



## ROMANIANS AND BULGARIANS – INCIDENTS AT THE DANUBE RIVER BORDER (1890-1901) –

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*On 2/14 September 1829, the Peace Treaty of Adrianople between the Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire was concluded with important effects for the two Romanian countries, Moldavia and Wallachia. Their political development was regulated by a separate document, an integral part of the text of the Treaty. The separate Act confirmed the agreements made by the Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire in the text of the Akkerman (White Citadel) Convention on 25 September/7 October 1826, on the election of the Romanian ruler, following the wish and consent expressed by the Sublime Porte. In addition to these political issues, important for the topic covered in this article were the provisions related to the protection of the borders, especially the right bank of the Danube and the islands close to the left bank of the great river that were in proximity to the Ottoman Empire. According to the Adrianople Treaty of 1829, the thalweg along the Danube was considered the border between Moldova and Wallachia on the entire common sector up to the confluence with the Prut River, agreement protected by the Sublime Porte.*

*In 1830, after the Treaty of Adrianople, a commission composed of the delegates of Wallachia, Moldavia, the Tsarist Empire and the Ottoman Empire proceeded to delimiting the river border between the Ottoman Empire and the Romanian Countries by fixing the existing thalweg at that time. Obviously, natural phenomena contributed over time to its modification, so that, after the Congress of Berlin in 1878, when it was decided to trace the land border between the countries bordering the Danube, a series of incidents at the Romanian-Bulgarian river border occurred. In this context, it is highlighted the strategic and economic importance of the Danube.*

*Keywords: islands border incidents; Treaty of Adrianople 1829; Geographical Service of the General Staff; thalweg; the Danube;*



## ISLANDS IN THE DANUBE – A BULGARIAN PRETEXT FOR INSTABILITY AND BILATERAL ANIMOSITIES

At the beginning of 1890, the Consulate General of Romania in Sofia transmitted daily to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest reports highlighting the steps taken by the Bulgarian government on the frequent illegal crossings of Bulgarians in the estates assigned to Romania to cut existing trees on their surface and loot everything it had an economic connotation, motivating that, according to the change in the Danube course, they belonged to the Bulgarian territory. From the discussions with the diplomatic representatives of the Bulgarian government, it was necessary to create a river map of the Danube between Vidin and Silistra (AMAE, Collection Problema 52, p. 23) in order to highlight both the Romanian and Bulgarian islands. Finally, on 4 March 1891, the Diplomatic Agency in Sofia received a table containing the existing islands and forests on their surface from the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ib., p. 111).

On 28 November 1892, the same Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, the Forestry Section, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the address no. 65418/27 November 1892, about the report of the Head of the Brăila Forestry Unit, signalling the plundering of the forest fund from the islands and ponds in the county (Ib., p. 124). According to him, the sailors of the river vessels, especially the wind-powered ones, devastated the willow forests. The troops responsible for guarding them could not retaliate against the numerous crews on board the vessels. In this context, the head of the Forestry Unit suggested a more efficient control in ports by the captaincy agencies regarding the origin of the goods existing on board of the vessels from Bulgaria and other countries, as well as the intervention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ib., p. 134).

During 1893 there were a lot of incidents of that kind. Therefore, the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, the Forestry Section, brought to the attention of the Minister of Foreign

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Affairs the legal provisions of Article 31, 34 and 35 of the Forestry Code, which provided for any civil servant or public officer, according to competence, to participate in preventing, detecting and stopping forestry crimes. Shortly after, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified the Danube Flotilla Command about the report of the Ministry of Agriculture (Ib., p. 145). On 4 March 1894, the Flotilla Command from Galați informed by the note no. 10193 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the controls performed by the captaincies, following the ministry intimation. Thus, the Captaincy of the Port of Bechet reported on the complaint of the brigadier of the Murto Craiova Forestry Unit regarding the forestry crimes committed into the island “Vărsariu” by six Turks who were allowed to fish in Romanian waters. The caretaker of the part of the sailing line from Gura Ignatului to Capul Drăgăsinului de Jos caught the foresters Ilie Grigorie Știrbu and Gligore N. Roșca with four carts loaded with stakes cut from the Gura Ignatului, a fact about which he notified the Captaincy of the Port of Bechet (Ib., pp. 161-162).

