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THE EMERGENCE OF ANOTHER “LITTLE ENTENTE”? THE “PRAGUE SPRING” AND THE NEW DIVISIONS IN THE BALKANS

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1968 was a turning point in the history of Europe and it had significant repercussions on the relations in its eastern part and the Balkans in particular. That was the time when the region was divided more than ever. During the “Prague Spring” there was much speculation of the emergence of a possible tripartite agreement between Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, actually of a revival of the “Little Entente” of the interwar period. The article seeks an answer how viable that possibility was and how close and similar were Romania and Yugoslavia, which were united in their support of Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Prague Spring, Little Entente, Balkans, international relations.

1968 was a turning point in the history of Europe and it had significant repercussions on the relations in its eastern part and the Balkans in particular. The “Prague Spring” was the third major crisis in the Soviet bloc since the beginning of the Cold War after the Stalin – Tito split in 1948 and the Hungarian events of 1956. It actually drew new dividing lines within it with two distinct camps being formed: on the one hand, Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia and on the other, the five Eastern European member states of the Warsaw Pact, which sent troops into Prague. With regards to the Balkans, that was the time when the region was divided more than ever. Greece and Turkey already made part of the Western camp, since the Sino-Soviet split in 1961 Albania embraced the Maoist ideology and was gradually getting more and more isolated, Romania and Yugoslavia took the side of “rebellious” Czechoslovakia, while Bulgaria presented itself as the most ardent Soviet supporter. During the “Prague Spring” there was much speculation of the emergence of a possible tripartite agreement between Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, actually of a revival of the “Little Entente” of the interwar period¹. How viable that possibility was and how close and similar were Romania and Yugoslavia, which were united in their support of Czechoslovakia – these are some of the questions to which I shall try to find an answer in the following pages.

¹ An alliance between Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia (1921–1938) that came into being in the aftermath of the First World War, by which the three states engaged to assist each other for the preservation of the territorial status-quo.

The far-reaching liberalization measures undertaken in Czechoslovakia in the early months of 1968 led to a number of meetings between the new leadership of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CCP) and the leaders of the Communist and Workers' parties of other East European countries, in particular the Soviet Union. The frequency of these meetings was seen by Western commentators as an indication of the concern felt by the East European nations, especially the USSR, that the "socialist democratic revolution" in Czechoslovakia could take a non-communist or anti-communist nature. At the Sofia meeting of the Political Advisory Committee of the Warsaw Pact held on March 6 to 7, 1968, the concern over the changes in Czechoslovakia began to overshadow the ideas of reforming the structure of the political-military bloc. At the meeting of party and state leaders of the Soviet bloc held in Dresden on March 23, 1968, the Czechoslovak leaders were subjected to "comradely court" and forced to defend the socialist nature of the transformations they had initiated. The Dresden meeting was followed by the Moscow meeting of the leaders of five East European states (the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria) of May 8, 1968, which again discussed the situation in Czechoslovakia. At that meeting for the first time was launched the idea of a military solution.

At the next meeting of the five, held in Warsaw on July 14 to 15, 1968, the communist leaders strongly condemned the political line of CCP. Leonid Brezhnev spoke about the socialist countries' collective responsibility for the fate of socialism in each of them, and thus for the first time outlined the concept of "limited sovereignty" or the so called "Brezhnev doctrine". The participants to the meeting sent a collective letter of warning to the Czechoslovak communists. That was followed by the meeting of the leaders of the five communist parties with the Czechoslovak leadership held in Bratislava on August 3, 1968, where was adopted the Declaration on the unity of the "fraternal parties" against the attempts of imperialism and "other anti-communist forces" to undermine the socialist system and the unity of the socialist countries.

All these talks were to no avail and at an extended meeting of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) held on August 16, 1968, the decision was taken for military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Two days later a secret meeting between Leonid Brezhnev, Janos Kadar, Wladyslaw Gomulka, Walter Ulbricht and Todor Zhivkov took place in Moscow, during which it was stated that all political means to influence the CCP leadership were exhausted and was accepted the Soviet Politburo's decision for military intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. On August 21, 1968 the intervention was already a fact.

