

BESSARABIA AND BUKOVINA – FROM THE GREAT UNION TO EUROPEAN MEMBERSHIP

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Abstract

Even though Bessarabia and Bukovina were the first provinces to join the Romanian Kingdom in 1918, today all of Bessarabia and part of Bukovina are separated from the country. At the risk of walking the well-trodden path on a topic the readers may be familiar with, this paper aims to formulate a series of assumptions and general comments about the Great Union. This risk is well worth taking since I. I. C. Brătianu's warning that "history holds some truths which, unrepeated, will be forgotten" is worth heeding.

At the end of the First World War, and in the context where empires such as the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian ones were crumbling, new states emerged such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, the Serbian and Croatian and Slovenian kingdoms (later to become Yugoslavia). Other countries such as Romania or Greece completed their national unity. Thus, without necessarily being a singular event aimed against a particular state, the Romanian Union is an integral part of a wider phenomenon taking place in a vast region between the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic Sea and against a background of political and social transformations in Europe at the end of the Great War.

Keywords: Bessarabia, Bukovina, the Great Union, historical legitimacy.

A country's national holiday is a perpetual source of satisfaction for its citizens and a responsibility for its rulers. To the historian, the occasion refers to a number of his functions: apart from his qualified position of the nation's "living memory" by evoking the forefathers who authored the celebrated event, he also studies the founding act of his community and gives meaning and context to a historical evolution. From this last perspective, the topic at hand represents the presumably sad part of the Great Union. Even though Bessarabia and Bukovina were the first provinces to join the Romanian Kingdom in 1918, today all of Bessarabia and part of Bukovina are separated from the country. At the risk of walking the well-trodden path on a topic the readers may be familiar with, this paper aims to formulate a series of assumptions and general comments about the Great Union. This risk is well worth taking since I. I. C. Brătianu's warning that "history holds some truths which, unrepeated, will be forgotten" is worth heeding.

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The symbol of the Great Union

The phrase “the Great Union of December 1st, 1918” is a largely simplifying mass-media construct. It is a historian’s professional duty to reaffirm the fact that the Great Union of 1918 was a cumulation of historical moments that included the addition, in turn, of Bessarabia (March/April), Bukovina (November), and Transylvania (December 1st). Therefore, the 1st of December 1918 must be construed as the closure point of a process that unfolded over that year when the First World War was ending. At the same time, we must emphasize that Romania is one of the few countries which associate the national day with their political unity. Kingdoms generally hold their national day to represent the time when they celebrate their ruler’s anniversary or coronation, and many countries evoke their independence or a glorious revolution on that day. To the Romanian people, the idea of national unity is the very essence of their modern history, especially after 1859 – the year of the Little Union. The concept was understood as a rejection of the divided history the Romanian Principalities had had up to that point, and the people’s desire to have a national community and a sense of Europeanness. From this point of view, December 1st prevails over other significant moments in Romania’s historical evolution – i.e., January 24th, May 9th or 10th and so on, as it cumulates several meanings and symbols which resonate with the Romanian society as a whole. So, the discussions on maintaining the national day as December 1 are useless and counterproductive. The Romanians who journeyed to Alba Iulia in the winter of 1918, on foot and in carts, to participate in the Great Assembly and to validate the birth of a new society did not mind the temperature!

The European context

It was the hardships that Romanians endured in their multi-century history, and their dependence of various stakeholders of the European political environment that generated the constant comparison to Europe, both culturally and politically. From politicians to simple citizens, the question “what will Europe say?” often gave away a small society, fearful and preoccupied by its own survival. But the concern of the Romanian elite to define a Romanian nationhood in its relationship to Europe signalled the start of the country’s integration in the European civilization, the formal adaptation of a language and a model of action that would make Romanians appear trustworthy, articulate, and proud members of the European family. The shaping of the modern Romanian state towards the end of the 19th century followed a pattern similar to that of the German and Italian states and a parallel process, albeit at a different pace. The similarities that can be made into their historical evolution are more significant than the differences, even in what regards marginal phenomena such as the development of urban communities.

