

The History of Formation of the Romanian State – From the Middle Ages to the Proclamation of the Romanian Kingdom



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FORMATIVE FACTORS

European states differ in their ages, the formation of some dating back to the early medieval times, even if they had different forms and dynastic relations throughout the centuries. Some others are young states that formed their autonomous existence as states either through secession from the territories of preceding states, or through transforming their dependent and partial state actualization into an autonomous one in the 19th-20th century, in accordance with the politics of great powers. The Balkan and Eastern Europe are typical examples of such regions, and Romania stands out even among the young states, with its singular historical development and territorial changes. The major historical and geographical factors of the formation and spatial development of the Romanian state are the followings:

- the features and characteristics of the geographical space
- the intermediary position between large European regions
- the workings of the routes between these
- the processes of population migration, most significant during the early periods
- the formation of the major Eastern and South-Eastern cultural spaces and the stabilization of religious spaces
- the long-lasting impact of the imperial spaces of the periods, and the alternating dominant directions of effects
- the decisions of great powers that shaped the region

Until the end of the 19th century, the Romanian territorial organisation consisted of two similarly structured, but separate princedoms, Wallachia and Moldavia.¹ Regarding geography, the territories of the two principalities were not only adjacent, but similarly arranged. These regions can be defined as follows:

- 1) Wallachia: Its part west of the Olt was called Oltenia, while the Eastern part was Muntenia — sprawling between the Southern Carpathian Mountains and the

1 See C. DURANDIN, *A román nép története*, Budapest 1998, pp. 44–62.



Danube, with most of its area plains and narrower floodplains along the Danube, and a smaller area of hills and mountains: the outer ridges of the Southern Carpathians and its lower foothills. The land, whose meadows range from floodplain to snowy highlands, is divided by the network of rivers bound to the Danube from the Carpathians.

- 2) Moldavia: An extensive region between the Eastern Carpathians and the Dniester. In its central region, the Prut River collects the waters of most rivers arriving from the Carpathians. The land is composed of low foothills and mountain slopes on the one hand, and river-crossed hillsides on the other hand, just as between the Prut and Dniester. Larger plains are dominant in the Southern region only.
- 3) Bessarabia: The land between the Danube-delta and the Dniester, the Southern part of the Podolonia ridges, and the plains by the sea came in the possession of the Romanian principalities in the 14th century.
- 4) Dobruja: It is a land of hills and ridges south of the Danube-delta, between the Danube and the Black Sea, which eventually became part of the Wallachian territory.

As to its geographical location, the region surrounded by the Carpathians, the Danube, and the Dniester is a typical middle ground of the political and cultural effects of the Carpathian basin, the Eastern European Plains and the Balkan Peninsula. This situation has meant a constant exposure to effects coming from the three directions, today as well as in the past.

HISTORICAL PERIODS

During the course of several historical periods and drawing from multiple territorial bases, the Romanian state attained the rank of the independent European state through various sorts of political dependencies, at the end of the 19th century. Later on, in the 20th century, its uncommon politics granted it the expansion of its state space on several occasions. Until the end of the 19th century, it was constituted of two separate, yet similarly structured principalities, Wallachia and Moldavia.² The historical periods of the Romanian state basically conformed to the political processes of the Eastern European and Central European region, as dictated by the great powers, as it was the collision space of these powers where its territories were formed.³ The history of its existence as a state can be divided into two main periods: one is the period of principalities with various dependencies and before autonomy, and the other is the period of the post-1878 Romanian state, its autonomy recognised by the great powers.

