

**WORDS AND WITS: A TERRITORIAL DEBATE  
AND THE CREATION OF AN EPISTEMIC  
COMMUNITY IN INTERWAR DOBRUJA (1913-1940)**

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**Abstract**

This article establishes a link between a creation of an epistemic community and a territorial debate while addressing the Romanian-Bulgarian dispute regarding Dobruja. Moving beyond approaches centered on an investigation of similar territorial debates over contested lands and their immediate outcomes, the paper primarily analyses the potential of a political conflict for generating a community of intellectuals who become involved in propagating their respective state and nation-building causes. Putting the case of interwar Dobruja into the context of “entangled history”, the study clarifies its place within the framework of similar debates regarding other borderlands. Relying on the publications of the participants of the debate, the article claims that a conflict over a territory and the possibilities of its integration binds together influential public actors, various representatives of the local intellectual elite, uniting them in an unlikely epistemic community.

**Keywords:** epistemic community, social networking, state-building, Dobruja

**Introduction**

A borderland is not only a contact zone (Pratt 1992, p. 4), but a constant source of political creativity for the local public actors. Territorial frames of an idealized nation-state are usually vague, contested, based on various interpretations of multiple historical legacies and their application to practice. Diplomatic treaties and military successes provide every perspective state with a perfect image of its idealized state-building potential, which like the Treaty of San-Stefano in the case of Bulgaria (1878), the idea of Greater Romania, or the consequences of the

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Treaty of Trianon (1920) for Hungary form a basis for future claims related to the gains and losses that are nurtured by the intellectual elites engaged in political creativity. Therefore, territorial disputes persist as multiple irredentist demands of the modern European radical parties, constructing their ideology on the perceived interpretations of the legacies that constitute the myths of Greater Hungary, Romania, Serbia, etc. Each of these projects becomes an idealized state-building goal for many of the public actors advocating it. A narrative that lays the basis for the current article is centered on a territorial dispute that unites intellectual elites, who determine the importance of a region for a state-building debate, referring to the “idealized plan” that turns into subsequent grand-scale political projects.

A relatively narrow strip of land stretching from the Black Sea to the Lower Danube, Dobruja remains a region combining distinct social, geographical and cultural landscapes (Danescu 1903, p.16) similar to other boundaries between various political formations. Divided between Romania and Bulgaria, the province is yet another example of a borderland territory separating two nation-states. Its choice as a focus for the current analysis is largely clarified by its exemplary position as a “contested frontier”. It is further explained by the insight the case offers into the formation of an epistemic community, a network of intellectuals addressing a particular political issue in the region and into the subsequent ideological clashes generated by this group. The article explores the roles of various public actors in conceptualizing the borders of nation and state-building, Bulgarian and Romanian in the respective case. While connecting several texts of the participants of this borderland dispute to the state-building propaganda, the research demonstrates the direct impact of this agenda on their political imaginations that, in its turn, integrated them in an epistemic community<sup>1</sup>.

While the case of interwar Dobruja is neither unique, nor rare, it offers a large number of printed documents that reflect the interactions of the intellectual elites from both sides as well as the clashes of their state-building propagandas. Since the debate lasted for several decades and was eventually resolved, it also brings out the mechanisms that agitate politically-involved public actors and subsequently mold them into an epistemic community.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “epistemic community” itself usually describes a set of networks of international public actors, who share certain ideas and therefore go beyond the space of their nation-state to share and propagate them (Haas 1992, pp. 1-35; Zollman 2007, pp. 574-587).

When analyzing the works of several prominent public actors and certain propagandistic tools they use to endorse their arguments, this research claims that contested regions produce a borderland discourse and create a communal unity of intellectual elites<sup>2</sup> that advance shared interests. Therefore, activated state-building projects mold groups of unlikely individuals, while relying on the already existing social networks and the experiences of previous interactions.<sup>3</sup> The current approach not only sets territorial debates in the context of entangled history (Werner and Zimmermann 2006, pp. 30-50; Daskalov and Marinov 2013), but offers a transnational view on various regional homogenization processes through their ability to generate an epistemic community, a unity of individuals supporting different causes.

The article is divided into sections that scrutinize the creation as well as the disappearance of an epistemic community. While the first part deals with the theoretical concepts and definitions applied to the current case, clarifying its theoretical basis, the second one explores the events that framed the territorial debate. The third section addresses the personalities of the public actors involved in the debate and highlights the reasons that determine their active participation. The fourth segment focuses on the interactions between the participants of the debate from both sides and the ways their epistemic war forged them into a group. The fifth part introduces a paradox that demonstrates how in their attempts at creating caricatures of one another, the public actors eventually strengthened their intellectual “fight club”. Finally, the conclusion stresses the potential of a territorial debate for creating epistemic communities, while engaging prominent individuals in state-building creativity.

### **Theoretical concepts and clarifications.**

The current text focuses on the propagandistic questions in the debate concerning the Dobruja region and the attempts of the two states to “nationalize” the area in the period of 1913-1940, when territorial exchanges between Romania and Bulgaria took place, having previous Romanian-Bulgarian interactions as a basis (Constantinescu-Iasi 1956, pp. 20-23; Velichi, and Eanu

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the public actors partially exemplify roles of “well-informed citizens”, although some of them may be professional historians, ethnographers etc. Their relation to the region of Dobruja, however, is explained through the relevance of the topic in the given time-period, much less through their general search for fundamental knowledge (Schutz 1976, pp. 120-134).

