

**Marthe, Princess Bibesco (1886–1973)  
– Diplomacy through Arts and Letters –**

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**Abstract.** With a European high-life and known for being a famed writer and socialite of the 1900s-1930s, Marthe Bibesco proves to have had played the role of a cultural diplomat ‘avant la lettre’. Revealed by her writings and ideas, her perspectives on Europe’s politics, civilization and way of life, as well as those on her country’s role and cultural vocation, were astutely put together in order to create the image of a Romania whose complexity was as enchanting as Europe’s own.

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“You do personify Europe to me.”  
(Charles de Gaulle to Marthe Bibesco, 1970)

*Described* by her biographers as “the last Belle-Epoque orchid”<sup>1</sup> or “the enchantress”,<sup>2</sup> Marthe, princess Bibesco was – for many of those who met her – a remarkable personality. Roumanian aristocrat, writer, aesthete, Bibesco was highly educated, beautiful, charismatic, and – last but not least – a creative author. During her entire life – covering almost 87 years from 1886 to 1973 – she moved in Europe’s royal, political and intellectual élite circles. She was friend, confidante, and sometimes intimate of European monarchs, prime ministers and presidents.<sup>3</sup> It was

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<sup>1</sup> Ghislain de Diesbach, *Prințesa Bibescu. Ultima orhidee* (Princess Bibesco. The Last Orchid), Bucharest: Vivaldi, 1998. First edition, *La Princesse Bibesco. La dernière orchidée* (Paris: Perrin, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Christine Sutherland, *Enchantress. Marthe Bibesco and Her World* (New-York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Journal. 1970–1978* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), vol. 3, 252: “I’ve read ‘La vie d’une amitié’, annotated correspondence between Marthe Bibesco and the abbé Mugnier. The most interesting letters are those from Marthe Bibesco, and yet I heard so much about the extraordinary abbé Mugnier! Marthe Bibesco was endowed with a prodigious memory. In addition, all the kings, all the dignitaries, all the monsignors, dukes, princes, famous writers, men of state, and scholars who lived after 1900 were among her friends and her acquaintances. How extraordinary would be the biography entitled “Marthe Bibesco and Her Contemporaries”!

this aspect of her biography that justifies, in many ways, our present attempt to portray Marthe Bibesco as a cultural diplomat of her birth country, Roumania.<sup>1</sup>

While Marthe Bibesco's high-profile life and her literary triumph in the Belle-Epoque Paris and through the "roaring '20s" are well-known – thanks to Ghislain de Diesbach and Christine Sutherland – Marthe Bibesco's political involvement and her diplomatic activities, strongly related to how she understood Europe, how she imagined the European unity and how she conceived her own identity, are less known. These are joined by the manner she tactfully – and often resourcefully – promoted Roumania in the French and British political circles of the time.

### **To History through Genealogy**

Marthe-Lucie, Princess Bibesco, was born Lahovary in an influential family where she could easily perceive political realities and understand the country's national interest. The Lahovary were the leading Conservative political family of Roumania, rivaling the Liberal Bratianus, and active politicians: her father – Jean Lahovary (1844–1915) – served as Minister of Foreign Affairs and has been Minister of Roumania to France; her uncle, Alexander Lahovary (1841–1897) was, on various occasions, Minister of Justice, Minister of Agriculture, Industry, Trade and Property, Minister of Public Works and Minister of Foreign Affairs; another uncle, Jacob Lahovary (1846–1907), was Minister of War and Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Her mother Emma Mavrocordato belonged to a princely dynasty of Greek origins, alternatively ruling in Moldavia and Wallachia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, illustrated by grand names such as Alexandros Mavrocordato, *dragoman*<sup>3</sup> of the Ottoman Empire from 1673 to 1709.<sup>4</sup> His marriage to a descendant of the founding dynasty of Moldavia, next to his father's previous union to a dowager Princess of Wallachia, positioned the Mavrocordatos as hypothetical heirs to the throne of both countries – a position they skillfully took advantage of in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, shaping a ruling dynasty illustrated by strong personalities. Cultured and refined, with a touch of eccentricity, art lovers and owners of renowned book collections,<sup>5</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> We shall use the classic British spelling of Roumania (related to the French 'Roumanie') for România, instead of the Americanised version "Romania" (officially in use since 1965), as in 2001 the Roumanian Academy decided to return to the use of the British spelling. (Thus, the international code of Roumania was changed in the same year from ROM to ROU.) — We shall also use the Frenchified or Anglicised versions of the Roumanian names, some of which established by Marthe Bibesco herself in her texts (e.g. the Mogoshoaia spelling for the residence, the palace of Mogoșoaia): Brancovan for Brâncoveanu, Bibesco for Bibesco, etc.

