



## GHEORGHE I. BRĂȚIANU AND THE BLACK SEA STRAITS QUESTION (1933-1944) – “STRAITS FATALISM” –

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10.55535/RMT.2024.1.12

*The study analyses the position expressed between 1933 and 1944 by Gheorghe I. Brătianu regarding the Black Sea Straits Question. Through the works published during those years, he established himself as one of the greatest Romanian historians, his scientific interests focusing on the evolution of Romanians in the Middle Ages as well as on the role of the Black Sea in all international relations.*

*In this context, as a Professor at the University of Bucharest, between 1941-1943, he taught a course at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy on The Black Sea Question, in which he extensively developed his concepts. They can be summarized in the phrase according to which Romania has faced the Pontus Euxinus “Straits fatalism” throughout its existence.*

*At the same time, as a politician and party leader, Gheorghe I. Brătianu opposed Nicolae Titulescu’s policy of envisaging a mutual assistance treaty with the Soviet Union, a country that had not recognised the unification of Bessarabia with Romania. As such, he criticized the position adopted by Romania at the Montreux Conference (22 June-21 July 1936), which modified the status of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, according to Moscow’s interests. By the Convention signed on 20 July 1936, the access of non-littoral military ships was severely restricted.*

*Keywords: Black Sea; Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits; Gheorghe I. Brătianu; Nicolae Titulescu; Montreux Convention;*

The Black Sea Straits Question has been a focal point in our both older and newer historiography. To provide some examples in this regard, I would mention the works of Constantin Diamandi (ANIC, file 29), Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940) (1915), Nicolae Dașcovici (1888-1969) (Studiu introductiv/Introductory study, 1937; 1937; 1943), as well as the more recent preoccupation with the topic of the Institute for Political Studies of Defence and Military History on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Montreux Convention<sup>1</sup>.

Among the historians who addressed the Straits Question is also Gheorghe I. Brătianu. In 2023, we celebrated 125 years since he was born and commemorated 70 years since he died in dramatical conditions at Sighet<sup>2</sup>. In what follows, as a sign of tribute to this great Romanian scientist, I will briefly present his contribution to the understanding of this topic that is so important for the Romanian nation. The period between 1933 and 1944 will be mainly considered, as it was the most fertile one from a scientific point of view, although Gheorghe I. Brătianu also conducted a lively political activity, being, between 1930 and 1938, the President of the National Liberal Party (Georgist) (Gruber, 2013).

The topic of the Black Sea and implicitly of its straits became one of interest early in his career, more precisely during his doctoral studies in Paris, when Gheorghe I. Brătianu developed a thesis on the Genoese commercial activity in the Black Sea, brilliantly defended in 1929 (Brătianu, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. Later, he published a significant number of papers

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<sup>1</sup> See the volume *Marea Neagră de la “lacul bizantin” la provocările secolului XXI* (2006). București: Editura Militară.

<sup>2</sup> Further details related to his death can be also found in Brătianu, M. Gh. (1997). *Gheorghe I. Brătianu – enigma morții sale*, translated into Romanian by Antonia Constantinescu, with an introductory study by Șerban Papacostea and addenda by Ion C. Brătianu. București: Fundația Academia Civică; *Gheorghe I. Brătianu în dosarele securității. Documente. Perioada domiciliului obligatoriu. Arestarea. Detenția. Moartea* (2006). The selection of documents, introductory study and addenda by Aurel Pentelescu and Liviu Țăranu, and foreword by Acad. Dinu Giurescu. București: Editura Enciclopedică.

<sup>3</sup> Brătianu, Gh. I. (2014). *Recherches sur le commerce Génois et les Vénitiens dans la Mer Noire aux XIII-e-XIV-e siècles*. Editors: Victor Spinei and Ionel Căndea. București: Editura Academiei Române; Brăila, Muzeul Brăilei: Editura Istros. According to Constantin C. Giurescu, it took five hours to defend the thesis in Sorbonne. (See Giurescu, Const. C., 2000. *Amintiri*, editor Giurescu, D. C. București: Editura All, p. 135).



