

Romania's status in the new European geopolitics imposed by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact

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Abstract

The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact has represented, until today, a reference topic in the analyses of those who study history and international relations. From the Romanian point of view, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact achieved the master stroke to the system of alliances built by Romania in the interwar period. In fact, the German-Soviet agreement eliminated the Franco-British presence in South-eastern Europe, the European equilibrium was destroyed and its reconstruction in favour of Romania was almost impossible in the new geopolitical and geostrategic situation.

Keywords: Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Romania, Transylvania, geopolitics, South-Eastern Europe

AT THE BEGINNING of the summer of 1939, Europe was trying to hastily organize its defense. And it was not a precipitated succession of sensational events; on the contrary, the fight between chancellors had already gone in the undertone, hidden from the world. And history has already demonstrated that at the end of the fourth decade of the 20th century, Stalin did everything that was possible to prevent the achievement of the worst Soviet nightmare, which was the coalition of the main Western Powers against the Soviet Union. Considering that War was inevitable, he acted so that the War would start between the Western Powers, and the Soviet Union would remain, even if just at the beginning, out of the conflict and possibly, finally, have a heavy word to say on the terms of peace. History has also demonstrated that both sides played a risky and dangerous game, whose victims were security, peace and the whole European and global system.

In all that context, the signing, on 23 August 1939, of the non-aggression treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany by Molotov and Ribbentrop, in the presence of Stalin, who was “only a smile” (Vlad 2006:133), produced a state of surprise and confusion in the European political and diplomatic environment, as few were those who expected a German-Soviet agreement. Thus, international relations and European secu-

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rity entered officially in a new stage! Or, as Raoul Bossy confessed in his memoirs, “the balance of forces was inverted now in favor of the Axis” (Bossy 1993: 146).

However, despite the signing of the non-aggression agreement in August 1939, nobody doubted that the Nazi-Soviet Pact would lead to war in Europe. And this broke out a few days later, on 1 September.

It is beyond any doubt that the famous Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact provoked a substantial transformation, with major implications, not only in the evolution of relations between Germany and the Soviet Union, but it reshaped the international political and military relations, in the years following the signing of the document. At the same time, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact has represented, until today, a reference topic in the analyses of those who study history and international relations. And the promoters of that agreement were aware of the size and importance of the moment; immediate statements are relevant to the expectations of public opinion in their own countries. In his speech at the Special Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, during the ratification of the non-aggression Pact of 23 August 1939, V. Molotov pointed out that the document “is a turning point in European history. This Treaty gives us not only the chance to address the danger of war with Germany, but to reduce the field of possible military clashes in Europe and serves, in this way, the general cause of peace; it must ensure the opportunities to increase our forces, to strengthen our positions and to expand the Soviet influence on the international developments”. Regarding Hitler’s view, it is clear from his own statement (September 1, 1939, Reichstag), meaning that the Pact “excludes the use of force between Germany and the Soviet Union, the two countries being compelled to consult each other and cooperate in the economic field, a decision of colossal importance, its significance for the future being difficult to foresee” (Ciorbea and Ploeanu 2011: 33-34).

In this entire European context from late ‘30s of the 20th century, Romania was particularly exposed, being surrounded by neighbours with territorial claims, although traditional allies, France and Great Britain, still continued their commitment to assist Romania if it had been subject to an act of aggression. And although of little practical value, because they concerned the independence of Romania, not its territorial integrity, the British and French guarantees were received with satisfaction in Bucharest (Vlad 2006: 138).

From the Romanian point of view, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact achieved the master stroke to the system of alliances built by Romania in the interwar period and led to an almost complete political and military isolation of the country, the Munich Agreement and the Soviet-Nazi Pact cancelling the Treaty of Versailles and the arrangements which the newly formed states in Central and Eastern Europe had concluded after the First World War. 4 independent states, members of the League of Nations had already disappeared:

Austria, Czechoslovakia, Albania, and Poland, follow by three others: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Dismemberment of Czechoslovakia abolished the Little Entente, the division of Poland cancelled the Romanian-Polish defensive alliance and the regional and bilateral pacts signed during the interwar period proved to be worthless (Giurescu 1988: 253).

