

*Italy and Romania between Risorgimento liberalism and the raison d'état: ideals, strategic vulnerabilities and the quest for security in a changing continental system (1875–1883)*

Habilitation Thesis Abstract by prof. dr. Rudolf Dinu

This study offers a new interpretive framework for understanding how small and medium European powers navigated the hierarchical order of the late-nineteenth-century European Concert. By comparing Italy and Romania during the critical years 1877–1883, it demonstrates that the two young states underwent remarkably synchronous strategic recalibrations in response to a shared sequence of systemic shocks. While previous scholarship has examined these states largely in isolation, this study reveals the extent to which their foreign-policy transformations followed parallel trajectories shaped by the Eastern Crisis (1875–1878), the Tunisian Crisis (1881), and the Romanian–Austro-Hungarian dispute over Lower Danube navigation (1881–1883). The transformations unfolding in independent Romania during these years – shaped by the Eastern Crisis (1875–1878) and the Romanian –Austro-Hungarian dispute over navigation on the Lower Danube (1881–1883) – displayed notable structural parallels with developments in Italy, which faced analogous pressures from France (the Tunisian Crisis of 1881) and Austria. These crises drew both states into asymmetrical confrontations with regional hegemonies, precipitating a period of international isolation that exposed the limits of their non-engagement strategies.

Yet these setbacks also acted as catalysts: they prompted decisive shifts in how Italian and Romanian elites perceived the international system and accelerated the adoption of new foreign and security policy orientations. By tracing these synchronous processes, the thesis demonstrates that the strategic realignments of Italy and Romania were shaped not only by external constraints but also by the interaction between domestic state-building imperatives and the systemic pressures of the European Concert.

The study draws on official and private diplomatic correspondence, ministerial papers, and contemporary political writings to reconstruct Italian and Romanian decision-making. Special attention is given to the role of count Giuseppe Tornielli-Brusati, general secretary of the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (and after minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest), whose memoranda and interventions reveal some of the intellectual foundations of Italy's Balkan policy.

*Italy and the security dilemma before and after the Oriental Crisis (1870-1881).* In 1861, Italy emerged as a sovereign state with the potential to join the ranks of the great powers. Its recognition stemmed from both its unilateral declaration of independence and military victories, against Austria. Yet, despite its ambitions, Italy was the least significant power in the Concert. Its economic and military limitations prevented it from matching the influence of other great powers—except perhaps the Ottoman Empire—and it could not compete with the commercial presence of France or the Central Empires in Southeastern Europe. The wars of unification had left it with a negative military balance record, so there could be no question of displaying its military potential.

In southeastern Europe, Italy, like other Western states, had the difficult task of asserting its prestige in the midst of fierce competition with other great powers, operating in a region where neighboring empires such as Russia and Austria-Hungary had a much stronger presence. Promoting Italian interests through traditional means, on a par with other powers, would have required military force and the willingness to use it when diplomacy failed. Lacking such capabilities, the Italian government sought instead to safeguard its interests and those of its citizens by relying on the state's political prestige and by pursuing sustained, assertive diplomatic efforts.

As a distinctive feature of how the Italian elite perceived international realities between 1870 and 1880, I also recall the persistence of a mental map deeply impregnated with *Risorgimento* ideology, which often set Italy apart from the prevailing trends in European diplomacy.

From the very outset of its existence, the new Italian state faced the imperative of security – the urgent need to safeguard its recently achieved independence and fragile unity. Italian foreign policy entered a phase of contraction after 1870, in which a moderate paradigm prevailed, focused on internal development and the consolidation of the Italian state's position in the concerted system. The vision of the Historical Right placed security and stability above all else, as Italy sought to present itself to Europe as a force for peace and balance in order to strengthen its still fragile political and economic foundations. For Foreign Minister Visconti Venosta and many other Right-wing leaders, true sovereignty meant ensuring political independence and territorial integrity. Therefore, alongside the long-term goal of completing national unification, Italy faced the more immediate and pressing need to secure its own safety.

“Good relations with everyone” was the motto of the Historical Right, and this guiding principle remained in place even after the uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina broke out in July 1875. However, Italian public opinion—largely uninformed about foreign affairs—struggled to understand or support this cautious approach, especially amid the volatile international climate created by the renewed Eastern Crisis. The events unfolding in the Balkans stirred emotions, aspirations, and principles that Italian politicians could not easily ignore or set aside.

The reopening of the Eastern Question also coincided with a key turning point in Italy's domestic politics: the rise to power of the Left in the spring of 1876. The Left's arrival in government was accompanied by hopes of major changes in Italian foreign policy. Yet these expectations soon faded. The Italian Left was significantly divided on foreign policy issues and its first actions in government largely resulted in the maintenance of the existing international line.

