

The Geopolitical and Geostrategic Position of Romania during 1938–1940

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“We are a state of European necessity, in the attention of the East and the West, the North and the South alike. . . . Our geopolitical and geostrategic position has permanently attracted concern and sympathy, sometimes protection, but more often lust and danger.”
(Gheorghe I. Brătianu)

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IN THE field of international relations, geopolitics, geostrategic and/or political geography, the geopolitical position is an element of particular importance. Although the definition continues to generate debates and controversies,¹ military historian Petre Otu points out that most authors tend to accept that it comprises two components²: a geographical (area, latitude, longitude, geography, hydrographic network, climate, vegetation, mineral resources, geographical neighbors, natural borders, etc.) and a political one (the remoteness or proximity to the regional, continental and global power centers, the nature of the neighborhoods, the domestic political system, etc.). The geopolitical position of a state results from the interaction between these components. Other authors consider geopolitical position as being defined by “the sum of highly favorable conditions needed to strengthen their own national foundations, to consecrate that country within its community.”³ The geopolitical position includes three levels: macro-position (or the relations with the world powers),

the middle position (the place on the continent) and micro-position (the relations with neighboring states).⁴

A special interest presents the buffer position (in the middle). The buffer state⁵ is the geographical and political entity, with relatively little power, which is situated between two or more great powers, created and maintained to ensure the reduction of conflicts. The buffer zone is the region where there are multiple powerful states and where, at a certain point in time, a “power vacuum” appears. Consequently, the great powers will seek to expand their domination and control over that space or block the access of another strong state in that area.⁶ In international relations, buffer zones are meeting and friction points between great interests, places where many conflicts are generated or are taking place.

The dynamic nature of the geopolitical position is determined by the variability of the relationship between geographical and political factors. Ion Conea stresses that while “geographical location remains always the same, the geopolitical position is always different” and “the political face of the Earth is a giant chessboard, on which players always move pieces, always giving them new positions and functions.”⁷ Thus, the Romanian geographer and historian argues that the global political environment must be observed and defined on geographical bases: “the geographical conditions explain and characterize this environment” and geopolitics is “the political expression of a set of geographic features that converge in it.”

Along with the political, economic, military, geostrategic significances which the nature and composition of the geographical factor carry in a certain historical context of regional, continental or global power relations, the geopolitical position of a state defines its precedence over the immediate or more distant neighbors. History has shown that the destiny of states and nations was significantly affected by the existence in their vicinity of one or more powers. The member states of the “sanitary belt”⁸ created from the Baltic to the Black Sea after the Great War of 1914–1918 are an eloquent testimony to this effect.

From these descriptive elements, we will try to briefly outline the geopolitical position of Romania during 1938–1940 and its implications on the military policy and the actions undertaken on the secret front. In this regard it is necessary to recall some defining political and geographic features.

After the Great Union of 1 December 1918 recognized by the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919–1920, Romania’s territory reached 295,049 sq km (thus holding the tenth place in Europe in terms of territorial size), and in 1938 the population was 19,353,398 inhabitants (eighth among European countries), compared to 137,000 sq km and a population of approximately 7.25 million in 1916.⁹ At European level, Romania accounted for 2.52% of the continent and 3.85% of its population.¹⁰

Romania's population density was 65.1 inhabitants per sq km in 1935, an average higher than the European one, which stood at 45.4 inhabitants per sq km. The total length of interwar Romanian borders was 3,400.37 km, with a ratio of 1.2 km of border for each 100 sq km. The natural borders (rivers, streams) measured 2,285.9 km and 1,114.4 km were represented by the conventional ones. These features placed the Romanian state among the European countries with the most balanced ratio between the length of the borders and the area they enclosed, military experts considering it as optimal because it ensured the conditions required to mobilize significant resources for the national defense effort.

The border structure of Greater Romania

Country	Border type						TOTAL
	Mountains	Hills	Plains	Rivers	Streams	Sea	
USSR					Dniester (812)		812
Hungary			407.2		Mureş (20.8)		428
Bulgaria		213.4		Danube (388)			601.4
Poland	74.9				Dniester (112.4) Ceremosh Pruth (159.3)		346.6
Czechoslovakia		122.3	13		Tisza (65.7) Bega Timiş Berzova		201
Yugoslavia			283.6	Danube (232.9)	Nera Cevaya Caraş (40.87)		557.3
Black Sea						454	454
TOTAL	74.9	335.7	703.8	620.9	1,211.07	454	3,400.37

SOURCE: *Anuarul statistic al României, 1937-1938* (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1939), 41.

The national territory, ellipsoidal in shape, with the long axis measuring 650 km in the east-west direction and the short axis of 550 km in the north-south direction, ensured favorable conditions for achieving a strong defensive system and carrying out maneuvers. Furthermore, the Danube River, a natural barrier of strategic value, and the Dniester River, with its dominant right bank on the

Romanian territory, represented natural elements which provided a defensive advantage.

The relatively equal share of the three geographic forms—mountains, hills, plains—and the land configuration give Romania a harmonious and balanced geographical profile, and this essentially contributed to the endurance and strength of Romanians throughout history. The strength of the Romanian unity was given by the Carpathian Mountains, which are considered “the backbone of the land and the Romanian people.”¹¹ Alongside the Carpathians, the Black Sea¹² and the Danube River¹³ are the three physical and geographical elements with a decisive role in the genesis and development of the Romanian people.

