

ROMANIA AND BALKAN GEOPOLITICS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Abstract: Aromanians, Megleno-Romanians and Istro-Romanians have served, to this day, as proofs of the existence of Oriental Romanity in a part of Europe which has suffered, throughout time, transformations that have substantially modified the Roman heritage of the area. In the mid-19th century, the young Romanian State became ever more interested in the communities of Aromanians from the Ottoman Empire, considered to be part of the pool of Romanianness in the Balkans. Through the church and the school institutions, the authorities in Bucharest attempted to preserve the ethnocultural identity of these “Romanians south of the Danube,” who were subject to a process of assimilation, characteristic of modern times. At the beginning of the 20th century, the nationalism promoted by the political power holders, the expansionist projects, the influence of the Great Powers, which were interested in the area, transformed the Balkans into a field of ethnic conflicts.

Keywords: Balkans, Romanian foreign policy, Aromanians, Hellenisation, confessional identity, 1900-1914.

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The prisoner of clichés that have been intensively circulated in postmodernity, the Balkan world of the early 20th century can be imagined, from the vantage point of international relations, as a mirror that can accurately convey the shaping of Europe’s geopolitical map. All the major power holders of the old continent were involved, in one way or another, in the destiny of this peninsula, which by that time was only nominally placed under Ottoman tutelage.

There existed, in effect, a pseudo-discreet,² yet effective and lasting alliance between Britain and Greece, which made its debut under the sign of romanticism, during the anti-Ottoman uprisings from the 1820s, when, attracted by the glorious scent of ancient Hellas, the famous poet Byron passed away during the terrific Greek resistance from Mesolonghi. For the United Kingdom, a strong Greece, receptive to the English advances, ensured practically Albion’s strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Straits, as an alternative to the Ottoman Empire, whose dissolution had been underway for centuries. The “sick man of Europe” had been

¹ PhD student at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, email: iemanuil@yahoo.com.

² Albion had played a considerable role in Thessaly being ceded to Greece in 1881, just like in 1864, when the British troops had evacuated the Ionian Islands, offering them to Greece. Daniela Buşă, *Modificări politico-teritoriale în sud-estul Europei între Congresul de la Berlin şi Primul Război Mondial (1878-1914)*, Bucureşti: Paideia, 2003, p. 70. The strategy formulated by Salisbury in 1878, according to which “the Turkish downfall and the Greek ascent must go hand in hand” was faithfully observed until the beginning of the 20th century. N. Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor din sud-estul Europei în epoca modernă (1789-1923)*, Târgovişte: Ed. Cetatea de Scaun, 2011, p. 223.

clinically dead for a long time, but was resuscitated whenever needed, as it happened repeatedly during the 19th century, when the Empire from the East would have succumbed to various external military blows, had it not been for its Western allies. After 1878, the Ottoman Empire became a semi-colony, whose formal independence was supported by the Western states, which were had an economic and strategic interest in its territorial evolution. After 1878, the Ottoman sultan lost Tunis to France, Greece added Thessaly to its territory in 1881, England occupied Egypt in 1882, Bulgaria conquered Rumelia in 1885, and Crete was *de facto* liberated from Ottoman control in 1897.³

Another problem which further complicated the internal situation of the already fragile Ottoman construction was represented by the Macedonian matter. Macedonia encapsulated *in nuce* all the problems of the Balkans: the antagonism of the great powers, the struggle for the supremacy of the Christian element, the Islamic element, and the religious, military, economic and administrative problems. Its highly heterogeneous ethnic composition led to this territory being claimed by all the surrounding states. For Greece, Macedonia became the very *raison d'être* of its foreign policy.⁴ For Bulgaria, the Archbishopric of Ohrid, the Slavonic heritage and the majority ethnic representation in the territory represented targets of national interest. Driven by the dream of having access to the Aegean Sea and of territorial compensations for the Serbian provinces in Austria-Hungary, Serbia had also launched an annexation plan.⁵ The Romanian State became involved in the territory because it was inhabited by a population it claimed pertained to it and also because it was interested in maintaining the status quo in the Balkans. In 1903, a bitter revolt of the Christian, especially Bulgarian-speaking population broke out in the area of eastern Macedonia, known as the "Ilinden Uprising," against the Ottoman administration. The violent intervention of the authorities determined the involvement of the Great Powers and the organisation of the Macedonian reform plan, stipulated in the Mürzsteg Agreement of the same year. At this meeting between Tsar Nicholas II and Franz Joseph, there were laid the foundations of an understanding on the Balkan question. As regards Macedonia, it was stipulated that the area should be placed under the control of an international gendarmerie body and that the administrative borders should be redrawn so as to get districts with higher ethnic homogeneity. The reforms were to be implemented by the representatives of the five interested powers.⁶

³ Constantin Velichi, "Imperiul Otoman și statele din Balcani între 1878-1912", in *Studii și articole de istorie*, vol. XV, București, 1970, p. 173.

⁴ Barbara Jelavich, *Formarea statelor naționale 1804-1920*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1999, p. 210.

⁵ In 1905, during a meeting of Serbian diplomatic corps, there were established the coordinates of Belgrade's Balkan policy in relation to Romania. The following decisions were reached: "We cannot have anything against the Romanian success in Macedonia, given our own and their position in relation to Bulgaria and the Bulgarian cause in Macedonia. We should maintain ourselves in reserve as regards the Romanian-Greek dispute, waiting for the right moment so that we may use their success as a precedent. The most cordial relations should be cultivated with Romania, considering our policy towards it, as a means of exerting pressure on Bulgaria." Miodrag Ciurușchin, *Relații politico-diplomatice ale României cu Serbia în perioada 1903-1914*, Timișoara: Editura Mirton, 2010, p. 68.

