The Balkans and Caucasus: Parallel Processes on the Opposite Sides of the Black Sea

Edited by

Ivan Biliarsky, Ovidiu Cristea
and Anca Oroveanu

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REGIONAL COOPERATION ACCORDING TO INTERWAR ROMANIAN NATIONALISTS

ROLAND CLARK

On his way home from southern France in the autumn of 1930, Nichifor Crainic (1889-1972) stopped in Geneva to observe a session of the League of Nations. What he saw was very disappointing: "Utopian dreamers" who had sacrificed "humanity" for atheism and international co-operation (Crainic 1991: 227). Soon after returning to Romania, the journalism of this poet-theologian turned right-wing intellectual revealed his increasing conviction that not only was the League of Nations dominated by Freemasons and Jews, but that its policies were deliberately harmful to Romanian interests. Internationalism was a very pejorative word for Crainic, as it reminded him both of the Masonic-Jewish conspiracy centred in Geneva, and of Communism. Instead, Crainic suggested something he called "Christian internationalism," which did not negate the cultural specificities of nations, but saw them as normal. He encouraged each nation to develop "the springs of its own national culture," and believed that only then "peoples will be able to love; seeking to understand each other, and they will be able to understand when they know each other directly" (Crainic 1928: 77).

Crainic was not alone in this vision. In a conference held at the South-East European Institute in 1940, the eminent historian Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) argued that when one thinks about the relationship between the countries of South-Eastern Europe, one realizes that

> Everything unites us whether we want it to or not. Just one thing: instead of beginning and ending with diplomacy, the biggest and most important thing is to begin with what already exists and to end with the way things need to be (Iorga 1940a: 14).

In a summer course from that same year, he told his students that

> A single people cannot sustain civilization alone; only humanity in its entirety has such strength. [...] Thus collaboration between peoples is necessary, but collaboration can only happen between people who know, understand and love one another (Iorga 1940b: 6).

Here Iorga was promoting a position that was reasonably common among both moderate and extreme nationalists during the interwar period.

Nationalists are often portrayed as isolationists. They are anti-international, anti-European, and anti-foreigner. This is only part of the truth, and does not do justice to their reasons for opposing projects such as the League of Nations or a United States of Europe. The three intellectuals I discuss in this paper – the theologian Nichifor Crainic, the historian Nicolae Iorga and the economist Mihail Manoilescu (1891-1950) – maintained that cooperation between nations was both possible and desirable, but it had to be based first and foremost on the national peculiarities of each people. Only after a nation developed its own individual potential could it begin to cooperate with other nations. Moreover, like attracts like, so cooperation should begin between neighbours who share a similar cultural heritage before being extended on a global scale. While Nicolae Iorga used these ideas to advocate for peace and appeasement within a pro-French system of alliances, Nichifor Crainic called for ethnic cleansing and a "war of extermination" against Bolshevism hand in hand with Germany, and Mihail Manoilescu dreamed of an economic bloc formed by the agricultural nations of South-Eastern Europe that could overturn the trade imbalance in Europe. Yet all three promoted a similar symbolic geography and a similar vision of regional cooperation based on cultural, religious and economic ties.

During the nineteenth century, various Romanian public figures had advocated forming some sort of federal state in South Eastern Europe to replace the Habsburg monarchy (Ciorănescu 1996: 1-64). The popularity of such ideas dwindled once the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were joined under Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1859 and the great powers recognized Romania as an independent state in 1878. Transylvanians like Aurel Popovici continued to promote federalist ideas up until the First World War, but they too became less vocal about regional federations once their province joined Greater Romania (Ciorănescu 1996: 65-85; Popovici 1906; Boia 2009: 69-76). In a country with only a small sea coast, neighbours were usually potential enemies. In 1913, the Romanian politician Vasile Kogălniceanu (1863-1921) wrote that only a war of expansion would make Romania into "a real force of progress and civilization which will guarantee our existence in eternity (Kogălniceanu 1913: 48)." Kogălniceanu had co-founded the Democratic Nationalist

Party together with Nicolae Iorga and A.C. Cuza in 1910, a party whose political philosophy was based on harnessing the peasantry as a political force, destroying Jewish involvement in Romanian politics, society and commerce, and strengthening Romania's international influence (Bozdoghină 2007: 70-75; Nagy-Talavera 1999: 133). What is worth noting about Kogălniceanu's position is not only the allusion to war as a civilizing force à la Heinrich von Treitschke, but the notion that an enlarged Romania would keep its new borders into eternity because they reflected its natural destiny (Von Treitschke 1916: 593-599).