N. Al. Rădulescu, in his reference study entitled *Probleme românești dunărene* (Romanian Issues about the Danube),¹⁴ stated that “navigation on the Danube could be done freely only in those times in which the Russians were removed from the Danube, this principle being especially true in the future.” As a result, the Romanian geographer concluded that there is a connection between the dimension of the Romanian state and the European status of the Danube, so that: “1. the safety of navigation on the river could be threatened by the existence in the middle basin of states interested in breaking the link between the state which rules the upper basin and the one that stands guard at the mouths of the Danube; 2. Europe needs at the mouths of the Danube a powerful and unified Romanian state, with a Black Sea coast long enough to afford a defense of the Danube Delta.”¹⁵

Furthermore, Gheorghe I. Brătianu formulated a series of geopolitical ideas and theses that remain fully valid today. Thus, in the lectures on the “Black Sea Issue,”¹⁶ held during 1941–1942 at the University of Bucharest, the historian formulated the geopolitical concept of “security space” of Romania which, according to him, “comprises those regions and points without which no nation can either meet its historic mission, or fulfil the opportunities that make up its destiny.”¹⁷ On this occasion, Brătianu also introduced necessary delimitations between the concepts of security space, ethnic space and vital space. Thus, ethnic space was “the space inhabited by the same people, in the sense of a nation,” while the vital space was a “balance of power” and “the space over which a force expands at some point.”¹⁸ Consequently, the security space could have coincided with the ethnic space, resulting in a “strong position,” but it could also exceed it. In the historian’s view, the affirmation of the security space did not mean the will and the desire to conquer “a vital space,” therefore it was not the manifestation of an expansionist force.

Also, Gheorghe I. Brătianu identified two “key positions,” from a geopolitical point of view, that Romania had to include in the evaluation of its geostrategic interests: “1. The Bosphorus and the system of straits in general that allow

navigation beyond this great enclosed sea, and 2. Crimea, a forward maritime bastion into the Black Sea, which, through its harbors and ancient strongholds, is an obvious position of power commanding the entire maritime area. Who controls Crimea could control the Black Sea. Who does not hold it, is not a master. It is obvious that this problem is related to our issues, because, ultimately, the straits are nothing but extension of the Danube Delta.”¹⁹ Starting from these geopolitical and geostrategic realities, Brătianu added that “the concept of security space means that we cannot be indifferent to what happens in these two key positions of a sea that is so closely connected to our existence” and concluded that “the history of the nineteenth and the twentieth century is a fight between Russia and Europe over the Black Sea.”²⁰

Studying the position of Romania on the European continent, Simion Mehedinți concluded that “the Carpathian fortress and its surroundings form Europe’s Easternmost bastion.”²¹

Another element that influenced the key geopolitical position of Romania in 1938–1940 was, again, the wealth of natural resources, among which oil played a primordial role. The international status of Romania in the first half of the twentieth century cannot be objectively explained unless the implications of the competition between the great powers to control this vital resource for the Second World War²² are well understood.

Having become for over a century and a half “the sovereign among fuels,” oil decisively influenced the economy and world civilization, a fact which triggered at global or regional level a permanent struggle between trusts, states and great powers. Hence the assertion according to which oil is also “capable and culpable”²³: able to contribute to the creation of a high living standard and responsible for the aggressions that brought/bring disaster to mankind. The two major world wars of the twentieth century turned Romania into a genuine arena of confrontation and a “land of discord” in the political, economic, diplomatic, military fields and, last but not least, in the secret war between the great powers with interests in this area.

In the early months of 1939 Romania produced 3,328,939 tons of oil, being the fifth largest producer in the world and the only exporter state in Europe. The Romanian oil was rich in light elements, allowing for quality gasoline production, and was seen as one of the best in the world. Also, the Romanian oil-fields were located near the industrialized areas of central and northwestern Europe, so that they were a convenient oil provider in case of trouble with the supply system in other regions.

In January 1936, Dr. Steinberger, a specialist in oil issues, published in *Deutsche Wehr* an article that was intended to draw attention to the oil needs of the German armed forces in the event of an armed conflict, namely 12.5 million tons (5.5

million tons for the ground forces, 1.7 million tons for the air forces, 2 million tons for the naval forces, 2.45 million tons for the home front). Also, in the study “Oil in the World War,” published in Stuttgart, Dr. Ferdinand Friedensburg highlighted the interest for the oil resources of Poland, Romania, the Caucasus and the Middle East, the only areas that could be dominated by the German ground forces. Thus it was emphasized that Romania held an important place in Berlin’s war plans, something which, in our opinion, was not perceived and understood in time and in-depth by the political and military decision-makers in Bucharest.

