

CONSERVATISM IN A POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRY: THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE AND THE EXTREME RIGHT IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

My paper focuses on the sensitive point of intersection between the far-right orthodox autochthonous conservative school of thought and the pluralist, European center-right Popular ideology in the case of the contemporary Romanian conservative intellectual elite. How this tension does shape the conservative discourse in contemporary Romania?

This issue becomes especially relevant within the particular post-socialist political and ideological context of Romania. In the years following the 1989 Revolution, the Romanian the dominant discourse of the anticommunist intellectuals turned towards the right. Major figures, like Andrei Pleșu and Gabriel Liiceanu inspired an ideological turn towards an autochthonous conservative school of thought that originated in the 19th century and which reached a peak during the interwar period with the nationalist ideological strand that, amongst other things, inspired the far-right Legionar Movement. During that period a particular name comes to attention, that of Constantin Noica. Persecuted by the communist authorities, he managed to organize a small group of philosophers that will later be known as “the Păltiniș School”. Amongst the young people recruited were the above mentioned Pleșu and Liiceanu. After 1989 they embarked in a series of various projects that encouraged the emergence of a strong group of young right-wing orthodox conservative intellectuals currently associated with the Christian-democrat strand within the Romanian Popular movement.

In order to reach my research goal, I will analyze the contemporary Romanian conservative discourse, mainly relying on published texts, interviews and opinion pieces of the most representative intellectuals of this ideological strand.

Keywords: *conservative discourse, Romania, orthodoxist nationalism, public intellectuals.*

1. Introduction

For those who usually follow the Romanian political discourse, it comes as no surprise finding in the right wing Christian-Democrat positions a number of elements that seem to originate with the interwar extreme right Orthodoxist views. Embedded in wider models, which are seemingly ideologically attuned with contemporary conservative Christian discourse, they create the somewhat strange general picture of an ideological mixture concealing behind the pro-European and democratic discourse an authoritarian and intolerant filiation.

This observation however creates the necessity of an extremely important classificatory question: to what extent could we speak of a conscious apprehension of these radical elements in contradistinction with the manifestation of some other type of phenomenon? In other words, could we speak of an ideological undertaking assumed as such by the respective individuals/groups, or are we dealing with a structural feature that shapes this particular type of conservative discourse?

The thesis which I presently developed in order to deal with this issue is that the obvious discursive tension between the far-right Orthodox autochthonous conservative school of thought and the pluralist, European center-right Popular ideology specific to the new Romanian conservative intellectual elite, reflects a deeper reality, one which involves specific structuring ideological frameworks

which essentially mould both the direction and the substance of this discourse. In light of this observation, beyond certain self-expressing inabilities of some political individuals, or eventually specific to the general model of the Romanian political discourse, in the particular case of the right wing conservative doctrine we can speak of the existence of a radical ideatic core that ideologically nourishes this political orientation. The seemingly European (pluralist, tolerant, socially involved) Christian-Democratic discourse professed by the representatives of this political direction appears to be a mere cover for a completely opposed (intolerant, authoritarian and elitist) background.

In this paper I attempt to identify two possible sources for this background – 1. The cleavage between autochthonism and modernism, respectively 2. certain elements originating with the interwar extreme right intellectual elite, particularly with its philosophical wing (Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran and especially Constantin Noica). First, I will outline the ideological cornerstones of the Romanian conservatism and afterwards I will try to identify some elements which it holds in common with the interwar nationalist right wing perspective. Secondly, I will attempt to determine the reflection of the aforementioned aspects on the thought of the New Right School in post-communist Romania.

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2. Peripheral conservatism and nationalism in Romania

2.1. The conservative frame

The first of these origins represents in fact the expression of a historically constituted cleavage, namely one previous even to the creation of modern Romania, more precisely emergent at the beginning of the 19th century, that implicitly forged the main ideological positions, (Liberalism and Conservatism) – i.e. the one between modernism and autochthonism. The Liberals (and later on, at the end of the century, the Socialists) represent the modernizing, pro-Western pole, while Conservatism roughly corresponded to the autochthonistic one. To get a better picture of this dichotomy, we could say that it involves two inter-related themes: that of national identity and the other one concerning Romania's peripherality with respect to the West, both being structuring elements of the Romanian ideological context.