<sup>2</sup> More details on their genealogy, Costel Iordăchiță, *Familia Lahovary. Ascendență și destin politic* (The Lahovary Family. Genealogy and political destiny) (Pitești: Carminis, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The equivalent of a Minister of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>4</sup> He was the main negotiator of the Porte with the Austrian Monarchy during the Austro-Turkish War of the 1680s, and author of the treaty of Karlowitz (1699). The house of Austria honoured him with the rank of Serene Highness in the same year. See Alexandre A.C. Sturdza, *L'Europe Orientale et le rôle historique des Maurocordato, 1660–1830* (Oriental Europe and the Historical Role of The Mavrocordatos) (Paris: Plon, 1913), 25–47, 50–60.

<sup>5</sup> When Constantine Mavrocordato (III), Prince of Moldavia and of Wallachia, considered selling his private library, he received offers from Pope Clement XII, the Holy Roman

Mavrocordatos were best illustrated by Constantine (III), whose Enlightened despotism was embodied by the fundamental law he granted to his subjects: *Constitution faite par S[on] A[ltesse] M[onsieur] le Prince Constantin Mauro Cordato, Prince des deux Valachie & de Moldavie, le 7 Février 1740 (&c)*, published in the *Mercure de France* of July 1742. By the end of the century, the Mavrocordatos were completely Roumanianised.<sup>1</sup>

It was for Marthe to conclude: “*I had, being born, two families; one was political, the other dynastic (...) One ruling in the past, the other governing the present.*”<sup>2</sup> This background, strongly connected to the historical and political existence of the Roumanian Principalities since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was going to be achieved by Marthe’s marriage to a distant cousin, George Valentin, 4<sup>th</sup> Prince Bibesco (1880–1941).

A fairly old western Wallachian family – dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century –, emerging to political power in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bibesco gradually split into three main and three cadet branches. One of the main became known as Știrbey, themselves acquiring a princely title as Princes of Wallachia in the 1850s; a second one inherited the Austrian-German and Roumanian princely title Bassaraba de Brancovan, next to the consequent fortune; a third one continued the princely Bibesco line. Both the Bibesco, the Brancovan and the Știrbey developed powerful Austrian, German, French, Belgian, Italian, Spanish and British alliances, most of which in close connection to royalty. They were also politically active.

This was going to offer Marthe not only an additional social dimension, but also an extended European frame where she felt she could speak on behalf of her own country when the case, as a diplomat. Years later, Louise Weiss, French journalist and politician, would write: *From her numerous and glorious [family] alliances [Marthe Bibesco] had created an imaginary map, built on blood streams. The most famous places of the Continent were thus united by rivers belonging to her literally, and whose history she liked to treasure. (...) At the end of each of these*

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Emperor Charles VI of Austria, from King George II of Great Britain and from Louis XV of France (Corneliu Dima-Drăgan, “La bibliophilie des Mavrocordatos” (Mavrocordatos’ Bibliophilia), in *Symposium. L’époque phanariote* (The Phanariot Aeon) (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974), 215–216.

