

**A ROMANIAN DIPLOMAT ON THE ENGLISH FOREIGN POLICY  
FOLLOWING THE MUNICH AGREEMENT**

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**Abstract**

The article *A Romanian diplomat on the English foreign policy following the Munich Agreement* is based on a *Confidential report* written by Romanian diplomat Radu Florescu and refers to English foreign policy (1938-1939), outlining Great Britain's interests in: maintaining and strengthening military partnership with France; the partnership with the USA; the means of cooperating with Germany and Italy; maintaining the *status quo* in the Mediterranean; establishing peace in the Far East with a view to "disengaging the Japanese from the activity of the Rome-Berlin Axis"; stopping anti-Semitic excesses in Germany; preventing "German expansion towards Eastern Europe and England's prospect of helping countries in the Black Sea basin."

**Key words:** *Diplomat Radu Florescu, Great Britain, Romania, The Munich Agreement, the Black Sea*

In the interwar period, multiple and complex problems arose on the international stage. The peace treaties in Paris, signed in 1919-1920, recorded, on the one hand, the victory of the Allied powers, and, on the other hand, the results of the national-revolutionary struggle of certain peoples for reconstructing and reuniting their national states.

Haunted by the memory of the First World War, the elites and the population in Great Britain remained, until 1938, attached to the principles of disarmament, peace and collective security. *Peace seemed to be the most important national objective.* British Governments hoped that keeping the balance of power in Europe was the main safeguard against the outbreak of a new war. Many British were convinced that World War I had expanded upon the peoples of Western Europe because of a rigid system of alliances and unbending military plans. Therefore, most governments refused to force the country make sacrifices in order to maintain the *status-quo* and particularly to assume recognition or protection of the borders of Eastern Europe. This attitude was to mark Britain's politics until 1939. Most politicians acknowledged the importance Europe had for the United Kingdom, but very few considered Great Britain a European country fully interested in working with other states – especially those newly emerging after World War I. British interests were global rather than merely continental. It was appreciated that preserving the Empire was essential for Great Britain to remain a great world power. In 1924, the Foreign Office drew up a document of exceptional importance, establishing the United Kingdom's future directions of foreign policy. Entitled *British Policy considered in Relation to the European Situation*, the document "clarifies British foreign policy strategy" in relation to two

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categories of problems: the interests of the British Empire itself; European peace and security in relation to these interests<sup>1</sup>.

During the interwar period, Britain's main objectives were<sup>2</sup>: maintaining good relations with the United States, the United Kingdom having to take into account the fact that the USA was already a great economic power and potentially a great military power and could be in need of American help at any time; another goal shared by all governments was to ensure a proper defence mechanism for the country. The defence policy was based on four major objectives: the security of the United Kingdom; defence of the main British trade routes; defence of the Empire; the decision to cooperate in ensuring the defence of Great Britain's allies; at the same time, most British politicians hoped that a judicious policy of conciliation and compromise could prevent a new conflict. This was later called a policy of *appeasement/conciliation*. *Appeasement and conciliation* can be used to characterize almost all manifestations of British diplomacy between the two world wars. Or better still, they could be used to characterize the attitude of N. Chamberlain towards Germany in 1937 and 1938; the commitment to a policy of collective security, in particular through the support of the League of Nations. Governments (as well as public opinion) in the United Kingdom agreed that the League possessed its own system for the peaceful settlement of all international problems. Many British politicians believed no aggressor would dare start a war against the 50 member states of the League, and, consequently, force would not have to be employed to support the principles of the League. Confident in its ability to defend itself in the event of real danger<sup>3</sup>, Great Britain refused obstinately throughout the interwar period to become allied with any of the European states, becoming the custodian of Europe's balance of power<sup>4</sup>.

