

Considerations on the Romanian-Hungarian Negotiations Held in the Summer of 1940

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(M. Manoilescu)

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Greater Romania, created at the end of World War I at the cost of the human and material sacrifices of several generations of Romanians, disintegrated in the summer of 1940 as a result of the political and diplomatic actions of the neighboring revisionist states, supported substantially by Italy and Germany. In the last days of June, the USSR invaded Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Herța region, on the strength of the ultimatum given to Romania on 26 June 1940 and accepted by the Bucharest government. On 30 August 1940, in Vienna, the Romanian delegation was forced to cede to Hungary a large part of Transylvania and accept in principle to surrender the entire Cadrilater to Bulgaria (the official treaty with Bulgarian was signed several days later in Craiova).

As a result of the Vienna arbitration, Romania lost a territory of about 43,000 km² with an indisputable Romanian population, as shown by the ethnic structure of the population in the ceded area, according to the 1930 census: 1,171,534 Romanians, 910,692 Hungarians, 138,763 Jews, 68,264 Germans, 46,038 Romany, 24,100 Ruthenians, and so on. The ordeal suffered by the Romanian population in Northern Transylvania for 4 years (the mass murders of

the Romanians in the villages of Ip, Treznea, Moisei, etc. by the Hungarian army have remained a symbol of martyrdom for those years), the extermination of almost all the Jews in that area in the spring of 1944 by the German Nazi authorities in cooperation with the Hungarian ones, are common knowledge and we shall not insist on them now. Likewise, the international context, the geo-political situation in the summer of 1940 have been thoroughly dealt with in the more or less recent Romanian historiography.

All the specialists who have dwelt with professional discernment upon the act of 30 August 1940 have admitted that Romania had no other alternative but to accept the arbitration. Otherwise, the Romanian state would have disappeared shortly due to the military interventions of Hungary, USSR, Bulgaria and eventually Germany (as a comparison, we can refer to the case of Poland in 1939 and Yugoslavia in 1941). This perspective was very clearly expressed by Mihail Manoilescu, the Romanian foreign minister who had to sign the fateful act in Vienna: *"We either accepted the arbitration on 30 August, or we would have been destroyed as national state and army."*¹ Manoilescu was also the one who left, in my opinion, one of the most comprehensive and clear justifications of the political outlook and philosophy that presided over Romania's acceptance of the Vienna sentence:

*"The salvation of the state at any cost was inspired by the principle affirmed and confirmed by our entire history, namely that our nation cannot be mortally endangered as long as there is a free Romanian state. However weak or diminished in size, it means to the Romanians what the Piedmont meant to the Italians: a starting point and a cornerstone for the large home that would host one day the whole nation."*²

The trauma suffered by the majority of the population in the territory under Hungarian occupation between 1940-1944 seems therefore to have been inevitable. In these circumstances, a *reassessment* of the events as well as of the conduct of the Romanian and the Hungarian politicians of the time can only be beneficial to the servants and enthusiasts of the muse Clio.

The fact that the Romanian government accepted the Soviet ultimatum of 26 June 1940 was somehow justified in Bucharest by Romania's need to preserve all its forces in order to defend Transylvania's territorial integrity. Saving Transylvania at any cost became the rulers' leitmotif, and not just theirs. "Sacrificing" the Romanians in the territories occupied by the Soviets, and the "resignation" in the face of the imminent loss of Cadrilater seemed to serve a truly wonderful truth, namely that of avoiding the loss of Transylvania. All the politicians and the opinion leaders in Romania became more or less involved – with the best and most noble intentions – in this "battle for Transylvania", if we were to use the title of a book by Valer Pop to describe the political and diplomatic efforts of that hot summer. It is not just that, at a certain point, in the last decade of August 1940, the international context was utterly unfavorable to us, and that the loss of part of Transylvania, a province vehemently claimed by Hungary throughout the inter-war period, was inevitable. The signals both Germany and Italy sent to our

country in those days were very clear, in the sense that Romania had no choice but to meet at least some of Hungary's revisionist requests.

