

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title.

The Extreme Right in Contemporary Romania

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- In contrast to the recent past of the country, there is a low presence of extreme right groups in the electoral competition of today's Romania. A visible surge in the political success of such parties in the upcoming parliamentary elections of December 2012 seems to be unlikely. This signals a difference from the current trend in other European countries, but there is still potential for the growth of extremism in Romania aligning it with the general direction in Europe.
- Racist, discriminatory and intolerant attitudes are present within society. Casual intolerance is widespread and racist or discriminatory statements often go unpunished. In the absence of a desire by politicians to lead by example, it is left to civil society organisations to pursue an educative agenda without much state-driven support.
- Several prominent members of extreme right parties found refuge in other political forces in the last years. These cases of party migration make it hard to believe that the extreme views held by some of these ex-leaders of right-wing extremism have not found support in the political parties where they currently operate. The fact that some of these individuals manage to rally electoral support may in fact suggest that this happens precisely because of their original views and attitudes, rather than in spite of them.



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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BEC	The Central Electoral Bureau
BOR	The Romanian Orthodox Church
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CNCD	The National Council for Combating Discrimination
EU	The European Union
IMF	The International Monetary Fund
ND	The New Right
PDL	The Democrat Liberal Party
PNG-CD	The New Generation Party – Christian Democratic
PP-DD	People’s Party – Dan Diaconescu
PPP	The Party for the Fatherland
PRM	The Greater Romania Party
PSD	The Social Democrat Party
PUNR	The Party for Romanian National Unity
SRSP	The Romanian Society of Political Sciences
TPT	Everything for the Country
UDMR	The Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania
USL	The Social Liberal Union

1. Introduction

Since the collapse of communism, the dynamics of right-wing extremism in Romania have followed a rather peculiar pattern. That said, there are clearly many similarities with other Central and East European (CEE)¹ countries. As critics observed with surprise, extreme right-wing nationalism experienced a resurgence immediately after the collapse of communism in the region (Verdery, 1993). Romania was no exception, but it occupies an atypical position because right-wing extremism emerged here with more virulence and resilience. A number of factors account for this. One is the communist regime's deployment of nationalism as a means of consolidating and legitimating power; another is the violent nature of the events of December 1989 and the power vacuum² that emerged after the regime collapsed. Both of these helped to create a fertile breeding ground for right-wing extremism and, in a more broad sense, were also partially responsible for the slow (in comparison to the other CEE countries) transition to a post-communist order. As a result, extreme right-wing groups in Romania scored electoral successes very quickly. The Party for Romanian National Unity (the PUNR)³ and the Greater Romania Party (the PRM) were the first extreme right-wing formations in CEE to enter government (as coalition partners) in 1992, followed by the Slovak National Party in 1993 (Mudde, 2005: 165). Subsequently, the PRM reached the peak of its electoral success in 2000, when it became the largest opposition party, and its leader, Corneliu Vadim

Tudor, managed to enter the second round of the presidential elections (anticipating by two years Jean-Marie Le Pen's feat in the 2002 French presidential elections).

The representation of the extreme right has, in recent years, increased in the parliaments of various CEE countries and in Europe more widely (one need look no further than the recent results in Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Sweden, to name but a few). Romania seems to buck the trend here. Since 2000, the PRM's support has declined consistently, and currently the party has no representation in the Romanian parliament. Moreover, no other extreme right-wing group has since managed to achieve significant electoral success, and the achievements of the PRM are unlikely to be replicated by any other party in the near future.

These results in Romania appear reassuring in comparison with the trend in Europe. However, new extreme right-wing political groups have emerged and intend to participate in elections. Extreme nationalism, revisionism and intolerance vis-à-vis various groups, including the Roma, ethnic Hungarians and sexual minorities, are still manifest outside electoral politics in institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms. Furthermore, what I call *casual intolerance*⁴ is a common occurrence in public and private speech. Far from being harmless, this phenomenon is widespread and contributes to the perpetuation and reinforcement of racism and intolerance in Romanian society. Thus, a more detailed examination is necessary in order to establish an accurate picture of the extreme right-wing landscape in Romania. To this end, the present study surveys the current key players in this category and outlines their main features in terms of organisation, rhetoric, support and impact. In doing so, it also reflects on more general aspects of Romanian society.

Some brief conceptual clarifications are necessary from the outset. The literature on extreme nationalism and right-wing politics abounds in names and labels attached to the phenomena investigated. There is little agreement on what constitutes the »right«, which

1. The descriptor »Central and Eastern Europe« is employed here in the same way Cas Mudde (2005: 162) used it, namely to refer to the post-communist states that have joined the European union (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia).

2. I refer here to the fact that in Romania there were no organised groups able to challenge the dominance of the communist regime through elections and to make a legitimate claim for power (in the same way it happened, for example, in Poland or the former Czechoslovakia). As a result, members of the communist nomenclatura were able to exploit the chaotic events of December 1989 and to hijack the transition from communism.

