

## THE SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN CONTEXT IN THE PERIOD OF THE BALKAN WARS, 1912-1913

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**Abstract.** Between 1912 and 1913, the Balkan Peninsula was affected by two wars, which are known in the region historiography, as well as in the public consciousness as the *Balkan Wars*. The process of ending the Ottoman domination over the states in that area generated a virulent campaign for clarifying the ethnic as well as territorial identity. Not involved in the First Balkan War, in 1912, Romania firmly imposed its point of view in the Second Balkan War, in 1913, after Bulgaria had surprisingly attacked its former allies. The Peace Treaty of Bucharest, masterfully led and concluded by Titu Maiorescu, the Romanian Prime Minister, laid the foundations for a balance of forces in the region. Romania became an important actor in the area because of his mediating role recognised by both the belligerents and the great powers.

**Keywords:** peace, war, conference, accord, diplomacy, alliance, armistice

One should search for the origins of the Balkan Wars in the years 1912-1913 in the situation occurred in the Balkan Peninsula in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The new independent states, emerged after 1878, were faced with particularly complex issues related to the fate of the territories still under Ottoman rule and to the drawing of borders.

On the other hand, the states in the region were convinced that it was only together that they would get rid of the Turkish domination in Southeast Europe, despite their divergences, especially as far as splitting the liberated territories was concerned. Therefore, following negotiations between Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, military treaties and alliances were concluded, which, in certain situations, such as the case of the Bulgarian-Serbian Treaty, had a secret annex stipulating that Serbia was bound to start a military intervention against Romania, if our country would have attacked Bulgaria, just as Bulgaria undertook to support Serbia in case of an Austro-Hungarian attack. The undeniable truth was that all states in the Balkans, including the Romanian one, located north of the Danube, had to reach an extremely sensitive goal, namely of accomplishing national unity, by getting back certain territories, which were part of the Ottoman and Austro-

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Hungarian Empires at that moment<sup>1</sup>. Another fact that also had to be taken into account was that the political evolution of the states in the region was influenced and most of the times determined by the position of the great powers, which had their own interests in the Balkans. For instance, after being defeated in 1866, losing the Italian possessions, and in order to survive, Austria-Hungary became a dual state, the area in which it was able to exert a big influence being Southeast Europe<sup>2</sup>. In its turn, Russia unreservedly backed Bulgaria and Serbia, going so far as to establish a Balkan alliance that would help it reach the straits.

Romania was reluctant to the Balkan alliance of the three states and tried to keep normal relations with both the Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire.

The relations between our country and Greece were normal, improved by the meeting between the Romanian and Greek monarchs, during which a trade convention was signed. After the Turks in Dobrogea received compensations, Romania's relations with the Ottoman Empire progressed significantly, also thanks to the decree of the Sultan in 1905, which granted Aromanians the same rights as the other nationalities. The ascending evolution of the relations between the two enabled the increase in the exchanges of visits at different levels and the signing of consular conventions. Our country's relations with Serbia, although marked by the policy of assimilation of the Romanians in the Timoc-Morava area, were based on supporting Belgrade against the aggressive policy of Austria-Hungary<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, Romania embraced a benevolent attitude towards the neighbouring country, Bulgaria, the proclamation of independence of this state being received with great sympathy in our country, which recognised it before the great powers.

Unfortunately, Bulgaria consistently carried a policy that was hostile to the Romanian state, believing that Dobrogea was integral part of the Bulgarian patrimony<sup>4</sup>.

Under these circumstances, when Bulgaria's tendency to expand its territory by attacking Turkey was obvious, and given that certain Bulgarian leaders pressed for reclaiming Dobrogea as well, Romania, in order to maintain the balance of forces in the region, demanded that the strategy of compensations should be applied, namely that our country should receive a territory up to the Rusciuk-Varna or the Silistra-Varna line. A series of events would complicate even more the situation in the Balkans. The *Young Turks* movement, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, in October 1918, the aggressive

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<sup>1</sup> Gheorghe Zbucea, *România și războaiele balcanice, 1912-1913, pagini de istorie sud-est europeană*, Editura Albatros, București, 1999, pp. 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> L. Raicu, V. Cristian, Gh. Platon (coord.), *România în relațiile internaționale, 1699-1939*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 1980, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> Gheorghe Zbucea, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> G. Dabija, *Amintirile unui atașat militar la Sofia*, București, 1936, p. 136.

policy of the Dual Monarchy towards Serbia all generated an explosive situation in the Balkans, the general belief being that all the tension would eventually led to the outbreak of a war that would spread across the entire continent. The war waged by Italy against the Ottoman Empire for Tripolitania was the signal for the three Balkan states to start the attacks. Under these circumstances, Montenegro launched hostilities on 9 October 1912, and was joined, on 17 October, by the three allies. Even though the great powers were convinced that Turkey would win, the events unfolded favourably for the Balkan allies, which were successful on all fronts. Turkey called for the truce, which was signed on 3 December 1912.

