Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century

Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century: Volume 2

Edited by

Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE HABSBURG EMPIRE AND NATIONALITIES: THE CASE OF ROMANIANS

REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF THE ROMANIANS FROM TRANSYLVANIA AND HUNGARY (1848–1914)[1]

VLAD POPOVICI

Since the fundamental concept this paper operates with is that of "political culture" (or "civic culture"—we will use the terms interchangeably), it is only natural to start by defining it. Without proceeding into the subtleties of sociological and political science debates regarding the relation between the community on one side and the political act and experience on the other (Almond and Verba 1963; 1989) we believe it appropriate to designate as starting point the definition given by the *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Institutions*, according to which the political culture represents "the notion of a culture, spirit, mood or set of values which shapes the conduct of politics of a nation or groups" (Bogdanor 1987, 446).

On opening the subject we also believe it necessary to briefly present the general characteristics of the shaping and evolution of the political culture of the Romanians from Transylvania and Hungary. Starting with the second half of the eighteenth century, the process of the emergence of national consciousness began and one could witness the first political manifestations with a national basis (Prodan 1984, 62–94) together with the crystallization, at the elite level, of the political culture's first stages. As the elite grew in number and diversified professionally, broadened its intellectual scope through readings and academic journeys (Sigmirean

[1] This paper was supported by CNCS—UEFISCDI through the research project PN—II—PCE—2011—3—0040.

2000, 24–38) and experienced the rise of liberal expectations due to the spread of the French revolution's ideas (Prodan 1984, 281–304; Bocşan 1997, 34 sqq.) the political culture gained consistency. In fact, one can state that it developed, in the first stage, as a consequence of the effort of theorizing the idea of nation.

Prior to the 1848–49 events, given the nature of political and social systems in the Habsburg Empire, what one might call political culture remained the privilege of a small elite group, less connected to the nation's body—which mainly consisted of peasants. It had, however, a fundamental component that could be found both in the elite's discourse and at the mass level: the philo-dynasticism (Maior 2006). It was the political practice of 1848–49 and 1861–65 that represented the beginnings of the spreading of political culture to the masses. Starting with the 1867 Compromise and Transylvania's integration into the political and legislative system of Hungary, within the context of an increasingly regular electoral exercise, but also of the intense press debates between the passivists and the activists, the Romanians entered a new stage of political cultural development (Suciu 2000, 235–99). The changes are noticeable both in the elite's discourse and in the current practice: taking part in elections or boycotting them. This second stage faced an accelerated growth of the Romanians' interest for politics at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a result of the intense professionalization of the political life and the Romanian National Party (RNP) giving up passivity (Maior 1986, 51–80).

Given the historical context presented above, our research raises the question: what was the contribution of the cultural personalities and what was the impact of the cultural and scientific ideas of the time in shaping the political culture of the Romanians in Transylvania, between 1848 and the outbreak of World War I?

In order to globally understand the role of cultural personalities in forming and modeling the political culture of a nation that was still in search of its identitary landmarks, it is firstly necessary to identify the position held by these personalities in the political structures and in relation to the national propaganda instruments (mainly the political press). The first Romanian political representation forum was the National Romanian Committee from 1848. Its composition was fluctuating, but one must take into account the high percentage (over 70 percent) of members with cultural-scientific concerns, who later became important personalities in their fields: Simion Bărnuţiu, Alexandru Papiu Ilarian, August Treboniu Laurian, Timotei Cipariu, Andrei Şaguna (Pavel 1995, 220–36).

Within the Romanian national committees from 1861 and 1863, the percentage of culturally active members dropped significantly to almost 30 percent—especially given the fact that almost half of them were high hierarchs (Popovici 2012, 11–16). The same trend continued between 1869 and 1881, the shift of ideological support from culture and philosophy towards law and jurisprudence (in an attempt to judicially justify passivism through the illegitimacy of the 1867 Compromise) also contributing to this effect (Popovici 2012, 33–58).

