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*Eastern borderlands as ‘cordon sanitaire’: Romanian and Polish frontiers  
in interwar geopolitics*

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Elity polityczne w Rumunii wobec polsko-litewskiego konfliktu w pierwszych latach  
niepodległości po 1918 r.

1. ‘CORDON SANITAIRE’: ANTINOMIES BETWEEN THE CREATION OF IMPERIAL  
GERMANY (1917–1918) AND THE FRENCH ACHIEVEMENTS (1919–1921)

‘Cordon sanitaire’, the French-inspired political system, envisaged, immediately after the First World War, a union of trusted or allied states of Paris, meant to stop the spread of the Soviet military and propaganda forces in Europe<sup>1</sup>. However, most of these state structures have been founded and afterwards protected by imperial Germany, in its exercise of underlying a large geographical and political space, intended to support it in the war effort and in exercising its tools of European domination.

The implosion of Tsarist Russia and the emergence of Eastern countries – Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, the Kingdom of Poland (of 1916) – represented almost exclusively, from an international viewpoint, the will and action of Berlin. The Moldavian Republic – autonomous at the end of 1917 and independent from January 24th, 1918 – constituted, among others, a stake (though available as an offer) in the peace negotiations between Central Powers and So-

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<sup>1</sup> Essential research on this topic has been provided by the Finnish historian Kalervo Hovi, *Cordon sanitaire or barrière de l’Est? The Emergence of the New French Eastern Europe Alliance Policy, 1917–1919*, Turku, 1975 and Idem, *Interessensphären im Baltikum. Finnland im Rahmen der Ostpolitik Polens 1919–1922*, Helsinki, 1984. Our approach: Florin Anghel, *Construirea sistemului “cordon sanitaire”. Relații româno-polone, 1919–1926*, Târgoviște, 2008.

viet Russia. 1918's Germany – the one that prepared and carried out the Russian withdrawal beyond Kiev, Helsinki and Caucasus – had perceived this vast region, now free of any sphere of influence, as nothing more than an appendage of the *Mitteleuropa* defined in 1916 by Fr. Naumann.

All political regimes – democratic or authoritarian – of Central or Southeastern Europe that built their identity in 1917–1919 had based their foreign policy strategies on the antinomy *they/us*: *they* were, usually, those dissatisfied with the results of the First World War and/or of the peace treaties. In most cases, the pursuit of institutional modernity of these states consistently avoided any appeal to otherness: their political leaders tackled the ‘state’ issue from a traditionalist standpoint, prioritizing the national ideal in an exclusive manner. This is the classical dilemma that was described at the end of the Second World War by the Hungarian political scientist Istvá Bibó in his essay *The Misery of the Small Nation States of Eastern Europe*: ‘*liberty and democracy are threatening the cause of the nation*’<sup>2</sup>. This concept was the main obstacle in the normal functioning of parliamentarism, constitutionalism and civil/civic democratic institutions. One exception – in the very beginning of the new Central European geopolitical order – was the Hungarian Republic of Mihályi Károlyi. We herein argue that the manifesto proclaimed on November 24th, 1918, by the Budapest government to all ‘non-Magyar nations’ can benefit from a new reading, other than the radical identity discourse of the national movements. ‘If Hungary is going to be disbanded – predicted Mihályi Károlyi the very tragedy of the future state – you [those that did not accept to participate in the new Republic –note ours] will lose your present outlets and your old buyers. (...) In the free Republic of Hungary there is all you need for human happiness. Here anyone can live well and one will not suffer from hunger and cold, if order is restored and we all work together. (...) You all better accept this new country and try to establish with it a strong alliance, so that by working together we could get rich and teach to Bohemia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary to all be like a single country!’<sup>3</sup>

Even more relevant for the general atmosphere of the first postwar years was an episode related by a Romanian intellectual, unfairly forgotten by her posterity, Smaranda Gheorghiu, known as Mother Smara. In 1925, while in Prague, the female writer had a very long philosophical talk about the European state of affairs with the president of the Republic, T. G. Masaryk: ‘neither we, nor they (the Czechs) – wrote Mother Smara in her diary – have a lot of friends. (...) It is God that holds the scales of justice’<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> István Bibó, *Misère des petits États d'Europe de l'Est*, Paris, 1988, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> The full text is reproduced in Corneliu Mihai Lungu, Ioana Grigorie editors, 1920. *Un act de justiție. Documente*, București, 2005, p. 78–79.

