

THRONES – BETWEEN DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES AND POLITICAL INTERESTS. ROMANIAN–BULGARIAN PROJECTS OF DYNASTIC MARRIAGE, 1921–1926¹

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Abstract: The current study is grounded in the examination of three *dynastic marriage* projects pursued between 1921 and 1926—the last of which was, in practical terms, terminated in 1930—concerning the Royal House of Romania and that of Bulgaria, more precisely involving one of the Romanian princesses, Mărioara or Ileana, and Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria. The analytical paradigm underpinning this research consists in tracing the evolution of Romanian–Bulgarian bilateral relations from an innovative and hitherto unexplored perspective within Romanian historiography, namely the implications of matrimonial alliances in the foreign policies of the two states.

Keywords: Romanian Bulgarian Relations; Royal House; Dynastic Marriages

The Romanian–Bulgarian Dynastic Union/Marriage in Romanian Historiographical Discourse

The current study is grounded in the examination of three *dynastic marriage* projects pursued between 1921 and 1926—the last of which was, in practical terms, terminated in 1930—concerning the Royal House of Romania and that of Bulgaria, more precisely involving one of the Romanian princesses, Mărioara or Ileana, and Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria. The analytical paradigm underpinning this research consists in tracing the evolution of Romanian–Bulgarian bilateral relations from an innovative and hitherto unexplored perspective within Romanian historiography, namely the implications of matrimonial alliances in the foreign policies of the two states.

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From the outset, it is imperative to underscore the conspicuous absence of specialized scholarly research devoted to this subject; in the case of the Boris–Ileana project, this absence is total. While the avoidance of such topics prior to 1989 is readily explicable, the scarcity of post-1990 analyses may be attributed either to a lack of interest, to an erroneous assessment of the role played by the Royal House in Romania's foreign policy, or to the failure to interpret foreign policy objectives and strategies through the lens of the Royal Court's actions.

With regard to documentary sources, we note the existence of materials like official diplomatic reports and press accounts—preserved within Romanian diplomatic archives, which, for the most part, have been insufficiently exploited. It is essential to emphasize that, unlike other dynastic initiatives, the above-mentioned projects never culminated in successful outcomes; this circumstance is one of the reasons behind the predominance of rather confusing information disseminated by the international press, and the proliferation of rumors circulating within foreign political circles, many of which are frequently of dubious credibility.

Among edited primary sources, particular mention must be made of the remarkable contribution of Constantin Argetoianu², through the testimonies in his memoirs—especially those referring to the visit of Bulgarian Prime Minister Aleksandăr Stamboliiski to Romania in January 1921. Equally important are the daily diaries of Queen Marie³, especially given that the sovereign was arguably the most influential political actor within this relevant context. As for historiographical studies addressing this issue, the valuable works of historian Constantin Iordan⁴ deserve attention; some of his findings, partially based on novel sources, corroborate the evidence utilized in the present research. Conversely, the only extensive monograph dedicated to interwar bilateral relations, authored by Tatiana Solcan⁵, makes no reference whatsoever to the subject under consideration⁶.

² Constantin Argetoianu, *Memorii. Pentru cei de mâine. Amintiri din vremea celor de ieri*, vol. VI, 1919-1922 (Bucharest: Machiavelli Printing Press, 1996).

³ Maria, Regina României, *Însemnări zilnice*, vol. III (Bucharest: Historia Publishing House, 2006).

⁴ Constantin Iordan, *România și relațiile internaționale din Sud-Estul european: probleme ale păcii, securității și cooperării 1919-1924* (Bucharest: All Publishing House, 1999). Idem, "De l'histoire des relations roumano-bulgares: Aleksandăr Stamboliiski à Bucarest," in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie A.D. Xenopol*, XXII, 1 (Iași, 1985), 103-115.

⁵ Tatiana Solcan, *Relații diplomatice româno-bulgare în perioada interbelică (1919-1940). Documente diplomatice, presă, românească și străină* (Iași: Junimea Publishing House, 2004).

⁶ For details regarding romanian-bulgarian relations, see Daniel Cain, *Diplomați și diplomație în Sud-Estul european. Relațiile româno-bulgare la 1900* (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2012); Constantin Iordachi, "Diplomacy and Making of a Geopolitical Question: the Romanian-Bulgarian Conflict over Dobrudja, 1878-1947," in *Entangled*

The Offensive of the Romanian Royal House in European Politics during the Early Postwar Years

The conclusion of the First World War found the Bulgarian Saxa-Coburg-Gotha dynasty entangled in strained relations both with the Allied Powers and with the representatives of domestic public opinion. Owing to Bulgaria's alliance with Germany and its failure to recover territories lost during the Second Balkan War, Tsar Ferdinand came to be perceived as the main culprit⁷, and was consequently compelled to abdicate on 3 October 1918 in favor of his son, Boris III⁸.

