The Debate between Mihail Kogălniceanu and Petrache Roset-Bălănescu Concerning the Future of Emancipated Roma in Moldavia (1855–1856)

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Abstract

This article explores a decisive moment in public debates that surrounded the emancipation of enslaved Roma in the Principality of Moldavia. In December 1855, Mihail Kogălniceanu, a prominent leader of the local "forty-eighter" liberals and proponent of immediate abolition, engaged in a lengthy epistolary exchange with Petrache Roset-Bălănescu, a wealthy conservative nobleman favouring a more gradualist approach to the emancipation of enslaved Roma. This exchange, published shortly afterwards in the pages of the Moldavian newspaper *Steaua Dunării*, touched upon some key economic and social aspects of the process and so helped steer the public debate from a short-termed legalist and administrative perspective towards a more long-term social one, and in the process, problematized the scope and ramifications of the emancipation program in Moldavia. In so doing, both debaters endeavored to provide practical answers to the complex questions associated with Roma's transition from enslavement to freedom and from coerced to indentured labor.

Keywords

- Abolitionism
- Enslaved Roma
- Moldavia
- Mihail Kogălniceanu
- Petrache Roset-Bălănescu

Introduction

After the Revolution of 1848, elites in the Principality of Moldavia showed a renewed interest in debates concerning the future of the local institution of enslavement as the main point of contention shifted from the gradual dissolution of this form of bondage without upsetting the existing social order to its expedient abolition to facilitate the integration of enslaved Roma into mainstream society. These debates took center stage in local political life during the autumn of 1855, as Prince Grigore A. Ghica, the ruler of Moldavia, announced his intention to abolish enslavement and therefore encouraged local elites to voice their opinions about the best course of action to bring about this long-awaited reform. However, Prince Ghica's initial expectations, limited to more immediate legal and administrative concerns arising from Roma's transition from enslaved to free, tax-paying status, were soon surpassed by bold proposals put forward by a few local liberal statesmen. They problematized the social aspects of abolition linked with the transformation of enslaved Roma, an ethnically diverse and impoverished group kept for centuries in bondage, into "contributive members" of society (Achim 2010, 24). How should this transition from enslavement to freedom occur, and what would the new social status of freed Roma be?

Such complex questions did not remain unanswered for long and were addressed during the public debate between Petrache Roset-Bălănescu and Mihail Kogălniceanu, two leading statesmen who supported the same abolitionist cause while favoring different tactics and solutions. Certain that their practical knowledge of enslavement granted them license to articulate pragmatic solutions, both defended their views in a series of public letters they exchanged during late 1855 (which were published afterwards), reflecting some of the core ideas and general tone of the latter-stage abolitionist debates in Moldavia. While initially agreeing on the short-term legal measures, they soon found themselves at odds over the direction of reforms, as their exchange clearly revealed a fragmentation of local elites into different groups, each with its own approach. Whereas conservative landowners such as Roset-Bălănescu supported a "progressive" or "gradual" emancipation that would ultimately turn enslaved Roma into *corvée* peasants in the new scheme of labor, Kogălniceanu and his fellow liberals argued for full and "immediate" emancipation and securing emancipated Roma against new forms of bondage. What this letter exchange made even more evident was that a sound abolitionist program had to involve deeper engagement with broader questions concerning the redefinition of labor relations and civic equality in the country.

The aim of this paper is to examine the content of this correspondence in its historical context and discuss how it helped steer the public debate concerning abolition from a short-term, legalist perspective towards a more longer-term, social, and economic one. More specifically, it sets out to explore the question of how the debaters problematized the scope and ramifications of the abolitionist program. After briefly reviewing the scholarly literature on this topic, analysis will focus on four sections. The first one situates this debate in its historical context; the second compares the debaters' intellectual backgrounds, political careers, and motivations; the third analyses their opposing views on emancipation, as expressed in their letters; and the fourth and final section explores the influence of their political views over their choice of what aspects to include, minimize, or exclude altogether from this exchange concerning the future of emancipated Roma.

1. Literature Review

Abolitionist debates are traditionally situated at the intersection of Romani history and nineteenth-century political reformism, two areas of research that have been receiving more attention in Romanian historiography recently. Apart from becoming better integrated into the grand narrative of the history of Roma in the Romanian Principalities (Achim 2004; Petcuț 2015) or Romania's complex path to modernization (Iordachi 2019, 127–164), antislavery ideas and abolitionism have recently become the topic of a few specialized studies focusing on the role of local progressive statesmen and the liberal press in the emancipation of enslaved Roma. Achim (2010), for instance, explored the public debates surrounding the envisaged integration of emancipated Roma into the local economic structures and/or their ethnic assimilation into the mass of Romanian peasants, while Tomi (2010) looked at how said debates found their way into the militant literature and press of the 1840s and 1850s, and influenced the development of antislavery public sentiment. By tracing the contributions of leading abolitionists proponents, such as Mihail Kogălniceanu, both studies led to a deeper understanding of the efforts of the young generation of "forty-eighters" to put the emancipation issue on the public agenda and to pressure local rulers to enact social reforms.