Throughout the crisis Romania and Yugoslavia took quite similar positions, presenting themselves as dissenters from the Soviet bloc. Both countries did not take part in the Warsaw Pact talks on the regulation of the crisis - Yugoslavia for not being a member and Romania for not being invited. Romania and Yugoslavia

were united in their support of the right of Czechoslovakia to decide its own fate and that all communist parties in the international communist movement were equal and free to choose their own path to socialism. The two countries reacted very sharply to the Warsaw “Letter of the Five” to the leadership of CCP. It was perceived as particularly pain full in Yugoslavia because it stirred memories of the time twenty years ago when the Yugoslav Communist Party was attacked in a similar manner by Stalin and the Cominform.

The events in Czechoslovakia were broadly reflected in the press both in Romania and Yugoslavia. In this regard, one of the Romanian high party functionaries of that time Paul Niculescu-Mizil recalled that from the very beginning of the crisis in Czechoslovakia were specially sent a significant number of journalists, who were to provide timely information of the situation on the ground. The events in Czechoslovakia were broadly discussed at the Plenums of the CC of RCP and when in January 1968 Dubcek was elected as the new leader of the CCP Romanian leadership took the decision to support the new course². In July *Scînteia* published the “Letter of the Five”, as well as the answer of Czechoslovakia. On July 12, 1968 the situation in Czechoslovakia was the subject of a session of the RCP Executive Committee, which adopted a document on the Romanian position on the “Prague Spring”. The decisions of the plenum were made public. With the acceleration of events, the materials in the press were getting more abundant and the tone of the leadership more acute, an evidence of which are Ceaușescu’s speeches in Galați (July 15) and Braila (July 16). The same was true also for the Yugoslav press and the position of Yugoslav leadership.

This support on the part of the two countries was welcome in Czechoslovakia. “We are glad of the brotherly and complete support of Romania and Yugoslavia”, “We are not isolated”, were the headlines of major newspapers in Czechoslovakia at that time³.

At the same time, the party and government leaderships of the two countries held a number of bilateral meetings and meetings with the Czechoslovak leadership. In fact, the diplomatic activity between Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia during the entire period of the “Prague Spring” was really noteworthy. The meetings at the highest level were accompanied by parallel meetings at lower level, which created a friendly atmosphere of relations among the three countries.

In January 1968, when in Czechoslovakia was given the start of the reforms, Ceaușescu was on a state visit to Yugoslavia and had official talks with Tito. The following month a Romanian delegation headed by Ceaușescu paid a visit to Prague on the occasion of the celebrations of the two decades since communism had come to power in Czechoslovakia. Already at that meeting the Romanian

² P. Niculescu-Mizil, “România și “primăvara de la Praga”” – In: *Dosarele istoriei*, nr. 5 (21), 1998, p. 47–55.

³ M. Retegan, *In the Shadow of the Prague Spring. Romanian Foreign Policy and the Crisis in Czechoslovakia, 1968*. Iași, Oxford, Portland: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2000, p. 115.

leader expressed clearly for the first time the Romanian position for cooperation between the socialist countries in accordance with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs and the right of each party to follow its own political line.

On March, 21–22, 1968, the foreign minister of Yugoslavia Marko Nikezic was on a visit in Romania and had talks with Ceaușescu and the Romanian foreign minister Corneliu Mănescu. Two months later, on May 15, 1968, at the end of his two-day visit to Prague during which he had talks with the prime minister Alexander Dubcek and the foreign minister Jiří Hájek, the Yugoslav foreign minister expressed the support of his country for the new tendencies in Czechoslovakia. At a press conference Nikezic pointed out that the internal and external position of socialist Czechoslovakia would be strengthened as a result of the recent developments, adding that the Czechoslovak people, the government, and the Communist Party were capable of taking care of themselves and of solving effectively the problems facing them. On May 27 – June 1, 1968, a Romanian delegation headed by Ceaușescu paid an official visit to Yugoslavia and had talks with Yugoslav leaders, including Tito. The followed by visit was a communiqué openly supportive of the events in Prague, stating that the two countries attached particular importance to the consistent application of the principle of independent and equal rights, proletarian internationalism, observance of national particularities, and the creative development of socialist theory and practice⁴.

A month later, on July, 1–3, 1968, the Czechoslovak minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Hájek paid a visit to Romania. After his talks with Romanian officials the statement was made that there were all necessary conditions for the intensification of bilateral cooperation. From August 9 to 11, 1968, Tito visited Prague and just four days before the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops, on August 15–17, 1968, Ceaușescu was in the Czechoslovak capital. The latter visit of Ceaușescu was actually a very important moment in the bilateral relations of the two countries, as on August 16, 1968 was signed a renewal of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. The special value Romania attributed to its relations with Czechoslovakia is evidenced by the fact that although 1968 was a year for the renewal of basic bilateral treaties throughout the Soviet bloc, Romania was not in a hurry for doing so (in February had to be renewed the treaty with the USSR, in January with Bulgaria), with only one exception – Czechoslovakia⁵.

