

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

**Edited by
Vladimir Lj. Cvetković
Ionuț Nistor**



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Adrian VIȚALARU
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași
adrian.vitalaru@uaic.ro

Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovak Crisis of 1938

Abstract: The Czechoslovak crisis was, on the one hand, a test case for the cohesion between the three allied members (Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) of the Little Entente. On the other hand, the decision of the Great Powers to impose territorial cessions on Czechoslovakia represented the beginning of the end for both the Czechoslovak state and the Little Entente. As the international crisis unfolded in 1938, Romania and Yugoslavia tried to coordinate their diplomatic actions in support of their Czechoslovak ally. Nevertheless, there were occasions when the leaders in Bucharest and Belgrade acted differently. Because Romania was more closely tied to the fate of Czechoslovakia for economic and security reasons, the government in Bucharest was more active internationally in supporting Czechoslovakia. However, Romania and Yugoslavia tried to avoid being drawn into a war that might involve Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovak crisis, Little Entente, Interwar period

Introduction. Little Entente under pressure

The year 1938 was shaped by several major events in international history, but perhaps the greatest tensions on the international scene were caused by the „Sudeten crisis”/ „Czechoslovak crisis”, which was settled by a decision taken by the leaders of the four great powers (Germany, England, France, Italy, and France) attending the Munich Conference (September 29–30, 1938).¹ The decisions taken through the Munich Agreement led to the

¹ From the rich bibliography on the Czechoslovak crisis, here are just a few reference books: Telford Taylor, *Munich: The Price of Peace*, (London: Sydney, Auckland, Toronto, Hodder and Stoughton, 1979); Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939. The Path to Ruin*, (Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1984); Yvon Lacaze, *La France et Munich. Etude d'un processus décisionnel en matière de relations internationales*, (Bern, Francfort-s. Main, New York, Paris, Vienne: Peter Lang, 1992); David Gillard, *Appeasement in Crisis. From Munich to Prague, October 1938–March 1939*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

integration of the Sudetenland into Germany, underpinned the ceding of Czechoslovak territories to Hungary and Poland, and created the preconditions for the demise/destruction of the Czechoslovak state. All these events destabilized the security equation in Central and Danubian Europe and led to the collapse of the Little Entente (an alliance between Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania).

The objective of the study is to provide a Romanian perspective of how Romanian-Yugoslav relations were intertwined in the context of the Czechoslovak crisis. Therefore, the study is mainly based on the investigation of Romanian archival sources, the memoirs of Romanian statesmen, but also integrates the contributions of Romanian and foreign historians on Romanian-Yugoslav relations and the events in Central Europe in 1938.

In order to understand better the attitude of the leaders in Bucharest, we should answer the following question: What did Czechoslovakia represent for Romania in 1938? Czechoslovakia was an ally with a positive image in inter-war Romania, because the two countries had strong political and cultural ties. However, the most important element was the economic component of the bilateral relationship. In 1938, Czechoslovakia was among Romania's three primary trade partners, both in terms of imports and exports.² Of all Romania's allies, the strongest trade relationship, based on the complementarity of the two economies, was with Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Czechoslovakia was an important arms supplier for Romania, which increased the strategic component of the Bucharest-Prague relationship.

We should take into account two other elements to recompose the Romanian background of the Czechoslovak crisis. In the context of events in Central Europe, Romania's position was, in my opinion, complicated than that of Yugoslavia. Because it bordered directly on Czechoslovakia, Romania could have been a potential gateway for Red Army troops to enter Czechoslovak territory if the network of treaties between France, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union had been activated.³ This is why the leaders in Bucharest have been under constant international pressure on this sensitive issue. In terms of internal politics, King Carol II was trying to consolidate his authoritarian regime imposed at the beginning of the year, which was contested from various levels of society, but also to keep under control the numerous Hungarian minority.

On the other hand, Yugoslavia was an ally of Romania in the framework of the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente, playing an important

² Gh. Iacob, *Economia României (1859–1939). Fapte, legi, idei*, (Iași: Editura Fundației „Axis”, 1996), 102.

