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) and, consequently, the loss of southern Bessarabia, allowed the Romanian Principalities to unite (1859) and to take the path towards an institutional model of their own. The final rupture occurred only after the re-annexation of southern Bessarabia to the Russian Empire, in exchange for the recognition of Romania's independence (1878), following their joint anti-Ottoman war of 1877-1878.

We start from the idea that the development of commercial institutions reflects the real economic progress of a country. In fact, institutionalists talk of *institutions* not only as organizations, but also as relations and norms (such as routes and means of transport, commercial policies, customs tariff, etc.).<sup>1</sup> But, as Avner Greif points out, institutions contribute to change only to the extent that they alter the interests and knowledge underpinning the prevailing rules or contracts, as economic institutions are established and changed through political processes.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the development of commercial institutions also reflects the political progress of a society.

While certain components of an institution, such as formal rules, or organizations, such as bourses or courts, are observable, others, such as norms about honesty in dealing with strangers and beliefs about legal enforcement, are inherently difficult to observe and measure. Unobserved institutional elements can vary systematically across societies and directly influence the effectiveness of an institution.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the evolution of the commercial practices in Bessarabia was not necessarily determined by the Russian trade institutions, but could also result from the interaction with merchants of neighbouring regions with a different institutional evolution, as the province was at the periphery of the Russian Empire and having strong economic ties with Bukowina (under Austrian rule) and the



Romanian Principalities. This, therefore, proves to be a more sophisticated issue that we intend to research on another occasion, limiting this study to institutions as organizations and legal norms.

### **Sanitary-customs Institutionalization**

The Romanian Principalities record no changes with regard to the sanitary-customs institutionalization in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The customs continued to be leased to different entrepreneurs and the tariff were maintained at a very low level for both import and export, based on the Ottoman capitulations with the European powers. The lack of quarantines on the borders with the Ottoman and Austrian empires until 1830 made the plague almost endemic.<sup>4</sup>

In Bessarabia, on the other hand, progress was more significant. In 1817 the customs organization at the border of the Prut and the Danube was definitively established, the concessions liquidated and the customs were taken under direct control by the Ministry of Finance, based on the existing principles in Russia: customs offices were established in Noua Suliță, Sculeni and Reni, and customs posts in Lipcani, Leova, Ismail and Akkerman.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Russian government initiated the establishment of quarantine stations on the Prut and Danube borderline, maintaining those on the Dniester. The location of quarantine stations doubled the configuration of customs offices and posts. Depending on the class in which they were included, certain commodities could be transported over the border only through quarantine stations of certain class, those which permitted their sanitary cleaning.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with 1820, the new liberal customs tariff was introduced in Bessarabia, adopted on 20 November 1819 and based on the same principles as the 1816 customs tariff. But the change in the course of the Russian trade policy led to the adoption in 1822 of a new protectionist customs tariff. Already on 30 October 1823, Alexander I approved the use of the norms and taxes established by the 1822 tariff on imports of goods from abroad into Bessarabia and the cancellation of the customs duty of 3% *ad valorem*, collected until then.<sup>7</sup>

The period after the conclusion of the Adrianople Peace Treaty (1829) brought significant progress in terms of the sanitary-customs institutionalization in both the Romanian Principalities and Bessarabia. As for Bessarabia, the Regulation of 26 September 1830, on the liquidation of

the customs cordon on the Dniester, marked the end of the commercial-customs isolation of the province from the rest of the empire.<sup>8</sup> The former Bessarabia customs district was divided in two: the Sculeni customs district and the Ismail customs district. The customs in Sculeni, Noua Suliță and Ismail were designated as first class, while the customs posts from Lipcani, Leova, Reni and Akkerman as third class.<sup>9</sup> Within first class customs, six months were granted for carrying out customs procedures, and only one month within third class ones, during which time the goods could be kept in customs warehouses.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, on 4 January 1833 a new quarantine regulation was published, which resulted in a number of quarantines being established: a central quarantine in Sculeni, a special quarantine in Leova and a quarantine post in Lipcani, all in Sculeni district, and in Ismail district, a central quarantine in Ismail, a special quarantine in Reni and quarantine posts in Akkerman and Bazarciuk. Internal quarantines were kept on the Dniester in Dubăsari, Movilău and Isăcăuți, as well as a quarantine post in Parcani, which were activated when necessary.<sup>11</sup> With regard to domestic trade, no specialized control body was provided for the sanitary control of the traded goods. Sanitary monitoring of the sale of perishable products was the responsibility of local police.<sup>12</sup>

For the Romanian Principalities, the *Organic Regulations* provided the establishment in Wallachia of three first-class quarantines (in Calafat, Giurgiu and Brăila), four second-class quarantines (Cerneți, Turnul, Zimnicea and Călărași), and four small offices “for exchanges” (Izvoarele, Bechetul, Oltenița and Piua-Pietrii), while in Moldova were to be established a quarantine on the Țiglina estate, a barrier for exports between Țiglina and Galați, and an import barrier below Galați, at the entrance to the city, for commodities not requiring quarantine. These formed the sanitary cordon on the Danube. Only the first-class quarantine stations allowed the sanitary cleaning of all susceptible goods, being provided with spacious warehouses.<sup>13</sup>

Customs were still leased to private entrepreneurs by auction for 3-5 years, but the concession projects became more elaborate, being discussed and approved by the Public Assembly.<sup>14</sup> The concession of customs revenues and the faulty customs organization encouraged smuggling, due to the impossibility of the concessionaires to ensure an effective control at the border.<sup>15</sup> A first step towards building their own customs system was the establishment in 1836-1837 of the Porto Franco regime in Brăila and

Galați.<sup>16</sup> A second success was recorded in 1852, with the raise of the customs duty from 3 to 5% *ad valorem*, for both imports and exports.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the Russian customs tariff applied from 1 January 1851 diminished the customs duties on the main imported goods.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion of the Treaty of Paris of 18 March 1856 brought with it the establishment of a new customs district in Bessarabia – Cubei, as Ismail and the adjacent territories were ceded to Moldova.<sup>19</sup> In 1857 a new Customs Regulation was approved in the Russian Empire, and the customs were divided into three classes, with two categories each. Sculeni, Cubei and Noua Suliță customs were included among the first class customs, category II, which allowed goods to be stored for a maximum of 6 months, compared to 12 months for category I. The other customs in Bessarabia were transferred to third class, category II, namely Cărpineni, Tatarbunar, Lipcani, and the customs post of Akkerman, where clearing procedures could not exceed one month and the goods could not be transported to other customs of the empire.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, a new tariff was adopted, which further mitigated the protectionism course taken in 1822.<sup>21</sup>

Only after the Union of the Romanian Principalities in 1859, as a result of a 9 July 1860 law, the customs revenues were taken into administration by the government.<sup>22</sup> A general directorate of health services was also organized within the Ministry of Interior. In 1862, a central veterinary service was formed<sup>23</sup> within the general directorate of health, and councils of hygiene and public sanitation were established in each county, but also in eight of the country's main cities, the obligations of which included the monitoring of traded goods.<sup>24</sup> The organization of Zemstvas in Bessarabia in 1869 determined a similar development in the sanitary plan, by creating the positions of sanitary doctors, as well as of sanitary offices, sanitary-chemical and bacteriological commissions and laboratories. A Public Sanitation Service was also instituted within Zemstva, to monitor the epidemiological evolution among animals.<sup>25</sup>

The 1870s brought about a series of transformations of the customs system with the junction of the railways of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires with Romania. In Bessarabia, with the junction of the Odessa-Bender-Chișinău railway with the Cernăuți-Iași railway, through the ukase of 13 (25) June 1873, a first class customs was established in Ungheni.<sup>26</sup> It was opened on 1 February 1874.<sup>27</sup> The Sculeni customs was, instead, downgraded to second class and at the Prut border a third class customs was also established in Avrămeni, opened on 15 April 1877.<sup>28</sup>

Also, by the ukase of 3 September 1877, the third class Bolgrad customs, next to the Bender-Galați railway, was upgraded to first class.<sup>29</sup>

In Romania, the General Law of Customs promulgated on 15 June 1874 concerned similar aspects of the relocation and functioning of customs in the new infrastructure framework.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the first autonomous import tariff, developed to protect national producers,<sup>31</sup> was delayed in order to obtain the international recognition of independence. Thus, on 10 (22) June 1875 a Trade Convention was signed with Austria-Hungary,<sup>32</sup> on 15 (27) March – with Russia, on 14 (26) November 1877 – with Germany, on 11 (23) March 1878 – with Italy, and on 18 (30) March 1878 – with Switzerland, which set preferential tariffs on the reciprocal import and export of goods.<sup>33</sup> Thus, even after obtaining the full sovereignty of the country in 1878, it could not be fully used in foreign trade policy to protect the internal market. The general tariff of customs duties, fixed by the law of 16 March 1876, was applied from 1 May 1879 to the import of the products of any other countries with which Romania hadn't signed a trade convention with a most favoured nation clause.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, the loss of the counties of Cahul, Bolgrad and Ismail, re-annexed to the Russian Empire, and the incorporation of Northern Dobrogea generated the need for new changes in the customs law.<sup>35</sup> In Bessarabia, the Russian government also made a series of trade-customs changes in the same context.<sup>36</sup> The imperial ukase of 15 November 1878 liquidated the Porto Franco regime that existed in Ismail.<sup>37</sup> In the 1880s, the customs system of Bessarabia also underwent a series of institutional optimizations. On 13 April 1882, the customs from Sculeni and Nemțeni were downgraded to crossing points.<sup>38</sup> In addition, on 8 February 1883, the number of customs districts in the empire was reduced from 15 to 9, and the province was left with only one of its two customs districts, the one called *Bessarabia*.<sup>39</sup>

In Romania, in terms of trade and customs policy, the measures were similar. On 17 February 1883, a new law was promulgated repealing the Porto Franco regime in the cities of Brăila, Galați and Constanța,<sup>40</sup> with Sulina alone maintaining this status received in 1870 as part of the Ottoman Empire and recognized by Romania in 1880.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, through the 17 March 1882 amendments to the Customs Law, the number of customs offices was reduced from 56 to 39, a number of 25 branches being instead established.<sup>42</sup> At the expiration of the customs agreement with Austria-Hungary, in 1886, the customs regime was radically changed, and a protectionist regime on import was introduced. The protectionist

customs tariff of 1886 replaced the single general tax of 7% on the import of industrial products with various taxes of 8-20%.<sup>43</sup> As competition on the international market deepened, a new customs tariff was enacted on 28 January 1906, raising the protection to an average of 10-30%. The import of goods from the states with which Romania did not sign trade agreements were subject to a tax 50% over the one set in the tariff, or 30% *ad valorem* for goods exempt from customs duties.<sup>44</sup>

The changes in this regard taking place in Europe determined the Russian Empire to also revise its tariff policy. In 1891, the customs tariff, for many items, increased by two to ten times, compared to that of 1868. Also in 1893, the countries that did not offer preferential conditions for the import and transit of Russian goods were subjected to double customs tariffs.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, measures were being taken to reduce the expenses of the customs services. On 23 May 1896, the *Bessarabia* customs district was liquidated, being included in the neighbouring districts.<sup>46</sup> More precisely, the first class customs Noua Suliță and Ungheni, as well as the third class ones Lipcani and Leova, the Fălciu customs post, but also the Nemțeni and Avrămeni crossing points were transferred to the Radziwilow customs district, while the first class customs Ismail and Reni, the customs posts Cahul, Gura Prutului, Chilia, Vîlcov, Akkerman were included in the Southern customs district.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding the sanitary institutionalization in Romania, the Sanitary Law of 1874 was amended in 1881 to include the establishment of five cattle quarantines at the country's borders, two of first class and three of second class. The Sanitary-Veterinary Police Law of 28 May 1882 provided the operation of sanitary services for epizootics at the central level, under the General Directorate of Sanitary Services within the Ministry of Interior, at the level of counties, at borders and in urban communes. A Superior Council for Epizootics was also established to examine the projects relating to the organization of the sanitary-veterinary police.<sup>48</sup> On 18 June 1893, the institutes of chemistry, subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, were required to deal with the control of food and drink in commerce.<sup>49</sup> The sanitary law of 18 December 1910 established that in the ports of Sulina, Constanța, Brăila and Galați a special and permanent medical service was to operate for the sanitary control of ships, passengers and goods, according to the provisions of the international conventions and service regulations.<sup>50</sup> In the Russian Empire progress in sanitary institutionalization in trade was similar and limited mostly to the legalization of medical and police measures.<sup>51</sup>

## Commercial-Judicial Institutionalization

After annexation, Bessarabia would also make institutional progress concerning its commercial-judicial institutionalization. On 1 April 1819, the first commercial court was opened in Reni, established on the same principles as the Commercial Court in Odessa.<sup>52</sup> The latter was instituted in early 1808, as the first of its kind in the Russian Empire, the model being later extended to other port cities on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.<sup>53</sup> The statute of these courts was elaborated based on those existing in the port cities of the northern Mediterranean. Thus, merchants from the city elected three members, and two were appointed by the state. The court judged all cases concerning the trade of the city, regardless of the social status of those involved,<sup>54</sup> the merchants being hence protected from the judicial system controlled by the nobility. On 2 September 1824, the Russian government decided to move the Court to Ismail, after becoming aware of the location's commercial advantages over other ports of Bessarabia. The jurisdiction of the court was limited only to the disputes of the merchants of Ismail, Reni, Akkerman, and Chilia.<sup>55</sup> As an experiment, in 1829, the number of merchant members of the Court was increased to four and they were elected for a one year term. The president of the court was still appointed by the state.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, the judicial system existing at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Romanian Principalities lacked such an institutional practice. The nobility held the monopoly on judicial positions in all courts. For this reason, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, foreign merchants of Christian law had, in Bucharest, a special organization with a court of seven to judge. With the advent of foreign consulates, foreign merchants, but also many natives, turned to their protection in order to secure their businesses.<sup>57</sup> It was only the *Organic Regulations* that established commercial courts in the Romanian Principalities, according to the model existing in the Russian Empire. In Wallachia, the opening of the Commercial Courts in Bucharest, with five judges, and Craiova, with three, was provided. The president and a judge were appointed by the ruler of the country, and the other three by ballot, by the assembly of the 30 most important merchants, being invested for a period of two years. In Moldova, the *Organic Regulation* provided the opening of a single commercial court in Iași.<sup>58</sup> On 23 March 1833, a commercial court was established instead in Galați, which began its activity on 1 May 1833.<sup>59</sup>

It was made up of three judges, with the president selected from among the boyars and the other two judges from among the merchants.<sup>60</sup>

On 14 May 1832, the institutional practice of commercial courts was extended from Novorossiia to the rest of the empire, including St. Petersburg.<sup>61</sup> As for the Ismail Commercial Court, its jurisdiction was extended from 16 March 1837 to merchants from the whole of Bessarabia.<sup>62</sup> The new procedure rules of the Commercial Court of Ismail were approved on 19 March 1841. According to them, the court examined the private disputes related to the province's trade, decided on the resignation of brokers and notaries, confirmed the documents drawn up by the brokers, examined the causes of bankruptcy, notified the creditors on the date of seizure of the real and movable property, examined the creditors' claims, established the possible share to be refunded from their sale, checked the captain's report on the ship itinerary and the logbook, supervised the unloading of goods from failed ships, etc.<sup>63</sup>

The French Commercial Code introduced in 1840 in Wallachia included similar attributions of the commercial courts.<sup>64</sup> Still, the authority of commercial courts, but also of civil ones in the Romanian Principalities, was undermined by that of foreign consuls.<sup>65</sup> With the decline of the Ottoman military force, the Romanian Principalities saw the opening of several European consular offices, but often with diplomatic and political responsibilities.<sup>66</sup> The abolition of the regime of consular jurisdiction for foreign subjects was one of the political aspirations of the leaders of the union of the principalities.<sup>67</sup> In Bessarabia, on the other hand, the Russian government allowed only the activity of a few consular agents.<sup>68</sup>

After the restitution of the southern counties of Bessarabia to the Principality of Moldova, according to the Treaty of Paris of 18 (30) March 1856, the Commercial Court of Ismail was temporarily transferred to Chişinău, by order of the Council of Ministers of 25 January 1857, and its name was changed to the Commercial Court of Bessarabia.<sup>69</sup> On 26 July 1863, at the insistence of the merchants, the activity of the Commercial Court was extended until the application of the new judicial reform, which was to exclude commercial courts from the judiciary system.<sup>70</sup> But the application of the reform in Bessarabia, through the ukase of 8 April 1869, did not lead to the immediate liquidation of the court, as was also the case as well as in the rest of the empire.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, in the United Romanian Principalities, the law of 4 July 1865 for the organization of the judiciary system liquidated the monopoly of the nobility. Regarding the commercial courts, it stipulated that commercial

cases be judged by county courts. In Bucharest, Craiova, Galați and Ploiești it provided the operation within the county court of a section for trade cases.<sup>72</sup> Unlike in Bessarabia, the commercial courts were closed without delay. In 1877, the number of commercial cases in civil courts accounted to 4,901, of which 2,843 were registered for the first time and 2,058 having remained since 1876. Of these commercial cases, 6,006 were completed and 1,895 commercial cases awaited for the trial remained for trial the following year.<sup>73</sup>

The development of the judicial system no longer required a separation of commercial cases from other civil cases, neither in Romania, nor in the Russian Empire. In Chișinău however, it was only from 1 January 1898 that the Commercial Court of Bessarabia was closed, simultaneously with the commercial courts of Kerch and Taganrog, and its activity was subordinated to the district courts established under the law of 12 July 1889.<sup>74</sup> Instead, such judiciary courts would appear within commercial bourses. Thus, in 1887, an “arbitration commission” was set up under the Odessa Bourse Committee to resolve the misunderstandings and disputes that arose around commercial transactions.<sup>75</sup> In Romania, the law on bourses of 1904 also established the arbitration chambers within the bourses, to judge the disputes between the members of the bourses or between them and third natural and legal persons. Arbitral jurisdiction became mandatory by this law for bourse operations. An appeal against its decisions could be made only to the Court of Appeal.<sup>76</sup>

## **Institutionalization of Commercial Legislation**

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both the Romanian Principalities and the Russian Empire were still deficient in terms of the institutionalization of commercial legislation. It is true that, in 1766, Catherine II formed a commission to codify the Russian legislation, but the goal was not achieved, not even during the reigns of Emperors Paul I and Alexander I.<sup>77</sup> Some progress was registered in engaging the merchant class in the drafting of trade legislation. Thus, on 27 March 1800, Paul I ordered the establishment of the honorary title of *trade advisers* for merchants. Instead, the holders, at the request of the government, were to participate without remuneration in the improvement of commercial legislation, in the elaboration of regulations on trade and the statutes of trade institutions, conventions and trade treaties.<sup>78</sup>



The institutionalization of commercial legislation gained important improvements only after 1829. Thereby, the Russian emperor approved on 23 October 1829 the creation of a Trade Council in St. Petersburg, which was to notify the authorities of problems hindering the development of domestic and foreign trade, as well as to make proposals and reports on these issues at the request of the Minister of Finance. The council was to have four permanent members from the 1<sup>st</sup> Guild merchants. Branches of the Trade Council were opened in Moscow, Arkhangelsk, Riga, Taganrog and Odessa. Among their members, 6 were designated from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> guild merchants.<sup>79</sup> The cities of Bessarabia did not have such an entity, but their role in drafting trade law within the empire was generally very modest.

Still, during the reign of Nicholas I efforts to codify Russian law were completed in 1832, but *The Code of Laws* was recognized as the official source of legal norms only from 1 January 1835.<sup>80</sup> However, in the commercial field, the *Code* was rather a set of regulations in force, a mechanical combination of laws issued in different periods, containing, to a large extent, police and fiscal regulations. In the next two editions of the *Code of Laws of the Russian Empire* (from 1842 and 1857), the Commercial Code was revised, but its level of codification remained deficient.<sup>81</sup>

In the Romanian Principalities, the first “codes” of trade were included in the *Organic Regulations*. For Wallachia, it consisted of 26 articles, covering the following major issues: ensuring freedom of trade, maintaining trade routes, operating grain storage depots in rural areas, food security measures for cities, capitalization of private mines for commercial purposes. In Moldova, the section consisted of 20 articles, addressing in addition the regulation of customs tariffs and the organization of traders.<sup>82</sup> The provisions of the commercial codes included in the *Organic Regulations* were too general, and the Legislative Assemblies of the principalities took the option of adopting the French commercial code. In Wallachia, it will be implemented from 1 January 1841, being translated after the edition of 1808, with the amendments made until 1838. For some issues, the provisions of the *Organic Regulation* were maintained (relative to the deeds of trade, trade procedure, etc.).<sup>83</sup> In Moldova, the initiative did not materialize.<sup>84</sup>

Only after the union of the Romanian Principalities, by the law of 10 December 1864, the French Commercial Code was extended to the whole country.<sup>85</sup> That same year, the first law on Chambers of Commerce was discussed and was promulgated on 26 October 1864. It was planned

to establish chambers of commerce in the main cities and ports, having as attributions the presentation to the government of opinions and proposals on the changes projected in the commercial legislation, on the establishment of other chambers or economic institutions, on customs tariffs and transport services, etc. Chambers of Commerce were set up in Bucharest, Turnu-Severin, Craiova, Turnu Magurele, Giurgiu, Brăila, Galați, Ismail, Bârlad, Iași, Bacău, Piatra-Neamț, Botoșani, Focșani and Ploiești.<sup>86</sup>

The law of 1864, however, did not provide the Chambers of Commerce with the freedom to carry out their activity and initiative. The interference of the local state administrative authorities – the prefects who chaired the meetings of the Chambers – influenced their decisions and led to the limitation of their activity. However, the Bucharest Chamber of Commerce and Industry intervened in the discussion and drafting of laws and regulations at the request of some ministries or on its own initiative: the draft of the laws for the regulation for bourse brokers, registration of companies, sale of spirits licensing, and others. At the same time, in 1875 it contributed to the preparation of the new customs tariff.<sup>87</sup>

The situation would be remedied by the law of 10 May 1886, which established new rules regarding the organization of the chambers, their attributions, administration and revenues.<sup>88</sup> The law clearly established the consultative responsibilities of the Chambers in front of the government, regarding the needs of commercial and industrial development.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the Chambers of Commerce got more involved in the country's economic policy. For example, they actively participated in the elaboration of a new commercial code, initiated in 1884 and approved in 1887. The Italian Commercial Code of 31 October 1882 was taken as a model and therefore, unlike the edition of 1840, the notion of trade facts was put at the forefront. The legislator excluded those provisions that referred to commercial institutions of public utility (fairs, docks, chambers of commerce, issuing banks), which now formed the object of the administrative law, a branch of public law.<sup>90</sup>

The year 1887 was marked by the publication of a new edition of the commercial code in the Russian Empire as well. It had a substantially revised form, primarily by separating commercial judicial proceedings into a separate code, clearly enshrining the idea of the independence of the Russian commercial law. The delay in the development of Russian commercial law was largely caused by the non-recognition of trade customs as a source of law, which played an exclusive role in the

specialization and formation of this branch of law.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, on 7 June 1872, the emperor approved the reorganization of the St. Petersburg Council of Commerce and its subsidiaries by their merging with councils for manufactures. No substantial changes in their role in drafting trade legislation occurred, however.<sup>92</sup> In Romania, a Superior Council of Commerce had been established by the law of 17 February 1907, which, unlike its Russian counterpart, had clearer legislative duties.<sup>93</sup>

As for the chambers of commerce and industry, they appeared in the Russian Empire very late, in the form of the Russian-English, Russian-Italian (both active in St. Petersburg) and Russian-American (Moscow) chambers. They were to contribute to the development of bilateral trade relations. In addition, a single Russian Chamber of Commerce was created, the status of which was approved at the end of 1910 and aimed only at regulating and facilitating export trade, with no legislative functions.<sup>94</sup>

### **Institutionalization of Commercial Intermediation**

In terms of trade intermediation, Bessarabia also apparently obtained more institutional benefits after 1812. Following the law of 1721, bourses were to be opened in all commercial port-cities of the Russian Empire, but in reality this desideratum remained unaccomplished. It wasn't until 1796 that the second bourse, after that of Sankt Petersburg, was opened in the newly established port city of Odessa.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, brokers were acting in the field of trade in other cities also. The Russian legislation, in fact, included several categories of brokers: *hofmaklers* (chief brokers), public notaries, private brokers, brokers of servants and workers, bourse brokers, merchants' ships brokers, brokers of the State Commercial Bank, Craftsmen Councils' brokers.<sup>96</sup>

Accordingly, already in 1813 a *hofmakler* was appointed in Bessarabia, who institutionally also held the position of provincial notary. In reality, the public brokers were those that exercised the attributions of authenticating the contracts within the city, and the function of notaries was initially provided only for the authentication and rejection of the promissory notes. Public brokers used the title of notary in order to distinguish themselves from private and specialized brokers. In addition to brokering private contracts, *hofmaklers* were also acting as state agents, informing authorities about any trade violations, but also about the evolution of commodity prices.<sup>97</sup> The notarial attributions were not separated from the

judiciary, in the cities where no notary was designated, their attributions being exercised by magistrates or by other public or police authorities. Outside the empire, brokerage services for merchants were provided by consular officers. According to the regulation of 25 October 1820, their obligations included the protection of the interests of national trade and navigation, the performing of the functions of notary, civil servant and police officer, etc.<sup>98</sup>

With the systematization of notarial legislation in the Russian commercial code of 1832, the number of brokers-notaries increased in Chişinău and gradually notaries appeared in other cities of Bessarabia.<sup>99</sup> In the Romanian Principalities, the notarial activity was still closely related to the judicial one, lacking an institutional separation on this level. With the establishment of commercial courts, through the *Organic Regulations*, their attributions, in addition to examining commercial disputes, included the authentication of contracts between merchants in the cities where they were, a position that in other parts continued to be performed by county courts.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the fact that the 1840 Commercial code of Wallachia also regulated the activity of bourses, none were established. Instead, the provisions referring to the activity of exchange dealers and brokers (of goods, insurance, dragomans and renters of ships, land and water transport),<sup>101</sup> represented an impetus to local projects to institutionalize the activity of commercial intermediaries.<sup>102</sup> For Bessarabian entrepreneurs the bourse of Odessa continued to be the only institutional way to trade their products to exporting merchants. But the progress of bourse trading in Odessa, but also in the rest of the Russian Empire, was slow. The importance of this bourse became significant only in the second half of the 1840s, driven by substantial progress in grain exports. Consequently, a bourse committee was opened in 1848, to manage the activity of the bourse more efficiently.<sup>103</sup>

Other substantial progresses occurred only during the Reforms of the 1860s. On 14 April 1866, a new Regulation on notarial activity was adopted in the Russian Empire, as part of the judicial reform. The Russian legislators aimed to create an independent institution, separated from that of intermediaries, with broad powers in the field of protection of entrepreneurial and property rights and interests, but the reform failed to delineate the notarial powers, with which the justices of the peace were also invested. The notarial reform was applied in Bessarabia from 1 December 1869.<sup>104</sup> In Romania, on the other hand, the notarial activity

continued to be exercised by the civil courts. In 1877, the number of notarial operations in the Romanian civil courts amounted to 11,563.<sup>105</sup> The Law on the authentication of documents of 1886 still made no reference to notaries.<sup>106</sup>

Instead, the commercial intermediation functions gained progress for the Romanian entrepreneurs abroad. An institutional form of this desideratum was conferred by the Law on the Organization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 15 March 1873, which provided the establishment of consulates "where necessary". The exact duties of consular officers were to be laid down in a special regulation.<sup>107</sup> But the problem of opening Romanian consulates abroad continued to be an acute one because of the opposition of the Ottoman government.<sup>108</sup> After 1878, Romania proceeded to negotiate consular treaties, by which the signatory parties granted their right to establish consular representations in the cities and ports of the territory of the other party. Such treaties were signed with Switzerland on 2 (24) February 1880, with Italy on 5 (17) August 1880, with Belgium on 31 December 1880 and with the USA on 5 (17) June 1881. The consular regulation of 20 June 1880 provided notarial, judicial and police duties for consular officers, in order to meet the needs of Romanian subjects doing business abroad.<sup>109</sup> The Trade Code of 1887 completed the commercial attributions of the consular representatives abroad, opening the way for the rapid increase of the number of consulates abroad.<sup>110</sup>

Within the country, the first real steps to institutionalize commercial intermediation were taken by the promulgation on 25 June 1881 of the Law for Bourses. The establishment of the bourses took place based on the following procedure: the submission of a request by the traders of a city to the Chamber of Commerce, justifying the demand for establishing the institution and the means necessary for its functioning. This proposal was to be endorsed by the minister of commerce and later approved by a royal decree. Only Romanian citizens were admitted to the bourse administration bodies and to trade within them. This law also officially established the functions of exchange and commodity intermediaries. It was provided that in each city the number of exchange and commodity brokers was fixed by the chamber of commerce every three years. Where no chamber of commerce was established, the number of brokers was fixed by the communal council.<sup>111</sup>

The amendments to the Law for Bourses of 24 June 1886 revealed the functioning of the bourses only in Bucharest, Galați and Brăila. Elsewhere, the bourse operations were carried out by authorized brokers.<sup>112</sup> Actually,

until 1904 the Romanian bourses had a weak activity, being strongly competed, on account of some organizational and legislative deficiencies, by a “black bourse”, developed in parallel.<sup>113</sup> A major problem was considered the non-acceptance of foreigners, who had important capital and enterprises in Romania.<sup>114</sup> It was only in 1904 that the new Law for Bourses established the bourse corporation to which all merchants and bankers could belong, regardless of nationality, but the elective and representative rights of foreigners were limited to maximum  $\frac{1}{4}$  of this corporation’s composition.<sup>115</sup> The situation was similar in the Russian Empire, in which there were only six bourse committees operating by 1880, and a further eight were set up by 1904.<sup>116</sup>

### **Institutionalization of Trade Enterprises**

In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the situation regarding the institutionalization of commercial enterprises continued to be precarious in both the Romanian Principalities and Bessarabia. In the Russian Empire, the legal norms for the formation of trading firms were established on 1 January 1807. Russian merchants could set up trading houses by either total or partial association. The merchants who founded trading houses by total association were responsible with all the capital they had and, in addition, could not enter into another association. The partial association presupposed the liability of the merchants only within the limits of the amount of contribution.<sup>117</sup> Even though in the great commercial cities of the empire there appeared dozens of trading houses, institutionalized according to legal procedures, in Bessarabia the situation was different. A primary cause was the insufficient spreading of the guild system in the province prior to 1831, as merchants were required to be enrolled in guilds in order to open trading houses or companies.