Once war broke out in 1914, Romania set to work negotiating with both sides to get the best possible deal, and after two years of talks it entered the war on the side of the Allies. Its troops were quickly defeated, but after the war the Allies punished the Central Powers by expanding Romania's territory to an extent that earlier nationalists had only dreamt about. After invading Hungary to secure those new borders, the primary goal of successive Romanian leaders was to keep them intact (Hitchins 1994: 282-290). Under the guidance of Take Ionescu and Nicolae Titulescu, Romania threw itself enthusiastically into the League of Nations, hoping that the Great Powers would defend its territorial integrity (Miloiu 2003: 223). Aware that this was not altogether likely, it also signed a mutual assistance treaty with Poland and formed the Little Entente with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia (Hillgruber, 2007: 37-38). These treaties were designed to prevent Russian and Hungarian revisionism, but also to secure France allies in the East who could intimidate Germany, whose troops had occupied Romania during the First World War. Titulescu's policy of ignoring his neighbours made sense both geopolitically and economically. Not only were Romania's neighbours her most immediate competitors for land, they also produced many of the same goods as did Romania itself, and thus were useless as trading partners. Effectively, these treaties linked Romania's destiny to that of a peaceful Europe under French leadership, and isolated it from neighbouring countries.

Titulescu's pro-European policy sparked hostile reactions from right-wing nationalists almost immediately. A. C. Cuza (1857-1947), a university professor and leading anti-Semitic politician, argued that "Every nation desires and has the right to control its own destiny (Cuza 1941: 19)." The League of Nations, he said, prevented this because it took sovereignty away from nations and spent too much time checking whether or not Romania was treating its minorities correctly. In its place Cuza suggested allying Romania more closely with Germany, a position for which he was

frequently heckled in parliament with accusations about his being a paid German agent (Cuza 1941: 20-30).

Also a Germanophile, Nichifor Crainic was equally hostile to the League of Nations. A celebrated poet, journalist and theologian, Crainic became a prominent right-wing demagogue during the 1930s. His political rhetoric championed the peasantry, celebrated tradition, mysticism and folklore, and railed against Romanian democracy and its system of international alliances (Hitchins 1983: 231-258). "Internationalism," he declared in 1928, is "utopian and absurd" if it hopes to bring Germany and France together as peaceful neighbours (Crainic 1928: 76-77). The League of Nations at Geneva, he said in unison with Cuza, was only interested in crushing the aspirations of nationalist leaders such as Adolf Hitler. It had no interest in stopping the "humanitarian crises" caused by other nations, and did nothing when the USSR introduced internal passports for its citizens in 1932 (Crainic 1941: 66-69). Not only was the League of Nations anti-German, but all those who came to the table preaching "peace and disarmament" were still maintaining their empires through military force (Crainic 1941: 19-21). "That which is called 'Europeanism' is nothing but French-ism," Crainic argued (Crainic 1929: 1). It was French nationalism that had imposed the crippling Treaty of Versailles on Germany, and the same spirit lay behind attempts by the League of Nations to curb German expansionism under Hitler (Crainic 1941: 78-80). Moreover, the "unfair and blind egoism" of the French was having a disastrous impact upon the countries of the Danube Basin. France's system of treaties with Danubian countries, Crainic claimed, was causing general instability in the region (Crainic 1941: 84-87). Using his daily newspaper *Calendarul*, Crainic described "satanic liturgies" which took place in Bucharest when the League of Nations opened its offices there (Crainic 1941: 12-13; Crainic 1944: 2), and charged that all diplomacy conducted by Romanian politicians in Geneva was part of a Masonic plot (Crainic 1932a: 1). Geneva was not linked to Freemasonry by accident. Both were decisively "international," and in Crainic's vocabulary, this was a euphemism for evil (Crainic 1932b: 1).

