

# THE UNION OF THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES, RUSSIA AND THE PROBLEM OF BASSARABIA

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Bessarabia and the Romanian-Russian relations in the context of achieving the Union of the Romanian Principalities is a subject not to be exhausted in a few pages. It raised the interest of the pre-war Romanian historiography and we mention in that respect the studies of I. Nistor, Al. Boldur, N. Iorga, Șt. Ciobanu, Gh. I. Brătianu, a.o. A special mention deserves Al. Boldur's work, *La Bessarabie et les relations russo-roumaines*. Of course, other important contributions to our subject could also be mentioned here. Those would not change much of the perception that the most important studies concerning Bessarabia, belonging to Romanian historians, were worked out between the two wars, as in the communist times Bessarabia, was, for a long period, an untouchable subject. That does not mean that it was completely ignored, but it is also a fact as to the history of Bessarabia and its belonging to the Romanian space almost exclusively Romanian authors of the diaspora discussed the matter, those from inside the country treating the question only superficially and only in the context of the events which marked its destiny: 1812–1856–1878–1918–1940–1941–1944.

Coming back to our subject, *i.e.*, the Romanian-Russian relations in the problem of Bessarabia, we think that some items are necessary to be made clear. The first of them refers to the documentary ground: even though lots of articles and studies, works of monographic type, etc. were published, only very few sources from the Romanian archives were edited, being preferred to those of Russian descent, a fact which makes an exhaustive historiographic approach impossible. Another specification refers to the methodology, taking into account the dimension of the subject. We aim at discussing only one issue and, specifically, the methods used by Russia, which only had losses after the Treaty of Paris (1856), including territories – and we only mention the south of Bessarabia to react towards the union of the Romanian Principalities as an international matter and the dimension by which the problem of Bessarabia comes to be a constituent of “the Romanian question” during mid-19th century.

The stipulations of the treaty of Paris concerning the Romanian Principalities are known, but also those referring to Russia. The former included the maintaining of the

Ottoman suzerainty, the guarantee of the Great Powers, expelling of any exclusive protection (that was for Russia), of any private right of encroachment, independent and national administration, liberty of religion, of laws, trade, navigation, revision of the Organic Regulations, for which a special commission was to be made, gathered in Bucharest which would suggest the grounds of the future organization, two Ad-hoc Assemblies to express the desires of the country which were to be exposed at a Conference of the Great Powers in Paris, a conference meant to give a final decision which was going to be communicated to the Principalities by means of a *hatisherif* (Sublime Porte decree bearing the Sultan's seal), any military intervention in the Principalities was forbidden without prior agreement between the warrant Powers, the evacuation of the occupied territories being done after exchanging the instruments of ratification.

In what concerns Russia, the most important decisions of the Congress were: giving up of the southern part of Bassarabia in the favour of Moldavia, and the loss of the Danube mouths, neutralization of the Black Sea, their forbidding to have military marine and building fortifications on the Black Sea shores, the principle of closing the straits during the periods of peace, removing of the exclusive protectorship of Russia over the Romanian Principalities and their replacement with the system of collective warrant.

The Congress of Paris and the Treaty of peace established on that occasion (March 30, 1856) promoted an idea of a special type, appreciated as an innovation in the international relations: the principle of nationalities and the consulting of the people's will. The union of the Romanians into one state could not be left out of the preoccupations of the European diplomacy at the moment when it officially recorded on its working agenda the revision of the status of the Principalities. But the main reason for promoting the idea of the union at the table of negotiations and finding a solution belongs, undoubtedly, to the Romanians. Around and during the Congress of peace, the Romanian emigration, together with the representatives of the national Party in the country had a vast and sustained activity in the favour of creating the Romanian national state, reaching up to demanding full independence and the unification of all Romanian provinces.

The creation of the Romanian national state was seen by the European diplomacy as the most efficient solution of protection of the Ottoman Empire and raising a barrier in the way of the Russian expansionism. Napoleon III, and the French politicians, supporters of the principle of nationalities and, implicitly, protagonists in the struggle to create a Romanian national state, had to make some concessions to Russia. These concessions had yet a limit, as is very clearly shown from a letter of the French government from 1856, about reorganizing the Romanian Principalities: "The Black Sea was closed to Russians, now the Danube must be closed as well; the way of reaching that purpose is the Union of Principalities, which makes one nation, a union which would lead to making a state under the suzerainty

of the Porte and protected by the European public right.”<sup>1</sup> On March 7, 1856 the Minister for Foreign Affairs Walewski, in a letter addressed to Clarendon, affirmed in very determined terms that no peace would be solid or long-lasting without mentioning the union and independence of the Romanian Principalities.