Trade did not encourage any formalized institutionalization of business in the Romanian Principalities either. Seasonal forms of trade were predominant, with requests for the establishment of fairs indicating that these were the main form of distribution of goods. But in the cities there were certain premises for the permanentisation of trade, and the local authorities encouraged this process.<sup>118</sup> However, the business class still lacked a solid organization on modern principles. The *Organic Regulations* had contributed to some extent to increasing the institutionalization of trade enterprises in the Romanian Principalities, in conjunction with

the freedoms and privileges granted to encourage foreign trade, but the formalized institutionalization of business was practiced almost entirely by foreign traders. In Wallachia the situation was a little better from this point of view, after the adoption in 1840 of the French commercial code. According to it, merchants could establish trade partnerships of three kinds: comprehensive, limited and anonymous. The first was based on the association by contract of two or more merchants, each responsible for the contracts and debts of the company, even if they bore the signature of only one of the associates. The contract was to be certified by the court in each county where the firm was to operate. The limited partnership was also constituted by contract, by the association of two or more capitals, being administered by a limited partner, with the associates having no right to get involved in the administration of the partnership. Each of the limited partners was liable only for the amount of capital they contributed to the partnership. In both cases, the partnership was to bear the name of one or all associates. On the other hand, the anonymous company did not impose such an obligation, as it could bear a name chosen by the shareholders. These could be established only with the permission of the Wallachian ruler.<sup>119</sup>

The reforms of 1860s in the Russian Empire brought about some fiscal changes which encouraged the development of enterprises. The law of 1 January 1863 divided commercial establishments into four categories, from I to IV, and patent fees were set according to the class in which the city was registered. In Bessarabia only the city of Chişinău was included in class II, Akkerman, Bender, Hotin in class III, and the other cities and fairs in Chişinău, Akkerman, Bender, Orhei, Soroca, Hotin and Iaşi counties in class IV. The law also introduced some changes regarding the taxation of private and joint stock companies. However, their connection with the guild system was maintained, because the persons who wanted to establish a formalized commercial firm were still required to obtain 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> guild merchant patents, depending on the type of activity.<sup>120</sup> Still, these changes encouraged the opening in 1869 of the first trading house in Chisinau, named Fitov & Bros.<sup>121</sup>

In Romania, an important moment was the application of the French Commercial Code throughout the country as of 1 January 1865. However, there continued to be many limitations. Thus, in 1877 only 14 files for the establishment of commercial firms were submitted to the courts, 13 of which being collective and one anonymous. In addition, 12 files were acts of liquidation of trade firms.<sup>122</sup> The Romanian lawmakers tried to

encourage the institutionalization by introducing a sliding tax system, similar to that of the Russian Empire. On 23 March 1877, the patent fee was divided into a fixed and a variable part. The fixed tax depended on the cities in which the entrepreneurs conducted their activity and the variable one was 10% for banks, confectioneries, flour mills, 5% for stores, shops and workshops in general and 2% for industrial establishments, such as factories or plants.<sup>123</sup> Also on 15 April 1879, the Law on Trademarks was adopted, for the recognition and protection by the state of trademarks, emblems, signs of production and trade. The registration was made at the registry of the court of residence and was valid for 15 years, after which it was to be reconfirmed, the fee being 20 lei.<sup>124</sup> In the following period, conventions for the protection of trademarks were signed with Belgium (1881), Germany (1882), France (1889), Austria-Hungary (1893), Italy (1903, 1906), and the USA (1906).<sup>125</sup>

But Romanian lawmakers went even further. On 18 March 1884, the Law on the Registration of Firms imposed the obligation to register firms in the special register at the court of the district of residence. A period of six months was granted for all traders to comply with the provisions of the new law.<sup>126</sup> From a few dozen prior to the law being passed, the number of individual firms registered in Ilfov County increased to 3,000 just one month after it became mandatory.<sup>127</sup> Subsequently, their number reached 4,000 at the beginning of 1887, and 6,657 by 29 October 1890. By this date there were also 600 registered joint-stock companies.<sup>128</sup> By the Commercial Code of 10 May 1887, the notion of "cooperative society" was introduced and regulated, representing a society that had registered in its statute the right of associates to increase or decrease the constitutive capital. Thus, numerous mutual aid cooperatives were established for granting preferential loans to members, but also to other traders and industrialists.<sup>129</sup>

As opposed to this progress, by 1905 in Chişinău there were only six registered trading houses, two more operating in Akkerman. In the rest of the cities of Bessarabia there were no trading houses at that time, according to the reports of the city administrations. From the point of view of organization, existing trading houses were full or limited partnerships.<sup>130</sup> The situation was even more deficient for joint stock companies in the field of trade. The only joint stock company with a (partial) trade profile we found in the period 1863-1912 was "The Bessarabian joint stock company for winemaking and production of cognac of E. Reidel in Chişinău" (the statute approved in 1899).<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, there were many trade



firms and joint stock companies operating in the province, but registered in the rest of the Russian Empire or even abroad. The largest firm for the production and sale of Bessarabian wines of I. and V. Sinadino, the status of which was approved in 1894, was registered in Odessa, where the company had its main warehouse.<sup>132</sup> The causes of such a deficient condition were multiple. First of all there was no obligation to register a trade enterprise. Secondly – the registration of a trade enterprise, as opposed to a trade place, involved the payment of the guild merchant's license. And thirdly, the trademark law was adopted in the Russian Empire only on 26 February 1896.<sup>133</sup>

## Conclusions

Based on the research of primary and secondary sources, we have come to the conclusion that Bessarabia, after its annexation to the Russian Empire in 1812, had benefited institutionally only in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The modern institutions in the sphere of trade, their model imported from Europe and implemented in the Russian Empire throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, actually found their practical utility only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by virtue of the country's socio-economic backwardness as compared to the West. Imposed from above rather than implemented with regard to the economic processes within the empire, they often did not correlate or meet real needs, undergoing permanent adjustments as a result, especially during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, since the *Organic Regulations*, applied in 1831-1832 by the Russian imperial authorities in Wallachia and Moldavia, largely expressed their visions, the modern Russian institutional economic model had a great impact on that established initially in the Romanian Principalities. As these acts also had political limitations, the Romanian lawmakers struggled to change the Russian economic institutional model, which was largely based on the German one, preferring instead the French, Italian or even Belgian ones. The following political shifts towards independence would determine clearly distinct phases in the process of institutionalization of trade practices in the Romanian Principalities / Romania, especially when compared to the Russian Empire, and to Bessarabia as part of it.

After the Union of 1859, the Romanian Principalities were still behind the Russian Empire with regard to the institutionalization of trade, but not

essentially, especially when compared to Bessarabia. The reasons were multiple. First of all, the territory between Prut and Dniester had already had a different institutional experience, which determined that some institutions were accepted faster than others. Secondly, it was granted a limited institutional autonomy from the rest of the empire until 1828-1831. Afterwards, being at the periphery of the Russian Empire, the province was included institutionally in Novorossiia, with Odessa as its centre. Thirdly, only 10% of the trade revenues were kept in the province, the rest being devoured by the imperial treasury, with no investment budget at all. Thus, already in the 1860s the trade of Bessarabia was surpassed organizationally by the Romanian territories on the other bank of the river Prut. The gaining of independence in 1878 marked Romania's leap forward, and a rapidly increasing institutional gap in the neighbouring territory.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Vasil'eva 1999, p. 170.
- <sup>2</sup> Greif, 2006, p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>4</sup> Pantaz, 2012, pp. 151-152.
- <sup>5</sup> Nebolsin, 1835, p. 132.
- <sup>6</sup> Mihail, 1993, pp. 106-112, 271-274.
- <sup>7</sup> Tomuleț, 2015, p. 118.
- <sup>8</sup> Tomuleț, 1998, p. 212.
- <sup>9</sup> *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, tome V, otd. 2, 1830. SPb., 1831, No. 3968, p. 86.
- <sup>10</sup> *SZRI*, t. VI, Kn. 1. Tamozhennoe uchrezhdenie i Ustav po Evropejskoj trgovli, SPb., 1832, pp. 2, 4.
- <sup>11</sup> *Kommercheskaja gazeta*, 1833, 5 January, No.2.
- <sup>12</sup> *SZRI*, t. XIII, Kn. 2, Ustav medicinskoj policii, SPb., 1842, pp. 83-87.
- <sup>13</sup> Negulescu, 1944, pp. 79-85, 279-285.
- <sup>14</sup> *Analele parlamentare ale României*, Tome III, Part I, Bucharest, 1892, p. 203; *Ibid.*, Tome XI, Part I, Bucharest, 1900, p. 132; *Ibid.*, Tome XI, Part II, Bucharest, 1900, p. 825; *Ibid.*, Tome XIII, Part II, Bucharest, 1903, pp. 57-58; *Ibid.*, Tome XIII, Part II, Bucharest, 1903, pp. 57-58; *Ibid.*, Tome XV, Part II, Bucharest, 1903, pp. 805, 824.
- <sup>15</sup> Vitcu, 1987, p. 194.
- <sup>16</sup> Ardeleanu, 2014, pp. 61-63.
- <sup>17</sup> *Voenno-statisticheskoe obozrenie Knjazhestva Moldavii*, Chast' II, SPb., 1853, p. 133.
- <sup>18</sup> Piljaeva, 2012, p. 109.
- <sup>19</sup> *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, t. XXXV, 1860, otd. 1, SPb., 1862, No. 35885, p. 708.
- <sup>20</sup> *SZRI*, t. 6, Ustav Tamozhennyj, SPb., 1857, pp. 1-9.
- <sup>21</sup> Piljaeva, 2012, p. 109.
- <sup>22</sup> Bujoreanu, 1873, p. 1338.
- <sup>23</sup> Furtuna, 1904, p. 3.
- <sup>24</sup> Șuta, 2009, pp. 45-48, 54, 65-67.
- <sup>25</sup> Coadă, 2009, pp. 76-78.
- <sup>26</sup> *PSZRI*, Sobr. 2, t. XLVIII, 1873, SPb., 1876, otd. 1, No. 52385, p. 840.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, t. XLIX, otd. 1, 1874, SPb., 1876, No. 43048, p. 56.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 43246, pp. 358-359; *Ibid.*, t. 52, otd. 1, 1877, No. 57174, p. 378.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, t. LII, 1877, SPb., SPb., 1879, otd. 2, No. 57685, p. 109.
- <sup>30</sup> Hamangiu, 1903, pp. 1640-1720.
- <sup>31</sup> *MO*, 5 (17) April 1875, No. 77, p. 1887.
- <sup>32</sup> *MO*, 5 (17) July 1875, No. 145, pp. 3275-3276.

- 33 *MO*, 6 (18) April 1878, No. 78, p. 2258-2266; *Ibid.*, 6 (18) April 1878, No. 78, pp. 2258-2266; *Ibid.*, 16 (28) May 1878, No. 107, pp. 2903-2904; *NANO* 1938, Nr. 1149, p. 341; *Ibid.*, No. 770, p. 205, No. 662, p. 155.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 13 (25) April 1878, No. 84, p. 2428.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 5 (17) December 1879, pp. 7652-7662.
- 36 *PSZRI*, sobr. 2, t. LIII, 1878, SPb., 1880, otd. 2, No. 59124, pp. 302-303.
- 37 *Ibid.*, No. 59015, p. 236.
- 38 *Ibid.*, sobr. 3, t. II, 1882, SPb., 1886, No. 796, p. 159.
- 39 *Ibid.*, t. III, 1883, SPb., 1886, No. 1367, p. 35.
- 40 *MO*, 18 February (2 March) 1883, No. 260, p. 4146-4147.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 21 December 1879 (2 January 1880), Nr. 287, pp. 8066-8067.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 12 (24) April 1875, pp. 2031-2035; *HAMANGIU* 1903, p. 1647.
- 43 Axenciuc, 1999, pp. 138, 176-177.
- 44 *MO*, 1 februarie 1906, 1 (14) February 1906, p. 8243.
- 45 Piljaeva, 2012, pp. 109-110.
- 46 *PSZRI*, sobr. 3, t. XVI, 1896, SPb., 1899, otd. 1, No. 12989, p. 481.
- 47 *Obzor vneshnej trgovli Rossii po Evropejskoj i Aziatskoj granicam za 1897 god*, Tabl. III, p. 4.
- 48 *Hamangiu*, 1903, pp. 1958-1992.
- 49 Şuta, 2009, p. 73-74, 87, 103, 120, 130; *HAMANGIU* 1903, pp. 2050-2098.
- 50 *MO*, 20 December 1910 (2 January 1911), No. 211, pp. 8526-8527.
- 51 Frejberg, 1913, p. 377.
- 52 *PSZRI*, Sobr. I, 1819, t. XXXVI, No. 27750, SPb., 1830, p. 130.
- 53 Smol'janinov, 1853, p. 388.
- 54 Semenov, 1859, p. 185.
- 55 Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (following ANRM), F. 3, inv.1, d. 753, f. 47-47 verso
- 56 Taşcă, 2009, pp. 366-368.
- 57 Iorga, 1925, p. 108.
- 58 Negulescu, 1944, pp. 118-119, 212.
- 59 *Analele parlamentare ale României*, t. III, Part II, p. 335; t. IV, Part II, p. 302.
- 60 *Buletinul curții de casațiune date în materie civilă*, Tome 8, No. 1, Bucharest, 1870, p. 367.
- 61 *PSZRI*, Sobr. 2, t. VII, 1832, SPb., 1830, No. 5360, pp. 268-298.
- 62 *Ibid.*, t. XII, otd. 1, 1837, No. 10036, SPb., 1838, pp.173-174.
- 63 *Ibid.*, t. XVI, otd. 1, 1841, No. 14377, SPb., 1842, pp. 193-195.
- 64 Bujoreanu, 1873, pp. 264-293.
- 65 Negulescu, 1944, pp. 26, 195.
- 66 Buşe, 1970, p. 99.
- 67 Maciu, 1959, p. 66.

- 68 ANRM, F. 2, inv. 1, d. 528, ff. 800 verso-801 verso; *Ibid.*, d. 677, f. 337 verso; *Ibid.*, F. 3, inv. 1, d. 759, vol. III, f. 348.
- 69 PSZRI, *Sobr.* 2, t. XXXIV, 1859, SPb., 1861, otd. 1, No. 34518, pp. 483-484.
- 70 *Ibid.*, t. XXXVIII, 1863, SPb., 1866, otd. 1, No. 39914, pp. 864-865.
- 71 Nakko, 1879, p. 240.
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- 73 MO, 13 (25) June 1881, Nr. 57, p. 1857.
- 74 PSZRI, *Sobr.* 3, t. XVII, 1897, SPb., 1900, No. 14832, p. 714.
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- 76 *România economică*, Year VI, No. 8, 22 February (6 March) 1904, p. 10
- 77 Fedorov, 1911, p. 72.
- 78 PSZRI, *Sobr.* 1, t. XXVI, 1800-1801, SPb., 1830, No. 19347, pp. 102-103.
- 79 *Ibid.*, *Sobr.* 2, t. IV, 1829, SPb., 1830, No. 3250, p. 737.
- 80 *Ibid.*, t. VIII, 1833, otd. 1, SPb., 1834, No. 5947, p. 68.
- 81 Fedorov, 1911, pp. 72-73, 86-88.
- 82 Negulescu, 1944, pp. 74-78, 273-278.
- 83 Dumitrescu, 1904, pp. 13-14
- 84 *Analele parlamentare ale României*, Tome IV, Part II, Bucharest, 1894, p. 248.
- 85 Boerescu, 1865, p. 1-2.
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- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 2120-2124.
- 90 Dumitrescu, 1904, pp. 13, 25-26.
- 91 Fedorov Fedorov, 1911, p. 85.
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- 94 Tompston 2008, pp. 102-103.
- 95 *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.
- 96 SZRI, t. XI, Ustavy i uchrezhdenija torgovye, SPb., 1832, §1870, p. 377-378.
- 97 PSZRI, *sobr.* 1, t. XV, 1758-1762, SPb., 1830, No. 10886, p. 266; t. XXV, 1798-1799, No. 18371, p. 63.
- 98 Marnej, 2006, p. 87-88
- 99 ANRM, F. 54, inv. 1, d. 9, ff. 174-176; F. 55, inv. 1, d. 27, f. 53 verso – 54.
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- 101 Bujoreanu, 1873, pp. 255-256.
- 102 Munteanu, 2013, p. 159.
- 103 PSZRI, *sobr.* 2, t. XXIII, 1848, SPb., 1849, otd. 1, No. 22459, p. 430.

- 104 *Ibid.*, t. XLIV, 1869, SPb., 1873, otd. 2, No. 47638, pp. 256-257.
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- 110 *Raporturi economice ale legațiunilor și consulatelor României*, pp. VI-VIII.
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- 124 *MO*, 15 (27) April 1879, Nr. 86, p. 2185.
- 125 Nano, 1938, pp. 102, 108, 164, 171, 181, 206, 207, 348.
- 126 Hamangiu, 1903, pp. 2038-2043.
- 127 *MO*, 12 (24) April 1885, Nr. 10, p. 245.
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# NORTHERN ENCOUNTERS: THE RUSSO-FINNISH BORDER AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN A CROSS-REGIONAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

## Abstract

This paper explores the connection between border making and order making projects and informal transborder practices and experiences in the geopolitically important sectors along contested Russian imperial/Soviet borders in the early twentieth century. In particular, the study examines how borders and controls were locally co-constructed at two different border strips of the Russo-Finnish border in the 1920s, while also conceptualizing the border as a site of informality and resistance. Findings, based on an array of previously unused historical sources, reveal that the cooperation patterns and rivalry between economic and military-political border control agencies in the early Soviet context differed in various regional frameworks, depending on the multiplicity of local factors. Civil, economic measures of border protection finally failed due to its inherent incompatibility with the increasing state pressures in a new, highly politicized context and a lack of financial and human resources. The paper demonstrates that the disintegration of the Russian empire was accompanied by enlivening of not only economic, but also generating new unique social and cultural exchanges at formerly 'transparent' borders. Novel cross-border networks and practices emerged around Soviet borders after 1917 in a radically transformed postimperial space, were all geared toward illicit transborder trade, but had their own unique specificity.

**Keywords:** Russo-Finnish border, economic and political border controls, postimperial space, imperial traditions, Soviet border controls, smuggling, illicit transborder networks.

## Background and Introduction

Borders and border-making constitute one of the most problematic issues in the story of the contested borderlands, bringing to the fore the questions

of power relations within the border zones, along with the processes of inclusion and exclusion in borderland cultures and identities.<sup>1</sup> Their increasing recognition as fully dependent on human understanding and practice underscores contextual aspects of the border mobilities, exploring, how, in the case of each particular border, people in its vicinity actively participated in the creation of the border and its meaning.<sup>2</sup>

This is especially relevant in respect to Soviet international borders. Upon the demise of the Russian Empire they cut across and through multiethnic populations, dividing ethnic groups and separating borderland peoples from groups and power centers with whom they had more in common than with Moscow. The Soviet border areas became a space of confrontational interaction between the newly created state and local communities, but also a source of survival of the latter. Based on this background, White-émigré organizations, along with the foreign counterintelligence services, searched for the transborder possibilities to uproot the new regime. Moreover, the 1920s was a period when the Soviet border zones served as a laboratory for testing Soviet “politicized” approaches of border control and borderland population management.

A broad range of regional state and quasi-state projects based on modern forms of political imagination upon the collapse of the Russian imperial statehood in 1917 have received ample scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Much less is known about experiences that marked postwar transformations of former imperial transborder spaces, including creation of new identities, economic relationships, social hierarchies, and cultural narratives along the early Soviet borders.

Most of the recent explorations of the early period of the “ensemble of the Soviet borders” tend to focus on the increasing border controls in the endangered Soviet frontiers, reflecting their gradual “hardening.”<sup>4</sup> Economic border management, patterns and scales of transborder traffic and the illicit passage of commodities shed light upon the loss of official revenues, gains to informal economies, and means of state surveillance.<sup>5</sup>

The current paper explores local variations of the early Soviet border control implementation and transborder trafficking. It uptakes a case-study of the Soviet-Finnish frontiers as an illustrative example of politicized, contested border.<sup>6</sup> As such, it provides special sections on Russian Karelia (from 1923 – AKSSR, the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), and at the Karelian Isthmus in the Petrograd/Leningrad Governorate (*guberniia*).<sup>7</sup> Historically, these territories belonged to different administrative units – Olonets and Arkhangelsk Governorates in

Russian Karelia, and Vyborg and Petrograd Governorates at the Karelian Isthmus. Within the newly created Soviet state, respective border strips were managed by different administrative structures within AKSSR and Petrograd/ Leningrad Governorate.<sup>8</sup>

The study investigates specifics of the local border controls in these areas during the 1920s; scopes of the contraband and illegal transborder trafficking; its national/ethnic composition; character and significance of information circulated across the border. Finally, the paper explores and compares the motivations of the participants in transborder trafficking at the respective border strips. Using archival sources it focuses on smuggling networks and their participants for an exploration of interethnic contact and the informed political and national choices of certain individuals in border regions. Thus, it aims to provide a glimpse into the contexts and careers of the “border people” in the unique historical circumstances and to illustrate how border zones of contact brought together borderlanders of different ethnic, social, and political backgrounds.

The research draws on a wide array of published and unpublished sources. The discussion makes extensive use of archival materials generated by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karelia, the local Karelian GPU (Main Political Administration), and Customs Administration, stored in the National Archives of Karelia. For the first time it brings into circulation the collection of contraband cases against the local peasantry in the 1920s. The cases initiated by the GPU AKSSR during the period 1923–1929 were transferred to the Petrozavodsk Customs Administration as confiscation cases.

The section on the 200 kilometer border strip of the Karelian Isthmus is based on the archival collections of the Leningrad Oblast State Archive (LOGAV), devoted to the Soviet-Finnish border controls and trafficking. The paper introduces new historical sources – a bulk of contraband and espionage cases from the 1920s, processed by the Petrograd (Leningrad) Governorate court of the People’s Commissariat of Justice (1922-1924) and Petrograd Governorate Revolutionary Tribunal of the Petrograd Military District (1921-1924).<sup>9</sup> Finally, the paper refers to the documents from the Russian State Archive of Economy (RGAE)<sup>10</sup> on elaboration of the economic model of the Soviet border protection, which is important for our understanding of center-periphery dynamics in this process.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first part sketches an overview of the evolution of the economic (and partly political) border regimes and transborder trafficking in Russian Karelia at the beginning

of the 1920s, while the second part dwells upon the illegal transborder practices associated with the contraband trade, and the ways the Soviet state tackled it at a strategically important part of the Soviet-Finnish border – the area of the Karelian Isthmus.

## **I. The Russian-Karelian Border Case**

### ***Soviet B/order Making: Old Practices in New Contexts***

The geographical space at the Russian-Finnish border, Karelia, a vast inhabited area in Northern Europe of historical significance to Russia, Finland and Sweden, has always been a watershed between East and West, between Northern and Eastern Europe. This civilizational border with Russia is considered by cultural anthropologists and historians to have played an important role in the process of Finnish identity building.<sup>11</sup> According to the treaty with Sweden in 1809, Finnish territories made a part of the Russian Empire until 1917 as a Great Duchy of Finland. During the imperial period, the administrative border was almost transparent to the local population. In the almost total absence of the cordons and the gap in prices in Russian Karelia and Finland, Karelians and Finns almost freely crossed the border, actively trading with each other.<sup>12</sup> With Finland's independence in 1917, Russian Karelia's border ranging 1245.6 kilometers received a state border status.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian Civil War in Karelia was marked by half a dozen Wars for Kindred Peoples (*heimosodat*), fought between 1918 and 1922. Inspired by Finnish nationalistic ideology, Finnish right-wing radicals and nationalist activists wanted to unite all the Finno-Ugric peoples in Finland, Russia, and Estonia and expand the borders of Finland to the east. Thousands of Finnish volunteers took part in military expeditions to Russian regions of Ingria, the Karelian Isthmus, East Karelia, White Sea Karelia, and Pechenga.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of the national Soviet republic (Karelian Labor Commune) in 1920 and the formation of the AKSSR (Autonomous Karelian Soviet Socialist Republic) in 1923 neighboring "bourgeois" Finland opened a new page in the history of this Northern border.

The turmoil of the civil war left many of the Soviet borders transparent, mobile, and almost unguarded. If at first their protection was a prerogative of Cheka, in accordance with the resolution of the Council of Labor and Defense (STO) of the RSFSR from September 27, 1922, the protection of



land and sea borders was entrusted to the State Political Administration (GPU) under the NKVD RSFSR. At the same time a separate border corps (OPK) of the GPU troops was created, which included 7 border districts.<sup>15</sup> By the end of 1924 the Karelian border with Finland, coinciding with the administrative border delineated in the nineteenth century, was partially blocked by the GPU border detachments. However, attempts to delineate the border were not undertaken since the end of the nineteenth century, so even in 1927 the supposed border line was “concealed behind the forest areas, with the majority of the border posts collapsed.”<sup>16</sup>

The early Soviet military-political and economic border control projects heavily relied on the pre-revolutionary models. This dependence manifested itself in general strategic planning,<sup>17</sup> customs infrastructure implementation, methods of detecting and detaining the contraband, and in the arrangements of interagency cooperation in border controls.

