

ROMANIA'S NEUTRALITY IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS SEEN BY THE SERBIAN PRESS (1914-1915)

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Abstract. In difficult moments of struggle for survival, when the First World War was in full swing, and Austro-Hungarian troops at the country's borders, Serbia hoped that Romania would engage in the war, given that these two countries had common interests in the great empire from their vicinity. The paper tracks and presents the attitude of the Serbian press towards Romania's position in the early years of the Great War, at a time when it had not yet made a final decision of military involvement in the World War. The Belgrade Daily *Politika*, the most prestigious publication in the country, followed with keen interest the events in Romania, showing the political events in the neighboring country almost in every number and often naively announcing Romania's future entry into the war against Austria-Hungary. Depending on the situation at the given moment, comments that were usually favorable towards Romania sometimes also received a dose of skepticism regarding Romania's exit from its neutrality and entrance into the war on the side of the Entente. When Germany launched its offensive on Serbia, the newspaper ceased to publish, as a consequence of the evacuation of Belgrade and the withdrawal of the Serbs from the capital.

Keywords: Serbia, *Politika*, Triple Entente, Romania's Neutrality, war

Introduction

The Great War is one of the themes that in the last few years has regained its relevance, both through the appearance of new approaches and interpretations of the causes and pretext of the outbreak of the world conflagration, as well as through the anniversary itself, the centenary of the outbreak of the war representing an opportunity to organize numerous events scientific, publishing new monographs and studies, creating other content on this topic.

Serbia is of course one of the key states regarding the outbreak and development of this tragic event in human history. Over the centuries, Serbia's relations with Romania have represented an example of peaceful collaboration

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between two neighboring states, which were also allies during the Great War. Until the moment Romania entered the war, Serbia counted on the alliance with Romania, although, on the other hand, when Romania expressed its territorial aspirations in the event of entering the war, a dose of mistrust and suspicion in the intentions of Romanian diplomacy regarding the takeover of territories in the event of the disintegration of Austria-Hungary. Of course, it is about the delimitation between Serbia and Romania in Banat and the aspirations of both states over this territory, which each considers as part of its own national space.

Serbia in the Great War

The war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, which began on July 28, 1914, with the declaration of war that the dualist monarchy sent to the Serbian government through an ordinary telegram,¹ expanded very quickly, becoming a European and world conflict.

The Serbian Supreme Command assigned its three armies to the rivers bordering Austria-Hungary, from where the enemy's main attack was expected. The commander of the Austro-Hungarian army in the Balkans, General Oskar Potiorek, set up his command in Tuzla, Bosnia, and decided to direct the main attacks to the more difficult directions, across the Drina, to take the Serbs by surprise.

After crossing the Drina, at the beginning of August 1914, the enemy began the penetration towards Valjevo, waiting to enter the decisive battle with the Serbian army from the positions in front of this city. The commander of the Second Serbian Army, General Stepa Stepanović, then undertook the famous march to the Drina, stopping the enemy's advance towards Valjevo in the decisive battle on Mount Cer, near the Drina, on the night of August 15-16. The Austro-Hungarian troops, taken by surprise, offered greater resistance for only three to four days, and then they completely withdrew from Serbia, across the Drina and the Sava. The victory at Cer was an important event not only for Serbia but also for the Entente as a whole, representing the first victory of the Allies in the First World War.

At the beginning of September 1914, the Austro-Hungarian army started a new offensive. From the middle of September, on the peaks of Gučevo, Boranje, Jagodnje, and Soko mountains, heavy battles took place for several weeks, known as the Battle of the Drina. The heaviest battles took place on the top of Mačkov kamen (one of the peaks of Jagodnje mountain) and Crni vrh (on Gučevo).²

By mid-November, the Serbian army was completely exhausted. The aggressor's new attack was unstoppable, so the command of the Serbian army decided that all three armies should withdraw to new positions, rest, and complete their divisions.

