

## THE GREAT UNION OF THE ROMANIANS IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract.** *The making of Great Romania in 1918 was the combined result of two main factors, an external one – the launch of the famous 14 points of the American president Woodrow Wilson that have been the basis for the organisation of the international society since 1918 –, and the second one was the result of the will of the Romanian people from the neighboring empires – Austro-Hungarian and Russian – to unite with the Romanian state. The Great Union was the end of the process of creating the Romanian national state, similar to the processes by which other European states, such as Italy or Germany, were formed.*

**Keywords:** *The Great Union of the Romanians, the principle of national self-determination, the end of World War I.*

### *International context*

The making of Great Romania in 1918 was the combined result of two main factors, an external one – the launch of the famous 14 points of the American president Woodrow Wilson that have been the basis for the organisation of the international society since 1918 –, and the second one was the result of the will of the Romanian people from the neighboring empires – Austro-Hungarian and Russian – to unite with the Romanian state. Based on them and in the conditions specific to the end of the World War I – which found Romania in the camp of the winning countries with whom it had fought since 1916 – when the old continent map was withdrawn, three Romanian provinces, Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania had joined the Romanian kingdom.

The announcement by the USA president Woodrow Wilson to the American Congress, of the 14 points on the basis of which the world peace was to be organised at the end of WWI, was the external impetus that the nations living in the three great European empires, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman, needed to decide their own destiny. Given that the war had not yet ended – but had produced

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the greatest material and human loss that humanity had ever known in any war – the American president announced the principles that would have been behind the reorganisation of the international society after the end of the war. The statement of the American president is decisive for resettling international society after the war. It was believed that the USA involvement in the war was the definitive departure from traditional American isolationism and the United States would play a leading role in the world, given that the great European powers were engaged in the world conflagration that consumed much of their material and human resources. On the other hand, USA did not carry the war on its own territory and had the necessary resources to help European countries in the post-war period, being the most developed economy of the world.

The most important principle, as Woodrow Wilson said, was “the principle of justice to all people and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand.”<sup>1</sup>

The principle of national self-determination that underpinned the withdrawal of the new European frontiers at the end of World War I had an “explosive effect in Central Europe”<sup>2</sup> and, as Henry Kissinger said, the US president pursued “to recast a whole system of international relations as it had been practicing for nearly three centuries”<sup>3</sup>. “In his famous Fourteen Points, Woodrow Wilson told the Europeans that, henceforth the international system should be based not on the balance of power but on ethnic self-determination, that their security should depend not on military alliances but on collective security and that their diplomacy should no longer be conducted secretly by experts but on the basis of «open agreements, openly arrived at.»”<sup>4</sup>

National self-determination has thus become the basic principle for the new world order that has been set up after the First World War. Under these circumstances, the new states were founded on the basis of the national principle and others – just like the case of Romania – were able to extend their borders – in the particular situation of Romania, by the decisions of the Romanians who lived in the neighboring empires to be an integral part of the Romanian state. Thus, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, became state actors of the European political scene in the new territorial configuration after 1918.

The end of the European territorial empires was achieved in the specific conditions of the end of the First World War, under the impetus of Wilsonian principles. But there was also a particular case, that of Russia, in which national liberation movements took place in the context of the civil war that the empire had faced after the October 1917 Bolshevik coup d'état. One month after the Bolsheviks

<sup>1</sup> [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/President\\_Wilson%27s\\_Fourteen\\_Points](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/President_Wilson%27s_Fourteen_Points).

<sup>2</sup> James W. Peterson, *American Foreign Policy. Alliance Politics in a Century of War. 1914-2014*, New York, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

took the power, in November 1917, the *Declaration of the Rights of the Russian People* was adopted and signed in the name of the Russian Republic, by Iosif Dzhughashvili Stalin, People's Commissar for Nationalities and V. Ulianov, President of the Council of People's Commissars at that moment. The Declaration was preceded by the decisions taken by the first Congress of Soviets (June) that proclaimed the right of the people of Russia to free self-determination; and the Second Congress (October) that "reaffirmed this inalienable right of the people more decisively and definitely."<sup>5</sup> So, the Council of the People's Commissars stated the following principles that would be the basis for solving the problem of nationalities in Russia:

"1. The equality and sovereignty of the people of Russia.

The right of the people of Russia to dispose of their own fate even to separation and the establishment of an independent state.

Abolition of all privileges and limitations, national or religious.

