

Petre Macrogheni's resignation from the Lascăr Catargiu Government (1875)

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Abstract

A large number of financial and economic initiatives and reforms are closely connected to the name of Petre Mavrogheni, a highly competent and capable statesman of modern Romania. Minister of Finance in several governments, both before the reign of Cuza and during his mandate, and subsequently, during the long governance of Carol I, Petre Mavrogheni was appreciated both by his opponents and by those sharing the same political views. Finance portfolio minister under the first great Conservative government of modern era (1871-1876), Peter Mavrogheni resigned in early 1875 owing to the outbreak of a legal-diplomatic scandal in Vienna. The name of the Romanian Minister was mentioned in the legal action taking place in the capital of the AustroHungarian Empire, being connected to perfecting some onerous businesses. Although supported by an important part of government colleagues and despite the fact his innocence was, eventually, recognized, Petre Mavrogheni left the government, never to occupy this position in any of the next governments.

Key words: Petre Mavrogheni, resignation, Conservative Party, monarchy.

Although acknowledged, retrospectively, for the abilities manifested in the administrative matters, the unyielding and hermetical manner applied by the conservators in the affairs of the government generated exasperation among the liberal politicians as they maintained to power for no less than five years.

The governmental durability in the years prior to the National Independency represent an absolute prime time for the Romanian society. The year 1875 and especially the coming of the Parliamentary elections in the Spring was to be a witness to the mad intensification of the campaign held against the conservators. Between the scandals specific to that age and to those intensely sustained by the liberal's press, there was the resignation letter of Peter Mavrogheni from the Ministry of Finances, the political man that Mihail Kogalniceanu said to be the most capable of all from the Romanian department of finances (Mamina & Bulei, 1994: 219).

Minister of finances in many governments, first one during the reign of Grigore Alexandru Ghica (Slăvescu, 1939: 14) in Moldova, during Alexandru Ioan Cuza (Slăvescu, 1939: 17) until he took the finance's leadership under the government presided by Lascar Catargiu, he also held the same status during the Government of adinterim rulers (Slăvescu, 1939: 17), as well as in the second cabinet established by Ion Ghica's (Mamina & Bulei, 1994: 14) government under Carol I of Romania. Capable and held in high regards for his ingenious activity in the finances domain (Damean, 2008: 80), Petre Mavrogheni managed to create a series of reforms meant to ameliorate the financial situation by reorganising and consolidating numerous financial aspects, by ensuring a balanced budget, by creating new sources of income and by instituting the first monetary standard of modern Romania. The Monetary Law from April 1867 was one of the most important and long lasting initiatives (Budiu, 1934: 173-185; Slăvescu, 1939: 34).

Returning to the central subject and that is the resignation of Petre Mavrogheni, we have to point out that this reshuffling, unplanned and unexpected was generated by a fraud lawsuit that was under way at the beginning of January 1875. The lawsuit was held against Offenheim, one of the most important and well-known constructors of Petre Mavrogheni's resignation from the Lascăr Catargiu Government (1875) railroads in Romania at the Jury Court from Vienna. Offenheim was accused of corruption and fraud in the construction of the railroad Lemberg-Cernauti-Iasi. By using some passages from a viennese newspaper during the process, passages that contained some private correspondence between Adolphe de Hertz (director of Romania's Bank) and Offenheim, the railroad constructor, the name Petre Mavrogheni came up alongside the sums of money spent in the affair from which he appears to have reaped some benefits

(Maiorescu, 1897: 247; Ornea, 1986: 325). This situation seems to have pushed Petre Mavrogheni to resign.

In the letter addressed to Lascăr Catargiu dated 6 January 1875, among the polite and kind words there appears clearly the reason behind the resignation. Not wanting to attract more disputes for the Government that he was a part of and the wish to eliminate all suspicions regarding the accusations not as a political person but as a normal citizen, Petre Mavrogheni offered thus his support for the Government he was a part of for four years (Nicolescu, 1903: 152) Prince Carol I understood exactly the ungrateful situation that Mavrogheni was a part of, relating in his memoirs that he is convinced of the unjustness of this act declaring that he will receive the resignation of this deserving advisor on one condition: that as soon as all will be cleared up in the affair, he will resume his attributions (The memories of King Carol I of Romania by an eye witness, 1993: 348).

Published in the O.M on 9 January 1875 (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 65), the resignation was received by Prince Carol I who moved G. Gr. Canatuzino from the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Affairs to Finances, his place being taken by Theodor Roseti, member of the High Court of Cassation (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 65). The episode of governmental reshuffling is portrayed by Titu Maiorescu in a very picturesquely manner. Informed by Lascăr Catargiu of Mavrogheni's resignation, Titu Maiorescu along with the president of the Council of the Ministers arrived with the carriage to Theodor Rosetti proposing him the Ministry of Finances, the latter one refusing though, declaring that he feels too weak for a practical leadership of the finances (Maiorescu: 225; Maiorescu, 1999: 45).

