
VII.

ACTORS OPPOSING EXTREMISM IN ROMANIA

There are two types of actors that have limited or blocked the development of extremism in Romania: internal and external actors. Less visible but ultimately crucial is the synergy between them. Both kinds of actors have supported and legitimated each other in their anti-extremist efforts, and neither would have achieved on their own the degree of efficacy they achieved in cooperation.

Internal Political Forces

Between 1992 and 2002, the main forces that opposed extremist ideologies were non-governmental organizations or teams gathered around media. In this respect at least, the academic world has not been a worthy model. On the contrary, leaders of educational institutions participated in shameful anti-Hungarian campaigns.

As for the post-1990 political class, it was rather a source of chauvinistic, racist, anti-Semite manipulation. The evolution of ultranationalist parties (PRM, PUNR) is merely one aspect of the relation between extremism and politics. These parties have constantly received direct or indirect support from the political force that led the country in the first post-revolutionary years (the Front for National Salvation [FSN], and later the Party of Social Democracy in Romania [PDSR]). The latter has constantly been interested in employing nationalism to secure legitimacy, but also in order to ensure a more “decent” status by comparison with the ultranationalists.²¹⁷ Yet the political opposition before 1996 was itself weak, fragmented, and confused. For years, the parties making up the old

²¹⁷ Gabriel Andreescu, Renate Weber, “Nationalism and Its Impact on the Rule of Law”, *International Studies* no. 1, Bucharest, pp. 47-62.

Opposition have tried to win the electorate, sometimes through nationalist attitudes and statements.²¹⁸

Human rights and pro-European organizations have been at the forefront of the anti-extremist campaign. In the first years after 1989, one of the main actors was the Group for Social Dialogue in Bucharest, whose *22* magazine represented for a while the voice of the pro-democratic Romanian intellectuals. The Timișoara Society fought in the eponymous city for the generalization of the local model of interculturality and ecumenism. The Târgu Mureș based Pro-Europe League has been the most successful promoter of Romanian-Hungarian dialogue. It was also one of the first groups to develop programs for Roma. In Cluj, the Transylvanian city held under siege by its ultranationalist mayor Gheorghe Funar, the Association for Interethnic Dialogue and its *Dialog Interetnic* journal were of particular importance.²¹⁹ The largest civil movement in the country, the Civil Alliance, has been conceived from the very beginning as a framework for interethnic action. This enabled it to defuse aggressive incitements coming from the ultranationalists.²²⁰

Among the Human Rights Organizations, the Romanian Helsinki Committee deserves a special mention for its important programs and advocacy in the field of national minorities. The Committee was involved in the improvement of the legislative framework in the field of national minority protection, and contributed to the adoption, in 2000, of anti-discrimination legislation.

ACCEPT, the first organization concerned exclusively with the question of the rights of sexual minorities managed to obtain, at the end of 2001, the disinclination of homosexual relations, in spite of fierce resistance from the Romanian Orthodox Church and other extremist-nationalist forces. ACCEPT specialized in raising awareness within a society that remains largely homophobic.

The press has often been an outlet for nationalist forces or, when political command was absent, it promoted its own chauvinistic cultural politics, especially with regard to Roma and Hungarians.²²¹ In this

218 Tom Gallagher, *Op.cit.*

219 Gabriel Andreescu, *Ruleta*.

220 The Covasna branch of the Civic Alliance organized, in the fall of 1991, a meeting bringing together 5,000 Romanians and Hungarians. This meeting was responsible for defusing one of the most serious crises in Transylvania (Gabriel Andreescu, *Ruleta*).

221 A 2001 study indicated that while anti-Roma stereotypes in the central press are present in a percentage of 41.59% of the articles surveyed, positive attitudes are expressed in a mere 4.59% (*Studiu de caz (Study Case)*, Romani CRISS and Media Monitoring Agency).

context, one should emphasize the significance of the anti-fundamentalist cultural press, including such journals or magazines as *Orizont* (Timișoara), 22, and recently *Observatorul cultural* (Bucharest).