Free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting Russian territory."<sup>6</sup>

"The Declaration of the Rights of the Russian People promised equality, sovereignty and the right to free self-determination to all nationality groups and facilitated the acceptance of Soviet power on the multiethnic fringes of the empire."<sup>7</sup>

In the context of the civil war that took place in the empire, the new Bolshevik leadership considered it useful to adopt a policy favorable to national minorities. The movements of minority populations from the empire to gain autonomy or/and independence gained greater amplitude in the context of World War I and manifested themselves intensely when the Bolsheviks gained political power. Fanaticism of the new leaders led by Lenin and Trotsky, who believed in the triumph of the socialist universal revolution, led to believe that minority populations of the empire will be attracted by the lure of socialism and will appreciate the opening which they show to people of other nationalities, so they will support the socialist movement in the civil war that was unfolding at that time. Lenin considered that as long as minority populations did not feel repressed, as had happened during the Tsarist regime, they would be attracted to socialist ideas and would support the new leadership installed in Moscow, in November 1917.

There is still controversy over the real purpose of Soviet leaders about this statement. A first point of view considers that Soviet leaders have used the principle of national self-determination as a conspicuous tactic, their aim being to gain the confidence of minority populations for the new socialist regime that had just come in power, thinking that the tolerance they displayed on rights of the minorities will gain adherents to socialist ideas. Another point of view in the analysis of the period of installation of communist regime in Russia relies on the idealism of Kremlin leaders, who were convinced that belonging to a national

<sup>5</sup> Robert Vincent Daniels (ed.), *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia. From Lenin to Gorbachev*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1993, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Chubarov, *Russia's Bitter Path to Modernity. A History of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*, New York, London, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001, p. 83.

group cannot be more important than the adherence to socialist ideas, and therefore the impact that this declaration will have on the territorial configuration of the empire will be minimal. A third category of authors believes that there was rather a type of extended fanaticism of the group led by Lenin and Trotsky, who did not doubt the expansion of the socialist revolution throughout Europe. Under these circumstances, the issue of national self-determination became a secondary problem, without the importance that it acquired in the years immediately following the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of the Russian People.

It is certain that the socialist leaders in Moscow were surprised by the intensity of the national liberation phenomenon that embraced the entire empire after the adoption of this statement. Based on this, many provinces of the Russian Empire declared their autonomy, and later their independence from Moscow. The Poles, Finns, Ukrainians, Azerbaijani, Armenians, Georgians, Estonians, Lithuanians and Bessarabians declared their independence, the latter opting for the vote of their representatives to join with Romania. But their real intentions can be deciphered by the behavior they had after the end of the First World War, when they refused to recognize the independence of several provinces, including the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, and then to occupy and encompass several of these former provinces in the Soviet Union (see situation of Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia).

The Declaration of the Rights of the Russian People boosted the national liberation movements that have been growing with increasing intensity in the Russian Empire in the context of the civil war, but it has not had any further impact since the policy of freedom of choice for the Russian minority population was quickly abandoned by Communist leaders. If in Eastern Russia they could quickly occupy again the provinces that declared their independence, they could no longer apply the same force policy in the West of the Empire.

The territorial resettlement produced at the end of the First World War was a consequence of the application of the principle of national self-determination, as was stated by president W. Wilson. This principle was an emanation of an European reality, with the minority populations of the European empires reaching the maturity of their national consciousness after all the major events that crossed the century of the nations (the nineteenth century) and which now took advantage of the international conjuncture to decide their own state structures.

### *The Romanians decided*

The Romanian population that lived before the First World War in the neighboring empires (Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist) had a somewhat different situation from the other inhabiting populations of the two empires. If the latter had to build their own state structures completely, the Romanians in the three historical provinces – Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania – benefited from the existence of the Romanian state which they decided to join. Each province, in its own end-of-war situation, decided to unite with Romania.

### *Bessarabia*

The first province that decided to unite with the Romanian state was Bessarabia, by the vote of March 27, 1918. In the chaos caused by the revolutionary events in the Tsarist Empire, the provinces inhabited by other nationalities began one after the other to assume the right to state existence, first declaring autonomy and then independence from the disintegrated empire. In the whole empire, “autonomous states” are organized, “local authority,” “power of the country” is created. Common and military national organizations organized national congresses, which formed “local parliaments,” “country councils,” “national advice,” leading executive bodies, “directors,” “general directorates,” “national secretariats.” Russia is breaking apart, its unity disappears<sup>8</sup>.

