CHAPTER TWO

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE CARPATHIAN-DNIESTER REGION AND OF THE NEIGHBOURING TERRITORIES

By being placed at the junction of the western extremity of the Eurasian steppes with the Lower Danube Plain, towards the northernmost limit of the Balkan Peninsula, southern Moldavia fell in the path of the great migrations. When they reached the Bugeac and the Bărăgan, the nomad peoples made their way either towards the Balkans, or along the Danube. On their way to the middle course of the great river, some of those peoples of eastern Europe avoided Moldavia, and they reached the Pannonian Plain through the Verecke Pass of the northern (Sylvanian, or Ukrainian) Carpathians. The direction of the nomad peoples’ advance was, without exception, from east to west, their return to the Black Sea steppes taking place only when their incursions failed.

During the first millennium, southern Moldavia was one of the European regions most affected by the movement of people. Ever since the first half of the seventh century, when the Danube ceased to be the northern frontier of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, the territories on the left bank of the river were not any more among the political and diplomatic priorities of the Byzantine government in Constantinople. However, both before and after the Iconoclastic crisis, Byzantium remained concerned with the situation in the steppe lands north of the Black Sea and strove to maintain control of the Danube Delta, especially by means of the navy, as well as of skilful diplomacy aimed at manipulated the military potentials of the “northern barbarians.”

Tenth Century

By the end of the third quarter of the first millennium, a perceptible stagnation in the demographic dynamics of eastern Europe took place. This occurred due to the strengthening of the Khazar state north of the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and the Black Sea. The Khazars were now a major power in eastern Europe. Their alliance with Byzantium,
consolidated during their confrontations with the Persians and the Arabs, was to remain stable until the end of the millennium, even if, temporarily, the interest of both in ruling Crimea also created discontinuities. The political circles on the Bosporus saw in Khazaria not only an ally against some common enemies, but also a barrier meant to stop the penetration of the nomad peoples towards the Byzantine boundaries. From the latter point of view, the Kaghane proved to be extremely efficient, by establishing a prolonged period of peace in the southern steppe lands of eastern Europe. At the same time, the Khazars effectively stopped the Arab advance into eastern Europe at the passes across the Caucasus Mountains, at about the same time Charles Martel was pushing the Arabs beyond the Pyrenees. Without those successes the balance between the Christian world and the Islamic one would overwhelmingly have weighed in the favour of the latter.

The infiltration of the Arab cultural influence in eastern Europe was but partially attenuated, and it materialized not only through the conversion of some communities to Islam, but also through getting some privileged positions in the caravan trade. Khazaria, a polity in which most inhabitants were Turanian pagans, was the target of missions from both the Caliphate and Byzantium. However, the confrontation between Christianity and Islamic did not lead to the conversion to either one of the two world religions, since the Khazar elites eventually chose to convert to Judaism.¹