Advocates of the European idea such as Mihai Ralea, Mircea Eliade and Nicolae Bagdasar posited their dream on the belief that a common European civilization, history, logic and religion could serve as the basis of international unity (Pecican 2008: 49-50, 109-124, 349-352). Their opponents disagreed. The religious philosopher Nae Ionescu (1890-1940), who like Cuza and Crainic was also an anti-Semite, an academic and a Germanophile, opposed the idea of a united Europe on the grounds that "Europe" was simply a fiction, and was not based on historical realities

(Ionescu 1990: 91-94). "Politics is based on realities," Ionescu argued, and so regional confederations based on Central Europe or South-East Europe would make more sense for Romania (Ionescu 1990: 87-90, 133-137).

Though he himself was not altogether opposed to European integration, Nicolae Iorga was also a passionate supporter of regional cooperation (Pecican 2008: 125-129). "In the place of a Balkanism of hate," he said in 1916, "in the place of a Balkanism of rivalry or reciprocal dislodgement, we put a Balkanism of common historical memory (Iorga 1916: 44)." In Iorga's thought, organic connections to place were demonstrated through historical continuity and justified not only military alliances but also territorial claims (Nagy-Talavera 1999: 82-84; Georgescu 1966: 37). In more ways than one Iorga's vision was deeply indebted to Johann Herder (1744-1803), who preached that his nation should "seek out what *we* must respect and love in our fatherland in order to love it worthily and purely." No-one should impose their culturally-specific spirit (*Geist*) on anyone else, but "peoples should live *beside* each other, not mixed up with and on top of each other oppressing each other" (Herder 2002: 374, 385; Compare Iorga: "A true nationalist does not want to steal from other nations" quoted in Nagy-Talavera 1999: 86). This is an organic conception of nations which, as Iorga noted, was very different from the political nation celebrated by the French revolutionaries (Iorga 1916: 16). Iorga's insight here was that nationalists conceived of international cooperation differently because non-nationalists were interested in contractual relationships whereas nationalists wanted organic relationships (Cheah 2003: 17- 234 for an excellent study of the organicist metaphor upon which modern nationalism is based).

Iorga founded the South-East European Institute in 1914 with the intention of bringing the nation-states of the region closer together by emphasizing their ties to each other of blood, religion, geography and history (Iorga 1939: 3-4, 16-18; Nagy-Talavera 1999: 138; Iorga 1916: 9-10). After the First World War was over, Iorga wrote extensively about the histories of Romania's neighbours, producing monographs and giving lectures on the histories of the Hungarians, the Bulgarians, the Eastern Slavs, the Czechoslovaks, the Saxons and the Albanians among others (Nagy-Talavera 1999: 258). Much of his historical research emphasized these ties in an effort to cement the pro-French bloc being created in the region. Commenting on the treaty concluded in February 1934 between Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, Iorga wrote that

> This Balkan Pact is not a new thing. This collaboration has existed from time immemorial. We have travelled together throughout history. [...] The entire Byzantine epoch was nothing if not an epoch of collaboration. Not one of these states existed which did not influence the others, and no nation which did not influence the thinking of another (Iorga 1939: 19-20).

Iorga promoted this thesis in a book entitled *Byzance après Byzance* (*Byzantinum after Byzantium*), in which he suggested that something he called "Byzantine civilization" had continued to shape the region's culture and societies up until the nineteenth century (Iorga 2002: 5-10, 220). Byzantium, according to Iorga, was proof that war was not the natural way in which nations related to one another (Iorga 1940b: 11).

Nationalists like Cuza and Crainic, who promoted expansionism at the expense of other nations, had clearly not understood nationalism, Iorga thought (Iorga 1916: 27-28). In his view, true nationalism meant understanding the ties between nations as part of one's own culture and history (Iorga 1924: 29). Iorga parted ways with A. C. Cuza in 1916 when the two former political partners disagreed over Romania's decision to ally with Britain, France and Russia against Germany in the war, a debate which rocked most political parties to a greater or lesser extent. Cuza advocated for a pro-German alliance, whereas after vacillating somewhat, Iorga threw himself wholeheartedly into supporting the war effort (Boia 2009: 39; Bozdoghină 2007: 57-61). His split with Crainic – who had been Iorga's protégé during the war years – occurred gradually during the 1920s, as they quarrelled over editorial decisions and aesthetic taste (Crainic 1991: 188-189; Livezeanu 2001: 118-121). Although himself not a philo-Semite, Iorga bitterly opposed the growing anti-Semitic movement during the 1920s, and the government which he led in 1931 was the first to officially outlaw the fascist Iron Guard (Nagy-Talavera 1999: 215-228, 306; Georgescu 1966: 78). Iorga's opposition to fascism was first and foremost anti-German, and he compared Hitler's plans for expansion at the expense of the "small states" of Europe to the imperial designs of Frederick II in the thirteenth century (Nagy-Talavera 1999: 388; Georgescu 1966: 30-73). In a 1940 pamphlet endorsing appeasement and condemning imperialism, Iorga maintained that foreigners had been invading Romanian territory for almost two thousand years, and he identified such invaders as the central problem of Romanian history (Iorga 1940c). Not all nations were as dangerous as Germany though. Italy's Latin roots made it a natural ally of the French, Iorga believed, and so he maintained an equivocal yet positive attitude towards Mussolini throughout the interwar period (Nagy-Talavera 1999: 315). For Iorga organic, historical ties such as a Latin or Byzantine heritage were crucial to forming relationships between nation-states, and countries such as Germany which lacked those ties had no right to interfere in Romanian politics.