On 26 March 1939, the Soviet Minister in Paris conveyed to Moscow a series of data and impressions collected from the official circles according to which Germany would attack France only when Romania “is completely subservient to German influence (the peaceful option shall be also accepted),”²⁴ which will make Hitler “undisputed master of the Danube basin, it will secure the supply of wheat and oil, it will provide a base on the Black Sea and it will pave the way for the Balkans and the Middle East.”²⁵

In a study about the Vienna Dictate of 30 August 1940 presented to his staff, Eugen Cristescu, director of Special Intelligence, stated that “black gold, as oil is also called, a gift of nature so rich in benefits, played this time a negative role in terms of our interests.”²⁶

All these points highlight the importance of the Romanian geographical space among the preoccupations of the geopolitical centers of power. Unfortunately, the Romanian political class did not understand at its just value the exceptional importance that oil had and the role it could have had for our country’s relations with the Great Powers, and deciphered their interests incorrectly, with adverse consequences for Unified Romania.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD structure of Greater Romania, a major element in defining the geopolitical position of a state, was radically changed by the major transformations that took place at the end of the First World War. Thus, on the eastern border there was now Soviet Russia (1922, USSR), which was formed after the Bolshevik coup d’état of 25 October/7 November 1917. The new Soviet state continued with the same consistency the Tsarist Empire’s expansionist objectives, recognizing neither the act of 27 March/9 April 1917 which consecrated the union of Bessarabia with Romania, nor the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919–1920, and adopting a revisionist policy.

Except for a short period (1934–1936), when the Foreign Ministry was headed by Nicolae Titulescu, who tried to bring Romania into a security arrangement formed by the triangle Paris–Moscow–Prague, the Soviet-Romanian relations were particularly tense.²⁷ The Soviet Union refused any Romanian offer of settlement on the Bessarabian issue (Romania was the only neighbor with whom

the Soviet Union did not sign a bilateral agreement of a political nature) and used a variety of ways and means, including the Communist Party of Romania, a section of the Comintern, in order to dismember the Romanian national state. So, Romania was directly threatened from the east. The policy pursued by the USSR throughout the interwar period, the historical antecedents, the military potential, the expansionist ideology, the pressure constantly maintained on the Dniester line are only a few elements that foretold the greatest dangers to the security and vital interests of Romania coming from this direction.

Hungary, Romania's western neighbor, was a very tough opponent. Although they had signed the Treaty of Trianon, which established at international level the legality of the unification act adopted at Alba Iulia on 1 December 1918, the Hungarian political circles maintained throughout the interwar period an intense and continuing revisionist policy against the Romanian state. Bulgaria, Romania's southern neighbor, also showed clear revisionist intentions. Although Bulgarian revisionism did not have the intensity of the Hungarian one, it was aimed at the annexation of Dobruja and, as a minimum objective, at the reoccupation of the Quadrilateral.

With Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, Romania had good relations throughout the interwar period; between 1920 and 1921, the three countries formed a regional defense alliance, the Little Entente,²⁸ which was intended mainly to counter Hungarian revisionism. The imperative to maintain the status quo in the Balkans led to the creation, in 1934, of the Balkan Entente, a regional defense alliance, joined by Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey.²⁹

With the northern neighbor, Poland, the relations were overall positive, as indicated by the defensive political-military alliance concluded in 1921 and renewed in 1926 and 1931.³⁰ The treaty ensured support for each party in case of an unprovoked attack from the east and was particularly important, as it was the only support against the Soviet expansion, the greatest danger to Romania. The bilateral relations degraded when the Foreign Ministry was run by Nicolae Titulescu, because of his belief in improving relations with the Soviet Union, something which was deeply unacceptable for the Polish side. In turn, Poland had tense relations with Czechoslovakia, one of the main allies of Romania, because of a dispute over Teschen province. Instead, Warsaw maintained cordial relations with Hungary, Polish diplomacy refusing to ratify the Treaty of Trianon. Also, Józef Beck, the Polish foreign minister, actively supported the creation of a common Polish-Hungarian border by dividing the territory called Carpathian Ruthenia, located in Czechoslovakia until 14 March 1939, which affected the security interests of Romania, especially in Transylvania.

Following this brief presentation of Romania's neighbors and the relationships with them in the interwar period, it appears that 53% of the national borders were vulnerable, threatened from three directions: east, west and south.

The Romanian military analysts had correctly perceived this reality. In 1927, Major Ion Cernăianu wrote: “Our neighbors, Russia, Bulgaria and Hungary, from whom we took back the territories that we were entitled to, have been accustomed to regard these territories as their absolute and permanent property, and tearing them from their body was and is seen from their side as a blatant injustice. As a result, their enmity is grounded in territorial claims, joining them in a community of interests. Therefore, we must look at the Russian-Hungarian-Bulgarian friendship as a true aggressive alliance, which will strike us without mercy when able to do so.”³¹ These are fair and realistic observations which will unfortunately come true in the fateful year 1940.

Given the geographical and territorial configuration of the country and the development of the external risk factors, the General Staff had to devise a defensive model by dividing the territory into “fronts,” hypothetical theaters, in order to counter the threats coming from the mentioned directions. Thus, they defined “the Eastern Front” between the Eastern Carpathians and the Dniester, the “Southern Front” between the Southern Carpathians and the Danube River, including Dobruja, and “the Western Front” between the Western Carpathians and the western border. The Transylvanian Highlands, called “the strategic redoubt of the country,” was usually the place of concentration of the General Staff reserve.³² The political and military developments from the regions that presented interest for the Romanian state could have led to military operations in one, two or three directions. The assumption of a simultaneous attack launched from all three strategic directions would have created a very difficult situation, described by military experts of the interwar period as “the Romanian strategic issue.”

