

## Introduction: the establishment of Russian influence in the Danubian Principalities



Although Russian influence over political life in the Principalities did not become firmly established until the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji in 1774, Russian actions were already playing an important role in their internal development at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The main direction of the policy of Peter the Great was toward the Baltic rather than the Black Sea, but he had early in his career also shown an interest in expansion southward toward the Black Sea and, in particular, in the acquisition of Azov. The entire question of Russian relations with the Ottoman Empire became especially acute when in 1709, after his defeat at Poltava, Charles XII of Sweden fled to Constantinople and there, with French assistance, attempted to stir the Porte into action. His efforts met with success, and in 1711 the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia.

Within the Principalities the Russian victory over the Swedish king made a deep impression. The temptation was strong to enter into relations with the Russian court in an attempt to break the Ottoman control over the Principalities. Accordingly, both Constantine Brîncoveanu, the prince of Wallachia, and Dimitrie Cantemir, the ruler of Moldavia, opened negotiations with Peter. In April 1711 Cantemir and Peter concluded the Treaty of Luck. This pact of mutual assistance placed Moldavia under Russian political control; the terms stated that Cantemir, the boyars, and all of the Romanian population would henceforth be considered the Russian ruler's faithful subjects. Other sections of the treaty guaranteed Cantemir's personal and political future. Engaged in a struggle with the boyars, the prince used his Russian connection to strengthen his own position. The terms of the treaty thus declared that "all the state power will rest in the hands of the prince," that the no-

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bility and the subject population should submit to his orders, and that the cities should be regarded as "his own property." Should the new allies lose the war, Cantemir was to emigrate to Russia, where he and his family would be supported in a proper manner by the Russian treasury.<sup>1</sup>

After a similar understanding had been reached with Brîncoveanu, Peter launched in June 1711 an ambitious Balkan campaign. In a pattern that was to be a standard feature of Russian policy during the next two centuries, he called upon the Ottoman Balkan Christians to rise in his support. The Russian armies crossed the Pruth River and advanced as far as Jassy. Although Cantemir fulfilled his alliance obligations, Brîncoveanu remained passive. In July, when the Russian troops were surrounded, Peter was forced to make a treaty with the Ottoman Empire that contained highly unfavorable terms. Cantemir, who was placed in a dangerous situation, left with the Russian army. He subsequently lived in St. Petersburg, where he pursued a highly productive literary career. In accordance with the promises in the previous treaty, he received from the Russian government fifty villages and fifty thousand serfs, together with two houses in the Russian capital. His family and his descendants were subsequently to hold prominent positions in Russian service. Brîncoveanu remained on the Wallachian throne until 1714, when he and his four sons were executed for suspected treasonous relations with the Habsburg Monarchy.

The Russian defeat had enormous political consequences for the Principalities and resulted in a severe restriction of their autonomous position. Since the Ottoman government no longer trusted the native boyars, it henceforth appointed the princes only from among the ranks of the Phanariot Greeks. This group derived its name from the Phanar, or Lighthouse, district of Constantinople, which was not only the residence of the Orthodox patriarch, but also the home of many Greek or Hellenized families who had come to be closely associated with the Ottoman administration. Although those of Greek background predominated, some were of Italian, Romanian, or other ancestry. Often extremely wealthy, they had won their power and riches through their service to the Porte and through exploiting the economic opportunities to be gained by this association. Since at this time the highest positions in the Ottoman administration went to those with the money to purchase them, the Phanariot Greeks were in an advantageous situation. For over a century they were thus able to control some of the major posts in the Principalities. They were also deeply involved in other aspects of Ottoman foreign affairs and internal administration.

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The Phanariot period is usually pictured as the worst in modern Romanian history. Although the Porte did not divide the Romanian lands into pashaliks or send in regular troops to occupy the land, it did place the provinces under extreme fiscal pressure.<sup>2</sup> Undergoing a century of internal economic decline, domestic political chaos, and repeated defeat on the battlefield, the Ottoman government regarded the relatively rich Principalities as excellent sources of tax revenues and food supplies for the army and the population of Constantinople. The Phanariot princes became the agents of the Porte for the collection of these prizes. Some were indeed responsible for important reforms, but the majority represented the interests of the central government more than those of the people whom they ruled. This situation also resulted from the conditions under which they governed. Themselves the victims of the Ottoman system, the Phanariot princes held office but a short time. They thus did not have the opportunity to become closely acquainted with or to identify their interests with those of the Principalities, although they often became large property owners in the region. Naturally, the native boyars, belonging to the formerly dominating class, deeply resented the power and influence of the new princes, despite the fact that they usually cooperated closely with them. The temptation for certain groups of boyars to look for assistance to foreign courts, in particular Vienna and St. Petersburg, was accordingly strong.