3. The PUNR was the first extreme right party to emerge in post-communist Romania. It was formed in March 1990 as the Party for the National Union of Romanians in Transylvania (the PUNRT), the political arm of the Romanian Hearth Cultural Union (VR) which, itself, was born as a reaction to the organisation of the ethnic Hungarians, in December 1989, into the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR) (Gallagher, 1992). It changed its name to PUNR in June 1990 (most likely to de-emphasise its local character in an attempt to build on the minimal success of the March 1990 elections). However, the PUNR remained largely a parochial party. It was overtaken in terms of success by the Greater Romania Party (the PRM) and was eventually absorbed into the Conservative Party (PC). The VR later severed its ties with the PUNR. It still operates as a peripheral organisation and it maintains its strong nationalist and anti-Hungarian stance.

4. The term borrows from Michael Billig's (1995: 6) notion of »banal nationalism« and refers to day-to-day discursive practices displaying embedded intolerance which often goes unnoticed, while having the negative effect of reinforcing stereotypes. Idioms such as »*inecat ca țiganul la mal*« (drowning like a gypsy by the bank/shore) are illustrative examples in this respect.

of the tags used («extreme» right, »far« right, »radical (populist)« right, etc.) offers the most precise description of reality and what kind of political groups or parties fall into this category (Hainsworth, 2008: 5–23; Mudde, 2000: 5–16; Eatwell, 2004: 5–15). For the purpose of this study, the label extreme right will be used with reference to groups that – according to Mudde’s maximum definition – display as key ideological features nativism, authoritarianism and populism (2007: 20–23). Thus, the extreme right exhibits »exclusionary representations of the nation« as well as anti-parliamentary, anti-pluralist and anti-systemic tendencies, even when operating within the norms of liberal-democratic frameworks (Hainsworth, 2008: 11–12).

2. Extreme Right Actors

Despite the current lack of representation in parliament, the landscape of extreme right-wing groups and organisations in Romania is abundant and diverse. Such manifestations occur both within and outside the framework of electoral politics. In the first category, three actors stand out: the Greater Romania Party (PRM), the New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (PNG-CD) and the Party »Everything for the Country« (TPT). These parties deserve a closer investigation in this study due to their previous electoral success (the PRM), the way in which they have contributed to the shaping of party politics (PNG-CD) or because of the character and significance of their discourse (TPT).

Among the groups not engaged in electoral politics it is worth mentioning the New Right group (ND) because of its overt use of the Iron Guard legacy (in this respect it competes directly with the TPT party), the effective dissemination of its ideas on the Internet (and during various public appearances) and its ambitions (yet to be realised) to stand for election. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) is also an institution that has traditionally mixed a nativist form of nationalism with authoritarian tendencies and a propensity for involvement in public and political life.

Outside these groups and institutions, which represent the most significant current extreme right players in Romanian society, a large number of other, smaller organisations operate. Andreescu (2004: 172), for example, identified twenty-eight organisations and as-

sociations promoting racist and extremist activities. It is extremely difficult to monitor the number of such groups: many are organised as cultural associations and foundations, tend to operate on a largely parochial level, have low membership, and their activity and even existence/disappearance often falls below the radar. In addition, a large number of groups are only active on the Internet, where they disseminate – often anonymously – racist, discriminatory and intolerant materials and ideas. It is not the purpose of this study to identify and examine all such groups. Rather, its focus will be on the politically relevant groups, movements and manifestations.

Finally, if we look at extreme right subcultures we find that there are no skinhead-type groups operating in Romania. Random acts of violence motivated by racism, homophobia or intolerance still occur, but have not been widespread in recent years (U.S. Dept. of State, 2011). Cases of football hooliganism, where fan groups display racist banners or chant racist slogans (mostly hostile to the Roma) still occur, but not in an organised manner. These instances are part of the casual intolerance phenomenon highlighted earlier.

2.1 The Greater Romania Party

Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Eugen Barbu, two former sycophants of Ceaușescu’s regime, founded the PRM a year after they had set up the weekly publication with the same name. Under Tudor’s leadership, the party’s success grew steadily, peaking in the 2000 elections, when it became the largest party in opposition. A combination of a failed attempt by Tudor to shed the party’s and his anti-Semitic image (which undoubtedly alienated some of their core supporters), internal struggles, mass defections and a realignment of the political landscape in Romania, which generated a challenge to Tudor’s dominant rhetoric focused on justice versus corruption, ushered in the PRM’s decline from 2004 onwards. Since then, the party has failed to secure any seats in parliament (in the 2008 elections) and currently Tudor (together with George Becali) is an MEP (Cinpoieș, 2010). In their most recent electoral test – the local elections of June 2012 – the PRM performed dismally, winning not a single presidency of any county council, no county council seats, and only seven mayoral mandates and 600 local council seats (BEC, 2012).

