

ROMANIAN ELECTION NEWS SHEETS IN BANAT AND TRANSYLVANIA BEFORE 1918*

Vlad Popovici**, Ovidiu Emil Iudean***

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(Abstract)

The study analyses three publications that appeared in 1909 and 1910 and had a purely electoral nature: *Oravița, Alegătorul (The Voter)* and *Sus inimile (Raise Your Hearts)*. These are the only Romanian election news sheets prior to the year 1918 that were preserved from Transylvania and Banat, being little known and referred to in historiography. The study presents the publications' content, their role within the moment's electoral campaign and the relationship between the information they offer and the one provided by other sources from the same period. The conclusions emphasise the important role played by these news sheets in understanding the electoral process at the beginning of the 20th century, but also their obvious limitations and especially the caution with which one must use the information they offer, as it is clearly influenced by their' propagandistic and mobilising character.

Before 1918, the Romanian political press from Transylvania and Hungary comprised 42 titles, amongst which three 'occasional news sheets': *Oravița, Alegătorul (The Voter)* and *Sus inimile (Raise Your Hearts)*.¹ Occasional electoral

supplements to the Romanian newspapers have been published ever since the end of the 19th century, but stand-alone election news sheets are rare, and have been almost completely neglected by historians. Although their message is identical with that of the regular press, their reduced number and their late appearance on the market place them amongst the new instruments of electoral propaganda, alongside electoral brochures² and printed parliamentary and electoral discourses.³ At a different level, the election news sheets can also be included in the category of the publications destined for the large masses of peasants, representing a continuation of the line opened in 1893 by *Foaia Poporului (The People's Sheet)* and a form of the publishing effort of the Romanian National Party (RNP) meant to bring it closer to the rural electorate by editing brochures and almanacs of political education. It is interesting that these election news sheets seem to have remained almost unknown to historians,⁴ being signalled only in press bibliographies. One of the reasons for

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** 'Babeș-Bolyai' University Cluj-Napoca, 1 Mihail Kogălniceanu street, 400084, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; vladpopovici@yahoo.com.

*** 'Babeș-Bolyai' University Cluj-Napoca, 1 Mihail Kogălniceanu street, 400084, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; ovidiu.iudean@gmail.com.

¹ Here we are referring exclusively to those electoral sheets that did not appear as supplements to certain periodicals. For instance, before the parliamentary elections of 1910, the journal *Olteanul* published the occasional sheet *Apel (Appeal)*, which we did not include in our list precisely because it was published as a supplement to a newspaper and not as an independent title. Cf. Faraon 2008, 133–140. On the other hand, there have certainly existed other election news sheets in the form of leaflets that were not preserved. One of them, the very adversary of *Oravița* in 1909, is mentioned in Valeriu Braniște's correspondence with Ioan Slavici as being transported from Bucharest to Banat by a correspondent of the journal *Minerva* in order to support the electoral campaign of George Pop de Băsești. See Braniște 1989, 139 (Ioan Slavici to Valeriu Braniște, 24 February 1909).

² Selectively: *Lupta de la Ighiu* 1906; *Lupta de la Ighiu* 1910.

³ Selectively: Mihali 1905; Mihali 1914; Maniu et alii 1907.

⁴ Mentions regarding *Oravița* have recently appeared in Iudean 2013, 79–95.

this situation was already mentioned – the message's lack of originality compared with the regular press –, while a second one is probably related to the reduced number of copies preserved in libraries – the target audience (comprised mostly of peasants) did not help too much in this regard.

Oravița appeared at Oravița in 27 February 1909. It had four pages (42x29), it was printed in Felix Weisz's printing press and did not contain any references to its editors. According to press bibliographies, a copy is preserved at the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest.⁵ Another copy has been recently identified in a personal archive fund at the Caraș-Severin County Archives.⁶

Alegătorul appeared at Blaj, in 3/16 May 1910, having Ioan Miha as publisher and editor-in-chief. It had four pages (47x30) and was printed at the 'Printing press and bookshop of the Greek-Catholic Seminary'. The bibliography mentions only the copy preserved at the 'Lucian Blaga' Central University Library from Cluj-Napoca,⁷ with the current location P IV 213, but another one can also be found at the Romanian Academy Library, Cluj-Napoca Branch, with the location P V 497.