⁶ Douglas Dakin, *The Greek Struggle in Macedonia 1897-1913*, Salonic: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1966, pp. 111-116.

The map of the Balkans should not be viewed strictly from a political perspective, as the confessional configuration of the region complicated its geopolitical make-up, shuffling and reshuffling the camps according to their spiritual affinities. The ethnic entities in the Balkan Peninsula that were under the umbrella of the Ottoman Empire were not recognised as such, from a linguistic or racial perspective, and solely religious divisions were functional. The “millet” formula revolved, thus, around a religious denomination, as besides the Orthodox millet, there was also an Armenian, a Mosaic, a Catholic and a Protestant one. The Orthodox Christians in the empire were placed under canonical obedience to the Ecumenical Patriarch. The institution, which was actually a legacy of the Byzantine period, was accepted by the sultan caliph, who bestowed the title of political head to the millet of the Ecumenical Patriarch. This political position, added to the ecclesiastical dignity of Constantinople’s bishop and his suffragans, was to generate a series of exclusive temptations that would prove detrimental to ecumenicity: Graecisation/Hellenisation became an objective pursued with increasing obstinacy and this caused inevitable tensions within the Orthodox communities. The two neighbouring empires were to take advantage of this situation, fuelling the dissensions inside the so-called Balkan “powder keg.”

Tsarist Russia exerted the most constant influence in the area, appropriating the thesis of the third Rome; the successor of Byzantium’s autocracy imposed itself as the protector of the Orthodox subjects in the Ottoman Empire after the Peace of Küçük Kaynarca. The halo of Russian Orthodoxy in the Balkans embraced, in practice, the Panslavist tendencies that justified Petersburg’s geopolitical strategy of acquiring access to the warm seas where internal resistance was the weakest. After the Peace of Berlin, the role of Russia in the Balkans envisaged regaining some positions of power in the Orthodox world, lost after the Crimean War. The emergence of the independent Serbian State was the first conquered redoubt, although Russia would have to deal with the duplicitous position of the Obrenović dynasty, whose members, for economic reasons (a trade that was dependent on the Austrian Monarchy), were not to be found among the Tsar’s allies, especially in around the year 1903. That year, through the coup d’état and the coming to power of the Karađorđević dynasty and of Nikola Pašić as Prime Minister, Serbia made a 180 degree turn and became a faithful ally of Russia’s plans for the Balkan reconquista.

Even if Russia put on the image of a protectress of all the Orthodox in the Balkans, it actually posed, above all, as the defender of the Slavic populations in the area. This is an extraordinarily important nuance if we are to understand the distribution of the actors in this peninsula and the adroit use of the Orthodox motivation therein. The Bulgarian case is representative in this regard. The emergence of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870 produced the first schism within the Orthodox Church, the Patriarchate of Constantinople anathematising, on this occasion, the entire clergy, as the adepts and promoters of the break from the Mother Church, who were accused of serious violations against the church canons through their so-called Phyletist heresy, theorised in a synod in 1871. In this context, Russia’s role was to prove decisive. St. Petersburg’s plan was to encourage the union of the South Slavs,

in the timespan 1850-1863, Belgrade becoming the centre of the initiative to support the Bulgarian irredenta in the Ottoman Empire.⁷ As Jovan Ristić stated, Serbian policy “made no distinction between the Serbs and the oppressed Bulgarians,” and the first Bulgarian textbooks were printed in Kragujevac and Belgrade with the help of the local authorities.⁸ The breaking point for the Serbians and the Bulgarians was the year 1878, when the Russian influence in the Balkans led to the emergence of a new Slavic state, in the wake of the Treaty of San Stefano: Greater Bulgaria, covering over 160,000 square kilometres, a satellite state of Russia, which could thus get very close to the much coveted Straits. Tsarist diplomacy relied on the Bulgarians in settling the Oriental question, especially after having also secured, as mentioned above, the religious dependence of this state through the creation, in 1870, of the Bulgarian Exarchate, a structure that was protected both diplomatically and hierarchically by St. Petersburg. The religious dependency of the Bulgarian Exarchate was also ensured through the annual provision of the Holy Myrrh.⁹ This act was a clear demonstration of the orthodox Russian jurisdiction over the Exarchate and of the disregard for the synodal decisions of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, considered to be too close to the interests of the Greek State. What should be noted is the consistency with which Russia managed, during the same period, to maintain good relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Russian diplomacy skilfully speculated the moment, offering guarantees to the Patriarchate, so much so that the consequences of the schism remained entrenched within the borders of Exarchate and did not, as it would have been natural, spill over unto those who were in communion with the “Bulgarian schismatics,” namely the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russia played the Bulgarian card also because this exarchate complied better with the Panslavist policy than the Serbian metropolitanate in Belgrade, over which the quasi-autocephalic Patriarchate of Karlovitz exerted a damaging influence, of Austrian import, in Russia’s view. The beneficiary of outstanding prestige, this patriarchate had a Western influence on the political class in Serbia, which the Tsarist autocracy considered to be hardly amenable.

In its relations with Greece, Russia tried, without much success, to use the Orthodox umbrella, although its intentions were oriented, as shown above, towards the Panslavist horizon of the Balkans. On the other hand, the transfer of Byzantine symbolic power was deposited in the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a more than formidable ally for Greece, even though Russia had attempted to stir Greek dissent within the Ecumenical Patriarchate, by accepting an autonomous Greek church in 1830.¹⁰ Despite this fact, the unity of views between the state that was the first to acquire its independence in the Balkans and the Ecumenical Patriarchate was

⁷ N. Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor...*, p. 161.

