

## THE BALKANS – A DISTANT REGION. COMMENTARIES OF THE U. S. PRESS IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

### БАЛКАНИТЕ – ОТДАЛЕЧЕН РЕГИОН. КОМЕНТАРИ НА АМЕРИКАНСКАТА ПРЕСА В ПЕРИОДА МЕЖДУ ДВЕТЕ СВЕТОВНИ ВОЙНИ

Прегледът на американската преса в периода между двете световни войни ни представя много интересна картина – понякога Балканите са представени като екзотично място, където всичко е възможно и където законите и принципите са обект на най-различна интерпретация. Още в началото трябва да отбележим, че от американската преса като обект на проучване сме подбрали *Time* поради това, че е седмичник и поради разнообразието на отразяваните в него теми. В текста е обърнато внимание на новия опит в сферата на държавността (чрез понятия като *електорално поведение* и *политическа фигура*) като основна причина за грешките при вземане на решения, за изявените предпочитания към авторитаризъм и политически етнически радикализъм. По наше мнение подобен подход е интересен, защото дава възможност за външен, макар и понякога събуждащ неприятни чувства поглед върху реалностите на Балканите – регион на постоянен смут.

**Ключови думи:** Балканите, електорално поведение, политическа фигура, авторитаризъм, мания за власт.

The Balkans, the most restless region in Europe, the most fragmented and ethnically puzzled area too, was present in the pages of United States newspapers, in the interwar, despite of the diplomatic retreat of this country from the European affairs, as a consequence of U. S. Senate refuse to ratify the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations Pact.

The object of this paper is not to identify a pattern of American press analyses but to highlight images, positions, commentaries which could be found in the newspapers from United States. We must state, from the beginning, that our analyze is based on the commentaries from the *Time* magazine, a very well known and famous publication and in which we could find, due to the nature of it, facts and interpretations which are, probably, more profound than in a daily newspaper, centred mostly on information.

At a not quite profound glance, we could easily observe that notions like *Balkans*, *Balkanized*, easily repeat themselves in various analyses, on various subjects. The topics and the characters are not relevant, all and anybody could be “looked” through the eyes of above mentioned notions. And not only to define, strictly geographically, a region; using this concepts is made in order to stresses some characteristics – politically and socially, mainly – which, in most of the cases are negatives, comparatively with Western ones (American, especially) and, automatically, associated with the discussed area. And another

observation: in general, for the United States newspapers, there isn't a very clear defined bordered area which is called *Balkans* and the preoccupation for this matter is secondary. Instead, all countries, from Adriatic to Black Sea and from Danube (including Romania) to Aegean Sea are included into *Balkan* area. Important is, as we mentioned above, the "internal behaviour", which, in most of the cases, is a "balkanized one" and the area potential to become, as proved from the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, a disruptive factor of the established order in international relations.

*Electoral behaviours* are one of the aspects which is very much related with the characteristics of the area. One example, from a very large number of it: "Elections in the Balkans, particularly in Yugoslavia, work on an entirely different principle than do those in other lands. In the first place, much depends upon whether the Government in power wants to remain in power. Usually it does and, to achieve its desired end, it uses many means. Sometimes it is bribery, often ballot changing, occasionally death, imprisonment or illegal disenfranchisement – all of which efforts are destined to increase the Government's plurality" (Yugoslavia 1925).

Of course, there was not a singular case, in the Balkans, as a whole. We know today that in Romania too, despite the fact that wasn't – geographically speaking – a Balkan country, the range of instruments used for assuring the electoral success was very large, and the scheme, above mentioned, quite the same. The important thing is that, in 1925, the American reader, and not only, could easily make an image about the realities from the Balkans, in the field of political struggle, and this image contrasted very hard with what was known as a custom in the United States.

*The political figure*, the behaviour of ruler, either King or Prime Minister, is, obviously, taken into consideration. As in general it was considered that between monarchy and dictatorship must be, *in the Balkans*, a close relations and the case of Romania was underlined: "in the Balkans a monarch must often act with vigour if he expects to stay King, and at Bucharest last week Carol von Hohenzollern suddenly made himself as much a Dictator as was his brother-in-law, the late King Alexander of Yugoslavia, assassinated at Marseille. Carol II has long hankered after the absolutism of his Hohenzollern kinsman Wilhelm II" (Rumania 1938). This is not an easy job, in the opinion of the *Time* columnists: "it takes considerable work and ability to be a Balkan ruler nowadays and, particularly in Rumania, the job will not get any easier in the months to come. The old "Playboy of the Balkans", now 46, runs a country of 20,000,000 people whose 113,884 square miles, rich in oil and cereals, are not only the most prosperous in their part of the world, but the most coveted by grabby neighbours" (Rumania 1939).