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On 20 May 1894, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notified the Flotilla Command regarding the note of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains referring to the petition of Osman Husein from Rahova (Bulgaria) on the exploitation by the inhabitants of the Bulgarian communes near the Danube bank of the islands belonging to the Romanian state. Thus, he mentioned the islands “Ada” or “Pirgos” from Rusciuc, “Taban” from Giurgiu, “Paraschiva” from Turtucaia, “Cavanlâeh” from Rusciuc, “Adasi” from Sviștov and the small islands near “Taban” and “Pirgos” (Ib., p. 172). As a result of the investigations carried out by the representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, it was found that the island “Ada” located four hours from Rusciuc and the island “Taban” located four hours from Giurgiu did not exist! The island “Ada” belonged to Bulgaria. The island “Kossi” had an area of 25 hectares and was located in the middle of the Danube between two branches of equal width, the navigation being carried out only on the Romanian side. The island “Parachiva” (in contrast to “Paraschiva”, in the possession of the Romanian state), located near the Bulgarian village Popina, had an area of 40 hectares, being positioned in the middle of the Danube between two branches. The Romanian side had been eroded over the past five years, which is why navigation was possible only in the Bulgarian side, where the depth of the river allowed the passage of vessels (Ib.).

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL SERVICE OF THE GENERAL STAFF CONTRIBUTION TO DRAWING A MAP OF THE DANUBE

For the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains representatives it was very difficult to enforce compliance with the forestry provisions, especially in winter, when the ice that was formed between those islands facilitated the access to their territory and thus the possibility to steal wood. Some of those islands modified permanently, which entailed changing the border line established across the Danube River thalweg. There were findings of facts provided in the forestry code, but in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the Ministry’s Forestry Section requested from the Flotilla Command a map of the nearby islands (Ib., p. 179). Moreover, the line of the river border between Romania and the riparian states had undergone significant changes compared to the limits established by the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829 (Jelavich, 2000, p. 32). That is why a discussion was required on the new realities on the ground. The geological changes and the deposition of alluvium that influenced the river border line were the main factors of the misunderstandings and non-compliance with the provisions of the Romanian Forestry Code and the fishing regime on the Danube (AMAE, ib., p. 188).

On this aspect, namely a map conforming to the changes occurred after 1829, the year when the Russian General Staff made a map of the Danube River and the existing islands, the Minister of Foreign Affairs informed his counterpart from the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, in the summer of 1894, that the Ports Inspectorate received an order from the Flotilla Command to develop a map, together with the technical staff and forestry agents from the ministry of agriculture, by going on the field and finding out the changes (Ib., pp. 201-202). Attempts were made on this issue also at the Department of Public Works and the Ministry of War (Ib., p. 202), for a contribution to the topographical effort of drawing the map, which, in the end, had to undergo the verification of a joint commission made up of representatives of the riparian states, in order to establish the river border line.

On 7 July 1894, the Minister of Foreign Affairs received a response from the Ministry of Public Works, Second Division, Ports Office, through the note no. 10385, requesting the postponement of such a complex approach, due to the temporary absence of the director



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of the hydraulic cadastral service, who was attending an inland navigation congress taking place in The Hague (Ib., 207). Insisting on his approach, the Minister of Foreign Affairs made again, in September, the request that the proposal on drawing the map should be analysed when the representative of the hydraulic cadastral service came back to the office. On 7 October 1894, the Ministry of Public Works, Second Division, Ports Office notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, note no. 15723, that the Hydraulic Cadastral Service had been already conducting the specific studies and works in order to draw a river map of the Danube, as well as the geodesic works from Galați to Calărași, Romania, profiles and level curves being raised in front of the main ports (Ib., p. 211). The activity of the Ministry of Public Works was to be supported by the works carried out by the Geographical Service of the General Staff and that of the Flotilla Command, depending on the pace at which those institutions conducted their activity and the decisions taken by their leaders. The Ministry of Public Works took the necessary steps to receive support from the Ministry of War (Ib.). In order to simplify the interinstitutional collaboration procedure, the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, the Forestry Section, suggested, on 3 October 1894, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the note no. 67922, that all necessary information should be transmitted to the heads of the forestry units to facilitate the quick access to the data and facts found in the field (Ib., p. 217). The Flotilla Command was also informed about the above-mentioned aspect.

On 9 November 1894, the Ministry of War notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, note no. 3016, that the topographic research of the Danube course started in 1894, having the starting point in Brăila (Ib., p. 225). On this occasion, the Geographical Service of the General Staff had the mission to draw up the map of the country, carefully following the topographical works that were performed on the Danube (Ib.). Almost two months later, on 3 January 1895, the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Commerce and Domains, the Forestry Section, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that both the regional forestry inspectorates and the heads of the units that administered the Romanian Danube islands were instructed to provide full support to the representatives of the Flotilla Command and the Port Inspectorate, for the establishment and identification of the existing islands (Ib., p. 288).