Bessarabia<sup>9</sup> has just begun (in the first part of 1917) to create its own structures of representation that it could not have had as long as it was within the Tsarist Empire. In April 1917, the Moldavian National Party was formed, bringing together the most important leaders of the national movement in Bessarabia, and several organizations of various social categories (teachers, students, priests etc.) were created, the most important role being played by the Great Military Congress (Marele Congres Ostășesc). The latter structure assumed the role of a representative assembly (some 1,000 delegates and some 200,000 Bessarabian soldiers arrived from all fronts that had previously been deployed) who decided to form the first state institutions of their own, the decisions being made at the November 1917 meeting. The first and most important was the declaration of the autonomy of Bessarabia (October), the creation of its own armed forces and the creation of Council of the Country (Sfatul Țării) as a representative body of Bessarabia, consisting of representatives of different social categories and of different ethnic groups, this institution having the role of leading body of the province. At the beginning of 1918, as more and more provinces of the Tsarist Empire declared themselves independent of Moscow, Bessarabia followed this trend also – and on 24 January (a day with an important historical connotation for all the Romanians, in 1859 being recorded on this day, the birth of the Romanian state through the union between Moldova and Wallachia, or the “little” union) it declared its independence.

The anarchy that ruled the Tsarist Empire during this period was also spreading in the newly proclaimed independent republic of Moldova. Different groups of villains destabilized the situation in Bessarabia. They were joined by groups of Bolsheviks who were trying to stop the path that the recently proclaimed independent republic had hired. The new and fragile structures of Bessarabia could not stabilize the situation in the Republic, so they appealed to the Romanian state to send troops to help stabilize the situation, given that here were ammunition

<sup>8</sup> Ștefan Ciobanu, *Unirea Basarabiei. Studiu și documente cu privire la Mișcarea Națională din Basarabia în anii 1917-1918 [The Union of Bessarabia. Study and Documents on the Bessarabian National Movement in the years 1917-1918]*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1929, pp. XXV-XXVI.

<sup>9</sup> Bessarabia was in the Tsarist Empire from 1812 when, at the end of the Russian-Turkish war (1806-1812), part of the Moldavian Principality was broken and given to the Tsarist Empire. The province was named *Basarabia*, and the other part of the Principality of Moldavia remained under Ottoman suzerainty joined in 1859 with the Principality of Wallachia and formed the Romanian state.

depots of the Romanian state, which risked to be in possession of these groups. Romania responded positively to the request and sent four divisions with the aim of restoring order in Bessarabia, to protect the civilian population, weapons depots and communications lines. In this situation, the Bolshevik troops who were still here withdrew to Tighina, and the Bolshevik government broke diplomatic relations with Romania on the grounds that the entry of the Romanian troops was an act of aggression against Russia. The principle of national self-determination until the separation from the Empire that the Soviet government has proclaimed has proven to be of no practical value.

Subsequently, the Council of the Country, the representative body of Bessarabia, in which all the important minorities, from the numerical point of view, were represented, declared the union with Romania on March 27, 1918, in a solemn session. The choice of Bessarabia was a natural one in the conditions of the war, but also of the claims that neighboring Ukraine – which had proclaimed its independence – raised on the territory of Bessarabia. Most of the population of Bessarabia formed the Romanian population<sup>10</sup>, despite the forced and intensive Russification it had known for more than a century under the Tsarist rule. So the majority vote for the union with Romania that was given at the Country Council meeting was natural, the leaders of Bessarabia deciding to reunite with the territory of the same language and nationality from which they had been separated more than a century ago.

### *Bukovina*

Bukovina was, at the beginning of the First World War, an area – inhabited since ancient times by Romanians – included in the Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1775, following an agreement between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire. The colonization process encouraged by the Austrians following the incorporation of the province and the massive entry of the Ukrainian population into the north of the province has consistently diminished the number of Romanians in Bukovina, but still they remained the majority, especially in the south of the province.

During the First World War, the territory of Bukovina was the theater of military operations, the province being occupied on several occasions by the Russian troops and reconquered by the Austrian ones. More powers were eager to master this space, both the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy that hoped for the eastward expansion of the province, but also Russia and the Ukrainian national movement, and later Ukraine<sup>11</sup>, all negotiating the territory of Bukovina in the various secret agreements signed during the war.