Even though the governmental reshuffling didn't represent something new for the Romanian politics, during Lascăr Catargiu's leadership, among all the changes going on in the structure of the cabinet (Giurescu, 1966: 152; Alexandrescu, Mamina, Bulei & Scurtu, 2010: 194), Petre Mavrogheni's file raised much interest for the liberal opposition from the Parliament, especially with the upcoming elections. By wanting to quickly disgrace one of the most well regarded members of the conservative cabinet, the liberal newspapers unleashed a massive press campaign with the sole purpose of carrying on the lawsuit of the Minister of Finances.

The content of all the articles in which Petre Mavrogheni was calumniated was a harsh one, occupying the front page of all the liberal newspapers at the beginning of the year 1875. Thus, on 9th of

January, the newspaper *The Telegraph* published an ample article regarding then scandal affair from Vienna. By quoting several published fragments from the pages of the viennese newspaper *Noue-Freie-Press*, the assumed position of the liberal newspaper did not present any doubt. The unmasking of the illegalities and all the frauds committed with the occasion of the concession of *Offenheim* was approved for breaking the veil of this mysterious affair sustained by the mighty ones (*Telegraphul*, 1875). It is interesting to notice the comparison the authors made with a similar case from *Belgia* when an employee got mixed up in a similar affair like *Mavrogheni*, ultimately being dismissed, offering thus satisfaction to the general public (*Telegraphul*: 1875). The hint to the blameworthiness was genuine. The key content, though, was unjust, pathetic and did not allow an objective evaluation of the situation, the article concluding in a gloomy manner: not even under the *Phanariots* was the country more insulted like in these times where *Romanians* were just in their belief of the reascension of the national dignity (*Telegraphul*: 1875).

The whole affair quickly moved from the press to the Parliament. The main voice here was that of *Nicolae Ionescu*, a liberal deputy who in the Assembly of Deputies from January the 11th 1875 addressed an *Petre Mavrogheni's* resignation from the *Lascăr Catargiu* Government (1875) interpolation to *Lascar Catargiu* asking for explications on the subject of *Mavrogheni's* resignation. The whole affair had a high political significance in the eyes of the liberal deputy by risking even the independency of the Assembly of Deputies.

Nicolae Ionescu was asking for punctual explanations regarding the implication as a private person of *Petre Mavrogheni* in the *Offenheim* affair, on one hand and clarifications regarding the declaration of the ministry of finances from the year 1874 on the other one, in which he showed that at that time he wasn't a part of the administration of the iron road *Offenheim* (*Official Monitor of Romania*, 1875: 195-196). After being assured by *Lascar Catargiu* that he will analyse the interpolation, *Petre Mavrogheni* admitted his eagerness of seeing the case closed motivating also his gesture of resignation by stating that he did not allow himself to keep the ministry in this situation. Also he did not hide the fact that he had to take responsibility for the affair of the iron road in 1868 when he was a deputy.

By being moved again into the press, the whole speech about the affair became full of demagogical aspects. In the article dated 12 January, the *Telegraph* appeared worried about the lack of response

from the authorities against the fraud of Petre Mavrogheni, the corrupt instrument that corrupts foreign investors (Telegraphul, 1975). What could bring redemption to all those noble feelings of the Romanian people?, were the article's authors asking themselves. By condemning the resignation of the ministry of finances declaring it irrational and lacking of any meaning, the redactors of the liberal newspaper launched themselves in a heated debate with the advocate redactors from the Press newspaper.

The latter one had two main arguments for their position: one was the inaccuracy of the translation of the passage and the second one was referring to the fact that Mavrogheni was not a minister but a deputy at that time, thus, declaring the Telegraph's statements as monstrous and morbid (Telegraphul, 1875).

Two days later, on 14 January, The Assembly of Deputies was to be a witness to some heated debates regarding the allegedly blameworthiness of Peter Mavrogheni. The opportunity for this debate was offered by Nicolae Ionescu after analysing the interpolation that he previously announced on 11 January. By declaring that he was not in a position to accuse anyone, the liberal deputy pronounced himself in the favour of starting a parliamentary investigation, the only investigation capable of bringing light to the national consciousness over this important affair (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 292).

