

DIPLOMATIC APPROCHES

THE MACEDO-ROMANIAN QUESTION WITHIN THE ROMANIAN-GREEK RELATIONS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY (1900–1913)

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The Romanian-Greek relations followed, since the establishment of diplomatic relations at level of legation in 1879 and until the outbreak of World War Two, a sinuous course, marked by numerous incidents, some of serious impact and leading to a temporary break of diplomatic relations between the two states. Without any doubt, one among the issues affecting in a considerable way the relations between Romania and Greece was the situation of the Romanians living in the Balkan Peninsula, especially in Macedonia. Based on the idea that Macedonia in its whole belonged to Greece, the local Greeks and the Greek authorities in Athens took various actions, going as far as to send over armed bands "to defend interests" in the area, a fact which also affected other ethnic segments in the region, the Macedo-Romanians (Vlachs) included. One should note that by the end of the nineteenth century, the Macedo-Romanians made up a considerable ethnic segment, more exactly a quarter of the population of Macedonia,¹ within an extremely varied ethnic conglomerate which included Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedo-Romanians, Albanians, and Jews.

Beside the actions taken by the Greek authorities, the Oecumenical Patriarchate was also employed as a lever in order to prevent or limit the aspirations of the Macedo-Romanians for a cultural and ecclesiastic life of their own.

The first breakthrough in the statute of the Macedo-Romanians was made towards the end of the nineteenth century, in 1878, when an order of the Grand Vezir acknowledged the right of the Macedo-Romanians to enjoy Ottoman protection and to found their own schools. As a result, by the end of the nineteenth century, there were 118 such establishments: 114 primary schools, two business schools, a school preparing schoolmasters, and a high school.² In 1900, 6 high schools and 113 public schools for the Macedo-Romanians would be recorded in Macedonia.³

¹ Al. Rubin, *Les roumains de Macédoine*, Bucarest, 1913, p. 98.

² *Ibidem*, p. 282.

³ Th. Capidan, *Les Macédo-Roumains. Esquisse historique et descriptive des populations Roumaines de la péninsule Balkanique*, Bucarest, 1937, pp. 66-67.

The Romanian-Greek diplomatic relations, broken off in 1892-1896 as a result of the argument over the estate left by V. Zappa, were resumed in 1896. In addition to the the two legations, consulates were also opened at Pireu, Patras, and Corfu. The Crete crisis of 1897 and the Greek-Turkish war were regarded upon with sympathy by the authorities in Bucharest, who supported many Greek volunteers in their project to leave for Greece. At the official level, Bucharest assumed a neutral position, so as to avoid causing any discontent in Constantinople and any possible repercussions on the Romanian campaign for official recognition of the Romanian nationality in the European part of the Ottoman Empire.

The position of Greece and Romania in the issue of the Macedo-Romanians was addressed at Abbazia, in the spring of 1901, during the meeting between King Carol I and King George, on which occasion King Carol I tried to calm down the suspicions of the Greek monarch regarding the Romanian propaganda in Macedonia, while the king of Greece promised Greece would offer support by the Oecumenical Patriarchate, and insisted on a solution to be given to the Zappa argument.⁴ The meeting between the two, deemed by the European press as beneficial to maintaining the peace and the statu-quo in the Balkans,⁵ brought no real solution to the arguments between the two countries. The authorities in Athens continued to show their irritation in relation to the Romanian actions in Macedonia, while the authorities in Bucharest were criticizing the part played by Athens in delaying a solution to the ecclesiastic issue of the Macedo-Romanians who were subjects of the Ottoman Empire.⁶

The outbreak in 1903 of a strong revolt in Macedonia, with the assistance of Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, a revolt that was eventually put down by the Ottoman troops, brought about a change in the attitude of the Ottoman authorities in relation to the Macedo-Romanians living in the Ottoman Empire, whose requests had been long advocated by the authorities in Bucharest. Thus, Romania obtained the issuance of an *iradea* by Sultan Abdul Hamid II, on 9/22 May 1905, recognizing the nationality of the Macedo-Romanians living in the Ottoman Empire, and the fact that they had rights equals with those of the other Christian subjects in the Empire (Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs, Albanians). Some Greek authors opined that this achievement of the authorities in Bucharest was equally due to the backstage plots of the Romanian representative in Constantinople (Alexandru Lahovary) and the intercession of Austria-Hungary, Italy and Germany, member states of the Triple Alliance, by the Sultan⁷. The *iradea* stipulated that, "His Imperial Majesty the Sultan, who, by his sense of high justice and out of concern for all his peoples,

⁴ Michel Lh eritier, *L' volution des rapports gr co-roumains depuis un si cle (1821-1931)*, Paris, 1933, p. 585.