Nichifor Crainic approved of many elements of Iorga's theories about regional cooperation, although he disagreed with Iorga's hostility towards Nazi Germany. Crainic saw regional cooperation as a way of strengthening military alliances in the region and of asserting Romanian dominance among its neighbours as the first among equals. In 1941 and 1943 he dedicated issues of his monthly periodical, *Gândirea* (*Thought*) to Bulgarian and Croatian contributors. The opening editorial of the Croatian issue declared that

> today we [Croatians and Romanians] stand before history through our own efforts and we can show each other what we have created in the epoch of our national formation (Crainic 1943: 610).

Crainic was impressed by the Croatians as Romania's wartime allies, but more important for him were the Orthodox nations in the region. In 1924, he argued that Orthodoxy was the defining element of Romanian culture:

> tied to the Occident through the Latin idea, we are tied to the Orient through faith. Latinity is the path through which we receive. The path through which the pulse of Europe beats in our blood. Orthodoxy is the path through which we give (Crainic 1924a: 21).

In 1941, Crainic made this idea the basis of a conference that he ran in Sofia on Romanian-Bulgarian unity. His argument – delivered before a Bulgarian audience in German – was that

> we Orthodox have two fatherlands (*patrii*): one of our blood, the other the communal *patria* of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Zissulescu 1941: 568-569).

Orthodoxy, Crainic argued, should form the basis of an alliance which could reinvigorate Europe. Ştefan Zissulescu characterized Crainic's argument thus:

> Every man is like an instrument in an orchestra, and nations are groups of instruments, all with a mission to make the Christian symphony of the love of one's neighbour resound (Zissulescu 1941: 568; Staniloaie 1935: 76-84).

Crainic's vision of an organic region united by a common Orthodox history and culture mirrored that of the *Abendland* ("Occidentalist") movement of mostly Catholic academics in interwar Germany, who

argued for the creation of a Greater Germany based on Central Europe's Christian heritage. Crainic was heavily influenced by Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* (*Decline of the West*), which was also a seminal text for the German Abendlanders who, like Crainic, believed that European culture was in crisis as a result of secularisation and "decadency" (Pöpping 2002: 25-26, 29ff; Crainic 1924b: 181-186; Crainic 1929: 1-11). Both Crainic and the Abendlanders rejected liberal democracy, capitalism, and Communism, and both dreamt of a strong state which could impose religious conformity on its population (Pöpping 2002: 7, 22-23, 167-170; Crainic 1938). The similarities between the Abendlander vision of Greater Germany and Crainic's speeches about an Orthodox regional alliance are revealing in that both proposed first religion then culture as the building blocks of supra-national entities in a world dominated by nation-states. Moreover, both were culturally exclusivist utopias that left no room for people who were ethnically or religiously other. As Katherine Sorrels notes, once nationalists began to imagine their nations in ethnic terms after 1880, the idea of Europe as a family of nation-states came to exclude Jews, Roma and other state-less peoples who could not be Europeans because they did not belong to any of Europe's constitutive nations (Sorrels 2009: 10-14). If this applied to pan-European projects, it applied ten-fold to the religiously-based regional entities promoted by Crainic and the Abendlanders.

