

Mindsets and perceptions across Europe: Karl Gustaf Idman's portray of Romanian corruption in the 1930s

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Abstract: Mindsets and perceptions across Europe: Karl Gustaf Idman's portray of Romanian corruption in the 1930s. This article deals with the mindsets and perceptions of a Finnish envoy concerning the malpractices, misconducts and corruption of the Romanian society. It starts from the premise that mindsets, perceptions and stereotypes can play an important role not only in the everyday or casual encounters between nationals of different ethnic background, but can also influence to some extent the forging of the relations between nations and countries. The article is based on the careful analyse of Karl Gustaf Idman's diplomatic reports to Hesinki found in the Finnish archives. The findings are referred to Rasma Karklins's typology of the acts of corruption.

Keywords: Karl Gustaf Idman, Romania, Finland, corruption, mindsets, perceptions, stereotypes

With some noticeable exceptions, the encounters between Romanians and Finns have been rather recent and casual. With some traits in the Middle Age and Modernity, the establishment of the Romanian-Finnish diplomatic relations in 1920 can be understood not as much as the climax of previous developments, but rather as a hopeful start in new international circumstances (S. Miloiu, 2006). Despite the technical progress in terms of transportation and knowledge not many Finns ventured as far as the seashores of the Black Sea and the Danube Delta. Therefore, the Finnish diplomats who resided in Romania (such as Väinö Tanner, Bruno Kivikoski or Ensio Hiitonen) or who travelled to this country such as Finland's envoys to Romania residing in Warsaw would count among the best documented Finns with regard to the realities of the Romanian society. In the absence of a larger sphere of contacts between the two societies, their views upon the other can be dealt with as case studies and some preliminary conclusions from their perceptions can be drawn. In this article, I will refer to the case of Karl Gustaf Idman who by virtue of his lasting appointment as Finnish envoy to Bucharest stretching for about a decade from the end of the

1920s to the end of the 1930s was in the capacity to follow the Romanian developments longer than any other of his colleagues in the Finnish Foreign Ministry. Karl Gustaf Idman (1885-1961) was a graduate from the Faculty of Law of Helsinki University who acquired a Ph.D. in Law in 1914. Eventually, he became a professor in Helsinki University. From 1918 Idman started a very successful career in the Finnish Foreign Ministry. Idman was posted to Copenhagen (at the same time being accredited from 1922 to Budapest) from 1919 to 1927, Riga (covering also Kaunas from 1927 to 1928), Warsaw (covering also Bucharest and for some time Prague) from 1928 to 1938 and Tokio during World War II. He reached the climax of his career in 1925 when he was from March to December his country's foreign minister (*, 1991).

Part of the Swedish Empire during the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age and an autonomous Grand Duchy under the Russian Tsars until 1917, once they became independent the Finns depicted themselves as a peripheral but integral part of Scandinavia to which they belonged by the virtue of their culture, traditions, religion and social traits while also preserving their uniqueness in

terms of language and historical developments. The rise of Finnish nationalism across class boundaries and the creation of an inter-class community have traditionally played a central role in the vigour of the young Finnish nationalism and national pride (R. Alapuro, 1980). Although some comparisons to the Romanian society as latecomers to modernity can be drawn, the geographical, cultural, social, religious and historical contexts in which the two nations have evolved are rather different. My article will show how these background differences have influenced Idman's perceptions of Romanian society.

Mindsets, perceptions and stereotypes can play an important role not only in the everyday or casual encounters between nationals of different ethnic background, but can also influence to some extent the forging of the relations between nations and countries. They are not static and have often changed as any other socially constructed reality. In a pledge for the importance of the psychological factors in decision-making, Glen Fisher emphasises the idea that even in the conduct of diplomacy, "today's reality in foreign affairs is found less in the formal dimension of diplomatic practice and more in the informal and even irrational dimension with selective knowledge, prejudices, attitudes, and opinions of participating masses of people" (G. Fisher, 1997, p. 11). To some extent, the moods and the viewpoints of the Finnish public opinion – in case that there existed something like that in a structured form with regard to South-Eastern Europe – have not influenced Idman's mindsets and perceptions of the Romanian society. Ironically, as I will demonstrate in my article, Idman's views in this respect have been influenced more by the moods and viewpoints of the Polish political, diplomatic and even public mindsets and perceptions.