The new tsar—who was young and politically inexperienced—was confronted from the very outset of his reign with an unprecedented situation; on the one hand, the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine formalized the new territorial settlement⁹ and on the other, internal political instability, exacerbated by the treaty's conditions, led to the defeat of traditional parties and the ascent of agrarian and communist forces, which secured 31% and 18% of the votes¹⁰, respectively, in the 1919 elections. This context necessitated a concerted effort on the part of the Bulgarian dynasty, aimed at restoring prestige and unequivocally resolving the conflict with the authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Aleksandăr Stamboliiski¹¹.

Within this strategic framework, Romania arguably represented the most significant vector, given its highly favorable territorial and international legal position, as well as the positive image enjoyed by its royal family within

Histories of the Balkans- Volume four- Concepts, Approaches and (Self)- Representation, eds. Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova, Tchvadar Marinov and Alexander Vezhenkov (Balkan Studies Library, 2017), 291-393; Anghel, Cojoc, Tiță, "Români și bulgari"; George Ungureanu, *Problema Cadrilaterului în contextul relațiilor româno-bulgare (1919-1940)* (Brăila: Editura Istros, 2009); Stoica Lascu, *Mărturii de epocă privind istoria Dobrogei (1878-1947)*, vol. I (1878-1916), Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie Constanța, 1999; Blagovest Njagulov, "Violences contre les civils de la Dobroudja, 1916-1918: Historiographie et mémoire en Bulgarie et en Roumanie," in *Bulgarian Historical Review* 1-2, 18-38.

⁷ Simon Consant, "Foxy Ferdinand, 1861-1948. Tsar of Bulgaria (London: Routledge, 1979); Alexandre Davier, Un rege artist, biolog și botanist – Ferdinand al Bulgariei," *Magazin istoric*, no. 12 (2003): 38-42.

⁸ Stanko Grueff, *Crown of Thorns: The Reign of King Boris III of Bulgaria, 1918-1943* (Lanham: Middleton, 1987).

⁹ Simeon Damjanov, "Le traité de Neuilly et ses répercussion sur les relations interbalkaniques (1919-1923)," *Études balkaniques*, no. 2 (1980): 56-69.

¹⁰ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Istoria Balcanilor 1815-1944* (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2002), 230.

¹¹ J.D. Bell, *Peasants in Power. Alexander Stamboliiski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899-1923* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

political, diplomatic, and journalistic circles¹². For Bulgarian decision-making factors, the conspicuously disadvantageous position of the Sofia dynasty was self-evident, further accentuated by the divergent roles occupied by the two crowned heads in European politics. Whereas King Ferdinand of Romania chose, in 1916, to join the war against Germany—thereby severing ties with the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen family—Tsar Ferdinand of Bulgaria remained loyal to Kaiser Wilhelm II until the very end¹³.

In the first years following the 1919–1920 peace treaties, through the direct political involvement of Queen Marie, Romania succeeded in forging dynastic alliances with the royal families of Greece¹⁴ and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Within this context, a dynastic *marriage*—or even a *dynastic union*—with Bulgaria, should the Bulgarian Royal House have been expelled, might have resolved both territorial disputes and strategic tensions. In Romania, the notion of a dynastic union circulated within political circles, particularly in light of proposals emanating from Hungarian leaders who envisaged Ferdinand as king¹⁵. Moreover, even Poland expressed interest in the Romanian Royal House, viewing Prince Nicolae as a potential alternative following the anticipated demise of Marshal Józef Piłsudski¹⁶. From Sofia's perspective, however, signals tended to favor a *dynastic marriage* rather than a union—one that would allow Tsar Boris to retain his throne without politically implicating the Romanian Royal House. A *dynastic union*, by contrast, would have entailed young Boris III's abdication and implicitly, the abandonment of the Saxa-Coburg-Gotha dynasty. In this political landscape, the objective of Bulgaria's leaders south of the Danube was unmistakable: to extricate Bulgaria from international isolation through a *dynastic marriage* with one of the Romanian princesses.

¹² Also see, Hannah Pakula, *Ultima romantică-Viața reginei Maria a României* (Bucharest: Lider Publishing House, 2003); Guy Gauthier, *Missy. Regina României* (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 2004).

¹³ For further details regarding Bulgaria's situation after the First World War, see Léon Lamouche, *La Bulgarie* (Paris, 1923); George Clenton Logio, *Bulgaria – Past and Present* (Manchester, Sherratt and Hughes, 1936); P. Pavlov, I. Danev, D. Cain, *Istoria Bulgariei* (Bucharest: Corint Publishing Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Radu Tudorancea, "Le double mariage dynastique helléno-roumain (février-mars 1921)," *Historical Yearbook IV* (2007): 145-152.

