

Alliance under Stress. Wilson's Fourteen Points and their Impact on Romania

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Abstract

The Fourteen Points have become part of a whole political narrative dealing with the birth of a new world order or more exactly with the apparent failure to deliver a functional new world order after the cataclysm of 1914 – 1918. At the same time, any discussion about Wilsonianism leads to questions debates about unilateralism or internationalism or about the acceptance or refusal of interdependence by the United States in world politics. As US policies have fluctuated so much during the recent past it is perhaps natural to return to the founding father of the US global role. This dominant version has also obscured another aspect: while Wilson may have won the battle with posterity and identified himself with the new international order, phrases such as “national rights”, “the principle of nationalities” were already in common use in April 1917. In the short term the Fourteen Points were clearly perceived by Romanian officials as a challenge to their peace program. US refusal to endorse Romanian objective was troubling and the Peace Conference in Paris would prove that Wilson was indeed a reluctant supporter of Romania's territorial agenda.

The history of the Fourteen Points as it is written nowadays goes a long way to demonstrate to what degree international history has become a sophisticated trade. Over the course of this discussion we will cover only a few aspects, but a comprehensive approach would require dealing with intellectual history/history of ideas, political biography, old-fashioned (but nonetheless satisfying for some of us) diplomatic history, transnational history/global history, etc.¹ Decision-making mechanisms are dissected in the search for the meaning or the genesis of a certain phrase. The interactions between domestic and foreign policies, between the diplomatic strategic of the many actors

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¹ For recent contributions see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford, U.P., 2007; Trygve Thrøntveit, *The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National self-Determination*, “Diplomatic History”, vol. 35, no. 3/2011, pp. 445-481; Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations*, London, Palgrave, 2002.

involved provide us with a fascinating picture, one that is highly complex and therefore sometimes difficult to grasp. Equally important, one should not forget the tense relationships between the White House and the State Department, the role of colonel House or the political naivety of the „scientific”² peacemakers of the Inquiry.

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The history of the Fourteen Points is both the history of its formulation and its worldwide impact. President Wilson obviously played a central role in formulating, in drafting and redrafting the points, but he was sometimes a simple witness to the way their impact unfolded. In a subsequent speech in the Congress in February 1918 the president did not avoid “self-determination”. Furthermore, he seemed fully aware of the impact the phrase would have on the ground:

“National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.”³

American policies interacted with the policies of the other Great Powers and with the local forces on the ground and the Wilsonian discourse was appropriated and given different meanings. There is no doubt that the concept of self-determination offers the best example for this global process of action and reaction. Although never used in the Fourteen Points and not very present in Wilson’s political vocabulary, self-determination became an umbrella term under which sheltered both sophisticated ideas about democracy and self-government and the countless and often conflicting political and territorial agendas in Central and Eastern Europe.

Romanian reactions to the Fourteen Points form part of a larger, regional picture. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps for some, reactions to the President’s speech were almost uniformly negative in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴ One exception was represented by the Polish although Joseph Blociszewski, one of the first diplomatic historians of Poland’s rebirth thought it surprising given that the same assurances had been previously offered

² The idea of a “scientific” peace was expressed by Wilson in a conversation with the French ambassador (A. Link, *Woodrow Wilson. Revolution, War, and Peace*, Arlington Heights, Harlan Davidson, 1979, p. 75).

³ ****President’s Wilson Policy*, London, HMSO, 1920, 54.

⁴ ****Paper Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918. Supplements 1, Volume 1. The World War*, Washington, USGPO, 1933, p. 791.

by British, French and Italian statesmen over the few weeks preceding Wilson's speech.⁵ At the same time Romania was affected in unique ways due to recent diplomatic and military developments. Romania was the beneficiary of a secret treaty of the type Point I denounced. Its main objective upon entering the war was Transylvania but the President's famous Point X was a clear step back from earlier Entente statements. For example, the Entente's reply in January 1917 to one of Wilson's peace initiatives had spoken about „the liberation of Italians, Slavs, Romanians and Czecho-Slovaks from foreign domination”⁶ while the president was clearly speaking in terms of maintaining the integrity of the Dual Monarchy.