Sus inimile appeared in Blaj as well, in 28 May 1910, having the same publisher and editor-in-chief and being printed at the same printing house. It had six pages (47 × 30) and only one copy is preserved, at the Romanian Academy Library, Cluj-Napoca Branch,⁸ with the location PB 76.

All three election newsheets were printed for the precise purpose of constituting electoral vehicles, but they served different sides. *Oravița* supported Iosif Siegescu's 1909 candidacy against George Pop de Băsești during the parliamentary by-elections that took place in the Oravița constituency for the tenure opened by Coriolan Brediceanu's death. On the other hand, *Alegătorul* and *Sus inimile* supported the parliamentary electoral campaign of the RNP at the general parliamentary elections of the year 1910.

The circumstances surrounding George Pop de Băsești's candidacy in the year 1909 have been recently analysed and thus we will not insist on them.⁹ After C. Brediceanu's death, the RNP decided that George Pop de Băsești, the party's president at that time, should be its candidate

for the vacant tenure. His opponent was another Romanian, Iosif Siegescu, a high school professor from Budapest, supported by the Constitutional Party (Országos Alkotmánypárt) – a governing party in Hungary at that time. Opposing the nationalities' candidates through compatriots supported by the Hungarian governing parties represented a political tactic developed ever since the first years of Dualism, reaching its peak during the years in which the Liberal government led by Tisza Kálmán was in power and being perpetuated until the beginning of the 20th century as well, after the RNP re-entered electoral activity.¹⁰ In this particular electoral fight, which was eventually won by Siegescu, *Oravița* represented an instrument of direct and personal attack against the president of the RNP.

Firstly, his name was written in its Hungarian version (Illéfalvi Pap György), in order to cut off his ethnical connection with the voters. Secondly, an emphasis was laid upon his social position, which placed him amongst the large landowners, thus creating the portrait of a man despised even by compatriots from his native area. The failures in the 1906 general parliamentary elections in Sălaj and Orăștie were presented as arguments in this regard, and it was also highlighted that between 1876 and 1882 George Pop de Băsești had been a deputy on the lists of the Independent 48 Party (48-as Függetlenségi Párt) and even vice-president of this Hungarian political formation.

The description of the avatars of his designation as candidate in Oravița and of his electoral campaign in the villages from the constituency occupy the largest part of the leaflet, being seasoned with carefully selected elements in order to stimulate the national spirit (Vasile Lucaciu is presented as a Hungarian: Lukács) and regional feelings (a rumour was spread according to which G. Pop de Băsești's candidacy had prevented the one of Valeriu Braniște – a popular figure among the Romanians from Banat). The entire text seeks to transform the RNP's candidate into a Magyarised Romanian or at least into a philo-Hungarian, supported by Hungarian politicians (all the names of the Romanian deputies who accompanied him appear in their Hungarian translation), lacking any connections with and any support in Banat. Within the description of his electoral tour, an important place is allotted to the opposition represented by

⁵ Baiculescu et alii 1969, 453.

⁶ Caraș-Severin County Archive Service, Romulus Novacovici Fund, File I, 128–129.

⁷ Baiculescu et alii 1969, 15.

⁸ Baiculescu et alii 1969, 639.

⁹ Iudean 2013, 79–95.

