

POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC REGROUPINGS AND MILITARY IMPLICATIONS AT THE BLACK SEA (FEBRUARY-OCTOBER 1939)

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Generally speaking, the main events marking the development of international relations during the tumultuous year 1939, at least in Europe, were framed, chronologically, into March and April, respectively August and September. However, February 1939 saw the regular annual meeting of the Balkan Entente’s Permanent Council (in Bucharest) and also the Soviet initiative for a “Black Sea Pact”, while, in October, it was concluded the trilateral pact between Turkey, Britain and France, immediately after the failure of the Soviet-Turkish discussions on a bilateral alliance pact. Meanwhile, several dramatic political and diplomatic changes had also taken place in this part of Europe, mainly as a result of the surprising German-Soviet rapprochement from August 1939. The main sources of the article consist of documents from Romanian military and diplomatic archives, supplemented by a series of historiographical contributions, quite diverse in origin and language.

Keywords: alliances; agreements; balance of power; intelligence; war;

INTRODUCTION

The events and developments that occurred during the dramatic year of 1939 have been, and continue to be, the subject of a huge number of historiographical contributions, for reasons that are more than obvious to anyone having some expertise in the field of history. When it comes to the question of chronological demarcations within the framework of this watershed year in European and world history, the vast majority of specialists in the field take as their reference points the total break-up of the Czechoslovak state in mid-March, followed by the renunciation by France and Great Britain of their policy of appeasement towards Germany, and then the initiation of contacts and, from 14 April, negotiations with the USSR, with a view to curbing German expansionism in Central Europe, German-Soviet contacts and negotiations (concluded with the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, in Moscow, on 23/24 August 1939), the outbreak of war in Europe (at the beginning of September), the defeat and division of Poland and, sometimes, the beginning of the “Winter War” between the USSR and Finland in late November.

The present article is atypical from this point of view, having as its main chronological landmarks two less dramatic calendar months of the year 1939, namely February and October. However, as far as we are concerned, we consider these months to have been of particular importance, taking into account the political, diplomatic and military developments in the Black Sea region. Thus, in early February 1939, in the context of a dinner hosted by the embassy of the Republic of Türkiye, the head of Soviet diplomacy, Maksim Maksimovich Litvinov, launched the idea of a “Black Sea Pact”, consisting of the USSR, Türkiye and Bulgaria, as an alternative to the Balkan Entente (Hitchens, 1983, p. 115), a regional alliance consisting of Romania, Türkiye, Greece and Yugoslavia. In the discussions at the Turkish embassy, Litvinov did not mention Romania, even though the Romanian state had a fairly large littoral area at the Black Sea. However, by the end of January, the Soviet side had already initiated a few inquiries about such a pact among the Romanian diplomats accredited in Moscow (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, 1992, pp. 16-17). Between 20 and 22 February 1939, the regular annual meeting of the Balkan Entente’s Permanent Council was held in Bucharest (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, pp. 309-310).

THE BLACK SEA COAST STATES IN EARLY 1939

The so-called “*Munich Agreement*”, finalized at the end of September 1938, marked the culmination of the appeasement policy followed by Great Britain and France towards Germany and the beginning of the break-up of the Czechoslovak Republic. That political-diplomatic act was also a moment of exclusion of the Soviet Union from the concert of European Great Powers, both by the London-Paris tandem and by the Berlin-Rome Axis (Kissinger, 2001, pp. 272-278). Europe’s political and diplomatic scene was to be dominated by the arrangements in the Bavarian capital until mid-March 1939.

In the winter of 1938-1939, the Soviet Union, by far the most powerful state in the Black Sea region, seemed to be in a situation of isolation and weakness unprecedented after the 1918-1921 Civil War. Internally, the Stalinist purges had also affected the higher structures of the Red Army, and the Soviet state, ignored in the Munich arrangement, was also facing hostile military action in the Far East from Japan; as a solution, Stalin and some of his collaborators were increasingly considering a direct deal with Germany, some discreet signals being sent to Berlin (Ib., pp. 297-299; Constantiniu, 2010, pp. 85-86).

The impetuous development of heavy industry and the collaborations between the Soviet state and states or firms in the capitalist world also included or involved an important military dimension, a fact known, at least in general and in part, outside the Soviet Union, a situation that included Romania. Since, unlike pre-war Tsarist Russia, the inter-war Soviet state had only small access to the Baltic Sea, the commercial and military-strategic importance of the Black Sea and the coast of the Kola Peninsula had increased (Collection XIV, crt. 254/1939, l. 16). However, at the beginning of 1939, the intelligence services of the Romanian armed forces reported a “*feverish activity in all the shipyards*” of the Soviet Union, with three battleships and seven large cruisers under construction. The Soviet Union had no fewer than 160 submarines at its disposal, of which only “*a small fraction*” were deployed in the Black Sea, a situation that was attributed to other threats, namely the Japanese one in the Far East and the German one in the Baltic Sea (Ib., l. 23). At the same time, the Soviet political leaders and military commanders attached great importance to the development of aviation (Collection 5417, crt. 900/1939, passim). In Romanian military circles, the USSR’s tendency to create strategic *glacises* (the word is used verbatim) had already been noticed, for the time being (only) in the Far East, with the Mongolian People’s Republic and the Republic of Tuva being perceived in this way (Collection XIV, crt. 254/1939, pp. 18-19).

For Romania, the fundamental foreign policy objective at the beginning of 1939 remained that of preserving its territorial integrity, without, however, totally excluding the possibility of territorial concessions in Southern Dobruja (The *Quadrilateral*), a territory with a predominantly non-Romanian population, obtained from Bulgaria in the summer of 1913.

From a political-diplomatic point of view, under the conditions of the dissolution of the Czechoslovakian state (and implicitly, of the Little Entente), Romania maintained privileged relations with France, Great Britain, Poland and the allied states of the Balkan Entente, the Romanian legations in Paris, Ankara, Athens and Belgrade, yet not those in London and Warsaw, being raised to the rank of embassies in the winter of 1938-1939 (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, pp. 308-309).

The relations with Germany had undergone a crisis between 1938 and 1939, after the assassination of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and other leaders of the Legion Movement by order of King Carol II, but pragmatism prevailed in both Bucharest and Berlin, and the diplomatic crisis was overcome in early February 1939. For the members of the government in Bucharest, Germany’s need for raw materials (primarily grain and oil) was a solid premise not only for the development of bilateral trade, but also, by implication, to dissociate the *Reich* from Hungary and Bulgaria and to gain its interest into protect the borders of Greater Romania (Haynes, 2003, pp. 75-77). Consequently, talks on a bilateral economic treaty were initiated in February and finalized on 23 March (Ib., pp. 85-90).

The relations with the USSR were much more problematic and unpredictable, primarily because Moscow permanently avoided to explicitly recognize the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, *ipso facto* the common border along the Dniester. Bilateral trade opportunities were reduced, while the ideological factor also played a significant part. Bilateral diplomatic relations had been re-established in 1934, but after the recall of Mikhail S. Ostrovsky, followed by the flight of his interim replacement, Fyodor Butenko, to Italy (January-February 1938), the Soviet government had no longer appointed a plenipotentiary minister to Bucharest (Dobrinescu, 1991, pp. 116-117, 177).

