

# **Serbian/Yugoslav-Romanian Relations and Interactions in the 20th Century**

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## A Cry of Horror Rose from Our Chests: The Romanian View of the May Coup

**Abstract:** The May Coup, one of the pivotal chapters in Serbian history, continues to attract scholars' attention. Beyond the detailed analysis of the conspiracy and the factors that resulted in the assassination of King Aleksandar Obrenović and Queen Draga, scholars have focused extensively on the responses of great powers to this event. However, there is a notable lack of information regarding Romania's perspective, given that noble families were related to the Obrenović dynasty. This paper aims to explore the Romanian government's response to the May Coup. Additionally, we will examine the coverage of the Obrenović dynasty's downfall in Romanian newspapers, and the portrayal of the Obrenović and Karađorđević dynasties in them.

**Keywords:** May Coup 1903, Aleksandar Obrenović, Draga Mašin, Petar Karađorđević, Charles I of Romania, Serbia, Romania, Adevărul, Voința Națională, Constantin Mille

### Introduction

The tumultuous upbringing of King Aleksandar (1889–1903), the final ruler of the Obrenović dynasty, was marked by frequent conflicts between his parents, King Milan (1868–1889) and Queen Natalija,<sup>1</sup> as they battled for influence and control in raising their son. When they officially divorced in 1888, Natalija was forced to leave the country. A year later, King Milan abdicated in favor of his son and also left Serbia to live as an ordinary citizen in Paris. Since Aleksandar was a minor when he became a king, a three-member regency was established to rule in his place. The former king, who lived a lavish lifestyle in Paris, had accumulated significant debts. This

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<sup>1</sup> Natalia Cheșcu (1859–1941) was the oldest child of Russian colonel Petru Cheșcu and Pulcheria Sturdza, the granddaughter of Moldavian ruler Ioniță Sandu Sturdza (1762–1842).

prompted him to seek ways to obtain money in Serbia. As he was not permitted to return until the young king came of age, Milan encouraged his son to carry out his first coup d'état, resulting in the overthrow of the regents and the establishment of his independent rule in 1893, one year before he came of age. The following year he abolished the democratic-based Constitution of 1888, which was modeled after the Belgian Constitution of 1831, and reinstated the more conservative Constitution of 1869.<sup>2</sup>

By inviting his father to return to Serbia, King Aleksandar gained support for his political endeavors. On the other hand, former King Milan continued his conflict with the Radical Party, which opposed his pro-Austrian policies. The Radical opposition used King Milan's standing in military circles and his appointment as commander-in-chief of the Royal Serbian Army in 1897 to accuse him of being responsible for his son's increasingly authoritarian rule. Additionally, Russia viewed former King Milan's presence in Serbia as a threat to its interests in the Balkans due to his close relationship with Austria-Hungary.<sup>3</sup>

The crucial question for the Obrenović dynasty was King Aleksandar's marriage. As the only male representative, he had the responsibility to ensure an heir, and the matter of his marriage was closely linked to Serbia's foreign policy direction. Former King Milan wanted to arrange a marriage between his son and a German princess to strengthen Serbia's ties with the Triple Alliance. On the other hand, the king's mother preferred a marriage to a Russian princess. When his parents started looking for a bride with him, the young king was already romantically involved with his mother's lady-in-waiting, Draga Mašin. Although the former Queen Natalija knew about their relationship, she didn't pay much attention to it. King Aleksandar was aware that his parents would not approve of his marriage to Draga, so he carefully devised a plan. Using the pretext of negotiating his marriage to a German princess, he arranged for his father to travel to Germany. Then, in July 1900, King Aleksandar announced his engagement to Draga Mašin.<sup>4</sup>

The King's betrothed was the widow of an engineer and was not well-liked in Belgrade for various reasons. Firstly, there were rumors circulating about her being unable to have children, and that she was promiscuous after her husband died. Additionally, Draga was 12 years older than King Aleksandar. Hence, the engagement announcement surprised the public in Belgrade. The Serbian government, after a failed attempt to persuade the king not to marry Draga, resigned. The political crisis that followed, due to the opposi-

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<sup>2</sup> Слободан Јовановић, *Влада Александра Обреновића*, Том. I (Београд: БИГЗ, 1990), 134–167, 189–190, 193–199; Ratomir Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Čigoja štampa, 2022), 107–113, 118–119.

<sup>3</sup> Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, 223–225, 243–245, 260; Slobodan Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. II, (Beograd: BIGZ, 1990), 16, 66–67.

<sup>4</sup> Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. I, 359; Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. II, 157–158; Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, 125–126.

on of the politicians to the king's marriage, resulted in King Aleksandar barely managing to form a new government. To make matters worse, ex-king Milan accused Draga of being a Russian agent, causing further controversy. Unable to convince his son to change his decision, Milan resigned as an army commander and fled to Vienna, where he remained until he died in 1901. The relationship between Aleksandar and his mother was also broken up.<sup>5</sup>

The opposition to the king's marriage slightly decreased when Russian Emperor Nicholas II congratulated the king on his engagement and agreed to be the principal witness at their wedding. Despite this, the marriage damaged the king's reputation among the people, and especially among the Serbian army. The wedding took place in July 1900, and soon after, the Court announced that the Queen was pregnant. However, in May 1901, doctors from Vienna and Bucharest examined her and found that she was not carrying a child. Queen Draga's false pregnancy caused a scandal and posed a significant problem for King Aleksandar's reputation. The first reaction came from the Russian Emperor, who did not want to receive the king and queen upon their planned visit to Russia.<sup>6</sup> After it was revealed that the Queen was not actually pregnant, concerns arose about who would succeed to the Serbian throne. Draga's brother, Nikodije Lunjevica, was considered the next in line. After their sister's wedding, both Nikodije and Nikola quickly advanced in the Serbian Army. Their reputation for arrogant behavior towards other officers and frequent public outbursts made them widely disliked. Consequently, strong opposition emerged against the possibility of Nikodije Lunjevica ascending to the throne after King Aleksandar.<sup>7</sup>

