

STEPHEN THE GREAT - DOMESTIC POLICY*

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Domestic Policy. The situation inherited by the young prince was not an easy one: a quarter of a century of factional struggles for power had opened the way to foreign military interventions and sapped the very foundations of the recently established state. From within, Moldavia was undermined by the rapidly growing centrifugal influence of the high-ranking *boyars*, owners of large estates, while from outside she was subject to constant interference by the foreign powers, which imposed hard conditions of vassalage in exchange for support given to the various pretenders. Moldavia's territorial unity was often endangered and the country was badly divided because of the irresponsible thirst for power of the aspirants to the throne.

When Stephen acceded to the throne, his foremost concern was to liberate Moldavia from any foreign domination. He soon became aware that his fight for independence could not be successful unless the central power of the state was strong enough and was no longer subject to the control of the big *boyars*. That was why he first concentrated on the domestic scene with an aim to achieving such an internal cohesion that would make it possible to move toward a gradual improvement of the country's standing in the international arena.

State power in the feudal system was vested in the person of the prince, and so it was only natural that Stephen should endeavour to strengthen his own authority. Shortly after his accession in 1457, he tried to secure through negotiations his recognition by the Polish crown and, at the same time, to have Petru Aron banished from Poland. Stephen wrung the desired concessions by military inroads into the neighbouring kingdom. Equally determined was Stephen in hunting out and eliminating all the pretenders to the throne, who polarized the *boyars'* opposition while acting as tools in the hands of foreign intervention. One after the other, he got rid of Petru Aron (captured and executed in 1469), Petru Hronoda (in 1486), who had been sent to Moldavia by Sultan Bayazid II with a Turkish army, and Petru Aron's son, executed by the Poles (in 1501) at Stephen's request.

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The centralizing tendencies evinced by Stephen since the very first years of his reign were opposed by a part of the *boyars*, who were trying to regain or at least to preserve their former privileges. But Stephen was able to control all the internal crises resulting from the *boyars'* reaction. The first and most serious crisis took place during the campaign of Matthias Corvinus (1458—1490) against Moldavia by the end of 1467, when the discontented boyars failed the Prince on the battle field and, after the Hungarian withdrawal, even staged an uprising in the southern part of Moldavia. Immediately after that campaign twenty prominent *boyars* were beheaded on Stephen's order and forty lesser ones were impaled for treason or disobedience. Another hostile group was suppressed in 1471, when three more high-ranking *boyars* were beheaded. Stephen's last act of power was to suppress, in 1504, by several executions, the group of *boyars* who had proved to be hostile to his appointed successor.

But Stephen's efforts towards centralization were not limited to a mere repression of the political manifestations of the *boyars'* opposition. He was equally determined in strengthening the economic basis and the institutional instruments of his power. Opposing the tendency shown by the *boyars* to enlarge their estates, a practice that had become quite widespread during the period of anarchy preceding his rule, Stephen made a steady effort to restore to the prince and to the socio-political forces that supported him the main source of wealth and power: the land. This new policy aimed at expanding the princely estate was carried out either through extensive purchase of whole villages by the Prince's own treasury or through the seizure of the lands belonging to the treacherous *boyars*. Land gifts from the Prince's estates were sparingly offered: the main recipients of such generosity were the Christian Orthodox Church, one of the pillars of the Prince's power, and the lesser *boyars* who subsequently became the mainstay of the Prince's military and political predominance.

The strengthening of the economic basis of the Prince's rule and of the social forces that were favourable to him went hand in hand with the consolidation of Stephen's own power within the existing governing bodies. In this respect too, Stephen's rule evidently differed from the former state of affairs. Most significant was the shift in the part played by the Prince's Council, the main governing body next to the Prince, sharing with him the responsibilities of the state power. Originally, the Prince's Council used to be the direct expression of the landowners — laymen and clergymen — whose function was to see to it that the powers entrusted to the prince upon his accession were exercised in accordance with their own interests. Gradually, as the state and its institutions began to take shape and an embryo of state apparatus came into being, the most prominent members of the emerging bureaucracy (court dignitaries appointed by the Prince) had their own seats on the Council together with the representatives of the landowners, who nevertheless preserved their ascendancy till the latter half of the 15th century. The composite character of the Prince's Council was maintained during Stephen's reign, but the court dignitaries, representatives of the Prince's power, started to gain the upper hand. The number of high-ranking *boyars* holding no formal office, those who had formerly dominated the governing body of the state and supervised its operation, slowly declined and then-names appeared less and less frequently on the list of witnesses to the decrees

issued by the Prince. This fact obviously marked a significant transfer of influence from the prominent boyars to the prince's centralized power, which was relying on a much wider social basis.

The decisive part in the Prince's Council, when Stephen succeeded in organizing it according to his intentions, was assigned to the *parcalabi* (burgraves), chiefs of the fortresses, the centres of Moldavia's military power, which also became centres of administrative authority. By permanently expanding the military, administrative and legal powers of the *parcalabi*, both within their respective fortresses and in the adjacent areas, Stephen made this institution into the very hub of his governing system. As a result, centralized state power superseded the power formerly generated by the feudal estate. Without suppressing feudal immunity, an institution which embodied the public power of the landowners, Stephen set up a network of administrative, legal and military power which covered the whole country and was answerable to and controlled by the Prince himself.