However, these studies only mentioned in passing the 1855 debate between Kogălniceanu and Roset-Bălănescu and devoted little attention to explaining their respective intentions or proposals (*Ibid,* 66). In addition, the two debaters received very unequal treatment. Whereas Kogălniceanu's antislavery ideas and activities have been well researched in their own right (Achim 2006), Roset-Bălănescu's hardly received any notice (Cojocaru 2014). This paper aims to fill this lacuna by examining both opponents' contribution to this lively exchange of ideas and situating it in the larger context of political debates surrounding the enactment of the emancipation law of 1855.

2. Historical Context

Kogălniceanu and Roset-Bălănescu were men of their time whose ideas need to be understood in relation to the passions and contradictions that shaped nineteenth-century Moldavian political life. Situated at the crossroads of three rival empires, the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia were autonomous states under Ottoman suzerainty and a Tsarist protectorate during the early 1850s. The outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853 served as a catalyst for change since the defeat of Russian troops brought the Tsarist protectorate over the Romanian Principalities to an abrupt end. The victorious powers (France, in particular) offered to support the Moldavian elites' claim for greater autonomy, provided that domestic reforms were adopted (Berindei 2003, 430–435). This favorable international context offered Grigore A. Ghica, the ruling prince of Moldavia, the chance to put into practice his program of adopting Western-inspired measures to reform the outdated *ancien regime* structures, such as the *corv*ée system and enslavement, and to advance abolitionism as a modernizing step required to remove the stigma of "backwardness" still linked to his country (Boicu 1973, 103). Yet, the task ahead was complicated by the deep-rooted nature of Roma enslavement, the pervasive influence of local slaveholders and dilemmas facing the ruling princes when it came to enacting social reforms likely to undermine the local nobility's and Orthodox clergy's century-old privileges (Iordache 1998, 2: 280).

Enslavement was a complex institution that had been intricately woven into the fabric of Moldavian society and economy for at least four centuries. It was still a socially acceptable institution during the early nineteenth century, as the ruling princes, a small number of privileged nobles ("*boieri*" in Romanian), and the Orthodox monasteries continued to exert dominion over the lives, labor, and families of their enslaved Roma (Achim 2004, 27). Statistical data is sparse, but by some conservative estimates, there were at least 60,990 enslaved Roma in Moldavia around 1849 (Achim 2005, 117). Servile treatment varied with each household, but what this ownership meant in legal terms, according to the then valid civil code (Rădulescu et al. 1958, 72–75), was that the enslaved were reduced to a type of "movable property" that could be donated, sold, or mortgaged at will by their Moldavian masters who were free to exert discretionary powers when exploiting the former's labor, severing their family ties, or meting out corporal punishment.

Attempts to modify this form of bondage had been typically met with disapproval by local nobles, as most were slaveholders and so had a vested interest in protecting their privileges and sources of income (Georgescu 1971, 125). However, it was from the same Moldavian nobility, albeit of a more progressive orientation, that the ideas for reform first emerged during the 1820s, just as Western-inspired liberal ideals, a market-oriented type of economy and other factors linked to the process of modernization began to exert their influence over both Principalities. The abolitionist writings of some French, English, or German writers and diplomats who criticized the continued existence of enslavement, largely extinct in Western Europe but still alive and well when they visited Iași or Bucharest, raised awareness among the educated nobles of the degrading effects of enslavement (Tomi 2010, 63). The spread of this new awareness among Moldavian elites, coupled with a few discrete changes of an economic and social nature, probably favored the gradual emergence of a critical attitude towards enslavement among certain local nobles who, in a gesture of magnanimity, began to free the enslaved Roma living on their estates (Kogălniceanu 1908, 43).

At least this is Kogălniceanu's interpretation of how antislavery ideas took root in Moldova, pointing to the gradual shift in the sensibilities and value system of the local nobility under the beneficial influence of Western liberal influence. Yet the complex road from social critique and antislavery sentiment to abolitionist agitations and actual anti-slavery proposals was not so clearly mapped out and much remains to be investigated by contemporary researchers. The available data suggests that, despite the growing opposition to enslavement based on similar humanitarian, cultural, and social grounds, there was a diversity of opinions among local elites concerning the direction of reforms during the 1840s and 1850s (Achim 2010). Such diversity probably reflected individual motivations, the influence of the emerging liberal and conservative doctrines that came to structure local bi-partisan political life and the more distant gradualist or immediatist trends that agitated Western abolitionist movements. During their uneven evolution in Moldavia, antislavery ideas were being advanced by actors of various stripes, driven by an eclectic mixture of reformist ideals and pragmatic motivations and increasingly concerned that the perpetuation of enslavement was hindering the country's path to rapid modernization (Iordachi 2019, 131–132). During the 1850s, the most visible division was between supporters of "gradual" abolition, intent on securing first the enslaved Roma's economic self-sufficiency by progressive measures, and those of "immediatism," arguing for direct abolition to put an end to slaveholders' abuses and ensure some type of civic equality as understood in those times (Sion 2014, 27).

Apart from this divergence of opinions, the slow maturation of antislavery ideas into abolitionist agitation was also due to the reluctance of the conservative political establishment to accept any reformist proposals coming from outside the traditional circles of power. As Ion Ghica, a member of the young generation of liberals known as "the forty-eighters," argued, any such abolitionist proposals that sporadically found their way into the local progressive press, such as *Propășirea*, caused outrage from ruling princes during the 1840s. The latter were willing to go to great lengths to silence its proponents because they feared that any unsanctioned attempt to mobilize public sentiment in the service of the abolitionist cause represented not only a direct critique of the social status quo but also an oblique challenge to their authoritarian rule (Ghica 1914, 3: 90).