In Karelia of 1919, the general principles of dislocation and functioning of the newly created customs outposts along the Soviet-Finnish border mirrored the imperial ones.<sup>18</sup> Countermeasures against smugglers at the border guard outposts duplicated the imperial practices, with the only difference being that while in the last imperial decade the searches for contraband in the villages were conducted by the customs officials, in Soviet times this task was accomplished by the GPU border guards, who also initiated the cases and conducted interrogations of the witnesses.<sup>19</sup> The basic difference was attitude towards the natural landscape. Soviet officials, unlike their imperial predecessors, no longer pinned their hopes on environment and landscape in “the combat against smuggling”; rather, they admitted their total impotence in mastering and using the specifics of the Northern nature for blocking illegal transborder trade.<sup>20</sup>

By 1925, however, new anti-smuggling measures were introduced. Apart from regular (but not particularly successful) propaganda campaigns, the OGPU initiated a series of the so-called “anti-smuggling raids in the border strips” along the Soviet western border, within 18 to 40 verst (approximately 19-42 km) from the border line. Contrary to the well-organized border “cleansing” operations of the 1930s, such experiments rather resulted in “repressive chaos,” also generating multiple criminal cases on the premises of the GPU border guards abuses upon a stream of victims’ appeals to the GTU (Main Customs Directorate). As is obvious from a circular letter signed by the Deputy Chairman of the OGPU Genrikh Yagoda on March 4, 1925, “Concerning vicious approaches to smuggling,” most of the raids resulted in mass robberies of the local residents, provoking

“unrest in the border strip and undermining of the authority of the Soviet government in the mass consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Close interagency cooperation in exercising border controls – yet another imperial feature of Soviet border regimes– acquired peculiar forms in a new politicized context. Up to 1917, the Division of the Separate Border Guards Corps (*Otdelnyi korpus pogranichnoi strazhi*) of the Russian Empire was subordinated to the Department of Customs Duties and Fees and headed by civil officials of the Ministry of Finance, making an *economic* agency largely responsible for exercising border controls. From the onset of the nineteenth century, along with the European borders’ broadening function as a political filter, practices of collaboration between customs officials, local police officers, and border guard outposts were established not only in terms of anti-smuggling measures, but in detecting and detaining the “political” criminals: insurgents, propagandists, and revolutionaries of all kinds, with the anti-smuggling actions remaining a primary task of the Customs Directorate.<sup>22</sup>

Under Article 5 of the “Border Protection Regulations of the USSR” of 1923, border protection was assigned to the Soviet Border Guard as a structural unit of the OGPU,<sup>23</sup> but it was not removed from customs authorities under the aegis of the General Directorate of Customs within the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Trade (NKVT).

From the very beginning this “dual power” regime created multiple problems at the localities. For example, regulations on border crossings remained extremely contradictory in the 1920s, causing multiple interagency conflicts.<sup>24</sup> In Karelia the latter involved the SNK and the GPU of the AKSSR, as well as the trade mission of the USSR in Finland. For example, Article 7 of the Helsinki convention, signed by the governments of the RSFSR and the Finnish Republic on October 28, 1922, “on timber rafting through water systems extending from the Russian territory to Finland and vice versa”<sup>25</sup> entailed free border crossings for Finnish controllers of the rafting procedures. Still, even in 1926-1927, local GPU border guards, ignoring the telegrams signed by the Karelian SNK members with a demand to let the Finns pass, detained Finnish commissioners.<sup>26</sup>

However, the most serious interagency problems at the level of particular border districts were encountered in the sphere of the “combat with the contraband,” which at the all-Union level were elaborated by the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Trade (NKVT), GPU (OGPU), the structures of the People’s Commissariat of Finance with the active participation of the organs of the party and state control – Central Control

Commission (TsKK), and Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (RKI). A major role in this process was ascribed to the Central Anti-Smuggling Commission, which was comprised of leading GTU administrators and top GPU officers, with analogous commissions created in the Soviet regions.

From the creation of this interagency administrative body on December 8, 1921, under the chairmanship of Vasily Ulrikh, assistant to the KRO GPU chief A. Artuzov, and up to its dismantlement,<sup>27</sup> its activities were marked by constant conflicts between the OGPU and the NKVT officials over the leading role in combatting the contraband, generating a cornucopia of mutual accusations.<sup>28</sup>

The strongest catalyst in the unfolding struggle was the pre-revolutionary system of the percentage of revenue from detained smuggling<sup>29</sup>. In the new conditions of increasing Soviet requirements, and a severe lack of material and human resources, it provoked numerous conflicts at the level of border guard and customs outposts. On May 4, 1923, a meeting of the Central Commission for the Struggle with Contraband headed by Customs Administration head A.I. Potiaev\* and attended by the representatives of the NKVT, NKF, GPU, represented by I.S. Unshlicht, Vice-Chairman of the GPU, significantly reduced the rights of customs authorities and laid the beginning for the rivalry for power and resources in the border strip. The operational capacities in the 7.5-kilometer, as well as 1.5-kilometer border strips were the prerogative of the GPU.<sup>30</sup> However, customs agencies could "also operate there upon an agreement with the GPU."<sup>31</sup> Reflecting these developments, local power struggles over economic border regimes and contraband bonuses between the GPU border guard and customs officials became a grim reality at almost all Soviet borders, since most of valuable contraband was traditionally detained at the border strips, and in settlements adjacent to the border.

The squabbles between Karelian customs officers and GPU border guards were accompanied by lengthy correspondence, recriminations and disputes on the subject of the confiscated contraband.<sup>32</sup> Definition of "smuggling" itself became increasingly confusing in the conditions of absence of unified rules for border crossings and commodities transfers. Criminal cases were actively initiated starting from 1920-1921 upon

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\* Potyaev, A.I., GTU chief 1922-1927, arrested on July 28, 1936, sentenced by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR on May 27, 1937, upon the accusation in participation in a counter-revolutionary terrorist organization; executed on May 28, 1937.

complaints of local Karelian residents about customs officers and the border guard officers. However, during the investigations it frequently turned out that both customs officers and border guards relied on the opposite instructions on border crossing permits and conflicting definitions of "contraband."<sup>33</sup>

Contradictions between the customs authorities and the GPU AKSSR were also poignant in the field of intelligence functions. The Customs Directorate of People's Commissariat of Trade had a staff of authorized agents. The local GPU officers actively objected to customs agencies' intelligence functions. Despite repeated prohibitions, at the end of the 1920s most of the customs posts of the Karelian District Customs Administration were still actively working with informants and managed their own informants' networks.<sup>34</sup> This was also the case with other Soviet border districts.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, all-Union statistics of the detained smuggled goods demonstrated a steady increase in the contraband "captured by the OGPU," in the course of the 1920s from 62.3% in 1925 to 85.6% in 1927; the same tendency was reflected in regional developments.<sup>36</sup>

Appointments and personnel management made yet another problem of local interagency cooperation, By 1923, GPU officers were given control of all personnel appointments within the customs apparatus.<sup>37</sup> They regularly reported on slightest abuses, bribes and "domestic decay" of the Customs officials, demanding their dismissals.<sup>38</sup> Most frequently, the resulting conflicts were resolved according to the GPU officers' interests.<sup>39</sup> By 1930, Karelian customs chiefs were deprived of the right to make their own decisions even on border crossings. The GPU had almost complete control over their activities, including the location of export centers and the procedural aspects of cross-border transfers of commodities.<sup>40</sup> In 1930, as part of a transition from the New Economic Policy to the Soviet command economy, a mass scale closure of the Soviet border customs occurred, with the majority of the personnel dismissed.<sup>41</sup> The remaining customs posts retained only the shadow of their previous functions.

In Karelia, after a radical cut in the Customs personnel numbers by November 1930, a manager of the Kem Customs, Peter Piho, filed a petition to the head of the GPU AKSSR. On the grounds that the remaining administrators at the customs posts along the Finnish border had plenty of spare time, he proposed the transfer of their positions under the jurisdiction of the chiefs of the nearest border guard outposts.<sup>42</sup> The Karelian GPU chiefs rejected the proposal, finding the offer "impractical",

and suggestions on the involvement of the heads of the customs outposts in the GPU work 'totally unacceptable.'<sup>43</sup> In 1937-1938, a large share of the high and mid-rank ex-customs staff were repressed in the Russian Northwest. Standard charges of ex-customs officers in 1937 included "counter-revolutionary agitation," espionage and sabotage activities in favor of Finland.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Northern Cross-Border Encounters: Smuggling as a Split Ethnic Community Experience***

In the first half of the 1920s, illegal cross-border trade at the Soviet Western border belt was enlivened and triggered by the famine of 1922 and the gap in prices on different sides of the border.<sup>45</sup> The basic assortment of the contraband trade in borderland rural areas in the 1920s was typical of the entire Soviet western border: furs exchanged for leather, textile, provisions, coffee, clothes, agricultural instruments. In Soviet Karelia, it almost duplicated the contraband assortment smuggled to its territory during the imperial times from the Great Duchy of Finland.<sup>46</sup> In this particular region, as it happened during the imperial period, smuggling was seasonal, reviving during summer months.<sup>47</sup>

National composition of illegal trafficking in Karelia was clearly pronounced: most of smuggling was conducted by Karelian refugees (*karbezhtsy*) –those residents of the borderland areas, especially of Northern Karelia, who fled to Finland during 1919-1921, and partly returned in the course of the Soviet amnesty (1923-1926) as a Soviet diplomatic and securitization measure.<sup>48</sup> Specific conditions of the Soviet amnesty in 1923-1926 did not result in a decrease of cross-border contacts.<sup>49</sup> The repatriation process itself during the years 1923-1926 eventuated in the large bulk of contraband cases, initiated by the GPU on the premises that a large share of repatriates exceeded the limit of the goods allowed to take with them.<sup>50</sup>

The share of the Finnish population in the contraband trafficking was relatively small: only a few Finnish smugglers detained on the Soviet territory were mentioned in the vast bulk of contraband cases in the 1920s. For comparison, at the Polish border, many smugglers were Jewish, for the reason Jews had dominated trade in these former Pale of Settlement territories for centuries. They continued to trade as the fluid frontlines and emergent borderlines turned local peddling into international smuggling; the share of Polish citizens was also high there.<sup>51</sup>

Due to the insignificant population density of this Russian North-Western borderland, the contraband traffic was thinner there than along other Soviet borders, and the number of the smuggling bases (in Latvia - barter stations) – much lower. At the beginning of the 1920s, at the border between Latvia and the USSR, in the Latvian territory, there were 35 barter stations, serving also as crossing points for Latvian spies and counterspies.<sup>52</sup> The protocols of interrogations of the Karelian peasantry include references to several well-known barter stations, *hutora*, located along the Finnish border. Such stations were usually managed by one or two owners (usually Finns or Karelian refugees), well known to the inhabitants of Soviet Karelian borderland villages.<sup>53</sup>

The *politization* of cross-border traffic in Karelia and strategic importance of the information transmitted through its border were much less pronounced than in other Western parts of the Soviet “border belt.” Largely, it was the consequence of the remoteness of the border location from the Soviet centers, its length, and low population density. Judging by the official number of the counterintelligence agents dispatched through the Western border strips, 120 agents were deployed by the USSR on the Latvian strip only over the course of the operational year 1923/24 (October 1, 1923 – September 30, 1924), and on the Estonian segment over the course of 1924, 35 individual spies were deployed to the Soviet side, and 28 crossed over to Estonia.<sup>54</sup> According to Russian researchers, from 1918 to 1939 a total of approximately 135 agents were operating in Soviet Karelia. From 1919 on, the Soviet security agencies were arresting one or two Finnish agents yearly, with averagely 35 agents arrested in 1918-1939.<sup>55</sup>

As well as smuggling, intelligence intensiveness in this area was a seasonally depending task. In February 1925, for example, seasonal impassibility of roads was noted by the GPU AKSSR as a major reason for the Finnish agents’ inactivity in some borderland areas, in spite of the fact that an anti-espionage GPU operation, carried out at the same time, was described as “not particularly effective.”<sup>56</sup> There was a correlation between the border villages mentioned in the reports of the GPU in the early 1920s as “highly problematic” due to the “counter-revolutionary attitudes” of their population and the number and volume of criminal cases on smuggling charges initiated against their residents. The largest number of the cases occurred in the border villages of Sopokha and Klushina Gora (Pig Mountain), whose inhabitants even in the late 1920s “went to Finland” regularly and en masse and which were mentioned in

the regular GPU reports as the most “problematic” from the perspective of “political moods” of their inhabitants.<sup>57</sup>

The authorities took pains to classify the contrabandists as “professional” and “occasional” to fit them into the existing legislation with its basic division of professional (“*promyslovaya*”) and plain contraband. The first group consisted of the Finnish counterintelligence agents, for whom smuggling was a disguise and a side business, and professional smugglers per se who also, as a rule, served the interests of intelligence services. The second category of “contrabandists,” the non-professional one, in the 1920s included inhabitants of the Soviet borderland villages usually caught by the GPU border guard for the first time: families or groups of women regularly crossing the border for trading the clothes, provision, cattle, and agricultural tools,<sup>58</sup> Karelian teenagers, for whom it was an exciting adventure and a way to get desired commodities, and smugglers’ relatives, accused of “assisting contraband networks.”<sup>59</sup>

There were certain differences in the smuggling patterns between these two groups. For example, professional smugglers with permanent residence in the AKSSR seldom crossed the border themselves. Upon their conditional signal, their Finnish partners came directly to the line. The deal was usually carried out on the Soviet territory or at the border itself.<sup>60</sup> Ordinary peasants, non-professionals, were frequently caught at the border while crossing it and got extra charges for “illegal border crossing.”<sup>61</sup>

Distinction between smuggling and intelligence was extremely blurred in the early Soviet context. Some of the protocols of interrogation of “ordinary” Karelian peasants detained by the GPU mention “unobtrusive” questions of their Finnish contraband partners about the deployment of Soviet military detachments.<sup>62</sup>

Not only did the refugees - Karelian contrabandists - become transmitters of strategic intelligence information across the border, but they also actively assisted in keeping community transborder ties. Upon arrival in Soviet Karelian villages, they collected notes to the relatives from the local residents. Clandestine night meetings in peasants’ houses were devoted not only to the smuggling deals, but to a common practice of “sending letters with the bandits to Finland.”<sup>63</sup> Some letters were composed by the peasants themselves, some by the local village administrators, also native Karelians. The latter served a double function: they wrote petitions to the Soviet authorities, but also notes to the relatives across the border, to be transferred with the help of the “bandits.”<sup>64</sup>

Reports of the Counter-Revolutionary Section of the Karelian GPU mention the desire of the contrabandists and Finland's counterintelligence agents of Karelian origin to see their relatives as a powerful motivation for risking their lives apart from the economic incentives.<sup>65</sup> The same rationale for border crossing was prevalent in the interrogation protocols of the detained smugglers/smuggler-agents engaged in "systematic contraband," and the smugglers' relatives, contained in the contraband cases.<sup>66</sup> Despite attempts of the majority of the interrogated peasants to deny the visits of their smuggler relatives from Finland, GPU officers were frequently informed (albeit after the fact) about such visits, and, being unable to catch the smugglers and agents, monitored such households, arranging regular searches.<sup>67</sup> Sometimes, however, smugglers became victims of murder and robbery by the local peasantry, who, being detained by the border guards, "spoke Bolshevik," justifying the killing and robbing of their former neighbors who had crossed the border by the fact that they were "Finnish agents" or "contrabandists."<sup>68</sup>

During the first half of the 1920s, while processing the cases on contraband charges, the people's district courts in Russian Karelia usually took into consideration class origins, material status and educational level of the accused, as well as their smuggling experience. A criminal section of the AKSSR main court usually sentenced professional smugglers to 5-8 years of imprisonment in the Petrozavodsk correction house, or USLON (Solovki Special Camp). However, condescension of the Soviet penal justice towards the culprits of "proper origins" resulted in multiple conditional sentences.<sup>69</sup>

In cases of "non-professional" smugglers, the resulting fines, imposed by the Petrozavodsk customs council, were almost never paid. Far exceeding the peasant property appraisals, they were lifted either upon petitions of the culprits, or as "hopeless to receive."<sup>70</sup> In the confiscation cases the "professional" contrabandists appeared as poor and dispossessed as the majority of the Karelian peasantry; however, the GPU AKSSR officers complained that in many cases "professionals" managed to successfully evade the fines imposed on them, and shielded their property from auctioning by concealment of their place of residence or transfer of responsibility for smuggling to third persons.<sup>71</sup>

Reflecting growing Soviet fears of the "enemy encirclement," a stable link between border crossing, smuggling and espionage was emerging starting from the years 1925 -1926. It found its reflection in the contents of smuggling cases, when local residents charged with "assisting"



smuggling, were summarily accused of “spying connections” on a regular basis, inscribing the instrumentalization of the “Finnish danger” in mass consciousness. Stigmatization, the major outcome of hundreds of smuggling cases initiated by the Karelian GPU in the 1920s, became the primary reason for the executions in the area in 1937-1938,<sup>72</sup> and probably accounting for higher female numbers in the Karelian executions statistics of 1937-1938 than the average Soviet numbers<sup>73</sup> due to an extremely active role of women in the transborder community life a decade earlier.

## **II. “Espionage Window to Europe:” Border Controls and Trafficking at the Karelian Isthmus in the 1920s**

### ***Background: Pre-Revolutionary Economic Exchanges***

The nineteenth century border between the Great Duchy of Finland and the Governorate of St. Petersburg marked an area long fought over by Russia, Finland and Sweden in their attempts to dominate the northern tip of Europe. It was the oldest cultural divide on the Eurasian continent, with its first legal marking drawing back to Nöteborg treaty of 1323 between the Catholic Kingdom of Sweden and the Orthodox Novgorod Principality delimitating religious influence on the Karelian Isthmus.

Until 1918, the majority of the bilingual population in the area made their living through serving the inhabitants of Russian summer cottages or trading in St. Petersburg/Petrograd markets. With the adjacent Vyborg Governorate (part of the Great Duchy) being a zone of economic influence of and a site of lively exchanges with St. Petersburg, its vast *dacha* territories welcomed traders from entire Finland. In the late 1800s, the Karelian Isthmus between the Gulf of Finland in the west and Lake Ladoga in the east hosted a “customs border” with nine customs stations, and one customs (Jurkkyanen next to Ristikivi), blocking all major transborder roads but failing to stop the contrabandists. The best time for smugglers was winter, with its fine sledge path through the Gulf. However, in summer the Gulf along with Sestra River still made popular contraband routes.<sup>74</sup>

The railway line St. Petersburg-Vyborg-Helsinki, opened in 1870, was yet another important contraband corridor. It gave an impetus to the infrastructural developments in the area, and to the creation of settlements, which became centers of legal and illegal transborder trafficking, such as Terijoki. This Finnish town with the population of 10,000 and around

55,000 in high summer season by the end of the nineteenth century evolved into a center of vibrant transborder life.<sup>75</sup> In imperial times, along with Beloostrov, another station on the Finnish side, it hosted a customs post.<sup>76</sup>

From the end of the nineteenth century, cheap industrial goods, firearms, drugs and Marxist literature were actively imported from the Great Duchy of Finland to Russia through the Karelian Isthmus. St. Petersburg newspapers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were bombarded with reports of skirmishes with Finnish smugglers in the area, which was reflected in the painting "A Brawl with Finnish Smugglers" by Vasili Khudiakov (1853, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow).<sup>77</sup> But it was the Russian revolutionaries (led by Vladimir Lenin) who made a major smuggling deal accomplished at this border, with the leader of the world proletariat being successfully bargained for Finland's independence.

### ***Border Controls and Failures***

As it happened in Russian Karelia, the events of the civil war resulted in significant displacement of the population of the Petrograd Governorate, to which the Russian borderland territories of the Karelian Isthmus belonged. The changes affected the social and national composition of the population, resulting in significant decrease of its Finnish share.<sup>78</sup> The repatriation process started in spring 1921, several months after the Tartu Treaty had been signed, and was completed by 1926. By the mid-1920s, around 5,500 Ingrians and almost 11,000 Russians returned to Soviet Russia. The data on the number of the Ingrians remaining in Finland is controversial, ranging around 2,000-3,000.<sup>79</sup>

According to the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920, the border was set along the Terijoki (Sestra) River. At the closest point it was just 32 kilometers from Petrograd, the second largest city of Soviet Russia with the population of 1.614 million in 1926,<sup>80</sup> and a large industrial center, home to important military production, and a key base for the Baltic Red Banner Fleet. For Finland the Karelian Isthmus also was strategically important. This stretch of land provided the shortest route to Finland's capital, Helsinki. A relatively good road, a railway network, and absence of significant natural obstacles endowed this area with strategic significance, with Finnish historians describing it as a "key to Finland."<sup>81</sup>

As a result, neither the Soviets nor the Finns were fully comfortable with the division of 1920, with both sides beginning an intensive period of

fortification and defensive planning already in the 1920s, which, being a specific feature of this border strip, is not, however, a subject of the current study. Despite the fact that separate border guard detachments were set at this part of the border at the onset of the 1920s,<sup>82</sup> border control was no less problematic than in other areas. Even at this strategically vital border strip, in the 1920s border control infrastructure was poorly developed. With disconnected border outposts at a great distance from each other, the border itself was vaguely defined. The planned clearing of the border strip of 150 sazhen (roughly 274 m) wide began only in 1925.<sup>83</sup> As it happened in Russian Karelia, border guard and customs officials frequently found themselves helpless in relation to the large scale contraband traffic, finding consolation in occasionally detaining small groups of peasant smugglers.<sup>84</sup>

However, multiple tensions and conflicts between GPU and customs administrations, an inherent part of all early Soviet border control,<sup>85</sup> in the Petrograd (Leningrad) Customs District were much less pronounced. Reports of the Commission on the Struggle with the Contraband at the North-Western regional administration of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade (NKVT) from the 1920s on repeatedly stated "absence of any problems or conflicts" in an interagency cooperation, and described the relationship between the GPU and the Customs officials as "fully satisfactory."<sup>86</sup> The reports from particular customs posts mentioned minor frictions, but not serious conflicts leading to breaks or paralyses of controlling cross-border transactions or detaining contraband, as it happened in the case of the AKSSR.<sup>87</sup>

Partly, the reason was an active integration of the GPU structures into the economic border controls in this area. For example, in 1923 half of the chiefs of the customs outposts of the Kingisepp customs of the Administration of the Petrograd Customs district were "Chekists," appointed directly by the GPU.<sup>88</sup> In 1923, in order to establish "the closest ties between the GPU and NKVT administrations," heads of the customs outposts of the Administration of the Petrograd customs district - the Chekists with working experience - were hired by the border outposts as assistant chiefs, entrusted with the operative functions of the "struggle with economic contraband" with the salaries paid by the customs district administration.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, upon the petition of the district commission on the struggle with the contraband, the head of the secret-operative section of the GPU's third border guard special department was appointed as a "secret district inspector on the struggle with the

contraband,” with the chief function of supervising the customs outposts, managed by assistant heads of the GPU border outposts.<sup>90</sup>

Most probably, the GPU active and relatively unproblematic intervention into the economic controls was a consequence of the strategic importance of this short-ranging, 200-kilometer-long border strip and its highly politicized trafficking. Moreover, higher contraband scales and the presence of the railway, where the customs had their own sphere of activity, more or less separated from the GPU, and the source of regular income, made struggle over contraband bonuses less severe and the interagency cooperation less problematic than in Soviet Karelia. Finally, some customs staff heavily relied on their GPU neighbors in terms of logistics. For example, outposts of the Kingisepp customs functioned in the absence of adequate transportation routes and frequently could arrange the transfer of the large loads of detained contraband to the “inland” only with assistance of the local GPU border guard, who possessed motorboats.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Contraband Trade in the 1920s: Rates, Routes, and Patterns***

Contraband rates at the Karelian Isthmus, however insignificant in comparison with other parts of the Soviet “border belt,”<sup>92</sup> were the highest in the Soviet North Western region. In the 1920s the yearly sum of detained contraband at the Karelian customs district (Karelian AKSSR border strip) never exceeded its peak of 1926 (7,753 rubles). The officially detained contraband value in the marine districts of Murmansk region and Kronshtadt during the years 1923-1924 amounted to 4,018 and 6,753 rubles respectively. The share of the Karelian Isthmus at the same time ranged around 28,000-30,000 rubles.<sup>93</sup> A large share of export from the Karelian Isthmus to Petrograd consisted of provisions.

Contraband volumes had seasonal fluctuations, with sharp increase in winter times, caused by intense contacts between Russian and Soviet fishermen due to fishing permission in a neutral zone of the Gulf of Finland.<sup>94</sup> The same was true of general transborder trafficking, including the couriers activity: it reached its peak in winter and in autumn, and somehow declined in summer due to the “perils of the white nights.”<sup>95</sup>

Old forms of illegal transfers coexisted with the new ones. Human trafficking became a widespread and profitable business from 1918. A professional cohort of transborder guides of Russian refugees and of counterintelligence agents emerged from the ranks of the borderland peasantry, in service for the illegal networks located in Petrograd with

commercial agents actively and regularly searching for new clients.<sup>96</sup> Most frequently, a sea route through the Gulf of Finland was used. One-way transborder transfer cost 10,000 Finnish marks for a refugee, half of the sum paid to the guide, and half to the intermediary, precious stones making a widespread currency.<sup>97</sup> Professional counter intelligence couriers paid around 4,000-5,000 Finnish marks for receiving assistance in border crossings.<sup>98</sup>

After Russia introduced prohibition in 1914, a murky stream of Finnish liquor swept Petrograd. Special VTsIK orders of the USSR reinforced this policy.<sup>99</sup> With full prohibition of liquor trade in Finland lasting from 1919 to 1932, a total ban on the importation of alcohol in both countries turned the “additional” smuggling distribution networks into a large-scale commercial activity and the main source of alcohol supply, ushering in an “alcohol war” between smugglers on the one hand and Finnish and Soviet officials in the respective countries on the other. Liquor became the most popular and widespread currency in the borderland villages on both sides of the border, a payment for seasonal work, and a means of exchange.<sup>100</sup>

In the 1920s, the Finnish islands in the Gulf, especially Lavansaari and Seiskari, became popular barter and transit stations, hosting large portions of liquor on transit route from Estonia, later delivered to the USSR by Soviet submarines or warships.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, they hosted market sites for a lively seasonal illegal international trade.<sup>102</sup>

At the Finnish side of the border favorite smuggler routes were chain ridges in Kivenappa Volost in the space between upper reaches of the Sestra and Sadejoki rivers; in the Rauta Volost - near the remote Korle village, in the Metsäpirtti Volost – through the vast Lumisuo swamp.<sup>103</sup> At the Russian side of the border, alcohol smugglers were particularly audacious in Soikinskaya Volost of Kingisepp Uezd, accounting for the largest percentage of the contraband traffic in the region in 1924.<sup>104</sup> Infrequently, they sent signals in the direction of Finland from trees on the shore of the bay, after which fast-moving foreign motorboats entered the Soviet territorial waters. Approaching the shore, they threw into the water hundreds of cans of alcohol, the locals catching them, hiding them in the woods, and making up whole caravans sent to the rear.<sup>105</sup> The transborder railway became a popular route for a network of smuggling of precious stones and foreign currency.<sup>106</sup>

### ***Transborder Networks and Nomads***

It comes as no surprise that up to the mid-1930s this border strip was actively used as a site for the so-called “Intelligence Crossing Points (PPP)” or, in official terminology, “green border” routes not only for the Soviet counterintelligence agents, but for the couriers of the Department of International Relations of the Komintern Executive Committee (OMS IKKI), foreign representatives and delegates to the Komintern Congresses.<sup>107</sup> As a result, the Soviet-Finnish border along the Sestra River and in the Gulf was literally strewn with the transborder corridors and so-called “windows,” swarming with peasants, smugglers, communists, monarchists, spies, couriers, defectors and transborder guides.<sup>108</sup>

The military organization of the Red Finns, formed in Petrograd in autumn 1918, proclaimed “dissemination of the world revolution and collapse of the world imperialism” as its major goal. In coordination with the Finnish Communist Party (KPF), created in Moscow in 1918, it launched a regular transfer of Komintern literature through the Vyborg-Terijoki transborder route.<sup>109</sup> Secret operations of Russian anti-Bolshevik combat organizations based in Finland during the interwar period, 1917–1939, in cooperation with the intelligence services of the Finnish General Staff, also actively used this “window to Europe.”<sup>110</sup>

One of the first transborder networks after the civil war belonged to the Petrograd Combat Organization (PCO), a subject of the infamous Tagantsev case.<sup>111</sup> Apart from the White émigrés, it involved a motley category of the “border people” - Ingrian smugglers, some of them employees (or ex-employees) of the Terijoki branch of the Finnish State Police (ValPo); Russian and Ingrian peasants of the borderland areas of the Petrograd Governorate who served the PCO as couriers, hosts of the border stations, owners of safe houses, and intermediaries between the counterintelligence services and the organization itself; Russian émigrés in Finnish borderland areas.