<sup>3</sup> The integration of the Northern part of Dobruja in the Romania state in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is thoroughly scrutinized by Constantin Iordachi (2002).

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1979, pp. 3-20). In the article, the methods of legitimizing claims over the land are explored through analyzing the texts of a number of Romanian and Bulgarian authors from the period 1913-1940 (historians, diplomats, politicians, writers, unlikely bound together by a common goal of opposing each other's ideas) identifying how they presented and constructed the history of the region, highlighting and omitting certain facts not suitable for the dominant nation-building program of the state. The Dobrujan dispute of 1913-1940 is explored as part of the continuation of the Romanian and Bulgarian 19<sup>th</sup> century state and nation-building agendas (Daskalov 2004, pp.41-57; Trencsényi 2008, pp. 129-130; Trencsényi 2012, pp. 20-70), and put in a larger context of similar cases of claiming rights over a borderland.

An “epistemic community” is viewed as a fluid social group, sweeping through the borders of nation-states and engaging in an idea exchange that not only creates interconnections, but is initially spawned by them. As a result of networking, the groups' very unity manifests itself in antagonism that inspires a clash of propagandas, developed by public actors from both sides. Since a contested territory offers a suitable background for the investigation of complicated interregional networks and their shifts, the article concentrates on the reactions of the public actors, who become parts of a certain epistemic community, who form, share, and propagate their opinions and considerations with an obvious wish to confront their opponents and support or (in rare cases) argue against their respective national narratives. Furthermore, the article claims that a territorial debate forms an epistemic community, while inspiring a number of prominent public actors to promote their state-building agendas and triggering an opposing reaction from their opponents.

The article, although concentrated on the propagandistic side of the Dobrujan debate, does not regard the province as the only politically, socially, and economically important region for both Romania and Bulgaria, but sees it as merely an example of how the propaganda of both parties tried to increase its significance, engaging in a battle of “words and wits”. The literary bloom in the Balkans<sup>4</sup> led to the development of historic writing in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Kiossev connects the appearance of the history of Bulgarian literature of Alexander Teodorov-Balan with the bitter reaction of Ivan Vazov, who was warning the public that once “a benefactor” would say that the Bulgarian nation does not exist if there is no memory and consciousness of its literary heritage (Kiossev 2004, pp.355-357). Similarly, Diana Mishkova (1994, pp. 63-93) analyzes the rapid spread of literacy in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulgaria, which, in the current case, led to the appearance of influential public actors in 1910-1920.

century, which later resulted in a great number of highly influential texts by writers, publicists and historians aimed at supporting nation-building propaganda in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Introducing the voices of individuals into the processes of transforming “history into national history, legitimizing the existence of a nation-state in the present-day by teleologically reconstructing its reputed past”, the text addresses the ways “pedigrees of national descent are constructed, refined, and lengthened, and the ancestors of a “nation” become a vehicle for majority-group legitimation” (Karakasidou 1997, p. 17).

The Dobrujan dispute between Romania and Bulgaria lasted for almost three decades, featuring a number of voices representing both sides of this “epistemic war” and, therefore, interacting with one another. Their rhetoric followed the same patterns of claiming and justifying rights over the land and creating images of the “enemy”. These typical attempts of “othering” (Mishkova 2008, pp. 237-256) quickly escalated, turning into local variations of “orientalizing” one another (Bakic-Hayden 1995, pp. 917–931). However, they gradually became less focused on “mutual demonization” and much less actual, as by 1940 World War II had dramatically altered the political situation in the region, drawing the attention of both states away from once again divided Dobruja. The important transformations in the discourses of the public actors can be witnessed in the passing years. Successes and failures of the Romanian administration of the region became more evident and easy to interpret for both sides, since time offered the participants of the debates possibilities to witness and evaluate the ongoing changes. Yet, even in opposing each other, Bulgarian and Romanian intellectuals preserved striking likenesses: they appealed to the same historical legacies, followed the same goals of including a territory in a nation-state, and occasionally referred to each other’s publications. They were a community, united by the reality of a territorial debate.

### **States and territories.**

The story of the dispute that created a short-lived epistemic community that is investigated in the current research began with the treaty of Bucharest in 1913, although Romania’s integration of Northern Dobruja in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century should be seen as a necessary prelude. Back in 1913, the Romanian Prime Minister and Minister of foreign affairs, Titu Maiorescu, justified the annexation of Cadrilater, the Southern part of Dobruja, in the following manner: “It was not just the fear of a European War: there was something in-between. We knew what had bound Serbia and Bulgaria together in June 1912, and that was a danger for us”. Further, he added that “we had to deal not only with Bulgaria, but with the entire Balkan block” (Maiorescu 1995, p. 241). The first annexation did not last long. In 1918, after Romania’s entry in World War I, the

territory was returned to Bulgaria, only to be claimed back by Romania a year later (Motta 2013, pp. 191-196).

Already in 1914, after Romania had established control over Dobruja, the so-called “Dobrujan brotherhood” was created as one of the reactions from the Bulgarian side to the annexation of the Southern part of the territory. The aims of the society were simple: cultural support of the Bulgarian inhabitants of “enslaved Dobruja” and their unification with the Bulgarians from “free Bulgaria”, moral and material help to the so-called “Dobrujans”, preservation of Bulgarian schools, and political and religious freedoms.<sup>5</sup> The “Dobruja brotherhood”, unlike the Bulgarian revolutionary organizations active in the region since its complete transition to Romania (Nyagulov et al. 2007, pp. 341-407), was generally a propaganda-oriented society that attempted to weaken the Romanian position in the province and strengthen the Bulgarian one within the limits of their propagandistic abilities.