The discontentment with King Aleksandar's reign has reached a critical point. The financial strain on the state has left officers and army personnel without pay for months, and junior officers expressed concerns that the queen's false pregnancy damaged Serbia's international reputation. After King Aleksandar got married, his foreign policy position became delicate. The Radical Party in power in Serbia, which supported Russophilia and a nationalistic program, led to animosity in Austria-Hungary. King Aleksandar was uneasy with the fact that Austria-Hungary accepted his political opponents as refugees, while Emperor Franz Joseph was disappointed that King Aleksandar did not marry a German princess as he promised. On the other hand, after King Aleksandar's marriage, Russia's influence on the Serbian government and Court increased significantly, and the Russian minister in Belgrade started to interfere in both the internal and external affairs of Serbia. Therefore, the Serbian king hoped that the Russian Emperor would welcome him and Draga on an

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<sup>5</sup> Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol II, 159–166, 179; Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, 127–128.

<sup>6</sup> Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. II, 169–170, 187, 218–222.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 223–225; Dragoljub Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karađorđević. U izgnanstvu 1844–1903. godine*, (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2003), 451–453.

official visit. Nevertheless, that did not happen, and the removal of the radicals from power worsened Serbian-Russian relations. The 1897 agreement between Russia and Austria-Hungary aimed to keep both countries from interfering in Balkan affairs. Because of that, Russia expressed significant unease over King Aleksandar's intentions in the Macedonian issue. Upon realizing that Russia would not be an ally, King Aleksandar sought support from Vienna, where the decision-makers were skeptical about his sincerity. Ultimately, King Aleksandar found himself in a state of isolation.<sup>8</sup>

In March 1903 protests erupted against King Aleksandar, regime, resulting in confrontations between the people, army and police. The following day, King Aleksandar annulled the Constitution, abolished certain laws, enacted new ones, and promptly reinstated the Constitution an hour later. This incident marked the fourth coup in 10 years, intensifying his unpopularity and foreshadowing the end of his reign.<sup>9</sup>

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When Queen's false pregnancy was exposed back in 1901, a group of dissatisfied officers, unhappy with King Aleksandar's rule started to gather with the aim of overthrowing him. As the number of conspirators grew, they recognized the need for support from political circles. Former government ministers and those who once were close to the Obrenović dynasty played vital roles in organizing the conspiracy. Working together with officers, they sought a candidate for the Serbian throne, with a keen focus on the stances of Austria-Hungary and Russia on this crucial issue. Upon discovering that both countries did not object to the election of Petar Karađorđević,<sup>10</sup> the conspirators proceeded with their plans for the coup. When one of the conspirators informed Petar Karađorđević of their intentions, he reacted with caution and suspicion. He insisted that he should ascend to the Serbian throne only through the National Assembly's election and that no blood should be shed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. II, 257, 261–262, 312–315; Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, 155–157.

<sup>9</sup> Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, 153–154, 161.

<sup>10</sup> Petar Karađorđević (1844–1921) was the son of Aleksandar Karađorđević, the Prince of Serbia from 1842 to 1858. After his father abdication, Petar lived in exile with his family. He received education in Geneva, then attended military academy Saint-Cyr, and Higher Military School in Metz. Petar joined the Foreign Legion during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and also volunteered in the Herzegovina Uprising (1875–1877) against the Ottoman Empire. His presence was seen as a threat to the ruling Obrenović dynasty, leading to his return to France. Petar later married the daughter of Montenegro's ruler Prince Nikola, and eventually moved to Geneva, where he lived until 1903. For more details, see Mile Bjelajac, „King Petar I Karađorđević”, *The Serbs and their Leaders in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Peter Radan, Aleksandar Pavković, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 95–112.

<sup>11</sup> Dragoljub Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karađorđević*, 453–463; Bjelajac, „King Petar I Karađorđević”, 99.

In the early morning of May 29, 1903, the conspirators, led by the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Petar Mišić, entered the Royal Palace. The royal couple were found hiding inside a secret room and they were assassinated by gunshots. After the assassination their bodies were thrown from a second-floor window. Along with the royal couple, the conspirators executed Prime Minister Dimitrije Cincar-Marković and Minister of the Army, General Milovan Pavlović. Queen's brothers Nikodije and Nikola Lunjevica were also assassinated.<sup>12</sup> The streets of Belgrade echoed with the chants of Petar Karađorđević's name as the conspirators celebrated the coup. To ensure the legitimacy of his reign, it was important to establish an interim government to oversee the constitutional election of the new king.<sup>13</sup>

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In the following part, we will examine the perspectives of the Romanian decision-makers on the May Coup and the first months of King Petar's reign. Additionally, we will compare the coverage of the May Coup in two Romanian newspapers: *Adevărul* (The Truth), an independent newspaper with anti-dynastic views, and *Voința Națională* (The National Will), a publication associated with the National Liberal Party, which held power in Romania from 1901 to 1904. Furthermore, we will analyze how both the Obrenović and Karađorđević dynasties were portrayed in these newspapers.

### **The Perspective of the May Coup from the Romanian Political Circles**

The assassination of King Aleksandar threatened Serbia with diplomatic isolation. European courts viewed the murder as a potential threat to their own stability. Besides, the manner in which the murder was carried out astonished the European public. In addition to the brutality of the conspirators, the violation of the soldiers' oath given to the king especially drew condemnation. Although one of the new Serbian government's tasks was to ease the hostile attitudes of the great powers towards Serbia, the National Assembly's decision to absolve the conspirators of responsibility only complicated the situation further. Even though Austria-Hungary and Russia initially agreed not to intervene in Serbia's internal affairs and supported the election of Petar Karađorđević as King, they were the first to demand punishment for the conspirators. Other great powers followed suit.<sup>14</sup>

Neighboring Romania, where the noble Catargiu and Lahovari families were related to the Obrenović dynasty, acted with restraint following the

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to the individuals mentioned, 14 people lost their lives during the coup, while 5 sustained injuries (Milikić, *Državni udari u istoriji Srbije*, 167).

