

## THE INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF THE UNIFICATION OF BESSARABIA WITH ROMANIA

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**Abstract.** *On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1918, as a consequence of the fall of the Russian Empire, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, and on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1918, the Romanians from Bukovina, and the ones from Transylvania, under the conditions of the very fast decomposition of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, expressed their will to unite with Romania. The recognition of this great act was going to be embraced in the Peace Conference from Paris in the years 1919-1920.*

*As long as the Romanian delegation was led by the prime-minister I. I. C. Brătianu, who wanted to respect entirely the Alliances Treaty from 1916 and confronted the signing of other treaties, which affected the sovereignty of the country, The Big Four, did not want to discuss the problem of Bessarabia.*

*The situation was going to evolve in a positive way for Romania, when in December 1919 a new cabinet was being appointed, led by dr. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, a well-known politician and diplomat in Western politics and who was considered a reliable and sincere interlocutor. Taking over the head of the Romanian delegation at the Peace Conference in January 1920, Vaida raised in an assiduous way the issue of the recognition of the union of Bessarabia with Romania. As a result of assurances given to the Allies that in Unified Romania, the rights of the national minorities, including the confessional ones, will be strictly respected, that they will soon withdraw the Romanian troops from Hungary and that – following the change of attitude of the Western powers towards Soviet Russia – he started direct negotiations with the latter, and obtained, on the 3<sup>th</sup> of March 1920, the official recognition of the Peace Conference of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania.*

**Keywords:** *Al. Vaida Voevod, Peace Conference, Great Powers, Bessarabia's Unification, Romanian-Soviet treaty.*

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The problem of the union of Bessarabia with Romania, the consequence of the First World War, the triumph of the principle of nationalities and the formation of national states in Central and Southeast Europe through the disappearance of the empires, was not a matter to be included in the Peace Treaty of August 4/17, 1916, which stipulated Romania's entry into war with the Entente and the conditions for its participation; in fact it was not a matter to be discussed, due to the fact that Bessarabia was a component of the Tsarist Empire, the ally with which Romania would directly participate in the war. But the question of the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, which expressed the will of unification in the solemn act from 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1918 – decision to unite with Romania, which could not have been discussed in the time when the Romanian delegation at the Peace Conference was led by the prime-minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, who was permanently uncompromising in fully respecting the Treaty, which had now a new problem to solve: Bessarabia.

Since the Allies did not agree with the new borders of Romania, as planned, and in addition to that, Brătianu refused to sign side treaties, which were basically an attempt at the sovereignty of the Romanian state and an attempt for the Great Allied Powers to seize natural resources and the economy of the country, Brătianu had to leave the Peace Conference in July 1919, and two months later he presented the resignation of his government to King Ferdinand.

In the autumn of 1919 there was a profound tension in the relations between Romania and the Allies, which threatened a serious deterioration of these relations but also the participation of Romania in the works of the Conference.

In November 1919, parliamentary elections were held in Romania, this time with the participation of the Romanians in the united territories and under the conditions of the universal vote, the elections bringing to power a government led by Dr. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, a member of the Romanian delegation at the Conference and recognized the Allies as a viable partner for discussions.

Taking advantage of the ascendant created by Vaida Voevod's acceptance of the signing of the Treaty with Austria, in his capacity of prime minister, of the appreciation that the Great Powers showed to Romania, he raised – after taking over the leadership of the Romanian delegation at the Peace Conference, in January 1920 – the Bessarabian problem and its recognition as an integral part of Romania.

The issue was welcomed by the suggestions made by England and France that the neighboring countries with Soviet Russia should deal with the settlement of disputes between them. "With the Bolsheviks," Vaida wrote to I. Maniu, "we must seek – without fear – to make peace. Just as they have insisted a few weeks ago to give Denikin weapons, we are now urging all of Russia's neighbors to conclude peace, and the big ones to profit without being bothered by the Bolsheviks"<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Sibiu County Directorate of National Archives (from now on, SCDNA), *Alexandru Vaida Voevod Fund*, Correspondence between Vaida Voevod and Iuliu Maniu; Liviu Maior, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod între Belvedere și Versailles (însemnări, memorii, scrisori)* [*Alexandru Vaida Voevod between Belvedere and Versailles (notes, memories, letters)*], Sincron Publishing House, Cluj Napoca, 1993, p. 86.