As reflected in the materials of the investigation process, started by the Petrograd Governorate Revolutionary Tribunal as a part of the Tagantsev case in May 1921, most of the couriers as well as their assistants were of peasant or, rarely, working class background, non-party members, semi-literate, with the profession indicated as a “peasant,” a “worker,” or a “fisherman.”<sup>112</sup> Upon arrival in Soviet Russia some time they stayed at safe houses located in the borderland villages. The hosts of the safe houses actively assisted the couriers with errands in Petrograd.

Despite the couriers' close affiliations with Finnish intelligence services, their transborder political missions were extremely poorly organized. The trips were set up quite haphazardly, without basic conspirative measures undertaken prior to and during the transfers.<sup>113</sup> For example, the PCO couriers could easily switch their safe house upon crossing the border to a new one upon the new host's invitation for the reason that their original destination was "overcrowded" due to the dense seasonal illegal traffic.<sup>114</sup>

Finnish counter-intelligence couriers were regularly tried in the Finnish Vyborg court at the beginning of the 1920s, on the basis of unauthorized contraband tours.<sup>115</sup> After being dispatched from intelligence services for free sailing in the muddy waters of transborder life for "improper lifestyle," these individuals found out their illegal transborder skills were in high demand, and they were eagerly engaged as couriers for the Russian "counter-revolutionary" organizations. Even after being warned on their possible arrests, some agents went on with their business. Several PCO couriers were arrested in Soviet Russia in May 1921 while on "private contraband missions."<sup>116</sup> Actually, leading figures of the White émigré "counter-revolutionary" centers, such as David Grimm, deeply regretted their dependence on the couriers. *Kuryershchina*, including its close ties with the contraband trafficking, was quite justly considered as extremely dangerous to an entire enterprise.<sup>117</sup>

The motivation for couriers and rank-and-file participants for involvement in the transborder espionage and contraband networks had a diverse nature. In the conditions of economic devastation, giving shelter to transborder travelers of common ethnic origins was a natural way of providing a daily subsistence. Due to close economic and social ties of a transborder community prior to the events of 1917, in most cases the hosts of the safe houses at the Soviet side of the isthmus knew their visitors from imperial times.<sup>118</sup> Commonly, arrests of the owners of the borderland peasant safe houses on the Soviet side were accompanied by extraction of riches unheard of by ordinary peasants, including expensive jewelry and precious stones – a usual payment for the tasks that such families were often entrusted with: hosting the couriers, making errands to Petrograd/Leningrad with their correspondence, or accompanying agents there for security purposes, and assisting cross border transfers of the passengers through the Gulf.<sup>119</sup>

Sometimes these duties made up a family business, inherited from deceased or arrested relatives. For example, a number of relatives of those executed in course of the Tagantsev case took up their business

of maintaining safe houses at the border and running errands for transborder networks.<sup>120</sup> Some of them, during the interrogations that followed their arrests, pleaded mercy on the ground that they had no choice but “obeying their elders” who sent them to Petrograd with the correspondence and contraband.<sup>121</sup> Responding to the pressure of assisting the common “ethnic” – Finnish – cause became a primary reason for Finnish citizens remaining on the Soviet side to get involved in illegal networking; some of them were arrested in the process of preparing the documents for emigration to Finland<sup>122</sup> or were employed by the Finnish consulate in Petrograd (Leningrad).<sup>123</sup> Playing important roles in Taganstev’s organization, most of the rank-and-file participants, however, were not informed about the goals and activities of the PCO; for the most part their knowledge was limited by the fact of serving a rich and mighty “organization.”<sup>124</sup> As it happened in the case of the territory of the AKSSR, the “gender” aspect was no less pronounced in illegal transborder endeavors: women, including teenagers, not only actively assisted in contraband trafficking and espionage missions, but participated in the risky enterprises of large-scale liquor trade through the Gulf of Finland.<sup>125</sup>

For borderland peasantry involvement in illegal politicized transborder networks meant not only obtaining easy and stable means of survival, but also enjoying the illusion of belonging to the *haute société* and the luxuries and glamor offered by the restaurants and casinos of Petrograd (Leningrad), and the Finnish borderland town of Terijoki.<sup>126</sup> This motivation was frequently the case with counterintelligence agents and ex-agents of Finnish and Ingrian origins. While some TsSP agents worked without financial gratification, out of the deepest “sympathy to newly created independent Finnish government,”<sup>127</sup> for others contraband earnings made a worthy compensation for generally meager salaries. Indulging in the Terijoki and Helsinki restaurants and casinos, gambling, playing golf and billiard with White émigré officers became yet another bonus.<sup>128</sup> Being part of “counter-revolutionary” and contraband networks meant a certain “social mobility” for dispatched Finnish counterintelligence agents, couriers, and GPU agents.<sup>129</sup>

In this social milieu, boasting of “connections” with the GPU, Soviet Political Police, was extremely popular.<sup>130</sup> In their turn, some GPU officers, entrusted with investigation of large-scale contraband networks functioning in Petrograd/ Leningrad, soon ended up in service of their suspects as agents or assistants with regular salary and bonuses as it happened in the case of the Glavstroybalt administration.<sup>131</sup>



Ways of recruitment into the illegal transborder networks varied. Adolf Henriksen's<sup>132</sup> story in the PBO started with his colleague Aleksander Paiu's offer of well-paid transborder errands serving a "long-term business of Schmidt"<sup>133</sup> with whom he got in touch through a British agent. In Paiu's words, "there is nothing to do, just weekly bring some letters to Russia and take the responses to Finland."<sup>134</sup>

However, in the cases of the Soviet citizens of Russian origins, "blind" involvement frequently occurred. Heads of the village councils, inspectors, heads of the local harvesting sections, cabmen, drivers – actively traveling on business to Petrograd (Leningrad), played minor, but important roles of inadvertent couriers, intermediaries, responsible persons for transborder transfers of participants or drivers in the illicit transborder networks; they claimed during the interrogations and confrontations that they participated without knowledge of the networks and financial bonuses, at least initially.<sup>135</sup> Others ended up in court after giving a lift to their acquaintances a couple of times during their business trips in the border areas,<sup>136</sup> or after being visited once by a counterintelligence or a "counter-revolutionary" agent under a false identity.<sup>137</sup> As is turned out in the course of the investigation proceedings, active members of the PBO had enrolled in village councils for minor positions. In the conditions of the cadres deficit they were taken without a prior experience or appropriate education.<sup>138</sup>

The simplest reason for becoming a courier or a counterintelligence agent was a physical neighborhood. As indicated in the protocols of interrogations of several intelligence agents and the couriers, residence in or near the transit centers of illegal networks on the Finnish side of the border almost certainly meant an early or late involvement. Certain locations at the Finnish side of the border, small settlements hosting TsSP quarters such as Terijoki, or Tyrisevyalda<sup>139</sup> had a large share of their residents involved in illegal networking.<sup>140</sup> On the Soviet side, railway station Gorskaya was an example of such a "spying and contraband settlement."<sup>141</sup>

Finally, intensive military-ideological training that took place on both sides of the Soviet-Finnish border from 1918,<sup>142</sup> prepared not only a militarized support of the newly created states, but also a cohort of armed transborder nomads. From the times of the Civil War the agents of Finnish and Soviet intelligence services served as headhunters who surfed the transborder space in search for displaced and disoriented peasantry.<sup>143</sup> On the Soviet side of the border, nine-month courses at the Military

School of Red Officers in Petrograd were opened since 1918, for which students were illegally recruited in Finland and transferred to the USSR, mostly through the Karelian Isthmus.<sup>144</sup> Accordingly, Karelian refugees to Finland received an intense military drill in hopes for making a viable force for retrieving Eastern Karelian territories.<sup>145</sup> Some of the graduates, instead of serving the Finnish national or Soviet political cause, actively used newly acquired connections and skills for making quick money after the paramilitary organizations on both sides of the border had dissolved into the regular border guard troops and illegal contraband networks.<sup>146</sup> Many of the transborder mercenaries did not have any convictions, but easily made them up while under arrest, either on ethnic grounds (for in their majority they were Finnish or Karelians) if arrested in Finland, or social and political, claiming the peasant origins or proletarian pedigree if arrested by the Soviet GPU.<sup>147</sup>

Interrelations within the illicit contraband, “Finnish espionage,” and “counter-revolutionary” networks operating in the Petrograd/Leningrad area and border territories of the Karelian Isthmus reflect social hierarchies, contradictions and internal rivalry inside these circles. Scholars mention frictions between the Finnish intelligence officers and White émigrés, ethnic Russians, caused by the reluctance of the latter to recognize Finland’s independence due to their ideal of restoring the Russian Empire.<sup>148</sup>

But the feeble alliances were torn apart not only by interethnic, national or political contradictions. The dependance of the White émigrés upon the rank-and-file transborder actors of peasant or proletarian origins became a disaster for some of them, threatening to disrupt the entire enterprise. A brother of Sergey Fedorov,<sup>149</sup> an active agent and an ardent counter-revolutionary Nikolay Fedorov liked to note to his peasant transborder guides and hosts, “*gus’ svin’e ne tovarisch*” (“A goose is no companion for a pig”), causing the annoyance and fury of some of them, conflicts being mitigated by Anatoly Tol.’<sup>150</sup> At the same time, the unsuccessful border crossing endeavors of the White émigrés were followed by their pleas of help to their peasant accomplices on the Soviet side.<sup>151</sup>

During the 1920s the Soviet-Finnish transborder space at the Karelian Isthmus became a market, with the intelligence information being the most important currency. Some White émigré officers, residing in Finland at the beginning of the 1920s served more than one General Staff, and the information provided by them became a subject of rivalry among the intelligence services, influencing their uneasy relations.<sup>152</sup> Infrequent

refusals by some intelligence officers to pay unofficial couriers for their missions on the pretext that the information supplied was “outdated” resulted in long-term hostilities.<sup>153</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, however, the border at the Karelian Isthmus finally closed. The banks of the River Sestra were tightened with rows of barbed wire, mainly from the side of Soviet Russia. All bridges over the river were blown up except for the only railway bridge near the Beloostrov station, which put on all rail traffic between Finland and the USSR. The border guard was distributed along the entire border strip. It was one of the first Soviet borders to be actually “sealed,” and, being reinforced by the Mannerheim line on the Finnish side, provided a stern military divide between the hostile states.

## Conclusion

Historical practices of the European borders demonstrate that theirs was a history of long-term, contradictory evolution of major functions of the border protection: military, economic and political. And never were these contradictions so poignant and fierce as during the early Soviet years. Partly it was the consequence of the fact that initially the Soviet project combined the impulses to break the borders and export the revolution to the neighboring countries and to seal them in an obsessive fear of the borderland ethnic minorities’ treachery,<sup>154</sup> partly because of the unavoidable necessity to rely on the border controls practiced in the Russian Empire.

Thus, the history of the Soviet borders is not only a history of their gradual sealing,<sup>155</sup> but also of managerial practices and inter-agency alliances that were adapted to the requirements of the Soviet authorities or failed in the new, increasingly politicized contexts. Some of these practices, such as designation of certain borderland territories as “the most endangered border zones,” preparing them for future warfare, heavy limitations put on their industrial and infrastructural development and cleansing them from “unreliable elements,”<sup>156</sup> would assume extreme forms under “high Stalinism.” Various other, “civil,” or “economic” models of the border protection were eliminated due to their incompatibility with the mounting political pressures, military buildup and “closure” of the Soviet borders.

General implementation of Soviet border military and economic controls was based on imperial “systemic” political and economic visions

that enabled the Soviet leaders to interpret them as a complex or *ensemble* with the borders closely intertwined with each other. However, as the administrators of several border areas complained throughout the 1920s, a global imperial vision in the context of *Soviet* security dilemmas frequently disregarded local circumstances such as geographical specifications of the borders, environmental factors, population density and transborder activities, and local administrations' necessities. Nevertheless, the cooperation and rivalry between economic and military-political border control agencies in the early Soviet context varied in different regional frameworks, and lasted until the end of the 1920s. Afterwards, the increasing political pressures from the center prevented any local initiative in solving multiple albeit similar problems of border regime.<sup>157</sup>

In the 1920s, however, one of the most poignant problems of the Soviet border controls was the authorities' impotence in regard to the illegal cross border trafficking, vibrant at all Soviet borders. In the North-Western dimension— at the Russo-Finnish border - the natural landscape of Russian Karelia and the Karelian Isthmus, with its large woodlands, dozens of medium and small lakes and rivers with marshy or rocky steep banks, rocky ridges and numerous large boulders gave ample grounds for illicit cross border trade, flourishing in the region for centuries and receiving a new impetus from 1917.

The transformed post-imperial Northwestern border space not only became a source of economic survival, allowing borderland population with opportunities to withstand the deprivations of the Civil War, but a site of resistance, generating new social and cultural landscapes supporting anti-Soviet networks. On the background of imperial transborder ties new cross-border networks emerged after 1917, geared by the military and politicized Bolshevik plans of exporting the revolution, the Finnish military-nationalist responses, allied with the White émigré revanchist plans. A new category of the "border people" emerged in the Russian North-West - exiles and expatriates, some of them having received ideological and military training, others officially enrolling into the intelligence services and, dropping out of them, continuing to run well-paid but risky transborder errands.

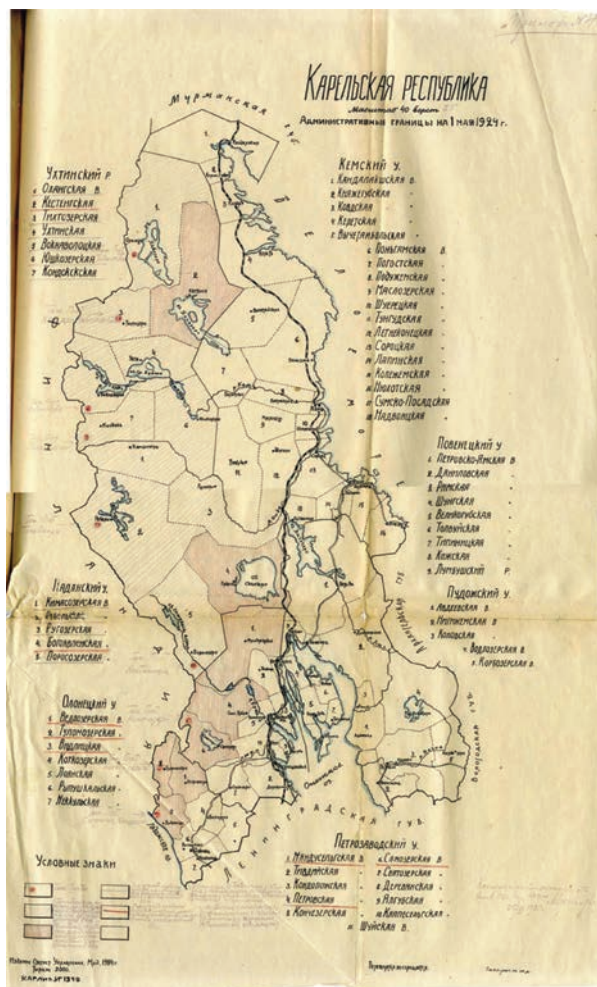
These Finnish, Karelian, and, to a lesser extent, Russian borderlanders of peasant origins for some time successfully resisted increasingly muscular military and political border controls in the previously unimpeded contact zone – a cultural space of multiple intermingled and false identities. While couriers usually disguised themselves as contrabandists, contrabandists

infrequently, out of desire to make an impression on their co-workers, claimed themselves as couriers and counter-intelligence agents.<sup>158</sup> Many of them failed due to their lenience towards what was described in the Soviet sources as “amoral lifestyle,” and drowned entire networks and organizations.

However, there was a specificity to the previously “transparent” post-imperial border sectors. Intensiveness of transborder trafficking, its contents, politization, ethnic composition of the participants, strategic importance of the information circulated across the border differed even within one state border framework depending on the multiplicity of factors, starting with the geopolitical location of the border strip, its proximity to the Soviet and Western European political centers, ethnic composition of the borderland population, and logic of mass transborder migrations during and after the civil war.

In Karelia, the revolution, the Civil War, and the dismantling of paramilitary Finnish organizations, such as the Eastern-Karelian Committee, active during the Karelian uprising, along with an incomplete repatriation, turned many of peasant peddlers - *korobeiniki* – into transborder nomads, who, engaging in contraband, regularly visited their families and relatives in Finland or Soviet Karelia. Most of the contrabandists, designated as “bandits” in Soviet terminology, played extremely important roles in the local peasant communities, not only supplying them with the means of survival, but assisting in keeping cross-border family ties. At the transborder space of the Karelian Isthmus, in addition to regular smuggling, a highly politicized transborder trafficking emerged, including refugee trafficking, which, with intense circulation of intelligence information, made this area a site of unrealized anti-Bolshevik plans. This transborder culture, albeit in a changed form, existed until the mid-1930s, when the OGPU repressive operations not only cut the numbers of “transborder nomads,” leaving just a few counterintelligence agents well-known to each other to operate in the Soviet-Finnish border space,<sup>159</sup> but transformed territories adjacent to the border into the “dead zone.”

## Appendix



Karelian Republic. May 1, 1924. Petrozavodsk Customs District of Petrozavodsk Customs Area (created in 1922) with nine customs outposts (marked by red dots along the Soviet-Finnish border), managed by the Petrozavodsk customs.

Courtesy Repukhova Oksana, "Karelskaya tamozhnya v 20- kh godakh," in CARELiCA: Nauchnyi elektronnyi zhurnal, № 2/2014 (12), P. 24. URL: [http://carelica.petsu.ru/CARELiCA/\\_2\\_2014\\_\(12\)/Articles/Articles.html](http://carelica.petsu.ru/CARELiCA/_2_2014_(12)/Articles/Articles.html)



Heimosodat – the Finnish Kinship Wars of 1918-1922

<http://www.alternativefinland.com/the-heimosodat-the-kinship-wars-of-1918-1922-part-1/>





Karel'ian Isthmus, end of the 1930s. Mannerheim line.

<https://topwar.ru/173986-reshimost-finljandii-voevat-prichiny-i-posledstvija-sovetsko-finskoj-vojny.html>



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Scott J., *Agenda for Border Studies. Borders: political arenas, sites of contestation, spaces of Possibility*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing House, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Konrad V., "Toward a Theory of Borders in Motion" in *Journal of Borderland Studies*. March 2015, 30(1):1-17; Brunet-Jailly E., "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective" in *Geopolitics*, 2005, 10(4):633-649.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, in relation to the North-Western area, see the following discussion: Golubev A., Osipov A., "Introduction to the Forum: Civil Wars, Visions of Statehood and Quasi-State Actors in the Northwest of the Former Russian Empire," in *Ab Imperio*, 2/2019: 186-196.
- <sup>4</sup> Dullen S., *Uplotnenie granits. K istokam sovetskoi politiki, 1920-1940-e gody*, NLO: 2019, URL: <https://mybook.ru/author/sabin-dyullen/uplotnenie-granic/reader/>
- <sup>5</sup> Shlyakhter A., "Smuggler States: Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Contraband Trade Across the Soviet Frontier, 1919-1924," 2020, PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago.
- <sup>6</sup> Paasi A., *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*, New Jersey: Wiley, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd in 1914 and then Leningrad in 1924 up to 1991.
- <sup>8</sup> Petrograd Guberniya (1914 – 1924) was then renamed Leningrad Guberniya, and later, from 1927 on, called Leningrad Oblast.
- <sup>9</sup> Logav. F. P- 2205. Op. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Rgae F. 413. The Ministry of the Foreign Trade of the USSR.
- <sup>11</sup> Northern Karelia is known for retention and accumulation of a body of cultural traditions upon which the emergent Finnish nation drew selectively during the nineteenth centur. Paasi, A., "Inclusion, exclusion and the construction of territorial identities. Boundaries in the globalizing geopolitical landscape" in *Nordisk Samhallsgeografisk Tidskrift*, No. 23, October 1996: 6-23.
- <sup>12</sup> NARK. F. P-378. Op. 4, D. 6. P. 29. P. 65.
- <sup>13</sup> NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 6/ 27. P. 74.
- <sup>14</sup> Mainio A., "The Fight for the Russian Empire: Finland and White Russian Combat Organizations, 1917–1939" in *Ab Imperio*, 2/2019, P. 290.
- <sup>15</sup> *Pogranichnye voiska SSSR. 1918-1928: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, Moscow: Nauka, 1973.
- <sup>16</sup> NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 27. P74. During the 1920s, joint Soviet-Finnish commissions were set up several times to define the exact border line, but the work was never accomplished. Rupasov A., Chistikov A., *Sovetsko-finyandskaya granitsa 1918-1938: Ocherki istorii*, St. Petersburg, 2007.

- <sup>17</sup> Major Soviet leading defense bodies, such as Defense Committee at the Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR based its strategic military planning of the Soviet borders defense on the prerevolutionary division into Eastern (Asian) and Western (European) borders. The European borders included three Western military districts: Leningrad, Byelorussian, and Ukrainian, while the so-called "Asian" borders were divided into Transcaucasian, Middle Asian, and Far Eastern military districts. Protocol of the meeting at the Military-Marine inspection of the NK RKI, June 16, 1925. GARF. F. 374. Op. 28. D. 748. P. 2–3. Similar logic can be traced in relation to the economic border protection arrangements, namely, the division of the Soviet borders into the Customs sectors. Logav F. P-3441. Op. 7. D. 12. P. 9.
- <sup>18</sup> The customs chain at the Soviet Finnish border in the Olonets part of Karelia that was installed and began to operate in 1919 duplicated imperial arrangements, which had existed in the area from 1785 to 1809. NARK. F. P-378, Op. 4, D. 6. P. 29. P. 66. For the late eighteenth-century arrangements of the Karelian customs dislocation, see: "An opinion of the Olonets viceroyalty board on the dislocation of the border customs chain between Swedish kingdom and this guberniya," from July 1, 1785, NARK. F. 2. Op. 61. D. 1/12. Pp. 36–40. The Petrozavodsk Customs district, finally created in August 1922 as a branch of the Petrograd customs area, included 9 customs outposts and a customs in Petrozavodsk. NARK. F. P-544. Op. 1. D. 1/3. P. 97.
- <sup>19</sup> NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 27. P.79.
- <sup>20</sup> Ermolaeva O. "The Role of the Environment in (B)order-Making and Border Crossing in Russian Karelia from the Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Century," a manuscript to be published in the collective monograph in the CES-WSF project, 2021-22.
- <sup>21</sup> NARK. F. P-378, Op. 4, D. 1/1. P.17.
- <sup>22</sup> North Karelian border, (as other Russian imperial borders) broadened this function after the Polish uprising, when the local administration regularly provided the existing customs offices with the detailed lists of the outcasts and rebels. While Customs officials in Northern Karelia vigorously checked the entrants into the Russian empire, sorting out political rebels and outcasts, police and border guards regularly assisted them in "combatting the contraband." NARK. F. 589. Op. 1. D. ½.
- <sup>23</sup> It was approved by the Chairman of the TsIK USSR Mikhail Kalinin and the Secretary of the TsIK USSR Avel Enukidze, and also declared by the Order of the OGPU from July 14, 1921 no. 396/551/94 "The Regulation on the Protection of the Border of the USSR." Regarding the issues of combatting espionage and smuggling border guard units were subordinated to the Counter-Revolutionary Department (KRO) of the local GPU branches.

- 24 NARK. F. P-544. Op. 2, D. 4/68. P. 96. Legal cross-border trade with Finland included exporting timber and saw boards, importing equipment, agricultural machinery and tools, parts for gas pipes, textiles, fishing supplies, yarn, iron, tools, leather, and coffee.
- 25 NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 27. P. 5-10.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 The commission along with its local branches existed until 1927, when the final power transfer to the OGPU was accomplished. *Pogranichnye voiska SSSR, 1918 – 1928*. P. 253.
- 28 RGAE. F. 413. Op. 14. D. 190. P. 13 -19.
- 29 The system of encouraging the detainers of the contraband began to form in the eighteenth century; the customs charter of 1755 included Chapter Four “On the denunciations of concealment of duties of goods and how to deal with them” which promised an award to the whistleblowers in the form of half of the confiscated goods. *Tamozhennyi ustav 1755 goda*, St. Petersburg, 1755, URL: <https://www.prilib.ru/item/316009>; later, however, the proportions changed. According to the SNK decree “On the award of contraband detainers,” signed by the SNK chief V. Ulyanov-Lenin on February 1, 1922, the bonuses included 20% of the detained amount, one third of which went to the “direct detainers,” one third to the “indirect” ones, and the last third was divided between customs employees of the district. NARK. F. P – 544. Op. 1, D 1/3. P. 16.
- 30 RGAE. F. 413. Op. 11. D. 210; An instruction to this effect was sent to the district Customs administrations: NARK. F. P- 275, Op. 1, D. ½. P. 48, 60.
- 31 RGAE. F. P- 413. Op. 11. D. 210; NARK. F. P-275. Op. 1. D. ½. P. 60.
- 32 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 24/539.
- 33 NARK. P-641 Op. 1. D. 53. For example, the customs officers followed the decree of the SNK RSFSR “On Customs Border Protection” from September 1, 1922, while GPU AKSSR border guards received instructions that openly contradicted it.
- 34 NARK. F. P-378. Op. 4. D. 3. P. 20.
- 35 Lyapustin S., “Ob istorii ispolzovaniia tamozhennymi organami Rossii vozmozhnostei agenturnogo apparata v bor’be s kontrabandoi,” in *Tamozhennaya politika Rossii na Dalnem Vostoke*, Pp. 111 – 116.
- 36 *Pogranichnye voiska*...P. 226.
- 37 NARK. F. P- 275. Op. 1, 1/2. P. 2.
- 38 NARK. F. P-378. Op. 4. D. 1/8/ P. 6.
- 39 NARK. F. P -378. Op. 4, D. 1/7. P. 8-15.
- 40 NARK. F.P-378. Op. 4.D. 1/7. P. 56-57
- 41 NARK. F. P-378. Op 4. D. 6. P. 1.
- 42 NARK. F. P-378. Op. 4. D. 6. P. 10.
- 43 NARK. F. P-378. Op. 4. D. 1/8. P. 7-10.

- 44 Agamirzoev K. *Neizvestnye stranitsy tamozhennogo dela na severo-zapade Rossii i v Karelii v 1918 – 1945 gg.* Kostomuksha, 2003.
- 45 Egorov A., *Pskovskie pogranichnye raiony v 1920 – 1930-e gg.* (dissertation), St.Petersburg, 1998, P. 26.
- 46 NARK. F. 277. Op. 1. D. 30/23. P. 2.
- 47 NARK. F. P-378, Op. 4, D. 6. P. 29. P. 69.
- 48 According to some estimations, from the 12,479 refugees who left Russian Karelia in 1921-1922, 11,239 went to Finland. Repukhova, O. "Repatriatsiia bezhentsev v Kareliyu v 1920-kh godakh d kontekste mobilizatsionnoi podgotovki" in *The World of Scientific Discoveries/V Mire Nauchnykh Otkrytiy*, 2015, 67 , issue 7, 9: 3243-3253, URL: <http://naukarus.com/repatriatsiya-bezhentsev-v-kareliyu-v-1920-h-gg-v-kontekste-mobilizatsionnoy-podgotovki>. Although, in comparison with the general population numbers of Russian Karelia at that time, the refugees amounted to around 6%, in some borderland parishes around 80-90% of the population left. Later on, in the course of the 1920s, from 6,000 to 8,000 Karelians returned home, around 5,000 stayed in Finland. Takala I. "Granitsa na zamke! Osobennosti gosudarstvennogo terrora v Karel'skom prigranich'e 1920 – pervoi poloviny 1930 gg.," in *Almanakh severoevropeiskikh i baltiiskikh issledovaniy*, 2016, Issue 1, pp. 137-138.
- 49 The conditions of the amnesty itself contributed to the "split families effect" to retain the land and property remaining in Soviet Karelia. According to the regulations of 1925, it was to be transferred to the state if the owner, did not return, so multiple refugee families split, with some family members returning to the USSR, and others staying in Finland during the last year of the amnesty. E. A. Gyulling: *Pervyi Rukovoditel' Sovetskoj Karelii. Dokumentny i materialy*, Y.A. Kilin, ed. Petrozavodsk, 2020, Pp. 420, 423.
- 50 NARK. F. P-544. Pp. 3. D. 4/2.
- 51 Shlyakhter A., *Smuggler States: Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Contraband Trade Across the Soviet Frontier, 1919-1924*, 2020, p. 57.
- 52 Shlyakhter A., *Smuggler States: Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Contraband Trade Across the Soviet Frontier, 1919-1924*, 2020, P. 352.
- 53 NARK. F. P-382. Op.1. D. 23/530. P. 33; D. 25/568, pp. 220; 382. Judging on such materials, however, it is difficult to determine the nationality of the Finnish "agents." GPU border guard officers marked them as "Finns", with remarks that this term rather denoted country of service rather than nationality. NARK. F. P-382, Op.1, D. 23/530
- 54 Data taken from the report by A. Artuzov, the chief of the head of Counterintelligence Department (*Kontrrazvedyvatel'nyi Otdel*, or KRO) of the OGPU to OGPU Chairman Dzerzhinsky in November 1924. In Shlyakhter A. *Smuggler States: Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Contraband Trade Across the Soviet Frontier, 1919-1924*, 2020, PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, p. 352.