The Left, more than the Right, remained deeply attached to the ideological legacy of the *Risorgimento* and to the principles that had guided the creation of the Italian nation-state. This made its approach to foreign policy far more impassioned and idealistic. Within the governing majority, members of the Extreme Left argued that “*the solution to the Eastern Question must come through the strict application of the principle of nationalities.*” Italian foreign policy had to be entirely oriented towards these new peoples. This was a national priority because Italy could gain future political and economic power in the Balkan area. Given its own history and the unique nature of its unification process, Italy had to support oppressed peoples in every

way possible. Support for the “sacred Slavic cause” was unquestionable for the Extreme Left, but that was not all. Italy had to be an apostle of the principle of nationality, not only by encouraging the peoples of southeastern Europe, but also through actions that would lead to the triumph of this principle in its own country —since, in their eyes, Italy’s own national program was still incomplete.

This invitation to help others, with the aim of creating favorable conditions to reopen the issue of the unredeemed territories, met the much more pragmatic vision of those representatives of the Left, including several ministers and diplomats, who viewed the question of pursuing the principle of nationalities in foreign policy in a rather transactional optic. If the Eastern Question offered an opportunity to revive Italy’s territorial claims, the country had to be ready to secure its share.

According to historian Enrico Decleva, the moderate stance advanced by the Historical Right stood in clear opposition to the radical current of the Extreme Left. In the “Eastern question, Italy had no interests other than and distinct from the general interest of Europe,” which was to avoid a general war. Any attempt to exploit the Balkan crisis to push the issue of the unredeemed territories before the European chancelleries—especially through pressure or demands for compensation—was seen as dangerously reckless and had to be avoided at all costs. For the Right, Italian foreign policy had to remain grounded in close coordination with the other great powers. It should have aimed to maintain harmony among them, advancing proposals that balanced competing interests so that “Europe-wide” solutions could prevail. These solutions were meant to uphold the rights of peoples and improve their conditions while preserving the Ottoman Empire’s territorial integrity. It was not an entirely coherent goal, since the moderates envisioned a Balkan order that would have included an independent and stronger Montenegro, a quasi-independent Romania, and several autonomous entities still under Ottoman sovereignty.

Amid these competing and often conflicting political currents, the government led by Agostino Depretis struggled to define a coherent and stable foreign policy. Its task was further complicated by persistent political instability, which fragmented government action and led to frequent alternations in leadership between the two leading personalities of the Left, Depretis and Benedetto Cairoli, who successively held both the premiership and the Foreign Affairs portfolio. Each was influenced in different ways by key diplomats involved in shaping foreign policy—most notably Tornielli Brusati, Secretary General of the *Consulta*. As a result, the direction of Italian diplomacy fluctuated, giving the country’s foreign policy an air of ambiguity and unpredictability.

Much has been written in Italian historiography about how Italy’s new foreign policy paradigm took shape under the first government of the Historical Left, and most interpretations broadly agree on its defining features. It is generally accepted that the rapid succession of events in the Balkan Peninsula during the spring of 1877 hastened the decision to abandon the policy of contraction that Italian governments had followed until then. Likewise, historians concur that the Eastern Crisis soon exposed Italy’s isolation within the international system—a reality that fostered a deep sense of insecurity and frustration among the country’s decision-makers. Events

unfolding on the neighboring peninsula, particularly the prospect of a shift in the military balance in the Western Balkans brought about by a possible Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, made it clear that Italy's Adriatic and Mediterranean interests required a more pragmatic approach that would secure Italy a place in that strategic area or, at least, slow down the advance of other interested powers in the region. This was largely the source of the proactive momentum of the Left's policy which, in the name of the sacrosanct principle of nationality, began to raise the idea of territorial compensation as a solution for the fulfillment of the national program, linking it closely to the equally fundamental issue of ensuring Italy's security.

Italian historian Pietro Pastorelli argued that the real innovation introduced by the Left-wing governments in managing foreign policy lay in the complementary pursuit of Italy's two fundamental objectives: national security and the achievement of the national program. According to Pastorelli, this new approach rested on the belief that an alliance with Germany could address both aims simultaneously—providing security through a defensive pact, while advancing national unification through potential territorial compensation, achieved not by confronting Austria, but by reaching an understanding with her.

The interpretation that the Depretis government gave in 1877 to the unfolding events in the Balkans was not driven solely by sentiment or by a desire to support Balkan national movements. Nor was it limited to viewing the situation as an opportunity to pressure Austria in pursuit of the unredeemed territories. On the contrary, we could say that it highlighted above all the geostrategic implications of a potential shift in the regional balance, which could have resulted from an Austro-Hungarian advance towards the mouths of the Cattaro (the mouths of the Bay of Kotor).

In light of these developments, what concerned Italian leaders most was the need to strengthen the country's position by aligning with the strongest military power in Europe—Germany. An important document written by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Count Tornielli, in the form of a long note summarizing an equally dense discussion with the German ambassador von Keudell on July 2, 1877, shows us that the initiative to present a proposal for an anti-French and anti-Habsburg alliance, later brought to the attention of the German chancellor through the Francesco Crispi mission, took shape in the heart of the Depretis government as early as the beginning of the summer of 1877, within a group of politicians and diplomats, some of whom (De Launay) were traditional supporters of a close formal relationship with the German Empire.

Thanks to Tornielli's testimony, we now know that the historical Left interpreted the Balkan crises of 1876–1877 in strategic terms. From this analysis, it concluded that Italy needed to find concrete support in Berlin. Tornielli's conversations with the German ambassador were not merely theoretical exchanges about shared anti-clerical views but laid the groundwork for concrete diplomatic proposals. The Depretis government explored the possibility of close cooperation with the German cabinet—first through Ambassador De Launay and then, in September 1877, through Crispi's formal proposal of an alliance during his mission to Berlin.