¹⁵ Information regarding the dynastic union projects can also be found in the Romanian diplomatic archives and, to this day, little remains known. For example, see the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fonds 71/1914 E2, Part II, vol. 26, 80–90.

¹⁶ Florin Anghel, "Guvernul N. Iorga și un proiect româno-polon de uniune dinastică, 1931-1932," in *Nicolae Iorga. 1871-1940. Studii și documente*, ed. Constantin Bușe, vol. II (Bucharest: The University of Bucharest Publishing Press, 2006), 19-32; Mihai Fotin Enescu, "Principele Nicolae. Încercare de portret veridic," in *Prințul Nicolae de Hohenzollern. În umbra coroanei României*, ed. Gheorghe Buzatu (Iași: Moldova Publishing Press, 1991), 152.

Immediately after consolidating his power on the domestic front, Aleksandăr Stamboliiski launched an extensive diplomatic campaign aimed at extricating the country from international isolation. In this context, he obtained approval to undertake an official visit to Romania, which took place between 9 and 13 January 1921¹⁷. In Bucharest, he succeeded in meeting prominent political factors, including leaders of the Peasant Party, the President of the Council of Ministers, General Alexandru Averescu, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Take Ionescu, and, last but not least, King Ferdinand and Queen Marie¹⁸.

The visit to the Pelișor Palace on 11 January 1921 was by no means incidental; rather, it pursued highly ambitious objectives. Supporting arguments are provided by Constantin Argetoianu, who, in his memoirs, vividly describes the encounter and recounts how, at a certain moment, “while chewing, the brute (Stamboliiski) creaked his chair, turned toward Queen Marie, and said something.” After a moment of hesitation, Nicolae Mișu—one of Romania’s most seasoned and experienced diplomats, minister in London, collaborator of Ion I.C. Brătianu, and member of the Romanian Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference—who was present as translator, stated in French: “His Excellency greatly admires Princess Mignon and congratulates Your Majesty on having such a child”¹⁹. To this remark, the Queen merely replied that “he is very kind, very kind”²⁰. According to the interpretation of the Minister of Internal Affairs in the Averescu government, however, the Bulgarian dignitary’s actual wording had allegedly departed from any acceptable convention. “Grunting” toward Mișu, he is reported to have continued: “Ask the old woman (that is, the Queen) whether she wishes to give the chubby one (that is, Mignon) in marriage to our king... I like her, there is plenty to grasp in one’s hands”²¹. The marriage proposal, original in the formulation presented above, received a response of comparable tone from the Queen. At least according to Nicolae Mișu’s interpretation, we note that “the old woman considers that the chubby one is not suited to your standing”²².

Naturally, setting aside the satirical character of the dialogue as rendered by Argetoianu—whose plausibility in this precise form may reasonably be questioned—it is essential to emphasize the political reality emerging from this

¹⁷ For further details, see Ioan Scurtu, “Un moment controversat din istoria relațiilor româno-bulgare: vizita lui Aleksander Stamboliiski în România (ianuarie 1921),” in *Români și bulgari. Provocările unei vecinătăți*, eds. Florin Anghel, Mariana Cojoc, Magdalena Tiță (Bucharest: Cartea Universitară Publishing House, 2007), 189-200.

¹⁸ Constantin Iordan, *România și relațiile internaționale...*, 42.

¹⁹ Constantin Argetoianu, *Memorii*, 193.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

meeting. It is evident that the Bulgarian Prime Minister did not enjoy the sympathy of Minister of Internal Affairs Argetoianu, an attitude largely representative of the Romanian political class in its relations with Bulgaria during the early postwar years. Indeed, the entire account of the luncheon at Pelișor is conveyed in markedly severe terms toward the Bulgarian official. The image constructed by Argetoianu depicts an individual of manifestly coarse manners, whose social origins clearly distinguished his conduct from that of the other participants. In contrast to them, Stamboliiski originated from a peasant family, while even his interpreter descended from a family of standing, which partly explains the admiration directed toward Miss Stancicov by those present²³.

The episode at Pelișor in January 1921 is also recalled by Queen Marie herself. She, however, deemed it necessary to emphasize the interlocutor's rather crude and primitive qualities, describing him as "massive, solid, and broad-shouldered; one immediately senses his strength, though it is not a pleasant one—an individual of extraordinary energy, a peasant by origin, possessing only the strictly necessary manners to be admitted into a drawing room"²⁴. From her daily notes it emerges that both the Queen and the Princess responded to the Bulgarian Prime Minister's "penetrating gaze" solely with smiles, offering no favorable indications²⁵. In the same notes, the Queen elaborates on the details of this unusual visit, recalling, for instance, some of the flattering remarks made by her interlocutor, who regarded her as "one of the most important political figures in Romania, if not the most significant." A seasoned politician and a diplomat, Marie was not seduced by these flattering observations, which were clearly intended to persuade her to support Bulgaria's territorial claims aimed at securing access to the Aegean Sea in Thrace. "I was nearly reduced to silence," the Queen recalls, "as he was so direct, and I replied that I believed our countries must live in peaceful conditions, that I desired peace and good understanding, that I felt both sympathy and compassion for *the lonely and young king* (s.n.), and that I harbored genuine admiration for the man who had assumed the immense task of rebuilding his country under extraordinarily difficult circumstances"²⁶.