The manifested close relations among the three socialist countries normally provoked allusions of the establishment of a formal union among them that could divide the Eastern bloc. A Situational Report of Radio Free Europe of March 27, 1968 stated that: “At any rate Romania’s absence in Dresden increased on the one side her isolation within the Soviet Bloc, but brought her in what used to be called

⁴ K. Dawisha, *The Kremlin and the Prague Spring*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. 113.

⁵ P. Otu, “Raporturi româno-cehoslovace în timpul “primăverii de la Praga” – in: *Dosarele istoriei*, no.5/1998, p. 41–47.

the southern tier, much closer to the position of Yugoslavia.” Western journalists considered that since among the European communist states there were three which had more or less independent relations or autonomy from the U.S.S.R., it was absolutely natural that they looked towards each other. And as they were allies in the period between the two world wars (The Little Entente), the renewal of this structure was rapidly speculated upon, although the context was entirely different from the interwar one: “Whether the sympathetic reciprocal comments spread by the Czechoslovak, Yugoslav and Romanian media will lead to a substantial rapprochement between these three countries belonging to the southern and the northern tiers is, of course, a question of the future”⁶.

Soviet leaders could not but fear the potential development of a new “communist Little Entente” in this area that would undermine the Warsaw Pact. Reports about the enthusiastic reception in Prague of Yugoslav President Tito and Romanian party leader Ceaușescu shortly after Bratislava apparently further irritated the Soviet leadership. During the visit of a Czechoslovak delegation in Moscow in May 1968 Brezhnev defined the Romanian position as nationalist, and the Yugoslav one as revisionist. At a CC CPSU Politburo session on July 9, the Soviet prime minister Kosygin pointed out that the Czechoslovaks have suddenly turned towards Romania and Yugoslavia to show that they were not alone, but three. A few days later Brezhnev spoke of a “Danubian conspiracy.”⁷ The visits of Tito (9–11 August) and Ceaușescu (15–17 August) in Prague, accompanied by large popular meetings were regarded in Moscow as an attempt at building a socialist “Little Entente”.

It is not surprising then that this close relationship between the three countries in the course of the “Prague Spring” aroused suspicion of a certain revival of the “Little Entente” also among the Balkan socialist states and particularly in Bulgaria, which feared its two neighbours could direct it against her. Moreover, taking into account the fact that the Bulgaria’s relations with Yugoslavia at that time were quite strained with regard to the ever present “Macedonian question”⁸. In the “hot summer” of 1968 among the Bulgarian governing and diplomatic circles there was a growing anxiety that the establishment of such alliance was probably underway.

Bulgaria watched closely the situation in the three countries, mainly through the extensive reports from the Bulgarian embassies in Bucharest, Belgrade and Prague. In these reports it was generally noted a growing interest in the media of both Romania and Yugoslavia towards the developments in Czechoslovakia and was also pointed to the fact that the Czechoslovak press published comments about instances of interwar cooperation among the three countries. At the same time it was observed a cooling in the attitude towards Bulgaria due to her position the

⁶ Cited by Retegan, *op. cit.*, p. 90–91.

⁷ F. Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, Bucuresti: Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2011, p. 499.

⁸ For more details on this issue see: St. Troebst, *Die bulgarisch-jugoslavische Kontroverse um Makedonien, 1967–1982*, München: Oldenbourg, 1983.

events in Czechoslovakia already before the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops. However, none of these reports confirmed the fears of the Bulgarian government of the establishment of a formal agreement between the three countries. A note from the secretary to the Bulgarian Embassy in Bucharest to the Ambassador Georgy Bogdanov of June 1968 regarding the publications on the issue of the Little Entente in Romania, for example, concluded that not allusions were made of the separation of Romania and Czechoslovakia from the Warsaw Pact in order to participate in a closed political group. But at the same time it was pointed out that quite often in scholarly publications or articles in the press was emphasized the increasing role of the small states in international politics and there was reference to the close partnership of the three countries in the interwar period. The appearance of the book bearing the name “The Little Entente” by Eliza Campus in that same year was pointed as hardly merely a coincidence⁹. Regardless of the assurances coming from the Bulgarian embassies that there was no such thing as a potential new alliance of the three states, Bulgarian authorities continued to keep a close eye on this issue even after August 21, 1968.