<sup>1</sup> Six sovereign Princes of both Moldavia and Wallachia stemmed from this family – Nicholas, John, Constantine, John II, Alexander and Alexander II Mavrocordatos – covering most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also the last Princesses of Wallachia, Zoe Mavrocordatos, adopted heiress to the princely house of Bassaraba de Brancovan and spouse of George Demetrius Bibesco (1804–1873), Prince-sovereign of Wallachia before the 1848 Revolution. Their children would inherit the Bassaraba de Brancovan princely title (in Austria, 1828 and 1860) and the Roumanian Bibesco princely title (Sturdza, *L’Europe Orientale*, passim; Dan Berdindei, “Urmașii lui Constantin Brâncoveanu și locul lor în societatea românească. Genealogie și istorie” (Constantine Brancovan’s posterity and their role in the Roumanian society. Genealogy and History), in *Constantin Brâncoveanu*, edited by Paul Cernovodeanu and Florin Constantiniu (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1989), 275–285.

<sup>2</sup> Manuscript, ‘Le Cousinage’, archive folder, box V, Bibesco papers, Manuscripts Occidentaux, NAF D. 29738, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

*genealogical rivers, when they were about to lose their ways into the Acheron, a phoenix [= saviour] was born again, known only to her, provoking their rebirth.*<sup>1</sup>

Surrounded by the historical resonance of all the aristocratic family alliances, with a love for history carved in her spirit since her young years, for Marthe Bibesco politics – in a diplomatic sense – was a responsibility, both agreeable and gratifying. She knows she can contribute to History for the sake of Europe; and, even if she cannot do it in the manner her sovereign ancestors did, nor in the fashion her father and uncles could (as Ministers of Foreign Affairs), she would gracefully choose to follow the steps of Chateaubriand, in many ways her role model.<sup>2</sup> Not just contributing to Europe's history, but discerning the aftermath of the events, the direction they would take, calculating the risks, deciphering their profound meaning was an intellectual exercise she gave into.

Such an approach, next to her erudition, built Crownprince Ferdinand of Roumania's confidence in her and in her opinions. Their amity continued after he succeeded as King in 1916. King Alphonso XIII of Spain was also fond of her... But Marthe's penchant for politics and diplomacy became even more obvious in her good relations with Wilhelm, Crownprince of Germany and Prussia (a fact which would cause much gossip by Marthe's foes, in days of war, when diplomatic nuances fade away). Their friendship – started in 1909 – was built on admiration, as documents prove above all.<sup>3</sup> While feeling pleased and privileged to be his part-confidante, Marthe esteemed the Kronprinz's almost philosophical concern to be a good emperor. In return, Wilhelm admired her poise, intelligence, sophistication and her grasp on statesmanship. Their long epistolary exchanges are, in this respect, eloquent. It was her that he entrusted, for instance, with secret details about the Eulenburg scandal of 1908<sup>4</sup> and, later, with the mission of examining the opinion of French political circles in 1915–1916: *"I would be very interested in you writing me about what people think there [about the war and about himself] (...) Most probably you will meet leading politicians and you will hear their positions."* The Crownprince had drafted a peace treaty, 7 months after the start of the war, and was suggesting Marthe Bibesco to disclose it to the French officials: *"I believe France would accept our peace [proposal] with the following conditions: 1° we return the occupied provinces [Alsace and Lorraine], 2° we give France a part of Belgium and keep the rest, 3° France allows us to use Calais as long as the war against England shall last (...) These are my personal opinions. I do not know what the government considers, but I imagine they would be interested in knowing my plans. I write you all this because it is a great pity that France and Germany wage war while the d\*\*\**

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Weiss, *Mémoires d'une européenne* (Memoirs of a European), transcribed fragment in the Bibesco papers, V.

<sup>2</sup> Diesbach, *Prințesa Bibescu*, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Constantin Iordan, *Martha Bibescu în timpul ocupației germane la București, 1916–1917* (Marthe Bibesco during the German Occupation of Bucharest, 1916–1917) (Bucharest: Anima, 2005), 10–100; idem, *Martha Bibescu și Prințul moștenitor al Germaniei. File de istorie, 1909–1910* (Marthe Bibesco and the German Crownprince. Pages of History, 1909–1910) (Iași: Institutul European, 2010), 45–183.