By the end of November, the Austro-Hungarians occupied northwestern Serbia with the cities of Belgrade, Šabac, and Valjevo. The three Serbian armies fortified themselves on the right bank of the Kolubara River. After a short rest, the counteroffensive of the Serbian armies began, which ended with the defeat of the

enemy. The Austro-Hungarian soldiers began their rapid retreat. Already in the middle of December, the Austro-Hungarian units were expelled from Serbia, and Belgrade was liberated.

In the fall of 1915, a new military action of the Central Powers began. The command over this action was entrusted this time to German Field Marshal Mackensen.³ He decided that the main attack would be made by the German troops, from the north. He ordered the Austro-Hungarian army to attack from the west, and the Bulgarians to cross the border with Serbia and strike the Serbian army from behind. At the beginning of November, the Serbian soldiers began to withdraw. Although a strong resistance was put up, Belgrade quickly fell into the hands of the enemies. In the south, the Bulgarians entered Vranje, Skopje, and Kumanovo and severed the links between the Serbs and the allies who were in Thessaloniki.

When the leadership of the Serbian army understood that the retreat towards Thessaloniki was completely impossible, it ordered the retreat towards Kosovo and Metohija. The territory of Serbia was divided between Austria-Hungary (the northwestern part) and Bulgaria (the southeastern part). At the end of November, the decision was made to withdraw the Serbs through Montenegro and Albania, up to the Adriatic coast. A month later, after the arduous retreat over the snowy ridges and canyons of the Drin and Morača rivers, some 150,000 soldiers and civilians arrived on the Albanian coast near Shkodër, completely exhausted and hungry. More than 60,000 people died of cold and hunger on the road.

Staying on the Albanian coast did not offer safety, especially because of the Austro-Hungarian army that was close by. Because of this, in January 1916, the French organized a camp to welcome the Serbs on the island of Corfu. The crossing of the Serbs from the Albanian ports, with the ships of the allies, constantly threatened by the submarines of the enemies, to the islands of Corfu and Vido in the Ionian Sea, lasted over a month.⁴ Although they were given medical aid, another ten thousand people died of exhaustion. Until the end of the war, the meetings of the Government and the National Assembly were held on the island of Corfu. The supreme command, together with 125,000 restored soldiers, passed to the area of Thessaloniki, where they joined the allies.

By distributing the Serbian units between the French and British troops, the formation of the Thessaloniki Front was completed. The definitive breakthrough of the Thessaloniki Front was reached only two years later. The new commander of the allied forces, General Franchet d'Espèrey developed the attack plan together with Vojvoda Živojin Mišić. In mid-September 1918, the attack of the Serbian infantry began.⁵ By the end of the month, the entire country was liberated. On November 1, the vanguard of the Serbian armies entered Belgrade, and the Serbian units crossed into the territory of Austria-Hungary, which soon capitulated and disintegrated. Serbia emerged victorious from the war and achieved its main objective: the liberation of the country and the unification of the South Slavs.

***Politika* – the most important newspaper in the history of Serbian publishing**

During the period in which the military and political circumstances allowed the printing of this newspaper, *Politika* from Belgrade paid special attention to the events related to the war and the situation in the neighboring country regarding a possible entry into the war on the side of the Entente, informing its readers in each issue, about the events in Romania. The first issue of *Politika* newspaper appeared in 1904, with Vladislav F. Ribnikar as owner, director, and editor, a descendant of a well-known family of intellectuals of Slovenian origin, who settled in Serbia as early as the 19th century.

Considering the importance of this family in the history of Serbian publishing, we will briefly present the first Ribnikars, involved as publicists and journalists, as we can see, in informing Serbian public opinion about the possibility of Romania entering the war against Austria-Hungary. The founder of this family, Dr. Franja Ribnikar, came to Serbia from Slovenia in 1869, where he worked all his life as a doctor. Vladislav was the eldest son of Franja Ribnikar, born in 1871 in Trstenik. He studied history and philology in Belgrade, the Sorbonne, and at the Humboldt University in Germany. In the year 1904, he started publishing the daily newspaper *Politika* in Belgrade, which, with some interruptions during the two world wars, appears until today. He lost his life at the beginning of the First World War, on September 1, 1914, as an officer in the Serbian army. Franja's second son was Davorin-Darko Ribnikar, born in 1878 in Trstenik. He studied law in Germany, in Jena and Berlin. After his father's death, he returned to Belgrade to help his brother Vladislav in the editing of the daily *Politika*, standing out in particular through his reports from Romania in 1907⁶ and from the Friedjung trial (1909). Like his brother, he died in the battles for the defense of Serbia, on August 31, 1914. After a period in which it ceased to appear due to the foreign occupation during the First World War, *Politika* will be taken over after the end of the war by Slobodan, the youngest of the Ribnikar brothers, a doctor by profession. His successors will edit the prestigious Belgrade newspaper to this day.