The entire foreign policy of the United Kingdom – during this period of turmoil and political, military and statal transformations in Europe – is captured by Radu Florescu, in a confidential report entitled *On British Policy after the Munich Agreement*<sup>5</sup>. In his brief analysis, Radu Florescu emphasises that Britain's foreign policy differs from that of other European countries because “*the British Empire, being a community of interests so widely spread over the surface of the globe, her actions and reactions are naturally different from those of a State with limited and compact geographic interests*”<sup>6</sup>. That's why “*No head of a British Government and no Parliament would be able to engage the entire Empire to defend local interests, knowing that they would be*

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<sup>1</sup> Viorica Moisuc, *Istoria relațiilor internaționale. Până la mijlocul secolului al XX-lea*, București, Editura Fundației România de Mâine, 2002, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Apud Alan Farmer, *Marea Britanie: politica externă și colonială, 1919-1939*, București, Editura ALL, 2000, pp. 11-45.

<sup>3</sup> Great Britain's confidence in being able to “defend itself” was based on the numerous strengthening and modernization programmes run by the military forces. A fine example is *The Aeronautical Development Programme* which, in only two years, led to the construction of 1500 aircraft; the development of 34 new aerodromes; the training and selection of 3100 pilots; and the total number of enlisted men in Aeronautics rose to 51000 people, 4850 of whom were officers. Apud Arhivele Militare Române, Pitești (The Romanian Military Archives, hereinafter: A.M.R.), fond 3832, dosar nr. 198, ff. 3-7.

<sup>4</sup> See Marusia Cîrstea, Gheorghe Buzatu, *Europa în balanța forțelor. 1919-1939*, vol. I, București, Editura Mica Valahie, 2007, pp. 91-108.

<sup>5</sup> Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României, București (The Archives of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, Bucharest, hereinafter: A.M.A.E.), fond 71 România, vol. 262, ff. 196-219.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 196.

*putting much higher interests at risk*<sup>1</sup>. However, continues diplomat Radu Florescu, “*a vital concern for the Empire is the geographical and military connection between England and a continental power. For England, Europe’s gendarme is France, so anyone who attacks France weakens England’s military bridgehead on the Continent*”<sup>2</sup>. Taking into account these interests, England and also France, unwilling to engage in a detrimental war, will sacrifice the integrity of Czechoslovakia on the altar of what supporters of the “conciliation” policy called “the cause of peace”<sup>3</sup>. “*The impression of the unfavourable moment prevails in the explanations of the government-inspired press. Added to this, the belief that the revision of the Czechoslovakian borders prevented the German armies from immediately invading south-eastern Europe, which could not have been defended effectively by the Bohemian fortifications, isolated after the annexation of Austria and the defection of Poland. Chamberlain’s invitation that Mussolini come to Munich to stave off German pressure confirms Italy’s role in Central Europe as well as the difficulty of reaching a solution in the absence of Italian consent*”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Munich inaugurated a change in the direction of British foreign policy to the effect that any conflict “*arising outside England’s vital areas should be brought under control, as much as possible, to prevent war*”<sup>5</sup>.

At the beginning of 1939 N. Chamberlain received a series of disturbing reports (some incorrect) from the British secret services, predicting German actions against Poland, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine and even the Netherlands and Switzerland. After Germany occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939, Chamberlain accused Berlin of having become alienated from the spirit of Munich. In late March, Chamberlain’s government abandons the appeasement policy pursued so far and tries to organise a common resistance against Hitler’s threat, in cooperation with the French government<sup>6</sup>. Guarantees were given to Poland, Romania and Greece<sup>7</sup>. Under the circumstances, Great Britain moved even closer to France. Both countries had embarked on the road to democracy and were equally afraid for their security. That is why the two countries’ main concern was extending their military cooperation based on “the strength of the British fleet, which needed to be maintained at a level that would frustrate the reunited European fleets in their attempts to defy it. Germany’s latest demand for parity in submarine tonnage was met with wonder here and the Germans’ explanations were not convincing in the least. On the grounds of the Franco-British cooperation, the French army, in its turn, is called upon to stand against an enemy of Germany’s size, expecting

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 197.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 198

<sup>3</sup> M.P. Renouvin, *Les relations franco-anglaises, 1935-1939. Esquisse provisoire*, în vol. *Les relations franco-britanniques de 1935 à 1939*, Paris, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1975, pp. 39-45.