The PRM describes itself as »centre-left, of a national direction« (Statutul PRM). However, the »national doctrine« outlined in its official publication highlights the fact that the PRM glorifies its nationalist predecessors and claims to represent their nationalist goals (Doctrina PRM). This, together with staunch revanchism,⁵ its authoritarian organisational hierarchy and its hate speeches directed at members of ethnic minorities (ethnic Hungarians, Roma and Jews being the preferred targets) and sexual minorities, and its positioning itself against the political mainstream warrants the inclusion of the party among the representatives of the extreme right in Romania.

Ideologically, three broad value frames appear relevant, each with its own discursive correspondent (Cinpoș, 2010: 115–122). First the notion of territory and ancestry is expressed in the party's focus on the issue of Romania's territorial integrity. The historical continuity of the Romanian nation (defined in a purely ethnic way) and the need to protect the territorial integrity of Romania and to return to its pre-1940 borders constitute the key markers of the PRM discourse. The ethnic Hungarian community in Romania is the main target of PRM hate speeches and fear-mongering. It is accused of plotting the secession of Transylvania with the cooperation (or at least connivance) of the Romanian authorities, and the party has repeatedly called for the outlawing of what it calls the »terrorist organisation« the UDMR (see among others: Agrigoroaie, 2003 and *România Mare*, August 2002; Tudor, 2001: vol. II, 60; and Agrigoroaie, 2012). On the other hand, the PRM states as one of its key goals the unification of Romania with its lost territories in Bessarabia and Bukovina. The party has consistently pursued this revanchist line, lobbying, for example, for the freeing of Ilie Ilașcu, imprisoned by the authorities of the self-proclaimed independent Transnistria. He was subsequently freed, became a member of the PRM and held a seat in the Romanian Upper House between 2000 and 2008.

The second value frame in the PRM's ideology is the notion of sovereignty and independence and its corresponding articulation of Romania's position in Europe and the world, which is rather ambivalent. On the one hand, the party emphasises a mythologised version of Romania's historical continuity and importance in Europe. On the other hand, the party has accepted mem-

bership of the EU, albeit reluctantly. Furthermore, PRM discourse focuses substantially on the external »other«, which it accuses of ceaselessly conspiring to subjugate and destroy Romania. The favourite culprits of the PRM's rampant anti-Semitism are the »Jewish Mafia«, »Zionism«, the US (controlled by Israel), Judeo-Freemason groups, but also Western actors more generally who it alleges are trying to impose their control through a »New World Order« (Cinpoș, 2010: 118–120).

Finally, the Christian Orthodox tradition and beliefs relating to the issue of corruption (both material and spiritual) form an essential aspect of the PRM's ideology. The issue of corruption in particular has featured prominently in the party discourse, especially since 2000. The Romanian political elites and state institutions are held responsible for the failure to establish law and order in Romania. From this point of view, the PRM positions itself as a populist, anti-system party. I have argued, however, that the extreme nationalist dimension of the party is relevant here, because it legitimises the solutions offered by the PRM and identified by it as part of the Romanian Christian Orthodox tradition (Cinpoș, 2010: 121). Thus, economic failure goes hand-in-hand with the widespread moral failure of society. As well as the political class in general, specific groups are targeted, in particular the Roma minority and the gay minority,⁶ and are held responsible for moral degeneration in Romania.

Like most groups of the extreme right, a charismatic leader – Corneliu Vadim Tudor – stands at the centre of its structure and organisation. Any sense of internal democratic process is absent, and decisions are taken at Tudor's whim. This has led over time to the alienation of prominent figures who eventually left the party. In fact, Tudor himself has often emphasised his role as the party's decision-maker, and any attempts to undermine his authority have resulted in people being expelled from the party and then being named and shamed in the *România Mare* and *Tricolorul* magazines, the party's mouthpieces (Tudor, 2002; Cinpoș, 2010: 132–133, 168–170). More recently, Tudor and the PRM have also been abandoned by their youth organisation and the editor of the *Tricolorul.ro* newspaper.⁷

5. As its name (which points to the enlarged territory of Romania, following WWI) suggests, the party has openly been militating for the restoration of the Romanian territory along the lines of the 1918 borders.

6. Tudor's use of words such as »sallow and repulsive vice« that Romanians »judge very harshly, as being diabolic« directed at the former US Ambassador in Romania, Michel Guest (who had openly declared he was gay) is illustrative of the PRM's approach to these issues (in: Cinpoș, 2010: 140).

7. See statements explaining their actions at: <http://www.ziarultricolorul.ro/>, 30 January 2012 and 7 May 2012, last viewed on 11/08/2012.

Traditionally, the PRM has attracted people sympathetic to the nationalist policies of the communist regime as well as former members of the communist nomenclature (including retired members of the army and of the *Securitate*) who found themselves deprived of their positions of influence (Deletant, 1993: 111–113). In other words, the members and supporters of the PRM are mainly drawn from among those who have been affected negatively by post-communist realities and are likely to display nostalgia for communism (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2004: 63). Thus, the PRM's constituency is largely working class, not very educated and increasingly consists of older people (Sum, 2010: 22–23).