At first glance at least, in Romania we are dealing with the political reflection of the same tensions which can be found in the Western countries and which Rokkan and Lipset defined as the industrial/agrarian cleavage¹ – i.e. the one between the dynamic forces of industrial capitalism and the world of landed aristocracy. However, from a cultural and historical perspective, things look more complicated as we are dealing with three basic elements – our belonging to the Ottoman Empire and to the Orthodox world, combined with the absence of the capitalistic development. These elements, on the one hand, mold the structure of the national identity and, on the other, affect the local instantiation of the general ideological spectrum, of Conservatism in particular.

With respect to the national identity, we are dealing with the integration of two elements constitutive to the national discourse, both derivative of one of the great European models (German – the ethnic and cultural one, respectively French – the civic one). Interestingly, both can be provided with a geographical determination, as the French influences are characteristic to Moldavia and Walachia, while the German influence is quite obvious in Transylvania. Moreover, subsequent to the emergence of the modern state, the two models will be alternatively incarnated by the two main political parties – the Liberals and the Conservatives: in the former case, the civic-national element will be most significant, while in the latter, the ethnic and cultural one. With regard to the nature of the entire ideological spectrum, the most important fact is that,

irrespective of its ideological nature, it does not evolve outside the nationalistic thought. This is a structural cornerstone of the entire political history of modern Romania, its most common and obvious manifestation residing in the names of the main political parties – the *National Liberal Party*, the *National Peasants' Party* etc.

On the other hand, the construction of the national identity produced probably the lengthiest political debate in Romanian history, i.e. the one concerning modernization. However, given the country's peripherality², the aforementioned dispute did not necessarily concern the economic tension involved with the emergence of capitalism, but rather a completely different process, i.e. the Europeanization or, in other words, the Westernization of Romanian society, especially with regard to its political, legal institutions and so on. As such, modernization has only a secondary relationship with the actual industrialization process in Romania, or with the creation of an infrastructure similar to the Western one, while in fact being perceived rather as the explicit adoption by the Romanian political environment of a set of political institutions, consequently as political modernization. The most notorious example is probably the almost full imitation by the Romanian Constitution of the 1831 Belgian one. This model, fundamental to the liberal vision, led to a rapid transition of the society from the traditional institutions to the modern state (in the Western European sense of the word), generating a wide wave of (not exclusively political) consequences. Thereupon, the Conservative reaction mainly centered around accuses of institutional duplication incompatible with the national background, eventually generating the "background-less shapes" theory, concerning not only the political aspects, but especially the cultural ones. Initially drawn up by Titu Maiorescu, in the paper entitled *Against the Contemporary Tendency in Romanian Culture (În contra direcției de astăzi în cultura română)*, it was inherited and developed by Mihai Eminescu, a poet and editor of the "Timpul" ("Time") conservative newspaper.

2.2. The Nationalist frame

Mihail Eminescu, considered by his posterity as Romania's national poet³, developed in his political writings a radical conservative and reactionary view, based on xenophobic nationalism, the (Romantic) valorization of the traditional organization, norms and institutions (as opposed to the imported ones) and on value autarchy. Although the success of his political writings was rather

¹ S. Lipset, S. Rokkan, „Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments”, in S. Lipset, S. Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Coter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, New York: Free Press, 1967.

² See Aldcroft, D. H. *Europe's Third World. The European Periphery in the Interwar Years*, Ashgate, 2006, chap. 1-4.

³ And therefore having an implicitly tremendous influence on later Romanian society, especially regarding education and heavily contributing to the construction of national identity.

limited in his days, Eminescu will gain national political relevance along with his “rediscovery” by Dumitru Murărașu in 1932⁴ and with his integration with the thought of the young post-war nationalist intellectuals (M. Eliade, N. Ionescu, E. Cioran, N. Crainic, later C. Noica etc). From this perspective, the extreme right wing borrowed, continued and developed on its own account some of the previous models of the conservative thought by selective (and implicitly limitative) adaptation, specifically looking for those aspects and elements relevant to the national ideological construction as well – Romanian identity, Orthodoxy, the traditional peasant communities, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, misogyny and so on⁵.

