

## THE STATUS OF MINORITIES IN ROMANIA IN THE EARLY POST-WAR YEARS. 1944–1947

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In the first years after the war, the settlement of the status of national minorities followed in principle the abandonment of racial policies and of laws restricting their rights. A turn for the worse only happened in the case of the German minority, which had to pass from the status of favoured minority to that of a demonised one. The attribution of guilt threw the German community, not only of Romania, but also of other states which had a significant German population (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia), into an extremely difficult situation. On the other hand, the Hungarian and Jewish minorities evolved from the position of victim of the war to that of its main beneficiaries. The consequences of the war and the Soviet presence ensured them a particular importance in the framework of the political strategies of the Communist Party, which resulted in the growth of resentment among the majority of the population. In the turbulent and ambiguous situation of the early post-war years, the minorities card proved to be crucial for the evolution of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), which encountered major difficulties in harmonising, for example, the emotional and cultural attachments of the Hungarian minority with post-war realities, and especially in the perspective of Transylvania's return to Romania. Ethnic tensions were transferred into the political space, a fact favoured by the RCP whose ranks were joined by numerous members of Hungarian and Jewish origin.

The status of minorities in the early postwar years needs to be interpreted from a dual perspective: that of territorial arrangements which awaited confirmation at the Peace Conference; and that of a second dimension, closely linked to the first, which consisted of the use of nationalism by the historical parties, but especially by the Communist Party. At the same time, another two categories of problems can be identified: on one hand, we are dealing with a minority for whom the territorial problem is closely linked to a political dimension (the Hungarian minority), whilst on the other hand, the Jewish minority, whose status is judged exclusively from the perspective of its political options<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> On 2 September 1944, the rights and freedoms of the citizens of Romania were re-established by putting into force the provisions of the Constitution of 1923. The second Sănătescu government created the Ministry for Minorities, which became, from 13 November 1944, that for Co-inhabiting Nationalities.

In the resolution of territorial problems, a reality perceptible not only in the case of Romania, Moscow took on the role of arbiter. The early post-war years the Soviet Union played an essential role in all these arrangements (Romanians against Hungarians; Czechs and Slovaks against Hungarians and Germans; Czechs against Poles). In the redrawing of the postwar frontiers were practically implicated all the states of central and south-eastern Europe. The picture was extremely complex from the point of view of territory, as well as of groups of populations caught in the middle of strategic calculations. The idea of population exchange alternated with that of ceding territory. More precisely, the Soviet attitude towards the fate of ethnic minorities in the countries now in its sphere of influence was often contradictory. If for example, in 1945, Stalin assured the Czechoslovakian side that in the case of the deportation of the Hungarian minority, Moscow would not only not intervene, but even give them a free hand, in 1948, the attitude of the Soviet leader was the polar opposite. The Communist leaders were accused of having shown 'chauvinist zeal' in promoting their minority policies. What is hidden behind these contradictory attitudes is the way in which the Soviet leader imposed control on the leaders of the Communist Parties, especially with the development of the Cold War. Such an evolution of the Soviet position shows that for Moscow the problem of national minorities was never regarded as a question separate from the problems of the bloc in formation. If at the end of the 1940s, Moscow encouraged certain brutal policies towards the minorities of Central Europe involving deportation or expulsion, at the beginning of the 1950s, its priorities changed. The aim of Soviet policy was the consolidation of the Soviet bloc, nationalist deviation becoming one of the main accusations made against Communist leaders. Thus, the entire Communist policy on the national question was full of contradictions. According to Robert King, the Communist governments established after the Second World War in Eastern Europe were confronted with two provocations: the first was from the traditional nationalism developed especially after the First World War and maintained by interwar governments through restrictive policies towards minorities; whilst the second provocation consisted of the way in which Communist Parties sought to harmonise their interests in the extremely tense atmosphere of the end of the Second World War. The propaganda which accompanied this process emphasised constantly the benefits of Soviet treatment and functional solutions found by the Soviet Union, however these could not be interpreted as the achievement of national goals, but as the fulfilment of the objectives of the Communist Parties. The unity of the working class, regardless of nationality, represented the antithesis of nationalism. Communist propaganda constantly emphasised the superiority of Soviet treatment and solutions concerning the national question, indicating as a fundamental document the political programme of the CP (bolshevik). Nationalism, now interpreted as 'bourgeois reactionary thought' was in reality cultivated in equal

measure on both sides: as much by the minority groups as by the majority population. Confusion was increased by the turbulent context, and also by the ambiguities of the political class<sup>2</sup>. The Communist Party obsessively promoted the idea of equality and fraternity between the majority and the minority, as a direct way of demonstrating its liberal and innovative character in opposition to the repressive policies of interwar governments. In the early postwar years, the struggle against nationalist 'deviations' became one of the credos of the Communist leaders. Considered to be a remnant of reactionary capitalism, nationalism had as its direct consequence the division of class consciousness of the working masses, regardless of their nationality.