After the unification of the two Romanian political parties from Hungary (1881), the number of cultural personalities within the new party board remained low (Surdu 1968, 323). Out of the representatives of the old generation only G. Bariţiu and somehow I. Popescu stood out, while the presence of cultural personalities amongst the younger generation was still scarce. Members such as I. Slavici, N. Fekete-Negruţiu, C. Diaconovich, G. Popa, A.C. Popovici, D.P.-Barcianu or D. Comşa did not benefit from more than two mandates, while the politicians with a judicial formation (especially lawyers) constantly formed over 50 percent of the party board. The beginning of the twentieth century perpetuated this state of affairs, and names such as V. Goldiş or O. Goga represent exceptions in a Central Committee dominated by lawyers (70 percent) and other intellectuals without great expectations regarding culture (Popovici 2012, 33–58, 71–90). The same thing can be said about the Romanian MPs in the Hungarian parliament (including those elected on the Hungarian parties' lists), whose educational background was mainly a juridical one (Iudean and Onojescu 2013).

Looking back, one can realize that, whereas by 1848 the nation's political leadership had been assumed by personalities with a high intellectual formation, connected to the great ideological movements of the time, after the process of political professionalization began, leadership affairs remained in the care of bureaucrats (1861–65), then freelance intellectuals, mostly lawyers. The few leaders with major cultural concerns who appeared after 1890 cannot even be mentioned under the category of "cultural personalities," except maybe for O. Goga, who would benefit a lot from his literary capital in order to advance in politics. Furthermore, none of the three MPs who held the positions of professors at the University of Pest (A. Roman, I. Ciocan, I. Siegescu) can be regarded as "cultural personalities" of the time, being rather "career intellectuals" (Iudean 2012, 54–57, 101–4, 107–10). The gradual elimination of this elite category from the ranks of opinion is an obvious effect of the political class's professionalization and modernization, but at the same time, it

raises major question marks regarding the impact that European cultural and scientific movements of the time had on the Romanian electoral body.

It is obvious that the liberalism of the 1848 generation was crucial for the affirmation of the ethnic and political character of the idea of nation, and also in stimulating the people, as an element of the nation, in the political process (Bocşan 1997, 122). In this context, framed by the revolution, the Romanians' political culture was strongly influenced by their relation to the national and social otherness represented by the Hungarians. This mirror-identity construction offered extra support to the illuminist philo-dynasticism, maintaining the image of the "good emperor" as a component of the Romanians' political culture up to the years of the Memorandum (1892–96).

The neo-absolutist period, through opening the Romanians' access to the administrative structures, only strengthened this trend among the masses. The strict censorship, a small number of political newspapers and the explicitly loyalist attitude of some important public figures also contributed to orientating the Romanians' emerging political culture towards the throne. The liberal ideas developed only amongst a certain part of the elite that could not express them open-voiced, thus rendering their public impact minimal. One can state, without fear of being wrong, that between 1850 and 1860 the most permeable category for this type of discourse were the students (Sigmirean 2000, 24–38 passim)—due to their age and wide intellectual horizon—especially the ones who were to become members of the future political and administrative elite.

The evanescent liberal experiment of the 1860s consistently contributed to the Romanians' growth in political experience, although it brought little addition to their political culture. The experience was shared by both the elites (in the form of national committees) and the masses (through exercising their electoral rights). However, the changes in the political culture, slight as they were, were exclusively present at the elite level and maybe among some educated people (such as teachers and priests). They did not spring as a result of an expanding cultural horizon, but as a secondary result of the political experience gained during the negotiations with the Hungarian elite, of the parliamentary struggles and of the frequent contacts with the Imperial Court (Retegan 1979; 2004; Onojescu 2012). On another side, the time span in itself (1860–65) was too short for allowing political education activities with long-term effects and the political press was yet poorly developed: only one new political newspaper emerged during these years (*Concordia*), it was issued two times a week and was mostly read in the Banat and the western parts.

