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**ROMANIA AFTER THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF**  
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ROMANIA

AFTER THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1956

*The reaction of the authorities to student protests*

The student protest movements in the autumn of 1956 came as a genuine shock to Romanian communist leaders. There was an immediate reaction from the decision-making bodies in Bucharest to this open opposition to the communist regime itself by young people educated—at least in theory—according to the new ideology, including repression.

38 It is important to note there were hotbeds of protest in all the major university centres of Romania in the autumn of 1956, and the demands voiced by the students in each were broadly the same. Only a brief overview of these student movements will be given here. The first signs of discontent with the regime had appeared among students in the spring and summer of 1956 and sometimes been expressed openly, at meetings of the Union of Working Youth (Uninea Tineretului Muncitoresc, UTM) or in roundabout ways, at discussions in university corridors or hostels. The authorities then made moves to keep student circles under surveillance and forestall a crisis. In August 1956, the leaders of the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) decided to set up a new umbrella organization: the Union of Student Associations. Though the new body proclaimed itself apolitical in public discourse, it was controlled directly by the RWP. This was exemplified by the fact that its leader designate was a secretary of the Politburo of the UTM Central Committee.

When students returned to their studies in September 1956, it became plain that these measures had not had the expected effect. Instead of discontent easing, the crisis intensified against a background of the ongoing events in Hungary and Poland. Issues considered taboo up to then were brought up by students at UTM meetings and gatherings organized by party activists to “clarify” what was going on in Hungary and Poland. Among these were relations between the Soviet Union and Romania, the presence of Soviet troops in Romania, forced collectivization of agriculture, events in Poland and Hungary, and demands made by the Poles and Hungarians.

Several student meetings began to be held in September, some organized and some spontaneous, where students voiced open discontent. The very harsh speeches raised unprecedented matters such as the peasantry question, the hardships of students, the habitual deceit in the UTM, and falsifications being peddled by the leadership and the official press, both of which were at odds with reality. The students expressed discontent about the new system for awarding grants, and criticized excessive politicization of the education programme and bureaucratization of UTM structures. They demanded access to forbidden books in the libraries. A UTM meeting on September 27 in the Philology Faculty at Bucharest led to several students being expelled a month later and sanctions against the entire organization, under orders from the RWP Politburo.<sup>1</sup> On October 24, an unofficial meeting was held at the Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj. Its two initiators were arrested next day, as were other students, from the Bucharest Philology Faculty, for having submitted to *Scânteia Tineretului* (“The Spark of Youth”) a piece criticizing the party leadership for retaining aspects of the “cult of personality”. A group of students in Timișoara proposed on October 27 a meeting on October 30 that attracted about 3 000 students, which 2000 were detained and 30 sentenced to prison terms of up to eight years for “public incitement”. Students of the Bolyai University in Cluj gathered at the city cemetery on November 1 to mark All Souls’ Day with tributes to those fighting in Budapest.

The crisis at Bucharest University peaked on November 5, when groups gathered in University Square at 3 p. m. for a scheduled demonstration. The demonstration failed, as its instigators had been rounded up on the previous day, there were large law-enforcement forces in the square, and there was no one brave enough to step forward as leader, but that did not end the crisis. A wave of arrests starting that evening involved dozens of students of medicine, philology, law, polytechnics, architecture and theatre, who were interrogated by the Securitate. Another protest planned for November 15 was thwarted when its organizers were arrested. Further arrests took place in mid-November of students from the faculties of Philology and History in Cluj and Philology in Bucharest (the Paul Goma group).

It can be seen that the students sought various channels to transmit their demands. They tried an institutional framework to convince the authorities to resolve at least a part of their grievances. Other methods of exerting pressure included a strike and street protests, but no specific action was induced in the authorities. But there was an initiative to foster open protest that might involve other sections of the population. These actions were all thwarted by the presence of informers even in the students’ ranks, by close official surveillance of student circles, and as a determining factor, by

1 For more detail see Boca 2001.

the Soviet invasion of Hungary on November 4, 1956. But as one of the student leaders arrested at the time declared, the significance lay in the aims, not the success or lack of it. And the reactions of the decision-makers in Bucharest at the time of the student crisis demonstrate in a way that the students were achieving some of their aims.

