

## 1930. DOCUMENTS REGARDING THE PASSAGE OF SOVIET WARSHIPS THROUGH THE BOSPHORUS AND DARDANELLES STRAITS

Marusia CÎRSTEA\*

**Abstract:** The article refers to “*the problem of the straits*” and the entry into the Black Sea of the Soviet warships “*Parischkaya Komuna*” and “*Profintern*”, which led to a “*diplomatic conflict*” between the Soviet Union and the Straits Commission. The incident came under the attention of Romanian diplomats, who feared that “the Soviets were preparing to attack”.

**Keywords:** The Black Sea, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, Turkey, the Soviet Union, warships.

In the interwar period, Romania’s diplomatic actions fell under the supreme and unvarying goal of defending the country’s independence and national sovereignty, preserving the territorial *status-quo* and also observing all the peace treaties that had put an end to the great war of 1914–1918. Among the peace treaties signed at the end of the war, there were the Treaty of Sevres with Turkey (10<sup>th</sup> August 1920 – also signed by Romania) and the Treaty of Lausanne (of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1923), which set the borders between Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, Syria and Iraq (one of the annexes to the treaty referred to the regime of the Black Sea Straits)<sup>1</sup>.

After the conclusion of these treaties, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk understood that Turkey had to undergo a process of modernization, that is “to change its own people’s system of values [...] and head towards Europe culturally and politically”<sup>2</sup>. In this context – of territorial changes, of a need for commercial connections between the states that bound the Black Sea (the USSR, Romania, Bulgaria) – with other states – the straits of the Black Sea (the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles) occupied a main position (only in 1831, the sum total of the entries and exits from the straits

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\* Associate Professor, PhD., University of Craiova, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of History, Political Sciences and International Relations; E-mail: cirsteamara@yahoo.com

<sup>1</sup> *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VIII, *România Întregită (1918–1940)*, coord. Ioan Scurtu, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 2003, pp. 29, 30; Ion Calafeteanu (coord.), *Istoria politicii externe românești în date*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing House, 2003, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Răzbumarea geografiei. Ce ne spune harta despre conflictele viitoare și lupta împotriva destinului*, Translated by Mihnea Gafița, Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2014, p. 381.

rose to 8366 ships)<sup>3</sup>. Discussing the importance of the straits for Romania, historian Seton Watson emphasized the following during a conference on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1921:

“In the future, Romanian politics will be determined by Russia’s attitude at the loss of Bessarabia and the problem of the straits, Romania being the country most interested in that matter. They must be nationalized and it is necessary that Romania play a decisive role in the Commission”<sup>4</sup>.

During the interwar period, “the problem of the straits” was constantly in the attention of the Great Powers; thus, at the Lausanne Conference, whose proceedings ended on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1923, when the Straits Convention was signed, it was established, among others, that “commercial vessels, as well as all ships that did not belong to any military maritime fleet, should pass the straits unhindered at anytime, both in times of peace and war – if they belonged to a neutral state;” at the same time, “it proclaimed freedom of transit through the straits in peace times, of all war ships under any flag, with a reserve regarding the maximum force a non-Black Sea power could transit through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles”<sup>5</sup>. As regards the regime of the Black Sea Straits – established in the Conference of Montreux (22<sup>nd</sup> June – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1936) – Romania supported the proposals made by Turkey and the Soviet Union, being convinced that “the identity of the goals pursued by our political actions in the interest of peace will facilitate the observance of Romanian interests through the signing of additional security agreements”<sup>6</sup>.

In January 1930 “two Russian warships, the battleship « Parischkaya Komuna » and the battle cruiser « Profintern », under the command of Admiral Galber, passed through the straits heading for Sevastopol without informing the Straits Commission”<sup>7</sup>. At that moment a “diplomatic conflict” arose between the Soviet Union and the Straits Commission. In reality, the warships had informed the Turkish Post by telegraph, but “since it was a Friday (17<sup>th</sup> January), and a Turkish holiday, the General Secretariat of the Commission was closed”<sup>8</sup>.