On the basis of these sources, corroborated by supporting diplomatic testimonies, one may advance the hypothesis that the Bulgarian Prime Minister's visit was, in essence, intended to persuade the Romanian royal family to consent to the marriage of one of its daughters to Tsar Boris III. Admittedly, this objective could not be publicly acknowledged insofar as it did not meet

²³ Her father had been Minister of Bulgaria in Paris, and her mother was née de Grenauld (Count de Grenauld, her father, had been Marshal of the Court of Tsar Ferdinand).

²⁴ Maria, Regina României, *Însemnări zilnice*, 23.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 23-24.

with success. Indeed, upon his return home, the Bulgarian Prime Minister delivered a speech in Rusciuc before a large audience, without making any reference to discussions concerning the marriage project²⁷. It is interesting, in this context, that in January 1921 the Belgrade press published a piece of news which, according to contemporary accounts, generated “profound dissatisfaction” in Belgrade political circles, alleging that Princess Marioara was to marry Tsar Boris of Bulgaria²⁸. Stamboliiski’s proposal is further substantiated by an analysis of unpublished Romanian diplomatic correspondence on this subject from several months later.

On 24 October 1921, Romania’s minister in Paris, Dimitrie I. Ghika, informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the French press had publicized a telegram from Belgrade insisting upon the marriage between Princess Marioara of Romania and the Bulgarian sovereign, an arrangement allegedly orchestrated by the Bulgarian Prime Minister during his visit to Pelișor²⁹. The text further insisted that such a marriage would have facilitated Bulgaria’s integration into the international community, initially within the framework of the Little Entente, an initiative supported by the Czechoslovak government³⁰.

From the perspective of Romanian diplomacy, this situation entailed considerable political risk due to the nature of these disclosures, as Romania was publicly promoting an exclusive policy aligned with France, the Little Entente, and Poland. Any association with Bulgaria would have gravely undermined its credibility at a moment when Bucharest’s indispensable alliance system was still under construction. Starting from these circumstances, Foreign Minister Take Ionescu requested that the Romanian Legation in London categorically deny any reports concerning this project, following similar

²⁷ A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944 Dosare Speciale 71/1920-1944, vol. 48/4, f. 68-70.

²⁸ Constantin Iordan, *România și relațiile internaționale...*, 38. It is noteworthy that Belgrade, during the period 1919–1921, functioned as an important center for the collection and dissemination of information—more or less accurate—concerning the Romanian royal family, primarily regarding King Alexander’s marriage to Princess Maria, on the one hand, and the pressures exerted by the Banat question, on the other. Accordingly, the first reports concerning a dynastic union between Romania and Hungary appeared in the political and diplomatic circles of Belgrade, later echoed in the semi-official newspapers *Politika* (22 September 1919)—A.M.A.E., fond 71/1914 E2, part II, vol. 26, f. 90, telegram 456/23.09.1919 from Constantin Langa-Rășcanu, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister in Belgrade, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and *Demokracja* (18 September 1919); *ibid.*, f. 90, telegram 431/19.09.1919. Through Belgrade, in June 1919, a report circulated by the Greek media claimed that Crown Prince Carol had committed suicide (A.M.A.E., fond 71/1900–1919 RS, vol. 110, f. 67, telegram 350 of 12.06.1919 from N. N. Filodor, Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister in Athens, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

²⁹ A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944, Dosare speciale, vol. 57, f. 1.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

initiatives undertaken by the British and French press³¹. Shortly after the rumor was launched and disseminated in the French and British press, the web of intrigues and contradictory information surrounding the Romanian princess grew even more complicated in Belgrade. Thus, Serbian daily newspapers reported, on the basis of official communiqués, that King Alexander was to depart on 6 January 1922 for Sinaia, where he would celebrate Orthodox Christmas and the New Year together with the Romanian royal family and also mark his engagement to Marioara. According to the Belgrade daily “Pravda” of 5 January 1922, “this meeting of the two sovereigns will remove all misunderstandings that have arisen between Yugoslavia and Romania in connection with the Paris Peace Treaty”³². The nature of the divergence referenced by the Belgrade press pertained to Ion I.C. Brătianu’s well-known stance at the Peace Conference—he claimed the entirety of the Banat on the basis of the principle of national self-determination—whereas Take Ionescu, adopting a more moderate approach in line with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau’s ideas, rather favored compromise in order to reach an understanding.