<sup>4</sup> The citation can be found in Mihaela Mudure, *Călătoriile Smarandei Gheorghiu*, in “Tribuna”, Cluj Napoca, an II, no. 23, 16–30 November 2003, p. 12–13.

## 2. TWO INTEGRATIONS, SAME SYSTEM: BESSARABIA/ROMANIA AND MIDDLE LITHUANIA/POLAND IN THE 'CORDON SANITAIRE' SYSTEM

May 27th, 1918, represented, ultimately, the victory of the plebiscitary principle, that of the autodetermination that respected mostly the ethnic reality, an idea borrowed in the first part of the year 1917 by the fragile Romanian elite in Chişinău. *The Official Declaration of Bessarabia's National Council* (called *Sfatul Ţării*), from March 27th, 1918<sup>5</sup>, included, in its content, the main components of President Woodrow Wilson's *Fourteen Points*: local autonomy, radical land reform, universal suffrage, respect for the rights of ethnic minorities<sup>6</sup>. In this respect we argue that the *Declaration* can be analyzed from conceptual, historical and political standpoints, as a political contract between two sovereign and independent entities: the Kingdom of Romania and the Moldavian Democratic Republic. This type of *political contract* between two parties of the same unit, politically divided for a while, marked by the same burden of historical memory, represented a *model* applied also in the case of *Middle Lithuania's* integration (an unknown republic, with Vilnius as a capital) into the Republic of Poland, in the same context of strategic developments along the borders with the Soviets.

The main idea of the newly constituted Republic of Poland was recreating a federation with Lithuania, in total and visible disagreement with the Baltic state's own political class. *'The ancestral land'* – ideologically inspired and codified on the level of the 'cultural nation' in the 19th century by Adam Mickiewicz – was not required to be ethnically Polish nor Catholic; that ideal (ancestral) land was an idealized Community of Poland and Lithuania, driven towards the East, which 'civilized' and christened the Lithuanian pagans and the Ukrainian nobility, which sunk the Moscow barbarians, which rejected Tatars' raids and invasions. *Further-*

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<sup>5</sup> The full text in *Unirea Basarabiei și a Bucovinei cu România, 1917–1918*, edited by Ion Calafeteanu, Viorica Moisuc, Chişinău, 1995. Same in Dinu Poştarencu, *O istorie a Basarabiei în date și documente, 1812–1940*, Chişinău, 1998. A detailed overview for the period 1917–1918 in Dimitrie Bogos, *La răspântie, Moldova de la Nistru, 1917–1918*, Chişinău, 1998. A synthetic analysis of the question of Bessarabia in interwar international relations in Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, *Bătălia pentru Basarabia, 1918–1940*, Iaşi, 1991. See also Mitru Ghiţiu, *Revoluţia rusă din februarie–martie 1917 și renaşterea naţională a românilor din stânga Prutului*, in "Caiete de istorie", Chişinău, no. 2 (6), March 2003, p. 1–8 and Valeriu Popovschi, *Despre constituirea Republicii Democratice Moldoveneşti la 2 decembrie 1917*, in "Revista de Istorie a Moldovei", Chişinău, no. 1–4, 2001. A complete research in Alberto Basciani, *La difficile unione. La Bessarabia e la Grande Romania, 1918–1940*, Roma, 2007. Studies that challenge the historiographic trends so far: Vasile Stati, *Istoria Moldovei*, Chişinău, 2002; Izeaslav Levit, *Republica Moldovenească, noiembrie 1917–noiembrie 1918*, Chişinău, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> For instance: Petre Cazacu, *Moldova dintre Prut și Nistru, 1812–1918*, Chişinău, 1992; Ştefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei. Studii și documente cu privire la mişcarea naţională din Basarabia în anii 1917–1918*, Chişinău, 1993. A modern and interdisciplinary approach: Iulian Frunţaşu, *O istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei*, Chişinău, 2002.

more, it was Vilnius – not Warsaw, not Krakow – that became the cultural capital of Poland starting from the 19th century<sup>7</sup>.

In October 1920, as ordered by Marshal Józef Piłsudski, General Lucjan Żeligowski's troops attacked Lithuania, occupied the city and the region of Vilnius and proclaimed *the Republic of Middle Lithuania*<sup>8</sup>. The new state did not have international recognition except from Poland, despite all the insurances, given by Piłsudski on April 22nd, 1919, that all the inhabitants of historical Lithuania would be treated equally in terms of legal and civic rights<sup>9</sup>. The mimetic internal political actions of the exotic Republic's authorities were aimed at discouraging Bolshevik subversions<sup>10</sup>, while at the same time making efforts to attract all ethnic communities – Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Russians, Germans, Belarusians – into civic participation. The general elections to the Vilnius Sejm, organized in 1921, gave this institution the legitimacy of a Constituent Assembly. In *January, 1922*, following the example of *Sfatul Țării* of Chișinău, this Sejm voted for the Republic of Middle Lithuania's incorporation into Poland.

