

Jumping in Freezing Waters Local Communities and Escapees on the Danube during the Cold War*

LAVINIA SNEJANA STAN

“**T**HERE ARE only two good neighbours Romanians had have: the Serbians and the Black Sea” was one of the popular sayings evoked by the Romanian press in the context of NATO intervention in Serbia¹ in 1999. At that time, Romanian authorities were criticized—by parts of the civil society—for betraying the traditional friendship with Serbia and thus for endangering the allegedly excellent neighbourhood because NATO was allowed to use the Romanian aerial space in order to bomb and dismantle Serbian military infrastructure. For historians, this situation gave birth to a series of questions such as: was there any good neighbourhood? And if so, how this neighbourhood was in the second part of the 20th century? Was it a myth or a lived reality, especially for the people living on both sides of the border? And was there any role-played by the escapees from Romania in the context of the Cold War?² The purpose of this paper is to analyse if and to what degree the frontier was permeable for local communities,³ through investigating how smuggling merchandise and people⁴ over border was a surviving strategy of local people on Danube’s Romanian side.⁵

Oral history approach challenges the traditional perception of a frontier as a space of separation, a caesura between territories and peoples,⁶ providing a rather conflicting perspective on this issue. The official discourse of the communist authorities emphasized the perfect closure and the infallible border protection, subsequently implying that Romanian citizens were protected against any enemies both from inside and outside the border. The enemy from inside is presented in an oral history testimony by a former border guard who expressed the frustration of being forced to “defend” the frontier against its own citizens, “by having the weapons turned to the inside.”⁷

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In the 20th century, the appearance of the Romanian-Yugoslav border underwent tremendous change generated by both natural changes such as the flooding following the constructions of the Iron Gated electric plant in 1972 and under the pressure of international events such as the end of the Second World War, Tito's defection in 1948, and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Isolated rural communities of Serbians, Czechs, and Romanians preserved their identity, and it was only recently that the region passed through a metamorphosis when the touristic potential started to be exploited and the beauty of the landscape generated an improvement in touristic infrastructure and an increase of the number of people visiting the area. However, going back only few years, in the 1990s, the region looked pretty much as in the 1970s. However, in the context of the UN embargo against Yugoslavia (in fact, Serbia and Montenegro), imposed in 1992, the shore road between Orșova and Moldova Nouă was finally modernized because it was needed in order to provide an easier access for gas tanks to supply the breaking of the embargo.⁸ Gas pumps emerged in a space where only scorpions and serpents lived a couple of years before. Very poor village communities, such as Pescari (Coronini), became overnight symbols of a newly enriched community whose members went to the closest town to buy, symptomatically, refrigerators. The village of Pescari portrayed an image of courtyards overwhelmed with cars and speedboats used for smuggling gas. However, it was not only gas that was carried over the Danube. Local people from a Serbian village, Svinița, in Romania, would recall that they carried over the river pianos and sheep, not to mention food and tractors. Romanian media provided contrasting images of big tanks on one hand and, on the other hand, plastic bottles filled with gas in handbags, carried over border by old village women. How this large-scale embargo breaking can be explained only few years after the fall of communism and the dismantling of what was considered to be one of the most protected borders in the Eastern block? One possible explanation is that smuggling was a long-term practice of borderland people, its objects changing according to the political and economic contexts.

A Love-Hate Relationship

IN THE second half of the 20th century the border between the two countries was permeable as even since 1943, Yugoslav communist partisans used to pass across Danube and hide in the forests on the Romanian shore. The situation at the border was complicated: until 23rd of August 1944 Romania fought on Germany's side, while Tito and his partisans succeeded to throw out the German occupation army. Serbians of the Danube shore in Romania were drafted to Romanian army and sent to combat against the Russians on the Eastern front. Many deserted the army, but entered in collision with the local authorities that arrested them as deserters. Therefore, in Serbian villages on the Romanian side of the border, several pro-

Tito organizations emerged even before 23 August 1944. After this date, though the communization of Romania started, it took three more years until the country was transformed into a People's Republic.⁹ Archival documents mirror a certain concern of the Romanian authorities for the ideological pressure of partisan groups who crossed the river and tried to influence especially the Serbian minority in Romania to adhere to communism. During this unclear transition period between 1945 and 1947, some local ethnic Serbians, together with Yugoslav partisans, Russian soldiers and officers carried out a revenge campaign in which local Romanian officers were attacked and killed.¹⁰