A decisive part was played by the civil and political organizations of national minorities. In the case of the Hungarian community, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) has dominated in an absolute manner the relations between this community and the majority, while other Hungarian associations and foundations have been primarily concerned with the issue of identity preservation. As a part of the government in 1996, and later as a signer of a protocol with the governing party in 2000, the ability of the Hungarian community to promote its interests increased.²²²

One delicate aspect of the public sphere in Romania is that of anti-Roma sentiment and discrimination. Of all social groups, Roma are today the most likely target of extremist attacks. The emergence of Roma civic and political elites was crucial to limiting such tendencies. As of this writing, several dozen Roma associations and three political parties are active. They contributed to new relations between the Roma communities and public institutions. In March 2000, the Romanian gendarmerie signed a “Protocol of Partnership” with Roma representatives, aimed at increasing co-operation and mutual trust.²²³ Roma NGOs have also learned to coordinate their positions on issues of common interest. At the beginning of 1999, at their initiative, representatives of 80 Roma NGOs nominated a fifteen-person Roma Working Group to represent them in working with the National Office for Roma to develop a Phare-sponsored national strategy for Roma.²²⁴ Roma NGOs have participated in campaigns for the adoption of the Law on Public Advertising and of Ordinance 137. They have joined forces in protests against racist statements in the press, as well as in support of the adoption of positive legal measures to ensure equal treatment for Roma.²²⁵

In 2000, the most powerful Roma political organization, the Roma Party, signed a protocol with the governing party, PSD, which is the first

222 Which did not prevent anti-Hungarian attitudes in 2001, even within the PSD (see, among others, the Report of the SRI Control Commission concerning the “loss of state control in Harghita and Covasna”). See APADOR-CH Report, 2001.

223 Open Society Institute, *Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2001.

224 The meetings – held in Mangalia and Sibiu – were supported and attended by representatives of the DPNM, the EU and the Project on Ethnic Relations. *Aven Amentza*, No. 12-13, 2000.

225 *Aven Amentza*, No. 12-13, August–September 2000.

226 The Group for Social Dialogue, Civil Alliance, Association of Ex-Political Prisoners in Romania, the Association of the Victims of the Miners’ Crusades.

instance in which the Roma community took part in the definition of public policies in Romania.

A good example of the way in which civil society joined forces against extremism was the reaction against the attempted coup of 1999 orchestrated by the Greater Romania Party (PRM). Several important organizations in Bucharest created a veritable “strategic council” which prepared the defense against those who were threatening the rule of law. Their strategy included media statements and articles, demonstrations and talks with the authorities. As the government and the president were getting ready to call a state of emergency, the NGOs²²⁶ announced and held in Bucharest a march of solidarity with the rule of law (January 22, 1999). A similar march had taken place in Timișoara the day before, also as part of a coherent strategy devised by active pro-democratic groups. The fact that the leaders of the parties in power and other high officials²²⁷ insisted, on the morning of January 22, that the demonstrations should be held as planned, points to the self-conscious weakness of the state, but no less to the part played by the NGOs in the public space.²²⁸

This short list indicates the role of a part of the civil society in the fight against extremism. On the other hand, as indicated above, a large number of foundations and associations promote nationalist and extremist associations. The paradox is that, today, pro-democratic organizations in Romania are almost completely sponsored from the West, while many nationalist, overtly chauvinistic associations receive funds from the state budget.²²⁹

Romania’s Participation in International Life, as a Major Factor Limiting Extremism

Romania signed the Declaration of the Copenhagen Meeting of 1990. It became a member of the Council of Europe in 1993, and enjoyed full membership rights after it ratified the European Convention of Human Rights in 1994. Opinion 176 on Romania’s application for membership in the Council of Europe requested the Romanian state to “urgently modify... Article 19 of the Act on the organization of the judiciary”; “Article 200 of

227 Among them, the mayor of the Capital.

228 On the other hand, the weakness of the authorities on that occasion was also apparent when they failed to fulfill other duties (e.g. in their poor administration of exceptional measures).

229 Some nationalist leaders found new associations and baptize them with pro-European names. In this, they seek democratic legitimacy and eliminate authentic NGOs from competition for resources. See European Studies Center Covasna-Harghita.

the Criminal Law will no longer consider as a criminal offence homosexual acts in private between consenting adults”; “implement improvements in conditions of detention”; “adopt and implement as soon as possible (...) Recommendation 1201”; “make use of all means available to a constitutional state in order to combat racism and anti-Semitism, as well as all forms of nationalist and religious discrimination and incitement thereto”; “sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages”.

The modification of the law on the organization of the judiciary and the appointment of unmovable judges were both implemented in 1994. The provisions of Article 200 of the Criminal law were relaxed in 1996, and then completely abrogated in 2001. The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages was signed but, so far, not ratified. The legislation in the field of national minorities improved to a considerable extent, but chauvinistic and discriminatory manifestations and attitudes remained a part of the public space in Romania. Romania’s participation in the Council raises an obvious question concerning the effect of Romania’s integration in intergovernmental bodies.