Information, opinions, and comments about Romania's neutrality in the war

In the first two years of the war (1914-1916), Romania and the Romanians were especially present on the pages of the Belgrade daily. We have identified 120 articles, longer or shorter, published between July 1914 and September 1915, in which the situation in the neighboring country is presented, its attitude towards Serbia, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, comments regarding the Romanians from Austria-Hungary, information about the economic, social or political situation in Romania, news about King Carol and his death, etc.

We started our investigation with the crucial moment - the Sarajevo Assassination, which caused the outbreak of the Great War. The first information about Romania after this date, of June 15/28, 1914, is not particularly important. It is a brief note about the two-month leave that, with the consent of the Bucharest

government, the diplomatic representative of Romania in Belgrade, Filality, is taking. During his absence, diplomatic affairs will be handled by his deputy from the diplomatic representation of Romania in Belgrade.⁷ In the following days, there are also some references to Romania, but without sensational articles. It is interesting, among other things, the information from which we learn that the delegations of the two states, led by Ilić and Cotescu, measured the land on the Romanian side of the Danube bank, in order to build a railway bridge,⁸ so it was not yet believed that a large-scale war would break out, but they planned constructive projects, useful for both parties. From the days preceding the official outbreak of the war, it is also worth remembering the information regarding the meeting in Sofia between the Romanian envoy Derussi and the president of the Bulgarian government, which lasted only 15 minutes, but from which we learn, to the satisfaction of the author of the article, that Derussi informed the Bulgarian prime minister “what attitude Romania expects from Bulgaria in the current situation,”⁹ referring, of course, to the maintenance of Bulgarian neutrality in the Serbian-Austro-Hungarian conflict. Another moment of satisfaction for the editorial staff of the Belgrade daily, in the same issue, is the demonstration in Bucharest, in which the “Romanian nationalist youth”, out with flags on the streets of the capital, demanded from the officials the involvement in solving the “fraternal duty” to release Transylvania and Bucovina. The editor's comment is as follows: “Romanians believe that the time has come to liberate Transylvania,”¹⁰ thus anticipating the actions that will take place in the next period and that will, in fact, lead to the union of Transylvania with Romania. Romania's positive attitude towards Serbia is also evident from the action of stopping a Hungarian train at Vârciorova, in response to the torpedoing of Serbian ships by Austro-Hungarian forces.¹¹

At the time of the declaration of war, the citizens of Serbia found on Austro-Hungarian territory had the unpleasant surprise of being arrested. From an article published in several issues of the newspaper *Politika*,¹² written based on the testimonies of a certain Mrs. Zarić, who was in Fiume (Rijeka) on the first day of the war, it can be learned that the Austro-Hungarian authorities arrested the male citizens of Serbia, who were in the Austro-Hungarian territory for various reasons, especially for health reasons, while women, children and the elderly were loaded into a train to transport them to Orşova, from where they would be taken over by the Romanian authorities who would further organize their transport to Serbia. From Orşova, Mrs. Zarić continues to testify, apart from the family of Danilo Vladislavljević, who continued on his way to Bucharest, the others were taken to Turnu Severin. “The Romanians waited for us nicely. It was already Wednesday evening when I found out that Voivode Radomir Putnik was lying there, seriously ill [...] Voivode Putnik was taken care of in Franasović's house.”¹³

The first comments on Romania's attitude of neutrality also appear in the first days of the war. Namely, the correspondents of the newspaper reported that in Romania polarization has finally been reached between those who are for and those

who are against the war. Unofficially, there are calls that the moment has arrived to liberate the Romanian nation from Austro-Hungarian rule. On the other hand, the Romanian authorities are still undecided, despite the demands of French public opinion to decide which side they want to participate in the war.¹⁴ It seems, however, that the Romanian state wants to break off relations with both German states, because it sent its diplomatic representation in Berlin 40,000 marks for the return of the Romanians to their homeland.