<sup>10</sup> See, Nicolae Enciu, “Majoritari și minoritari în Basarabia interbelică. Structura etno-confesională a populației” [*Majorities and minorities in the interwar Bessarabia. The ethno-confessional structure of the population*], in *Istoricul Stelian Neagoe la 70 de ani* [*Stelian Neagoe historian at 70 years*], Bucharest, ISPRI Publishing House, 2013, pp. 209-212.

<sup>11</sup> See Constantin Ungureanu, “Consiliul Național Român din Bucovina (toamna anului 1918)” [“Romanian National Council of Bukovina (Autumn 1918)”], in *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, No. 1/2018, pp. 103-104, <http://revista.ispri.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/103-117-Constantin-Ungureanu.pdf>.

Unlike Bessarabia, in Bukovina there was an old Romanian national movement that had fought within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy for the rights and the preservation of the national conscience of the Romanians here. The leaders of this movement knew how to manage the situation at the end of the First World War in order to achieve the union with Romania. The attitude of the Emperor Carol I of Habsburg, who, in the famous proclamation *The Appeal to My Peoples* of October 16, 1918, which sought to save the monarchy and organize the empire on the federal basis, did not include the Bukovina territory between the independent states that followed to form the future federal state. The Romanians in Bukovina were still treated as a subordinate nation, which strengthened their conviction that their only option was to unite with Romania and they formally rejected a federalization proposal through a *Declaration*. A second factor was the attitude of the Ukrainians who tried to annex most of Bukovina territory to Ukraine (refusing to recognize the rights of the Romanians from Bukovina), using military groups that created a state of chaos in the province.

In this situation, the Romanians from Bukovina organized and convened a large representative assembly, which decided, in October 1918, to create a National Council composed of representatives from the entire province and from all social strata. This Council, in its turn, has appointed a Council of State Secretaries acting as the Provincial Government in charge of its administration. Subsequently, the Romanians in Bukovina acted in two stages: first, the large representative assembly voted with a majority of votes (the opposition to this decision coming from the representatives of the Ukrainian minority) the union of Bukovina with the other Romanian countries and “it would go to this end in full solidarity with the Romanians in Transylvania and Hungary.”<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the neighboring Ukraine had declared its independence from the Russian Empire and declared the incorporation of most of Bukovina into the new Ukrainian state. Ukrainian legions, joined by the Ukrainian soldiers returning from the front, entered in Bukovina and terrorized the Romanian population and they also entered into the place where the National Council was operating<sup>13</sup>. Under these circumstances, the National Council requested the Romanian state’s support for the restoration of order. The new government of Romania, led by General Constantin Coandă, responded positively to the request and sent a division that succeeded in restoring order in the province, including the capital, Cernăuți. Under the conditions of social peace, the National Council was able to resume its activity and impose its authority on the whole of Bukovina. The Council also decided to convene a General Congress of Bukovina to decide on the political relations that the province will have with Romania.

On November 28, 1918, the General Assembly gathered together with the representatives of the Romanians and the Ukrainians, the Germans and the Poles, as well as several thousand inhabitants from all parts of Bukovina. The Congress

<sup>12</sup> *Istoria românilor [The history of the Romanians]*, vol. VII, tom II, *De la Independență la Marea Unire (1878-1918) [From the Independence to the Great Union (1878-1918)]*, coord. Acad. Gheorge Platon, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, 2003, p. 501.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 504.

decided with a majority of votes (along with the Romanians voted representatives of the Germans and the Poles, the only ones who were opposed were the representatives of the Ukrainians) the unconditional and complete unification with Romania. The motion presented to support unification with Romania, emphasizing the “Romanian character of Bukovina” and the reality that the 144 years of Austrian oppression had not made Bukovina give up the fight for their national rights and “lose hope in the time salvation”<sup>14</sup>, which had just arrived.

### *Transylvania*

Transylvania was the largest Romanian province, under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both in terms of the size of the territory and the number of Romanians, with about 3 million Romanians living here before the First World War. For centuries under Austrian / Austro-Hungarian domination, the Transylvanian Romanians have been the most oppressed in their cultural and social rights, being for a long time a “tolerated nation” within the empire, although in Transylvania they represented more than half of the inhabitants. But all the policies that have been taken over against the Romanians over the years, have been answered by them. “In Transylvania, the Romanian national movement was the most powerful of all the Romanian-inhabited and foreign-controlled territories. There was a strong Romanian bourgeoisie with a solid political culture and the two Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches, over certain suspicions and misunderstandings between them, had given massive support to the effort for national emancipation.”<sup>15</sup>