Referring to this incident, Romania’s Consul General, Mr. Ionescu, highlighted the following: “Turkish circles are dissatisfied about the presence of the two Russian vessels in the Black Sea” and “are eagerly looking forward to the departure of these

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<sup>3</sup> Ilie Seftiuc, Iulian Cârțână, *România și problema Strâmtoarelor*, Iași, Tipo Moldova Publishing House, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României, București (The Archives of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, Bucharest, hereinafter: AMAE), Londra fund, vol. 39, unpaginated.

<sup>5</sup> Ilie Seftiuc, Iulian Cârțână, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolae Titulescu, *Documente diplomatice*, edition by George Macovescu, Bucharest, Political Publishing House, 1967, doc. 472, p. 803; see also Ioan Scurtu, *România și Marile Puteri (1933–1940). Documente*, Bucharest, Fundația România de Măine Publishing House, 2000, doc. 24, pp. 60–62.

<sup>7</sup> AMAE, 71 România fund, vol. 20, f. 164.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

warships, suspecting that the Soviet Government would like to maintain them in order to ensure supremacy over Turkey”<sup>9</sup>.

The incident – the two Soviet vessels crossing the Straits – came under the attention of other states (Italy, Poland, Great Britain and others) who mentioned that “Soviet Russia does not pursue any well-determined real goal, and neither is she considering the extension of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea as a consequence of a Russian-Turkish agreement”<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, certain Romanian diplomats considered that Turkey’s position was partly due to the new “Protocol between Soviet Russia and Turkey” of 17<sup>th</sup> December 1929, signed by the Turkish Foreign minister Tevfik Rüstü Aras and the Russian ambassador to Istanbul, Lev Karahan<sup>11</sup>. Thus,

“through the recently concluded Turkish-Soviet agreement – emphasized C.M. Laptew, charge d’affaires to London, – Mr. Karahan secured a promise that the two governments should consult on matters regarding their foreign policies, especially with regard to possible agreements with other countries”<sup>12</sup>.

The entrance of Russian warships in the Black Sea waters continued to preoccupy Romanian diplomats, who maintained – through the voice of Constantin Diamandy, Romania’s minister plenipotentiary to Paris (1922–1930) – that “without wishing to escalate the strengthening of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea, we ask the question whether France [...] is satisfied with the Sea becoming a Russian lake”<sup>13</sup>.

The English press also mentioned the two warships; thus, under the title “Fears at the Black Sea” the Daily Chronicle wrote the following: “Romania has been quite concerned since Russia placed two warships in the Black Sea”, which is the reason for the need to “discuss the possibility of reorganising and extending the naval base and the defences at the Black Sea”<sup>14</sup> – during the English Admiral R.G. Henderson’s visit to Romania.

Also in connection to the entrance in the Black Sea of the two Russian military ships, Romanian diplomat Diamandy emphasised certain assessments made by foreign politicians regarding Russia’s intentions towards Romania, more precisely that “the Soviets would prepare for attack”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 212.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 213.

<sup>11</sup> Ionuț Cojocaru, *România și Turcia. Actori importanți în sistemul de relații interbelice (1918–1940)*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2014, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> AMAE, România fund, vol. 20, f. 214.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 216.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, 71 Anglia fund, vol. 16, f. 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, România fund, vol. 20, f. 217.

However, the Romanian minister showed – as a result of the information he had received – “Russia would not intend to take any action against Romania, but rather to intensify communist propaganda in Bessarabia”<sup>16</sup>.

In the following pages, we present the two documents that refer to the entrance of the warships in the Black Sea.

25<sup>th</sup> January 1930

Bulletin no. 2 of the Western Politics Direction  
(Extract)

*The entrance in the Straits of the Soviet warships*

Consul General Ionescu, delegate in the Straits Commission, informed the Ministry that on the 17<sup>th</sup> of this month, two Russian warships, the battleship “Parischkaya Komuna” and the battle cruiser “Profintern”, under the command of Admiral Galber, passed through the straits heading for Sevastopol without informing the Straits Commission.

In a later report, on 20<sup>th</sup> January this year, Mr. Ionescu establishes the facts and provides additional explanations as regards the passing of the two Russian ships through the Straits.

