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Between the treaty of Berlin and till the outbreak of the Great War, the Eastern Question in its Balkan version, dominated part of the European and international relations¹. Far from being only a question of political, economical and cultural hegemony, the Eastern Question led also to the shaping by outside observers, of perceptions over people and societies directly implicated in its unraveling plot. It was during that period terms such as Balkan or Oriental, coined previously, became largely used in the public space, assigned to various actors, places, or historical regimes². Situated at the crossroads of the Ottoman Empire, the domains of the Hapsburgs and tsarist Russia, caught in the struggle between the French and German antagonism for the expansion of their respective spheres of influence, reflecting also opposing affinities within local sociopolitical elites, Romania found herself at the borderline of geo-historical and socio-cultural boundaries constructions³.

Through the consultation of diplomatic archives, mainly the ones of French embassy at Bucharest, but also those of the consulates at Constanza and Iasi, this paper proposes an interactional approach in the study of representations and international relations⁴. More concretely, my goal was to discover which were some of the key sociopolitical events and institutions, daily life aspects or cultural heritages, at the eve and the aftermath of the Great War, that influenced French diplomats' perceptions seeking to represent Romania and Romanian people and place them within the imagined geography of Balkans or the Oriental/Western constructed space dichotomy⁵.

Romanian public space as a field of Great Powers' political, economical, cultural antagonisms

On July 1900, Louis Hérítte, French vice-consul at Iasi, writes to Théophile Delcassé, Minister of Foreign Affairs, that in the eyes of Romanians, "whatever is made in France, is automatically seen as something beautiful, intelligent and superior. (...) Especially at Iasi, everyone among the elite class, has studied in France or in French schools (...) and speaks French"⁶. In the symbolical/virtual battle opposing the Great Powers for the consolidation of political and military coalitions in the Balkans at the eve of the Great War, Charles Petit, tries to minimize the impact of Romania's diplomatic ties with the Triple Alliance. He observes in *Le Petit Parisien*, the newspaper with the largest print run during the Belle-Epoque, that no

¹ For a panoramic presentation of the different sequences of the Eastern Question, see Alexander Macfie, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* (London: Longman, 1996).

² Maria Todorova established a genealogy of names used to design the Balkan peninsula, throughout various historical periods. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.21-37.

³ Regarding Romania's position within European Great Powers' antagonisms, see Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), especially the chapter upon the French myth and the German counter-myth, p.160-165.

⁴ See Maria Matilde Benzoni, Robert Frank, Silvia Maria Pizzetti (dir.), *Images des peuples et histoire des relations internationales* (Milan, Paris : Unicopli, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008).

⁵ For a study upon the representational evolution between the West and the East, or more exactly between the two mental structures, fabricated by Western Europe's savants during the 19th century, since the early Romantic's movement's fascination with the Orient, till the Colonialist dominant representation of such a bipolar geographical scheme, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: the History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ *Archives Diplomatiques Françaises*, Paris, 144/CCC/8, Jassy, July 26, 1900, the vice-consul L. Hérítte to Delcassé, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

matter how much German policies are pervasive: « all Romanian ‘high society’ speaks French and French books are displayed everywhere in libraries’ windows”⁷.

Even in Transylvania, a region traditionally considered by French diplomats as included to the German sphere of influence, the French consul at Cluj, comments at the aftermath of the Great War, how during a prize giving ceremony to Romanian scholars, Emile Daeschener, the French ambassador, became aware of the sympathies his country enjoyed in that region⁸. On June 1922, he travels to Iasi. At that occasion, he recalls of the warm welcome he was given in a series of receptions at the University, at the Military Club on behalf of the General Governor and at a banquet organized by the mayor on his honor. He had also presided over the prize giving ceremony to the students of Notre Dame de Sion, while he mentions as well, the existence of a Franco-Romanian study center, named Lutetia. The action of these groups and institutions is even more useful today, emphasizes to his Ministry, given that before the war, “the University of Iasi was penetrated by pro-German cultural and scientific influences”⁹. Certainly, the German myth as Lucian Boia describes it in his work upon *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, had been seriously affected by the outcome of the First World War¹⁰. Nevertheless, the existence of a propaganda service within French embassy at Bucharest during the Interwar period, whose aim was to counteract German similar proceedings, reveals French representation of Romanian public space as a battlefield for cultural hegemony.