<sup>13</sup> Dragoljub Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karađorđević. U otadžbini 1903-1914. godine*, (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2003, 3-5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

May Coup, and announced a mourning period of 14 days. The decision-makers in Romania closely monitored the events in Serbia, and the Romanian minister in Belgrade Edgar Mavrocordat regularly provided detailed updates about the political situation in the Serbian capital. He informed the Romanian government that the officers had significant influence over politicians, the public, and the press, and that the Serbian press considered the assassination of King Aleksandar to be a patriotic act. He also stressed that the army's early endorsement of Petar Karađorđević demonstrates its exclusive support for him, exerting pressure on the National Assembly.<sup>15</sup> Observing events from Serbia shortly after the Coup, King Charles of Romania assessed that the „atrocious crime” would not disrupt the peace in the Balkans. In addition, King Charles emphasized an important detail: the conspirators would not be held accountable.<sup>16</sup> The conspirators' influence on King Petar and the pressure they exerted, marked the early years of his reign.

According to Colonel Milan Mihailović, the Serbian minister plenipotentiary to Bucharest, „the events of May 29<sup>th</sup> had a significant impact in Romania and throughout Europe”. Colonel Mihailović stated that Romania found the manner of dethroning King Aleksandar particularly surprising. The fact that King Aleksandar had strong family connections on both his father's and mother's sides and that King Charles was the honorary commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, which played a crucial role in the May Coup, further intensified the impact. As a result, King Charles renounced the honor of being the head of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Once it was confirmed that order had been restored in Serbia, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ion I. C. Brătianu, paid a visit to Colonel Mihailović. Brătianu mentioned that the Romanian king was unable to come to terms with the fact that „his” regiment had carried out a May coup, which ultimately led to his resignation. Although Brătianu believed that many people died unnecessarily during the coup, he was pleased that Serbia was able to resolve the dangerous crisis peacefully and with order. Brătianu was highly concerned about the fate of the officers involved in the conspiracy and their influence on Serbian internal affairs, as well as foreign policy. In response, Mihailović stated that this matter had been discussed before Petar Karađorđević was elected as a king, and that it would be unwise for him to bring it up, as it would only complicate his already challenging situation. To conclude, Brătianu expressed his hope that Serbia and Romania will maintain cordial relations as there is no reason for Romania to be hostile towards Serbia. Mihailović noted that the Romanian government saw the May Coup as an internal Serbian matter, and in mid-June

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<sup>15</sup> Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe [Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] (AMAE), Fond Problema 21/Serbia, vol. 13, year 1903, *Rapoarte politice de la Belgrad*, f. 76, 91.

<sup>16</sup> Sorin Cristescu, *Carol I. Corespondența personală (1878–1912)*, (București: Tritonic, 2005), 417.

1903, Edgar Mavrocordat established regular diplomatic relations with the Serbian government.<sup>17</sup>

In early July 1903, Mavrocordat observed that the conspirators, primarily through their newspapers such as *Ștampa*, criticized King Charles' decision to give up the honorary command of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment. The Romanian minister believed that by doing so, the conspirators were attempting to create a division between Serbia and Romania.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in the political circles in Belgrade, King Charles' withdrawal from the position of head of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment made a strong impact. The new Serbian government's difficult position was further complicated by the demands of the great powers to bring the conspirators to justice.<sup>19</sup>

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The dynastic change in Serbia in 1903 raised questions about its foreign policy direction. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Austria-Hungary influenced Romanian foreign policy to focus on the Aromanian population in the Ottoman Empire with the aim of neutralizing Romanian national interests in Transylvania. This shift affected relations between Bucharest, Sofia and Athens, and the Macedonian question became an important political and national issue for decision-makers in Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, the interests of great powers in the Balkans, especially Austria-Hungary and Russia, further complicated relations in the region.<sup>20</sup> For Romania, a key concern was the relationship between Serbia and Austria-Hungary, as well as between Serbia and Russia and Bulgaria. Even though King Charles stated that relations between Romania and Bulgaria were on a good path at that time, Romania's foreign policy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prioritized propaganda among the Aromanians in Macedonia. Therefore, the Romanian government was concerned about Serbia and Bulgaria getting closer after the May Coup. Mavrocordat believed that King Petar would receive strong support from Russia, unlike his predecessors, Milan and Aleksandar Obreno-

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<sup>17</sup> *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1914*, tome 1, vol. 1, ed. Andrija Rade-  
nić, (Beograd: SANU, 1991), dok. 29, 58.

<sup>18</sup> AMAE, Fond Problema 21/Serbia, vol. 13, year 1903, *Rapoarte politice de la Belgrad*, f. 159.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 97; Cristescu, *Carol I. Corespondența personală*, 417–418.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Cain, *Diplomați și diplomație în sud-estul european. Relațiile româno-bulgare la 1900*, (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2012), 114; Ionuț Nistor, „România și criza macedoneană din 1903”, *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie „A. D. Xenopol”*, XLII, 2005, 323–325; Rudolf Dinu, „Romanian Foreign Policy from Berlin to Sarajevo, 1878–1914. Some characteristics”, in *Romanian and European Diplomacy. From Cabinet Diplomacy to the 21st Century Challenges*, eds. Gh. Cliveti, Adrian-Bogdan Ceobanu, Adrian Vițalaru, Ionuț Nistor (Trieste: Beit, Iași; Editura Universității „Al. I. Cuza”, 2012), 225–227; Ionuț Nistor, „Inter ethnic conflicts and political disputes in the Balkans at the beginning of the 20th century”, *Analele științifice ale Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza din Iași (serie nouă). Istorie*, LIV-LV, 2008–2009, 244–245.