For example, a comparison between the cities of Iași (Romania) and Turin (Italy) shows that they both lost their status of country capital and their importance decreased after the political union – with the difference that the city of Turin was granted an important financial support reflected in its opulent architecture. To sum up, the 1918 union was a process comparable to what happened in the central and eastern parts of Europe. At the end of the First World War, and in the context where empires such as the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian ones were crumbling, new states emerged such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, the Serbian and Croatian and Slovenian kingdoms (later to become Yugoslavia). Other countries such as Romania or Greece completed their national unity. Thus, without necessarily being a singular event aimed against a particular state, the Romanian Union is an integral part of a wider phenomenon taking place in a vast region between the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic Sea and against a background of political and social transformations in Europe at the end of the Great War.

Historical legitimacy

In full enthusiastic swing after the 1918 Union, a number of politicians, diplomats, and intellectuals claimed (some do even today) that the Romanians' action represented a historically given, legitimate in itself. In their view, only the ignorant or the ill-wishing would doubt the entitlement of the Romanian nation over the land where the Romanians had been living, or their legitimate aspirations for unity, independence or sovereignty. Still, the controversy still exists to the day in both public and academic circles. In the dynamic political and ethnic landscape of Europe, many nations have difficulty demonstrating their historical right over the space where they live now, or at least some parts of it. As an ancient European population characterized by historical continuity and by a specific development of the political forms of the state, the Romanians legitimately refer to their own territory which largely corresponds to the one defined in the document of the Great Union and recognized in the treaties of the Paris Conference (1919-1920). Transylvania was the cradle where the Romanian nation and people were formed, whereas Bukovina and Bessarabia were an integral part of the medieval state of Moldavia. The fortresses on the Dniester River clearly indicate the territorial borders that needed defending against the foreigners who threatened these lands.¹

The ethnic component strengthens the historical legitimacy of the Romanians' Union. Regardless of the political colour, all the censuses conducted in the 19th and early 20th century in Transylvania, Bukovina or Bessarabia, regions

¹ A simple analysis of the way the medieval military fortifications are positioned in the Romanian territories can provide significant clues. The fact that fortresses erected by Moldavian rulers are still found on the borders of Bessarabia and Bukovina as part of an intricate defence system speaks volumes. The White Fortress, Hotin, and Soroca represent a mirrored display of the fortresses of Neamț and Suceava on the west border of medieval Moldavia.

which were under Austro-Hungarian or Russian occupation, revealed the fact that the Romanians were the majority population. This fact continued despite some consistent policies of denationalization and oppression implemented by the state's institutions, by the administration, the school, or the church. Forced migration to the Kingdom or America (especial in the 19th century), along with internal colonization, showed how much the imperial authorities wanted to change the ethnic ratio in the Romanian Provinces, but also the Romanians' historical resilience as they continued to remain the most populous community even under these policies.²

European geopolitics caused the history of Central and Eastern Europe to be a rather turbulent affair, with rare episodes of respite and institutional growth. Large states, like Poland or Hungary, but also smaller ones including Serbia or Bulgaria (to only list some in Romania's vicinity) were missing for centuries on the European map. All this time, the Romanians preserved their statehood even with a very reduced sovereignty. The political statement of the state's existence was made mid-19th century by the recognition of the first two Principalities, which helped form modern Romania at a time when nations larger than Romania (the Polish) merely survived through their exiled intellectual elites.

So, even if this is a process typical of the 19th century and early 20th century, the Great Union of 1918 was the consequence of a long historical process of asserting a national identity and entitlement over the territory legitimately owned by the Romanians.