Shortly after his arrival in Paris in January 1920, as Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, he was invited to appear before the Supreme Council. Clemenceau presided over it. There were present – L. George, Tittoni, Balfour, Hoover, Marshal Foch, Ph. Berthelot. After Vaida presented himself in his new official capacity, he raised the issue of Bessarabia. The Council subjected him to a real indictment, imputing to the Romanian government the non-execution of the decisions of the Supreme Council to withdraw the Romanian troops from Hungary on the line set by it. “We have shown that in our country there is terrible frost and heavy snow. We could not pull the troops faster without evacuating the weapons and ammunitions and equipment stores. (I knew from Marshal Foch that if he had made a retreat a few miles a day and every soldier would have carried only 5 kg, yet we would have gone far east to the line set by the Supreme Council. Foch did not interfere. This exceptional man supported us as much as he could). I then described in the most sinister colors the time of the occupation and the requisitions that the Mackensen army made on the occasion of the retreat ... Then I went on: “I will make provisions for our troops to withdraw on the line set by You”<sup>2</sup>. Satisfied with Vaida’s assurance, Clemenceau, obviously with the intention of helping me, intervened saying that now, let’s get to the Bessarabian thing. L. George then pulled out an ethnographic map. I noticed that it was a map on which colored spots were indicating the nationalities in compact geometric shapes. I took a few steps to L. George, pointing to the southern part of Bessarabia, attracting Their attention that, in fact, the Bulgarian and the Gagauzian minorities, Gagauzia etc., are mixed among the Romanians and do not form compact masses as the cartographic technical mistakes have shown.

Ll. George opened the discussion, saying that we are claiming Bessarabia, although we have not evacuated Hungary yet, ignoring the Council’s decision. I have uttered all the material of the arguments on the basis of which we sought to recognize our rights over Bessarabia: historical, statistical and self-determination of the population, etc. I reiterated the commitment that I will take without delay provisions for our troops to withdraw from the line established by the Conference.“ Ll. George and Clemenceau assured Vaida that as soon as the Romanian troops were withdrawn, the issue of Bessarabia would follow<sup>3</sup>.

Before leaving for his first visit to London, the Romanian Prime Minister paid a visit to Ph. Berthelot, being received “very kindly and contrary to his nature, that on different occasions with Bratianu and me, warm, communicative. I had in the meantime the sympathy of Clemenceau, Barthou, Nitti etc.” Vaida again raised the issue of Bessarabia. “He said, Look for the English. We’ll give you through Mr. Millerand and our minister in London all the support”<sup>4</sup>.

The matter of Bessarabia was rather complicated. In fact, in this territory united with Romania by the will of the Bessarabian Romanians, an open conflict with the Soviet Russian troops, but also with the Ukrainian ones started – Ukraine, after the Bolshevik Revolution, declared its independence and claims on Bessarabia.

<sup>2</sup> SCDNA, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod Fund, Memories*, Package 2, Notebook 1 (mss.).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, Notebook 2, Part 2.

In this territory, Romania sent troops at the request of the terrorized Romanians. Even Georges Clemenceau wrote to White Russian General Kolceag to continue his struggle against the Soviets “for the Russian side of Bessarabia will always be assigned”<sup>5</sup>. Great Britain and France gave support to the “white” Russians. In return, the “white” Russians, which were emigrated to Paris were contesting the “annexation” of the province between the Prut and the Dniester by Romania, trying to prove that Bessarabia is Russian. The Supreme Council also used the Russian emigration in Paris to defeat the resistance of I. I. C. Brătianu.

The military operations against the Soviet Russia of the 14 capitalist states begun, and they also asked Romania to get involved. In Bucharest there were voices to intercede with Poland and the “white” Russians, Kolceag, Judenici, Kornilov, when the internal struggles in Russia were at their peak. But Romania did not get involved in the conflict.