vić, and that Russian assistance could lead to improved relations between Serbia and Bulgaria.<sup>21</sup>

Six months after ascending to power in Serbia, King Charles criticized King Petar's lack of energy and his failure to break free from the influence of the conspirators. In letters to his siblings, King Charles painted a bleak picture of the state of Serbia, describing it as being ruled by only „the shadow of the king”, with a powerless and isolated monarch and an army comprised of murderers. In addition to the complex internal situation in Serbia, its ruling circles also had to confront foreign policy challenges. As the new year of 1904 approached, the diplomatic representatives departed from Belgrade. King Charles interpreted this as a clear outcome of the unresolved status of the conspirators involved in the May Coup.<sup>22</sup>

### **Romanian Newspapers and the May Coup The Portrayal of the Obrenović Dynasty**

The beginning of King Aleksandar's independent rule after the coup in 1893, sparked criticism in the *Adevăru*<sup>23</sup> newspaper, and his visit to Bucharest three years later left a lukewarm impression: In a front-page article, Constantin Mille<sup>24</sup> fiercely accused King Aleksandar of being a petty tyrant who followed his father's path with a coup d'état and brutal persecution of members of the Radical Party. At the end of this article, Mille stated that the young Serbian king deserves neither applause nor respect, nor even a welcome from the Romanian people.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, *Voința Națională* warmly welcomed King Aleksandar's visit and reported on the cordial reception by the Romanian population in Drobeta-Turnu Severin. It also reminded readers that this visit would strengthen the bonds between these two nations.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> AMAE, Fond Problema 21/Serbia, vol. 13, year 1903, *Rapoarte politice de la Belgrad*, f. 155; Cristescu, *Carol I. Corespondența personală*, 418; *Scrisorile Regelui Carol I din arhiva de la Sigmaringen 1878–1905*, ed. Sorin Cristescu, (București: Paideia, 2012), 496.

<sup>22</sup> *Scrisorile Regelui Carol I din arhiva de la Sigmaringen 1878–1905*, 497; Cristescu, *Carol I. Corespondența personală*, 419.

<sup>23</sup> This newspaper had strongly anti-dynastic views and eventually became known for exposing abuses of power in Romania's governments. Ștefan Petrescu describes it as an independent newspaper, characterized by the lack of political alignment with the two political parties in Romania, the Conservative and the National-Liberal. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Adevărul* was one of the most widely read newspapers in Romania, with a circulation of around 30.000. Unlike *Adevărul*, the National-Liberal's and Conservative Party's newspapers did not circulate more than a thousand copies. Ștefan Petrescu, *Corespondenții români de presă și publicațiile emigrației balcanice: (1877–1916)*, (Brăila: Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei „Carol I”, 2021), 7–10.

<sup>24</sup> Constantin Mille (1861–1927) was a prominent Romanian socialist and lawyer. At the time of the May Coup Mille was the editor of *Adevărul*.

<sup>25</sup> Constantin Mille, „Sosirea regelui Serbiei”, *Adevărul*, 19 octombrie 1896.

<sup>26</sup> „Visita M. S. Regelui Serbiei”, *Voința Națională*, 19 (31) octombrie 1896.

When King Aleksandar announced his engagement to Draga Mašin, *Adevărul* suggested that the Serbian King had won the love of the people by choosing an ordinary wife, while also causing despair among government ministers. The scandal sparked by the king's engagement led to various writings in the Romanian press. *Adevărul* in one of them concluded that „the young king would have a turbulent future ahead of him. This is why we can see this romance as a tragedy”. On the other hand, *Adevărul* did not fail to show the Serbian king's opinion regarding the public disagreement with his choice of wife. Prophetically, he declared that he would rather die than part with the one he loves.<sup>27</sup>

On July 22, 1900, the day before the wedding, Ștefan Mihaileanu, an Aromanian professor and journalist, was killed in Bucharest by the Supreme Macedonian-Adrianople Committee, which garnered significant attention from the Romanian public and political circles at that time. *Adevărul* provided mostly neutral coverage of King Aleksandar's wedding, and the ceremony in Belgrade was the focal point of attention. However, reports of King's conflicts with his parents due to his marriage, and former King Milan's request to General Sava Grujić to expel Draga Mašin from the country, did not go unnoticed. The news that King Aleksandar severed all ties with his mother also caused a great sensation.<sup>28</sup>

*Voința Națională*, on the other hand, did not pay too much attention to the engagement and wedding of the Serbian king. Not much was written about Draga Mašin either, and what King Aleksandar emphasized when he announced the engagement was repeated: that his fiancée was from the distinguished Lunjevica family,<sup>29</sup> and that her grandfather Nikola Lunjevica had the title of voivod at the time of the Second Serbian Uprising (1815–1817). This newspaper, immediately below the news about the king's engagement, announced that the Serbian government had resigned, but there was no mention of the motive for such a step. The next day, *Voința Națională* announced that former King Milan had resigned from the post of Commander of the Serbian Army. It was reported that the engagement of King Aleksandar caused a great depression in Serbia, and that the ministers believed that this would be the end of the Obrenović dynasty, although no reasons were given for such conclusions. This newspaper reported that the Serbian king declared in front of the officers who came to congratulate the engagement, that for every soldier, the king's will should be the law, and that he would not change the decision about the wedding. This article indicates a certain dis-

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<sup>27</sup> Extern, „Evenimentele din Serbia”, *Adevărul*, 14 iulie 1900; Soo, „Romanul amoros din Belgrad”, *Adevărul*, 21 iulie 1900.

<sup>28</sup> „Căsătoria regelui Serbiei”, *Adevărul*, 25 iulie 1900; „Căsătoria regelui Serbiei”, *Adevărul*, 28 iulie 1900.