Romania’s mobilizable military potential in 1939 was, theoretically, about 3.5 million, representing a little more than one-sixth of the total population, but the mobilization documents actually listed only 1.55 million people, grouped into four armies or 11 corps. The experts in the Great General Staff’s leadership estimated: “*There are human forces*”, yet “*for the time being, the lack of war material limits the number of large units that we can mobilize, although the needs would require an increase in the provisions of the current mobilization plan*” (*Istoria românilor/*

The History of Romanians, VIII, 2003, pp. 205-206). The Romanian naval forces included the Sea Division and the Danube Division, whose development was generally underfunded; in 1936 and 1939 new naval programs were developed and approved, but few of their provisions were materialized, and it was not until 23 May 1939 that the first Romanian submarine, “*Delfinul*”, was launched (Ib., p. 200).

The Turkish Republic had suffered the shock of losing its founding leader, Mustafa Kemal (*Atatürk*), on 10 November 1938. His place was taken by a close associate, İsmet İnönü, who remained President of the Republic for almost 12 years. On 25 January 1939, Mahmûd Celâl Bayar was replaced as Prime Minister by Refik Saydam (Popa-Matei, 2002, p. 534), and Şükrü Saracoğlu succeeded Tevfik Rüşdü Aras at the head of Turkish diplomacy.

The area of the Republic of Türkiye in the early 1939 (before the acquisition of the Hatay/Alexandrette area, included after the First World War in French Syria) was 763,000 km², of which only 24,000 km² were in Europe, the so-called Eastern Thrace (Collection 5417, crt. 878/1939, p. 29). The population had reached almost 17.5 million, increasing by about a quarter within 12 years (Kıyıkı, 2005, p. 95). The peace-time forces of the Turkish armed forces included about 10,000 officers, 20,000 non-commissioned officers and 150,000 troops (the equivalent of two contingents), while the mobilizable forces were estimated at a maximum of 1,200,000 (Collection 5417, crt. 878/1939, pp. 9-13).

On the political-diplomatic level, the Turkish state pursued a policy of balance between the Soviet Union (its great initial ally) and the Great Western Democracies (France and Great Britain), with which it had progressively improved its relations in the second inter-war decade, without however risking a deterioration of the ties with the USSR (Biagini, 2005, pp. 111-114). Türkiye firmly opposed the territorial revisionism promoted by Germany and Italy, but the Ankara regime’s economic policy was more nuanced, with Germany accounting for 44% of Türkiye’s exports and 11% of its imports in 1938 (Özden, 2013, p. 94).

Bulgaria, the smallest and most sparsely populated of the four Black Sea coast states, was not part of any regional alliance, promoting the so-called “*peaceful revisionism*”. Roughly 65% - 70% of Bulgaria’s imports and exports went from, respectively to Germany, but Bulgaria accounted for only 2% of the *Reich*’s foreign trade. After Munich, hopes for peaceful territorial gains had grown exponentially, the most popular claim being Southern Dobruja, as Romania seemed to be the most isolated and vulnerable neighbour (Ungureanu, 2009, pp. 327-333).

With an area of 103,000 km² and almost 6,000,000 inhabitants, Bulgaria could theoretically mobilize about 750,000-800,000 men, but actually the trained troops that could be mobilized did not exceed 500,000. The Bulgarian armed forces included 14 infantry divisions, two rapid divisions, a mountain division and a Sea division. The latter division included two marine and two coastal artillery regiments. The two marine regiments were equipped, according to the information available to the Romanian General Staff, with four torpedo boats, six speed boats, three auxiliary vessels and one or two submarines, while the coastal artillery regiments included two divisions each, with 72 pieces of different calibre (Collection XIV, crt. 213/1939, *passim*).

From the military point of view, Romania, Türkiye and Bulgaria faced a number of similar problems and difficulties: the poor development of their own armaments industry and dependence on imports, the age and heterogeneity of their armaments, the low degree of motor mechanization etc., and from 1936 onwards, hasty and only partially successful efforts were made to remedy those shortcomings.

During the February 1939 meeting in Bucharest of the Balkan Entente’s Permanent Council, the divergent trends within the alliance, which had been forged since 1936/1937, were again brought to the fore. Thus, Greece and Türkiye were in favour of strengthening collaboration with Great Britain and France, while Yugoslavia promoted an increasingly “*equidistant*” policy between the Great Powers, a policy that was actually favourable to the Berlin-Rome Axis, and the Romanian diplomacy tried to preserve the unity of the alliance. Bulgaria claimed, on the one hand, its readiness to join the alliance, on the condition of getting some territories, while, on the other hand, it tried to isolate Romania and Greece by developing ties with Yugoslavia and Türkiye (Ungureanu, *ib.*, pp. 330-331).

In early 1939, Soviet-Turkish relations were good, as the gradual improvement in Türkiye’s relations with Great Britain and France did not contradict the interests of the USSR, because of the caution of the Ankara government, and because the Soviet Union was still in the anti-revisionist camp. The precautions of Turkish diplomacy in relation to its large northern neighbour also manifested themselves within the Balkan Entente. The very founding document of this regional alliance, in its secret annex, noted Türkiye’s unwillingness to get involved in a conflict with the USSR (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 281), a reservation known in diplomatic circles as the “*Russian clause*”. However, the reservations categorically expressed in 1934 were to be partially diminished towards the end of 1937, when, in an official letter from Marshal Fevzi Çakmak, the Turkish state undertook to act against Bulgaria in the event of a joint Soviet-Bulgarian attack on Romania (Ib., p. 302).

The content of the discussion between M.M. Litvinov and the Romanian minister in Moscow, Nicolae Dianu, on 8 February 1939, is very relevant for the specifics of Romanian-Soviet relations in the first half of 1939. According to the Romanian diplomat, Litvinov began his exposition by criticizing Great Britain's and France's passivity in relation to Germany, pointing out at the same time that the USSR had received and rejected a series of proposals for economic collaboration from Berlin. Litvinov went on to refer to the breaking of diplomatic relations with Horthyist Hungary as a result of the latter's adherence to the Antikomintern Pact, described as "*a pact of aggressors*", directed primarily against France and Great Britain (!), and towards the end he sought to minimize, in the eyes of the Romanian interlocutor, the danger of Bulgarian revisionism and especially the significance of certain references to Bessarabia in the local Soviet press, namely the non-appointment of a plenipotentiary minister in Bucharest (M.F.A.R.- M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 102, pp. 220-222).

Soviet-Bulgarian relations had just begun to improve and amplify, from an economic, cultural, journalistic and propaganda standpoint, and that trend was noted by the Romanian military-information structures, which also noted the re-establishment of collaboration between Bulgarian right-wing (nationalist) and left-wing subversive organizations in Dobruja (Collection 950, crt. 651/1938, pp. 46-47; lb., crt. 227/1939, pp. 159-160); moreover, the Bulgarian diplomatic research conducted in Moscow on the "*Dobrujan question*" in November 1938 and January 1939 had ended with encouraging results (Ungureanu, p. 330).

Encouraged by the general European climate increasingly favourable to territorial revisionism, the rulers in Sofia practically abandoned the direct negotiations with Romania, initiated in 1933, in order to conclude a bilateral treaty on the basis of the existing borders; the method used was that of postponement *sine die*, combined with the reopening of previously agreed issues (lb., pp. 332-333).

At the time, Turkish-Bulgarian relations were dominated by Turkish diplomatic efforts to bring Bulgaria into the Balkan Entente and, at the same time, strained by tensions due to the Bulgarian authorities' treatment of the country's Turkish-Muslim minority, representing about one tenth of the total population, or, in absolute figures, about 600,000 people (Stănciugel, 2008, p. 171).

In the first half of February 1939, the Yugoslav government of Milan Stojadinović was replaced with a government led by Dragiša Cvetković. This act of Prince Regent Paul (*Pavle*, in Serbian) was based on both domestic and foreign reasons, as he did not agree with Yugoslavia's sliding into the Berlin-Rome Axis (Jelavich, 2000,

pp. 187, 197), which was also known in certain Romanian military-intelligence circles (Collection 950, crt. 201/1938, p. 157).