However, the promotion of French-language press in this race, was not always enthusiastically received by Third Republic’s delegates. The publication of a Romanian newspaper in French was not seen as a necessarily positive event. Despite its influence within the diplomatic circles, *L’Indépendance roumaine*¹¹, close to the pro-German National Liberal party led by Dimitrie Sturdza, was considered as hostile to France’s interests, especially as “its main editors are Israelites”¹², concludes French Ambassador Léon Descos, in one of his letters to his administration on August 1900. As a matter of fact, Romanian Jewish people were considered by several French diplomats, as susceptible to German influence. At the turn of the 20th century French anti-Semitism meets French germanophobe nationalism and anti-Zionism. The Zionist movement, largely anchored in German-speaking regions at those times, was viewed by French nationalists during the Eastern question, as a German policy seeking to compete and undermine French-speaking Alliance Israélite Universelle’s influence among Balkan or Ottoman Jewish communities¹³. The latter one, was preaching assimilationist stances and practices for Jewish people in their respective countries, and it was viewed as subservient to French official cultural and political projects in the Balkan Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

⁷ Charles Petit, « La Roumanie et la Triple Alliance » [Romania and the Triple Alliance], *Le Journal*, January 14, 1913.

⁸ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM/ 67, Cluj, June 13, 1921, the consul of France at Cluj to French Minister of Foreign Affairs, about the development of French culture in Transylvania.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Bucarest, June 13, 1922, about the journey of French ambassador to Iasi and Kichinau.

¹⁰ Lucian Boia, *History and Myth...*, op.cit., p.165.

¹¹ French-speaking newspaper founded on 1879.

¹² *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Sinaïa, August 10, 1900, n°40, French ambassador to French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹³ See Catherine Nicault, « Face au sionisme, 1897-1940 », in André Kaspi (dir.), *Histoire de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle de 1860 à nos jours* [History of the Alliance Israélite Universelle since 1860 to nowadays] (Paris : A. Colin, 2010).

The agrarian/peasants' revolt of March 1907, was another event that led to the reproduction of such representations and discourses. J. Sibi, vice-consul at Iasi, wrote to Stephen Pichon that it was miserable life conditions and a systematic exploitation of Romanian peasants that provoked the outbreak of violence¹⁴. The fact that many Romanian Jewish had been attacked during this uprising, was put down to their position as intermediaries between the land-owners and the peasants¹⁵. The anti-Semitic character or motivations of this revolt was excluded by French diplomats¹⁶. At the same time, they were blaming foreign press, notably the *Neue Freie Presse*, of intentionally persisting in the explanation of such a phenomenon on the basis of Anti-Semitism, implying that the Austrian leading newspaper was prompt to a political 'instrumentalisation' and exploitation of this social phenomenon.

At the aftermath of the Great War and while the antagonism with Germany remains always eager, there is another country whose actions in the Romanian public space are worrying French diplomats. In the new post-war international order, they are suspicious of the real or hidden intentions of American humanitarian aid. According to them, besides or behind charity, relief campaigns are also characterized by a mercantilist orientation and they are used as a means for promoting American manufactured goods. "We are impressed by the number of engineers, industrialists, chemists, traders, finance managers, arriving under the auspices of the Red Cross mission »¹⁷, announced the count of Saint-Aulaire to his colleagues in the Quai d'Orsay. As a matter of fact, till the First World War and especially during the Balkan conflicts of 1912-1913, humanitarian diplomacy became one of the leading aspects of Eastern Question's stakes. Great Powers were competing each other in this field, by trying to outnumber their competitors' medical or nursery convoys and looking for enhancing consequently their 'sympathy' capital or the scientific prestige of their schools among local populations. Henceforth, humanitarian missions were viewed too, as a vector of economical and political marketing.

Apart from the 'battle' opposing the 'Made in France' with the German or American manufacturing industry, and French cultural aura to trans-Rhine or Trans-Atlantic ones, there was also the competition for the control of transportations and mainly the railways that laid at the core of the Eastern question in its Romanian dimension as well. French diplomats were closely following the development of railway construction projects in the Romanian public space. On May 1922, the professor of colonial geography and right-wing deputy, Henri Lorin, joined by ex-senator Alexandre Grosjean, paid an official visit to Romania. Emile Daeschener, informed the Quai d'Orsay that they had dinner at the Polish and the French embassy, and that their 'sociabilities' agenda, included also their reception by the King and the Queen at the Cotroceni Palace. Their main goal, during their diplomatic receptions as well as at the occasion of the Press conference they organized at the Atheneum Palace, was to foster ties between France and the Quadruple Entente by promoting the railway trajectory, linking Nantes to Constanza, instead of the North-South project supported by Germany¹⁸.

¹⁴ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Jassy, Mars 23, 1907, J. Sibi, vice-consul to Stephen Pichon, French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁵ See Keith Hitchins, *Rumania : 1866–1947* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1994), p.177.

