

# THE ROMANIAN DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVE OF THE “NEUTRAL BLOC” IN THE POLITICAL-MILITARY CONTEXT OF THE BLACK SEA (SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 1939)

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*The dramatic developments between 21 August and 28 September 1939 had a substantial impact on the Black Sea region. The new course of Soviet policy caused deep unease in Bucharest, astonishment in Ankara, and enthusiasm in Sofia. In this context, in September 1939, Romanian diplomacy, led by Grigore Gafencu, pursued several regional objectives, which were summarized at the end of October in the „Neutral Bloc” project. However, the idea of a potential bloc of neutral states in southeastern Europe, under the Italian aegis, had already been discussed and analyzed in various European diplomatic circles since September. This article reviews the preliminary phase of this initiative, the reactions of the European Great Powers and of the small and medium-sized states aimed by Gafencu’s plan, as well as the failure of this ambitious project. Sources list includes Romanian military and diplomatic archives, as well as published Romanian, Turkish, and Soviet diplomatic documents.*

*Keywords: 1939; Neutral Block; Grigore Gafencu; Italy; USSR;*

## INTRODUCTION

The dramatic diplomatic, military, and political-territorial developments between 21 August and 28 September 1939 (the creation of the monstrous German-Soviet partnership, the German attack on Poland, and its division between Germany and the USSR, the declarations of war by Great Britain and France against Germany), also disrupted the regional context in the Black Sea area. The outbreak of war between the Great Powers of Western Europe (with the exception of Italy) was perceived in Bucharest as a victory for the USSR, which thus gained great freedom of movement (i.e. expansion) in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. For Romania, a traditional ally of France and Great Britain, the Soviet Union represented a greater threat than Germany, with which it did not share a border and which could be “*appeased*” through economic concessions (exports of oil, grain, and other raw materials), whereas the Soviet danger was threefold: political, territorial (the issue of Bessarabia), and ideological (Hayness, 2003, pp. 125-126).

Under these circumstances, Romanian diplomacy sought new formulas likely to increase security in South-Eastern Europe, maintain peace and stability in this part of the old continent, and, last but not least, defend the territorial integrity of the Romanian state. Essentially, several major objectives were pursued, namely avoiding entry into the war, consolidating the Balkan Entente, achieving *détente* in the relations with the small revisionist neighbouring states, Bulgaria and Hungary, and developing relations with Italy, the only Western Great Power remaining outside the conflict. In the months leading up to the outbreak of war, Romanian-Italian military relations had been on the rise, particularly in terms of air and naval cooperation (Dobrinescu-Pătroi-Nicolescu, 1999, pp. 251-255), and Romania’s declaration of neutrality was accompanied by a warm message from Charles II to the leaders in Rome, who were considered guarantors of peace in the Balkans (Ib., p. 243). There were also a significant number of Romanian attempts to contribute to a possible reconciliation between Germany and the Franco-British tandem, in order to limit the Soviets’ room for maneuver. Thus, in the first half of November 1939, King Charles II joined the peace initiative of the sovereigns of Belgium and the Netherlands, making a series of otherwise futile approaches to the three belligerent states (IPERD, 2003, p. 320).

The objectives of Romanian diplomacy in the new regional and continental context were summarized at the end of October in the so-called “*Neutral Bloc*” project, finalized on 28 October 1939, by Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu, after consultations with the Romanian ambassadors to Turkiye, Greece, and Yugoslavia (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu-Nicolescu, 1999, pp. 245-246). This regional structure was supposed to bring together no fewer than seven states, namely the four member states of the Balkan Entente, plus Hungary, Bulgaria, and a major power, namely Italy. The Romanian diplomatic initiative was probably also boosted by the creation of the Oslo Group by six neutral states in northern and western Europe: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg (Stănciugel, 2008, p. 201).

The draft, sent two days later to Romania’s diplomatic representatives in Ankara, Athens, Belgrade, Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, Budapest, Moscow, and Sofia, stipulated:

- “*Neutrality in the current conflict*”;
- “*Non-aggression between member states*”;
- “*Adopting a position of benevolent neutrality by the participating states, in case one of them was attacked*”;
- “*Normalization of military measures at common borders*”;
- Contacts between the foreign ministers, and exchanges of political, diplomatic, and military information of mutual interest;
- Economic collaboration between the member states.
- The nature of the bloc was to be entirely defensive, not directed against any third power (IPERD, 2003, p. 320).

This ambitious diplomatic project was to be implemented in two stages, with the governments in Rome, Sofia, and Budapest only being included in the second stage, after a full agreement had been reached between the Balkan allies; until then, only a number of surveys or explorations had been carried out in addition to the three governments (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu-Nicolescu, p. 246). However, as we shall see, the governments initially notified also conducted a series of surveys with third countries, which meant that the details of the Romanian project became known quite quickly in European diplomatic circles.

Virtually, the history of this Romanian diplomatic initiative began on 21-22 September 1939, when the first proposals to take over the leadership of a neutral Balkan bloc were sent from Bucharest to Rome (Marzari, 1970, pp. 771-772), and it was to end on 16 December 1939, when, during a speech delivered before

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the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations, the head of Italian diplomacy and Benito Mussolini’s son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, dealt the final blow to Romania’s last hopes of co-opting Italy into a neutral regional political project, which had been partially revived after the communiqué of the Grand Fascist Council of 5 December, which referred to maintaining peace in the Balkans, and to Italy’s special interests in this area (Ib., pp. 786-787).

In what follows, we will first review how the five Great Powers of the then Europe related to the Balkans and the Black Sea area in the last third of 1939, then the two major stages in the evolution of Romanian diplomatic efforts to establish a regional bloc of neutral states, with the participation and even under the aegis of Italy, namely the stage prior to, and the stage following the systematization of this project at the end of October 1939.

### **THE GREAT POWERS AND SOUTH-EAST EUROPE (SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 1939)**

In the months preceding the outbreak of World War II, the Soviet Union was by far the most powerful state bordering the Black Sea, not least in terms of air and naval power, while Türkiye played a key role in the region, both geopolitically (control of the Straits) and politically and diplomatically, as a state with a traditionally privileged relationship with the USSR, and also allied with Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia within the Balkan Entente, as well as in a process of strengthening relations with France and Great Britain. Romania was trying to preserve the unity of the Balkan Entente, given the growing differences between Türkiye and Yugoslavia, while Bulgaria hoped to satisfy some of its territorial claims peacefully, primarily concerning Southern Dobruja (Ungureanu, 2024, pp. 770-773). The news of the conclusion of German-Soviet economic and political arrangements aroused deep unease in Bucharest, astonishment in Ankara, and enthusiasm in Sofia (Ib., pp. 793-795).