For the purpose of this article, I will define mindsets as mental inclinations or attitudes, states of mind, filters which allows one to see selective parts of the social reality by virtue of education, experience or prejudice. In my case, Idman's birth in a higher class Finnish-Swedish family, his conservative political views and his close relations to Polish aristocratic circles have undoubtedly influenced his mindsets regarding the Romanian society. Mental images and intuitive cognition, the perceptions start with a stimulus "that, in effect, triggers a release of previous experience to round out the whole picture" (G. Fisher, 1997, p. 24-25). In this respect, the psychological construction and function of mindsets and perceptions is different. The cognitive system has also a strong impact on perceptions, a fact which will be exemplified by this article. A term introduced in the social sciences by

Walter Lippmann in 1922 to designate the opinions borrowed from elsewhere and the instant images, stereotypes refer to the first reaction, a cliché, usually basic, a generalization which applies to whole categories of individuals, social groups, or objects on the basis of their look, idiosyncrasy, social or cultural belonging. Defined as "social shortcuts", stereotypes concur to the creation of instant evaluations and judgments of the surrounding social reality (J. M. Seca, 2005). The problem with stereotypes is when they become more than impressions and are incorporated as such into mindsets and perceptions. In this case, they tend to deform the lenses by which the image is formed on the retina and downgrade the role of cognition in the construction of perceptions.

Long before the Transparency International (founded in May 1993), its Corruption Perception Index (starting with 1995) or the Google motor search (which gives some 27,100 results for "România corupție" = "Romania corruption" and 56 for "Suomi korruptio" = "Finland corruption" – 14.10.2009) existed the corruption was acknowledged as having a negative impact on the development, success, openness and satisfaction of the inhabitants of a given country. The corruption created disharmony, malfunctions and unrest within the society which, with the appearance of the modern mass-media, became widespread.

In a book concerning the corruption in post-communist societies, Rasma Karklins points out to the roots of corruption predating the communist takeover or the transition. The author undertakes a typology of corruption at three levels: the daily interaction between officialdom and citizens, the interactions within the public institutions and the influence on the public institutions. On the first level, Karklins includes, for instance, the corruption of the officials in order to transgress the law (initiated by citizens or by officials) or the abusive usage of authorizations and inspection rights. The second level encompasses the use of public funds and resources in personal scopes, dilapidation and traffic of influence. The third level, the most threatening for the society, includes the "state capture" in order to create personal fiefs, the creation of secret power networks, the undermining of elections and political competition, the arbitrary use of the legislative power, the corruption of the courts and the judiciary, the corruption of mass-media (R. Karklins, 2005). Karklins' typology is relevant to this article by its all-embracing character and serves us – when adapted to the interwar realities of Romania – to frame the most striking features of Romanian corruption that appear in Idman's diplomatic records.

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Although I do not intend to generalize the value of my findings based only on a case-study, they can be also a good indicator for explaining the widespread dissatisfaction inside the Romanian society at the time of Idman's reports that has stroke historians such as Armin Heinen (1999) or Francisco Veiga (1995). The reason for paying attention to these diplomatic documents as a key of reading the "malpractices" (as the author often calls them) in the Romanian society is that in terms of public honesty Romania and Finland were situated then as they are situated today poles apart. A history of hard work and social equality, a tradition of ethicality and the inheritance of Protestantism all account for the honesty of the Finnish political and administrative classes. In contrast, as Finnish travellers have witnessed already in the 19th century, the fertile soil, the plentiful of resources, the laziness, the social fractures within the society, and the inheritance of a corrupted political system born during the Ottoman Empire decadence may be quoted as fundamentals of Romanian corruption (R. Bossy, 2008). The contrasts between the two societies would have influence the mindsets and perceptions of a Finnish observer of the Romanian society be him as open-minded and stereotype-less as it may. The impact was bound to be stronger on a Finnish conservative whose moods were not necessarily favourable to Romanians.