¹⁶ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Bucarest, Mars 29, 1907, n°23.

¹⁷ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM/67, Bucarest, May 24, 1919.

¹⁸ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM/145, Bucarest, May 12, 1922, French Ambassador to French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Another event that caught the attention of French diplomats within the framework of Franco-German antagonism, was the opposition by the Junimists and the Liberals to the renewal of the concession for the lighting of the city of Bucarest to a French company. On January 1906, this attitude was severely criticized by Bourgarel¹⁹. The French ambassador considered this reaction as a sign of chauvinism and xenophobia. Thus, any kind of opposition to the promotion of French economic or cultural interests in Romania, was stigmatized by French diplomats as an expression of nationalism. Accustomed to the 'neocolonialist' evolution of Capitulation treaties within the politically and economically declining Ottoman Empire of the 19th century, Great Powers' vision of post-Ottoman Balkans was strongly influenced by their privileged status during the previous era. When the balance of interests' and affinities within the political landscape of a country at the heart of Eastern question's antagonisms, was not any more in favor of French foreign policies, then automatically, the actors of such a change were negatively viewed and blamed as narrow-minded people. In order to predict the destiny of their interests in Romania, as well as in other countries directly concerned by the Eastern question in its Balkan dimension, French diplomats were evaluating Romanian political actors according to their supposed degree of attachment to French or German propagandas. When Petre Carp's cabinet was formed on 1900, Léon Descos drew a schematic representation of new government's members. Petre Carp, was presented as someone always hostile towards France. On the contrary, French ambassador underlined that he was particularly appreciated at Berlin and Vienna²⁰. Titu Maiorescu was also viewed as leaned to German tendencies, whereas Blanesco, Interior Minister, ancient student of the Ecole central, was said to have French habits. On the other hand, Alexandru Marghiloman, Romanian Foreign Minister at this cabinet, was considered as someone split between his French education, ex-student of Paris Law School and his loyalty to the policy decided by the head of the government he was making part.

Besides the personal affinities of political leaders, there were also the nation's perceived historiography and supposed genealogy that they were taken in consideration so as to delimitate Romania's position in the axiological scale of Great Powers. These methods used already from Balkan actors in order to legitimize their territorial claims at the expenses of their neighbors or competitors, they were also mobilized by Great Powers' observers, scholars or diplomats who were trying to weave a historical narrative of each Balkan State-nation, bringing it closer to their own ambitions on the ground²¹. In such a sense, French ambassador, informs his minister that the count of Keyserling came to Bucarest invited by the Romanian Intellectual Union. At this occasion, the Russian-German philosopher gave several conferences with the first one taking place in the German Embassy. This event brought together members of the German community, various diplomats and some Romanian intellectuals. The director of 'Gesellschaft für Freie Philosophie' (Society for Free Philosophy) at Darmstadt, raised his voice against the theory of Romanians' connection with the Latin race. On the contrary, he opted for the Scythian scenario of Romanian origins. As far as the sympathies of Romanian people for their French fellows were concerned, he attributed them to French's vain, light character and temperament. « It is not difficult to be Parisian, he said. Me too, I feel very Parisian when I am going to Paris distracting myself for a couple of weeks²². Germany's effort to 'balkanize' Romania's past in order to move her

¹⁹ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Bucarest, January 8, 1906, n°1, French Ambassador to French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, August 5, 1900, n°38.

²¹ See Andrew Wachtel, *The Balkans in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²² *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM/67, Bucarest, February 26, 1927, French Ambassador to French Minister of Foreign Affairs.

away from French influence zone, were disproved by several French and Romanian intellectuals²³.

Léo Claretie, a nationalist columnist, claims in *Le Petit Parisien* during the Balkan Wars, that the Danube river separates two worlds, two races, the Latins and the Slavs²⁴. At the same time, Hélène Vacaresco²⁵ writes in *Le Figaro* that Romania, situated at the marches of Europe, in contact with the barbarian Orient, has a role of civilizing its neighbors. According to French senator, Ambroise de Landemont, Romanians are different from the people at the south of Danube. “There is certainly more blood kinship between a Provençal and a Romanian, than between a Southern and a Northern French”²⁶, asserts in his travel memoirs. At his turn, French Ambassador, Henri de Manneville, professes in the *L’Illustration économique et financière*, on April 1925, that Romanians are Latins by race, “they represent at the Eastern part of Europe whatever French are in its western part, a revenge of Rome upon Barbarians. Apart from Latin stamp they are also bearing a Gallic mark (...). Let us visit one of these villages of Hatzeg district, where Romanian blood remained pure”²⁷. If you are staring at their inhabitants, “the peasants, their language, remind us of our Provençal, doesn’t? Their candid eyes, quite dreamy, their long moustache, remind us of the Gallic fellows of Vercingetorix, or maybe some of the great Chouans of Vendean countryside, don’t they? Following the shady paths of rich Oltenia, let’s stare at these slender women peasants so graceful. They remind us of the elegance and the instinctive concern about their appearance, of the charming girls of Arles or Bordeaux, don’t they?”²⁸ he ends his stereotyped French-Romanian comparison.