Indeed, during his long visit to Moscow between 25 September and 17 October, the head of diplomacy in Ankara, Şükrü Saracoğlu, was confronted with the Soviets’ strident tendency to subordinate Türkiye’s foreign policy to the Kremlin’s new orientations. Basically, the Soviet Union wanted control over the Straits by installing air and naval bases in their vicinity (despite the provisions of the Montreux Convention), but also to cause Türkiye to distance from France, Great Britain, and its Balkan allies, including Romania, which had territorial disputes with both its large eastern neighbour and Bulgaria. The content of the talks, held on 1 October 1939,

between the Turkish foreign minister and I.V. Stalin and V. M. Molotov (DVP, II, 1992, doc. 654, pp. 146-153), is still most significant and telling.

Another worrying signal came from Moscow at the end of October 1939, when, in a speech delivered before the Supreme Soviet, V. M. Molotov declared that the traditional notions of “aggression” and “aggressor” had become obsolete and inadequate for the new stage of concrete evolution of international relations (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu, 1992, p. 16). This statement called into question numerous commitments previously made by the Soviet Union, such as the Conventions on the Definition of Aggression and Aggressor (London, 3-5 July 1933), and appeared as a potential justification for possible and increasingly likely military action against some of the signatory states of the above-mentioned act, including Romania.

The loss of Turkiye’s privileged position in relation to the USSR at the regional level benefited Bulgaria, which, however, in the first decade of October 1939, declined the Soviet offer to conclude a mutual assistance treaty similar to those just signed by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Ungureanu, *ib.*, p. 796).

Nazi Germany, which had major economic interests in the Balkans related to the supply of raw materials, did not want tensions to escalate, let alone hostilities to spread in this geographical area, but it was also not interested in a profound and lasting improvement in relations between the states of South-Eastern Europe, a development that would have reduced its room for maneuver in relation to them. As historian Frank Marzari observes, London and Paris wanted collective neutrality for the small and medium-sized states of South-Eastern Europe, while Berlin preferred the individual neutrality of those states (Marzari, *ib.*, pp. 769-770). Eloquent in this regard is the message conveyed directly by Joachim von Ribbentrop in early September 1939, during an official visit to Budapest; the head of German diplomacy warned Hungary not to attack Romania under any circumstances, but also not to conclude any non-aggression pact with it (IPERD, 2003, p. 318). Also in September 1939, Germany reiterated the message sent in July to Sofia that the Reich would not look favourably on Bulgaria’s participation in an attack on an economically cooperative Romania (Genchev, 1998, p. 102). During discussions with Galeazzo Ciano on 1 October 1939, Adolf Hitler stated that if Romania did not maintain strict neutrality, Germany would be forced to fully support Russia, Hungary, and Bulgaria in order to “*liquidate the Romanian problem*” (Oprea, 2003, pp. 198-199).

As a matter of general principle, the idea of a neutral bloc of Balkan states had been approved in London as early as mid-September 1939 (Marzari, *ib.*, p. 781).

Even earlier, in the second week of the same month, Ciano and Mussolini had concluded that the formation of a bloc of neutral states in South-Eastern Europe, under Italy’s aegis, could have been beneficial in the long term not only to Italian interests, but also to German interests. The plans to attack Greece and Yugoslavia, finalized in August, were thus canceled (Ibid., pp.770-771).

Hitler was also concerned about the possibility of Italy taking hasty action in the Balkans, which would have created economic difficulties for Germany, so he sought to temper Italian-Soviet tensions, fearing the consequences of possible Italian imprudence more than Soviet expansionism in this part of Europe (Ciadakis, 1974, p. 177).

The conclusion of the German-Soviet agreements in August 1939 had led, almost ipso facto, to the deterioration of Moscow’s relations with London and Paris. However, the two great Western European democracies wanted to maintain communication with the Soviet Union, in the hope of subsequently improving relations with that great power. In their contacts with their Soviet counterparts, British (and French) diplomats sought, without much success, to highlight the danger that German expansion in South-Eastern Europe posed to the USSR (see DVP, II, 1992, passim). For example, on 29 November 1939, on the eve of the outbreak of the “*Winter War*”, Richard Austin Butler, Lord Halifax’s deputy at the Foreign Office, tried to convince the Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan M. Maiski, that Soviet and British interests in the Black Sea and the Balkans were convergent, with both great powers interested in stopping German expansion. In that context, the British diplomat told his Soviet counterpart that “*the fate of Bessarabia is of no concern to England*” (Sturza, editor, 2016, pp. 258-259).

## THE UNSYSTEMATIC STAGE OF THE PROJECT

After the shock of the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland (17 September 1939), at the beginning of the last third of the first month of war in Europe, there were also some positive signs for the stability of the South-Eastern part of the continent, with the involvement of Italy. Thus, on 20 September, the joint Italian-Greek declaration was issued, and in the days that followed, a tacit Romanian-Hungarian agreement, mediated by Italian diplomacy, was reached on reducing the military forces massed near the common border (Marzari, ib., pp. 778-779).

Also on 20 September 1939, in Ankara, Ambassador Vasile Stoica had a meeting with Şükrü Saracoğlu, during which the head of Turkish diplomacy indicated that Great Britain and France had given their approval for the Republic of Türkiye

to participate in a regional bloc of neutral states, yet subject to the Turkish state's compliance with the commitments it had made to the two great powers on 12 May and 23 June 1939, respectively. The head of Turkish diplomacy was also optimistic about obtaining the favourable opinion of the Soviet Union (RPMROT, II, 2024, doc. 57, pp. 181-182). The progress and final outcome of the discussions in Moscow with Stalin and Molotov would prove that initial optimism to be unfounded. On 24 October, Saracoğlu would note, in front of the same interlocutor, that the Soviet Union had resumed the expansionist policy of imperial Russia (Cojocaru, 2014, pp. 206-207).

The Romanian diplomatic attempt to negotiate a non-aggression pact with the USSR, based on the territorial status quo, undertaken in the context of the Soviet declaration of 18 September regarding the Soviet state's neutrality towards Romania, also ended in failure (Ungureanu, *ib.*, p. 786). Furthermore, on 20 September V. M. Molotov categorically reproached the Romanian minister in Moscow, Nicolae Dianu, for Romania's hosting military refugees from the disintegrating Polish army (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 123, pp. 252-253). In a less blunt but rather ironic manner, Molotov's assertions were repeated the next day by the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, Aleksandr Shkvarchev, in front of the Romanian diplomat Radu Crutzescu (DVP, II, 1992, doc. 622, p. 120). Quite surprisingly, in the last week of September 1939, some Soviet diplomats gave reassurances to their Romanian colleagues accredited in the capitals of third countries (Lungu, Negreanu-editors, 2000, doc. 24-25, pp. 195-197). At the beginning of October, diplomat Gheorghe Davidescu succeeded Nicolae Dianu as minister plenipotentiary in Moscow, and Romania's new prime minister, Constantin Argetoianu, approved the request of the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Bucharest, Pavel G. Kukoliev, regarding the entry and distribution in Romania of 400 copies of the newspaper *Izvestiya* (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 130, p. 163).