The answer has to take into account the considerable force of the autochthon groups and groups who are opposing the values of European democracy. In the political internal competition, nationalism and ultranationalism are a very handy tool in the hands of those who control institutional access and economic power and can turn ideology into political capital.

Considering the above, we believe that the answer is in the positive. Without the authority of intergovernmental bodies it is less likely that Romania had continuously improved its legislative framework and public policies. The legitimacy lent to the organizations of civil society, which often appealed to means provided by the Council, was no less instrumental to these achievements.²³⁰

For many years, OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities Max van der Stoep has played a remarkable role by reducing the danger of ethnic crisis in the country. The High Commissioner’s visits in Bucharest, during the most critical times, the 1990s, convinced Romanian decision-makers and Hungarian leaders to keep dialogue.

While the relationship with the Council of Europe was crucial in the first years after 1989, later on the main engine of change were the negotiations with the European Union. EU norms concerning equality of opportunity led to the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation in 2001.²³¹

230 Gabriel Andreescu, *Solidaritatea alergătorilor de cursă lungă*, Iași, Polirom, 1999.

231 See the Council Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, June 2000.

The government's "Strategy for Improving the Roma Situation", approved in April 2001, was an item of the short-term Accession Partnership Agreement.²³² Between 1997 and 2000, the European Union funded 12 projects dedicated to improving the situation of Roma through the "Phare Democracy" and "LIEN" programs.

A significant part was played by the relation between Romania and the United States, in which the process of NATO enlargement loomed large. The US State Department may still exert considerable influence upon Romanian authorities. The Department prepares a yearly report on human rights in Romania, in which the issue of extremism is discussed more or less explicitly. The interventions of American congressmen prompted several government leaders and presidents to add their voices to the chorus of criticisms against the cult of Marshall Antonescu, in spite of sympathetic positions taken by many in the country's political elite. In other words, American concern over anti-Semitic manifestations in Romania was a very important sign of warning for the Bucharest authorities.

The United States also played a decisive role in determining the PDSR-led government to sign and ratify, in 1996, the Basic Treaty between Romania and Hungary. They were no less important in preventing the adoption of legislation against religious minorities in spite of tremendous pressures by the BOR.

Synergy

The last example is illustrative of the significance of the synergy between internal and international actors. In 1999, Ambassador at Large Robert A. Seiple came to Bucharest and, by virtue of his powers under the International Freedom Act of 1998, voiced his concern with the adoption by the government of a bill concerning the regime of religious cults that grossly violated freedom of belief and religion. The cooperation of active human rights organizations and churches²³³ was decisive, and additional international support ultimately resulted in the withdrawal of the bill from the Parliament.²³⁴

In more general terms, almost all cases of anti-extremist success involved a synergy of internal and international actors. Keeping the tension between Romanians and Hungarians at sub-critical levels was possible due to the ability of Project for Ethnic Relations to preserve dialogue

232 The development of a Roma strategy was supported by a PHARE budget of two million (Reference no. PHARE RO 9803.01).

233 Romanian Helsinki Committee and the Baptist Church.

234 Gabriel Andreescu, *Working Paper*, Bucharest, CENPO, 1999.

between the Romanian and Hungarian political leaders in moments of tension. The involvement of Romanian civic actors was equally crucial.

In 1994–1995, special ties between Dutch Helsinki Committee, OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, Romanian Helsinki Committee, and UDMR preserved opportunities for rational analysis and dialogue. This was essential for developing adequate approach to Hungarians requirements and preparing that civic and political environment necessary for the change in 1996, when UDMR joined the government.²³⁵

A final example would be that of the cooperation between organizations dealing with the rights of gay and lesbian persons²³⁶ and the European Commission and European Parliament. These organizations were online as the parliament and the government were debating the issue of Article 200 of the Criminal Code. The homophobic pressures of orthodox circles could be defeated only by fast, informed, joint reaction against the decisions of Romanian authorities before they were ratified.

To conclude, the synergy between internal civic and political groups, on the one hand, and international bodies on the other, is one of the most powerful instruments of democratic evolution and anti-extremist action in this country.

235 One could notice the role of some key actors, one of them being the OSCE expert Arie Bloed. He worked that time with High Commissioner, but as member of the Dutch Helsinki Committee, he put in connection those Romanian NGOs leaders committed for minority rights, with their governmental partners. This strategy proved to be a resource of inter-ethnic stability.

236 First of all, ACCEPT, with the help of organizations such as the Romanian Helsinki Committee.