Romania had the military capability and the necessary force to repel only one offensive, launched either by the Hungarian or the Bulgarian armed forces, or even a combined attack from both countries. The situation could have become difficult in case of a Soviet military attack, given the obvious difference between the potential of the two armies. In case of an aggression from the three strategic directions, “the Romanian strategic issue” would have become unsolvable.³³

The campaign plans of the Romanian army in the interwar period scheduled maneuvers along interior lines, in response to the external maneuvers of potential adversaries. In case of an aggression from one or more directions, the most exposed “front” would have been activated and the general strategic reserve was to be employed on the threatened theater. Since the Carpathian chain hinders the movement from one direction to another, the General Staff proposed to the policymakers the development of the rail and road infrastructure in the mountainous region. The option of resistance in the intra-Carpathian plateau,

considered “the orographic center of the national defense,” although it was one of the last solutions available to the Romanian state for preserving its existence, was also taken into account by the strategic planning structures.³⁴

The Romanian defense plan was relying largely on the political and military alliances concluded between the wars. Romanian political and military decision-makers were persuaded that in case of a Soviet attack against Romania, the alliance with Poland would have become operational, while Hungary’s aggression would have been countered by the Little Entente and a possible attack from Bulgaria would have been blocked by the Balkan Entente. Also the political elite in Bucharest were relying on the support of France and England as great guarantors of the political system created at Versailles. At a primary assessment, the Romanian alliance system seemed a well articulated construct, capable of providing Romania with adequate protection. However, a closer analysis would have shown much structural vulnerability. Although the major threat to Romania came from the east, the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente could provide little assistance to Romania in this direction. For example, Czechoslovakia had very good relations with the USSR and the operations plans of the three states of the Little Entente did not foresee the participation of Czechoslovak and Yugoslavian military forces to operations meant to ward off a Soviet aggression. Turkey, in turn, introduced a clause to avoid being engaged in military conflict with the Soviet Union.

Also, Romania’s presence in the two regional alliances worsened the relations with Germany and Italy because they had disputes with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The events of 1937–1938 would show that Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, for different reasons, were vulnerable entities of the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente, which eventually caused the failure of the political project of the two regional security structures.³⁵

Aggravating was also the fact that Romania had not signed military agreements with France and Great Britain that would constitute credible guarantees for the independence and territorial integrity of our country. The Treaty with France signed on 10 June 1926 had a general character, more of a moral value, while the one with the United Kingdom was not even a security arrangement. There was also a big issue in providing military help to Romania in case of a military conflict on the Eastern front, unless Bulgaria was favorable to an Anglo-French policy in the region. But this meant territorial concessions to Bulgaria, especially from Romania and Greece, which was an unpopular idea with Bucharest and Athens.

Another European center of power that tremendously influenced the geopolitical position of Romania in the second half of the fourth decade of the twentieth century was Germany. The Third Reich was interested in reoccupying the positions held until 1914 in Central and Southeastern Europe, and Romania,

with its oil and agricultural resources, became an important element in the German expansion plans. The political and economic subordination strategy adopted by the Berlin authorities included economic pressure, encouraging Hungarian-Bulgarian revisionist claims, conducting skillful propaganda, the disruption of the regional alliance system that included Romania, support for some of the internal political forces etc.³⁶

Given the changes in the European balance of power in favor of Germany after 7 March 1936,³⁷ the decrease in the Franco-British influence in Central and Southeastern Europe and the conciliatory attitude of London and Paris towards the breach of the peace treaties by revisionist states, some Romanian politicians argued that the proximity of Germany was a possible solution for preserving the territorial integrity of Greater Romania. Thus, Gheorghe I. Brătianu, Octavian Goga, Mihail Manoilescu etc. advocated for strengthening the economic and political ties with Berlin, being opposed to Nicolae Titulescu, the minister of Foreign Affairs, who advocated a closer relation with the Soviet Union and the inclusion of Romania in the triangle Paris–Prague–Moscow.³⁸

In November 1936, during the debates in Parliament, Octavian Goga drew attention on this issue, saying that “a war alongside Russia, regardless of whether we are winners or losers, would create a hopeless situation: If we were to be defeated we will suffer the consequences of the *Vae victis dictum!* A victorious Bolshevik Russia . . . would mean penetration to the West, the trampling of our land, a continental, even global Bolshevization, I would say...”³⁹ Goga was a supporter of the idea that “Greater Romania was possible only after fighting against Vienna, but it shall not be maintained unless Berlin’s help is involved.”⁴⁰ In fact, he continued the political axiom formulated by Titu Maiorescu, who said in 1881 that “the state that owns the Danube Delta is forced to ally with Germany.”⁴¹

With the new European geopolitical realities in mind, after 7 March 1936 the decision-makers in Bucharest opted for a prudent policy of navigating between the established continental power blocks. The traditional orientation toward France and Great Britain was kept, but they also sought ways to improve the relations with Germany and to avoid excessive closeness to the Soviet Union. Armand Calinescu, in his diary, synthesized this political orientation on 24 May 1938:

Geographical Location. Rich country. Located on the route of invasions. On the traffic routes—the Danube. Where ideologies are intersecting . . . which should be the political approach? No sentimentality, only interest. It can be neither the Russians nor the Germans. If we stand with the Germans, their victory means economic and then political subjugation. We have seen this before, the country and the crown. And then it was a Hohenzollern, a relative and a nobleman. Humiliations nevertheless. What would it be with an adventurer of low birth?