Beyond the contradictory and confusing signals sent by Soviet diplomats, Romanian decision-makers also received information about Moscow's position through other channels. As evidenced by the content of the telegram sent on 9 October by Vasile Stoica, Romanian diplomatic circles were aware of Soviet demands on *Turkiye* regarding the Straits (RPMROT, II, doc. 63, pp. 186-187).

Soviet intentions to monopolize the Black Sea were also described in the 10 October telegram from the Romanian military attaché in *Turkiye*, Lieutenant-Colonel Traian Teodorescu (*ib.*, doc. 64, pp. 187-188). Consequently, on 11 October Grigore Gafencu sent Vasile Stoica a telegram with the following content: "*Given*

that in today's times we have a vital interest in not remaining alone in the Black Sea and with the Straits closed, for any circumstance, you will make every effort to ensure that the possibility of assistance is not suppressed.” (ib., doc. 65, pp. 188-189). The head of Romanian diplomacy had in mind the possibility that the British and French military fleets could transit the Straits to come to Romania's aid in the event of an attack on the Romanian state.

Sofia was also aware of Soviet pressure on Türkiye, also on the issue of Ankara's policy in the Balkans, as evidenced by the content of a telegram sent from the Bulgarian capital by Italian diplomat Giorgio Talamo on 10 October 1939, after a discussion with the head of the Bulgarian government and diplomacy, Georgi Kyosseivanov (IID., T2, 1993, part II, doc. 46, p. 363). A few days later, several Bulgarian newspapers reported that the stagnation of the Soviet-Turkish talks in Moscow was allegedly due to the Turkish side's refusal to accept the Soviet point of view on Bessarabia, and to making representations to the Romanian government for a “peaceful resolution of the Bessarabia issue” (Fond 71/Türkiye, vol. 61, l. 244).

However, in mid-October, Romanian-Hungarian and Romanian-Bulgarian relations were going through a period of calm, even a relative *détente* (Stănciugel, 2008, p. 201). However, the regional political equation was further complicated by the firm refusal of the Greek leader, General Ioannis Metaxas, to accept the idea of any territorial concessions to Bulgaria, on the part of the member states of the Balkan Entente (Tudorancea, 2011, pp. 158-160).

Also in mid-October, French military sources confirmed the information held by the Romanian General Staff regarding the concentration of Soviet troops in three areas located near the Romanian border, namely north of Cernăuți/Chernivtsi, 140 kilometers west of that city, and along the Tiraspol-Odessa railway line (Constantiniu, 2002, p. 110, note 3). Although he acknowledged that Great Britain and France were unable to provide Romania with prompt and consistent assistance in the event of a Soviet aggression, the British minister in Bucharest, Reginald Hoare, reproached the Romanians for their tendency to see Germany as a counterweight to the Soviet threat (Dobrinescu-Pătroi, 1992, pp. 14-15).

On 17 October 1939, Şükrü Saracoğlu's long visit to the Soviet Union ended without any noticeable result. On the same day, G. Ciano informed the German ambassador in Rome, von Mackensen, of Italy's decision to abandon its intention to participate in a regional bloc of neutral states (Marzari, ib., p. 774). That decision was not made public until two months later, either because of Mussolini's arrogance,

or because of the internal bureaucratic inertia of the Italian diplomatic apparatus (Ibid.), which fueled the illusory hopes of Romanian diplomacy.

The issue of creating a Balkan (South-East European) bloc of neutral states under Italy's leadership had been discussed during the Hitler-Ciano talks on 1 October, when the Führer agreed only to the idea of a (strictly) Mediterranean bloc, i.e. without the participation of Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary (Ciadakis, 1974, p. 177). According to L. Marzari, Hitler saw the creation of this potential bloc under Italy's leadership as an opportunity to amplify the Italian-British maritime rivalry, while Ciano aimed to consolidate both Italy's neutrality and Italian influence in South-Eastern Europe (Marzari, 1970, p. 773).

On 18 October Lieutenant Colonel Traian Teodorescu sent a report from the Turkish capital to the Second Intelligence Section of the Romanian General Staff regarding the failure of the Turkish-Soviet negotiations in Moscow. According to the Romanian military attaché, the negative outcome of the discussions was likely due to the Turkish side's rejection of two Soviet demands, namely the inclusion of a "German clause" in the text of the future bilateral mutual assistance treaty (the Soviet Union was not willing to support Türkiye in the event of aggression by Germany), and Türkiye's assuming the obligation to declare war on non-Black-Sea states that would attempt to violate a possible decision to close the Straits (RPMROT, II, doc. 68, pp. 191-192).

On the same day Grigore Gafencu sent a telegram to Vasile Stoica requesting information on the position of decision-makers in the Republic of Türkiye regarding the "*bloc of neutral Balkan states*" (including Bulgaria), but also on the possibilities of cooperation with Hungary and Italy (Ib., doc. 67, pp. 190-191).

The following day, on 19 October 1939, the Anglo-French-Turkish Treaty was concluded, which, according to historian Türkkaya Ataöv, caused "*chagrin in Moscow, wrath in Berlin, and misgivings in Rome*" (Ataöv, 1965, p. 62). Following that act, Germany and Italy vehemently contested Türkiye's status as a neutral state and, implicitly, raised objections to its participation in a potential neutral bloc of states (Ekrem, 1993, p. 106). However, Türkiye had no objections to Italy's possible participation, despite the formal existence of the Berlin-Rome-Tōkyō Axis (Ib., p. 107), which had nevertheless proved ineffective at the time of the conclusion of the German-Soviet agreements.

The act of 19 October 1939 also contained the traditional "*Russian clause*", namely Türkiye's unwillingness to engage in armed conflict with the USSR

and to admit of, or participate in, political-military actions likely to lead to such a conflict (IPERD, 2003, p. 320). This did not prevent the newspaper *Izvestiya* from assessing that Great Britain and France had thus succeeded in drawing Türkiye into the war, attributing the failure of the Turkish-Soviet talks prior to 19 October to Türkiye’s failed attempts, instigated by Great Britain and France, to turn the Soviet Union against Germany (Ataöv, 1965, pp. 62-63). Molotov himself, in his speech on 31 October 1939, echoed Berlin’s assessments, accusing Türkiye of abandoning its neutrality and tying its fate to that of the Western imperialist powers (Dobrinescu-Pătroi, ib., pp. 16-17).