Scholarly research also shows that there were no formal talks on the establishment of such alliance, nor mentioning in the press regarding its contemporary dimensions. Expressions of support from both Belgrade and Bucharest existed, but there is no documentary evidence of political or military cooperation, even in an elementary form¹⁰.

However, regardless of the fact that a new “Little Entente” did not come true, throughout the crisis and in its aftermath the new divisions in the Balkans were a fact.

Albania was totally isolated from the discussions in the socialist camp on the events in Czechoslovakia. The Albanian-Soviet split in 1961 was a harsh experience for Albania, leading to her political isolation from Eastern Europe. In early 1966 Albania began its cultural revolution, almost simultaneously with the launching in China of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. That was the time it would proclaim itself as “the first atheistic state in the world”¹¹. The Albanian communist party and government were among the first who declared themselves against the intervention of the five socialist states in Czechoslovakia and, as a Bulgarian diplomat has noted in a report to the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs “in their assessment were not different from the most reactionary imperialist circles, most of their malice and slender being directed against the USSR”¹². On September 12,

⁹ Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, op. 24, a. u. 2174, 2194, 3122, 3126.

¹⁰ Retegan, *op. cit.*, p. 115. The already mentioned Romanian senior party official P. Niculescu-Mizil had clearly stated that as regards Romania its leadership had never had the idea to organize an alliance between Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, adding that he had good reasons to believe that in the Czechoslovak communist party there was such a tendency. See: Cătănuș, Dan (ed.), *România și “Primăvara de la Praga”*. București: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2005, p. 78.

¹¹ For more details on the foreign policy of Albania in this period see: P. Prifti, *Socialist Albania since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Policy Developments*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978, p. 242–252.

¹² Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, op. 24, a. u. 447, f. 18.

1968, Albania officially declared its withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact because of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

Bulgaria showed very pro-active position in support of the military solution and took part in the intervention. In Dresden the Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov was very resolute in his criticism pointing out that what was happening in Czechoslovakia was a counter-revolution that should be stopped by any means. Similar position he had expressed already at the Warsaw Pact meeting in the beginning of March, where he used his position of a host to talk with the Soviet representatives. On March 29, 1968 was held a Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) which discussed the Prague Spring. The prevalent opinion was that "if Czechoslovakia fails to deal with the counter-revolution, we are obliged to intervene and stop it." At the Warsaw meeting in July Todor Zhivkov suggested to act with military force and to start military preparations. On August 20, 1968 came out the Top Secret Decree № 39 of the Council of Ministers of the PR Bulgaria for "participation in armed forces to help the Czechoslovak people in their struggle against the counter-revolution." Early the next day Bulgarian troops crossed the state border of Czechoslovakia together with the Soviets.

Already before the end of March 1968, i.e. before the CC of CCP has adopted the draft of its new "Agenda for Action", in Bulgaria was introduced censorship of official Czechoslovak institutions. On March 26, 1968 the Politburo of BCP took a decision to impose strict censorship on the coverage of what was happening in "brotherly" Czechoslovakia. With alert had to be watched the activity of the Czechoslovak Embassy and citizens residing in Bulgaria so that to prevent undesired information about the events in Czechoslovakia to be spread on Bulgarian territory.

On April 23–26, 1968, Todor Zhivkov paid an official visit to Czechoslovakia for the signing of a new Treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual support, as the previous one was expiring. The official signing of the new bilateral agreement greatly disappointed the official Bulgarian delegation, because it was made without any media interest. The visit, however, was used by Todor Zhivkov to get a personal impression of what was happening in Czechoslovakia and especially to meet the leading Czechoslovak figures. Zhivkov's meeting with Dubcek took place the first day of the visit and it was the first meeting between them. Dubcek explained in detail the inevitability of the reforms brought about by internal party and social problems and defended ardently both the personnel changes and the new action program of CCP. Zhivkov expressed his conviction that the Czechoslovak reforms were nothing more than a repetition of the events of 1956 pointing that Bulgaria had gone through the same events twelve years before. The memories of participants in the visit of Zhivkov in Czechoslovakia show that preliminary

attitude in the Bulgarian delegation was that “Dubcek was a revisionist and that in the country was taking places counter-revolution and restoration of capitalism”¹³.