Certainly, the internal and institutional mechanisms of the two temporary political entities (The Moldavian Republic and The Republic of Middle Lithuania) cannot be appreciated as juxtaposed nor can they be examined in a strictly comparative manner. One needs to be cautious when comparing the two, although in many respects their domestic conditions are similar: the opposed ethnic communities, the precariousness of education and civic beliefs, the economic and cultural development deficit, their archaic rural world. However, both experienced the same reactions from the Great Powers: on the one hand, the clear opposition of Soviet Russia/the USSR to Bessarabia's Unification, as well as the Allies' unwill-

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<sup>7</sup> Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Mickiewicz și problema teritoriului sacru*, in Sorin Antohi, Vladimir Tismăneanu coords., "De la utopie la istorie. Revoluțiile din 1989 și urmările lor", București, 2006, p. 585–587. For *the sacred territory* in the Romanian symbolic space see Florin Anghel, *Balchik – Building a Symbolical History of National Identity in the Romanian Inter-War Period*, in Krassimira Mutafova editor, "Balkanite – Ezik, Istoriia, Kultura. The Balkans – Languages, History, Cultures", Veliko Tarnovo, 2008, p. 321–329.

<sup>8</sup> For a complete overview see Alfred Erich Senn, *The Great Powers, Lithuania and the Vilna Question*, Leiden, 1966; Idem, *On the State of Central Lithuania*, in "Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Östeuropas", 10, 1964; Robertas Ziugdas, *Lithuania and the Western Powers 1917–1940*, Vilnius, 1987; Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Zalys, *Lithuania in European Politics: the Years of the First Republic, 1918–1940*, New York, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> The manifesto entitled *To the Inhabitants of the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania*, printed in Vilnius on April 22nd, 1919, on the occasion of the entrance of Polish troops in the city. It was edited – fully or partially – in different volumes. See also Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warszawa, Akta Leona Wasiliewskiego, vol. 30, f. 137–140.

<sup>10</sup> With respect to this, see an excellent study for Bessarabia's case in Ludmila Rotari, *Mișcarea subversivă din Basarabia în anii 1918–1924*, București, 2004.

ingness to execute the October 1920 Paris Treaty<sup>11</sup> *ad litteram* and, on the other hand, the substantial support of the Kremlin to the Republic of Lithuania in all its conflicts and disputes with Poland.

We will therefore try to formulate some explanations for the *common character* – sometimes *identical* – of the claims of the two texts – of Chişinău and of Vilnius – regarding the Unification with the ‘mother state’. We would indicate as a first argument the education of the national elite of the two capitals in the same university centers, within a system of shared civic, intellectual and cultural values: Dorpat/Tartu (Estonia)<sup>12</sup>, Riga (Latvia), Sankt Petersburg. The respective leaders became aware – and then persuaded Bucharest and Warsaw – of the permanent threat, and not just from a military perspective, that Soviet Russia represented for them. Correspondingly, the same elites produced a similar foreign policy discourse toward the Kremlin, which can be illustrated by the signing in Bucharest, on March 3rd, 1921, of the *Romanian-Polish Treaty of Defensive Alliance*.

### 3. THE ROLE OF EASTERN BORDER PROVINCES IN BUILDING DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES

The common Romanian-Polish border<sup>13</sup> allowed the geopolitical construction of a transport/strategic corridor between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, at the Western frontiers of the USSR: some researches advance a term aimed to circumscribe geographically and politically the substance of our discussion, namely the *Balto-Pontic isthmus*<sup>14</sup>. On January 26th, 1926, on the occasion of the renewal of the *Bilateral Convention* of 1921, the Polish Prime Minister, Count