The first is definitely the longer of the two periods, spanning about eight centuries. Regarding the formation of the political space, together with the antecedents, it can be divided into several phases:

2 DURANDIN, pp. 87–102.

3 Z. TRÓCSÁNYI — A. MISKOLCI, *A fanariótáktól a Hohenzollernekig*, Budapest 1992, pp. 5–119.

- phase 1: 8th–12th century: controversial origins, population mixing, early organizational period
- phase 2: 12th–15th century: period of territorial stabilization and organization — vassal principalities pledged to the Kingdom of Hungary
- phase 3: 15th–early 19th century: period of Ottoman rule
- phase 4: early 19th century: the period of secession
- phase 5: 1878/1881–1918: the first independent Romanian state, then the period of the so-called Romanian Old Kingdom



CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 1ST PHASE (8TH–12TH CENTURY)

Weak forms of Romanization appeared as a buffer-zone effect in Wallachia. Actually, the short-lived land of Dacia that existed on the territory of the later Transylvania was connected by a narrow corridor to the province of Moesia west of the Olt, on the right side of the Danube. By the 4th century, a significant number of “barbarian” population had gathered at the borders of the province, which was only intensified when the Huns appeared in Europe. During the centuries that followed, nearly all significant ethnic groups coming from the East entered the Southern and Eastern doorway of the Carpathians: the Goths and then the Gepids even established short-lived territories there.

They were followed in this by the Bulgarian-Turkish populace: the 7th century saw the formation of the Danube Bulgar khanate. The Bulgarian presence is there to stay until the 9th century, then they remain in power south of the Danube only. Due to the immigration of the Bulgarian and Slavic population in the 6th–8th centuries, migration within the Balkan also intensifies: the Vlachs start to migrate northward. This is followed in the 9th–12th centuries by a new population surge from the East. The Hungarians, pushing into the Carpathian basin, are followed by the Pechenegs and Cumans up until the Carpathians, with the Vlachs crossing the Danube at the same time. The early 11th century brings major changes. Adjacent to Constantinople, the Bulgarian state consolidates, the Kingdom of Hungary is formed and becomes dominant; on the west, the Kingdom of Croatia is founded and the Serbian principedom begins to be organized. Thus migration paths to the west and to the south have been closed, but the pressure of the population migration remains powerful.

The crowding and shifting of population from the East and the Balkan lasted up until the 12th century. However, their settling did not occur through block-like territorial conquest, there was a strong vertical and horizontal mixing, according to the various demands of functional territory use (agriculture, riverside herding, mountain herding, crafting, trading, soldiering, etc.). The peoples with less efficient means of self-defence were subjected under ethnic groups with more powerful military organizations, with several sources naming the Cumans as the major leading power in the region.⁴

These ethnicities of differing origins and functionalities existed as a set of somewhat interconnected smaller tribes led by voivodes or *kenéz*-s, which were organized into a regional and cultural unity by the common territoriality and the use of the Latin language, as well as by the regional identity of the more and more predominant

4 N. DJUVARA, *A románok rövid története*, Cluj-Napoca 2010, p. 328.



Orthodox Church. From the 12th century on, the Kingdom of Hungary was establishing an imperial territoriality and had ever more influence on the region, which had a loose but already stabilized and socially differentiated organization.⁵

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 2ND PHASE (12TH-15TH CENTURY)

In the first half of the 10th century, the Hungarian organization in the Carpathian basin had showed up with a great military and political impact and created the Kingdom of Hungary in the 11th century. The new state started a serious work of regional organization. It incorporated the territories previously under Frank-Moravian influence, the Slav-populated mid-Dráva-Száva region and later it managed to claim the lands ruled by the Bulgars along the Maros and Temes. This was followed by Erdőelve, later called Transylvania⁶. By the end of the century, spatial units of various functions had been established. Beside the royal counties, ducats and provincial regions also had a significant role: Slavonia and Transylvania. Finally, the Kingdom of Croatia came under the rule of the Hungarian crown.

The imperial structure was further reinforced in the 12th-13th century with the formation of march-like buffer regions in power dependence. In the south, banates were organized along the right-side tributaries of the Száva and a system of fortifications along the Danube, while in the foothills of the Carpathians, the consolidating but still divided Latin-speaking boyarates were subjugated into feudal bonds. It was actually the functional connection to the Kingdom of Hungary as a consolidated great power that started to weaken the division and initiated the formation of a unifying system of power: the principality.