As a result of the inquest, it was determined that in reality the Russian warships had informed the Turkish Post by telegraph from Ok Meidan about their entrance in the Dardanelles on 16<sup>th</sup> January, and on the next day, Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> January, they had informed the Buyuk-Liman wireless telegraphy post about their exit from the Bosphorus. The messages of these two Turkish wireless telegraphy posts were dispatched to the Straits Commission on Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> January when, as it was a Turkish holiday, the Secretariat General of the Commission was closed.

For this reason, the Straits Commission was only able to take note of the information regarding the two vessels only on Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> January. On the same day, the Commission informed the League of Nations by telegraph about the entrance of the Russian warships in the Black Sea.

Mr. Ionescu adds that although the Convention of the Straits (unsigned by Russia) does not stipulate any restriction in the matter of the increase or decrease of Russian presence in the Black Sea, the passage of the said vessels through the Straits caused some surprise in Constantinople, especially since the reasons that determined the Russian government to take such action were unknown.

It is believed that the two vessels, which are part of the war fleet in the Baltic Sea, will not remain in the Black Sea for a long time and their passage to Sevastopol is owed to the need for certain repairs in the shipyard there.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 218.

In a first report of 22<sup>nd</sup> January, Mr. Ionescu provides some clarification regarding the passage through the Straits of the two Russian warships and shows that the press in Turkey and in other countries wrongly referred to the fact that these vessels passed through the Straits with or without authorisation from the Turkish government.

In reality, an authorisation to pass through the Straits for any type of vessel is only necessary when a warship intends to visit Turkish ports or territorial waters. In such a case, the proper authorisation must be requested by diplomatic means from the Turkish government.

The passage of any vessel through the Straits is unrestricted, on condition that the commander of the ship announces their entrance and exit from the Straits in time to the wireless telegraphy posts which, in turn, convey this information to the Straits Commission.

In its meeting on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January this year, the Straits Commission determined, as a result of the applications they received, that the two Russian warships had complied with the obligation of announcing their passage through the Straits and decided that an announcement to that effect be published in the press in Constantinople.

At the same time, it was decided that the Commission's Secretariat General be open even on holidays, so as to avoid in future any delay in information regarding the passage of warships through the Straits.

AMAE, 71 România fund, vol. 20, ff. 164–166.

15<sup>th</sup> February 1930

Bulletin no. 3 of the Western Politics Direction  
(Extract)

*The entrance in the Black Sea of the two Russian warships*

Regarding the entrance in the Black Sea of the two Russian warships "Parischkaya Komuna" and "Profintern", the Ministry of the Army dispatched a memo from the Inspectorate of the Navy to this Department, proposing certain investigations be made through our Legations abroad.

Thus, a telegram was sent to our Legations in London, Paris, Rome, Prague, Warsaw, Washington and Berlin requiring them to draw the respective government's attention to the strengthening of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea and asking them to send us the information they may have as regards the real and immediate purposes pursued through this increase in naval power.

At the same time, information was requested from the Legation in Angora and the Romanian Delegate in the Straits Commission.

Upon receiving answers from the Romanian representatives posted abroad, this Department provided the Ministry of the Army with the explanations they had requested.

For the complete clarification of our military authorities, it was first shown that the Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits, signed on 24<sup>th</sup> July 1923, established in its Annex no.2 complete freedom of passage through the Straits for all war vessels during peacetime, regardless of their flag.

*The stipulations of the Convention regarding the passage through the Straits of warships*

This paragraph makes provisions for certain reserves regarding the total force which a non-Black Sea country may transport through the Straits.

However, the above mentioned convention does not establish any hindrance on the Black Sea powers from increasing their war fleets by means of ships brought either from the Baltic Sea, such as it is the current case with Russia, or commissioning them from any shipyard and later sailing them through the Straits.

According to the above mentioned text in the Convention, Turkey will not be held responsible as concerns the number of the ships that pass through the Straits.

Moreover, in the unlikely case in which Turkey would attempt to hinder the passage of the ships in question, the Straits Commission had the responsibility, the only one or, in any case, the most important it has, to do everything in their power to ensure freedom of passage is respected.

