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ABSTRACT
ROMANIAN-BELGIAN RELATIONS
1919-1940

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Key words: diplomacy, legation, visits, treaty, neutrality, occupation, economic relations, cultural relations, The Belgian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce, The Belgian-Romanian Friendship Association, exhibitions, students.

The diverging realities and interests revealed in the wake of the Peace Conference in Paris, the frustrations and vengefulness, augmented by the Great Depression, as well as the emergence of totalitarian ideologies, which upset the precarious balance established by the ruling of the Versailles system, resulted in conspicuous confrontational developments at the level of European diplomatic relations, which introduced the phrases ‘European civil war’ (Ernst Nolte) and ‘second thirty-year War’ in the historical literature. The afore-mentioned phrases are chronologically bound to the years 1919-1940, an age of great transformation and unreleased tension largely owing to the dissatisfaction of certain states ‘*punished*’ at the Peace Conference, where viable solutions to the satisfaction of all parties could not be found.

An inventory of the issues on the agenda of international relations between the two World Wars could include matters pertaining to territory disputes, minorities, war debt and reparations, the German Question, attitudes towards the Soviet Union, collective security, disarmament, etc. The complexity of the issues taken into account, as well as the large number of diplomatic documents, have elicited the attention of historians, leading to the publication of an impressive quantity of scholarly work on the topic.

A great part of the existent literature addresses either the issue of the relations between the Great Powers or those with the Soviet Union, ‘the great absentee’ of the Peace Conference; the smaller or, as they had been initially nominated/classified during the Peace Conference, the ‘limited

interest' states,¹ are only tangentially approached. It is in this context that the debate concerning the Romanian-Belgian relations fits, although, naturally, a question arises: why the Romanian-Belgian relations?

One must stress the fact that the bilateral relations had in view have not been, up to this point, sufficiently explored. The topic occasions a case study of the relations between two states during a period deemed 'golden' with respect to the exposure of second-class countries on the scene of international relations.

The study of Romanian-Belgian rapports can also be regarded as an opportunity to better the understanding of Europe between the two World Wars.

In the analysis of this bilateral relation we rely on the Diplomatic Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*The 71/Belgium Funds, Bruxelles, Fund 42, Fund 90 and Conventions*), the Central National Historic Archives (*The Fonds Belgium, The Royal House and the Ministry of National Propaganda, The Ministry of Home Affairs*) the National Bank of Romania Archives (*The Funds Studies and Secretariat*). The archive documents represented the central element of the research, given that the greatest part of the bibliography only touches upon issues pertaining to Romanian-Belgian relations.

¹ See works such as: R. Baxter Blair, *The World Remapped. A Summary of the Geographical Results of the Peace Settlement after the World War*, Second Edition, Denoyer-Geppert Companz. Scientific School Map Makers, Chicago, 1922; Peter Calvocoressi, *Europa de la Bismark la Gorbaciov*, traducere de Lucian Leuștean, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2003; Eric Hobsbawm, *Secolul extremelor*, traducere de Anca Irina Ionescu, Editura Lider, București, 1994; Barbara Jelavich, *Istoria Balcanilor. Secolul al XX-lea*, vol. II, Traducere de Mihai Eugen Avădanei, Postfață de I. Ciupercă, Editura Institutului European, 2000; Viorica Moisuc, *Istoria relațiilor internaționale până la mijlocul secolului al XX-lea*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Fundația România de Măine, București, 2007; , René Rémond *Introduction à l'histoire de notre temps. 3. Le XX-e siècle. De 1914 à nos jours*, Editions de Seiul, 1974; A. J. P. Taylor, *Originile celui de al doilea război mondial*, Traducere și note de Lucian Leuștean, Postfață de I. Ciupercă, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1999 etc.

Furthermore, published Belgian documents proved useful², as e two world wars and works on the foreign policies of European countries, with particular focus on Belgium³ and Romania, respectively. Unfortunately, there are very few works strictly about Romanian-Belgian relations, except the landmark ones belonging to Aurel Filimon, concerning the relations between the two states during the modern period; that of Laurențiu Vlad, treating Romania's participation in the Belgian exhibition, J. Antohi⁴ and, last but not least, Ioan Alexandru Roceriu⁵.