*Therefore, armed support must be sought farther away. I recognize that France is in crisis. On the point of recovery, though. But we have England. Here we must anchor our policy.*⁴²

A big anglophile, the Romanian prime minister did not accept that Britain would not support the countries of Southeastern Europe, including Romania, against the German and the Soviet expansion. Subsequent events showed that Britain pursued only its own interests in this area. On 27 September 1939, London notified the Government in Bucharest that in case of a Soviet aggression, Romania would not receive military support from Britain, a decision strengthened by the secret provision of the treaty between France, Britain and Turkey, signed in Ankara on 19 October 1939. Later, the “Churchill–Stalin secret percentages’ agreement” signed in Moscow in October 1944, sealed the placement of 90% of Romania under Soviet influence in exchange of a similar share for Great Britain in Greece.

THE ANNEXATION of Austria on 13 March 1938 and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia by the Munich “Agreement” disaggregated the Little Entente and worsened Romania’s geopolitical situation.⁴³ In an internal document, dated 27 October 1938, the General Staff drew attention to this worrying fact, stating that: “The events of recent years have deteriorated much of the value of these alliances . . . Great Britain and France were not able to oppose this and the Little Entente had a passive attitude. Since the amputation of Czechoslovakia, the Little Entente, although not formally dissolved, is in fact non-existent . . . , a lesson learnt from the recent events is that the value of the alliances and political-military commitments signed in peacetime is relative.”⁴⁴ Also, in another document the General Staff pointed out: “Through the partial annexation of the Bohemian Quadrilateral and the control over Vienna, the most important communication center in Central Europe, Germany implicitly controlled the entire Danube basin and its expansion in the three directions, south, east and south-east, was far easier.”⁴⁵

Through the total dissolution of the Czechoslovak state on 15 March 1939, Romania’s geopolitical and military situation became far more complicated. The General Staff had to organize a new defensive line in the Maramureş area in order to ward off a potential attack threatening the right flank and the rear of the Transylvanian front. Under the pressure of new events, on 14 March 1939, Romania declared partial mobilization, and on 23 March it signed the economic treaty with Germany.

On 13 April 1939, Great Britain and France, concerned with the German rapid expansion in Central and Southeastern Europe, offered unilateral securi-

ty guarantees to Romania and Greece. The Berlin leaders reacted with hostility, considering this a part of the Reich “encirclement” policy. Besides, during Grigore Gafencu’s visit in Germany of 18–20 April 1939, Hermann Göring pointed out to him that “if Romania takes part in the encirclement policy, we [the Germans] will abandon it to the Bulgarian and Hungarian neighbors.”⁴⁶ Moreover, the Nazi leader showed his dissatisfaction, saying that “after Munich, in a region in which we hoped to be undisputed leaders, that is, Eastern, Danube and Balkan Europe, England and France again showed their presence.”⁴⁷ In the discussion with Göring, Gafencu proposed that Germany should give Romania a guarantee like the Franco-British one, but the proposal remained unanswered.⁴⁸

As the European political and military situation deteriorated, the authorities in Bucharest regarded with hope the tripartite Russian-Franco-British negotiations, in the summer of 1939. At the same time, they were aware of the fact that Romania’s situation was dire. Armand Călinescu wrote that we have “weaknesses in the west, east and south alike” and that “we won’t escape the broil.”⁴⁹ It is well known that Bucharest was not consulted in any way by the Western allies regarding the Soviet request for the Red Army to transit the Romanian territory, in the event of any action against Germany; the responsibility for the failure of the tripartite negotiations was cynically and hypocritically cast by Moscow on Poland. In this regard, on 25 August 1939, V. Molotov declared to Emile Naggiar, the French ambassador, that “Poland’s stubborn refusal [to allow the Soviet troops to transit the Polish territory] makes impossible a tripartite pact support,” and therefore, “the Soviet government had to solve the problem . . . by signing the non-aggression pact with Germany.”⁵⁰

At that moment, King Carol II tried, through Turkey, to find out Moscow’s position towards the conclusion of a nonaggression pact with Romania. Therefore, on 11 August 1939, during the discussions with the Turkish president, İsmet İnönü, the Romanian sovereign said that “Romania, especially given its grain and oil, would provide, in case of defeat, an enormous advantage to the offenders. Therefore, as events will allow, Romania wants to take action as late as possible, being convinced that preventing the aggressors from getting its resources and throwing its forces into the war in crucial moments will bring service to the common cause.”⁵¹

The king’s remarks show his intention to keep Romania away from a European war for as long as possible and also the warning that, in case of defeat, the offenders could benefit from the country’s resources, harming “the common cause.” The Moscow tripartite negotiations’ failure and the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact gave the coup de grace to the alliance system built by Romania in the interwar period and led to an almost complete political and military isolation of the country. After 23 August 1939, the Franco-British support and also the German-Soviet

rivalry did not present any advantages for Romania's security. The German-Soviet agreement swept out the French and British presence in Southeastern Europe, the European equilibrium was destroyed and the reconstructed Romania was in an almost insoluble geopolitical and geostrategic situation. It was again a buffer state, between two power centers which were sharing areas of influence from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Although they did not know the details of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact, the Romanian leaders were aware of the new geopolitical situation of the country. In this respect, on 22 August 1939, Armand Călinescu wrote in his diary: “Coup de grace of the German-Soviet Agreement. I consider it a very serious situation; did they have a deal to divide up Poland and Romania?”⁵² In turn, Grigore Gafencu observed: “Romania was no longer surrounded by two rival empires which asked only for its neutrality, but by two partners who demanded nothing but docile obedience towards the new order they would agree upon.”⁵³