The following day, during his annual speech at the opening of the National Assembly, Turkish President İsmet İnönü spoke in traditionally positive terms about the Turkish-Soviet relations (Ataöv, 1965, p.63), but, according to Romanian diplomat Gheorghe Căpităneanu, who was present at the ceremony, this time, the passage in question elicited only polite applause, unlike the passage referring to friendship with Great Britain and France, which was greeted with energetic applause and ovations (Fond 71/Türkiye, vol. 61, l. 253).

However, despite certain (maximal) interpretations regarding the commitments made by the Republic of Türkiye, on 19 October 1939, it maintained its *de jure* neutrality until 23 February 1945, and *de facto* until the end of the conflagration, constantly and successfully avoiding direct involvement in the war on the grounds of insufficient preparation of its armed forces (Biagini, 2005, pp. 126-134).

On 23 October Romanian Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu himself conducted a survey with Soviet chargé d’affaires P. G. Kukoliev. In his discussion with the Soviet diplomat, Gafencu emphasized the common aspirations and interests of peace, security, and cooperation among the Black Sea littoral states and argued that “*a rapprochement between all the Balkan states could be in the direct interest of these countries as well as of the neighbouring Great Powers, by preventing the spread of war in this part of Europe...*” (Dobrinescu-Pătroi, ib., p. 16). The initiative of the head of Romanian diplomacy remained without a concrete response. However, it can be said that there was an indirect response from Moscow, but it consisted of several Soviet officials and diplomats circulating statements that “*when the Romanian government is asked about Bessarabia, it will be ceded without a fight*” (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 139, p. 278).

The fact that Soviet-Romanian relations were frosty raised hopes in Budapest. Also on 23 October, Hungarian Foreign Minister Count Csáky István spoke out against joining a regional bloc initiated or supported by Romania, pointing out

that Hungary had a good chance of obtaining Transylvania in the event, considered very likely, of a joint Soviet-Bulgarian attack on Romania, in Bessarabia and Dobruja, respectively (Marzari, *ib.*, p. 782).

### THE SYSTEMATIZED PROJECT STAGE

Among the Great Powers, the Soviet Union continued to have the most unfavourable attitude towards rapprochement between the states of South-Eastern Europe, even at the beginning of November 1939. On 6 November, when he was not yet familiar with the details of the Neutral Bloc project, Molotov addressed Berlin, communicating the USSR's dissatisfaction regarding the plans to establish a Balkan bloc of neutral states, and on 9 November the Soviet minister in Sofia, Anatoli I. Lavrentiev, declared that the USSR would never allow Italy to lead a Balkan bloc (Marzari, *ib.*, p. 784). In contrast, the German ambassador in Ankara, Franz von Papen, in discussions held around the same time with his Romanian counterpart, Vasile Stoica, did not object to the idea of a neutral bloc with Italy's participation, but he expressed skepticism about Turkiye, which he described as "*almost belligerent*" by virtue of the agreements concluded with France and Great Britain; in response, the Romanian diplomat recalled the situation of Italy, considered similar to that of Turkiye, but in the sense of a special relationship with Germany (Ekrem, 1993, pp. 108-109).

Following the Soviet initiative of 6 November, German foreign policy leaders approached Rome, suspecting possible secret negotiations between Italy and the Balkan states. Consequently, on 16 November 1939, Mussolini and Ciano reiterated to the German ambassador in Rome the statements they had made a month earlier, but still without making any public announcement (Marzari, *ib.*, pp. 785-786).

Meanwhile, through Turkiye, the Soviet government had become aware of the full content of the Romanian diplomatic project. On 11 November Numan Menemencöglü had communicated this content to Soviet Ambassador Aleksei Terentiev, along with the information that the Turkish ambassador to the USSR, Ali Haydar Altay, had been tasked with informing the Soviet government about this Romanian diplomatic initiative (DVP, II, 1992, doc. 768, pp. 278-279, strictly confidential telegram).

On 13 November, V. M. Molotov questioned the German ambassador, Friederich Werner von der Schulenburg, about the surveys undertaken by Romania with a view to forming a bloc of neutral countries; according to the information held by Molotov, Grigore Gafencu had claimed that he already had the agreement of Great Britain, France, Italy, and even Germany. In response, the German ambassador attributed

this alleged statement by Gafencu to his tendency to mistake his wishes for reality and estimated that Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, and Yugoslavia were not interested in the project, while Italy’s position was unknown and that of Germany was unspecified (Ib., doc. 773, pp. 285-287). On 17 November, in a new conversation, Molotov and Schulenburg again addressed, this time among several other topics, the issue of the Romanian diplomatic initiative. The Reich representative stated that he had informed the Berlin government about Molotov’s communications four days earlier, receiving only a preliminary response at that time, that the German government was still waiting, and that Gafencu’s statements about the positive opinion from Wilhelmstrasse were premature, to say the least (Ib., doc. 790, p. 314).

Later, Joachim von Ribbentrop would assure Moscow that both powers of the Berlin-Rome Axis opposed the Gafencu plan, which was considered favourable to Great Britain and France, as it would allow them to consolidate their positions in the Black Sea, also to the detriment of the Soviet Union (Marzari, ib., p. 785). During November 1939, the Soviet Union continued its policy of pressure on the two non-Slavic neighbouring countries on the Black Sea, Romania and Turkiye.

According to the estimates of the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, quoted by Gheorghe Davidescu in a telegram sent on the first day of November, the concentration of Soviet troops near the Romanian borders did not have “*a direct and immediate purpose*”, but rather the Soviet government was waiting for either a favourable moment or a pretext to take action, for example, a possible crossing of the Straits by the British and French military fleets (Lungu, Negreanu, ib., doc. 26, p. 198).

On 3 November, during meetings between the Romanian foreign minister and the French ambassador and British minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest, Adrien Thierry and Reginald Hoare, respectively, it became clear that, in practical terms, the two Western powers had no concrete means of providing military assistance to Romania in the event of aggression by the USSR. (Ib., doc. 28-29, pp. 199-203). Finally, in mid-December, Great Britain officially informed the Romanian government that the application of the guarantees of 13 April 1939, in the event of Soviet aggression, was conditional on the attitude of Italy and Turkiye (Ib., doc. 33, pp. 209-211), which was basically a negative response to Romania’s requests on that issue, given the “*Russian clause*” in the Anglo-Franco-Turkish treaty of 19 October 1939. In fact, at the end of November 1939, Richard A. Butler told I. M. Maiski that the fate of Bessarabia was of no interest to the British Empire, which wanted to collaborate with the USSR in order to stop German expansion towards the Black Sea (Sturza, editor, 2016, pp. 258-259).