For quite a while, Oltenia belonged directly to the Kingdom of Hungary, under the name of the Szörény banate.⁷ Already in the 13th century, Muntenia had a stronger organization than Moldavia. Growing strong urged the Muntenian politics toward autonomous political efforts in the 14th century. This coincided with the new Hungarian dynasties being less alert toward the east and the Golden Horde losing its power and influence, which resulted in Moldavia becoming more stable and in Wallachia's autonomy efforts.

In the early 14th century, it was the voivode Basarab (1310-1352) who confronted the Hungarian king Charles I and actually unified Oltenia and Muntenia, thus creating the Principate of Wallachia. He proclaimed himself as grand voivode and extended his unified principedom to the line of the Dniester; the land was called Bessarabia after his conquest. From then on, the grand voivode ruled the principality and strove to maintain the relations with the Hungarian king in accordance with the internal and external power situation. But all in all, dependence itself remained, sometimes in the person of the voivode and sometimes for the sake of holding the principality together.

5 M. MAKK, *Magyarország a 12. században*, Budapest 1986, pp. 197-221.

6 G. CSÜLLÖG, *Birodalmi térszerkezetek a Kárpát-medencében*, in: *Jelenkori társadalmi és gazdasági folyamatok*, Vol. 1/2, 2010, pp. 181-186.

7 G. CSÜLLÖG, *Áramlási terek és régiók a magyar állam történetében*, in: *A Virtuális Intézet Közép-Európa Kutatására Közleményei*, Vol. 2/3, 2010, pp. 233-242.



The organization of the Moldavian Voivodship was a longer period, but in the case of the dynasties that came after the House of Árpád (the period of mixed dynasties, 1301–1526),⁸ the Eastern region decreased in importance. Still the first Moldavian state is related, through Dragos, to the Kingdom of Hungary. It was probably formed as a Hungarian margrave in the early 14th century. The voivodes after him also had to take the Kingdom of Poland into account. It was voivode Stefan (1433–1504) who strengthened the state of Moldavia and strove for autonomy against the great powers in the region. During this work, however, he had to face the Turks and when he did not get support even through the Polish feudal relations, he made a pact with the Turks. In Moldavia, it took more time for the Orthodox Church to gain hegemony over the Catholic Church, and paradoxically, this happened during the time when their feudal loyalty was pledged to the Catholic Polish king. There was a short-lived unity in Dobruja (the land got its name after one of its rulers), but this was soon subjugated by the Ottoman Turks.

The two principalities were not only geographically similar, by the 15th century they also had comparable culture, language use, society and political structure as well. The grand voivode ruled over the boyars, being judge, legislator and military leader in one person. The army consisted of peasants, noblemen and merchants called to arms. Decisions were made in the ruling council, made up by boyars and high priests.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 3RD PHASE (15TH – EARLY 19TH CENTURY)

At the end of the 14th century, the consequences of the Ottoman Balkan-politics reached the two principalities as well. The quick Turkish expansion in the 15th century, the powerful military strikes resulting in the gradual occupation of Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Serbian action areas, and the establishment of the Ottoman military-regional structure directly affected the political transformation of the region.⁹ The processes also caused the Kingdom of Hungary to activate its politics in the Balkan, but the intentions of Hungarian monarchs were insufficiently assertive during the century.

János Hunyadi's activity had the most impact on the history of the Balkan, but his alliance policy was not always steady.¹⁰ His erratic alliances, victories and defeats seriously influenced the survival-oriented politics of the Romanian princes. The Ottoman successes and conquests, the weakness of the Matthias Hunyadi's successors and the increase of the Ottoman power following a temporary recession all drove the voivodes toward swapping their feudal loyalty.

They soon realized that, on their own, they have little chance against Ottoman military power; but as a vassal, under their protection and with suitable compromises, they could continue with their state establishment and have a role in regional

8 I. BERTÉNYI, *Magyarország az Anjouk korában*, Budapest 1986, pp. 88–110.

9 P. FODOR, *The Simurg and Dragon. The Ottoman Empire and Hungary 1390–1533*, in: I. ZOMBORI (Ed.), *Fight against the Turk in the Central-Europa in the Half of the 16th Century*, Budapest 2004, pp. 9–36.

