

Emanuel PLOPEANU
“Ovidius” University of Constanța, Romania

THE CONCEPTS OF THE INTERWAR BALKAN STATE SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES PRESS¹

Емануел ПЛОПЛЕАНУ
Университет „Овидий” – Констанца, Румъния

СХВАЩАНИЯТА В АМЕРИКАНСКАТА ПРЕСА ЗА ДЪРЖАВНОСТТА НА БАЛКАНИТЕ ПРЕЗ МЕЖДУВОЕННИЯ ПЕРИОД

The aim of this paper is to highlight the way in which the United States press looked upon political evolution in the Balkans, between the two World Wars. We try to identify the main concepts through which the U.S. press defined the Balkan statehood and the relations between governments and peoples. Coming from a long distanced society, but one in which respecting rules was at high level for centuries, it is important to see the image cultivated into the American society, by the American press. In many cases, the definitions of this area are not quite satisfactory, the U.S. press frequently mentioning the governmental corruption, the lack of care about people needs, the absolute need for power, the malfunction of the state powers – definitions, which, in our days, are gathered into a single concept: “failed states”.

Keywords: Balkans, state system, modernity, not-modern social habits, authoritarianism, U.S. press.

The Balkans, the most troubled region in Europe, the most fragmented and mixed area too, was present in the pages of United States newspapers in the interwar period. Now, we have a direct access for the period after 1924, to the large part of the United States press, which are digitalized by the Library of Congress (100 Years Ago Today, 1917)¹.

First observation: notions like *Balkans*, *Balkanized* easily repeat themselves in various analyses, on various subjects, and not only to define strictly geographically a region: using this concepts is made in order to stresses some characteristics – mainly politically and socially, which in most of the cases are negatives, compared with Western ones (American especially). Second observation: in general, for the United States newspapers, there isn’t a very clearly defined bordered area, which is called *Balkans* and the preoccupation with this matter is secondary. Instead, all

¹ This article represents an extended version of the study published in *The Balkans – Languages, History, Culture*, vol. II. Veliko Tarnovo: “IVIS” Press, 2011, pp. 175-179 (*The Balkans – a Distant Region. Commentaries in the U.S. Press in the Interwar Period*).

countries from the Adriatic to the Black Sea and from the Danube (including Romania) to the Aegean Sea are included into *the Balkan* area. What is important, as we have mentioned above, is the “internal behaviour”, which, in most of the cases, is “balkanized one” and the potential of the area to become, as it was proved from the middle of the 19th century onward, a disruptive factor in the established order in the international relations.

The state system in the Balkans is very negatively pictured. For the American press, countries from the Balkans (as those in Northern Africa, the Middle East, and also Portugal, Russia) are unfavourably defined: “strictly speaking all of these countries are not countries” (Immigration 1923) is written in a paper regarding the applications for immigration in the United States, according to the established quotas. Seven years later, the trip from Tirana to Teheran of Charles Calmer Hart in order to take the position of the head of the mission in Iran was characterized as “an arduous trip of nearly 2000 miles through primitive countries” (The Cabinet 1930).

But the most ironical story and at the same time demonstrating the mental distance between the Atlantic world and the Balkans but also revealing the real situation of general crisis, is the last one offered to readers in April 1924. In this article it was narrated how, at the beginning of April, “a wandering millionaire” entered into the office of the United States representative in Tirana and asked if the throne of the Albanian Kingdom was open because he wanted to hire it (Albania 1924).

Electoral behaviour is one of the aspects, which is very much related to the characteristics of the area. Here is one example among a very large number of such: “Elections in the Balkans, particularly in Yugoslavia, work on an entirely different principle than 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 these 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 it is not – 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 get an impression of the realities in the Balkans in the field of political struggle, and this impression contrasted very hard with what was known as a custom in the United States.