- 55 The real number of the actually dispatched agents, of course, is likely to exceed these numbers. Laidinen E., Verigin S., *Finnskaya razvedka protiv sovetskoy Rossii*, P. 173.
- 56 NARK. F. P - 689. Op. 1. D. 8/81. P. 123.
- 57 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 21/466.
- 58 NARK. F. P-382. D. 24/ 540.
- 59 NARK. F. P-382. D. 24/541. Pp. 1 – 42. Teenagers were usual figurants in the criminal premises of “assisting the contraband.” NARK. F. P-382. Op. 4. D. 2/16. P. 7.
- 60 NARK. F. P-382. D. 23/527. P. 37; D. 24/ 540. P. 38.
- 61 NARK. F. P-382. D. 24/550. P. 16. While proceeding the cases on the basis of Article 97 of the Soviet Penal Code (professional contraband), the district People’s court took into the consideration the class origins, material status, and the level of literacy of the accused, and, if it turned out to be “simple,” not “professional” contraband, the sentence could be 6 months or one year of conditional imprisonment.
- 62 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 4. D. 25/568. P. 220.
- 63 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 22/485. P. 16-17.
- 64 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 22/485. P. 17.
- 65 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 22/485. P. 9.
- 66 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 21/480; D. 21/469.
- 67 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. D. 21/480. P. 8.
- 68 NARK. F.P-382. Op. 1, D. 24/539.
- 69 NARK. F. P-382. Op. 1. P. 21/ 469. P. 72. For the evolution of the Soviet anti-smuggling legislature and the increasing role of the Special Collegium of the OGPU in this process see Schlachter A., *Smuggler States*, P. 450.
- 70 NARK. F. P-382, Op. 1. D. 26/614. P. 33.
- 71 NARK. F. P-544. Op. 1, D 1/3. P. 105.
- 72 Chukhin I., *Karelia -1937: Ideologiya i praktika terrora*, Petrozavodsk, 1997, pp. 88-98.
- 73 Takala I. “Bolshoi Terror v Karelii” in *Almanakh severoevropeikikh i baltiiskikh issledovaniy* [Nordic and Baltic Studies Review] 2018, Issue 3, P. 186.
- 74 LOGAV. F. 1. Op. 2. Dd. 678, 681, 683, 687 – 688.
- 75 From 1939 it was renamed Sestroretsk, and became a Soviet suburban town on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, 50 kilometers from Leningrad.
- 76 For the list of Finnish customs posts along the border with Soviet Russia see LOGAV. F. 1. Op. 11. D. 1.
- 77 *Runivers library digital collection*. [https://runivers.ru/gal/gallery-all.php?SECTION\\_ID=7072&ELEMENT\\_ID=373136](https://runivers.ru/gal/gallery-all.php?SECTION_ID=7072&ELEMENT_ID=373136)
- 78 For the most part the decrease was a result of the population exodus to Finland. Scholarly estimations slightly vary. Some studies indicate, at

- the end of the 1922, with its peak of the refugees numbers, the overall number amounted to around 33,000, with approximately 14,000 refugees having arrived from Russian Karelia, and the rest from Ingria. Repukhova, O. "Repatriatsiia bezhentssev v Kareliyu v 1920-kh godakh v kontekste mobilizatsionnoi podgotovki" in *The World of Scientific Discoveries/V Mire Nauchnykh Otkrytiy* [Repatriation of Refugees to Karelia in the 1920s in the Context of Mobilization Preparation], 2015, 67, issues 7, 9: 3243-3253, URL: <http://naukarus.com/repatriatsiya-bezhentssev-v-kareliyu-v-1920-h-gg-v-kontekste-mobilizatsionnoy-podgotovki>. According to other estimations, in 1922 approximately 33,500 former Russian subjects remained in Finland, of whom 19,000 were identified as ethnic Russians and the rest predominantly as Ingrians, East Karelians, and Finns. Mainio A. P. "The Fight for the Russian Empire: Finland and White Russian Combat Organizations, 1917–1939," P. 294.
- 79 Musaev V. I. *Politicheskaya istoriia Ingermanlandii v kontse XIX – XX veke*, St. Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Instituta Istorii RAN "Nestor-Istoriia," 2003, P. 174, URL: <https://histrf.ru/read/articles/politichieskaia-istoriia-inghiermanlandii-v-kontsie-nineteenth-xx-viekie>, P. 201.
80. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Moscow: Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia, 1969 – 1986, URL: <https://www.booksite.ru/fulltext/1/001/008/069/513.htm>
- 81 Irincheev B., *The Mannerheim Line 1920–39: Finnish Fortifications of the Winter War*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, P. 4.
- 82 Establishment of the border security at this border strip was completed in 1925, when the OGPU troops formed the Sestroretsky Border Guard, which on April 2, 1926, was renamed as the 5th Sestroretsky Border Guard (5th SPO), subordinated to the Border Guard Management, with the headquarters in Sestroretsk. Balashov E., *Finskaya granitsa: kontrabandisty i agenty OGPU*, P. 19.
- 83 Rupasov A., Chistikov A. *Sovetsko-finlyandskaya granitsa. 1918-1938: Ocherki istorii*, St. Petersburg, 2007.
- 84 GARF. F. 374. Op. 28. D. 748. P. 39; LOGAV. F. P-3944. Pp. 1. Pp. 40-69; F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 44. P. 43.
- 85 For example, for the interagency rivalry at the Sino-Soviet border see: RGIA DV. F. P-1639. Op. 1. D. 60; Belyaeva N., *Tamozhennoe delo v Dalnevostochnoi Respublike*, Vladivostok, 2018. P. 38; Lyapustin S. N., "Ob istorii ispolzovaniia tamozhennymi organami Rossii vozmozhnostei agenturnogo apparata v bor'be s kontrabandoi" in *Tamozhennaya politika Rossii na Dalnem Vostoke* no. 4 (73) /2015, P. 116.
- 86 LOGAV. F. P-3944. Op. 1. D. 2. Pp. 18. 51; F. P-3441. Op. 7. D. 7. P. 1, 5; F. P -2205 Op. 1. D. 56.
- 87 LOGAV. F. P-3441. Op. 7. D. 7. P. 46. Most frequently, minor conflicts occurred over the questions of the GPU's intervention into the passengers'

luggage inspections at the railway and were resolved during regular district commission sessions. LOGAV. F. P-3441 Op. 7. D. 12. P. 83.

88 LOGAV. F. P. 3441 Op. 7. D. 1. P. 11.

89 This idea was for the first time proposed during the December 1922 session of the Petrograd district commission on the combat with the contraband. LOGAV. F. P. 3441. Op. 7. D. 1. P. 7.

90 LOGAV. F. P. 3441. Op. 7. D. 1. P. 8.

91 LOGAV. F. P-3441 Op. 7. D. 7. P. 54.

92 For example, during the 1922/23 fiscal year (October 1, 1922 – September 30, 1923), officials in Soviet Ukraine alone recorded over 6,700 seizures of imported contraband goods, valued at nearly 670,000 rubles; these had presumably come almost entirely from Poland. Poland was also the likely source of well over half of the 9,540 separate seizures of contraband imports, valued at over 760,000 rubles, which the authorities carried out in the Western Customs District. Schlyachter, A., *The Smuggler States*, P. 385. At the Sino-Soviet frontier, according to a report of the Dal'revkom, the Far Eastern Revolutionary Committee, the estimated value of contraband assets in 1924 at the borders of the Soviet Union's Far East constituted about one-third of those of its European borderlands. The population in the European territories, however, was ninety times the population of the Soviet Far East. Urbansky S., *Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2020, P. 129; in 1923/24, in comparison with 22,808 contraband arrests made at the entire western border, 13,425 smuggling arrests were accomplished in just one Far Eastern district. *Pogranichnye voiska SSSR. 1918-1928: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, Moscow: Nauka, 1973, P. 99.

93 NARK. F. P-690. Op. 1. D. 27. P. 79.

94 LOGAV. F. P-3944. Op. 1. D. 4. P. 5.

95 LOGAV. F. P- 2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 26.

96 LOGAV. F. P-2205. D. 19. Op. 1. Pp. 10, 51; D. 993.

97 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. P. 89; D. 19 b. P. 104.

98 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 26.

99 The Soviet policy towards alcohol selling was set on prohibition until TsIK decree of 1925 that made it legal.

100 LOGAV. F. P- 2205. Op. 1. D. 39. P. 110.

101 LOGAV. F. P-3441 Op. 7. D. 7. P. 14.

102 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 177. P. 41; Pp. 1. D. 44. P. 9.

103 Tuokko, Kaino. *Na granitse nespokoino*[Rajalla rauhatonta]. (Saarijarven Offset Oy, 2000), URL: <http://terijoki.spb.ru>. P. 189.

104 LOGAV. P-3441. Op. 7. D. 7. P. 61.

105 LOGAV. F. P-3441. Op. 7. D. 7. P. 1.

106 LOGAV. F. P-3944. Op. 1. D. 4. P. 27; F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19 b. P. 109.

- 107 Mainio A. "The Fight for the Russian Empire: Finland and White Russian Combat Organizations, 1917–1939," Pp. 289-309.
- 108 Tuokko, Kaino., *Na granitse nespokoino* [Rajalla rauhatonta], Saarijarven Offset Oy, 2000, P. 188, URL: <http://terijoki.spb.ru>.
- 109 Balashov E., *Finskaya granitsa: kontrabandisty i agenty OGPU*.
- 110 It was a transborder route for the well-known Trust's clandestine operations, in the course of which networks of different Western countries and émigré organizations targeting Soviet Russia were controlled by the OGPU in 1922–1927. Mainio A. "The Fight for the Russian Empire: Finland and White Russian Combat Organizations, 1917–1939" *Ab Imperio*. 2/2019, Pp. 296 - 300.
- 111 Resistance group known as the Petrograd Combat Organization, formed in the city of Petrograd, and headed by Vladimir Tagantsev, a young professor of geography at Petrograd State University. Despite the fact that the case itself has received an ample scholarly and public attention, not the least due to the fact of famous Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev being its most famous victim, most of its history is still concealed from the public. Of the entire investigation materials of the Tagantsev conspiracy, only three volumes are available to researchers, and 383 are still closed in the Russian state security archives (Tsentralny Arkhiv FSB Rossii). In total, 833 people were arrested in the case of the Petrograd Combat Organization of V.N. Tagantsev in 1921. 96 of the accused were executed or shot while being detained. Chernyaev V. Yu., "Delo 'Petrogradskoi boevoi organizatsii'." *Repressirovannye geologi*, Moscow-St. Petersburg, 1999, Pp. 391- 395, URL: <http://www.encspb.ru/object/2855694419?lc=ru>. Upon the Memorial Society organization request it was announced that an access to the materials would be opened in 2042.
- 112 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 65 p. 164; D. 19, 19 a, 19 b. 19 v.
- 113 LOGAV. F. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 104; Chernyaev V. Yu. Delo "Petrogradskoi boevoi organizatsii" *Repressirovannye geologi*, P. 186.
- 114 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19 b. P. 113.
- 115 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 65. P. 159.
- 116 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19. P.107, P. 22-26; D. 65. P. 10 - 11.
- 117 David Grimm, a prominent Petersburg lawyer and an active member of the White émigré "counter-revolutionary" organizations residing in Helsinki at the very beginning of the 1920s. Grimm, David Davidovich in *Encyclopedicheskyy slovar Brokgauza i Efrona v 86 tomakh*. St. Petersburg, 1890—1907.
- 118 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19 a. Pp. 12-40; D. 19. P. 26; D. 39. P. 110.
- 119 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19. P. 114.
- 120 LOGAV. F. P- 2205, Op. 1. D. 19 b. P. 114; D.19. P. 141.
- 121 LOGAV. F. P- 2205. Op. 1. D. 19 v. P. 8.
- 122 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 96.



- 123 LOGAV. F. P -2205. Op. 1. D. 19 b. P. 37.
- 124 LOGAV. F. P- 2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 128; Chernyaev V. Yu. "Delo  
'Petrogradskoi boevoi organizatsii'," *Repressirovannye geologi*, P. 195.
- 125 LOGAV. F. P -2205. Op. 1. D. 56. Pp. 23; 36.
- 126 LOGAV. F. P -2205. Op. 1, D. 38. Pp. 33-102.
- 127 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 1. D. 19. P. 36.
- 128 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 65. P. 26.
- 129 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 65. P. 26; P. 160; D. 38. P. 100.
- 130 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 38. P. 100; D. 19 b. P. 16.
- 131 LOGAV. F. P -2205. Op. 1. D. 38.
- 132 An ex-Finnish counter intelligence agent, actively assisting PBO, whose arrest  
in 1921 and connections within the PBO network became the ground for  
initiating a number of criminal cases on a large number of "rank-and-file"  
PBO members.
- 133 The chief of the White émigré organization Soyuz Vozrozhdeniya who  
coordinated the work of this organization in Russia.
- 134 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19 b. P. 113.
- 135 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 58; D. 29 a. P. 42; F. P- 2205. Op. 1.  
D. 65. Pp. 17, 26.
- 136 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. Pp. 2-181.
- 137 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. P. 22.
- 138 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. P. 42.
- 139 This settlement was marked in the investigation materials as a popular point  
of Finnish agents' departure to Soviet Russia via the sea route and the origin  
of some Finnish counter-intelligence agents. However, the search for the  
Finnish version of the settlement and its current name was unsuccessful.  
LOGAV. F. P-2205. D. 19. Op. 1. P. 9; P. 144.
- 140 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19. Pp. 9; 107; D. 65. Pp. 10, 38.
- 141 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 111; D. 65. P. 26.
- 142 Takala I., "Granitsa na zamke! Osobennosti gosudarsvennogo terrora v  
Karel'skom prigranich'e 1920 – pervoi poloviny 1930 gg.," in *Almanakh  
severoevropeikh i baltiiskikh issledovaniy*, 2016, Issue 1, P. 137; Musaev  
V.I., *Politicheskaya istoriia Ingermanlandii v kontse XIX – XX veke*, St.  
Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Instituta Istorii RAN "Nestor-  
Istorii," 2003, Pp. 212-213.
- 143 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 137. P. 9; 31.
- 144 Tuokko K. Na granitse nespokoino..., P. 209;
- 145 Neizvestnaya Karelia..., P. 22; Laidinen E.; Verigin S. Finskaya razvedka  
protiv Sovetskoi Rossii. Spetsialnie sluzhby Finlyandii i ikh razvedyvatelnaya  
deyatnost' na Severo-Zapade Rossii (1914 – 1939).
- 146 LOGAV. F. P-2205 Op. 1. D. 19 P. P. 11.

- 147 See cassation appeal of A. Henricksen to the Cassation Section of VtsIK SSSR, dated May 6, 1922. LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19 v. P. 37.
- 148 Mainio A. "The Fight for the Russian Empire: Finland and White Russian Combat Organizations, 1917–1939," P. 291.
- 149 A professor of the Military Medical Academy and "the best surgeon of the Red Army" in the 1920s.
- 150 Lieutenant Anatoly Tol' (Antonov-Dyadik), an intelligence chief in the Yudenich army, from 1919 a courier of the counterintelligence department of the Finnish general staff, from the mid-1920s a plenipotentiary of the "Alliance of the United Monarchists in Finland." The reward for this capture, offered by GPU reached 50000 Finnish marks. LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1, D. 29 a. P. 180; more information on this personality: KA, EK Valpo I. Asiamaipit 2823 Venäläiset emigrantit 1910—1940 XXI a.
- 151 In some cases White emigres were robbed by the armed gangs at the Soviet-Finnish border while attempting to cross it. LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 29 a. P. 22.
- 152 For example, a long-term hostility between Pyotr Sokolov, a prominent figure and, according to some sources, a chief of the British intelligence in Terijoki, and Penttilä, a head of the Terijoki section of the TsSP, occurred in 1922 after Sokolov, having received an intelligence information from Soviet Russia via his couriers, first sent it to the British Consulate in Finland, and only then to Penttilä. LOGAV. F. P- 2205. Op. 1. D. 65. P. 138.
- 153 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 19. P. 52.
- 154 Shlyakhter A. *Smuggler States: Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Contraband Trade Across the Soviet Frontier, 1919-1924*; Dullen S. *Uplotnenie granits. K istokam sovetskoi politiki. 1920-1940-e.*
- 155 Dullen S., *Uplotnenie granits. K istokam sovetskoi politiki. 1920-1940-e..*
- 156 Repukhova O., "Sistema pogranichnykh polos v Karelii v 1930-kh godakh" in *World of Scientific Discoveries*, № 11.8(59), 2014, P. 3218.
- 157 Protocol of the November 1929 Moscow meeting of the OGPU and the Main Customs Directorate Administrators with the participation of regional Customs Management section chiefs, devoted to the pressing problems of the "combat with the contraband" and the situation with the border regime at all Soviet borders. NARK. F. P -378, Op. 4, D. 6.
- 158 LOGAV. F. P-2205. Op. 1. D. 44. P. 81.
- 159 Laidinen E.; Verigin S. *Finskaya razvedka protiv Sovetskoi Rossii. Spetsialnie sluzhby Finlyandii i ikh razvedyvatelnyaya deyatlnost' na Severo-Zapade Rossii (1914 – 1939).*

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- F. 282. Kem' Customs outpost (1880-1922). Kemskaia tamozhennaya zastava
- F. 589. Supervisor of the border guard of the Kem border district (1854 – 1856). (Nadziratel pogranichnoi strazhi Kems'koi distantsii).
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# THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE SYNAGOGUE IN BIRZULA: MATERIALITY, TEXTUALITY AND AGENCY IN THE EARLY 1920'S SOVIET UNION

## Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between religious materiality and textuality in the Soviet archives as reflected in the case of the 1923 closure of a Synagogue in Birzula, a town located in the northern part of the Odessa district (oblast) in Ukraine. This study combines the approach of the Foucauldian 'Soviet subjectivity' school with the methodological framework of new materialism in order to identify and analyze the traces of the agential power of the Synagogue of Birzula. In their confrontation over the status of the synagogues, religious actors, Soviet activists, state and party officials produced numerous documents in which they spoke about themselves and about the synagogue. The case of the Synagogue of Birzula encapsulates the wider confrontation over the role and status of religion in Soviet society. This paper is about how to read the textual to discover the agential power of the material.

**Keywords:** Soviet antireligious policy, Synagogue, Material Religion, New Materialism, Soviet Subjectivity School, Soviet Archives.

This study combines the approach of Foucauldian 'Soviet subjectivity' school with the methodological framework of new materialism in order to attempt a reading of Soviet archives that aims to identify and examine the traces of the agential power of non-human religious entities seen in terms of their material presence. The case under analysis is the 1923 closure of the Synagogue in Birzula, a town located in the northern part of Odessa oblast of Ukraine. The unmaking of this Synagogue was the product of the implementation of a state-designed policy and resulted in the isolation of this religious building from a part of its social relations, which were the

source of its social personhood.<sup>1</sup> The Synagogue was readjusted into a worker's club which related to its visitors in a new way but preserved the capacity to dominate and attract the members of the Jewish community of Birzula through its materiality.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was followed by the opening of previously secret archives, which provided access for cultural historians to such archival documents as petitions, autobiographies, and other official texts in which those who wrote them spoke about themselves. Igal Halfin, a representative of what has been termed the Soviet subjectivity school, in his book on the autobiographies of Soviet students from the postrevolutionary years, bases his approach on the insights of Michel Foucault, who argues that when examining statements, it is important to pay attention to what they have in common while their individual features can be overlooked. As Halfin outlines, Foucault proposes to examine the repetition of the statements, the social environments in which they are distributed, how they circulate, their occurrence in time and place and their influence on people's thinking.<sup>2</sup> The discursive approach is central to my study because I analyze the effects of the agential power of a synagogue based on several textual representations of this sacred building.

The material turn in the humanities can in general be seen as a response to the dominance of Foucault's analysis of discourse and of Derrida's deconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Hence, scholars influenced by the new materialism<sup>4</sup> in particular propose a very different understanding of the interaction and interconnectivity between human actors and things to that implicit in discursive approaches such as Halfin's. Objects are regarded as entities exerting generative power, as agencies in their own right, participating in social and cultural life.<sup>5</sup> As Tamsin Jones observes, new materialists do not reject the idea that "our realities are socially constructed", but they assert that they "are also materially given". Reality, according to this perspective, "is both constituted by, and resistant to, our constructions".<sup>6</sup> The emergence of the new materialism has led to a shift from an anthropocentric perspective on material religion based mainly on the analysis of texts and beliefs, to one that relies on the concept of assemblage, in which both human and non-human actors participate in cultural work, being neither simply objects or subjects of their interaction.<sup>7</sup> As social actors, non-human agents are brought to life by a set of specific relations. As Graham Harvey remarks in his study on representational understanding of art and buildings, "[p]ersons are known to be persons when they relate

to other persons in particular ways [...] 'person' is not a nominal category but a performance, and one that is corporeal and corporate."<sup>8</sup>

New materialism ascribes an immanent vitality to objects and often refers to the inventive and productive power of things and substances, including inorganic matter. A central idea in new materialism is that matter should not be regarded as dead and apart from humans, but rather human beings should be considered part of a process of materialization. Materiality, new materialists assert, is more than matter, it is "an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable."<sup>9</sup> Jane Bennett describes the vitality of matter not only as the capacity of substances to oppose human will and intentions, but also as "...agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own"<sup>10</sup>. Bennett claims that the agency of matter does not always involve intentionality "in any strong sense", that it can be regarded as "active and energetic" rather than simply "inert and passively resistant", and she rejects the deterministic approach to matter, where matter is always calculable.<sup>11</sup> Non-human entities acquire their agency from the lively immanence of their matter and acquire the status of 'persons' through a set of relations which integrate them in society.

In her study on religion in Soviet archives, Sonja Luehrmann formulates an approach to the study of archives which permits a combination of the analysis of material features of the documents with a discursive approach to their textual contents. She regards "the materiality and placement [of the documents] in the archives as traces of the social relationships from which they emerged and that continue to shape them."<sup>12</sup> Luehrmann considers the archives as a place of confrontation between religious actors and atheist institutions over the role and place of religion in Soviet society, a repository where documents produced by religious and political actors acquire a "reality effect." According to Luehrmann, the archival "files were places where the voices of different sides – religious adherents as well as atheist critics – where collected, preserved, categorised, and made available for further study and administrative decisions."<sup>13</sup> The archival documents were the device through which the Soviet policymakers constructed their understanding of the religious communities they never encountered directly. This understanding was at the basis of the strategies deployed by officials, and the archives were also used to assess the results of the state policies. The placement of the documents in archival sets of relations produced the reality they themselves inscribed. Luehrmann

addresses the materiality of the archives, but not the materiality of religions as reflected in the archives.

In this paper, I identify and analyze the traces of the agential power of the Synagogue of Birzula in several archival documents through a combination of the methods of the Soviet Subjectivity School informed by the theoretical framework of new materialism. As Sonja Luehrmann concludes, an exclusively Foucauldian reading of documents has the potential to divert us to questions solely related to regimes of truth and power<sup>14</sup> whereas the content of the documents might also reveal certain personal interests of their authors, agendas of institutions, and a set of social relations.<sup>15</sup>

In my study study, I engage in a reading of archival documents that explores a set of social relations in the town of Birzula in which non-human actors participated. A key question for this study is: How can we identify the effects of the agential power of religious things that we cannot see and experience based on the archives of the Soviet atheistic regime that had as one of its primary purposes the elimination of religion and of the very religious objects it captures in its texts? I regard the archives as a product of, and participants in, the social fabric, with non-human entities in their role as social actors influencing the process of compilation of the archives. This study examines the generative power and social role of the Synagogue of Birzula not by identifying the textual evocations of its agency in the archives (which are missing), but by measuring its agential power against its impact and relationality.

As already mentioned, my study draws from the definition of personhood applied by Graham Harvey and from the concept of vitality of matter described by Jane Bennett.<sup>16</sup> The agenda behind my study is to apply these concepts to the case under analysis in order to bridge the gap between the archival data and non-human religious entities, created by the absence or scarcity of evocations of agential power of material religion (sacred buildings, artefacts) in atheist archives. I apply this theoretical framework convinced that an approach to the study of religions under Soviet Communism which neglects the role of material religion can produce only an incomplete understanding of the processes that occurred in the religious landscape. The objective of this article is to see how a study of atheist archives that is more attentive to the role of non-human religious entities can contribute to our understanding of Soviet antireligious policies and creative responses of religious groups.

## The Jewish Community of Birzula

The case under analysis is the closure of the Synagogue in the town of Birzula in the Odessa oblast of Ukraine in 1923. This settlement had been formed around a rail junction after the building of the railways Odessa-Kiev in 1865, and Birzula-Kharkov in 1869.<sup>17</sup> The rail station and the settlement took their name from a nearby village called Birzula.<sup>18</sup> The settlement of Jews in Birzula was banned by tsarist authorities in 1882, but in 1903 this restriction was lifted.<sup>19</sup> In 1897 there were only 95 Jews in Birzula, but their number had been growing rapidly to 2,507, or 25 per cent of the total population, in 1926.<sup>20</sup> Because of the steady growth of the entire population of the settlement, by 1923 the housing crisis was a major problem in Birzula<sup>21</sup>. The existence of a Jewish cemetery at the beginning of the twentieth century is attested by tombstones, the oldest of which dates from 1910. A pogrom was perpetrated in Birzula in 1905, and in 1919 50 Jews were killed by the followers of Simion Petlyura.<sup>22</sup> At this time, the Christian population of the city was increasing as well. In 1897 the building of an Orthodox wooden Church was completed, and in 1906 it had a total number of 1,642 parishioners. According to official data collected by the Russian Orthodox Church around 1906, in the settlement there were no sectarians or Old Believers.<sup>23</sup>

According to Soviet sources, Birzula was a settlement where revolutionary ideas were spread among railway workers from before the revolution, and a number of locals were actively involved in a local revolutionary underground movement.<sup>24</sup> In 1923, 200 Jews were members of the Trade Union of Birzula and signed a petition requiring the transformation of the local Synagogue into a club-theatre.<sup>25</sup>

The building of a stone Synagogue in Birzula started in 1914 and was completed after the end of the Great War. Soviet officials and activists closed the Synagogue in 1923. The making and unmaking of this Synagogue reflect the efforts to consolidate and to transform the Jewish community of Birzula undertaken by the members of the Jewish religious community and by local Bolsheviks. These two groups engaged in a confrontation over the Synagogue that encapsulated the broader struggle over the role, status and place of religion in Soviet society.