Mihai Pelin considers that in the period between 1945 and 1947 many Yugoslav citizens of Romanian ethnic origin crossed the border into Romania because of the discriminatory policy promoted by the Yugoslav authorities towards minorities. In this context, "between the Romanian border guards and the Yugoslav partisans was a strong tension, climaxing with gunfire,"¹¹ because Yugoslav border guard fired on their own citizens, as Romanians would do later. A more concrete concern of the Romanian authorities was the fear for possible territorial changes in favour of Yugoslavia. "More than the illegal border crossing, Siguranța [the Secret Police] of Bucharest was much concerned with the information that the Serbs were preparing to occupy the Banat region."¹² These rumours, the presence of Serbian partisans, and the inability of Romanian local authorities to enforce the law, nurtured the fear against strangers. However, in the borderland communities for which the war enemy was the German,¹³ most people were Tito's sympathizers.

Nonetheless the troubles and fears of people living on the border, the bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Romania were excellent. On December 19, 1947 a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance was signed. Petru Groza's speech, the Romanian prime minister at that time, underlined the traditionally good relations between the two countries. "It may be said that in our past, we did not had any territorial quarrel. Our peoples were not instigated one against the other as in the case of Hungarians, Bulgarians and Russians."¹⁴ Moreover, the same document stated that the way Yugoslavia dealt with its different nationalities was considered a model to be followed by the Romanian politics, because "both our countries are multinational and they need a correct national politics, both in domestic and international affairs. Without finding firstly a solution for domestic national problem, it would be impossible to establish friendship relations with other people on the other side of the borders." Which, according to the document, the Yugoslav succeeded to do as "their correct national politics gave them the possibility of achieving the moral unity of their numerous peoples, binding them together in a single bouquet and to attach them at the Popular front and their leader, Marshall Tito."¹⁵

Shortly after that, the Romanian communists faced a new situation: Tito's exclusion from the communist block in 1948. This generated a strong anti-Tito propaganda campaign on the Romanian-Serbian border and its apparent failure peaked with mass deportation of Serbian and German ethnics to Bărăgan, in Romania, and

Donbas, in USSR. Initially a role model in handling the problem of nationalities, Yugoslavia became a nationalistic danger as it promoted the national way towards communism in contrast to the soviet model. The Romanian-Yugoslav border was highly militarized with observation towers for border guards, concrete bunkers, wire fences, green strip, armed border guards, dogs, road control of documents, interdiction for the strangers to travel in this area, surveillance of the local population, creation of local informants network, etc. This situation launched the border relations in a new era. The tradition of the border communities of trans-border communications needed to find new, more creative ways to continue under the new circumstances. As there was no legal way out of Romania, those who were persecuted and wanted to live the country needed to illegally cross the border.

Danube became, during the communist regime, one of the most frequented spaces for illegal crossing¹⁶ of those who were seeking freedom in the West. These escapees are remembered by the collective memory as the frontier trespassers (so-called “frontieriști”) and populate all accounts about border communities’ past.¹⁷ The frontier trespassers were either envied for the success of escaping the communist “paradise” or admired for their courage in assuming the risk of imprisonment or death if caught by the border guards. However, this perspective does not exclude the accounts of escapees who succeeded to cross the Danube, although some were arbitrarily sent back by the Yugoslav authorities. If this is the general perception, at the ground level, people of the area, even though positive toward their neighbours, did seem a little bit puzzled by the fact that no one could understand why the Yugoslavs would sometimes sent the escapees back.

In what concerns the situation within the local communities, cross border communication continued even after the 1948 exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Soviet camp, as a document issued by the Central Committee of the Romanian Worker’s Party, stated that “Serbian communists from Timisoara receive dead threatening letters instigating against the Romanian Worker’s Party and glorifying the Yugoslav leaders.”¹⁸ In spite of the propaganda and radical measure taken against Serbian population of Romania the same document illustrated a kind of “hypocrisy” manifested by some ethnic Serbians: “even though during the party meeting, the leaders of the lowest hierarchy would give declarations of solidarity, there are signs that in many villages this attitude is hypocrite and that, in reality, they militate even today in Tito’s favour, following instructions received from Yugoslavia.”¹⁹