³ Adrian Vițalaru, „Some Remarks on a Controversial Subject. Romania and the issue of the Soviet Troops Transit on their Way to Czechoslovakia in 1938”, *The Munich Conference (September 1938) – the Path towards the Destructuring the Democracy in Europe*, coords. Mihail E. Ionescu, Eva Semotanová (București: Editura Militară, 2014), 160–208.

role, from the perspective of the leaders in Bucharest, in the deterrence of possible threats from Hungary and Bulgaria. However, the level of cohesion between the two allied states had declined after the tensions of 1937, caused by the reconfiguration of relations between Belgrade and Sofia, as well as Yugoslav-Italian relations.⁴

However, diplomatic documents demonstrate a permanent dialog between the head of the Romanian legation in Belgrade and the head of the Yugoslav government or the deputy foreign minister (Ivo Andrić) on the negotiations on the agreement between the Balkan Entente and Bulgaria or the negotiations of the Little Entente, through the Romanian foreign minister, with the Hungarian officials. Exchanges of messages, permanent consultations, and meetings between the diplomatic representatives of the two alliances show that in May-July 1938, attempts were being made to maintain a unity of views/a common denominator in negotiations with Sofia and Budapest.⁵

Nevertheless, there were also concerns in Bucharest about the foreign policy of the Stojadinović government. For example, the Yugoslav prime minister's visit to Italy was closely monitored by Romanian diplomacy.⁶ Romanians expressed their surprise that the head of the Yugoslav government delayed giving them details of the conversation with the Italian Foreign Minister, which were considered particularly important in Bucharest.⁷ It was not until June 28 that Stojadinović met with Cădere, telling him that Italy wanted an agreement between Hungary and its neighbours. Italy was disinterested in the situation in Czechoslovakia, and the head of diplomacy in Rome reportedly said that he did not consider „that a serious crisis would threaten the state of affairs” in Central Europe.⁸

Even if the collaboration at the signing of the Thessaloniki Agreement (with Bulgaria) and the ongoing consultations during the negotiations with Hungary, which led to the signing of the Bled Agreements in August 1938, erased some of the impressions left by the previous year,⁹ there were still plenty of political dossiers in which the two states acted in separate lanes.¹⁰ But clearly the most important question in September 1938 was whether the two sta-

⁴ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period, 1919-1941*, (East Europeans Monographs, Boulder, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 215-219; Vasile Râmneanu, *Istoricul relațiilor româno-iugoslave în perioada interbelică*, (Ti-mișoara: Editura Mirton, 2007), 60-70.

⁵ Milan Vanku, *Mica Înțelegere și politica externă a Iugoslaviei 1920-1938. Momente și semnificații*, (București: Editura Politică, 1979), 233-234.

⁶ On June 20, the Romanian Foreign Minister wrote to Cădere to inform "thoroughly" about the purpose and outcome of the meeting between Stojadinović and Ciano (Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe [Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] (AMAE), Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 9, 158).

⁷ AMAE, Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 9, 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁹ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period*, 239-241.

¹⁰ One of these issues was the attitude towards the League of Nations.

tes would comply with the agreements on which the Little Entente was based. For the Little Entente states the Czechoslovak crisis represented a „moment of truth”, a test case for relations between the three allied states.

It should be noted that since mid-August, Romania was represented in Belgrade by the chargé d'affaires, Dan Geblescu, since Victor Cădere, the diplomat who led the legation since 1936, was appointed to the direction of Lower Danube County.¹¹ Thus, during the tense period of September 1938, Romania was represented in Belgrade by a diplomat of secondary rank, who had just started his mission in Yugoslavia,¹² while Jovan Dučić, Yugoslav plenipotentiary minister in Bucharest, was an important man of culture with a wide diplomatic experience,¹³ who headed the diplomatic mission in the Romanian capital since 1937.

Czechoslovak crisis at its climax

At a meeting in early September 1938, the King Carol II presented the coordinates of Romania's foreign policy to Romanian Foreign Minister Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen. The sovereign believed that Romania relied on close relations with France and Great Britain and loyalty to its alliances, but Carol II wanted to avoid „at all costs” engaging in a conflict with Germany. Moreover, the King underline that: „The passage of Soviet troops through our territory is an impossibility and no Romanian will admit it.”¹⁴ These comments show Romania's foreign policy options before the final phase of the Czechoslovak crisis.

With these coordinates, the Romanian Foreign Minister travelled to Geneva to take part in the League of Nations session. In discussions in Geneva with members of the French and British delegations, Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen explained the Romanian sovereign's views. The Romanian Foreign Minister stressed that Czechoslovakia was an important ally of the Romanian state, but he considered it impossible for Soviet troops to pass through Romania.¹⁵

¹¹ Ioana Ecaterina Asăvoaie, *Diplomatul Victor Cădere 1919–1944*, (Bragadiru: Editura Mii-decărți, 2019), 251.