At the annual meeting of the Balkan Entente's Permanent Council (Bucharest, 20-22 February 1939), some different attitudes towards Bulgarian territorial claims were also manifested. On the eve of the meeting, Georgy Kiosseivanov, the head of the government in Sofia and also head of Bulgarian diplomacy, had tried to convince Ş. Saracoğlu of the justness and advisability of ceding South Dobruja as a *sine qua non* condition for Bulgaria's joining Balkan Entente, gesture desired in Ankara, but in Bucharest, Grigore Gafencu and Ioannis Metaxas (head of the Greek government) firmly opposed to any territorial concessions, and claimed for regional cooperation on the basis of the existing borders (Ungureanu, p. 331). After the signing of the Bulgarian-Yugoslav pact of "*eternal friendship*" on 24 January 1937, Bulgarian revisionism was channelled towards Greece and Romania.

THE LAST PEACEFUL MONTHS (MARCH-AUGUST 1939)

The dissolution of the Czechoslovak statehood in mid-March 1939 by Nazi Germany, with the assistance of Slovak nationalists and Horthyist Hungary, despite all previous assurances, prompted Britain and France to abandon their policy of appeasement and to take diplomatic steps to build a broad anti-revisionist front in Central and South-Eastern Europe, including Soviet Union. These political-diplomatic projects and approaches, with important military implications, dominated the European scene until the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was concluded, which effectively signalled the outbreak of war in Europe.

The dramatic political-territorial developments in the immediate vicinity of Romania, chronologically superimposed on the last stages of the negotiations for the Romanian-German economic treaty, generated a tense atmosphere in Romania; in that context, the mobilization of several contingents was decreed and rumours were spread about an ultimatum given by the Reich to the government in Bucharest, in order to quickly conclude the bilateral economic treaty (the famous "*Tilea incident*").

On the very day of 17 March 1939, Virgil Viorel Tilea, Romania's minister in London, had a discussion with the Turkish representative in the British Capital, the former foreign minister Tefvik Rüştü Aras. The Turkish diplomat spoke strongly in favour of building a Black Sea Pact and of the Balkan Entente's consolidation, being firmly convinced that the Soviet Union was really interested in blocking German expansion (Dobrinescu-Pătroi, 1992, p. 28). The next day, the Romanian military attaché in Ankara, Lieutenant-Colonel Traian Teodorescu, indicated in a report

that both Turkish rulers and public opinion wanted to transform the Balkan Entente into a “foreign political entity with broader aims than it has at present” (Collection 5417, crt. 830/1939, pp. 29-30). For the Turkish diplomacy, therefore, the Black Sea Pact project did not contradict the objective of consolidating the Balkan Entente; instead, it was complementary to it, unlike the early February initial Soviet proposal.

On 17-19 March 1939, G. Kyosseivanov paid an official visit to Türkiye. In this context, as multiple military and diplomatic sources record, the Turkish dignitaries manifested, in the clearest and most categorical manner, their determination to respect their obligations as a regional ally of Romania, in case of a Bulgarian attack on Romania, regardless of other hypothetical circumstances, successively evoked by Kyosseivanov: the involvement of Hungary and Germany, the passivity of the other Balkan allies etc. (Ungureanu, p. 332). Military Attaché Teodorescu sent a report on this subject on 22 March 1939 (Collection 5417, crt. 830, pp. 9-12). In a discussion with Lieutenant-Colonel Teodorescu, the Chief of the Turkish Army General Staff, Field Marshal Fevzi Çakmak, assured his interlocutor that Türkiye had sufficient forces to neutralize Bulgaria, even in the event of an Italian attack in the Izmir region (Ib., pp. 15-16). Moreover, on 22 March 1939, the Romanian military attaché in Ankara also reported that he had received assurances from the Soviet ambassador, Aleksei V. Terentiev (“If Romania holds its position firmly, Russia will supply it with everything it needs”), expressing, at the same time, his surprise and suspicion at the attitude of Soviet diplomats in Türkiye towards their Romanian counterparts, which he considered “overly courteous” (Ib., pp. 16-17).

The next day, the Romanian-German economic treaty was concluded. The event was hailed in Berlin and Rome, criticized in London, Paris and Moscow, yet it aroused consternation in Budapest and Sofia (Dobrinescu-Pătroiş-Nicolescu, 1999, pp. 226-227), which confirmed, at least temporarily and partially, the correctness of some political-diplomatic calculations of the leaders in Bucharest.

On 29 March 1939, through the voice of M.M. Litvinov, the Soviet government expressed to the Romanian diplomat Nicolae Dianu not only its dissatisfaction, but also some suspicions about the content and significance of the Romanian-German economic treaty, including certain alleged secret clauses of the agreement, which, in the Soviet view, were likely to turn Romania into a base for German expansionism at the Black Sea. The head of Soviet diplomacy linked the act performed on 23 March 1939 to certain “anti-Soviet” positions in Romania, and reiterated his well-known position on the futility and inappropriateness of an official Soviet declaration explicitly recognizing Romania’s sovereignty over Bessarabia (M.F.A.R.-M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 107, pp. 227-228).

On 8-9 April 1939, Romanian Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu paid a visit to Ankara, where he had talks with his Turkish counterpart, Şükrü Saracoğlu (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, pp. 312-313). The diplomatic moment was commented favourably by the Soviet press agency TASS, probably on the basis of information from the USSR’s chargé d’affaires in Bucharest, Pavel G. Kukoliev (Collection 5417, crt. 830/1939, pp. 2-4).

An even more important diplomatic moment took place on 13 April 1939, when France and Great Britain simultaneously announced the unilateral granting of solemn guarantees of independence to Romania and Greece (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 313). That act had rather a moral value and showed, at least in the case of Romania, a half-committal attitude on both sides: France and Great Britain avoided explicitly guaranteeing Romania’s territorial integrity, thus keeping a certain margin of negotiation with Hungary, Bulgaria and especially the USSR, while Romania, for its part, avoided taking a very categorical stance in favour of the two guarantor powers, in order not to break, at least for the time being, all bridges with Germany, seen as a counterweight to the USSR.

On 14 April 1939, the tripartite Franco-British-Soviet talks began in Moscow, and lasted more than four months, without any concrete result. Mutual suspicions and diverging visions and interests were to prove stronger than the potential factors for rapprochement.

A number of issues concerning the Central and Eastern European states situated between Germany and the USSR, which were reluctant towards the Bolshevik great power, but subject to demands and conditions made by the Soviet side to the French and British negotiators, proved insurmountable. In the summer of 1939, in all these small and medium-sized states, the Soviet proposal for France and Great Britain, to include in the future tripartite agreement the phrase “indirect aggression”, defined as a domestic political change to the advantage of the aggressor, caused great anxiety, because it opened up wide possibilities for interference in the internal affairs (Kissinger, 2001, p. 305; Constantiniu, 2010, pp. 86-87).

At the regional level, for the second half of April 1939, one can also note certain dissatisfaction on the Turkish side, through Şükrü Saracoğlu, with the attitude of Romanian diplomacy, which was considered too intransigent in the South Dobruja issue (Stănciugel, p. 175). However, in March-April 1939, the ruling circles in Bucharest were considering the option of partially ceding the *Quadrilateral*, but only on the condition that Bulgaria would join the Balkan Entente or a system of alliances close to Great Britain and France (Ungureanu, pp. 332-335).