⁵ For the meeting between the two monarchs, see the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania (AMAE), Fund 71/1909-1919, vol. 36, file 71/1901, ff. 140-141.

⁶ Michel Lh eritier, *op. cit.*, p. 585.

⁷ Spyridon Sfetas, *Cadrul istoric al rela iilor politice greco-rom ne 1866-1913*, in *Interferen e rom no elene  n secolele XV-XX*, Ia i, 2003.

extends his blessings and favors over all his loyal subjects, no matter their race or religion, taking in consideration the requests addressed lately to the Imperial Throne by his Valach subjects, is willing to decide that, by virtue of the civil rights the aforementioned are enjoying, like all the other non-Muslim subjects, their communities are allowed to elect *muhtari* (mayors), in agreement with the laws in force, such as done on a customary basis by the other communities; the Vlachs should also be accepted in the administration councils, the Imperial authorities should enable the appointed teachers of these communities to inspect their schools, and allow the fulfillment of all the formalities required by the laws of the Empire so as to open new schools.⁸ Despite Romania's efforts to demonstrate that she wished to maintain her friendship relations with the Greek State, and that the document issued by the Sultan did not affect the interests of the Greek State, the reaction of the Oecumenical Patriarchate and of the Greek government was prompt and violent.⁹ The negative attitude of the Greek authorities and of the public opinion in Greece was fuelled by the idea that the Macedo-Romanians (the Vlachs) had nothing to do with the Romanians, and that the Greeks had to defend their positions in Macedonia.¹⁰

Although the Romanian authorities tried to appease the ever greater discontent of Greece in relation with the *iradea*, a strong press campaign was soon to be launched in Athens, with slandering press articles, criticizing virulently the Romanian State, which determined Romania to place a ban on the introduction of Greek newspapers in the country.¹¹

As the actions undertaken by Greek partisans – among others – against the Macedo-Romanian communities in Macedonia intensified, the representative of Romania in Athens, Papiniu, requested the intervention of the Greek Government, especially as the Romanian party was convinced that most of the groups of Greek fighters were assembled on Greek territory, and that the Greek authorities were well aware of these activities. The situation continued to deteriorate and, after the reception by the Greek representative to Bucharest, Tombazis, of the order to leave the capital of Romania, on a vacation of imprecise duration, a similar order was given to the Romanian representative in Athens, Papiniu. Before his withdrawal from the legation in Athens, Papiniu had informed the authorities in Bucharest about the memoirs addressed by the Greek Government to the Great Powers, in which Greece was declaring that in absence of firm support to the Greek State, the break of diplomatic relations seemed almost imminent.¹² Given the situation, the Romanian Government notified Greece that the denunciation of the commercial

⁸ For more details concerning the *iradea*, see Spyridon Sfetas, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

⁹ Constantin N. Velichi, *Les relations roumano-greques 1879-1911*, in "Revue des études sud-est européennes", t. VII, 1969, 3, p. 535.

¹⁰ Spyridon Sfetas, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹¹ AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1919, file 71/1905 M 2, f. 3.

¹² AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1919, file 71/1905 M, f. 32.

convention signed by the two states, and of the appended protocol giving a legal statute to the Greek communities living in Romania, had also been taken in consideration.

The correspondent of a Dutch newspaper to Constantinople made an excellent description of the strained relations between Romania and Greece. Thus, the issue of 11 October of *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* informed about the unfavorable position held by Greece in relation to Romania. Given the geographical location, a war could not break out, which was all the better for the Greeks, since "the very well-organized Romanian army would teach them a lesson more difficult to take in than the one they had been taught by the Turks in 1897. However, Romania could inflict upon Greece huge economic losses in the areas of trade, navigation, and other branches of economy."¹³

The situation grew worse in 1906, and the signals given by most European capitals seemed to approve the stand taken by the Romanian officials. The Greek party, on the pretext that several Greeks had been expelled from Romania, eventually took the decision to break diplomatic relations, and on 30 May 1906, the attaché d'affaires of Russia to Bucharest, Lermontov, notified George Gr. Cantacuzino, President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, that Greece had decided to call back her diplomatic representatives, including the consuls, and that the interests of the Greek State would be further defended by Russia.¹⁴ Romania in her turn decided to have Italy represent her interests in Greece.¹⁵