The representative character of the Great Union

A generous topic of debate for politicians albeit less so for historians, the representativeness of the 1918 Union was not an unusual pattern in the European picture. Largely, the states which obtained their independence or their unity in Central and Eastern Europe underwent a similar process. The National Council of Chişinău, the General Congress of Cernăuţi and the National Assembly of Alba Iulia were all bodies formed of Romanian representatives but which generally expressed requests of the social groups they represented, which requests made a reference to the organization of a new society together with the Romanians from the Old Kingdom. The representativeness of the Union consists not only of a wider recognition of the interests of the majority population, but also of the integration of ethnic minorities in the framework of the new political and social project. More often than not, the categories which became an ethnic minority within the Romanian State post-Union adhered to the Union's modern principles. The credential books where the Transylvanian population designated their delegates to

² Dumitru Drăghicescu, *Marea Unire a românilor cu românii. 1918. Banatul și Transilvania, Bucovina și Basarabia* (Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 2001), 186 (for Bukovina), and 236 (for Bessarabia).

Alba Iulia reveal a strong sense of national solidarity and illustrate the representativeness of the Union. In that complex context, the political and intellectual elites acted decisively on behalf of the people, who followed very closely in a glorious moment of affirmation of the national spirit.

The plebiscitary character of the Great Union

The discussion about the legitimacy of the Union as an international political act looks contradictory between those who defend the Romanian project and those who contest it. The wide consultation of a region's inhabitants had been evoked at the end of the war in various diplomatic circles in the context of the debates around the organization of a sustainable peace and new borders. But in the post-war setting, deeply marked by political, economic and social turmoil, such a plebiscite was utopian. However, the 100,000 participants in Alba Iulia who upheld the union of Transylvania with Romania, those representatives that united the Romanians willing to salute the act of December 1st, the impressive adhesion of about one million military people from the front line to the acts in Chişinău, Cernăuţi, and Alba Iulia, the support rallies in the Old Kingdom – all this significant contribution of the political bodies and the mass media in defining the Union process demonstrate it was the Romanians' firm will to build a future together within the framework of the same state. The representatives of the non-Romanian communities adhered to the same principles with a view to partaking a democratic life and a good standard of living. There was no plebiscite – which would have been impossible to organize in the very complicated context at the end of the Great War but the ample manifestation of national solidarity bestows a largely consultative status to all the acts around, and of the Union.

The role of the cultural and political elites in achieving the Union

The national movement that made possible the 1918 Union was articulated by the action of the Romanian political and cultural elites in Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia prior to the war and then later in the favourable context of the fall of the great empires around the Kingdom of Romania. It often was a pluri-party approach with its fair share of gaps but which did structure the Great Union. Despite later partisan discussions,³ the Romanian professional elites and

³ For example, on Bessarabia, Ştefan Ciobanu believes that the premises of the Union should not be looked for in the local factors or the propaganda carried out on the other side of the Prut River, but in the revolutionary Russia and in the struggle of the nations under Russian domination to break free (Ştefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei. Studiu şi documente cu privire la mişcarea naţională din Basarabia în anii 1917-1918*, f.l., f.a., XVI). He considers that the national movement in Bessarabia did not have a specific body of leaders, but was a profound turmoil of the entire people, a collective action. (Ştefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei*, XXXVII). In his book *Istoria Basarabiei*, Ion Nistor

sub-elites (priests, teachers) took over the power and achieved the union with the Old Kingdom on behalf of the Romanian nation, which they would have been unable to officially question in advance. But the large majority of Romanians followed their representatives enthusiastically and with high hopes for a new political society called *Great Romania*.

The political leaders from Chişinău (Vasile Stroescu, Pavel Gore, Pan. Hallipa, Teofil Ioncu and Ion Inculeţ, later Constantin Stere) and from Cernăuţi (Ion Nistor, George Popovici and Iancu Flondor) had a decisive influence by outlining a project and a political programme and by channelling the diffuse energies of the people towards the Union with the mother country.⁴

