

ELITES UNDER TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP AND THE “TAMING” OF ROMANIAN WRITERS (1953-1956)

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The turmoil triggered in East European countries by the *Secret Report* delivered by Nikita S. Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of February 1956 was also felt in Romania, albeit less intensely. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej was forced to develop a strategy against both genuine de-Stalinization, targeting him as well, and potential rivals who would have jumped at the opportunity to overthrow Dej. The leader of the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) and his close collaborators suppressed all attempts to limit “ideological vigilance” and relieve pressure exerted on the intellectual milieu.¹

In the spring of 1956, the RWP leadership was considerably alarmed by the possibility of having to face radical contestation from intellectuals, and subsequently from the entire society.² In addition to visceral repulsion for intellectuals and criticism, there was fear that contestation of the ideological apparatus by Hungarian and Polish writers would spread into Romania as well. Writers in Hungary had pleaded for greater freedom and they had played a major part, alongside Imre Nagy, in preparing for the Hungarian Revolution. I. Nagy had numerous contacts in the intellectual milieu, among writers, artists, journalists, professors and students. Moreover, the Petöfi Circle – an informal association of young communist intellectuals, later to become an important center of debate on different topics – attracted thousands of participants.³

In Romania, the top leadership of the Party lacked a political figure of Imre Nagy's cultural ideological profile or of Władysław Gomułka's. For a while, some writers perceived Miron Constantinescu as a reformer Imre Nagy. But after hesitant contestation of Gheorghiu-Dej, M. Constantinescu adopted the rhetoric of exposing the “liberalism” and “intellectualism” in Romania in the context of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The only real contestation by a member of the elite could have come from Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, executed after the secret trial of 1954.

¹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Intellectualii români și destalinizarea*, in vol. *Arheologia terorii*, second edition, București, 1998, p. 115.

² Ioana Boca, *1956 – un an de ruptură. România între internaționalismul proletar și stalinismul antisovietic*, co-authored with Teodor Stanca and Mircea Popa, București, 2001, p. 36.

³ Paul E. Zinner, *Reflections on the Vicissitudes of a Totalitarian System. Revolution in Hungary*, in “The Journal of Politics,” vol. 21, February 1959, no. 1, pp. 21-23.

Moreover, a cynical and adroit maneuver devised by Gheorghiu-Dej blocked any anti-dogmatic and revisionist trends. Most probably in association with the much feared Leonte Răutu, head of the Propaganda and Culture Department, Gheorghiu-Dej employed the mediocre writer Alexandru Jar as an instrument to divert writers' complaints about censorship and post-Stalinist dogmatism. To many of his colleagues, Jar had been compromised by writings published during the period of cultural *Zhdanovism*. And it is exactly Jar that Gheorghiu-Dej encouraged to publicly denounce abuse in Stalinist times in a meeting with Party cadres held in late May 1956.⁴ Subsequently, Jar was exposed and ousted from the Party, and his few supporters anathematized by Party ideologists. Lack of solidarity added to Gheorghiu-Dej's perfidious strategy. Romanian intellectuals avoided direct confrontation with the political power, and the Writers' Association failed to become a stronghold of contestation of Stalinist dogmatism, like in Hungary and in Poland.

In a context more favorable for expressing discontent – more exactly in the years 1953-1956, characterized by a cultural-ideological *thaw*, the spirit of Geneva, and the (ephemeral) reconciliation of the Soviet Bloc with Tito's Yugoslavia –, ever more writers and literary critics made a reevaluation of the monopolistic socialist realism and of literary work produced in the years of Stalinism. Cautious at first, such reconsiderations came to challenge, albeit in a low tone, the Party's guidance of literature. Concurrently, attempts were made to make a *periodization* of postwar literature, and demonstrate that Stalin's death, occurred in March 1953, had marked a break with *Zhdanovism*. To begin with 1953, Iosif Chișinevschi and Leonte Răutu, the two watchdogs of Party ideology, held several meetings both to probe for the state of mind among writers and to discourage ideological nonconformism. Unlike on previous occasions, not everybody agreed with Răutu's views. The meeting of November 25, 1953 is illustrative in this respect and can explain the circumstances of Alexandru Jar's exposure of May-June 1956. The tense dialogue between the ideological Czar and a writer whose Party membership dated back to the interwar period must have contributed to the latter's falling into disgrace three years later:

“Com. Leonte Răutu: ‘Please state your views regarding these proposals, should you have any objections, modifications or things to add.’