The Congress of peace in Paris from 1856, beside discussing the situation of the Principalities as a very important element of the Eastern crisis, revealed a new positioning in the system of alliances constituted during the war. The two above mentioned camps, unionist and anti-unionist, were made up not on the ground of the affective options favourable to the idea of the Union, which became due to the Romanians, an international problem, but mostly on the game of interests governing the Powers in the years following the end of the military conflict. Differences of opinions and interests manifested during the Congress towards “the principle of the Union” will continue openly even after it, during the debates of the European Commission in Bucharest, and also behind the scene, on the occasion of the elections for the Ad-hoc Assemblies. On June 12, 1857, Ch. Morny, the ambassador of France in Russia, after a discussion with Chancellor Gorchakov about how the members of the European Commission would interpret the letter and the spirit of the Treaty of Paris, sent to the minister for Foreign Affairs Walewski some information very significant in the problem of the attitude of the Austrian government about the Romanian question, information obtained through the representative of Russia in Vienna, Budberg. The latter, after a meeting with Count Buol, reported the obvious interest of the Austrian cabinet to the daily subject, the Minister for Foreign Affairs admitting that “the problem of the Principalities is of a direct importance for Austria, it is for it an affair of existence”<sup>2</sup>. The real meaning of that interest, in the view of the Austrian diplomat, was fundamented on “the fact that the Principalities cannot conceive the Union without a foreign Prince and without an absolute independence towards the Porte”<sup>3</sup>.

Worried of the appearance, near their own borders, of an independent national state, a point of attraction for the Romanians from the Empire and a contaminating example for the movements of national emancipation, the Austrians were the most dangerous enemies of the Union. Their machinations were directed to the achievement of a real anti-unionist international plot which led to falsifying the elections for the Ad-hoc Assembly in Moldavia<sup>4</sup>. The matter in itself was predictable if one took into account, among others, the threat made by the same Austrian minister for the Foreign Affairs. “I told Mr. Bourqueney – Buol affirmed –

<sup>1</sup> *Acte și documente*, III, p. 114–115.

<sup>2</sup> Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques, Correspondance Politique, Russie, vol. 214, f. 230 și 249 (and on C.P. Russie); see D. Ivănescu, *Unirea Principatelor Române*, in *M.M.B.*, an LXV, nr. 1, ianuarie–februarie 1989, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> C.P. Russie, vol. 214, f. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Leonid Boicu, *Diplomația europeană și triumful cauzei române (1856–1859)*, Iași, 1978, p. 155–185.

that if count Walewski wants to promise me to abstain and not have such a firm attitude in the problem of the Union, I myself promise not to take position, but if he continues to try to influence the population, contrary to the spirit of the Treaty of Paris, I shall consider myself justified to struggle against that influence by the same means. *Austria has here too much interest to remain a passive spectator*"<sup>5</sup>.

The Austrian-Turkish machinations in Moldavia, made in close cooperation with *caimacam* Vogoride, started to have effects, both in the interior and abroad. One of them consisted in straining the international situation, the countries which embraced the idea of Union finding themselves, due to the suggestion of France, to break their diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, if the latter did not decide to cancel the elections. On July 15/27, 1857, a telegram sent by Walewski to the French ambassadors advised them "to suggest to their colleagues (diplomats) from Russia, Prusia and Sardinia to go up to threatening the Porte with breaking relations"<sup>6</sup>. Ten days later an Austrian army corps was ordered to head for the Principalities, and units of the Russian army were gathered at the border with Moldavia<sup>7</sup>. The most important of the consequences was, yet, the French-English meeting at Osbourne in August 6–10, 1857, between Queen Victoria and Emperor Napoleon III. A meeting in which *the Romanian problem* was a priority during discussions, and the two sovereigns, "animated by a spirit of conciliation which had to be introduced in the international relations", decided, after a series of "reciprocal concessions"<sup>8</sup>, as Walewski affirmed, to cancel the elections in Moldavia.