Constantin Argetoianu also realistically and soberly analyzed the German-Soviet Agreement effects: “Russia has pursued only a single matter, to start a war in Europe, to maintain it for at least 2–3 years, to watch and then to reap the benefits. The benefits, regardless of the winner, will be ruin, anarchy and communism imposed to all belligerent countries. What the Third International and propaganda couldn't do, the war would achieve.”⁵⁴

Trapped between the Soviet Union, whose minimal request was the annexation of Bessarabia and Bukovina, and Germany, highly interested in the Romanian oil and grain, but also in the political control over the rest of the national territory, Romania declared its neutrality on 6 September 1939. It was a temporary solution, suited to the geopolitical realities of the moment. Between 6 September 1939 and 28 May 1940, the day of Belgium's surrender, Romania led a balanced external policy, or a “right turn,” as Grigore Gafencu observed, between the two totalitarian powers in the east and west. It was a specific conduct for a buffer state and it was part of the Romanian diplomatic tradition, which went back to the Middle Ages.⁵⁵

The political and military decision-makers in Bucharest were still hoping that the French and the British would maintain the balance of power in the west, but also in the southeastern part of the continent. The Belgian surrender and France's military collapse dissipated their illusions.

Radu Lecca claims in his memoirs that the sympathies and pro-Allied beliefs of Carol II and his collaborators during the neutrality period represented one of the factors which allowed the survival of Greater Romania till June 1940. Therefore, Radu Lecca said:

*In Bucharest, I found a German journalist named Klaus Schikert, whom I have known since 1933, from the **Völkischer Beobachter**, and now has been*

appointed in Bucharest as a representative of the DNB official press agency. Schikert was well informed, and in Germany he had relations with the administration. In that period (1939–1940), I expected everyday that Romania be dismantled. So did Ritgen (another German diplomat). But Schikert told us that Romania's dismantlement could not happen unless France is occupied, because King Carol, as long as France is not defeated, would be able to resist militarily against the territorial cession. In that case, Russia, as a neighbor, would be the first to occupy the oil-rich regions, a fact that would not suit Germany at all. This is the reason why it could remain intact until the summer of 1940.⁵⁶

Without overestimating the role of this factor, we consider that it must be taken into account when the period September 1939–June 1940 is analyzed.

After the Wehrmacht's dazzling victories on the Western Front and with the prospect of being alone in face of the Soviet colossus, Carol II and his advisors changed the external political orientation in order to save what they could from Greater Romania's independence and borders. It was already late. After the rape of Bessarabia, Northern Bucovina and Hertza, the German "card" remained the only solution, or "the lesser evil," to ensure the survival of the Romanian state. But now the price imposed by Germany was much higher than the one asked in 1936. The Reich asked Romania imperatively to come to an agreement with Hungary and Bulgaria regarding the two countries' territorial claims. Totally isolated politically and militarily, with a weakened internal cohesion and an army poorly equipped and not ready for war, the regime of King Carol gave Northern Transylvania to Hungary and the Quadrilateral to Bulgaria. The Romanian geopolitical and geostrategic situation became critical, and there was a real risk of a total territorial dismantlement of the state, because the Soviets were supporting the territorial claims of Bulgaria and Hungary and were maintaining a permanent tension along the borders set following the ultimatums of 26 and 27 of June 1940. There are elements that suggest that the Soviets were interested in triggering military hostilities between Hungary and Romania, which would have provided favorable conditions for them crossing the Pruth River, occupying the Eastern Carpathians, the oil-rich region and Dobruja, and for the expansion of their influence in the Balkan Peninsula.⁵⁷

Realizing the Soviet intentions, Hitler imposed on Romania the Vienna "arbitration" of 30 August 1940, establishing a strategic border on the Eastern Carpathians approx. 90 km away from the Prahova Valley. This allowed him to control, in case of necessity, the oil-rich region of Prahova. To cut off the Soviet access to Southeast Europe, the Reich guaranteed the new borders of mutilated Romania, producing the second rupture in the Soviet-German relations after the signing of the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact.

The dramatic events from the summer of 1940 outlined one more time the difficult situation of Romania as a buffer state between the two poles of geopolitical power. Located in the Ponto-Baltic isthmus, Romania, together with 12 other nations (Finnish, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, and Greek) had to be a “bumper” for the shocks provoked by the geopolitical centers from both east and west. The warnings of some Romanian politicians and diplomats who stated that Romania must pursue “a geographical foreign policy” and not one of “badly understood sentimentalities” were unfortunately confirmed.⁵⁸

With hindsight, we consider that this kind of policy, while it would not have saved Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, because the Soviet Union was among the winners of the Second World War, would have imposed another course of events which could have saved the honor of the country and of the army in 1940 and perhaps, would have limited the human and material losses generated by the participation in the Eastern and Western war, in an attempt to recover the territories previously lost without a fight.

