

## GEOPOLITICAL LANDMARKS OF THE ROMANIAN SPACE: SOME REMARKS ON THE CURRENT RELEVANCE OF THE CLASSICAL DISCOURSE

PhD. in History, professor at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu – Department of International Relations, Political Sciences and Security Studies.

Author of the volumes *Sibiul între medieval și modern*. Sibiu: Etape, 2000; *Etnie și conviețuire interetnică în sudul Transilvaniei. Experiența Țării Secașelor*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012; *Miercurea Sibiului. Monografie*. Sibiu: Astra Museum, 2016; *The Transnistrian Conflict Files*. Sibiu: Technomedia, 2017; *Transnistrian Bibliography*. Sibiu: Technomedia, 2019; *The Romanian Synology. Authors and Bibliographic Lists*. Sibiu: Technomedia, 2019. Principal editor of the volume Eugen Străuțiu, Steven D. Roper, William E. Crowther, Darg Zabarrah-Chulak, Victor Juc, Robert E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The Armed Conflict of the Dniester. Three Decades Later*. Lausanne-Berlin-Bruxelles-Chennai-New York-Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2023.



Eugen STRĂUȚIU

### Geopolitical landmarks of the romanian space: some remarks on the current relevance of the classical discourse

**Abstract.** Classical Romanian geopolitics is presented as the sum of geopolitical works (volumes, magazines, atlases) published in interwar Romania and which mark a quantitative and qualitative peak during World War II. The authors, directly connected to significant Western geopolitical trends, put into practice the classical methodology (to which they corrected and added, depending on the national specifics) to identify and explain the European geopolitical motives of Greater Romania, but also to substantiate the directions of foreign policy and war strategies. After several decades of banning geopolitical discourse, with the overthrow of the regime in 1989, the necessity and fashion of geopolitics returned to Romania. In this context, it becomes a necessary and useful exercise to compare the premises of our classical geopolitics with the contemporary ones – to verify how much and how it remains valid. Our brief observations conclude that most of the classic analyses, models, and scenarios remain valid, with some adjustments that do not affect the essence. These updates are mandatory due to the changing regional context (primarily the identity and capacity of neighboring states) and some border changes.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Romania geopolitical school, Romanian borders, Black Sea geopolitics, Danube geopolitics, Carpathian geopolitics.

### Repere geopolitice ale spațiului românesc: câteva observații privind relevanța actuală a discursului clasic

**Rezumat.** Geopolitica clasică românească se prezintă ca suma lucrărilor geopolitice (volume, reviste, atlase) publicate în România interbelică și care marchează un apogeu cantitativ și calitativ în timpul celui de-Al Doilea Război Mondial. Autorii, conectați direct la tendințele geopolitice semnificative occidentale, au pus în practică metodologia clasică (la care au corectat și adăugat, în funcție de specificul național) pentru a identifica și explica rațiunile geopolitice europene ale României Mari, dar și pentru a fundamenta direcțiile politicii externe și strategiile de război. După câteva decenii de interzicere a discursului geopolitic, odată cu răsturnarea regimului în 1989, necesitatea și moda geopoliticii au revenit în România. În acest context, devine un exercițiu necesar și util să comparăm premisele geopoliticii noastre clasice cu cele contemporane – să verificăm cât și cum rămâne valabilă. Scurtele noastre observații concluzionează că majoritatea analizelor, modelelor și scenariilor clasice rămân valabile, cu unele ajustări care nu afectează esența. Aceste actualizări sunt obligatorii din cauza contextului regional în schimbare (în primul rând identitatea și capacitatea statelor învecinate) și a unor modificări de frontieră.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Geopolitică, școala geopolitică românească, frontierele românești, geopolitica Mării Negre, geopolitica Dunării, geopolitica Carpaților.

**Introduction.** Romanian geopolitical research, starting with the international recognition of the Great Union and ending with the end of World War II, explained and justified the Romanian nation's right to a strong state in southeastern Europe, using the paradigms and language of Western geopolitics (German, French and English with priority) – which they adapted and enriched with original language and theories.