After the defeat of Peter, the Habsburg Monarchy stood in the forefront of the European powers from whom dissident boyars might expect aid against the Porte. Some of these men were willing to accept Habsburg suzerainty over the Principalities as long as the boyar domination of local government was retained. In 1718, when Austria gained Oltenia and the Banat in the Treaty of Passarowitz, they were able to experience the consequences of Habsburg rule directly. At first the region was allowed a measure of autonomy, with boyar control retained. The administration was in the hands of a council under the *ban*, or governor, George Cantacuzino. However, at this time the Austrian court had other objectives in mind for Oltenia. With the intention of converting the new possession into a major grain-producing area to supply the imperial army, the Habsburg officials were more interested in establishing a centralized, efficient administration than in protecting the interests of the Romanian aristocrats. The introduction of imperial institutions both reduced the political power of the boyars and increased the obligations of the peasants who worked the land. Habsburg rule thus lost much of its attraction as an alternative to Ottoman suzerainty. Moreover, throughout the century the Habsburg government was especially

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interested in expansion directly southward into the lands of the western half of the Balkan peninsula. It therefore had less need to win the support of, or to make promises to, the Romanian leadership.

In contrast to the Habsburg Monarchy, the Russian government recognized the prime strategic importance of the Romanian lands in its continuing struggle with the Porte. Throughout the period of this narrative the Russian leaders, tsars and officials alike, were fully aware of the role that the Principalities would play in their conflicts with the Ottoman Empire, both as staging areas for campaigns against Constantinople and as a source of agricultural supplies for the army. In 1736 the continuing Russian pressure against the Khanate of the Crimea, an Ottoman tributary state, and the lands north of the Black Sea led to the outbreak of further hostilities. Austria joined the conflict in 1737.<sup>3</sup> Although the initial Russian campaign was conducted in the steppe zone and the Crimea, in 1739 an army under the command of General Münich entered Jassy. The Moldavian boyars once again welcomed foreign intervention, but their hopes were disappointed. First, Austria was forced to make a peace in September 1739 in which it surrendered most of the gains of the Treaty of Passarowitz, including Oltenia. The Russian government, after signing a similar agreement, withdrew from the Romanian lands and kept finally only the city of Azov. For the next thirty years, from 1739 to 1768, the Principalities enjoyed a period of peace. At this time, during the reigns of Constantine Mavrocordat in both Wallachia and Moldavia, reforms were introduced in both principalities. Since the measures affected the privileged position of the boyars, in particular their relations with the peasants, this group became even more hostile to the Phanariot princes and more willing to look abroad for assistance against the Ottoman-sponsored regime.

With the accession of Catherine the Great in 1762, Russian policy became more adventurous and aggressive, especially in regard to Poland and the Ottoman lands north of the Black Sea. In 1768 the Porte declared war as a result of Russian encroachments in Poland, and once more Russian armies entered the Principalities. At the same time a fleet was sent from the Baltic to the eastern Mediterranean to challenge the Ottoman navy. Since the Russian forces were almost uniformly victorious, the hopes of the native boyars were again high. The political status they preferred was the establishment of two independent principalities, but under the protection of one or more of the great powers – Russia, Austria, or even Prussia. The question of annexation by Russia, with the maintenance of internal autonomy, although discussed, was an unrealistic alternative. All of the European states at this time were extremely apprehensive about the Russian intentions. In fact, the

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Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji of 1774, which brought peace, was concluded under great-power pressure to prevent Russia from making even wider gains at Ottoman expense. The first partition of Poland, in 1772, was arranged in part as a diversion to hinder Catherine from making further demands on the Porte.

