



The First Diplomatic Mission of Romania in Portugal (1880)

Mircea Iliescu¹

Abstract: In March 1880, the first Romanian diplomatic mission was sent to Spain and Portugal, led by Alexandru Plagino, seconded by Dimitrie Bărcănescu. The Spanish and Portuguese Crowns would be willing to recognize the independence of Romania in the context of the end of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Treaty of Berlin, 1878, and the previous recognition by the Great Powers. The objective of the mission was to strengthen bilateral diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Carol I; Luis I; Alexandru Plagino; Dimitrie Bărcănescu; Lisbon; diplomatic mission

1. Introduction

After the end of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878, in which the Romanian army participated on the side of Russia, Romania obtained the recognition of its independence by Russia and Turkey in 1878, then Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1879. On 20 February 1880, on the same day, France, the United Kingdom and Germany recognised Romania's independence, considering that the Danube Principality had made important progress in relation to the conditions imposed by the Treaty of Berlin (1878): Romania had annexed the north of Dobrudja, including the Danube Delta and Snake Island, but had lost again, three counties in the south of Bessarabia (generically called Bugeac), in favour of Russia. Internally, Romania had to amend one of the articles of its Constitution to grant citizenship rights to

¹ PhD, School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy, Institute of History Nicolae Iorga", Romania, Address: Aviatorilor Boulevard, no. 1, Bucharest, sector 1, Romania; Corresponding author: mircea.iliescu77@gmail.com.

non-Orthodox, namely Jews, whose immigration had increased significantly since the 18th century. Finally, apart from the impositions of the Treaty, “satisfaction of the claims of the German shareholders in the issue of the redemption of the railways” was insisted upon (Damean, 2011, p. 10).

Prince Carol, from the house of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, together with the Romanian Government, led by Ion C. Brătianu¹, decided to send, as of 1879, a special mission to the Courts of Madrid and Lisbon so that Romania’s independence would be acknowledged by the two Iberian countries².

2. The Family Relations of Carol with the House of Braganza

After the unexpected death of Queen Maria II in 1853, Crown Prince Pedro, aged just 16, succeeded to the throne, with his father, Ferdinand (Fernando) II, securing the regency. Having reached maturity, however, the question of marriage arose. The choice fell on a princess from the House of Hohenzollern, strongly recommended by Prince Consort Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, the husband of Queen Victoria, for whom the young Portuguese king had a special appreciation. In a letter dated 29 March 1857, Prince Albert wrote to Pedro his nephew (his father Ferdinand and Prince Albert were first cousins): “You would have the advantage of marrying a Catholic princess from a Protestant and liberal home and of entirely new blood, untainted by the admixture of Bourbons or Habsburgs, besides having enjoyed a simple education, unspoiled by the flattery at the Court” (Mónica, 2000, p. 129).

At the age of twenty-one, Pedro V married Stephanie of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen by proxy in Berlin on 29 April 1858, in St. Hedwig’s Cathedral. The groom was represented by Prince Leopold, Stephanie’s older brother. Prince Carol, who was then nineteen years old and who, eight years later, would reach the throne of the Principalities, also attended the ceremony (Vilhena, 1922, p. 38).

¹ Liberal Prime Minister, leading four governments between 1876 and 1888.

² Dan Caragea (coord.). (2017). *ROMÂNIA – PORTUGALIA: 100 de ani de la stabilirea relațiilor diplomatice româno-portugheze / ROMÉLIA – PORTUGAL: 100 anos desde o estabelecimento das relações diplomáticas romeno-portuguesas / ROMANIA – PORTUGAL: 100 years since the establishment of Romanian-Portuguese diplomatic relations / ROMANIA – PORTUGAL: 100 years since the establishment of Romanian-Portuguese diplomatic relations*. Bucharest: Dynasty Books.

The marriage in the presence of Stephanie with Pedro V took place in Lisbon, at the Church of St. Dominic (São Domingos), on 18 May 1858, Stephanie thus becoming Queen Consort of Portugal. “The image of the perfect and virtuous couple appeared as an epitome of all celebrations, and public opinion saw in Stephanie and Pedro a kind of Iberian emulation of Victoria and Albert of the United Kingdom”.¹ Unfortunately, Stephanie died a year later, on 17 July 1859, a victim of diphtheria. Two years later, Pedro V also died of typhoid fever. “This episode could pass as melodramatic, if the marriage had not been an attempt to bring Prussia closer, a rebalancing of forces in relation to the Great Powers (Caragea and Voicu, 2017, p. 20)”.