<sup>4</sup> A.M.A.E., fond 71 România, vol. 262, ff. 199-200.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 199.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandru Cretzianu, *Ocazia pierdută*, ediția a doua, prefață de V.Fl. Dobrinescu, postfață de Sherman David Spector, Iași, Institutul European, 1998, p. 49; Gh. Buzatu, Marusia Cîrstea, *Din istoria relațiilor anglo-române, 1920-1941. (Un raport sinteză al lui Al. Cretzianu)*, în “Europa XXI”, vol. XI-XII/2002-2003, București, Editura Mica Valahie, 2003, pp. 249-265

<sup>7</sup> M.F.W. Deakin, *Anglo-French Policy in relation to South-East Europe, 1936-1939*, in vol. *Les relations franco-britanniques de 1935 à 1939*, pp. 63-87.

England to extend her own army by training reservists and instituting permanent reserves”<sup>1</sup>.

Analysing the political and military situation of 1939, Radu Florescu emphasised that Great Britain wished “to avoid, if possible, in case of conflict, having to face the risks of a war in which she would stand against the three states bound in the Anti-Comintern Pact, albeit together with Russia and France”<sup>2</sup>. The British government’s secret hope – emphasized Radu Florescu – was that “they would in the end manage to break the Axis, separating Italian interests from German ones” and that they would turn the two countries’ claims “towards the European East” because “Italy has just as much interest as Germany in reserving areas of commercial influence up to the mouths of the Danube, including the Romanian oil”<sup>3</sup>.

Radu Florescu’s examination of English foreign policy – after 1938 – outlines Great Britain’s interests in: maintaining and strengthening military partnership with France; the partnership with the USA; the means of cooperating with Germany and Italy; maintaining the *status quo* in the Mediterranean; establishing peace in the Far East with a view to “*disengaging the Japanese from the activity of the Rome-Berlin Axis*”; rediscussing “*the problem of the colonies*”, going as far as retrocession of some of them “*if German methods of military pressure and propaganda aggression were discarded*”; a project which made provisions for “*the deployment of Ukraine*” so as to “*to provide Germany with an abundance of the foods she lacks*”; stopping anti-Semitic excesses in Germany; preventing “*German expansion towards Eastern Europe and England’s prospect of helping countries in the Black Sea basin*”<sup>4</sup>.

It is well known that Great Britain’s main ally in the interwar period was France. Nazi Germany’s increase in power was a constant concern for both countries, which promoted a closer cooperation, especially in the military domain. This cooperation, Radu Florescu emphasised, “*is based on the strength of the British fleet, which needed to be maintained at a level that would frustrate the reunited European fleets in their attempts to defy it. Germany’s latest demand for parity in submarine tonnage was met with wonder here and the Germans’ explanations were not convincing in the least. On the grounds of the Franco-British cooperation, the French army, in its turn, is called upon to stand against an enemy of Germany’s size, expecting England to extend its own army by training reservists and instituting permanent reserves. The government’s plan is to begin training reservists. The British air force is going to be superior to the most powerful continental aviation. At this time, due to production efforts in aviation, this latest British desideratum is about to be accomplished. They say that by next summer, regardless of the size of the French and other aviations, the English air force will be the strongest in the world. The strength of this air force resides in the fact that the new factories producing aircraft for the British army are located outside the area under threat from of any aggressor, being set up partly in Canada and Australia*”<sup>5</sup>.