The political figure, the behaviour of a ruler, either king or prime minister, is, obviously, taken into consideration. As in general, it was considered that there had to be close relations between monarchy and dictatorship *in the Balkans*, and the case of Rumania was underlined: “in the Balkans, a monarch must often act with vigour if he expects to stay king, and in 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 was

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, the 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 bound 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 Tzar Nicholas II show 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”, secondly a “farmer”. The Tzar 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 seem 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 an area.

Moreover, power in Balkans (and not only, of course, but these area is our subject of analysis) could easily be transformed into an obsession, as in the case of Nikola Pasici, an “octogenarian monocrat”, who, 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: Pasici, who was then Premier, resigned, having first advised a general election. The King declined to dissolve the Narodna Skupština (National Assembly) – a step necessary for 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. Pasici was reappointed Premier. It was announced that the Narodna Skupština would be dissolved and a general election would be called (Foreign News 1924)”. The old statesman won again, against the will of the King and his political views mastered the political scene.

A similar type, maybe slightly more able, was the Romanian Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, to whom *Time* dedicated a cover story (Back to Bratiano 1927). The man was a master of art of power and controlled the state, the banking system, the oil, and the industry. And even the formal losing of power did not mean its effective losing because in his place always came someone connected with him or dominated by him. Brătianu seemed a Carolingian “Mayor of the Palace” who controlled the Royalty, the Government, obviously and “more vitally it controls the indescribably corrupt electoral machinery of Rumania 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 have been the “guardian” or the “keeper” of the faith of his country. Soon, events contradicted them, as long as the Romanian political leader died in the same year in which he regained the power effectively (Back to Bratiano 1927). The habits of this “extraordinary man” are presented several times with an emphasis on the fact that in some external aspects, Bratiano seemed 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 was functioning. Anyway, six years later, also in the same magazine it was written that “dynasty restored”, in the “sleazy Bucharest, the “Paris” of the Balkans...after three years in eclipse, the great political Dynasty of Bratianu – the makers of Rumania – were again ascendant last week over Rumania’s Royal House of Hohenzollern. Buck-toothed King Carol, who has tried to play the dictator, was forced to accept a new Cabinet chosen not by himself, as his National Peasant Party cabinets had been, but by the National Liberal Party of the Dynasty of Bratianu” (Rumania 1933).

In the midst of that type of appreciations, some acts relating to the *non-conflict potential* of the area could seem quite strange, taking into consideration the long established image of the Balkans as the powder barrel of Europe. However, the American journalists under a suggestive title underlined the nuance: “not all Balkan crises lead to threats, overt acts, wars”, and they connected this conclusion with the problem of Bulgarian comitadjis who attacked 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).

But was it all only negative? The same U. S. press pictured also optimistic signs, and for a long term at that. One example is nothing but glamorous and concerned almost half of the Balkans. We refer to the royal wedding on June 8, 1922, of King Alexander of the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom and the Romanian Princess Maria, daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Maria. As I have mentioned, the optimistic tone is very confident and I let the press article to speak: “”Medieval pomp

and splendour marked the wedding here today of King Alexander of Yugoslavia and Princess Maria of Rumania. Nearly every nation of the Old and New World was represented at the ceremony, *which linked the dynasties of three Balkan countries, forming a powerful barrier against future wars in this turbulent part of Europe*. The event probably will remain unmatched for a long time in Balkan annals for its political significance; the lavishness and beauty of its settings; the enthusiasm and fervour of the people; the picturesqueness of the processions and the quaintness of the presents to the bride and groom” (King Alexander 1922).