During 1941, Gheorghe I. Brătianu, transferred from the University of Iași to the University of Bucharest, included in the analytical curriculum of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters a new course, namely *The Black Sea Question*, which he taught in the years 1941-1942 and 1942-1943, totalling 51 lectures.

on the same topic, gathered in separate volumes or inserted in the pages of periodicals in the country and abroad. At the same time, the issues related to the Black Sea, to the navigation regime in the Pontic area, as well as to the straits were analysed sequentially in different works having a greater or lesser extent.

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At the end of the course, he explained his preference for the Black Sea topic. His research was continued, as it is well known, resulting in the great book: *La Mer Noire. Des origines à la conquête ottomane*, first published abroad and only in 1988 in Romania, thanks to Victor Spinei (Brătianu, 1988).

The history of the Romanians, the scientist emphasises, evolved between two geographical realities and permanent factors – the mountain and the sea. In his course taught at the University of Bucharest, *The Black Sea Question*, recently published following all scientific rigour by Victor Spinei, President of the Section of Historical Sciences and Archaeology of the Romanian Academy, and Ionel Căndea, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, the scientist motivated his preference for the role of the sea as follows: *“And if I chose for this course an issue related to the sea, I did it for two reasons. First, because it is the sea that makes us enter universal history. The mountain is a national issue, an issue limited in space./.../ Secondly, because I believe that the sea question must be more deeply ingrained in the national consciousness.*

*To talk about the mountain issue would be to push open doors. There is no need to talk about the mountain issue, it is deeply rooted in the consciousness of each of us; any Romanian has his mind focused on what is missing from this direction. From this point of view, the Romanian consciousness is similar to the heart's desire, which does not need an urge to be followed.*

*The sea issue is one of reason. It is not the first time that we are confronted with the heart-reason dilemma. In 1916, I chose the heart, because the sea issue did not then present the gravity that it does today. On the sea, then, we faced a collapsing Russia, while, now, the sea issue includes the threat of a formidable power, like today's Soviet Union.*

*The mountain issue, let us not hide it, is a problem of the neighbourhood with Hungary, a country with which the enmity has sharpened in the current war; of course, it is not that easy/.../ Put these two circumstances into balance and you will see that it is the heart's impulses that urge us to the mountain. The sea issue weighs more on our judgment than that of past generations”* (2022, pp. 918-919).

Gheorghe I. Brătianu was also interested in geopolitics, being a member of the editorial board of the publication *“Geopolitica și Geoistoria. Revistă Română pentru Sud-Estul European”*. The committee also included: Sabin Mănuilă, Mircea Vulcănescu and Anton Golopenția. Here he published the study *Geopolitica, factor educativ și național* (1941, pp. 13-17), then reproduced in the volume *Cuvinte pentru Români* (1942, pp. 95-106).

One of the most important contributions made by Gheorghe I. Brătianu, in relation to the Black Sea and its Straits, is the category of space. In the inaugural lesson of the course on the Black Sea at the University, he briefly spoke about the *“safe space of the Romanians”*, which generated reactions both internally and externally. For example, the issue of 30 December 1941 of the official organ of the German National Socialist Party, *“Voelkischer Beobachter”*, referring to what the scholar said, made a direct connection with the ongoing events, deciphering tendencies of territorial expansion on the part of Romania, which was *“fully aware of its position on the Black Sea, which had to be defended from the Soviet threat, the only one that endangers the safety of this people. It explains Romania's desire to have points of support and spheres of influence on the Black Sea coast”* (ANIC, file 505, p. 2).

This wrong understanding of things by the German newspaper, which of course also reflected the position of the official circles, led Gheorghe I. Brătianu to provide, in the lecture on 12 January 1942, new clarifications, in which he detailed his concept in that complicated



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Gheorghe I. Brătianu appreciates that there are three categories of spaces – ethnic, vital and security. The ethnic space is the easiest to define, because it represents the area “on which the same race lives, the people with the same language and the same consciousness of origin, made up of individuals who are connected to each other by all the threads, seen and unseen, from which it is woven what is defined, in the modern sense of the term, as a nation”.

problem. Later, he analysed these aspects on other occasions, including in the work *Origines et formation de l'unité roumaine* (1943, pp. 19-26; 35-45)<sup>4</sup>.

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The *ethnic space* is, in the scientist’s opinion, a state of fact with a relatively stable character, although even here mutations can occur related to the demographic potential, the language expansion power, which can increase or decrease.