Even with these limitations, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji was a major triumph for Russia, and it is a landmark in the Russian advance to the south and west. Its terms gave Russia lands between the Bug and the Dnieper rivers, formerly in the possession of the Khanate of the Crimea. The latter state was declared independent, a condition that left it open to eventual Russian annexation. Russia also gained important commercial privileges. Its ships were allowed the right of free navigation in the Black Sea, which had previously been closed to non-Ottoman shipping, and through the Straits into the Mediterranean. The Russian government could now appoint consuls in Ottoman cities, and it was to enjoy commercial rights there similar to those which had been previously granted to France and Britain. In the highly controversial Article 7 Russia received what was later interpreted by its diplomats as the right to speak in behalf of the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire. The presence of Russian shipping in the Black Sea and the official representation in Jassy and Bucharest were, of course, to be of great significance for the future, but even more important was Article 16, which related directly to the Principalities and gave Russia the right to oversee Romanian internal life. Of the ten points, the most significant was the last, which stated: "The Porte likewise permits that, according as circumstances of the two principalities may require, the ministers of the Imperial Court of Russia . . . may speak in their favor, and promises to listen to them with the attention that is due to friendly and respected Powers."<sup>4</sup> In other sections of this article the Ottoman government granted amnesty to those who fought with Russia, gave assurances of tax relief, allowed those who wished to emigrate to Russia to do so, and agreed in no way to obstruct the free exercise of religion or the building and repairing of churches. The princes were also permitted to send official representatives to Constantinople to defend their interests.

Although this treaty brought undoubted benefits to the Principalities, Moldavia in the same period was forced to accept the Habsburg Monarchy's annexation of Bukovina, which was claimed as a reward for theoretical services rendered in the conclusion of the peace. Unable to hinder the cession, because of its military vulnerability, the Porte accepted the action in 1775.

The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, in officially recognizing Russian

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rights of intervention, gave the great northern power a major voice in all subsequent political changes in the Principalities.<sup>5</sup> In the ensuing years the Russian statesmen made full use of their privileges, both to extend Romanian autonomous rights and also to tie the provinces closer to their interests. With Russian encouragement the Porte next proceeded to make a series of declarations and agreements that defined the obligations of the Principalities to the Porte and gave certain political guarantees. The most important of these were the Hatti Sherif of 1774, the Sened of 1783, and the Hatti Sherif of 1784. In these the payments due the Porte from the provinces received closer definition, and the already existing exclusion of Muslims as residents or property owners in the Principalities was reconfirmed. Russian influence was also strengthened. The Porte agreed that the princes were not to be removed arbitrarily and that depositions would be carried out only in agreement with Russia. When the Porte in 1786 dismissed Alexander Mavrocordat in Moldavia without consulting St. Petersburg, the Russian representative in Constantinople immediately protested the action as a violation of treaties.

In addition to the strengthening of its position in the Principalities, the Russian government was concerned with exploiting other gains made in the treaty. In 1779 the Treaty of Ainali Kavak, which was followed by another agreement in 1783, gave Russia additional commercial rights. Much attention was directed toward developing the newly annexed territory, including the Crimea, which became a part of the Russian Empire in 1783. Colonists were brought in not only from Russia, but from other lands, in particular from the German states. Efforts were also made to build up Russian naval power; Kherson became the major base, and construction of a Black Sea fleet was begun. The Russian colonization of the former Ottoman lands and the establishment of a naval presence in the Black Sea profoundly altered the power balance in the area.

Despite the enormous gains of the previous years, Catherine was not content. As long as Maria Theresa remained empress of Austria, Catherine could not tempt her into an alliance aimed at further advances at the expense of the Porte. After Maria Theresa's death, when Joseph II proved easier to influence, the Russian empress proceeded to propose nothing less than the full partition of the Ottoman possessions in Europe, as well as the distribution of some of the Asiatic lands of the sultan. In an exchange of letters in 1782 Joseph and Catherine agreed upon a division: Austria was to obtain Oltenia, a part of Serbia, Bosnia, and Hercegovina; Istria and Dalmatia, then in Venetian possession, were also assigned to Vienna, with their former owner re-



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ceiving compensation with Crete, Cyprus, and the Peloponnesus. France, which had yet to be approached with the scheme, was allowed Syria and Egypt. The Russian share was to be the largest of all. Two areas, the lands between the Bug and Dniester rivers and territory in the Caucasus, were to be annexed directly. Two puppet kingdoms were then to be established. The first, a revived Greek-Byzantine state, was to include Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Greek territories. Catherine's grandson, Constantine, was the intended ruler, but with the provision that the state should never be united with Russia. The second kingdom, composed of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Bessarabia, was to be named Dacia and placed under an Orthodox prince. It was rumored that Catherine's favorite, Gregory Potemkin, who had done a great deal to build up southern Russia, was a possible candidate.

