

---

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL IDEAS CONTAINED IN THE *PROCLAMATION OF 23 JANUARY 1821*

---

Iulian PÎNIȘOARĂ

“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, România

**Abstract:** *AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD DECADE OF THE 19TH CENTURY, THE SUBLIME PORTE DECIDED, MORE BECAUSE OF DISTRUST TOWARD GREEK ADMINISTRATORS OF THE PRINCIPALITIES THAN BECAUSE OF THE EFFORTS AND MEMORANDA OF THE NOBLES OF MOLDAVIA AND WALLACHIA, TO ABANDON THE PHANARIOT RULERS AND REINTRODUCE THE LANDED DOMINIONS. THE WEAKENING OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE'S POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON THE TWO ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES WAS TO HAVE A DECISIVE INFLUENCE ON THE PATH THAT MOLDOVA AND WALLACHIA WOULD FOLLOW, AT FIRST SEPARATELY, AND FROM 1859 TOGETHER, IN THE ALMOST ONE HUNDRED YEARS THAT SEPARATED THIS MOMENT FROM THE OUTBREAK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR.*

**Keywords:** *TUDOR VLADIMIRESCU, DISCOURSE, SELF-TAUGHT, PROCLAMATION, EQUALITY*

**Contact details  
of the  
author(s):** Email: [iuliandepinisoara@yahoo.com](mailto:iuliandepinisoara@yahoo.com)

### Introduction

The role of the movement initiated and led by Tudor Vladimirescu in Wallachia in the spring of 1821 should not be diminished. Although it has been considered that this movement was merely an 'extension' of the Greek independence revolution, it is clear that Tudor Vladimirescu had his own 'agenda'. The fact that political, national demands took precedence over social demands (Georgescu, 1987, p. 64) meant that Tudor's movement was supported by part of the nobility, but was unable to attract to its side a larger section of the common people, the peasantry, who were less interested in political issues, for which they had little understanding.

At that time, the echoes of the French Revolution were still alive in south-eastern Europe, which had given rise to feelings of freedom and self-determination among the Balkan peoples, based in turn, on the feeling of social equality (Djuvara, 2010, p. 173), an idea that would also contaminate the 'revolutionary' from Oltenia, Tudor Vladimirescu.

The spread of the ideals of the French Revolution led to the emergence of revolts against Ottoman rule in most of the territories under the Porte in Southeastern Europe. The struggle for



independence and emancipation of these peoples coalesced around Greece and the secret societies that coordinated this effort, the most notorious in this respect being Philike Hetairia (Hitchins, 2013, p. 179).

However, it was not the Greeks, but the Serbs, who were the first to turn against the political, military and economic domination of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. Initially led by the self-styled Prince George Petrovich (also nicknamed Karagheorghe, or in Romanian Gheorghe cel Negru), and later continued by his successor and rival Milos Obrenovich in 1815-1817, the uprising was partially successful. Obrenovich's authority was recognised, and he was given the title of Pasha and had the Ottoman troops withdrawn from the territory under his authority, but the obligation to pay tribute and the Ottoman suzerainty (Djuvara, 2010, p. 174) survived.

The fact that social demands were not in the forefront is not specific to Tudor Vladimirescu's movement, as it is a phenomenon common to all movements for the emancipation of the Balkan peoples from Ottoman rule. This is, for example, the case of the Greeks, who had no specific strategy (Glenny, 2020, p. 51).

The Philike Hetaeria Society, the 'Society of Friends', was revived in Odessa, Russia, in 1814. It had been established at the end of the 18th century, and its founder was the Greek nationalist poet Rigas Feraios. A romantic rather than a pragmatist, Feraios imagined the movement to liberate Greece from Ottoman rule as a struggle of nations united in a federation of the Christian states of the Balkans (Kinross, 2019, p. 367). There was some chronological synchronisation between the Greek liberation movement and that led by Tudor in Wallachia. Only Vladimirescu was not a dreamer like Rigas Feraios, but a very pragmatic politician who was aware that the Romanians' struggle for their own political and social goals had to have its own identity.