The press communicate of the Greek Telegraphic Agency concerning the meeting of the Greek Parliament on the subject of the official break of diplomatic relations between Greece and Romania came as a surprise to the governmental circles and to the public opinion in Romania, owing to the distorted image that was being given of the causes and evolution of the Romanian-Greek conflict.¹⁶ Almost immediately, the Romanian Telegraphic Agency presented the point of view of the Romanian party, along which the Greek government had taken violent action, "sparing no means in the effort to block the application of the Imperial *iradea*"¹⁷ concerning the situation of the Macedo-Romanians living in the Ottoman Empire. The Romanian party also informed that several bands organized on Greek territory, with financial support from an association located in Athens, had crossed the borders of the Empire on several occasions, without the Greek authorities trying to prevent them, "committing odious acts of violence and terrorizing the Romanian

¹³ Ibidem, ff. 101-106, the article *Les Koetzo-Vlaques*, in "Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant", 11 October 1905.

¹⁴ AMAE, Fund 71/1905, letter M, ff. 4-10.

¹⁵ Ibidem, f. 22.

¹⁶ AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1919, file 71/1906, letter M 2, f. 30.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

populations by arson, looting and assassinations.”¹⁸ It was also noted that the Oecumenical Patriarchate supported the Greek action, in an “issue not in the least related to religious principles or dogmas, by odious persecution inflicted on the Orthodox priests and populations that employed the Romanian language in their churches.”¹⁹ Quite outrageously, according to the Romanian party, Rhallys, President of the Greek Council of Ministers, once notified of this situation, had retorted that he could not advise the Patriarch, but if he were to advise him, he would have asked him “to be consistent in his stand.”²⁰ Moreover, Rhallys declared that he did not recognize the existence of Romanians in Macedonia, and had no knowledge of “the existence in Athens of a secret association organizing the bands operating in the neighboring provinces of the Ottoman Empire.”²¹

The Greek Government, through its Minister of Foreign Affairs, had declared in the Greek Parliament, in early June, that the Romanian party, in its boldness, was accusing the Greek State of acts “which are being undertaken abroad, on Ottoman territory, and against some Ottoman subjects, acts that have nothing to do with the Greek State.”²² As to the activity of the Patriarch, the Greek party declared that it could not interfere with a strictly religious problem, and that it waved all responsibility for the relations between “the autocephalous church, the Oecumenical Patriarchate, and the populations under the jurisdiction of the Oecumenical Patriarchate.”²³ Moreover, the Greek Government believed that the pretensions of the Romanian State were “completely absurd, and unfounded,” and that their rejection by the Greek party had led to “retribution against the Greek population living in Romania, long concocted by the Romanian State.”²⁴

In their turn, the Romanian officials retorted that they were not reproaching Greece with not exerting control on the Ottoman territory, but rather with closing an eye to the organizing and supporting on her territory of bands undertaking repeated raids into Macedonia and committing crimes, often under the leadership of Greek army officers.²⁵ The Romanian Government believed it only just to react to these “violent actions leading to violent crimes,” denounce the Trade Convention, and expel some Greeks established in Romania, whose presence was deemed “incompatible with public order and security.”²⁶

¹⁸ Ibidem

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² AMAE, Fund 71-1906, M 2, ff. 44-62.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem, f. 32.

²⁶ Ibidem.

One should also note that both Romania and Greece experienced the unpleasant effects of the denunciation of the Trade Convention signed in December 1900. Thus, Romanian imports from Greece fell from 1,653,997 ROL in 1905 to 944,788 ROL in 1906, and to 612,000 ROL in 1907, while Romanian exports to Greece fell from 2,411,173 ROL in 1905 to 1,056,511 ROL in 1906, and to 497,706 ROL in 1907.²⁷

The Romanian-Greek relations, interrupted in 1906, were resumed five years later, in June 1911. Subsequently, before and during the Balkan wars, new Romanian-Greek arguments reoccurred in relation to the many excesses committed by some Greek bands, or even regular troops, against the Macedo-Romanian population living in Macedonia and the Epirus. Thus, a first signal of alarm was given by the General Consul of Romania to Salonika, who, in a report dated 21 July 1911, was informing the authorities in Bucharest on an intensification of the activity of the Greek bands, which had crossed over into "Turkey in their Evzoni uniforms, and under the command of army officers." This had made roads dangerous, and had forced the Vlach population "either not to travel at all, or to take great precautions when going from one place to another"²⁸.