<sup>29</sup> Nikola Lunjevica was known as a rich merchant. During the Second Serbian Uprising he helped the Serbian army with financial resources. However, he did not have the title of voivod. King Aleksandar wanted to raise Draga's reputation and highlight her maiden name.

satisfaction in political and military circles in Belgrade. However, it does not state the reasons for that dissatisfaction, nor does it discuss the personality of the future Serbian queen.<sup>30</sup>

In *Adevărul*, Queen Draga was often portrayed in a negative light, especially after it was revealed that she was not pregnant. One of the doctors who examined her was Romanian expert, Ioan Cantacuzino (1863–1934).<sup>31</sup> The scandal surrounding the false pregnancy was extensively covered in early May 1901 by *Adevărul*, which detailed the news at the Serbian Court and the public's reaction. *Adevărul* published many false stories about Queen Draga, including claims that she had been married twice, had children with multiple men, and had been King Milan's lover before becoming involved with King Aleksandar. *Adevărul* also mentioned that she was unpopular in Serbia and that King Aleksandar attempted suicide because of the false pregnancy.<sup>32</sup> This newspaper accurately predicted the impact this scandal would have on the Serbian Court: „The Obrenović dynasty will end with the death of King Aleksandar. This is the sad conclusion of the tragic drama from Belgrade”.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, *Voința Națională* did not pay much attention to events at the Serbian Court. On May 6, 1901, it was reported that the heir to the throne of Serbia was not expected, and that the doctors confirmed that Queen Draga was not pregnant, but they didn't rule out the possibility of her giving birth to an heir.<sup>34</sup> The news about the false pregnancy of the Serbian queen was scarce in the following days, and there was no information about the reaction in Serbia to this unpleasant news.<sup>35</sup>

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*Adevărul* had a sense that something tragic would happen to King Aleksandar, but the May Coup still shocked the Romanian public and the rest of Europe. In an attempt to understand the brutal murder of the Serbian royal couple, the authors of the articles suggested that the characters and influences of the king's parents played a role. Milan, the corrupt king, and Natalija, the ambitious and unbalanced queen, were accused of negatively influencing their son, who grew up listening to their arguments. The portrayal of Aleksandar Obrenović in these articles suggests that he was a man with an unfortunate fate, a victim of his parents and wife's ambitions. Queen

<sup>30</sup> „În jurul logodnei regelui Serbiei”, *Voința Națională*, 13 (26) iulie 1900; „Din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 14 (27) iulie 1900.

<sup>31</sup> Petrescu, *Correspondenții români de presă și publicațiile emigrației balcanice: (1877–1916)*, 151.

<sup>32</sup> Fantasio, „Scandalurile Curței Sîrbești”, *Adevărul*, 6 mai 1901; „Drama din Belgrad”, *Adevărul*, 6 mai 1901; Ad, „Drama regala din Belgrad”, *Adevărul*, 7 mai 1901.

<sup>33</sup> „Sarcina reginei Draga”, *Adevărul*, 8 mai 1901.

<sup>34</sup> Buletin telegrafic „Din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 6 (19) mai 1901.

<sup>35</sup> Din streinătate, „Din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 9 (22) mai 1901; Agenția română, „Din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 12 (25) mai 1901.

Draga was depicted as a power-hungry woman who knew how to manipulate the king and mock the people.<sup>36</sup> Constantin Mille's article „Charles and Aleksandar” compares the reigns of Romanian and Serbian kings. The article provides insight into how Mille evaluates the reign of King Aleksandar. In the introduction, he notes that he has been criticizing King Charles' policy for years and believes that the constitutional form of government in Serbia and Romania exists only to cover up the absolute rule of their kings. However, Mille suggests that King Aleksandar, unlike King Charles, believed that he could violate the Constitution and be brutal. The Romanian king, on the other hand, knew how to cover up the affairs at his court and showed that he could control his passions and desires, while this was not the case with the Serbian king. „A ridiculous marriage with Draga Mašin was fatal for him, because it ultimately led to his horrible death.”<sup>37</sup>

Considering the close family ties between the Obrenović family and the prominent Romanian families, such as Catargi and Lahovari, *Adevărul* interviewed some members of these families after the May Coup. The interviews revealed that the tragedy in Serbia deeply affected King Aleksandar's relatives. Henri Catargi<sup>38</sup> shared the views he had heard from Milan Obrenović, regarding the marriage of King Aleksandar to Draga Mašin. Catargi mentioned that Milan predicted the death of his son, saying that he would end up like his cousin, Prince Mihailo.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he stated that former King Milan had advised his son in a letter not to marry Draga Mašin, warning that it would be fatal for him. According to Henri Catargi, Aleksandar's refusal to heed his father's advice and allow him to come to Belgrade ultimately led to the death of Milan Obrenović in February 1901.<sup>40</sup>

*Voința Națională* showed less interest in the personalities of the Serbian royal couple after the May Coup compared to *Adevărul*. This newspaper quoted an interview with Đorđe Genčić,<sup>41</sup> a conspirator from the political circles, in a Viennese newspaper. He stated that King Aleksandar made mistake after mistake after ascending the throne, and that his marriage with Draga and the scandal surrounding her false pregnancy caused him to lose the little respect he had left. The reports in *Voința Națională* primarily focused on the consequences of this event and sharply criti-

<sup>36</sup> „Privire retrospectivă asupra politicei Serbiei”, *Adevărul*, 31 mai 1903.

<sup>37</sup> Constantin Mille, „Carol și Alexandru”, *Adevărul*, 2 iunie 1903.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Catargi was the son of Sofia Catargi, sister of Elena Maria Obrenović, who was Milan Obrenović's mother.

<sup>39</sup> Mihailo Obrenović, Prince of Serbia 1839–1842 and 1860–1868, was assassinated in Belgrade.

<sup>40</sup> A. B, „Ce spun rudele regelui Alexandru”, *Adevărul*, 31 mai 1903.