10 Z. TEKE, *Hunyadi János és kora*, Budapest 1980, pp. 110–141.



MAP 1: Principality of Romans at Middle of 17th Century

- 1) Habsburg Empire; 2) Military District of Kingdom of Hungary; 3) Border of Holy Roman Empire; 4) Ottoman Empire; 5) Towns

tendencies. What's more, if the political relations allowed, they would even be able to attain independence. Though the formation of the Principality of Transylvania in Ottoman dependency, was not directly favourable for their goals, its division from the Kingdom of Hungary and becoming a similar Ottoman vassal was more promising. But the Transylvanian princes led a Central-Europe-oriented politics with the same role as that of the Hungarian Kingdom, and thus Transylvania gained strength and became an important actor of balance, whom the Turks preferred to a unified Romanian principality. This is why the empowering-unifying goals could only be attained by Vitéz János through military means during his brief reign.

By the middle of the 16th century, it had become clear that the main direction of the Ottoman expansion was the Central European Danube valley, its main opponent being the empire of the Habsburgs.¹¹ The consequence was that, beside the directly conquered Dobruja territories by the sea, the Turks formed a sort of buffer region from

¹¹ S. PAPP, *Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (From the Beginnings to 1540)*, in: ZOMBORI, pp. 37–90.



the subjugated states in the direction of Eastern Europe, where the opposing power had been the Mongols, and currently was the Polish Kingdom and later the Tsardom of Russia. Such subjugated states were Wallachia, Moldova, and the Crimean Khanate. These retained their previous political structure, they were allowed to elect their own princes, but their rule required approval from the sultan and they had to pay a regular yearly tribute to the Ottoman state. They could maintain their army and lead campaigns, but only with the permission of the Sublime Porte and according to its aims. In some regions, the Turkish army was free to maintain bases and to assemble for campaigns; this resulted in that the external politics of the principalities were allowed to develop only in accordance with the Turkish interests. Their feudal situation was more suppressed than the dependence on the Hungarian state had been in the 14th–15th century, since the Turkish power was stronger, and yet it offered more opportunity to state development than in the case of the Bulgarian and Serbian states that were incorporated into the empire and were thus erased.

All in all, the centuries that followed proved that the swapping of feudal dependencies was positive to the Romanian state development. The external power ensured the framework of existence as a state, and internal power, recognised and maintained by the former, ensured its continuous functioning, including territorial defence. These states fulfilled important functions for the Turks: the filtering of spatial migrations and of the effects from external powers on the one hand, and keeping each other in check on the other hand. Change, and thus the weakening of the alliance of interests, was brought by several factors. These were the halting of the Turkish expansion at the end of the 17th century,¹² the growing of the Habsburg and Russian empires and the activation of their Balkan politics, and later the more significant intervention from French and English side caused by the Napoleon-era.¹³

All these caused the political elites of the Romanian principalities to re-evaluate their relation with the Turks and seeking out new allies. With this, the goal of unification and the realization of an autonomous existence as a state became central again.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 4TH PHASE (FROM THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY TO 1878)

From the end of the 18th century, the principalities were put under significant external pressure; moreover, there were changes in the politics of the Turkish Empire that still meant an important protective factor in spite of the dependence. The end of the conquests brought internal crises, autonomy efforts from the pashas of the borderlands, which in turn caused the Sublime Porte to answer with harder internal policies. The importance of the Balkan increased for the Turks, they made major changes. On the one hand, their power system tightened and regional administration was reformed through more and smaller vilayets. On the other hand, they made compro-

12 J. MATÚZ, *Az Oszmán Birodalom története*, Budapest 1990, pp. 132–166.

13 P. KENNEDY, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York 1987, pp. 111–138.



mises to the Greek, Serbian, and Bulgarian efforts becoming more active after the Napoleon wars.