The impressions of Romanians about the attitude of the Serbs in the war were presented in a short article entitled "The Romanian about the Serb,"¹⁵ in which the readers are informed about the passage through Serbia of the commercial representative of Romania in Marseille, Lipasco, whose impressions were also published in the newspaper *The Universe* from Bucharest, describing the war atmosphere in the neighboring country as a festive one following the victory against the Austro-Hungarian troops at Cer, with flags and slogans such as "To the death for Greater Serbia!"

On the other hand, an unfavorable impression was left by the passing of a train with German sailors who were sent to Turkey, a fact that provoked the revolt of the Romanian public opinion. The Romanian authorities explained that it is about workers going to finish the railway to Baghdad and that in order to eliminate any suspicions, in the future no group of more than 20 people will be allowed to pass through Romania.¹⁶

At the same time, the dissatisfaction of the Romanian population in Austria-Hungary is also growing, where there have been clashes between the people and the authorities, especially in Bucovina. The number of Romanian fugitives from Hungary in Romania is getting bigger and bigger.¹⁷ Defeated on all fronts, Austria faced a possible Hungarian and Romanian revolt. The Austrians were afraid of a possible revolt of the Romanians from Bucovina and that is why their houses were raided.¹⁸ Persecutions of the Romanian-language media and the prohibition of Romanian-language education in Transylvania are recorded. In the border areas, the Romanian population is sympathetically waiting for the Russian troops, hoping for liberation from the Austro-Hungarian yoke.¹⁹ At the beginning of September, the anti-dualist demonstrations intensified in Romania as well, a demonstration was recorded in Galati, attended by residents belonging to all social classes and especially the youth, who applauded Russia, England and France.²⁰ It should be noted that the Belgrade newspaper generally cited sources taken from the Romanian press, or from the foreign press, when reporting events and comments from Romania.

It is clear that during the outbreak of the war, Serbian propaganda, in order to encourage public opinion in the fight against the enemy, went in the direction of favoring the information that could create a positive atmosphere among the population and the Serbian army. Therefore, information was favored in which the defeats and problems encountered by the Austro-Hungarian authorities were presented, on the one hand, as well as the victories and successes of the Serbs and the

Entente powers in the war and, last but not least, the possibility of entering war of the states still in a position of neutrality, among which was Romania. It goes without saying that in this aspect as well, the most favorable information was sought, which was in the interest of Serbia.

The neutrality of Romania

The first reference to the possibility of Romania entering the war and leaving neutrality is published in a short text, but written in large and black letters, proof of the importance the editors attached to this case.²¹ The article is titled “To Transylvania!” with the subtitle “Romania in front of military action”, with the information that the Romanian newspapers convey the idea of the need for the parliament to debate the issue of a campaign of Romanian troops in Transylvania and Bucovina. The time has come for the Romanians to renounce neutrality, “so that our children cannot accuse us of treason”. Supporting this initiative, a demonstration was organized in Iasi in honor of the Russian Tsar. From this moment, throughout the years 1914-1915, until the (temporary) cessation of its publication, the newspaper eagerly awaited Romania's entry into the war, supporting this idea in a very large number of articles.

The “Latin solidarity” between Italy and Romania, “near the beginning of the action against Austria,”²² is welcomed, and the Russian press also writes about the attitude of Romanian public opinion regarding the “crossing of the Carpathians”. Italy and Romania maintained their neutrality until that moment, but they did not give up their national claims, because “if they had remained neutral at the moment when the fate of Austria, humiliated by the enemy's force, was finally decided, both Italy and Romania would tacitly renounce their claims.”²³ Both countries carefully followed the development of the situation on the fronts, being prepared to intervene at the appropriate moment. “This moment has arrived”, claims the Serbian author of the article, evidently in his great desire for two more states to go to war against Austria-Hungary. The reality was, however, different.