In 1928 Karl Gustaf Idman would succeed Procopé at the head of the Finnish Legation in Warsaw, also supervising the Romanian developments. However, his diplomatic mission in respect to Romania would be really activated only in 1932, the year from which his diplomatic reports from Warsaw and Bucharest would become regular. The Swiss envoy René de Weck remembered Idman's visits to Romania twice a year to Romania and his support to the German and Polish foreign policy line (R. de Weck, 2000).

In one of his first diplomatic reports from Romania, Idman refers to what Karklins would call in her typology traffic of influence, decision manipulation (level 2) and creation of personal fiefs (level 3). The influence of these factors upon King Charles II decision-making was obvious in the way the resignation of Iuliu Maniu's government was brought about in January 1933. Commenting upon king's mistress Elena Lupescu's role in politics, Idman uses an inductive argument by concluding that politics and love were so much intertwined in Romania that they can be approached in the same dispatches regarding the general situation of the country (**, Idman's dispatch no. 1 of 20.01.1933).

The National Peasants Government's resignation in November 1933 and their substitution for the National Liberal Party occasioned Idman an evaluation of the activity of the former executive. Thus, he notices the peculiarity of this government formed around former Austria-Hungarian subjects revolted against the malpractices encouraged by former Old Kingdom power holders. The first Iuliu Maniu government was greeted with enormous satisfaction and great expectations were invested in its capacity to bring honesty into the country's system of governance. Idman believed that the government had genuinely sought to achieve these results but the fact that the stakes were too high, the incapacity of the government to start fighting corruption from its own ranks and the effects of the Great Depression which delayed the payments of the administration for months brought it to failure. Among Romanian politicians, Idman praises Maniu as a personality whose honesty was above any doubts. As regards the Liberal Government, the Finnish diplomat predicts a victory in elections due to the Romanian governments' ability to win the elections they were organizing, a practice which falls into level 3 of Karklins' typology concerning the undermining of elections and political competitions. By the end of 1933 Idman's perceptions of the Romanian political scene were formed and they will mature in the subsequent years. It is no wonder that at the end of his report Idman shows his caustic pessimism that the "hopes" and "prophecies" that the new government will cease the flourishing vicious practices will come true (**, Idman's dispatch no. 6 of 28.11.1933).

The span of a year passed until his report of November 1934 dealing with the Romanian corrupted governmental system would not alleviate the diplomat's perceptions. The "thesis" of his idea is presented already in the first phrase of the dispatch when arguing that "Romania belongs to those countries where the domestic situation can never be satisfactory when judged according to the public decisions". In this respect, Idman quoted the lack of honesty of the officials and their corruptibility. These factors also affected the courts. As with the hopes vested into the National Peasants in 1928, the optimism regarding Charles the Second's ability to better organize the country's administration had failed to materialize. Nevertheless, Idman was not unaware of the power of the king according to Romanian political practices where the monarch appointed the PM and the government "made" the Parliament or of Charles' authoritarian designs. The manipulation of the electoral process was due to a mixture of administrative pressure and peasantry

submission based on the idea that all governments are equally bad or good and that was better to vote for the government in order to expect some benefits from it (**, Idman's dispatch no. 4 of 20.11.1934).