As early as 4 November, the Romanian government had approached the German government with a view to mediating negotiations that would lead to an improvement in relations, and even to the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Romania and the Soviet Union (Hayness, 2003, p. 130). At the same time, rumours were spreading in various diplomatic circles that, after the conclusion of the Soviet-Finnish negotiations that began in early October, the Kremlin would take action on the issue of Bessarabia (Constantiniu, 2002, p. 110, note 4; Lungu, Negreanu, *ib.*, doc. 30, pp. 203-204).

Towards the end of November, the USSR attempted to resume talks with Türkiye on the conclusion of a mutual defense pact, but the Ankara government made the resumption of discussions conditional on the withdrawal of the two Soviet demands that had been rejected by Şükrü Saracoğlu during the talks in Moscow, namely the amendment of the Montreux Convention and the introduction of a “*German clause*” in the text of the future bilateral treaty (Ekrem, 1993, p. 111).

Almost simultaneously, in issue 10 of the Comintern magazine for 1939, an article entitled “*The Imperialist War and Romania*” appeared, signed by the first secretary of the Communist Party of Romania, Boris Ştefanov (an ethnic Bulgarian from Southern Dobruja), written on 24 November. The basic idea of the text was that the only salvation for Romania and “*its peoples*” would have been, supposedly, the urgent conclusion of a mutual assistance pact with the USSR, following the model of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Many diplomats and politicians saw the publication of this article as a sign that the USSR was preparing to apply the “*Baltic method*” to Romania as well (Constantiniu, 2002, pp. 94-95). In some Berlin circles, there was a piece of “*information*” circulating that a Soviet attack on Romania was to take place on 6 December (*Ibid.*, p. 95). Meanwhile, however, at the end of November, the “*Winter War*” broke out between the USSR and Finland, and the unexpectedly strong resistance of the Finns to Soviet aggression prompted the Kremlin to postpone its plans for Romania and South-Eastern Europe. On 8 December, Molotov in Moscow and Pavel G. Kukuliev in Bucharest made statements distancing themselves from the ideas in Boris Ştefanov’s article (*Ib.*, pp. 95-96).

The two great Western democratic powers at war with Germany, namely Great Britain and France, had communicated their favourable opinion of the project in the first half of November, which most likely led to Berlin’s ultimately unfavourable attitude.

London’s positive and unreserved opinion was communicated on November 6 (IPERD, 2003, p. 320), while in Paris there were still some uncertainties, particularly

regarding Rome’s role in this planned regional constellation. The French ambassador in Paris, R. Massigli, expressed a series of suspicions on this subject at the beginning of November, and the positive opinion communicated to Grigore Gafencu by Adrien Thierry on 13 November contained some reservations generated by the Quai d’Orsay’s fears regarding Italy’s supremacy within the planned bloc of neutral states (Tudorancea, 2011, p. 162). Also, in response to French objections regarding Italy’s role in his regional political project, Grigore Gafencu asked the Romanian ambassadors in Ankara, Athens, and Belgrade in early November to insist on two points: 1. Only Italian participation was likely to have a positive effect in Budapest and Sofia. 2. This participation had every chance of strengthening Italy’s neutrality in the long term (Ekrem, *ib.*, p. 110).

However, Romania’s military attaché in Rome, Colonel Gheorghe Petrescu, assessed in a report drawn up on 31 October that the chances of attracting Italy into a regional anti-Soviet defensive bloc were null and void, since, in the Romanian officer’s view, such a move would have led to tension in Rome’s relations with Moscow and deepened the rift in the relations with Berlin, thus ultimately bringing Italy closer to London and Paris, which was not at all in the intentions of the Italian fascist leaders (Apud Dobrinescu-Pătroiuc-Nicolescu, 1999, pp. 247-248). In the same comprehensive summary report, Colonel Petrescu mentioned that he constantly received assurances from his Soviet counterpart regarding the USSR’s most peaceful intentions towards Romania, including the absence of any territorial claims (*ib.*, p. 248). The reactions of the Balkan Entente member states were essentially favourable, but official affirmative responses would not be issued until the third week of December, after the project had been definitively abandoned.

The first allied government to be officially consulted was Greece. On 30 October, Romanian Ambassador Radu Tr. Djuvara was received by General I. Metaxas and Nikolaos Mavroudis (Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs). The two expressed interest and promised a firm response for the following week (Tudorancea, 2011, p. 162). At the same time, in the following months, Greek diplomacy expressed its willingness to contribute to the improvement of Turkish-Italian relations (Ekrem, *ib.*, pp. 107-108).

On 31 October, legation counselor Gheorghe Căpităneanu had a discussion with the head of Turkish diplomacy, Şükrü Saracoğlu. According to the Romanian diplomat’s telegram, the Turkish foreign minister had expressed a favourable attitude towards the project, but this was overshadowed by a certain distrust of Bulgaria’s intentions, the conclusion being that laborious negotiations would follow.

Surprisingly (and unrealistically), Italy's attitude was considered favourable, and Rome's dissatisfaction with the act of 19 October was minimized. (RPMRROT, II, 2024, doc. 73, pp. 203-204). In the case of Turkiye, consultations with the French and British allies followed (Cojocaru, 2014, p. 207), but also, as we have shown, the Soviets were informed.

On 5 November, Gafencu was still optimistic, awaiting responses or counterproposals from Ankara, Athens, and Belgrade (Dobrinescu-Nicolescu-Pătroiu, 1999, p. 248).

Within the Balkan Entente, Romania's relations with Yugoslavia (increasingly "equidistant" between the Great Powers, and increasingly distant from its traditional and regional allies) had become quite problematic. As early as 15 July, the Romanian military attaché in Belgrade, Lieutenant-Colonel Gheorghe Popescu, had sent a report on the increasingly cold, even hostile attitude of Yugoslav public opinion towards Romania, in contrast to the increasingly friendly attitude towards Bulgaria and even Hungary, visible both in public opinion and at the official level (Collection XIV, dossier 278, ll. 210-213).

On 10 November 1939, Ambassador Victor Cădere met with the head of Yugoslav diplomacy, Aleksandar Cincar Marković, to discuss the Neutral Bloc project. The Yugoslav official initially presented the results of the surveys conducted among the ministers of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy in Belgrade (Yugoslavia had no diplomatic relations with the USSR). The French and British ministers were in favour of the project, the German minister had some objections to Turkiye's participation in the project, while the Italian minister was skeptical because of the tensions between the Balkan states. For his part, Marković stated several conclusions, namely that Italy's participation was indispensable for the establishment and functioning of the Bloc, but that Italy remained reserved, and that clarification was needed between Italy and Turkiye, as well as a détente in relations with Hungary and Bulgaria. In turn, at the end of the telegram sent to Bucharest, the Romanian diplomat summarized some of his Yugoslav counterpart's more convoluted assessments in the following formula: *"If sacrifices were to be made for the establishment of the Bloc, they should be made only by Romania."* (Fund 71/Yugoslavia, vol. 52, ll. 221-223).