⁸ Jean Mousset, *La Serbie et son église 1830-1904*, Paris, 1938, p. 263.

⁹ *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, vol.II (1054-1982), Bucureşti: Editura Institutului Biblic, 1993, p. 485.

¹⁰ In 1850, St. Petersburg mediated the reconciliation between the Greek Church, declared schismatic, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. As a result of the negotiations, the tomos of autocephaly was conferred to the Greeks that same year. Claudiu Cotan, *Ortodoxia şi mişcările de emancipare naţională din sud-estul Europei în secolul al XIX-lea*, Bucureşti: Ed. Bizantină, 2004, p. 184.

restored once the centre of power shifted from the secular to the ecclesiastical, that is, starting from the late 19th century, when Athens began to have a decisive say in the synod of Constantinople. At the same time, the linguistic and cultural assimilation campaigns of the Greek State towards the ethnic minorities on its territory (especially, of course, towards the Aromanians) escalated, their magnitude being directly proportional with the interest manifested by the Romanian State in this regard.

In Russia's relations with the Ottoman Empire, the former power officially recognised the existence of a population referred to, in reports, as the "Kutso-Vlachs," a "group of nomadic herdsmen" from the area of Macedonia and Thrace who spoke a Latin dialect that was very close to modern Romanian. Russia recognised the legitimacy of Romania's involvement in safeguarding their interests despite the opposition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which represented the interests of the Greek State in the area.¹¹ By this, Russia was endeavouring to improve its image before the political class in Romania and to undermine King Carol's alliance with the Central Powers. Russia was also interested in altering the Russophobe perception that had worsened in Romania especially after the Treaty of Berlin, given that the political class in Bucharest had turned the anti-Russian discourse into a common diplomatic agenda. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs himself, Sazonov, admitted in his memoirs that Russia's uninspired game towards Romania had politically driven the latter into the arms of the Triple Alliance.¹²

However, at the turn of the 20th century, Russia's prestige was strongly shaken by its own defeat by Japan, this failure downplaying the ambitions of ordering the Balkan world that the eastern colossus had nurtured.

Russia's competitor to achieving supremacy in the Balkans was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which, impelled by its northern ally, powerful Germany, aimed to ensure easy access routes to the East through the economic outlets in this area. Maintaining the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, at least for a while, was to the political advantage of the Dual Monarchy. Then, given the annexation, in 1908, of Bosnia Herzegovina, Austria-Hungary's intentions of southward expansion were no longer a secret to the great powers. Vienna's move could be interpreted as a response to the paradigm shift in the foreign policy assumed by the Serbian State in 1903, when the pro-Austrian Obrenović dynasty was brutally removed and replaced with the Karađorđević dynasty, supported by Russia. Still, the latter protested formally only in 1908, during the annexation of Bosnia, showing that the alliance with Serbia had been circumstantial, and that, depending on the circumstances, Belgrade could be immediately abandoned.

Serbia's position in the Balkan equation was somewhat similar to that of Romania, as Belgrade had to manage a strong irredenta outside the borders of the country. Serbia tended to turn its attention north of the Danube, toward the regions controlled by Budapest, eastwards, towards Bosnia, Novi Pazar and even Dalmatia, with a substantial Serbian population under the administration of Vienna, but also to the Aegean, whose coastline could be reached through the annexation of Macedonia.

¹¹ S. D. Sazonov, *Fateful Years, 1910-1916. The Reminiscences of Serge Sazonov*, New York, 1928, p. 103.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 134-138.

The Serbian diplomacy was consistent in its pursuit of the so-called plan of Greater Serbia – *Nacertanije*, developed in 1844 by Ilija Garašanin, the counsellor of Prince Alexander Karađorđević, a plan which synthesised how the territories claimed by the Serbs could be annexed in the future. Garašanin's concept of the state targeted a predominantly Orthodox and Muslim union, which was to include Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Vojvodina, as well as Northern Albania.¹³ In addition, the Dual Monarchy had begun to act ever more decisively to engage the Balkan states in its own area of influence, with the direct support of Germany, which virtually dictated the Treaty of Berlin, pointing Belgrade towards the northern neighbour. Baron Heymerle, the Austro-Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs from the years 1879-1881, considered that, at first, the Austrian influence had to be primarily economic, being subsequently doubled by a political influence and attracting, thus, the Balkan countries, one by one, into the Austro-German alliance system.¹⁴ After a series of commercial treaties that placed Serbia in the position of an economic outpost for Austria, Milan Obrenović signed in Vienna, on 28 June 1881, a political convention whereby Austria-Hungary undertook to support the Obrenović dynasty in its attempt to proclaim the Kingdom of Serbia, which actually did happen in February 1882. Instead, Prince Milan had to give up any claims on Bosnia, Herzegovina, the Sanjak of Novi Pazar and the territories inhabited by the Serbs that were under Austrian rule.¹⁵ Thus, the Ball-Platz practically invited Belgrade to Macedonia, which the Serbs called Old Serbia, a province that was already under the confessional tutelage of the Exarchate. In 1885, the first inter-Slavic war of the modern period was occasioned by the union of Rumelia and Bulgaria. Austria-Hungary was in favour of this conflict, having driven Serbia to attack its neighbouring state for territorial compensations.¹⁶ The defeat suffered by the Serbian troops led to a change in the strategy for achieving Greater Serbia. In as early as 1879, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognised the autocephalous nature of the Serbian Church, a gesture refused to the Bulgarians and still delayed to the Romanians. The attention granted by the high prelates of Constantinople was meant to encourage an opponent that aspired to be formidable in the face of the increasingly powerful propaganda orchestrated from Sofia.