An important aspect for the analysis of the post-1989 conservative discourse is represented by the activity of one of the aforementioned intellectuals – Constantin Noica. While the others, either died, either chose to leave Romania and break with their extremist *drift* (as is the case of Mircea Eliade or Emil Cioran), Noica had remained in the country, was politically persecuted and afterwards initiated one of the most fascinating intellectual projects – that of the School of Păltiniș. Here, where he retreated from the long arm of the Communist state, he co-opted some of the young philosophers of the 70’s, in a spectacular attempt, on the one hand, of preserving certain values, on the other, of creating an elite capable of contributing to Romania’s intellectual rebirth in the eventuality of the fall of the communism⁶. The extent to which Noica broke with his legionary past is still debated, but the certain thing is that the *Romanian nature* and the national/universal tension remained the main concerns of his philosophy. After the nationalistic drift of the Ceaușescu regime, Noica will be significantly rehabilitated, his works started to be published by the communist state as now they overlapped with the general national-communist ideological direction, fact which also raises serious questions with respect to the compromise to which the old philosopher subscribed in order to make his ideas known⁷.

After 1989, two of his school’s representatives – A. Pleșu and G. Liiceanu - will carry on their masters’ ideas, grounding the so called Group for Social Dialogue, overtaking the former Political Publishing House of the Romanian Communist Party and renaming it Humanitas⁸, enabling the emergence of the New Europe College, and getting involved in high politics (e.g. A. Pleșu was the minister of culture and, later foreign minister. In the last presidential mandate he was appointed as presidential counselor and so on). Thereby they greatly succeeded in initiating the emergence of an entire current of thought, on the background of an intellectual and doctrinaire void resulted from the communist era. In other words, much of the mainstream intellectual public discourse nowadays originates in their endeavor.

3. The case of the New School of the Right

After 1989, conservatism, as an ideological orientation, was mostly associated with a pejorative perception – conserving what? Communism and its inheritance? Nevertheless, especially after the beginning of the 2000’s, a new debate emerged in the public space, continuing the pre-and inter-war one and preserving to a certain extent the (conservative) argumentative structure of that time: how do we want to shape Romanian politics, or the institutional and political construction of the state, respectively, how can we overcome the identity crisis caused by the four decades of communist dictatorship? Anew, a debate about political modernization and national identity emerged, but in a wholly different context, namely regarding European identity and more precisely the reclaiming of a Romanian European identity which had been lost during Ceaușescu’s Asiatic type communist regime. This time, the issue of the *background-less shapes* regarded the ideological imports (Western Liberalism vs. autochthonism), the implementation of the E.U. aquis (which was actually perceived as an uncritical duplication of a foreign set of values and institutions) or reinstating a traditional value-

⁴ D. Murărașu, *Naționalismul lui Eminescu*, București: Ed. Pacifica, 1994 (first ed. 1932).

⁵ V. Nicolescu, R. Pircă „Femeia în gândirea naționalistă românească: patriarhalismul indiferenței”, in *Patriarhat și emancipare*, Iași: Polirom, 2002, 149-205; L. Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism. The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s*, Oxford&New York: Pergamon Press, 1991, 56-61.

⁶ This was a project he worked on sporadically from 1944 onwards. It took him a long time to refine his methods of selection, sometimes having entire cahiers filled with information regarding philosophy students that had in his view the potential to become the new Romanian intellectual elite – see A. Laignel-Lavastine, *Filozofie și naționalism. Paradoxul Noica*, București: Ed. Humanitas, 1998, 35

⁷ From 1970 onward, Noica will manage to get published again, taking advantage of the re-emergence of nationalism in Socialist Romania. The most important titles are: *Rostire filosofică românească (Romanian philosophical expression, 1970)*, *Creație și frumos în rostirea românească (Creation and beauty in Romanian expression, 1970)*, *Eminescu sau gânduri despre omul deplin al culturii românești (Eminescu or thoughts on the complete man of Romanian culture, 1975)*, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei (The Romanian sentiment of being, 1978)*, *Spiritul românesc în cumpătul vremii (The Romanian spirit at crossroads of time, 1978)*.