The reverence to the Romanian elites from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania must be considered together with a recognition of the role the elites had in the Old Kingdom. Conservatives and Liberals alike supported the previous process of defining the Romanians' national identity outside the borders of the Old Kingdom and had an important influence on Romania participating in the First World War, aware of the historical opportunity to be reunited with their brothers who were living under foreign occupation. As Barbu Ştefănescu-Delavrancea stated in front of the Romanian Academy at 2/15 September 1916, "it was not for the sake of conquest that we are accepted the chaos and this carnage, but for our freedom. It is not what isn't ours that we want, it is the union with our brothers from Ardeal, Banat, and Bukovina."⁵ These political elites of

claims that the Moldavian soldiers had the main role in the national movement because they had had the opportunity to meet with their counterparts in the Kingdom and from the other historical provinces, and thus they were the first to uphold the national cause. C. Kirîţescu has a similar view as he claims that the separation of Bessarabia from Russia was first discussed in military meetings (Ştefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei*, XII). In his turn, Petru Cazacu shows that the manifestations of Moldavian nationalism were first somewhat scattered and inconsistent but that they ripened in military circles only to be then taken over by the Moldavian National Party and the Iaşi-based Romanian government.

⁴ For Bessarabia today, see Ion Agrigoroaiei, *Basarabia de la unire la integrare* (Chişinău: Cartdidact 2007), 142 and the next. In the case of Bukovina, the political voices became more and more articulate on the matter of the national cause toward the end of the 19th century, which was reflected in the founding of the political society "Concordia," of journals such as "Revista politică" and "Gazeta Bucovinei," and then the Romanian National Party. When younger people joined the political ranks – i.e., Iancu Flondor and George Popovici, the political agenda sees new ideas such as promoting the Romanian language, rural educational programmes and popular banks. Iancu Flondor joined the organization called "Dieta Bucovinei" and on more than one occasion spoke about the Romanian character of the dukedom; in 1898 he proposed that Romanian be used in the official state documents (Marian Olaru, *Mișcarea națională a românilor din Bucovina la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului al XX-lea*, (Rădăuți: Septentrion, 2002), 153 and the next).

⁵ Barbu Dealvrancea, *Războiul și datoria noastră* (Bucharest: Carol Göbl, 1916), 27. Nicolae Iorga viewed the historical moment of joining the war as something the nation had been waiting for two centuries, "for which we have been toiling and writing, fighting and thinking" (Nicolae Iorga, *Războiul nostru în note zilnice*, vol. 2, 1916-1917, (Craiova: Editura Ramuri) 83). Also see Gheorghe Platon, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. 7, tom. II, *De la Independență la Marea Unire (1878-1918)*, (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2003), 420-422.

Liberal orientation (with Ionel Brătianu at the forefront) or various Conservative groups (a wide spectrum from Nicolae Filipescu and Take Ionescu to Alexandru Marghiloman) managed the phenomenon of the national rise of the Romanians from Bessarabia, Bukovina and Ardeal with tremendous wisdom, whether from near or far. Most of them had completed their education at various western universities,⁶ they were intellectuals by formation and their strategic aim had always been, ever since the revolution of 1848, to achieve a united Romanian nation within the borders of the same state. Thus, they demonstrated their ability to act in an unbiased manner with regard to the essential issues of the nation (even during the war in the effort to save the state and monarchy). The political effort was accompanied by the cultural one with many prestigious intellectuals such as Nicolae Iorga publicly promoting the idea of a union and organizing numerous meetings in the Romanian Provinces in the neighbouring empires, which opportunity contributed to the favourable attitude of both simple people and local leaders to all the acts of the Union.⁷

An important addition to this enumeration of the Romanian elites (active on both banks of the Prut River or in Bukovina and Ardeal) who contributed to the Union, is King Ferdinand himself, the *Union King*. Both from a national point of view – as he broke from his German roots and identified himself with the Romanian people’s aspirations of union – and from a democratic and social⁸ point of view (the electoral reform), the King conferred stability to the Union process and became the political pillar so much needed to the new construct.

The Church and the Union

Just like the discussion above about the elites, the discussion about the role of the Church must be carried out at two levels: the contribution of the Romanian churches in the territories under foreign occupation on the one hand, and that of the Church inside the Kingdom. Conceived not necessarily as an institution, but as a dedicated social and national body, the Orthodox Church had a significant role in preserving the Romanians’ national identity in Bessarabia and Bukovina, especially in the rural areas where the Romanian population was predominant. Many priests ended up in exile at the hand of the Tzarist authorities on grounds of supporting the

⁶ Gheorghe Iacob, *România în epoca modernizării (1859-1939). Towards a Modern Romania (1859-1939)*, (Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2013), 54-55.