<sup>11</sup> See a case study in Ioan Chiper, *Italy and the Ratification of the October 28, 1920 Treaty Concerning Bessarabia*, in “Revue Roumaine d’Études Internationales”, XXVI, no. 2 (18), 1992. From an Italian perspective, see Alberto Basciani, *Les relations italo-roumaines et la ratification du Traité pour la Bessarabie (1919–1927)*, in Veniamin Ciobanu, coord., “East-Central Europe and the Great Powers Politics (19th–20th Centuries)”, Iaşi, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> At the University of Dorpat (Tartu) studied the Romanians Pantelimon Halippa and Ion Pelivan. The only Estonian account on Bessarabia during these years is due to Richard Roht, member of the literary group *Noor Eesti*, an Estonian counterpart of the Romanian *Junimea*, who arrived in October, 1916, in a small town of Bugeac. On the occasion, Roht noted in his diary: “The local officials, with whom we drink a glass of red wine, are telling me they are Moldavians. Upon the arrival of Romanian officers, they become childishly happy, they offer them their best food and just after the officers’ departure, they are whispering to me: Romanians [are] fool people, very fool.” See Boris Buracinschi, *Între deal și vale. Corespondență din Estonia*, “Contrafort”, Chişinău, no.1–3 (87–89), January–March 2002.

<sup>13</sup> See: Florin Anghel, *Despre o problemă aproape necunoscută: frontiera româno-polonă în perioada interbelică (1918–1939)*, in “Revista Istorică”, 3–4, 1997, p. 255–270.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucher, *Transitions géopolitiques dans l’isthme mer Baltiques-mer Noire*, in Idem (coord.), “Transitions géopolitiques sur le continent européen. Mutations dans l’isthme mer Baltique-mer Noire”, Fondation pour les Études de Défense, Paris, 1998, p. 11–20.

Aleksander Skrzyński declared that *'Poland will support Romania in case of a Soviet attack while legal arguments or the idea of a plebiscite in Bessarabia have only relative value for Poland'*<sup>15</sup>. In its turn, Romania succeeded to assure Warsaw of its full backing in case of a similar unprovoked attack coming from the East, even if it did not give such a categorical statement.

*The Dniester* was perceived from the very beginning as a state/regime frontier and, from a symbolic geography standpoint, as an entity which obviously separated two parallel, unmistakable and non-cooperative worlds. Therefore, the Dniester was standing at the periphery of economic and investment interests: however, at a theoretical level, it represented a permanent starting point in any discussion about creating a strategic corridor linking the Baltic and the Black Seas, which involved building a modern infrastructure of navigable waterways and railroads. Thus, the *Rompol-Polrom* railroad would have had to connect Gdynia and Constanța harbors, via Lwów and Cernăuți, with other strategic lines towards Chișinău, Galați and Brăila<sup>16</sup>. Fast and modernly equipped trains, that would have reached a speed of 120km/h, on fully electrified lines, would have transported both countries' economic goods but, especially, in case of a war with the USSR, war material, munition and troops<sup>17</sup>. The Dniester river, completely fortified, would have been an impregnable line of defense, due both to geographical conditions (the Romanian bank being much higher) and military reinforcements.

Another point of closeness among the shared border interests of the two countries was undoubtedly the Polish community of Bukovina and Bessarabia. Estimated around 8–10 000, the number of Bessarabian Poles, to be found mostly in Chișinău and Bălți, was however smaller than that of the Poles in the neighboring Bukovina<sup>18</sup>. The Polish Consulate-General in Chișinău was among the first established by the Foreign Ministry of Warsaw: in 1919, along with that of Cernăuți<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (from now on AMAE), fond 71/1920–1944, Polonia, vol. 62, f. 34–35.

<sup>16</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Warszawa, fond Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, vol. 450, f. 3–5. Seventy years later, on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001, in Mangalia, it would be signed the *Memorandum regarding the collaboration for the modernisation and development of Gdansk-Constanța railroad*. The route, 2163 km long, passes through Poland, Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania, on the following itinerary: Gdansk–Warsaw–Krakow–Muszyna–Košice–Halmeu–Cluj–Napoca–Brașov–Bucharest–Constanța and it lasts 18 hours (instead of 26), with average speed of 160 km/h for passenger trains and 120 km/h for freight trains. See “Adevărul”, July 10<sup>th</sup> 2001, p. 6. Also, Tomasz Wiśniewski, *Via Carpatica: drumuri bune până în Polonia*, in “22 Plus”, no. 247, April 29<sup>th</sup> 2008, p. 10. This last article talks about the itinerary Kaunas–Lublin–Prešov–Košice–Debrecen–Bucharest–Constanța (with the alternative Calafat – Vidin).

<sup>17</sup> “Buletinul Uniunii Camerelor de Comerț și Industrie”, no. 9, 1936, p. 566.