The *vital space* represents, according to Gheorghe I. Brătianu, a concept that belongs to geopolitics and it can only be defined by reference to a ratio of forces. It is “the extension beyond the limits of the population of the same origin with more or less predominant influences of a nation or a state, which is justified by the overwhelming number of the population, by the demographic potential that causes population growth and needs growth; finally, by economic, industrial superiority etc., which naturally demand outlets” (Ib., p. 2-3).

In the vision of Gheorghe I. Brătianu, the vital space had an offensive character par excellence and was linked to great interests, to the rivalries and clashes of the great powers that aspired to world supremacy. The scholar referred to Germany, where the leaders of the Third Reich officially adopted the “*vital space*” theory. In his opinion, Germany, until the spring of 1939, acted according to ethnic commandments, and with the expansion of control over the Quadrilateral and Bohemia the “*vital space*” theory was put into practice.

The Soviets did the same with the occupation of the Baltic states, a part of Finland and Bessarabia, where they could no longer invoke

<sup>4</sup> The Romanian version, *Originile și formarea unității românești* (2018), 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and added edition, translated by Maria Pavel, introductory study, notes, commentaries and index by Ion Toderașcu (ed.). Iași: Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, pp. 45-61.

the ethnic principle, as they did in the case of the occupation of a part of Poland, in September 1939.

The historical analysis as well as the terrible clash of forces that took place at that moment, led Gheorghe I. Brătianu to operate with a new category of space, namely that of *security space*. It includes “those regions and points without which a Nation can meet neither its historical mission nor the possibilities that make up its destiny” (Ib., p. 4).

What is the relationship between the security space and the other two analysed types of space? In the scholar’s opinion, the strongest position is that of the people whose ethnic space coincides with the security space, but it is quite rare. Regarding the situation of Romanians, in many respects, the ethnic space coincides with the security space. There are areas in the south of the Danube inhabited by Romanians, real islands left after the collapse of Eastern Roman Empire, which are part of the ethnic space, but not of the security space, because “they are too far from the core around which the political unity of our nation was formed” (Ib., p. 10).

It is the same in the East and in the West, but Romania has never claimed those spaces. It is proved by the February 1919 memorandum of the Romanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.

The problem is also the other way around. There are some areas that no longer enter the ethnic space, but they enter as obviously as possible the security space. Gheorghe I. Brătianu gives the example of the region inhabited by the Szeklers, stuck like a nail in the middle of the Romanian mass.

Considering the mountain-sea connections highlighted by Gheorghe I. Brătianu<sup>5</sup>, Romania had great security interests in certain regions of the Pontic basin, namely the Straits and the Crimean Peninsula. Their status was essential for the evolution of the Romanian state, because the Black Sea presented itself as a closed sea, and Crimea was a maritime bastion that had always controlled a large part of the Black Sea maritime traffic.

Romania’s interest in these objectives in no way means that the Romanian state was a follower of an expansionist and annexationist

<sup>5</sup> Further details in Gheorghe I. Brătianu (1995). *Originile și formarea unității românești. Prelegeri ținute la Școala Superioară de Război*, notes, afterword, addenda, chronology by Aurel Pentelescu, Petre Otu (eds.). București: Editura Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare.



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*The security space is par excellence a defensive notion, unlike the vital space, which is an offensive notion, which necessarily entails an expansionist policy. Gheorghe I. Brătianu was particularly clear in this regard – Romania did not go so far to pose the problem of “vital space”, but only of “security space”, which is a primordial issue for the existence of each and every state.*

policy. The solution was for the status of these regions to be established in such a way as not to affect Romanian interests. The scholar highlighted two situations in which Romania’s aspirations were favourably met – the Congress of Paris (1856), which demilitarised Crimea, and the Lausanne Conference, from 1923, which disarmed the Straits and ensured freedom of trade in the Black Sea.

The security space can be viewed in two ways. In his analysis, Gheorghe I. Brătianu had in mind its permanent significance, which was indissolubly connected with the lasting interests of the Romanian state. Of course, it could also be viewed from a temporary perspective, linked to concrete situations, strategic and military considerations. An example in this respect is the campaign of the Romanian armed forces in 1919, in Hungary, which became Bolshevik in the spring of the same year, a campaign that responded to a temporary security interest of Europe and Romania, that of preventing the expansion of Bolshevism towards the central and western parts of Europe<sup>6</sup>.