Returning to Bulgaria, this state was also intensely courted at the turn of the 20th century by Austria-Hungary, which sensed that its Romanian partner was increasingly vulnerable in its alliance relationships and sought to counterbalance its influence in the Balkans. Then, the Germanic dynasty of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha was much more likely to draw closer to Vienna and Berlin than to St. Petersburg.¹⁷ Despite the exceptional service offered by Russia, as the Exarchate was to mark the

¹³ R. J. Crampton, *Europa Răsăriteană în secolul al XX-lea...și după*, București: Editura Curtea Veche, 2002, p. 32.

¹⁴ Bogdan Cătană, *Relațiile diplomatice Româno-Sârbe 1880-1913*, Craiova: Editura Universitaria, 2009, p.105.

¹⁵ Constantin Velichi, "Imperiul Otoman ..." p.13.

¹⁶ N. Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor...*, p. 236.

¹⁷ Plamen Pavlov, Iordan Ianev, Daniel Cain, *Istoria Bulgariei*, București, 2002, pp. 111-118.

confessional emancipation on national grounds of most of the Slavs in the Ottoman Empire, the dynasty of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in Bulgaria displayed a certain reserve towards Russia at the highest diplomatic levels, throughout this period, and its representative, King Ferdinand, was perceived as a “Swabian agent.”¹⁸ Eventually, however, he proved to be an astute speculator of the Russo-Austrian interests in the area. In January 1909, Austria-Hungary proposed a treaty stipulating that in the case of an Ottoman attack on Bulgaria, Vienna should undertake to defend Bulgaria against Serbia and to obtain Romania’s benevolent neutrality. Russia immediately intervened in these Turkish-Bulgarian talks and paid the entire Bulgarian debt to the Porte, much to the irritation of Aehrenthal, who immediately stopped the negotiations with Sofia.¹⁹ The geopolitical position occupied by the Bulgarian quasi-independent state entity at the beginning of the 20th century was particularly important as regards the perception of the Aromanian matter, from the vantage of the Balkan political games.

There were, at the level of the strategies deployed by Sofia and Bucharest, a series of similarities concerning the national emancipation from Ottoman rule of the Macedo-Bulgarian and Aromanian or Macedo-Romanian communities,²⁰ as they were known at that time. Like the Aromanians, the Bulgarians who were spread across the Vilayets of Thessaloniki and Monastir, as well as south of the Kossova Vilayet, more precisely in the area of the Uskub Sanjak, a territory that received the generic name of Macedonia,²¹ gradually began to aspire to self-determination. The Bulgarian ethnics were the subject of Greek propaganda and, to a lesser extent, of Serbian propaganda. The particularly strong influence of Greek spirituality in the Bulgarian community, channelled by some of the Patriarchist prelates toward a nationalist assimilationist purpose, alien to the canonical ecclesiastical spirit,

¹⁸ Andrew Rossos, *Russia and the Balkans: Interbalkan Rivalries and Russian Foreign Policy 1908-1914*, University of Toronto Press, 1981, p. 21.

¹⁹ S. Cristescu, *Carol I și politica României (1878-1912)*, București: Paideia, 2007, p. 327.

²⁰ The term was unfortunately wrong, despite the fact that it was the most commonly used at the time, generically designating the Romance peoples south of the Danube, more specifically, the groups of Aromanians and Megleno-Romanians from the Ottoman Empire, who were, in their overwhelming majority, concentrated at the periphery of the region known as Macedonia, comprising the Pindus Mountains, South Epirus and Central Albania.

²¹ As an administrative entity, Macedonia has never existed: it is basically a geographical area of outstanding strategic importance, which was the subject of the claims made by three neighbouring countries: Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. From an administrative standpoint, Macedonia consisted of the following themata: Thessaloniki, Kassandra, Langaza, Kukuş, Doiran, Kavadarci, Stroumitza, Ghevgele, Voden, Enidje-Vardar, Kara-Feria, Katerina, Athos, Serres, Nevrocop, Zihna, Razlog, Demir-Hissar, Petrich, Melnik, Djumaia, Drama, Kavala, Sari-Chaban, Pravichta, Monastir, Perlepe, Ohrid, Kichevo, Florina, Gostivar, Kolonia, Starova, Kailari, Nasselitch, Grevena, Kojani, Selfidje, Elasona, Uskub, Kalkandelen, Koprulu, Tikves. Brancoff D., *La Macedoine et sa population chretienne*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1905, p. 12. In nationalist speeches from south of the Balkans, the word Macedonia has become not only the name of a disputed region, but also a national symbol of identity, with a glorious past. Kakasidou Anastasia, *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia 1870-1990*, London, 1997, p. 12. After all, the so-called geographical Macedonia overlaps almost perfectly with the territories that Bulgaria received from San Stefano but that were rejected by the Great Powers in Berlin; nonetheless, Bulgarian diplomacy has maintained its more or less official claims on these territories to this day.