This principle of the freedom of passage through the Straits was the greatest victory that the Great Powers, and particularly England, secured over Turkey in Lausanne, a victory that we enjoyed more than anyone, as we know very well how much we suffered in the not too distant past because of the closure of the Straits.

Then the information received from Romania's representatives abroad was transmitted to the Ministry of the Army.

*Information provided by various Legations*

Thus, our delegate in the Straits Commission sent a cable saying that his colleagues in the said Commission do not attribute any aggressive intentions to the entrance in the Black Sea of the Russian ships, since Russia's internal affairs are said to be very bad.

It is believed that the Soviet ships will return to their base, most probably at the end of March, because the Soviet government do not wish to reduce the number of their units in the Baltic Sea although there is also talk of their trust in the Black Sea fleet.

The English delegate in the Straits Commission believes the said ships were forced to withdraw to a Russian port in order to be repaired, as their terrible state and the bad weather prohibited them from returning in the Baltic Sea which is frozen at this time of the year. He added that so far the British government has not attributed a great importance to the passage of the two ships through the Black Sea.

Additional information from English sources show that "Profintern" is not strong enough and has already been repaired during this journey, in Brest. The two ships left the Baltic Sea on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1929 to start a journey in the Mediterranean, which they would have liked to finish in one month, had the weather been favourable.

Consul General Ionescu adds that Turkish circles are unhappy with the presence of the two Russian ships in the Black Sea. The President of the Straits Commission, Counter admiral Vassif Pasha, told our delegate that he was looking forward to the departure of these vessels, as he suspected the Soviet government maintains them here in order to ensure supremacy over Turkey, who currently only possesses the ship "Yavuz", formerly "Goben", as a more important vessel.

Mr. Ionescu finished by communicating his very exact impression that, although there is a Turkish-Russian alliance, Soviet Russia continues to inspire concern among the members of the Turkish government and that the old fear that Turkey once had towards Russia still persists to this day.

The Legation in Angora, on the other hand, reports, on the strength of information received from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that the Turkish government does not attribute any hidden purpose to the accidental increase of Russian fleet in the Black Sea, as the two warships entered this sea in urgent need of repairs and also that the concern expressed by some in Turkish circles is not justified.

Minister D. Ghica reports that, according to information received from the Italian ambassador in Moscow, the entrance of the two warships in the Black Sea is due mainly to lack of discipline and proper instruction among their crew, which determined the passage of the two units from the Baltic into the Black Sea, where bearing and discipline are much better.

In any case, the Italian government does not believe that Soviet Russia pursues any well-determined goal or that they are considering the extension of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea as a consequence of a secret agreement between Russia and Turkey.

Minister Cretzianu informs us that, in the opinion of the Polish Foreign Affairs minister, the Soviet government is not pursuing a plan of direct threat towards Romania, but rather of encouragement of communist propaganda in our country.

Charge d'affairs Laptew shows that at the Foreign Office, the entrance of the two warships in the Black Sea is not considered connected to the right of Black Sea countries to sail their units in and out of the Black Sea. Therefore, there would be no need for a secret Turkish-Russian agreement, since Russia has this right provided to all Black Sea countries in the Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits.

Authorised English circles consider that there is no direct correlation between the passage of these ships in the Black Sea and the recent visit made by Mr. Karahan in Ankara.

Through the Turkish-Soviet agreement recently signed in Ankara, Mr. Karahan obtained that the two governments confer with each other in matters regarding their

foreign policy and especially in those regarding agreements to enter in with other states. According to English circles, this is the only result of Mr. Karahan's visit to Ankara.

Additionally, Minister Laptew later transmits that the two Soviet warships left the Baltic Sea last summer first in order to fly the Soviet flag and secondly to head for repairs in Sevastopol.

In the Foreign Office the situation is not considered serious, because the Soviet fleet in the Black Sea was already the strongest *before the arrival of the two warships*. It is also believed that the noise made around this matter is caused by an interested Power that is trying to make a case out of nothing.