The Bulgarian propaganda campaign can hardly be seen as purely a state project. The state did sustain a number of Bulgarian revolutionary organizations, and did encourage the creation and distribution of the materials supporting their cause; however, in most cases the societies were not directly dependent on the Bulgarian government and acted according to the interests of their leaders (Zlatev 2009). The members of the revolutionary organizations, as well as the individuals associated with the “Dobrujan brotherhood”, quickly became the people engaged in the process of generating texts that had to help in accomplishing several important goals that should have led to Bulgaria gaining the province. These objectives were the resistance to the Romanian propagandistic machine, the stimulation of solidarity and pro-Bulgarian feelings among the non-Romanian oriented inhabitants, and the attraction of foreign attention to the Bulgarian side.

By 1913, the Romanian party found itself in different, more favorable, conditions. Although temporarily losing the territory and getting it back in 1919 according to the treaty of Neuilly, Romania still had more time and possibilities to “assimilate” and “colonize” the region than its neighbor. Romanian propaganda, therefore, was mainly aimed at keeping the province under control and preserving its territory within the borders of a “unified and homogeneous” country (Sata 2009, p. 81). Bulgarian attempts to question that project were to be thwarted and re-interpreted by Romanian public actors. However, the idea of a perfectly

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<sup>5</sup> See „Устав на братство Добруджа”/”The regulations of the Dobruja brotherhood” from 1914 (Поров 1992, pp. 242-243).

unified Romania with Dobruja representing an ultimate success of the Romanian government was not entirely shared by all the Romanian participants of the territorial debate, some of whom would criticize the official policy.<sup>6</sup> However, the majority of them were actively expressing opinions supporting the Romanian claim and praising the government's successes, trying not only to prove the legitimacy of the Romanian legacy in the region, but also to convince the internal as well as the foreign audiences of the extreme importance of possessing Dobruja that in 1878 was widely regarded as an unfair exchange for "more pronouncedly Romanian" Bessarabia (Kuzmanova 1989, pp. 18-19). Between 1913 and 1939, Romanian propaganda reached its peak, pushing the borders of the territorial dispute and making it a vital state-building issue.

### **Individual voices and unlikely groups.**

Exploring the roles of the public actors, whose texts are used in the current article, one should underline the diversity of their backgrounds, a trait that supports the argument regarding the direct influence of the competing Romanian and Bulgarian state-building doctrines on the creation of an epistemic community and its subsequent discourse. The main link between individuals of very different origins, occupations, and destinies was their direct interest in bringing back Dobruja to Bulgaria, proving the illegitimacy of the Romanian annexation, or justifying the Romanian legacy in the region, an interest that becomes clear when the backgrounds of the authors are compared with the backgrounds of Bulgarian or Romanian revisionisms respectively (Mylonas 2012, pp. 17-48). Therefore, the generated "epistemic community" demonstrates a pattern that can be applied to a variety of other cases of territorial debates.

The authors generally targeted several types of audiences and presented their views from rather different angles that were determined by their past experiences and current positions. The first and the most important audience was the international one. The possibilities of attracting foreign public opinions

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<sup>6</sup> Vasile Kogălniceanu had complicated views regarding the province. He saw an opportunity for Romania's modernization in Dobruja and, yet, he viewed Cadrilater as a politically dangerous piece of land for Romania's state border, not approving of the methods and the consequences of its annexation (Kogălniceanu 1910). Except for Vasile Kogălniceanu, a critic of the Romanian policies in general, Ștefan Zeletin, did not approve of the dominant Romanian attitudes towards the newly acquired province (Zeletin 1998, p. 54). Publicist Foru would also express opinions against Romania's annexation of Southern Dobruja (Cadrilater), writing in 1914 in *Universul*: "Sooner or later, according to ethnic principles, we'll have to give Cadrilater that we have taken after the Bucharest peace treaty, back to Bulgaria, In that way we will be honest towards the Bulgarians and will do for them something we want to be done for us" (Mavrodiev 1917, pp. 38-48).

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to either the Romanian or Bulgarian side could grant support to one of the parties, since neither Romania nor Bulgaria could gain and preserve the whole region without the Greater Powers favoring one of them (Schmidt-Rösler 1994, pp. 40-69). This fact explains the choice of the language by some of the authors. While it seemed to be a logical decision to write in Romanian or in Bulgarian in various local periodical editions, the texts published by diplomats or historians like Nicolae Iorga and Petar Mutafchiev very often had two versions – the Bulgarian/Romanian one and the French one. The works published by the Dobruja organization in Bulgaria or, for instance, the “Romanian national league of America”, were written in English and, evidently, oriented to the foreign audience, a narrow layer of an educated local public and, foremost, the fellow members of the unlikely epistemic community, their bitter opponents (Stoica 1919; Markov 1919 a).