Yugoslavia's distancing from the other Balkan Entente states continued. Thus, on 13 November the Yugoslav General Staff notified its counterparts in Romania, Greece, and Turkiye of its (unilateral!) decision to cancel the annual meeting of the chiefs of staff of the four allied countries, planned to take place

in Belgrade at the end of 1939 (Ibid., I. 228). At the same time, the Romanian General Staff, through its chief, General Florea Țenescu, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 27 November that the Yugoslav side had not sent the Romanian side a response to the draft bilateral (secret) military convention against Hungary and Bulgaria, which had been submitted to it in August (Ibid., I. 229).

The small revisionist states neighbouring Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, once again expressed their revisionist aspirations and disinterest in initiatives based on the territorial status quo in the context of the promotion of regional cooperation plans.

Thus, in discussions on 10 and 20 November with Romanian Minister Eugen Filotti in Sofia, Gheorghe Kyosseivanov rhetorically asked who the future bloc of neutral states was directed against, given that Germany had given assurances considered credible in terms of keeping the Balkans out of the conflict, and on 5 December, in an interview with the newspaper *Paris Soir*, he reiterated the idea of Bulgaria returning to its pre-Second Balkan War borders (Ungureanu, 2009, pp. 347-348). The radio address of 26 November by the new Romanian Prime Minister, Gheorghe Tătărescu, referring, among other things, to the defense of his own borders and mutual concessions on the issue of minorities, was harshly criticized by the Bulgarian press (Ib., p. 348).

On 11 November, alarmed by the appearance in the Bulgarian press of articles taken from the Italian press concerning the creation of a regional bloc of neutral states under the aegis of Italy, the Soviet minister in Sofia, A.I. Lavrentiev, requested an audience with Gheorghe Kyosseivanov for clarification on this issue. According to the Soviet diplomat, who had certain doubts about the sincerity of his interlocutor, the latter made the following statements and assessments:

- The Neutral Bloc was an anti-Soviet project;
- The implementation of this project would have led to war in the region, given Turkiye’s position after 19 October;
- Bulgaria would maintain its neutrality and freedom of action;
- Bulgaria’s minimal aspirations were to return to the borders of (spring) 1913;
- There were no indications of Italian interest in organizing a regional bloc of neutral states;
- If Bulgaria were to receive concrete official proposals to join such a bloc of states, the Soviet government would be promptly informed (DVP, II, 1992, doc. 771, pp. 281-282).

A new meeting between Kyosseivanov and Lavrentiev took place on 15 November. According to a strictly confidential telegram sent by the Soviet diplomat to Moscow, the head of the Sofia government thanked the Soviet government for its attitude towards Bulgaria and its aspirations, pointed out that joining a neutral Balkan bloc was not in Bulgaria's interest, and specified that Germany was opposed only to Turkiye's presence in such a structure (Ib., doc. 783, pp. 298-299). The Hungarian reaction was even more categorical. After being assured that Italy was not interested in the Romanian project, Count Csáky began to sabotage it by putting forward and circulating demands that were impossible to meet. Thus, in a speech on 21 November, the Hungarian foreign minister made clear references to Transylvania, but also allusions to the Romanian diplomatic initiative, based on the frontiers that were considered "*unjust*" in Budapest (Marzari, ib., p. 783).

Towards the end of November, Moscow's opposition, which had also intervened in Berlin, on the one hand, and Italy's implicit disinterest, on the other, as well as negative reactions from Sofia and Budapest, converged towards the failure of the Neutral Bloc project.

On 28 November, Grigore Gafencu told the German minister in Bucharest, W. Fabricius, that, given the objections from Italy and Germany, the Neutral Bloc project had just been abandoned (Hayness, 2003, p. 128). A similar communication had been made by the head of Romanian diplomacy to the Italian chargé d'affaires, Capecce, three days earlier (Marzari, ib., p. 786).

On 29 November, Grigore Gafencu gave a presentation at the Senate headquarters before the Foreign Affairs Committees of both Chambers. With regard to the USSR, the head of Romanian diplomacy spoke once again about the mutual advantage of good-neighbourly bilateral relations, beyond differences in ideology and internal political regime, and reiterated references to the Moscow Protocol (9 February 1929), the London Conventions (3-5 July 1933), and other instruments of international law adopted by both states (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 141, pp. 280-281, note 1). However, V. M. Molotov's assertions at the end of October regarding the alleged obsolescence and inadequacy of old concepts of international law, such as "*aggressor*" and "*aggression*", seriously called into question Gafencu's optimistic tone, and the USSR's conduct towards Finland only served to confirm, once again, the lack of practical value of the obligations previously assumed by the Soviet state.

At the beginning of December, however, new reasons for hope emerged for Romanian diplomats, linked in particular to certain attitudes of Italy towards the Soviet Union and towards South-Eastern Europe, in the context of the unexpectedly strong resistance of the Finns to the Red Army.

Turkish Foreign Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu also expressed a certain optimism regarding Italy on 2 December 1939, in a discussion with Romanian Ambassador Vasile Stoica. According to the Romanian diplomat’s account, Turkish-Soviet relations remained quite cold, with Turkish public opinion outraged by the aggression against Finland. Saracoğlu did not believe in the concrete possibility of forming a bloc of neutral states capable not only of maintaining their neutrality, but also of repelling a possible aggression, due to a complex set of obstacles, namely the positions of Germany, the USSR, Hungary, and Bulgaria, and even the attitude of Yugoslavia. However, the head of diplomacy in Ankara did not believe in the durability of the German-Soviet partnership either (RPMROT, II, 2024, doc. 76, pp. 240-241). On 4 December, Gafencu addressed Ciano, through the Italian diplomat Capece. Ciano’s response arrived on 7 December, and was essentially categorically negative, beyond some generalities regarding Italy’s sympathy for attempts to improve relations between the Balkan states, which led Grigore Gafencu, on 9 December, to definitively acknowledge the failure of the project (Marzari, 1970, pp. 786-787).

The article “*Us and the Others: Italy and the Balkan Balance*”, published in the 5 December 1939 issue of the daily newspaper *Il Messagero*, caused quite a stir in European diplomatic circles. The article began by noting the existence or persistence of two trends in the Balkans, namely Pan-Slavism and Pan-Germanism, to which, after the events of April 1939 (the annexation of Albania), the assertion of Italian influence had been added. According to the Italian newspaper, this more recent trend did not contradict German interests, but rather Soviet and Bolshevik expansionist tendencies (Collection XIV, dossier 197, I. 25-28).

