



**09.04.1918**

**Bessarabia, Bukovina, Transylvania and Banat unite with Romania**

The First World War was the perfect context in which Romanians could finally claim their right to national unity. 'I don't know how the war will unfold,' wrote the Romanian Prime Minister, Ion I.C. Bratianu, on 8 August 1916 to his son Gheorghe, 'we could have the fate of Serbia [completely occupied at that moment], but we will have confirmed, from now on, our rights to our rightful land. [...] If the peace is concluded without us, we will be crushed between a Great Hungary and a Great Bulgaria. The world must see what we want and for what reason.' In spite of the fact that in 1913 the alliance with the Central Powers had just been renewed, fulfilment of the national ideal was determined by Romania's decision to enter the war. The Romanian government did not accept breaking its neutrality until the Entente finally recognised, through the alliance treaty concluded on 4 August 1916, Romania's historical rights to the territories inhabited by Romanians in Austria-Hungary: Transylvania, Banat, Crisana, Maramures and Bukovina. The reflection of the national unity ideal could be noticed in the fact that on 14 August 1916 Romania declared war only on Austria-Hungary and the offensive which was unleashed was aimed at the very territories inhabited by Romanians over Carpathians.



Romania's exit from the war, in the context created at the end of 1917, seemed to compromise the ideal for which the fight was designed. The fall of Tsarism in Russia, followed by the establishment of the Bolshevik regime, as well as the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, again turned the tides in favour of accomplishing Romanian national unity.



The Great Union was achieved, mainly, in three phases:

## Union of Bessarabia with Romania

A part of Moldova, occupied during the Russo-Turkish War of 1812, Bessarabia preserved its mainly Romanian background even after its transformation into a Russian province. The great political changes that began with the Russian Revolution of February 1917 and was followed by the recognition by the government led by Lenin of the right to self-determination (until secession) of peoples from the former Tsarist Empire created the proper setting for Bessarabia's union with Romania. In April 1917 the National Moldovan Party was created, which became the main political vector of the Romanian national emancipation movement in Bessarabia. At the same time, Moldovan soldiers which were part of the Russian army made up a strong current in favour of national self-determination. The great soldier

congress organised in Chisinau on 20 October/2 November – 27 October/7 November 1917 proclaimed Bessarabia's autonomy and decided to convoke a representative leadership body, called the Country Council. Gathered on 21 November/4 December, the Country Council was made up of eighty-four Moldovan deputies and thirty-six deputies of other ethnic minorities (Russians, Jews, Bulgarians, etc.), representing various social categories. At the beginning of December, the Country Council proclaimed the Moldovan Democratic Republic on the territory of Bessarabia, as an autonomous entity within Russia, and on 24 January (the celebration of the Union of Walachia and Moldova principalities)/6 February 1918, it proclaimed the independence of the new republic.

**A**fter the signature of the truce between Russia and the Central Powers in December 1917, thousands of Russian soldiers withdrew from the Romanian front to Russia, through Bessarabia. Many resorted to plunder, rape, destruction and a part of them, sharing communist convictions, even attacked the Government and the Country Council of Bessarabia. Faced with these conditions, the leaders of Bessarabia asked for the help of the Romanian government. The latter sent four divisions, led by General Ernest Brosteanu, who restored order but without becoming involved in the political situation.

**A**s a result of disarming the Soviet troops in Bessarabia, the Soviet government announced on 13/26 January 1918 the breakup of diplomatic relations with Romania and the confiscation of the Romanian gold reserves, sent during the previous year to Russia.

**H**owever, in Bessarabia the unionist current intensified so that on 27 March/9 April 1918, the Country Council voted in favour of Bessarabia's union with Romania. The proclamation stated: 'On behalf of Bessarabia's people, the Country Council declares: the Moldovan Democratic Republic, within its borders between rivers Prut, Dniestr, Danube, Black Sea and the former borders with Austria, separated more than one hundred years from the body of old Moldova, by the power of historical right and the nation's right, on the basis of the principle that peoples should decide by themselves their fate, beginning from today and forever, unites with its mother country, Romania.'