⁷In Paris, Nicolae Bălcescu declared in 1847 that, “We cannot have any other aim but the national unity of all Romanians” (Cornelia Bodea, *1848 la Români. O istorie în date și mărturii*, vol. 1, (București: Editura Științifică și enciclopedică, 1982), 319).

⁸ The King had always been a keen supporter of the agrarian reform, one of the most important points in the unionist agenda of the Bessarabian leaders. At 17/30 March 1918 the King signed the letter to the Administrator of the Crown Estate in which he requested that lots of land from these properties be granted to the peasants so as to fulfil his promise made in July 1917.

Romanian cause.⁹ Also, after the revolutionary wave in Russia and the dissolution of the imperial administration, the Orthodox Church in Bessarabia intensified its support to the pro-unionist cause in the public space. The Union of the Moldavian priests, whose aim was to work for the spiritual liberation and enlightenment of the Moldavian nation, led by Archimandrite Gurie,¹⁰ and Protopriest Alexandru Baltaga, the Church's representative in the National Council, was the promoter of national emancipation.

In the kingdom, the Orthodox Church (and not only) participated in the war effort, as its mission was manifold: it ensured religious counselling for the soldiers, it offered social care services (caring for the wounded and the suffering) and it promoted the national cause. The Metropolitan church of Moldavia, the region where the country's administration had to retreat after the defeat suffered in the fall of 1916, was a steady moral, symbolic and material support for the Romanians. The Church organized five mobile hospitals where 90 monks and at least 20 nuns worked side by side with the Romanian Red Cross staff.¹¹ Several monasteries were practically converted to military hospitals.¹² When the government withdrew to the city of Iași, the very Metropolitan palace together with the adjacent buildings were opened to shelter the incoming refugees.¹³

With his sermons, and by his very presence in the midst of his parishioners who were struggling in disease and privations of the war and refuge, Metropolitan Pimen was a pillar of encouragement and an example of faith in the victory of the Romanian cause.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, he was called Metropolitan of the War and

⁹ See the case of Ion Rădulescu, sub-inspector with the Theological Seminary of Chișinău, and of Vasile P. Florov, teacher at the Eparchial School for girls (Boris Buzilă, *Din istoria vieții bisericesti din Basarabia (1812-1918; 1918-1944)*, (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române; Chișinău: Întreprinderea Editorial-Poligrafică Știința, 1996), 74). In Bessarabia, the editorial board of the journal *Luminătorul* fought for raising in its readership a sense of nationhood and promoted a national Church. See the case of Macarie Untul, priest and teacher at the Theological Seminary of Chișinău, member of the Committee for printing Romanian worship books, jailed for his activity (Buzilă, *Din istoria vieții bisericesti din Basarabia (1812-1918; 1918-1944)*, 71). In its turn, the clerical body from Bukovina represented a factor of resistance and a nuisance for the local authorities. Metropolitan Arcadie Ciupercovici was accused of disloyalty to the emperor by the Governor of Bukovina.

¹⁰ Buzilă, *Din istoria vieții bisericesti din Basarabia (1812-1918; 1918-1944)*, 91.

¹¹ Archimandrite Teoctist Stupcaru, "Activitatea Călugărilor din Eparhia Moldovei în timpul Războiului" in *Viața Monahală*, 1, no. 11-12, (January-February 1934): 319. According to Stupcaru, the head of the monk mission, the monks and nuns organized five mobile hospitals, and each of them cared for around 10,000-12,000 patients during the war, both soldiers and civilians (Stupcaru, "Activitatea Călugărilor," 319-320).

¹² Stupcaru, "Activitatea Călugărilor," 322. The list includes the monasteries of Neamț, Văratec, Râșca, Slatina, Vorona, Gorovei, Secu, Bistrița, Agapia and Agafton.

¹³ Pimen Georgescu, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Suceava, *Amintiri din Marele Război*, (Tipografia Monastirii Neamțu, 1920), 50-53.