Bismarck, while interested in an anti-French alliance, categorically rejected the idea of extending such an agreement against Austria. He also made it clear that he would not oppose Austro-Hungarian expansion into Bosnia-Herzegovina, suggesting instead that Italy seek compensation in Albania or other Ottoman territories in the Western Balkans if the regional balance were to change. Equally categorical was the Vienna government's refusal to discuss any direct Italian-Austrian agreement based on the idea of compensation in Trentino. Count Andrassy's suggestion to the Italian government was to seek compensation in other continents, such as Africa.

Relying on assumptions rooted more in sentiment than in a realistic assessment of the balance of power, the Left's attempt to build a new security strategy inevitably failed, deepening the sense of frustration and unease already present both in Italy and in the European chancelleries.

From this profound mistrust of Austria—and from the perception of an immediate threat posed by Austro-Hungarian moves in southeastern Europe—arose the urgent need to devise countermeasures. These took the form of concerted diplomatic action to prevent territorial changes in the Balkans and of a policy of protest intended to convince the great powers of Italy's right to compensation. The unspoken aim of this latter approach was to push Vienna toward a direct agreement on the Trentino question.

The above testimony of Count Tornielli shows us that, as early as 1876, the issue of compensation, initially intended as a policy to discourage Austro-Hungarian ambitions, was effectively studied and evaluated by the Italian government, even though this fact was firmly denied in public statements. The notion that Italy was entitled to equivalent compensation if Austria-Hungary occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina circulated widely among European chancelleries, promoted by diplomats close to the Historical Left such as Costantino Nigra in St. Petersburg, Count De Launay in Berlin, Menabrea in London, and, above all, by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tornielli-Brusati.

Regardless of the form it took, the compensation hypothesis did not lose ground even for a moment before the Berlin Congress, as another contemporary diplomatic testimony shows. Luigi Corti who served as foreign minister from March to October 1878, found “this fatal idea of compensation deeply rooted in the *Consulta*” and in parliamentary circles, supported and inflamed by some diplomats close to the historical Left, but above all by Tornielli, “the damned soul of Crispi and Depretis.” Corti considered this tendency extremely dangerous, believing it could draw Italy into a disastrous conflict with Austria-Hungary. Determined to halt this drift, he advocated a strict policy of neutrality and the restoration of mutual confidence with Vienna. Yet his appeals for restraint fell on deaf ears, as the parliamentary Left, the party press, and large sections of public opinion were already inflamed by nationalist fervor.

Cultivating and feeding vain nationalistic hopes – because that was the case every time, between 1876 and 1878, when the question of Bosnia and Herzegovina arose – could ultimately lead only to great disappointment. Having achieved absolutely nothing in Berlin, particularly in regard to Trentino, after President Cairoli and others before him had explicitly supported the irredentist demonstrations, appeared to be in too flagrant contradiction with the gains made by Austria, England, and France. The Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maffei,

observed in this regard that the satisfaction Italy derived from having participated in the highest expression of the European Concert, the Congress of Berlin, was not at all equal, in the eyes of Italian public opinion, to the real strategic advantages obtained by Austria-Hungary in the Balkans and by England in Cyprus.

Despite the failure of the compensation policy, the Left-wing governments of Depretis and Cairoli did not entirely abandon their opposition to Austria's growing dominance in southeastern Europe.

Whether through coordinated efforts within the Concert—such as Italy's stance in the European Danube Commission until the summer of 1881, resisting Austrian efforts to control navigation on the lower Danube—or through the independent actions of diplomats like Count Tornielli in Belgrade and Bucharest, who encouraged local resistance to Austro-German influence, Italian policy retained its antagonistic tone toward Vienna.

Fostering closer ties with smaller Balkan states such as Romania and Serbia, encouraging them to pursue independent foreign policies, aligned perfectly with Italy's Risorgimento-inspired ideal of a Europe built on the principle of nationality. At the same time, it reflected Italy's own strategic interests in the region, grounded in geography and historical tradition. It was therefore natural that Italy continued along this path—the only one possible until it became imaginable to talk about collaboration with Austria-Hungary and Russia for the joint management of the Balkan questions.

Yet this course of action, even when balanced by a “correct” policy toward the great powers, ran counter to the conservative strategy of the Central Empires. Consequently, Italian foreign policy continued to languish in serious isolation even under the last Cairoli government (July 14, 1879 - May 29, 1881).

This liberal-nationalist-Austrophobic perspective, and with it the policy of equilibrium, slowly changed under the imperium of necessity. However, it took time to assimilate the conviction that moderates had long held, namely that the *so-called freedom of action was fatal to Italy*.