The period of 1944–1947 was dominated by uncertainty and disorganisation. This was due to many more factors such as the ambiguous status of Transylvania, the impossibility for the government to exercise its authority<sup>3</sup>, the imposition of Soviet military administration, from November 1944–March 1945, the intense activity of the Hungarian minority, and not least, political clashes. Temporary political alliances increased confusion, doubling ethnic tensions. Northern Transylvania became the scene of confrontations between the historical parties, in particular the National Peasant Party (NPP) – which adopted an anti-Soviet but in particular anti-Communist position – and the RCP, whose ranks were joined by numerous members of Hungarian and Jewish origin. The advantage was to the latter, since the territory was under the control of the Soviet military administration.

The situation in Transylvania was explosive, all the more so as the Soviet Union delayed clarifying its position until the installation of the Groza government. According to a report by the Office of Special Services (OSS), there was a community of interest between left wing groups and the Soviet command, in exploiting 'the mortal enemy between Romanians and Hungarians'. Similarly, the French consul in Galati, Gabriel Richard, noted that in Transylvania, the public conflict was doubled by a national conflict, through the placing in the

<sup>2</sup> Alfred J. Rieber, *Repressive Population Transfers in Central Eastern and Sud-Eastern Europe: A Historical Overview*, in "Journal of Communism Studies & Transition Politics, vol. 16, issue 12, 2000, p. 2. Before the First World War, debates on the protection of minorities were particularly lively in the social-democratic circles of Central and Eastern Europe. According to Rosa Luxemburg, the revolution did not need to lead to the breaking up of the Tsarist empire into separate national states (as happened in the case of Poland), but should have as its aim the creation of a socialist republic, constituted on class principles. At the other extreme were the theories of Lenin and Stalin who opted for the idea of self-determination. A generation later, Stalin relaunched the primitive version of national policy to justify the extension of frontiers westwards and the deportation of class enemies to the newly-acquired territories.

<sup>3</sup> Marcela Sălăgean, *Administrația sovietică în Nordul Transilvaniei (noiembrie 1944–martie 1945)*, Cluj Napoca, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2002. See the report of 1946 "The Problem of the Hungarian Minority in Romania", in ANIC, Fond PCM–SSI, dosar 58/1946.

administration of 'some minorities with advanced ideas, especially Jews and Hungarians, who enjoy the support of Communist elements'<sup>4</sup>.

The clarification of the status of minorities was achieved through the elaboration of the Decree nr. 309 for the Status of Minority Nationalities in 'Monitorul Oficial' nr. 30, of 7 February 1945 where art. 1 stipulates that 'all Romanian citizens are equal before the law and enjoy the same civil and political rights, without distinction of race, nationality, language or religion'<sup>5</sup>. The official language was declared to be Romanian, but in the administrative territories or legal constituencies where there existed at least 30% belonging to a national minority the latter's language could be used 'without requiring a translation into the language of the state'<sup>6</sup>. The resolution of the national problem became a priority for members of the Communist Party. The term of minority was replaced with that of 'co-inhabiting nationality', a fact also established in the Law concerning the status of co-inhabiting nationalities, promulgated a day after the installation of the Groza government<sup>7</sup>. The title of the ministry provoked long disputes between Gh. Vlădescu-Răcoasa and C. Vișoianu. Whilst the first spoke in favour of adopting the Stalinist thesis – equality in diversity between nationalities liberated from class domination – the latter insisted, in the spirit of the traditions of the League of Nations, on instituting the term minority<sup>8</sup>. It was considered that regarding national minorities 'it will be preferable for us to be inspired by the solutions found by states with the same minority problems as Romania'<sup>9</sup>.

The line and attitude of the authorities on the minority problem is outlined on 17 July 1945 by Teohari Georgescu in his 'Administrative lectures of Northern Ardeal' where he emphasises that 'the government cannot allow outbreaks of

<sup>4</sup> *Documente franceze despre Transilvania, 1944–1947*, a selection of documents and introductory study by Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu and Ion Pătroi, București, Editura Vremea, 2001, p. 184. After the Vienna arbitration, according to official statistics, there existed in Romania nearly 444,090 Hungarians. In 1943, it is believed that their number increased by around 100,000. In 1945, Transylvania had 5,853,508 inhabitants of whom 3,685,350 Romanians, and 1,405,763 of Hungarian origin.