<sup>18</sup> A broad overview of this question in: Florin Pintescu, Daniel Hrenciu, *Din istoria polonezilor din Bucovina, 1774–2002*, Suceava, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Michel, *La formation du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et le personnel diplomatique en Pologne de 1918 à 1939*, in vol. “Ostmitteleuropa Geschichte und Forschungen”,

With their institutions' help and due to the influence of their community's leaders important projects were carried out in cultural, educational and economic fields. The Polish organizations, institutions and associations in both Romanian provinces declared their unreserved commitment to the institutions and laws of the state in which they were acting, condemning every time the interference and untruths of the Bolshevik propaganda among the foreigners.

The unification of Bessarabia with Romania and the shaping of a violent type of Soviet foreign policy discourse towards it completed the Romanian-Polish shares of the 'cordon sanitaire' system with those often represented by Latvia<sup>20</sup> and, occasionally, Estonia and Finland<sup>21</sup>. An eloquent elucidation of these neighbors' fear and of the whole system/corridor of Eastern border provinces can be done by presenting, in extenso, a passage from the article *Soviet Power Politics on the National Question in Russia*, published in October 1920, in the Bolshevik official newspaper 'Pravda', by I. V. Stalin. The Soviet leader, although not yet a supreme one, strongly argued against the right to independent existence of all these states as long as they were not promoting a friendly policy towards Moscow and would not enter, eventually, in the composition of the Soviet Union. 'In case of a life and death struggle between proletarian Russia and imperialist Entente – Stalin wrote – there are only two possible exits for the *peripheral lands* [ideological and political term used to designate all territories/states detached from Russia in 1917–1918, note ours]: *either* with Russia – and then: the release of the working masses from the imperialist yoke, *either* together with the Allies – and then: the inevitable yoke of the imperialism. There is no third exit'<sup>22</sup>.

Unavoidably and unusually, Bessarabia involved Romania in the Eastern geopolitical issues, previously almost completely unknown to the Bucharest diplomacy. This was because, after the proclamation and recognition of Independence (1877–1878), the Romanian foreign policy issued obsessive strategies concerned almost exclusively with Transylvania and diplomatic relations with Austria-Hungary.

The acute interest for the Romanian communities of the Balkans – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – as well as the military involvement in the Second Balkan War (1913) were nothing more than a certain outlet of the violent

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Stuttgart, 1981; Waldemar Michowicz, *Organizacja Polskiego aparatu dyplomatycznego w latach 1918–1939*, in "Historia dyplomacji polskiej", t. 4, Warszawa, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> For a systematic presentation of the entire interwar period see: Florin Anghel, *Starp paraleliem spoguliem: Rumanijas un Latvijas attiecības starpkam laika*, in "Latvijas Arhivi", Rīga, 4, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> The first Romanian approach in: Silviu Miloiu, *România și Țările Baltice în perioada interbelică*, Târgoviște, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> I. V. Stalin, *Politica puterii sovietice în problema națională din Rusia (1920)*, in Idem, "Marxismul și problema națională și colonială. Articole și cuvântări alese", (in Romanian), Editura în Limbi Străine, Moscova, 1940, p. 73.

ethnocentric/national discourse formulated by all political parties and groups, and the concrete preparation to achieve those mythical commandments issued by the Forty-Eighters in order to build Greater Romania.

Thus, for the first time, Bessarabia and the Dniester border were key topics on the Romanian diplomacy agenda, obliged to articulate a defensive policy discourse together with the directly concerned strategic partners – Poland and Latvia – and to seek non-conflicting solutions. In their turn, the Baltic leaders (and especially those of Riga) had quickly convinced themselves of the identity of interests and options with their greater, yet unknown, neighbor from the Danube and the Black Sea. The following statements of intent of these strategic allies with respect to Bessarabia and its border have overwhelmed the feverish expectations of Bucharest: on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1925, while receiving Al. Iacovaky, the Romanian ambassador accredited to both Warsaw and Riga, the President of Latvia, Janis Čakste, agreed on all essential points of collaboration. ‘If I examine the current boundary that separates the neighboring countries of Soviet Russia – showed president Čakste – I must confess that these boundaries do not seem to me very stable so that we must prepare ourselves for the day when our countries’ independence will be threatened. *We are fully aware that a Soviet war for the conquest of Bessarabia would greatly influence our own situation*’<sup>23</sup> [italics ours]. In like manner, a few months earlier, on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1925, the Latvian Foreign Minister, Zigfrids Meierovics, answered to a question of the same Al. Iacovaky on solutions that Romania could use to obtain from the USSR recognition for Bessarabia’s Union with Romania. ‘*Strength* – emphasized Meierovics – is the only argument that Russia takes into account and in the present situation we cannot be strong without being united’<sup>24</sup>. In the 30s, driven by the energetic foreign minister Nicolae Titulescu, and especially after the establishment of the Baltic Entente (in 1934), the collaboration between the two capitals became more obvious, the question of defending the Eastern borders becoming an undisguised priority on the agenda of bilateral talks and meetings<sup>25</sup>.