Between 1951 and 1956, the Serbian community on the Romanian border along Danube faced the trauma of collective deportation, “in order to create an ideal protection strip against Tito’s disobedience and even more so against the Occident.”²⁰ Despite all the measures taken to prevent local population either to flee or to help other to flee, in 1954 the secret police was worried about the fact the Romanian-Yugoslav frontier was not protected enough. The only explanation for the permeability of the border was that the local informants network, the so-called *agentura*²¹ was not efficient enough. “In spite of the importance of the tasks assigned to them, many

commanders and leaders of border guard intelligence services underappreciated the role played by the intelligence work in ensuring the protection of the border. They do not understand that the main weapon in the fight against the spies and other frontier criminals is the local informants network. The analysis of the intelligence work of the border guards at the Yugoslav border show that in most cases, it is primitively, simplistic organized, seldom disregarding the fundamental principles.”²²

Therefore, on March 15, 1954 a new regulation was issued stating the ways in which the border guard intelligence service should work with these agencies. Among other problems needed to be solved by local intelligence networks possible trespassing or hiding places for escapees were mentioned. According to the same document, “the surveillance of persons with tendencies of escaping, of treason, and people whose family members were abroad or those who were hiding escapees” was problematic. Local informants had “to discover and communicate to the border guards all strangers and suspicious persons, who have the intention of illegally cross the border, or those who crossed the border from the other side to undertake actions against the Romanian state.”²³

In 1955 however, Tito was re-accepted in the communist block after Khrushchev’s visit to Belgrade. Romania aligned itself to the big brother’s behaviour. Romanian and Yugoslav leaders organized mutual visits and the bilateral relations entered a new phase of development which included common infrastructure projects. The visible sign of this new trend was the disappearance of the wire fences on the ground border between the two countries. All other measures remained on place. The brotherhood relations between Romania and Yugoslavia reached a pick in 1964–1972 when the two countries build a common huge dam and an electric plant at the Iron Gates. In the new context, the flooded border militarized infrastructure was abandoned, and replaced by “softer” items, such as the green strip and border guard patrols. This positive trend of the bilateral relations continued until the above-mentioned 1999 NATO intervention. Many oral testimonies mention that, “we heard the bombing and even saw the flames in Beograd.” Moreover, among the Serbian community along the Romanian side of the Danube the former pro-Tito attitude metamorphosed into a strong pro-Milosevic, especially after his sending to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. People would not speak about the ethnic cleansing carried out by Milosevic, but only about his “tragic” faith in the “hands of that tribunal.”²⁴

Smuggling as a Practice

ROMANIAN HISTORIAN, Doru Radosav claims that smuggling is a “privilege” of the borderlands communities. Danube worked in fact more as a connecting than a separating element for this region. The interviewees in the borderland communities would whisper about their relations with the other side as

if possessing some truth not to be shared with the strangers. For ethnically mixed border communities who live in isolated villages on Danube, the semantic coverage for the word “stranger” did not have an ethnical or racial connotation, but a geographical one: those who are not indigenous, who did not belong to the region. The isolation made even more obvious the presence of such strangers. In the context of Romania’s policy that prohibited its citizens to go abroad, human smuggling over the border became, especially after 1960, a very profitable (though risky) business, while metamorphosing into assets for heroization after the fall of communism.

A report issued by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs in 1948 mentioned that along the Romanian-Yugoslav border approximately 2000 Romanians escaped that year, of which 15% originated in the region. All of them were accommodated in camps in Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Serbia. Many of them crossed the river by boats. There were rumours that many of them will be sent back to Romania, as they were suspects of being members or sympathizers of the former extreme right movement in Romania.²⁵

One of the most arbitrary situation Romanian escapees faced after a successful Danube crossing, was the probability of being sent back to Romania. This happened even in the midst of anti-Tito campaign, such was the case of Ene Mărgrit who illegally crossed the Danube near Orșova, together with another person who died and whose body was found in the same area.²⁶ The fear of being sent back is a constant feature in all testimonies taken to people who successfully or unsuccessfully escaped. There is no clear explanation why and how the Yugoslav authorities would do the selection on who will be sent back home and who will reach the West. Local people said “when the Serbians needed salt, they send a Romanian back in exchange for a wagon with salt. A salt wagon for every man sent back.”²⁷ A former deputy commander-in-chief of the border guards gives another explanation: “who had money to bribe the Serbian authorities would literally buy their freedom. The others were sent home and we took them.”²⁸