The local audience had to play its own specific role in the eyes of the authors, who had to create a public opinion. This “public” definitely consisted of people who could have or would have wanted to read the texts that historians, diplomats, or journalists had generated. Hence, the “local audience” as seen by the participants of the debate was a very narrow strata of educated people that would be interested in getting acquainted with the historical propagandistic works of Iorga, often written in French (Iorga 1918), or Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen’s political essays (Petrescu-Comnen 1918). The second type of local audience was the less educated and the more numerous one that could be more entertained by stories and a simplistic vision of the region’s history elaborating on Romanian or Bulgarian rights over it. This much wider circle (and, apparently, much less interested in the political debates between Romania and Bulgaria) had to be attracted by articles published in local newspapers or books written in a more captivating story-telling manner (Culea 1928; Vladescu 1926).

It is almost impossible to find out whether the local peasantry was directly influenced by the texts, as the wide public of Dobrujan peasants, fishermen or Aromanian settlers did not express their opinions by writing historical research or pamphlets, therefore not joining the debate, and making it a somewhat privileged epistemic fight club (Zahra 2010, pp.93-119). Methods of influencing the more “indifferent” audience were generally economic. One should still admit the possibility of the authors appealing to less educated people; however, it becomes clear that this audience was not the main target. Officer Christian Vladescu and writer Apostol Culea, for example, clearly attempted to create “compelling” texts that could interest very different readers due to their efforts to combine a “story” with clear political doctrine directed against the Bulgarians



(Vlădescu 1926). However, there is no evidence that they were widely read and discussed by either the peasantry, or even their peers.

It should be noted that the participants of the debate not only addressed their respective audiences, but subsequently each other, sometimes directly, entering personal confrontations (like Iorga and Mutafchiev). This aspect becomes evident in several works supporting the Bulgarian cause when the authors present contra-arguments objecting to the affirmations expressed by the Romanian participants. For instance, Milan Markov would openly criticize Mihail Kogălniceanu's views of the Romanian administration of Dobruja, depicting it as criminal and outrageous, and praise his son, Vasile, for his wish to demonstrate the true position of the peasantry in the region (Markov 1919 a, pp.20-23).

The idea exchange that makes an epistemic community did exist. It should once again be noted that many of the works were published in French, German or English allowing not only the abstract foreigners, but the opponents, who did not know Bulgarian or Romanian, to read them. Although the level of their national or international influence differed, they were all following the same propagandistic scope with several exceptions, who, like Ștefan Zeletin or Take Ionescu, possessed definite authority but chose not to tow the official Romanian line. The information related to the participants of the debate and their destinies can be limited or exhaustive, depending on their social status and public influence.

As one of the most famous and internationally acknowledged Romanian historians, Nicolae Iorga had a number of works dedicated to Dobruja (Culicea 1998, pp. 5-8; Iorga 1918; Iorga 1910). He, unlike many other Romanian authors, attempted to include Dobruja into the general context of Romanian history that he, as a historian, interpreted and re-created (Boia 1997, pp. 42-58). Similar acknowledgements can be made about Petar Mutafchiev, a celebrated Bulgarian colleague of Iorga's, who openly opposed the arguments of the Romanian historian (Mutafchiev 1993, pp.3-5). In his "Bulgarians and Romanians in the history of the Danubian lands", he actively argued against Iorga's ideas regarding Romanian historical rights over Dobruja based on the Roman origin of the Romanian people, twisting Iorga's interpretations and entering a fight of words and wits that had brought the unlikely epistemic community together in the first place (Mutafchiev 1999, p. 141, 181, 210).

Tentatively, one can divide the members of the epistemic community according to their approaches to the territorial debate that had spawned their enthusiasm.

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The scholars, like historian Nicolae Iorga, geographer Atanas Ishirkov,<sup>7</sup> Dobrujan lawyer Ivan Penakov and historian Petar Mutafchiev claimed to have generated a well-grounded proof-basis that supported the Romanian/Bulgarian rights over the territory. The advocates, like jurist and professor of social science in the Military Academy of Sofia, Milan Markov, or diplomat and publicist Vasile Stoica (Stoica 1919), wrote mainly influential and very congested pamphlets, picking out the “brightest” facts in order to prove their version of events, lacking, in most cases, consistency. The last group, the “storytellers”, consisted of personalities like former officer Christian Vladescu (Vladescu, 1926), captured by the Bulgarians in 1916, publicist Petar Gabe and writer Apostol Culea, who attempted to create a tale out of which the reader would have got the idea of the region’s appurtenance. Although these arrangements of the authors in groups are very fluid—as not all the texts can be defined within these precise categories—they make the dispute easier to be perceived when analyzing the agendas behind them.

### **Disputed territories and contested rights.**

The flexibility of the term “historical rights” turns the very concept into a playground for “civilizing missions” and “mutual caricatures” (Basciani 2001, pp.169-170). The first and one of the most influential arguments used in the texts is the one referring to the “historical right” over Dobruja. The Romanian side’s claims were mainly focused on the “Roman heritage” of Dobruja that bound it together with the Romanian nation of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Iorga’s interpretation, however, went beyond that line. In his “What do we represent in Dobruja?”, published in 1910, Iorga wrote, scrutinizing the idea of the “civilization” the Romanians had to represent: “From the Thracians we have not only most of our blood, but also almost everything from our pastoral culture... as the representatives of the oldest nation that was living in all those parts (meaning also the Balkans), granting them the first elements of civilization, we similarly manifest ourselves in Dobruja” (Iorga 1910, pp.5-6).