Three years later, at a time when rumours of the Liberal Government's resignation were circulating, Idman remarked the widespread dissatisfaction with Gheorghe Tătărăscu-led government. The Finnish diplomat understood that the real power holder in Romania was King Charles II whose Western press portrait of an insignificant man who does not really participate in the leadership of the government he strongly denies. On the contrary, Idman portrays Charles as a "capable and hardworking" sovereign who took advantage of the country's primitive and corrupted "civilization" thus becoming almost an autocrat. Thus, Idman accounts for the virtual "state capture" which was on the way of being undertaken by the king (Idman's dispatch no. 2 of 1.06.1937, UA, 5 C14). Idman felt fortified in his opinions following a meeting with one of the leaders of the National Peasants Party who complained that no Romanian ruler had interfered into the things such as King Charles II. Contrasting his leadership with King Charles First's, the politician complained that even the censorship and the martial law derived from the will of the monarch, the primary meaning of them being to prevent the newspapers writing anything about his mistress Elena Lupescu. Nevertheless, Idman was not prepared to take all these accusations for granted as according to his interpretation the phenomenon was more general and malpractices and bribery not only stayed with the King at the table but made good family with governments (**, Idman's dispatch no. 8 of 29.10.1937).

Idman's perceptions have been constructed not only from political accusations or press investigations, but also from concrete facts some of which are quoted in his dispatches to Helsinki. In this regard I will refer to some of the most striking examples from his diplomatic dispatches. When the head of the Finnish company Suomi Gummittehta Westerlund and his wife had visited Romania, in order to get their passports and leave the country in time had to buy tickets for a football competition where they did not have the possibility to go because the competition was scheduled four days after his leaving. A manager from Tampere who found himself in a similar situation was obliged to buy four or eight bricks at the hotel desk in order to have his passport stamped. The hotel that took care of stamping considered the issue so natural that it was unquestionable to them to pay the requested amount of money. Following his investigations into the

matter, Idman learned from an Englishman that it was habitual that foreigners paid such sums and the whole process was fully organized. In the case of football tickets, the mayor was the head of the football association and he extorted this way money for covering the expenses. The "buying" of the bricks derived from a time when sums were sought in order to build a new prefecture office building. With the prefecture already finished for years, the brick selling to foreigners continued, an English acquaintance of Idman estimating that the sums hoarded up by these means amounting to the construction of ten prefectures. Idman also quoted the case of an Englishman leaving in Bucharest who had to pay over years at least 60,000 lei for bricks! (**, Idman's dispatch no. 8 of 29.10.1937).

If foreigners were extorted this way, the Romanians interacting with the state institutions were not faring any better in Idman's interpretation. The dishonesty of officials extended also to such important institutions as the army. Idman mentioned the cases when conscripts were obliged to pay their officers in order to shorten their term of service or receive permission. The Finnish diplomat quotes the case of a German-language worker who was obliged by law to serve 18 months of military training. However, he was released after only six months and was employed in a fabric. Weekly he went to pay a share of his salary to his officer. The military service's conditions were very heavy because officers treated badly their soldiers. The German soldier quoted cases when soldiers died because of the abusive treatment. Although the law forbade the usage of corporal punishment, this was often not obeyed (**, Idman's dispatch no. 8 of 29.10.1937).

Idman's mindsets and perceptions of the Romanian society will influence his analysis of the Legionnaire Movement (more famous in Western historiography under the more martial name of the Iron Guard). Idman dedicates some diplomatic reports to this movement whose growth in the 1930s was indeed impressive (for instance in his report no. 1 of 15.01.1938, UA, 5 C14). In a dispatch of mid-May 1938 Idman professed of sharing with his Scandinavian colleagues, with the British envoy Sir Reginald Hoare and with the German envoy Wilhelm Fabricius the idea that the domestic prevailing malpractices had brought about the birth of this organization and as such he interpreted it as being rooted into the Romanian inner life and not a result of German sponsorship. The widespread dissatisfaction of the youth with these malpractices – recognized even by Charles Second's PM and Patriarch Miron Cristea in a conversation with Idman - was largely responsible for the movement's

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popularity. Idman describes in a favourable light the personality of the leader of the party, Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, whose real popularity in Romania is acknowledged (Idman's dispatch no. 5 of 18.05.1938, UA, 5 C14). In another report Idman will portray Codreanu as "strong-minded" and man with exceptional organizational skills who for many years made a quiet, obstinate work (**, Idman's dispatch no. 2 of 28.02.1938).