¹⁰ For details regarding the phenomenon's extent and the activity of the Romanian deputies elected on the lists of the Hungarian parties, see Popovici, Iudean 2011, 121–146; Iudean 2012 passim.

local groups that supported Siegescu and that were presented as forming the majority of the voters, while the supporters of the RNP's president are depicted as a minority, often composed of women and children (thus persons who did not possess the right to vote), gathered in one place due to curiosity. Not lastly, an emphasis is placed upon the adherence of the rural intelligentsia (priests, teachers) to Siegescu's programme, about which V. Braniște acidly wrote that it promises *nothing to the whole* [of the people], *but everything to the loners*.¹¹

The text's backbone is represented by the highlighting of G. Pop de Băsești's otherness in relation with the Banat (*Down with the Transylvanian foreigner!*) by comparison with the local roots of I. Siegescu (*the shirt is closer to the body than the sheepskin coat; more precious to us is the child who came from our peasant sandals*), upon which the social distance between the RNP's candidate and the voters is superimposed (*you are a Hungarian magnate/that we do not want*). In this sense, the sheet's third page contains two electoral poems: *Hora noauă* (*The new hora*) and *La alegerea din Oravița* (*At the election from Oravița*), which present in lines fairly easy to remember the previously circulated ideas, both directly attacking the RNP's president and having the purpose to combat similar poems composed by his supporters – e.g. *Doina lui Badea Gheorghe* (*The ballad of old man George*). The fourth page was conceived as a poster with the text: *Long live our candidate Dr. Iosif Siegescu!*

It is also worth noting that *Oravița* is not a typical election newssheet, created according to one candidate's programme and for his supporters, but rather a pamphlet directed against his opponent. I. Siegescu's only quality that can be extracted from the entire text is the fact that he originates in Banat (although a long time had already passed since he did not reside there anymore). At the same time, G. Pop de Băsești's personality and political past are deconstructed and reconstructed in such a manner that the president of one of the most radical national parties in Hungary ends up being presented to the electorate as a Magyarised great landowner who had long ago broken his ethnical and social ties with the nation he belonged to. The fact that such a deconstruction was possible – and we must imagine that it was assimilated by some of its addressees, since G. Pop de Băsești lost the elections –, draws attention to the cultural level of the epoch's electorate. Here we do not refer merely to the electorate from the Banat area, but also to the

entire electorate from the rural areas of Hungary and Transylvania. Only an insufficiently developed political culture and a very limited cultural and geographical horizon could have ensured the success of gross propagandistic falsifications of the kind promoted by *Oravița's* editors. These premises also enlighten the degree to which the ideas presented by the daily political press had been accepted by the mass of the voters: if the RNP's president could be successfully subjected to such personal attacks, then there existed a layer of voters who were willing to believe them, which automatically implies that those people did not interact with the Romanian daily newspapers. Not lastly, the voters' readiness to accept the ideas of *Oravița* unequivocally indicates the presence of a regional identity in Banat that strongly competed with the Romanian ethnical/national identity.

It is difficult to estimate the extent to which the leadership of the RNP learned from the example of *Oravița*, but, after only one year, before the general parliamentary elections from 1910, two election newssheets that, this time, supported the National Party were published: *Alegătorul* and *Sus inimile*. Ioan Mișu, their publisher and editor-in-chief, has benefited from some historiographical attention, although far less than he would have deserved. In fact, except the collection of correspondence and memoirs published by Silviu Dragomir in the interwar years, the subsequent retrievals were few and they had in view, almost in their entirety, his involvement in the Romanian-Hungarian negotiations from the period 1910–1914.¹² No details regarding the circumstances under which I. Mișu ended up editing the sheets are known. We do not know if the original impulse appertained to him or if he did it at the party's suggestion, or rather at the request of the two Romanian candidates that the sheets support: Alexandru Vaida Voevod and Iuliu Maniu. Unfortunately, Mișu's memoirs for this period do not contain mentions concerning his involvement in the electoral campaign, with the exception of the approaches made by the ones close to Tisza István in order to achieve a Romanian-Hungarian political conciliation.¹³

Apart from the difference in title and date, the firmament of the last two publications is similar, both graphically and textually. The title is framed by two explicitly electoral manifestos, whose message aimed to attract the public to the polls and to combat the electoral corruption due to

¹¹ *Drapelul IX*, (1909), no. 18, 14/27 February, p. 1.