Com. Jar: ‘I believe people feel intimidated.’

Com. Răutu: ‘Please do not feel intimidated. You are absolutely free to speak up your mind.’

Com. Jar: ‘The issue of dishonest stands has been approached here. I think that we may come up with some results at this meeting. We should discuss at

⁴ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for all Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., 2003, pp. 136-167. See also Ana Selejan, *Literatura în totalitarism 1955-1956*, București, 1998, pp. 23-35.

length and in all honesty everything on our mind. Nothing bad will ensue. It is a month since the meeting held by Com. Chişinevschi. Some issues concerning the literary work, the activity within the Communist Party, and especially the leadership of the Writers' Association were debated there. I remember Com. Răutu making many exaggerated statements there but, generally speaking, the essence was quite correct. And Comrade Chişinevschi supported Comrade Răutu.”⁵

The well-known meeting with activists of the Party Committee of “I.V. Stalin” Sector of Bucharest, held on May 21, 1956, during which Jar made his extremely critical and anti-Party intervention, supported by Ion Vitner and Mihail Davidoglu,⁶ was actually the culmination of old disputes, mostly with Jar and Vitner in the spotlight. It is worth mentioning that Vitner and several other writers had already taken critical stands against the ideological departments of the CC of the RWP several months before. A record of Vitner's contestation can be found in a document signed by Virgil Florea, head of sector in the Science and Culture Department (led by Pavel Țugui): “Thus, for instance, in a conversation with the bureau of the Primary Party org[anisation] of the Writers' Association, Vitner declared that com[rades Pavel] Țugui and Ofelia Manole ‘are wrecking the Romanian literature,’ and that ‘by certain practices, they have placed literature beyond the Party line.’ He also declared, in a conversation at the Science and Culture Department, that com. Răutu ‘is watching’ him, ‘has offended’ him, and so forth. In conversations with several writers at the Science and Culture Department (M[aria] Banuş, [Alexandru] Jar, and Vitner) they showed their disapproval of the fact that comrades with important tasks in the RWP Central Committee's structures (the aforementioned) did not make a severe self-critical analysis of their past ‘mistakes.’ Also, that no official statement (an editorial in ‘Scânteia’ or a decision by the CC) had been made until then in order to expose as mistaken some of the methods employed in the past by Party activists and by comrades at the leadership of the Writers' Association, in their guidance of literature (...) Some writers (Vitner, [Eugen] Jebeleanu) denied the right of the Science and Culture Department of the CC of the RWP to direct the activity of the Primary Party organization of the Writers' Association or initiate certain discussions in the Primary Party organization.”⁷ However, no real solidarity was shown in relation to such acts of contestation.

Inertia and passivity, which dominated the behavior of most mature intellectuals, were not always found among young writers. The nonconformist spirit emerged at the meeting of the young writers of March 20-21, 1956, where Nicolae

⁵ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale, București (hereafter: ANIC), fund CC al PCR – Secția de Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 81/1953, p. 196.

⁶ See for details Elis[abeta Neagoe-]Pleșa, *Problematica cultului personalității în mediul literar din România. “Cazul” Jar*, in vol. *Ungaria 1956: revolta minților și sfârșitul mitului comunist*, ed. by Doina Jela, Vladimir Tismăneanu, București, 2006, p. 198.

⁷ ANIC, fund CC al PCR – Secția de Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 9/1956, pp. 141-142.