The most important international event carried out in Bulgaria in the hot political summer of 1968 was the Ninth International Youth Festival that started on July 28 in Sofia. There was much concern in Bulgarian party and government leadership about the impact the members of the Czechoslovak delegation could have on Bulgarian youth, therefore precautionary measures were taken to keep liberal ideas from penetrating the country.

In his book “Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision”, which was one of the first serious studies on Soviet decision-making regarding the Prague events, Jiri Valenta wrote that the Soviet interventionist coalition found support particularly in East Germany and Poland, whose leaders feared that “the infliction of liberalism” would spread to their countries and undermine their positions. In his view, developments in Czechoslovakia had perceptible effects in Bulgaria only late in the crisis. Perhaps because of geography and a different political situation, he claimed, Bulgarian concern with Czechoslovak reforms was not comparable to that of the East German and Polish leaderships¹⁴. Although these arguments of his are true, a closer look at the political behavior of the Bulgarian party and state leadership show that from the very beginning of the crisis Bulgaria manifested herself as the most loyal Soviet ally and firmly supported the Soviet position, moreover, it was very active in raising a voice against the “counter-revolution.”

Romania and Yugoslavia acted as close allies and coordinated their positions. At the same time the chill in the relations of the two countries with Bulgaria (and the rest of the Warsaw Pact members, which declared themselves against the transformations in Czechoslovakia), especially after the Warsaw “Letter of the Five” was quite evident. In any case 1968 was the time of greatest rapprochement in the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia since the beginning of the Cold War.

This visible intimacy in the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia in the course of the “Prague Spring” was remarkable indeed, especially if we cast a glance at the development of the bilateral relations throughout the post-war period. Actually, they have not always been that friendly, but were rather quite dynamic. Generally speaking, they varied from open forms of hostility towards gradual normalization and intensive cooperation in various sectors to convergence and coordination of common positions. These dynamics in the bilateral relations were determined primarily by external factors.

¹³ И. Баева, “Ролята на “Пражката пролет '68” за еманципацията на българското общество”. – В: *Чехи в България. Ролята на чешкото присъствие в българското национално възраждане*, София, Изд. Валентин Траянов, с. 23–40.

¹⁴ J. Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, p. 23–25.

If in the period before World War II the relations between the two countries were generally characterized by the absence of sharp conflicts, long-standing disputes, antagonism, but rather by a tendency to cooperation, a few years after the end of the war, there was a radical change in the bilateral relations. The Tito-Stalin rift led to tension in the relations of the other countries of Eastern Europe with Tito's Yugoslavia, and this is particularly true for Romania. Yugoslavia became a "country-rebel" in the Soviet camp, while Romania remained a "loyal" partner of Moscow. Romania sided with the USSR and was even extremely active in condemning the "spy Tito" and his clique. Tensions between the two countries were suspended again as a direct consequence of the change in Soviet-Yugoslav relations in the mid 1950s. That was during the period of detente in East-West relations after Stalin's death, when Nikita Khrushchev made an attempt to draw Yugoslavia back into the Soviet bloc. That was followed by gradual normalization of Romanian-Yugoslav relations.

Since the early 1960s Romania and Yugoslavia started to discover more similarities in their foreign policy. Yugoslavia headed the Non-Aligned Movement, while Romania put emphasis on its gradual distancing from the USSR. In this period, there was intensification of Romanian-Yugoslav relations on different levels. Actually, already from 1957 the leadership of RCP started to distance itself from the criticisms in the socialist camp against the foreign policy of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia started to be viewed as an example of a socialist country that followed an independent foreign policy. In November 1963 the Romanian leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej paid a state visit to Belgrade, where Tito gave him the special privilege to speak at the Yugoslav Parliament. Moreover, they agreed to cooperate outside of CMEA to develop navigation and hydropower potential of the passage Iron Gate of the Danube. Much effort was invested in this joint project for a giant water supply system of the Iron Gate, the first stone was laid on September 7, 1964 in the presence of the two heads of state. This evolution of bilateral relations, together with the principle of different paths to socialism, expressed in the Declaration of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) of April 1964 was the initial core of the friendly relations between the two countries in the next years.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that Tito has never been openly supportive of Romania and watched the behavior of Romanian leaders with suspicion. For example, during the meeting of Tito and Khrushchev in Leningrad on June 1964 the problems of the relations of the USSR with Romania became almost the primary subject of the talks between the two leaders. At that time the Soviet leader was much irritated by Romania's activation of contacts with the major competitor of the CPSU in the international communist movement - the Chinese Communist Party. Tito not only rejected any possible reproaches of support on the part of Yugoslavia regarding the special course of the RCP, but pointed out that such course was not desired, especially as regards the rapprochement with the Chinese leadership, which posed a threat to international

peace and security. He promised to exert influence on the Romanians turning their attention to the necessity of keeping stability in the Soviet-Romanian relations in the face of strong Chinese provocations that threatened Yugoslav positions, too¹⁵.