After the end of the communist regime, which prohibited further research and even access to previous editorial production, Romanian geopolitics was systematically recovered. We are witnessing the re-publication of classic works, the updating of old theories, and their completion following the new realities of borders, neighboring states, regional conflicts, and international organizations in which Romania evolves. Universities include massive geopolitics courses, publishing houses offer profile series, specialized magazines appear, and we can count impressive numbers of authors (Romanian and foreign) and works (originals and translations).

Our research aims to identify and assess the major themes that classical Romanian geopolitics launched, to assess how useful they are for understanding the deep purposes of the Romanian state and for its orientation in the regional and global future. We will review, with priority, the issues of Romania's geopolitical position (with an emphasis on Romania's evolution to the main geopolitical axes); the specificity of the state's form and extent; the geopolitical role of the Carpathians, the Danube, and the Black Sea; the problem of Bessarabia; the geopolitical role of demography and infrastructure.

In conclusion, we will outline estimative (qualitative) relationships between what remains valid and what is theoretically outdated, what is useful and what has become useless to political decision-makers – and what are the needs of Romanian geopolitical research in the near and medium term.

Our research methodology will primarily employ document analysis. Many of the articles

and commentaries of the classics of Romanian geopolitics now have document value, being also founders of subsequent theories and currents of thought; in addition, we will comment on maps and sketches published in the classical era. Furthermore, we will operate with comparative analysis (where different authors approach the same subject) and with case study (where we research in detail a specific subject addressed in our sources).

**Romanian geopolitical position.** The theme of the geopolitical position of the Romanian state was approached through applications to the theory of the Swede Rudolf Kjellen (*The State as a Life Form*, 1916), which makes a clear distinction between geopolitical position and geographical position, according to the theorem “We are neighbors not only with our immediate geographical neighbors but also with those few Great Powers that constitute a kind of ‘aristocracy in the world of states’.” [1, p. 65] Or, in another formulation, the geopolitical position of a state is defined as its position on the map “in relation to the points or regions of friction of great politics.” [1, p. 64-65]

Starting from this, Ion Conea, in the work *O poziție geopolitică* (published in “Geopolitica și Geoistoria. Revistă Română pentru Sudestul European”, 1944), identifies the following defining characteristic of Romania's geopolitical position: “The first line in outlining the geopolitical position of the Romanian state is this: Romania is part of an area of very sensitive political friction, of a vast buffer territory: on the Ponto-Baltic isthmus, namely the alignment made up of Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania, Greece, a territory known and defined in the specialized literature since the mid-20th century, as an area of political earthquakes.” [2, p. 13-14] Therefore, Romania's geopolitical position is the one “Zwischenlage” (“between them”), respectively between Western Europe – Germanic and Roman, industrial, and Eastern Europe – Slavic or Russian, agricultural. Romania's geopolitical

position derives its role as a geopolitical shock absorber: “Small states and buffer states fulfill, in the life and political map of the planet, the function of living shock absorbers between the Great Powers.” [1, p. 66]

Valuable clarifications regarding Romania’s geopolitical position are also made by Gheorghe Brătianu, in a university course taught at the University of Bucharest in the academic year 1941/1942. He speaks about the geostrategic role of the three defining geographical components of the Romanian space – the Carpathians, the Danube, and the Black Sea – in the following terms: “The occupied mountains and the closed sea strangle freedom and national life (...) The free sea and the mountains in our hands are for us not only vital space, but vital conditions, they are the very elements of our existence.” [3, p. 30] Elsewhere, the author emphasizes that in the proximity of the national space, there are two other key geopolitical positions, which Romania must necessarily include in its strategic calculations. First, the Bosphorus-Dardanelles strait system, because “navigation in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles is the natural extension of that of the great river that puts Central Europe in communication with the Pontic basin” (the Danube).” [4, p. 46]. History confirms geography, because „from the Crimean War to the Balkan conflicts and the great world confragments of our century, the issue of the Straits places the Pontic basin at the center of events.” [5, p. 98] Secondly, an essential landmark for Romanian geopolitics (and the Black Sea in general) is Crimea, as an outpost over the entire maritime complex of the Black Sea: “through its natural harbors, through its fortresses from the most ancient times, through the advanced maritime bastion it represents in the Black Sea, it is obviously a dominant position, for the entire maritime complex here. Whoever has Crimea can dominate the Black Sea. Whoever does not have it, does not dominate it. It is obvious”. [5, p. 108]