¹² On Geblescu's career see Stelian Neagoe, „Dan Geblescu: un diplomat român uitat”, Dan Geblescu, *Chestiunea Basarabiei și relațiile româno-sovietice, 1917–1934*, ed. Stelian Neagoe (București: Editura Machiavelli, 2013), 7–23.

¹³ Born in 1874, the writer and diplomat Jovan Dučić was a special figure of Yugoslav diplomacy, working throughout his career at diplomatic missions in Sofia, Rome, Athens, Madrid, Geneva, Cairo, Budapest, Bucharest, Madrid and Lisbon. Dragan Bakić, „The First Yugoslav Ambassador: Jovan Dučić in Romania, 1937–1940”, *New Cultural and Political Perspectives on Serbian-Romanian Relations*, Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, Jovana Kolundžija, Mircea Măran, Otilia Hedeșan, Christene D'Anca (eds.) (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023), 147–171.

¹⁴ Regele Carol al II-lea al României, *Însemnări zilnice. 1937–1951*, volumul I, 11 martie 1937–4 septembrie 1938 (caietele 1–6), ed. Viorica Moisuc (București: Editura Iscripta, 1995), 237.

¹⁵ More details in Adrian Vițalaru, *Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen – diplomat*, (Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2014), 386–387.

When the international crisis in Central Europe seemed to reach its climax (September 12, 1938), following the German support for the self-determination of the Sudetenland, which paved the way for secession, Romania became increasingly interested in the attitude of its Yugoslav ally. This explains the confidential report sent on September 14, 1938 by Victor Cădere, former Romanian Minister Plenipotentiary in Belgrade, to King Carol II. Such written reports, summarizing the work of a diplomat, were unusual and did not fit into the classic protocol of Romanian diplomacy. Cădere stated bluntly that: „As far as the German-Czechoslovak dispute is concerned, Yugoslavia will not intervene in case of a German attack.”¹⁶ The crisis in Central Europe was considered by the experienced Romanian diplomat as „(...) a test case for the Little Entente, since it also raises the question of Hungary's future attitude (supported or guided by Germany).”¹⁷ The diplomat's conclusions were not encouraging for the leadership in Bucharest: „from all the political issues presented here, it can be deduced that Yugoslavia is mainly disposed towards a policy of neutrality.”¹⁸

In the second half of September 1938, Romanian diplomacy aimed to reduce the risk of a possible Hungarian military intervention against Czechoslovakia, which would have meant a practical implementation of the clauses of the Little Entente agreement.¹⁹ Another scenario that made it difficult for Romanian leaders to position themselves was that Hungary would allow German troops to attack the Czechoslovak state from its territory. In order to prevent a possible war that would have involved Romania, the leaders in Bucharest made demarches to Berlin, asking the Germans not to use Hungarian territory as a springboard to attack Czechoslovakia or to force the Hungarians to join them.²⁰

In this context, on 19 September 1938, the Foreign Minister proposed to King Carol II for his approval the possibility that Yugoslavia and Romania should approach the major European powers (in particular - France, Great Britain and Italy) and Poland in an attempt to temper Hungary.²¹ Having received Bucharest's agreement, he made demarches in Belgrade, through Romania's chargé d'affaires in the capital of Yugoslavia, for joint action by the two allies.²² In his reply, however, the Yugoslav Prime Minister wondered to what extent the existence of the Little Entente was still feasible after

¹⁶ AMAE, Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 51, 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁹ Dov B. Lungu, *Romania and the Great Powers, 1933-1940*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), 131.

²⁰ Rebecca Haynes, *Politica României față de Germania între 1936 și 1940*, (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2003), 58.

²¹ Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă. Documente. Septembrie 1938*, (București: Adevărul Holding, 2010), 433.