## **Sacred Spaces and Antireligious Policy**

Soviet antireligious policies concerned sacred buildings not only because they were the main venues for practicing religion collectively, but also because they were symbols of a traditional way of life. Sacred buildings were immovable assets of major importance for the congregations that could not be moved or hidden and therefore were more easily regulated by secular power than other aspects of material religion. The assault by the Bolshevik regime on material religion as the most easily targeted aspect of religions had three main sources, the first one being their Marxist ideology, which regarded religion as an emanation of economic and social realities. During the Russian Civil War and during the years of famine, the Bolshevik regime aimed at destroying religious institutions and their economic wealth. Through these measures, Bolshevik leaders hoped, religion would be eliminated swiftly or at least would be consigned to a marginal position in society. During this early period, the Russian Orthodox Church was the main target of Bolshevik anti-religious policies.<sup>26</sup>

The second source of the assault against sacred spaces were the policies and techniques of exercising control over religious groups devised by Soviet institutions. In order to be able to use their churches or prayer houses, believers had to register their communities, to formally recognize the stipulations of the law through official agreements, and consequently to accept the legitimacy of Soviet law and the authority of the state to penalize them in case of any irregularity. Additionally, the registration procedures were an efficient way to compel the believers to provide information referring to their congregations, which was important from the perspective of the regime's attempts to examine religious movements and to formulate new antireligious policies based on the collected data.<sup>27</sup>

The third source of the assault against religious buildings were the initiatives of the local officials. Religious buildings could be used by local authorities as objects of manipulation with religious communities or as a focal point of repressive policies, both in line with, and contrary to the existing legislation. One of the most frequent abusive methods of antireligious work applied at the local level was the arbitrary closure of sacred buildings (Peris 1998, 28-30).<sup>28</sup>

## The Campaign of Closing Synagogues and the Case of Birzula

In 1923 there was a campaign of synagogue closures that affected Jewish communities in numerous cities and small settlements across the Soviet Union, including Birzula. This spate of closures represents an interesting example of mass seizure of sacred buildings in the early Soviet period. A report of the Antireligious Committee (*Antireligioznaja komissija CK KP(b)*) to Central Committee of RCP(b) for the period between May and mid-September 1923 mentions that most of antireligious work among Jews was conducted by local authorities. A number of important articles were published in the Yiddish edition of the newspaper 'Pravda' with the purpose of involving the masses of workers in antireligious activities, including closing choral synagogues and struggling against Jewish religious holidays. The report states that the party activists were successfully achieving the goals set for this campaign.<sup>29</sup> Anna Shternshis mentions that during the period between 1917 and 1929, 646 synagogues were closed. Numerous synagogues were seized with the purpose of demonstrating that the Jewish religion received no privileged treatment, and were used for organising political and cultural activities for the same communities that used them earlier as prayer houses.<sup>30</sup>

A letter written before 20 July 1923 referring to the campaign of closure of synagogues was sent by the leaders of the Jewish communities from Moscow, Minsk and Kharkov to the Soviet Government. The document mentions that the Jewish religious community from Moscow had received numerous letters, signed by the members of Jewish communities from small settlements and provincial cities, complaining about the closure of their synagogues by local authorities who transformed them into clubs or theatres. The believers asked the Moscow Jewish community to intervene. The document enumerates the Soviet laws breached by the actions of local functionaries, and mentions the artistic and archaeological value of the closed synagogues. The complaint states that the process of closure of synagogues started in 1920, and in the first months of 1923 the level of aggressiveness of this policy increased. Local activists of Yevseksiya<sup>31</sup> played a central role in this campaign, and some of the synagogues were not used for any purpose for several years after their closure. The local Executive Councils ignored the petitions sent by believers, and the official position of such state agencies as Rabkrin<sup>32</sup> and the Ministry of Justice that attempted to defend the rights of local Jews.<sup>33</sup> The complaint of the Jewish communities from Moscow, Minsk and Kharkov mentions the situation of

the closed Jewish prayer buildings from Minsk, Kharkov, Vitebsk, Poltava, Kremenchug, Simferopol, Smolensk, Kiev, Odessa, Taganrog, Birzula and from many other cities and settlements.<sup>34</sup>

On 13 October 1923 the Executive Committee of the Soviet of Ukrainian SSR debated a number of petitions and investigation reports relating to the case of the main Synagogue in Birzula. The Committee decided to reject the petitions of the local Jewish community and to let local authorities continue using the building as a club-theatre for organizing political and cultural activities for workers.<sup>35</sup> The Executive Committee based its decision on the fact that an agreement of exploitation of the building between the religious organisation and the authorities was not signed in due time.<sup>36</sup> This final decision was taken after a number of petitions sent by believers, local authorities, and by the members of the local Trade Union.

On 20 June 1923, the Jewish community of Birzula sent two petitions, one to the Executive Committee of Ukrainian Soviet and one to the Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The petitions requested an intervention by the central authorities in support of the congregation whose Synagogue had been seized by local authorities. The petitions read:

[...] violating the sacred principles of national and religious freedom declared by our Socialist Republic, they [local officials from Birzula] took from us the Synagogue to [organize there] a club-theatre.

Until 1914 the Jewish population of Birzula [...] conducted its religious rites in three Prayer Houses [...] in private houses [...] which were enough for up to 500 persons and in 1914 the Jewish population started the building specifically destined to be a synagogue. [...] only due to weekly donations made by each Jew of Birzula from their modest earnings was it possible to build the main Synagogue, though only its stone walls. The war began [and] the economic situation of the Jews of Birzula became even worse and only with heroic efforts could we succeeded to build the wooden roof [...] and this humble national and religious patrimony was taken from us.

During the black days of Petliura's incursion in our region, we preserved our Synagogue by risking our lives [...] [and now] we lose our national patrimony?<sup>37</sup>

In their petition, the Jews of Birzula build a very specific image of their religious community, mentioning some very important points. Firstly, they



present themselves as a Jewish community of modest economic means, witnessed by the technical details and by the history of the building of their Synagogue. Secondly, they present themselves as beneficiaries and supporters of the liberation of their town by the Red Army from the forces of the Ukrainian Republic, who had committed a pogrom against local Jews in 1919. Thirdly, they invoke the principles of religious and national freedom declared by the Soviet authorities, reminding those they are addressing of the tragic pre-Soviet experience of the Russian Jews. These three elements of the petition legitimise the requests of the Jews of Birzula, stressing the necessity to preserve the Synagogue as a prayer building by mentioning a large number of believers who used it for this purpose. Additionally, they present their Synagogue not only as a piece of religious heritage, but as part of their national patrimony and a physical and material evidence of who they are.

As in other cases of closed synagogues mentioned in the petition of the Moscow Jewish community, the requests of the Jews from Birzula received the support of central authorities. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August the Executive Committee of the Supreme Soviet sent an order to Birzula -requiring all the relevant documents for investigations, ordering the return of all religious items to the community, and authorizing the use of the Synagogue for religious purposes between 10 September and 15 October.<sup>38</sup> As in the case of other closed synagogues, the Government took a stance favorable to the believers and ordered the local authorities to allow the local Jewish community to use the synagogues while an investigation was being conducted.

One of the first reactions in Birzula to Moscow's decision was an undated petition by the local Trade Union signed by 180 workers. The petition, which was sent to the local executive committee, stated:

[...] we, the members of the union, workers and [public] servants of Birzula district ask you to consider the following: [...]

2. [...] apart from this prayer house in the town of Birzula for 500 Jewish inhabitants, there are another 3 old Prayer Houses /Synagogues/ [...]. In addition, the Prayer House occupied by us served the religious necessities of only 38 families from the local bourgeoisie [...]

3 [ ...] we ask you to leave to us this building in which we have made significant investments, especially because its return [to the religious community] would provide an occasion for celebration to a small clique of local bourgeoisie and [will cause] a deep sorrow to the workers of our city.<sup>39</sup>

The petition presents the Jewish religious community as a small group of socially alien elements, who had misinformed the central authorities. Additionally, the petition manipulates the emic and etic meanings of the terms 'prayer house' and 'synagogue'. By presenting the three existing Prayer Houses organized in private homes as synagogues, the petition suggests that the main Synagogue was not the only building of its kind in Birzula, and that the Jewish community had deliberately misinformed the central authorities.

The investigation report produced by the functionaries responsible for examining the situation in Birzula concludes that the petition sent by the believers contained deliberate misinformation, referring in particular to the statement according to which the disputed building was asserted to be the only Synagogue in Birzula, but also exaggerates the number of members of the Jewish community. Additionally, the report mentions that the Synagogue was used only by rich Jews who would not allow the poor believers to attend it. Likewise, the report states that the signatures on the petitions were not genuine.<sup>40</sup> As already mentioned, the last decision of the authorities was to divest the Jewish community of its rights to the Synagogue. The case of the Synagogue of Birzula and the similar cases mentioned in the complaint of the Moscow Jewish community reveal the contradictory nature of the regime's policies and the competition of different state agencies with conflicting agendas.

### **The Textuality of the Petition of Jewish Community and the Materiality of the Synagogue of Birzula**

The petitions of the Jewish community of Birzula and the one of the local Trade Union ended up by being included in a file from the archival fonds of Ukraine's NKVD. The inclusion in the same archival file of two petitions containing opposite perspectives on the role and nature of the Synagogue of Birzula reveals that Soviet archives were one of the places where the confrontation of atheist agencies promoting a secularist agenda with the religious believers was going on. Based on the voices of various actors involved in this strife, Soviet authorities adopted their strategies for eliminating religion, and therefore documents collected and stored in the archives acquired a reality effect. As Sonja Luehrmann observes, this approach to the Soviet archives allows for a combination of Foucauldian analysis of textuality with the study of materiality and its agency.<sup>41</sup> A

Foucauldian analysis of the petitions of the religious community and of the Trade Union of Birzula can help reveal important details about the relationality of the Synagogue and the struggle over its role and status.

The petition of the religious community and the one signed by the members of the Trade Union of Birzula have three common features. Firstly, their authors speak on behalf of the entire Jewish community of Birzula, except for a small minority. For the believers, the minority are the activists and the party workers who violated their legal rights, while in the petition signed by the members of the Trade Union the minority are '38 families from local bourgeoisie' who allegedly used the synagogue for their religious needs and did not allow the Jewish workers to attend religious ceremonies. These common details of the petitions reveal the fact that the struggle was not only about the synagogue, but about dominance over the entire community.

The second similarity between the petitions is that they both refer to some of the claims and statements of their opponents as misinformation. The accusations of lying were largely the product of the contrasting nature of the way the authors of petitions imagined the community they were part of. Each author assumed that s/he represents the true interests of the Jewish community, and conceived it as being organized around different principles and values. At the same time, both sides integrated their understanding into the dominant political discourse and used the cliché of official propaganda, expecting central authorities to side with them.

The third similarity between the petitions is that both are attentive to the relationship between the technical details of the Synagogue and the class status of those who used this building. For the authors of the petition signed by the members of the Trade Union, the Synagogue was the largest Jewish religious building used by only 38 families, which attested to the privileged social status of the latter. On the other hand, the petition of the Jewish congregation states that preserving the Synagogue was in the interest of the entire community and refers to all the members of Jewish community of Birzula as members of their congregation. Jewish religious spaces in Birzula are presented as insufficient for the local Jewish community, and the technical details of the town's largest Synagogue are described as being poor and revealing the modest economic means of the local Jews. This similarity reiterates the importance of the Synagogue as a building which projects a specific identity onto the members of a community. In this way, the petitions present the nature of the building as the key to the nature of the community, as a mirror of its very body.

Based on a series of interviews, Anna Shternshis concludes that the majority of Jews considered antireligious propaganda and the marginalization of their religious traditions as the price they paid for the rights that the Soviet regime granted them. In 1920s and 1930s the anti-religious campaigns of the Soviet regime divided Jewish communities in those who promoted atheist ideas and the defenders of religious tradition. Usually this was a confrontation of generations, with a part of young Jew population actively involved in Soviet campaigns against Judaism, that was defended by older generations.<sup>42</sup> The petitions written by the Jewish religious congregation and by the members of the Trade Union of Birzula are a case of division of a Jewish community in two groups, one promoting a secularist agenda, and one defending the religious traditions and old way of life. In the case of the petition written by believers, by presenting themselves as supporters and beneficiaries of the Bolshevik revolution, and by employing the dominant political discourse, the authors expressed their hope that the Soviet regime would become the protector of Jewish religion and traditions. The authors expressed these hopes in an early postrevolutionary period, in which the intentions of the Bolshevik party were not yet entirely clear for them. The hopes of the religious community are explainable by the fact that the Bolshevik experiment offered the Jewish minority new opportunities by eliminating numerous restrictions imposed by the old regime. Many of the discriminatory policies of the tsarist authorities had been based on religious criteria.<sup>43</sup> Judaism was the main distinction between the Jewish minority and the Gentiles, which constitutes an explanation for this Jewish post-revolutionary religious self-definition.

A good way to measure the degree to which the self-representation of the Jewish community of Birzula was anchored in the Bolshevik Revolutionary worldview is to identify the mutual and divergent notions in their historical narratives, and to examine the way the authors of the petition made what Igal Halfin calls the 'eschatological diagnosis' of their place in history. The Bolsheviks were preoccupied with history viewed as a journey of the proletariat from the darkness of capitalism to a 'bright future' of classless society. Salvation would be achieved through the advent of a messiah embodied in the New Men, who were the politically conscious proletarians.<sup>44</sup> A strong sense of liberation was characteristic for Jewish communities after the Red Army attained victory in the Civil War and a number of discriminatory restrictions were lifted. The pre-revolutionary period and the years of the Civil War were seen as times of discrimination

and oppression against the Jews of Birzula in a manner similar to the way Bolsheviks perceived the tsarist past as an era of darkness and oppression. The revolution and the Civil War were understood as important stages in the liberation of the local Jews as well as the Bolsheviks perceived them as the first step in the building of a new world. Nevertheless, the destination of the revolutionary transformation desired by the Jewish community was different from the 'bright classless future' envisioned by the Bolsheviks. The believers used some parts of the dominant political discourse to make sense of their position in the unfolding revolutionary process, but the destination they desired was an unrestricted traditional life, and not the atheist, classless, communal society.

In seeking to answer the question what influence the agency of the Synagogue of Birzula had on the Jewish community and on the processes it underwent, I have drawn on the insights of the so-called new materialism. Approaching the materiality of the Synagogue of Birzula through textual documents allows us to regard it as a process. The petition of the religious community from 1923 describes a recent experience of building the Synagogue as an endeavor of the entire Jewish population of the settlement to create a single religious venue accessible to all its members and capable of accommodating all of them together. For a community using three prayer houses up until that point, and experiencing a steady growth in the number of its members, the joint efforts to create a common religious place was central to the process of building a community and forming and consolidating ties between its members. From this perspective, the petition signed by the members of the Trade Union can be regarded as an attempt to reverse the process of creating a traditional Jewish community through seizing its religious space, defining a social alien among its members, and converting the Synagogue into a place whose technical features would facilitate the spread of the ideas of class war. The transformation of the Synagogue into a club-theatre could be regarded as an attempt to seize some of its power to attract and congregate local Jews, and to utilize the Synagogue, its agency and power for political purposes.

Initially the Synagogue was designed as a uniting space, but the final result was that it created a conflict and a split in the Jewish community and beyond it. Before its closure, the Synagogue was a building that consolidated the community by generating a set of relations between itself and the Believers participating in its construction as well as between the members of the community. Nevertheless, the Synagogue was a building with specific technical features architectural features that made it a

dominating presence in the community, and it attracted and enhanced the ambitions to conquer it, especially those of local activists and Trade Union members willing to implement the Bolshevik projects. In this sense, the Synagogue manifested what new materialists call 'the creative contingency' of materiality.<sup>45</sup> The Synagogue was imagined, designed, and built by believers as a uniting space, but its builders could not foresee all possible roles of this building as a social actor. By inciting the desire for possession, the Synagogue exacerbated the competition between two groups of Jews promoting different agendas for the future of the community. The absence of a synagogue would have limited the implementation of the 1923 antireligious campaign in Birzula to antireligious demonstrations and agitation, and would have made it less aggressive and efficient in dividing the Jewish community.

Not all synagogues closed during the inter-war decades were transformed into theatres or clubs, but only the largest among them.<sup>46</sup> The affordance of a building can be measured in relation to the size of the surrounding buildings and the number of the population. Hence, it is calculable based on a relationality that shaped the understanding of the Synagogue and its possible roles in the human minds. The report of the commission that investigated the situation in Birzula concludes that in this settlement the Synagogue was the only building capable to accommodate the Jewish (and other) workers.<sup>47</sup> Another religious building in Birzula was the Orthodox wooden Church. Apart from the fact that the conversion of the Orthodox Church into a club for workers could entail the discontent of a numerically larger ethno-religious community, an important role was played by the nature of the substance out of which the Synagogue and the Church were built. The materiality of the stone in contrast to the wooden walls of the Orthodox Church made it not just more appropriate for the Bolsheviks' ambition to build a new modern world, but also more durable in time. For as the vital force of stone is intended to resist in time, that of the wooden walls of the Orthodox Church was more prone to undergo the decomposition characteristic of organic matter. The builders of the Synagogue imagined their sacred space in relation to other Jewish religious buildings and to the number of local Jews, but not in relation to the wooden Orthodox Church, the spaces used for Bolshevik political activities, or in relation to the entire population of the settlement. Nevertheless, by being physically close to each other, these buildings and the population living in Birzula formed a set of relations between each other. The wooden Church, the Synagogue, and other buildings from the

town were never projected to be part of an assemblage, and were built at different periods, but by being present in the same settlement they formed an assemblage which exercised its agential power by directing the Bolshevik grasp towards the Synagogue to create a space of proletarian congregation. The new materialists would call this interaction of objects 'the capacity of nonhuman materiality to self-organize'. Jane Bennett exemplifies this phenomenon through her encounter with a collection of material things scattered by waves on a seashore. Each of the objects could not be noticed without the presence of the other. She also mentions that her immobilisation in front of encountered objects could be 'simply the result of [...] sudden recollection of the web of cultural meanings associated with the images "[dead] rat," "plastic," "wood"'.<sup>48</sup>

Applying Bennett's observation to the case under analysis, one could ask if the seizing of the Synagogue was purely the result of the Bolshevik ideological thrust to eliminate religion in the context of an antireligious campaign conducted among the Jews, and if their choice not to close the Orthodox Church, for example, and transform it into a club before 1923, was the result of the ethno-religious and political context in Birzula. The closure of a religious building could not be envisaged and applied by local officials without a dominant political discourse that encouraged the elimination of religion, but nevertheless, the affordance of the building, which is a relative feature calculable in relation to other buildings and to the number of population, is a key element. From the perspective of the affordance of the building and its relation to the rest of the town, the transformation of the Synagogue into a club-theatre can be regarded as a result of its materiality, or of an excess, relationality, and difference,<sup>49</sup> which encouraged the Bolsheviks to convert the Jewish sacred space into a place for proletarian gatherings.

A campaign of synagogue closures could not be possible without the existence of numerous Jewish religious buildings, and this sentence is correct whether we regard the synagogues as subjects or simply as objects in this interaction between Soviet activists and religion. Nevertheless, the understanding produced and the actions of humans at a local level were influenced by urban assemblages which included and excluded buildings as part of a logic shaped by 'the creative contingency' of the materiality, by its capacity to self-organize in different constellations of assemblages, and to dictate the undertaking of certain actions to human actors through their affordance.

## Conclusions

Soviet antireligious policies and religious communities' responses to them are traditionally explained exclusively in ideological and social terms, and they are indeed central for understanding these processes. Nevertheless, numerous non-human actors participated in the social relations in the context of which official policy was negotiated and implemented. The sacred buildings over which a dispute between Soviet officials and religious actors was going on, were not simply subjects of an interaction between humans. They were part of relationalities and exercised their agency, manifested their creative contingency and the capacity to self-organize as the context and strategies of involved human and non-human actors shifted.

This non-anthropocentric approach to the study of religions in Soviet archives faces two major challenges. Firstly, Soviet archives are in most cases opaque for a reading aiming to identify textual evocations of the intentionality of non-human religious actors. Nevertheless, the archives provide the necessary data for reconstituting the social relations and even some examples of manifestation of the vital force of religious objects, while the new materialist literature provides a rich theoretical basis for analyzing them.

Secondly, in most of the cases the processes of interaction between atheist regimes and religious communities which involved non-human entities can be very efficiently explained from an anthropocentric perspective. Nevertheless, wasn't the existence of a synagogue in a town during a campaign against Judaism enhancing a more violent confrontation between local activists and believers and changing their calculations? Through its affordance, relationality, and through the vitality of its matter, the Synagogue of Birzula shaped perceptions and behaviors, and shifted the strategies of human actors. This article attempts to show that a reading of atheist archives intended to listen to the silenced voices of non-human religious objects could produce a more complete understanding of the dialogical interaction between Soviet atheism and religions.

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# B/ORDERIZATION OF THE BOUNDARY: ENTANGLED PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPLIT VILLAGES OF THE TSKHINVALI REGION/ SOUTH OSSETIA

## Abstract

Since the Russo – Georgian war in August 2008, a once fictional administrative boundary of the currently occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, is being transformed into a heavily militarized “state border”. While much of the perimeter stays uncertain and unmarked, locals are frequently detained by the Russian/South Ossetian militants, which creates constant psychological pressure and an insecure living environment. In some cases, „border” demarcations serve to create security through their supposed clarity. At the same time, they produce uncertainties for different actors and in different places. This paper shows how locals experience the complex process of b/orderisation of the boundary around the occupied territory; how this creates ambiguities, precludes clarity, and thus generates further un/certainties that must be dealt with – analytically as much as practically.

**Keywords:** Borderization, Georgia, Tskhinvali Region, South Ossetia, Creeping Occupation.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia entered a profound multidimensional crisis. The country turned out to be unprepared for the grueling processes of the post-Soviet socio-economic transition and the restoration of independence and struggled to cope with the domestic or foreign challenges brought on by the new reality. In addition to economic collapse, the disintegration of state institutions, and political instability, the country was also unable to maintain its territorial integrity and avoid ethnic conflicts: first, it found itself embroiled in hostilities in

the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in 1990-92, and later in Abkhazia, in 1992-93 (Loladze 2021).

After the hostilities of the 1990s, Georgia and its breakaway regions (especially the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia) went through a period of fragile but still peaceful coexistence, marked by the restoration of economic and social ties and a certain degree of normalization (Zakareishvili 2021; Janiashvili 2020). However, these ties were severed following the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, with Georgia losing control over 151 settlements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region (see Map 1). The b/orderization process, which has been pursued in the vicinity of this region since 2011, resulted in the division of 34 more settlements, with residents' homes and agricultural lands falling on the opposite sides of the dividing line (IDFI 2015).

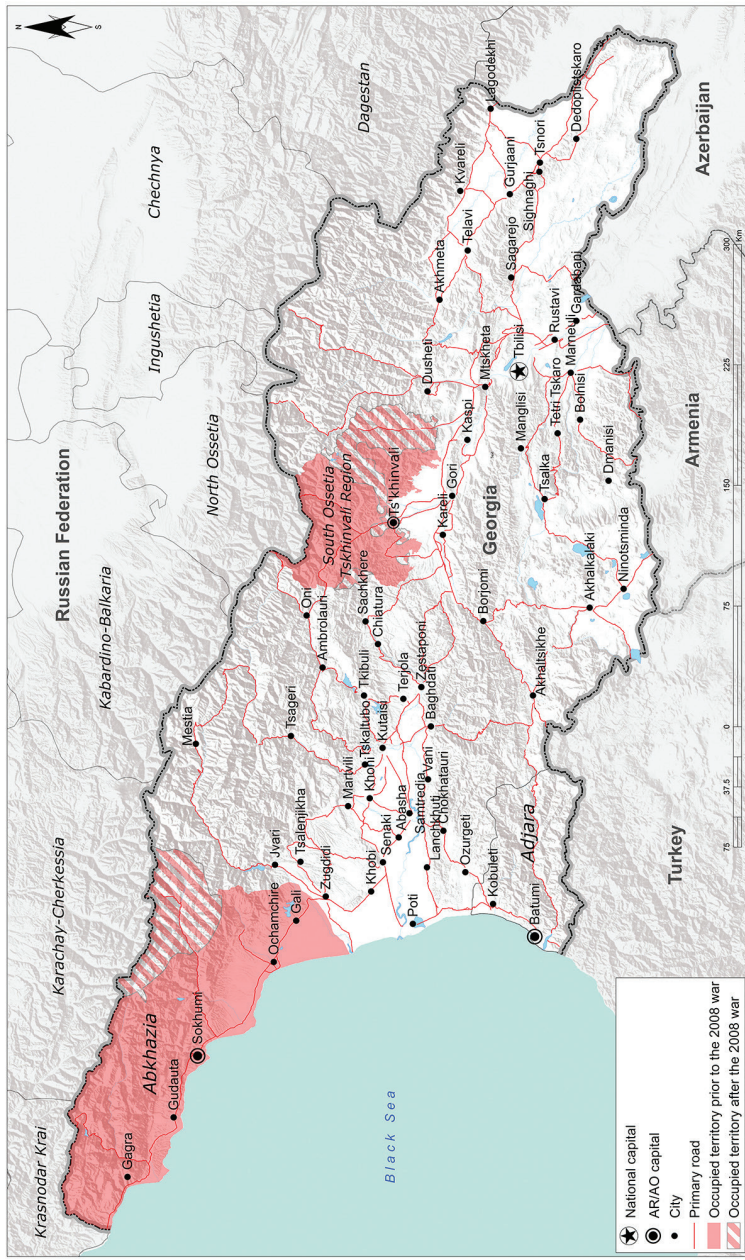
Prior to the August 2008 war, the Georgian government controlled 110 settlements located in the Great and Little Liakhvi gorges, other gorges adjacent to the Tskhinvali region, as well as in the Akhalkgori district (see Map 2). Nevertheless, after the war, these villages came under the control of Russia/de facto South Ossetia. Subsequently, in April 2010, the de facto government of the occupied region passed the Law on the State Border (RES 2010). In 2011, based on this law, the Russian side actively resumed the process of b/orderization, which had begun fragmentarily in 2009, as well as the construction of new border infrastructure alongside the occupied territories (Amnesty Int. 2019).

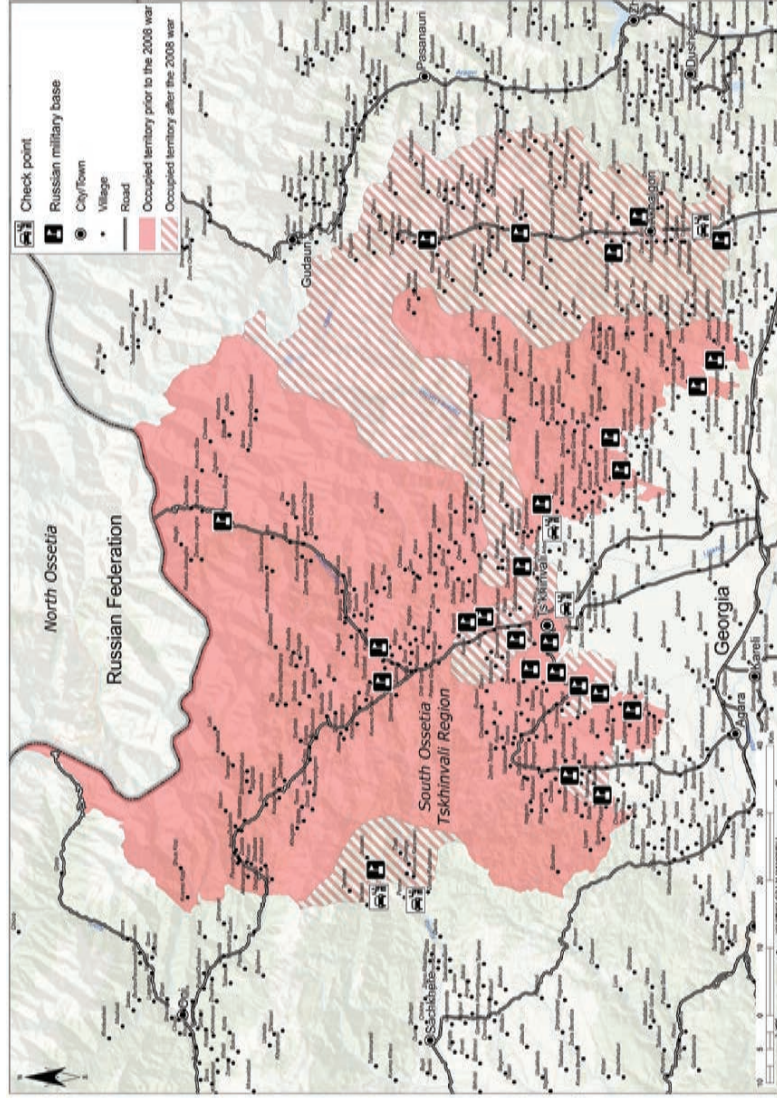
The official positions of Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and the international community on the 2008 war and the territories located on the occupation line differ considerably: Georgia and the international community are calling this process a "creeping occupation" or "borderization", while the official Russia and the de facto South Ossetia see it as a transformation of the administrative boundary into a highly militarized international border (Zakareishvili 2021; Jalabadze 2020; Boyle 2016).