engendered a similar evolution with that of the Aromanian problem. The permeation of the philhellene sentiment caused violent partitions within the Bulgarian community, dividing it into two antagonistic currents.²² Even so, the nation's spiritual unity was achieved by the already mentioned Exarchate, the structure that emerged in the mid-19th century in response to the Panhellenic ideology that had begun to guide the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople a century before.²³ With the abolition of the Serbian Patriarchate of Peč and the Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid at the beginning of the second half of the 18th century, both the Serbs and the Bulgarians were imposed, in keeping with a quasi-secular model, a Greek hierarchy that launched the Hellenisation of religious books and, implicitly, of liturgical language, which determined a response of the Bulgarian bourgeoisie, at first, along educational lines, through the establishment of secular schools that would double and counter the assimilationist efforts undertaken by the Greek prelates. However, Bulgarian nationalism was aware that without a church in the Slavonic language, the success of the emancipation struggle would be almost completely undermined, especially since only religious communities were recognised in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, for the first time in history, the sovereignty of the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the Orthodox millet was now being disputed. A form of additional pressure for the Patriarchist clergy consisted in the proselytising activities of the Catholics, who were willing to allow the Bulgarians an unrestricted use of Slavonic in worship and the ordination of Bulgarians bishops and priests.²⁴ The situation itself was considered extremely dangerous for Russia, which despite the constant support it had granted the Phanar, changed its strategy and provided decisive support for the foundation and recognition of the Bulgarian National Church,²⁵ by the royal edict of 28 February 1870.²⁶ In addition to establishing the first eparchies that were exclusively dependent on the exarchate, Article 10 of the edict offered the legal foundation for the creation of new bishoprics where at least two-thirds of Christians demanded a Bulgarian bishop.²⁷ Bulgarian Propaganda reached tremendous momentum after 1870, even though it was not backed by a state but by a Church, which actually represented a theocracy where

²² Dimitrie Ghyca, our consul in Thessaloniki, recounted in detail a typical situation for the civil war in the Balkans at the beginning of the 20th century, a situation encountered in most of the Aromanian and the Bulgarian communities. The incident Ghyca described had happened in the locality Gradobor, which had been set fire to by the Bulgarian komitadjis. Following the attack, the entire diplomatic corps accredited in Thessaloniki was invited by the Greek consul Caromilas to become aware of: "the terrible fate of the poor Greeks relentlessly assassinated by the Bulgarians." In reality, the village was entirely inhabited by Bulgarians who did not speak Greek, but many of them had remained faithful to the Orthodox rite that belonged to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, whereas the others had converted to the so-called schismatic confession of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Dimitrie Ghyca, *Memorii 1894-1940*, Iași, 2007, p. 69.

²³ Plamen Pavlov, Iordan Ianev, Daniel Cain, *Istoria Bulgariei*, București: Editura Corint, 2002, p. 109.

²⁴ Ghellose Lepide, *Macedoine indivisible devant le futur Congrès de la Paix*, Lausanne: Fritz Ruedi, 1918, p. 31.

²⁵ Thomas Meininger, *Ignatiev and the Establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate 1864-1872*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1970, passim.

²⁶ Ghellose Lepide, *Macedoine...*, p. 33.

²⁷ A.M.A.E. Fund Problem 16, Volume I, pageless.

the spiritual leader also became the civil ruler, practically organising Greater Bulgaria. The majority of the Christians in Macedonia were placed under the authority of the Exarchate during the first years after its establishment, and the transition would have been almost complete (among the Bulgarians, of course) if the rebellion in Bosnia had not broken out, instigated by the Serbs,²⁸ who were supported by Austria, which, in turn, was interested in channelling Serbia's attention southwards. Ever since then, the Bulgarians have seen the Vlachs in Macedonia as their natural allies, placed, like the Bulgarians, under Hellenising ecclesiastical influence, with the Patriarchate from Constantinople as their common enemy.²⁹ Notwithstanding all this, the Romanian-Bulgarian cooperation did not take root, although there were cases when the members of some Aromanian communities enthusiastically passed under the tutelage of the Exarchate, as was the case of the church in Ohrid.³⁰ It is also worth mentioning, in the context of the above-mentioned cooperation, the proposal put forward by the Bulgarian leader Stambulov in 1885, after the abdication of Prince Battenberg, that a Bulgarian-Romanian dynastic union should be accomplished under the sceptre of King Carol I.³¹ Contrary to expectations, at the turn of the 20th century, there occurred a strong rift between Bucharest and Sofia, triggered by the assassination of the journalist Ștefan Mihăileanu, a well-known supporter of Romania's involvement in the Balkans, for supporting the Aromanians; Mihăileanu had been slain by the representatives of a paramilitary structure, with connections in the Bulgarian political circles.³²

At the beginning of the year 1908, Austria-Hungary announced its intention of building railways in the Balkans. This project, which was to link Sarajevo and Thessaloniki, was considered by the Russian press as an attempt at Germanising the Near East. What was thus violated was the spirit of the Münchener Agreement of 1903, which had tacitly approved the division of the Balkans into Russian and Austrian spheres of interests. The fact that the Sultan had approved the Austrian intentions under the irade of 1908 did not resolve the tension created, but led to a similar demand from Russia, that it should also build a railway linking the Danube to a port by the Adriatic. The two railways were to cross paths in the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, "proving the deep divergence between the two policies by which they were inspired."³³

Considering the balance of new relations in the Balkans, it is worth noting that the year 1908 was relevant from several points of view: in July there was the revolution of the Young Turks; on 15 September, in Büchl, Russia received the consent of Austria-Hungary that it should change the regime of straits;³⁴ in exchange,

²⁸ G. Bazhdarov, *The Macedonian Question Yesterday and Today*, Sofia, 1926, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³⁰ Ștefan Mihăileanu, "Biserica Românească din Ohrida," in *Primul Almanah Macedo-Român*, Constanța, 1900, pp. 130-138.