This control of the press via censorship cast some light on the dilemmas facing the authoritarian regime in power when it came to enacting social reforms. Whereas enslavement benefited large sections of the nobiliary and clerical elites, its continued existence still depended on the support of the local political authorities. Mihail Sturza (1834–1849) and Grigore A. Ghica (1849–1853; 1854–1856), the two princes who ruled Moldavia during this period of transition, were not impervious to antislavery ideas. Fully aware that reforming the *ancien regime* structures was required to meet the challenges of a modernizing state aspiring for inclusion in European politics, they probably saw the benefits of integrating abolitionism into their political discourse, as the emancipation of Roma would both win them popularity abroad as enlightened reformers and consolidate their finances by increasing the number of taxpayers in Moldavia. Still, their hesitant initiative to coax local slaveholders into parting with their "moving property" was curbed by apprehension about the conservative opposition of nobiliary landowners, who stirred up the specter of political instability as soon as their feudal privileges came under threat, and the pressure exerted by liberal groups such as "the forty-eighters," whose vocal demands for rapid change threatened the existing order and might have invited Tsarist military intervention (Boicu 1973, 14–15).

Prince Sturza sought to balance these opposing trends when he introduced the first emancipatory laws in January and February 1844, which freed Crown-owned and monastery-owned Roma and established a special fund for the gradual redemption of Roma put on sale by nobles. Behind the official discourse praising his philanthropy was the prince's aim to adopt orderly social change – intended both to "steal the thunder" from the forty-eighters who were pressing for swift reforms and to appease conservative groups' qualms by unofficially stating that these limited measures were prompted by the growing needs of the state treasury. In fact, the inclusion of former enslaved Roma into the free population did increase by default the number of taxpayers (Ciurea 2012, 103).

It fell to his successor and nephew, Prince Ghica, to enact the emancipation of the last category of enslaved Roma owned by local nobiliary families. At first, the new prince's support for liberal modernizing discourse was matched by his willingness to rely upon Kogălniceanu and other forty-eighters to counterbalance the influence of conservative nobiliary groups. By relaxing the rigors of censorship to allow the printing of liberal, pro-abolitionist journals such as *Steaua Dunării*, he announced his intention to follow the "path of reforms," but at the same time did not actually stray from the path of autocratic modernization pursued by his predecessor (Boicu 1973, 109). Despite all his liberal-inspired rhetoric, he pushed his reformist agenda by playing one political group against another and biding his time until a favorable international context presented itself (*Ibid,* 103). The Crimean War enabled his government to finally overcome conservative opposition in the legislative

council (Divanul Obștesc al Moldovei) and pass the much-awaited emancipation bill on 22 December 1855, which proclaimed that "slavery shall forever be abolished in the Principality of Moldova and from this day forward, all those who set foot onto Moldavian soil shall be considered as free persons. All Gypsies, particularly those previously deemed as someone's private property, shall henceforth be emancipated and none shall be permitted to sell, buy, or own slaves" (Kogălniceanu 1855c, 137).

3. Parallel Biographies

No sooner had Prince Ghica announced his intention to abolish enslavement than the issue of the role of the nobiliary elites in this process resurfaced more markedly, as the latter were not simply called to voice their opinions but to part with their enslaved Roma. The new law focused primarily on the legal, fiscal, and administrative facets of emancipation, leaving many of the practical aspects concerning the economic transition away from enslavement in the hands of local landowners. The question of how local nobles should support this abolitionist measure, which entailed both sacrificing their own material interests and providing some form of economic assistance to their former enslaved Roma, caused a stir, prompting Roset-Bălănescu and Kogălniceanu to publicly voice their opinions about what they thought the best course of action would be. Since both relied on their intellectual, personal, and political engagement with antislavery to give more weight to their opinions, a closer look at their biographies is warranted to ascertain the breadth and depth of their commitment to the abolitionist cause. As there is no space to give a full biographical study, I will limit myself to a brief exploration of the debaters' social origins, education, and careers in an attempt to compare how their perception of enslavement had been filtered through their individual experience with Roma and shaped by their breadth of vision.

Enslavement was hardly an abstraction for the debaters, as both had first-hand knowledge of it due to their family backgrounds. Both were born into the privileged group of the Moldavian nobility, whose hereditary privileges, social prestige, and accrued wealth reinforced their lead roles in what was largely an agrarian-based economy still relying on *corvée* and enslaved labor (Crăciun 1996, 118–134). There were several nobiliary sub-groups, differentiated by their ancestry, wealth (large estates), and influence they wielded on account of the political and administrative offices they held: the high nobility, to which the Roset (also spelled Rosetti) family belonged, veered towards imposing a virtual monopoly on the highest offices, so limiting the access to power of the lower nobility, from which Kogălniceanu's family hailed (Ghibănescu 1933, 25: 192–200).