<sup>5</sup> *România. Viața politică în documente. 1945*, coord. Ioan Scurtu, Arhivele Statului din România, București, 1994, pp. 121–124. It should be remembered that one of the first legislative measures by which ethnic and religious discriminations were abolished was the Decree nr. 1,626 of 31 August 1944.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> *România. Viața politică în documente. 1945*, p. 121. Article 4 forsee: „Romanian citizens, belonging to nationalities of language, race or religion other than Romanian, will enjoy the same treatment and the same guarantees in law and in fact, as other Romanian citizens. Any restriction, direct or indirect, on the rights of citizens, or inversely, the establishment of privileges, direct or indirect, for citizens, on the basis of race, religion or nationality, are punishable by law”.

<sup>8</sup> *Documente diplomatice franceze despre Transilvania...*, p. 212; Ghiță Ionescu, *Comunismul în România*, București, Editura Litera, p. 214.

<sup>9</sup> AMAE, Fond Conferință Păcii, volum 131/1946, fila 10.

chauvinism among Romanians or Hungarians<sup>10</sup>. In this favourable context, the RCP counted on increasing its numerical base by attracting national minorities. On the other hand, through the promotion of the governmental discourse the Magyar Popular Union (MPU) came to fulfill the desire of the Communist Party to swell its ranks. The activity of the MPU was directed exclusively towards collaboration with the RCP. The Communist party became the key to resolving the Transylvanian question, whilst the Soviet Union's promise to return Transylvania represented a good argument for swelling its ranks. In the opinion of the British representative in Romania, Adrian Holman, Soviet ambiguity encouraged the Hungarian minority, whilst Petru Groza committed the error of 'basing his policies on political and ideological principles which conferred preferential treatment on Romanians and Hungarians who had rallied to the governmental parties in comparison with those who had not'<sup>11</sup>.

The solutions preferred at the time also aimed for a solution suitable to both sides, Romanian and Hungarian, and centred on either exchange of population (less acceptable in Hungarian circles, but received favourably in Bucharest), or giving up territory (a solution rejected by the Romanian authorities, but with powerful support from the Hungarians). In the view of Sabin Mănuilă, one of the promoters of the idea of exchange of population, this was suitable to the Romanian state for many reasons: a favourable international context and public opinion: the manifestation of chauvinist nationalism in the Balkans, which demanded an urgent solution of the problem of the Hungarian minority. On the other hand, it was believed that to bring into the country Romanian groups from across the frontier would lead to the elimination of problems with neighbours and contribute to filling the gaps in population subsequent to the war. So as not to create tension, two hypotheses were put forward: a voluntary or obligatory exchange<sup>12</sup>. Regarding the Hungarian minority was proposed the application of the Yugoslav solution or the Czechoslovakian one: 'If Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are going to impose on Hungary an exchange of population, then we will invoke this precedent, by soliciting the same measure in Transylvania. [...] In any case our thesis must be based on two principles: 1. Fewer territorial concessions and 2. More Hungarians out of the country'<sup>13</sup>.

Another moment of tension arose with the declaration by one of the leaders of the Magyar Workers' Party (MWP), Révai József, at a public meeting in favour of revision of frontiers, through the ceding of some districts of Romanian territory

<sup>10</sup> ANIC, fond PCM, IGJ, dosar 40/1945, fila 171.

<sup>11</sup> Ioan Chiper, Florin Constantiniu, Adrian Pop, *Sovietizarea României. Percepții anglo-americiane (1944–1947)*, București, Editura Iconica, 1993, p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> AMAE, Fond Conferința Păcii, volum 131/1946, fila 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, fila 16.

and the creation of an autonomous zone in the Szekely region. Representatives of the Communist Party in Transylvania recognised in May 1946, at a session of the Bureau of the Central Committee, that the situation of 1944–1945 created a state of uncertainty which oscillated – ‘can or cannot Transylvania be independent’<sup>14</sup> – and let itself be influenced by the ‘chauvinist Hungarian current’. Violent incidents broke out in Cluj, in May 1946, demonstrating the fragility of the situation in Transylvania. The presence of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu demonstrated the gravity of the situation. The Minister of Justice emphasised that tensions were fed by Hungarians who had come to Transylvania in 1940 as occupying troops, being mainly ‘agents of the Hungarian revisionists’. In his speech Pătrășcanu condemned the revisionist policy of Hungary, as well as the attitude of the leaders of the MPU who refused to recognise the authority of the Romanian state.