The controlling character of the PRM leader and his increasingly erratic behaviour have led to a significant drop in both membership of and support for the party. The main beneficiary of the PRM's decline is the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD),⁸ which is also gathering support from among those disgruntled with the Social Liberal Union (USL) and the Democrat Liberal Party (PDL).

2.2 The New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (PNG-CD)

The New Generation Party (which in 2006 changed its name to the New Generation Party – Christian Democratic) was an anonymous formation founded by the former Bucharest mayor Viorel Lis. In 2004, George Becali – the owner of the football club Steaua Bucharest and a controversial figure in Romanian public life – became the leader of the party, signalling a change of direction characterised by a mixture of extreme nationalism, Christian Orthodox beliefs and intolerance. At the time, there was speculation that the PSD informally supported Becali's decision to enter politics, in the hope that his party might erode the PRM's electorate (Shafir, 2004).

Whether such allegations are true or not, in 2004, the party did offer an alternative to potentially disillusioned PRM voters. However, it performed modestly, failing – with only 2.26 per cent of the vote for the Upper House and 2.23 per cent for the Lower House – to secure any

seats in parliament. The 2008 elections brought similar results – 2.53 per cent of the votes for the Senate and 2.27 for the Chamber of Deputies – and again, no seats (SRSP, 2004; BEC, 2008). After 2008 the trajectories of the PNG-CD and the PRM intersected: despite previous verbal tussles between the leaders of the two parties, Becali ran on the PRM lists in the European parliament elections of 2009 and secured an MEP seat; this coincided with his arrest and investigation for kidnapping! Like the PRM, the PNG-CD is also declining: in the 2012 local elections its results were dire – winning only one mayoral position and 108 local council seats (BEC, 2012).

Under the leadership of Becali, the ideology of the party has come close to that of the inter-war fascist legionary movement with an added twist of opportunism, demagoguery and gutter talk. In the past, Becali has appropriated symbols and slogans of the Iron Guard, and the party slogan currently displayed on its official website – »Serving the Cross and the Romanian Nation!« – reflects this fusion of conservative Christian Orthodoxy and mythologised nationalism. In terms of structure, the PNG-CD resembles the PRM inasmuch as it is largely centred on its leader. Thus, what the party lacks in programme is made up for by Becali's insulting language, homophobia and intolerance. So far he has been fined several times by the National Council for Combating Discrimination for making discriminatory statements against women, the Roma and other ethnic minorities, and he is well known for his homophobic statements. At one point he stated that he would never hire gay players in his football team and that »homosexuals are protected by Satan« (ProTV, 2012).

His constant references to God and the Orthodox Church, and his use of legionary symbols may – as Frussetta and Glont argue – have offered voters »a rallying point for protest against conventional politics« (2009: 564). However, crass populism rather than toying with legionary symbols has so far been Becali's recipe for success, and competition from the PP-DD on that front is likely to dash the PNG's chances of further success. As for the committed sympathisers of the Iron Guard and its legacy, it is unlikely that they were ever taken in by Becali's pretences. The PNG-CD's core constituency is to some extent similar to that of the PRM. For a while, the PNG-CD was actually home to former PRM members and supporters. As Sum (2010: 22–23) points out, however, despite the common class base, the PNG-CD seems to attract more young and unemployed voters.

8. The PP-DD is a populist party founded by Dan Diaconescu, the owner of the successful tabloid-type television channel OTV. Despite making grounds in the recent local elections, and already scoring double figures in opinion polls, this party does not meet the criteria for this study. While sharing some of the characteristics of extreme right groups (populism being the most obvious one), it lacks a clear nativist dimension.

All in all, the future does not look promising for the PNG-CD. After a tentative attempt to forge an alliance with the PRM for the local and general elections of 2012 (which, incidentally, might have been mutually beneficial, given that both parties are struggling), the two leaders failed to reach an agreement (Ionel, 2012).

2.3 The Party »Everything for the Country« (TPȚ)

One party that – despite operating since 1993 – has only recently achieved some electoral success (tiny as this may be) is »Everything for the Country« (TPȚ).⁹ The group was called the Party for the Fatherland (PPP) until February 2012, when a court officially approved the use of the name TPȚ – the name carried by the political arm of the Legionary Movement in inter-war Romania. The party declares itself openly as a perpetuator of the legacy of the Iron Guard, an aspect demonstrated, for example, by its efforts to secure the official registration of the current name, or by the fact that the official website states that the party was »re-established in 1993« (a clear allusion to the continuity with the Iron Guard) (Partidul »TPȚ«, [no date]).

Membership of and support for the party comes mostly from younger educated people, who sympathise with the fusion of ethnic nationalism, Christian Orthodox faith, folk tradition and racial purity based on the nationalist foundation myths that characterised the Iron Guard. With the exception of the president of the party, Coriolan Grigore Baci, who is fifty, and a few other persons, most of the TPȚ candidates are in their thirties (including the executive president, Florin Dobrescu). At the other end of the age spectrum, the party has attracted a number of former members of the Iron Guard, some of whom survived imprisonment during communism. This latter category of members has provided legitimacy for the party with respect to its claim to continue the Iron Guard legacy.