Under these circumstances, the engagement was celebrated at Cotroceni Palace on 20 February 1922, followed by the wedding of Princess Marioara and King Alexander Karađorđević in Belgrade on 8 June. In fact, this initiative formed part of what may justifiably be termed the marital conquest of the Balkans. Earlier precedents included the marriage of Carol to Helen of Greece³³, in 1921, that of Elisabeta to George II of Greece³⁴ in the same year, as well as discussions concerning the restoration of the Albanian monarchy, where Wilhelm of Wied—nephew of Queen Elisabeta of Romania—had been installed as king in 1913³⁵.

³¹ *Ibidem*, f. 3. It is noteworthy that, also in the autumn of 1921, Romanian political circles circulated the report according to which the Hungarian Prime Minister, Béthlen István, had proposed a plan with two variants—either a tripartite confederation between Romania, Transylvania, and Hungary, or a personal union (under King Ferdinand or one of his sons)—ideas which Take Ionescu dismissed as both fantastic and ephemeral. In this context, suspecting that these new rumors of Budapestian origin were aimed at the recently established Little Entente, as had been the case with those concerning Princess Maria’s potential marriage to Boris, the authorities in Bucharest adopted an unusually firm stance, describing the claims as an “absolute falsehood” in *Universul*, December 4, 1921, in Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen, *O primă experiență comunistă în Ungaria*, edited by Nicolae Petrescu and Gheorghe Zamfir (București, 2005), 160.

³² A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944, Dosare speciale, vol. 57, f. 20.

³³ Arthur Gould Lee, *Regina-mamă Elena a României* (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing Press, 2005), 77-87.

³⁴ Guy Gauthier, *Acvile și lei. O istorie a monarhiilor balcanice din 1817 până în 1974* (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing Press, 2004), 132; Hannah Pakula, *Ultima romantică*, 385-386.

³⁵ For further details, see Florin Anghel, “Influențe românești în Albania prințului Wilhelm de Wied, 7 martie-3 septembrie 1914,” *Revista istorică* 5-6, tome V (1994): 487-494.

Among the political and diplomatic sources of the failure of the marriage project between Marioara and Boris, one must first note the reserve of the Romanian Royal House, which would have found itself in an extremely delicate position given the newly established dynastic ties with the Greek royal family—a state against which Bulgaria harbored its principal territorial claims. In this sense, equally significant was the role of the Bucharest government and its diplomacy, which would likewise have occupied an awkward position due to the potential regional implications, ultimately connected to Bulgaria's accession to the Little Entente—a difficult undertaking given the territorial dispute between Bulgaria and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. On the other hand, Constantin Argetoianu's attitude toward the Bulgarian Prime Minister is nothing but an encapsulation of the broader stance of the Romanian political class and the Averescu government toward their southern neighbor, regarded as chiefly responsible for numerous atrocities committed by Bulgarian troops in occupied territories during the war, particularly in Dobruja. Last but not least, without excluding any of the foregoing explanations, the refusal of the Romanian Royal House to approve Marioara's marriage to Boris may also be linked to a personal and intimate consideration—namely, the possible opposition of the Princess herself, whose attention was drawn more strongly to the sovereign in Belgrade.

The Project of Tsar Boris III's Marriage to Princess Ileana

Although it concluded without a positive outcome, the Romanian–Bulgarian dynastic marriage project remained viable, as evidenced by the initiation of a second attempt in 1923, under markedly different domestic and international political circumstances, yet pursuing identical objectives. Compared to the political landscape of 1921, Sofia witnessed the replacement of Stamboliiski's government with that of Aleksandăr Tsankov following the coup d'état of 9 June 1923 and the assassination of the agrarian leader, while in Bucharest General Averescu had been succeeded at the head of government by the Liberal Ion I. C. Brătianu. On the international stage, Bulgaria had failed to extricate itself from its prior crisis, whereas Romania had consolidated both its strategic standing vis-à-vis the Great Powers—within the framework of the Little Entente—and its position among the Balkan dynasties. Within this context, a marriage between Boris and Ileana would have constituted, for Bulgaria, a crucial first step toward restoring its decisional prestige in foreign affairs, while for Romanian political circles it promised the resolution of diplomatic disputes with the southern neighbor and the curtailment of border instability generated by armed Bulgarian bands. Not least, an alliance with the Saxa-Coburg-Gotha dynasty would have transformed the Romanian Royal House into the most important vector of the region from this point of view.

