

THE RETURN OF BESSARABIA WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE COUNTRY – INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONDITIONS

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Abstract. Given that over the time, a great deal has been written - fully justified - about Bessarabia's history, I considered that there is no need to approach again some of the aspects that are too well known and dealt with scientific probity by those who dared to. We wanted to use the memory of other documents - especially those preserved in foreign archives - in order to outline, in the first place, the very special internal and external conditions in which the return of Bessarabia to Romania was made. Another aim is to demonstrate that the only ones who wanted the unity and fought for this purpose were just the Romanians, without any type of support from anyone, but obstacles and barriers.

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In 1812, 200 years since the annexation of Bessarabia by Tsarist Russia, I published a study¹ based on archive documents demonstrating that the act was intentional and possible due to the agreement of other great powers. Now, a century after the territory between Prut and Nistru returned in the natural boundaries of the Country, I considered appropriate, based on other documentary testimonies, to mark the event that opened both the way to fulfilling the national ideal and the completion of the process of Romania's unification that started in 1859.

Given that over the time, a great deal has been written - fully justified - about Bessarabia's history, I considered that there is no need to approach again some of the aspects that are too well known and dealt with scientific probity by those who dared to. We wanted to use the memory of other documents - especially those preserved in foreign archives - in order to outline, in the first place, the very special internal and external conditions in which the return of Bessarabia to Romania was made. Another aim is to demonstrate that the only ones who wanted the unity and fought for this purpose were just the Romanians, without any type of support from anyone, but obstacles and barriers.

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¹ Corneliu-Mihail Lungu, *The Tragedy of the Romanians in 1812, a premeditated act*, in "Anals", series on History and archeology, Academy of Romanians Scientists, vol. IV, no. 2, 2012, Bucharest, pp. 9-16

Despite the Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz victories, the situation on the battlefield and the evolution of the events in Russia during the second part of the year 1917 have influenced Romania's faith that found itself in a state of turmoil ascertained by the diplomacy of those times. A first remark in this respect comes from the report of the Belgian military attaché in Paris, I. Lambert, who reported on August 23/ September 5, 1917 that Germany was making efforts to "provoke a change of reign in Romania for the benefit of one of the Emperor's sons, if the military events allow him to conquer the entire Moldova"². Moreover, the Belgian military attaché concluded that Bessarabia was considered "a field for practicing hostile policy for their neighbors."³

About the intentions of the Central Powers and the danger that hung over Romania, reported the chargé d'affaires of **Switzerland**, in Romania, G. Boissier in September 1917. Based on some information obtained from "reliable sources", the Germans carried out strong concentration of troops in three areas of the Romanian battlefield: towards Siret, in the Oituz valley near Târgu Ocna and in Bucovina, in the northern part of Moldova.⁴ The author of the report was able to appreciate that when the Germans possessed enough forces and materials it would have been "possible to succeed in forcing the front and invading Moldova, especially if the Russians' competition remained equally problematic."⁵

Towards the end of 1917, the attitude of the Central Powers, with the aim to impose a so-called peace to Romania, turned into harsh pressure exerted especially on King Ferdinand in order to obtain a rectification of the border in favour of Austria. Edifying in this respect is the telegram sent by O. Czernin, the plenipotentiary minister of Austria-Hungary in Romania, on December 2, 1917, to G. Hohenlohe, the Austrian representative in Berlin. A first fact that is worth to remember is the intention of the Central Powers to carry "peace talks with Romania that were held **separately** from the Russian ones, in order to remain as isolated as possible"⁶. In the same time, O. Czernin considered that border modifications would have been easier to perform if the negotiations were made directly with King Ferdinand, who was threatened with the abolition of the dynasty.

At the beginning of 1918 the threats and pressure exerted on Romania became so harsh that even the Austro-Hungarian emperor, Carol the 1st, asked

² Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (în continuare A.N.I.C.), Colecția Microfilme Belgia, rola 20, cadrul 179 (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et du Commerce Extérieur, Corespondance générale).

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ *1918 la Români. Documente externe (1916-1918)*, vol. II, Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983, p. 1005

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ A.N.I.C., Colecția Microfilme Austria, rola 129, cadrul 189, Haus-Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, k. 1055