Nicolae Ionescu's view of this whole procedure was justified, of course, by the necessity of granting the Romanian legislators their importance. By joining side with Peter Mavrogheni, Lascăr Catargiu mentioned the fact that in the case of his ex minister there were no complaints about possible suspicions of corruption and that the reason of his resignation was something that revolved around delicacy (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 293) and respect for the government. Referring to the involvement of Peter Mavrogheni in the iron road affair, the prime minister declared that once gotten out of that partnership, his minister was compensated for his expenses on studies and many more (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 293).

Next, Petre Mavrogheni addressed the audience, the same man that the liberal press launched against a massive attack. In his speech, Petre Mavrogheni answered punctually to every political interpolation of Nicolae Ionescu, adding the fact that at the time he had a direct interest in conceding the railroads he wasn't in the government's favours. By being in an opposite side of the governments of that time, he did not have any influence nor was he corrupted in any way in any

situation (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 294). Referring to the passage extracted from the correspondence between Adolphe de Hertz and Offenheim in which his name appeared, Petre Mavrogheni demonstrated that it was only a simple information given the fact that the affair was a public one, the whole sum of money being registered officially (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 294-295).

Neither the solid intervention of the Minister of Justice, Alexandru Lahovari who offered reassurances on behalf of the Ministry of Justice in order to elucidate the affair, had any effect over the already excited public. By quoting Adolphe de Hertz, Alexandru Lahovari demonstrated the ill intended actions of the newspaper *Romanul* by translating some of the passages from the private correspondence that Petre Mavrogheni's resignation from the Lascăr Catargiu Government (1875) inculpated Petre Mavrogheni (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 295).

The polemics stirred up in the Parliament were aggravated by Nicolae Blarembur who showed himself doubtful of the justice's capacity to solve the case, considering it was handled faltering (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 296). For avoiding similar causes in the future, N. Blarembur was proposing some changes in the electoral law by introducing new eligibility criteria (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 296-297).

Petre P. Carp, D. G. Manu and M. Cornea also took side with Petre Mavrogheni the first one condemning the interventions made by his colleagues and stating that he considers Petre Mavrogheni to be innocent and safe from any suspicion. At the same time, starting from the premise that many people took part in this onerous affair, Petre P. Carp pronounced himself in the favour for a new investigation in which everyone involved to be enquired, the same ones that not only sold their individual work, but also their consciousness (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 297-297; Gane, 1936: 163-164). Without being virulent in his speech, D.G. Bratianu criticised P.P. Carp's proposal by resuming the investigation only to those who are not part of the conservator's group. Sharing the same doubts over the justice's fairness he pronounced himself in the favour of a parliamentary investigation (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 298).

Far from being over, the dispute was sustained by Manolache Epuranu and General Christian Tell. The first one charged against both Petre Mavrogheni (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 301) and prime minister Lascăr Catargiu, declaring that the latter one was guilty of trying to fraud the next elections (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875:

302), General Tell pushed the accusations even further asking to examine more carefully the sums of money from tobacco and alcohol registered as preliminary spendings (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 304). The incriminations were extremely severe, Lascăr Catargiu being accused also for not asking the prosecutor for the rapport of the entire affair. Thus, from an affair that only concerned Petre Mavrogheni it all transformed into an affair for the entire conservator government. Only Lascăr Catargiu's dynamic interventions and C. Gradisteanu's denials were able to defuse the situation proving thus the ungrounded affirmations of general Tell (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 304-306; Maiorescu, 1897: 250-255).

Titu Maiorescu and eventually Vasile Boerescu intervened in the discussion carried on in the plenum, succeeding in supporting Petre Mavrogheni's innocence, calling on to rationality and patriotism. Declaring himself downhearted over the lack of tact and patriotism in some of his colleagues, Titu Maiorescu condemned harshly the media lynching of the opposition's two newspapers *Romanul* and *Telegraful* that Petre Mavrogheni suffered from (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 302; Maiorescu, 1897: 250-255). On the other hand, by using his lucidity and eloquence, Vasile Boerescu insisted on the uselessness of a parliamentary investigation as the whole affair was cleared up and Petre Mavrogheni's innocence was beyond doubt. Vasile Boerescu approached the whole matter morally and judiciously and solicited prudence and carefulness from his colleagues when confronted with calumny because it cannot be constituted as an element of guiltiness of a man. Lacking any clear evidences of Petre Mavrogheni's corruption, Vasile Boerescu declared during general applause that it is not moral to try to find guiltiness where it does not exist (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 306-308). With this last intervention, the closing in of the whole affair was agreed on, a new proposal aimed to name a parliamentary investigation to analyse the fraud suspicions in the concession of the Lemberg - Iasi railroads being approved (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 308).