²² See the account of his actions in N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma. Ricordi e documenti di un diplomatico*, (Roma: Edizioni Leonardo, 1947), 101-111.

the Prague authorities had accepted the principle of ceding part of Czechoslovak territory.²³ In addition, the Yugoslavs said that it was impossible to deny the Hungarians and Poles the implementation of the principle of nationalities, once Germany would benefit from such measures. Therefore, Stojadinović said, „Yugoslav public opinion does not understand the rationale of our intervention against Hungary, considering all the above.”²⁴

Although the Romanian foreign minister did not seem surprised by the attitude of the Yugoslav leader, he tried to obtain a clarification of Yugoslavia's attitude. Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen continued to insist on joint action by the two allies against Hungary. He wrote to Dan Gebleescu, asking that the following message should be conveyed to Stojadinović: „Far from my mind the idea of engaging in an action that could lead us to war. But I believe that we have a historical responsibility and that one day we may be asked how it is possible that the governments in Bucharest and Belgrade have not at least tried diplomatic action to prevent the union of Slovakia with Hungary, which could mean the beginning of a total revision of the clauses of the treaties *manu militari*.”²⁵ Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs was of the opinion that the leaders in Bucharest and Belgrade should declare that they would do nothing to threaten peace as long as Hungary accepted the territorial rectification consented by the Czechoslovaks, but that they would not remain unmoved by the attribution of Slovakia to Hungary.²⁶ Stojadinović's reply on the evening of 23 September²⁷ led Petrescu-Comnen to assert that the unity of views between the two states seemed to be restored.

But what motivated the Romanian minister to make such a statement? Firstly, the fact that the Yugoslavs were not questioning - for the moment - the existence of the Little Entente and, secondly, their agreement to initiate a common approach aimed at preventing the possible annexation of Slovakia to Hungary.²⁸ Thus, we can observe how Romanian diplomacy was trying to exploit the potential of relations between Belgrade and Bucharest, especially to avoid a strengthening of Hungary, which would have meant a weakening of the position of the two allied states, rather than to support Czechoslovakia.²⁹

The leaders in Bucharest were also doing so because Romania's relations with Poland were at an impasse after the Poles made public their own territorial demands over Czechoslovakia and expressed their readiness to support Hungarian claims.³⁰

²³ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period*, 242; AMAE, Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 51, 180–185.

²⁴ Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă*, 506–508.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 522; N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 110.

²⁶ Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă*, 522.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 558–559.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 561.

²⁹ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period*, 244.

³⁰ Florin Anghel, „In tres partes divisa: Polonia și criza cehoslovacă în documente diplomatice românești (septembrie-octombrie 1938)”, *Revista Istorică*, 5–6/2007, 579–589.

Within this context, since September 19, the Chief of the Romanian General Staff of the Army ordered his commanders to: „Maintain the reserve officers and troops currently undergoing instruction under arms. Complete the effectives (officers and troops) and the requisitions of the active portions of the covering units on the Western Front. Concentrate, without delay, through individual call-up, the troops and reserve officers of the pioneer (engineering), transmission, and aeronautic units designated for duty on the Western Front.”³¹

On 23 September, the Czechoslovak army was on a state of war, and Romanian military and diplomatic intelligence reports showed troop movements in Hungary and on Romania's border with the Soviet Union. All these military deployments increased the anxiety of Romanian leaders and led them to consider the Czechoslovak decision to mobilize the army as „dangerous and regrettable.”³²

A day later the tension seemed to grow more pronounced, and the news from the British Prime Minister's meeting with Hitler was not encouraging.³³ This was the general international context on the evening of 24 September, when Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen left Geneva after more than two weeks' stay.³⁴ On the morning of 25 September 1938, the Romanian minister, who had arrived in Yugoslavia, met Stojadinović, with whom he tried to establish the details of the diplomatic actions initially negotiated through the Belgrade legation.³⁵ Petrescu-Comnen and Stojadinović come to the conclusion that Romania and Yugoslavia should adopt a wait-and-see attitude, trying to act to avoid a possible conflict, but in case of war they should maintain neutrality.³⁶

During the night of 25 to 26 September a meeting of the restricted Council of Ministers of Romania was held, which was attended by King Carol II, Patriarch Miron Cristea (Prime Minister), Petrescu-Comnen, Armand Călinescu (Minister of Interior) and Mircea Cancicov (Minister of Finance).³⁷ Armand Călinescu, Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs, gives us, in his memoirs, an account of the discussions that took place in Sinaia on the night of 25 to 26 September 1938. He noted that the Romanian Foreign Minister informed the King of the international situation, stating that „Stojadinović did

³¹ Larry L. Watts, „Romania as Military Ally (I): Czechoslovakia in 1938”, *Romanian Civilization*, volume VII, Nr. 2, Fall, 1998, 38.