Bulgarian demands were, however, larger, and Bulgarian availability, much smaller. Thus, on 19 April 1939, Georgy Kyosseivanov sent to all Bulgarian diplomatic missions the six-point Directive No. 19 on Bulgaria's position, conduct and aims in the general European context of the time. According to this document, Bulgaria's minimal territorial claims were South Dobruja and Western Thrace, and the readiness for integration into a regional alliance system was almost null (I.I.D., 1993, part II, doc. 44, pp. 358-359).

From 26 April to 8 May 1939, Vladimir Petrovich Potëmkin, one of the deputies of the Soviet chief diplomat, took a regional tour, including Romania, Bulgaria, Türkiye and back, namely the states bordering the Black Sea. A few days before the beginning of that tour, V.P. Potëmkin had a meeting with Nicolae Dianu, during which he emphasized the strategic importance of Romania and Türkiye for the security of the south-western borders of the Soviet Union (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, 1992, p. 70).

During his journey through Romania to Sofia, in Bulgaria, the Soviet dignitary was not invited to talks with any high Romanian official, in order not to upset Germany (Haynes, 2003, p. 109). The desire not to provoke Germany was also the explanation offered by Grigore Gafencu to his French interlocutors at the end of April 1939, during his visit to Paris, when he was questioned about Romania's reluctance towards the Soviet Union (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, pp. 76-77).

In early May, Romania's ambassador to Türkiye, Vasile Stoica, also received suggestions from Ş. Saracoğlu to improve Romanian-Soviet relations. The head of Turkish diplomacy sought to demonstrate to Ambassador Stoica the lack of viability of the anti-revisionist plans involving Central and South-East Europe, in the absence of at least passive cooperation (benevolent neutrality) on the part of the USSR (Stănciugel, p. 187). The President of the Republic Türkiye, İsmet İnönü, went even further with his political-military reasoning, arguing, in discussions with French and British interlocutors, that, in the event of war, the Red Army should be directly and massively involved against Germany, so as not to give the Soviet Union the chance to remain neutral and to take advantage of the mutual exhaustion of combatants, in order to expand its social-political regime in Europe (Ib.)

It was also in early May, upon his arrival in Ankara, that Potëmkin had a meeting with the French ambassador to Türkiye, R. Massigli, that the Soviet diplomatic official hinted that there was a possibility that the USSR would issue an official statement on the renunciation of any claims to Bessarabia; the information was communicated by the French diplomat to Vasile Stoica, and was transmitted

to Bucharest on 17 May 1939 (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, p. 93, note 100). During his discussion with his French counterpart, V. Stoica, taking note of that piece of information, told that such a categorical unilateral declaration could only have a positive effect on the Romanian-Soviet relations, while pointing out that, from a strictly legal point of view, Romania did not need such an act from the Soviets (Stănciugel, p. 176).

However, in his direct discussion with Vasile Stoica on 3 May 1939, Potëmkin did not address this issue, but summarized his talks in Sofia with Georgy Kyosseivanov, who had again tried to justify Bulgaria's non-adherence to the Balkan Entente by blaming Romania's intransigence on Southern Dobruja (Ib.). The Soviet dignitary then questioned the Romanian diplomat about Romania's readiness to join the USSR and other states "*in a broad anti-revisionist front*". In his answer, Stoica showed Romania's willingness to defend its borders and to contribute to the defence of peace and the territorial *statu quo* in Central and South-Eastern Europe, on the basis of the country's existing alliances; the idea of Romania's joining new alliances was not totally excluded, but was considered worthy of consideration (only) in the event of imminent or actual aggression against the Romanian state (Ib., pp. 187-188). Basically, Stoica reiterated, in a rather convoluted and polite form, the vision of the Bucharest rulers, who invoked the risk of unnecessarily provoking Germany as a reason for their reluctance to various regional projects involving the Soviet Union.

On 3 May 1939, newly installed at the helm of Soviet diplomacy, Vyacheslav M. Molotov, sent to V. P. Potëmkin one of his first telegrams in his new capacity. The telegram contained an outline of a plan for regional cooperation and two recommendations for the Ankara-Sofia-Bucharest return route. Thus, Bulgaria was to be included in the "*common front against aggressors*", an objective for which Türkiye was to put pressure on Romania to cede Southern Dobruja. At the same time, Potëmkin was advised to return directly to Moscow, possibly with a short stopover in Sofia, in order to address his hosts with "*a few warm words, which do not oblige to anything*". Towards Romania, the attitude should have been even more reserved: "*We advise you not to stop in Romania, and if the Romanians nevertheless board your carriage, you can talk to them about weather*" (Sturza, 2016, pp. 202-203).

Not coincidentally, Potëmkin's telegram to Molotov, sent from Bucharest on 8 May 1939, a letter rather brief, began with the self-justifying phrase "*I could not avoid the meeting with Gafencu*" and focused on the reservations and dissatisfactions expressed in the discussion with the Romanian Foreign Minister (Ib., p. 203).

The head of Romanian diplomacy gave a somewhat more extensive description of the meeting. In contrast to his Soviet interlocutor, Gafencu recorded, first, Potëmkin's assurances that replacing Litvinov as head of Soviet diplomacy did not mean changing the foreign policy guidelines of the USSR, and finally, his interlocutor's promise of the imminent appointment of a plenipotentiary minister in Bucharest. Gafencu attributed to Potëmkin the conclusion that any concessions, especially territorial ones, towards Bulgaria, were inappropriate. As far as the exchange of opinions on the Romanian-Polish military alliance is concerned, the two accounts are convergent, at least *grosso modo*, as it is the avoidance by both diplomats of any direct reference to delicate issues in bilateral relations, such as Bessarabia or the possibility of concluding an alliance treaty (M.F.A.R.-M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 112, pp. 234-235).

The exclusively anti-Soviet character of the conventions subsumed under the Romanian-Polish military defence alliance was not likely to please Potëmkin, but Gafencu assured him that there were both the possibility and the intention to turn the alliance into an *erga omnes* one, which was not to happen, however, due to the reluctance of the Polish side, which invoked the need not to provoke Germany (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, p. 71). A month later, N. Dianu characterized Potëmkin's attitude towards Romania as "cold" (ib., pp. 107, 116), in flagrant contradiction with the image left to posterity by G. Gafencu in his memoirs (Gafencu, 1992, pp. 187-190).

The signing of the Turkish-British declaration (12 May 1939) and the Turkish-French one (23 June 1939) marked a new stage of political-diplomatic developments in South-East Europe. Unlike the guarantees given to Romania and Greece on 13 April, those acts were bilateral in nature and presupposed a committed attitude on the part of Türkiye (Cojocaru, 2014, pp. 195-201). Of the member states of the Balkan Entente, Türkiye felt the least pressure from Germany and turned, more and more transparently, towards Great Britain and France, which were just negotiating an agreement with USSR, its old ally.

In the light of those geopolitical and diplomatic coordinates, we can understand the disapproving reaction of Turkish decision-makers to the Romanian-German economic treaty of 23 March 1939, which was considered, in the days immediately preceding 12 May 1939, as "detrimental to Romania's interests" (Collection 71/ Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, pp. 108-109). Actually, immediately after the signing of the Turkish-British bilateral security declaration of 12 May, Germany's share in Türkiye's foreign trade halved (Özden, 2013, p. 94).