The deviation of Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu on the national problem offered Gheorghiu-Dej the opportunity to accuse him of ‘hitting the Hungarian chauvinists harder than the Romanian ones’<sup>15</sup>. In reply, Pătrășcanu emphasised that he considered it necessary to clarify the Party’s position on the national problem, precisely in order to calm a Romanian population which considered the RCP to be revisionist and against Romanian rights in the region. Through his Cluj speech, Pătrășcanu presented in large part what was being thought at the level of the entire political elite. But although he tried to lessen the tensions provoked by the Groza government, by promoting in the local functions of the leadership representatives of the Hungarian minority, the effect at the level of the Party leadership was unexpected. Vasile Vaida alerted the leadership to the fact that ‘good, unchauvinist comrades say: «If the CC agrees with the speech of comrade Pătrășcanu, we’re not staying in the party»’<sup>16</sup>.

At a meeting of the Politburo on 22 June 1946, Gheorghiu-Dej insisted on ‘explanations of some political and theoretical aspects linked to the national problem’<sup>17</sup>. In his opinion, Pătrășcanu not only did not follow the party line, but assumed prerogatives which the Politburo and the Secretariat had not given him<sup>18</sup>. With the publication of *The Positions of the PCR on Chauvinism and Nationalism*, Pătrășcanu’s approach was publicly disavowed by the Party leadership: ‘The leaders of the historical parties arrive at the conclusion that the declarations in Cluj by comrade Pătrășcanu signify a tactical change in the RCP’s policy on the

<sup>14</sup> Ședința din 26 mai în Biroul CC, în *Ibidem*, p. 333.

<sup>15</sup> *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Maghiarii din România (1945–1955)*, coord. Lucian Năstasă, Centrul pentru Resurse de Diversitate Culturală, Cluj, 2002, p. 370.

<sup>16</sup> Apud Florin Constantiniu, *P.C.R., Pătrășcanu și Transilvania (1945–1946)*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2001, p. 220.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 160.

national problem [...]. Those who imagine that dissent exists in our Party prove their total ignorance of the character and methods of our party'<sup>19</sup>.

From this day on, the presence of Pătrășcanu at the centre of decision-making in the Party was much more formal. The Party leadership's reservations about Pătrășcanu made themselves evident at the beginning of 1948: his co-opting to the delegation to Budapest only happened for reasons of reciprocity, Ana Pauker affirming that 'the Hungarian comrades are going to be disturbed by nationalist words'; he was not included in the following delegation which met Gh. Dimitrov in Bucharest, despite the fact that Pătrășcanu had longstanding links with him; he was not included in the commission for drawing up the Constitution of the People's Republic of Romania. Subsequently, on 28 January 1948, he decided to address the ambassador of the USSR in Bucharest, S.I. Kaftaradze, with the intention of being helped on a delicate problem, that of his position in the Party concerning nationalist deviation. In reference to this episode, in the documents of his subsequent investigation, Pătrășcanu asserts that 'not only once have I myself sought to understand if in fact I am guilty of such deviations. [...] However, if I want to remain true to myself [...] I do not consider myself to be nationalist or one who abandoned proletarian internationalism'<sup>20</sup>. But his meeting with the Soviet ambassador aggravated the situation even more, as he proposed to the Secretariat of the CC (Dej, Pauker, Georgescu) that it shed light on 'this sombre affair'<sup>21</sup>. After two years from his arrest, at the time of the investigation, Pătrășcanu was forced to recognise that his nationalist deviation was principally due to 'petit-bourgeois, intellectualist/individualist vestiges and prejudices'<sup>22</sup>.

Once the territorial problem was settled by the peace treaty, the leaders of the party had to draw up a program clearly inspired by the Soviet experience. Constitutional rights and freedoms were widely popularised, even if they sat within the limits of the one-party-state. The relationship between the majority and the minority in the framework of the new communist state were to be definitively resolved through the application of the Stalinist principle of equality in diversity. Terror and repression, constants of the totalitarian state, were applied in equal measure to majorities as well as minorities, and this would make itself felt immediately after the establishment of the one party monopoly.

<sup>19</sup> Apud Anton Rațiu, *Cumplita odisee a grupului Pătrășcanu. Adevăruri dureroase*, vol. I, București, Ed. Gestiunea, 1996, vol. II, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Apud Lavinia Betea, *Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu. Moartea unui lider comunist*, București, Humanitas, p. 119.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.