We note from the very beginning that there are two main points of kinship between the states on which our research focuses. Firstly, at the Peace Conference they joined the ranks of the small powers, with limited interests. Secondly, both desired the observance of the Versailles treaties. Consequently, the relations between Romania and Belgium unfolded along several levels: diplomatic, commercial and cultural.

² Eg.: De Visscher, Ch. Van Langenhove, *Documents diplomatiques Belges 1920-1940. La politique de sécurité extérieure, Tome III, IV*, Bruxelles, 1964; De Visscher, Ch. Van Langenhove, *Documents diplomatiques Belges 1920-1940* etc.

³ Eg: Marc Reynebeau *Histoire Belge. 1830-2005*, Éditions Racine, Bruxelles, 2005; Bernard A. Cook, *Belgium. A History*, Ed. Peter Lang, New York, 2002 Dhondt, Jean, *Histoire de la Belgique. Deuxième édition mise à jour*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1968 etc.

⁴ *Considérations sur les échanges commerciaux belgo-roumains et sur l'importance du port d'Anvers dans ces relations. Comments on the Belgo-Roumainien Commercial Exchanges and on the Importance of Antwerp in View of Those Relations*, Moniteur Officiel et Imprimeries de l'Etat, Imprimerie Nationale, Bucarest, 1937 ; *Funcțiunea economică a portului Anvers și schimburile cu România*, Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeria Statului, Imprimeria Națională, București, 1937.

⁵ *Expozițiile în legătură cu economia națională*, Extras din "Corespondența economică", anul IV, nr. 3, Monitorul Oficial și Imprimeriile Statului, Imprimeria Națională, București, 1933; *Târgurile. Instrumente economice*, "Tiparnița", Institutul de Arte Grafice, București, 1933 ; *Expoziții și târguri*, Tipografia Libertatea, București, 1935; *La Législation Roumaine Relative aux Expositions et aux Foires*, Extrait de la "Correspondance Economique Roumaine", no. 1, 1937, M.O., Imprimeria Națională, București, 1937.

We chose to structure the paper in five main chapters (Chapter I - **Romanian-Belgian Diplomatic Relations**; Chapter II - **The Evolution of Belgium between the Two World Wars**; Chapter III- **Romanian-Belgian Economic Relations**; Chapter IV - **Romanian-Belgian Cultural Relations**) with subchapters focusing on key-elements of Romanian-Belgian relations each, in order to outline as well-defined as possible a view of the situation of the states on which our research focuses.

The delicate geographic positions of Romania and Belgium, the interests of the main European actors that manifest in the political and military environment in 1940, as well as the geo-political, geo-economic and geo-military factors are responsible for the evident similarities between the two states. The imperative of maintaining the *status-quo* established at Versailles, of ensuring territorial security and avoiding the reiteration of the horrors of World War I, influenced the scene of international relations between the two world wars. The geostrategic position (in the case of Belgium, the vicinity with Germany and, in the case of Romania, with the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria, all countries with revisionist tendencies) that the two countries elicited different dangers, influencing the strategies they applied. The internal issues both states faced also played an important part in their external decisions. The great 'ally' that both Romania and Belgium chose was France, which proved useless (or perhaps its economic and political interests were given precedence) in providing support. The peace-maintenance projects during the two world wars also proved to be utopian.

The relations between the two countries we are interested in, however, did not debut between the two World Wars. Thus, as early as

the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries the products brought by Transylvanian merchants from Ypres, Louvain, Bruges, Maastricht or Malines⁶ were in high demand. The consolidation of the Ottoman suzerainty regime in the sixteenth century led, for a while, to the interruption of Romanian connections to Western countries. Only after 1830, with the 'creation' of the new state of Belgium, were Romanian-Belgian relations re-launched and gained scope.

The evolution of Belgium between the two World Wars cannot be ignored, either; to it, the second chapter is dedicated. A great part of the problems the country faced in the years following the first world conflagration originate in the ante-bellum period, which led to a separate subchapter on the topic. The home issues, as well as apprehensions concerning the outbreak of a new war, took a significant toll on Belgium's actions on the international scene.