<sup>41</sup> Once close to the Obrenović dynasty, Genčić was a fierce opponent of the marriage of King Aleksandar Obrenović with Draga Mašin. Because of the public condemnation of this marriage and political discussions, Genčić was sentenced to seven years in prison, of which he served one. For more details, see Jovanović, *Vlada Aleksandra Obrenovića*, vol. II, 158–161, 183–185.

cized the murder of King Aleksandar, Queen Draga, her brothers and other prominent figures in Serbia.<sup>42</sup>

### **„Soldiers, you have betrayed me!” Reconstruction of the Conspiracy and Perception of the Coup**

Following the May Coup there was widespread shock among the public in Romania, and *Adevărul*'s reporting focused heavily on reconstructing the conspiracy and the murder of the royal couple. There was also a lot of attention paid to the impact of this event on the European public and the initial actions of the new Serbian government formed after the coup. On May 31, *Adevărul* sent journalist Albin Kutschbach (1853–1936) as a correspondent to Belgrade to report firsthand on the events in Serbia. However, the news regarding the king and queen's deaths was largely inaccurate and sensationalized, leading to hysteria among the residents of Bucharest.<sup>43</sup>

According to a telegram from Vienna, it was reported that the Serbian king was still alive after being thrown into the courtyard from the window, where he received the fatal shot. His last words were reported to be „Soldiers, you have betrayed me!”. The same issue also quotes news from Berlin that King Aleksandar, upon realizing that a conspiracy was being prepared against him, shot his wife, and then committed suicide. In contrast, a telegram from Budapest reported that the conspirators did not plan to execute the queen, but intended to arrest her and take her across the border. However, Queen Draga grabbed a revolver and exchanged fire with the conspirators, showing courage by defending herself to death.<sup>44</sup>

*Adevărul* not only reported biased news about the coup, but also attempted to uncover the perpetrators of the assassination. This newspaper published an interview with Lieutenant Colonel Petar Mišić, in which he stated that he did not know who fired the first shot, but expressed satisfaction with the outcome, believing that the conspirators had done the country a favor. In the June 10, 1903 issue, *Adevărul* revealed that the conspiracy among the army officers had been in the work since the exposure of the queen's false pregnancy in May 1901, and implicated politicians close to the Obrenović dynasty.<sup>45</sup>

*Voința Națională* also extensively covered the execution of King Aleksandar and Queen Draga. Most of the articles were news pieces from foreign press, condemning the coup in Serbia. For instance, the front page of the May

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<sup>42</sup> „Asasinatele și ororile din Belgrad”, *Voința Națională*, 1 (14) iunie 1903.

<sup>43</sup> Petrescu, *Correspondenții români de presă și publicațiile emigrației balcanice: (1877–1916)*, 152.

<sup>44</sup> „Asasinarea familiei regale sârbești – telegrame amănunțite, speciale și oficiale”; „Regele s-a sinucis”, *Adevărul*, 1 iunie 1903.

<sup>45</sup> „Geneza ultimei revoluțiuni din Serbia”, *Adevărul*, 1 iunie 1903.

31 issue gave significant coverage of the May Coup, detailing how it was carried out. This reporting was based on news from Vienna, Berlin, and London media, as well as correspondents from Belgrade. In the following issue, the coup in Serbia was described as a „terrible massacre” and „the Asian destruction of the dynasty”, causing „deep consternation in Romania”. The Serbian army was compared to the Janissaries and Praetorians, and because of the coup, it became unworthy to be counted among the armies of civilized countries. The article emphasizes the „butchery” of the ministers and the royal couple showed a huge difference in morals between the Serbian and Romanian nations.<sup>46</sup>

Constantin Mille, however, shared an intriguing perspective on the motives behind the May Coup in an article titled „Lawful Savages”: „A cry of horror rose from our chests when we heard about all the crimes committed in Belgrade... I believe that no one has the right to suppress another in the struggle for existence. Here, however, we are talking about something else. It is an explanation of a historical event. What happened in Serbia can be explained and justified by the country's political situation and its inability to get out of this state of theft and shame brought by the Obrenović dynasty [...]”<sup>47</sup>

Mille criticizes the internal policies of King Milan and King Aleksandar, and takes the suppression of the political rights of the Serbian people as the motive of the May Coup. He justifies the brutal killing of the royal couple as there was no other way for the Serbian people to get out of the political crisis.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the potential outcome of the coup and the crisis that endangered Serbia's domestic and foreign policies in early June 1903 were extensively discussed in *Adevărul*. Although the Serbian government sought to portray the coup as an internal matter, *Adevărul* reported that the Romanian public viewed the May Coup as an event with potential implications for the Romanian king, government and army. This was because King Charles was in command of the Serbian 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which played a significant role in carrying out the coup. „Civilized humanity today can no longer tolerate such massacres, and therefore even the bloody dethronement from Belgrade cannot remain an ordinary internal matter [...] Civilized Europe demands the punishment of murderers if Serbia wants to preserve its international relations [...]”<sup>49</sup>

The resignation of King Charles from the leadership of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Serbian Army in this article was described as evidence that the coup in Belgrade was of great significance for international relations. This is especially noteworthy because King Charles was one of the first monarchs in Europe to accuse Serbian officers of being „perjurers, traitors and assassins”.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> „Evenimentele din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 3 (16) iunie 1903.