Italy's position of influence in some countries of the southeastern Europe was certainly episodic and ephemeral, as it did not survive beyond the reconfiguration of Italy's foreign policy in 1881-1882. The alignment with Germany and its old rival, Austria-Hungary, did not strengthen Italy's policy and strategies in the East and the Balkans and, more specifically, had no positive transformative effect on relations with Romania or Serbia. To paraphrase Tornielli once again, after 1882 “it was nothing more than a precipice”. The regression of Italian policy was general and affected relations with the entire southeastern European region, leading to a state of torpor that would remain unchanged until the outbreak of the Rumelian Crisis in the autumn of 1885.

The alliance with the Central Empires did not in any way eliminate the pre-existing tendency of Italian rulers to pursue the goal of compensation. It persisted in the form of repeated attempts to transform the alliance in order to gain new advantages and became a constant feature of Italian foreign policy in the following decades. German historian H. Afflerbach observed that this “political culture” of compensation became particularly evident among the political elites on whom the relationship with the Central Empires was based, namely the monarchy and

government representatives. The belief of many Italian politicians that the Triple Alliance should have produced, at the appropriate time, compensation, that is, the diplomatic completion of national unification, remained firm at least until the end of the 19th century.

The alliance with the Zweibund in 1882 coincided with a broader turning point in Italy's foreign policy. The pragmatism imposed by international isolation, economic weakness, and diplomatic fatigue gradually displaced the idealism of the 1870s. With the conclusion of the Triple Alliance in 1882, Italy largely abandoned the liberal-national ambitions that had once guided its diplomacy in the Balkans, replacing them with a policy of alignment and cautious accommodation. What had begun as a mission to assert Italy's moral and ideological influence in that part of Europe thus yielded to the imperatives of security and power politics goals, within a system dominated by stronger powers.

*The "Cursed Soul" of Crispi and Depretis: Count Giuseppe Tornielli Brusati. The Ideas and Foreign Policy Strategies of a "Herald of the Principle of Nationalities" (1876-1885).* A figure often associated with the foreign policy pursued by Italy's Left-wing governments during the reopening of the Eastern Question is Count Giuseppe Tornielli Brusati di Vergano. Historian Federico Chabod identified him, alongside Alberto Maffei, as one of the "true inspirers" of Italian diplomacy during the turbulent years of the Eastern Crisis. Despite the historiographical ubiquity of the character, genuine interest in his concrete role in shaping and managing foreign policy between 1876 and 1881 has rarely gone beyond general observations. When he took over as Secretary General of the Ministry in March 1876, Tornielli undoubtedly had the most extensive and detailed knowledge of Italy's diplomatic portfolio.

How Tornielli understood to "guide" Italian foreign policy during the Eastern Crisis, we have already mentioned, pointing out that many contemporaries saw him as the true inspirer and main supporter of the policy of equivalent compensation due to Italy in the event of Austria-Hungary's installation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Initially conceived as a deterrent to Habsburg ambitions in the Balkans, this policy soon took a dangerous turn, "bringing Italy two fingers away from war with Austria".

The course of action imagined by Tornielli Brusati to accredit the principle of compensation was, of course, intrinsically linked to the objective of completing national unity and, in a more general sense, to that of promoting the liberal-national ideals affirmed by Italian unification. His position was in this respect significantly different, in its radicalism, from the moderate line assumed and promoted by Italian ambassadors accredited in the main European capitals. According to Tornielli, pursuing the principle of nationalities was not strictly limited to the process of Italian unification. Italy had a moral obligation to assume the role temporarily abandoned by France as the standard-bearer of the liberal-national cause in Europe, supporting and leading the mission of that "party" against the "efforts of the renewed Holy Alliance," recently transposed into the decisions of the Berlin Congress.

In Tornielli's eyes, the Balkans were more than a regional concern. They were the stage on which "the victory or defeat of the principle of nationality as the foundation of the new European public law" would be decided. The struggle unfolding there was, in essence, a continuation the battles of the Risorgimento — a clash between progressive and reactionary

forces in which Italy was called to lead, together with the Balkan states, against Austrian domination.

Count Tornielli's vision of Italian foreign policy focused on two fundamental objectives: maintaining and consolidating Italy's status as a great power in the concerted system, which implied assuming the role of leader of the European liberal-national movement, and building a position of regional hegemony in Southeast Europe by drawing on its traditional historical ties with this area and, above all, on the moral influence that Italy had in this region thanks to ideological affinities. The two objectives were interdependent and had an important anti-Habsburg strategic connotation, as they aimed to counteract and manage the main threat perceived as coming from Austria-Hungary.

To achieve these ends, Tornielli believed that both Italy's vote in the collective mechanisms of the great powers could be instrumentalized for the benefit of the liberal-national cause, as well as the principle of nationalities as the ideological basis for free, equal, and independent interaction with emerging liberal-national states. His focus on Southeastern Europe was not a temporary response to the Eastern Crisis, but a long-term strategic vision, a central axis of Italian diplomacy meant to compensate for the country's limited material power—its modest army, weak navy, and constrained financial resources.

In Tornielli's opinion, "the gradual development of autonomous and national entities in the Balkans had a contrasting effect on the European system of states, both positive and negative in equal measure. Positive because the newly born entities "seemed destined to form a 'system of secondary states in southern Europe,' intended to 'restore the balance that the great imperial agglomerations disrupted. Negative because national movements were evolving much more rapidly than had been estimated and were naturally undermining the political and territorial order decided by the Great Powers for this part of Europe, catalyzing the contrasting interests of neighbouring empires and thus favoring the destabilization of the balance of power, or what Tornielli called the confrontation between "the nationalities principle and that of partition (of compensation), in which Italy was 'on the side of the former'".