³¹ Gh. I. Brătianu, *Origines et formation de l'unité roumaine*, București, 1943, p. 264.

³² Alexandru Budiș, *Bulgaria: istorică, geografică, politică, economică, culturală, militară*, București: Casa Școalelor, 1943.

³³ Al. E. Lahovary, *Amintiri diplomatice*, București, 1936, p. 312.

³⁴ Daniela Bușă, *Modificări politico-teritoriale în sud-estul Europei între Congresul de la Berlin și Primul Război Mondial (1878-1914)*, București: Paideia, 2003, p. 220.

Vienna was given *carte blanche* in the Balkans, where, on 5 October 1908, Emperor Franz Joseph issued a rescript regarding the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁵ Taking advantage of the situation, almost simultaneously, Prince Ferdinand proclaimed Bulgaria's independence as a state and crowned himself as tsar.³⁶ On 12 October, the local parliament in Crete sanctioned the union with Greece after a speech delivered by Venizelos.³⁷ In the Ottoman Empire, the tense situation forced Sultan Abdul Hamid to issue the irade for restoring the Constitution of 1876 and to announce forthcoming elections for a new parliament. This was the dawn of an era of democratic freedoms in which the Aromanians would win several key positions, including the right to be represented in the Ottoman Parliament.

Romania, the only state that did not have a common border with the Ottoman Empire, proposed a policy of intervention in the region, which was aimed at the protection and the cultural and spiritual preservation of the Aromanian communities, known at the time as Macedo-Romanians. During the reign of Carol,³⁸ the interest of the Romanian Kingdom in the Balkan Romanity witnessed its peak. In the period 1880-1904, there were set up consulates in Thessaloniki, Monastir and Ianina, whose main objective was the connection with the Aromanians in the area. There are historical interpretations arguing that the attention the Romanian authorities granted the Aromanian populations had been strategically directed and encouraged by Austria-Hungary, which was keen to redirect the Romanian foreign policy and public opinion away from the increasingly uncomfortable Transylvanian "irredenta" and towards the much farther and utopian horizon, in the view of some, of Balkan Romanianism.³⁹ Others explained Romania's intervention through the territorial advantages it would have benefited from thanks to its involvement (Silistra), while yet others noted that the young kingdom north of Danube wanted to dominate the Balkans by capitalising on the Aromanian issue.⁴⁰ Even if this assumption is justified as regards a section of the political elite in Bucharest, there prevailed a disinterested perspective at this political level which sought to ensure, at the height of a romantic age, the cultural-national renaissance of the "brothers south of the Danube." The Romanian cultural effort in the Balkans was eventually initiated by a number of personalities of Aromanian origin, who had immigrated to the space north of the Danube and who had managed, in the course of time, to hold key positions both in the

³⁵ Nicolae Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor...*, p. 265.

³⁶ Al. Budiş, *Bulgaria...*, p.45.

³⁷ Constantin Iordan, *Venizelos şi Românii*, Bucureşti: Omonia, 2010, p. 23.

³⁸ Although the first Romanian schools were opened in the Balkans during Cuza's reign, the phenomenon gained momentum only with the coming of Carol to the country's throne.

* It should be noted that the Sultan's Decree of 1905 accepted, for the first time in history, the Ullah-Romanians as an ethnic community without their having their own church as a national institution.

³⁹ On 5 December 1905, Pallavicini, the head of the Austro-Hungarian Legation in Bucharest, addressed himself to Goluchowski, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Vienna, stating that the national unrest in Transylvania could be assuaged by shifting concern onto the problem of the Kutso-Vlachs, which, had it not already been created, it would be in the interest of the Monarchy to "discover." T. Pavel, *Mișcarea românilor pentru unitate națională și diplomația Puterilor Centrale*, Timișoara: Editura Facla, 1982, p. 210.

⁴⁰ N. Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor...*, p. 226.

state apparatus (Anastasiu Panu, Alexandru Diamandi, Eugeniu Carada, Tache Ionescu, Gheorghe Manu) and in the cultural and economic life (Ioan Kalinderu, Ioan Caragiani, Dimitrie Cozacovici, Menelau Ghermani, Pericle Papahagi). When, in 1880, the Macedo-Romanian Cultural Society was set up as the ultimate representative authority for the Aromanian aspirations before the Romanian State and the national and European public opinion, the national movement south of the Danube began to coagulate and to issue, in ever more articulate manner, its desiderata of a particularly cultural-religious nature, weakening, in effect, the philhellene position of many Aromanians in Romania and in the Balkans. On this occasion, two divergent discourses – Romanian and Greek – were born within the same Macedo-Romanian community, regarding the issue of the South-Danubian Vlachs. It was the first time the Balkan Aromanian entity had found an alternative to the Hellenising process that had already been underway for centuries. The Romanian State did nothing more than provide a number of tools and means of opposition that, in the beginning, would cause a backlash among the rural Aromanian population, less affected by Hellenisation, which had caused major changes in their mindset and in the perception of their own Romance identity throughout history, profoundly changing the texture of their Greek national conscience, which had already developed sufficiently deep roots. However, there still existed an ethnic consciousness of the otherness of the Greek element, which was nonetheless blurred given its extraordinary ability to assimilate the Aromanian elite, a process that was beginning to climb down to the foundations of the social pyramid. Just when the Hellenising assimilationist process, fuelled along the confessional channel and reinforced by modern educational means, was about to level, once and for all, the ethnic composition of Northern Greece, Romania intervened with its “disturbing” action in the territory.