The myth of the malefic complot carried out by strangers against Romania was exploited by the propaganda since the beginning of the communist regime.²⁹ However, in the context of building the so-called national communism, Nicolae Ceausescu exploited, with reinforced energy after 1971, this myth with reference both to foreigners, and intellectuals alienated from the people, “who were sold to the American warmongers.” These clichés were exploited by propaganda and guaranteed the tendency of heroisation and tabuisation. In order to manipulate both the present and the past, “significant moments of the past were over auctioned, by always placing at its core the stranger who is the enemy in his intentions or inferior as moral status and level of intelligence.”³⁰

For border people, the stranger was defined as someone who arrived in the area with the purpose of escaping. The communist propaganda emphasized the fact that all strangers coming into the community are potential criminals and traitors and must be considered as such by the indigenous. Everybody’s patriotic duty was thus,

to report all strangers and to make sure the authorities are well informed about the purpose of their visit. In an isolated community, the stranger was a suspect.

How to avoid being labeled as a stranger and get into a border community in order to flee the country? One could rely on the authority given by their profession. Such was the case of a major, professor at the Romanian Military Academy in Bucharest who fled the country with his teenager son. He established good relations to a student of his, living in Orșova. The major pretexted that he came to pay a visit to his former student. With this occasion he used his high rank officer uniform to go to the control barriers on the Danube, took a speedboat to “inspect” the area and accosted on the Yugoslav side. The consequences were very strong for his former student who was interrogated, thrown out the army and condemned to a paria status for a long period of time.³¹

Other people systematically pursued opportunities to find jobs in the border area. In June 1961, Doru Lucian Vulcu, a 27 years old medical doctor from Cozla, a miner’s village on the Danube, escaped. He came from Cluj-Napoca to work in this region in order to prepare his fleeing. In the investigation that followed the escape, made by the border intelligence agency, all people who were in contact with the doctor were investigated.³² The results of this report shows that the doctor was not under the surveillance of the secret police because “there were not any suspicions that he intended to cross the border, but given the fact that he was a stranger in the area, it would have been right to be under surveillance.” Suggested measures to be taken are that all people in contact with the “criminal” will be placed under observation. A successful escape would have severe consequences for the authorities. In the above-mentioned case, for the failure in managing this issue of strangers on the border, the responsible officer was punished with short-term incarceration in the garrison.³³

Some local people specialized in smuggling people to the Serbian Danube shore. In the 1970s and 1980s, in the village of Dubova, the entire Țărescu family succeeded to organize a very efficient network of smuggling people outside Romania. One brother who lived in Timisoara recruited the candidates for the illegal trespassing, almost always from among the German community or the Protestant believers that allegedly had enough money to pay the guides. The mother and father Țărescu would hide the fugitives in the house or garden until the moment of crossing was a suitable, and Petru, the other son and the brain of the operations would cross the escapees on the other side of the river. They invented different ways of bringing people to Dubova, as the roads were controlled and in the Orșova train station police patrols checked every newcomers. For example, they smuggled a group of people hidden in the furniture for their new house or in other instance they hide other escapees in a double floor of the poste car. The most spectacular however was the organization of Petru Țărescu’s wedding in 1978 in Dubova with a lady from the Serbian community, which provided the opportunity of bringing lots of strangers as guests for his wedding. During the night of the wedding party, most of the guests escaped.³⁴

Their actions were considered after 1989 heroic, because they helped people to reach the freedom. There are however many question marks on the purpose of this human smuggling: people had to pay lot of money to cross and if not having the money, they would not have been taken over. Second, it is highly improbable that given the isolation of the community in which the Țărescu family lived, the local intelligence agency was not aware of what this family was doing. Even after the spectacular escape of the wedding guests, the Țărescu family was not arrested, though some of them were investigated several times. Petru Țărescu was arrested only late, in November 1989, because he was caught in the act while trying to smuggle two ethnic Germans on the other side of the river.³⁵ The deputy commander of the border guards in that period claimed, “he (Petru Țărescu) was a criminal. I have personally interrogated him several times. In order to do his smuggling, out of a group of 10 people, he would give us two, other two to the local Securitate and six would smuggle them for money.”³⁶ It is plausible that the network the Țărescu build involved special relations with both local communities and local authorities. The black and white post-1989 heroisation of all such guides who smuggled people over the border needs to be re-evaluated.