Anyway, by the mid 1960s from Tito's enemy, Romania turned into friend of Yugoslavia. The new Romanian leadership headed by Nicolae Ceaușescu, who took power after the death of Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965 continued the adopted by his predecessor foreign policy and even worsened the criticism of the USSR. In 1966 Romania even mentioned the possibility the country to leave the Warsaw Pact. In his meeting with Tito in May 1966 Ceaușescu spoke quite critically about the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. Pro-Western course reached its apogee during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. The clearest demonstration of independence from the Soviet Union was Ceaușescu's refusal to take part in the intervention of the forces of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia and its condemnation.

The two Balkan socialist countries with "special positions" in the camp felt most directly affected and even threatened by the military operation of the Warsaw Pact. Particularly sharp was the first reaction of Romania, which felt an imminent threat of invasion of Warsaw Pact troops on its territory. For the Romanian leadership, the military threat from the Soviet Union and Bulgaria after the intervention in Czechoslovakia seemed quite real. It interpreted the events as the beginning of military action against all the "non-obedient" in the socialist camp. On August 21, 1968, just hours after the start of the invasion, Ceaușescu delivered a speech before a huge crowd in Bucharest, which vehemently condemned the aggression of the Warsaw Pact countries in Czechoslovakia and declared the necessity of taking protective measures on the part of Romania, calling for the formation of "voluntary" armed troops.

As the American researcher Mark Kramer had clearly pointed out, citing new declassified sources, actually it was not the determination of the Romanian government to oppose aggression stopped Moscow from entering Romania in August 1968, but the fact that both sides were aware of the potential hazards of the confrontation and skillfully managed to dilute the tensions over the crisis¹⁶. However, even though there was no direct threat of intervention in Romania, Ceaușescu was able to take advantage of the situation in order to finally establish himself as a defender of the Romanian national sovereignty and to broaden public support for the regime. Prominent Romanian public figures and intellectuals united and became members of the Romanian communist party, while the opposition to the leader became equivalent to opposing Romanian identity. The intervention against Czechoslovakia gave Ceaușescu the unique opportunity to start building his

¹⁵ Al. Stykalin, "Hrușciov și Tito: O discuție îndelungată despre România" (Leningrad, iunie 1964) – in: *Arhivele Totalitarismului*, 1–2, 2014, p. 165–194.

¹⁶ See M. Kramer, "The Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia: New Interpretations", in: *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Fall 1993, p. 12.

political image as a “national hero”. The concerns expressed by Ceaușescu in his “balcony speech” on August 21 and the decision to create “voluntary” armed squads served rather to fuel Romanian nationalism as a new pillar of power. Ceaușescu managed to win over the support of the greater part of the Romanian population and especially the intellectuals. He acquired fame and legitimacy at the same time. As a Romanian historian has noted, that was his “finest hour”¹⁷.

Yugoslavia also reacted strongly to the aggression and announced a partial mobilization on the border with Bulgaria. The newspapers in the country condemned the intervention and at the meeting of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY)¹⁸ held on August 24, 1968 the same was formally done by the party. At the same time, as in the case with Ceaușescu, for Tito the military action of the Warsaw Pact also proved to be very convenient as it enabled him to divert the attention from the domestic problems. At that time the country faced the need to carry out serious economic reforms and to deal with ethnic tensions. The most significant event in the internal political life of Yugoslavia in the troubled 1968 was the unrest in June at the universities of Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje and Nis, expressed in demonstrations, strikes, rallies and open clashes with the police, which took most severe forms at the Belgrade University¹⁹.