⁸ Also creating one of the very first cases of high corruption in Romania, due to the fact that the former Political Publishing House (Editura Politică, the official publishing house of the Romanian Communist Party) was transformed into the Humanitas Publishing House by an ministerial order issued by Andrei Pleșu, then Minister of Culture, and also putting Gabriel Liiceanu in charge of the newly created institution - <http://www.cotidianul.ro/andrei-ple-su-l-a-cadorisit-pe-gabriel-liiceanu-cu-tot-patrimoniul-editurii-politice-209751/>

system that was considered lost during the communist era.

The New School of the Right was founded towards the end of 2000, while being proposed as the ideological driving engine of the liberal-democrats, the main governing party between 2008 and 2012. Although the public statements of its members cover a wide range of ideological positions⁹, the latter find common ground on two essential directions: an outspoken conservatism and the reverence shown to the representatives of the Paltinis School (A. Pleșu, G. Liiceanu)¹⁰, whom they recognize as their mentors.

This thought trend first coagulates in various formulas, around the Liberal Democratic Party or around some of the latter's foundations, like the Christian-Democratic Foundation or the Institute of Popular Studies. After the first period, during which the overlapping with the main governing party had been almost total, some of the intellectuals supporting this school of thought started an independent political career (such is the case of Mihail Neamtu, who started a short-lived new political party – The New Republic) or they became alienated from the party (such is the case of Cristian Preda, who was excluded from PDL as a consequence of his critical remarks brought to the party's management).

No doubt that the conservative speech or elements of the latter have been found and are to be found in various regions of the Romanian political specter, but the Christian approach was only seen on two occasions after 1989 – in the case of parties associated with Christian-Democracy and in the case of right wing extremist parties¹¹. While the latter failed to make the subject of my presentation, as they hold a marginal position in the Romanian political system, the first offer two relatively opposite ideological manifestations, although both parties are affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP) – PNT-CD is the heir of one of the centre-left parties from the interwar period, while PD-L is a party which was founded after 1989 and which decided to exit the Socialist International after 2000 and to join the EPP, thus delivering a dramatic ideological twist. After this moment, PD (which became PD-L after the merger with a faction broken from the liberals)

has found itself on a never-ending quest for an original speech which would identify it on the right political specter, a speech which would be different than those of the liberals or of PNT-CD¹². This is the period when intellectuals like A. Pleșu, G. Liiceanu or H.R. Patapieviici decided to support the party's ideology, while taking it upon them to help PD-L construct a distinct doctrine and identity. This event generated a snowball effect, as a wide range of young disciples joined the seniors, thus giving birth to the New School of the Right.

What is interesting when making the above mentioned comparison between the Christian-Democracy of PNT-CD and PD-L is the Christian nationalist spark originating in the interwar radical views of C. Noica and which was passed on by the Păltiniș School to its disciples. PNT-CD is offering (or it offered to be more precise, in the context of its long and troubled history after 2000) an ideological position close to that of other similar European parties and especially to that of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), to which the social component present since the party's interwar existence was added. From this perspective, PNT-CD is a modern, democratic, secularist party with a significant communitarian component. The new School of the Right, on the other hand, is caught between the democratic pro-European speech and the radical positions present in the thought of its interwar forefathers. The effects of this dissonance are quite visible, especially through the contradictions created by such a position.

The segments where this type of tension becomes most visible are the following: the state-church relation, intellectual intolerance seen as an expression of elitism; the vision regarding national identity and the values of the post-communist era.

In the case of the state-church relationship, perhaps the best example was the proposed project of the law regarding the state-church partnership¹³. The latter aimed to externalize the social services provided by the state by using the Church and the initiative was saluted by then Christian-Democratic Foundation President and Minister of Foreign Affairs Th. Baconschi, by Radu Carp¹⁴, Mihail Neamtu and Radu Preda who argued that “after 50 years of atheist ideology, the time had come for the

⁹ That span from the neoconservatism of Cătălin Avramescu, to the classical conservatism of Ioan Stanomir's ideology, which is based on Burke's thought.