¹² Mișu 1938; Rășinăreanu 2002, 3–6; Morar 1997–1998, 273–283; Ghitta 2013, 68–85.

¹³ Mișu 1938, 12–17.

which the Romanians' votes went to Hungarian candidates.¹⁴

– *Romanians, the durability, bravery and reasonableness of a people are judged by how it knows to use its right to vote – You give it [your vote] to strangers, you are a weak and servile people – You give it to your own, you are a people that is valued and honoured by all.*

– *Not servility elevates and rises you in the strangers' eyes, but your pride as a Romanian – because you should know that rights are not begged for – they are taken. Do not cant in the face of strangers, nor ask for their pity, because you will give cause to ridicule and contempt.*

Alegătorul was published, by no means arbitrarily, on 3/16 May and its title page made a connection between the events of the year 1848 and the ongoing electoral campaign. The text's largest part emphasises the symbolic importance of commemorating the Great National Assembly of Blaj and offers the example of the old men belonging to the 1848 generation who *have paid with their precious blood their love for their people*, rejoicing however because *our people has also risen and kept up with the other peoples*. The necessity for an electoral activity serving the National Party is argued through the alternation between generations, each of them being endowed with a special mission; moreover, it is considered a manifestation of Romanianism and a national duty.

The editor's manifesto is followed, in the second page, by the *Central Committee's electoral manifesto*, published by the entire Romanian daily press,¹⁵ already mentioned and analysed by the historians.¹⁶ The manifesto also contains the list of the RNP's candidates for Parliament.

Pages three and four of the sheet host the electoral correspondence: *From the Ighiu constituency* and a detailed description regarding *The tour of Dr. I. Maniu*. The correspondent from the Ighiu constituency (more precisely from Abrud-village) signs a mobilising article about Alexandru Vaida Voevod's re-election as deputy. The text reiterates the electoral struggles from this constituency and Alexandru Vaida Voevod's dignified attitude in Hungary's Parliament, announcing at the same time the beginning of his electoral tour on 14 May.

The article that describes Iuliu Maniu's tour gives rise to small interpretation problems. The text begins abruptly (*Then professor Dr. Nicolescu*

spoke bringing up significant examples from the life of the Irish people.), thus making it obvious that it was a fragment taken from another publication and insufficiently polished. This phrase is followed by the description of Maniu's electoral tour in the villages Dumitra, Hăpria, Drâmbar, Şeuşa, Ciugud, Limba, Oarda de Sus and Oarda de Jos, Vinţu de Jos, Vurpăr, Cârna, Acmariu, and Balomir. The fragment was meant to be continued (the specification *to be continued* exists), but its continuation appeared in *Sus inimile*. This fact, associated with both sheets' numbering (Year I, No. 1), leads us to believe that at least *Alegătorul*, if not also *Sus inimile* were initially conceived as campaign periodicals, with a limited, but regular issuance, and not as occasional newssheets. Not lastly, the text's abrupt beginning, although more plausibly due to an editing error, could also indicate the existence of another occasional sheet, previous to *Alegătorul*, which has remained unidentified until now. Although less likely, this hypothesis cannot be completely excluded.

The article's content describes in detail the visits paid by Iuliu Maniu and his campaign team in various communes of the Vinţu de Jos constituency. From this viewpoint, even if the descriptions are in general stereotypical, the information is important for retrieving the image of an electoral campaign at the beginning of the 20th century. In each village visited, the text insists on the presence of priests and teachers, who greet the candidate upon his arrival. Green branches and leaves, bouquets of flowers, triumphal arches and sometimes riders do not lack from the inventory associated with the festive welcome. The speeches were delivered by both Maniu and his companions. In certain cases, the presence of all the Romanian voters at this event is highlighted. The themes tackled in the electoral discourses are related to the necessity of preserving national identity through the church and through schooling, but also to the fight for universal suffrage. As an interesting detail, the article emphasises *Dr. Maniu's humbleness, who wants to keep himself in the shadow and to raise his colleagues in front of the world*. At the end, a short calendar of the upcoming visits is also provided – visits whose description appears in *Sus inimile*.