Furthermore, Wilson's address and his point VI requiring the „evacuation of all Russian territory” came at a moment when the Romanian authorities were actually deciding to send troops into Bessarabia, a province of the Russian Empire for the past hundred years and now an autonomous republic threatened with revolutionary upheaval. The Bessarabian issue would remain a point of contention as President Wilson seemed attached to the principle of Russian territorial integrity with the exception of carefully delineated Polish territories.

In Romanian official circles especially Point X was met with scepticism, disappointment and even confusion. The latter is not in the least surprising if we understand that lack of clarity seemed to be one of the dominant features at the top of the US administration.⁷ At the beginning of December 1917 United States had finally declared war on Austria-Hungary. It was an encouraging factor in itself. But asking the Congress for the declaration of war the President stated that „we do not wish in any way to impair or to rearrange the affairs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.”⁸ That same month, in the *New York Times*, former president Theodore Roosevelt spoke for many when insisted that „our talk about making the world safe for democracy is a sham” unless „we intend to break up Austria and Turkey”.⁹ Woodrow Wilson however wrote privately that „pushed to its extreme the principle would mean the disruption of existing governments to an undefinable extent.”¹⁰ This conservative strand was reinforced by his Secretary of State Robert Lansing. Lansing's own attitude was noticeably ambiguous. Although the impact of the principle of

⁵ Joseph Blociszewski, *La restauration de la Pologne et la diplomatie europeenne*, Paris, A. Pedonne, 1927, p. 111.

⁶ James Brown Scott (ed.), *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals. December 1916 to November 1918*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1921, p.35. Interestingly, the introduction of the „the principle of nationalities” was contested by the Russians who feared the Germans might use it in the Baltic region but the Anglo-French went ahead anyway. (Sterling Kernek, *The British Government's Reactions to President's Wilson Peace Note of December 1916*, „The Historical Journal”, vol. 13, no. 4/1970, p. 762, n. 111. A short time earlier the Entente had replied to German peace initiatives stating that „no peace is possible as long as the...acknowledgment of the principle of nationalities and of the free existence of small states shall not be assured.” (James Brown Scott (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 28).

⁷ The literature on this is vast. For an introduction and a historiographical essay see M.B.B. Biskupski, *Wilson's Policies toward Eastern and Southeastern Europe, 1917-1919*, in Ross A. Kennedy, *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 406-426.

⁸ James Brown Scott (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 196.

⁹ Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe 1914-1918: A Study in Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda*, Princeton NJ, Princeton U.P., 1957, pp. 161-162.

¹⁰ Wilson used the words during a conversation on January 3rd 1918 with the British ambassador in Washington, Sir Cecil Pring-Rice (George Schild, *Between Ideology and Realpolitik. Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921*, Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 1995, p. 58.

self-determination worried him, Lansing was privately convinced that the preservation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not in the interest of the United States.¹¹ It is also significant that Lansing kept his criticism of the Fourteen Points to himself.

Five months later, in May 1918, after Brest-Litovsk and the treaty of Bucharest, after the German Spring Offensive and the Sixtus affair, State Secretary Lansing was still able to write to the President: „you have been, as I have, importuned by representatives of these nationalities....This importunity is increasing. What should be said to these people? ...Should we aid them or discourage them?”¹² By then peace with victory had replaced “peace without victory” and yet the President was still unwilling to commit to the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Lansing had been doubtful from the beginning concluding the only possible course of action was to help build new states in Central and Eastern Europe. From his point of view, there was no idealistic attachment to national self-determination. Instead supporting these new polities was both a way to win the war by weakening the Dual Monarchy and to prevent German domination after the war.¹³

Other contemporary observers, the British experts at the Crewe House, were right to note that „expressions such as self-government or autonomous development should be avoided because they have a sinister meaning in Austria-Hungary and tend to discourage the friends of the Allies.”¹⁴ British planners were right. Brătianu’s decision to accept an armistice can be directly related to Wilson’s speech in the Congress requesting a declaration of war against Austria.¹⁵

While admitting that the Fourteen Points might not be the last word with regard to the shape of the post-war world, Ion Gheorghe Duca, a close ally of prime-minister Brătianu, remembered that „reading Wilson’s message was for all of us one of the most painful moments of the entire war”.¹⁶ Saint-Aulaire, the French minister in Iassy in 1918, describes in great detail the impact of both Lloyd George’s speech of 5 January and Wilson’s fourteen points on Romanian decisionmakers.¹⁷ British actions for example provoked at the end of January an official demarche by the Greek, Serbian and Romanian Governments which claimed that they understood the political and military consideration which had tempered British support for the nationalities but warned that „not recognizing the right to independence for all the nationalities living in these two countries [Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire] the problems of the last century will continue into the next”.¹⁸

¹¹ George Barany, *Wilsonian Central Europe: Lansing’s Contribution*, „The Historian”, vol. 28, no. 2/1966, p. 232.