Closely following the evolution of the project initiated two years earlier, it is once again noteworthy to observe the attitude adopted by Romanian political circles assigned with endorsing or disavowing the initiative in accordance with signals emanating from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by I. G. Duca—Ion I. C. Brătianu's most trusted associate and, in turn, the political leader closest to the Queen. It is therefore reasonable to argue that this position mirrored that of the Romanian Royal House itself.

A meticulous analysis of political developments in Romania reveals that the Viennese and Prague press—arguably the most accurately informed outlets in Central and Southeastern Europe during the interwar period—devoted considerable attention to the prospective marriage between Boris and Ileana. Drawing on information from Belgrade and Vienna, Romania's minister in Prague, Constantin Hiott, emphasized the persistent circulation of rumors concerning the future union of Princess Ileana with the Bulgarian Tsar, adding that “King Boris will soon travel for this very purpose”³⁶. As in 1921, the response from Bucharest was prompt, albeit less categorical, contenting itself with the assertion that “the piece of news is inaccurate”³⁷. One day later, on 22 June 1923, a similar note was recorded by Romania's minister in Vienna, Ioan Mitileu, who remarked— not without surprise—upon the intense interest displayed by Austrian political circles in this marriage. Once again, the formula of “inaccurate news” was employed, and the information was to be denied only “verbally”³⁸. Nevertheless, amid the increasingly frequent appearances in the Viennese press of reports concerning the Romanian Royal House—partly erroneous—and following discussions with Foreign Minister I. G. Duca, Mitileu informed the head of Romanian diplomacy on 23 July that “everywhere in journalistic circles we have encountered a favorable atmosphere toward us, provided that we supply more precise information regarding our actual situation; the principal editors of the Viennese press, whom we have told that they often mislead foreign public opinion with tendentious news, appear willing henceforth to verify such information directly with me”³⁹. Efforts to correct these rumors reached significant proportions, as evidenced by the fact that the “Vossische Zeitung” of Berlin published an announcement to this effect on 4 July 1923⁴⁰.

All developments of this nature were carefully scrutinized at the Sturdza Palace, headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and subsequent diplomatic actions entitle us to assert that press reports—often swiftly denied by Bucharest—were grounded in first-hand information emanating from circles very close to the Royal Palace. This claim is substantiated by a report from Sofia

³⁶ A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944, Dosare speciale, vol. 64, f. 1.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 2.

³⁹ A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944, Austria, vol. 6.

⁴⁰ A.M.A.E., fond 71/1920-1944, Dosare speciale, vol. 64, f. 4-5.

dated 8 September 1923, authored by Constantin Langa-Rășcanu, head of the Romanian Legation, according to which the Bulgarian minister in Bucharest, Ivan Fichev, held a lengthy audience with the new prime minister, Aleksandăr Tsankov. At the conclusion of this meeting, Tsankov allegedly urged the acceleration of negotiations concerning the settlement of Romanian–Bulgarian disputes remaining from the First World War and the establishment of close, trust-based relations between the two states⁴¹. Such political premises, Tsankov conceded, were indispensable for resuming discussions regarding the marriage of Tsar Boris III to Princess Ileana. Langa-Rășcanu emphasized in his report that this matrimonial alliance was “warmly desired in political circles”⁴², prompting the Sofia government to organize an official tour of the Tsar through several European capitals—including Bucharest—where he would have the opportunity to meet Romania’s influential royal family. In fact, Bulgarian enthusiasm for linking the Saxa-Coburg-Gotha and Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasties was also reflected in the British press, as noted by the newspaper *România* on 25 December 1923, which allotted quite ample space to this subject⁴³, while the American magazine *Time*, one of the most prestigious publications worldwide and a close observer of events, reported on 29 December 1924 that the Bulgarian Tsar, during his tour of European royal houses in search of a bride, would make his first stop in Belgrade—where no princesses resided, but where he could meet Ileana, the youngest daughter of Queen Marie⁴⁴.

Once again, however, the Bulgarian sovereign failed to achieve success, the anticipated visit to Bucharest—desired by Tsankov—most likely being thwarted by Romanian refusal, given Bucharest’s unfavorable stance toward collaboration with the new Bulgarian government. Equally significant were diplomatic comments circulating in early 1924 regarding possible Romanian–Italian princely marriages—Prince Nicolae with Princess Mafalda or *Princess Ileana with Crown Prince Umberto*—aimed at occupying the vacant Albanian throne⁴⁵.

The manifest failure of the second project imposed a reassessment of objectives and strategies under radically altered political conditions in 1926. It may be hypothesized that behind this renewed effort stood—just as in 1921–1923—the same personalities who had promoted and institutionalized Queen

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, f. 6.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ “România,” 25 decembrie 1923, 4, apud Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen, *op. cit.*, in *Postfață*, note 54, 179.