Commenting over the displaying of the meeting, prince Carol noted in his memoirs the fact that the Assembly of Deputies offered the government a vote of trust with a great majority (The memories of King Carol I of Romania by an eye witness, 1993: 349). Carol was also writing down in a letter to his father, prince Carol Anton de Hohenzollern, the complications brought forth by the iron roads. Proving his lucidity and knowledge over the Mavrogheni affair, the Romanian Prince showed his regrets over his minister's resignation

from the government, considering that Mavrogheni was one of the main factors of the cabinet (King Carol I of Romania. Speeches and letters, 1909: 389). Declaring Petre Mavrogheni's resignation from the Lascăr Catargiu Government (1875) himself satisfied of the general state of the finances, all thanks to the wise administration of Petre Mavrogheni, prince Carol declared to his father his hopes of winning him back again for the ministry after the closing of the Cameras (King Carol I of Romania. Speeches and letters, 1909: 394).

The next day, during the Assembly of Deputies on 15 January, as a consequence of Lascar Catargiu's intervention, the parliamentary commission was designated. Alongside G. Bratianu, P. Carp, Alexandru Stirbei and G. Manu, in the parliamentary commission was also voted and included Christian Tell because, following the intervention of the same Lascar Catargiu, he would bring on to the commission the necessary evidence for finding out the truth (*Official Monitor of Romania*, 1875: 333).

Far from taking note of the recommendations coming from the Assembly of Deputies and far from tempering the tone, the liberal newspapers continued with even more virulence the attacks against Petre Mavrogheni. Thus, in the days that followed the meeting from the Parliament, the Telegraph of Bucuresti launched a series of violent critics to the government, using harsh epithets for the conservative ministers. If Petre Mavrogheni was called recidivist, fraudulent and corrupt, Lascar Catargiu was joshed by using terms like "the honest", "the righteous", "the virtuous", "the honest" president of the Council of ministers (*Telegraphul*, 1875). The taking out of the context and the distortion of informations was the weapons used by the redactors of the Telegraph. After examining the biased narration offered by Petre Mavrogheni on the scandal that he was involved into (*Telegraphul*, 1875), the text of the newspaper *Presa* and the authors of the article were asking for nothing less than the ministers' casting out as defrauders and the dissolution of the Chamber that proteted them and all the corrupt men (*Telegraphul*, 1875). Neither Christian Tell's intervention from the parliamentary tribune was left aside, being exploited in every possible way. As this whole affair represented a weak spot, the newspaper's redaction gave the whole matter an apocalyptical proportion, subjugating the conservative ministers to a violent and aggressive campaign (*Telegraphul*, 1875).

A few weeks later, during a meeting of the Assembly of Deputies on 6 February, the whole affair would finally end. Alexandru Stirbei

presented the report of the investigation's council where the accusations of general Tell from a month ago proved to be groundless. Guided by the wish to settle, definitively, the value of some rumors that weakened the audience's trust and their capability to pull to pieces the whole country, the

members of the parliamentary commission disapproved the ease with which the rumors were spread, that ran down the whole country in the eyes of the other states (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 858). Even though general Christian Tell tried to maintain a shadow of distrust over the whole affair (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 860-862), supported by G. Vernescu (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 863-864), he declared that he did not try to diminish his merits and services brought to the country (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 860).

The only motion formed during the discussions was advanced by V. Pogor. By taking act of the facts stated in the investigation report and keeping his convictions regarding the groundlessness of the complaints brought upon the government which were made with unforgivable ease, the authors of the motion (17 deputies) declared that they regretted profoundly the incident admitting the conclusions of the report and thus deciding to finally get on with the daily agenda (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 861). The motion, voted, was adopted with 72 votes for, 31 against and two abstentions (Official Monitor of Romania, 1875: 861).

Even though the accusations and the calumnies set against Petre Mavrogheni were now rejected and settled as groundless, he did not come back to the conservator cabinet remaining, though, a supporter of it until the end (Slăvescu, 1939: 58). The fact that his authority remained intact is proved in the moment, when, the government Catargiu started to weaken and it proposed him to be the ministry of finances in a government presided by Dimitrie Ghica, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, on January 1876. His refusal to participate in this governmental scheme put an end to the whole project (Slăvescu, 1939: 58).

The Ministry formed by Lascăr Catargiu at the end of March 1871, changed multiple times (no less than 16 reshuffling and ministerial changes Petre Mavrogheni's resignation from the Lascăr Catargiu Government (1875) being registered between 1871-1876), was a government of capable men, who offered this country five years of peace and progress under a decent form of government, as decent as the historical juncture permitted our regime to reign (Rosetti, 2013: 594).

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