While some nationalists advocated regional cooperation based on common culture or religion, Mihail Manoilescu supported the surprising suggestion that a regional block made good economic sense, because then the poorer countries from South-Eastern Europe could work together to create an economic bloc whose sum was greater than its parts (Ciorănescu 1996: 126). Manoilescu was a well-known economist, and is best known for his writings on corporatism. He theorised corporation as an economic system which was neither capitalist nor communist, but which promoted state direction of the economy through central planning and mediation between employers unions and workers unions (Manoilescu 1934). Arguing in favour of a regional economic bloc was a remarkable position for an economist of Manoilescu's standing to take given that, as the former Finance Minister Virgil Madgearu pointed out, 90% of Romania's cereal exports and 75% of its petrol went to countries outside the region (Manoilescu 1934: 125). It should be noted that the notion of a regional bloc was not originally Manoilescu's idea. The Austrian Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi had suggested the idea of an Eastern European federation in his book *Pan-Europa* in 1923, and then the French leader Aristide Briand promoted European integration in 1929. The failure of

Briand's initiative did not dissuade his successor, André Tardieu, from attempting to create a pro-French federation in Eastern Europe as the first step towards a United States of Europe (Manoilescu 1934: 111-127). Although it was eventually rejected, Tardieu's plan met with approval from a number of mainstream politicians in Romania (Dimitrie Gusti, "Problema federatiei europene," ["The Question of the European Federation"] and I. G. Duca, "Statele Unite ale Europei," ["The United States of Europe"] in Pecican 2008: 61-96, 97-103). Manoilescu supported the plan only so long as the federation would be allied with Germany, and not with France, and he argued that it had to be a full-blown federation like the United States of America and not just a political alliance or a customs union (Manoilescu 1934: 51-55). Unlike Briand, Tardieu and their Romanian supporters, Manoilescu saw a regional federation as a means by which agricultural countries could upset the dependency balance in Europe and gain leverage with the industrialised north. For Manoilescu it was precisely *because* they produced the same goods and had the same dependent trade relationships with the north that the countries of South-Eastern Europe needed to unite.

Manoilescu is a perfect example of how limited nationalist rhetoric about organic regional cooperation actually was. In a cabinet that also contained Nichifor Crainic, Mihail Manoilescu became foreign minister of Romania in July 1940, and immediately attempted to strengthen Romania's ties with Germany (Hillgruber 2002: 111). He admitted in his memoirs that "My economic ideas, which theorise the revolt of the agricultural countries against the industrialised world which exploits them, were completely opposed to German interests," and yet the Germans wanted him in power because they knew that they could count on him when necessary (Manoilescu 1991: 46). By this time Manoilescu was an active sympathiser of the fascist Iron Guard, whose leader had declared in 1937 that

> I am against the great democracies of the West, I am against the Little Entente, I am against the Balkan Pact and I feel absolutely no attachment to the League of Nations, in which I do not believe. I am for a Romanian foreign policy allied with Rome and Berlin, with nationalist revolutionary states against Bolshevism. In 48 hours after the victory of the Legionary Movement, Romania will have an alliance with Rome and Berlin (Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, quoted in Mihail Sturdza 1994: 130).

For the Germanophile Manoilescu, who also had close ties with Italy, this was not a difficult position to hold, even if it made a laughing stock of his own economic theories.

From the moment Manoilescu became foreign minister, and continuing under his successors Mihail Sturdza and Mihai Antonescu, Romania's foreign policy was intimately tied to that of Germany, among other things because they felt that an alliance with Germany was the best way to limit the territorial claims of their neighbours. This approach proved of limited value during the Second World War because the Nazis conceived of their alliance as an empire dominated by Germany, rather than as a federation in which states such as Romania might have had a chance to promote their own interests (Mazower 2008: 555-565). Manoilescu fainted in the conference room when Romania lost northern Transylvania to Hungary, and Crainic resigned from the cabinet soon after (Case 2009: 72).

Regional cooperation was a common idea in the writings and speeches of interwar Romanian nationalists, but ultimately most were less interested in organic cultural or religious affinities than in strengthening their own country's power base in an ideologically divided Europe. Whereas Iorga tried to use regional cooperation to create a nationalism of "small states" allied with France, Crainic exploited the same organicist theories to establish Romania as a regional power allied to Germany, and Manoilescu dreamed of the economic influence that such a bloc could command. All three based their positions both on their academic studies and on their readings of European geopolitics, but even those intellectuals who claimed to be most in favour of regional ties were actually thinking in terms of international networks with Western Europe because they still saw Romania as a peripheral state at the mercy of the Great Powers.

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