³² This was the view expressed by Alexandru Cretzianu, political director of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a meeting with the French Minister Plenipotentiary in Bucharest (Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), Fond Bucarest-Légation, carton 37, telegram no. 877-881, Bucharest, 26 september 1938).

³³ N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 114-115.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 115. He claims that he warned the King of the seriousness of the international situation and took the train home. He does not recall being summoned by the government in Bucharest.

³⁵ N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 119-121.

³⁶ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period*, 245.

³⁷ N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 122.

not wish to take any steps to prevent the partition of Czechoslovakia. He believes that since he has accepted the surrender, the treaty is no longer in force.”³⁸ However, the Yugoslavs expressed their willingness to examine with the Romanians the question of a possible annexation of Slovakia to Hungary.³⁹ The decision taken at Sinaia was that Romania should adopt a policy of neutrality.⁴⁰ In this context, the King did not approve the mobilisation requested by the Higher General Staff, but agreed instead to the proposal to reinforce Romanian troops on the Hungarian border.⁴¹

According to the memoirs of the Romanian Foreign Minister, King Carol II approved his proposals to approach the Polish government, to inform the European chancelleries about the Slovak problem and to help Czechoslovakia at all costs to save as much of its territory as possible and to maintain its independence.⁴² The fact that the Romanian Foreign Ministry acted in the following period according to the principles established at Sinaia is demonstrated by several telegrams sent to Belgrade, Prague and Warsaw on September 26 and 27, 1938.⁴³

On September 27, 1938, the Romanian Foreign Ministry sent a telegram to Belgrade requesting Stojadinović’s approval that the two governments should present a joint declaration (which had to be read) in the major European capitals (Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, Warsaw) condemning, in the first place, Hungary’s territorial demands against the Czechoslovak state.⁴⁴

This action was aimed at pressuring Budapest not to intervene in the event of a German attack against Czechoslovakia or to avoid provoking a conflict with the neighboring state, which would have led to the activation of the military clauses of the Little Entente.⁴⁵ The Romanian foreign minister would have preferred an immediate response from the Yugoslav government so that the declaration could be read out in the five European capitals on September 28. However, Romania’s chargé d’affaires in Belgrade was not immediately received by Stojadinović, which led to discontent in Bucharest. The

³⁸ Armand Călinescu, *Însemnări zilnice 1916–1939*, ed. Al. Gh. Savu (București: Humanitas, 1990), 397.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dov B. Lungu, *Romania and the Great Powers*, 134–135; Armand Călinescu, *Însemnări zilnice*, 397.

⁴¹ N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 122; Ioan Talpeș, *Diplomație și apărare. Coordonate ale politicii externe românești 1933–1939*, (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1988), 241.

⁴² N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 122.

⁴³ Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă*, 382, 383.

⁴⁴ AMAE, Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 9, 245–246.

⁴⁵ The Yugoslav leader has apparently told Budapest that if the Hungarian government guarantees Yugoslav territories and does not claim Slovakian territories, he will make demarches to the government in Prague to cede the territories inhabited by the Hungarian minority to Hungary (Milan Vanku, *Mica Înțelegere și politica externă a Iugoslaviei 1920–1938*, 246).

meeting took place on the afternoon of September 28, but the Yugoslav leader did not give a clear-cut answer, demanding to amend some passages in the document. The opinion of Romanian diplomats was that the Yugoslavs were avoiding giving their consent because they feared that some passages of the declaration might be interpreted negatively in Berlin.⁴⁶ Trying to clarify the situation, the Romanian Foreign Minister even had a telephone conversation with Stojadinović, who tried to convince him that the most prudent thing to do would be to wait for the results of the Munich Conference.⁴⁷

Although he doesn't express it strongly in his memoirs, the Romanian diplomat attributes to the Yugoslav politician the failure of joint initiatives in support of Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Petrescu-Comnen suggests that Stojadinović was sometimes naïve in his interpretation of certain political gestures made by some European leaders. On the other hand, he uses kind words when writing about the Yugoslav minister in Bucharest, Jovan Dučić, of whom he said he was a good friend.⁴⁸