¹⁴ Aurel Pentelescu and Gavriil Preda, *Mitropolitul Pimen Georgescu. Viața și înfăptuirile sale (1853-1934)*, *La 150 ani de la nașterea sa* (Ploiești: Printeuro, 2003), 101. In the context of the

of the unified of Romanian nation, a title now found on his tombstone at Provița de Sus (the county of Prahova).¹⁵ In his capacity of manager of the collective memory, grief and end-of-war joy, the Metropolitan requested all the priests under his authority to draw up a report on the events that had taken place in each of their parishes over the war years.

The army's role in creating the premises for the Union

The discussion about the role that the Romanian army played in the process of the Union is a sensitive one as there are still accusing voices against the military action that Romania took across the Prut River and in Bukovina. From a certain political point of view, the Romanian military presence in Bessarabia and Bukovina might cast a shadow on, if not legally invalidate, the Union acts in March/April and November 1918. The end-of-war context and the historical facts provide a good understanding of the role the military body played in those events. Both Army Corps 6 (led by General Ernest Broșteanu) which crossed into Bessarabia at 12/23 January 1918, and Division 8 (headed by General Iacob Zadik) – present in Bukovina in early November of the same year, had been summoned by the Romanians living under Bolshevik/Ukrainian pressure, direct physical threat, and the shadow of future national aggression i.e., annexing these former imperial provinces to other political entities (especially Ukraine).¹⁶ This was an outer projection of Romania as a safe-keeper of the legal social order and holder of democratic values. Therefore, the intervention of the Romanian army with the political process underway in Bessarabia and Bukovina was minimal.

The participation of the Romanian army in the Union process can also be discussed against the internal background. A characteristic of any modern state, the army was a cradle of Romanian citizenship and patriotism. Romania's involvement in the World War, described as the Union War or the "war for reuniting the Romanian nation,"¹⁷ validates the army's status of "school of the nation." Given

proclamations of the two unions, the Metropolitan Pimen wrote a special thanks prayer for the fulfilment of the national aspiration, which was published in the summer of 1919 in the Official Journal and read in all the churches across the country.

¹⁵ Pentelescu and Preda, 196.

¹⁶ For the moment when the Romanian army entered Bessarabia, see Vasile Arimia, Ion Ardeleanu, Constantin Botoran, *Cartea neamului. Marea Unire de la 1918. Documente istorice* (Bucharest: Globus, 1993), 78-79, with the assumed limits of the military action. For Bukovina, see Ion Nistor, *Istoria unirii Bucovinei cu România. 28 noiembrie 1918. Studii și documente*, (Bucharest, 1928) (new edition, Bucharest 1991), 483-384. The occupation by the Romanian army – led by General Moșoiu – of the Mureș zone in Transylvania had mostly military aims in accordance with the Entente's agenda. At no time did the Romanian army cross paths with the participants in the Alba Iulia Assembly.

¹⁷ See Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României. 1916-1919*, vols. 3, (Bucharest: România Nouă, 1922) (also see the third edition of 1989).

the difference of equipment and military experience between the Romanian army and its adversaries, the former demonstrated a high level of military technique and especially a sense of national awareness that supported the political cause. The toll of 800,000 victims is proof of the devotion and enormous sacrifice in those war years.

It must be emphasized that the Great Union was not made by the army; however, the Union acts of Chişinău and Cernăuţi would not have been possible but for the Romanian military presence in Bessarabia and Bukovina. And, generally speaking, the Union would not have lasted in the absence of direct military action. The sacrifice of the Romanian army during the Great War allowed for the fulfilment and defence of national statehood as of 1918.