Wilhelm II in a telegram sent on the 3rd of February not to impose Romania "more difficult conditions than it was necessary"⁷. Nevertheless, as proven by the documents of the time, the attitude of the Central Powers has turned into direct attacks on the Romanian's nationality existence, as it was demonstrated by another telegram since February 14/27, 1918, sent by Saint-Aulaire, the French plenipotentiary minister in Romania, informing his Ministry of Foreign Affairs that O. Czernin used an aggressive tone towards the Romanian authorities, pointing out that: "If Romania does not obey it will be crushed in a month and it will disappear forever from the map of Europe."⁸ Even the Austro-Hungarian minister confirmed the gravity of the situation in his **Notes** drawn up after the meetings he had with King Ferdinand, in the same month of 1918, at Răcăciuni. After the sovereign was asked to accept the peace "**immediately** (underlined in text) under the conditions agreed by the four Allied Powers, of which not a jot could be changed", Czernin emphasized that there is no other way, because "sooner Romania cannot have any type of ammunition and if it resumes the battle the Kingdom and the dynasty will cease to exist within six weeks at the most".⁹

Naturally, facing such unacceptable conditions, the Romanian authorities had to react accordingly, despite the harsh circumstances imposed by both the war and the out-of-control events in Russia. From the same reports made by Czernin it follows, according to his words, that "The King didn't make any objection", but he noted that "the conditions are extremely tough"¹⁰.

At that time Romania had politicians, military men of value and moral strength that faced the pride of the enemies and defended the national being. Besides Ion I.C. Brătianu, to whom we owe Romania, there have been other outstanding personalities who contributed to the assertion of identity and the realization of the supreme ideal. Proof is the document since 11/24, February 1918, of the German delegate for the peace talks in Bucharest, Richard von Kühlmann, that was communicating to the German Foreign Ministry the results of the talk with General Al. Averescu. At the meeting attended also by O. Czernin, the Romanian general replied that: "Romania, in a situation of coercion without its fault, because of the collapse of its allies, especially of Russia, can only sign honourable peace". And by honourable peace, Averescu meant only "the one in which a territorial *statu-quo* is preserved."¹¹

The difficult situation of Romania, implicitly of Bessarabia at the end of 1917 and the beginning of 1918, was due not only to the attitude of the Central

⁷ *1918 la Români...*, p. 1062

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 1076

⁹ A.N.I.C., Colecția Microfilme Austria, rola 221, cadrele 679-680, Haus-Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Arhiv, k. 520

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹¹ *1918 la Români...*, p. 1066

Powers and to the deployment of military operations on the front, but also, to great extent, to the evolution of the events in Russia unjustifiably believed to be favourable to the fight for national liberation of the nations under the Czarist rule. In fact, although national movements have intensified, the Russian government has tried to influence those movements and orient them towards the model of the Bolshevik revolution. A well informed and event analyst proved to be the head of the French Military Mission in Romania, reporting to his superiors in November 1917 about: "the very serious situation Romania was facing as a result of the latest events in Russia."¹² In his opinion it was dangerous that "the Bolsheviks and the Provisional Government treats with the enemy a separate peace whose conclusion would bring Romania the final catastrophe".¹³ Unfortunately, as it emerges from a secret correspondence between Clemenceau and General Berthelot, it was brought up the possibility to "disarm the Romanian army or dissolve it."¹⁴

Appreciating the gravity of the situation, the French government communicated to the head of the French Military Mission in Romania that: "there can be no question of discharging Romanian army. Dissolving a force that was successfully put together would mean sacrificing Romania's future."¹⁵ Moreover, the French authorities appreciated that if the army was forced to evacuate the Romanian territory for a while, it would have had to continue fighting in Bessarabia, especially because the French government declared that it did not recognize any power in Russia, who deals with the enemy¹⁶.

At these critical moments, the Romanians needed such encouragement because, as Major Stanley Washburn, the American press correspondent for Romania and Russia said, they had lost their entire agricultural area, the entire industry, and now they own no more than 15% of their country, and at this point this part is threatened too."¹⁷ In such a context, the Belgian plenipotentiary of Rome, van der Steen, rightly observes that: "Surrounded by liar enemies, in an occupied territory and with unsure friends, the Romanian is abandoned."¹⁸

The Bolshevik red plague had become, especially for Bessarabia, the greatest threat, since under the mask of "the right to self-determination of the nations until separation" the intention to place them in a Russian Federative Republic was hidden, which proved that only the political colour had changed, not the old Tsarist mores. Besides, it was precisely those Bolsheviks who had recognized the principle of self-determination that proved to be the fiercest adversaries of the

¹² A.N.I.C., Colecția Microfilme Franța, rola 176, cadrul 28 (Archives Historiques Militaires Vincennes, Ministère de la Guerre, Etat Major de l'Armée)

¹³ *Ibidem*

¹⁴ *1918 la Români...*, p. 1018

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 1019

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 996

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 1003

separation of Bessarabia. More seriously, as it results from a telegram sent on January 23, 1918 from Petersburg by the diplomatic agent of Serbia in Russia, the plan of the Bolsheviks was to provoke "a revolution in Romania and its entry, together with Bessarabia, as a unique Romanian republic, in the composition of the Russian Federative Republic."¹⁹