Romania's more cautious conduct towards Germany was also manifested during Grigore Gafencu's visit to Ankara on 11-14 June 1939, only nine weeks after the previous one, when the head of Romanian diplomacy obtained from his Turkish counterpart the promise that the Balkan area would not be mentioned in the text of the final Anglo-French-Turkish treaty (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 316). In the same context, Gafencu rejected Saracoğlu's suggestions, which were probably inspired by the Soviets, concerning Romania's accession to the Black Sea Pact and the ceding of Southern Dobruja in order to draw Bulgaria into the Balkan Entente, pointing out that the Romanian state could not precipitately change its attitude towards Germany or the USSR, and that the government in Sofia were not really interested in adhering to the Balkan Entente (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, pp. 103-104). According to a telegram sent by Gafencu to the Romanian minister in Warsaw, R. Franasovici, Saracoğlu insisted on the Black Sea Pact, making it known that Türkiye intended to conclude a treaty of alliance with the USSR; in the end, the two foreign ministers agreed that Türkiye would mediate between Romania and USSR, and Romania, between Türkiye and Poland (Collection 71/ Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, I. 169).

Also in the middle of June 1939, as Soviet and German sources prove, Bulgarian diplomacy, through the minister in Berlin, Purvan Draganov, sought to strengthen the tendencies of rapprochement between Germany and the USSR, already noticed in certain circles. According to the diary of Georgy Astakhov, the USSR's chargé d'affaires in Germany, and to a memorandum drawn up by Ernst Woermann (one of Joachim von Ribbentrop's deputies), in separate talks with the two diplomats, on 14 and 15 June 1939, Draganov had mentioned in favourable terms the possibility of a direct and comprehensive German-Soviet agreement, considered to be advantageous not only for the two Great Powers, but also for Bulgaria, in order to gain territorial advantages. In that context, the Bulgarian diplomat had mentioned, during both meetings, Southern Dobruja, and, in the first discussion, the access to the Aegean Sea, blaming France and Great Britain (Sturza, 2016, pp. 205-207).

At the end of June and the beginning of July 1939, the Romanian-Soviet relations saw difficult moments. Thus, on 28 June, on V.M. Molotov's orders, his deputy, V.P. Potëmkin, summoned the Romanian minister in Moscow, N. Dianu, to inform him in very categorical terms of the Soviet government's dissatisfaction with the use, in a note addressed by the Romanian Legation to the Soviet side, of the expression "Romanian territory", referring to a place in Bessarabia. Such a thing was considered unacceptable by the Soviet officials and had been communicated as such to the Romanian side as early as June 1938 and taken into consideration

by the Romanian side during the following year. Consequently, the note of the Romanian Legation was returned as unacceptably worded, which was a veritable diplomatic incident (M.F.A.R.–M.F.A.R.F., 2013, doc. 114, pp. 237-238). A week later, Dianu sent a telegram to Bucharest, at the end of which he noted that the Soviets had resumed “*the system of chicanery and blackmail concerning the Bessarabian question*”. According to the Romanian diplomat, one of the reasons for that development was Romania’s refusal to categorically and unconditionally accept the Soviet Union’s guarantees and aid, as well as Romania’s reluctance to accept the Black Sea Pact (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, pp. 117, 127).

On 8 July 1939, King Carol II discussed with G. Gafencu the international situation, especially the Soviet insistence on the “*indirect aggression*” clause in the negotiations with the French and the British; the resumption of the Soviet press campaign on Bessarabia was also discussed. The king asked the head of Romanian diplomacy to communicate to London, Paris and Ankara Romania’s concern over “*the Soviet claim to guarantee countries, even without their will, when the USSR believes they are in danger*” (Ib., pp. 118-123).

The older topic of Romania’s possible joining the Black Sea Pact was approached on 10 July, in a discussion between Vasile Stoica and Şükrü Saracoğlu. The Romanian ambassador in Ankara was in favour of the idea of Romania’s accepting the Pact in exchange for a non-explicit, (apparently) spontaneous and unilateral official declaration by the USSR, in the sense of explicit recognition of Bessarabia’s belonging to Romania (Stănciugel, p. 177). A few days later, however, the head of Romanian diplomacy, Grigore Gafencu, sent a circular telegram in which, reminding the complexity of the international situation, he cited arguments for the lack of interest in the Black Sea Pact, but also the abstention from protests and other gestures, in reaction to the press campaign in the USSR regarding Bessarabia. In another telegram, addressed to V. Stoica, on 14 July 1939, G. Gafencu rejected the idea of joining the Black Sea Pact, even in the event of the USSR recognizing the common border along the Dniester (Ungureanu, p. 337).

An important discussion on the international situation took place on 26 July 1939 between King Carol II, Prime Minister Armand Călinescu and Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu, in which the King considered Türkiye as Romania’s most loyal ally, and Hungary and Bulgaria as effectively placed in the camp of the Axis Powers. Türkiye was also seen as a viable intermediary in the difficult relations with the USSR, and the Romanian sovereign hoped to conclude a bilateral non-aggression pact, recognizing the common border at the Dniester. In the undesirable eventuality

of Soviet troops landing in Bulgaria, in the context of a hypothetical, but increasingly probable war, the Turkish troops were, in Carol II’s vision, to position themselves between the Romanian military units and the Red Army forces, in order to prevent direct contact between them (Călinescu, 1990, pp. 420-421).

At the end of July 1939 and at the beginning of the following month, a Bulgarian parliamentary delegation visited the USSR. According to an Italian source, during the discussions with the members of the delegation, V.M. Molotov expressed sympathy for Bulgarian claims on Dobruja, but avoided commenting on the question of Bulgaria’s access to the Aegean Sea, and made concrete proposals for increasing bilateral trade (I.I.D., 1993, part two, doc. 48, pp. 368-369). At the same time, on 4 August, Soviet General Boris Shaposhnikov (future Marshal) wrote down some considerations on the progress of the tripartite military negotiations with Great Britain and France. General Shaposhnikov considered it necessary, among other things, to ensure a passage for Red Army troops through Romania to counter possible German-Hungarian-Bulgarian aggression. Also, in case of Bulgaria’s involvement in the war on the side of the unnamed “*main aggressor*” (Germany – our note), France and Great Britain would have to draw Greece and Türkiye into the war, on the opposite side (Sturza, 2016, p. 211).

On 11 August 1939, the third Romanian-Turkish high-level political-diplomatic contact in four months took place. That time, the two authoritarian heads of state, Carol II and İsmet İnönü, met. The Republic of Türkiye was determined to defend the territorial *status quo*.

The Romanian monarch and the Turkish president agreed to step up their démarches in Belgrade and their ties with Poland. With regard to the USSR and the position of its large Eastern neighbour towards Romania, the Turkish side undertook to carry out certain diplomatic research actions, but reiterated the suggestion that Romania should join the Black Sea Pact, otherwise the chances of obtaining certain concessions from the Soviets were considered minimal (Collection 71/Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, pp. 189-204). The refusal to join the Black Sea Pact was motivated by the Romanian side, that time as well, on the grounds that such a gesture would have represented a provocation towards Germany (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, p. 134). On 13 August 1939, Carol II once again presented A. Călinescu his vision of Romanian-Turkish-Soviet relations: “*If the Soviet Union formally recognizes Bessarabia, we will then be able to move to a non-aggression pact, Saracoğlu will test in Moscow. Any Black Sea Pact is out of the question*” (Călinescu, p. 424). On the same day, the man who had officially taken the presidency of the Romanian

Council of Ministers five months earlier, noted in his diary: “General D. Popescu and Colonel Paul Leonida are returning from Ankara, Türkiye, with very good results, they will bring 200 battalions to Thrace and their objective is to put Bulgaria out of fighting” (Ib., p. 424). Thus, on 15-21 August, synchronized Romanian and Turkish military manoeuvres took place near Bulgaria’s borders, in order to deter a possible aggressive action (Stănciugel, p. 199).