¹² ****Paper Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. The Lansing Papers. Volume II*, Washington, USGPO, p. 128 [From here on *FRUS Lansing 2*].

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.129. Victor S. Mamatey, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

¹⁴ Sir Campbell Stuart, *Secrets of the Crewe House*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1920, p. 32.

¹⁵ Sherman David Spector, *România la Conferința de Pace de la Paris. Diplomația lui Ion C. Brătianu*, Iași, Institutul European, 1995, p. 40.

¹⁶ I.G. Duca, *Memorii. Volumul IV. Războiul. Partea a II-a (1917-1919)*, București, Editura Machiavelli, 1994, p. 70.

¹⁷ Conte de Saint-Aulaire, *Însemnările unui diplomat de altădată în România, 1916-1920*, București, Humanitas, 2016, pp. 229-231.

¹⁸ ****1918 la români. Desăvârșirea unității național-statale a poporului român. Documente externe 1916-1918*, București, Editura Științifică și Pedagogică, 1983, pp. 1054-1056. The Romanians, Greeks and Serbians were in fact paraphrasing Lloyd George’s speech and they were replacing self-government with independence.

US policy continued to be a disconcerting factor for pro-Entente politicians in Romania and the Fourteen Points came at a critical juncture in the history of the Great War in Eastern Europe. As Russian resistance was collapsing Britain and France hoped to find the means to preserve the existence of an Eastern Front. To that end London and Paris had divided their spheres of action with Britain taking over responsibility for the Caucasus while the French focused on Romania and the Ukraine. It was obvious for everyone that if such a project were to succeed the Entente needed Romania's active participation. Wilson's refusal to admit knowledge of the August 1916 secret treaty was worrying.¹⁹ A cause for concern was also his repeated refusal to go further than a simple promise to restore pre-war Romania in the case of an Allied victory or to be drawn into a discussion (as dr. Angelescu, the newly appointed Romanian minister in Washington²⁰, or the Anglo-French diplomats repeatedly tried) about the fate of the subject nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Most worrying however were the visible signs of an Austro-American dialogue and Romanian, Czechs, Italian or Serbs were all worried at the beginning of 1918 that their interests were going to be sacrificed on the altar of a separate peace with Vienna.²¹

The impact was not restricted to political elites. One French officer assigned to recruiting volunteers from the ranks of Transylvanian prisoners of war noted that the Romanian soldiers were discouraged by Wilson's utterances.

Point X played therefore an important role in undermining the morale of the Romanian decisionmakers at a time when there seemed to be no realistic alternative to a separate peace. It is unclear however whether more encouraging news from Washington would have made much of a difference in the absence of actual military assistance. Russia's defeat and revolution, coupled with the Romanian internal divisions created an atmosphere where the impact of Wilson's speeches was especially deleterious. Vopicka, the US minister in Iassy, wrote a few days after Wilson's speech:

"The President's peace programme as reported by telegraph here has made the situation a great deal more critical than ever before and now demands for immediate peace with Germany are heard on all sides."²²

At the first glance, the combined effect of Points VI, X, and XI meant that Romania would have nothing to gain if it remained in the war and nothing to lose if concluded a separate peace.

Even months later, in early October, Romanian statesmen were still unable to ascertain how much of Point X remained in force. Prime-Minister Marghiloman relates a conversation with the King:

¹⁹ ****Paper Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918. Supplements 1, Volume 1. The World War*, Washington, USGPO, 1933, pp. 752, 757, 759 [From here on *FRUS 1918 Supplement 1*]. There are numerous proofs to contradict Wilson's statements. See for example *FRUS Lansing 2*, p. 25.

²⁰ ****Paper Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1917. Supplements 2, Volume 1. The World War*, Washington, USGPO, 1932, pp. 737-738.

²¹ Sterling J. Kernek, *Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination along Italy's Frontier: A Study of the Manipulation of Principles in the pursuit of Political Interests*, „Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society”, vol. 126, no. 4/1982, p. 246.