Recently, the party has been busy enhancing its profile as a political actor with electoral ambitions. Its programme lists of relatively tame conservative themes such as the importance of the family, the church, and the struggle against bureaucracy and corruption, which it addresses in vague terms. (Partidul »TPȚ«, [no date]). However, it is at

the grass-roots level of civil society participation that the strategy of the party is predominant. Like the Iron Guard before it, the members of the TPȚ often organise ritualised activities and cultural events ranging from marches and celebrations of various nationalist heroes and personalities held in reverence, to work camps and visits to Christian Orthodox churches and monasteries. While participation in these events is usually low in terms of numbers, they nevertheless aim to be very visible: members often wear traditional costume and carry Romanian as well as party flags. Another similarity with its inter-war predecessor is the fact that the group has received significant moral support from monastic figures in the Orthodox Church.

Party discourse emphasises what are considered to be central Romanian spiritual values (especially rooted in folk traditions and Christian Orthodoxy) and highlights the threats to them from actors inside and outside the country. Thus, in the online publication *Buciumul* (The Bugle) – one of the TPȚ mouthpieces – one can find numerous articles denouncing plots by the Hungarian state or the Hungarian community in Romania designed to undermine Romania's territorial integrity. As far as territory is concerned, the movement is also a supporter of unionist claims concerning the lost territories of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. In terms of external threats, Western organisations perceived as globalisation agents are often portrayed as instruments controlled by occult groups (Free Masonry is often identified as the culprit) aiming to establish a new world order. Sexual minorities are also a key target, and several contributions to the online publication have condemned them and claimed links between homosexuality and paedophilia.¹⁰

While irrelevant in electoral terms, the TPȚ's recent public presence is perhaps relevant for the general social and political context: it shows that the Iron Guard (and what it stood for) not only still has currency but can also be used openly as a legitimate discourse and political alternative in contemporary Romania.¹¹

10. Several entries on *Buciumul*, either original or imported from other online outlets, focus on these aspects. See, among many other, the articles: »Ce mărturisiri face un francmason pe patul de moarte«, available at: <http://www.buciumul.ro/2012/06/25/ce-marturisiri-face-un-francmason-pe-patul-de-moarte/> or »Secretul mișcării pentru drepturile homosexualilor: pedofilia«, taken from the Christian Orthodox website *Familia Ortodoxă* (<http://www.familiaortodoxa.ro>), available at: <http://www.buciumul.ro/2012/06/28/secretul-miscarii-pentru-drepturile-homosexualilor-pedofilia/>.

11. On a related note, the fact that in 2012 a court deems legal that the party registers the name »Everything for the Country« after a court rejected the same name in 1993, may be, in itself, significant for broader mutations Romania.

9. The party managed to obtain one single local council seat in the 2008 local elections and 2 local council seats in those of 2012, but in 2012 has had a much more visible public presence (BEC, 2008b; BEC 2012).

2.4 The New Right (ND) Movement and the Nationalist Party

The TPȚ party has not been the only group in post-communist Romania to lay claim to the legacy of the Iron Guard: the New Right (ND) movement has been its main competitor. The ND group was founded in 2000 and since then has been a consistent element in the extreme right landscape in Romania. The movement has more than twenty-five branches (including in Germany, Italy and the Republic of Moldova) and an active online presence. Apart from its official website and blog – www.nouadreapta.org and <http://blog.nouadreapta.org>, the websites of some of its branches, and a large number of other blogs operated by ND members and supporters, the ND movement also has a YouTube-based television channel with more than seventy uploaded videos and more than 200 subscribers (YouTube, *Noua Dreaptă TV*).

The similarities between the ND movement and the TPȚ party are manifold. Beside its ideological roots, the ND, too, appeals primarily to young, educated people with strong nationalist and Christian Orthodox beliefs. Alongside its president – the thirty-four-year-old lawyer Tudor Ionescu – most of the movement's leadership are university students or graduates in their twenties and thirties.

The main themes of the movement's discourse are likewise drawn from a mythologised interpretation of Romanian history informed by strong Christian Orthodox values. The revisionist tendencies of the movement are more explicitly argued than those of the TPȚ. The official website, for example, displays the slogan of the movement – »For a dignified and strong greater Romania« – and a map of Romania with its 1918–1940 borders. The group's »Bessarabian« branch and its activities in the Republic of Moldova reinforce this aspect. Another central theme is its opposition to the rights of sexual minorities. In terms of public appearances, the ND is best known for organising counter-marches (called »marches for normality«) in opposition to marches by sexual minorities in Romania. More broadly, the ND focuses in unambiguously intolerant terms on anyone deemed to be contributing to economic, social and moral decline in Romania. Externally, the preferred targets of the ND discourse are institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, often portrayed as agents of Freemasonry (ND, Actiuni 2012). Internally, the »gypsy problem« and »Hungarian irredentism« along with the whole political class are favourite scapegoats.