Another example is connected also with the Southern Slavs area and with the optimistic view of the future, more specifically with the capital city of the new state, Belgrade, which was seen (the article was from the Associated Press) as competing for the title “Paris of the Balkans” with Bucharest. “The city is being rapidly transformed from a sleepy, melancholic, unattractive, provincial town to something like a European capital. Its stores are full with luxuries, jewels, rich furs, silks, lingerie, expensive confections, perfumes and cosmetics. Everybody seems to have ample money to buy these articles. A tide of prosperity is now flowing through the country. There is not sufficient room in the capital for the thousands of Slavs who want to come here from the united provinces. Several thousands new buildings are under construction. The streets are being repaved, parks, public squares and an esplanade are planned, a new Royal Palace and a new Parliament building are nearing completion, the construction of a great stadium is contemplated and the government is offering prizes of 500.000 francs for the best plan for improvement and beautification of the city. “You won’t know Belgrade in another five years”, its citizens say proudly. “We shall have a capital worthy of a nation of 13.000.000 people and a city that will attract Europeans” (Belgrade 1922). So high was the optimistic tone, captured by the press. However, the powerful reality of contrasts – a common appreciation, which was to be found in almost all analyses regarding the *Balkans* – is present also in this article: “It is a city of strong contrasts. In the heart of the business, banking and shopping section the visitor sees many peasants, herdmen and handmade farm carts drawn by the immemorial ox” (Belgrade 1922). And of course, the American is confused by these contrasts, which gave the impression of an exotic and uncivilized area: “An American visitor was startled to see an aged ex-soldier carrying a coffin on his back through the crowded shopping district of the capital. It was explained that the Serbian undertakers made their deliveries of coffins to their patrons in this fashion. *Such incongruities are constantly to be seen in the capital*” (Belgrade 1922).

We could conclude at the end of this paper, that the Balkans, with all that happened in this area, no matter of the field of activity, were perceived in the United States in the light of their very own values and standards and, finally, the outcome of this process was the forming of not so pleasant image of this part of Europe and one, which easily reached all the corners of the North American continent and not only. Its main feature was the strong opposition of contrasts, between efforts of modernisation and the resistance of old habits, mentalities and historical traditions (*medieval*,

in the United States' perception). Finally, we should never forget that we are facing *images*, transmitted through the words of journal articles, images, which could be subjective, incomplete, based on unverified information (much of which false), and so on. All that, for objective and subjective reasons, is not always possible to detect.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albania 1924:** Albania: King Job. // *Time*, April 7.
- Back to Bratiano 1927:** Back to Bratiano. // *Time*, July 11.
- Belgrade 1922:** Belgrade Paris of Balkans. // *The Commonwealth*, January 24.
- New Cabinet 1926:** New Cabinet. // *Time*, April 12.
- Foreign News 1924:** Foreign News: King Capitulates. // *Time*, November 17.
- 100 Years Ago Today, 1917:** Library of Congress, *100 Years Ago Today*, 04.09.1917, <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>>
- Immigration 1923:** Immigration, the first week. // *Time*, July 16.
- King Alexander 1922:** King Alexander and Princess Marie Married Today with Medieval Pomp and Splendor. // *West Virginian*, June 8.
- Mayor of the Palace 1926:** Mayor of the Palace. // *Time*, December 13.
- Portrete de presă 2008:** Portrete de presă: despre Ion I. C. Brătianu și Józef Pilsudski în Statele Unite ale Americii în perioada interbelică. – // *We wspólnocie narodów i kultur. W kregu relacji polsko – rumuńskich. Materiały z sympozjum (Comunitatea popoarelor și culturilor. În lumea relațiilor polono – române. Materialele simpozionului)*. Suceava.
- Rumania 1938:** Rumania: Hohenzollern Dictator. // *Time*, February 21.
- Rumania 1939:** Rumania: Playboy into statesman. // *Time*, November 13.
- Rumania 1933:** Rumania: Dynasty Restored. // *Time*, November 27.
- The Balkans 1926:** The Balkans: Not always. // *Time*, September 6.
- The Cabinet 1930:** The Cabinet: Tirana to Teheran. // *Time*, January 13.
- Yugoslavia 1925:** Yugoslavia: Balkanized Elections. // *Time*, January 19.