Despite some degree of inadvertence, inadequacy and naivety, the student movement of autumn 1956 was the only one to organize protest action backed by a well-defined programme of demands aimed at the whole of Romanian society. Young people showed that although they had been subjected to “education” by the Party and were expected to form a primary constituent of the regime, they were not inclined to accept the lies and misinformation the leadership was promoting or put up with the prevailing conditions of poverty. The student movement was defeated, while many dissidents were arrested and given heavy prison sentences, and many others were expelled from their faculties. But student unity and a common desire to reform society had been shown.

Common grievances were expressed in all the university centres, although they were not drafted by the same persons, which emphasized the urgent needs of youth and Romanian society in general. The students understood the need to have cohesion in the student body and attract the public to their side. Their failure came because they lacked a centre of coordination and support from other groups in society, and the authorities took strong anticipatory action to thwart them.

The aftermath of these movements was felt in subsequent years. The arrests after 1956 demonstrate that there remained dissident groups among the students, who were not intimidated by the coercive measures. But the lives of those arrested or expelled from university were scarred. Only after 1964 did some of them managed to complete their university studies, and even then, their files as former political detainees would pursue them for the rest of their lives.

The actions of the Bucharest leadership were directed in the first place at brutal repression of protest. The official reactions were swift in the midst of the student crisis, and intended to prevent solidarity developing among the hotbeds of protest. The RWP Politburo took an immediate decision to arrest the protesting students, and in the case of the Timișoara students, to suspend their courses.

On November 12, 1956, the rectors of higher educational establishments sent all faculties instructions to monitor their students closely. Teachers were advised to

2 The Archive of Bucharest town, Fond Institute of Medicine and Pharmacy (Arhivele Municipiului București, fond Institutul de Medicină și Farmacie, hereafter AMB, IMF), file 10/1956, f. 6.

3 Ibid.

spend more time with students and above all to probe all aspects of student life, from academic activity to personal matters, paying special attention to cultural and sporting activities and gatherings of various kinds.<sup>2</sup> Measures were to be taken in order to avert unauthorized gatherings, such as those that had taken place at the Institute of Fine Arts at Cluj on October 24 or Timișoara Polytechnic on October 30. According to an Education Ministry order, deans' offices were to post the regulations on higher learning for students' attention and impose sanctions for failing to abide by them.<sup>3</sup> Punctuality at courses, for teachers and students, became a priority.

One of the main directions in which educational policy developed after 1956 was in the admission requirements for university, in an effort to "purge" the students. The Politburo meeting on November 13, 1956 instructed the Ministry of Education to draft measures to "improve the social composition" of the student body.<sup>4</sup> On November 19, 1956, the Ministry circulated all institutions of higher education instructing them to send to the General Board of Higher Education within seven days reports of readmissions in the period 1955–6, adding that these must specify students with political convictions.<sup>5</sup> Romania had been admitted to the United Nations in 1955 and Romanian domestic policy had also been influenced at that time by the so-called "spirit of Geneva", which produced a relaxation of the repressive policies. Dozens of political detainees were released under amnesties in 1955–6, many of them students, who were readmitted to university. These students were the first collateral victims of the student protests, though the vast majority of them were not involved. There was a return to the practise of the early 1950s, when university admission was based on an applicant's "file" of declarations on their parents' means and political affiliations.

Expulsion of those whose "files" were unsatisfactory was carried out with immediate effect in December 1956–January 1957, without any account being taken of academic results,<sup>6</sup> by direct order of the Ministry of Education. (The Ministry order stipulated expulsion for anyone found guilty of a variety of misdemeanours.)<sup>7</sup> The tone of this

4 Lungu–Retagan 1996, 243.

5 AMB, IMF, file 3/1956, f. 159.

6 The fifth-year medical student Mircea Selten, for instance, was arrested in 1947 as a member of the National Peasant Party youth movement and sentenced to ten years in prison, but released in 1956 and readmitted to the Faculty of Medicine. Three months later he was expelled again by order of the Ministry of Education. In a memorandum to the minister in February 1957, Selten requests that since "I have three terms left until graduation and bearing in mind that I am 32, an age at which it is very hard to start training for another profession, I request you to reconsider my expulsion, allow me to follow a career and complete my degree, for which I do not have long to go." AMB, IMF, file 18/1956, f. 23.