As recently as the end of 2011, the ND movement attempted to enter electoral politics, when it tried to register as a political party under the name of the Nationalist Party. The courts rejected the application, however. As a result, the main relevance of the movement remains in its grass-roots organisation outside political competition, where it operates – as is the case with TRȚ – mainly by organising work camps, marches and commemorative events.

2.5 The Influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church on the Extreme Right Discourse

The inclusion of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) in a study of the extreme right in Romania is motivated by the role it has played in informing and influencing the extreme right discourse in Romania. The BOR has a long history of articulating and/or supporting an ethnically based conception of the nation. Over time, the BOR ideological position has intersected (directly or implicitly) with that of other extremist political groups. In inter-war Romania, the collaboration between the Iron Guard and the Orthodox Church was extensive, with a large number of priests sympathising with the Iron Guard and even running in elections for the »Everything for the Country« Party (Iordachi, 2004: 35). Currently, the attitude of the BOR can be summarised – as Andreescu (2004: 178) points out – in terms of four characteristics: its exclusivist nationalist definition of the Romanian state (equating the Romanian state with the Romanian nation and the Romanian nation with the Christian Orthodox faith); its authoritarian, fundamentalist tendency to subordinate the notion of rule of law to that of divine right; the use of aggressive instruments to protect its position; and its ability to mobilise people and resources to achieve its aims.

Considering that Romania recently occupied sixth place in a global index of religiosity (WIN-Gallup International 2012) and that Christian Orthodoxy is the dominant religion in Romania, it is no surprise that the BOR manages to exercise such a large degree of influence over public life. Owing to this privileged position, it is common for political figures to pander to the BOR. Political figures across the whole political spectrum often attend various religious celebrations to gain political advantage. The BOR is also able to exert pressure on parliament and on political parties in order to achieve favourable outcomes for its various causes. During the electoral cam-

paign of 2004, for example, after being repeatedly criticised by Pimen, the Archbishop of Suceava and Rădăuți, then Prime Minister and presidential candidate Adrian Năstase was forced to seek a public reconciliation with the Archbishop and to pledge support in pressing the court case concerning the return of 90,000 hectares of forest to the Orthodox Church (*Ziarul de Iași*, 2004).

The nationalist and intolerant attitudes of the BOR are visible through its involvement in other areas of public life. It has, for example, been a staunch activist against the rights of sexual minorities through its publications and has provided a rallying point for other civil society groups campaigning against the rights of homosexuals in Romania.¹² In addition, there are documented links between the BOR and neo-legionary groups in Romania, including meetings of such organisations hosted in churches or participation by Orthodox priests in events organised by them.¹³

Consequently, the BOR has played an important role in the shaping of the extreme right in Romania. Its ideological position has functioned as a key reference point and source of inspiration for various such movements and organisations, which have incorporated aspects of it in their discourse. On a more concrete level, the BOR's involvement in public life has often lent legitimacy to attitudes and actions and even provided a point of convergence for extremist views.

3. The Relevance of the Extreme Right in Romania

As argued earlier in this study and shown by the brief survey of relevant extreme right organisations in Romania, there does not appear to be a serious chance that any of these groups will gain significant electoral ground. There are several reasons for this. First, the electoral system in Romania has since 2008 been a form of mixed-member proportional representation, with a reasonably

high threshold (5 per cent for political parties and up to 10 per cent for political alliances), thus favouring larger parties (Monitorul Oficial, 2008). Second, in parliamentary elections looming later in the year, the USL looks to be the front-runner (at least if this year's local elections results are anything to go by); other parties likely to secure seats include the PDL, the newcomer PP-DD and the UDMR (although the last really needs to mobilise its voters in order to secure parliamentary representation). The PRM, the PNG-CD and the TPT (if it manages to stand for election at all) look certain to fail. However, given the tense situation in Romania at the moment and the apparent stalemate between the president and the current government, together with general public disillusionment with the mainstream parties, new competitors may emerge. Finally, the extreme right groups themselves seem to be affected by an inability to profit by the current situation. Both Tudor and Becali (and their respective parties) seem to have alienated their public, which appears to have moved on to the next populist group promising unrealistic solutions to their problems (this time it is the PP-DD that has attracted some support), while the supporters of the inter-war legionary movement are very much divided between the TPT and the ND (with accusations and invective being exchanged between members and supporters of the two groups, in the very active Romanian extreme right blogosphere).

The fact that Romania does not appear to be following the trend of increasing electoral support for the extreme right visible elsewhere in Europe might seem laudable. However, there are some other aspects influencing the social, cultural and political climate in Romania that might require further consideration.

First of all, the presence of a very large number of extreme right (many of them of a neo-legionary character) Internet-based outlets (websites, blogs, facebook pages and groups, publications, etc.) that disseminate overtly racist and intolerant messages and materials should not be underestimated. As Goodwin (2012) suggests, the web can serve several purposes: it assists these groups in »their quest for credibility«, it provides a space to sustain the loyalty of members and a sense of community and comradeship, and last, but not least, it offers the possibility of instant communication and mobilisation for real life activities. If nothing else, the web has helped to validate messages and reinforce stereotypes that would otherwise not stand up to any process of common sense scrutiny.