At the European level, however, things began to take a turn that few had anticipated a few months earlier. German-Soviet contacts suddenly intensified in mid-August, and on 23 August 1939, German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, arrived in Moscow, by which time a bilateral German-Soviet economic agreement had already been concluded. By concluding a number of German-Soviet political deals, Hitler removed (at least temporarily) the possibility of confronting formidable adversaries (Great Powers) on two fronts, while Stalin succeeded, on the one hand, in precipitating a war between the capitalist Great Powers and, on the other hand, in gaining the opportunity to create a strategic *glacis* on the western borders of the USSR (Constantiniu, 2010, pp. 88-93).

In the German-Soviet talks of 23 August 1939, Türkiye was also mentioned; it was accused of having adhered to the policy of encircling Germany (Ribbentrop), or, as Stalin put it, of vacillations and duplicity (Hitchens, 1983, p. 216). Hitler’s aim with Türkiye was to stop its rapprochement with France and Great Britain and to bring it to a policy of equidistant neutrality, yet he did not agree with its entry into the Soviet influence (Ib., pp. 206, 223).

FROM THE RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV PACT TO THE ANGLO-FRENCH-TURKISH PACT (AUGUST-OCTOBER 1939)

On 23/24 August 1939, in Moscow, after several hours of discussions with Stalin, Ribbentrop signed a bilateral “*non-aggression pact*” with Molotov, which also contained a secret additional protocol concerning the delimitation of the spheres of influence between the two totalitarian Great Powers, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. While the delimitation was rigorous in the Baltic area and the Polish territories, the same cannot be said for South-Eastern Europe (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 317; Sturza, 2016, pp. 224-225).

The conclusion of the August 1939 German-Soviet economic and political agreements came as a major surprise to many political and military decision-makers, who had based a number of calculations, hypotheses and projects on the idea that the contradictions between Germany and the USSR were irreconcilable.

On 22 August 1939, Armand Călinescu wrote in his diary: “*the coup de théâtre of the German-Soviet agreement*”, asking rhetorically, “*Did they agree on the division of Poland and Romania?*” (Călinescu, p. 425). The next day, the Romanian prime minister recorded his conviction that, despite the German-Soviet rapprochement, “*England, France, Poland and Türkiye will go ahead*” (Ib.). The establishment of a German-Soviet economic partnership significantly reduced Romania’s room for manoeuvre in its relations with Germany.

The news of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact also shocked the head of Turkish diplomacy, Şükrü Saracoğlu, who characterized it as “*a coup de théâtre unheard of in history*”; in the new context, negotiations for a Turkish-Soviet alliance treaty were becoming complicated (Hitchens, pp. 227-228) However, the Turkish foreign minister correctly assessed that his country had not been abandoned by Germany in the Soviet sphere of influence; on 27 August Türkiye rejected the *Reich’s* economic proposals (Ib., pp. 231-232).

In Bulgaria, the turning point in German-Soviet relations was received with satisfaction and enthusiasm, as the pact of 23 August 1939 united the most popular Great Powers in Bulgarian public opinion (Ungureanu, pp. 342-343). On 25 August 1939, the Romanian diplomat Nicolae Florescu, deputy director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sent a telegram from London to the minister in charge, Grigore Gafencu, citing information received from “*fellow diplomats in the Balkan Entente states*”, according to which, encouraged by the Soviets, the Bulgarian authorities had intensified pan-Slavism propaganda abroad (M.F.A.R.—M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 117, p. 244).

On 1 September 1939, Nazi Germany’s aggression against Poland began, and two days later Great Britain and France declared war on the aggressor Germany. The Second World War thus broke out in Europe. As early as 3 September 1939, the Romanian government intervened with the Turkish government and obtained its consent to supply the Polish armed forces with war material through the Straits, *via* Romania (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 318). At that time, Poland was still expected to resist for a long time, and a war of positions was expected. After only two weeks, the supply route for the Polish armed forces would turn into a corridor of refuge for many Polish dignitaries, soldiers and civilians.

On 4 September, in a discussion with V.G. Dekanozov, one of Molotov’s deputies in the Soviet diplomatic leadership, N. Antonov, the Bulgarian minister in Moscow, expressed the satisfaction of the Bulgarian government and people with the improvement in German-Soviet relations, and in this context expressed the hope that the USSR would help Bulgaria in the “*Dobruja question*” (Sturza, p. 236).

At the same time, German diplomats insisted with V.M. Molotov that the government in Moscow intervene with the government in Ankara so that Türkiye would maintain strict neutrality; the Germans were alarmed by rumours of French and British military forces crossing the Straits to land in Romania (Ib., p. 237).

At the Crown Council of 6 September 1939, which confirmed Romania's neutrality, King Carol II mentioned the possibility of Türkiye brokering a détente in Soviet-Romanian relations (Mamina, 1997, p. 182). According to Armand Călinescu's notes, during the discussions, Constantin Argetoianu raised the issue of relations with the Soviet Union ("*Russia*"); the monarch replied that diplomatic action had already been initiated in this regard, through Türkiye (Călinescu, p. 430).

On 17 September, when the collapse of Poland was imminent and the Red Army had entered the territories east of the Curzon Line, Armand Călinescu inserted two proposals in his diary, both of which implied a certain role for Türkiye, namely a non-aggression pact with the USSR and drawing Bulgaria into the Balkan Entente, even on the condition of satisfying certain of its territorial claims (Ib., p. 432). Surprisingly, a ray of hope seemed to come from Moscow itself. The official Soviet communiqué on the entry of Red Army units into the territory of the dissolving Polish state contained the periphrasis "*the Dniester River, which is our border with Romania*", a fact also noted by N. Dianu (Lungu-Negreanu, 2000, doc. 19, p. 188).

On 17 and 18 September, in the new context, the USSR and Romania assured each other of their neutrality (M.F.A.R.–M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 121-122, pp. 249-252); however, on 20 September, V.M. Molotov strongly admonished N. Dianu for Romania's hosting military Polish refugees, considered a danger for the Soviet Union (Ib., doc. 123, pp. 252-253). The previous day, A. Călinescu had noted in his diary that the German danger had receded and the Soviet danger had increased after the collapse of Poland (Călinescu, p. 432).

The rapid succession of events in Poland encouraged Bulgarian diplomacy to advance its own claims. Thus, on 18 September 1939, the Bulgarian diplomat Karastoyanov evoked, in Berlin, in front of Ernst Woermann, a scenario that would take shape in the summer of 1940, asking his interlocutor what Bulgaria was supposed to do if the USSR occupied Bessarabia and offered Dobruja (to Bulgaria) "*on a platter*". The German diplomatic official replied and characterized that scenario as unlikely, at least for the time being, and urged the government in Sofia to maintain a close relationship with Berlin (Sturza, p. 239). On 25 September, Purvan Draganov held a discussion with the USSR's chargé d'affaires to Germany, A.A. Shkvartzev. According to the Soviet version, the Bulgarian minister in the Reich

capital, after expressing his satisfaction with the development of relations between Germany and the USSR, reiterated the Bulgarian arguments concerning Dobruja and Western Thrace, alluding to possible effective Soviet pressure on Romania on the issue of Southern Dobruja and putting British support for Greece on the issue of Western Thrace down to the London government's fears of the possible extension of Soviet influence to the Aegean Sea through a greater Bulgaria (Ib., pp. 242-243). In a telegram sent from Bucharest on 27 September 1939, Pavel G. Kukoliev cited several pieces of information, obtained from the Bulgarian military attaché, according to whom the Romanian authorities had already begun to evacuate archival material from Bessarabia, and that Soviet action in this province was therefore expected (Ib., p. 244).