Another example is related to the campaign of the Romanian armed forces between 1941 and 1942, which took the Romanian troops to the Don Bend, in the Kalmyk steppe and at the foot of the Caucasus. It was not one of Romania’s interests, but the regions behind the Romanian troops undoubtedly represented a security space, which had to be secured temporarily, because it was an important condition for obtaining victory on the battlefield.

In conclusion, the security space is par excellence a defensive notion, unlike the vital space, which is an offensive notion, which necessarily entails an expansionist policy. Gheorghe I. Brătianu was particularly clear in this regard – Romania did not go so far to pose the problem of “vital space”, but only of “security space”, which is a primordial issue for the existence of each and every state.

This emphasis is, we believe, very important to prevent any “slippage” of the interpretation of the scholar’s developments in relation to these geopolitical issues, which, especially during the communist regime, represented “accusations” for the physical

<sup>6</sup> *Ib.*, p. 58. Related to Romania’s participation in the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and the campaign in 1919, see also Gheorghe I. Brătianu (2001). *Acțiunea politică și militară a României în 1919 în lumina corespondenței diplomatice a lui Ion I. C. Brătianu*, foreword by Șerban Papacostea (ed.). București: Editura Corint.

extermination of Gheorghe I. Brătianu and the ban on his historical papers.

The problem of the Black Sea Straits was a constant concern of the political activity of Gheorghe I. Brătianu, too. He was the head of the National Liberal Party (Georgist), separated from the National Liberal Party in 1930, the reason for the dissidence being the position towards Carol II, who became king despite of the fact that he was disinherited four years before, when he was a prince.

Starting in 1933, Gheorghe I. Brătianu permanently opposed the policy pursued by Nicolae Titulescu regarding the rapprochement with the Soviet Union and especially the projected mutual assistance treaty with the great neighbour. In the party meetings, in the media of the time, at the Parliament tribune, Gheorghe I. Brătianu constantly criticized Titulescu’s policy in this direction.

On 24 June 1934, he questioned Nicolae Titulescu about the conditions under which diplomatic relations were established (Brătianu, 1934, pp. 101-102). The series of interventions continued, Brătianu categorically opposing the project of a mutual assistance treaty between Romania and the Soviet Union. He appreciated that we cannot leave the defence of Greater Romania to the Red Army, knowing that Moscow did not recognize the unification with Bessarabia in 19187.

It was natural for Gheorghe I. Brătianu to express his concern about the signing of the Montreux Convention (21 July 1936)<sup>8</sup>. He considered Romania’s attitude as strange. He agreed that Bucharest should support Turkey, our ally in the Balkan Entente, but, beyond this support, Moscow imposed its will, practically blocking the access to the Black Sea of the military naval forces belonging to non-littoral states (Brătianu, 2022, pp. 912-913). The fortification of the Straits was to the advantage of Turkey, the limitation of the presence of foreign vessels was in favour of Russia. “However, where our points of view

<sup>7</sup> For further details see Otu, P., Pentelescu, A., Brătianu Gh. I. (2003). *Istorie și Politică*. București: Editura Corint, pp. 23-47. Other documentary details in: Gheorghe I. Brătianu (1936). *La Roumanie et l’URSS*, Bucarest; Idem (1936). *La Roumanie et la crise du système politique européen*, Bucarest; Idem (1937). *La politique extérieure de la Roumanie*, Bucarest; *Relațiile româno-sovietice. Documente, vol. II, 1935-1941*, Coordinator: Costin Ionescu, Authors: Vitalie Văratcă, Dumitru Preda, Stelian Obiziuc. București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, pp. 44-81.

<sup>8</sup> For further details related to the Montreux Conference, see Deutsch, R. (1975). *Conferința de la Montreux*. București: Editura Politică.



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Gheorghe I. Brătianu was particularly concerned about the evolution of the international situation and Romania's prospects. Thus, the conclusion of the Anglo-French-Turkish tripartite pact (19 October 1939) unsettled him, as he considered that the Balkan Pact had become obsolete, since Turkey had committed to taking no action against the Soviet Union.

met with those of the Soviets, the scientist appreciated, there was a huge question mark about the goals that our delegate would have pursued" (ib., p. 913).