Compared to the actions in the other provinces, the Bessarabian national movement was considered by the provisional Bolshevik government a greater danger, with the prospect that after separation it would unite with Romania. Among Russia's plans and manoeuvres, the proposal of Bessarabia to be part of an autonomous Ukraine, made by the Ukrainian Council of July 1917, was not unknown. The entire population, including the Bessarabian minorities, resolutely rejected such an idea, claiming that "Bessarabia had no connection with Ukraine" and that "**the history does not know any moment when Bessarabia was politically subordinated to Ukraine.**"²⁰ (underlined in the text)

The one hundred and six years of Russian rule, that could not be forgotten, and the tendencies of the Provisional Government have made, as Dr. C. Uhling remarks in his work **Die Basarabische Frage: Eine geopolitische Betrachtung:** "For a great part of the Bessarabian population, Bolshevism is synonymous with death and decomposition. Not even the cultural autonomy appease these fears."²¹

In spite of all the vicissitudes, of the hostile internal and external conditions, the national battle of the Romanians living between the Prut and the Dniester continued and integrated into the general movement of liberation of the nations under the rule of the empires of those times, but following its supreme goal, common to that of their brothers from Bucovina and Transylvania. The idea of political and territorial autonomy of Bessarabia, the necessity of establishing an Assembly to represent the people, in other words a **Country Council** and the creation of a local administrative body, were firmly claimed during the Military Congress of November 9, 1917. An important step towards the great act was made on 2 December 1917 when the **Country Council** voted for the Declaration by which Bessarabia became the Moldavian Democratic Republic.²² This title was maintained until January 24, 1918, when the same **Country Council** unanimously proclaimed the independence of Bessarabia.

In the following period, that independence was also demonstrated, as evidenced by the Declaration of February 15/28, 1918, when the Government of the Moldavian Republic "vigorously protested against the violation of its sovereign rights, demanding the Austro-Hungarian Government to withdraw

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1061

²⁰ Dumitru Th. Pârvu, *Problema Basarabiei în lumina principiilor actelor juridice internaționale*, Edit. Bibliotecii Metropolitane, București, 2013, p. 215

²¹ Apud: Dumitru Th. Pârvan, *Problema Basarabiei...*, p. 211

²² *Ibidem*, p. 218

without delay the troops <that entered the territory of the Republic>."²³ Another proof is the NOTE from the Government of Chisinau on March 3, 1918, which conveyed to the governments of the European countries and the United States of America that: "By the decision of the Moldavian Parliament, named **Country Council**, the Moldavian Republic declared itself independent."²⁴ In the same note it was made the request to acknowledge the declaration and to "**admit the existence of the Moldavian Republic as an independent, absolutely sovereign state**".²⁵ (underlined in text)

The Act passed on March 27, 1918 and the return of Bessarabia in the natural borders of the Mother Country were made under particularly difficult internal and international conditions. All this was possible and was due to the will of the Moldavian Romanians, because after more than a century of Tsarist rule they did not forget their origin, language, traditions, culture and identity, which have not been received as a gift from the great powers, nor have they been acquired through one's generosity. It is true, as noted in the above-mentioned paper, that both "the World War and the Russian Revolution have awakened the consciousness of the popular masses". But more remarkable is that the idea of autonomy, of national liberty, of self-determination, "did not belong to some improvised propagandists and circulated as revolutionary and national formulas in the mentality of the subjugated peoples. National consciousness preexisted in Bessarabia even before World War I was in a latent state"²⁶.

These facts are demonstrated by one of the conclusions that have been stated in the monumental History of Bessarabia by Ion Nistor, who appreciated that the return of **Bessarabia** to Motherland was voted for and achieved by the Bessarabian **peasantry** through its leaders and rulers. And this is a giant step in the development of national consciousness"²⁷.

Finally, in order to place accordingly the day of March 27, 1918, a day that opened the way to completing the process of Romania's unification a century ago, it is enough - in our opinion - to highlight the report of the Minister of Spain in Bucharest, Manuel Multedo, dated December 5, 1918, who appreciated that: "What happened once and for a short time, during the reign of the Romanian Prince Michael the Brave in the year 1600, namely the fact that all the Romanian nation was united within the borders of Trajan's old Dacia, seems to be achieved again and this time not by the force of arms, but by the free will of the provinces that make up this country"²⁸.

²³ *1918 la Români...*, vol. II, p. 1082

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1086

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 1087

²⁶ Dumitru Th. Pârvan, *Problema Basarabiei...*, p. 225

²⁷ Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei* (ediție și studiu bio-bibliografic de Stelian Neagoe), Edit. Humanitas, București, 1991, p. 290

²⁸ *1918 la Români...*, vol. II, p. 1254