Mr. Laptew adds that at the Foreign Office he has been told the following: "The less you preoccupy yourself with this matter, the better; we continue to be unresponsive and do not consider it is necessary to bestow too much importance on it".

Minister Diamandy conveys very important clarifications on the entrance of the two Soviet ships in the Black Sea. He starts by showing that any intervention by us in this matter cannot be made on the basis of Treaties.

He reminds us that during the Conference in Lausanne he had asked for disarmament of the Black Sea, but the solution that was reached was complete freedom of passage for warships through the Straits. Any fleet can enter the Black Sea with a force that shall not surpass the fleet of the most powerful Black Sea state, in other words a system of balancing forces.

He then conveyed the result of the talks he had on this topic with Ambassador Berthelot, whom he asked what information he had about Russia's intentions in sending the two Soviet warships in the Black Sea. The Secretary General at Quai d'Orsay answered that the Russian press reports certain effervescence in Moscow in relation to Bessarabia, but the information received from Quai d'Orsay does not indicate an intention of or a planning of an attack on Romania.

Minister Diamandy then reminded Mr. Berthelot that at the Conference in Lausanne, the Allies transformed the Romanian delegation's thesis of the disarmament of the Black Sea into the system of naval balancing forces, insisting on the fact that this particular regime of the Straits would allow them the possibility to come to our aid in case of need. He also added that, without wanting to escalate the strengthening of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea, we ask the question whether France is disinterested in the situation in the Black Sea and if she is satisfied with this sea becoming a Russian lake.

Then he also reminded us how much he had to struggle at the beginning of 1925 to stop the French government from giving back the Bizerte fleet of the former General Wrangel, as they intended to do, and the suggestion made then by Mr. Herriot to establish a naval base in Constanța.

Minister Diamandy felt that Mr. Berthelot was impressed, but also very confused by the answer he was expected to give.

The Foreign Office Secretary General offered as an excuse the fact that France cannot provoke the Soviets, since they only used their right when sailing the two



vessels into the Black Sea and because the situation is very serious and complex, it needs to be examined by the French government in agreement with England.

Minister Diamandy replied that Romania does not request *any provocation*, but she wants facts to be established as they are and said that in the context of an increase of the Russian naval presence in the Black Sea, it is advisable that we *react without any provocation*. Carrying on, he suggested to Mr. Berthelot on a very personal note whether it is possible for General Gourand, who is to make a visit to Romania, to be brought to Constanța not on land, but at sea by a French warship.

Mr. Berthelot took note of this suggestion, saying he could not give any answer because the problem is too complex and is within the purview of the entire French government.

On the same topic, of the entry of the war ships in the Black Sea, Minister Diamandy communicates the assessments made by certain informants in relation with Russia's intentions towards Romania. Thus, in Mr. Alexinski's opinion, the Soviets are preparing to attack us. On the other hand, a Russian personality, a great man belonging to the former Russian diplomacy, holds the opposite point of view, based on the following arguments: From the point of view of the troop morale, the Russian army would not be able to face the army of a well organised state, especially now, when the internal situation in Russia is worsening.

The same person, having business connections with German engineers who work in Russia, does not signal the Soviets's intention to attack. However, this Russian personality believes that after the evacuation of the Rhineland, there will be tensions between Germany and Poland on the topic of the Danzig corridor.

In the end, Minister Diamandy shows that, according to the news received from the Polish ambassador to Paris, the two Soviet vessels that entered in the Black Sea are in a very serious state and nobody knows if they have any value at all.

The Polish ambassador also told Mr. Diamandy that, according to the information his government has, Russia does not intend to take any action against Romania, but rather to intensify communist propaganda in Bessarabia. This information of Polish origin is provided unofficially\*.

AMAE, 71 România fund, vol. 20, ff. 209–218.

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NB: it is interesting to show that this is contrary to the information provided in Bucharest by Count Szembek and Mr. Kobylanski, Legation Counsellor, both of whom, in long reports made for this Department, insisted on the mistake of not taking the Red Army seriously and tried to emphasise the real force, both in terms of armament and also organisation and discipline, represented by the Soviet troops.

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