<sup>4</sup> Diesbach, *Prințesa Bibescu*, 245.

*English just take advantage. (...) I wish that Roumania joins us, taking Bessarabia and good parts of Russia and Bulgaria, as well as half of Serbia, leaving the other half to Austria.”<sup>1</sup>*

Marthe Bibesco, whose sympathies were international, not exclusively national, formulated a smooth answer: *“It is a great misfortune that the circumstances and the high dignity God invested You with, next to so many other things, prevent us to openly discuss the subject You commenced in the last letter. I feel the same about the peace, but well-thought reasons make me believe France will never accept to seize the smallest part of the Belgian territory. It is a psychological fact – the French public opinion has learned to consider the Belgians victims as well, and heroes. Convincing them to accept a peace treaty ‘à l’amiable’ would require a completely different approach than offering a compensation in Belgian lands; they would be ashamed to accept it. — I have been to England a few days ago. I noticed lots of ‘sang froid’, not hatred, but a great trust in the final victory. It is the feeling every warrior has when confronted with their ennemy in this war that reached a world-wide scale.”<sup>2</sup>*

The same spirit of diplomatic openness presided over Marthe Bibesco’s residences, the palace of Mogoshoaia – a few kilometers from Bucharest – and the mansion in Posada (by Comarnic), neighbouring the Peleş royal castle in the mountains. Once the restoration of Mogoshoaia was achieved in 1927, Marthe hosted reunions and dinners with British, French, American, German, Spanish and Swiss diplomats (chargés d’affaires, ministers to Roumania, ambassadors to various countries, delegates to the League of Nations); the closing reception of the 1931 Congress of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale<sup>3</sup> took place in her residence, and so did, partly, one of the Congresses for South-Eastern European Studies. The royal and aristocratic set of Europe was also attending her reunions when in Bucharest. Marthe’s spiritual conversation, the excellent cuisine, the historical grounds (Mogoshoaia had been the spring residence of Wallachia’s last national dynast, Constantine Bassaraba de Brancovan, 1688–1714, to which the Bibescos were main heirs and successors) made her invitations sought after. The glittering international society gathering there turned Mogoshoaia into “the second Geneva” or

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<sup>1</sup> Letter of Prince Wilhelm (Crownprince of the German Empire) to Marthe Bibesco, p.XCV, d 2, ff 88–89, the “Alexandru Saint-Georges” files, Archive of the National Library of Roumania, Bucharest.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Marthe Bibesco to Prince Wilhelm, p.XCV, d2, ff 90–91, the “Alexandru Saint-Georges” files.

<sup>3</sup> Grigore Gafencu, *Însemnări politice* (Political Notes) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991) 260. Founded on 14 October 1905, the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI / The World Air Sports Federation, in English) was and still is the world organisation for air sports, aeronautics and astronautics world records, with headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. First presided by Prince Roland Bonaparte, it gradually became an institution reuniting the (back then) newly created and strategic Ministries of Air/Aviation of different European countries and of the United States. George Valentin, Prince Bibesco (1880–1941) presided the FAI from 1931 to 1941 (F.A.I. History, accessed December 2014, <http://www.fai.org/about-fai/history> and F.A.I. presidents, accessed December 2014, <http://www.fai.org/about-fai/presidents>, last modified Monday, 26 November 2007).

“the second League of Nations”, as Louis Barthou, French minister of foreign affairs – himself a visitor – put it.<sup>1</sup>

This sophistication, comprehensive understanding of circumstances and proximity to the political milieus of Europe turned Marthe Bibesco into a privileged diplomatic messenger when the case. It was through her that Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime-Minister – and friend –, or Léon Blum (French Prime-Minister) informally contacted Roumanian governments of the late 1920s and the early 1930s. In 1942, it was, again, through her that the US Minister to Switzerland, Leland Harrison (previously US Minister to Roumania) notified Antonescu on the American opposition to Roumania’s pursuit of war against the Soviet Union east of Dniestr.<sup>2</sup>

Her political awareness was also innovative. Earlier, in the 1930s, she had suggested the creation of an intervention force, an aerial military fleet controlled by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale and placed under the authority of the League of Nations, destined to prevent regional aggression.<sup>3</sup> In this, her opinion coincided perfectly with that of her husband, president of the FAI. Today, we can only speculate on how Europe would have looked in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had the idea been put into practice...