The Bulgarian diplomacy's insistence on the "*Soviet card*" in September 1939, we believe, must be linked (also) to the categorical signals received from Berlin, in both July and September 1939, to the effect that Germany did not intend to act against Romania, as long as it was satisfied with its economic relations with this country (Ungureanu, pp. 338-344).

An important (diplomatic) episode for the development of the political-diplomatic relations in the Black Sea area, as part of the sequence of dramatic events recorded between 23 August 1939 and 17 September 1939, was the long and not very fruitful visit of Şükrü Saracoğlu to Moscow between 25 September and 17 October 1939. The purpose of the visit was to finalize the Turkish-Soviet bilateral talks, which had begun a few months earlier, by a bilateral treaty of alliance which, in the view of the Ankara government, was to complement the Turkish-British and Turkish-Soviet bilateral declarations (Hitchens, p. 236). After 23 August 1939, however, the relations between the USSR and Great Britain and France were on a downward slope, which could only complicate the Turkish-Soviet talks. Despite this fact and the satisfaction aroused by the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, in some Bulgarian circles, fears of a possible Soviet-Turkish pact on the Black Sea persisted in the early autumn of 1939 (Avramovski, 1986, pp. 3335-3336). In order not to irritate the USSR, Saracoğlu did not follow Gafencu's suggestion to make a stopover in Romania, either on his way to Moscow or on his return (Collection 71/Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, pp. 217, 222-223); yet on his departure he assured Stoica that he would "*defend Romanian interests as vigorously as Turkish ones*" (Ib., pp. 232, 236).

While the Turkish diplomats (still) hoped to complete the foreign policy work begun in May-June through an agreement with the USSR, the Soviet objectives

in relation to Türkiye, as Saracoğlu's visit to Moscow was to reveal, were quite different. Thus, the Soviet side actually wanted to diminish Türkiye's sovereignty, especially over the Straits, by installing their own military (air-naval) bases in their vicinity, to exclude any military presence of the non-Black Sea littoral states in the Black Sea area, to distance Türkiye from Great Britain and France, but also from its Balkan allies (first of all Romania), which included reconsidering some of the commitments previously undertaken (Hitchens, pp. 236-242; Ekrem, 1993, pp. 98-103; Biagini, 2005, pp. 124-125).

The broader context in which the Turkish-Soviet talks were taking place is also quite important. On 28 September, for the second time in less than 40 days, Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow; on that occasion, the secret bilateral agreements of the previous month regarding the division of Poland and the Baltic area were amended (Constantiniu, pp. 94-98).

At the same time, between 28 September and 10 October 1939, Stalin proceeded to establish a strategic *glacis* in the Baltic area, successively and rapidly imposing on Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the conclusion of "mutual aid" treaties with the Soviet Union and starting negotiations with Finland in order to agree on border "rectifications" (ib., pp. 95-97).

Moscow did not neglect South-Eastern Europe either. To the concern of the decision-makers in Bucharest, at the end of September, the USSR re-established diplomatic relations with Hungary (Haynes, p. 130), which had been severed eight months earlier, and at the beginning of the following month, Bulgaria was the target of a Soviet proposal for a bilateral mutual assistance pact (Miller, 1975, pp. 14-15). The loss of the privileged role that Türkiye had had in the USSR policy on the Black Sea and in south-eastern Europe, in favour of Bulgaria was becoming increasingly obvious; in many diplomatic circles the scenario of a "Baltization" of the Bulgarian kingdom, by the installation of Soviet military bases, as in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, was being discussed (Avramovski, 1986, p. 336).

According to a Soviet diplomatic document, representing the summary of the discussions held on 1 October 1939, by Saracoğlu with Stalin and Molotov, confronted with an avalanche of demands from his interlocutors, the Turkish Foreign Minister appears to have declared that Türkiye would remain neutral in case of a Soviet-Romanian military conflict over Bessarabia, pointing out, however, that in case of Bulgarian aggression against Romania or Greece, his country would be in a position to react militarily (Sturza, pp. 251-253).

Two days later, Şükrü Saracoğlu met Romania's new minister in Moscow, Gheorghe Davidescu, in the capital of the USSR. In his discussion with the Romanian diplomat, the Turkish Foreign Minister was optimistic about the negotiations with the Soviets, also in relation to the chances of including in the text of the Turkish-Soviet treaty the stipulation that Türkiye's previous commitments to Britain and France did not conflict with the interests of the USSR (M.F.A.R.-M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 132, pp. 265-266).

The Bulgarian Prime Minister, G. Kyosseivanov, was aware of the Soviet pressure on Türkiye, as is clear from a telegram from the Italian plenipotentiary minister in Sofia, Giorgio Talamo, sent to Galeazzo Ciano on 10 October 1939; the head of the government in Sofia and of Bulgarian diplomacy had informed the Italian representative that the USSR was sympathetic to Bulgaria's territorial claims against Greece and Romania (I.I.D., 1993, part two, doc. 46, p. 363).

On 14 October, Davidescu cited information obtained from a French source concerning the Bulgarian minister's activities in Moscow, including his frequent meetings with Soviet and foreign policy leaders, as well as statements in discussions with third parties, to the effect that Germany had left not only the Baltic area to the discretion of the USSR (M.F.A.R.-M.F.A.R.F., 2003, doc. 135, pp. 269-270).

On 17 October 1939 the American Ambassador in Moscow, Laurence A. Steinhardt, after a discussion held "in the strictest confidence" with Saracoğlu, dealing with the failure of the Soviet-Turkish negotiations, stated in a report: "The question of Romania was also raised by the Soviet government in order to obtain assurances of Turkish neutrality not only in case (sic!) the Soviets seize Bessarabia, but also in case the Bulgarians attempt to regain Dobruja"; the essential cause of the failure of the talks was summarized in a few words: "Turkish refusal to accept Soviet claims" (Sturza, pp. 254-255).

On 24 October, Saracoğlu presented to the Romanian Ambassador Stoica the main points of the talks in Moscow. The head of Turkish diplomacy revealed to his interlocutor some of the Soviet demands, namely the obligation for Ankara to consult with Moscow before implementing the obligations assumed under the Balkan Pact, the establishment of a "German clause" in the implementation of some of the obligations previously assumed by Türkiye, and undertaking certain obligations in the event of a war opposing the USSR to Great Britain and France. V. Stoica also learned from his interlocutor that he had noted in Moscow a great deal of solicitude for Bulgarian claims. In the same context, Saracoğlu also said that Stalin and Molotov had not explicitly referred to Romania, which was hard to believe.

Asked by the Romanian ambassador what Türkiye's attitude would be regarding the passage of the Franco-British military fleet through the Straits to Romania's aid in case of Soviet aggression, the Turkish foreign minister gave an evasive and vaguely encouraging answer: "*Türkiye will proceed as dictated by its interests in the defence of its territory, determining the concrete course of action in agreement with Great Britain and France*" (Collection 71/Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, pp. 248-252). In March 1940, Şükrü Saracoğlu would admit that he had been asked by Molotov about Türkiye's attitude in the event of an armed Soviet-Romanian conflict, and he had given an ambiguous answer, intended to make the Soviet government cautious towards Romania (Ib., pp. 292-293).

Shortly after the end of the unsuccessful visit of Turkish diplomacy's head to Moscow, the trilateral pact between Great Britain, France and the Republic of Türkiye was concluded (19 October 1939). Under this act, signed in Ankara itself, the three contracting parties were to provide mutual aid in the event of an attack by a European power against Türkiye or in the event of aggression in the Mediterranean. In Article 3, Türkiye undertook to cooperate with Great Britain and France in implementing the guarantees given by these countries to Romania on 13 April 1939. However, in spite of the considerable cooling of Turkish-Soviet relations, the Turkish side requested and obtained the insertion (also) in the text of this agreement of a secret annex, which reiterated the well-known "*Soviet clause*", i.e. the unwillingness of the government of the Republic of Türkiye to take any action that could have resulted in direct armed conflict with the USSR (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 320).