At the London Conference, which began on 17 December 1912, Romania submitted its applications for compensation, which included a settlement of the border with Bulgaria to the Black Sea and the incorporation of Silistra in the Romanian state. The Bulgarian delegation, headed by the President of the Sobranie (the National Assembly), Stoian Danev, tried to avoid making a serious commitment, saying that his answer was to be announced at the completion of negotiations with Turkey. Faced with the reluctance shown by Bulgarians, Romania changed its attitude and demanded the Turtucaia-Balcic line, and to prove that it was willing to take any action, including the military one, in order to achieve that goal, the Chamber of Deputies approved, on 30 December 1912, a loan of 151 million lei for the armed forces<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, according to our country's diplomatic representative in London, Mișu, Bulgaria agreed only with a minor correction to the border with Romania, Silistra not being, in any event, the subject to the negotiations with the Romanian side.

The intervention of Nicolae Filipescu during the Crown Council on 12 January 1913 shows how much it mattered for Romania's image to obtain a favourable outcome in that matter: "*The Romanians from Transylvania, from Basarabia, from Bucovina are watching us, if we are humiliated, all prestige falls*"<sup>6</sup>. Romania's position became radical on 9 January, when King Carol I informed the Bulgarian Government that the Bulgarian proposals could not be accepted and, given the situation, the Romanian military would be forced to occupy the Turtucaia-Balcic line. The dialogue between Ionel Brătianu and Titu Maiorescu is also interesting in this respect. When accused by Brătianu that Romania lost its train (allusion to the non-intervention in the First Balkan War), Maiorescu said: "*You are wrong, Romania's train is just arriving*"<sup>7</sup>. Taking note of Romania's intention to occupy the Turtucaia-Balcic line, Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Count Berchtold assured the Romanian authorities that he would prevent any action that... "*could make the establishment of good relations*

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<sup>5</sup> Titu Maiorescu, *România, Războaiele Balcanice și Cadrilaterul*, Editura Machiavelli, București, 1995, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandru Marchiloman, *Note politice*, volumul I, p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Titu Maiorescu, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

*between Romania and Bulgaria impossible*”<sup>8</sup>. The fact that the intervention of Austria-Hungary in favour of Romania was mentioned, in case of a Serbian-Bulgarian attack, did not calm down the Bucharest leadership, as insistent calls for moderation and a number of warnings given to our country led to the idea that the Dual Monarchy was backing Bulgaria.

The situation had become so clear that the pro-Bulgarian policy of the Viennese diplomacy, combined with the forced Hungarianisation of Romanians from Transilvania by the authorities in Budapest, made even King Carol I, an advocate for the Alliance with the Central Powers, believe what Marghiloman said, that in foreign policy we should be *“courteous with Russia”*<sup>9</sup>. Our country became close to Russia in the circumstances in which France supported the Romanian demands and tried to influence Russia to support Romania in its efforts<sup>10</sup>. Beyond the disputes with Bulgaria, on the issue of compensations, the Romanian Government was convinced that resolving the hardships of the situation of the Romanians in Transilvania could not be solved with Austria-Hungary, but with the support of France and Russia.

Thus, the head of the Liberals, Ionel Brătianu, informed Blondel, French Minister in Bucharest, that *“the day will come when the Austro-Hungarian establishment will collapse and the disparate elements that make it up will go to their aspirations”*, and, in that moment, mentioned the Liberal leader, Romania should be able to *“receive our brothers in Transilvania without anyone opposing it and to this end we can benefit from Russia’s support”*<sup>11</sup>.

The one to best notice Romania’s strategic importance in the geopolitical plans of Austria-Hungary was the heir to the throne of the Dual Monarchy, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who, in a letter to the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold, pointed out: *“Thank God that you are also of the opinion that, first of all, Romania should be helped. Romania and its brilliant King are for us, after Germany, the most important ally and it must be aware of our friendship right now, in that we will do everything to fulfil its wishes. Bulgaria and its totally fake and frivolous King are not close to us, they are far from us and our interests and come a long, long after Romania... I am confident that Your Excellency will solve this problem in a particular way and will use everything to strengthen Romania and to link it to us even more, for now and for the future”*<sup>12</sup>.

In reality, Count Berchtold wanted to support Romania and Bulgaria at the same time, the great dilemma of Austria-Hungary being that the interests of both

<sup>8</sup> Călin-Radu Ancuța, *Arhiducele Franz Ferdinand și rolul său în relațiile româno-austro-ungare*, Fundația pentru democrație și educație politică, București, 2002, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 203.

<sup>10</sup> C. Nuțu, *România în anii neutralității (1914-1916)*, Editura Științifică, București, 1972, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ștefan Pascu, *Făurirea statului național unitar român, 1918*, Editura Academiei, București, 1983, p. 325.