On 28 March 1895, the Ministry of War, the General Staff, the Third Section, notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the fact

that the works along the Danube, started by the operative officers from the section, required their presence on the territory of the Bulgarian Principality, which called for the intervention of the ministry to the Bulgarian government to allow those officers to place the geodetic and topographical signs. It was also requested the stationing of those officers, namely, Colonel Brătianu Constantin – director of the works, Major Gărdescu Ion – head of geodetic works, lieutenants Scărlătescu Gh., Verescu Theodor, Graur Alexandru – operators, as well as the Romania warship, with all the military personnel, on the Danube banks and waters, between Rusciuc and Siliștra (Ib., pp. 291-293). On the mentioned issues, the Sofia Diplomatic Agency took the necessary steps with the Bulgarian government, in April 1895, receiving the requested agreements from the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct the topographic works. The Romanian officers and the crew of the Romanian ship were accredited for stationing in the Bulgarian waters and territory (Ib., p. 298). Shortly after, Major Gărdescu Ion telegraphed Colonel Brătianu Constantin that the Bulgarian authorities in Turtucaia did not allow him to stay on the territory of the southern neighbouring country (Ib., p. 301). However, the topographic works continued on the Romanian bank of the Danube.

On 26 September 1895, the Commander of the Flotilla, General Ioan Murgescu, informed the Minister of Foreign Affairs, note no. 6434, that there were developed a memoir comprising the study of the Romanian islands on the Danube, five minutes, a comparative analysis of the islands ranked in natural order from Vercioarova to Gura Borcei and from the Prut to the Sea and three plans of the Lower Danube. With that note, General Ioan Murgescu delivered the painting of the Romanian islands and the seven maps sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 1895 as well as the 12 drawings made by the Russian General Staff in 1830 (Ib., p. 312).

In April 1900, the Ministry of War, Fifth Division, the Navy, notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the finding of the Commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Vlașca on the Bulgarians taking possession of the “Covanlâc” island. According to the minute drawn up by him on the spot, “today, 27 March 1900, following the confidential order of the Ministry of War no. 1440 of 22 March 1900, the undersigned in charge of investigating the possession of the Covanlâc and Cama islands proceeded as follows: 1) On 25 March 1900, the undersigned, accompanied by elderly people who knew these localities very well, were transported



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*The confidential report on the occupation of the "Covanlâc" island, located on the left bank, and at the back of the "Cama" island, by Bulgarian citizens, submitted by Lieutenant Boerescu Cesar to the Ministry of War, signalled the presence on the island of some Turkish fishermen who received a fishing permit from the Bulgarian authorities in Rusciuc. At the same time, the back of the "Cama" or "Dinul" island, named by Bulgarians "Pergos", was occupied by sheep.*

*by the Siret gunboat and disembarked on both Islands, collecting all the information necessary to solve this investigation; 2) On 26 March 1900, we went by land to Malu village, which is located in front of these islands, from where, besides the observations made on their situation, we also collected categorical information on the possession of these bodies from old people who had performed the forestry service before 1877; 3) Taking into consideration the current Danube course and the current configuration of these islands, the Austrian map of 1853, as well as all the statements of the people who supported us, providing clarifications in this inquiry, we are fully assured that the current course of the Danube and the configuration of the islands in question are exactly as shown in the annexed documents; 4) Considering the list of the islands provided by the Ministry of Domain, showing exactly the islands and the meadows belonging to the Romanian state, as well as all the information collected in this regard, we have the following results: a) the tail end of the island Cama, shown on both sketches, named Perigos by the Bulgarians who has it in possession, is attached to an island that is in the possession of Romania. The two islands were separated by a Danube waterway just after 1877. At the time of the control, they were united, being highlighted when the water decreased" (Ib., p. 351).*

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noted that it had got united with the island of "Cama". The proposal of Lieutenant Boerescu Cesar was that, in order to eliminate any possible divergences, a superior representative of the Ministry of Domains would be appointed to make a new recognition of these islands. After completing this process, it was planned to mark the territorial limits by milestones so that the regiment responsible for border guard and forestry workers could have the necessary landmarks to respect the Romanian-Bulgarian border line. A rigorous delineation, one adapted to geological and geographical changes, was beneficial for both the Romanian and Bulgarian fleet.