Iorga’s ideas regarding Dobrujan history were connected mainly to Romania’s spiritual and cultural presence in the region during all the periods of its history and resistance to the Bulgarian “barbarians” (Iorga 1910, p.10). However, the claims of the Romanian historian were still rather careful, and came mainly from interpretations. The idea of all other nations present in Dobruja being

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<sup>7</sup> Anastas Ishirkov was a member of the Bulgarian delegation in Bucharest during the signing of the Peace Treaty of 1913 and wrote a memorandum for the Paris Peace Conference (Penkov 1987).

latecomers coincided with similar views expressed later by other supporters of the Romanian cause.

Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen (1919, p. 4) emphasized: “Dobruja made part of Wallachia until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the epoch of the Turkish invasion, and the congress of Berlin wished to fully recognize the legitimacy of the Romanian rights over this ancestral land, which we have also earned in the war of 1877-1878”. According to the author, the Bulgarians were “the recent population” (Petrescu-Comnen 1919, p. 12), the Romanian legacy was depicted not only as ancient, but also as the one “deserved with blood in war”. Apostol Culea (1928, p. 19) presented the same issue, referring also to archeology: “The research of our archeologists beginning from professor Tolescu and continuing with the most learned among the learned foreigners, professor Vasile Pârvan, have proved that Dobruja is the oldest Roman land”.

It should be highlighted that Culea, unlike many of the Bulgarian historians, geographers, or ethnographers, was a writer, and his methods of justifying Romanian historical legacies in the province surpassed the elaborated interpretations of events and happenings, referring to the voices of the locals, an approach never chosen by Iorga or Ishirkov. Describing the pastoral idealistic character of Romanian Dobruja, he reproduced his oral conversations with an “authentic” local, Tudose Macarie, born, surprisingly, in Bessarabia (Culea 1928, pp. 4-5), who once asked local Bulgarians if they had found something left from “their voievods” in Dobruja, only to confront them in the following manner: “Haven’t found anything?! And from our Trajan – as much as you wish, just in the furrows left by your ploughs! When I hear them talking about those of their own, my heart pains: my blood does not leave me in peace!”(Culea 1928, p. 5). In this way, the borders of the Romanian nation, according to Culea, conveniently expanded, incorporating Emperor Trajan and the Asens altogether (Culea 1928, p. 32).

Similarly to Culea, Romulus Seișanu, a Romanian journalist, when explaining the history of Dobruja, repeated that “this land was inhabited and ruled in Antiquity by our ancestors, Geto-Dacians and Romans” (Seișanu 1928, p. 14). The brisk affirmation was followed by vivid details regarding the Vlach origins of prince Balica of Dobruja (Seișanu 1928, p. 147) that were generally impossible to prove. Referring to the considerations of Mutafchiev (Seișanu 1928, pp.147-148), Seișanu did not deny the Bulgarian presence in the region. However, he did not focus on it either, leaving it a convenient blank space.

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Unlike Seișanu's book, the work, edited and partially written by Vasile Stoica, already in the beginning contained several negative remarks about the Slavs, mentioning that they devastated the region after the "just rule of the Romans" (Stoica 1919, p. 18). Stoica acknowledged that Dobrotich, who maintained control over Dobruja remaining its most famous lord, was "an adventurer and held it by right of conquest as he might have held any land, Greek, Romanian or Hungarian" (Stoica 1919, p. 19).

As it becomes clear from the previously cited works, the Romanian side had a more or less common idea of Dobruja's history connected to that of the Romanian nation-state, basing this vital link on the Daco-Roman legacies, vague interpretations of the inhabitants' national affiliations, Byzantine heritages, and rights of conquest. Similar conclusions can be made when investigating the Bulgarian party, who practiced a more defensive approach. Milan Markov, in his "Bulgaria's historical rights over Dobruja", wrote that it was the land where Asparukh in the 7<sup>th</sup> century founded the Bulgarian Cis-Danubian Empire (Marcoff 1918, p. 3). He also denied the fact that in 1372 Dobruja was conquered by the Wallachian voievods, giving a long, elaborated explanation:

This historical theory appears to be an invention, and is based on the false titles of some Wallachian voivodes and on the keen imagination of the Roumanian chauvinistic writers. Thus is explained by the fact that subsequently the Roumanian historian Yorga, himself a noisy Roumanian patriot, saw himself constrained to reduce somewhat these historical fictions to a claim of possible rule over Dobrudja by the voyvode Mircho. Speaking on this disputed point and accepting the thesis of Yorga, a third Roumanian historian and geographer — captain Jonescu, comes to this conclusion: In spite of all personal antipathy which a historian might naturally have against the Bulgarians, the documents and sources of the time prove to us that Muntenia (Wallachia) under Vladimir and Radu-Negru Bassarab never ruled Dobrudja, and that such a rule took place only after the year 1386 under the voyvode Mircho (Marcoff 1918, p. 3).

Unlike Markov, who highlighted the medieval Bulgarian legacy in the region, Ivan Penakov was more interested in proving the economic insignificance of Dobruja for Romania. When referring to Bulgaria's historical rights, he pointed out that Dobruja had only strategic importance for Romania, as historically it was a region connected to Bulgaria from medieval times (Penacoff 1928, p. 46). It should be noted that according to Penakov, Cadrilater mattered more to Bulgaria than Northern Dobruja, which had become Romania's main target for Romanization since 1878.