Tornielli believed that the Berlin Congress had marked a regression from the cooperative spirit of 1856, when the great powers collectively guaranteed the autonomy of Balkan peoples, allowing them to find their own conditions for peaceful coexistence. The conversion of the Concert, or at least its conservative core, to a policy of spheres of influence was destabilizing for the entire system because the mandate assigned to a regional-power to enforce stability in a specific area of the continent fundamentally contrasted with emerging national programs and because it implied a policy of compensation whose main effect was to alter the existing balance of power. Consequently, for Tornielli, the advance of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans threatened not only Italy's immediate interests in the Adriatic but also the broader European balance of power.

In assessing the most likely trends in southeastern Europe, Tornielli correctly anticipated that, in the absence of a "strong" Italian [or French] policy to come to the aid of these nationalities and compensate for the harmful influence exerted on them by neighboring empires, the Balkan states would eventually be compelled by circumstance to orient themselves toward a policy of

cohabitation with the regional hegemon. To prevent this, he urged an independent and active Italian diplomacy, distinct from that of the Central Empires, whose aims he considered fundamentally opposed to those of the emerging Southeast European nations.

Tornielli did not place much value on the legitimist management of the Concert expressed in the decisions of the Berlin Congress, considering the solutions imagined to be inoperable and, above all, contrary to the national liberal aspirations of the populations in the region. Therefore, he advocated a flexible but autonomous foreign policy, one that allowed Italy to join coalitions of powers whenever genuine liberal objectives aligned. While he did not reject the Concert of Europe as a mechanism for managing international affairs, he repudiated its hierarchical foundations, which subordinated small states to great ones and violated the ideal of a Europe composed of “free, equal, and sovereign nations.”

Tornielli categorically rejected any concerted action that, under the pretext of general European stability, actually favored the specific interests of certain great powers. The Italian diplomat referred specifically to empires such as Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, which, using the mechanisms of the Concert, sought to perpetuate, for their own benefit, a European political order in which second-rate states such as those in the Balkans would have limited external sovereignty.

In Count Tornielli's opinion, Austro-German diplomacy, in particular, pursued such objectives in southeastern Europe, seeking to secure its political, economic, and strategic preeminence in the area, including through supranational mandates obtained with the consent of the Concert, such as, for example, the preeminent vote in a body of the European Commission of the Danube, which was to establish and control the navigation regime on the Lower Danube. In pursuit of their own interests, the German and Austro-Hungarian governments had already shown that they favored aggressive action based primarily on the diplomacy of force, using the tools of informal imperialism (asymmetrical political and economic agreements, financial and commercial domination, etc.) to compel the governments of the Balkan states to accept the role of clients.

In this regard, the central empires attempted to employ all possible intimidation and moral coercion, including the prerogative assumed by all major powers in the 19th century to recognize, or not to recognize new independent state entities. Seeking to convince his own government of the need for immediate recognition of Romania's independence, Tornielli insisted, in the autumn of 1879, that Germany was deliberately delaying recognition of the small principality's sovereignty, thereby gaining the support of a large part of the Concert (France, Great Britain, and Italy), the real immediate stake being to force the Romanian government to buy back the railways built by a bankrupt German consortium. As long as Romania remained an unrecognized state, the German government could claim legal jurisdiction to settle such matters, treating the principality as a territory under capitulation regime.

The German proposal to block Romanian commercial traffic on the Austro-Hungarian and German Danube was also part of this aggressive action, which was intended to force the governments in Bucharest and Sofia to accept the navigation rules for the Lower Danube drawn

up by Austria in the spring of 1880. The new regulations gave the Vienna government a decisive vote on this issue and, once implemented, would have forced the small riparian states to orient their trade towards Central Europe, thereby disadvantaging the trade of other European states in the region.

In Tornielli's opinion, such coercive actions, whether unilateral or cloaked in the form of a European mandate or collective action by the great powers, should have not been viewed as isolated episodes but as part of a deliberate strategy aimed at keeping the small states of southeastern Europe in a situation not very different from that of vassal entities such as autonomous Bulgaria or other tributary actors of the Balkan subsystem that could only carry out a limited range of external actions.

In a very concrete and pragmatic way, Tornielli fought to impose a decision by his own government, favorable to Romania, precisely to prevent such an outcome, which would have left room for the formation of an abnormal periphery within the system, populated by states only partially recognized as independent, weak, and inexorably exposed to the control of neighboring empires. In his argumentation for premier Cairoli, he showed that the coercive policy pursued by the Berlin government in its relations with the Romanian principality, transposed into the delay of the act of recognizing its independence, "in a way excluded Romania from the European consortium," temporarily isolating it in an intermediate zone outside the norms of the European state system, such an outcome being beneficial only to the policies of influence pursued by the central empires in this part of Europe.