For most nobiliary families owning large estates in the Moldavian countryside, enslavement was a socially accepted practice, and the Roset and Kogălniceanu families made no exception. Roset-Bălănescu's family owned such an estate in Cârligi (Neamț County) and Kogălniceanu's in Râpile (Fălciu County), where enslaved Roma lived and toiled as domestic servants, craftsmen, or day laborers. Kogălniceanu's father, Ilie, owned several families (or "*sălașe*" in Romanian) of enslaved Roma (*Ibid,* 232), possibly the same as the ones mentioned by his son in 1837 as "seven or eight families of Gypsies working the land [of Râpile village]" (Kogălniceanu 1837, 24). Sadly, the scant data concerning the Cârligi estate does not offer a precise image of the size of the local servile labor. Although both hailed from noble families who owned enslaved Roma, neither debater was a slaveholder at the time their debate took place. In Kogălniceanu's

case, it was his father, Ilie, who owned the Râpile estate together with said enslaved Roma, whereas the son, Mihail, had already secured the latter's legal emancipation well before December 1855 (Achim 2006, 472). Roset-Bălănescu was indeed the owner of the Cârligi estate, but he had already freed his enslaved Roma sometime around 1844, a fact that he stressed in his letters to publicly distance himself from the "retrograde" local nobles (Kogălniceanu 1855b, 126).

A second element that they had in common was their solid education, as both of them studied law abroad: Roset-Bălănescu in the Tsarist Empire during the early nineteenth century, influenced by Russian culture (Cojocaru 2014, 321), while Kogălniceanu in Prussia from 1835 to 1838, a period which left a deep imprint on his intellectual development. Whereas the former spoke little of the time he spent in the Tsarist Empire, Kogălniceanu described in detail how the lectures delivered by Eduard Gans and other eminent law professors at the Friedrich-Wilhelms University of Berlin introduced him to liberal doctrine, while observing in practice the outcomes of the abolition of serfdom in Prussia convinced him of the benefits of individual freedom (Zub 1974, 87).

On returning home, both men occasionally practiced law while overseeing the running of the family estates. But whereas Roset-Bălănescu busied himself with exploiting his inherited estate in the Moldavian countryside, Kogălniceanu diversified his range of activities upon his return to Iași in 1838. In turn, he practiced liberal professions alongside his fellow forty-eighters, including teaching and journalism, edited liberal newspapers such as *Propășirea* and *Steaua Dunării,* which openly supported abolitionism, and invested in pioneering business ventures, employing freed Romani blacksmiths in the felt factory that he opened near Neamț around 1852 (Chiriță 1964, 7).

As was typical for gentlemen of noble birth, education, and means in those times, both secured positions in the state administration and had distinguished careers which familiarized them with the intricacies of local politics, including the state's efforts to enact social and economic reforms. The more senior Roset-Bălănescu started his career around 1816, steadily climbing the political ladder during each successive regime that ruled the country and holding various positions in the state administration, government, and legislative assemblies until the late 1860s (Cojocaru 2014, 322). During his entire career, he remained true to the conservative principles enshrined in the Organic Statute of Moldavia of 1832, which he had helped draft. Such principles essentially included an eclectic mixture of modernizing initiatives and traditionalist views, which strove to reorganize the state bureaucracy and to redistribute political power according to constitutional principles (by creating a legislative assembly composed of nobles to counterbalance the prince's authority) while avoiding any attempt to restructure agrarian relations that would pose a threat to the nobility's fiscal privileges, wealth, or land ownership (Georgescu 1971, 106). He defended these self-serving principles 25 years later, in 1857, when he was elected in the local special advisory assembly (Adunarea ad-hoc a Moldovei) and championed the cause of the landed nobility. His proposals supported gradual and organic agrarian reforms that intended to foster "social harmony and economic stability" (first and foremost for the benefit of the local nobility) and prevent social unrest or so-called "unchecked peasant mobility" (Filitti 1936, 18).

Kogălniceanu had a more agitated political career between 1838 and 1856, which typified the forty-eighters' complex relations with authoritarian regimes and revolutionary change. His political activity alternated between an initial, short-lived period of collaboration with Prince Sturza, bitter years of exile

between 1845 and 1848 triggered by the latter's irritation at young Kogălniceanu's proposals for liberal reforms, fervent participation in the short-lived revolutionary agitations in Iași in 1848, then once again cooperation with Prince Ghica, who recalled Kogălniceanu and appointed him in several high-ranking government positions after 1849 (Pop 1979, 149–151). Although his relationship with Prince Ghica soured by 1853, as he quit his office to devote himself to activities in support of the Union of Moldavia and Wallachia, Kogălniceanu offered his support to the throne in 1855. He probably was involved in drafting the emancipation law in the same year, a task he claimed to be the climax of his long struggle for turning antislavery into a topic of public debate and pushing abolitionism on the political agenda (Kogălniceanu 1908, 47), a topic that I have discussed elsewhere (Chiriac 2019, 28–32).

The apparent similarities between the two men's social origins, education, and careers can hardly obscure the deep cleavages in political orientation that set them apart. Whether this was due to the age gap (Kogălniceanu was 25 years younger than Roset-Bălănescu) or the different periods and academic environments in which the two intellectually matured remains a matter for debate. Each embraced a different political creed, in tune with their vision of social progress. Roset-Bălănescu strikes a pose as a pragmatic conservative defending a vision of gradual social change, allegedly in harmony with the organic needs of society but, in fact, more concerned with linking the state's welfare with the preservation of the large nobiliary estates and the hierarchical social structures. In turn, Kogălniceanu defended a liberal ideal of social reform, typical of the generation of forty-eighters, that criticized the privileged nobility's near monopoly on wealth and political power and proposed, as early as 1835, that merit should supersede birth as the main determinant of social standing: "*[c]'est le mérite qui est la vrai distinction. La naissance n'est rien*" (Merit is true distinction. Birth means nothing) (Haneș 1913, 148). Both as an idealist forty-eighter revolutionary and a more pragmatic reformer counseling princes, he shared a strong belief in the common people's innate capacity to ameliorate their stance in life and a strong commitment to free individuals from the constraining institutions and rigid hierarchies of the *ancien regime* via social reform and public education (Turliuc 2020, 104).