Regarding Romania’s geopolitical position on the East-West European axis, in the *Cuvânt înainte* to the first issue of the magazine “Geopolitica și Geoistoria” (1941), Brătianu analyzes

as follows: “We are what Nicolae Iorga called: a state of European necessity. Perched on the Carpathian fortress and watching over the Danube Mouths, guarding here in the name and interest of the whole of Europe behind it, and even further, it is said that our Romania lives and speaks here not only for itself. Our state is therefore in the attention of the East and the West, the North and the South alike, and at all times. It holds, as has been said, a key position, and this attention of another for you can be care and sympathy, it can be protection, but it can also be appetite or danger. A state with such a situation in which the winds and waves follow you everywhere is the first to know this situation, to be permanently aware of everything, good and bad, that is hidden in it. All members of this state, and primarily its ruling class, must always have their minds focused on them.” [6, p. 3]



Fig. 1. *Geopolitical axes of interest for Romania – Seišanu, Romulus. Romania. Historical, Geopolitical, Ethnographic and Economic Atlas, București: Universul, 1936 (cover)*

A complementary analysis of our geopolitical position, in geopolitical terminology, is offered by the geographer Simion Mehedinți. This refers to Romania’s location as the edge



of Europe on the Baltic-Black Sea axis. (*Das rumänische Volk in der Welt. Die geopolitische Lage Rumäniens*, in “Zeitschrift für Geopolitik”, 1938): “The area of the Ponto-Baltic isthmus is, for the world of Western states, of great importance. From a geological, morphological, climatic, hydrographic, biogeographical, ethnographic, anthropogeographical, and geopolitical point of view, the Baltic countries with Poland and Romania together constitute the border of Europe in front of the ‘Great Siberia’. Especially the Romanians, with their origin, language, and culture, who have their origin towards the Mediterranean, they – appear as a border people par excellence, just as the Carpathians are a bastion of Europe.” [7, p. 304-305]

If Simion Mehedinți deepens Romania’s role on the north-south geopolitical axis, Virgil Tempeanu (*Die geopolitische Lage Rumäniens und Deutschland*, which appeared in 1937 in Bucharest) focuses on the geopolitical axis East– West. Starting from the idea of Romania as a country at the crossroads between West and East, Tempeanu suggests that the orientation of Romanian policy must be towards the West, towards Germany. After all, Romania as a “transition country” is seen by the Bolsheviks as a gateway to the West. Symmetrically, Westerners see Romania as a gateway to the East, which means that “both the powers of the West and those of the East want to ensure their influence over this important land.” [8, p. 116]

A brief analytical recapitulation of previous research convinces us that the assessments of interwar authors regarding the geopolitical position of the Romanian state remain intact today, even if certain border changes (the loss of Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and the Quadrilater) have modified its capacity.

The most obvious proof is the regional project “Trimarium”, analyzed in a geopolitical paradigm by Radu Baltașiu in 2018. (*Reunificarea României. Elemente de infrastructură geopolitică*).