Only the shock caused by the 1867 Compromise and the radical changes it brought, together with the loss of Transylvania's autonomy, provoked agitation strong enough to lead to the reconfiguration of the political tactics of the entire nation. The attempt to impose passivism accelerated the political culture's formation process, on the one hand, through the debates raised at the elite level, but also through the impossibility of imposing these tactics amongst the masses. Left outside the elite's influence, a large part of the Romanian voters were integrated into the country's political system, their civic culture taking a hybrid shape of both a formal support of the national goals and the passivist leaders of the RNP, but at the same time of the involvement in the electoral campaigns of the Hungarian parties' candidates.

Up to the present day, there is no research to analyze and evaluate the real level of electoral involvement among the Romanians from Hungary, but it is obvious that their positions were divided and most of them probably incoherent. As long as they were under the direct influence (made so by physical presence) of a RNP leader, they had the tendency to maintain passivism. As the distance from the regional party center increased, or its propaganda was overshadowed by financial incentives, the Romanian voters' presence at elections also increased (Iudean 2012, 395–410). Even more, regarding the participation at county elections, historiography had a complete disinterested attitude, even if there the most intense political activities of the Romanians took place, with a real impact upon the voters' everyday life.

Even if we lack exact statistics, we are certain that passivism was a half-failure, but with positive side-effects concerning the Romanian population's experience and the political culture. Frauds were a rather established practice for the Hungarian elections, but just as customary were staging an electoral show, with persuasive actors participating at electoral meetings and sometimes giving speeches in more than one language (Iudean 2012, 240). The Romanians that could vote took part in these manifestations and especially before 1887 their high frequency (once in three years or even more often) was an important factor in educating the electorate, regardless of nationality. Thus, the political culture of the Romanian electorate was built upon two foundations, fundamentally different, but relatively equally influential. On the one side stood the nationalist political discourse, spread through the nationalist press and sometimes through national gatherings. On the other side, the discourse of the parliamentary candidates must have been just as influential—even more as it was part of a complex of manifestations (shows, feasts) designed to impress.

During the 1870s, the influence of the main European cultural and scientific trends on the Romanian political press seemed to have been minimal. Even the most elaborated texts were tributary to local realities, exceeding only by accident the historical-juridical context of Hungary. The situation was somehow normal, as the main point of interest was Transylvania's autonomy and all energies were focused on justifying the abuse made by the 1867 Compromise, while trying, more or less, to cope with the new situation. The activist manifest "The Romanian question in 1872" is representative (Păcăţian 1910, 25 sqq.). When some European paradigms were present (such as in the writings of V. Babeş), (Bocşan 1979, 281–83), they were the ones from 1848, carried on by the members of that generation. At the opposite pole, gifted young personalities, who could have imposed ideas in accordance with the newest European trends, gave up politics very soon—as is the case of Alexandru Mocioni (Botiş 1939, 111–259).

The emergence of a new generation, which stood out from the end of the 1870s, brought into the press new ideas and concepts, taken from the major European flux, implicitly introducing them into the political culture, at least at the elite level. The intellectual formation of some of those with major cultural-scientific concerns determined them to adopt the ideas of Darwin and Spencer into their political discourse, consequently emphasizing the necessity of a socioeconomic training of the nation as premises of political success (Popovici 2008, 32–33). The liberal ideas were also aligned with the current forms of the European liberalism—namely with the nationality principle—and this can be best seen in the structure of the famous 1892 Memorandum (Bocşan 1994, 265 sqq). The historical circumstances determined the perpetuation, in the political culture, of a permanent relation to the competing Hungarian otherness, either in the form of "survival of the fittest," or by blaming the *façade* of Hungarian liberalism.