Geographer Atanas Ishirkov broadened the ideas of the Bulgarian medieval legacy, underlining that the name Dobruja itself had come from a name of a Bulgarian lord, Dobrotich (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 5). Subsequently he mentioned that Constantine Porphyrogenete in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the Russian chronicler Nestor in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, called Dobruja “Bulgaria” or “Black Bulgaria” (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 5). Contesting Romanian claims related to their Roman descent, Ishirkov dedicated special attention to the Greek past of the province, pointing out that the Romanians, Thracians or Romans by origin, blood or culture, were not the most ancient civilized peoples inhabiting Dobruja (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 13).

All these aspects found their reflection in the works of Mutafchiev, Iorga’s most fervent opponent. Arguing with his Romanian colleague, the Bulgarian historian underlined the Slavic origin of the word “Dobruja” (Mutafchiev 1999, p. 147). He added that “after the Romans had left Dacia, everything that could have remained there fell under the sword of the barbarians” (Mutafchiev 1999, p. 68) and explained that the few Romanian settlers came to Dobruja already when the Bulgarian Empire was ruling over the land (Mutafchiev 1999, p. 83).

Although ideologically opposed, both Romanian and Bulgarian sides presented similar patterns that varied in their degree of negating the neighbor’s presence in the region. Sharing Mutafchiev’s views, Lyubomir Miletich noted that “the Romanians appear in history as a separate nation with its own state organization only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the Bulgarian nation had already passed six centuries of history with cultural and military deeds of international significance” (Miletich 1994, p.107). Such notions as “nation”, “legacy”, or “ethnicity” seem to converge, leaving space for vague interpretations of a bright cultural landscape of a frontier.

Unlike “glorious history”, religion, mostly shared by Bulgarians and Romanians, became a less profitable topic of the debates, and most participants preferred to avoid it. Although the question of Orthodox legacy and its impact on Romanian and Bulgarian nation-building did not lose its actuality, it was overshadowed by the linguistic feature that turned out to be much more powerful in animating a nation on a borderland. The participants of the Dobrujan debate mainly linked the linguistic aspect to the “historical rights” and, therefore, strengthened the solidarity between the inhabitants of Dobruja, relating to a “marker” more obvious than a vague “legacy”.

The texts of the authors from both sides present examples of how opponents were trying to justify territorial claims. It should be noted that both parties

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hardly intended to copy or imitate each other's arguments. They simply reflected their ideas connected with the history of the region, engaging into an open argument, battling each other in a field they considered their own, claiming to be "specialists", bearers of "ultimate knowledge". The participants of the debate were aware of the works published by their opponents. They referred to each other's publications and openly argued, while sketching convincing interpretations of the vague historical legacies that were used in promoting their respective nation-states.

The debate between Nicolae Iorga and Petar Mutafchiev became a professional competition, sparked by two distinguished historians, each attempting to prove the legitimacy of his own claims, each following the same strategy. The Dobrujan dispute triggered a wave of publications that otherwise would have had little practical sense. The state-builders were not simply writing Romanian and Bulgarian history, they were justifying the existence of their state within its' idealized borders. And while they were certainly interested in the reactions of their domestic audiences, those were their opponents, whose stories they needed to debunk. Contested Dobruja united the public actors, attracting their attention to each other's works, forcing them to enter a state-building competition that otherwise would have been pointless. Therefore, the writings reflect a state-of-the-art intellectual battleground. In this case the similarity of the rhetoric can be explained by the attempts to re-interpret the same events and occurrences in different ways, trying to reach the same scope of legitimization of territorial rights.

### **Epistemic Wars and shared caricatures.**

Rumiana Stancheva, when referring to the complexity of various images of the Romanians in Bulgarian literature, points out that, although the events of 1913 badly affected the relations between the countries, they did not immediately turn the figures of Romanians into villains and criminals (Stancheva 1994, pp. 6-7). The process of producing caricatures of one another was complicated, and required several decades to pass for the stereotypes to be imprinted in the consciousness of different audiences. Building on Blagovest Nyagulov's argument, one should underline that the Bulgarian stereotypes of their neighbors were almost entirely outcomes of the wars of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nyagulov 1995, p. 6).

The diversity of the images, in this case, was produced by different social and cultural communities (Danova 2003, pp. 11-92). The perceptions of the "other" by the peasant population came from folklore, while the intellectuals grasped it through written texts, and on the governmental level it was connected with

various official documents (Nyagulov 1995, pp.6-7). The current section, therefore, is concentrated on the examination of the images crafted in the texts of several most representative participants of the territorial debate, intellectuals bound by an unlikely epistemic link.

In “The annals of Dobruja”, I. N. Roman referred to the Bulgarians in general, summing up all the negative traits they had been supposed to possess: absolute barbarity, uncivilized character, ferocity, cruelty, and brutality (Roman 1920, p. 126). Bulgarians were generally presented as an opposite to Romanians: the degree of radicalism of these “descriptions” varied depending on the author’s writing style. The Bulgarian counterparts of Roman adopted a very similar strategy of portraying Romanians and, conversely, they had to face the same dilemma of destroying the remains of neutral and positive images of the preceding periods.