In fact, the rapid turn of events meant that England and France looked at Romania as the only possible way to support Poland, the Western solution being to use Romania as a safe haven for the Polish government and what was left of its army. But, Romania was again a buffer state, between two power centers which were sharing areas of influence from the Baltic to the Black Sea, the two Great Powers being partners in the game of interests in Eastern Europe.

Intending, in his turn, to have a “freehand” on Poland, Hitler made important concessions to the Soviets, which caused the authorities in Bucharest serious reasons to fear. Worried about the consequences of recent events, on September 21, 1939, the Romanian Government sent a declaration of neutrality to Moscow, a possible Russian attack in the fall of 1939 being the main concern of Romania. That situation determined the Armand Călinescu, the Prime Minister of Romania at that time, to declare, as just two days after the Soviet Union invaded Poland, that “the German danger was removed, now the Russian danger is principal” (Quinlan 1995: 48-49). At the same time, the remarks made by King Carol II made clear his intention to keep Romania away from the European War for as long as possible, and also, issued the warning that, in case of defeat, the offenders could benefit from the country’s resources (Prisăcaru 2012: 47-48).

In fact, by the end of September 1939, the international position of Romania was increasingly insecure, and the fear of Russia had increased, determining new decisions by the country’s foreign and internal policy makers in the period that followed. But, even if the European situation was aggravated, and even though the influence of Germany in Romania was felt more strongly, Bucharest continued to respect its old European alliances, although, after 1939, the Franco-British support and also the German-Soviet rivalry did not present any advantages for Romania’s security. In fact, the German-Soviet agreement eliminated the Franco-British presence in South-eastern Europe, the European equilibrium was destroyed and its reconstruction in favour of Romania was almost impossible in the new geopolitical and geostrategic situation. Although they didn’t know the details of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Romanian leaders were aware of the new geopolitical situation of the country, and 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, and also in the South-eastern part of the continent. But, the Belgian surrender and France’s military collapse dissipated their illusions (Prisăcaru 2012: 49).

In this case, since the fall of 1939 until the spring of 1940, the main goals of the Romanian authorities were: a) keeping the country out of the European conflict; b) maintaining military forces until the end of the war; c) maintaining the territorial status quo until the general conference of peace. The premise of these decisions was the memory of the First World War (war of positions, mutual weakening of the opponents, lengthy hostilities). Internally, these events led the Romanian authorities to take a number of measures, such as: a) the arming of troops and convening the concentration reservists in the units; b) an attempt to political reconciliation internally, particularly with the representatives of the far right – in reality, it was an attempt to change the face of the regime to be as much to the liking of Germany. But all this was practically useless.

In fact, since May 29, 1940, in a limited Crown Council – attended by the Romanian King, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Affairs Minister and the Minister of the Palace – it was found, by unanimity, that the major threat to Romania came from the Soviet Union, because of the explicit declaration of Vyaceslav Molotov to the Supreme Soviet on 29 March 1940, in which he stated that there was a contentious issue left unsolved, namely Bessarabia, whose union with Romania was never recognized by the Soviet Union. And in front of that threat, Romania's alternative was: a) the armed resistance; b) the division of Romania between the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria, and maybe Germany; or c) adapting to the new balance of forces, more exactly, moving closer to Germany.

On June 2, came the reply from Berlin. The Romanian Government was asked to respond to what extent it was ready to treat a request for revision made by its neighbors, for example the Soviet Union, in the Bessarabia question! The essential had been said, and the due date was the night of June 26, 1940 (Giurescu 1988: 254-256).

The Soviet Union took advantage of the treaty it had concluded with Germany a year before, in order to impose an ultimatum to Romania, demanding the immediate evacuation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Germany advised Romania to accept the Soviet Union's demands, in order to preserve the peace in the Balkans. The same advice was given by Italy, Greece and Serbia. Romania decided to accept Soviet demands, the reason being the preservation of the Romanian state, with its institutions and armed forces, which were necessary to defend Transylvania. The attempts of Romania to negotiate with the Soviet Union were met with an uncompromising refusal. The evacuation had to be completed in four days, but the deadline was not respected by Moscow: the Russian troops entered the Romanian province two days earlier, on 28 June, causing numerous incidents.