After a while, France, Italy and England, considering that the armed intervention would not yield results, but especially for economic and political reasons, reconsidered their position towards the Soviet Russia, intending to resume normal relations with it. The Bolsheviks also wanted to enter into normal relations with the European states<sup>6</sup>.

As long as Ionel Brătianu headed the Romanian delegation to Paris, the Allies did not want to discuss with him the problem of Bessarabia. Taking over the leadership of the Romanian delegation, from December 1919 to March 1920, Vaida Voevod understood the new tendency of the Great Allies towards Soviet Russia, desiring normal relations for Romania with the Soviets. Moving the discussions of the Conference in London under the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, in his new capacity as President of the Conference, I. I. George respected Vaida’s great diplomatic qualities and advised him in a discussion to begin peace talks with the Bolsheviks. He had the encouragement of England and Italy and the benevolent understanding of France. Vaida understood that if we conduct talks with Russia, the Supreme Council will recognize the reunification of Bessarabia with Romania<sup>7</sup>. He had also firmly promised Clemenceau that “if you withdraw troops (from Hungary – nn) the issue of Bessarabia will be favorably solved”<sup>8</sup>.

As a first contact with the Soviet authorities, he instructed D. N. Ciotori (he was not a career diplomat but had skills in this respect and knew the status of Russia and Bessarabia) to connect with Copenhagen, with Russian representatives on the grounds of commitments to repatriate Romanian prisoners from Siberia. Vaida also gave Ciotori on January 31, 1920, instructions necessary for the negotiations. If the negotiations advanced, the instructions contained the terms and conditions set by the Romanian Prime Minister for the peace signing: 1. the recognition of the reunification of Bessarabia; 2. the refund of the treasury; 3.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolae Titulescu, *Basarabia pământ românesc [Bessarabia – Romanian land]*, Bucharest, 1992, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> V.V. Tilea, *Acțiunea diplomatică a României. Noiembrie 1919-martie 1920 [The diplomatic action of Romania. November 1919 – March 1920]*, Sibiu, 1925, pp. 95-100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> SCDNA, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod Fund, Memories, Notebook 1*.

repatriation of Romanian prisoners from Russia; 4. non-interference in internal affairs; 5. abstainment from any propaganda. On the basis of the conditions laid down by the Romanian Prime Minister, Ciotori held talks between 9-12 February 1920 with M. M. Litvinov, the representative of Soviet Russia. Moscow accepted the demands of the Romanians and, after some controversy between the two parties, which one to address the other the first peace offer, Cicerin, the commissar of the people of foreign affairs, sent Vaida a telegram to London on 24 February 1920. He said: "The Russian government considers that all the differences between the two countries can be established through peaceful negotiations, and all territorial problems can be resolved by good understanding"<sup>9</sup>.

He also urged Vaida Voevod to indicate where and when the representatives of the two countries met. On the day he receives the telegram, the 3<sup>th</sup> March 1920, he also tells Cicerin that he receives his proposal to enter into peace treaties, and that Romania will refrain from any interference in Russia's internal affairs<sup>10</sup>. It was a great diplomatic victory gained by the first Romanian delegate. Understanding with Russia, as well as the promise that Romania will withdraw its troops in Hungary as soon as possible (only the conditions of winter hindering the rapid withdrawal of troops), has removed any barriers to the recognition by the Peace Conference of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania.

The final step was made during Vaida's second visit to London (February-March 1920) at L. George's insistence to be present when the Hungarian delegation headed by Count Apponyi arrived at the Conference in the capital of Great Britain; at the request of Vaida, the Hungarian delegation would no longer be received. At the meeting from the 3<sup>th</sup> March with the British Prime Minister at his Downing Street residence, including Romanian Ambassador V. Boerescu, the English Premier told him that he had received a telegram from US President W. Wilson, who was interested in how Romania will ensure in the future the freedom of conscience, the right of various confessions and sects regarding their functioning (Wilson was a Puritan Baptist). Vaida assured him that in the future Constitution of Romania, freedom will be guaranteed for all cults. "We cannot do otherwise," Vaida continued, "in the interest of order and tranquility in the state. Because we have a lot of cults ... altogether over 10 denominations.