According to another report sent to Bucharest by the General Consulate of Romania in Monastir, dated 31 January 1912, the assassinations "against the Romanians were committed after the instructions of some Greeks of Grebena, who call in a band head established in Greece, in the villages near the border," as declared to the Romanian consul by the Head of the Gendarmerie of the *vilayet* himself, Colonel Iusuf Bey.²⁹ The Romanian Consul G. C. Ionescu also noted in his report that the measures taken at the border by the Turkish authorities would have been effective if the Greek authorities had acted in a similar way, "arresting the band heads, and punishing their hosts on Greek territory"³⁰. There were also several memoirs addressed to the diplomatic representative of Romania in the Empire, such as the report of 18 July 1912, by which the Macedo-Romanian inhabitants were complaining about having their lives threatened by Greek bands, "unless we give up our mother tongue, that is eliminate it from school and church."³¹

A suggestive image of the persecutions suffered by the Romanian population is given in a report by the Royal Consulate of Romania at Janina, dated 8 March 1913, which includes a list of Macedo-Romanians who had been murdered, or had

²⁷ *Comerțul extern al României și mișcarea porturilor în 1910*, Bucharest, 1912, pp. 6-7.

²⁸ AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1914, R 4, Vol. 94, Report no 927 of 21 July 1911 by the General Consulate of Romania at Salonika, ff. 78-79.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, Report of the Romanian Consulate, Monastir, 31 January 1912, f. 110.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*. Memoir addressed to the General Consul of Romania at Salonika, included in report no 776/18 July 1912, ff. 119-122.

had their houses looted and burned down, or again had been forced to take refuge in Romania, as a result of the persecutions suffered from the Greek bands and troops.³² In their turn, the fleeing Macedo-Romanians, upon their arrival in Romania, addressed memoirs to the Romanian authorities, such as the one filed by schoolmaster Nicu Balamotti, who noted that, "the Greek atrocities against everything that is Macedo-Romanian continue, despite the fact that the Greek authorities assure the Government that they are not laying a finger on the Macedonian Romanians." Balamotti requested the Romanian Government to intercede by the cabinet in Athens, "so that they should put an end to the systematic persecution of the families of my co-nationals, otherwise I will be forced to take revenge on the Greeks established in the country."³³

The intercessions of the Romanian party at diplomatic level were made as early as 1912, through approaches to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs in protest against the treatment dealt to the Macedo-Romanians, and in order to inquire about the fate of some of the Macedo-Romanians. The Greek party, more exactly Foreign Minister Coromilas seemed somewhat irritated by the fact that the Romanian representative to Athens, Florescu, had accurate information on the developments in Macedonia and the persecution of the Macedo-Romanian subjects.³⁴ The talks between Florescu and the Foreign Minister in the Greek Government gave the Romanian representative the conviction that Coromilas was the "most arrogant xenophobe," with "a biased and hostile attitude towards us."³⁵ As a rule, the talks between Coromilas and Florescu would begin with considerations on the origin of the Macedo-Romanians, source of new arguments between the two diplomats, such as mentioned in a report sent by Florescu to Bucharest. According to this report, Coromilas had asserted that the population referred to by Florescu as Macedo-Romanian was in fact a Hellenized Latin population that had nothing to do with the Romanians, such as the French, albeit of Latin origin, were not Romanian.³⁶

As to the protests of the Romanian party against the actions of the Greek bands against the Macedo-Romanian populations, the Greek Foreign Minister, after having denied for some time the existence or the nature of their activity, tried to persuade the Romanian representative that the armed groups in question would vanish. Which did not prevent the Romanian diplomat from noting in his report to

³² AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1919, B/17 bis, Report no 44, of 8 March 1913, addressed to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers by the Royal Consulate of Romania at Janina, pages not numbered.

³³ Ibidem, Memoir addressed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 16 May 1913 by schoolmaster Nicu Balamotti.

³⁴ AMAE, Fund 71/1900-1919, vol. 19, Report no 646 of 5 December 1912. From the Romanian Legation in Athens, ff. 172-173.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem, Report no. 682 of the Romanian Legation in Athens, dated 19 December 1912, ff. 200-203.

Bucharest that, "now that the project to assassinate so many prominent Romanian leaders has almost been carried through, and the terror has served its purpose, the bands can indeed vanish."³⁷

The question of the Macedo-Romanians would be settled to some extent at the end of the second Balkan war, when by the peace of Bucharest (more exactly by a series of pledges made by the delegations of the Balkan states and included in several letters appended to the peace treaty) the Greek State bound itself to observe the rights of the Macedo-Romanians. However, the putting into practice of these stipulations would be long and difficult.

³⁷ Ibidem.