The Osborne meeting stirred vivid comments at the time and even later, both the contemporaries of the event and those preoccupied with its studying expressing different theories, more or less grounded, about the compromise reached by the two Powers in order to achieve a common viewpoint because, as known, the dialogue was not materialized by the signature of any document by the two parts. It is certain that for Russia Osborne meant a sign of alarm, a potential danger of its diplomatic approaches meaning a rapprochement to France. That is the reason why Chancellor Gorchakov did all his best to make possible a meeting between Alexander II and Napoleon III in September 25, 1857, in Stuttgart, an occasion used in order that any misunderstanding derived from the Osborne meeting be removed. Satisfied with the results of that meeting, the Chancellor would later affirm to a French diplomat the following: "Count Walewski sees this agreement like myself; we made an agreement in Stuttgart about the problems preoccupying us and I like to believe that this agreement will be a long-lasting one, as it is today. Anyhow, I have daily new evidence that the Government in Paris also wishes to develop a policy like ours."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> C.P. Russie, vol. 214, f. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, f. 292–293.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, f. 319–322.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, f. 341.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, vol. 215, f. 287.

Russia, defeated in the war, wishing to dismember the alliance hostile to her, to attract the sympathy of some of the victorious and, henceforth, to repair some of its lost prestige, tried an agreement with France. Because of that, at congresses and conferences after the postwar period, in the European Commission sent to Bucharest or at the diplomatic meetings in Constantinople, its representatives supported Napoleon III's policy about the Romanian Principalities, mainly on the main point, that of the Union of two Romanian countries. The rapprochement of Russia to France is proved, once again, by the secret treaty of March 3, 1859, and later by the Protocol made on July 8, 1862, by which the two Powers obliged themselves to collaborate at the Conference in Constantinople, in order to diminish the danger of a Turkish occupation in Serbia and obtain that the population of Turkish descent of that country be subjected to local jurisdiction. The political relations established by Russia with France, in regard with the Romanian Principalities, respected the backgrounds imposed by Napoleon III, but not leaving Russia in total submission to them. Moreover, as historian T.W. Riker commented, Gorchakov's country "stayed in expectation only to see on which side lay its own interest"<sup>10</sup>.

The new elections from Moldavia resulted, as expected, in the overwhelming victory of the Unionists. The works of the two Ad-hoc Assemblies were opened on 4 and 19, respectively, of October 1857, both adopting the same desires: autonomy, union, a foreign prince, representative government, and neutrality of the Principalities. The intensity and power of the mass movement favourable to the Union, an effect of the participation of the whole people, meant a real surprise for the European society. The adoption of the unionist motions by the two national Assemblies meant a first accomplishment which had to be let known to the European governments. Referring to the elections for the Ad-hoc Assemblies in Moldavia and Wallachia in the report of October 12, 1857 sent to Buteniev, the Tzar's ambassador in Constantinople, Basily, the Russian representative in the European Commission emphasized the role of the revolutionaries from 1848 in the elections and pointed out that "the Wallachian Divan is in the totality of its members made up of exiled from 1848". Moreover, the Russian diplomat appreciated that the events occurring in the Romanian Principalities "offer an analogy to what had happened in 1789 in France"<sup>11</sup>.

"By not signing the treaty of peace of Paris – affirms the historian V.N. Vinogradov, who studied the correspondence between Gorchakov and the representative of Russia in Paris, Kiselev, the Russian government intended to change it", to regain what it had lost and "above all, to re-establish the rights of Russia on the Black Sea"<sup>12</sup>. But that could not be done when being confronted with

<sup>10</sup> T.W. Riker, *Cum s-a înfăptuit România. Studii unei probleme internaționale, 1856–1866*, București, f.a., p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> C. P. Russie, vol. 215, f. 185.