Unsurprisingly, these differences left a deep mark on their individual engagement with abolition. The details of how Roset-Bălănescu, yesterday's slaveholder turned now into a supporter of Roma emancipation, are unclear. Maybe his experience with running a large estate helped him develop a pragmatic notion of emancipation hinging upon the paternalistic belief that (former) slaveholders had to assume personal responsibility for their (former) enslaved Roma by guiding them in their path to freedom and providing them with, if not material support, at least economic models to emulate. His decision to free his enslaved Roma seems less like a clear rejection of his entitlement (he held the nobiliary title of "*mare logofăt*" or high chancellor) and more like an exercise of his will to impose his vision of how the transition to freedom should take place (Kogălniceanu 1855b, 126). Kogălniceanu's involvement was more personal and far-reaching, bearing the signs of a self-imposed moral mission to denounce all types of bondage and forms of nobiliary ranks, including his own of "*mare vornic*" or court official in charge of justice and internal affairs (Kogălniceanu 1855a: 102). His autobiographical writings tell us how witnessing abuse inflicted upon Roma sparked moral outrage and fueled his opposition to enslavement, while his studies abroad convinced him how incompatible enslavement was to his generation's ideals of social progress:

> Even on the streets of Iași, during my youth, I saw human beings wearing chains on their arms and legs, some with iron horns around their foreheads fastened around their necks with metal

> collars. Suffering cruel beatings, starvation and hanging over smoking fires, confinement in their masters' private prisons, and being thrown naked into the snow or freezing rivers: such was the fate of the wretched Gypsies. Then there was the contempt for the sacred institution of the family. Women were wrested from their husbands, and daughters from their parents, children from the breast of their parents, separated one from another and sold like cattle to different buyers from the four corners of Romania. Neither humanity, religion nor the civil law offered any protection to these wretched beings; it was a terrible sight, which cried out to Heaven. For these reasons, several old and younger noblemen, inspired by the spirit of the time and by the laws of humanity, took the initiative of redeeming the fatherland from the stigma of slavery (Kogălniceanu 1908, 42).[1]

Witnessing the cruel facets of this form of bondage in practice served as a catalyst that propelled young Kogălniceanu into antislavery activities, during which he denounced servile mistreatment as common practice and slaveholder abuse as the unwritten and inhumane rule (*Ibid,* 4–42) He upheld the same convictions, although more moderate in tone, in his later historical writings, denouncing enslavement "as a dark stain in the social history of all nations" and its dehumanizing effects on both the enslaved Roma and their Moldavian enslavers (Kogălniceanu 1976, 483–485).

4. Text Analysis

Having briefly discussed the historical context and the two authors' biographies, I will now turn to the content of their correspondence. As a category of writing, these texts belong to the epistolary genre and follow mid-nineteenth-century conventions of composing open letters intended for a wider audience and touching upon the burning issues of the moment. This exchange encompasses four pieces: two lengthy letters to the editor penned by Roset-Bălănescu and two equally lengthy responses written by Kogălniceanu, accompanied by several editorial notes. It was started by the former on 2 December 1855, came to an end on 5 January 1856, and later was published in the columns of the *Steaua Dunării* in the form of two editorials signed by Kogălniceanu.

On a more general note, this exchange clearly was intended from the beginning for publication, and so both debaters employed rhetorical strategies to argue their cases. Roset-Bălănescu, the one who initiated it, wanted to pose as a well-intentioned and open-minded man of state, but showed himself more as a calculated and pragmatic defender of the local nobility. He extended Kogălniceanu every courtesy, wanting to convince readers of his affability, but at times one notices a scattering of criticism and misgivings about the emancipation agenda, barely concealing his nobiliary prejudice. Kogălniceanu, in turn, was a skilled journalist, a brilliant intellectual, and a gifted historian who could match and surpass his opponent in many ways. As editor-in-chief of *Steaua Dunării*, he displayed the rhetoric of a seasoned debater and managed to steer the course of the dispute via a strategy of alternating praise for his opponent's abolitionist commitment with gentle irony and skillful rebuke of his arguments. I intend to examine the arguments

1 Unless otherwise noted, all translation from Romanian into English are my own work.

advanced by the discussants, focusing mainly on the points related to emancipation and grouping them into three categories: general approach, reservations, and practical aspects.

In the opening part containing Kogălniceanu's first round of editorial comments, Roset-Bălănescu was commended for his decision to voice his opinions about emancipation. This could not have come at a better time, he argued, since it followed the recent adoption of the emancipation law of 22 December 1855 and so allowed readers to hear the opinions of a prominent member of the nobility on this topic. Such an efflorescent display of courtesy and praise was not only intended to win Roset-Bălănescu's good graces but also imply that the latter was a spokesperson of the broad-minded section of the Moldavian nobility (labeled "the moderate conservatives" by Kogălniceanu) ready to endorse the abolitionist cause publicly and willing to make a personal contribution to the emancipation program. As the debate unfolded, Kogălniceanu's intention to present Roset-Bălănescu as a model to be emulated (in certain respects) by his peers became clear:

> […] The esteemed great logothete Petru Roset-Bălănescu sent us the following letter on 2 December, but it came into our possession only two days ago due to our absence from Iași. This letter, which expresses Mister Roset's sympathy for all Christian and generous hearts for the eternal principle of freedom, is to be published with overwhelming joy in the columns of *Steaua Dunării*. This is the first time a leading member of our nobility has stepped into the arena of journalism to express his views on this matter. In this alone, we see a clear sign of progress in our social life (Kogălniceanu 1855b, 125).