Obviously such wide aims could be achieved only after a crushing military victory. In September 1787 Russia again went to war with the Porte; Austria joined in February 1788. Both governments sent armies into the Principalities. Russian war aims in this campaign were set in November 1787. Despite Catherine's ambitious schemes, the principal objective was the acquisition of the land between the Bug and the Dniester. The establishment of an independent buffer state, comprising Wallachia and Moldavia, was also foreseen. The war, however, did not proceed as expected. The allies found their efforts distracted by the subsequent events in Western Europe connected with the French Revolution; Austria was compelled to make peace in August 1791 because of the dangers in that region. Moreover, in the previous year Joseph II had died; his successor, Leopold I, was more cautious.

Events were also not proceeding well for the Russian government. Although the gifted general Alexander Vasil'evich Suvorov was able to win impressive victories in the Principalities, the international situation became increasingly unfavorable for Russia. In 1788 Sweden declared war, an action that prevented the sending of a Russian fleet to the Mediterranean. In addition, the attitude of the other great powers to the Russian efforts was becoming increasingly hostile. Therefore, in the Treaty of Jassy, concluded in 1792, the Russian government contented itself with the acquisition of the territory between the Bug and the Dniester. This agreement, like those preceding, had a great significance for the Principalities. Russia was now a neighbor of Moldavia. Moreover, Article 4 stated that the Porte would abide by the provisions of the previous agreement, and the arrangements concerning taxes, emigration, and amnesty were reaffirmed.<sup>6</sup>

The Porte was, of course, well aware of the dangers of the increasing

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Russian rights in regard to the Principalities. The Ottoman officials had also witnessed the dubious loyalties of the Romanian boyars. In 1792 and 1793 attempts were made to win the support of this group by a series of declarations and promises concerning the provinces and their unique privileges. Unfortunately for the Porte, the internal weakness of the state and the continuing pressure of the great powers limited its ability to assure a stable and acceptable administration. In fact, during the rule of Constantine Hangerli, prince of Wallachia from 1797 to 1799, Phanariot rule probably reached its lowest point. Not only was the Porte unable to retain the loyalty of its Romanian subjects, but Russian interference continued unabated.

Although a period of relative tranquility followed the conclusion of the Treaty of Jassy, Catherine did not abandon her previous objectives in regard to the Principalities. The primary Russian attention, however, was focused on the Polish question and the conclusion of the final partitions of 1793 and 1795. From 1792 to 1796 the Russian agents in the Principalities concentrated their efforts on winning adherents among the boyar families and maintaining and consolidating their predominant influence.<sup>7</sup> At this time the center of Russian activities was Jassy, where the consulate-general was located.

The Russian officials were particularly concerned with assuring that the princes were in their camp. In this endeavor they soon faced competition, not only from the Porte, but from France. Although Sultan Selim III wished to maintain the peace, he also continued the traditional Ottoman policy of close ties with France. Deeply concerned about his military weakness, he embarked upon a period of military reform for which he depended on French advisers and support. From their advantageous position in Constantinople, the French diplomats wished to extend their influence into the Principalities. In 1796 a temporary agent was dispatched to Bucharest; in 1797 regular representatives were appointed for the Principalities. They joined the Russian agents, who had held office since 1782, and the Austrians, who arrived in 1783; British representation was not established until 1803. From the Russian viewpoint, the French presence introduced a disturbing element. Like their Russian colleagues, the French consuls attempted to play between the factions in Romanian politics and to set up their own party of clients and supporters.