The destruction of the positive image from both sides began with the notion of “backstabbing”, a predictable attempt of making an opponent less “human” and “similar” to oneself. Seișanu, when writing about the Bulgarians in his book, noted: “Bulgarians have quickly forgotten the sacrifices made by Romania in the war of 1877-1878 for their liberation from the Ottoman yoke just like they have forgotten the hospitality offered by Romanians to the refugees from the other side of the Danube that were fighting for the realization of their national ideal” (Seișanu 1928, p. 253). Later he added that Dobruja had never been part of Medieval Bulgaria, but the Bulgarians were still trying to stir the foreign and local public opinion, practically inventing the “Dobrujan question” (Seișanu 1928, p. 253). Culea, even referring to the works of Miletich, a Bulgarian author, claimed that, especially in Northern Dobruja, the existing Bulgarian population consisted purely of emigrants. He further added that many of them tried to escape the fury of the Ottomans and found shelter in Dobruja during the Russian-Turkish wars, especially after the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople (Culea 1928, pp.160-161).

The author’s attitude to the Bulgarians, “emigrants and escapees”, reflected mainly open neglect: “When the Turks were getting rid of the Russians, they gave the rebelling Bulgarians hard times! That is why the Bulgarian population rose up to flee the carnage and took off to Russia or the South of Bessarabia, where there remained empty places after the Tatars had left them. The way of those unfortunate escapees was through Dobruja. Even the Turkish authorities were helping the Bulgarian population to leave in the middle of the night so that they could get rid of spies and guides for the Russian armies” (Culea 1928, p.159). Therefore, Culea stressed the fact that even the Turks wanted to get rid of the Bulgarians, who were good for nothing except for “backstabbing”. The mutual

“demonization” quickly escalated, turning into a war of caricatures (Ungureanu 2005, pp.11-15). This war of pen and paper, however, was again a competition of mirroring each other’s tactics and re-interpreting legacies: “Treacherous Bulgarians” competed with “untrustworthy Romanians”.

The Romanian troops attacked Cadrlater when Bulgarian forces were fighting against Serbia and Greece, hence, the Bulgarians felt themselves “stabbed in the back” by the Romanians, whom they had previously considered allies. Ishirkov stressed the subjective “jealousy” of the Romanian side that might have pushed it to annex Cadrlater, admitting that several Romanian intellectuals, like Take Ionescu, Vasile Kogalniceanu and others could foresee the unfavorable outcomes of such actions (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 103).

Considering the events of 1913 and following years, Ishirkov stressed that “the Romanians, who consider themselves successors of the Romans, are deprived of glorious history” (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 102). He added that they attempted to present themselves as the most splendid victors of the war of 1877-1878 and accentuated the short rule of Mircea the Elder in Dobruja (Ischirkoff 1919, pp. 102-103). According to Ishirkov, who expressed himself in rather evasive terms, Romanians were “unable to wage wars honorably” and, hence, treachery was all that could be expected from them (Ischirkoff 1919, pp. 102-103). The same idea was expressed by Alexandar Dyakovich, another public actor, who, when admitting the existence of Romanians in Dobruja explained: “But those were the deserters who had fled their country so that they could hide along the banks of the Danube under the protection of the Turkish authorities, who out of political considerations, aimed at making the Bulgarian element less powerful and compactly settled” (Dyakovich 1994, p. 369). Thus, the idea of “treachery” became part of the renewed images of one another.

In 1921, Stiliyan Chilingirov wrote about his impressions of Romania and its inhabitants: “Romania is the least cultivated country in the whole of the Balkan peninsula. She seems to be a vulgar and dressed-up prostitute, who eats *mamaliga* while she does not even bother to put on a blouse under the corset of her dress” (Basciani 2001, p. 123). Blagovest Nyagulov, discovering similar opinions about “vulgarity” and “lack of civilization” among the Romanians, cited Yordan Yovkov’s novel “The crossroad”. The author explained that primitive and barbaric Romanian souls have their “ferocity” hidden inside them, and later referred to the bloody peasant revolt of 1907, viewing it as an example of typical Romanian behavior (Nyagulov 1995, p. 11). The image of the Romanians after 1913 in the Bulgarian sources (the affirmation is adequate for the Romanian



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sources as well) resembled a caricature of a barbarian (Stancheva 1994, p. 6), a sort of “Balkanism within the Balkans” (Todorova 1994, pp. 453-482).

Just like the Bulgarian caricatures of “fierce wildlings”, the Romanian images of their neighbors did not differ much. Even Iorga, when referring to Asparukh, described him and his warriors as “absolute barbarians”, who were nothing like the noble Romans and their descendants. He also added dramatic expressions, depicting Asparukh’s “clothes covered with blood” (Iorga 1918, p. 10). Yet, the most interesting portrayal of the Bulgarians is to be found in the memoirs of Christian Vladescu, who got into Bulgarian captivity after the fall of Turtukaia in 1916 (Vladescu 1926, pp. 3-15).

Vladescu described in great detail all the atrocities of the Bulgarian soldiers, underlining their absolute lack of knowledge about such simple objects as, for example, pocket watches. Bulgarians, according to Vladescu, were fierce wildlings who fought only for the possibilities of robbing Romanian soldiers. The author noted: “I have preserved the impression that the bravery of the Bulgarian warriors would have been much more encouraged if before the battle they had been told :”Do not forget that every Romanian has a pocket full of watches!” (Vladescu 1926, p.7) Later he compared Bulgarian soldiers with monkeys, who were given a mirror as a toy (Vladescu 1926, pp.7-8). In this way, he successfully contributed to the already persisting image of a dangerously aggressive, uncivilized nation that he perceived Bulgarians to be.