To clarify the issue, on 27 July 1900, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was notified by the Ministry of War, Fifth Directorate, for the establishment of a joint commission consisting of a navy officer and a delegate of the Ministry of Domains to resolve issues related to the possession of Danube islands, establishing at the same time their area and production. It was interesting that the Ministry of War suggested a reasonable compensation for the state that lost, by changing the thalweg, the possession of the respective islands. In the case of united islands, it was respected the dividing channel or, if the channel disappeared through alluvium deposits, there was the possibility of delineation through milestones. However, as Romania had the oldest, largest and richest islands formed on the right side of the Danube Thalweg, the thalweg limit could not be invoked according to the nominal list established in 1830 under the Treaty of Adrianople (Ekrem, 1993, p. 212). In order not to be suspicions, it was mentioned the participation of some Bulgarian delegates to take part in the discussions generated by the possible appeals, so that they could be analysed and resolved by the Romanian and Bulgarian governments in accordance with the provisions of international laws (AMAE, ib., p. 333). In this regard, the appointment of Bulgarian delegates required the intervention of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

On 10 August 1900, the Ministry of War, Fifth Division, the Navy, delegated Lieutenant (N) Boerescu Cesar to study the Danube islands, as he knew and was aware of the topographical and hydrological works carried out until that date. Another delegate was Lieutenant Stoianovici Constantin, whose mission was to help the members of the commission. The two were to report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 14 August 1900 (Ib., p. 344). At the same time, the Ministry



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of Domains was notified to appoint its representatives. The two officers were remunerated from the Navy budget and the necessary materials were paid by the Ministry of Domains. The representative of this ministry, forestry inspector Ghehaia, together with officer Boerescu Cesar, completed the map of the Danube in December 1900. On 31 January 1901, the map accompanied by two memoirs were sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania to start the necessary arrangements with the neighbouring states that were also riparian states to establish by mutual agreement the Danube River border line (Ib., p. 351 and the following).

Although a diplomatic resolution of the frequent incidents at the river border was attempted, on 23 December 1900, three Bulgarian soldiers from picket no. 24 opened fire on a Romanian sentry of picket no. 5 who wanted to stop a Bulgarian smuggler who was clandestinely passing in Romania (Ib., p. 360).

In April 1901, the Romanian subjects Beitullah Bechir and Iusuf Ibrahim were killed in Romania by Bulgarians Petcu Dinu and Iordan Ivanoff, who, although found guilty following the investigation carried out by a joint commission, received a 5-day sentence based on their statements that the two victims were smugglers who did not respond to their summons (Ib., p. 372). The 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps Command reported to the Ministry of War about the forays of the Bulgarian inhabitants on the "Gâsca Mare", "Gâsca Mică", "Cinghina" and "Bersina" islands, from where they were stealing wood. For the intercession of these facts, it was sent on patrol between Giurgiu and Turnu Măgurele, the "Argeş" military boat that was stationed in Zimnicea. On this occasion, the captains of the ports in the region were ordered to request the presence of Navy ships whenever they found irregularities on the part of Bulgarian and Serbian neighbours. In their support was sent the "Vedea" military boat, under the command of Second Lieutenant Coandă Gheorghe, which was stationed at Gruia to execute the patrol service between Calafat and Turnu-Severin (Ib., p. 381).

Another chapter of the Romanian-Bulgarian incidents was the one related to the island "Bujorescu", heavily publicised by the press of the time (Basciani, 2001, p. 23), because it had a major impact on the deterioration of the bilateral relations between Romania and Bulgaria, whose climax was transposed into the asymmetric positioning of the two parties during the Balkan wars (1912-1913).

## INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

In the international context of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the incidents on the Romanian-Bulgarian border were less approached by the Romanian historiography being probably considered local events and without much importance. In my opinion, these attacks and animosities show a tendency of Bulgaria to create a state of conflict with its neighbours in order to maintain a pressure specific to a state with expansionist aspirations, aspects confirmed by the Bulgarian government's policy before, during and after the Balkan events of 1908-1919 (Ciachir, 1997, p. 34).

Although my scientific approach is mainly aimed at researching these incidents as much as the editorial space allows me, on a secondary level, I want to pay homage to the Romanian officers from the Geographical and Topographic Service of the General Staff and to the soldiers who served in defending the state border – land, sea, river and air.

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