The article quoted above was also interpreted as an implicit Italian response to Boris Ştefanov’s article, “*The Imperialist War and Romania*”. The direct and unfavorable reaction of the Italian press to the article authored by the aforementioned communist leader was, in fact, particularly energetic, a fact that was received with satisfaction in Romanian circles (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu-Nicolescu, *ib.*, pp. 256-257). Departing from its previously rather reserved attitude, the press on the peninsula showed unusual solidarity with the Romanian state, unanimously condemning Boris Ştefanov’s assertions, which were seen as a symptom of the USSR’s territorial and ideological expansionist tendencies in the Balkans, while also highlighting Italy’s interests in the Balkans and its role as a counterweight to the Bolshevik threat. The *Gazzeta del Popolo* of 9 December 1939 went so far as to attribute the official Soviet denials and delimitations from Ştefanov’s article to Italy’s firm anti-Bolshevik attitude, manifested in the communiqué of the Fascist Grand Council of 5 December (*ib.*, pp. 22-23).

This attitude on the part of the Italian press, which would have been impossible without the consent of the fascist authorities, as well as certain passages in the communiqué of the Grand Council of Fascism, created exaggerated hopes in certain Romanian circles. Thus, a military document dated 11 December 1939, entitled *"How Italy's commitments in South-Eastern Europe are being discussed in diplomatic circles"* and marked *"Censored from the press"*, ended with the completely unrealistic conclusion that the regime in Rome had just sent a signal for the resumption of efforts to establish a bloc of neutral states (Ib., I. 31).

On 8 December, two Romanian-Soviet diplomatic contacts took place, namely the meeting between Gr. Gafencu and P. G. Kukoliev in Bucharest, and the meeting between Vladimir Petrovici Potëmkin and Gheorghe Davidescu in Moscow.

According to the meeting notes taken by Gafencu, the head of Romanian diplomacy assured his Soviet guest of Romania's peaceful intentions towards the USSR, but his interlocutor was not very impressed, complaining that various Romanian circles were spreading the idea of a *"Soviet threat"*, which he claimed was unfounded (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 141, pp. 280-282). According to the Soviet version, a significant part of the discussions was devoted to the subject of the *"Balkan bloc"*, with Kukoliev repeatedly expressing his suspicions about Italy's invitation and, in particular, about *"its insistent desire to be part of the bloc"*, a desire clearly proven, in the view of the chargé d'affaires of the USSR, by the communiqué of the Fascist Grand Council (Ib., doc. 143, pp. 284-285).

According to the telegram sent by Gheorghe Davidescu also on the evening of 8 December 1939, the discussion that same day with V. P. Potëmkin had lasted about 25 minutes. The deputy head of Soviet diplomacy expressed his disapproval of Ștefanov's article, but did not show much interest in Gafencu's statements regarding the convergence of Romanian-Soviet interests in the Black Sea and evaded a concrete answer regarding the start of negotiations for the conclusion of a bilateral trade treaty, despite Davidescu's insistence on both issues, especially the latter. The only subject in which Potëmkin showed a certain interest, which he tried to mask, was the one regarding obtaining translations of Grigore Gafencu's latest statements on the Balkan bloc issue (Ib., doc. 142, pp. 282-284).

It is not insignificant that three days earlier, during a meeting with the French ambassador to the USSR, Paul-Emile Naggiar, the same V.P. Potëmkin stated that *"Bessarabia is the true natural agricultural hinterland for Odessa"*, and that the Soviet government would raise the issue of Bessarabia *"if the fighting in Finland ends quickly"* (Oprea, 2003, p.199).

In the first half of December 1939, several signals arrived in Bucharest from German sources, indicating that the Reich could not prevent the occupation of Bessarabia by the USSR, but that it could not allow the Sovietization of larger areas of Romania, let alone the entire country, as outlined in the scenario put on paper by Boris Ștefanov (Hayness, 2003, pp. 130-131). Thus, on 13 December the chargé d'affaires for economic affairs for South-East Europe, Carl Augustin Clodius, told General Ernest Urdăreanu that Germany could support Romania against a Soviet attack under certain conditions, but only if the Red Army crossed the Prut River (Oprea, 2003, p. 195). Responding to a telegram sent from Bucharest by W. Fabricius on 8 December, which mentioned Gafencu's hope for diplomatic action by Germany to improve Romanian-Soviet relations, Ernst von Weizsäcker stated on 15 December that Berlin's interest was for Romania to make certain territorial concessions to the Soviet Union by peaceful means, so as to avoid the outbreak of war (Sturza-editor, 2016, pp. 259-263).

A similar view was held by the Italian ambassador to Moscow, Augusto Rosso, who, on 10 December declared to his North American counterpart, Laurence Adolph Steinhardt, that Italy would most likely not react, in the event of a Soviet attack on Romania, to obtain (only) Bessarabia, but *“Any attempt by the USSR to penetrate further into the Balkans, or along the Black Sea, would be met with Italian opposition, even by force of arms.”* (Ib., pp. 261-262). The attitude of the Yugoslav ally was not too favourable to Romania this time, either. Thus, on 7 December 1939, very upset by the text of the article signed by Boris Ștefanov, the Yugoslav minister in the capital of Great Britain, Ivan Subotić, visited the Soviet ambassador I. M. Maiski. The conclusion of what the Yugoslav diplomat had said, not explicitly formulated by him, but drawn by the Soviet one and communicated the next day in Moscow, was as follows: *“Take Bessarabia, but slowly, so that no war breaks out in the Balkans!”*. In reply, Maiski assured him that the Soviet Union also wanted to avoid “unnecessary complications” (Ibid., p. 259).

On 11 December, Pavel G. Kukoliev reported on the intensification of Romanian fears regarding the USSR following the outbreak of hostilities in Finland, a development he attributed to the British. In this context, the Soviet diplomat also mentioned that Romania's defensive military forces in the East were concentrated on the Prut River, not on the Dniester River or inside Bessarabia (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 144, pp. 285-288). On the same day, Gh. Davidescu sent a report from Moscow. The Romanian diplomat was aware that the Soviet Union had only postponed its action against Romania, but he had some hopes, linked to the Red Army's poor

military performance on the Finnish front and its possible long-term consequences (Lungu, Negreanu, ib., doc. 32, pp. 206-209).

The first official positive response to the proposals put forward by Gafencu at the end of October came from Athens on 16 December (Tudorancea, 2011, p. 163), exactly on the day when Galeazzo Ciano made public, in Rome, Italy's lack of interest in this project. On 18 and 21 December, respectively, positive responses also arrived from Ankara and Belgrade (Dobrinescu-Pătroiu-Nicolescu, ib., p. 249). However, the project was no longer relevant in Bucharest, as the negative positions of Moscow, Berlin, Rome, Sofia, and Budapest were already known.