12. In 2006, for instance, 22 civil society groups as well as a number of private individuals signed a petition to the representatives of the BOR requesting them to take a public stand against »the aggressive agenda pursued in Romania by homosexual activists« (details available at: http://ro.altermedia.info/familiesocietate/societatea-civila-impotriva-promovarii-homosexualitatii-memoriu_4159.html, last viewed on 11/08/2012).

13. Several pictures and articles on the official websites of TPT (<http://www.pentrupatrie.ro/>) and ND (<http://www.nouadreapta.org/>) document these links.

Linked to this point is the fact that public opinion in Romania is susceptible to intolerant and discriminatory messages. A survey by INSOMAR (2009) has uncovered highly prejudiced attitudes directed at minority groups. The study found that people of a different sexual orientation have the worst image in the public perception, with over 55 per cent of respondents saying they thought that sexual minorities should receive medical treatment, 90.5 per cent stating that they would not themselves marry a homosexual nor accept someone in their family doing so, and 70.9 per cent saying they would not have a homosexual as a close friend. Intolerant attitudes towards the Roma also score high, with 56 per cent of the respondents declaring that they feel uncomfortable around Roma people and 20 per cent stating that there should be shops and public places where Roma people should not be allowed.

Thirdly, intolerant and discriminatory tendencies and practices are still very much present in the discourse and actions of public figures, and – despite existing anti-discrimination legislation – are still treated with leniency or outright indifference by the authorities while the culprits often carry on in their public positions with impunity. One need look no further than the racist comments made, among others, by two former foreign ministers – Adrian Cioroianu in 2007, and Teodor Baconschi in 2010 – directed at the Roma minority, or the case of PSD Senator Dan Sova who – after having been involved in a public scandal due to his denial of the Jewish Holocaust in Romania – was appointed Minister for Relations with Parliament (Barbu, 2011; Mihăilescu, 2012).

Finally, the fact that extreme right parties are not successful does not necessarily mean that people holding extreme views do not find their way into mainstream politics. One characteristic of post-1989 Romanian politics is what has been dubbed *traseism politic* (political cruising). Thus, several former members of extreme right-wing parties have subsequently found refuge in other political parties. Lia Olguța Vasilescu, who formerly occupied important positions in the PRM, is currently a prominent member of the PSD, and Mayor of Craiova Anghel Stanciu is currently a PSD Deputy having abandoned the PRM in 2005. Valeriu Tabără – former leader of the PUNR – is currently a PDL deputy; Vlad Hogeș, a young lawyer with extreme nationalist views, has moved from the PRM to the PNG-CD, then to the PC and is currently executive secretary of the PP-DD. These are only a few cases of party mi-

gration, and it is hard to believe that the extreme views held by some of these people while they were active in extreme right-wing groups have not found – at least to some extent – support in the political parties where they currently operate. If nothing else, the fact that some of the individuals mentioned manage to rally electoral support may suggest that this happens precisely because of those views and attitudes, rather than in spite of them.

All these aspects create a fertile breeding ground for extremism and intolerance, and provide populist leaders and groups with themes that can be appropriated easily and effectively. President Băsescu, for instance, has shown his ability to play the nationalist card on several occasions, emphasising the national unitary character of the Romanian state; and his hints on the mobilisation of the ethnic Hungarian community on nationalist lines by the Hungarian government fuels the sensitivity of a large number of Romanians concerning territorial integrity and possible Hungarian secession plots (Cinpoș, 2010: 179–182). Similarly, the response of the Romanian president to Moldovan Communist President Voronin’s accusations that Romania is attempting to destabilise Moldova (alluding to the relaxation of the policy for granting Moldovan citizens Romanian passports) was another illustration of tit-for-tat politics that trades on a historical revanchist interpretation of Romania’s past (Kramer and Hill, 2009). It is unlikely that such instances will generate real conflicts between Romania and neighbouring countries. Rather, they function as populist, point-scoring exercises between officials in the countries involved. However, longer-lasting exchanges of this kind may result in the mutual radicalisation of the discourse and in growing support for extremist politics, not to mention a cooling of diplomatic relations between neighbouring states.

Considering all of the above against the current background of economic decline and austerity, it seems likely that the extreme right discourse has the potential to gain ground. Antipathy towards the EU and other international organisations, such as the IMF, has been growing in Romania (as elsewhere in Europe), but the country’s current dependency on IMF loans has led an increasing number of people to view their government’s relationship with the IMF as that of puppet and master. This feeds straight into the anti-European and anti-globalisation discourse of populist extreme right groups. While this would not necessarily convert into support for such groups, it does open the way for a further radicalisation of mainstream politics.

4. Dealing with the Extreme Right: Counter-Strategies

The specialised literature highlights the challenges of dealing with the extreme right, owing to the diverse nature of the groups operating under this umbrella term and the kind of threats it poses to democracy (Mudde, 2004). In the case of Romania, two levels of action will be briefly evaluated in the concluding remarks to this study: strategies involving political parties and state institutions, and strategies and actions by civil society, the media and other actors outside the state.