Moreover, in 1937, the question of disbanding the European Commission at the mouth of the Danube was also raised, but the idea was temporarily abandoned, as it was appreciated that it would be good for other, non-littoral, than the Soviet Union flags to be at least symbolically present there<sup>9</sup>.

As it is known, at the Sinaia Conference, on 18 August 1938, the "European Commission of the Danube" decided to transfer most of its prerogatives to Romania (Gogeanu, 1970, pp. 243-245; Cârțană, Seftiuc, 1972, pp. 325-327; Stanciu, pp. 297-299). Following this decision, the organisation disappeared and the "Administration of the Lower Danube" was established, a body under the control of the Romanian government, which was, in turn, disbanded in 1940, with the increase in German influence in the area. In the autumn of 1940, the Danube Conference was held, which reflected the increasing animosities between Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter wanting to extend its influence on the Danube (Trască, 2013, pp. 185-207).

Gheorghe I. Brătianu was also particularly concerned about the evolution of the international situation and Romania's prospects. Thus, the conclusion of the Anglo-French-Turkish tripartite pact (19 October 1939) unsettled him, as he considered that the Balkan Pact had become obsolete, since Turkey had committed to taking no action against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the existence of the agreement proved that Turkey had precise information that "Soviet Russia is about to start a diplomatic action in the south-east of Europe in the sense of those undertaken in the Baltic states" (ANIC, file 139/1939, p. 84). In his opinion, the tripartite Anglo-French-Turkish pact was directed against an expansion of Italy in the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

Gheorghe I. Brătianu correctly intuited the future actions of the Soviet Union. What he failed in exactly predicting, at least in the short

<sup>9</sup> For details related to the Commission history see Stanciu, Șt. (2002). *România și Comisia Europeană a Dunării: Diplomatie, suveranitate, cooperare internațională*, Foreword by Acad. Dan Berindei. Galați: Editura Pax Aura Mundi; Ardeleanu, Const. (2020). *The European Commission of the Danube (1856-1948). An experiment in international administration*. Boston: Brill, Lieden.

term, was the place where the actions were to take place. They took place not in the southeast, as the scholar believed, but in the north, in the Scandinavian Peninsula, which created a moment of respite for Romania, the political class from Bucharest harbouring the illusion that it could escape from the grip of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact<sup>10</sup>.

In his papers, Brătianu highlighted some geopolitical constants, regarding the Black Sea and its Straits. Whoever controlled the Straits felt the need to also have control over Crimea; vice versa, the power that ruled the peninsula made great efforts to reach the Straits. This geostrategic principle is strongly confirmed by the historical evolution in this area; examples – Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian Empires. As a rule, whoever controlled the Straits also controlled Crimea (or most of it). Conversely, although there was a real expansionist programme, effective control of the Straits was not achieved (Russian Empire, USSR, Russian Federation).

During the Second World War, Gheorghe I. Brătianu continued to be preoccupied with the straits question, speaking of their "geographical fatalism". Here's what he wrote in the "Curentul" newspaper on 17 March 1944: "If Russia's policy ever succeeds in circumventing the geographical fatalism of the straits, which limit its maritime perspectives at all latitudes, it will not be able to circumvent the no less obvious fatalism of the confrontation with the British power, if not with the entire political system of the Anglo-Saxon states. No constant is more fundamental than the one that the drawing of the map itself inscribes in history". (Curentul, 1944).

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<sup>10</sup> Related to the German-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1930 and its consequences on Romania see also: Constantiniu, F. (1991). *Între Hitler și Stalin: România și pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov*. București: Editura Danubius; Bold, E., Seftiuc, I. (2010). *Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov și implicațiile sale internaționale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised and added. Iași: Editura Demiurg Plus; *De la Marea Baltică la Marea Neagră 1939-1940 (Studiu și documente privind negocierea, încheierea și aplicarea Pactului Molotov-Ribbentrop)* (2019), Ion Șișcanu, Daniela Șișcanu (eds.). Chișinău: Tipografia Lexon Prim etc.



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- Brătianu, file no. 505, p. 2; file no. 218, p. 4, 10; file no. 505, p. 2-4; Collection *Direcția Generală a Poliției*, file no. 139/1939, p. 84.
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