The Romanian propagandists, however, had strong opponents in their homeland who, like Take Ionescu (Ischirkoff 1919, p. 103), Ștefan Zeletin,<sup>8</sup> or Vasile Kogalniceanu, constantly criticized the Romanian attitudes to Dobruja, mainly complaining about the ineffectiveness of social and economic policies in the region.

Among the Bulgarian participants of the debate there existed those, who, as it was mentioned previously, expressed very strong anti-Romanian attitudes and those, who, like Markov and Penakov, fiercely supporting the Bulgarian cause, did not attempt to demonize the Romanian nation at all. Markov referred to Vasile Kogalniceanu as a “sane and good Romanian” (Markov 1919 a, p. 20). Ivan Penakov, who lived among Romanians for many years, brilliantly mastering the language, mostly blamed the Romanian officials who had created “absurd

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<sup>8</sup> As an example see Zeletin’s poem “Noi vrem bacsis”/”We want a bribe”, mocking the absurdity of the Romanian policy of the annexation of Cadrilater (Zeletin 1998, pp. 49-50).

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legends” more to fill their compatriots’ heads than the Romanian nation as such. Penakov wrote in his “Shelter of Köstence” (Constanta) that Romanians loved to believe in tales that were covering the dishonorable deeds and highlighting the noble activities of the builders of the Romanian past (Penakov 1918, p. 9). Penakov also blamed the Romanian politicians for their inability to preserve Romanian Bessarabia, occupying Bulgarian Dobruja instead.

The analysis of the intellectuals’ texts proves that the dispute had a powerful resonance in the cultured and educated circles of both societies. Although counting on the local audience, the authors produced their works mainly for the influential international public and their colleagues and counterparts. The polemic between the sides found its reflection not only in the historical, ethnographic, or political writings, but also in several novels. These examples of mutual othering create a paradox. While both sides of the debate were actively involved in separating their group from that of the neighbor, they accumulated obvious similarities: their strategies coincided as well as the majority of their arguments. The public actors were desperately trying to create a breach, but engaged in the dispute that turned them into an epistemic community. While none of them wished to be seen as part of the same group, their obvious involvement in this relatively short-lived epistemic war forced them to communicate with each other.

The territorial dispute seen through the eyes of the prominent public actors does not represent an original pattern of propaganda. It only gives an astonishing example of a rapid formation of the negative opinions of a neighbor who had been previously considered a reliable ally, and of an effective denial of shared historical experiences (Kitromilides 1994, pp.75-78). The debates of 1913-1940 were aimed at destroying these ties between the two countries, while, paradoxically, creating even stronger boundaries, reflected in multiple battles of words and wits inside the freshly created Romanian-Bulgarian epistemic community.

### **Conclusion. Disputes and consequences.**

The solution of the Dobrujan problem in 1940 came with the signing of the treaty of Craiova (Bernhardt 1982, p. 119) that clearly marked the obvious end of the debate that animated the minds of various Romanian and Bulgarian intellectuals. Consequently, the “war of caricatures”, fueled and supported on a grand scale by both sides, lost its immediate purpose after Romania and Bulgaria found themselves engaged in a different war (Kuzmanova 1989, pp.287-288).

The borderland dispute bound together both Bulgarian and Romanian public actors into an international epistemic community that lost its point of existence and, predictably, crumbled to pieces shortly after the debate was interrupted by devastating political events on a grander scale. The “epistemic community”, kept together by the sole self-serving purpose of advancing a variety of Romanian or Bulgarian state-consolidating projects, turned to different topics and slowly faded, as did the acute Bulgarian-Romanian interactions. Therefore, the borderland disputes as such can be regarded as perpetuators of social networks, resulting in the creation of groups justifying the rights of one side over the other. The current paper investigates the vital link between a political dispute and a creation of an epistemic community. It argues that it is not an epistemic community that produces a borderland dispute based on actual nation and state-building strategies, but rather the former that gives development to an existing circle of public actors, transforming them into what can be described as a full-fledged formation of multi-national social networks united for the sake of serving a single propagandistic purpose.

A borderland dispute does not simply perpetuate the separation of different groups, but also unites a number of influential public actors, who promote their respective state-building claims. While advocating their political agendas, they are forced to oppose those of their opponents, therefore they engage in an epistemic battle that requires them to familiarize themselves with the strategies of their adversaries. Since most of the participants of the debates are active public actors, they form an epistemic community that is initially driven by the reality of a contested territory.

In the case of interwar Dobruja, the result of its partition depended mostly not on the value and propagandistic strength of the texts the participants of the debate had produced, but on external influence that brought the end to Greater Romania and reshaped the political map of the region once again after the Second World War. The works of contemporaries give an insight into the dispute that allows us to perceive the roles of the Greater Powers deciding the fate of the province, dividing and re-dividing it. The explanations of how and why Dobruja became important for both Bulgaria and Romania in 1913-1940 lie partially in the methods of propaganda of the sides that inserted the ideas of their nationalistic historical discourses into it.

Dobruja’s significance was defined mainly by its strategically important position that was making the province a precious land with possibilities of controlling Danube navigation, establishing ports and profiting from the access to the Black sea. Having obvious political and economic goals, nation-states claim regions

they consider important. Yet, those are not the public actors advancing the ideas that decide the fates of those regions, but rather the territories that become the focus of propagandistic battles. And those fights of words and wits bind adversaries into a club of self-proclaimed specialists, an unlikely “epistemic community”.

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