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### THE MEANING OF "EXTREMISM"

In his Report prepared for the Political Affairs Committee regarding the threat posed to democracy by the extremist parties and movements in Europe<sup>1</sup>, Rapporteur Henning Gjellerod (Denmark, Socialist Group) distinguished between five categories, depending on the ideologies they represent:

I. Extreme left-wing terrorist movements that aim to overthrow the lawful constitutional order by violent means;

II. Armed nationalist or independence movements and anti-independence movements, seeking either to bring about or to prevent secession by particular provinces or ethnic groups;

III. Armed Muslim fundamentalist movements and the European branches of fundamentalist parties from the Maghreb region of North Africa and the Middle East;

IV. Unreformed communist parties, mainly confined to Central and Eastern Europe, which are opposed to any compromise with the institutions established under the democratization process;

V. Extreme right-wing parties and movements, which propagate mistrust of democracy combined with racism and xenophobia and anti-Semitism and revisionism, all to varying degrees.

The Rapporteur noted the variety of evolutions and manifestations associated with extremism today in the countries of the Council of Europe; the spectacular growth of the number of nationalist-populist countries in the '90s; the importance of "talented demagogues"; the fact that populism and xenophobia are basic weapons of the extremists, united by their hostility against European integration; their anti-American character, given their anti-liberalism and aversion against anything that is cosmopolitan.

1 Of January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2000, cf. <http://starts.coe.int/>

This complex reality suggests that when we choose one particular “conception of extremism”, we should have in mind first and foremost the usefulness of that conception, i.e. its ability to cover the most debilitating tendencies in one particular country. In the case of Romania, these tendencies are racist, chauvinistic, xenophobic attitudes and their political manifestations. As a consequence, the subject matter of the following pages shall be those attitudes that are close to what has been called “hyper-nationalism”<sup>2</sup> or “ultra-nationalism”. *In the case of Romania, the most substantial, effective and dangerous form of extremism has taken the shape of hyper- or ultra-nationalism, i.e., “the belief that other nations or nation-states are both inferior and threatening and must therefore be dealt with harshly”.*<sup>3</sup>

One of the standard questions pertaining to the issue of extremism is whether we are dealing with right-wing or left-wing extremism. This question is doubly relevant in the case of Romania. During its last decades, Romanian communism put on the coat of national-communism, in which anti-Hungarian sentiment played a crucial part. After 1990, ultra-nationalism was spread by communist elites and the most compromised part of the old Securitate forces, as a strategy of re-legitimizing themselves.<sup>4</sup>

From the point of view of traditional categories, racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism are considered right-wing attitudes.<sup>5</sup> The fact that this analysis will look at right-wing attitudes can also be

2 In the sense given to it by John Mearsheimer, “The belief that other nations or nation states are simultaneously inferior and threatening, and therefore must be treated harshly.” (John Mearsheimer: “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War”, *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Summer 1990, pp. 55-56.

3 Although present in Romanian literature, the term “hyper-nationalism” is not as common as the “ultra-nationalism” variant. See Valentin Stan, “Nationalism and European Security: Romania’s Euro-Atlantic Integration”, *International Studies*, Bucharest, No. 1, pp. 27-48; Gabriel Andreescu, Renate Weber, “Nationalism and Its Impact upon the Rule of Law in Romania”, in *International Studies*, Bucharest, No. 1, pp. 49-64. In his extensive study of Romanian nationalism (*Democracy and Nationalism in Romania, 1989–1998*, Bucharest, All, 1999) Tom Gallagher refers to ultra-nationalism, as does another reputed analyst of Romanian extremism, Michael Shafir (see his *Reports on Eastern Europe* and *East European Perspectives*: [www.rferl.org/eeepreport/](http://www.rferl.org/eeepreport/)).

4 See Gabriel Andreescu, *Ruleta. Români și maghiari, 1990–2000*, Polirom, Iași, 2001.

5 See the definition of one of the European experts on right-wing extremism: “The term ‘extreme-right parties’ refers to political parties with a core ideology that includes (at least) the features of nationalism, xenophobia, welfare-chauvinism, and law and order.” (Cas Mudde, “Extreme-right Parties in Eastern Europe”, in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Institute for Jews Policy Research, vol. 34, no. 1, 2000, p. 5).

explained by the fact that left-wing extremism was – and still is – an obscure force in this country.<sup>6</sup> The few left-wing extremist organizations in the early nineties (“The League of Romanian Communists”, “The Initiative Committee for the Establishment of the Romanian Communist Party”, the *Scântea socialismului* newspaper) have been completely marginal in political life as well as in the media.<sup>7</sup> Their slogans against private property enjoy no sympathy today and will not inspire people in the future, either. Their presence in the public space is limited to statements that are hardly considered or covered by the mass media, and are always quickly forgotten. Their offensive style is just a mask for their almost total lack of audience and means.

Under such circumstances, this Report will refer to left-wing extremism only in passing. The extremist attitudes commonly described as right-wing cover almost completely the question of extremism in Romania.<sup>8</sup>

6 According to the June 1998 – June 1999 SRI Report, left-wing extremist movements have had little impact, especially due to their modest audience. Their goals have been predominantly connected with the re-organization and legalization of Romanian Communist Party structures. At the end of 1999, nine foundations or associations were active for those purposes. Since the financial means of these groups are very limited, their leaders usually seek foreign financial support.

7 Gabriel Andreescu, “Raportul Serviciului Român de Informații” (“Romanian Intelligence Service Report”), *Revista Română de Drepturile Omului*, No. 6-7, 1994, pp. 17-25.

8 Considering the level of poverty, the widespread corruption and the acute polarization, which leave little room for a middle-class, the emergence of left-wing extremism is, in principle, possible.