²² *FRUS 1918 Supplement 1*, p. 752.

“the tenth paragraph is clear: it stipulates autonomy for the different populations of Austria. The King believes that there is something more encouraging in <<the five points from another program or speech>> (!) The King tries to find them, but finds nothing.”²³

If nothing else the conversation proves just how difficult was to access reliable information from outside the Central Powers's area of influence. The ambiguous state of affairs did not help. On 29 May Secretary of State Lansing had publicly supported “the nationalistic aspirations of the Czecho-Slovaks and Jugo-Slavs” but Romania or Transylvania had not been mentioned.²⁴

The Fourteen Points must be seen as part of a larger history. The role of British and French planning and actions in Central and Eastern Europe must not be underestimated as we should not underestimate the remarkable degree of autonomy for the local actors as the war was drawing to a close. But we should also see the Fourteen Points as part of a dynamic process which means that Wilson's thinking evolved influence by the context and by the perception of what is possible and desirable to achieve. The image of an idealistic and almost naive Wilson is remarkably resilient. In reality Point X would allow everyone to read it as he wished. In that Wilson's strategy was remarkably similar to that of the British at the time. A victorious peace was uncertain and not really convinced about the merits of national self-determination Wilson refused to be drawn to a premature decision.²⁵

Only at the end of the spring 1918 Wilson began to favour the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By then there was probably no alternative left and clear statement with regard to the Romanian objectives were made as late as October and November. All this is another argument in support of the view that the Fourteen Points laid an ambiguous foundation for the American vision of the post-war world.

US support for Romanian objectives remained hesitant until the end of the conflict but this did not stop a dramatic transformation in the way the president's program was perceived. Wilson became widely known in Romanian territories, especially in Transylvania and US support for Transylvania's union with Romania was considered essential.²⁶ It is no accident therefore that in his last speech before the Hungarian Parliament, in October 1918, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, one of the leaders of the Romanian national movement in Transylvania invoked the Fourteen Points in order to assert the rights of the Romanian nation and used what can only be described as

²³ Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice. Volumul III*, București, Editura Machiavelli, 1995, pp. 193-194. The new Prime-Minister scepticism with regard to the US support for the Romanian cause is also visible in *FRUS 1918 Supplement 1*, pp. 768-769. The King was referring to Wilson's February speech in Congress when the President endorsed more clearly the idea of self-determination. Marghiloman, the pro-German prime-minister was still tempted to believe that nothing had changed and the King himself seemed resigned.

²⁴ *FRUS 1918 Supplement 1*, p. 809.

²⁵ The degree to which the political context influenced Wilson's ideas can deduced from the fact that in all probability the phrase „autonomous development” was inspired by the British report on their secret contacts with the Austro-Hungarians. The report was sent by Balfour to colonel House on January 2. (See V. Mamatey, *op.cit.*, p. 175).

²⁶ Vasile Vesa, *La réception du Wilsonianisme en Europe Centrale. Le cas de la Transylvanie*, in George Cipăianu, Vasile Vesa (eds.), *Le fin de la Première Guerre Mondiale et la nouvelle architecture géopolitique européenne*, Cluj-Napoca, Presses Universitaires de Cluj, pp. 133-141. *FRUS 1918 Supplement 1*, pp. 783-784

Wilsonian language: "By the virtue of the natural right of each nation to determine its own fate, the Romanian nation in Hungary and Transylvania demands to determine, in all liberty and outside all foreign interference, its own state institutions and the relations as equals with all the other free nations".²⁷ In the previous days Vaida-Voevod had done everything possible so that the text of the declaration reaches President Wilson.²⁸ The American President was clearly identified as the main source of international support and legitimacy for the Romanian national movement in Transylvania. It was the "Wilsonian moment" in action.

In the short term however the Fourteen Points were clearly perceived by Romanian officials as a challenge to their peace program. US refusal to endorse Romanian objective was troubling and the Peace Conference in Paris would prove that Wilson was indeed a reluctant supporter of Romania's territorial agenda.

²⁷ Text of the speech in Annex 3 of Mircea Djuvara, *La guerre roumaine 1916-1918*, Nancy, Berger-Levrault, 1919, 313-319.

²⁸ Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, *Memorii. Vol. I*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1994, p. 128.