The decision to accept the Soviet ultimatum was motivated by one more factor – the capitulation of France – which was a tremendous shock for Romanians, who had built their entire political strategy on the scenario of the First World War. And on top of that

shock came the Soviet ultimatum (Giurescu 1988: 257).

In fact, Moscow's intentions to enter into Bessarabia, the support for Hungary's demands and the encouragement of the Bulgarian pretensions over Dobrogea, became explicit almost immediately after signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Moscow intended, in fact, to achieve a direct connection with Bulgaria through the Romanian territory. At the beginning of December 1939, a former chief of the Romanian Communist Party (and militant for the secession of Dobrogea), Boris Stefanov, sustained both the concession of the Romanian provinces and the necessity to establish the Soviet military bases in the respective territories. On the occasion of receiving congratulations from the Bulgarian officers for the annexation of Bessarabia, the Soviet responded that "it is possible to meet again on the Danube" (Watts 2011: 122-125).

Grigore Gafencu, a contemporary of those events, grasped the true reality of the time. In his *Diary*, he would write the following: "from the very first day of the Great War, the Russians were determined to take advantage of their arrangement with the Germans (who gave them free hand from the East), in order to take back the lost territories and to win new defense and resistance positions. Their incursion into Poland all the way to the Carpathians, the pacts imposed to the Baltic States, and the war against Finland were facts proving their determination to take advantage of the reprieve created by the European war. Their attitude towards us, their brutal rejection of all our settlement propositions, Molotov's speech in late March last year would not allow us entertain any illusion regarding their true intentions. As long as our resistance could count on the balance among European forces, taking advantage either of Turkey's friendship and the Anglo-French pledge or on Italy's promises, we could avoid the Russian pressure. Neither Russia nor Germany had any interest to make it possible for an Eastern front to emerge in the Balkans and at the Black Sea. However, when France collapsed, the possibility of such a front also vanished. The Russians and the Germans were left by themselves, facing each other; allies with Western interests ruined the Russian plans: Germany stood strong and able to turn Eastward for its big reckoning with Moscow; the Soviets had no more time to waste; all defense positions had to be urgently reclaimed and consolidated. It is the moment when destiny turned towards us." (Gafencu 1991: 22-23).

On 1 July 1940, Romania renounced the Anglo-French guarantees and on 4 July formed the Gigurtu government. It was a pro-German government, which promoted a distinctly pro-Berlin policy. The Soviets were interested in what happened in Romania in the days immediately following the ultimatum of June 26, 1940; analyses made by them can be found in documents from the Russian archives funds. For example, an excerpt of the *Letter of political information, addressed to V.M. Molotov by A.I. Lavrentiev, the political representative of the USSR in Romania – about the foreign policy orientation*

of the Romanian government, the complication of relationships between Romania and Hungary, the Romanian reaction to the annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union, established on July 30, 1940, stated the following: “From the declaration of the current Romanian Government, which stresses that the Government will promote a policy of honest framing into the system created by the Berlin-Rome Axis, results that this is not only the expression of political realism, but also the logical consequence of the ideology of the government members, who transmit exactly the feeling of the nation. Such a sudden turn in the Romanian Government’s foreign policy to the Italo-German direction is dictated by: 1) the defeat of France; 2) Germany’s military successes; 3) fear that Hungary and Bulgaria would require large territorial concessions from Romania; 4) fear that the Soviet Union would present additional claims; and 5) growing pressure on Romania from Germany. The German diplomacy used these circumstances to influence the [Romanian] King and orient his actions in the required direction. There is no doubt that after the annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, Germany took all measures necessary so that a new pro-German government is formed in Romania. The choice fell upon Gigurtu, due to whom, since the times of the government headed by Tătărescu, Germany has consistently increased the influence (it is known that before being appointed minister of foreign affairs, Gigurtu was, between February and May inclusive, minister of communication ways, which had a huge significance for Germany at that time). I think the Germans have recommended Gigurtu for the position of prime minister because Gigurtu is known for his hostile attitude manifested towards the Soviet Union” (Islamov 2000; Sălăgean 2013).