Labiș, Radu Cosașu and other writers deplored “the narrow-minded, ossified prejudice,” and “the danger of dogmatism and misrepresentation of true life by employing calcified formulas.”⁸ It was a relapse on the part of Labiș, as between 1954 and 1956 several documents issued by the Literature Sector of the Propaganda and Culture Department, while praising his talent, constantly made note of foreign ideological influences persisting in his writings, such as the fact that “in early January 1956, “Scânteia tineretului” [the Young Communist Organization’s daily newspaper] published the poem *Moartea albatrosului* (Death of the Albatross) . . . , a hymn to despondency.”⁹ Nicolae Labiș, Radu Cosașu, Florin Mugur, Sonia Larian, Lucian Raicu, Doina Sălăjan, and Ion Gheorghe, all colleagues at the School of Literature and Literary Criticism “Mihail Eminescu” in 1952-1954, and several other young poets and novelists are mentioned in a note of December 1, 1956, issued by the Propaganda and Culture Department one month after the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution. The note speaks of “heinous manifestations against the democratic and people’s regime” by young writers, in a political context perturbed by the events in Poland and in Hungary.¹⁰ It has all the characteristics of an indictment. In addition to negativist and denigrating stands against the Party line, the author of the document, who was most probably an instructor working for the Department, mentions the “unhealthy,” bourgeois or petty bourgeois origins and the so-called immoral and randy behavior of Nicolae Labiș, Ion Gheorghe and Tamara Pânzaru. The latter had been under suspicion since 1954, because of a predilection for “decadent and pornographic” reading material,¹¹ and appeared, along with Sonia Larian and Zizi Munteanu, in an informative note of August 4, 1956 on some issues related to the Writers’ Association, as an “unfit” editor, to be dismissed from the staff of the literary journal.

Larian – who would be just as well pursued by censorship 30 years later, in 1986, when her autobiographical novel was withdrawn from the market¹² – had been included into a group incriminated as follows: “Radu Cosașu, N[icolae] Țic, E[ugen] Mandric and Sonia Larian have published in ‘Scânteia tineretului,’ in ‘Iașul literar,’ and in ‘Viața românească’ various sketches deliberately featuring negative aspects of reality, denigrating Party and State activists, showing petty aspects of reality that lack significance. For the publishing of these sketches, R. Cosașu and N. Țic, based on the Central Committee’s Propaganda and Culture Department’s demand were recently removed from the editing staff of ‘Scânteia tineretului.’ This group was made almost entirely by bourgeois or petty bourgeois

⁸ Ana Selejan, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-18.

⁹ Marin Radu Mocanu, *Cazarma scriitorilor (Documente)*, București, 1998, p. 122.

¹⁰ The note reached Leonte Răutu, and a copy of it, “Comrade [Pavel] Țugui.”

¹¹ Marin Radu Mocanu, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹² Adriana Babeți, *Memoria rănită*, foreword by Sonia Larian, *Bietele corpuri*, Iași, 2004, pp. 5-16.

elements. Thus, Sonia Larian is a tradesman's daughter, Radu Cosașu comes from a bourgeois family, and S. Damian was raised in a Jewish religious environment."¹³

There were in fact several stands against the official line that bothered the propaganda apparatus; Radu Cosașu, one of the incriminated, noted in his memoirs: "I stood up – Imprudence? Naïveté? Revolutionary spirit? Counter-revolutionary spirit? – in a meeting of young writers from all over the country, and asked that we, reporters, should be allowed to write about what we actually see, and not be forced to tell lies, and that censorship should apply to mediocrity and empty slogans. Then I quoted Lenin, who could not accept, after the takeover of power, the communist lie, and Whitman – carefully avoiding the names of France and Sebastian. My speech was immediately condemned by officials as pernicious, petty-bourgeois, hostile, and it was labeled 'the pitiful *whole truth theory*.' I was questioned at the Central Committee headquarters by the very person who had conducted the meeting during which I had launched the *theory* when he had given me the opportunity to express myself as a genuine young socialist realist writer; I had deceived them and had talked in a contrary way – Who had influenced me? What contacts did I have? What did I know about the *Petőfi Circle* in Budapest that supported the same ideas?"¹⁴ Radu Cosașu, a former Stalinist enthusiast who had made a break with his bourgeois milieu of origin out of revolutionary passion, was similar in terms of biography and possible conversion to some of the most energetic intellectuals of what was called *the Budapest revolt of the mind*. Undoubtedly, being a friend of Labiș, of Lucian Raicu and of other influential young writers, Cosașu was the perfect target for the keepers of the dogma.