The anti-legionnaire meaning of King Charles' coup d'état of February 1938 is also analyzed in Idman's reports. The carrying out of the coup and the introducing of a new Constitution turned the King into "a despot", a word which is used again in Idman's reports to refer to Charles II. The appointment of Octavian Goga's government and the calling of new elections created a climate where the political strife had intensified to the advantage of the Iron Guard. The government took harsh measures against the legionnaires: their members were forbidden to move by car to the countryside, wear uniforms and so forth. Feeding his perceptions from the Polish envoy to Bucharest Tomasz Arciszewski's estimations, Idman reported about "the enormous support from the population" that the Iron Guard enjoyed, a movement whose main goal – he stressed - was to ruthlessly cure the prevailing Romanian malpractices and misconducts. Idman also describes in general lines the Legionnaire Movement and makes the portrait-robot of the legionnaire. According to his dispatch, the Legion consisted of a couple of hundreds of thousands individuals totally committed to the movement, workers and intellectuals included. A legionnaire was a sworn individual who lived modestly and did things to improve the situation around him. Often living in groups in the countryside, they involved themselves into construction of needed schools, hospitals and buildings for public use requesting no salary, singing and living a peasant live. Their influence was beneficial in so far as soon the locality where they gathered "was filled with a mystical aspiration to do good and to benefit the native place." Facing with measures ordered against them and imprisonments, the legionnaire submitted himself without a murmur explaining that the real Romanian is submissive and can die if for the good of the country was necessary. The state violence against legionnaires brought the Iron Guard even broader support because it was nothing illegal in its activity. The anti-corruption focus of the Iron Guard ideology generated a reaction from the King and part of the political class who felt threatened by this program. This alliance produced the coup of February 1938. The King chose Patriarch Miron Cristea to be

appointed PM of the new regime in order to use the prestige of the church against the Iron Guard and its menacing peasant and priests supporters. The circumstances determined the King to use the discontent with the parties and promise to cure the society's malpractices. The coup caused Codreanu to call off the activity of his movement, but Idman doubted that such a national movement would stop abruptly. To support this idea, Idman refer to an information from Arciszewski arguing that in Romania hardly can be found a lawyer who would not be a member of the Iron Guard, their strive being for the improvement of the activity in the courts (**, Idman's dispatch no. 2 of 28.02.1938).

After witnessing the failure of the National-Peasants and early King's announced attempts to heal the "malformations" of the country's political life, Idman was not very optimistic in his assessments of the new regime to manage to do so although he expected that Charles II was going to try his best. The dismissal of numerous officials was necessary as it was habitual that every new government employed some 10,000 to 12,000 new officials, so that their number had reached a figure of 300,000. In case of sovereign's failure, the Finnish diplomat predicted many other "disturbances" in the Romanian society. Worse, the accusations against his advisers were going to turn after assuming personal responsibility into accusations directed against the monarch. Acclaimed individuals such as Maniu, Codreanu and Goga remained outside and critical of the new regime (**, Idman's dispatch no. 2 of 28.02.1938).

If the Romanian domestic political life is depicted as perverted by corruption and malpractices, its foreign policy is not considered bribery- and malpractices-free either. Often Idman describes Romania as a Balkan country and attributes to its politicians Balkan habits such as dishonesty, incapacity to obey the treaties, conventions and agreements and so forth. Idman includes even Romania's famous foreign minister Nicolae Titulescu within this category. The Romanian foreign minister is presented as living a luxurious life and winning the sympathy of the French press with "jingling gold" (**, Idman's dispatch no. 5 of 23.11.1934). The stereotype of Titulescu presented as a spendthrift and sumptuous individual whose expenses greatly exceeded Romania's capacities will return in Idman's analyses several times, including in his dispatched after foreign minister's removal from office on August 29, 1936 (**, Idman's dispatch no. 5 of 23.11.1934).