It was in the field of military organization that the shifting of the centre of gravity of the country's socio-political life from the upper *boyars* to the lesser ones and further to the freeholders became particularly evident. Stephen realized that his new foreign policy aimed at freeing the country from the oppressive tutelage of the neighbouring great powers would meet with their opposition and that in order to defeat their inevitable reaction he had to have a military instrument that should be far more efficient in point of number and loyalty to the Prince than his predecessors had ever had at their disposal; consequently, he reorganized the country's army. The military bands headed by high-ranking *boyars* gradually lost their importance, and the military burden was shifted upon the shoulders of the lesser *boyars* who formed the cavalry and provided the commanders, and upon those of the freeholders who formed the main body of the infantry. Developing an idea initially conceived by his father, who did not have the time to implement it during his short reign, Stephen strove to muster up the widest social basis available for the country's defense. „Not only knights and nobles, but peasants too were conscripted by him for military duty, and he used to state that each and every man had to defend the country. If he found a peasant lacking arrows, bow or sword, or coming to the army without spurs for the horse, he would mercilessly put that man to death”, wrote a chronicler, one of his best informed contemporaries. It was only by the widest social participation the Prince succeeded in securing for his army that one could explain the unexpectedly great military strength which Moldavia was able to oppose to the foreign invaders as well as the victories she won over the armies of much more powerful states such as Hungary, Poland and the Ottoman Empire.

Foreign observers were impressed by the military power of a country whose name had been unknown to some of them until then, and they provided some information on the strength of the Moldavian army; according to such records, starting from the time of the first wars with the Turks and until the end of Stephen's reign, Moldavia was able to line up about 40,000 – 60,000 soldiers, horsemen and foot-soldiers. It is hardly possible to check the accuracy of such figures which should rather be regarded as approximate assessments, but Stephen's decisive victories over his powerful enemies provided the

soundest proof to the effect that the country yielded to the Prince her entire human and military potential. It was the exceptional military might which the Prince had built up for his country that made Moldavia, during Stephen's reign and under his immediate successors who continued his policy, a dreaded enemy and a desired ally for all the Central and East European powers.

The military power of Moldavia was remarkable not only by its sheer strength but also by the broad social base from which the army was recruited to carry out the political programme of the ruler.

Contemporary observers were struck by Moldavia's military organization during Stephen's reign, featuring a large-scale involvement of peasantry on the battle field. Yet, to turn that involvement into a rule, the Prince felt that he had to win the lasting allegiance of those on whom he had to rely for his military exploits. The strong support lent by the army to the Prince could be explained only by Stephen's ability to make his own domestic and external policy genuinely appealing to the mass of the people. The spirit of justice which Stephen, as reported by his contemporaries, sought to promote in the Moldavian public life, was an expression of his social policy. The opposition put up by the Prince against the tendencies evinced by the big landowners to take hold of the lands of the lesser *boyars* and freeholders, was fully replayed by the latter; the Prince's endeavours to maintain the independence of the country received powerful military support from the people as a whole. It was only the sense that the state power had become a defender of their interests that determined the broadest social strata to accept the extreme severity of the Prince – who ruthlessly repressed any break of military duty by anybody, be they *boyars* or peasants – and the immense human and material sacrifices that the wars waged by him brought in their wake. The solemn ceremonies during which the soldiers from among peasants who had distinguished themselves on the battlefield were endowed by the Prince with land and raised among the privileged, were a symbol of the convergence between Stephen's social policy and his military organization.

The ability to regularly draw on this source to maintain his military power explains Stephen's astonishing capacity of recovery under the most serious circumstances, a capacity which was described in vivid terms by a chronicler when depicting the portrait of the Prince: „and when other carried the day, he did not lose hope; though fallen down, he always managed to rise above his victors.” Overwhelmed by a Turkish-Tartar coalition and defeated by Mehmed II (1451-1481) in 1476, Stephen withdrew to the mountains to only spring a second attack, shortly after, at the head of a hastily assembled new army that proved valiant enough to cause the retreat of the Sultan and enabled the Moldavian Prince, in cooperation with the Transylvanian army, to relieve Wallachia from the Ottoman control.

In 1485, when Stephen came again under heavy Turkish and Tartar pressure, he built up a strong army and eventually managed to counter the attempt of Bayazid II to dethrone him and to subjugate the country. The often repeated miracle of reviving after catastrophe was achieved as a result of a deeply felt communion between Stephen's unflinching will to secure Moldavia's independence and the response of his people by

their heroic deeds on the battle field. That was the chief secret of Moldavia's remarkable military power under Stephen the Great.