Approaching themes like the Russian geopolitics of space confronted the Romanian diplomacy with a number of unusual situations, mainly in the first years after the First World War, and called for ‘out-of-the-box’ solutions. To put it briefly, the recognition of the land between the Prut and the Dniester as belonging to Romania, on the one hand, and the return of the National Bank thesaurus from Moscow, on the other hand, represented *the central themes*, if not singular, of the Romanian-Soviet diplomatic relations in the interwar period. *By 1934, although Romania had adhered to the principles of peaceful coexistence* (highly propagand-

<sup>23</sup> AMAE, fond 71/1920–1944 Letonia, vol. 8, f. 67–68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 44–45.

<sup>25</sup> See *in extenso* in the chapter *Poziția României față de constituirea și consolidarea Înțelegerii Baltice* in Silviu Miloiu, *op. cit.*, p. 165–199.



distic) of the 1929 Litvinov Protocol, it remained the only European neighbor of the USSR which has not established diplomatic relations nor has signed a bilateral treaty/pact with Moscow. The author of one of the most complete and poignant monographs on this subject, Octavian Țăcu<sup>26</sup>, underlies that 'geopolitical interests pursued by the Soviets in the region, as well as their destructive nature, transferred the Bessarabian issue from a Romanian problem into an international one. Moscow's foreign politics and its diplomatic game towards Romania with regard to Bessarabia, in conjunction with the Kremlin's interference in the internal affairs of the Romanian province, plus the economic blockade along the Dniester border distorted significantly the integration process of the land between the Prut and the Dniester into the Romanian structures. *This was the major cause for which Romania strongly desired to achieve Moscow's recognition of Bessarabia as Romanian territory*<sup>27</sup>. It is clear, however, that its delicate geographical position and its precarious economic and social conditions have turned the Bessarabian province into a decisive test for the Romanian political elite: to modernize it would ultimately mean to transform Greater Romania from an artificial body into a real nation state for all its citizens<sup>28</sup>.

Additionally, Bucharest was obliged to reject as groundless the Polish projects to create a *security wall* in Ukraine and Belarus, by taking into administration vast territories surrounded by the Dnieper, the Black Sea coast and the Baltic shores<sup>29</sup>. Faced with permanent accusations coming from Moscow regarding violations of the rights of national self-determination in Bessarabia and support – including military – of the Romanian position by France and Great Britain, Foreign Minister, Take Ionescu, believed it necessary to send to the Kremlin one of the most daring and expressive diplomatic message. *'Romania – Take Ionescu wrote – is a civilized country and has not engaged nor will ever engage someone or something outside the superior rules of international morality. When Romania will want to make war, it will be out in the open and only through its regular army. Moreover, the Romanian government is able to control its entire national territory, the only territory occupied by Romanian troops'*<sup>30</sup>.

In the context of regulation – at least in terms of international legal instruments – of the Polish-Soviet border situation (following the Riga peace treaty signed in March 1921), Bucharest decided that the only way out of the impasse was continuing efforts to open bilateral negotiations with Moscow aimed at obtaining recognition of Bessarabia's Union with Romania and restitution of the

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<sup>26</sup> Octavian Țăcu, *Problema Basarabiei și relațiile sovieto-române în perioada interbelică (1919–1939)*, Chișinău, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> Alberto Basciani, *op. cit.*, p.105–106.

<sup>29</sup> See *in extenso* in Florin Anghel, *Construirea sistemului "cordon sanitaire"*, p. 68–78.

<sup>30</sup> AMAE, fond 71/1920–1944 Dosare Speciale, vol. 45, f. 257–258.