On the other hand, there were much more discreet actions to help people get across the border. Lidia Chibici’s testimony, 87 years old lady, about her son’s involvement in helping his friends to escape is symptomatic in this regard. The son, Daniel, was an employee of the Geography Institute in Orșova located on the Danube which had a small boat for water analysis. The mother found out only after the son was arrested and she was called to participate to his trial, that Daniel had constructed a handmade submarine able to hold two persons in order to get his friends out of the country. Daniel Chibici was sentenced to one year in prison, and after his releasing, he fled the country and now lives in Sweden.³⁷ In 1988, another employee of the same institution, Puiu Petcu, the director, fled the country to Yugoslavia with his wife and an infant child on the boat. His faith was dramatic as they were sent back by the Yugoslav authorities and a show trial was organized in the local cultural centre in order to give an example to the local community. Dr. Helmut Weber, who succeeded to cross the Danube in December 1969 with his wife and two infants after several attempts, was judged in a similar public show trial.³⁸ Johannes Braun experienced the same kind of trial in Reșița.³⁹

Some escapees were caught in the act or sent back by the Yugoslav authorities. They were seldom walked hand cuffed until late 1980s in the centre of villages or towns in order to intimidate local population. The effect was usually the opposite, as many interviewees recall that they felt such a pity seeing all those very young people, almost children, handcuffed and knowing the violence they were to endure in the prison. One escapee recalls, “the soldiers handcuffed me so straight that the pain was not bearably...”⁴⁰

In the secret police archive, a recurrent issue is that the success of those who cross the border was conditioned by a good knowledge of the region or the help

of a local people. For example, in 1972, two young men succeeded to go to Yugoslavia because they had worked for two years on the Danube, more specifically on reinforcing the quay in Drobeta Turnu Severin and they knew the terrain and the movements of the border guards. The solution to counter attack the trespassing was, of course, to organize a better informants' networks among the workers.⁴¹

But not only human smuggling acted as a permanent connection between Danube's two sides. Smuggling merchandise was a local practice which picked as shown at the beginning of this paper with the 1999s embargo breaking. During the Cold War, many people survived on food and coffee brought by smugglers. Smuggling was a crime and for example, archival documents mention some women who were under surveillance and then arrested and condemned because they have had "relations with the sailors," "hide strangers in their houses" and "sold illegal merchandise such chocolate, deodorant, soap, cigarette and coffee."⁴²

A very interesting issue is the gender specialization of smuggling. While men were involved huge, spectacular human smuggling (the role played by the women in this smuggling is only to host and provide food to the fugitive), the women would do lighter smuggling, such as buying merchandise from foreigners or from Yugoslavia and selling it at a better price to local people. Documents issued by the former Securitate show that both categories were surrounded by informants, sometimes being the informants themselves. Facing a more and more uncontrollable smuggling across the border, Romanian communist authorities quasi-regulated in 1971 the smuggling by inventing a special permit for a so-called small business. It allowed people residing in border villages or town to have limited travel to Yugoslavia in order to buy and sell a limited amount of merchandise. Levels of smuggling merchandise varied from huge quantities taken over border by corrupting both the Romanian and Yugoslav border guards to small quantities carries in a hand bag or hidden in a small trunks (such as macramé for handwork, men's underwear, emailed pots). Romanian citizens brought from Yugoslavia food, jeans, coffee, cigarettes, and chewing gum either for personal consumption or for the Romanian black market.

IN CONCLUSION, it may be said that even though at official level, the bilateral relations between Romania and Serbia varied a lot during the communist regime, living at the border meant having good relations with the neighbour. Escapees to Yugoslavia were a permanent figure among local population, which generated mostly positive reactions in spite of the strong propaganda and radical measures. Smuggling people and merchandise was a unifying asset that maintained riparian in permanent contact with the life on the Yugoslav side of the Danube. The blast of the Yugoslav federation and the breaking of embargo were often described by local people as a means of helping the good Serbian neighbours, thus placing the myth of good Romanian-Serbian relations in a long-term continuum. Future

research could go further back in history in order to find the limits—if any—of this *longue durée* phenomenon. □