The two issues already mentioned, namely the recognition of Romania's independence and the navigation regime on the Lower Danube, are case studies that illustrate how a particular strategy, devised not at the center but in the territory, was adopted by the decision-making group and became the official line of action of Italian foreign policy.

Fully aware of Italy's weaknesses and shortcomings as a great power, Tornielli attempted to supplement traditional means of influence (military, commercial, financial, or cultural) with a proactive and energetic public relations and image policy designed to suggest and emphatically underscore Italy's status as a great power.

Italy's position of influence, outlined by Tornielli in Bucharest, was certainly episodic and ephemeral, as it did not survive beyond the reconfiguration of Italy's foreign policy in 1881-1882.

The alignment with Germany and its old rival, Austria-Hungary, did not strengthen Italy's policy and strategies in the East and the Balkans and, more specifically, had no positive transformative effect on relations with Romania or Serbia. To paraphrase Tornielli once again, after 1882 "it was nothing more than a precipice". The regression of Italian policy was general and affected relations with the entire southeastern European region, leading to a state of torpor that would remain unchanged until the outbreak of the Rumelian Crisis in the autumn of 1885.

The end of Tornielli's influence coincided with a broader turning point in Italy's foreign policy. The pragmatism imposed by international isolation, economic weakness, and diplomatic fatigue gradually displaced the idealism of the 1870s. With the conclusion of the Triple Alliance

in 1882, Italy definitively abandoned the liberal-national ambitions that had once guided its diplomacy in the Balkans, replacing them with a policy of alignment and cautious accommodation. What had begun as a mission to assert Italy's moral and ideological influence in Europe thus yielded to the imperatives of security and power politics goals, within a system dominated by stronger powers.

*Romania in Search of External Sovereignty.* The modern Romanian state, born in 1859, was, at least in part, a successful product of the concerted diplomacy practiced by the Great Powers in the mid-19th century. It was configured territorially and politically as a buffer state, designed to reduce the risk of war in the Lower Danube region that could have arisen from the unilateral policies of neighboring powers.

A vassal state until 1877, and therefore not an autonomous player in the international system, Romania was placed under the collective guarantee of the Great Powers in 1856—neutralized and provided with a protective umbrella, which proved quite functional until the system underwent a new phase of instability and territorial reorganization, as occurred with the Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878.

At the beginning of the 1870s, Romania was clearly lagging behind Italy in the implementation of its national program, not so much from a territorial point of view but above all in the vital task of achieving independence and external sovereignty, without which, as Mazzini's motto recalled, the nation did not exist.

This aspect constituted the catalyst par excellence for all the proactive lines of action of the foreign strategy implemented by the autonomous Romanian government. Unlike the Italian government, it could not yet abandon the speculative policy of the *fait accompli*, nor abandon the risky actions of seeking/manipulating international opportunities, real or imagined, in an attempt to achieve the goal of independence.

Romania, as a tributary principality under Ottoman suzerainty, was placed in what contemporary jurists called the “sphere of partial political recognition.” This “penumbra” of semi-civilization encompassed the southeastern flank of Europe, where entities could be admitted into the international community only through the consent of the Great Powers and through demonstrable adoption of Western institutional models. Romanian elites understood this dual structure early on. They therefore sought to transform their perceived cultural marginality into a patriotic argument for accelerated modernization, using Western institutional transfer as both a domestic reform tool and a diplomatic strategy.

Romania did not have recognized external sovereignty, but its governments nevertheless actively exercised it (performed), building the foundations of a diplomatic arsenal specific to an independent state since the 1860s. This performative strategy was not merely symbolic. It represented a pragmatic response to the structural constraints of a nineteenth-century international system that was explicitly civilizationally stratified, and in which recognition was monopolized by a narrow circle of “legitimizing powers.”

In the 1870s, this process accelerated significantly, resulting in the creation of all the institutional instruments necessary to operate internationally: in 1873, the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs was reorganized to incorporate all the characteristics of a diplomatic bureaucracy typical of independent states: from its administrative organization to the definition of its legal mandate, which was to independently represent the sovereign interests of the principality abroad.

The arsenal used by the Romanian princely government to perform/exercise external sovereignty was diverse, ranging from the attempt to mint currency, to the creation of a national order, to the negotiation of postal and trade agreements, etc., to the expansion of the network of diplomatic representations. It is no coincidence that during this period, the proliferation of diplomatic agencies reached unprecedented proportions. Agents and agencies formed the backbone of the process of asserting sovereignty. The government of the Romanian vassal principality maintained informal relations with a large portion of European states, particularly with the governments of the great powers, constantly expanding its network of diplomatic agents—unofficial, but no less active and visible, in European chancelleries. They were armed everywhere with the general instruction to take every possible step toward achieving independence.

Romanian diplomatic agents were granted prerogatives identical to those of sovereign-state envoys: civil registration, consular protection, legalizations, issuance of passports, and the duty to report on political developments abroad. These functions were not merely administrative; they constituted acts of sovereignty, performed in anticipation of its recognition.

Performing sovereignty also required symbolic alignment with European diplomatic culture. Carol I introduced a diplomatic uniform modeled on those of sovereign states. The uniform of the agent in Constantinople—complete with gold embroidery and white plumes—was deliberately designed to signal the rank of a head of mission, even though the Ottoman Empire refused to acknowledge such status. This visual assertion of equality was a calculated challenge to the hierarchical norms of the system.