Later in 1939, same authoritarian king was pictured in the columns of the same magazine as a "playboy into statesman" (Rumania 1939). His sentimental life was taken into account, starting with the failed project to bond, through a dynastic marriage, the Romanov's and Hohenzollern's, before the outbreak of World War I. The failure of this project, due to the fact that Carol "for five years he had been allowed by indulgent parents to taste the pleasures of Bucharest, and already he was beginning to show decided

independence in his choice of women” (Rumania 1939) made Tsar Nicholas II to express his distaste not only for Carol but for the entire Rumanian Royal family by coining one of his very rare epigrams: “Rumania, bah! It is neither a State nor a nation, but a profession” (Rumania 1939). However, the columnists from the *Time* underlined the very essence of the twisted historical faith: “But the choosy Balkan Prince had the last laugh on the proud Emperor of Holy Russia. By 1918 Nicholas Romanov had lost his job and his life: by 1930 not only was Carol Hohenzollern very much alive, but after four-and-a-half years of self-exile, he was back in Bucharest and able truthfully to describe his profession to Rumania’s census-takers as “mostly a king”, secondarily a “farmer”. The Tsar lost his throne primarily because he did not know his job. Rumania and the world have become gradually convinced that farmer-king Carol thoroughly knows all the ins & outs of how to be a king in the Balkans” (Rumania 1939). And, again, the ability to be a ruler in the Balkans, a region which is very hard to be ruled under the very known and practiced standards of governing, is underlined. The words seems to say that a negotiating, even in a business way, plotting and, in general, an active player on the political scene, as was Carol in Romania, (to which a tumultuous personal life, not every time separated by the act of governing must be added) had much more chances of success into such area.

Moreover, power, in Balkans (and not only, of course, but these area is our analyzed subject), could easily transform into an obsession, as in the case of Nikola Pasic, an “octogenarian monocrat”, which, in the opinion of *Time* journalists “became so obsessed with his power to rule the Balkans with an iron hand that his views, somewhat arbitrarily enunciated, were reported to have angered King Alexander, a determined and able ruler. Result: Pasic, who was then Premier, resigned, having first advised a general election. The King declined to dissolve the *Narodna Skupština* (National Assembly), a step necessary to the calling of a general election. Instead, he appointed Lubomir Davidovici Premier. The new Premier was soon forced to resign. Last week, the King capitulated. Pasic was reappointed Premier. It was announced that the *Narodna Skupština* would be dissolved, a general election called (Foreign News 1924)”. The old statesman win again, against the will of the King and his political views mastered the political scene.

A similar type, maybe more able and slightly was Romanian Prime Minster Ion I. C. Brătianu, to which *Time* dedicated a cover story<sup>1</sup>. The man was a master of art of power and controlled the state, the banking system, the oil and industry. And not even the losing of power doesn’t meant an effective losing of it, because, in his place, always came someone connected with him or dominated by him. Brătianu seems a Carolingian ”Mayor of the Palace” which controlled the Royalty, the Government, obvious, and, ”more vitally it controls the indescribably corrupt electoral machinery of Romania by which new parties achieve overwhelming majorities and old ones are wiped out by the figurative pressure of a button: the button connecting the residence of Ion Brătianu by private telephone with the office of the Chief of Police of Bucharest, the activities of whose agents are national” (Mayor of the Palace 1926). In the above mentioned cover story the American journalist came to the conclusion that Brătianu must be the “guardian” or the “keeper” of the faith

of his country. Soon, events contradict them, as long as Romanian political leader died in the same year in which regained, effectively, the power (Back to Bratiano 1927). Habits of that “extraordinary man” are presented, several times, underlining the fact that, in some external aspects, Bratiano seems to be “the antithesis of a man of state” (New Cabinet 1926). We could easily observe the very tough attitude toward Romanian political and electoral system and toward the mechanisms on which that system is functioning.

In the midst of that type of appreciations, some relating to the *non conflicting potentiality* of the area could seem quite strange, taking into considerations the long established image of the *Balkans* as a powder barrel for Europe. However, the American journalists, under a suggestive title, underlined the nuance: “not all Balkan crises lead to threats, overt acts, wars” and they connect this conclusion with the problem of Bulgarian *comitadjis*, which attack the neighbour frontiers. A note of Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece received a sufficiently conciliatory reply from the Bulgarian Foreign Office in which the determination to “safeguard the peace of Bulgaria’s frontiers” was expressed (The Balkans 1926).

We could conclude, at the end of this paper, that the Balkans, with all what happened in these area, no matter of the field of activity, was perceived, in the United States, through the very own values and standards and, finally, the outcome of this process was a not too pleasant image about this part of Europe but one which easily reached in all the corners of the North American continent, and not only.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Back to Bratiano 1927. For a comparative analyses between Bratiano and another important political figure, from Central Europe, Jozef Piłsudski, seen also through the United States newspapers, see *Portrete de presă* 2008: 174–182.

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