After dispensing with the mutual praise, quite typical in mid-nineteenth-century letter exchanges, Roset-Bălănescu and Kogălniceanu outlined their approach to the concepts of personal freedom and rights. Both debaters generally agreed with the idea that enslavement, though contrary to natural law, had only existed in Moldavia until recently by virtue of ancestral customs and positive law and fully endorsed Prince Ghica's salutary decision to abolish this outdated social institution. In fact, they spent little time on debating the actual content of the recent emancipation law, since it had already been approved and promulgated, and chose to focus on how the emancipated Roma should understand and exercise their newfound freedom to secure their livelihood.

The debaters' views on the legal reasoning underpinning this princiary decision were divergent, as each adhered to different schools of legal thought. Although he came at things with a minimum of theoretical apparatus, Roset-Bălănescu's judgments bore the mark of a natural law approach, according to which legal norms and morality were connected organically, and laws should have a foundation in natural developments rather than the mere will of the sovereign (Firoiu and Marcu 1984, 358–363). From what we can glean from his letters, he believed that freedom could not simply be enacted by a legislative measure because people who had been enslaved for centuries required a period of transition to learn to enjoy its lasting benefits by becoming self-sufficient. Conversely, Kogălniceanu appears to adopt a view influenced by early nineteenth-century positive law theory, arguing that existing laws were human constructs largely enforced by the sovereign and, therefore, should be subject to change not only when they failed to meet the abstract ideals of justice but also when "the spirit of the times" demanded it. He retorted that Roma reduced to bondage hardly could learn much about freedom if they were kept in

servitude and had to work for their former masters in a largely unchanged economic and social setting, and it was the duty of the state to enact reforms that sought to correct social injustice:

> […] Here lies the difference between us. Mister Roset consents to reforms, for they are "allowed" by the existing laws. We support reforms because the principle of justice, the spirit of the times, and the situation of our country demand them. Laws are often in opposition to justice, and there comes a time when the times, the situation, and so on demand that law yields to justice (Kogălniceanu 1856a, 6).

Before getting to the vital point of how the state institution should address this form of injustice, first Kogălniceanu had to address his opponent's reservations concerning the risks of an ill-prepared emancipation process. Roset-Bălănescu's rather long and complex argument can be summarized as follows: In keeping with his conservative tendency for safeguarding public order against social unrest (and preserving the status quo), he warned against the dangers of radical propaganda spread by some liberal newspapers aimed at inciting other disenfranchised groups, such as the Moldavian indentured peasants, to seize freedom and land ownership by all means and the insidious threat that such "socialist agitation" among the rural masses posed for the entire society, as the sparks of disobedience could well engulf the Moldavian countryside in flames.

Kogălniceanu undoubtedly understood what his opponent was implying, namely that the abolition of enslavement could pave the way for other radical social and economic reforms, including the abolition of *corvée*, and made efforts to allay these concerns by explaining them away as mere embellishments of the press. In his efforts to convince Roset-Bălănescu of the peaceful and law-abiding nature of the rural population, Kogălniceanu claimed that local peasants were largely immune to such radical messages due to the limited circulation of the liberal press in the Moldavian countryside. He ended his argument with a rhetorical flourish, prophesizing (although history would prove him wrong) that "[…] the Romanian people are the least inclined to illusory dreams, to ideology or, to fully spell it out, to socialism" (*Ibid.*).

Roset-Bălănescu's mind was still not put at ease by his opponent's reassurances, as the memory of the revolutionary events of 1848 was still fresh in the memory of the local nobility. He warned of the threat posed by "unemployed and destitute" Romani freedmen to themselves and mainstream society. In his opinion, such "naked and hungry" Roma, socially uprooted and lacking the means to "earn an honest living," would either seek the protection of new landlords and so, enter again into bondage, or revert to a nomadic lifestyle and risk falling into a life of petty criminality. Despite the tendency to overgeneralize, Roset-Bălănescu's arguments are not entirely baseless, as the Moldavian state archives dating from the late 1850s contain several complaints issued by local landowners and reports from the local authorities detailing the "erratic movement" and "defiance" of recently emancipated Roma moving around the countryside in search of better employment or plots of land to work as *corvée* peasants (Crăciun 1996, 54, 140). Kogălniceanu did not address this argument head-on and equivocated by claiming that "the freemen who had formerly belonged to the Crown and the monasteries as slaves had been settled even before the emancipation laws of 1844" and "only the Layash Roma still led such a [nomadic] lifestyle" (Kogălniceanu 1856a, 6).