Another figure, even more prominent in European politics, was Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, Stephanie’s older brother and Crown Prince of that royal house. As I mentioned above, Carol, his brother, was Prince (from 1866) and then King (from 1881) of Romania, a reign that would last forty-eight years (1866-1914).

Leopold perpetuated his union with the Portuguese royal house by marrying, on 12 September 1861, Infanta Antonia, sister of King Pedro V. Prince Charles also attended the ceremony celebrated in the Church of St. Dominic (São Domingos) in Lisbon.

After the wedding, Duke Louis (Luís) and Infante John (João), the King’s younger brothers, accompanied Leopold, Antonia and Carol on their way back to Germany. On their return, in Paris, they learned of the death of Infante Ferdinand (Fernando) and of the King’s agony.

After the death of his brother, Louis I ascended the throne, being acclaimed on 22 December 1861, for a reign that would last twenty-eight years (Godinho, 1990, p. 18), one of the most balanced of the 19th century.

On the journey that Carol I later made in 1866 to Constantinople, to obtain confirmation of his investiture as ruler of the Principalities, the view of the sea facing the city reminded him of Lisbon:

“Constantinople, as depicted here, vividly reminds the Prince [of] Lisbon, where [he] accompanied in 1861 his brother, Prince [Leopold] of Hohenzollern, to his

¹ Isabel Corrêa da Silva. (1922). „Virtudes do corpo e da alma: um itinerário crítico pela memória de D. Pedro V”. *Ler História* (Lisabona), nr. 8; <https://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/11249>.

marriage to Infanta Antonia of Portugal. Although the view here is even grander, still the comparison is worth mentioning. At Lisbon's feet blue waves also rock, and bright white towers rise from the shore up to high hills" (*Memoirs*, 2011, II, p. 54).

On 14 October 1868, Prince Carol noted in his *Memoirs*:

"14 October - In Spain, Prim¹ and Serrano² go hand in hand to challenge the election of a new king: among the candidates are mentioned, apart from the King of Portugal [former King Consort, Ferdinand II./D. Fernando II], the Crown Prince of Hohenzollern [Leopold], Prince Philip of Coburg³ and the Duke of Montpensier" (*Memoirs*, 2011, IV, p. 62).

Negotiations on the possible candidacy lasted until July 1870, when Leopold finally agreed, but the strong reaction of France, which refused to accept the geographic siege of the Hohenzollerns, made him give up for good on 12 July. However, Emperor Napoleon III asked the King of Prussia for an official confirmation under the pretext that Prince Carol, Leopold's brother, had still ascended the throne of Romania despite an initial renunciation. Chancellor Bismarck's reply, intentionally provocative, inflamed the French Government and public opinion. On 19 July, France declared war on Prussia.

We should also add the fact that the second son of Prince Leopold and Antonia, baptized Ferdinand, after the name of his maternal grandfather, became, after the death of Carol I (who had no male descendants), in 1914, the second King of Romania (1914-1928).

¹ Juan Prim y Prats (1814-1870) was a military man and one of the protagonists of the Revolution of 1868. He later became involved in the question of succession to the throne of Spain.

² Francisco Serrano y Domínguez (1810-1885), Duke of Torre and Count Consort of San Antonio, was a military man and politician: Regent of the Kingdom (1869-1971), President of the Council (1868-1869, 1871, 1872, 1874) and the last President of the First Republic (1874).

³ Philip, Count of Flanders, who had been temporarily proclaimed, on 11 February 1866, by the royal lieutenant, Lord of the Principalities.

3. The Russian-Turkish War and the Recognition of Romania's Independence

In 1877, 24 April, the Russian-Turkish war broke out. On the side of Russia, Serbia, Romania, Montenegro and a Bulgarian volunteer army entered the war (we cite according to the size of the forces involved). Russia took advantage of the Balkan crisis and the secret alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany (Reichstadt Agreement, 1856, based on the League of the Three Emperors, 1873). Initially, Romania adopted neutrality, but due to the evolution of events, it decided to proclaim its independence, on 9/21 May, without the consent of the Great Powers. *Un fait accompli*. The reactions were varied, between the benevolent reception of Italy and the disapproving attitude of the United Kingdom (Iorga, 1927, pp. 99-101). The Romanian army began to occupy defensive positions north of the Danube. In August 1877, due to the losses suffered by the Russians, Grand Duke Nicolae expressly asked Prince Carol that the Romanian troops enter the war. The Romanian army crossed the Danube. Important victories followed, but also an appreciable number of casualties. On 31 January 1878, defeated Turkey called for an armistice. This was followed by the Treaty of San Stefano (3 March) and, somewhat later, the Congress of Berlin (13 June – 13 July).