However, people of culture or science had too little to do with all these additions, reconstructions and remodeling. At their origin stood the class of freelancers (lawyers, business owners, landowners, economists and publicists), promoting in Transylvania some of the Western ideas they stumbled upon during their university studies. It was them (especially those who gradually became professional politicians) who created and forwarded the Memorandum, reinstated activism and rebuilt the connection between the masses and the elite, after three decades of passivism (Maior 1986, 51–80). Thus, part of the Romanian electorate could use the experience gained in the electoral process to support their own candidates, leading to the partial disappearance of that hybrid form of

civic culture through which the nationalist electorate voted for Hungarian candidates, since the Romanian ones were absent.

The beginning of the twentieth century brought forth new influences, confirming the integration of the Romanian elite into the general evolution of thoughts and ideas from Central and Eastern Europe. V. Goldiş, for example, was a politician proliferating ideas resembling those of Christian-Socialists and Christian-Democrats, both programs being very suitable for the Hungarian realities. During this period, Goldiş developed a conception about nationality close to the Austrian-Marxists, originating in Otto Bauer's ideas: "nationality is a community of features generated by the community of destiny shared by people living together and is totally subjected to the combinations of natural laws" (Goldiş 2007, 65). On the other hand, his conception regarding the relationship between church and science was similar to those of Huxley or Spencer, considering that the two cannot be separated without provoking irreparable damage: true science is religious and religion can only flourish if it chooses to support itself on the conquests of science. Such ideas were reflected by the political speech and the interaction with the voters as well, possibly shaping their perception of the political role of the nation, especially since denomination was an important feature of the Romanian identity.

But besides such influences, most of the electoral speeches of the Romanian nationalist candidates were marked by the matters of their co-nationals' political and social rights, while the Romanian candidates on Hungarian parties' lists were focusing on solving particular problems of the community they were to represent (Iudean 2012, 411 sqq). On one side, the pragmatism of the political discourse and the lack of sophisticated theoretical frame are signs of the professionalization of the political class. On the other side, the increasing political and social tensions, generated by the process of Magyarization, contributed in imposing the national question as a fundamental element of political orations. It is very possible that the federalist solutions, brought into attention by part of the elite at the beginning of the twentieth century, were not assimilated or even understood by many less educated voters.

Under these circumstances, the civic culture of the Romanians from Hungary was at the time almost uninfluenced by the major trends of European culture and science. The ones that could have disseminated such ideas were not very active politically and their presence among the political elite continuously decreased. The press and speeches of the time reflect an interest for the Western-European space, but using it mostly as reference for various civic and political situations. Due to the electoral franchise, the figure of those holding a decent intellectual training was low

(illiteracy was still frequently present among those enjoying electoral rights) and for most of the voters the socioeconomic issues and the national question were reduced to the everyday conflicts with the Hungarian state.

Looking back on the evolution of the Transylvanian Romanians' political culture during the nineteenth century, a constantly decreasing relation with the cultural and scientific ideas of the time can be highlighted. The illuminist inclination toward the imperial power was successful because the population found the symbol of the emperor's person both strong and easy to understand. The romantic liberal ideas did not penetrate the low social layers, except in the national identity-related forms, thus sticking to a previous de facto situation and using the Hungarian otherness as a defining factor. Similarly, the social Darwinism adopted by the 1870s–80s generation fitted perfectly to the beginning of the Romanian economic development from the end of the nineteenth century. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, the changes in European cultural and scientific thought were much more alert than those from Romanian society in Hungary, which remained quite far away from the positivism, secularism and modernism of the Western side of the continent. Only the Marxist influences found a minimal implementation ground amongst the proletariat of the Western regions (Banat, Crişana), partly due to the substantial contribution of the Hungarian social-democrats.

The reconfiguration of the political elite, the social structure of the nation and the evolution of the Hungarian attitude towards the nationalities were the three factors that determined, at the beginning of the century, the visible decrease of the Western cultural and scientific ideas' influence on the civic culture of the Romanians in Hungary. If around 1850 the lagging was minimal, the sharpening of the national issue and the disappearance of cultural personalities from the foreground of politics led to reorientation. The interest towards theoretical concepts decreased, being replaced by the pragmatism of the political act, and even the federalist solutions remained the concern of a reduced elite group.

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