Such statements widely reproduced within French diplomatic and public space, are testifying of a mixture of ‘Maurassian’²⁹ racist/nationalist perception of individual origins and history/past narrative, based on blood ties and nation’s mythological collective continuity, associated with an orientalist discourse built upon the ‘civilizational’ burden and mission of countries represented as the incarnations of the West, and more particularly through a French point of view, the Latin West.

During the Balkan Wars, *La Croix* highlights that Romanians have not ceased to protest against their designation as a Balkan country³⁰. But the ultra-catholic newspaper asserts that Romanian origins, especially given their belonging to the Orthodox realm, do not

²³ At the turning of the 20th century, Nicolae Iorga published several essays and his work on Byzance after Byzance, in order to place Romania’s historical development within the cultural melting pot of the Eastern Roman Empire.

²⁴ Léo Claretie, « Choses de Bulgarie » [On Bulgaria], *Le Petit Parisien*, October 12, 1912. Such statements echoed Romanians’ dominant self-image at the eve of the First World War. Adrian Cioroianu asserts that ‘one of the leitmotifs of Romanians’ self-descriptions renders the country as a Latin island in a Slavic ocean’. See Adrian Cioroianu, “The Impossible Escape : Romanians and the Balkans”, in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, *Balkans as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), p.212.

²⁵ Hélène Vacaresco, « Paroles de Roumaine » [Words of Romanian woman], *Le Figaro*, July 10, 1913.

²⁶ Ambroise de Landemont, (comte), *De l’oppression à l’indépendance : l’avenir dans les Balkans* [From oppression to independence : the future in the Balkans] (Rennes, 1909), p.131.

²⁷ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM/67, M. de Manneville, « France et Roumanie », *L’Illustration économique et financière*, April 1st, 1925.

²⁸ *Idem*.

²⁹ For a study in the French nationalism inspired by Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès theories, at the beginning of the 20th century, see Eugen Weber, *The nationalist Revival in France, 1905-14* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1959) and Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français* (Bruxelles : Complexe, 1985).

³⁰ « La Roumanie », *La Croix*, December 28, 1912.

set them apart from their Serbian or Bulgarian neighbors. Afraid for the destiny of catholic congregations in post-Ottoman Balkans, *La Croix* is divided between her Islamophobic stance, and her reluctance towards Orthodox-dominated states. Throughout the Eastern question and beyond, mainly after the end of the Cold War, South-European countries where the Orthodox Church had the status of national religion, were seen as an in-between space as designed by Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans*, an intermediary between Catholic-Protestant dominating Western Europe and the Muslim Ottoman East. In such a mental ambiance, French diplomats' perceptions were not devoid of Orientalist/Balkanist representations.

Romanian public space as a field for Orientalist/Balkanist representations

At the resumption of Parliament's sessions on December 1901, Léon Descos, qualified the Parliamentary system in Romania, a pure fiction, a kind of occidental decor, adopted by Romanians but not taken seriously³¹. According to him, the only real political actors, forces are on the one hand the King and on the other, the political parties who do not incarnate ideological doctrines, but rather represent traditional groups, reflecting personal ambitions and interests. The 'clientelist' (vote-catching practices) or democratically-deficient political paradigm, perceived as predominantly an Oriental and/or Balkan characteristic, defines Romania as a space of otherness, lying outside normal Occidental patterns. On top of that, Romania and Romanians are viewed as trying to imitate without success the political ethos exclusively associated by Balkanists and Orientalists to Western European societies.

Another element/expression of such an essentialist representation, is the situation of human and civil rights in Romania as compared with their perceived or real state in France. Besides their perception of the 1907 events through a socio-economist rather than a racist prism, the majority of French diplomats at the turning of the 20th century highlight the widespread anti-Semitism in Romanian society. Thus, Henry, comte d'Aubigny, writes to Delcassé, that despite Carp's will to democratize the criteria of nationality's attribution, abolishing the discriminatory article 7 of Romanian Constitution, excluding Jewish from citizenship, he admits that his efforts will probably remain vain, undermined by the reactions of political parties, Church institutions and public opinion³².