campaign of expulsion was set by one of the members of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who, in a speech given in Bucharest on November 15, 1956, urged the immediate elimination of all former political detainees from university faculties (“it can no longer be permitted for second year students to have six students released from prison in their ranks. How can such a thing be permitted?”<sup>8</sup>), but also of any students critical of the regime, in order to set an example for all the other students. “Let it be clear to the others what are the consequences of incorrect behaviour and that our party is keeping a watch over their attitude.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1957, in a further attempt to “improve the social composition of students” and, at the same time, to “cleanse” the student body of any element that might endanger the restoration of “calm” (in the context created after the student protests of autumn 1956), decision 1003/1957 was issued, which imposed strict criteria for admission to university. Thus, in the 1958–59 university year, one year after the decision entered into force, two hundred students were ex-matriculated for “false declarations and disciplinary transgressions”, according to an official text of the Ministry of Education.<sup>10</sup> The aftermath of 1956 continued to be felt in the waves of expulsions in 1958–59.<sup>11</sup> For example, Nicolae Frecuș, Alecu Cuturicu and Emil Bîlcea were expelled in 1958 from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics at Bucharest University for “dubious conduct during the events in Hungary.” Elena Dumitrescu, studying philosophy, was expelled because “she displayed an inappropriate attitude during the events in Hungary” while studying in the Soviet Union. There were many similar cases. Those arrested in the autumn of 1956, on the other hand, were expelled on the grounds of “absence without cause”.<sup>12</sup> Many expulsions took place during UTM

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7 AMB, IMF, file 18/1956, f. 27.

8 Lungu–Retagan 1996, 255.

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. information dated 1959 from the General Board of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture addressed to the PMR Politburo. The Romanian Central National Historical Archives, Central Committee Fond of the Romanian Communist Party, Bucharest (Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale, fond Comitetul Central al Partidului Comunist Român, hereafter ANIC, CC of the RCP), Chancellery, file 16/1959, f. 63; Moraru 2000, 864.

11 Berciu–Drăghicescu–Bozgan 2004, 297–301.

12 Maria Someșan mentions finding in the Bucharest University Archives expulsion orders for Christl Depner, Mihai Derdena, Dan Onaca, Dumitru Constantin, Paul Goma, Alexandru Calciu, Mihai Rădulescu, Teodor Lupaș, Ștefan Negrea, Marcel Petrișor, and Horia Popescu. Someșan 2004, 324. All were arrested in November or December 1956 and convicted of agitation or public incitement.

meetings or student gatherings that were turned into public witch hunts.<sup>13</sup> The decisions taken at these meetings, chaired by party or UTM leaders, were then implemented by the heads of faculties.<sup>14</sup> A first meeting of the UTM was held at the Faculty of Medicine on December 20, 1956, at the height of the student arrests. Ten students who had been political detainees were summoned before 25 UTM officials, and told there was no further place for them in view of their pasts. The official order of expulsion came over the telephone from the Ministry of Education, and a list of expelled students was posted two days later, on December 24, “following the decision by the Ministry”.<sup>15</sup>

The student protests of 1956 were also followed by frequent meetings for denunciations and exclusions from the UTM. There students, and sometimes even teachers, were subject to violent accusations, which usually resulted in exclusion from the UTM and expulsion from their faculties. Student UTM activists were coerced into “unmasking” their fellows, making serious accusations against them and demanding their expulsion on the basis of ostensible evidence.<sup>16</sup>

Arrests of students continued in subsequent years. A group of students and former students of the Bucharest University Philosophy Faculty were rounded up in December 1957–February 1958, for having distributed manifestos around Bucharest in October 1956, calling for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania. Their sentences ranged up to 18 years’ hard labour.<sup>17</sup> In March 1958, four former students of the Bucharest University Philology Faculty were arrested for “shows of enmity

13 For an example of a denunciation meeting, see Mihalcea 1994, 17–20, 59–63.

14 On March 14, 1959, the executive of The Institute of Medicine and Pharmacy (Institut de Medicină și Farmacie, IMF) decided to expel four medical students: “On the basis of the meeting of the IMF association at Floreasca [the Floreasca Hall in Bucharest] and following approval of the general assembly, the rector’s office approves the expulsion from the IMF.” These were Edgar Savin, a fourth-year student (readmitted on June 23, 1959, by a decision of the executive), Lili Ștefan, a fourth-year student (readmitted for the 1959–60 academic year, on condition that she worked in production until her readmission), and Mihai Dimitriu and Ovidiu Dimitriu, sixth-year students. AMB, IMF, file 38/1956, f. 39v.