Commenting on the article “If I were king”, published in *Adevărul* by Constantin Faru, and in which the Romanian politician and journalist demands the withdrawal of Carol and the dynasty from the throne, the editor of the Belgrade newspaper states that he is aware of the at least unpleasant situation in which was found King Carol regarding Romania's entry into the war, but noted the following: “...from the moment he stepped on the Romanian throne and took the oath on the Romanian constitution, King Carol has no other homeland than Romania. Therefore, he and his heirs - who have become complete Romanians - must do only what the interests of the Romanian people demand.”²⁴

Politika continues to support the idea of Romania entering the war, encouraging its own readers and Serbian public opinion through article titles that contain a dose of combativeness (“To Transylvania!”),²⁵ but also hope in attracting new allies for Serbia bloodied by the war. “It is expected that Romania will finally

make the decision by the day after tomorrow at the latest”, hopes the Serbian editorial office, at the moment when the Russian troops crossed the border with Hungary in mid-September.²⁶ “In diplomatic circles it is considered that this week is decisive for Romania and it is not known how Romania could enter Bucovina and Ardeal, if the Russians conquer them with their troops before those from Bucharest decide to take action”. In relation to Russia's attitude towards Romania's position of neutrality, *Politika* quotes several times Russian newspapers and their comments on Romanian neutrality.²⁷

Meanwhile, the number of ethnic Romanian deserters from the Austro-Hungarian army was increasing. A group of three Austro-Hungarian officers, ethnic Romanians, who fled to Romania, claimed that the Austro-Hungarian military authorities had an inhumane treatment of ethnic Romanian soldiers. Among other things, it is mentioned that the wounded belonging to this ethnic group, barely healed, are again sent into battle, which is not the case with the Hungarian wounded.²⁸ On the other hand, the centuries-old Serbian-Romanian friendly relations also stood out on the battlefield. We will reproduce a fragment of a particularly moving article:

The Serbian and the Romanian. In the bloody fighting, during an assault, the Serbian soldier charged and bayoneted an Austrian. That one, defending himself, touches the Serb, who once again attacks with the bayonet.

-Enough, brother!, the wounded Austrian soldier said in Romanian. The Serb, also wounded, took the seriously wounded Romanian out of the fight and took him to the health center. There they parted.

When the wounded Serb arrived later in Niš, hearing that there were more Romanians lying there, he asked to be stationed with them. Thus the old enemies met again to heal their serious wounds as friends.

The correct attitude of the Serbian army towards the wounded ethnic Romanians from the Austro-Hungarian army is confirmed by another ethnic Romanian officer from the Austro-Hungarian army, who participated in the battles in Bosnia and after being wounded managed to flee to Romania. He testifies that the Serbs “took care of us as if we were their own wounded.”²⁹ Instead, the Austro-Hungarian military authorities return the wounded ethnic Romanians to the front before their wounds are healed, that's why many ethnic Romanian soldiers desert in Romania, “it's really surprising that whole regiments don't flee across the border in Romania”.

One of the most important articles dedicated to Romania is the one in which the readers are informed about the death of King Carol, whom Serbian journalists consider to have been the key personality in the modern history of Romania, but also

the main obstacle in bringing the decision to enter Romania into the war. In addition to the extensive biography of the Romanian monarch, there are also comments regarding his behavior during the World War, being the one who “kept Romania in a reserved position until the last moment.”³⁰ New reports and comments about the king's death and funeral also appear in the following issues of the daily *Politika*.³¹

A larger article about Romania appears at the beginning of February 1915, in which the internal political situation in this country is analyzed, with details about the attitude of all political parties and their leaders towards the “European war.”³² At the same time, the Austrian newspapers convey the concern of the military authorities regarding Romania, which is concentrating troops on the border with Transylvania, which is why the Austro-Hungarian offensive against Serbia was postponed.³³ Relations with Germany are also worsening. According to a telegram, the military attaché of Romania in Germany was invited by the kaiser to leave the German Supreme General Staff, where he was with the other military attachés, and to return to Berlin.³⁴ In Romania, however, there was still a struggle between the political factors regarding the entry into the war and the choice of the camp with which to enter the alliance. The Court is entirely on the side of Germany, and the landowners postpone entering the war, fearing the peasant movements that could engulf the country. German and Austro-Hungarian propaganda in Bucharest is very strong.³⁵