“Trimarium” is an initiative of Poland and Croatia, joined by 10 more states in 2016 (Austria, Bulgaria, the Baltic states, the Czech Re-



Fig. 2. The Vistula-San-Prut Corridor – Vasilache, Silviu. *Dacă-i ordin, cu plăcere* [online] [Accesat: 07.04.2025] Disponibil pe Internet la adresa: <https://www.faramogul.ro/daca-i-ordin-cu-placere-sa-fie-si-calea-navigabila-marea-neagra-marea-baltica-ca-de-zona-metropolitana-galati-braila-ne-am-plitisit-asteptand-o/>

public, Slovakia and Slovenia). “Although not everyone explicitly recognizes it, the function of the Initiative is to ensure the security of the Ponto-Baltic limes through, of course, economic interconnection. This initiative, more than others, highlights the national component of collective security and must therefore be read in this key: it is not an abstract concept, it is conceived between countries about a clear danger, it is about the security that the national policies of some states in the center of the EU cannot ensure for the states on the edge of the EU.” [9, p. 17]

The current war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (with Ukraine representing Western interests) should not mislead us: Romania remains on the edge of the Western world, with the Slavic world functioning to the east, which will easily reconstitute itself after the recent war episode. In the long term, Romania remains “of European necessity”, in a formula more similar to Poland than to Ukraine.

**The shape and extent of the state.** The geopolitical theory that justifies the superiority of the round shape of the national territory is based on the observations of German geopoliticians, who considered this shape to be ideal, the circle having the largest surface area to the length of its circumference; therefore, a large territory can be protected by borders of minimal extent. The two criteria can be complemented (or not) by the third, which emphasizes the ideal of the central position of the state Capital city.

As he concludes Mihai David (*Considerații geopolitice asupra Statului român*, 1939), in terms of the shape of the territory, Romania would be very close to a perfect shape: the elliptical one. Romania is one of the best-balanced countries in terms of borders, “because it shows us the smallest number of kilometers of border, compared to the surface they cover” (most of them being natural borders). [10, p. 305] Consequently, the ratio between the length of the border and the area to be defended is optimal. Romania’s interwar borders measured 3,400 kilometers, which shows that one kilometer of border defends 100 km<sup>2</sup> of surface. The shortness of the borders compensates for the relatively low population density. Secondly, it was relevant that most of the borders are natural. The natural border was located on two rivers: 621 km on the Danube and 925 km on the Dniester (we recall that this is the interwar period). The Black Sea coastline was 454 km. To this must be added the 160 km on the mountains. So out of the total of 3400 km, 2160 km represented natural borders.

According to the criterion of the appearance of the land, Romania appears as a fortress (the same metaphor used by Mircea Vulcănescu, often taken over by Romanian geopoliticians): “The land of Romania appears as an enormous natural fortress with strong walls formed by mountain ranges, which protrude outward in rocky waves.” [11, p. 106]

If the criteria of the form of the Romanian state have been studied in detail by geopoliticians, those of content have barely been introduced. The density and structure of the population are part of the geopolitical characteristics

of content, and the topic was addressed by Sabin Manuilă (*Studiu etnografic asupra populației României*, 1940). This refers to the ethnic aspect of cities, in terms of “inner borders” versus “outer borders.” Cities at that time had an extremely heterogeneous character from an ethnic point of view, with the Romanian population being concentrated predominantly in villages. Sabin Manuilă formulates the hypothesis that the ethnic elements in the villages will influence the ethnic character of the cities of the future: “What naturally determines the ethnic structure of the cities in future generations is the ethnic nature of the population around these cities. It is therefore natural to investigate with the greatest attention the ethnographic situation of the villages, to be able to mathematically predict the ethnic structure of the future cities.” [12, p. 190]

What remains today of our interwar geopolitics acquisitions regarding the form, extent, and content of the state?

Although territories were lost and, consequently, borders were modified, in principle the essential data are similar. The roughly elliptical shape of the state, with easily defensible borders, is maintained. The Prut replaced the Dniester in the east, still a natural border, although easier to penetrate with classical military means. The lack of the Quadrilateral makes Dobrogea more vulnerable from the south, but recent military technologies partially compensate for this. If we were to redo Mihai David’s calculations regarding the percentage of natural borders, today we see that of the total of 3,149.9 km., two-thirds (2,064.4 km.) are established on the Danube, Prut, and Tisa rivers or follow the Black Sea coastline, while one-third (1,085.5 km) represents the land border. Natural borders predominate abundantly, and the easily defensible state characteristic is maintained.