After the loss of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Herța region, the political factors in Bucharest were hoping that the dispute with Hungary and Bulgaria could be solved through population exchanges. This solution had been used in the inter-war period by Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria, which swapped their ethnic minorities³. Moreover, after the outbreak of World War II, Hitler initiated the so-called *Heim-ins-Reich Politik*, i.e. the transfer of German population from the Scandinavian countries as well as from Central and Eastern Europe to the territory of the Reich. Even Germany and Italy had provided a precedent. Indeed, after negotiations that lasted several months, the two countries signed an agreement made public on 21 December 1939. According to it, all the German citizens living in Southern Tyrol were to return to Germany, while the Italian citizens of German origin living along the Upper Adige had to opt either for German citizenship, in which case they had to leave, or for Italian citizenship, which allowed them to stay⁴.

Consequently, the Romanian officials too felt entitled to plead in favor of the ethnic principle, i.e. population exchange, when they were received by Hitler and Mussolini at the end of July 1940. At the meeting with Hitler on 26 July 1940, Ion Gigurtu and Mihail Manoilescu showed several Austrian, Hungarian, German and Italian maps from 1857-1919, which proved the Romanians' ethnic superiority in Transylvania and justified the political borders drawn after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919-1920. During the talks on the population exchange principle, the German party asked what area would be ceded to Hungary for the Magyar rural population Romania was to transfer to its neighbor. The Romanian delegates proposed a maximum 14,000 km². Ribbentrop replied that it was too little, and Hitler added that "*the Hungarians were entitled to a partial territory retrocession.*"⁵ Likewise, on 27 July, in Rome, Gigurtu and Manoilescu were warned by Mussolini that Hungary too was entitled (according to the Italians who supported Hungary's revisionist policy with all their strength) to demand a moderate revision of the borders. It was accepted that later the solution of the population exchange would be used to generate a greater ethnic homogeneity of Romania and Hungary.

Back home, the two Romanian dignitaries made press statements suggesting that the Romanian-Hungarian dispute would be solved through population exchanges, possibly followed by a small territorial correction of the north-western Romanian border. Consequently, Gigurtu and Manoilescu, together with King Carol II, ignored the German and Italian warnings imperatively requesting us to partly meet Hungary's territorial claims. In my opinion, the Romanian authorities should have "forewarned" the public opinion about the imminence of surrendering part of Transylvania, so that the shock experienced by the Romanian population in the territories ceded after 30 August 1940 would have been diminished. Let us note that on 31 July 1940, Wilhelm Fabricius, the German minister in Bucharest, informed the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Hitler's specific recommendation that our country should cede the whole Cadrilater to Bulgaria. In such circumstances, our politicians did not realize that for the moment the right of reason and demographic realities no longer counted in the face of force, and that

a new situation that would force us to cede part of the Romanian territory was imminent.

At the beginning of August, after a series of mutual diplomatic explorations carried out by Romania and Hungary, the two countries perfected their viewpoints with regard to their dispute. In an aide-mémoire dated 7 August 1940, the Hungarian government informed Romania that it would let it know what territory it claimed. It also accepted to make a population exchange after the territorial compromise. The Romanian government replied on 10 August 1940 in another aide-mémoire in which it insisted on the priority of the population exchange. It showed that “*the border shift can only be opportune to the extent to which it can enhance the vital space of the states that have to repatriate to their territory conationals that inhabit the territory of another state.*”⁶ As is well known, on 16 August 1940, the official negotiations between the Romanian delegation headed by Valer Pop and the Hungarian delegation led by Hory András began at Turnu-Severin. Since Hungary claimed 67,000 km² of Transylvania and our delegation insisted on the necessity first to exchange populations within the existing borders, the negotiations were suspended for consultations with the governments in Bucharest and Budapest, respectively. Resumed on 19 August, the talks reached deadlock because of the persistence of the two diametrically opposed viewpoints.