⁴⁴ “Time,” December 29, 1924.

⁴⁵ Constantin Iordan, *România și relațiile internaționale*, 101.

Marie's role as the "mother-in-law of the Balkans"⁴⁶: the Queen herself, Ion I. C. Brătianu, and I. G. Duca. Although seemingly outdated after three years during which the Romanian Royal House grappled with the repercussions of Prince Carol's renunciation of the throne (4 January 1926) and the agonizing decline of King Ferdinand, Princess Ileana's marriage once again became a matter of paramount concern in Bucharest. This time, the objectives related to this matter were primarily dynastic, aimed at reinforcing the standing of the Romanian Royal House, whose public image had been visibly compromised.

In this context, Bulgarian media announced in July 1926 the prospective marriage of Boris to Giovanna of Savoy, daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy⁴⁷. Naturally, in Sofia, this union was perceived as a victory, given Italy's rising prominence on the international stage. On the other hand, Fascist diplomacy sought to expand its strategic influence in Bulgaria and the Balkans, consolidating the Bulgarian throne while alleviating anxieties within anti-Yugoslav and anti-Romanian circles. In support of these assertions, the Sofia newspaper "Praznici Vesti", on 14 July 1926, in an article entitled "The King's Marriage", emphasized that "the Tsar's departure abroad under the name Count Rilschy made a strong impression upon all our neighbors"⁴⁸. According to the same publication, albeit unofficial, the journey attracted particular attention in Romania due to rumors that the Bulgarian Tsar intended to marry Princess Ileana of Romania. In support of these latter suppositions, the presence of photographs of the two in some American newspapers was cited, together with their engagement, a 'rumour' that was said to have circulated in Bulgaria⁴⁹.

A matter of particular interest in our study arises in November 1926, when Roman Fascist circles—possibly seeking to undermine Romanian–Bulgarian dynastic initiatives—speculated that Princess Ileana was to marry Albrecht of Habsburg⁵⁰. This plan formed part of an ambitious yet fantastical

⁴⁶ In a private conversation, Queen Marie told I. G. Duca jokingly, "I am in a very good mood; it probably does me good to be called the mother-in-law of the Balkans," cf. Hannah Pakula, *Ultima romantică*, 398–399.

⁴⁷ A. M. A. E., fond 71/1920-1944 Bulgaria, vol. 48, f. 36.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ In the autumn of 1919, Queen Marie was unofficially and very discreetly sent to Switzerland by the Allies, with the consent and support of the Romanian government, in order to persuade the former Emperor Charles of Habsburg, and especially his wife Zita, to renounce the throne definitively, in exchange for a sum of money or other advantages. It may be assumed that, seven years later, under different domestic and international circumstances, the Queen once again became involved in the destiny of the most important and oldest imperial family in Europe. A.M.A.E., fund 71/1914 E2, part II, vol. 31, f. 511; telegram no. 396/25.11.1919 from I. Tresnea Grecianu, Minister of Romania in Copenhagen to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Reliable information from Vienna reports that, a few days ago in Switzerland, H.M. the Queen had a meeting with the former Emperor of Austria, Charles, whom she persuaded to definitively renounce the throne and the possible personal

scheme: since the male members of the Romanian royal family allegedly failed to meet requisite political criteria—King Ferdinand gravely ill, Prince Carol a cocaine addict according to Elena Lupescu, and Prince Nicolae likewise afflicted by health issues—the proposed solution for the Hungarian throne involved a marriage between Albrecht of Habsburg, envisaged as Hungary’s future king, and Princess Ileana, who, through a reconfiguration of dynastic succession, would inherit the Romanian throne, thereby creating a Romanian–Hungarian–Austrian union. In this context, it appears that the issue resurfaced during the 4 April 1927 meeting between Mussolini and Hungarian Prime Minister István Bethlen, as Italy pursued a strategic offensive in both countries based on rapprochement between Budapest and Bucharest, as suggested by Rome⁵¹ and in line with the 1926 Romanian–Italian bilateral treaty concluded under the Averescu government.

Meanwhile, in Sofia, one may surmise the existence of an intense struggle for influence. Advocates of marriage with the Romanian princess argued that, certainly, strengthening Italian influence would undermine Bulgarian sovereignty, whereas orientation toward Romania would facilitate a desired rapprochement with the Little Entente, France, and Great Britain.

The Bucharest government—unable to withstand this *strategic competition*, clearly on the defensive following King Ferdinand’s death and the establishment of the Regency in July 1927, which implicitly diminished Queen Marie’s influence—displayed acute interest in the Bulgarian Tsar’s nuptial projects: this is amply demonstrated by the substantial volume of confidential information dispatched to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Romanian legations throughout the region, following extensive investigations within diplomatic, political, journalistic, and social milieus.