Towards the end of the First World War, driven by the Wilsonian principles, the nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were manifesting themselves more and more openly towards their own national self-determination. The *Manifesto* of Emperor Carol I *To my faithful peoples*, which proposed the creation of a federal state instead of the bicephalic monarchy, consisting of six states, Austria, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Transylvania to be part of Hungary, has spurred the Romanian national movement. The two Romanian parties that worked here, the Romanian National Party and the Romanian section of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, started in October to cooperate, the two taking the decision to form the Central Romanian National Council as a representative body for the entire Romanian nation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

At the end of October 1918, in the context of the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, when several provinces declared their independence (including Austria, part of the bicephalic monarchy which declared itself a republic on November 12), the unionist movement of the Romanians in Transylvania intensified its activity. Hungary had tried to negotiate the maintenance of Transylvania in Hungary, but Romanian leaders had rejected all its proposals. Instead, the Central Romanian National Council announced the decision to convene a Grand National Assembly,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 506.

<sup>15</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român [A honest history of the Romanian people]*, Bucharest, Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2008, p. 288.

in which to vote the unification of all the territories inhabited by the Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy with Romania.

During the following days, the representatives of the Romanian nation from across Transylvania to vote the union at the Great National Assembly, convened in Alba Iulia for December 1, were voted. Next to them were representatives of the priests, both Orthodox and Greek Catholics, of the cultural associations and of the two Romanian parties, the Romanian National Party and the Social Democratic Party. A number of 1,288 Romanian delegates from Transylvania, Banat and Hungary voted on December 1, 1918, a resolution on the union with Romania in the middle of a large crowd of Romanians (about 100,000 people) who came to Alba Iulia from the entire Transylvanian space to witness a historic moment.

The Romanians thus decided their future as part of the Romanian state, based on the principle of national self-determination, on the basis of which the national states of Central and Eastern Europe were established. And they have done justice after centuries of oppression in the Habsburg Empire. Because, as an American author wrote, in 1944, “the justice of the Romanian cause was above all opportunistic talks or polemics. It stems from the very nature of things. The triumph of this cause was the natural consequence of the great law of the nature that demands that the walls of the brethren of the same nation – raised by powers opposing unity – be thrown down to the ground.”<sup>16</sup>

With the decision of the Great Assembly in Alba Iulia on 1 December 1918, the process of establishing the Romanian national state was completed, a process that started in 1859, with the realization of the “little“ union between Wallachia and Moldova.

### *Conclusions*

The Great Union of Romanians in 1918 was not a coincidental event, and Romania from the interwar period was not an accidental creation. The change of the paradigm in international politics at the end of the First World War created the necessary conditions for the realization of the Great Union, conditions that both the Romanian state and the Romanians living in the three major Romanian historical provinces knew how to use. Romania’s entry into World War I in 1916 on the part of the powers of the Entente was made after lengthy and difficult negotiations with Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, who wanted guarantees that as many Romanians living in neighboring empires would be able to join the Romanian state. It was this “true fulfillment” of the Romanians, as King Ferdinand said, when he received the delegation that handed him the act of union voted in Alba Iulia. The unification of all the Romanians was a necessity that claimed the effort of the entire nation and “this necessity was understood by all people with a patriotic heart from here and beyond the Carpathians, from Nistru to Tisa ... After Bessarabia, after Bukovina, the most expensive stone was missing: Transylvania

<sup>16</sup> Milton G. Lehrer, *Ardealul, pământ românesc (problema Ardealului văzută de un american) [Transylvania, Romanian land (the Transylvanian issue seen by an American)]*, Bucharest, 1944, p. 195.

with Hungarian lands inhabited by Romanians. Today you brought us this last stone of the building, which crowns the great work of union.”<sup>17</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century, the century of the nations, was the one in which states were created on the national principle in the West of Europe. The cases of Italy and Germany are the most eloquent; the two states have seen also several stages until the conclusion of this process that ended for both states at the end of the Franco-German War of 1870-1871. And, like all political events and phenomena, these have been replicated in Central and Eastern Europe with a delay of several decades. The creation of Great Romania in 1918 was thus a natural continuation of the process of creating the national states of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>17</sup> *Cuvântări de Ferdinand I, Regele României. 1889-1922 [Speeches by Ferdinand I, King of Romania]*, Bucharest, Fundația Culturală – Principele Carol, 1922, pp. 177-178.