Globally speaking, British interests exceeded the continental sphere and many English politicians were hoping to maintain the balance of forces in Europe with the support of the U.S.A. Therefore, “the King of England’s visit to Washington (in June 1939) is meant to reaffirm the need for closer cooperation between the two great

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<sup>1</sup> A.M.A.E., fond 71 România, vol. 262, ff. 214-215.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, ff. 215-216.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, ff. 196-219.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

Empires”<sup>1</sup>. This closeness between the two states – showed Radu Florescu – “*was hastened by the government in Washington who, following persecution in Germany, was quick to overcome any petty difficulties in order to have a new agreement signed. This agreement is meaningful not just for purely commercial reasons, as it opens the doors for countries with hard currency, for those exporting raw materials and food, and, to the same extent, it is meant to frustrate exports of countries with a controlled currency. The relinquishment of the advantages that dominions had in the import of grain and raw materials on the English market and their placement on the same level with the United States illustrate the height of the widespread solidarity of all Anglo-Saxon countries, including the United States, all together forming an economic block and an extensive community of material interests supported by identical political goals and ideals*”<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding cooperation with Germany, it was stipulated that the English Government should not give “Germany any financial support outside of that resulting from current commercial arrangements”<sup>3</sup>. This measure – as Radu Florescu emphasised – derived from the English politicians’ intimate desire that “*Germany alter its methods and strive to understand the Anglo-Saxon mentality, so that they could cooperate again within the concert of European powers. If German methods of military pressure and propaganda aggression were discarded, I think, with the reserve of the League of Nations’ formal agreement, Great Britain would not be opposed to retroceding some of the colonies*”<sup>4</sup>. The economic policy pursued in relation to Germany also aimed at stopping the Nazi’s anti-Semitic excesses, because “The persecution of one race by another through uncontrolled domination is foreign to the English and Western political concept while today’s colonial systems are everywhere called to raise the cultural level of the dominated nations and this is often done even against their will. Cooperation between individuals and peoples in the sense of the English or American “*Commonwealth*” requires respect both for the personality of individuals and races”<sup>5</sup>.

However, so as not to “inflare” diplomatic, political and economic ties with Germany, certain British political circles were considering “*a project for the deployment of Ukraine*”, taking into consideration that “*there are two areas that may offer Germany the economic compliment it needs: the Danubian Plain or Ukraine*”<sup>6</sup>. In order to maintain the status-quo in the Mediterranean, “*the compensations the English can offer to the Italians are primarily financial and economic. An understanding on such bases would facilitate the development of Italian trade with European countries, among which Romania stands first. However, the Mediterranean reconciliation plan does not seem easily achievable, which in Mussolini’s view, confirms the necessity of maintaining the Axis*”<sup>7</sup>.

Referring to the British government’s foreign policy towards the countries in South-Eastern Europe, Romanian diplomat Radu Florescu explained: “*The coming spring (1939) is being mentioned and it seems that around the middle of February several hypotheses of operation will be analysed by the leaders of present-day Germany. The operation along the Danube requires cooperation with Hungary, the one in Ukraine – cooperation with Poland. Between the two alternatives, the English would prefer Ukraine, given that England considers that the straits and the Eastern Mediterranean need the protection of the combined forces of the three countries within the Balkan Pact. The straits and the*

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem.*

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*

*Black Sea associate us to British interests. According to the English political school of thought it would seem that if Romania's position were uncertain, the defence of the straits could be entrusted to an association of the other three Balkan States, which explains why Great Britain doesn't discourage the Bulgarians. If the strike were directed towards Ukraine, English politics would probably be limited to expressing their justified indignation without public opinion being stirred. The Poles themselves know that isolated, they cannot count on the support of Western democracies after the moment of crisis last September had an action which was contrary to the interests of the English and French, being well-known that the Poles were the first to ask to be exempt from the obligations of automatic sanctions within the framework of the League of Nations. All these would lead to the conclusion that only an unlikely revival of solidarity within the League of Nations or a union of all the Eastern European States could urge the States of Western Europe to come to their rescue in the case of an aggression”<sup>1</sup>.*