After the proclamation of the kingdom, the Romanian cultural action south of the Danube increased in intensity year by year, through the opening of new schools in the localities inhabited by Aromanians. There were also recorded a series of diplomatic attempts for the recognition of an autonomous episcopate in the Ottoman area. Romania, which had joined the Triple Alliance after 1883, focused its diplomatic efforts mainly towards preserving and protecting “the Macedonian Romanians,” managing, in 1905, to obtain their official recognition as a nation (millet) within the Ottoman State.⁴¹ The irade regulating the new state of affairs⁴² was the result of the intense diplomatic pressures the Bucharest officials placed on the Great Powers, especially on Russia and Germany. While the eastern neighbour was

⁴¹ Maria Todorova, *Balkanii și balcanismul*, București: Humanitas, 2000, p. 277.

⁴² Here is its content: “His Imperial Majesty the Sultan, who, with feelings of high justice and with parental care for His peoples, gives his blessings and favours to all His faithful subjects, irrespective of nation and religion, taking into account the prayers addressed to the imperial Throne by His Romanian subjects, has deigned to order that, based on the civil rights they enjoy, like the other Muslim subjects, their communities should be able to choose muftars, according to the regulations in force, as is customary for the other communities; the Romanian members should be received in the administrative councils; the imperial authorities should facilitate the teachers appointed by these communities to inspect their schools and to carry out the formalities required by the laws of the Empire for the opening of new school establishments.” Al. Lahovary, *Amintiri diplomatice...*, p. 62.

interested in supporting the Romanian initiative to “reject the well-known exertions undertaken by the Catholic propaganda in order to lay their hands on our coreligionists in Turkey,”⁴³ Germany saw things in a much more pragmatic light, since in exchange for its support it expected to receive from the Romanian government the concession for the exploitation of crude oil on an area of 30,000 hectares down the Prahova Valley, for the Deutsche Bank Consortium.⁴⁴

Unlike its Bulgarian and Serbian neighbours from the Balkans, Romania was more deeply integrated into an alliance that was hostile to the Russian Empire. In addition to this, after 1878 the Slavophobic sentiment had become ever more visible, both in the attitude of the Romanian governments and at the level of the public opinion. The Bessarabian matter had compromised any genuine rapprochement between the two states and produced animosities which produced real disservice for Romania in the Balkans. The ecclesiastical issue of the Aromanians would have had an altogether different destiny at the turn of the 20th century if the Russian-Romanian relations had been similar to the Russian-Bulgarian or Russian-Serbian relations. It should be noted that in the Balkans, Russia supported the use of national languages in the populaces’ own churches, a gesture that it ignored on its own canonical territory, where it obstinately refused this “privilege” even to the Orthodox, or the Romanians, in this case.

Amid the involvement of Romania in the Balkans, there occurred a series of diplomatic conflicts with the Greek State, which was rather alert to the Aromanians’ clamours, especially after the severance of diplomatic relations in the period 1892-1896.⁴⁵ The campaign of the paramilitaries backed by Athens against the Aromanian leaders in Macedonia inflamed the Bucharest diplomacy so much that after the issuance of the 1905 irade, there was a new rupture of diplomatic relations and these would be resumed only in 1911. In the early 20th century, Greece acted aggressively and provocatively in its diplomatic relations in the Balkans, causing a war with the Ottoman Empire and imposing major strains on the situation from Macedonia and Epirus, the latter representing yet another region that it claimed in full, without a numerical representation of the Greek element there.

The Albanians were the last nation that gained its autonomy; alongside the Aromanians, they are the oldest inhabitants of the Balkans. Ever since the late 19th century, Albanian immigration had found strong support in Bucharest, where there also appeared the project for an “Albanian-Romanian” (read Albanian-Aromanian) state for two “sister” nations. The idea might have seemed viable given the good geographical unity between the two ethnic entities, but the intervention of some of the neighbouring powers was to annihilate the envisaged confederation. The new Albanian State unsettled both the Serbian nationalist projects (through the dense

⁴³ The report of the Romanian Ambassador to Russia, from 9/22 March 1905, in Teodor Pavel, *Românii și rivalitatea germano-rusă 1905-1918. Documente*, Cluj-Napoca: Accent, 2003, p. 48.

⁴⁴ The report Minister Alexandru Beldiman addressed to Gen. Iacob Lahovary, Minister for Foreign Affairs, on 23 May/ 5 June 1905, in Teodor Pavel, *Românii și rivalitatea ...*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ This has remained known as the “Zappa affair,” whose protagonist, the Aromanian Evangelhelie Zappa, left a considerable part of his inheritance on the territory of Romania to the Greek state.

Albanian population in Older Serbia – Rascia, which the Serbs regarded as the sacred hearth of their ethnic entity) and the Greek nationalist projects (through the overwhelming majority represented by the Albanians and the Aromanians in the Vilayet of Epirus from Northern Greece). Up until 1913, perhaps also because of their political vulnerability, the Albanian leaders, be they Muslims or Christians, proved to be most loyal to the Aromanian cause in Greece. Ultimately, both ethnicities shared the same fate, having been subjected to the Hellenising pressure.