□

Notes

1. Sergiu Tămaș, *Geopolitica—o abordare prospectivă* (Bucharest: Noua Alternativă, 1995); Paul Dobrescu, *Geopolitica* (Bucharest: Comunicare.ro, 2003); Paul Claval, *Geopolitică și geostrategie: Gândirea politică, spațiul și teritoriul în sec. al XX-lea*, trans. Maria Elisabeta Popescu, preface by Octavian Mândruț (Bucharest: Corint, 2001).
2. Petre Otu, *Îmbriașarea anacondei: Politica militană a României în perioada 1 septembrie 1939–22 iunie 1941* (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 2006), 16.
3. Vasile S. Cucu, “Considerații geopolitice (I),” in *Geopolitica*, vol. 1 (Iași: Glasul Bucovinei, 1994), 361.
4. Ibid.
5. Martin Wight, *Politica de putere*, trans. Florin Tudor (Chișinău: Arc, 1998), 168.
6. Otu, 18.
7. Ion Conea, *O poziție geopolitică* (Bucharest: Imprimeria Institutului Statistic, 1944), 37.
8. “Sanitary belt” is defined in various studies and analyses of the international relations as the post-1919 policy of France that meant the creation in Central, Eastern and South-East of a “barrier” of states, consisting of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, to oppose the political and ideological influence of Germany and the USSR and to support the French security system.
9. Constantin Verdeș, *România: Studiu geografic, fizic, economic și militar*, 2nd edition, vol. 1 (Bucharest, 1939), 21.
10. Victor Slăvescu, *Potențialul de război economic și financiar al României* (Bucharest: Școala Superioară de Război, 1937), 17.

11. Ion Conea, "Destinul istoric al Carpaților," *Rânduiala* (Bucharest, 1941); the study was reprinted in id., *Geografie și istorie românească* (Bucharest: Lucafărul, 1944), 83–110. On this issue see the study published in this collection entitled "Spațiul geografic românesc," 7–25, and the article "Carpații—hotar natural?," *Geopolitica și Geoistoria* (Bucharest) 2 (1942): 62 sqq.
12. Gheorghe I. Brătianu, *Originile și formarea unității românești*, trans. Maria Paul, edition, introductory study and notes by Ion Toderașcu (Iași: Ed. Universității A. I. Cuza, 1998), 17.
13. On the role of the Danube see George Vălsan, "Dunărea de Jos în viața poporului român," *Graiul românesc* (Bucharest) 1, 10 (October 1927).
14. Excerpt from *Lucrările Institutului de Geografie al Universității Regele Ferdinand din Cluj și Timișoara* 7 (1942): 1–29.
15. Ibid.
16. George I. Brătianu, *Chestiunea Mării Negre*, lectures 1941–1942, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy and Philology, ed. Ioan Vernescu. The geopolitical aspects of the course were presented by the historian in other circumstances too. See in this respect: "Spațiul etnic, spațiul vital, spațiul de securitate," *Analele Academiei de Științe Morale și Politice* (Bucharest) 2 (1942); *Originile și formarea unității românești: Prelegeri ținute la Școala Superioară de Război* (Bucharest, 1942). Details about the geopolitical lectures held by Gheorghe Brătianu see Petre Otu, "Studiul geopoliticii la Școala Superioară de Război," *Revista de istorie militară* (Bucharest) 6, 34 (1995): 22–24.
17. Gheorghe I. Brătianu, *Marea Neagră: De la origini până la cucerirea otomană*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1988), 107.
18. Ibid., 106–107.
19. Ibid., 108–109.
20. Ibid.
21. Simion Mehedinți, "Frunteria României spre Răsărit," *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* (Bucharest) 8, 8–9 (1941): 250–273.
22. Among the works on this issue: Gheorghe Buzatu, *O istorie a petrolului românesc* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1998); Gavriil Preda, *Importanța strategică a petrolului românesc, 1939–1947* (Ploiești: PrintEuro, 2001); Horia Brestoiu, *Impact la paralela 45: Incursiune în culisele bătăliei pentru petrolul românesc* (Iași: Junimea, 1986); Eugen Preda, *Miza petrolului în vâltoarea războiului* (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1983).
23. Brestoiu, 5.
24. Cited in Preda, 28–29.
25. Ibid.
26. Cristian Troncotă, *Eugen Cristescu: Asul serviciilor secrete românești* (Bucharest: Roza Vânturilor, 1994), 142.
27. Some of the works dealing with the Romanian-Soviet relations during the inter-war period are: Florin Valeriu Dobrinescu, *Bătălia diplomatică pentru Basarabia* (Iași: Junimea, 1991); Marin C. Stănescu, *Moscova, Cominternul, filiera comunistă balcanică și România (1919–1947)* (Bucharest: Silex, 1994); Nicolae Titulescu, *Politica externă*