The issue of the central position of the Capital has been brought up several times, but almost exclusively by analysts. Alba Iulia and Sibiu are on the shortlist.

As for the demographic support of the Romanian state, the processes foreseen by Sa-

bin Manuilă were fulfilled with the industrialization of Romania: the Romanian population from the villages settled in huge percentages in the cities, changing the urban landscape in their favor. At the same time, most of the Jewish and Saxon inhabitants left for Israel and Germany. Today, except in the Harghita-Covasna region, the Romanian majority is a reality everywhere.

Interesting is the recent tendency of Romanian analysts to insist on another factor of geopolitical content of the state: infrastructure. The density, quality, and uniform distribution of transport routes and energy networks are emphasized by Radu Baltașiu (in the mentioned work) because infrastructure has a double function: the circulation of goods and the unification of spaces. Because it is part of dynamic density (in Emile Durkheim's formulation [13, p. 132]), the intensity of contacts between individuals, more precisely between jobs.

**The importance of the geopolitical landmarks of the Romanian space. The role of the Carpathians.** Vintilă Mihăilescu (*Unitatea pământului și poporului românesc*, 1943), shows that Romania "is Carpathian because it was born and evolved through the Carpathians and thanks to the Carpathians and is Romanian because it is inhabited over most of its extent by Romanian unanimity or majority." [14, p. 80] Therefore, geography does not act decisively, but on the contrary, the human factor adds unity to the geographical factor.

Starting from the geopolitical function of the Carpathians, Transylvania appears as a "core", "heart of the country", "vital center-piece" („Kernland" in Rudolf Kjellén's terminology), "hearth" (central place), and "geopolitical hotbed". In Ion Conea's formulation (*Transilvania – inimă a pământului și statului românesc*, 1941, "In yesterday's Hungary it played the role of a peripheral piece, while in today's Romania, Transylvania has returned to what we must call its human destiny of all time: to be a central, vital piece (...) a 'Horststaat' (Henning, in his geopolitics, gives it as an example of such), therefore as a starting point,

as a geopolitical kernel destined to bear fruit and to outline around itself a state formation, natural and viable. (...) The error of the Hungarian geopolitical perspective comes from the fact that they, the Hungarians, see in the Carpathians a predestined natural border (between us and them), while we see in the Carpathians what the German geographer H. Grothe saw as early as 1906: a backbone of the land and the people – and, therefore, of the Romanian state (...)." [15, p. 28]

**The role of the Danube.** In the 1941 article entitled *Hotarul românesc dunărean*, the geographer N. Al. Rădulescu considered that the Danube fulfills a threefold role. *First*: Navigation artery, known since Antiquity and resumed with intensity at the beginning of the modern era. *Second*: Border, because it separates Balkan Europe from Central-Eastern Europe (to which Romania also belongs): "Everything is in contrast between the two great divisions: the more mountainous relief, the predominance of the Tertiary, the reduced percentage of loess, the pre-Mediterranean climate, as well as the flora and fauna (main of the Balkan Peninsula) while in Central Europe there are diversified relief forms, with a high percentage of plains, the predominance of the Quaternary, rich loess layers, a continental climate of the Danubian and Polish type". *Third*: Political polarization of the Romanian state, as free navigation at the mouths of the Danube was guaranteed by a strong Romania, the only state interested in free navigation on the Danube. This polarization is based on the role of the Danube as an ethnic entity, as it has demonstrated in all historical eras: "If for the mentioned states the Danube became a border, it remained permanently an axis, from an ethnic point of view. It was in turn in the middle of the area inhabited by Thracians, Thracian-Romans, and later Romanians as a connecting element, as a link of unity. It has the same character today: from the entrance to Banat to the mouth, the population on one bank and the other, which subconsciously still preserves the traces of the pagan division of the

ancient Thracians, which caresses its waves with its gaze and creates its legends, is the same: the Romanian population.” [16, p. 3-7]