As mentioned above, when we discussed its involvement in the Serbian matter in the Balkans, Austria-Hungary was interested in further inflaming the Serbian-Albanian relations so as to redirect the attention of the Serbian political class southwards and to divert Belgrade's efforts away from territories north of the Danube. Through Albania, Austria-Hungary hoped to weaken or, at least, to benefit from Greece's benevolent neutrality in return. It should be noted that the Austro-Hungarian attention was focused mainly on Northern Albania, which was not featured in Greece's expansionist plans, but Athens was concerned about any foreign assistance that might have reinforced the Albanian quasi-statehood and hinder, in time, the Greek advancement towards Southern and even Central Albania, where, in the so-called Myzeqe region, the Aromanian element could be oriented to support the Greek cause. What also should not be neglected is Berlin's strategy, in agreement with Vienna, for gaining access to the southern seas also through a leg to stand on in Albania.

Yet another European state, which in the late 19th century lived its colonialist dream, expressed its interest in Albania: "Italy today, for reasons dependent on its historical evolution, has only the East in which it can hope to find the environment that will allow a peaceful development of its economic and social energies. Because it established its national state at a later date, Italy entered at a later time the international stage (the only one that can foster the development of an already formed national state), when the peoples had already exercised their right of expansion to territories *res nullius*. [...] That is why Italy, excluded from the colonial movement, must counterbalance its political and commercial influence with that of the other states."⁴⁶

For the Mediterranean state, the Albanian hinterland represented what it considered an easy prey, quite accessible in geographical terms, and the occupation of the Albanian shore would have led Italy to become the queen of the Adriatic Sea. Another incentive for Italy was represented by the so-called Arbëreshë, present especially in the zone of Calabria. They were the descendants of the Albanian immigrants from the medieval period, a series of Italy's leading politicians being recruited from among them (Premier Crispi is a relevant example). Beginning in 1877, Romania and Italy started querying each other about the Aromanian matter. For instance, in a meeting with the Italian politician L. Malegari, the secretary of the Romanian legation in Rome, Obedenaru suggested the formation of a state entity in Epirus, which would "rival Greece and be made a dependency of Italy."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Giovanni Amadori Virgilj, *La questione rumeliota (Macedonia, Vecchia Serbia, Albania, Epiro) e la politica italiana*, I, Bitonto: Casa Editrice N. Garofalo, 1908, p. 4.

⁴⁷ M. D. Peyfuss, *Chestiunea Aromână*, București: Editura Enciclopedică, 1994, p. 50.

A year after the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Italy signed a treaty with Russia at Racconigi, whereby both countries pledged to maintain the status quo in the Balkans; the diplomacy from Rome was to have a benevolent attitude towards the problem of the straits; and Russia was to support Italy's interest in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. This agreement was to represent the first step towards Italy's separation from the Triple Alliance.⁴⁸

Attempting on many occasions, when the diplomacy failed to properly play the Catholic card in Albania, Rome launched proselytising mission among the rather vulnerable tribes of the Mirdites, Albanian Catholics in the north. Moreover, the existence of the Aromanians deemed to be the Latins of the Balkans sparked further interest, especially in terms of an appeal to the ancient past, when the peninsula was part of the Roman Empire. In 1909, the estimates concerning the Catholics in Albania amounted to 100,000 out of a total population of 480,000 Christians.⁴⁹ What should be noted is that launching the Catholic propaganda in the Balkans had been an Austrian tactics since the late 19th century, consistent with the dream of a Catholic Wallachia around Monastir, to which end any dispute between the Greek Orthodox priests and the Aromanian communities was speculated and capitalised on.⁵⁰

However, Italy's expansionary trend in the Balkans could be characterised as a parade action, without conclusive results, since this was a state that aspired to the status of a "great power" and believed that a Balkan outpost would help accomplish its dream status.

In any case, the events of the years 1912-1913 further complicated the South European geopolitics. The outbreak of the Balkan Wars was preceded by an agreement regarding the division of the spoils, when states that prior to that moment had been involved in disputes for "overriding" expansionist interests came to agree on the liquidation of the Ottoman heritage in Europe. World War I would, of course, also engender disagreements between the conjunctural allies that would bring about the second global conflagration in which Romania had consented to intervene, especially to limit the power of Bulgaria, seen as a potential threat to the security of its own frontiers. Given the fact that Romania had tipped the scales, the peace terms and the territorial adjustments were to be dictated in Bucharest.

This brief presentation has outlined a dynamics of international relations in Southeast Europe that tends to be rather difficult to capture. The Balkan matter cannot be approached reductively as it encompasses, in fact, several conflicts: a) the one regarding the situation of the sultan's subjects, the Muslims and the Christians at the head of the old regime; b) the interference of the major powers in the affairs of Turkey and their Macedonian reforms; c) the claims Greece laid on Epirus and Southern Albania and Bulgaria's intentions to annex all or part of Macedonia, at the time Bulgaria demanding solely autonomy; d) the fight between Bulgaria and Serbia over Macedonia's Slavic element; e) the struggle of the four Macedonian

⁴⁸ D. Bușă, *Modificări teritoriale...*, p. 229.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Drage, *Austria-Hungary*, London, 1909, p. 682.

⁵⁰ Victor Berard, *La Turquie et l'hellenisme contemporain*, Paris, 1893, pp. 281-291.

nationalities: the Bulgarians, the Serbs, the Aromanians and the Albanians to stop the momentum of Hellenism, coordinated from Athens and Constantinople.⁵¹

Faced with this delicate tableau, the Romanian diplomacy attempted to strike a difficult balance between the national interest, seen through either liberal or conservative lenses, and the temptation of a state that would assume a European mission and would be willing to intervene in support of the Aromanian communities as long as its foreign policy managed to avert more adventurous pathways.

⁵¹ We herein use the old name of Istanbul especially when we refer to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which still retained the old name in the official title.