As we stated in the introductory part, the *de jure* recognition of Romania's independence by the Great Powers ended two years later, on 20 February 1880.

The year 1880 can be considered fundamental in building the foreign policy of the independent Romanian state. After the Union of Principalities, during the time of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Romania had only two diplomatic agencies: in Constantinople (1859) and in Paris (1860), and a diplomatic office in Belgrade (1863). Already during the time of Prince Carol, new offices were opened in Vienna (1868), Berlin (1872), Rome (1873) and Petrograd (1874). The simple mention of these cities speaks for itself about the closeness of relations between Romania and the Great Powers that "guaranteed" its place in the world. After the war, in 1879, two more offices were opened, in Athens and London, and one in Brussels (1880), ten diplomatic missions in all¹.

¹ See also Nicolae Iorga. (1923). *The foreign policy of King Carol I*. Bucharest: Institute of Graphic Arts "Luceafărul".

4. Special Mission to Spain and Portugal (March, 1880)

The first contacts with the Iberian countries, Spain and Portugal, date from 1879, being initiated by the Romanian diplomatic agency in Paris. We find the information in a telegram¹ sent by N. Callimachi-Catargiu² to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ion I. Câmpineanu³.

The telegram shows that although there was a request to receive a “special mission” aimed at getting the recognition of the independence of the Romanian state, Spain requested a postponement due to the King’s trip (“*prier mission roumain surseoir parceque Roi voyage*”). The Spanish minister in Paris was confident of a good reception, once the Silistra incident was resolved⁴, but he showed that it was difficult for Spain not to take into account the position of the Great Powers (“*il est difficile à l’Espagne ne pas tenir compte de Grandes Puissances de l’Europe*”). It was obvious that Spain did not want to recognise Romania’s independence before the Great Powers. Callimachi-Catargiu states in the same telegram that “tomorrow” he will meet with the minister of Portugal⁵. It was known that the position of the Portuguese Government was no different: recognition by all the Powers participating in the Congress of Berlin was expected. At the end of his telegram, the Romanian diplomat mentions the person indicated to lead the mission: “in any case, Plagino”⁶.

¹ AMAE, Telegrama no. 4710, de 6.2.1879.

² Nicolae Callimachi-Catargiu (1830-1882) was a politician and diplomat, twice Minister of Foreign Affairs (1869-1870, 1870-1871).

³ Ion I. Câmpineanu (1841-1888) was a liberal politician, Minister of Foreign Affairs (1878-1879; 1885) and the first Governor of the National Bank of Romania.

⁴ It was about the complicated problem of the Romanian-Bulgarian border, which was solved only on 6 August 1881, with the ratification by Turkey. The city of Silistra (or Dârstor) was then attributed to Bulgaria, of which it is currently a part, but it was also integrated into Romania between the years 1913-1918 and 1919-1946, cf. (Niculae, 2023, pp. 65-80).

⁵ José da Silva Mendes Leal, Minister Plenipotentiary of Portugal to France between 1874 and 1883.

⁶ Alexandru Plagino (1821-1894), a large landowner, was a cup-maker (1840), aga (1850) and Prefect of the Capital Police (1850-1851), great orator (1852) and Secretary of State (1854-1856).

After the Union of the Principalities, he was *ad-interim* Minister of Foreign Affairs (1861) and Minister of Finance (1861-1862), member of the Elective Assembly (1862) and Vice-President of the Senate (1865).

He was part of the Constituent Assembly (1866). He was a senator (1866), deputy (1871) and President of the Senate, four times, between 1869 and 1871.

During the War of Independence, he was appointed Commissar-General attached to the Great Quarter of the Russian Army (April-July 1877).

In March 1880, he was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Courts of Madrid and Lisbon.

Later, he was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary in Rome (1885-1891) and in London (1891-1893).

After the successful completion of the mission in Madrid, Alexandru Plagino, accompanied by Dimitrie Bărcănescu¹, traveled to Lisbon where they arrived at the end of March, during Holy Week of 1880.

The protocol was very similar to that of Madrid. In Lisbon, the Romanian envoys were received with “special distinction” by the President of the Council, the progressive Anselmo José Braamcamp².

On Good Friday, 26 March, on a rainy day, Plagino and Bărcănescu went to lay wreaths in the crypt of Queen Consort Stephanie of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, the older sister of Prince Carol I, who died in Lisbon in 1859 and whose body was buried in the pantheon of the House of Braganza, at the Monastery of St. Vincent de Fora (São Vicente de Fora).