Taking into account the relations between the great powers, Romania pursued, after Munich, *a politics of realities*<sup>2</sup> on the foreign stage – as stated by Grigore Gafencu, the Romanian Foreign Minister from December 1938 to May 1940. During his ministry, Gafencu attempted, in addition to the broad guidelines that had been drawn on the occasion of his appointment as head of Romanian diplomacy, to strengthen ties between the states that formed the Balkan Pact, aiming to turn it into *a block of neutrals* that could stop German penetration in the Balkan Peninsula and safeguard borders in this area. The journeys undertaken in the first half of 1939 to Berlin, Paris, London, Belgrade, Ankara and Athens addressed complete accomplishment of the political objectives Grigore Gafencu had undertaken when he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. Under pressure from public opinion, determined to defend the country's independence and territorial integrity, as well as due to the positive stance of certain leaders, Romania's foreign policy after Munich corresponded to the fundamental interests of the people and of peace in Europe. In an exposé immediately after being appointed head of the Romanian diplomacy, Grigore Gafencu declared Romania firmly pursued a foreign policy of peace. Gafencu specified Romania would continue to fulfil *“her peaceful duties towards herself, her neighbours and all the surrounding states, on the foundation of absolute independence and complete national integrity. No Romanian shall ever allow them to be infringed upon [...] Romania will reject with the utmost resolve any foreign interference in its state affairs, as well as any conspiracy that would tend to disturb her thinking and her life, to weaken her institutions, her defence power, her spiritual unity and faith in the free fulfilment of her high destiny”*<sup>3</sup>.

As a result of Germany's increased role in East-Central Europe after the occupation of Austria and the Sudetenland, Romania put great emphasis on specifying her relations with the Third Reich<sup>4</sup>. In this case, Gafencu suggested, *“we have to analyse our position so that we are ready to make certain concessions to Germany, but at the same time maintain our stand in all matters that may endanger our independence and sovereignty”*<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the position that Romania

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>2</sup> Grigore Gafencu, *Preliminarii la Războiul din Răsărit*, București, 1996, p. 245 și urm.

<sup>3</sup> Apud Nicolae Mareș, *Alianța româno-polonă între destrămarea și solidaritate (1938-1939)*, București, Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2010, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> See Hitler, *Regele Carol și Mareșalul Antonescu. Relațiile germano-române (1938-1944)*, ediție Stelian Neagoe, București, 1994; Ioan Chiper, *România și Germania nazistă. Relațiile româno-germane între comandamente politice și interese economice (ianuarie 1933 – martie 1938)*, București, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Grigore Gafencu, *Politica externă a României. 1939. Cinci cuvântări*, București, 1939, pp. 7-11.

prepared was as clear as possible: have economic connections with the Reich, but within the framework of respect for national independence and sovereignty. This attitude of Romania, coming into conflict with the goals and methods of the Nazi Reich, will explain the difficulties of the Romanian-German negotiations that preceded the famous economic agreement of 23 March 1939<sup>1</sup>.

After the events of March 1939, Romania benefited for a while from advantageous external conditions. In the context of the gradual abandonment of the appeasement policy, France and Great Britain proved through material efforts that they were not indifferent to the political and economic enslavement of South-Eastern Europe, including Romania, by Germany. Accordingly, on 31 March 1939, France signed an economic agreement with Romania, and on 11 May 1939, the United Kingdom followed suit by signing a protocol, reinforced on 12 July 1939 through an agreement<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, throughout 1939 Great Britain repeatedly sought to avoid leaving Romania in complete isolation. Referring to this, Alexandru Cretzianu, secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasises that Romania had accepted England and France's guarantees and remained connected with them both through close political contacts and also, indirectly, through alliances with Turkey and Poland, which had openly joined the Franco-British system<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ioan Scurtu, *România și Marile Puteri (1933-1940). Documente*, București, Editura Fundației România de Măine, 2000, pp. 101-106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> A.M.A.E., fond 71 Anglia, vol. 39, f. 17.

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