But from the end of the 18th century, these had been increasingly supported by the territorially growing Russian power, with the aim of claiming the Balkan routes and mainly the Bosphorus strait. Russia had become a true rival of the Ottomans in the 18th century. The collision zone was the coastal area of the Black Sea and Crimea, but the Russians soon showed up in the Caucasian region as well. The renewed Russian wars (1768–1774, 1806–1812) now affected the area of Bessarabia, Moldova and Wallachia, too. At this point, two important territorial changes are to be mentioned that had an impact on Romanian-inhabited regions.

- One territorial consequence of the Kücsük-Kainardzsi peace, signed on July 21, 1774 and concluding the 1768–1774 Turkish-Russian war, was that the Habsburg Empire annexed Bukovina in 1775, after signing the Constantinople Convention.
- By the Bucharest peace, signed on May 6, 1812 and concluding the 1806–1812 Russo-Turkish war, Russia annexed the part of Moldavia between the Prut and Dniester Rivers. Since then, the land has been referred to as Bessarabia. Regarding matters of terminology, it is to be pointed out here that, according to Romanian historians, only the southernmost part of the Moldavian territories, annexed in 1812, had been called Bessarabia before.¹⁴

This is when the Romanian principalities began their alternation between the interests of the Turkish, Russian, and Habsburg¹⁵ great powers, making promises to external powers for their support in territorial growth, primarily to the Russians (for Bessarabia) and the Austrians (for Transylvania), but at the same time they demanded independence-oriented compromises for their support of the Turkish politics. By the mid-19th century, three basic goals emerged in the Romanian politics: 1) attaining independence, 2) the unification of the two principalities, and 3) the unification of the Romanian-inhabited regions.

Due to the processes in the second half of the 19th century, the renewal of the spatial distribution of the great powers, the Italian and German unities, new actors and new interests appeared in the political struggle.¹⁶ The internal crisis and external weakening of the Turkish power was favourable to the Romanians, just as the proclamation of the Greek independence, the Serbian autonomy, and Montenegro's independence.¹⁷ Processes quickened in the 1850's. In the peace negotiations following the Crimean war, French politics, which had previously given great support as well, stood up for the unity of the Romanian principalities.

¹⁴ DJUVARA, p. 200.

¹⁵ M. M. NAGY, *Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia geostratégiai és katona földrajzi kényszerei*, in: *Közép-Európai Közlemények*, Vol. 2/3, 2009, pp. 31–40.

¹⁶ P. KOVÁCS, *A Duna, mint közép- és délkelet-európai geopolitikai tengely*, in: *Mediterrán és Balkán Fórum*, Vol. 1, 2012, pp. 2–10.

¹⁷ I. ROMSICS, *Nemzet, nemzetiség és állam. Kelet-Közép- és Délkelet-Európában a 19. és 20. században*, Budapest 1998, pp. 107–127.



Here we have to mention that one decree of the Paris peace treaty that concluded the Crimean war was favourable to the Romanian principedom: Southern Bessarabia, taken by the Tsardom of Russia in 1812, was annexed back to Moldavia. But central and northern Bessarabia remained under the control of the Russian state.

After the Romanians proclaimed their unification intentions at various gatherings in 1857, the 1858 Paris conference brought about an intermediary solution, by the creation of the Unified Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, with two monarchs, two governments and two national diets, but it did not prevent the two monarchs from being the same person.¹⁸ This is how the two principalities were unified in 1859 in a personal union (which also included the northern part of Dobruja as well): Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected ruler in Moldavia on January 5, 1859, and in Wallachia on January 24. Having functioned and progressed unobstructed throughout the centuries, previous local regional structures remained an important base of the renewed state. In 186, the personal union was also recognised by the Turks.