**The role of the Black Sea.** Simion Mehedinți (*Legăturile noastre cu Dunărea și Marea*, 1938) notes that the process of forming the Romanian state is also due to the Danube, for “the eras of enlightenment of the people of the Carpathians and the surrounding region were those when the eastern sea happened to be free and shared in all the fruits of Mediterranean civilization.” [17, p. 18]

In a similar sense, Gheorghe I. Brătianu (*Chestiunea Mării Negre. Curs 1941–1942*, 1941), demonstrates that the state of Moldova emerged from the need to organize the “road to the sea”: “the road to the sea required a state order here and this was accomplished by the Romanian people.” [3, p. 28]

**The Bessarabian Problem.** Romanian Bessarabia is justified and defended, from a geopolitical point of view, by the essential role of the Dniester. Simion Mehedinți (*Frunteria României spre răsărit*, in “Revista Fundațiilor Regale”, 1941) observes how, since antiquity, the Dniester has been configured as the eastern border of Europe, for the eastern edge of Dacia has been since antiquity the border of Europe towards Asia, as demonstrated by the row of fortified cities along the Dniester – which represent the most advanced line of European burghers facing the nomads of Asia. “Since the 17th century, Duca, the Voivode of Moldavia, ruled that region. The fords or drawbridges over the Dniester were guarded by Moldavian soldiers. From the Transnistrian villages and towns, the ‘pârcălabs’ and ‘zapciis’ watched over the collection of taxes for the treasury in Iași; judgments were made at the ‘divan’ in Iași, and the Voivode had even built a palace for himself near the Bug. If the demographic, ethnographic, and political process had continued as it was, the country of Moldavia would have become twice as large as during its military peak, under Ștefan cel Mare.” [18, p. 250-273]

As a partial conclusion, it is necessary to note that the analyses regarding the importance of the Carpathians, Transylvania, the Danube, and the Black Sea for the past, present, and future of the Romanian state remain unchanged.

Two discussions can be started, however. South of the Danube, in both Bulgaria and Serbia, the proportion of the Romanian population was dramatically reduced during the communist years and afterward, significantly diminishing its function as the “axis of the Romanian people”. As for the role of the Dniester, to which the Bessarabia issue is fundamentally linked, it was transferred to the Prut River, without the new border being supported by the same geographical, ethnic, and cultural differences of the two banks. Today, the Dniester is the border of Romanians from the historical, cultural, and spiritual points of view, and it provokes the reunification of the two Romanian states.

**Some conclusions.** The main conclusion of our brief observations is that most of the classical geopolitical analyses, models, and scenarios remain valid, with some adjustments that do not affect the essence. These updates are mandatory due to the change in the regional context (primarily the identity and capacity of neighboring states) and some border changes. And yet, the essential analyses regarding Romania’s position as a state of European necessity and the geopolitical value of our national and state landmarks (the Carpathians, the Danube, the Black Sea) remain intact.

The relevance of classical Romanian geopolitics (in which we summarize the period between the two world wars and the years of World War II, until the beginning of 1944) is imposed both by the validity of theoretical systems and by their capacity to suggest (or even oblige) policies.

Some things have changed. The nation as a state-generating factor matters less and less, but it still matters fundamentally, and this still becomes essential during armed conflicts. The neighbors are no longer the same, the Bolshevik colossus is no longer Bolshevik and is further



away, and we share our differences and common interests with smaller states, from the position of members of alliances that matter. Wars no longer resemble the era of classical Romanian geopolitical thinking: the technologies are different, and the non-military components are increasingly more important. But wars happen, including at our borders, and require preventive measures and the most realistic geostrategic and tactical plans, maximizing the chances of success.

And for these reasons, recovering, reinterpreting, and updating our classical systems of geopolitical theory remains essential.

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