<sup>47</sup> Const. Mille, „Sălbăticiii legitime”, *Adevărul*, 1 iunie 1903.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> R. P. „Două detronări”, *Adevărul*, 5 iunie 1903.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

The main focus of *Voința Națională*'s writings was on the conflict with Conservative Party's newspapers regarding their perspective of the May Coup. The Conservative's newspapers, such as *La Roumanie*, *L'Indépendance Roumaine*, and *Conservatorul*, compared the May Coup to the dethroning of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1859–1866) from the Romanian throne, and criticized the role of Dimitrie A. Sturdza,<sup>51</sup> the president of the National-Liberal Party and the Prime Minister of Romania (1901–1904), in the conspiracy against Cuza. *Voința Națională* primarily defended Sturdza and strongly opposed the comparison between these two events.<sup>52</sup> On the contrary, Constantin Mille had a different perspective on the matter. He pointed out that the prominent Romanian politicians and officers who were involved in the plot against Cuza continued their careers under King Charles Hohenzollern's regime. Mille accused King Charles of hypocrisy, as he didn't seem to mind being surrounded by traitors in the court and government, but now feels offended that the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment played a key role in the May Coup.<sup>53</sup>

The Serbian government's offer of the throne to Prince Karl Anton of Hohenzollern, the brother of the Romanian Crown Prince Ferdinand, sparked interest among the Romanian public. Kutschbach reported from Belgrade that many Serbian politicians supported the idea of a foreign prince occupying the Serbian throne, while King Charles did not approve of that idea. Romanian king, deeply shaken and disgusted by the tragedy that befell the royal couple in Belgrade, strongly opposed it, and advised Prince Karl Anton to reject the offer.<sup>54</sup> *Voința Națională* already reported on May 30, 1903 that the Serbian army declared Petar Karađorđević as the king of Serbia. In the following issues, this newspaper did not announce other possible candidates for the vacant Serbian throne.<sup>55</sup>

### The Portrayal of Petar Karađorđević

In the issues of *Voința Națională* and *Adevărul* published in the first days after the May Coup, articles about the new Serbian king and the Karađorđević dynasty occupied relatively less space than the reconstruction of

<sup>51</sup> Dissatisfied with the reforms that Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1859–1866) implemented in Romania, reducing the influence of large landowners in the National Assembly and distributing their land to peasants, a coalition was formed with a goal to overthrow Cuza. Prominent figures from the left and right, including Dimitrie Sturdza, joined this coalition. On the night of February 11, 1866, a group of armed officers entered the Court and demanded Cuza's abdication. He signed the abdication and left the country the next day. Njagu Džuvara, *Kratka istorija Rumuna*, (Beograd: Albatros Plus, 2020), 172–176.

<sup>52</sup> „Cumplita sminteală, cumplita decădere” *Voința Națională*, 3 (16) iunie 1903; „Asiaticii noștri”, *Voința Națională*, 4 (17) iunie 1903; „O slabă licărire”, *Voința Națională*, 5 (18) iunie 1903.

<sup>53</sup> Constantin Mille, „Coana veta rușinoasa!”, *Adevărul*, 6 iunie 1903.

<sup>54</sup> Sfînx, Un Hohenzollern rege al Serbiei, *Adevărul*, 2 iunie 1903.

<sup>55</sup> Agenția română, „Asasinatele regelui și reginei Serbiei”, *Voința Națională*, 30 maiu (12 iunie) 1903.

the coup and the dramatic events in Belgrade. Although the main attention was devoted to these topics, the personality of King Petar gradually became more attractive in the columns of these newspapers over time. It is worth noting that at that time, little was known about King Petar in Serbia. He returned to his homeland after 45 years spent in exile.

*Adevărul* first mentioned Petar Karađorđević on May 31, 1903. It briefly announced that the army declared him as the new king, and assumed that this would not have happened without the consent of Austria-Hungary and Russia. Additionally, this newspaper published a telegram from Geneva containing an interview with the new Serbian king, in which he stated that there was no official announcement from Belgrade proclaiming him as king, and that he was greatly surprised by the murder of King Aleksandar and Queen Draga.<sup>56</sup> Another interview with King Petar was published in the same issue, in which he described the events in Belgrade as „terrible, but predictable” because „one cannot mock the people with impunity”. King Petar also announced that he accepted the army’s offer to ascend the Serbian throne, stating that he is the son of Serbia and a legitimate pretender to its throne.<sup>57</sup> Following this, there were public discussions about Petar Karađorđević’s involvement in the coup. However, it was later reported that although he knew about the conspirators’ intentions to overthrow King Aleksandar, Petar Karađorđević insisted that no blood be shed.<sup>58</sup>

One of the main topics covered in *Adevărul* after the May Coup was the analysis of the political situation in Serbia and the challenges that the new king would encounter. An article strongly criticized the role of the army in maintaining peace on the streets of Belgrade and their influence on politicians after the coup. In the following, there is a question of whether this situation will be acceptable for the new king: „All of civilized Europe is waiting to see if Petar Karađorđević will accept that his throne is being surrounded by perjured advisers, military commanders, traitors and murderers”.<sup>59</sup> The author of this article acknowledges the internal complexities in Serbia and the challenging position King Petar will face. It is assumed that the interim government, the assembly, and the army avoid raising questions about punishing the conspirators in order to maintain peace in the country. However, the author also believes that discussions about the role of the assassins, who previously swore loyalty to King Aleksandar, then conspired against him, and now swear loyalty to King Petar, will continue in international relations and at the Serbian Court: „These are acts which the people and the civilized world

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<sup>56</sup> „Asasinarea familiei regale sârbești – telegrame amănunțite, speciale și oficiale”, *Adevărul*, 31 mai 1903.

<sup>57</sup> „Interview cu noul rege al Serbiei”, *Adevărul*, 31 mai 1903.

<sup>58</sup> „Asasinarea familiei reg. sârbești – telegrame amănunțite, speciale și oficiale”, *Adevărul*, 5 iunie 1903.