The matching positions brought Tito and Ceaușescu into unity. On August 24, 1968 they held a private meeting, on which the two leaders discussed the changed international situation and the possibilities for joint action. Ultimately, however, they failed to agree on a joint position in support of the Czechoslovak leadership and joint action in the event of an attack against one of them by the Warsaw Pact armies. As the then Romanian Foreign Minister Corneliu Mănescu has later recalled, Ceaușescu had returned very disappointed from the meeting in Vrsac, or as he put it, “he came from there with a curled tail.” Ceaușescu had told Romanian party and government leadership then that the question whether Yugoslavia would undertake measures to help Romania in case it was attacked, Tito had replied with “yes”, but as regards in what this commitment was expressed, he had said blankly, “we will open the borders, will disarm you and will provide political asylum”²⁰.

¹⁷ Constantiniu, *op. cit.*, p. 498. For the unprecedented popular support Ceaușescu received from various social strata at that moment, see: L. Betea (coord.) *21 august 1968. Apoteoza lui Ceaușescu*, Iași: ed. Polirom, 2009.

¹⁸ At the Sixth Congress of the Yugoslav Communist Party that was held in 1952, the party was renamed into League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY).

¹⁹ For more details on the political situation in Yugoslavia at that time, see: S. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918–2005*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 207–306.

²⁰ L. Betea, *Convorbiri neterminate. Corneliu Mănescu în dialog cu Lavinia Betea*. Iași: Polirom, 2001, p. 202. Mănescu himself was much disappointed by this position of Tito, because he personally liked Tito very much, for, in his words “he was one of the most important personalities of his time and at the same time a man who indulged himself”. *Ibid.*

The big disappointment came from the fact that the Romanian political leadership saw in Yugoslavia “a way out” in case something serious took place, but Tito had left them no illusions. Probably after that meeting Ceaușescu had been scared a little from the consequences of his actions, and the next day he convened a meeting of the Central Committee of the RCP, where the Romanian position became much more cautious. The Romanian historian Michael Retegan interpreted this action of Ceaușescu as an example of his exceptional ability to take use of critical situations for his own political benefit. In fact, according to him, he realized perfectly well that it was better to keep good relations with the most influential member of the bloc. Romania retained its aura of independence and image of a “naughty child” of communism without breaking its membership to the Warsaw Pact²¹.

In fact, both countries could not afford to oppose seriously the USSR and for that reason even before the crisis of 1968 had finally ended, Romania and Yugoslavia were forced to restore contacts with the Eastern superpower. None of them had abandoned the basic principles of the one-party system, the leadership of the Communist Party and the “democratic centralism”. We could agree that the dispute in the Balkans on the attitude to Czechoslovakia and the “Prague Spring” was not ideological but political. The disagreement with the intervention, both of Romania, and Yugoslavia was associated primarily with their concern that the military action might at that time or in the future be directed against them, and secondly - with the relationships within the Eastern bloc and in particular the right of the USSR to apply its leading role, and whether that involved military action²².

It should also be noted that regardless of the similarity in the foreign policy positions of the two countries and the close relations between them during the “Prague Spring”, internally the two countries remained profoundly different.

The model of Tito’s Yugoslavia was unique. Actually, the intermediate place between the East and the West, which Yugoslavia occupied, was the result of historical accident rather than of ideological choice, and that the introduced during the 1950s and 1960s certain decentralization of decision making and workers self-management were caused by the ethnic and geographical divisions in the federal state and particularly that, rather than the original, alternative approach formed the Yugoslav socialist model. Yet, Yugoslavia was different and we cannot but agree with Tony Judt that “the Yugoslavs were not richer and were freer, but they were not locked in an airtight system.”²³

In Romania, in the early 1960s and especially in the early years of the Ceaușescu government there was some ideological liberalization of the regime. But this liberalization took place within quite cautious limits and was carried out without losing the overall control of the party on society. Moreover, it was quite

²¹ Retegan, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²² И. Баева, “Криза в Източния блок – балканските измерения на 60-те години на 20 в.” – В: *Проблемът Изток – Запад. България и Балканите. Асоциация Клио-96*. С., 2006, с. 205 – 223.

²³ Т. Джуд, *След войната. История на Европа след 1945 година*, София: Сиела, 2010, с. 474.

short and continued somewhere up to the early 1970s. Distancing from the USSR, Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu distanced also from any need to repeat de-Stalinization and the reforms related to the Khrushchev era. Although in April 1968 he condemned in the Khrushchev way the abuses of his predecessor against some party members, Ceaușescu had no intention to introduce in Romania changes based on the model of the “Prague Spring”. The historian Dennis Deletant spoke of “the great paradox of Romanian foreign policy” of that time, which consisted in the fact that the poor governance in the country was in such sharp contrast to the conduct of its foreign policy²⁴.