In this sense, Romania's attainment of independence in 1877–1878 must be understood not simply as the outcome of geopolitical realignments or military contingencies, but as the culmination of a long and deliberate process of performing sovereignty within a hierarchical international system. By constructing institutions that mirrored those of sovereign states, by deploying diplomatic agents who acted with the prerogatives and self-presentation of recognized envoys, and by adopting the symbolic repertoire of European diplomatic culture, Romanian elites systematically eroded the conceptual and practical boundaries that confined the Principality to the status of a semi-sovereign polity.

*Romanian Statesmen Between the Risorgimento Mentality and Realpolitik.* From an ideational perspective, „Trajan's great-grandchildren”, through their political elite, distinguished themselves in Eastern Europe for a mindset and initiatives born from aspirations and visions born in the same crucible as the revolution and the European "national" rebirth: absolute independence, full integration into civilized and cultured Europe, the security necessary for the consolidation and development of the newly established state, manifestations of mono-ethnic sovereignty, as well as irredentist aspirations that explicitly aimed at the Romanianness of Transylvania, even if for the time being they had no prospect of immediate realization.

The Romanian politician of Risorgimento extraction was, paradoxically enough, a supporter and practitioner of an arcane, cabinet-level politics. This fact must be seen and understood as a reflection of the experience of fighting illegally against established authority. In this regard, Romanian liberal leader Ion Brătianu displayed a striking identity of ideas with statesmen such as Napoleon III, Agostino Depretis, and Francesco Crispi. This was particularly true for anything that could be traced back to possibilism, the instinctive impulse to exploit any crisis to advance one's agenda, to seek gain in the pursuit of the national agenda, and to view and use international instruments (offensive alliances) primarily opportunistically, especially to weaken or overthrow the established order.

The immediately succeeding generation, which we can consider hybrid in its intellectual background, had retained the generic elements of national-liberal ideology from the legacy of the Risorgimento (especially political opportunism, although more conservative and pragmatic in its approaches, thanks to the experience gained during its time in government), blending them with elements of social-Darwinist thought that would become dominant in many sociopolitical circles at the end of the 19th century. The Europe of free nations, united and harmonious, was slowly giving way, in the vision of these politicians, to a Europe of nation states that were not only opposed to multiethnic empires but also engaged in vital competition with each other.

The “imaginative” and “inventive” people that someone like Duiliu Zamfirescu spoke of were, first and foremost, representatives of the generation of 1848 and the Risorgimento era, the main architects of the Union of 1859, the founders of the modern Romanian state, active especially in the period 1840–1890. Educated with greater or lesser rigor in the West, the representatives of this generation lived long enough in Western European societies to be contaminated, many of them to the point of saturation, by the liberal-national ideas of the time and to become convinced bearers of the ideals of a Europe of Nations in their country of origin. The creative people were and defined themselves structurally in antithesis to the oppressors, even later, after emancipation, after the state had achieved independence. Like many representatives of the Italian historical Left, the red liberals such as Ion. Brătianu, C.A. Rosetti, Dimitrie Brătianu, and even some moderates, such as Vasile Boerescu, were characterized by widespread and persistent hostility towards Austria-Hungary, and this fact made the development of normal relations with the government in Vienna very difficult.

Able to accurately assess the backwardness of the Southeastern European world from which they came, the representatives of the Risorgimento generation were inevitably influenced in their actions by their own marginal and tolerated mentality, induced by the characteristics of the semi-sovereign and oppressed world from which they came. Profoundly marked and influenced by their condition as quasi-Europeans with limited freedom, the leaders of the Romanian Risorgimento obsessively prioritized the goal of independence and the construction of a modern, liberal nation-state, modelled on the West.

These creative minds countered the technical and pragmatic vision of the younger generation of politicians, anchored in the restrictive norms of international law and the legitimacy of the Concert of Great Powers, with a dynamic, energetic, proactive, and, above all, possibilist way

of thinking, legitimized only by the will of the sovereign nation, which did not require any kind of international recognition.

This was the mindset that defined and supported the strategy of the statesmen of the Risorgimento generation, that way of thinking on which the entire policy of the fait accompli was based: operating on the edge of legality, constantly pushing legitimistic barriers, challenging the established order to force change.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, many representatives of this proactive generation were still active and present in the governing process. Among them, I.C. Brătianu, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Vasile Boerescu, and C.A. Rosetti were those who, in the era opened by the achievement of independence (some for only a few years, others for almost a decade), continued this possibilist thinking (characterized by a greater attention to opportunities that could bring new successes for the national cause), putting it fully to the test in the management of foreign policy issues.

*Romanian Politics and the Security Problem before 1878.* The issue of security did not immediately present itself as an imperative after independence for most Romanian politicians. Nearly all were still imbued, and therefore conditioned in their assessment of international reality, by the serene experience of "guaranteed neutrality" that had enveloped the principality for nearly twenty years, between 1858 and 1877. Many struggled, at least initially, to understand the responsibilities and consequences of recognizing the Romanian state's external sovereignty, namely the need to find a reliable security provider. Others, quite a few, regretted the loss of the collective guarantee of the great powers and continued to dream of perpetual neutrality, similar to that enjoyed by Belgium.