<sup>59</sup> A. B., „Acoperirea asasinatelor din Belgrad”, *Adevărul*, 4 iunie 1903.

do not approve of. If breaking the oath of allegiance to a despotic sovereign can be legitimized in certain cases, what will never be justified is that perjurers and kingslayers are accepted, glorified, elevated and re-surrounded the throne that they defiled with the most heinous acts. This will not be forgiven or tolerated by modern civilization.”<sup>60</sup>

Constantin Mille also expressed his concerns about the challenges that King Petar might face due to the complex internal situation in the country. He questioned whether King Petar, who had spent his entire life in exile and experienced the life of an ordinary person, would have the bravery and capability to lead the people towards a peaceful era and comprehend the responsibilities of modern rule. Taking into account King Petar’s European education in „civilized and democratic countries” and his time in Switzerland, a liberal and democratic country, Mille believed that King Petar would have a different understanding of royal authority and the capability to confront the challenges required for successful rule. Mille’s main concern was whether the Serbian king, despite his good intentions, would be able to guide Serbia towards civilization. *Adevărul*’s editor correctly believed that King Petar needs to eliminate military terror quickly and demonstrate to Europe that he could punish treason and savagery. Mille viewed the army’s role in Serbia’s political life as one of the most critical issues, as political freedoms cannot coexist with military terror.<sup>61</sup>

*Voința Națională* only briefly addressed the internal issues in Serbia following the May coup. However, it did reference reports from foreign newspapers that closely monitored the events in Belgrade. According to one of these reports, there was an opinion among political circles in Belgrade that King Petar should not punish the conspirators because the coup occurred before he was elected king. *Voința Națională* also reported that the Serbian army held significant power and that King Petar would face challenges in maintaining peace and order in the country.<sup>62</sup>

On June 22, 1903, King Petar arrived in Serbia after 45 years in exile, and was warmly welcomed by the people. Both *Voința Națională* and *Adevărul* reported on the event, with correspondents from Belgrade sharing that the Serbian people welcomed their new king with great enthusiasm. Beyond the festivities, the papers highlighted the issue of officers’ guilt. *Voința Națională* raised concerns regarding whether the Serbian king would be able to hold the conspirators accountable, emphasizing that it was not just a matter of King Petar’s will.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Constantin Mille, „Regele Petru Karageorgevici”, *Adevărul*, 4 iunie 1903.

<sup>62</sup> „Presa străină despre evenimentele din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 6 (19) iunie 1903; „Evenimentele din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 12 (25) iunie 1903.

<sup>63</sup> „Evenimentele din Serbia”, *Voința Națională*, 13 (26) iunie 1903.

## Conclusion

The way *Adevărul* covered not only the May Coup but also the turbulent events of King Aleksandar's reign highlights why it was one of the most popular newspapers in Romania. By providing critical assessments of King Aleksandar's rule, transmitting rumors about him and Queen Draga, and detailing the events of the May Coup, *Adevărul* captured the interest of the Romanian public. The newspaper's inclusion of illustrations and caricatures further piqued readers' curiosity and shaped their perception of the final ruler of the Obrenović dynasty.

*Voința Națională* descriptions of the May Coup and the personalities of King Aleksandar and Queen Draga are presented in a more modest and neutral tone compared to those in *Adevărul*. The false pregnancy scandal, for example, was not described in detail in *Voința Națională*. Additionally, *Voința Națională* had fewer articles about the May Coup and the events that followed it. Instead, it focused on reporting news about the May Coup from European capitals and quoting their articles. Notably, *Voința Națională* did not delve into the motive of the May Coup or provide details regarding the last years of King Aleksandar's reign. The articles in this newspaper often addressed the perspectives expressed in the Conservative Party's newspapers. One such viewpoint was the May Coup, and the Conservative Party's newspapers used it to criticize Dimitrie Sturdza, the leader of the liberals, while *Voința Națională* defended him. These articles aimed to justify Sturdza's involvement in the conspiracy against Cuza on February 11, 1866, and strongly condemned the bloody murder in Belgrade.

In contrast to *Voința Națională*, certain articles in the newspaper *Adevărul* seem to approve of the assassination of King Aleksandar. The act of removing the ruler by force was justified by his despotic rule, which was believed to be hindering progress in Serbia. However, *Adevărul* openly criticized the conspirators and condemned the brutal murder. This newspaper emphasizes the need for the coup participants to be punished in order for Serbia to be accepted on the European stage.

The Romanian government demonstrated restraint while closely monitoring the events in Serbia and prioritizing peace in the region. Shortly after the tragic event, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs emphasized that the May Coup was an internal matter of Serbia and would not hinder Romania's positive relationship with its neighbor. The fact that the regiment named after King Charles carried out a coup initially caused concern, and King Charles' resignation signaled Romania's condemnation of the brutal events in Belgrade on May 29, 1903. This step resonated not only with Serbia but also with great powers, which welcomed King Charles' move. Romania, like the rest of Europe, recognized the importance of holding the conspira-

tors accountable to maintain stability in Serbia. However, the significant influence of the conspirators presented a serious obstacle to addressing internal issues and upholding Serbia's international reputation. Despite King Charles' assurance that the May Coup would not complicate matters in the Balkans, his letters expressed disappointment in King Petar's failure to confront and punish the conspirators.

## Summary

The response of the Romanian government and its people to the coup in Serbia closely aligns with the rest of Europe. The Romanian minister in Belgrade provided crucial insights into the internal situation in Serbia, and the Romanian government diligently observed the developments in the Serbian capital. By withdrawing from the head of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment, King Charles unequivocally denounced the army's role in the coup, accurately anticipating the pressure that the officers-conspirators would exert on King Petar. Yet, Romanian government emphasized its desire to maintain friendly relations with Serbia and its new administration.

The horrific coup in Serbia captured the attention of journalist during the summer of 1903. Not only did Romanian press strongly denounce the brutal murder in Belgrade, but it also presented vivid descriptions of King Aleksandar Obrenović, his spouse, and the reasons behind their tragic demise. The reign of King Aleksandar, along with the shocking events in his personal life, deeply resonated with the Romanian public. The newspaper *Adevărul* presented an optimistic view of Petar Karadorđević's rise to power in Serbia. There was a hopeful belief that he would successfully navigate Serbia out of the challenges that had emerged during his predecessor's rule. However, there was a genuine concern that the conspirators, empowered by their successful actions, would yield significant influence over Serbian politics. King Petar's failure to heed the demands of the great powers to confront the conspirators had far-reaching consequences during the initial years of his reign, impacting both foreign and domestic policies.

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