In this context, it is noteworthy that Romanian newspapers have published articles expressing criticism toward Yugoslavia's stance. The reaction of the Romanian press, as J. Dučić rightly notes, was based, on the one hand, on the following directive: „to speak with permanent sympathy about Czechoslovakia, but without the minimum offence to Germany and Italy.” On the other hand, the Yugoslav diplomat noted that articles critical of Yugoslav and Polish attitudes were part of the same tactical scheme: „to make people believe that Romania is committed to its obligations towards Czechoslovakia and that if it does not fulfil them, it will not be its fault but that of others.”⁴⁹

The agreement concluded in Munich by the leaders of the four major European powers was therefore awaited with great interest both in Bucharest and in Belgrade. It was the end of a crisis that confirmed the deterioration of an important axis of Romania's security system (the Little Entente) and required the King and his Foreign Minister to adopt a political stance that would bring the Romanian state into line with the new international realities.

After Munich. New challenges in relations between Romania and Yugoslavia

With the implementation of the terms of the agreement signed on the night of 29–30 September, Germany increased its influence in Central and South-Eastern Europe.⁵⁰ As previously noted, Romania became increasingly concerned when Poland and, notably, Hungary asserted their territorial cla-

⁴⁶ Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă*, 718.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 717; N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 148–150.

⁴⁸ N. P. Comnène, *Preludi del grande dramma*, 130.

⁴⁹ Jovan Dučić, *Rapoarte diplomatice din București (1937–1939)*, 260.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Haynes, *Politica României față de Germania*, 61.

ims over Czechoslovakia. Romanian diplomacy sought to act on several levels to block Budapest's intentions, while also seeking to test the reaction of the major powers to Hungarian and Polish claims. In this context, the Romanian Foreign Minister expressed the position of Bucharest's leaders. Thus, in a dispatch sent on 4 October to several of Romania's diplomatic missions, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that ceding „the Hungarian part” of Ruthenia (Subcarpathian Rus'; Carpatho-Ukraine) to Hungary would mean the economic strangulation of Czechoslovakia and would bring the railway and road connecting Romania to Czechoslovakia under Budapest's control.⁵¹ Moreover, the Romanian authorities considered that the loss of control over the railroad between Romania and Czechoslovakia would be a real catastrophe, as the Romanian state would no longer be able to obtain the war material that Czechoslovakia had to provide, and bilateral trade would be irreparably affected.⁵² As such a scenario was totally unfavourable to Romania's interests, the leaders in Bucharest asked Romanian diplomats to convey to the capitals where they were accredited that a favourable settlement of Hungary's claims on Ruthenia could give rise to a new crisis in Europe.⁵³

In the first days of October, when Hungary was pressuring the Prague authorities to comply with Budapest's territorial demands, Romanians tried to persuade the Yugoslavs to make new common demarches. Bucharest's leaders were determined to prevent Hungary from taking over territories inhabited by the Hungarian minority from its Czechoslovak neighbour, which could affect Romania's relations with Czechoslovakia and feed the revisionist appetite of the leaders in Budapest. But the Belgrade government had a different approach. The dispute had to be resolved as quickly as possible because it risked spreading to other minorities.⁵⁴ Therefore Czechoslovakia should not be supported and encouraged, but advised to "speed up the solution with Hungary."⁵⁵

The attitude of the Yugoslav ally caused discontent in the circles of power in Bucharest. On 5 October 1938, as information spread about the possible proclamation of the independence of Ruthenia, which, according to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, would have led to the entry of Hungarian troops into the region, the message sent by the Romanian head of diplomacy to Stojadinović through the Romanian legation in Belgrade was sharp. „Please draw the serious attention of the Yugoslav Government to this grave matter and ask them what attitude they would take to this hypothesis. I dare to believe that the Yugoslav Government is aware of the seriousness of this issue.”⁵⁶ At the same time, the Romanian chargé d'affaires in Belgrade raised

⁵¹ Arhivele Naționale ale României [National Archives of Romania] (ANR), Fond Casa Regală. Carol II, file 165/1938, vol. II, 86.