¹⁰ The best reference in this respect is probably represented by the volume of interviews edited by C. Pătrășconiu, *Noua școală de gândire a drepteii (The New School of Thought of the Right)*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011). Among others, in this volume, the main supporters of this trend – Th. Baconschi, M. Neamtu, Dan C. Mihăilescu, Cătălin Avramescu, C. Ghinea, S. Voinescu, C. Preda present their position on conservatism, while mentioning the influences of the main representatives of the Paltinis School. For example, on page 49, Sever Voinescu states: “Andrei Pleșu is my mentor”.

¹¹ Such is the case of the Legionary Movement, under its various names, a party still active today or of the more popular Great Romania Party, an initial national-communist party which has shifted towards a strange Christian version of the latter before the death of its leader, Corneliu Vadim-Tudor.

¹² It is very interesting that Th. Baconschi believes that the PD-L managed to integrate the Transylvanian voters of PNT-CD and of PUNR (The Romanians' National Union Party, a right-wing party which was merged with PRM) – C. Pătrășconiu, op. cit., p. 55.

¹³ Proposed by Raluca Turcan, member of the Chamber of Deputies and Vice-President of PD-L.

¹⁴ Mrs. Turcan's legal counselor for the drafting of the respective law.

Romanian society to discover the Church's historical contribution to common good"¹⁵. The project clearly favored the Orthodox Church by granting it two sources of financing derived from its quality of recognized cult and from specific charity projects which would have used money from the GDP. This initiative would have clearly increased the *politicization* of the Church, but it was sent back to Parliament by the President after it had been approved by the MPs.

As for the second dimension, the best examples are offered by the above mentioned book, *The New School of Thought of the Right*, where Sever Voinescu said that, in Romania, "nobody has ever had the strength to be conservative to the end". Also, while invited to the "Voice of Basarabia" radio station, Mihail Neamțu spoke of the "Christian-Democratic principles which we want to reinstate today", from his position at the time, that of Scientific Director of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and for the Memory of Romanian Exile (IICCMER). Neamțu's speech was directly related to the similar school of thought from the interwar period, while condemning the abuse of the local fascist party¹⁶. Still, Neamtu states he is the adept of a Romania "armed with living faith and with actual means of armed resistance"¹⁷. While talking about tolerance, Cristian Preda, believes that it is a constructed value, since it is taught to children: „tolerance forces you to accept that different is normal. It is not natural. Quite the opposite, human nature forces one to despise your neighbor – this is the big lesson of Hobbes"¹⁸.

Perhaps the most relevant example regarding the third dimension is provided by another vice-president of the former PD-L, Mr. G. Flutur. As president of the Suceava County Council, he approved in 2012 funding for a children's book written by an old legionar commissary, on the cover showing a picture of Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu, the founder of the far-right party. Also, in 2010, the same Suceava County Council funded the publication of another volume written by the same individual – George Ungureanu – called *Prin labirintul vieții (Through the Labyrinth of Life)* where the author describes his career as a Romanization commissar during the short-lived Legionary National State in 1940.

4. Conclusions

After 2014, the National Liberal Party and the PD-L decided for a fusion, under the name of the national liberals. But they also decided that the newly formed party will change its European ideological allegiance, by leaving the ALDE and joining the Populists (of which the former PD-L was a member). That produced not only some confusion amongst the party members, but also affected the party programme in the most peculiar manner – central doctrinaire concepts and values appear to be fused in order to accommodate the recent political and ideological metamorphosis. Perhaps the best example is constituted by the recent change in regard to the party's vision on the human nature. Reading the text posted on the official site of the party (before it was removed during April 2016), one could find a rather interesting approach, which combines the classical liberal view and the christian-democrat one: man is an individual due to his economic interests, but also a person because he has spiritual aspirations. This ridiculous philosophical mixture must have attracted the attention of some intellectuals of the party, because was promptly removed from the site and replaced by a milder, social-liberal version¹⁹. In my opinion, this was not the product of an isolated individual acting without some connection to the party doctrine, but was inspired by the earlier work done by former party president Valeriu Stoica and Romanian-American economist Dragoș-Paul Aligică, *The Reconstruction of the Right (Reconstrucția dreptei)*, where similar contradictory positions were expressed regarding the same issue.