In a letter addressed to his sister, Mary of Flanders, Prince Carol I wrote:

*“I also sent a diplomatic mission to Lisbon that I entrusted to one of my aides [Al. C. Plagino. See *Memoirs*, p. 311]. The gentlemen [Plagino and Bărcănescu] were received there in the most cordial manner and with special distinction in all respects. On Good Friday, they visited the tomb of our dear and unforgettable Stephanie and laid wreaths at her grave. This touching attention, which the Romanians regard in the same way, moved me deeply. Who would have thought 20 years ago that a messenger from the East would one day stand at the grave of our much loved sister to perform this act of piety on behalf of the brothers. Surely these are the first fresh flowers that have been laid there for a long time, for I fear the grave is seldom visited. Upon receiving the dispatch, Elisabeth and I remained looking at each other speechless for a while. Then I clearly felt that even the long passage of time is not able to completely heal a deep wound of the heart. In eight days my gentlemen return, and I am very anxious to hear their report [April 7 (19) 1880. See *Memoirs*, p. 321]” (Cristescu, 2005, p. 81).*

Al. Plagino was received on 30 March, at 1:00 p.m., at the Palace of Ajuda by King Louis I, in a private audience, in the presence of the President of the Council of Ministers and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The Romanian diplomat handed the letters of accreditation and the insignia of the "Star of Romania" Order to the King. Plagino said:

He died in 1894. (*apud* Caragea and Voicu, 2017, p. 14).

¹ Dumitru Bărcănescu (1841-1886) was lieutenant-colonel of cavalry, aide-de-camp to Carol I.

² Anselmo José Braamcamp (1817-1885), was President of the Council and *ad-interim* Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1879 and 1881.

“Sire, Charged with handing to Your Most Faithful Majesty the letter of His Royal Highness the Prince of Romania, my Sovereign, as well as the insignia of the Order of the Star of Romania, I am very happy, Sire, to have been designated for this high mission, which gives me the great honour of being presented to Your Majesty with the aim of making you aware of the absolute independence of Romania and of being a faithful interpreter of the lively feelings of sympathy that my Sovereign and the Romanians have for Your Majesty and for Your noble country.

Please, Sire, allow me to express the most ardent wishes I can offer for a long reign for Your Most Faithful Majesty, for Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen, for the Royal Family, and for the prosperity of Portugal”.

And the King of Portugal answered:

“Mr. Envoy Extraordinary, I receive with pleasure the letter by which His Royal Highness Prince Carol I of Romania informs me that he has entrusted you with the mission of bringing to my attention the absolute independence of the Principality.

Placing the highest value on the assurances you give me regarding the sympathy that your Sovereign and the Romanians have for my person, for Her Majesty the Queen, for the Royal Family and for the noble nation whose destinies are entrusted to me, I am happy to I assure you that these welcome sentiments are altogether the same as those which animate me towards His Royal Highness and towards His country, for the prosperity of which I extend my warmest wishes.

Particularly moved by the offer of the insignia of the Order of the Star of Romania, which your Sovereign bestows on me, please be the interpreter of all my gratitude to His Royal Highness.

As for you, Mr. Extraordinary Envoy, I have the pleasure of confessing that the choice of your person for this honourable mission can only be particularly pleasing to me”.¹

For his part, the King of Portugal granted Prince Carol I *the Ribbon of the Two Orders* (the *Order of Christ* and the *Order of Avis*).² At the same time, Louis I

¹ *Diário do Governo* (Lisboa), no. 71, 31.3.1880, p. 1 e no. 72, 1.4.1880, p. 1 (corectat și republicat); *Diário Ilustrado* (Lisboa), no. 2467, 31.3.1880, p. 1; no. 2469, 2.4.1880, p. 1. (translation from Portuguese *apud* Caragea and Voicu, 2017, pp. 18).

² *Diário Ilustrado* (Lisabona), no. 2468, 1.4.1880, p. 3.

conferred Al. Pagino the *Grand Cross of the Order of Christ*¹, as reported in the Portuguese press.

Of course, just like in Spain, the mission had two objectives: on the one hand, the recognition, by Portugal, of Romania's independence and, on the other hand, the consolidation of relations between the two states. In his letter, Prince Carol I spoke of "*close harmonious relations*", hinting at future diplomatic representation. Drafted on 24 January 1879, the letter was handed over to the Portuguese King only a year later, for reasons of political prudence and expediency².

5. Conclusions

Despite the good reception in Lisbon, but contrary to the path chosen by the neighbouring country, Portugal did not take any measures regarding the strengthening of diplomatic relations with Romania. On the other hand, the Brătianu Government and those that followed in Romania also failed to take any initiative, except for the creation of honorary consulates (1896, in Lisbon and 1906, in Porto; Portugal will also open a consulate at Brăila, in 1912).