In reality, after the Soviet ultimatum, it was seen conclusively that Romania was unable to resist any Great Power and that self-determination of small nations was just a meaningless expression (Goldschmidt Waldeck 2000: 104). In those conditions, immediately after the surrender of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and the Hertza region, the Romanian officials sought to normalize relations with the Soviet Union. Thus, on July 5, 1940, Premier Gigurtu expressed his intention to resolve all issues remained unsolved between Romania and the Soviet Union and to establish lasting and friendly relations between the two countries. In this spirit, the former Romanian foreign affairs minister, Grigore Gafencu, was sent to Moscow as envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary. In turn, Molotov said that after the solving of the problem of Bessarabia, the Soviet Union intended to maintain normal relations with Romania. Of course, the declarations had their significance, but the facts proved to be more complex (Ionescu et al. 2003: XVII).

As expected, the concession of Bessarabia and Bukovina allowed Hungary and Bulgaria to formulate open claims over Transylvania (see Sălăgean 2013) and Dobrogea.

But, for Germany, the importance of avoiding a Hungarian-Romanian conflict was clearly visible in the instructions transmitted by Joachim von Ribbentrop to the minister of the Reich in Budapest, on 2 July 1940. When hearing about the massive mobilization of Hungarian troops, the German foreign affairs minister informed the Hungarian government that although Germany sympathized with their revisionist demands, Hungary should not expect Germany to use its troops in order to achieve its goals (Vesa 2001: 100).

As regard the Soviet interest in the Transylvanian problem, since July 1940, the Hungarian foreign minister, Count Istvan Csaky informed Radu Crutzescu, the Romanian minister in Budapest, that the USSR submitted alluring proposals to Hungary. On 2 July, the Hungarian foreign minister went further, revealing to the Romanian diplomat the insurance given by the Moscow to Hungary. He told Radu Crutzescu that the Soviet Union considered the Hungarian claims on Romania fully justified and, if necessary, these would be supported even at the Peace conference. This information was confirmed by the Romanian minister in Berlin, Alexandru Romalo, who, on August 2, reported that the Soviet minister in Budapest informed the Hungarian government that the Soviet Union looked with sympathy at the Hungarian claims on Transylvania. In the same context, the Romanian minister in Athens, Radu Djuvara, reported on August 7 and 10 that the Hungarian minister in Athens, in his turn, declared that Molotov supported Hungary's claims on Romania, the information provided by the Romanian legation being certified also by the Foreign Minister of Greece on the basis on data received from Moscow (Trașcă 2000: 194).

A few days later, on July 20, on the occasion of the formal introduction that the newly appointed Romanian minister in Berlin, Alexandru Romalo, had with Hitler, the latter urged again Romania to quickly reach an agreement with the Hungarian government, stressing that the Reich could not conceive friendly relations as long as there was a possibility of a new conflagration in South-East Europe (Simion 1996: 205). Thus, Romania was urged to start negotiations with Bulgaria and Hungary for solving territorial disputes. If the claims of Bulgaria could be answered by returning to the frontiers as they were previous to the Balkan Wars, the talks with Hungary were unsuccessful. In these circumstances, Hitler became worried about the possibility of a Romanian-Hungarian War, and, on August 30, 1940, in Vienna, divided Transylvania between the two countries that were claiming it (Manoilescu 1991; Pop 1992).