The last of the three sheets, *Sus inimile*, seems to be, as we have previously mentioned, a somewhat extended continuation of *Alegătorul*. The sheet takes its name from the mobilising manifesto on the first page, which desires to impose on the electorate a few powerful ideas: the necessity of going to the polls, renouncing the practice of selling votes

¹⁴ *Alegătorul* I, (1910), no. 1, 3/16 May, p. 1; *Sus inimile* I (1910), no. 1, 28 May, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Tribuna* XIV (1910), no. 86, 18 April/1 May, p. 2.

¹⁶ Mândruţ 1995, 151.

to the Hungarian parties, supporting the RNP as a representative of the Romanians from Hungary – a nation that has reached the social and political level that allows it to fight for civil and national rights (*Romanian brothers! The times of shame when we were a people of wretched men lacking audacity have passed. Today we have so many enlightened men, who have fought with their words and with their writing for our rights*).

As an interesting fine point, the manifesto also mentions the colour of the RNP's electoral flags: blue.

The second page of the sheet is opened by a telegram from the mountainous inhabitants of Bucium: *We stand firm by Dr. Vajda. We will only give him up [if we are] dead. There is no terrorism that can frighten us. Long live our candidate!*

A short, rather anecdotal article about Iuliu Maniu's opponent, namely Mayer Ödön, a Jewish lawyer from Alba Iulia,¹⁷ then follows. Convinced by the county commissioner (alispán) of the Alsó Fehér (Alba de Jos) County, Szász Jóska, after numerous insistences, to run for election, Mayer – presented as being aware that his chances of success were minimal – would have accepted to be a candidate, under the condition he would not have to undertake the usual electoral tours in the constituency. The preparation of his electoral campaign was left in the care of the county's administrative apparatus, led by the county commissioner. In order to accentuate his unenviable position, the text's author reminds of an event from the 1896 elections in Făgăraş, where, in an attempt to defeat Nicolae Şerban, the government had sent a well-known Jewish banker from Budapest and had invested large sums of money in buying votes. At one of the public meetings of the governmental candidate, immediately after he had spoken, Nicolae Şerban managed to reach the rostrum and addressed the following words to the public: *Good people [...] the gentleman banker has told you a lot [of things] and has made a lot of promises, but go ahead and tell him to cross himself, like I do*. Obviously, the text bears the mark of the epoch's anti-Semitic attitude, but it is also worth noting the emphasising of different degrees of otherness between the Hungarians and the Jews. While in the case of the Jews the otherness is manifested in a rather anecdotal manner, as they are represented with contempt as tools of the administration, the hostility towards the Hungarian functionaries is much more profound.

The following two articles are dedicated to the situation from the Ighiu constituency and the popular electoral gatherings that took place here. The author(s) insist upon the pressure exerted by the authorities, which go as far as to use gendarmes to scatter A. Vaida Voevod's supporters. The advantages given to Vaida Voevod's opponent, Szász Pál¹⁸ (the son of the county commissioner), are also emphasised, advantages that included the provision of a car, and, not lastly, the voters were told not to go alone to the polls, as one of the strategies for defrauding the elections consisted in taking lone voters and forcefully placing them in the camp of the governmental candidate – where, as the vote was manifested through direct speech, they risked physical abuses if they did not vote as the majority. The role played by priests and teachers is accentuated when presenting the electoral meetings and the locations chosen for the latter are related to memorable historical facts (usually battles won by the Romanians). The manner in which these events take place is similar to that of those depicted in *Alegătorul*: a festive welcome, followed by speeches delivered by his supporters and by the candidate himself, on subjects pertaining to the church, schooling, the right to vote and the difficult political situation of the Romanian nation from Hungary.