As far as the first level of discussion is concerned, Romanian legislation prohibits a number of extremist acts. These include fascist, communist, racist or xenophobic activities, organisations and symbols as well as discrimination based on race, gender, disability, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, social status, beliefs, sexual orientation, age and other categories (The U. S. Dept. of State, 2011). In addition, state institutions such as *Avocatul Poporului* (the Office of the Ombudsman) and the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) are supposed to protect the rights of citizens vis-à-vis state institutions and other individuals and organisations. However, state authorities, including the police, have often been criticised for providing inadequate protection to citizens, for dragging their feet, especially in cases involving high officials, for playing down some incidents involving anti-Semitic vandalism or for mistreatment of some categories of people (especially the Roma) (The U. S. Dept. of State, 2011).

While progress has been made by state actors, the main issue is that their public conduct is not on a par with the legislative framework. It is still very common for members of mainstream political parties to adopt overtly nationalist, racist or discriminatory stances in their public appearances, ranging from Holocaust denial to inflammatory nationalist, homophobic or racist statements.¹⁴ Thus, fines imposed on people such as Becali for making discriminatory statements are merely a slap on the wrist,

with no immediate consequences. As long as politicians in Romania carry on practicing »casual intolerance«, and political parties and state institutions are not willing to sanction perpetrators in a meaningful way (removal from public positions and exclusion from parties), a culture of intolerance will continue to be reinforced and legitimised.

Civil society organisations seem to carry the burden of educating the public in the spirit of inclusion and tolerance and of pressuring political institutions and media outlets with regard to dissemination of extremist and discriminatory materials. A combination of »carrot« and »stick« types of actions might yield some results in the long run.

Education (the »carrot«) represents the most important precondition for a tolerant society, and this is an area that could be explored and pursued further by NGOs and civil society groups. Given that it is often the politicians and public figures in Romania who set a poor example when it comes to tolerant and inclusive views, closer work with political parties and public institutions focusing on educating them in the principles of equality and diversity training and about existing legislation concerning discrimination might be useful steps towards reducing *casual intolerance*. In the long run, this kind of cooperation could be extended to implementing institutional changes that reflect commitment to inclusive values. Eventually, public institutions could be assisted in developing in-house educational programmes that could more easily and more effectively be made available to all members and employees, thus producing a self-sustaining framework. These specific short- and long-term activities could be combined with broader ones, such as lobbying authorities with a view to improving the civic education curriculum in schools. A great deal of work is already being done by NGOs with a view to raising public awareness of discrimination and intolerance. Such educational projects, however, could benefit from better public exposure.

Additional strategies could be modelled on anti-fascist organisations in countries like the UK and Sweden, which often stage counter-protests (not unlike the marches by the ND in Romania) aimed at minimising the impact of the events organised by extremist groups. Their role is not only to upset the goals of fascist manifestations, but also to display a robust and visible public critique

14. Some significant examples have been discussed earlier. In addition, it worth mentioning the legislative proposal, in 2010, by PDL MP Silviu Prigoană to change the designation of »Roma« to »țigani«, allegedly in order to avoid confusion with »român« (Romanian). The proposal was eventually dismissed by the Senate, but it had the support of the Romanian Academy and a similar internet-based petition and Facebook page managed to collect, so far, over 77,000 signatures and over 20,000 members respectively.



of extremist actions and to provide channels and incentives for action for a supportive but otherwise passive and un-engaged people. Finally, more pressure on the authorities regarding the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation (the »stick«) may also contribute to the decline of right-wing extremism and intolerance in Romania. Given that the CNCD is relatively toothless when it comes to dealing effectively with discrimination, the use of existing criminal law frameworks could provide better protection to citizens, if the relevant authorities (such as the police, the prosecutors and the courts) make appropriate use of them.

Given the state of public opinion in Romania, which is still very much polarised on issues to do with equality, diversity and inclusion, civil society organisations still face an uphill struggle. Nevertheless, significant progress has been made in the past decade (not least through the setting up of the CNDC) and through the growing number and diversification of organisations concerned with fighting discrimination.

5. Conclusions

As this study suggests, extreme right groups have a low electoral profile in Romania, and a visible surge in the political success of such parties in the near future (and certainly in the coming parliamentary elections of 2012) is very unlikely. This is not to say, however, that there is no extreme right in Romania. Worryingly, racist, discriminatory and intolerant attitudes are more insidiously present within society. *Casual intolerance* is widespread and its exclusion from public life does not seem to be a priority of the political class. As a result, racist or discriminatory statements often go unpunished. In the absence of a desire by politicians to lead by example, and given the particularly ineffective action by the state authorities, it is left to civil society organisations to pursue an educational agenda, in the context of serious obstacles. In conclusion we can say that despite the poor showing of extreme right parties (which goes against the current trend in other European countries), there is potential for the growth of extremism in Romania, which would align it with the general direction in Europe.



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