Another important factor of Stephen's military power was the system of fortifications which he raised against the invading armies. Stephen strengthened, by building new walls, the existing fortresses and raised new ones – some of them over very short time, such as Chilia, a new fortress, built on the shore, probably opposite to the insular fortress of the same name – forming together a powerful barrier (Suceava, Hotin, Soroca, Orhei, Cetatea Alba, Chilia, Craciuna, Neamt and Roman) across the expected routes of attack. Twice at least, in 1476 and 1497, the resistance put up by the fortresses proved to be one of the decisive factors of victory.

Death and Transfiguration. A great historic destiny is not ended with the man's death. When on July 2, 1504, Stephen passed away at Suceava and was taken a few days later to his final resting place, accompanied by the pious mourning of an entire people, he was starting a new kind of posthumous existence in the affection and collective memory of his contemporaries and of the following generations as one of the nation's great heroes.

Foreign writers and statesmen placed him among the most outstanding leaders, giving him the epithet of supreme recognition: *Stephanus ille magnus*, „that Great Stephen”; that was how Sigismund, King of Poland, referred to the Moldavian Prince thirty years after his death.

The chronicler Martin Cromer paid homage to the memory of the Moldavian Prince in similar terms, when sketching the portrait of the Grand Duke of Muscovy, Ivan III, who also left the stage of history a year after Stephen: „All happy was Ivan. He had removed the Tartar yoke; he had added to his possessions with little or no effort many important principalities; he had established friendship and kinship with Stephen, the great Prince of the Moldavians...”

For the people he had ruled over and whom he had defended against the enemies for almost half a century, rendering them the justice of which they were in such need, Stephen was more than „the Great.” The spiritual link between the Prince and those to whom he had given the best moment of their history was expressed by a much more enduring monument than the stone tomb he had built for himself. The country's chronicle, written one and a half century after Stephen's death, recorded a recollection of the collective mourning that had shrouded Moldavia at the sad news of the Prince's death. „And Stephen was buried with great sorrow and mourning in the monastery of Putna, which had been erected by him. There was so much sorrow, and all were weeping as if he had been a father to them, and all knew that a doer of good and a great defender was lost.” It was from the tears shed upon Stephen's death, as a token of great affection, that the myth took shape.

A people of peasants, Stephen's Moldavians placed their ruler in a realm of tales and legends, but their creative imagination actually did nothing else but to project the salient features of his real character into the world of miracles.

First of all, for his brave deeds Stephen began to be regarded as a hero endowed with supernatural powers: „after his death” - the chronicle went on - „till this day they

call him Prince Stephen the Saint, not for the sake of his soul which is in the hands of God, because he had his sins too, but for his brave deeds, which no prince, either before or after him has ever equalled.” He was thought to have been protected in battle by supernatural forces and he was depicted as a mythical hero who cut down the Turks and the Tartars in the wars, „the Undaunted Prince” who would destroy anyone that dared invade his country, „the ruler of the land” during whose time Moldavia became a principedom and no longer had to look up in humility to her neighbouring powers. Foreign travellers who had had an opportunity to better know Moldavia - such as the Frenchman D'Hauterive in the 18th century - were aware that folklore was making Stephen into a demi-god: „his name replaced those of the Dacian divinities in the folk songs.”

The worship of the „Undaunted Prince” was related in the memory of the people to the bravery of the thousands of peasants whom he had protected both from the oppression of the local barons and from the alien conquerors. A legend which has come down to us in several variants glorifies Stephen for his opposition to the powerful lords of the land and for his kindness and justice toward the peasants, who used to form the main force of his army. Rightly or not, many freeholders claimed even centuries later that their lands had been originally granted by Prince Stephen to their brave ancestors who had proved their loyalty on the battle field; this connection between their land ownership, which the Prince had defended, and the entire land of the country, which they had defended at his call, was the source that shaped and further nourished Stephen's legend.

Lastly, folk mythology amplified Stephen's Faustian genius through the centuries, linking his name to various constructions or traces of constructive activity in Moldavia. „Any fortress, any wall, any trench one asks about, the answer one gets is that Stephen the Great built it. Any bridge, any church, any well, any old court or palace would owe its existence to that hero!...” – noted one of the initiators of folklore research in Romania in the last century. „Finally, for the Moldavians, this Prince is responsible for all the historic deeds, all the monuments, all the accomplishments and all the buildings raised during five centuries by so many rulers.”

Above all, Stephen remained in the memory of those who knew him and of those who from generation to generation took over and enriched that memory as the guardian of his country and champion of his people. There was a strong feeling among villagers that Stephen had staunchly defended his country since „God's and Saint Peter's time” and that, once he passed into the other world, he never ceased to watch over his people's destinies. During the bitter wars against hostile armies the people actually believed that he would rise again to lead them to victory. It was to him that the people directed their prayers in times of despair, hoping that the legendary hero would return to break their chains.

Much later, when the Romanian people's yearning for justice, for so long denied to them, was nearing its fulfilment, their most outstanding minstrel, Mihai Eminescu, embodied the national ideal in the person of Stephen the Great, calling upon him to leave the peace and quiet of the monastery where he had secluded himself and to return among the living in order to finish his work.