After the forced resignation of Cuza in 1866, Karl Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen became the new monarch under the name of Charles I. The new state behaved in the international political scene as an independent state (though officially it was still under Turkish protectorate). The most important mark of this was the introduction of the constitution. However, diplomacy at this time was not enough to attain independence: the new Turkish constitution of 1876 did not change the dependence of the country, thus the focus was shifted to military aspects. The Balkan uprisings were supported by the Russians and turned the Romanian politics toward the Russians. In the April of 1877, the new Russo-Turkish war broke out, which the Romanians joined after some early Russian protesting, and they carried out serious strikes on the Turkish defences along the Danube.¹⁹

After the Turkish capitulation in 1878, the new state spaces of the Balkan were defined in San Stefano and then in Berlin.²⁰ This way of resolution had impact on the Romanian state in several aspects, the most important ones being that it managed to attain complete independence.²¹ Besides that, two important territorial changes must be noted:²² The Romanian state had to yield the three provinces of Southern Bessarabia, Bolgrad, Cahul and Ismail, to the Russian state. This area was the same as reclaimed by the Moldavian principedom in the 1857 Paris peace treaty. In the 19th century, the Romanian principality practically lost Southern Bessarabia two times (1812 and 1878). Dobruja, along with the harbour of Constanta, was granted to the Romanian state from Bulgaria. Bucharest made efforts to integrate the region into the Romanian state as soon as possible. This is clearly shown by the fact that on November 25, 1878, the new members of the Dobruja administration were already appointed.

Through winning their independence and claiming Dobruja, important Romanian goals were achieved. Yet the final aim of the Romanian nationalism was still far away:

18 L. PÁNDI, *Köztes-Európa. Térképgyűjtemény*, Budapest 1996, p. 803.

19 E. RAFFAY, *A Vajdaságtól a birodalomig. Az újkori Románia története*, Szeged 1989, pp. 41–44.

20 I. DIÓSZEGI, *Klasszikus diplomácia, modern hatalmi politika*, Budapest 1967, pp. 273–276.

21 K. KOCSIS, *Territory and Boundaries of States*, in: K. KOCSIS (Ed.), *South Eastern Europe in Maps*, Budapest 2007, pp. 26–37.

22 A. J. P. TAYLOR, *Harc a hatalomért. Európa 1848–1918*, Budapest 2000, p. 311.



the unification of all regions that were inhabited by Romanians.²³ After three European great powers (Germany, England, and France) recognised Romania's independence on February 20, 1880, the Romanian politicians intended to further increase the prestige of their state by changing the state form as well. Therefore, the Bucharest national assembly decided on March 26, 1881, that the Romanian state shall be called a kingdom, instead of a principality. Thus the Kingdom of Romania was born, its first ceremonial act happening on May 10, 1881, when Prince Charles was crowned the King of Romania in the Bucharest basilica.²⁴

THE HISTORY OF FORMATION OF THE ROMANIAN STATE – FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PROCLAMATION OF THE ROMANIAN KINGDOM

ABSTRACT

European states are of various ages. The formation of the statehood of some of them took place in the Middle-Ages, and they have existed in dynastic relations, though in different ways, ever since. Others are young states which have become independent statehoods in the 19th and 20th centuries, either by breaking away from earlier states or by transforming their dependent and partial statehood in opposition to power politics. Such areas in Europe are the Balkan and Eastern-Europe, among whose young states Romania stands out because of the special historical development of its statehood and its territorial changes. The Romanian state became an independent European state over several historical periods, by building from several territorial bases, and through various kinds of political dependence, at the end of the 19th century. Later on, it grew its territory several times as a result of its peculiar 20th century politics. Until the end of the 19th century, it had consisted of two similarly structured but separate principalities: Wallachia and Moldova. The historical periods of the Romanian statehood basically correspond to the political processes dictated by the power states of the Balkan, Eastern- and Central-Europe, as its territory had shaped in their buffer zone.

KEYWORDS

History of Romania; History of Balkans; Political Geography of Balkan States

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²³ See L. GULYÁS, *Küzdelem a Kárpát-medencéért. Regionalizáció és etnoregionalizmus, avagy a nemzeti és nemzetiségi kérdés területi aspektusai Magyarországon 1690–1914*, Budapest 2012, pp. 208–216.

²⁴ E. RAFFAY, *Balkáni birodalom. Nagy-Románia megteremtése 1866–1920*, Budapest 2011, p. 38.