Accordingly, in a note dated 13 September 1928, interim Foreign Minister Constantin Argetoianu issued precise instructions to the staff of the Romanian Legation in Rome to ascertain “in a highly confidential manner whether any plan exists for a marriage between the King of Bulgaria and an Italian princess”⁵². The response of the chargé d’affaires, Dimitrie I. Ghika, was prompt, indicating that he would seek further details after a possible meeting with Sixtus of Bourbon, the Bulgarian Tsar’s uncle. Ghika reported that at that time, prevailing perceptions within the political and social circles which he had investigated had suggested that the Bulgarians had become skeptical towards such a marriage and Mussolini lacked interest in “dynastic matrimonial combinations in the service of his foreign policy”⁵³. Moreover, he noted that

union of Hungary with Romania. In return, he could be assisted in overcoming his financial difficulties.”

⁵¹ Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen, *op. cit.*, in *Postfață*, note 54, 179.

⁵² A. M. A. E., fond 71/ 1920-1944, Bulgaria, vol. 48, f. 40.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, f. 41.

“the Italian sovereigns do not wish their daughters to be queens, but rather to enjoy a happy future free of evident risks”⁵⁴.

Beyond these observations, decisive weight was naturally attributed to Vatican policy, given the implications of a marriage to an Orthodox sovereign and the presumption that offspring would likewise be raised Orthodox. In fact, the religious question had long constituted an insurmountable obstacle in similar European contexts, which is why a marriage with Princess Ileana would have been far more acceptable to the Bulgarian Church and, most importantly, consistent with the Bulgarian Constitution. The Bulgarian Constitution, which—very importantly—is identical in this respect to the Romanian Constitution of 1923, stipulated that the Tsar and, consequently, the Crown Prince were to be raised in the state Orthodox religion. A comparable situation had arisen in Boris’s own childhood, when his father, Tsar Ferdinand, was excommunicated by the Catholic Church for baptizing his son according to Orthodox rites. These considerations led the chargé d’affaires in Rome to conclude that, beyond *The Bronze Gate*, an Italian–Bulgarian matrimonial alliance was deemed implausible⁵⁵.

The struggle for information and the exceptionally active involvement of Romanian diplomacy only serve to underscore the high stakes attached to Princess Ileana’s marriage in Bucharest’s political calculations, particularly as matrimonial ties with the Danish Schleswig-Holstein dynasty of Greece had deteriorated following King Carol’s separation from Helen and Elisabeta’s separation from King George II. Conversely, Bulgaria identified in the House of Savoy a powerful ally capable of decisively assisting its return to the international political arena. Fascist Italy, in its offensive to conquer the Balkans, although it had established excellent relations with Romania during the period of the last Averescu government, nevertheless came to regard the main revisionist states in the region—Hungary and Bulgaria—as its principal allies.

In synthesizing Romanian–Bulgarian relations during the first interwar decade as shaped by the prospect of a dynastic marriage between Tsar Boris and one of the Bucharest princesses, it may be affirmed that the three phases of these projects—1921, 1923, and 1926—constituted elements of political processes meticulously orchestrated by the diplomats of both countries. While Bulgaria’s objective was unequivocal—emergence from the international isolation resulting from the First World War—Romania systematically declined participation in arrangements that would have jeopardized its relations with Greece and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. These considerations did not, however, prevent Romania from making it clear that interest arose as soon as the situation of the Bucharest dynasty began to suffer following Carol’s

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 42-43.

abdication on 4 January 1926 and the death of King Ferdinand, which occurred on 20 July 1927.

The strategies employed to achieve a mutual understanding were among the most complex imaginable. On the Bulgarian side, the two phases of the offensive were masterminded by the prime ministers Aleksandăr Stamboliiski and Aleksandăr Tsankov, who exploited both personal charisma and political leverage to implement a plan carefully devised within Sofia's governmental circles. In Bucharest, by contrast, it may be observed that Romanian diplomacy adopted different positions contingent upon political context and the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *while under Take Ionescu, rumors of a Romanian–Bulgarian dynastic marriage were categorically denied, under I. G. Duca, the tone was more measured; thus, between 1926 and 1930 a cautious attitude prevailed, neither encouraging nor explicitly rejecting the possibility of marriage.*

The failure of the two royal houses to reach a common ground, culminating in dynastic marriage, ultimately demonstrates that, despite geographical proximity, Romania and Bulgaria pursued core political interests that did not converge: Bulgaria articulated a revisionist vision towards Romania, Greece, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, whereas Romania structured its foreign policy around regional alliances, most notably the Little Entente. Last but not least, among the causes of failure, one must emphasize Bulgaria's gravitation toward the revisionist camp, a trajectory definitively sealed by Tsar Boris's marriage to Princess Giovanna of Savoy on 25 October 1930.