### **The Chateaubriand Way: Literature and Diplomacy**

Marthe Bibesco sees herself as a European whose preferences are directed towards France and Paris. While she understands nationalism, she resents its excesses which she often calls “a plague of the spirit”, because nationalism – be it French, German, Roumanian or other – alters what Marthe dreams about and attaches importance to: the European unity. Mixing Roumanian, Greek and French blood, she feels it is easier to navigate on different cultural seas and identify the already existing cultural unity of Europe. In her eyes, this unity is first of all based on the ancient Greek and Roman heritage, as well as on a common Christian legacy dually shared by the West and East as Catholicism – centered on Rome – and Orthodoxy, centered on the Second Rome, Constantinople. *We are all Greeks*, she used to say, quoting Shelley, the English poet, himself a friend of Marthe’s collateral ancestor Alexandros Mavrokordathos;<sup>4</sup> it was, in a way, a revival of La Fontaine’s famous line: *nous sommes tous d’Athènes*. Greekness is a symbol for an endless universality, the prestigious start of a fully stated trans-europeanity: “*Nous sommes transeuropéens comme l’art, la géométrie, la musique, tout ce que vaut la peine d’être désiré.*” [We are all transeuropeans like the Arts, the Geometry, the Music, everything worthy of being desired.] This fundamental identity, which is European, is augmented and fortified by the national ones: Roumanian, French, Hellenic, Italian, Polish, etc. “*Je ne renoncerais, pour ma part, à aucune de ces patries particulières. Mais*

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<sup>1</sup> Diesbach, *Prințesa Bibescu*, 550–554.

<sup>2</sup> Marthe Bibesco, *La vie d’une amitié. Ma correspondance avec l’abbé Mugnier, 1911–1944* (The Life of a Friendship. My letters to aboot Mugnier, 1911–1944) (Paris: Plon, 1957), vol. 3, 527.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Echanges avec Paul Claudel: nos lettres inédites* (Exchanges with Paul Claudel. Our unpublished letters), Paris:Mercure de France, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> 1791–1865, one of the founders of the modern Greek state, chargé d’affaires in different European capitals, Minister of Finance and ultimately Prime-Minister of Greece.

*j'appartiens d'abord à l'Athènes céleste qui fut transporté de mon temps à Paris, arche sainte.*" [I shall not relinquish, me, any of these particular fatherlands. But first of all I belong to Celestial Athens, which had been transferred in my days to Paris, a sacred Ark (of the Covenant)], the princess considered. Celestial Athens is – in Marthe's literary symbolism – the metaphor for the quintessence of the European culture so perfectly illustrated by the city of Paris; Paris had to be the capital of a Europe whose supreme duty was to find its unity.<sup>1</sup>

It is for this reason that she starts writing, in the 1920s, *La Nymphe Europe*. The first volume – out of 27 planned, each dedicated to a European country – reached 650 pages. Published in 1960, when Marthe Bibesco was already living in exile, *La Nymphe Europe* was the literary outcome of entire decades of political and social observation. It is a history and genealogy of Europe based on Marthe's in-depth knowledge of the European aristocracy, a « *symphony of history, philosophy and mythology* » (as Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi saw it), delivered as an autobiography throughout the centuries. Marthe's aim was to spiritually reconquer Europe against all the forces keeping it divided. *Nymph Europe* would therefore turn into a reflection of the European unity achieved by a transnational family, which was Marthe's own. The term "family" was extended from birth to alliance; this vast extension of lineages, of intertwined ancestors and dynasties, of overlapping political interests in the Past were enough to prove and build Europe's unity, as Louise Weiss perceptively noticed.<sup>2</sup> Eulogies follow the publication, and among the most representative of all are the opinions of Charles de Gaulle, France's president and Marthe's friend, who writes her: *Quel raccourci et quelle perspective! Quelle histoire et quel conte! Vous avez saisi l'Europe!* [What a view and what a perspective! What a history and what a recounting! You've depicted Europe!].<sup>3</sup> Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi is another admirer, writing her and confessing that he and Marthe must have met in another life through his Kalergi and her Mavrocordato ancestors who shared the same ideals.<sup>4</sup>