Signs of revolt began to appear all over the Balkans. Nevertheless, between these uprisings there was no unity as Feraios (Kinross, 2019, p. 368) had predicted. Each Balkan community tried to achieve its goals by its own means.

Even if the Greek emancipation movement, organised around Eteria, initially influenced the revolution in the Romanian Principalities the movement led by Tudor Vladimirescu was undoubtedly of an indigenous character (Jelavich, 2000, p. 189).

At the beginning of the 19th century, it was already clear, even in the Romanian Principalities, that printing was the most effective way of ensuring the 'free circulation' of ideas. Through printed materials, pamphlets, books, reform projects, the press, people could have much easier access, among other things, to the most modern political ideas and principles of government of the time. The printing made it possible to integrate the Principalities into European culture (Drace-Francis, 2016, p. 53).

Romanian society had entered a phase of visible thaw for some time. Slowly, the Byzantine-Ottoman influence was fading, including in terms of the classification of the Principalities as a veritable antechamber of the Ottoman Empire. The Western model begins to be highly appreciated. Clothing, mores, then political institutions, all are taken over by us. First by the women, then by the "studious youth", then by the older noblemen, more reluctant to change. Alecu Russo skilfully recreates the image of this veritable cultural warm up that swept through Romania: "Our fathers opened their eyes in the cradle of our ancestors; the people of 1835, who inaugurated the present generation, sprang up in the turmoil of new ideas. The eyes and thoughts of the fathers turned to the east; ours turned to the west, from heaven to earth. [...] Clothes, customs, the earth, even names have taken on a new appearance. [...] The first and greatest weapon that beat the fortress of the past was the change of the old garb. [...] Today's civilization is the logical act of abandoning the old clothes, the new ideas have come into the country with the trousers and more brave than the Tartar raids. [...] The idea and progress have come out of the tail of the tuxedos and the pocket of the waistcoat. The revolution's swiftness was mighty, furious, overthrowing right and left, good and evil, shaking all the customs and all the



beliefs of the old people [...] the upheaval of clothes at once transformed the social conditions of our world, as well as family relations. The emancipation of the children from the fear and the slaps of the pedagogue comes from the pants" (Russo, 2010, pp. 32, 37-38).

In the third decade of the 19th century, the process of westernization of the Romanian world began its last and most difficult phase, that of political and institutional renewal. The Eastern, Byzantine and Ottoman influence in the principalities began to be replaced by Western, primarily French, influence. The term Europe was perceived more as representing a certain model of political organisation and economic well-being. The French influence was not necessarily due to common Latin origins but rather to the strength, the extraordinary vitality of French culture. Tsarist Russia had also begun its modernisation process under the influence of French culture; Peter the Great had decided to adopt the French model after visiting the country in 1717. The case of Turkey is similar. In 1720, Chelebi Mehmet was sent as Ambassador Extraordinary to the court of Louis XIV. Together with his son Said, he was among the first Turks to learn French. However, its impact on the Ottoman world would be much less significant due to its conservatism.

By the early 19th century, political writing was no longer a foreign field in the Principality. Mihail Cantacuzino, Ionică Tăutu and Simion Marcovici are just two of the personalities who had such concerns. However, Tudor Vladimirescu is a real trailblazer in terms of political discourse, a true political communicator. He is the first politician in the modern sense of the term, aware of the importance of direct contact with the masses as the main means of inspiring them, as a very effective way of transmitting political ideas. Tudor Vladimirescu's interest in political discourse is all the more to be appreciated as there was no other means of communicating ideas of any kind in the Principality, except for books. Yet, the books had the disadvantage of being extremely rare and expensive on the one hand, and on the other had an extremely limited impact in a society where illiteracy was still at a huge level. Political discourse was therefore the most effective way of spreading ideas. The written press, slightly outdated nowadays, was still non-existent at that time in the principalities, the first newspapers in our country being Heliade-Rădulescu's *Curierul românesc* in Wallachia and Gheorghe Asachi's *Albina română* in Moldavia, which appeared only in 1829.