<sup>12</sup> V. N. Vinogradov, *Rossia, i obiedinenie Rumânschih Kneajestv*, Moskva, 1961, p. 88–90.

the French-English-Austrian coalition, and the only solution for Russia to solve it was by undermining it from the inside of the coalition; since for Tzarism England was the number one adversary in the Balkans, at the Baltic Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Pacific, and Austria was then not close to Russia, the only Power left accessible for Russia was France. So, here is how the union of the Romanian Principalities came to be a meeting point for the two Powers. The Russian option favourable to the union resulted from the encouragement of Paris for a rapprochement between France and Russia too, since Napoleon III needed the alliance with England, but that alliance did not offer him many advantages, and the French political circles considered it advantageous to support Russia in order to counterbalance the English influence in the Southeast of Europe and the Near East. Russia, in its turn, observed with great satisfaction that at the Congress of peace in Paris, France made efforts and succeeded in imposing decisions favourable to Petersburg: preservation of the fortifications on the Caucasian coast, evacuation of the Austrians from the Romanian Principalities, rectification of the Danubian border, etc. By exposing these arguments it is obvious that the union of the Romanian Principalities meant a happy solution for a French-Russian rapprochement in many disputed issues.

From these arguments it clearly results that the main object of preoccupation of the Tzarist diplomacy was not merely the destiny of the Romanian Principalities, but mainly the future of the Russian influence here and in the Southeast of the continent. From the estimations of Petersburg – affirmed by Gorchakov in his letter of October 6/18, 1856 to Budberg: “our opinions in the problem of the union depend on the circumstances it will be exposed in”<sup>13</sup> – the position of the Tzarist Empire was to be shaped according to the degree new steps were made on the way of giving up the harmful consequences for Russia of the Treaty of Paris.

As known, the Conference of Paris of the representatives of the Powers who signed the Treaty of peace decided on January 6, 1857, that Austria should remove its troops out of the Principalities till March 30, the same year, which was done. The Austrians conditioned the evacuation of the Romanian Principalities on the decision of delimitation of the border with Bassarabia. But for all the implicated parts the first priority was the mentioned evacuation. In secret instructions, sanctioned by the Tzar, to his officers from the commission of delimitation of the border, it was very clearly mentioned that “our main purpose is to clear the Principalities of the Austrian troops and the Black Sea and Bosphorus of the English ships”<sup>14</sup>. The delimitation of the border of Bassarabia became a European problem just because it meant a confrontation of the Powers who intended to be exclusively preponderant in the region. France supported Russia in these disputes trying, by these means, to attract it. Historian François Charles-Roux related that “between France and England everything is a matter of conflict: Bolgrad (that is the

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99–101.

<sup>14</sup> Leonid Boicu, *România în relațiile internaționale*, Iași, Editura Junimea, 1980, p. 152.

delimitation of the border of Bassarabia), the Island of Snakes, the Danube Delta, the Principalities, the Suez Canal. Born during the Bolgrad affair, the resentment referring to the Principalities takes day by day more and more troubling dimensions.”<sup>15</sup> The truth is that the English-French disputes had not Bolgrad as a starting point, the problem of the delimitation of the border of Bassarabia being another component of “the Romanian problem”. The Conference of Paris on January 6, 1857, made England and Austria win, Bolgrad being attributed to Moldavia, a fact which made the two western Powers become closer.

One of the most important problems of the period was the so-called “question of the Danube”, a matter of international interest, which included not only the riparian states, as was natural, but also the Great Powers of Europe on the whole. Economic interests were at stake, resulted from the role of the Danube in the commercial exchanges, but also political interests closely related to the Oriental crisis. The idea of removing Russia from the Danube belonged to Austria, and was successful, Russia stopping for over 20 years to be riparian to the great river. Taking into account the whole year 1857, the Austrian diplomat Hübner concluded that the delimitation of the border of Bassarabia, the so-called question of Bolgrad, the Neufchatel affair, organizing the Danubian Principalities and the regulation of the Danube navigation “fill this year and occupy the diplomacy of the Great powers”<sup>16</sup>.

The events occurred between 1857–1858 made Russia pass into the camp of the countries favourable to the union, but it is obvious that such a decision was determined by reasons of political opportunity, Russia, as could be seen from all exposed by now, did not intend to obey the decisions of the Congress of peace of 1856, and all its activities were directed to the revocation of the restrictive stipulations established by that congress. The Russian programme became possible in an interval of two decades when, after the Congress of Berlin, in 1878, the last stipulation, referring to the south of Bassarabia, was removed.

<sup>15</sup> François Charles-Roux, *Alexandre II, Gortchakoff et Napoléon III*, III<sup>e</sup> éd., Paris, 1913, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Leonid Boicu, *România în...*, p. 155.