In general, restless young writers, potential contesters through radical syntagms such as the *whole truth*, were spared until the repression of the Hungarian Revolution; immediately after, there were exposure meetings, exclusion from the Writers' Association, suspension from editing staffs, withdrawal of signature rights, and inquiries by the political police (the *Securitate*). Labiș' death in December 1956 was not the only tragedy. Other dramatic events added, like expulsions from the Communist Party, arrests, detentions, in anticipation to the repression wave of 1958-1960. The documents of the time – produced, for instance, by the Propaganda and Culture Department – demonstrate that the action taken by the *Securitate* against the intellectuals was not autonomous, but in response to Party directives. Beyond the crisis of literature in general, there was a crisis of the writers' milieu, which showed lack of solidarity, especially in 1956, and flawed communication within itself and with other disciplines, like for instance with philosophers. From the analysis of historians and political scientists, such as Vladimir V. Kusin and other researchers

¹³ ANIC, fund CC al PCR – Secția de Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 17/1956, pp. 106-108.

¹⁴ Radu Cosașu, *Autodenunțuri și precizări (plus câteva note informative, o addendă și spovedania unui convins)*, București, 2001, pp. 20-21.

who wrote about the intellectual origins of the *Prague Spring*,¹⁵ it results that dialogue and communication between philosophers and writers – in the Czechoslovakian case – were of crucial importance to a discourse of great impact and a reformation impulse based on which a reformation approach from within state socialism, or (neo-)Stalinist socialism could be developed.

The Romanian intellectual milieu and other social groups accepted a kind of a social contract with the political power. Moreover, they were unable to make meaningful demonstrations of solidarity going beyond ethnic boundaries, and this became obvious especially to begin with the 1956 moment (delimited by Khrushchev's secret report and the Hungarian Revolution). Romanian-Hungarian latent tensions in Transylvania – also seen in the literary and academic circles – were deepened by the creation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region, and they hindered communication at critical moments, when one foresaw the weakness and illegitimacy of the communist system. Therefore, the revolutionary process in Budapest, which mainly questioned the one party monopoly and, in the background, the guidance of literature by the Communist Party, did not bring about the creation of a Romanian-Hungarian joint platform liable to challenge the supremacy exerted over the intellectual life by the Propaganda and Culture Department. Generally speaking, Romanian historiography reflected satisfactorily the significance of Alexandru Jar's case, but neglected the unrest among the Romanian Hungarian intellectuals – a community torn by conflicts – under the impact of transformations in Budapest and contestation in Bucharest. In 1956, in Cluj, like Alexandru Jar, László Földes – a well-known literary critic and aesthete, chief editor of "Utunk"¹⁶ – showed "anti-Party" attitudes and "anti-Marxist" conceptions, which did not trigger his disgrace immediately.¹⁷ His discharge from office occurred only in 1958, when he was summoned to an exposure meeting in Târgu Mureș, due to a conflict in the Hungarian literary milieu of Transylvania.¹⁸ Like his Romanian peers, László Földes put forth a new periodization of literature (applicable to the Hungarian Transylvanian literary works), and his ideological inquisitors turned the opinion of a literary critic into a political fault.

¹⁵ Vladimir V. Kusin, *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring. The Development of Reformist Ideas in Czechoslovakia, 1956-1967*, London, 1971.

¹⁶ For details on the postwar evolution of the journal, see Lucian Nastasă, *Studiu introductiv* in vol. *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Maghiarii din România (1956-1968)*, ed. by Andreea Andreescu, Lucian Nastasă (coord.), Andrea Varga, Cluj, 2003, p. 56.

¹⁷ In 1957 László Földes was accused by Ion Ianoși, then a young instructor working for the Department of Science and Culture, of masked manifestations of liberalism and apolitism – ANIC, fund CC al PCR – Secția de Propagandă și Agitație, file no. 5/1957, p. 110, "Note on Several Aspects Regarding the Political Atmosphere among Some Magyar Intellectuals of Cluj."

¹⁸ Stefano Bottoni, *A hatalom értelmisége – az értelmiség hatalma. A Földes László – ugy*, in "Korall," 2004, no. 18.