thesaurus. Polish diplomacy insisted on – and achieved – that the meetings to be held in Warsaw in September–October 1921; however, nothing could persuade both Romanian and Soviet sides to reach a compromise. The ‘inflexibility’ of the Romanian negotiators led the head of the Bolshevik delegation, Lev Karahan, to pronounce an anathema upon the failure: ‘*I see – he addressed his Romanian counterpart, Gheorghe Filality – that you make such a big deal out of the miserable sum of less than a hundred million gold rubles that your whole treasury metal stock amounts up to. I hope you acknowledge that Bessarabia is worth a little more than that*<sup>31</sup>. The clear suggestion of an exchange – the treasure would remain in Moscow at the expense of acknowledging that the province between the Prut and the Dniester lied within Romania’s borders – was, however, rejected by Bucharest; otherwise, this has not been admitted in any of the opportunities provided throughout the interwar period. Finally, it seemed that the Soviets were ready to accept the recognition of *Dniester as a state border* in exchange for concluding a bilateral non-aggression pact that would have offered immense diplomatic advantages to the Kremlin. In the discussed draft – signed by Titulescu and Molotov on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1936 – it was mentioned in Article 3 that ‘*the Soviet government recognizes that (...) Soviet troops could never pass Dniester river without a formal request from the Royal Government of Romania and the Royal Government of Romania recognizes that Romanian troops could never pass Dniester river towards the USSR without a formal request from the Government of the USSR*<sup>32</sup>. Titulescu’s revocation from office – on August 29th, 1936 – and, afterwards, starting from 1938, the reshaping of the Romanian foreign policy canceled the scanty hopes arisen in the document.

However, at the same time, up to June 28th, 1940, Moscow has conducted an extensive process aimed to give an ideological character to the question of the Dniester border, including what was in 1924 designated as *Moldavian language* and *Moldavian people*. The Communist rebellion of Tatar-Bunar, in Southern Bessarabia, in September 1924, and the creation, in the same year, of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, with its capital at Balta, in Transnistria, represented only two of the most important components of Stalin’s action<sup>33</sup>. The idea of a distinct *Moldavian area* was resumed after The Republic of Moldavia declared its independence in 1991 and it was induced by – deliber-

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, vol. 43, f. 45. Published also in Dumitru Preda coord., *Relațiile româno-sovietice*, vol. I (1917–1934), București, 1999, p. 140–142.

<sup>32</sup> Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, coll. Titulescu, box 13, folder USSR, f. f.; the annotated text of the Titulescu – Litvinov Mutual Assistance Pact (I have received the copy of the document by courtesy of Professor Dr. Ioan Chiper).

<sup>33</sup> Two analyses outside Romanian-speaking space: Wilhelmus Petrus van Meurs, *Chestiunea Basarabiei în istoriografia comunistă*, Chișinău, 1995; Klaus Heitman, *Limbă și politică în Republica Moldova*, Chișinău, 1998.

ately scientific – arguments of historical, linguistic and psychological order. Thus, President Vladimir Voronin had been pointing out quite often on the specificity of *the language* and *nation* situated between the Prut and the Dniester, insisting – in a manner that recalls his predecessors from the interwar period – on the fracture with the original Romanian territory: *'in order for the relations between our countries to settle down – Voronin said in 2003, two years after becoming the country's supreme leader – it is essential for Romanians to abandon their Unionist and Nationalist policies towards Moldavia'*<sup>34</sup> [italics ours].

The collapse of the system of alliances resulted from the peace treaties of 1919–1920, implicitly the collapse of the 'cordon sanitaire' system, was a great opportunity for the Great Power so far excluded – Germany and the USSR – to assert their specific regional interests. *Bessarabia and Poland's Eastern region* were designated subject of the territorial divisions in *the Secret Additional Protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact* of August 23rd, 1939: their loss led to the disappearance of the Republic of Poland, Greater Romania's collapse and the dismantling of the Franco-British alliance system in Central-Eastern and Southeastern Europe<sup>35</sup>. In addition, both of these Eastern border provinces remained in the collective memory as the site of the most horrific moments in the evolution of genocide and the Holocaust.

With reference to the countries targeted by the provisions of *the Secret Additional Protocol*, we can discuss about *a patriarchal vision* of their diplomacies and diplomats, who failed not only to properly perceive the alliance between Berlin and Moscow but also to evaluate the geopolitical and military effects that such an alliance could have upon the region. Although the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigore Gafencu, noted that 'nobody in Europe could be misled by the meaning of the Treaty of Moscow and the preventive grand coalition had died'<sup>36</sup>, it is hard to believe that in Bucharest it was immediately understood the nature of the disaster and its consequences. From this point of view, the common perception in Riga was that 'Moscow's decision' was taken at the last moment and that 'the satisfaction is obvious, claiming that the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact would mean removing the dangers of war in Eastern Europe'<sup>37</sup>. The foreseeable verdict – yet disregarded by the Soviet neighboring states – was elegantly avoided by the Soviet diplomats in these capitals: the Soviet plenipotentiary minister in

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Voronin, *Republica Moldova nu este în situația de a alege între Occident și Rusia*, conversation with Mihnea Berindei and Arielle Thédrel), in "22", year XIV, no. 702, 19th–25th August, 2003, p. 4–5.