At any rate, following the signing of this trilateral pact, the favourable character of Türkiye's neutrality (non-belligerency) for Great Britain and France was emphasized, which widened the rift between the Turkish state and its Balkan allies, primarily Yugoslavia. Under those circumstances, one of the basic concerns of Romanian diplomacy was to keep Türkiye within the Balkan Entente, despite the growing Turkish-Yugoslav differences (Avramovski, p. 333). Romania's diplomatic efforts were also facilitated by the way in which the Turkish government understood to relate to the letter and spirit of the treaty of 19 October 1939, constantly avoiding direct involvement in a conflagration and invoking, as a pertinent reason, the insufficient preparation of its military forces (Biagini, p. 126).

The scenario of a possible attempt by the British and French fleets to cross the Straits in order to give aid to Romania on the basis of the guarantees of 13 April 1939, was also a preoccupation of Soviet diplomacy. On 28 October 1939,

the USSR ambassador in Ankara, A. V. Terentiev, raised this issue in a discussion with Ş. Saracoğlu, who initially shied away from a categorical answer, claiming that Romania did not seem to be threatened by any third power at the moment, and then, at the insistence of the Soviet diplomat, assured him that Türkiye would consult with the USSR in such an eventuality (Sturza, pp. 256-257).

At a time when Great Britain and France were at war with Germany, Italy was seen in Bucharest as the only Great Power willing and able to curb the Soviet tendencies of expansion in South-Eastern Europe (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu-Nicolaescu, pp. 243-245). On 20 October, Romanian diplomacy launched its most complete, ambitious and representative project of the "*phony war*" period, namely the "*Neutral Bloc*" initiative. That structure was supposed to bring together as many as seven states, namely the four members of the Balkan Entente, plus Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria. Basically, through this project, Romanian diplomacy aimed at preserving neutrality and normal relations with the three belligerent Great Powers (but also with the USSR), strengthening ties within the Balkan Entente, achieving détente in the relations with Hungary and Bulgaria, but above all, improving (or reinforcing) relations with Italy (I.P.E.R.D., 2003, p. 320).

On the last day of October 1939, a (new) disturbing signal came from Moscow. In his speech (i.e. report) on the development of the international situation and the foreign policy of the USSR, delivered before the Supreme Soviet of the Union, V.M. Molotov spoke, among other things, about the allegedly outdated and inadequate character for the new international situation of the old notions, like "*aggression*" and "*aggressor*" (Dobrinescu, 1991, p. 131). The second leader in the Soviet political hierarchy was thus making a transparent allusion to a number of international acts and documents to which the Soviet Union was (still) a party – first of all, the London Conventions of 3-5 July 1933, on the definition of aggression and aggressor. In the absence of an explicit recognition by the USSR of the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, and in the lack of a bilateral Soviet-Romanian political treaty, these instruments of international law constituted, from Bucharest's perspective, the legal basis for diplomatic relations with Moscow, as G. Gafencu had also pointed out in his broadcast speech at the end of 1938 (Ungureanu, p. 327, note 766).

Türkiye's new position in international relations was also reflected in the traditional annual speech delivered by the President of the Republic, İsmet İnönü, on 1 November 1939, when the new session of the Ankara Parliament opened. Present at that solemn event, Romanian diplomat Gh. Căpițăneanu noted that the paragraph in the presidential speech referring to the good relations

with the USSR, which was usually applauded vigorously, that time only elicited weak and complacent applause, in visible contrast to the paragraphs in which the importance of the Anglo-French-Turkish pact was presented and Türkiye's determination to fulfil its commitments was affirmed, which were received with prolonged applause and standing ovations. Căpităneanu also noted the absence of any representative of the German embassy in Ankara and the apathetic attitude of Soviet and Italian ambassadors (Collection 71/Türkiye 1920-1944, vol. 61, p. 253).

EPILOGUE

The Romanian diplomatic initiative of the "*Neutral Bloc*" was to receive favourable but very late responses from Athens (16 December 1939), Ankara (18 December) and Belgrade (21 December), after Romania had abandoned this project for about three weeks (Dobrinescu-Pătroi-Nicolescu, 1999, p. 249). The failure of the project was primarily linked to the unfavourable attitude of the totalitarian Great Powers, first of all the USSR, followed by Germany, which had initially shown a certain interest, then by Italy, which did not want to assume the role proposed by Romania; in those circumstances, Hungary and Bulgaria, revisionist states, rejected the project, waiting for the right moment to immediately satisfy some of their own territorial claims (Ungureanu, pp 342-345).

The cooling of Soviet-Turkish relations put an end to Romanian hopes of improving relations with the USSR. Through Türkiye, on 4 November 1939, Grigore Gafencu unsuccessfully requested that Germany should initiate the brokering of a Soviet-Romanian non-aggression pact (Haynes, p. 130). Fears of the USSR also prompted Carol II, in the first half of November 1939, to attempt to mediate between Germany and the Franco-British tandem (Ib., p. 126).

Towards the end of 1939, the Romanian-British project to build a military naval base at Taşaul-Năvodari was definitively abandoned (Ungureanu, p. 344), and Great Britain gave an essentially negative answer to the Romanian diplomatic demarches regarding the applicability of the guarantees of 13 April 1939, in case of a Soviet attack on Romania (Lungu-Negreanu, 2000, doc. 33, pp. 209-213).

CONCLUSIONS

In early 1939, the Soviet Union was by far the most powerful state in the Black Sea region, while Türkiye played, or at least appeared to play, the key diplomatic role in the region. In a long-standing friendly relationship with the Soviets and also in a regional alliance with Romania (the Balkan Entente), post-Kemalist Türkiye

was a diplomatic link between Bucharest and Moscow (which was also desired in Romania's capital), and also between Romania and Bulgaria, but without Ankara neglecting its obligations under the Balkan Entente. Türkiye's regional importance was also boosted by its geo-strategic position, especially after it had taken control of the Straits under the Montreux Convention (1936).

Until August 1939, the Soviet initiative for a Black Sea Pact, launched at the beginning of the year, could find support only from Türkiye.

The abandonment by Great Britain and France of their conciliatory policy towards Germany in mid-March 1939 and the diplomatic offensive launched in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe led to or encouraged the emergence of more complex regional projects than the Soviet initiative of February 1939, involving British and French patronage or participation, which lessened some Romanian fears of falling under USSR hegemony. Bulgaria's greatest hopes, however, did not lie in this direction: they were linked to Berlin or a possible or probable German-Soviet rapprochement. Türkiye was firmly committed to cooperation with Britain, France and the USSR, seen as future allies, while Romania was very cautious in that respect, partly motivated by the objective of not provoking Germany, which was to be proved as illusory in the context of the *Reich's* march towards war.

The conclusion of the German-Soviet agreements in August 1939, the outbreak of the Second World War and the initial course of the hostilities led to a new political-diplomatic configuration in the Black Sea area. Thus, Bulgaria took the place of Türkiye in the regional policy of the USSR, while maintaining privileged economic and diplomatic relations with Germany, and Türkiye continued its rapprochement with Great Britain and France, without renouncing the imperative of not entering into conflict with the USSR.

Of the four countries bordering the Black Sea, it was Romania that felt the shock of the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the outbreak of war the most acutely. Romania's foreign policy objectives during this period were best summarized in the "*Neutral Bloc*" project, launched at the end of October 1939, the failure of which reflected the growing isolation of the Romanian state.

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