Tudor was a representative of the free peasantry, descending from a family of free property owners from the northeastern part of Gorj county, from Vladimiri (hence his name), an area on the border between Gorj county and the counties of Mehedinți, Hunedoara and Caraș-Severin. He joined the Russian army at a young age and volunteered to take part in the war of 1806-1812, reaching the rank of *parucik* (the equivalent of lieutenant in the Tsarist army) (Djuvara, 2010, p. 175), for his merits, he was awarded the cross of St. Vladimir (Constantiniu, 2011, p. 199).

After the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812, Tudor resumed his commercial activities (Constantiniu, 2011, p. 199), which had occupied him for some time before the war. Taking advantage of his knowledge, acquired in the house of a Craiova nobleman where he learned to read in Romanian, he also acquired some knowledge of Greek (Hitchins, 2013, p. 182) and some rudiments of history (Constantiniu, 2011, p. 199). Taking advantage of these advantages, Vladimirescu pursued, in addition to his business career, an administrative one, obtaining the job of a *vătaf*<sup>1</sup> (bought as it was in those times) and acquired a considerable fortune from the livestock and grain trade in Transylvania and Hungary (Hitchins, 2013, p. 182).

A self-taught spirit, Tudor Vladimirescu acquired not only knowledge of law and economics but also the most modern political ideas. Even more. He had the skill and tact to package them into a penetrating and vigorous foreign political discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> Supervisor in the house of a boyar or in a monastery, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/v%C4%83taf>, (translated by MCD)



The literary critic George Călinescu also appreciated Tudor's oratorical qualities. He considered Tudor's personality to be truly *messianic*. Călinescu described the style of the leader of the Panduri as "biblical, using multi-coloured images of church stall painting" (Călinescu, 1988, p. 130).

Vladimirescu's qualities as a strategist, probably acquired during the Russo-Turkish war of 1806-1812, were demonstrated not only in military terms but also in the organisation of the movement he led. The way in which he articulated his speeches, the way in which he tried to inspire his audience, are pertinent evidence of this. In the struggle to achieve the break with the Ottoman Empire, Tudor used not only the weapons of proportion, but also the word, which, if wielded skilfully, as he was, can prove to be at least as effective a weapon. Although such a statement is a truism nowadays, two centuries ago the power of the word was much harder to anticipate, in a world where communication was much more difficult precisely because of communication barriers (Dutton, 2019, p. 30).

The proclamation of 23 January 1821 is an eloquent example of Vladimirescu's oratorical talent. It is not only a question of choosing the right words, but above all of the way in which he succeeded in inserting into the text of the proclamation political ideas that would otherwise hardly have been received. His most important skill was his ability to use words to "draw" images, symbols that were much easier to understand. Vladimirescu used the word as the great painters of the Renaissance used the brush. He had the skill to make his words come alive. He spoke in "symbols" as George Călinescu called them, in the sense that he used words with such a powerful meaning that they awakened the enthusiasm and adherence of the listener in the most effective way possible. Appreciating his speeches as true literary works, or when he spoke of their "biblical" character, George Călinescu in turn probably perceived the force and expressiveness of Vladimirescu's political speeches, similar to church writings.

For this reason we can safely say that Tudor Vladimirescu is himself a "cornerstone of the epoch", as Paul Cornea characterizes him in his work, *The Origins of Romanian Romanticism*. A threshold of the epoch, not necessarily in terms of the acquisitions of the moment, but especially in terms of the perspectives he opened up and the echoes he produced in Romanian society at the beginning of the 19th century thanks to the oratorical qualities he demonstrated in his speeches. Obviously, the most important result of Tudor's movement was the restoration of the earthly dominions. The movement created the conditions for accelerating the pace of the economic and especially the political development of the Romanian Lands, precipitating the crisis of the feudal mentality (Cornea, 2008, p. 152). Ionică Tăutu played a similar role was played in Moldova, but he managed to "innovate" more in terms of political and constitutional vocabulary, while formulating a more venomous criticism of the social and political situation there (Turczynski, 2000, p. 102).