In the morning of 23 August, Mihail Manoilescu and Valer Pop met Wilhelm Fabricius at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest. The latter told the two Romanian politicians that during the population exchange, when the new Romanian-Hungarian borders were drawn, Romania would have to choose between a minimal variant implying the surrendering of 21,000 km² (without Arad County), and a maximal solution of 27,000 km² (with Arad County) at the north-western and western border⁷. On 24 August, at Turnu-Severin, Valer Pop refused to answer Hory András’ request to indicate the territories Romania was willing to cede to Hungary, and the negotiations were suspended. I believe that if the Hungarian delegation had been more flexible and had accepted the population exchange first, and if the Romanian politicians had been defter and more realistic, the Vienna arbitration perhaps would have never taken place. Hungary would have had to accept eventually whatever Romania offered. Hitler did not need a Romanian-Hungarian war. He needed to be sure of the Romanian oil and could not allow the oil fields in Prahova Valley be threatened by a war at the western border. This situation would have become more complicated in the east, as the USSR was ready for a military intervention against Romania.

The failure of the Turnu-Severin negotiation rushed the events to our prejudice. Hungary informed Berlin on Romania’s refusal to indicate the territories it was willing to cede, and on its intention to attack our country. In this circumstances and in order to avoid a military conflict between Romania and Hungary, Hitler (annoyed by Romania’s delays) and his experts decided between 25-29 August the territorial limits of Transylvania’s partition. In my opinion, the 43,000 km² established by Hitler to be ceded to Hungary were also a punitive measure against Romania because the latter had ignored all German and Italian warnings and only got involved in pointless initiatives, without really negotiating with Hungary. Certainly, the 43,000 km² satisfied first of all Germany’s strategic

interests, as the new Romanian-Hungarian border reached as far as near Braşov, therefore close to the oil fields which could thus be easily occupied by the airborne German troops in case of a Russian attack or Romania's defection. From the existing information, it results that Germany did not have in view this solution at the end of July and the beginning of August.

Let us therefore sum up: 1) on 26 July 1940, Hitler and Ribbentrop considered that the 14,000 km² Gigurtu and Manoilescu offered to cede to Hungary were too little; 2) on 23 August 1940, Fabricius informed the Bucharest authorities that Romania had to take into consideration a maximal solution of surrendering 27,000 km² to Hungary; 3) on 24 August, in Turnu-Severin, Valer Pop refused to draw on the map, in front of the Hungarian delegation, the territory Romania accepted to cede, insisting that the Hungarian delegation should officially accept first the population exchange; 4) on 30 August 1940, in Vienna, Romania was faced with a *fait accompli* and had to cede 43,000 km² in order to avoid a three-front war which would have led to the disappearance of the Romanian state.

Leaving aside the realm of facts and trying to sketch another scenario for the end of August 1940, the question arises: how would the events have developed if the Romanian-Hungarian population exchange had actually taken place? Could the Vienna arbitration, with all the train of personal and collective dramas that unfolded in Northern Transylvania between September 1940 – September 1944, have been avoided? □

Notes

¹ MIHAIL MANOILESCU, *Dictatul de la Viena. Memorii, iulie-august 1940*, edited, with an afterword, notes and index by VALERIU DINU, Bucureşti, 1991, p. 275.

²*Ibidem*, p. 277.

³About 2 million Greeks, Bulgarians and Turks were involved in this population exchange. Cf. STEPHEN P. LADAS, *The Exchange of Minorities. Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey*, New York, 1932, p. 1.

⁴ DIMITRIE GHERASIM, *Schimbul de populație între state*, Bucureşti, 1943, p. 86 sq.

⁵ MIHAIL MANOILESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 110; VALERIU POP, *Bătălia pentru Ardeal*, edited by de SANDA POP & NICOLAE C. NICOLESCU, Bucureşti, 1992, p. 54.

⁶ MIHAIL MANOILESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁷ VALERIU POP, *op. cit.*, p. 110.