If we do not want to provoke everlasting conflicts and irreparable shortcomings in our state of life, in the social one, even to the familiar one, there remains only one solution: ensuring the full freedom of the cults, so that everyone can be happy in its own way. Lloyd George, the Baptist, listened to me, and sometimes he said one *Well*"<sup>11</sup>. The talks continued again with the British Prime Minister's suggestion that Romania should normalize its relations with Soviet Russia, being again satisfied with Vaida's assurance promises. He was then to send I. Incullet and N. Lupu to the negotiations with the Soviets. Not little was the joy of Vaida Voevod when, in a few days, on March 3, in the apartment reserved for

<sup>9</sup> Frederic C. Nanu, *Politica externă a României. 1919-1933 [The foreign policy of Romania]*. Edition edited by V. Fl. Dobrinescu and Ion Pătroi, Iași, 1993, pp. 111-114.

<sup>10</sup> V. V. Tilea, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, 105, 106.

<sup>11</sup> SCDNA, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod Fund, Memories, Notebook 2, Part 2.*

him, he found “a big envelope with the company of the English Foreign Office.” “Again, there was a rush of uneasiness. I had a bad feeling. I opened the envelope. It contained a copy of the protocol recognizing our right of Bessarabia from the Supreme Council, and a letter, also written on the typewriter, addressed to me by a signed autograph, Lloyd George, by which I was notified of my recognition”<sup>12</sup>.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1920, the Great Powers acknowledged the belonging of the territories between the Prut and Nistru to Romania. It was a great political success for Vaida. It is clear from the content of “the decision and the note, signed by Lloyd George, that the recognition of the reunification of Bessarabia with Romania by the Supreme Council is exclusively due to the efforts made by Dr. Al. Vaida Voevod”.

Moreover, Vaida was assured of great value for Romania, namely that if Russia would attack Romania, the Allies would help it<sup>13</sup>.

His so complex mission ended unexpectedly on March 13, 1920, by the appointment of General Alex. Averescu as Prime Minister, by King Ferdinand. It was only ten days since the recognition of Bessarabia’s union with Romania, and he was still in London when he learned of his dismissal. Later, Vaida Voevod found out what had happened: “At the Foreign Ministry, there was a certain Secretary General, Docan. He, in connection with an opposition leader (liberal-na), stole all the documents (telegrams) which arrived, regarding the talks with the Russians ... By machinations and intrigues besides the King, he scared the “democracy” from Vaida’s telegram to Russia (the King then personally reproaches him), he resigned. The behind-the-scenes intrigue “sent Bolsheviks” to the one who was sending statements to Lenin’s government and, above all, “Bolsheviks” like N. Lupu and I. Inculeț for negotiations”<sup>14</sup>. As a result, the negotiations for the normalization of Romania’s relations with Soviet Russia and its eventual recognition of Bessarabia’s membership in Romania have been abandoned.

The decision of the Peace Conference’s Supreme Council on the recognition of the union of Bessarabia with Romania, communicated to Vaida on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1920, a decision largely owed to the efforts of the first Romanian delegate, was firm and final. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1920, the representatives of England, France, Italy and Japan, on the one hand, and Romania, signed a treaty recognizing Romania’s sovereignty over the territory between the Prut, Dniester and the Black Sea<sup>15</sup>; it was ratified on 19 May 1922 by England and Romania, on 11 May 1924 by France, on 7 March 1927 by Italy; Japan has not ratified it.

The event from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1920, his entire activity within the Romanian delegation at the Peace Conference, together with his actual participation in the historical process of the autumn of 1918 in Transylvania, enlisted Dr. Alexandru Vaida Voevod among the makers of Great Romania, a position recognized by the majority his contemporaries.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> V. V. Tilea, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Biography of Alexandru Vaida Voevod (mss.), copy in the possession of the authors.

<sup>15</sup> I. Ionașcu, P. Bărbulescu, Gh. Gheorghe, *Tratatele internaționale ale României 1354-1920* [*International Treaties of Romania 1354-1920*], Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1975, p. 452.

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