- a României* (1937), ed. George G. Potra, Constantin I. Turcu, and Ion M. Oprea (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1994); *Relațiile româno-sovietice: Documente*, vol. 1, 1917–1934 (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1999), vol. 2, 1935–1941 (Bucharest: Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, 2003); Emilian Bold and Răzvan Ovidiu Locovei, *Relații româno-sovietice (1918–1941)* (Iași: Demiurg, 2008) etc.
28. Eliza Campus, *Mica Înțelegere* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1968); Milan Vanku, *Mica Înțelegere și politica externă a Iugoslaviei, 1920–1938, momente și semnificații*, preface by Viorica Moisuc (Bucharest: Ed. Politică, 1979).
 29. Eliza Campus, *Înțelegerea Balcanică* (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei, 1972); Cristian Popișteanu, *Înțelegerea Balcanică: Momente și semnificații* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1977), Alexandru Oșca and George Nicolescu, *Tratate, convenții militare și protocoale secrete (1934–1939)* (Pitești: Vlasie, 1994).
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 31. Ion Cernăianu, *Adoptarea doctrinei franceze în armata noastră* (Lugoj: Adolf Auspitz, 1927), 15.
 32. Pamfil C. Georgian, *Considerațiuni generale asupra geografiei militare* (Bucharest, 1939); Romanian Military Archives (hereafter cited as RMA), coll. 948, file no. 552, fol. 64.
 33. Ioan Cernăianu, *Defensiva în lumina noilor idei doctrinare românești* (Bucharest: Tipografia Marelui Stat Major, 1933), 23–37; Otu, 27.
 34. Valentin Arsenie and Petre Botezatu, eds., *Strategia militară românească în epoca modernă (1859–1999)* (Bucharest: Nummus, 1999), 83–131.
 35. Wight, 138–143.
 36. Speaking of the actions of Berlin, see the work of Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitler, Regele Carol și Mareșalul Antonescu: Relațiile româno-germane 1938–1944*, trans., edition and bibliographical study by Stelian Neagoe (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), 43–124.
 37. A. J. P. Taylor, *Originile celui de al doilea război mondial*, trans. and notes by Lucian Leuștean, afterword by I. Ciupercă (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 88; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, 2nd edition, trans. Mircea Ștefancu and Radu Paraschivescu (Bucharest: ALL, 2002), 267.
 38. Details in Rebecca Haynes, *Politica României față de Germania între 1936–1940*, trans. Cristina Aboboae (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 105–124; Petre Otu and Aurel Pentelescu, *Gheorghe I. Brătianu: Istorie și politică* (Bucharest: Corint, 2003), 16–47; Ioan Chiper, *România și Germania nazistă: Relațiile româno-germane între comandamentele politice și interese economice (ianuarie 1933–martie 1938)* (Bucharest: Elion, 2000), 201–249.
 39. Octavian Goga, *La politique étrangère de la Roumanie* (Bucharest, 1937), 49–50.
 40. Ibid.
 41. Cited in Otu, 29.
 42. Armand Călinescu, *Însemnări politice* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 391–392.

43. Milică Moldoveanu, “Dezmembrarea Cehoslovaciei (1938–1939) și implicațiile politico-militare asupra centrului și sud-estului Europei,” in *Probleme de politică externă ale României (1918–1940)*, vol. 3 (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1988).
44. RMA, collection 948, file no. 493, fols. 113–114.
45. Ibid., file no. 323, fol. 224.
46. Grigore Gafencu, *Ultimele zile ale Europei* (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1992), 69–70.
47. Ibid., 81.
48. Ibid.
49. Călinescu, 412.
50. Gafencu, 219.
51. Romanian Central Historical National Archives, collection Vasile Stoica, file no. I/70, fol. 70.
52. Călinescu, 425.
53. Gafencu, 256.
54. Constantin Argetoianu, *Însemnări zilnice*, vol. 7 (1 iulie–22 noiembrie 1939), ed. Stelian Neagoe (Bucharest: Machiavelli, 2003), 78–79.
55. Sorin Alexandrescu, *Paradoxul român* (Bucharest: Univers, 1998), 124–129.
56. Radu Lecca, *Eu i-am salvat pe evreii din România*, introductory study and notes by Alexandru V. Diță, preface by Dan Zamfirescu (Bucharest: Roza Vânturilor, 1994), 137.
57. Apud Ottmar Trașcă, “URSS și diferendul româno-maghiar în vara anului 1940,” in *România și relațiile internaționale în secolul XX* (Cluj-Napoca: Clusium, 2000), 188–203.
58. In this regard, see the manuscript of diplomat N. H. Lahovary entitled “Contribuție la problema RĂSPUNDERILOR: Cum am fi putut păstra ROMÂNIA MARE,” an essay on Romanian foreign policy failures in the interwar period and its effects on the Great Union of 1918, published by George Nicolescu, in *Diplomație și diplomați români* (Focșani: DMPress, 2001), 311–339.

Abstract**The Geopolitical and Geostrategic Position of Romania during 1938–1940**

Included in the “sanitary belt” created by France after the Great War of 1914–1918, Romania was, between 1919 and 1940, the southern “anchor” of the French defense system in Central and Eastern Europe, which was intended to block off the political and ideological influences of Germany and the Soviet Union. Together with the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Romanian space, the richness of its natural resources, among which oil occupied a leading position, generated a keen interest among the Great Powers, especially Germany and the USSR, who intended to expand their control over Romania. The belated understanding of the vested interests, the weaknesses of the foreign propaganda, a certain stiffness of Bucharest’s foreign policy after 7 March 1936, when significant mutations occurred in the balance of power in Europe, and also a series of deficiencies of the Romanian interwar state and society, were the main causes of territorial dismemberment of Greater Romania in 1940.

Keywords

collapse of collective security, buffer state, geopolitical pressures, sidedness in foreign policy, territorial dismemberment