## **Union of Bukovina with Romania**

In the Autumn of 1918, Austria-Hungary was on the verge of losing the war. The suppressed peoples from the empire, including Romanians, started to revendicate their right to national self-determination. In Bukovina, a region from the north of Moldova which had been occupied since 1775 by the Habsburg Empire, the national emancipation movement of Romanians intensified. On 9/22 October 1918, the first issue of the 'Glasul Bucovinei' ('Voice of Bukovina') newspaper was printed in Chernovitz, establishing as its political objective union with other territories inhabited by Romanians. Then, on 14/27 October, a National Assembly of Romanians was called in Chernowitz, which proclaimed itself a constituent and decided on 'the whole Bukovina's union with the other Romanian countries in an independent national state.' At the same time, a Romanian national Council was created under the leadership of Iancu Flondor, which had its demand to the Austrian governor for a transfer of power refused.

**B**ukovina was claimed not only by Romanians, but also by Ukrainians, who would have wanted to add to an independent Ukraine at least the north of Bukovina, with the capital in Chernovitz. The Romanian National Council, considering Ukrainians as recent immigrants, revendicated the whole of Bukovina for Romanians. Confronted with the danger of dividing the province and the action of Ukrainian paramilitary formations, the Committee asked for the assistance of the Romanian Government which, at the

beginning of November, sent a division led by General Iacob Zadic in order to preserve order. Thus, a General Congress of Bukovina was organised, to which representatives of the German and Polish National Councils took part as well as representatives of the Ukrainian population. On 15/28 November 1918, the Congress unanimously adopted the Declaration concerning the Union of Bukovina with Romania: 'Therefore, We, the General Congress of Bukovina, embodying the supreme power of the country and being the only one invested with legislating power, on behalf of national Sovereignty, decide: the unconditional and eternal Union of Bukovina, within its old borders, the rivers Ceremus, Colacin and Dniestr, with the Kingdom of Romania.'

## **Union of Transylvania with Romania**

**I**n their turn, Romanians in Transylvania led an intense national emancipation movement. On 29 September/12 October 1918 the Executive Committee of the Romanian National Party of Transylvania adopted the declaration of independence of the Romanian nation and the secession from Hungary, a document written by Vasile Goldis. The document was then read out on 5/18 October in the Hungarian parliament and was received with much hostility by Hungarian deputies. On 31 October representatives of the Romanian National Party and the Social Democratic Party made up, on the basis of parity, the Central Romanian National Council, which had to coordinate efforts for leading the national fight. At the beginning of November 1918 local Romanian national councils were established, as well as Romanian local guards, which took over local rule from Hungarian authorities. These council were subordinated to the Central Romanian National Council, which tried to convince the Hungarian Government to accept secession of Transylvania from Hungary but the negotiations, which took place in Arad from 13 to 14 November, failed.

**I**n order to demonstrate their wish to unite with Romania, the Great national Council (the new name of the Central Romanian National Council) called a Great National Assembly for 1 December 1918 which would decide the fate of Romanians in Transylvania. The place of the gathering was symbolically chosen; the city of Alba Iulia, recalling the union achieved by the Walachian prince Michael the Brave, in 1599 and the martyrdom of Horea, Cloșca și Crișan, in 1785. The assembly was attended by 1,228 delegates chosen from all settlements in Transylvania in the presence of 100,000 Transylvanian Romanians wishing to express their support for the union. Vasile Goldis read the draft resolution which started with the words: 'The National Assembly of all Romanians from Transylvania, Banat and Hungary, gathered by means of their rightful representatives in Alba Iulia on 18 November (1 December) 1918, decree the union of Romanians and the territories they inhabit with Romania.' The decision was voted for unaniously. It also contained, apart from the union decision, other principles on the basis of which the union was to be made: a radical land reform, universal voting rights (for those over twenty-one years old), democratic rights and freedoms, full national and confessional freedom for minorities in Transylvania, etc.

**T**he union of Transylvania with Romania completed the process of building the Romanian national unitary state, a process begun in 1859 by the union of Moldova with Walachia, continued by the union of Dobruja in 1878, of Bessarabia in March 1918 and of Bukovina in November 1918. The Great Union was the result of the will expressed by the Romanian nation through decisions taken with a broad democratic character.

**T**he Peace Conference of Paris (1919–20) and the Treaty of Trianon (1920) only confirmed through international documents a historical reality achieved after the heroic fight and the plebiscitary decisions

of Romanians.

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