The connection with the far-right orthodoxist thought seems to have been passed on to the new party, as it nominated its candidate for the mayor of Bucharest a neo-legionar politician, Marian Munteanu²⁰. He was the former leader of the Student League during the Piața Universității protests in 1990, leader of the neo-legionary party The Movement for Romania (Mișcarea pentru România) during the early 90's (1992-1995) and founder, at the beginning of 2016, of a civic initiative along with New Right's²¹ leader Tudor Ionescu – "Our Alliance" (Alianța Noastră)²². It is ironical that a neo-legionary gets to be nominated by PNL, due to the fact that, during the early 1930's, the liberal prime-minister I.G. Duca was assassinated by the legionnaires in Sinaia. The nominalization of Mr. Munteanu it's not a mere political mistake perpetrated by the liberal leadership, as it might

¹⁵ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-8395490-fundatia-crestin-democrata-condusa-teodor-baconschi-dupa-50-ani-ideologizare-atee-soc-ietatea-romaneasca-descopera-contributia-bisericii-binele-comun-prin-parteneriatul-stat-biserica.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4chLIq4hIQ>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ C. Pătrășconiu, op. cit., p. 71.

¹⁹ <http://pnl.ro/despre-noi/angajamentul-nostru/principii-si-valori-liberale>

²⁰ Who was promptly removed after a rather strong opposition and critique from both within the party and from the civil society.

²¹ New Right, a nationalist non-governmental association openly affirming its continuity with the interwar fascist Legionary Movement.

²² <http://www.aliantanoastra.ro/>

seem²³, but it reflects a particular ideological stream within the party. The best example of this is represented by “I.C. Brătianu 1875 Liberal Club”, an organization within the party which actually professes an... illiberal discourse²⁴. During 2015 it proposed the reformation of the party’s ideology in a document entitled “Appeal for Saving the National Liberal Party’s Identity”, in which strong nationalist-orthodoxist views were explicitly put forward (eg. Anti-abortion politics, revisionist politics towards Ukraine and the Republic of Moldavia, sustaining the “traditional” family and forbidding gay marriage, sustaining the presence of religious symbols in public schools and affirming Romania’s status as the... protector of the Christians in the Middle East)²⁵. Similarly, one of the members of the ICBLC, Ilfov M.P. Daniel Gheorghe held a political declaration in Parliament on the 21st of April 2016, where he openly and vehemently praised the virtues of orthodoxist nationalism²⁶.

What is the relationship between contemporary center-right conservative christian democrats and the xenophobic orthodoxist nationalism from the interwar period in the Romanian case? As I have tried to argue, there can be identified particular filiations between the two, resulting in a specific ideological framework that shapes the intellectual right discourse nowadays. The main dimensions of this discursive strand refer to the relationship between church and state, religion and the public sphere (eg. compulsory religion in school, anti-abortion, traditional patriarchal family, religious intolerance particularly towards Muslims, creating institutional partnerships between state and church, thus openly challenging the laicity principle, and so on) – both of them reflecting a (cvasi) fundamentalist ideological stance and, secondly, a xenophobic ethno-cultural conception of nation and national identity that is reminiscent of the far-right interwar nationalism.

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²³ The usual argument being that the national-liberals were aiming to promote a candidate that had a particular form of legitimacy in relation to the recent mass protests in Bucharest and other parts of the country. Therefore Marian Munteanu was nominated due to his history as a leader of the Piața Universității protest in 1990 and not as a consequence of his particular ideological stance.

²⁴ <http://www.clicb1875.ro/index.php/2016/02/>

²⁵ <http://www.activenews.ro/stiri-politic/Un-grup-de-liberali-propune-un-program-care-ar-infuria-UE-si-SUA-Economie-prin-noi-insine-Casatoriile-gay-considerate-toxice.-Program-ANTI-avort-115043>

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZXW5TPMbK4&feature=share>