⁵² ANR, Fond Casa Regală. Carol II, file 165/1938, vol. II, 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ AMAE, Fond 71/Iugoslavia, vol. 9, 265–266.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

the stakes in talks with Yugoslav officials. He said that the loss of Ruthenia would be a severe blow to the Czechoslovak state, as it would cut off the link with Romania. Moreover, Czechoslovakia was determined to defend its territory, and a Czechoslovak-Hungarian conflict would have consequences for the military clauses of the Little Entente.⁵⁷

Although in the early days of October the attitude of the Belgrade government to Hungarian territorial claims on Czechoslovakia was not as clear as the leaders in Bucharest would have preferred, arousing suspicion and prompting Romanian diplomacy to make persistent demarches in Belgrade, the situation became clear by the end of the first decade of October. The leaders in Bucharest were somewhat relieved (but also suspicious) of Stoiadinović's assurances that he would support Romania's efforts to keep Ruthenia within the Czechoslovak state.⁵⁸ The confirmation of the position of Belgrade, which has made demarches in Berlin and Rome, has been well received in Bucharest.⁵⁹

The failure of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian negotiations, however, transferred the question of Hungary's territorial claims to the Great Powers, signatories of the Munich Agreement. Germany and Italy assumed the role of mediators, and on 2 November 1938, Czechoslovakia was forced to cede territory to Hungary and Poland through the Vienna Award.⁶⁰ The cession of part of Ruthenia to Hungary weakened Romania's land links with Czechoslovakia, further undermining the coherence of Romanian-Czechoslovak relations. In this context, the Little Entente was not denounced (although in Bucharest and Belgrade the alliance was considered no longer valid), but remained „dormant”, as demanded by the leaders in Prague, in order not to further weaken Czechoslovakia's international position.⁶¹ On February 22, 1939, Romania and Yugoslavia signed a secret protocol renewing the 1921 treaty (under which the two countries were to offer each other help in the event of a Hungarian attack) until 1944, seeking assurances on their policy towards Hungary.⁶²

Conclusions

Romanian-Yugoslav relations went through a tense period in the context of the Czechoslovak crisis, which fuelled suspicions and at times reduced the level of mutual trust. Although the Bucharest government appeared to be

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 271–272.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 283–292.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶⁰ Miklos Lajko, „Curs yapping round the dying stag”, or the rituals of fractured societies: Hungary and Poland in the vortex of Munich Crisis of 1938”, *The Munich Crisis, politics and the people. International, transnational and comparative perspective*, edited by Julie V. Gottlieb, Daniel Hucker and Richard Toye (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 78–79.

⁶¹ Eugene Boia, *Romania's relations with Yugoslavia in the interwar period*, 246.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

more sympathetic to its Czechoslovak ally, it did not agree to the possible passage of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia through Romanian territory and sought to avoid involvement in a potential conflict. The Yugoslavs, on the other hand, wanted to stay as far away as possible from the crisis in Central Europe and to avoid a possible activation of the terms of the alliance with Romania and Czechoslovakia. This caution led the leaders in Belgrade not to support some of the initiatives of the Bucharest government, which was mainly concerned with countering Budapest's territorial claims and avoiding Hungary's involvement in the Czechoslovak crisis.

The Czechoslovak crisis and the Munich Agreement showed that the Franco-British geopolitical card played by King Carol II had not worked out as hoped in Bucharest, and Romania's security system was under great pressure. Somewhat isolated, Romania tried to strengthen its relations with Yugoslavia after Munich, as the leaders in Belgrade seemed more reasonable than the allies in Warsaw. This explains the visits to Romania by Regent Paul of Yugoslavia (November 1938 and January 1939) and the visit to Belgrade (February 1939) by Romanian Foreign Minister Grigore Gafencu, as well as the elevation of diplomatic missions to embassy level.

Summary

The Czechoslovak (Sudeten) crisis of 1938 was one of the great international crises of the interwar period. Although the protagonists were Germany and Czechoslovakia, it was the decisions taken at the Munich Conference that ended the crisis, which could have led to war. The leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy forced Czechoslovakia to cede territory to Nazi Germany and to satisfy the territorial claims of Hungary and Poland. Within this geopolitically tense framework, Romania and Yugoslavia monitored events in Central Europe with great interest and sought to coordinate their diplomatic actions, either to advise their Czechoslovak ally or to try to avoid possible Hungarian involvement if the crisis escalated into armed conflict. Although both Romania and Yugoslavia wanted to avoid conflict and limit Czechoslovakia's territorial concessions to Hungary, the leaders in Belgrade at times avoided supporting Romanian diplomatic actions that affected relations between the two allies. However, from the end of September 1938, when the Little Entente existed only on paper and Polish-Romanian relations had deteriorated, the leaders in Bucharest sought to strengthen ties with Yugoslavia both bilaterally and in the framework of the Balkan Entente.

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