Some years later, French ambassador at Bucharest, is making similar statements concerning the 'Guernut affair'. Henri Guernut was the general secretary of French League for Human Rights. He had visited Romania in order to take contacts with the local section of the League and with the scope to develop its actions in this society. When he tried to make a conference at the Carol Foundation, so as to explain to his audience the goals and the history of his institution, he was been restrained from addressing the public. Behind this interdiction was the Ministry of Interior and his fear to see anti-Semitic passions stirring the debate, as one of the members of the Romanian section of the league, was the lawyer of the Chief Police's family assassinated by a nationalist student, Corneliu Codreanu, the founder of the far-right movement Iron Guard. According to French ambassador, "No Romanian government is able to oppose itself to the Anti-Semitic party at the eve of elections. This does not prevent Romanian governments from talking about Justice, respect of civil rights, equality of races, so as to comply with Western/Occidental states of mind"³³. In this statement, anti-Semitism/racism and lack of legitimate state, considered as endemic or widespread

³¹ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Bucarest, December 26, 1901, n°61.

³² *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Sinaïa, August 5, 1900, n°35.

³³ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 110/CPCOM /145, Bucarest, June 24, 1925.

phenomena within a society categorized as Oriental or Balkan, works in a similar way during peace time, as the Brutality/Atrocities narrative does during military conflicts. Massacres committed during the Balkan Wars or other sequences of the Eastern question, were seen as a sign of the supposed inherent brutal nature of Oriental/Balkan people, whereas Westerners were defined as immunized to such aberrations, till the proof of the contrary at the First and Second World War as well as during the decolonization conflicts³⁴.

Commenting population statistics published in a review at Bucarest, de Prat, vice-consul at Iasi, asserts that the classification criteria adopted by the author are typical of Oriental classification system, characterized by confusion between national and confessional membership. Thus, orthodox is synonymous to Romanian, the column titled 'mosaic', designates Jewish people, who are considered as foreigners and for the majority of them are devoid of citizenship, whereas the third column, 'other religions', includes Christian foreigners and the Muslims. De Prat, considers that the only solution to the integration of growing Jewish populations arriving and settled in Romania as a result of their persecution in tsarist Russia, is their assimilation³⁵. But opposed to the successful experience of this procedure in England, France or Unites States of America, de Prat does not consider that the conditions are met in Romania. The Romanian Jew is described as someone eager to earn money not only for himself but also for the development and prosperity of his own community; on the contrary, the Romanian Christian, is portrayed as an individualist, only seeking to become civil servant, prone to sinecures, political intrigues, not having any chance for increasing his capital in the future, viewing richness not as the result of work and saving, but as the product of heritages, dowries, gambling or 'bakchich' (bribery)³⁶. Such statements reveal on the one hand, a confessional declension of essentialist discourses, with on the other hand, the reaffirmation of religious nationalism, lack of secularization and laziness-corruption human geography's model, as typical of oriental societies.

In order to conclude, I would like to say that I personally consider the approach I adopted and developed in this paper, somehow as parallel to Adrian Cioroianu's article 'The Impossible Escape : Romanians and the Balkans' in *Balkan as Metaphor*³⁷. Adrian Cioroianu reconstructed the political and cultural setting in which took place the debate over Romania's membership in a Balkan geo-historical and/or geo-cultural universe. I tried to study how French diplomats' perceptions of the Romanian public space, participated and intervened in their definition of Balkan space's limits and extension at the north of the Danube or not. In their personal reports and their correspondence with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, various degrees of proximity/identity, 'fareness'/otherness, with Romania and Romanians had been pronounced and conjugated to the geopolitical context at the eve and the aftermath of the Great War. As the Eastern question was the dominant issue of French diplomats' agenda in that region during that period, it also influenced their judgments. It was their perception of Eastern Question stakes, defined in diplomatic and military terms, as a battlefield where clashing interests opposing the Great Powers were expressing themselves but also in representational aphorisms of what is a Balkan or Oriental society, that ultimately led them to place or not Romania and Romanians within such imagined places as the Balkans or the Orient.

³⁴ The trend to view atrocities in the Balkans as "the expected natural outcome of a warrior ethos, deeply ingrained in the psyche of Balkan populations" was commented by Maria Todorova, *Imagining ...op.cit.*, p.137.

³⁵ *Archives diplomatiques françaises*, 194/CPCOM/1, Jassy, December 16, 1906, n°5.

³⁶ *Idem*.

³⁷ See Adrian Cioroianu, « The Impossible Escape : Romanians and the Balkans », in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, *Balkans as Metaphor...op.cit.*, p.209-233.