<sup>12</sup> Călin-Radu Ancuța, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.

countries were irreconcilable and could not support one of them without harming the other's interests.

In his turn, Field Marshal Conrad von Hötzendorf, Chief of the Great General Staff of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, expressed his confusion regarding this issue: "*How could the Monarchy deal with this dilemma? Austria cannot go against Bulgaria with... Serbia, but it cannot go against Romania with Bulgaria...*"<sup>13</sup>. Eventually, Austria-Hungary supported the interests of Bulgaria, something that did not go unnoticed by Romania, and that was the very reason why our country sought another solution to achieve its national objectives. Because there were fears regarding the alliance with Serbia and Greece, Bulgaria tried to reopen negotiations with Romania, to resolve the disputes in question. The rigid position of Bulgarian diplomats made it impossible for progress to be made in terms of border changes. Noting that the great powers were not interested in settling the Romanian demands and not even in preventing a conflict between Romania and Bulgaria, Romanian Prime Minister Titu Maiorescu urged Bulgaria to respond promptly and effectively and, if he did not receive a convenient offer, he threatened that the Romanian state would resort to the military solution to fulfil its objectives.

The firmness of the Romanian government led to the signing, on 29 January 1913, of a protocol in which the two countries presented their views. The dissatisfaction of the Romanian representatives to the Bulgarian offer prompted further talks. With all the evidence of the non-involvement of Austria-Hungary in Romania's pressing problems, even though the Romanian Kingdom was the ally of the great power, King Carol I agreed to extend the Treaty of Alliance with the Dual Monarchy in early February. After the signing of the Treaty, on 5 February 1913, by Prince Fürstenberg, Minister of Austria-Hungary in Bucharest, and Romanian Prime Minister Titu Maiorescu, King Carol I told the head of the Romanian Government to postpone sending the Treaty for ratification to Emperor Franz Joseph, because in the event of the coming to power of the Liberals, Ion Brătianu would certainly not agree to extend the Treaty, because of the Dual Monarchy did not support Romania in the disputes with Bulgaria<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the fact that both the ambassador and the military attaché of Austria-Hungary in Romania repeatedly pointed out in Vienna that it was likely that our country would distance itself from Austria-Hungary and Germany, those who were in charge of the foreign policy of the two great powers were misled by the resigning of the treaty of alliance, hoping that Romania would still remain in the influence area of the Central Powers.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Oțetea, D. Berindei, N. Fotino, C. Mureșan, *Le situation internationale et la politique étrangère de l'Autriche*, Editura Academiei, București, 1965, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> Călin Radu-Ancuța, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

Nicolae Iorga noted at that time: “*For us it can be said that the issue of Transilvania is being discussed across the Danube*” and anticipated that over the Danube: “*will start the war against the Austrian will*”<sup>15</sup>.

In turn, Take Ionescu rather eloquently expressed the state of mind of Romanian politicians: “*we go through Bulgaria to get to Transilvania*”<sup>16</sup>.

As the tension between Romania and Bulgaria increased and there was no hope that the situation would calm down, the six great powers held a conference of ambassadors at St. Petersburg in late March with a mission to establish the new Romanian-Bulgarian border<sup>17</sup>.

The Austro-Hungarian representative, Count Thur, argued that Romania should receive Silistra, but pleaded for Bulgaria to receive Thessaloniki as a compensation for the loss of Silistra.

The attempts made by Austrian ambassador to give Bulgaria, at first, Thessaloniki and then the islands of Thasos and Samatraca were rejected by the German ambassador, because Germany wanted to attract Greece in the Triple Alliance, the country being, from the point of view of the German state, more important than Bulgaria.

Although the Central Powers supported Romania to meet its claims, virtually, besides Silistra, the border was not rectified in the Mangalia area, a territory that would have allowed the construction of a military port at the Black Sea. Practically, at the end of the conference in St. Petersburg, the compensations demanded by Romania were not resolved, our southern border remaining vulnerable<sup>18</sup>. The dissatisfaction of Romanian authorities was suggestively presented by P.P. Carp in the Parliament<sup>19</sup>: “*This is ridiculous. Not even the size of my Țibănești estate*”.

To respect the historical truth, we must recognise that Germany was more active in supporting the Romanian rights as compared with Austria-Hungary, which, through the voice of its foreign minister, Count Berchtold, was trying to show that Bulgaria was a counterweight against Serbia, and regarding Romania he displayed an unrealistic optimism, believing that our country would not distance itself from the Central Powers because of the more pronounced support for Bulgaria<sup>20</sup>.