But it is not just the genealogical alliances of Europe's monarchies and aristocracies that build the unity of Europe. From East to West, Europe displays political, social, societal, anthropological, linguistic and geopolitical similarities which are, again, a proof of an underlying unity needing to be revealed and explained. This is – to Marthe, and not only – the cultural and civilisational heritage of Greece and Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes above are taken from Marthe Bibesco, *La Nymphe Europe, Mes vies antérieures* (Nymph Europe. My previous lives) (Paris: Plon, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> The title of the book is in itself highly suggestive. Europe is incarnated by a feminine symbol – a nymph, from the Greek *nymphē*, also meaning wife. This nymph is spirit, it is memory and also an abducted princess that her brother, Phoenix, searches for all over the world. But the phoenix bird is exactly the heraldic symbol of Marthe's maternal family, the Mavrocordato; hence, analogically, daughter of the Phoenix herself, Marthe takes upon her the duty to find Europe and her spirit.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Charles de Gaulle to Marthe Bibesco, 1960 (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the year), typewritten copy, Bibesco papers, V.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi to Marthe Bibesco, August 12, 1960, typewritten copy, Bibesco papers, V.



**Patricia Todoran, *On Obstacles* 5**  
40 cm x 50 cm, lambda print, 2015

It was in her Roumanian masterpiece, *Isvor, Pays des saules* (*Isvor, Land of the Willows*), that Marthe Bibesco explores the antique Roman and Hellenic backgrounds of her native country. The book was also conceived as a diplomatic message, destined to highlight Roumania's Occidental credentials and imply that a nation representing the only Latin community in Central-and-Eastern Europe should not be abandoned by its Western European relatives – mainly France, Italy and Belgium.

Written in Switzerland in 1917, the book is the expression of a revived cultural experience. Away from home because of the war, and missing it, Marthe starts writing about her country in an attempt to feel closer to Roumania. She searches for the nation's deepest and most hidden cultural sources – those that can be seen clearer only when looked upon from afar. She plunges in folklore and reinterprets Roumania by revealing the entire complexity of this nation who absorbed influences coming, in time, from Paris and London, from Constantinople and Moscow or Sankt-Petersburg, from Venice and Krakow. The geographic location and the tumultuous history explains Roumania's exceptionalism – rarely understood – and her multiple singularities: the only Latin yet Orthodox nation in Europe; the only Latin nation located in Central and Eastern Europe; the only Latin country having used, for centuries, the Cyrillic alphabet; the only country belonging equally to Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe and to Eastern Europe; a country whose cultural heritage imposes on it to perform despite the often hostile geopolitical context; a country hesitating between openness and reclusion. In one of her books, she wrote: "*The heart of Roumania, my native land, hangs forever in the*



*balance—half Orient, half Occident. Hers is a dual nature, two distinct faces, and two opposing elements which yet powerfully attract each other. Land of contrast, of flame and of frost, she is one of the infinitely sensitive points de résonnance of the universe.”* She compares the country to Byzantium, Granada, Ravenna, Venice or Ragusa, “*which are other sensitive points of Europe, where Orient and Occident meet*” creating a “*stagger of aesthetic emotions*”.<sup>1</sup>

Her immense erudition serves her in this quest to discover Roumania’s roots and commonalities with the rest of Europe. The poetic spirituality of the myths, legends and folk traditions, so similar to those of the Celts, Germans, Slavs, adds to the affinities to the Græco-Roman culture. Wasn’t Europe’s *unitas multiplex*, unidiversity, reflected in Roumania’s cultural richness?... Marthe Bibesco adds: “*But that is the secret of Roumania—her profound resource, the key to her dual heart. Whoever judges her by only one of her faces mistakes her. Whoever loves her only for one of her beauties does not truly love her. Whoever criticizes her for her faults does not know how to offset them by her redeeming qualities.*”<sup>2</sup>