<sup>35</sup> A good case study in Rebecca Haynes, *Politica României față de Germania între 1936 și 1940*, Iași, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Grigore Gafencu, *Ultimele zile ale Europei. O călătorie diplomatică întreprinsă în anul 1939*, București, 1992, p. 221.

<sup>37</sup> AMAE, fond 71/1920–1944 Letonia, vol. 3, f. 262.

Ankara, A. V. Terentiev, talking to his Romanian counterpart, Vasile Stoica, on September 9 and 11, 1939, persuaded the latter that ‘the pact is a peace tool, a result of Russia’s peaceful policy, not an alliance for an aggression policy’<sup>38</sup>. To this propaganda effort to disguise the true significance of the bilateral agreement was added, among other things, the declaration of September 23rd, 1939 (just a week after the Red Army had occupied Eastern Poland), of the Soviet Marshal Klement Voroshilov, according to whom ‘*the USSR has nothing to ask of Romania*’<sup>39</sup>. Such statements were made, however, while deploying along the Romanian borders three large Soviet army groups: the first North of Cernăuți, the second at a distance of 140 km from Hotin and the third along Tiraspol–Odessa railway<sup>40</sup>.

The collapse of French influence and, shortly after, of its political, military and security institutions in 1939–1940, as well as the cancellation by force operated by Germany and the USSR of the independence and/or territorial integrity of Central and Eastern European states led to the disintegration of the geopolitical system known as ‘cordon sanitaire’.

The rapid and profound changes were well summarized by Judy Batt, a researcher at the University of Birmingham, who learned a whole history of the region while interviewing an older person in a village in Transcarpathia (in the Northern Romanian Maramureș, in today’s Ukraine): ‘*I was born – told her the interviewee – in Austria-Hungary, I went to school in Czechoslovakia, I served in the Hungarian Army in the Second World War and I was imprisoned in the USSR. I find myself now in an independent Ukraine and I did all this without ever leaving my village*’<sup>41</sup>.

Security barriers, as they were designed in the early twentieth century under the conditions of excessive rivalry between the European powers (France/the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/the USSR) constituted a constant and substantial concern for the diplomacies of the states of the Ponto-Baltic geopolitical area. Whether they have accepted in 1917–1918 the military protection provided by the Reich, or that of France after the signing of the peace treaties of 1919–1920, these countries were simultaneously: subject to disputes and tensions all along the interwar decades; aims for the development of strategies; object of division into spheres of influence and, ultimately, pretext for the start of hostilities of the Second World War.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, fond 71/1920–1944 Turcia, vol. 74, f. 269.

<sup>39</sup> Vitalie Văratec, *Șase zile din istoria Bucovinei (28 iunie–3 iulie 1940). Invazia și anexarea Nordului Bucovinei de către URSS, Rădăuți*, 2001, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Citation found in Constantin Severin, *Transcarpatia, provincia din inima Europei*, in “Obiectiv. Vocea Sucevei”, Suceava, II, no. 224 (331), September 23rd, 2002, p. 6.

## STRESZCZENIE

Autor wskazuje, iż ogłoszenie 16 lutego 1918 r. w Tarybie niepodległości Litwy nie wywarło większego wrażenia na kołach dyplomatycznych Rumunii. Trwała jeszcze wojna, a król, parlament oraz rząd rumuński znajdowali się w Jassach. Stąd zarówno król, jak i premier Marghiloman dostrzegali rozwój rewolucji bolszewickiej, ale też w marcu tego roku żołnierze rumuńscy weszli do Besarabii, która złożyła deklarację połączenia się z Rumunią.

Na przełomie lat 1918 i 1919 elity polityczne Bukaresztu podjęły próbę budowy „kordonu sanitarnego” pomiędzy Bałtykiem a Morzem Czarnym. Realizując ten plan, mimo pewnego oporu Polski, Rumunia 24 sierpnia 1924 r. uznała oficjalnie Litwę. W czasie polsko-rumuńskich rozmów dyplomatycznych strona rumuńska twierdziła, że Litwa właśnie powinna być wspólnym sojusznikiem Polski i Rumunii w konstruowaniu owego kordonu, zamykającego drogę ekspansji Rosji Radzieckiej. Wynikało to m.in. z faktu, iż nie znaleziono perspektyw do nawiązania stosunków pomiędzy Bukaresztem a Kownem. Dyplomaci, politycy, elity kulturalne jakby obawiały się przełamania barier pomiędzy obydwojma krajami i narodami.