The role of the city of Iaşi in the Union

In a marginal position at the beginning of the conflict – as the major political decisions were taken in the capital Bucharest and the palace of Sinaia –, the city of Iaşi (a prestigious cultural and academic hub) became the capital of the country at the end of 1916 when the royal family, the Romanian government and administration, along with part of the civil population, were forced to seek refuge here. In the following years, the city took on multiple roles: it became the political, administrative, and spiritual centre for the Romanian people. A war capital, the city was identified as an essential space of the final resistance, the place where Nicolae Iorga gave his famous speech at the National Theatre on 14/27 December 1916.¹⁸ This was also the place where Romanians had kept coming from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Ardeal to find unity. As they arrived in the Union Square (named after the famous Little Union) at 26 May/8 June 1917, a representative of the volunteers from Ardeal, Lieutenant Victor Deleu declared that, “it was our duty to come to you today, when you were going through such hard times on our behalf... Today we have become citizens of Romania, of a great Romania.”¹⁹ This was also this city where the national hope was reborn and a new society emerged, because

¹⁸ Nicolae Iorga wrote in the journal *Neamul românesc* (29 November 1916) that, “the city of Iaşi is a very symbol of national resistance, of a perpetual duty we will never forsake. The Romanian flag, bleeding out of its heroic wounds, was brought here and that is the leading star our soldiers follow when they struggle in battle. This is how we will see Iaşi, and not a mere refuge place” (Platon, *Istoria Românilor*, 467). The speech he gave at the National Theatre was truly impressive: “Wherever we are, however we find ourselves, we are determined to go all the way in our belief that we shall never allow, even in the face of the cruellest organization, that a people lose its right to live in the land where every inch was dearly paid for with the noblest blood.” The army had been defeated at that point, but was completely ready to “rise anew against its victors” in order to reclaim “our right in full. For this and nothing more.”

¹⁹ Ion Gheorghe Duca, *Amintiri politice*, vol. 3, (München: J. Dumitru, 1982), 206. In his speech, Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu replied with: “Welcome to this part of Romania, which from now on is a great part because Greater Romania is now here in Iaşi after our union.”

this is where the Parliament discussed the reforms and the political, social, and economic measures necessary to make the Romanian future a reality. This is where people saw the first glimpse of joy around the Union on the occasion of the celebratory rallies that welcomed the delegations from Chişinău, Cernăuţi, and Alba Iulia to announce the Union of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania. In our point of view, the statement that “Romania was born in Iaşi” is no exaggeration given the symbolic status of the city during the Unions of 1859 and 1918.

The Romanian spirit in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transylvania between the Wars

The process of political unification was a long one, and its legal basis was laid by the 1923 Constitution which provided a joint pre-requisite. One of the main challenges to the new state was adopting the agrarian reform in both Bessarabia and the Old Kingdom, a provision that had been requested in the Union Act of March 27th. The reform meant both an economic and social solution, and a strong sign to the Romanian population employed in agricultural occupations that the new government in Bucharest was caring for its interests. At the same time, granting property to the people consolidated their attachment to the new state and nation.

The administrative reform, adopted in June 1925, as well as the exceptional support given to all forms of education and the policies designed to fight illiteracy, were meant to form the new citizen of a united Romania. They were an important share of educational and cultural investments in Bessarabia as the central elites wanted to help the Romanians here to bridge the huge development gap opened by the previous policies of the Tzarist administration. For example, if in 1920/1921 there were 1747 schools out of which 1233 were Romanian; their number grew to almost 2500 by 1940 with an enrolment of around 350,000. At the same time, adult education was organized – between 1923 and 1924 there were 200 adult courses in Bessarabia.²⁰ In 1926 the Faculty of Theology was founded and the School of Agricultural Sciences became an academic institution in April 1933, both schools being established as Chişinău-based branches of the University of Iaşi, which constituted a supplementary encouragement for the Romanians in Bessarabia. Rector Traian Bratu said about opening the Faculty of Theology that “it is a good idea to create an outpost of the Romanian culture in the heart of Bessarabia to help the access to the European culture...”²¹

Student migration contributed to consolidating a Romanian national identity and the ties with the Mother Country. More than half of the 4,656 students of the Universities of Iaşi and Bucharest in the academic year 1921-1922 came from outside the Old Kingdom. In this context, the University of Iaşi played a special

²⁰ Agrigoroaiei, *Basarabia de la unire la integrare*, 266-267.