Tudor and 1821 represent a checkpoint, "a parting of the waters" (Carp, Stanomir, 2009, p. 4), an end and a beginning at the same time. Just as the year 1789 represents the dividing line between the old and the new regime in France. The events of 1821 represent a dividing line that separates the old Romanian society - a society ossified in its orthodoxy, in the patriarchal spirit that dominated it, in oriental mores - from the new, increasingly secularised society, open to the influences of Western civilisation, extremely dynamic.

Tudor's contribution is all the more remarkable because, in the construction of political discourse, he encounters a great difficulty, namely the lack of an adequate political vocabulary. Political and constitutional language was still at an early stage of development in the Romanian Principalities (Stanomir, 2004, p. 15).

Tudor Vladimirescu's proclamation of 23 January 1821 begins with a word as simple as it is full of meaning - brothers. By way of comparison, American presidents, in their traditional speeches on the state of the nation, use an expression with a similar meaning: "my fellow Americans", which is difficult to translate into Romanian without losing, at least, part of the meaning of the English



language. From this first word, we have proof of Tudor's oratorical mastery. Beyond the colloquial meaning, the use of this word tries to induce the idea of a perfect equality between the members of a political community. The term 'brothers' implies an organic, umbilical link between all those who share the same 'mother', the homeland.

One of the central ideas of the proclamation of 23 January 1821 is the need to create a political community based on political equality between its members. To underline this, Vladimirescu inserts into the proclamation one of the fundamental ideas of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 26 August 1789, the right to resist abusive government. This idea is the result of a reinterpretation of older concepts, in the sense that the legitimacy of political power is determined not by its origin but by its purpose. In addition, by the quality of government and the extent to which it responds to the needs of society (Nay, 2008, p. 155), which marks the obvious divorce between the city of men and the city of God (Boia, 2007, p. 7). According to this view, the government of the "prince" must be accepted as long as it aims at and serves the interests of society, of the community. When he moves away from these values, the power of the "prince" is no longer legitimate. This is the foundation on which this "right to resist" was built (Nay, 2008, p. 156).

This is precisely how the correspondence between Vladimirescu and Nicolae Văcărescu should be interpreted. Tudor reproached Văcărescu for the fact that "you consider the people, with whose blood all the Bohemian people were fed and polished, good for nothing and only the robbers as the fatherland ... Then why, without giving any word of justice, do you call me a tyrant and how can you not consider that I am categorised only by the robbers ... But how can you not consider that the people is called fatherland and not the robbers?" (Documente, 1962, pp. 56-57). With these words, Tudor is trying to highlight the fact that the representatives of the nobility, disregarding the general interests of society and exercising an abusive government, had lost their legitimacy and, therefore, the right to claim the submission of the people. This reasoning justifies the right of the 'common people' to seek, by whatever means, political leaders who would bring about good government in accordance with the general interests of society, in other words, legitimate government.

The first paragraph of the text of the Proclamation of 23 January 1821, "no *pravilă*<sup>2</sup> prevents man from meeting evil with evil! The snake, when it comes before you, you strike it with a club to defend your life ..." (Ionescu, 2016, p. 64) we can interpret it today as an example of language inciting violence. Nevertheless, properly framed in the political and social context of the times, it only reiterates the idea that a government that has lost its legitimacy must be removed. At all costs. By any means, including violence.

This call to action can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the motivational function that any well-articulated discourse must contain. Cicero, one of the most skilled orators of antiquity, believed that, to be effective, a speech must fulfil three functions: to argue the content (*docere*), to please (*delectation*) and to move (*movere*). The purpose of this passage is precisely to excite, motivate and move the listener, to put him in a state of mind appropriate to the content of the speech.

Vladimirescu was not only a fine connoisseur of the psychology of simple people, as Paul Cornea put it. He had formed, over time, an equally accurate picture of how the representatives of the great nobility thought. He was able to formulate his Proclamation of 23 January in such a way as to appeal as far as possible to the common people, while at the same time trying to arouse the least animosity from the nobility.