Today, the length of the occupation line in the Tskhinvali region equals 350 kilometers. Moreover, according to data from the European Union Monitoring Mission, physical b/orderization includes "more than 60 kilometers of security fences, 20 kilometers of surveillance equipment, over 200 signs with the inscription 'Border of the Republic of South Ossetia', 19 Russian Federation border guard bases and four controlled crossing points" (see Map 2) (EUMM 2018:3).

Most of the perimeter of the dividing line is unclear and not precisely marked. As a result, the occupying military forces often detain the residents.







Map 2. Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia before and after the 2008 war (compiled by the author)

This situation puts a constant mental strain on the locals and heightens the feeling of living in an uncertain environment. While in some cases, the “border” signs serve to create a sense of security by purportedly bringing clarity, at the same time they produce uncertainty in various places.

It should be borne in mind that, likely, the Russian occupation regime cannot fully control the movement across the dividing line. Nonetheless, the number of people abducted and detained by the border guards remains alarming. According to official data, from 2008 until the end of 2020 1,365 people were kidnapped from villages near the occupation zone for illegally crossing the “border” (State Security Service 2021; Amnesty International 2019).

Until the fall of 2019, the Russian authorities and the representatives of the de facto South Ossetia allowed the crossing of the demarcation line with specific documents (the so-called “propuski” or passes) at four border checkpoints: in Mosabruni (the so-called Razdakhani), Ergneti, Karzmani, and Sinaguri. However, the occupying forces occasionally closed these checkpoints under various pretexts. The situation became particularly tense after August 2019, in the wake of the events surrounding the Chorchana village after the establishment of a Georgian observation post in Tbilisi-administered territory (EUMM 2019).

These crossing points were completely closed when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020. Before that, only the residents of Akhagori used the Mosabruni crossing points. The crossing points of Perevi-Karzmani and Perevi-Sinaguri were used by the population of several villages located on the Imeretian side. The Ergneti checkpoint was mainly utilized to transport patients to Tbilisi for medical treatment. The residents of other districts in the Tskhinvali region, as well as the residents of Tbilisi-controlled territories, are not allowed to use these checkpoints or to cross the administrative boundary line at all. Likewise, the Russian officers and representatives of the de facto government are preventing ethnic Georgians, who lived in other districts of the Tskhinvali region before the 2008’s armed conflict, from entering the territory (Amnesty 2019).

As stated in the periodical issued by the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia, “the southern part of the administrative boundary of South Ossetia cuts through the most fertile and densely populated agricultural lands in Central Georgia. In this abundance of people, farms, livestock, and plots, the administrative boundary poses an ongoing challenge for conflict-affected populations on both sides. It

impedes freedom of movement; restricts efficient cultivation of agricultural land and separates friends and family." (Observer 2017: 6).

In addition to producing a challenging day-to-day and political reality, the present situation raises important questions in terms of both anthropological and border studies, depending on the meaning the local population residing near the occupation line ascribes to the dividing line. Based on the interviews conducted in the villages of municipalities as part of the NEC project, this article explores the multidimensional impact of borderization through the interdisciplinary theoretical lens of border studies, analyzing it as a process experienced daily, narrated, and interpreted by the local population.

### **1.1. "Tskhinvali Region" or "South Ossetia"? A note on the use of terms**

The term "South Ossetia" itself is relatively new, and first became official in 1922, when the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast was created. Until then, no administrative territorial unit with a similar name had ever existed, all the more so outside of Georgian jurisdiction. The first time "Ossetia" (without the word "South") was used to describe an administrative-territorial unit was in 1843, when the *Ossetian Okrug*, composed of the Java, Smaller Liakhvi and Nari districts, was shortly separated from the Gori Uyezd, but still was under the Tiflis Governorate. The *okrug* in question included about a third of the current Tskhinvali Region, and only existed until 1858, before returning to the Gori Uyezd (minus the Nari district) as the "Mountainous Ossetia" district. (Janiashvili 2017; Jishkariani 2019).

According to existing sources, the first documented unofficial use of the term "South Ossetia" dates from 1830 and had purely orientational purposes – it was used by an anonymous author in the Russian newspaper 'Tiflisikie Vedomosti' (№72, 1830).<sup>1</sup> As for the first document in which the highlands of Shida Kartli are mentioned as "Ossetia" ("Осетия" in Russian), Georgian historiography considers it to be an account by general Karl von Knorring (head of the Russian administration and governor in Georgia) dated 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1802 (Berge 1866:587,717), in which he refers to the high-mountainous parts of the current Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia that had a majority of Ossetian population. The rest of the region, populated mainly by Georgians – was denominated "Georgia" ("Грузия" in Russian).



From the very first years after Georgian independence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as a response to the separatist movement forming in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, (thus even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union) the newly appointed Georgian government officially adopted a law on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1990 “About the dissolution of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast”, according to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> sections of the 104<sup>th</sup> article of the Georgian Constitution (Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia, 1990). This made the situation even more tense, and eventually led to an armed conflict in 1991-1992.

The 1990 resolution was never modified, and to this day, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast remains abolished. But in 2007, on the orders of president Mikheil Saakashvili, the *temporary administration of the administrative-territorial unit on the territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast* (Matsne 2007) was created, which didn't refer to a specific, demarcated territory, and the jurisdiction of which spread to the territories controlled by Georgia after the 1991-1992 war (see map 1). But of course, its creation meant and aimed to embrace the whole territory of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.

In 2008, after the last military conflict, in which Russia got openly involved against Georgia, the situation in the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast changed radically. After the war, the recognition by the Russian Federation of the self-proclaimed South Ossetian Republic has put Georgia and the rest of the international society in a fundamentally new situation.

As a result of these territorial and administrative changes and the situation following the 2008 war, today, in order to describe the territory in question, the following three terms are mainly used by Georgia and most members of the international community (who do not recognize the independence of the self-proclaimed Republic of South Ossetia): “Tskhinvali Region”, “Samachablo” or “Former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast”. Considering that none of these terms fully covers, in geographical terms, the territory currently occupied by Russia (Zakareishvili 2021, Amnesty Int. 2019), in the following article, I use the term “Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia”.

As for the term *B/orderisation*, I borrowed it from Van Houtum's ‘B/ordering Space’ (Houtum 2017). With it, I wanted to conceptually unify the various consequences of the erection of actual, physical borders, emphasize the nature of the newly currently practiced exclusion, as well as the establishment of a literally new order in the divided territories.

### **1.2. Current state of research**

Although the active phase of borderization in the Tskhinvali region began in 2011, the scientific literature based on empirical research is still quite scarce. Here, I should mention the publications of the ongoing research project supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation - "Life of the Villages in Russia's Creeping Occupation Zone" (FR-18-10229) (Jalabadze, Janiashvili, Loladze 2022; Loladze 2021; Jalabadze 2020; Janiashvili 2020;), which examines the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the villages located near the dividing line based on ethnographic research. Comparatively more publications are devoted to the history of the conflict and the geopolitical, macro and meso-level socio-economic and political analysis of the consequences of the 2008 war. This makes it possible to compare the works of both Georgian (Kakachia et al. 2017; Zakareishvili 2021) and foreign researchers (Coppeters 2007; van Peski & Gaecilia 2011; Boyle 2016; Toal & Merebashvili 2019; Sotiriou 2019) and reports from non-governmental and international organizations (Amnesty Int. 2019, EUMM 2018). These publications primarily highlight that the goal of the Russian post-war policy is to gain influence over the present situation in Georgia through illegally occupied territories, artificially established borders, barbed wires, and kidnapping. At the same time, this policy contributes to the transformation of ethnic and civic identities among the population living beyond the occupation line by isolating divided villages and dismantling traditional cultural or socio-economic institutions.

The collection of "Cost of Conflict: Untold Stories - Georgian-Ossetian Conflict in People's Lives" (Alborova, Allen and Kalandarishvili, 2016) is an important publication about the Georgian/ South Ossetian conflict, experienced and witnessed by people on both sides of the border. It is clear from the stories told on both the Georgian and the South Ossetian sides: "While one side perceives events, the other starts demonizing and victimizing itself. The other side wants to reconcile and recognize their past mistakes, but maybe not completely in-depth." (Ibid:6) As the explanation to the different perceptions, the authors name the two sides of the dividing line - the existence of different information fields and political vectors. A series of important papers to rethink the Georgian/ South Ossetian/ Russian conflict are publications based on hundreds of documents and material from archives as part of the New Generation Scholars' Timeline of Georgian-Ossetian Conflict (1977 - 2008): Documents for

Remembering and Rethinking the Past” (Chakvetadze 2019; Jishkariani 2019; Kobakhidze). Such publications play an important role in the Georgian-, Ossetian-, and Russian-speaking societies, in a post-conflict period, and help the process of rethinking historical facts and events interpreted mainly through the lens of nationalist sentiments for decades.

In this regard - aiming to offer an anthropological interpretation of the interviews and analysis of time-spatial characteristics of border and boundary construction dynamics in currently occupied territory - this article is the first attempt to examine the ongoing b/orderization process occurring along the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework of border studies.

### ***1.3. Research context and methodology***

This paper presents the results of 45 in-depth interviews (25 women - 21 to 71 (average 48.7) years old; 23 men, 19 to 75 (average 49.3) years old) out of which 32 (17 women, 15 men) interviews were obtained within the framework of the ongoing research project supported by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation - “Life of the Villages in Russia’s Creeping Occupation Zone” (FR-18-10229) in the summer and autumn of 2019. Another 13 interviews (8 women, 7 men) have been recorded during the fieldtrip organized in the frame of New Europe College’s Pontica Magna fellowship between the 28<sup>th</sup> of May until the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2021. These interviews have been recorded in the villages split by the ongoing b/orderization in the southern part of the occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, particularly in the municipalities of Khashuri, K’asp’i, Gori, and Kareli.

The selection of these locations was conditioned by the fact that in these municipalities the occupation line runs across some of the most fertile and densely populated agricultural areas, therefore b/orderization poses a most severe impact on daily safety and social-economic aspects of the local population. It must be mentioned that, unfortunately, I wasn’t able to conduct interviews in the villages controlled by the Russia/South Ossetia de facto government, as since 2008 it has become extremely difficult if not impossible to enter the occupied territory, particularly for the citizens of Georgia.

Using the case study approach made it possible to thoroughly study a particular case of the b/orderization impact on the affected communities and interrelationships. The main data collection techniques I used during

the fieldwork were participant observation, in-depth interviews and “spontaneous focus group” discussions. Spending extensive time in the field made me better acquainted with the life in the selected areas and gave me the possibility to observe and experience locals’ everyday lives, which also helped to gain their trust.

In addition to the qualitative analysis of the fieldwork interviews, I have also analyzed the spatial and historical characteristics of the state borders and administrative boundaries, time-space dynamics in Georgia as well as on the territory of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. To achieve this goal, I have combined bibliographic and archive materials with the spatial data collected from the fieldworks. Using ESRI software products (ArcMap & ArcCatalog 10.2.2) I have compiled geographic data, analyzed information, and built and managed geographic information in a database. This allowed me to spatially analyze and visualize the specific impact of the b/orderization process.

#### **1.4. Theoretical framework**

In terms of theory, due to their complex nature, border studies require diverse analytical perspectives. Today, there is no distinct approach that could be considered dominant in this area. In 2011, Anssi Paasi summed up the complexity of the border as an object of research and the need to conceptualize its various dimensions, noting that “since borders are context-bound phenomena, the development of a general border theory is unattainable or even undesirable.” (Paasi 2011: 27).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the conditions of intense globalization that began in the 1990s, in a world of uninterrupted flow of capital and information, some researchers saw the existence of borders as legacy of the past world order incompatible with the new one, focusing on their declining or even disappearing role (Dittgen 2000; Hudson 1998; Kolossov 2005; Kolossov and O’Loughlin 1998; Newman 2006a; Newman and Paasi 1998; Ohmae 1990; Paasi 1998; Shapiro and Alker 1996). However, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the discourse on the decline/disappearance of borders was soon replaced by the securitization discourse, giving borders an altogether new and much more complex meaning (Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Andreas and Snyder 2000; Laitinen 2003).

Political geographers (Nevins, Anderson, Paasi, as well as spatial planners such as Haselsberger) acknowledge that a border is not merely



a dotted line on the map but also an integral component, inseparable from the origin of the state it surrounds. This phenomenon is called the institutionalization of territories, which includes the formation of borders, symbols, and institutions (Anderson 1996; Haselsberger 2014; Nevins 2002; Paasi 2011). Borders are the key political institutions as in complex societies, it is impossible to organize economic, social, or political life without them. Moreover, the continued existence of a physical boundary, or the process of b/orderization itself, creates new subjects and identities associated with them to distinguish groups belonging to or alienated from the subject (Nevins 2002, Choi 2011). This context is directly applicable to de facto entities, such as South Ossetia, which seek to establish governing institutions distinct from Georgia. To achieve this goal the existence of borders carries the necessary strategic, socio-cultural, and symbolic importance for the Russian backed de facto government of the occupied region.

In addition, I applied Haselsberger's concept of "thick" and "thin" borders to the current framework of b/orderization in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia: Haselsberger, who analyzes borders from a spatial planning point of view, assumes that borders are overlapping layers of geopolitical, socio-cultural, economic, and biophysical boundaries. According to this concept, the border is a linear solid dividing element, found both in the actual area and on a map. Boundaries are elements of one particular aspect, which includes four different components (Haselsberger 2014;510):

1. Geopolitical boundaries - territorial and physical, mostly legally certified land. For example, a district, city, region, state, federation, EU, etc...
  2. Socio-cultural boundaries - social and cultural characteristics that are produced in society and sometimes have vague meanings.
  3. Economic boundaries - locally produced, ever-changing frameworks that are defined by economic aspects, such as cost-effectiveness or wealth (economic inclusiveness and exclusivity).
  4. Biophysical boundaries - through characteristics of the natural environment (such as rivers, mountains, landscape zones) in most cases vaguely demarcated terrestrial or marine habitats.
- Consequently, the more difficult it is to cross the boundary elements mentioned above, the 'thicker' the border is, and in the case of their openness, the 'thinner'. (Haselsberger (2014; 510)

As models of “thick border”, among others, Hasselsberger cites examples of the Iron Curtain, as well as the US-Mexico border and the military demarcation line between the two Koreas. The Iron Curtain, which is more familiar to Georgian reality due to its Soviet past, was a difficult border to cross and hindered interaction of any kind between neighboring countries. As a result, the border regions adjacent to the “Iron Curtain” have been characterized, to this day, by the slowing of social, cultural or economic development and therefore high outmigration rates, which have “reduced the vitality” of the bordering regions (Hasselsberger 2014:510).

As for the “thin” borders, unlike the “thick” ones, they entail simplified movement and contact, as for example, the internal borders of the EU zone (the external borders of the EU are “thick” and harder to cross). However, coming from Georgia’s Soviet past, it should be mentioned that borders between republics were undoubtedly “thin”, but after gaining independence, they “thickened” and, in some cases, raised some problematic issues, such as the ongoing demarcation of the David Gareja monastery complex on the Georgia – Azerbaijani borderland.<sup>2</sup> Given that this issue was less relevant within the Soviet “thin” internal boundaries and acquired a special severity after gaining independence - I believe this is a case where a “thin” border has transformed into a “thicker” one.

## **2. Historical Background: Spatial Characteristics of Administrative Divisions**

### ***2.1. Early modern period***

During medieval times, the territory of the Georgian Kingdom was divided into military-administrative territorial units known as ‘Sadroshos’ (literally “of a banner”). According to Vakhushti Bagrationi, there were four large Sadroshos in the 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries:

1. ‘Metsinave’ (“Avant-garde”) – southern Georgia;
2. ‘Memarjvene’ (“Right flank”) – western Georgia;
3. ‘Memartskhene’ (“Left flank”) – territories to the east of the Kartli region (mainly Kakheti and Hereti);
4. ‘Mepis Sadrosho’ (“Royal Sadrosho”) – Shida Kartli.

Sadroshos were led by a military commander, and had their own banners as symbols. These larger Sadroshos incorporated smaller ones called

‘Saeristavos’.<sup>3</sup> In battle situations, each army (of 1000 soldiers) brought by Sadroshos represented one military-tactical unit. The number of smaller Sadroshos was much higher, and each of the contingents brought to battle by these saeristavos were led by an Eristavi, who also had his own banner. In special situations, the mobilization of an entire army composed of all Sadroshos would happen quite fast and in battles, each Sadrosho (both large and small) had a specific function to fulfill in terms of tactical maneuvers.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the dissolution of a unified Georgia into several kingdoms and principalities, the old military-administrative system disappeared, even though like before, four Sadroshos were established in each of the newly founded political entities; in the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, this reorganization mainly took place during the 1470s, as was probably the case for the Kingdom of Imereti (Suny 1994; Klimiasvili 1964:122-123).

The insignias of a Sadrosho commander were a banner and a sword, which were handed to him by the king during the investment ceremony of the commander. The princes, bishops, landowners, and others living on the territory of the Sadrosho were all put under his authority, and would gather as an army under the commander’s banner. The main duties of the commander were to bring an army during wars, and in times of peace to train and prepare soldiers for battle. Apart from military affairs, the commander also had the duty to resolve small-scale disputes; each year, censuses were carried out according to the Sadroshos in order to determine the population of the Kingdom, the number of soldiers, and of taxpayers; this process was supervised by the commander himself, who also had the responsibility to collect taxes. This function provided him with some administrative rights; on the territory of a Sadrosho, the king was carrying out his administrative plans through the commander, and therefore, the commander also had a police and administrative structure under his command, known as the *iasaulebi*. As a result of all this, one can say the Sadroshos represented both military and civil administrative units (Suny 1994; Meskhia 1948).

A smaller-scale administrative-territorial unit called *temi* is also mentioned in Georgian historical sources since the 11<sup>th</sup> century; this term was used only to describe a territorial unit, and didn’t convey any military meaning (Topchishvili 2010). The *temi* could also describe a valley, for instance, the valleys of the main rivers found in today’s Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, namely the Liakhvi and Ksani valleys, are not mere geographical terms, but also convey historic-ethnographic meaning. These

*temis* were themselves divided into smaller *temis*. A *temi* was uniting several villages and had its own icon, had a collective responsibility towards the state and the church, was taking judicial decisions, and had the duty of defending and taking care of roads, collectively owned forests, hayfields, pastures, and arable lands. In Ivane Javakhishvili's 'Historical Map of Georgia' [Javakhishvili, 1923], the whole territory of Georgia is divided into *temis*. On the territory of today's Tskhinvali Region, one could find the *temis* of Gverdis Dziri, Maghran-Dvaleti, Savakhtango, Satskhavato, Zhamuri, Knogho, Ksnis Kheoba, Tskhradzma, Tchurta, and Khepinis Khevi. All these *temis* are comprised in Shida Kartli, which also includes Dvaleti.

From ancient times, from the foundation of the Iberian Kingdom (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC), Dvaleti was an integral part of Georgia, and it is only in 1859 that the Russian authorities made it an administrative part of the Vladikavkaz Oblast. Historical Dvaleti is currently part of the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia. Historical sources show that Dvaleti and Ossetia are different geographical notions, that the establishment of Ossetians in Dvaleti began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and that this process ended with the assimilation of the Dvaletians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After this, in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ossetians continued establishing themselves in Georgian villages from Shida Kartli's mountain regions (in the Smaller and Greater Liakhvi valleys), ravaged by the Mongols and emptied of their populations; as a result, in the 1730s, the Ossetian population lives in relatively compact settlements in the upper part of the Liakhvi valley, and more sporadic ones in the upper parts of the Mejudi, Lekhuri, and Ksani valleys (Gvasalia 1983:169-170).

## ***2.2. Territorial and administrative structure under the rule of the Russian Empire***

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the annexation of Georgia<sup>4</sup> by the Russian Empire, territorial and administrative structures changed significantly. As part of the Empire, the country's administrative and territorial structures were arranged according to Russian interests. The whole Caucasus was under the authority of a Governor-General (from 1844, Viceroy) appointed by the Emperor, and just like Russia, it was divided into provinces. These provinces were themselves divided into counties ("*uyezd*"). Apart from that, in some territories that were conquered by Russia relatively late, oblasts were established instead of provinces.

In the parts of provinces where national and religious minorities were dominant, yet other subdivisions (*okrugs*) were created instead of counties (*uyezds*), and they represented special administrative parts of the province. For instance, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large part of the Georgian territory was included in the provinces of Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Tbilisi's province included the Tbilisi, Gori, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Borchalo, Dusheti, Tianeti, Telavi, and Signaghi *uyezds*, as well as the Zakatali *okrug*, while the Kutaisi province included the Kutaisi, Shorapni, Senaki, Ozurgeti, Zugdidi, Lechkhumi, and Racha *uyezds*, and the Sokhumi, Batumi, and Artvini *okrugs*. Apart from that, part of the Georgian territory was incorporated in the Kars oblast as the Oltisi and Artaani *okrugs*. The villages constituent of a *uyezd* were united in village communities. *Uyezds* also included cities, which represented the administrative centers of their *uyezds*.

After the annexation of the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom in 1802, the establishment of any kind of territorial administrative entity on the territory of today's Tskhinvali region was not on the table for the rulers of the Russian Empire. At that time, the territory in question was divided in two parts – the Gori and the Dusheti *uyezds*. It is however noteworthy that some high-mountain villages of the Tskhinvali Region (Kornisi, Tbeti, Kusireti, Gudisi, Potrisi, Chvrissi, Mghvrissi, Satikhari, Kulbiti, Khromistskaro, Zhamuri, and others) were compactly inhabited by Ossetians, while others (Dzvileti, Sveri, Eredvi, Kordi, Ditsi, Atseriskhevi, Charebi, Snekvi, Beloti, Satskhenisi, Vanati, Vardziaantkari, Mereti, Karbi, Arbo, and others) were mixed, and hosted both Georgian and Ossetian populations (Totadze 2008). Unlike its highlands, the foothills and lowlands of the Tskhinvali region were almost completely inhabited by Georgians. In cities and towns, namely Tskhinvali, Akhagori, and Java, Jews and Armenians were living alongside Georgians.

As noted in subchapter 1.1 for the first time “Ossetia” was used to describe an administrative-territorial entity under the Tiflis Governorate in 1843, when the Ossetian *Okrug*, was temporarily separated from the Gori *Uyezd*. In 1858, on the orders of prince and governor Aleksandr Baryatinsky, the Ossetia *Okrug* was dissolved. From this period, the migration of Ossetians from the Northern Caucasus to the Tskhinvali Region increased in scale, and therefore, the established historic ethno-demographic balance in the Tskhinvali region was transformed due to the increase of the Ossetian population. In addition to this, as a result of the imperial policies purposefully carried out in Georgia, the integration

of newly established Ossetians was taking place not in a Georgian, but a Russian military-political, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic context, which was fundamentally opposing the already firmly established existing traditions. The logical outcome of all this was the estrangement of the Georgian and Ossetian inhabitants of the Tskhinvali Region, which was often accompanied by armed conflicts.

### ***2.3. Georgia's first democratic republic***

The territorial structure of Imperial Russia was preserved during the short independence period of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), and in 1919, local elections were held in the uyezd and four large cities of these territorial units. The territorial-administrative arrangement of Georgia was restructured through the constitution approved in 1921: Georgia was divided into 19 units – 18 oblasts and the capital Tbilisi. Apart from small differences, the regions mainly corresponded to the former uyezds. It was also decided to create three autonomous units: 1. The Autonomous Oblast of Abkhazia; 2. Muslim Georgia (modern Batumi region) and 3. Zakatala (nowadays a part of Azerbaijan) but due to the annexation of Georgia by Soviet Russia, these constitutional changes were not actually implemented) (Chyzhevskaya et. Al. 2019) Losaberidze 2019).

It is worth noting that the first separatist aspirations among the population living in today's South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region appeared right after Georgia freed itself from the rule of the Russian Empire. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1919, during one of the meetings of the Commission, created by the government of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, in charge of defining borders, representatives of the Ossetian National Council stated their decision to create a unified Ossetian Nation (by uniting South and North Ossetia), which would later unite with the Russian Democratic Federal Republic. But because at that stage it could not happen, they were asking the commission for political autonomy within the Georgian borders. The proposed decree ("On the partition of the village communities populated by Ossetians as a separate uyezd", listed the populated areas of the Shorapni, Racha, and Gori uyezds, and suggested that a new administrative unit, the "Java uyezd", should be created by uniting these three districts (Janelidze, 2007: 9; Janelidze, 2018:63; Songhulashvili 2009:97). Their request was not approved, but a joint commission was created with the objective of creating an ethnographic map of the Shorapni, Racha, Dusheti and Gori uyezds, on the basis of which the possibility of

creating a Java uyezd would be discussed, which would include about 1/3 less territory compared to the one provided to the South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast created during the Soviet rule.

This offer did not satisfy the separatist groups, and they openly and actively aligned themselves with the Bolsheviks against the newly independent Georgian Republic. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1920, the “National Council of South Ossetia” created the “Revolutionary Committee of South Ossetia”, which was asking the Russian Bolsheviks for political autonomy for “South Ossetia”, which led to a significantly tense situation in the region and resulted in violent clashes (Jones 2005; Jones 2014). In 1921, when the Red Army invaded Georgia, they were met as liberators in South Ossetia (Welt 2014; Jishkariani 2017).

#### ***2.4. The Soviet Union: creation of South Ossetian AO***

Right after the establishment of the Soviet rule, the territorial structure of Georgia changed once again. In 1921-1922, now already in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia (which became part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic<sup>5</sup>), three nominally different autonomous units were created simultaneously: the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), which, until 1931, was part of Georgia with an SSR status according to a special treaty based on federative principles, the Acharan ASSR, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region (“oblast”). According to this territorial-administrative arrangement, “the number of autonomous units in Georgia was greater than in any other Soviet republic apart from the RSFSR, though other republics contained ethnic minorities numerically larger than those in Georgia” (Gachechiladze 2015:84).

On October 31, 1921, the Caucasian Bureau of the Central Committee passed a resolution according to which South Ossetia received the rights of an autonomous oblast, while the Revolutionary Committee of Georgia was ordered to determine the borders of this autonomy together with the Executive Committee of South Ossetia. In the end, the terms “South Ossetia” and “North Ossetia” became of legal relevance in 1922-24, when, at first, the “South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast” was created by the Central Executive Committee of Georgia and the Council of People’s Commissars through the Decree №2 in April 1922 (Moambe 1922:81-85), and two years later, the North Ossetian ASSR on the territory of Russia in July 1924.

It is worth noting that since the enactment of this decree the precise demarcation of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast boundaries has never taken place. Most importantly, it turned out that the non-existence of demarcated boundaries does not only create problems now, in the times of occupation and unilateral “demarcation” - but was also the source of certain ambiguous situations during Soviet times, that sometimes evolved into a source of tension.