The French actions caused annoyance and anxiety in St. Petersburg for other reasons too. The Russian government was well aware that the French agents in the Principalities could keep a close eye on Russian military preparations across the border. French advisers to the sultan were involved in the strengthening of the Ottoman fortifications



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in the area, in particular the strongholds of Bender, Ismail, and Akkerman. The Polish situation was also a consideration. With the defeat of the national forces, bands of Polish rebels crossed into Moldavia. Not only were these groups ferociously anti-Russian, but they also formed a center for the dissemination of French revolutionary ideas and propaganda. The Russian officials feared their possible influence within Russia and the role that they could play in support of France in this strategically sensitive area.

Because of these additional considerations the Russian government continued to keep a close watch on Romanian affairs; it remained particularly concerned about the attitude of the princes and the possible attraction of France for them. These apprehensions led the Russian diplomats to insist on the replacement in 1795 of the prince of Moldavia, Michael Suțu, with Alexander Callimachi, who henceforth acted in the Russian interest. Similarly, in 1796 in Wallachia, Alexander Moruzi was replaced by the apparently more ardent Russian partisan Alexander Ipsilanti.

Despite the declared aim of good relations with the Porte, Catherine began diplomatic preparations for a more active policy. In an agreement negotiated in 1794, Austria and Russia decided that the Principalities should be united to form an independent state under Russian control. In 1795 Britain adhered to this pact; a favorable attitude could also be expected from Prussia. Further Russian campaigns against the Porte, however, were hindered by the death of Catherine in 1796. Her son and successor, Paul, reacted against what he considered the overly aggressive and expansionistic activities of his mother. He preferred an accommodation with the Porte to further territorial gains at Ottoman expense. Adopting a policy of maintaining the empire, rather than partitioning it among the powers, he sought to establish Russia instead of France as the government with the principal influence in the sultan's councils. Russian political predominance in Constantinople and the support of the territorial integrity of the empire were to become henceforth a standard alternative policy for the Russian diplomats should a program of partition seem unfeasible or dangerous.

In the 1790s European diplomacy was dominated by the ambitious schemes of Napoleon. The Russian position in Constantinople was immensely strengthened when in 1798 Napoleon launched an attack on Egypt; on the way he picked up the Ottoman possessions of the Ionian Islands and Malta. France, not Russia, had become the principal danger to the Porte. In September 1798, for the first time, a Russian fleet sailed through the Bosphorus and anchored outside Constantinople.<sup>8</sup> An alliance agreement negotiated in 1799 contained a secret

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clause permitting the Russian fleet to pass freely in and out of the Straits; Britain subsequently adhered to this treaty. A joint Russian–Ottoman operation was next launched against the French-held Ionian Islands, which quickly fell before this assault. Since Russia was an ally of the Ottoman Empire and a supporter of its territorial integrity, Russian officials in the Principalities of necessity adopted a passive policy. Even during the unfortunate period of Hangerli's rule, when conditions were extremely bad, no move was made in the Romanian interest.

In March 1801 Paul was murdered; he was succeeded by his son, Alexander I. At the end of his reign Paul was in the process of breaking with his allies and entering into negotiations with France. His successor, while not pursuing this policy, did favor a position of neutrality. In October Russia made peace with France, and in the following year Britain and the Ottoman Empire reached similar agreements with Paris. The Porte was to be spared further fighting until 1806. During this period a bitter battle for supreme influence was fought out in Constantinople among the representatives of Russia, France, and Britain. Undergoing a process of internal dissolution that was accompanied by the rise of strong local military leaders, the Porte tended to follow the dictates of the power that appeared to have the greatest military resources at the moment. Meanwhile, the attention of Europe had shifted from the Near East and Mediterranean to Central Europe, where the great battles for Continental predominance were being fought.

For Russia too the main concerns centered on Europe proper. However, its government continued to pursue certain definite aims in the Principalities. Following a policy of expansion in Georgia and the settlement of the southern steppelands, the Russian government wished to assure that a stable situation existed in the region and that friendly regimes held power in the Principalities. French activity, in particular, continued to cause concern. The blocking of foreign intrigues and the winning of as many partisans as possible from among the Romanian boyars remained standard Russian objectives. The annexation of the Principalities, or their reduction to the position of Russian vassals, also continued to be considered.

From 1796 to 1801, as we have seen, Russian activities remained circumscribed. After this date new considerations led to a change of policy. By this time the Porte had lost control over large sections of its lands in the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa to local notables, the *ayans*, who organized their own military forces, set up personal regimes in their districts, and successfully defied the central authority.