This is precisely the reason why Tudor Vladimirescu represents a true "threshold of era" (Cornea, 2008, p. 152), the first politician in the modern sense of the word. Knowing very well the psychology of the Romanian peasant and the realities of Romanian society at that time, an ossified,

---

<sup>2</sup> Civil law or church law, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/pravil%C4%83> (translated by MCD)



traditionalist society dominated by a strong paternalistic spirit, he managed to shape his speech in such a way that it made a strong impression on the audience.

A political order other than that which had its source in divinity was beyond the comprehension of the Romanian peasant. For this reason, Tudor Vladimirescu opted for a more tempered version of the new model of the city, the city of man. This explains his insistence that not only was the rebellion not contrary to the divine order and God's will but on the contrary, a form of fulfilling it: 'if evil is not received by God, the evildoers do well in the sight of God! For God is good, and to be like him we must do well' (Ionescu, 2016, p. 64). The evildoers were none other than those who had exercised government far from the general interest, and their removal from power by revolt could not have been other than just in the face of God.

The text of the Proclamation of 23 January 1821 also contains a parallel with the animal world: "No pravilă prevents man from meeting evil with evil! The snake, when it comes before you, you strike it with a club to protect your life ...". In his work *The Prince*, published in 1513, Machiavelli wrote " ... there are two kinds of struggle: one based on laws, the other on force: the first is proper to men, the other belongs to animals; ... it is necessary for a prince to know how to be both animal and man" (Machiavelli, p. 62). The resemblance between the two texts is far too great, which is why we believe it is not the result of chance. Tudor Vladimirescu wanted to be a ruler, and he acted like one. In these lines, he shows that he has the qualities needed for a prince, that he knows how to use, depending on the context, both peaceful methods of government and those based on force, force that is ultimately an essential attribute of power.

Tudor's conviction that legitimate government is only government that has the general interests of society in mind is also underlined by the fact that, according to the text of the Proclamation of 23 January, the revolt was not only in accordance with the divine will. Also with that of the Sultan, "the *veichil*<sup>3</sup> of God" who "wills that we ... live well" (Ionescu, 2016, p. 64). This expression, "to live well", is very similar in meaning to the happiness invoked by Tomas Paine in his work *The Common Sense*. Paine appreciated that "society is generated by our needs, while the form of government depends on our wickedness; the former contributes positively to our happiness ..." (Paine, 2013, p. 13) Happiness would be invoked in the same sense a little later in the meetings of the Public Assembly. Thus, a deputy should carefully consider "to investigate if the laws are uphold, if the treaties are respected, if the national prince is elected by the nation, if the purpose of the constitution is fulfilled, if orderliness, justice and economy reign in all branches of administration, if the magistrates have public confidence, if the state's money is used for the good of the state, in a word if the Romanians are happy" (Bodea, 1998, p. 118). "Then how should he not guard the carefully the laws establishing good mores, and thereby the glory, the honour, the grace of the nation before the world, and the true happiness of the people?" (*Analele parlamentare*, 1898, p. 464) Happiness or good living meant, first, a government oriented to the public interest.

Nor was the sovereignty of the people foreign to Tudor. The idea of a transfer of power from the members of the community to an assembly, a "political whole", an idea developed by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*. Appointed by the political community on the basis of a suffrage (Nay, 2008, pp. 338, 367). Therefore, Tudor appeals to the people "to choose from our chiefs those who can be good. They are ours and together with us they will work for good, so that they too may be good, as we are promised!" (Ionescu, 2016, p. 64). Tudor's exhortation to the people is not only to follow the members of this assembly "ordained for the good and benefit of the whole country", but also to obey all its decisions: "whatever the chief priests of the assembly will instruct you, that you shall follow, and where they call you, there you shall go".

---

<sup>3</sup> God's anointed (MCD)



At the end of the Proclamation of 23 January 1821, Tudor, as a true spokesman of this assembly, drew attention to the fact. "None of us is worthy enough, in these times of the community assembly to touch even a grain, the property or the house of a merchant, a townsman or a peasant ... but only the property and the ill-gotten wealth of the tyrannical landlords to sacrifice".