The political elite governing Romania in the late 1870s, formed during the era of national awakenings, did not yet perceive alliances, and would not do so even after independence was achieved in 1878, as a potential source of security, an alternative to the collective guarantees of the great powers. This was because their knowledge of this instrument was intrinsically linked to the era of the wars of national unification: in their interpretation, the alliance was an ad hoc instrument aimed at ensuring the rapid achievement of a specific objective, not a means of maintaining long-term peace.

In the early 1880s, Prime Minister Ion Brătianu's mentality and actions were still influenced by this opportunistic conception of the Risorgimento. For the Romanian leader, the alliance was a temporary instrument of power placed at the service of the national project, a bargaining chip, a means of payment, whose purpose was to facilitate the acquisition of territories still under foreign rule. The alliance was intended to provide protection to the newly formed Romanian kingdom and, at the same time, in the event of a war that many considered imminent, serve the national policy of recovering territories under foreign rule, following the model established in the Italian and German wars of unification.

*Romania's Alliance with the Central Powers (1883).* Having emerged as an independent state after the Congress of Berlin, Romania faced the challenge of redefining its international position in the absence of the collective protectorate of the Concert of Europe. Initially inclined toward neutrality, Romanian decision-makers soon recognized the strategic impossibility of

independent policy, given the geopolitical pressures exerted by neighboring empires. Russia's aggressive stance in 1878 and thereafter, combined with Austria-Hungary's interest in integrating Romania into its Balkan policy and strategic glacis, determined the country's path toward an alliance with the Central Powers.

The Italian government's anticipatory approach played an indirect role in accelerating Romanian decision-makers, since Italy's accession to the *Dreibund*, due to the feelings of fraternal admiration manifested by Romanian public opinion towards its older sister, gave greater appeal and legitimacy to the Bucharest government's decision to draw closer to the Central Powers. Somewhat expected, Italy's agreement with the Central Empires was read by some Romanian politicians in the light of *Risorgimento* thought patterns, being considered useful for its supposed valences as a "procurement society", a proactive contractual instrument, meant to bring concrete national gains to the signatory parties. Brătianu was convinced that Italy had accepted the alliance with the Central Empires only in the perspective of a territorial enlargement (Nice, Savoy and Corsica) promised in the event of a victorious war. For this reason, but also because he was slightly disappointed by the idea of a simple defensive alliance, as had been advanced by Bismarck, the Romanian prime minister sought, without success, to use what he considered to be the Italian precedent, to obtain an offensive and defensive treaty containing clauses regarding possible territorial gains.

In contrast, the non-creative people of the second generation, such as Sturdza and Carp, who had a more pragmatic and conservative vision of the system, in line with the post-Berlin trend, struggled to balance the prime minister's vision and reconfigure it in line with realistic security objectives. In particular, Petre P. Carp, the most lucid mind of the moment among Romanian decision-makers, explicitly asked the Romanian Foreign Minister to act to temper the prime minister's territorial appetite and focus negotiations on long-term security issues.

Romania's accession to the Triple Alliance occurred with the signing, on October 30, 1883, of the Treaty of Defensive Alliance with Austria-Hungary, a treaty to which Germany unconditionally adhered the same day. The alliance allowed Romania to emerge from external political isolation and resolve the Danube question in its own interests. The agreement guaranteed Romania security, conferred diplomatic prestige, and created a controlled framework for managing regional conflicts and crises. Romania's role within the alliance system was not passive: its integration into the Austro-German security mechanism transformed the country into a factor of stability in Southeastern Europe, moderating regional tensions throughout the period between the Bulgarian crisis of 1885 and the Balkan Wars (1912–1913).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that, in terms of the nature of the views held, the solutions envisaged and the actions taken, the parallels between the structural transformations that took place in the foreign policies of Italy and Romania between 1876 and 1883 were almost perfect. In practice, under pressure from the same external and internal stimuli, Romania's foreign policy underwent a similar process of transformation, which took place almost simultaneously with that of Italy. After a period of acting alone on the international stage, focused on the staunch defence of its regional interests and grounded in the right of nations, which led it quite

rapidly, between 1878 and 1881, to gaze in terror at the abyss of isolation and the threat of a destructive conflict with the region's hegemonic powers (Russia and Austria-Hungary), the Romanian government led by I.C. Brătianu ultimately identified a partnership with Germany – and, by extension, with Austria-Hungary – as the necessary solution to guarantee the state's security and achieve national unity.

The decision of Italian and Romanian statesmen to ally themselves with their traditional enemy, prioritising the tactical, strategic and prestige benefits offered by a security mechanism that also played an important role in crisis management, in exchange for the temporary shelving of national aspirations, represented a rational political calculation par excellence. The marriage of convenience entered into with Austria by states such as Italy, Serbia and Romania – whose very existence implied a latent potential for conflict with the Habsburg Monarchy – was, in its pragmatism, the clearest expression of the alignment of their respective elites with the general European tendency to view international relations through the prism of security policy.