This preliminary discussion paves the way towards the debate on the central issue of the epistolary exchange, namely the best course to enact abolitionist measures. The divergence between the two opponents now fully came to light as Roset-Bălănescu, staying true to his conservative principles, argued for a progressive, step-by-step emancipation. This measure, he claims, needs to be preceded by a transition period intended to prepare enslaved Roma "to acquire the habits of free folk," such as stability (sedentarization), industry (economic self-sufficiency) and the practice of useful trades (professional reconversion). To give more weight to his arguments, he presented his personal experience of freeing enslaved Roma living on his Cârligi estate around 1844. To "protect" the latter from reverting to a life of nomadism or entering another form of bondage on a neighboring estate, Roset-Bălănescu precipitated a series of major lifestyle alterations among his former enslaved Roma. He settled those who had previously led a nomadic lifestyle and converted most into ploughmen, while providing a few of them with a modicum of education oriented towards acquiring some practical skills (apprenticeship). Roset-Bălănescu gave no clear indication of whether the beneficiaries of such measures had been consulted about these radical lifestyle alterations. He believed these new Romani freedmen were likely to look forward to building a better future for their families as soon as their daily needs had at least been satisfied. Also, he wanted to persuade readers that what was feasible on a small scale on his estate in Cârligi could be scaled up and done wholesale across Moldavia:

> [...] Since 1844, I, the undersigned, decided to put into practice my belief in this great, commendable, and sacred principle [of emancipation] by freeing my own few slaves. But seeing the fate of the slaves released in accordance with the law voted by the Parliament and that many of them are running to new masters to place themselves anew into bondage or some others, naked and hungry, have taken to the roads and the forests, I thought it wise to prepare my own [slaves] to make good use of their freedom, by securing them a stable future; and since that moment and by every possible means, I strived to accustom them to working in the fields, those whom I could not train at my own expense for the typical occupations customarily among them […] (*Ibid.,* 126).

Kogălniceanu was too astute an observer not to discern the implied self-serving nature of the new arrangement proposed by his opponent. Roset-Bălănescu did release his enslaved Roma from personal bondage, but at the cost of severely restricting their freedom to move and coercing them into a new asymmetrical scheme of labor as *corvée* peasants, that is, tenant farmers who lived and worked on a landlord's estate and had to offer in exchange unpaid labor, dues, and other services. Although he admittedly renounced the arbitrary powers he had as a slaveholder over the labor and family of the enslaved, he still retained a position of authority as the "patron" of the new Romani freedmen and rightful owner of the estates on which the latter still lived and toiled, two factors which left the way open to new forms of labor exploitation with no explicit legal sanction.

Kogălniceanu was not opposed to gradual amelioration, both moral and material, but wanted to reverse the process of first preparing and then liberating Roma, as gradualist abolitionists argued. He favored immediate emancipation, arguing for complete and direct abolition to put an end to slaveholders' abuses and do away with the innate cruelty of this institution. He insisted that enslaved Roma should be first liberated and subsequently educated, since no genuine social emancipation could be achieved as long as Roma were still held in bondage. To further his argument, he relied less on personal experience and more

on his broad historical knowledge, which he repeatedly drew into the conversation. He referred to several social and economic reforms adopted in the course of Moldavian history, particularly the abolition of serfdom of 1746–1749 under the reign of Prince Constantin Mavrocordat, to illustrate "the inexorable march of history" towards increased personal freedom and justice for all people:

> […] To prove our point, we will raise the following question: had serfdom not been lawful until 1749? Despite that, it had to fall before justice. Was it not true that some of the ancestral nobiliary privileges had been lawful until 1830, when they were abolished by Articles 70 and 71 of the Organic Statues? And it is so hard to believe that today or tomorrow, no other privileges will be abolished, as the voice of justice and the needs of the times rightfully demand? (Kogălniceanu1856a, 6).

In a subtle display of diplomacy, the editor-in-chief of *Steaua Dunării* avoided directly rebuking Roset-Bălănescu's paternalistic proposals, attempting instead to appease him by finding some common ground on the practical aspects of the abolitionist program. Kogălniceanu believed the nobility's role in this process was crucial, since many former enslaved Roma, now free but destitute taxpayers, were hardly able to leave their former sites of enslavement. In the absence of direct state support, they had little choice but to turn to former slaveholders to secure work, housing, or even their daily food. Therefore, he agreed with Roset-Bălănescu that the noblemen's country estates were a primary vehicle for the gradual sedentarization and incorporation of Romani freedmen into the mass of the local peasantry as "new Rumanians." Depending on the context, this expression could assume either a social-economic meaning, namely the transition from performing coerced, unpaid labor as enslaved people to a form of contractual, indentured labor as *corvée* peasants, or an ethnic one, that is, newly-assimilated Romanians. Although they would enjoy a different, improved legal status, the new indentured laborers would still be subject to a strong form of social control while their agreement with the nobles on whose land they settled was in force, as the choices available to them in terms of which lands to settle on and what terms of service to accept would be sharply limited (Achim 2010, 27).