In contrast with the views of the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, the military attaché of the Dual Monarchy in Bucharest sent a not at all reassuring message for Vienna regarding the anti-Bulgarian and anti-Austrian feelings of the

<sup>15</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Sub trei regi. Istoria unei lupte pentru un ideal moral și național*, București, 1932, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Take Ionescu, *Amintiri*, București, 1923, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Călin Radu-Ancuța, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>18</sup> Gheorghe Zbucnea, *op. cit.*, p. 93

<sup>19</sup> Titu Maiorescu, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> Călin-Radu Ancuța, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

Romanians, which were clearly growing: *“The King cannot oppose this trend and, for reasons of self-defence, he is moving away from the Dual Monarchy”*<sup>21</sup>. His conclusion was that in the event of a confrontation between Bulgaria and Serbia, Romania would undoubtedly attack Bulgaria. On 29 June, without following diplomatic usages, Bulgaria attacked Serbia and Greece, triggering the Second Balkan War.

This prompted Count Berchtold to change his attitude and to propose to the heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, to take a position in favour of Romania. Delighted, Franz Ferdinand replied the next day to the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister: *“As you know, I have always been against this pampering and encouragement of Bulgaria... Let me talk to you with all my friendliness... I would have made this change sooner, when the first signs of this unpleasant alienation of Romania were felt... Romania is a vital condition for our Monarchy. Alongside Romania and Germany, we will defy the whole world, and especially Russia. By embracing a pro-Bulgarian policy, we alienated Germany and upset Romania and we will sit alone at the end, between two chairs to the ground”*<sup>22</sup>.

The heir to the throne estimated correctly that a *Great Romania* was helpful for the Austria-Hungary and criticised the Hungarian chauvinism whenever he could. It is no less true that France wanted an armed intervention of Romania in Bulgaria, after the country had attacked Serbia. In this regard, the Minister of France in Bucharest said: *“We are very close to winning the game for so long engaged between Austria and us, for the Romanian public opinion is undoubtedly favourable to us currently.*

*All the efforts of the French diplomacy must be further directed towards maintaining Romania in the dispositions so favourable to the French interests in this part of Europe”*<sup>23</sup>.

Being in a critical situation, Bulgaria demanded help from Vienna, believing that only the Dual Monarchy could save it. In such circumstances, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister considered it appropriate to support Bulgaria in those hard times, because in this way, in the future, the Bulgarian foreign policy would favour the Central Powers.

Finally, Bulgaria sought an alliance with Austria-Hungary and stated its willingness to restart negotiations with Romania, in order to regulate their dispute. Being in a state of collapse, as a result of the military defeat, Bulgaria was forced to seek truce, which was accepted by Romania and, at the request of our country, by Serbia, Montenegro and Greece. Certainly, Romania did not seek the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> Călin-Radu Ancuța, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>23</sup> Vasile Vesea, *România și Franța la începutul secolului al XX-lea (1900-1916)*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1975, p. 46.

eradication of the Bulgarian state, but the achievement and maintaining of a balance in the Balkans, which could be managed very well by our country, given the prestige obtained from the military campaign<sup>24</sup>.

The Peace Conference that took place in București between 30 July and 10 August, chaired by Titu Maiorescu, the Romanian Prime Minister, was concluded with a Treaty signed by the parties involved, in the last day of the Conference<sup>25</sup>. During negotiations, it was decided that Macedonia would be split between Serbia and Greece and Southern Dobrogea would be given to Romania on the line: “*from the Danube, beyond Turtucaia, to reach the Black Sea, in the south of Ekrene*”<sup>26</sup>. When the future borders were discussed, there were disagreements that were eventually settled. Heated discussions were held between the great powers when the question arose regarding the Macedonian port Cavalla. Germany and France were in favour of giving the port Cavalla to Greece, hoping that the country would enter under their area of influence, while Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy, for the same strategic reasons, opted for Bulgaria to get the port<sup>27</sup>.

The Peace of Bucharest had a considerable international echo, because it diminished a hotbed of tension that could have destabilised the region and showed that Romania was a political and military force capable of guaranteeing the status quo in the region<sup>28</sup>.

From the perspective of territorial rectifications, Romania emerged strengthened, being able to secure its southern border and thus develop an adequate naval force.

The Peace of Bucharest was also the signal for the separation from the Central Powers, Romania being concerned with adopting that strategy that would enable it to deal with the situation of Romanians across the border, especially those from Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina. Last but not least, we must not overlook the decisive contribution of Prime Minister Titu Maiorescu to the success of the Conference of Bucharest, about whom King Carol I said he was a great politician, like Mihail Kogălniceanu.

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<sup>24</sup> Călin-Radu Ancuța, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Titu Maiorescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-150.

<sup>26</sup> *The Peace Treaty*, article 2, p. 234.

<sup>27</sup> Russia backed Bulgaria, in order to get in the way of Greece's access to the Dardanelles and to support the economic development of Bulgaria.

<sup>28</sup> Gheorghe Zbucnea, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-245.