²¹ Agrigoroaiei, *Basarabia de la unire la integrare*, 269.

role at least through its geographical placement in the vicinity of the newly-joined regions. Aware of its role, the Iași-based Rector affirmed that “our University can proudly claim that it represents the most important laboratory in all of the Greater Romania, (but of course east of the Carpathian Mountains), for spiritual unity and for our citizens’ sense of nationhood within the natural borders of the Romanian State...”²²

In time, these policies made the inter-war period essential in the history of the two provinces, Bessarabia and Bukovina, leaving a vivid memory in the representations of their inhabitants generations over. The memory of Greater Romania, with everything it represented from a national and cultural perspective, contributed to preserving national identity to a degree that made it impossible to annihilate by the Communist doctrine, and it represented a prerequisite for tying and strengthening the bonds between the Romanians in Romania and those in Bessarabia and Bukovina after 1990. The long gap that had opened half a century ago was finally closed at the end of the Communist regime.²³

The loss of Bessarabia, North Bukovina, and the Herța region in 1940 had a dramatic effect on the Romanians in these parts. Apart from the population decrease – around 300,000 people are estimated to have crossed the border from Bessarabia to Romania to settle there – and the Soviet regime confiscating a large part of their livelihood,²⁴ the ordeal of the Romanians subject to the denationalization programme still remains a dark stain on our 20th century history.

Bessarabia, North Bukovina, and Romania today

The historical events of the past century show that, in dark times, Romania and its elite were caught rather unprepared at key moments. After the year 2000, despite the country joining NATO and the European Union, Romanian diplomacy,

²² Agrigoroaiei, *Basarabia de la unire la integrare*, 278.

²³ Around 150,000 people emigrated from Romania to the occupied territories (Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu and Ion Constantin, *Basarabia în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial (1939-1947)* (Iași: Institutul European, 1995), 208.

²⁴ According to the data presented to the Council of Ministers in October 1942 by the Board of the Public Estate Inventory, the value of the public estate taken by the Soviets was Lei 157,120,000,000 (for the same year, the budget of the Ministry of National Defence was Lei 18,727,500,000). The total value of the damages is difficult to assess because it was impossible to estimate the capital size of the private businesses operating in these territories at the time of occupation. This adds to the damages in agriculture – about Lei 161,000,000,000. Huge quantities of food and farming products were sent to the USSR (Dobrinescu and Constantin, *Basarabia în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial*, 209). As for North Bukovina, the public damages were estimated at 31,720,000,000. This sum must include the damages in agriculture of around Lei 5,578 million, out of which Lei 168 million is the value of the livestock confiscated by the Soviets, and Lei 2,276 million is the value of the industrial, banking, and commercial capital (Dobrinescu and Constantin, *Basarabia în anii celui de-al doilea război mondial*, 210).

unlike Hungary, Poland, or even Bulgaria, has displayed instances of incoherence, lack of promptness, and lack of political unity.²⁵

This weakness originates in the absence of a new national project. Romania is a member of Euro-Atlantic organizations with specific rights; under the circumstances, we must be aware that the issue of its borders will never be negotiated again. The international conferences and treaties, as well as the sacrifice of over 1,500,000 Romanians in both World Wars, should safeguard Romania against any threat. But at the same time, even though Romania is the largest country in Southeast Europe, many Romanians now live in places other than the state's territory, and the Romanian authorities and population have at least a moral obligation to them.

Romania has always supported the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in their efforts to join the European Union. This is the very solution to reunite the people by helping the two countries where Romanians from former Bessarabia and Bukovina still live to join the great political family called the European Union but, at the same time, Romania needs to nurture the relationship with these two states which are known to have hesitated on their path from East to West, even when they declared themselves pro-European and pro-Romanian.

Defining the national interest (including the relationship with the Romanians based in Bessarabia and Bukovina) and achieving internal political solidarity around it and the support of the civil society and the public opinion might bring up the advantages of Romania's placement in a meeting point between East and West, which could make Romania a model country for this part of Europe.

²⁵ See Gheorghe Iacob, "The Second Hundred Years' War (1914-2014). Geopolitical Implications for Romania," in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Winter 2014), 3-11.