Despite its particularly close relations with Yugoslavia in that period, Romania avoided Tito’s experiments with structural decentralization and pluralism. The rapprochement between Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia in the troubled 1968 was not because they shared the same political conditions and pursued the same goals. What actually put Romania alongside with Yugoslavia at that moment was the foreign policy of its leaders Gheorghiu-Dej and later Ceaușescu. Ceaușescu’s closeness with Yugoslavia was associated with the policy of non-alignment of Tito’s Yugoslavia, and not with interest on the Romanian side to develop a version of the Yugoslav’s self-management. Behind Romanian positions on issues such as non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, respect for the right of every communist party to guide the processes in its own country without being criticized for that there was a rejection of the pressure of the type of CMEA and the Warsaw Pact. They were related to the preservation of the power positions and any encroachment towards the government from the outside²⁵.

Although in a certain period both countries were perceived as defectors from the Soviet bloc, bearers of “national communism” and had earned the sympathy and support of the West, their place and role in the system of international relations was different. Different was also the degree of threat that this “secession” posed to Moscow and Moscow’s response respectively. Yugoslavia’s exit from the Soviet orbit in the period 1948–1949 was the most acute specific problem for Moscow in Eastern Europe after World War II. Tito was the first breach in the Soviet camp, which was seen as a dangerous precedent and a threat to the system in general, for the power positions of the communist elites in the different countries. The ability of Yugoslavia to withstand the extreme pressure from the USSR and Cominform and later to follow an independent communist line actually reveals the limits of Stalin’s power. Yugoslav independence offered an alternative for the others. Tito managed to establish a precedent of autonomy and that is why Moscow’s reaction was so acute²⁶. Due to its geographical position Romania was an inside country for the

²⁴ D. Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999, p. 118.

²⁵ R. Linden, *Communist States and International Change. Romania and Yugoslavia in Comparative Perspective*, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987, p. 29–30.

²⁶ Ch. Gati, *The Bloc that Failed. Soviet-East-European Relations in Transition*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 16–17.

Eastern bloc (it did not border with countries outside the bloc), hence, no matter how independent its policy was, it could not threaten it. In fact, one of the reasons which determined Khrushchev's decision to withdraw his troops from Romania in 1958 was precisely its secondary strategic position²⁷. The independent course in the foreign policy of Romania was not a threat to the Communist system itself, as well as to Moscow's leadership in it.

Tito and Ceaușescu were equally interested in supporting the Dubcek reform. The Yugoslav and the Romanian leaders used the events in Czechoslovakia to confirm their own concept of socialism. The solidarity with Dubcek was based on common rejection of the hegemonic claims of the USSR and not on similarities in domestic policies. While in Czechoslovakia people wanted a reform of the system, in Romania there was certain liberalization, a change in the foreign policy course, but the aim was not internal reform. The political culture of Romanian socialism was different from the Czechoslovak one. In Romania was used the same discourse as in Prague, but were meant different things. The skillful manipulation of national ideology provided a strong and enduring focus of identification with the communist regime. We could agree that 1968 in Romania was not the watershed year so frequently evoked by the literature, but was instead a climactic moment in a protracted process of national reassertion that had begun in the latter half of the 1950s²⁸.

In the turbulent 1968 the emergence of a new "Little Entente" was only a speculation. In times of great changes or uncertainties, all kinds of fears or expectations are being born. However, as it was pointed above, such a union was neither planned by the three countries, nor did it serve any purpose in the given circumstances. Even for a short time after August 21, 1968 it seemed that the Little Entente could recover partially as a bilateral alliance (Romania- Yugoslavia), this prospect was quite short-lived. Yugoslav-Romanian rapprochement remained situational rather than a deep one. The "Little Entente" was a union suited to other historical situation, in 1968 the times were different and it was practically inappropriate. At the same time, the "Prague Spring" clearly casted new dividing lines in the region, that would last for a long time.

²⁷ Retegan, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

²⁸ See: Vl. Tismaneanu and B. Jacob, "Betrayed Promises. Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Romanian Communist Party and the Crisis of 1968" – In: Vl. Tismaneanu, (ed.) *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion, Utopia*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2011, p. 257-283. As the leading scholar on Romanian communism Vl. Tismaneanu has pointed out, in Romanian history 1968 was crucial in terms of the future of the Romanian national communism and its evolution in "dynastic socialism", what Ceaușescu's regime had actually turned into. – Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 198.