Notes

1. For consistency, I will be using the name Yugoslavia, though this state ceased to exist.
2. A recent work on escaping the communist block, see Pertti Ahonen, “The Curious Case of Werner Weinhold: Escape, Death, and Contested Legitimacy at the German-German Border,” *Central European History* 45 (2012): 79–101.
3. Nowadays population on the left side of the Danube consists of different ethnic groups which are isolated in different villages: Romanians (in Eşelnița, Dubova), Serbians (Svinița, Sichevița, Pescari), Czechs (Eibental), while in some communities, all these ethnic groups are mixed: towns of Orșova (where a German minority reduced as a consequence of the massive emigration) and Moldova Nouă, and villages such as Liubcova and Berzsca. Prior to the construction of the Porțile de Fier [Iron Gates] electric plant, a compact Turkish community was concentrated on the Ada-Kaleh Island. In 1964 when the electric plant started to be built, the island together with some villages and town on both sides of the Danube river were flooded and the Turkish community displaced.
4. An interesting study on the current human trafficking in Romania is the one by Zizi Goschin, Daniela-Luminița Constantin, Monica Roman, “The Partnership between the State and the Church against Trafficking in Persons,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 8, 24 (Winter 2009): 231–256.
5. The focus of this research is on the Danube border between Romania and former Yugoslavia (290 km), even though there is a long ground border between the two states (256 km). There are only 13 villages and 2 small towns scattered along these 290 km.
6. There are research projects and scientific conferences that deal with different border regimes across time and space. Most of them treat the concept of frontier as a dynamic area rather than as a rigid linear separation between two nation-states. See, for example, the conference “From the Iron Curtain to the Schengen Area: Bordering Communist and Post-Communist Europe,” organized by Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres, 28–30 September 2011, Vienna.
7. P.T., interviewed by the author, audio recording, Orșova, 16.08.2011.
8. A totally new and antonymic connotation of the word “embargo” emerged: the breaking of the proper embargo by smuggling gas into Serbia
9. Dennis Deletant, “Cheating the Censor: Romanian Writers under Communism,” *Central Europe*, 6, 2 (November 2008): 123–125.
10. Miodrag Milin, *Titoismul la granița româno-iugoslavă*, available online at http://www.history-cluj.ro/Istoric/anuare/AnuarBaritHistorica2003/Miodrag%20Milin.htm#_ftn1, accessed 14.02.2011.
11. Mihai Pelin, *Uneori, nu prea des, și Stalin avea dreptate*, available online at <http://mihai-pelin.wordpress.com/category/relatiile-regimului-comunist-cu-iugoslavia/>, accessed 13.02.2011.
12. Miodrag Milin, note 21. For the deportation of the Serbian population between 1951 and 1956 see, Miodrag Milin, Ljubomir Stepanov, *Sârbii din România în Golgota Bănăganului*, (Timișoara, 2003), available online at www.banaterra.eu/romana/files/sarbi-din-romania-in-golgota-baraganului.pdf, accessed 12.12.2011; Smaranada Vultur, *Din radiografia represiunii: deportarea în Bănăgan 1951-1956*, (Timișoara: Mirton, 2011);