The discussions between Romanians and Soviets as a result of the rapprochement between

France and Soviet Union in mid-1930s were followed closely by the Finnish envoy whose country was deeply concerned about Soviet foreign policy. Sounding the opinion of PM Tătărescu about the ongoing discussion on this subject, Idman was astonished to hear from the head of Romania's government that in case such an agreement was reached it would be achieved "pour la galerie", the issue of Red Army crossing through Romanian territory being however decided at proper time according to the circumstances. This triggered a sarcastic comment from the Finnish diplomat that the issue of Romania concluding an understanding or not is given exaggerated importance because this country would not understand a pledge and a commitment similarly with other states: "in politics naturally anyone takes into consideration the dominant circumstances, but it is probably unusual that an important political treaty is concluded only for the gallery." However amazed by Tătărescu's frank statement, Idman pledged being himself accustomed to Romanian incapacity to keep to the agreements which he experienced during the "numerous" economic and commercial agreements signed with Romania and never implemented (***, Idman's dispatch no. 14 of 25.11.1935). Indeed, especially between 1933 and 1936 the difficulty in finding a common advantageous solution to the trade relations between the two parties will create a feeling of acrimony expressed in the Finnish envoy's dispatches to Helsinki (e.g. **, Idman's report no. 4 of 15.05.1933). If in his analyses of the Romanian domestic politics Idman's mindsets and perceptions have a strong root into his cognitive system, in his analyses of Romanian foreign policy stereotypes and generalizations are more present. Based on the study of his diplomatic dispatches, I advance the idea that Idman's excellent relations with the Polish Foreign Ministry and with the Polish envoy Arciszewski to Bucharest at a time when due to the divergent strategies of the two foreign policies the Polish-Romanian relations reached at their nadir explains the Finnish envoy bias against Romania's foreign policy. The stereotype of a country that singles out by not fulfilling its agreements and pledges must be rejected as simplistic and adding nothing to any serious critic of Romanian diplomacy behaviour and practices. This is not however to say that for a scrupulous Finn born in a country with very strict rules in obeying one own's promises the more libertarian Romanian manner of dealing with such issues would not be struck.

Idman's depiction of the malpractices, misconducts and corruption in the Romanian society discloses the mindsets and values of the author as

much as the drawbacks of the Romanian society. A Finn born into a Finnish-Swedish family with sympathies to conservatives, Idman appreciated order, stability, honour and public honesty which he found in a lesser quantity in Romanian political life. Moreover, his views were also influenced by him watching the Romanian developments – where he travelled about twice a year – from Warsaw from where he absorbed certain Polish prejudices against their allies and neighbours from Romania whose foreign, military and domestic policy was heading into a dangerous direction according to the opinion of some Polish diplomats, including Colonel Beck or Arciszewski. Moreover, according to the Swiss envoy René de Weck, Idman showed some sympathy to Nazi Germany. In my opinion these influences can partly explain Idman's mindsets and perceptions of the Legionnaire Movement which contrast strongly to his general assessment of the Romanian society. The Finnish envoy disgust of malpractices, misconducts and corruption would fill the picture.

If I refer back to Karklins typology of acts of corruption, Idman's dispatches are a proof regarding the widespread character and the dangerous level of Romania's corruption. The Finnish diplomat quotes situations when corruption occurred in the daily interaction between institutions and citizen, inside institutions and perverting the functional character of institutions. The request for bribery, the extortion of money or the usage of subordinates to achieve personal benefits – although widespread - are situated at the lower level of malpractices. More serious acts of corruption involved the corruption of the justice system and courts, the undermining of the free and fair elections system, the abusive use of the legislative power and the creation of secret power networks (the camarilla) and personal fiefs. In the end they will prove fatal to Romania's young democratic system and lead to what Karklins terms "state capture". Basing one's conclusions and generalizing upon the finding derived from a case study is not beneficial to our knowledge of the past. Yet, Idman's views are interesting given his background, personality and function and can be paralleled to the views expressed in some self-critical publications of mid-1930s such as "*România de azi*". In absence of such instruments as the Corruption Perception Index, such pieces of information when put together can contribute to a better understanding of the Romanian social unrest in the 1930s and the failure of the country's democratic system.

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