## EPILOGUE

After the failure of the "*Neutral Bloc*" project, Romanian diplomacy continued, until the spring 1950, to pursue, separately, the objectives that had been the basis of the project systematized towards the end of October 1939.

The USSR continued to be perceived as the greatest threat to the Romanian state and, first of all, to its territorial integrity. A negative element in bilateral relations occurred on 14 December 1939, when Romania voted in favour of the proposal to exclude the Soviet Union from the League of Nations, following the aggression against Finland (IPERD, 2003, p. 320). On the same day, Grigore Gafencu sent a circular telegram to Romania's diplomatic representatives in Paris, Berlin, Ankara and Budapest. The head of Romanian diplomacy recommended increasing contacts with Soviet representatives, for two purposes, namely deciphering Moscow's intentions towards Romania, and also explaining Romania's peaceful intentions towards its great neighbour to the east and north (RRS, II, 2003, doc. 145, p. 289).

At the end of 1939, it had become obvious to the leadership of Romanian diplomacy that Great Britain and France would not support Romania in the event of a Soviet attack. The greatest hopes for such a scenario continued to be linked to Italy. Moreover, in the winter of 1939-1940, in the conditions of the Soviet-Finnish war, diplomatic relations between Italy and the USSR experienced a historic crisis, leading to the prolonged withdrawal of the two ambassadors from their posts for consultations (Constantiniu, 2002, p.76).

In the spring of 1940, after the end of hostilities in Finland, the interest of the USSR in the Balkans became more visible, an important moment being the well-known speech of V. M. Molotov on 29 March 1940. Almost a month later, in a summary report for the period 24 March–24 April 1940, the Romanian military attaché in Rome, Lieutenant Colonel Gheorghe Petrescu, noted a series of changes

in the Italian foreign policy discourse, first of all, an *“intense propaganda action, intended to prepare the ground for entering the war alongside Germany”*, but also a softening of the tone towards the Soviet Union. *“There is no longer a single word, however slightly offensive, in the entire Italian press against our Eastern neighbour. The speech of Mr. Molotov, whp officially put the issue of Bessarabia back on the agenda, was not the subject of any kind of comment in the Italian press and was simply recorded.”* (Collection XIV, dossier 278, ll. 246-273). So, a major change compared to December 1939 and the reaction to Boris Ștefanov’s article.

Indeed, on 10 June 1940, Italy joined Germany in the war, and Italian-Soviet relations emerged from the frosty period that had largely corresponded to the calendar winter of 1939-1940. This development in relations between Rome and Moscow was tacitly based on the idea expressed directly by Molotov on 20 June 1940, in a discussion with Ambassador Augusto Rosso, who had since returned to his post: *“The Soviet government recognizes Italy’s supremacy in the Mediterranean, provided that Italy also recognizes the Soviet Union’s supremacy in the Black Sea.”* (Simion, 1996, pp. 165-166). A few days later, Bessarabia and other Romanian territories were seized.

Cooperation within the Balkan Entente also failed to make any notable progress in the first half of 1940. The last meeting of the Balkan Entente Council, held in Belgrade between 2 and 4 February 1940, highlighted the deepening differences between member states, especially between Turkiye and Yugoslavia, beyond the unanimous, but practically formal, to extend the Balkan Pact for seven years (Oșca, 2024, pp. 234-235, 251). Military cooperation within the Balkan alliance was practically blocked, with Yugoslavia’s conduct, especially the organization of its military forces in Western Banat, coming to be viewed with suspicion by the higher echelons of the Romanian army in the spring of 1940 (Ib., pp. 256-258). Nor was Romanian-Turkish military cooperation functioning within the previously agreed parameters any longer, and a meeting of the chiefs of staff of the four allied states, scheduled, in principle, in Athens, for mid-1940, never took place (Fond 71/Turkiye, vol. 61, pp. 286, 306-309).

Bulgaria’s interest in joining an increasingly dysfunctional regional alliance based on the territorial status quo was also practically nil, the rulers in Sofia deciding, on 4 April 1940, to launch a vast diplomatic campaign regarding Southern Dobruja and to categorically express their territorial claims towards Romania immediately after Italy or the USSR had taken action in this part of Europe (IID, T2, 1993, part two, doc. 49, pp. 370-371). That moment came at the end of June 1940.

Meanwhile, at the end of May, Grigore Gafencu had left the leadership of Romanian diplomacy, entrusted by King Charles II to Ion Gigurtu, a well-known Germanophile.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Romanian initiative of the “*Neutral Bloc*” in the autumn of 1939 represented an attempt by Romanian diplomacy to limit the proportions of the Soviet threat (amplified after 23 August 1939) by uniting the states of South-Eastern Europe, especially Italy, relying on a supposed Italian-Soviet antagonism in this part of Europe.

The project was not in itself anti-Soviet, except in so far as the USSR had expansionist ambitions in the area, and highlighting peaceful intentions towards the Soviet Union remained a priority for Romanian diplomacy during this period. However, Moscow was not interested in maintaining the regional status quo, so that, of the Great Powers of the time, the USSR reacted most promptly and most negatively to the Romanian diplomatic initiative, also drawing in Germany, which initially had expressed only certain reservations, mainly related to the role of Türkiye, a state with close relations with Great Britain and France, both enemies of the Reich.

With regard to Italy, Romanian diplomacy overestimated that country’s willingness and ability to oppose Soviet territorial and ideological expansion in the Balkans and to maintain its neutrality. This was also contributed to by the rhetoric of Italian diplomacy and the press, in particular the belated announcement of Italy’s unwillingness to participate in any regional political-military bloc of neutral states, even though the decision to this effect had been taken as early as 17 October, allowing Grigore Gafencu, Romania’s foreign minister, to finalize the “*Neutral Bloc*” project. The fact remains remarkable that Romania’s military attaché in Rome, Lieutenant Colonel Gheorghe Petrescu, managed to decipher the guidelines of Italian foreign policy very well, both in the autumn of 1939 and in the spring of 1940.

The attitude of Moscow, Berlin, and Rome towards Gafencu’s project, and, by extension, towards the idea of forming a regional bloc of neutral states, dashed any hopes of Sofia and Budapest joining in, leading to the failure of this ambitious Romanian diplomatic initiative.

In turn, this failure highlighted the growing isolation of the Romanian state at the regional level, especially when corroborated with certain signals received from various European capitals on the issue of Bessarabia.

However, despite the failure, Romanian diplomacy maintained the same general lines of action in the first months of 1940, in relation to the belligerent Great Powers, Italy, the USSR, the allied Balkan states, respectively Bulgaria and Hungary, until, under the pressure of new changes in the international context (the reaffirmation of Soviet claims over Bessarabia, the Italian-German rapprochement, the evolution of hostilities in Western Europe), the option of rapprochement with the Reich would become predominant.

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