Kogălniceanu was aware that such measures would benefit first and foremost the state and the landowners, since they involved both assimilating nomadic Roma into the mass of sedentary, tax-paying peasants and reducing them to the status of indentured agrarian laborers. Whereas Roset-Bălănescu was content to stop the abolitionist program at this point, Kogălniceanu's vision was broader. He believed that indentured labor represented only a transitory stage for emancipated Roma and that all *corvée* peasants, regardless of their ethnicity, would be sooner or later liberated from indenture and transformed into free, small landholders. Yet he was tactful enough not to flaunt in his opponent's face that "the forty-eighters" would never simply go along with such self-serving proposals to control freedmen's labor in the interest of the landed nobility. He voiced his opposition against the proposal to turn freedmen into indentured laborers in February 1856, when he had more scope to criticize the similar abolitionist law adopted in Wallachia in 1856:

> […] we regret the adoption of the provisions included in Article 7 [of the law concerning the emancipation of privately-owned enslaved Roma in Wallachia], which ties freedmen to the land for a shorter or longer period, and only serves to perpetuate their bondage for the following years. The freedom that ties an individual to the land, just like a tree rooted into the soil, cannot be called such. Nomadism served as a pretext for this provision which tarnishes

> the elegance of the law and the nobility of the fact; it could have been controlled by a more appropriate measure, in line with the lawmaker's intention, rather than by producing serfs tied to the land […] (Kogălniceanu 1856b, 74).

It was also probably prudence that prevented him from tackling other contentious issues likely to antagonize his opponent and further alienate the local conservative nobility. He refrained from discussing the issue of financial compensation awarded by the state to slaveholders for the "loss of their moveable properties," since Roset-Bălănescu already had forfeited such claims. Also, *Steaua Dunării* was making efforts to persuade other slaveholders to follow the latter's example and relieve the state treasury of the burdensome obligation of paying compensation (Chiriac 2022, 72). Such a reluctance to speak out might seem as overly pragmatic to contemporary readers regarding the ethics of a decision compensating slaveholders and not the enslaved. Still, Kogălniceanu and some other nineteenth-century statesmen seeking a pragmatic compromise probably saw this concession as the bitter but unavoidable "price of freedom" exacted by slaveholders in return for their support. Roma were now finally free from their legal bondage, yet the choices available to them in terms of stable employment were sharply restricted.

Conclusions

Seen from a larger perspective, this exchange between Kogălniceanu and Roset-Bălănescu added new layers of complexity to ongoing abolitionist debates in mid-nineteenth-century Moldavia. Not only did their letters contain, in a condensed form, many of the arguments around which abolitionist debates were framed at this latter stage, but their adversarial nature compelled discussants to refine further said arguments and provide supporting evidence drawn from their personal experience, while politely but firmly refuting each other's opinions. Apart from offering some rare glimpses into their personal involvement with enslavement and degree of commitment to the abolitionist cause, this exchange presented both the chance to defend their views on the best course to enact the abolitionist program and situate it amid larger social and economic debates.

Reading their letters side by side illuminates the extent to which the two men, nominally united in their support of emancipation, were divided over the means of putting it into practice. Roset-Bălănescu saw abolitionism as part of a limited, process of gradual reform and, staying true to his conservative views, was more concerned with securing stable employment for what he saw as an impoverished and mobile rural proletariat, even if that meant a transition to a new form of dependency. In doing so, one might argue that he went beyond defending his social group's economic interests and reinforced the old trope of a large estate owner who acted as a "benevolent protector" for local Roma – seen as "lacking capacity" to efficiently govern themselves on account of their "loose morals" and poverty (more probably due to their long enslavement) and so in need of being "ushered into" their new life as free people. Former enslavers were encouraged to continue to provide for and steer the lives of their former enslaved Roma in exchange for their loyalty and industry, an arrangement seen as "fitting" for ensuring not only the nobility's interests but also the well-being of Roma and even that of society at large.

Conversely, Kogălniceanu championed a more progressive view of emancipation in line with his liberal ideals of a merit-based social order. He believed that the freed Roma should be provided both with immediate employment and some form of economic self-sufficiency by associating legal enfranchisement with a subsequent major redistribution of land. But despite their doctrinal differences, both men favored an elitist approach to social reforms, concerned more with enacting controlled social change and economic transformation rather than involving (intended) Roma beneficiaries in the debate, let alone in the actual political decision-making process in Moldova.

In the end, both men were willing to reach a compromise that would advance the ultimate goal of turning emancipated Roma into "contributive members of society." Roset-Bălănescu possibly initiated this epistolary exchange to persuade his high-born peers that his small-scale initiative on the Cârligi estate was viable and could be scaled up countrywide. He also insinuated that there was little sense in opposing Prince Ghica's recent measure; by assuming an active part in the abolition process, the nobility could retain some degree of control over its implementation and, in the process, secure more favorable terms for itself. Kogălniceanu skillfully took up the challenges raised by Roset-Bălănescu and addressed the latter's misgivings about abolition. He was probably also eager to show that Moldavian men of state of various stripes could overcome their political differences and negotiate pragmatic solutions to secure some degree of assistance for Roma in their transition to freedom. In other words, former slaveholders were encouraged to renounce their claims to financial compensation, as well as continue extending their patronage over their former enslaved Roma to facilitate the latter's social integration and/or assimilation. The paternalistic tone and elitist approach of this entire exchange raises the difficult question of representativeness, that is, how widespread were these attitudes and ideas among the average Moldavian slaveholders of nobiliary extraction? The available sources are simply insufficient to allow a critical examination of the latter's position on this matter. Sadly, the same silence in the sources prevents us from examining the view from the ground, namely the intended Romani beneficiaries' aspirations and misgivings during their transition from enslavement to freedom. Future research will hopefully present readers with a detailed image of how local Roma understood the meaning of freedom, reacted to the various opportunities and challenges presented by the emancipation program, and engaged with their former masters and state authorities in making their newfound freedom a concrete reality.

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