Chapters III and IV are strictly concerned with the relations between Romania and Belgium and constitute, from our point of view, the core of the present thesis.

The reasons behind the establishment of diplomatic Romanian-Belgian relations pertained to economic factors, the distance between the two rendering all other interests marginal. If in the antebellum period the economic relations between Romania and Belgium soared, with Belgium occupying a top position in the ranking of states with which our country was involved in exchange, between the two World Wars was followed by up and downs also explained by the political context. Moreover, during the entire period between the two world wars, the issue of treasury bills and overdue debts (a problem left

⁶ P. Oprescu, *Bruxelles și Haga în Reprezentanțele diplomatice ale României, vol. I, 1859-1917*, Editura Politică, București, 1967, p. 284.

unsolved, unlike in the case of Italy, where there were greater interests vested) were constant drawback to the development of commercial exchange. The Romanian legislation, be it in the fields of mining or commerce, was not entirely favourable to the foreign capital invested in our country, either. However, we can notice the fact that, from a statistic point of view, the amount of exchanges place Belgium, depending on timing, between the third and fifth place in the hierarchy of states with which Romania had commercial connections.

An essential role in the growth of the economic relations between the two states after 1930 was played by the Belgian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce, which lead to the amplification of the relations between the societies from Belgium and Romania, defending the interests of both sides.

When referring to the cultural relations between Romania and Belgium (either in the expositional, or in the educational field), these unfolded according to clear coordinates. From our point of view, the cultural events are representative for the way in which Romania tried to highlight its culture, industry, but also its historical heritage, as weel as for the segment of international relations pertaining to the Belgian connection.

Between the two World Wars Romania chose, as a means of propaganda, to single out its art (especially its folk art), considering the fact that, industrially, our country was at a lower level than that of other European countries. From this point of view, the best strategy belonged to Tzigara-Samurcaş, the manager of the National Art Museum 'Charles I'. His point of view was best presented in his speech from the inauguration of Romania's pavilion from the Universal and International Exhibition of Bruxelles in 1935. He claimed that Romanian art and folk

art in particular singled us out from the other Latin peoples due to the Byzantine, Romance, Gothic, Armenian, Oriental influences that make themselves felt⁷.

The exhibitions are representative for the way in which Romania tried to put its economic profile at an advantage, as well as for the way on which, by using this element of international relations, knew how to create a clearly shaped image on the European scene. Such events represented a means to make local products known, even if, sometimes, greed or ignorance prevented the result from being the expected one (see Alexandru Țigara Samurca's 1936 account *Darea de seamă*, published in the „Convorbiri literare” magazine after the closure of the Universal and International Exhibition of Bruxelles from 1935).

At the educational level, the main axis was that of accrediting studies and ensuring as a correct validation of diplomas as possible, the issue of students was multifold, starting from the payment of studentships to the foundation of circles and associations that had as a purpose the ensurance of their members' welfare. Here, too, as in the case of the exhibitions, the presence of drawbacks made itself felt, leading to a much slower resolution of the occurring issues.

With both a cultural and economic role, the 'Belgian-Romanian Friendship' Association constituted, alongside the Belgian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce, one of the defining elements to Belgian-Romanian relations. It cemented the relations between the two states in the afore-mentioned areas, as well as in its social scope. With these reasons in mind, we paid special attention to the two institutions.

⁷ Laurențiu Vlad, *Pe urmele "Belgiei Orientului". România la expozițiile universale sau internaționale de la Anvers, Bruxelles, Liege și Gand (1894-1935)*, Editura Nemira, București, 2004, p.136.

The present paper ends with a series of 22 annexes which we consider relevant to a better 'understanding' of the way in which the Romanian-Belgian relations evolved at the time we are referring to.

We ascertain, thus, that, although the relations between Romania and Belgium did not have the intensity of those maintained with other states, there were moments when, at the diplomatic level, the two countries had common interests and positions, particularly since, as the Belgian Prime-Minister himself declared in 1924, there were no power games here (as in the case of the great powers)⁸.

⁸ "Adevărul", an XXXVII, nr. 12366 din 22 mai 1924.