But poetry was not just poetry. Marthe’s poetic vision was the seductive part of a political and diplomatic expression. In her writings, when describing Roumania, she always finds a comparison to places more familiar to Western politicians, diplomats, aesthetes and literati – so that one can already create a mental projection not only of Roumania’s atmosphere but also of the country’s natural and civilisational perfect compatibility with Europe. For instance, she referred to Roumania as “*Dacia felix*”. It was a *livresque* manner to revive the beautiful past of a European territory that had shown much potential when a part of the Roman civilisation, and also an indicator of a promising future if the country was properly governed. She also facilitates the understanding of tradition or of ancient Roumanian art by referring to the Byzantine and Italian artistic patrimony, or sometimes to Germany’s or Spain’s; the understanding of geography by jolly transliterations of the Roumanian toponymy; the understanding of the language by revealing Latin etymologies and establishing comparisons to Italian and French; the understanding of rural society by comparison (mainly) to the French.<sup>3</sup> In this, her talent was unparalleled. It was easy to do so, as she felt European and she thought in a European manner. This is most probably why, when visiting Roumania in May 1968, Charles de Gaulle – Marthe Bibesco’s last grand political friend – took *Isvor* to read in order to culturally understand the country he was going to visit for the first time, part of his *Europe des patries*.<sup>4</sup>

Last but not least, the recurring historical references constitute a discreet message sent to those unable to understand enough the nuances hiding behind factual truths: Roumania was not a newly built country, emerging only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the map of Europe under the rule of foreign sovereign and Liberal

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<sup>1</sup> Bibesco, “My Roumania”, in *Vogue Magazine*, London, 15 June 1925. (Also available at <http://www.tkinter.smig.net/romania/Bibesco/index.htm>, accessed July 2014.)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Brăescu, *Interferențe românești în opera Marthei Bibescu* (Roumanian influences in Marthe Bibesco’s writings) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1983), 145–165.

<sup>4</sup> Diesbach, *Prințesa Bibescu*, 828.

government. If the foreign prince could rule upon a 121,000 km<sup>2</sup> Roumania – following a decision of the country's political élites in 1866 – it was because this country, larger than Portugal, had been built by two national dynasties, the Bassaraba of Wallachia and the Mushat of Moldavia, generation after generation, century after century, confronting the powerful neighbouring states, especially the Ottoman Empire. Roumania's second monarchy – a newcomer introduced by political resolution –, could not ignore the country's heroic past, the achievements of the preceding monarchs, nor the cultural and civilisational results so intimately related to the Greek-Orthodox and the Mediterranean worlds, illustrated by an architectural heritage appreciated by European scholars and connoisseurs. Modern Roumania, a young, Liberal, Francophile country, was obliged, first of all, to a deeper-rooted Roumania, original, resilient, wise, a cultural and political heiress of Byzantium and of Roman traditions, influenced by Italy and the Germanic world; secondly, the 1900s Liberals were indebted to the first generation of enlightened modernisers, the Princes-sovereign of Wallachia and Moldavia from the 1830s-1850s.<sup>1</sup>

Marthe Bibesco's Roumania is a cultural projection, built on structures that revolve around those of Europe's celebrated societies in terms of history, geography and heritage. It was Marthe's precise will – and capability – not only to shed light on the ethos of her native country but also to reveal the intricate ways Roumania belonged to the rich, diverse and wide-ranging profile of the European civilisation: the very civilisation whose composite cultural unity had been built centuries before. What Europe needed was just to be aware.

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<sup>1</sup> This set of ideas is a few times expressed in her book *La Nymphe Europe II. Où tombe la foudre* (Nymph Europe II. Where the lightning strikes) (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1976).