Regarding the underlayers of the 30 August 1940 arbitration, Raoul Bossy, in a report presented to the government in September 1940, claimed the following: "The Soviet ultimatum regarding Meridional Bessarabia and Bukovina and the acceptance of Moscow's requirements, were for the Hungarian Government an opportunity to unleash a stronger

response. Knowing Germany's interest to avoid a conflagration in South-Eastern Europe, the Budapest Government openly played "the Russian card", claiming that the Hungarian public opinion forced it to attack Romania in the same time with a further advance of the Red Army in our country and an attack from Bulgaria. Against this threat of enlargement of the conflict in the Balkans directions, the Axis governments changed the attitude they had before, and decided to give partial satisfaction to Hungary, even before the general Peace... It seemed that a new Russian threat was looming indeed in those moments against our territory (the first objective being Galati and Dobrogea in view of a direct contact with Bulgaria), which the Hungarians had stated categorically to support, thus starting an attack against Romania. Simultaneous incidents that occurred before the meeting in Vienna on our borders from East and West could be interpreted as a sign of a cohesion established between the Soviets and Hungary. In some circles it was believed that a secret agreement was signed between Moscow and Budapest during the presence of a pseudo-economic Hungarian delegation in the Soviet capital. Even if did not come so far, it seems likely that Hungarians, being informed of Moscow's aggressive intentions in Romania, used the conjuncture to exert blackmail on Berlin, threatening to start an offensive against us, which would have led to a more extended fatal conflagration and the destruction of our oil-rich areas. Germany had only two alternatives: either to impose silence on Hungary by force, eventually resorting to military occupation, or to give it substantial satisfaction to reassure it and even to win it on its side, in case of a conflict with the Soviet Union. Between these two alternatives, the first one was unachievable because of the close Italian-Hungarian relations. It only remained the second alternative, one of a partial satisfaction of Hungary's claims (Bossy 1993: 287-289; Sălăgean 2013).

The analytical report sent on 9 September 1940 by Grigore Gafencu to Mihail Manoilescu informed about the deal between the government of the Reich and the Soviet one to adopt a threatening position against Romania, in order to determine the Romanian government to concede. The Soviet Union was interested in avoiding a conflict with Germany, although the solution and the guarantees offered by Berlin to Romania upset Moscow. The Soviet discontent was also due to the lack of any prior agreement with Germany in a matter concerning two countries bordering the Soviet Union, the Germans thus breaching the provisions of Article 3 of the non-aggression treaty of 23 August 1939 regarding the consultations in matters of common concern (Constantiniu 1991: 49).

Returning to the European realities of that time, after 23 August 1939, until the summer of 1940, the relations between the Soviet Union and Germany, with few exceptions, can be considered "harmonious". However, as of June 1940, the signs of dissension between the two partners became more visible. What disturbed the Soviet-German relations was the quick defeat of France, the USSR preferring a lengthier confrontation be-

tween Germany, Great Britain and France. Such a confrontation would have allowed the Soviet Union to complete its military preparations, and after exhaustion of the Western powers in the conflict, Moscow would have had the chance to intervene and even dictate the terms of a “Soviet Pax”.

The victory of Germany in the West complicated the situation in the East, the Soviet Union's response to the new geostrategic reality being the annexation of the Baltic States and the ultimatum addressed to Romania in June 1940. Both Germany and the Soviet Union used the non-aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, to achieve their objectives. For the redrawing of the borders of Eastern Europe, Berlin and Moscow enforced “division in two”, supported by military aggression. This agreement served Germany, both in its invasion of Poland, as well as in Western Europe. Referring to the role of the Pact from a geostrategic perspective, Göring appreciated that it was worth fifty German divisions, a contingent that should have been kept in the East if the Pact had not been completed (Ciorbea and Ploeanu 2011: 34). On the other hand, according to the analysis made by Mihail Manoilescu (Manoilescu 1991), the USSR was found in front of a last minute “friend”, whose future intentions it sought to probe. Its vital interest was that, without provoking Germany, to create an effective strategic border in the East. Reaching the Carpathians was not an expansionist objective in the vision of the leaders from Moscow, but an act of self-defense against the danger that threatened permanently. As a result, the Soviet Union, for security reasons, could not but take advantage of any circumstance in order to achieve this dividing line in relation to the sphere of German interests.

Romania, situated at the intersection of the two forces, would know dramatic events, as history demonstrated that Germany and Soviet Union, invoking military and security emergencies, imposed their indisputable control on our country. The stipulations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact constituted a prelude of what would happen in the coming years: new spheres of influence and games of interest, in which Romania was unwillingly involved and in relation to which it had to control its attitudes and choices.

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