This is confirmed by the 1931 unclassified documents from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia found in the National Archives of Georgia. For instance, as one can read in the document “Of disputed lands between the Oni District and the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast”,<sup>6</sup> because of the ambiguity about borders, soon after the creation of the autonomous oblast, administrative disputes occurred regarding lands and took a persistent character – both between local populations and bordering administrative units. Apart from that, the document shows that because of undetermined borders, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast would unilaterally seize bordering territories: *“Because Decree №2 does not give clear indications about demarcation points, these indications were interpreted freely, which led to the seizure by force of certain lands by the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast”*. We also read in the document that in certain cases, the seizure by force of agricultural lands after the creation of the autonomous oblast was a source of daily tension for a long time, but for years the relevant commission could not manage to resolve this issue: “When creating the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, part of the lands that were, since ancient times, cultivated by the farmers of the Oni District, were transferred to the newly created South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. As a result, the rights of the farmers from the Oni District were violated, as the latter could not make use of these lands anymore. This situation became the reason behind violent acts from both sides, sometimes even leading to bloodshed. In order to avoid such undesirable events and disputes between the populations of these districts in the future, commissions including both farmers and governing bodies of the Georgian SSR were created on several occasions, with the objective of clarifying this issue and resolving existing problems. But to this day, no results have stemmed from the work of these commissions”.

The rest of the document describes in detail the disputed parts of the agricultural territories of the villages Ghurshevi, Iri, and Ts’edisi in the Oni District, and once again underlines that “Even according to the legislative



content of the Decree №2, the lands (1941 ha) cultivated by farmers (169 households) from the villages of the Oni District – Iri and Ts'edisi should be assigned to the Oni District, but they were arbitrarily assigned to the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast".<sup>7</sup>

It is worth noting that both the above-mentioned document, in which one can find an open criticism of the Decree №2 (dated 1922) because of the absence of clearly defined borders, and the Decree №2 itself are signed by one and the same man, Filipp Makharadze;<sup>8</sup> in 1922 as the First Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee, and in 1931, as the head of the Central Executive Committee of the Georgian SSR.

Another interesting discovery from the archive documents is the 1933 resolution passed during a small presidium of the Central Executive Committee of Georgia. During a session held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 1933, it was decided to move the village council center of Stalinisi District from village Satsikhuri to village Tsaghvli. It was the same for villages from the village council of Ali: villages K'odistsq'aro, Chorchana, T'itvinis Ts'q'aro and Lomisa all joined the Ts'aghvli village council. In this case too, the reason behind such decisions was the necessity to delimitate bordering territories that had been absorbed by the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast because of undefined borders.

At this stage, due to the lack of accessibility to the National Archive of Georgia because of COVID-19 regulations, it was not possible to obtain more documentation from the Soviet period related to border changes in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, though there is a high probability for this kind of materials to exist in other periods of the USSR. Apart from that, during the Soviet times, if we disregard minor municipal appropriations of agricultural lands existing on the administrative border, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast did not undergo significant changes.

### **3. Perception and Experience of B/orderization in Everyday Life**

In addition to the historical spatial-administrative analysis of the bordering processes of the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, the qualitative analysis of the fieldwork materials provides a basis for understanding the process of b/orderization along the occupation line from locals' perspectives.

As the subchapters on the historical background of the administrative boundary time-space dynamics showed, administrative boundaries of the currently occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, have never been “thick”. The new reality after the occupation of the region by Russian troops caused previously unexperienced difficulties, even though the conflict in the region started in the early 90’s and Georgia had partially lost control over the territory. Since then, according to official data, Ossetian separatists, with the support of Russia, are carrying out the first so-called demarcation activities using a topographic map issued by the USSR General Staff in 1988, which shows the administrative boundary of 1984 (IDFI 2015). As one out of many local residents recounts, this can be interpreted as the “thickening” of a “thin” border:

BG;<sup>9</sup> They marked the borders as they were during the Old Ossetian autonomy, the communist one. Who cared about the border then? ... Now, they walk around with GPS. The Russians ... They are doing it, of course! Ossetians assist them as laborers. They walk around together; the Russians do not really consult Ossetians on anything.

BG – Female, 54 years old, village in Gori municipality

In this paper, as mentioned above, I rely on 45 in-depth interviews from the fieldworks conducted in 2019 and 2021. *Figure 1* represents a radar



Figure 1. The impact of borderization on daily life according to the interviews

that visualizes the impact of b/orderization on daily life by summarizing the interviews. The majority of the people interviewed emphasize the worsened economic (34), social (27) and cultural (22) situation, which increases the outflow of population from divided villages (26).

At a glance, the feeling of danger (21) and security (16) in their everyday lives seem to be mutually exclusive. However, the analysis of the field materials provided below shows that such perceptions depend on whether the fenced area is close or far to their settlements and to what extent the daily agricultural activities of the locals are affected.

### **3.1. Alienation**

Many interviewees noted that the presence of a physical barrier excludes the possibility to keep contact with the population on the other side of the dividing line. From NM's story, it is clear that since the 2008 war, an intense process of b/orderization of the boundary ("thickening" the "thin border") has become a fertile ground for maintaining constant fear, deepening the alienation and isolation between groups:

From 2008, the Russians forbade us [Georgians and Ossetians] to see each other. However, many Ossetian men have Georgian wives. Also, many Georgians have Ossetian wives. There is one Ossetian family in the village whose daughter got married [before the war] in [Names neighboring occupied village]. Since 2008 it's impossible for her to come here to see her parents. She can only call them by phone, but if something [bad] will happen, **she will have to take a long trip [530km] through Vladikavkaz [Russian Federation], to visit her family who lives just 700 meters away.** But we could go there [neighboring occupied village] without problems before the war. We had one church. We used to celebrate holidays together. We were together in good times and bad ones. We used to invite each other over, but now the church turned out on the other side of the border, so we cannot even pray there anymore. During Shevardnadze's<sup>10</sup> time, we used to live off energy. We went to Znauri's district [currently occupied territory] and brought stuff there. We worked there. We traded there. The people were not fighting. Nowadays, nothing is keeping us together. So many years have passed since the war... The kids have all grown up. They do not know anything about each other anymore."

NM – female, 61 years old, village in Khashuri municipality

Echoing the overwhelming majority of interviewees, NM also notes that, before the 2008 war, relations between the Georgian and Ossetian populations were largely restored, with close socio-economic and cultural ties existing between them. The interviewees also attached particular importance to shared traditional religious practices, thus the dividing lines could not significantly affect these relationships.

The interviewees see the long-term negative impact of ties severed due to borderization primarily in the lack of connection between new generations. According to those interviewed, more than ten years have passed since the borderization has begun, and now the new generations on both sides of the occupation line are growing up in complete isolation from each other, which will hinder the establishment of ties, the restoration of trust, and the ability to coexist in the future. Moreover, they believe that, over time, the elimination of subsequent alienation will become increasingly impossible.

Disrupted social and economic ties are the major disappointing consequences for AK, another interviewee from the split Village in Kareli municipality:

AK: Until the 2005 everything was fine, many of us had Russian car plates. There was trading, transportation of big cargos - we were going to Russia through Tskhinvali without problem. We [Georgians and Ossetians] had very good relationships. Then [in 2005] they closed Ergneti Market,<sup>11</sup> but still, until 2008 we used to go there [currently occupied territory] without any problem, and they [Ossetians from the Tskhinvali region] also used to come to us. Until 2008 I used to cultivate my plot of land near the modern "border", there was no problem at all.

I can tell you even more, until 2008, Special Forces from both sides visited me quite often in my previous house [was destroyed in 2008 war], which was close to the "border". We had many Supra [traditional Georgian feast] and great time together. There were even cases when they mixed up their rifle guns and couldn't identify whom it belonged anymore [laughs].

N.L: How is it nowadays? Do you meet the border guards from the other side? Do you communicate?

AK: No, not anymore since they have built those fences. There, where I have a tomato garden, a corner of my plot is cut by the fence. And they walk there several times a day, because they are patrolling the "border". Quite often I used to say "hi" – Zdarova rebyata ["Hello guys" in Russian] to them. I know that soldiers who wear masks are Ossetians, because they

do not want to be identified. Russian soldiers from Vladivostok don't care, they know that after the service they will never meet us anymore. And quite often I tried to keep conversation with them; once I even invited them to drink together; I told them I would bring some wine and they agreed, but when I came back, they were already gone.

NL: Is it forbidden for them?

Of course, it is! Nowadays soldiers would get shot if someone would catch them drinking with me.

AK – male, 44 years old. Village in Kareli municipality.

AK's account also reveals that until 2008, the inhabitants did not experience any difficulties with movement on the territories controlled by the Georgian government and the separatist government of South Ossetia. However, it is important to consider that AK emphasizes not only the restored relationships between civilians but also the trust and close relations between the Georgian and Ossetian military. On the one hand, it testifies to a distinctly high degree of reconciliation, and on the other hand, it reminds us that before the b/orderization began, in the everyday life, the dividing line between the opposing sides was an easily penetrable "thin" boundary which didn't hinder the social, economic, and cultural processes.

### **3.2. Outmigration**

The villages adjacent to the occupation line, not unlike other rural settlements in Georgia, are characterized by a high tendency towards rural-urban migration. For example, according to data from GeoStat, the population of rural settlements in Georgia is decreasing every year. Over the last ten years, the share of the rural population in Georgia has declined from 46.6% to 43.6% (GeoStat 2021). In the villages divided by b/orderization, the new challenges and an even harsher daily reality only add to this, giving rise to depopulation.

Like other interviewees, a 25-year-old young male from village in Gori municipality recalls:

NL: How many people live in this village?

SV: Some went to the city others left the country... There are 20-22 households. This was a combined village. There were up to 60 Georgian-

Ossetian households. But, after the war, no one could last here. Some houses burnt down. The Ossetian houses burned during the first war, next came the Georgian ones. Then, many left their homes altogether. Some sold them and moved to the city. It is completely empty now. You cannot see children in the village. We can go for a walk together. I bet you, we will not see any kids. I am 25 years old. There are only two men my age here.

NL: Why did they leave? What was their main reason?

SV: I do not know... It is a poor village. We lost all our pastures, so we lost the cattle too. Plus, the settlement is right near the border. Our gardens are literally on the border. The Russians are always here. You never know what can happen. They might be a little drunk... You never know how they will act. "Come here!" and then they will catch you or even shoot you straight away. We are always scared.

SV - male, 25 years old, village in Gori municipality

It becomes apparent from SV's account that the increase in outmigration is directly related to the specific economic hardships produced by b/orderization. First and foremost, the restrictions of access to agricultural lands must be mentioned, which, similarly to the village of SV, poses a significant problem for all divided settlements, frequently resulting in the disappearance of entire agricultural branches (in this case, animal husbandry).

Besides the economic hardships, the interviewees invariably point out the daily safety concerns and, like SV, underline the constant psychological pressure and insecure living environment. Following Haselsberger's concept of thick border, in addition to the slowing of social, cultural, or economic development discussed in the previous subsection, the situation caused by b/orderization stimulates migration (especially among young people), which induces the depopulation of villages close to the occupation line.

### ***3.3. Double-edged consequences***

The most fascinating and unexpected finding, based on the analysis of the fieldwork materials, is the dual perception of the b/orderization process by the locals (see Figure 1). On the one hand, for all interviewees, as well as according to the prevalent discourse in Georgia, b/orderization is unequivocally associated with an attempt at annexation, which involves, as I mentioned in the previous subsections, severed socio-economic ties,

increased threats, illegal arrests, and restriction of access to residential and agricultural property. Nonetheless, given the spatial context, inhabitants of the villages where the Russian military have erected fences talk about double-edged benefits, noting an enhanced sense of security they experience in their daily lives. For example, 52-year-old DT describes the consequent situation as follows:

NL: Do you own cattle?

DT: yes, but pasture lands were taken away (occupied) and it became very hard. Nowadays, **areas which have been enclosed are much safer**, there **we can pasture our cows without fear – we know that cattle cannot cross the fence and won't get kidnapped**. But we can't explain to cattle that some areas are uncontrolled and now they will need a visa to go there [laughs]. **When it [cattle] will overstep you have to follow and then both of you will be arrested and will have to pay the fine to get free.**

NL: How much is the fine?

DT: As we were told, now it has become 800GEL [≈254EUR] – it got very expensive recently. Until now it was 2000RUB [≈30EUR]. But you know, they have expenses as well – they take you on “excursion” to Tskhinvali for 3-4 days and have to provide bed and food for you [laughs].

NL: So, does it mean that it's safer with the border fences?

DT: **God knows it's hard for me to admit that, but unfortunately that's the reality we are in. If it would be enclosed, then they [Russian troops] wouldn't be allowed to kidnap us.** Besides that, now, **in the areas where they put fences - not a single meter of land is left unsown.** Russians even keep warning us to keep at least a 50-meter distance from the fence, but we do not care anymore. On the other hand, here [territory without fences or clear “border” signs] **we cannot access our plots in the radius of at least 500 meters, because we do not know till where we are allowed to go.**

DT - male, 52 years old, village in Kareli municipality

As we see from DT's narrative, despite the severe consequences of b/orderization, residents near the occupation line often think that getting close to fenced territories will not necessarily harm them, in contrast territories without physical barrier. According to the people from the same village in the Kareli district, if there was a physical barrier on the rest of the surrounding area of the settlement, not only would their daily lives become safer (since arrests and kidnapping due to them crossing

the “border” and their fear of losing their cattle will decrease), but their access to agricultural land will increase due to unimportance of keeping a “buffer zone” of 350-500 meters (see map 3).

As an excerpt from a later interview demonstrates, the inhabitants of the villages of the Khashuri municipality are forced to live in conditions similar to those of the Kareli municipality:

NL: How do you orientate in the areas where there are no clear signs or fences?

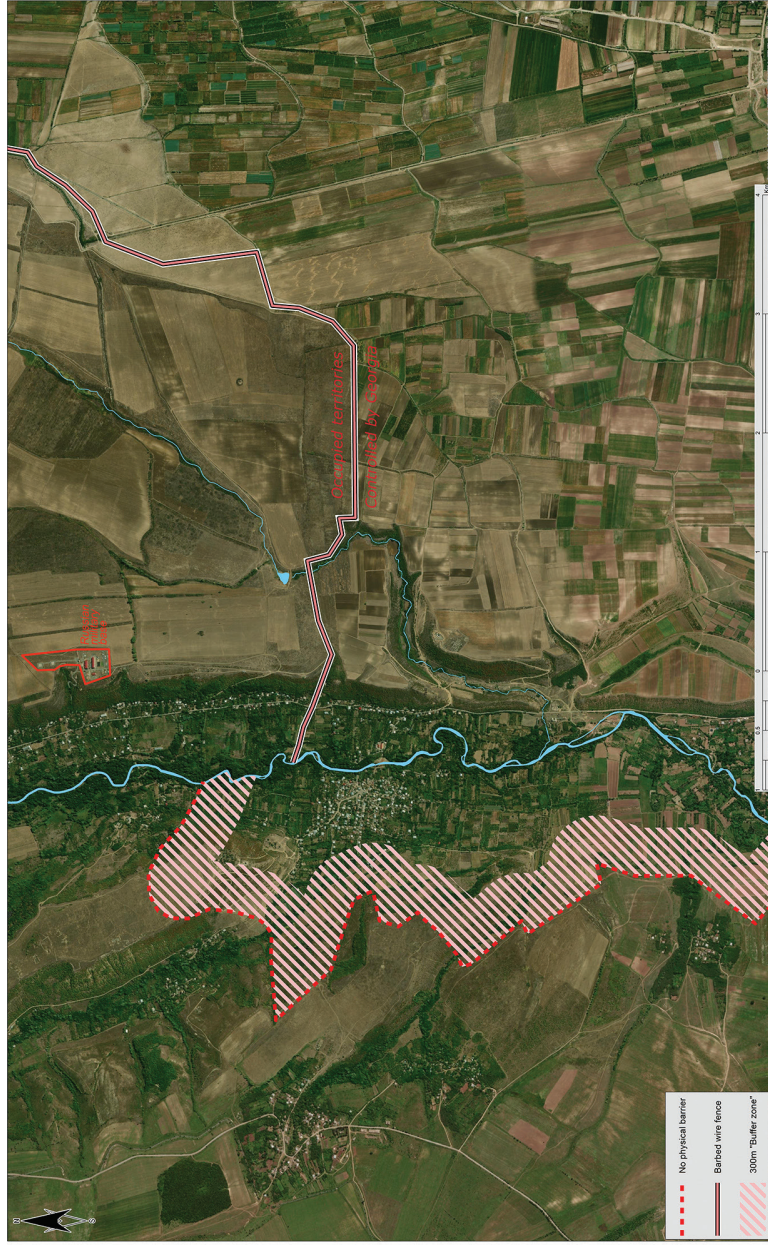
GM: **There are few places with signs, but for the rest we simply know that it's dangerous to cross the rill, or after some trees or rocks it's not safe to go, even though it is still our territory and what they call the “border” is 300 or 500 meters away.** Also, for example, there are paths where Russian soldiers regularly patrol with their dogs. So, we see it and therefore avoid it. Also, our police warn us regularly about it, too. **For example, this territory is not enclosed [shows on the map], so whenever I have to work in my garden, I have to ask [Georgian] policemen to come together with me and guard me.** They are very kind, always ready to help us. They keep telling us that we can work as long as we want, even till very late, but we must inform them before we go there, so as not to get kidnapped.

GM - Male, 64, village in Khashuri municipality

This portion of the interview with GM also clearly illustrates the precarious situation that accompanies daily life in the vicinity of the occupation line. When inhabitants move in areas that lack any proper signs or physical barriers, they risk, at best, imprisonment, and at worst, their own lives. Furthermore, the occupation line that is not clearly marked also forms a so-called buffer zone or a no man's land within a radius of 300-500 meters, restricting access of each adjacent settlement to at least tens of hectares of agricultural land.

Against a backdrop of the grueling day-to-day life caused by b/orderization, the section of the fenced occupation line certainly brings a degree of clarity and security to the local population. However, according to them, it is a double-edged benefit, and when making an assessment, they have to choose the lesser of two evils, as it is clear to them that the erection of physical barriers further isolates the occupied region, and that the creation of a “thick border” is a sign of its annexation.





Map 3. Example of b/orderization in Dvany, Kareli municipality (compiled by the author)

#### 4. Conclusion

At this stage of the study, it is clear that since 2008 the former administrative boundary, which was only a dashed line on a map, has become a strictly militarized physical barrier. According to the theoretical framework mentioned above, this process is evidently fitting the concept of transformation of “thin” boundaries into “thick” ones. As a result, intense b/orderization has become an insurmountable barrier for locals and leads to the severance of the longstanding socio-cultural and economic ties since already more than twelve years.

The new reality implemented by Russia in this region became a fertile ground for maintaining constant fear and deepening alienation and isolation between groups living on both sides of the occupation line. This situation stimulates outmigration (especially of the younger generation), which causes depopulation of the border-adjacent settlements. Most importantly, as the findings show - despite the difficult social, economic and cultural consequences, people living near the occupation line often perceive b/orderisation as a double-edged process, beneficial in the sense that it ensures their safety in everyday life.

Undoubtedly, in the long-term perspective, the post-2008 situation is causing irreparable damage to Georgian-Ossetian relations and bars any possibility of initiating any sort of constructive process. Meanwhile, new generations are growing up on both sides of the dividing line, alienated from each other.

However, attention should be paid to the fact that people on both sides of the occupation line still try to cross it to access land, to visit family, to trade, for health reasons, other socio-economic benefits, or simply to visit cemeteries and other religious sites at the risk of their own safety. Therefore, it is necessary to deal with ongoing b/orderisation processes analytically as much as practically.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The first Russian governmental newspaper in Transcaucasia, 1828-1833. At first, it was printed in both Russian and Georgian languages; Farsi was added in 1829. The newspaper published articles about the war, governmental decrees and communications, various pieces of news "of interest to this region", and in general, any text required by the government.
- <sup>2</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> century Georgian orthodox monastery complex. Part of it is located on the Azerbaijan–Georgia border, /which causes a border dispute between the two countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union/regaining the independence
- <sup>3</sup> Territorial unit in medieval Georgia, which was ruled by an Eristavi (duke).
- <sup>4</sup> The annexation of Georgian Kingdoms and principalities by Russian Empire started from 1801 by annexing Kartli-kakheti kingdom. By 1867 Russia annexed the last Georgian principality of Samegrelo.
- <sup>5</sup> A soviet republic in the years 1922-1936 formed by the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani Republics, as well as the Abkhazia SSR in 1922-1931.
- <sup>6</sup> National Archives of Georgia, Department of Central Archive of Contemporary History - Fund 284, catalogue 1, doc. N 1979. pages 1-23.
- <sup>7</sup> The document has an annex that presents schematic maps of the territories in question, but unfortunately the annex is not preserved at the Georgian National Archives.
- <sup>8</sup> Filipp Makharadze (1868-1941), a Georgian Bolshevik, revolutionary, communist party figure, and active opponent of the first Georgian Democratic Republic.
- <sup>9</sup> While presenting interview excerpts, I chose to assign random acronyms to interviewees, thus placing them on equal footing with myself (NL).
- <sup>10</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze – the Chairman of the State Council of Georgia in 1992-1995; 2<sup>nd</sup> president of Georgia in 1995-2003.
- <sup>11</sup> The market, active from 1996 to 2004 in the village of Ergneti, near the town of Tskhinvali, was an important trading post for the Georgian and Ossetian population. At the same time, it was one of the sources of shadow economy, wherein the smuggled food items, petroleum products, cigarettes, and particularly large quantities of wheat and flour produced in Russia, entered the territory of Georgia through the Tskhinvali region. Cases of drug and arms trafficking were also frequent. The market was closed in 2004 by the decision of the Georgian government.

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# NEW EUROPE FOUNDATION NEW EUROPE COLLEGE

## Institute for Advanced Study

*New Europe College (NEC)* is an independent Romanian institute for advanced study in the humanities and social sciences founded in 1994 by Professor Andrei Pleșu (philosopher, art historian, writer, Romanian Minister of Culture, 1990–1991, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1997–1999) within the framework of the *New Europe Foundation*, established in 1994 as a private foundation subject to Romanian law.

Its impetus was the *New Europe Prize for Higher Education and Research*, awarded in 1993 to Professor Pleșu by a group of six institutes for advanced study (the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, the National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences, Wassenaar, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, Uppsala, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin).

Since 1994, the NEC community of fellows and *alumni* has enlarged to over 600 members. In 1998 New Europe College was awarded the prestigious *Hannah Arendt Prize* for its achievements in setting new standards in research and higher education. New Europe College is officially recognized by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research as an institutional structure for postgraduate studies in the humanities and social sciences, at the level of advanced studies.

Focused primarily on individual research at an advanced level, NEC offers to young Romanian scholars and academics in the fields of humanities and social sciences, and to the foreign scholars invited as fellows appropriate working conditions, and provides an institutional framework with strong

international links, acting as a stimulating environment for interdisciplinary dialogue and critical debates. The academic programs NEC coordinates, and the events it organizes aim at strengthening research in the humanities and social sciences and at promoting contacts between Romanian scholars and their peers worldwide.

### **Academic programs organized and coordinated by NEC in the academic year 2020-2021:**

- ***NEC Fellowships (since 1994)***

Each year, the NEC Fellowships, open both to Romanian and international outstanding young scholars in the humanities and social sciences, are publicly announced. The Fellows are chosen by the NEC international Academic Advisory Board for the duration of one academic year, or one term. They gather for weekly seminars to discuss the progress of their research, and participate in all the scientific events organized by NEC. The Fellows receive a monthly stipend, and are given the opportunity of a research trip abroad, at a university or research institute of their choice. At the end of their stay, the Fellows submit papers representing the results of their research, to be published in the New Europe College Yearbooks.

- ***Ștefan Odobleja Fellowships (since October 2008)***

The Fellowships given in this program are supported by the National Council of Scientific Research and are part of the core fellowship program. The definition of these fellowships, targeting young Romanian researchers, is identical with those in the NEC Program, in which the *Odobleja* Fellowships are integrated.

- ***The Pontica Magna Fellowships (since October 2015)***

This Fellowship Program, supported by the VolkswagenStiftung (Germany), invites young researchers, media professionals, writers and artists from the countries around the Black Sea, but also beyond this area (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine), for a stay of one or two terms at the New Europe College, during which they have the opportunity to work on projects of their choice. The program welcomes a wide variety of disciplines in the

fields of humanities and social sciences. Besides hosting a number of Fellows, the College organizes within this program workshops and symposia on topics relevant to the history, present, and prospects of this region. This program is therefore strongly linked to the former *Black Sea Link* Fellowships.

- ***The Pontica Magna Returning Fellows Program (since March 2016)***

In the framework of its *Pontica Magna* Program, New Europe College offers alumni of a previous *Black Sea Link* and *Pontica Magna* Fellowship Program the opportunity to apply for a research stay of one or two months in Bucharest. The stay should enable successful applicants to refresh their research experience at NEC, to reconnect with former contacts, and to establish new connections with current Fellows.

- ***The Gerda Henkel Fellowships (since March 2017)***

This Fellowship Program, developed with the support of Gerda Henkel Stiftung (Germany), invites young researchers and academics working in the fields of humanities and social sciences (in particular archaeology, art history, historical Islamic studies, history, history of law, history of science, prehistory and early history) from Afghanistan, Belarus, China (only Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Regions), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, for a stay of one or two terms at the New Europe College, during which they have the opportunity to work on projects of their choice.

- ***The Spiru Haret Fellowships (since October 2017)***

The *Spiru Haret* Fellowship Program targets young Romanian researchers/academics in the humanities and social sciences whose projects address questions relating to migration, displacement, diaspora. Candidates are expected to focus on Romanian cases seen in a larger historical, geographical and political context, in thus broadening our understanding of contemporary developments. Such aspects as transnational mobility, the development of communication technologies and of digitization, public policies on migration, the formation of transnational communities, migrant routes, the migrants' remittances and entrepreneurial capital could be taken into account.

NEC also welcomes projects which look at cultural phenomena (in literature, visual arts, music etc.) related to migration and diaspora. The Program is financed through a grant from UEFISCDI (The Romanian Executive Unit for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding).

- ***Lapedatu Fellowships (since June 2018)***

Thanks to a generous financial contribution from the *Lapedatu* Foundation, NEC invites to Bucharest a foreign researcher specialized in the field of Romanian Studies, who is currently conducting research in one of the world's top universities. On this occasion, he/she spends a month in Romania and works with a young Romanian researcher to organize an academic event hosted by the NEC. At this colloquy, the *Lapedatu* fellows and their guests present scientific papers and initiate debates on a theme that covers important topics of the Romanian and Southeastern European history in both modern and contemporary epochs. The contribution of the *Lapedatu* family members to the development of Romania is particularly taken into consideration.

- ***Porticus N+N Fellowships (since 2020)***

The 'Nations and Nationalisms' (N+N) Program, developed with financial support from the Porticus Foundation, aims to approach one of the main challenges faced by societies around the globe, but mainly in Central and Eastern Europe: a growing tension between nationalizing and globalizing forces in a world dominated by migration, entanglement, digitization and automation. The *Porticus N+N* Fellowships are open to international candidates working in all fields of the humanities and social sciences with an interest in the study of nations, varieties of nationalism and/or populism, and the effects of globalization on national identities. Fellowship criteria are aligned with those in the other programs hosted by the institute. NEC aims to use the expertise of the *Porticus N+N* fellows to encourage scholarship and critical thinking among targeted groups of students in Romania and the region.

- ***AMEROPA Fellowships (since 2020)***

Organized with financial support from Ameropa and its subsidiaries in Romania, and with academic support from the Centre for Government and Culture at the University of St. Gallen, this program aims to investigate the conditions and prerequisites for democratic stability and economic prosperity in Romania and the neighboring region. The *Ameropa* Fellowship Program is open to early career Romanian researchers in history, anthropology, political science, economics or sociology. Their projects focus on aspects relevant for the challenges to democratic consolidation, economic development and strengthening of civil society in Romania and the region. Conditions and selection criteria are similar with those specific to all NEC fellowships. Each year, an annual workshop is organized in the framework of the *Ameropa* Program.

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New Europe College has been hosting over the years an ongoing series of lectures given by prominent foreign and Romanian scholars, for the benefit of academics, researchers and students, as well as a wider public. The College also organizes international and national events (seminars, workshops, colloquia, symposia, book launches, etc.).

An important component of NEC is its library, consisting of reference works, books and periodicals in the humanities, social and economic sciences. The library holds, in addition, several thousands of books and documents resulting from private donations. It is first and foremost destined to service the fellows, but it is also open to students, academics and researchers from Bucharest and from outside it.

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