A particularly interesting article refers to the activity of the Serbs in Romania. It is about the ethnic Serbs from different Serbian lands, who settled in Romania. The author of the article estimates that 10,000 Serbs live in Bucharest alone. They established their association called “Serbian Brotherhood”, which during the difficult times in which Serbia found itself, organized several actions to support the motherland, especially through money collections.³⁶

Romanians from Transylvania domiciled in Bucharest undertook, on the other hand, numerous actions in order to support Romania's military action against Austria-Hungary and to liberate the Romanian lands from the rule of the dualist monarchy. Such a demonstration took place in Bucharest on March 25, 1915.³⁷

Take Ionescu's comments regarding the causes of the outbreak of the war were presented on the front page of the Belgrade newspaper, referring in particular to the Romanian politician's attitude towards Serbia's position in relations with Austria-Hungary during the period from the Second Balkan War to the outbreak the “European war.”³⁸

In May 1915, as a result of Italy entering the war on the side of the Triple Entente, the pressure on Romania to enter the war on the side of the Entente intensified. In the Serbian press, the number of articles and news related to this topic is increasing, also resulting from Serbia's desire for the neighboring state to declare war on Austria-Hungary, sometimes also criticizing the neighboring country for its policy of hesitation and passive waiting for the outcome of the war.³⁹ This especially since Romania presented its claims on the Banat, which was also considered by Serbia as a national territory that should be annexed to the motherland after the war. The

first larger article in which the possible delimitation between Serbia and Romania in Banat is analyzed opens a problem that will be present in the years to come between the two allied countries. In this first phase, the means of communication, more specifically the railways, are analyzed, with arguments in favor of the passage of the Timisoara-Baziaş railway within Serbia.⁴⁰

This theme, just opened, will be repeated several times in the columns of *Politika*.⁴¹ Recognizing the numerical supremacy of the Romanians in Transylvania and Bucovina, *Politika* insists on the ethnic supremacy of the Serbs in the western parts of the Banat. The problem of demarcation between the two neighboring states was, therefore, open even before Romania entered the war.

One of the fundamental articles that appeared in the *Politika* newspaper during the years of Romania's neutrality was signed on July 15, 1915, by Mircea R. Şirianu,⁴² in which, with historical arguments, the Romanian publicist presents the reality of Romanian-Serbian relations. Starting from the idea that “the past does not always guarantee us that the future will be the same”, he believes that Serbia and Romania have common interests in the European war and the same interests towards the dualist monarchy, the main aspiration being the liberation of the lands inhabited by their compatriots and joining the homeland-mother. The only obstacle to the perfect functioning of the relations between the two states is the delimitation problem in Banat, so both sides are expected to make concessions for a good resolution of this problem.

The last issue of the Belgrade newspaper from 1915, before the fall of Serbia under the rule of the forces of the Triple Alliance, was printed on September 11. Information about Romania was not absent from this last stage of the existence of *Politika* before the disaster in the fall of 1915. The last important article is the account of a French reporter from Bucharest, presenting the situation in the country from which it was expected to enter the war.⁴³ The idea of Romania's final entry into the war on the side of the Entente has been repeated so many times already. Until this moment, however, it will have to wait almost another year. The last two, shorter articles, about Romanians and Romania are those of September 8 and 9.

Conclusion

Politika suspends its publication as a result of the tragic events of the autumn of 1915, during which the country fell under the occupation of enemy troops, and the army, parliament, government, dynasty, and part of the population of Serbia retreated through the mountainous areas of Albania to the Adriatic Sea. The reappearance of *Politika* will only follow after the end of the Great War, in which both Serbia and Romania came out victorious, managing to join their national territories found until then within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, confronting each other, on a diplomatic level, in the issue of delimitation in the Banat. A dispute that ended with a compromise, by dividing the Banat between the two neighboring states.

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