Only after the end of the war, with the birth of Greater Romania, did Portugal and Romania mutually open permanent legations. Until 1919, the year of the opening of the Portuguese Legation in Bucharest, respectively 1920, the year of the opening of the Legation of the Kingdom of Romania in Lisbon, there were attempts (as was the Portuguese one in 1909), hesitations, but above all, an obvious lack of economic interest and of political *rapprochement*. It is no less true that, from 1883 to 1914, the two countries belonged to opposite alliance systems: Romania had a secret treaty with Austria-Hungary, to which Germany had also joined, while Portugal remained traditionally linked to the United Kingdom and to France. Moreover, beginning in the eighth decade of the 19th century, Portugal had become extremely sensitive to Germany's expansionist policy. It became increasingly evident that, with the support of the United Kingdom, it was planning an attack on the Portuguese Empire in southern Africa.

¹ *Diário do Governo* (Lisabona), no. 74, 3.4.1880, p. 1; *Diário Ilustrado* (Lisabona), no. 2471, 4.4.1880, p. 1.

² AMAE, Scrisoare a Prințului Carol I al României adresată Regelui D. Luís I al Portugaliei, copie, 12 ianuarie (24), 1879, dosar „Al. Plagino”.

The end of World War I, with both countries on the side of the Allies, also marked the end of the diplomatic apathy that had dominated bilateral relations for nearly four decades.

References

*** (2011). *Memoriile regelui Carol I al României (de un martor ocular)*. 17 vols..(2011)/ *Memoirs of King Carol I of Romania (by an eyewitness)*. 17 vols. Bucharest: ErcPres Publishing House, (ediția originală: *Aus dem Leben König Karls von Rumänien. Aufzeichnungen eines Augenzeugen*, 4 vols., Stuttgart, Verlag von J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1894-1900).

Caragea, Dan & Voicu, Delia. (2017). Momente din istoria relațiilor diplomatice româno-portugheze, în Caragea, Dan (coord.). *ROMÂNIA – PORTUGALIA: 100 de ani de la stabilirea relațiilor diplomatice româno-portugheze / ROMÊNIA – PORTUGAL: 100 anos desde o estabelecimento das relações diplomáticas romeno-portuguesas/ ROMANIA – PORTUGAL: 100 years since the establishment of Romanian-Portuguese diplomatic relations*. Bucharest: Dynasty Books.

Damean, Sorin Liviu (2011). *România și Congresul de pace de la Berlin (1878)/ Romania and the Berlin Peace Congress (1878)*. Bucharest: Mica Valahie Publishing House.

Diaconescu, Emil (1937). *România și marile puteri după Congresul de la Berlin până la 1914./ Romania and the great powers after the Berlin Congress until 1914*. Iasi: Presa Bună.

Dragomir, Denisa Victoria (2018). Aspects of the Romanian-Spanish relations between 1881-1885. *International Relations and Security Studies Review*, nr. 1. Stockton, California: Global Research Publishing House.

Godinho, Isabel da Silveira (coord.). (1990). *D. Luís I, Duque do Porto e Rei de Portugal*. Lisabona: Palácio Nacional de Ajuda.

Iorga, Nicolae (1923). *Politica externă a regelui Carol I./ The foreign policy of King Carol I*. Bucharest: Institute of Graphic Arts "Lucaefărul".

Iorga, Nicolae (1927). *Războiul pentru independența României. / The war for Romania's independence*. Bucharest: National Culture, 1927.

Mónica, Maria Filomena (2000). *Correspondência entre D. Pedro V e seu Tio, o Príncipe Alberto/ Correspondence between D. Pedro V and his uncle, Prince Albert*. Lisabona: ICS/Quetzal.

Niculae, Daniel Silviu. (2023). Conflictul ostroavelor. Incidente la frontiera româno-bulgară (1879-1908) / The conflict of the isles. Incidents on the Romanian-Bulgarian border (1879-1908)" în *Buletinul Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”/ Bulletin of the "Carol I" National Defense University*, nr. 1, pp. 65-80; <https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/revista/article/view/1661/1611>.

Silva, Isabel Corrêa da. (2022). Virtudes do corpo e da alma: um itinerário crítico pela memória de D. Pedro V. *Ler História* (Lisabona), nr. 81; <https://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/11249>.

Sorin Cristescu (2005). *Corespondența personală a Regelui Carol I: 1878-1912, / The personal correspondence of King Carol I: 1878-1912*. Bucharest, Tritonic.

Vilhena, Júlio de. (1922). *Cartas Inéditas da Rainha D. Estefânia/ Unpublished Letters from Queen D. Estefânia*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade.