The ways in which the khagan maintained his authority and the reasons for his subjects' loyalty have yet to be clarified. It would be too simplistic to argue that the Khazars were able to impose themselves by force on the other ethnic groups, thus ensuring the integrity of the state. Another issue which remains unclear is which ethnic groups (if any, besides the Khazars) willingly embraced the khagan's authority and implemented the khaganate's policies in the various regions. It could be argued that the “internal” communities of Khazaria were constituted of bearers of the Saltovo culture (the Khazars, Bulgars and the Alans), which was the official (state) culture of the khaganate. The Bulgars and the Alans, both subjects of the khaganate, neighbored countries that were akin to them—namely, Alania and Volga Bulgaria (Black Bulgaria poses a separate problem). Both countries had complicated relations with Khazaria, since they were part of the khaganate. Actually, Alania and Volga Bulgaria can be classified as “external” communities in relation to Khazaria. The information from written sources, according to which during some period or other Alania and Volga Bulgaria had or could have had military conflicts with Khazaria, cannot be regarded as proof of their status in the khaganate or of the subordination of their rulers to the khagan. Their subjugated position in the Khazar Khaganate should be regarded as a fact by the tenth century, and especially by the 950s (the time of the Khazar ruler Joseph), although this idea is rejected by most historians, especially with regard to Alania.

It is possible that Danube Bulgaria also influenced the “internal” communities in Khazaria, especially during the tenth century when it was already a Christian state. The Bulgars in the khaganate were mostly pagans, although many among them were Christians and Muslims. Religious affiliation often brings with it political influence. It can be therefore argued that the political relations between Khazaria, Byzantium and the Arab Caliphate had an impact on the Bulgars and Alans in the khaganate. Or in other words, the Bulgars and Alans can be defined as both “internal” and “external” ethnic communities in the Khazar state. It should be borne in mind that the Alanian and especially the Bulgar communities, which were spread over the whole territory of the khaganate, were all on different levels of subordination to the central authorities. What should also be noted is that in the vicinity of the Saltovo culture the Bulgars probably constituted the majority of Khazaria’s population.
While the Saltovo culture provides us with some clues regarding the “internal” communities of the khaganate, the role of the ethnic groups with a different culture remains unclear. The information scientists have gathered until now is highly insufficient. Nevertheless, the extent to which the Burtas, Kasogs and, during the tenth century, also the Oghuz can be defined as “internal” communities for Khazaria should be examined more closely. This list can be extended with quite a few Caucasian, Eastern European and Middle Asian peoples. The line between “internal” and “external” in the Khazar Khaganate cannot be defined without acknowledging the different possibilities for interaction between the ethnic groups and the central authorities, the different standing of the various regions (which often had a mixed ethnic contingent) and the state entities that were subjugated to the khaganate. At the same time, truly unacceptable theories are maintained in science, that deal with the ethnic interpretation of the monuments of the Khazar Khaganate or the political subordination (dependency) of various regions that were a part of it.

5.1 Problems of the State Structure

According to the neoevolutional theory, Khazaria can be regarded as a so-called chiefdom or it can be defined as an “early state”. Without going into detail on these two concepts, let me state here that the line between them is quite blurry, especially after the introduction of concepts like complex-chiefdom or the term super-complex chiefdom that N. Kradin uses with regard to the steppe empires.1 The gradual expansion of the scope and characteristics of the chiefdom concept have brought it even closer to the early state one, making both of them difficult to distinguish from one another. As a result they began to be used according to the preferences of each historian.

Of particular importance are several characteristics of the chiefdom concept, which interweave with the ones of the early state concept. They include the sacral status of the supreme ruler and the associated with it broad support for the regime by the subordinate population; the inclusion of other peoples

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1 Kradin 1995 and 2001b; see also Stepanov 2003c, 44–46 and 54–55. The opinion of Tortika 2007 remains unclear to me: according to him, the population of the Don Region was organized in several simple chiefdoms, united in complex ones, which in turn were subordinate to the super-complex one of the Khazar Khaganate. See also Tortika 2006a, 133–143. Tortika 2006a, 141–143 nevertheless admits that the term “complex chiefdom” is “schematic” and “clumsy”. A much more suitable term for Khazaria would be “khaganate”, which includes all the traits of the complex chiefdom, as defined by N. Kradin. See also Di Cosmo 2004, 167–173.