- Viorel Marineasa, Daniel Vighi, Valentin Sămânță, *Deportarea în Bănăgan – destine, documente, reportaje*, (Timișoara: Marineasa, 1996).
13. See the testimonies gathered by Doina Magheti and Johann Steiner in *Mormintele tac. Relatări de la cea mai sângeroasă graniță a Europei*, (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 45–80.
 14. National Archives, fond CC al PCR, Relații externe, file no. 19/1947, 4.
 15. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
 16. About the so-called “frontieriști,” *The Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship of Romania* (available online at www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf accessed 21.01.2011) refers only to aspects regarding the criminal law applied against escapees. Brândușa Armanca in *Istoria recentă în mass-media. Frontieriștii* [Recent History in the Mass-Media. The Frontieriști], (Timișoara: Marineasa, 2009) approaches the frontier from a journalistic perspective. The book is based on research done in 2000 for a documentary called *Li se spunea frontieriștii*, by Dan Rațiu.
 17. During the communist period, people who illegally crossed the border were considered “criminals,” while the an positive connotation was given to the emerging concept of “frontieriști.” After the fall of communism, this name, which was at the time whispered, became a heroic, and sometimes tragic, attribute for courageous Romanians who choose the freedom. Marina Constantinoiu, “Pentru mulți dintre “frontieriști” viața s-a încheiat în Dunăre,” *Jurnalul National* 1, June 1, 2005; *Id.*, “Cauza morții: libertatea. Bilet spre libertate. Pierdut. Il declar nul,” *Jurnalul National*, June 13, 2005; *Id.*, “Cauza morții: libertatea. Un adevăr nebăgat în seamă. Dunărea, acest “Zid al Berlinului” pentru români,” *Jurnalul National*, June 5, 2008; William Totok, “Fenomenul frontierist – un capitol uitat din istoria comunismului românesc,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 16, 2009; Ovidiu Mărăscu, “Biblia frontieriștilor,” *Ziua de Vest*, August 11, 2010; Ioan T. Morar, “Cazul ciudat și de neînțeles al poetului Damian Ureche, devenit frontierist,” *Academia Cațavencu*, August 19, 2009; Vasile Surcel, “Metamorfoză: Un grănicer s-a preschimbât în frontierist,” *Jurnalul National*, May 29, 2009; Mira Bălan, “Cazanele morții – Visul zdrobit pe mal,” *Jurnalul Național*, June 12, 2005; Romanița Constantinescu, *Pași pe graniță. Studii despre imaginarul românesc al frontierei*, (Iassy: Polirom, 2009).
 18. National Archives, fond CC al PCR, Relații externe, file no. 19/1947, July 17, 1948, 6.
 19. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
 20. Miodrag Milin, Liubomir Stepanov, 3.
 21. According to a glossary published by the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (Further NCSSA), the “agentura” represented the local intelligence network, summing the totality of the informants for a Securitate officer or a Securitate unit. See *Index de termeni și abrevieri cu utilizare frecventă în documentele Securității*, available at <http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/arhiva/Dictionar%20termeni.pdf>, accessed 23.01.2011. It usually consisted of unqualified and qualified informers recruited at local level, as well as so-called residents, i.e. coordinators of the local network.
 22. *Directiva Ministerului Afacerilor Interne al Republicii Populare Române, Despre munca organelor de informații grănicerești cu agentura*, no. 70, March 15, 1954, available at http://www.cnsas.ro/documente/istoria_sec/documente_securitate/directive_instruțiuni/1954%20Directiva_1.pdf, accessed 12.01.2011, 1.
 23. *Ibid.*
 24. F.S., interview by the author, audio recording, Orșova, August 13, 2010.
 25. NCSSA, file D 014687, Report no. 23907, November 27, 1948, 82.

26. Ibid.
27. M.S., interview by the author, audio recording, Orșova, August 13, 2010. The story about salt as exchange token for people was not confirmed by other sources, but it is consistently mentioned in most interviews.
28. P.T., interview by the author, audio recording, Orșova, August 16, 2010.
29. Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Romanian Mythpolitics in the 20th Century," *Transylvanian Review*, 2 (2008): 3.
30. "Ideologie și teroare. Monopolul asupra vieții culturale," in *The Final Report*, 506.
31. C.T., interview by author, audio recording, Orșova, August 24, 2010.
32. NCSSA, file D 002018, report of July 11, 1961, 66-73.
33. Id.
34. In the interviews recorded by the author in Dubova in June 2011, all these stories appear in people's recollections of the past. Petru Țărescu's perspective can be found in Isidor Chicet, *Transfug la Orșova* (Drobeta-Turnu Severin: Prier, 2008), 126-129.
35. Isidor Chicet, 178-203.
36. P.T., interview.
37. L.C., interview by the author, audio recording, August 20, 2010.
38. Doina Magheți, 126-127.
39. Ibid., 93-95.
40. Ibid., 92.
41. NCSSA, file D 012001, 40.
42. NCSSA, file D 002023, 19.

Abstract

Jumping in Freezing Waters: Local Communities and Escapees on the Danube during the Cold War*

This paper investigates the permeability of the Romanian-Yugoslav border on the Danube during the Cold War, which challenges the traditional perception of the perfect closure of the borders in Communist Romania. Using an oral historical approach, the research tries to explain that smuggling merchandise and people were long-term surviving strategies for borderland communities. In spite of political issues such as the diachronically changing Romanian-Yugoslav bilateral relations during the second half of the 20th century, borderland people continued to cross—and to assist other to cross—to the other side

Keywords

oral history, smuggling, Cold War, border, communism, Romania, Yugoslavia