#### CONCLUSION

Tudor Vladimirescu's movement is perhaps more important in terms of the new breath it brings to our political and public life. He appears somewhat unannounced in Romanian political life. In terms of style, he belongs more to the *Pașoptist*<sup>4</sup> generation. Ion C. Brătianu, through his words, and C. A. Rosetti through the printed word are those who were to carry on the tradition initiated by Vladimirescu.

---

<sup>4</sup> A person who belonged to the generation of the participants in the 1848 Revolution, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/pasoptist>, (translated by MCD).

## REFERENCES

- Analele parlamentare ale României, tomul IX, Partea a II-a, Obicinuita Obștească Adunare a Moldovei, Legislatura II, Sesiunea II (VII), 1838-1839 și Legislatura II, Sesiunea III (VIII), 1840*, București, Imprimeria Statului, 1898;
- Bodea, Cornelia (1998), *1848 la Români*, București:Editura Enciclopedică;
- Boia, Lucian (2007), *Mitul democrației*, Ediția a II-a, București:Editura Humanitas;
- Carp, Radu, Stanomir, Ioan (2009), *Inventarea Constituției. Proiecte Intelectuale și Dezvoltare Instituțională în Principatele Române în Secolul al XIX-lea*, București:Editura C. H.Beck;
- Călinescu, George (1988), *Istoria Literaturii Române de la Origini până în Prezent*, Ediția a II-a revăzută și adăugită, Ediție și Prefață Alexandru Piru, București:Editura Minerva;
- Constantiniu, Florin (2011), *O Istorie Sinceră a Poporului Român*, Ediția a IV-a revăzută și adăugită, București:Editura Univers Enciclopedic Gold;
- Cornea, Paul (2008), *Originile Romantismului Românesc. Spiritul Public, Mișcarea Ideilor și Literatura între 1780-1840*, București:Editura Cartea Românească;
- Djuvara, Neagu (2010), *O Scurtă Istorie a Românilor Povestită celor Tineri*, ediția a XII – a revăzută și adăugită, București:Editura Humanitas;
- Documente privind Istoria României. Răscoala din 1821. Izvoare Narrative*, Vol. V, București:Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1962;
- Drace-Francis, Alex (2016), *Geneza Culturii Române Moderne. Instituțiile Scrisului și Dezvoltarea Identității Naționale 1700-1900*, Iași:Editura Polirom;
- Georgescu, Vlad (1987), *Istoria Ideilor Politice Românești, 1369 -1878*, Colecția Istorică Ion Dumitru – Verlag, Munchen;
- Glenny, Misha (2020), *Balkanii. Naționalism, Război și Marile Puteri 1804-2012*, București:Editura Trei;
- Hitchins, Keith (2013), *Români (1774-1866)*, Ediția a III-a, translation from English, George G. Potra și Delia Răzdolescu, București:Editura Humanitas;
- Ionescu, Cristian (2016), *Dezvoltarea Constituțională a României. Acte și Documente 1741-1991*, Ediția a III-a revăzută și adăugită, București:Editura C.H. Beck;
- Jelavich, Barbara (2000), *Istoria Balcanilor. Secolele al XVIII-lea și al XIX-lea*, vol. I, Iași:Editura Institutului European;
- Kinross, Lord (2019), *Istoria Imperiului Otoman. Mărirea și Decăderea Imperiului Turc*, București:Editura Orizonturi;
- Machiavelli, Niccolo, Principele, Editura Antet XX Press;
- Nay, Olivier (2008), *Istoria Ideilor Politice*, Iași:Editura Polirom;
- Paine, Thomas (2013), *Simțul Comun*, București:Editura All;
- Russo, Alecu (1910), *Scrieri*, cu o prefață de George Bogdan-Duică, București:Editura Minerva;
- Stanomir, Ioan (2004), *Nașterea Constituției. Limbaj și Drept în Principate, până la 1866*, București:Editura Nemira;
- Turczynski, Emanuel (2000), *De la Iluminism la Liberalismul Timpuriu. Vocile Politice și Revendicările lor în Spațiul Românesc*, București:Editura Fundației Culturale Române.