The last article presents at length, on almost two pages, the continuation of Iuliu Maniu's electoral tour, in the villages Vingard, Boz, Sângătin, Apoldu Mic, Spătac, Mănărade, Lupu, Cergău Mic and Cergău Mare, Tău, Şoroştin, Țapu, Alămor, and Loamneş. The accent is again placed upon the support of the Romanian population, expressed through: festive welcomes, the presence of the intellectuals' representatives, the supporters' speeches. The style remains festive and mobilising, but, at the same time, stereotypical. Beyond the interesting information regarding the electoral campaign in the rural areas, the descriptions are important as they name members of the rural intellectuality and supporters of the RNP, thus contributing to the prosopographical recovery of the party's 'members' – the quotation marks are due to the fact that the notion of 'membership' is in this case a generic one, as the period's political organisation and legislation leave a lot of room to interpretations regarding the condition of being a member of a political formation in Dualist Hungary, especially in the case of the RNP, whose activity had officially remained prohibited since 1894.

¹⁷ A bibliographical insert in: Végváry, Zimmer 1910, 354.

¹⁸ Végváry, Zimmer 1910, 424.

Even if, unlike in the case of *Oravița*, the pamphlet accents lack almost entirely from both election newsheets edited at Blaj, the information they comprise includes exaggerations or, in certain cases, truncations, meant to influence the electorate and to hide the weaknesses of the candidates they promote. While the sheet from Banat presented G. Pop de Băsești's tour as a total failure, the image that the sheets from Transylvania leave about Maniu's and Vaida's tours is one of total success. In the few situations in which the local authorities appear as causing somewhat more serious hindrances, these are surmounted and the wheel seems to be turning in favour of the Romanians. It is obvious that the triumphal tone was related to the electoral mobilisation strategy and did not reflect the reality. This fact is proven by the mere observation that both candidates were defeated in the elections from Ighiu and Vințu de Jos, these parliamentary seats being occupied by Szász Pál and Mayer Ödön.¹⁹ Of the 53 voters from Bucium, the majority (26) did indeed vote for Alexandru Vaida Voevod, but 12 of them supported Szász Pál and 15 did not go to the polls – some of them being deterred by the authorities as they were known to be supporters of the RNP's candidate and others being mistakenly registered on the lists although they were dead or had emigrated.²⁰

From this point of view, the limitations of the election newsheets as historical sources become evident. Their propagandistic and mobilising purpose makes the editors suppress or reconfigure in a favourable light certain less pleasant moments of the electoral tours. By contrast with the daily press, where the difficulties are explicitly mentioned and usually attributed to the pressure exerted by the administrative apparatus, the occasional sheets benefit from far fewer descriptive nuances. As they have an exclusively electoral, momentary role, the editors allow themselves to be much more selective when it comes to presenting the information, which imposes more attention and critical spirit upon the historian.

It is also interesting to compare the two types of discourse that are encountered: the one oriented towards deconstructing the opponent's image (*Oravița*) and the one based on creating a considerably improved image of one's own candidate (*Alegătorul* and *Sus inimile*). Both discourses are unilateral, lack any trace of balance and are meant to mobilise the electorate at any cost, but the former capitalises on the low level of political

culture by spreading tendentious rumours amongst the voters, while the latter seeks to construct a political culture through the exaggerated example of success of some electoral meetings. The first one has a purely informative purpose, while the second one also involves an educational component. Both types of discourse have the ethnical sameness between the candidate and the voters as a leitmotif, with the specification that in the example from Banat the mystification of the opponent's ethnical origin is employed as well. Not lastly, the discourse centred on deconstructing the opponent does not include any programmatic reference, while the texts meant to support the image of certain candidates also involve general references to their electoral programme – although, quantitatively, such references are far fewer than the mobilising stereotypical phrases and festive descriptions.

For the future, we suggest to those interested in this topic to carefully take into consideration these electoral newsheets, as their critical analysis could shed light on important aspects concerning the political culture and the electoral strategies of the Romanians from Transylvania and Banat at the beginning of the 20th century.

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¹⁹ Végváry, Zimmer 1910, 471, 477.

²⁰ *Lupta de la Ighiu* 1910, 35–38, 49.

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