15 *Ibid.*, file 18/1956, f. 35v.

16 “In the expulsions, Hangiu Gheorghe was the one to identify and accuse those in question, inasmuch as he had been called before the party earlier and criticized.” The Archive of the Romanian National Council for the Study of the Former Securitate Archives, Bucharest (Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studiarea Arhivelor fostei Securități, hereafter: ACNSAS), Fond Information, file 1269, I. f. 141v.

17 The first arrests occurred in December 1956. On 24 June 1958 the Military tribunal Bucharest passed sentence no. 585 in the case in which the philosophy students were involved. ACNSAS, Penal Fond, file no. 845, vol. I. See also Boca 2001.

during the events in Hungary”.<sup>18</sup> In August 1958, the Securitate in Cluj made arrests among students of Bolyai University, accusing them of having displayed solidarity with the Hungarian revolutionaries in October–November 1956.<sup>19</sup>

There were a number of specific developments in 1957–9. Student circles had been monitored by the authorities more closely after the protests of autumn 1956. The Securitate used every means possible—informers, infiltrators, spying—to identify “hotbeds of reaction” and eliminate them from the student body. Those arrested in the period often found that their conduct at the time of the events in Hungary was brought up as an aggravating factor. The Securitate could be seen to build up its cases very slowly, rather than making immediate arrests. The mood of terror among students was sustained through the denunciation meetings mentioned already, which caused exclusions from the UTM and expulsions from university. Arrests came as the final sanction, after an incriminated student had been “unmasked” in a process reminiscent on another level of the “Pitești phenomenon”.<sup>20</sup>

The repressive campaign after 1956 was on a large scale. Official data suggest that 2431 persons were arrested in 1956, including 528 who were only investigated, not brought to trial.<sup>21</sup> Hundreds of students were arrested in November 1956–January 1957, some for only a few days, and underwent investigation by the Securitate. Some were tried and others used as witnesses at such trials.

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The waves of expulsions from university involved not only former political detainees (seen as a source of possible contamination of the student body) but those who had dared to display the slightest gesture of solidarity with the Hungarian revolutionaries. Philology student Gloria Barna was expelled in January 1957 for showing solidarity with the arrested students and was examined during the Goma trial.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, Barna was arrested in her turn and sentenced to three years in prison. At the end of November, a meeting of territorial instructors of the RWP Central Committee heard that 60 students had already been convicted and their exclusion from the UTM was proposed. The magnitude of the protests that gripped student circles in the autumn of 1956 is confirmed even by one of the leaders of the party, Petre Lupu, who declared that if all who had an enemy attitude had been eliminated, “it would have meant eliminating a very great number of young people.”<sup>23</sup>

18 ACNSAS, Penal Fond, file 1060.

19 Ibid., file 915.

20 The so-called Pitești experiment was a savage prison regime applied to young intellectuals in the early 1950s.

21 ACNSAS, Documentary Fond, file 55, LXIII. f. 170.

22 Ibid., Information Fond, file 3654, I. f. 188.

At a meeting of the Ministry of the Interior of December 1957, Minister Alexandru Drăghici gave a broad account of the “work of the Securitate” during 1957, referring directly to events of autumn 1956. He said that during 1957, “242 elements suspected of enemy activity”<sup>24</sup> had been identified and 169 arrests made among “counter-revolutionary elements”.<sup>25</sup> Among student groups, there were 33 arrests, 29 of them students and four others teaching-faculty members.<sup>26</sup> Department III of the Securitate reported during 1957 “liquidating” ten counterrevolutionary organizations and making 142 arrests.<sup>27</sup> Official statistics for 1957 show 852 persons arrested on charges of “plotting against the social order” (compared with 327 in 1956), 1017 under accused of “public agitation”, and 78 persons of “distributing manifestos.”<sup>28</sup>

The discontent expressed even by party members during 1956, of which the RWP Central Committee had been informed, obliged Romanian communist leaders to take measures to eliminate “intruders”. One leader to adopt an intransigent position at the CC plenary was Nicolae Ceaușescu. This set the tone for a campaign of purges targeting broad swaths of society. Ceaușescu declared, “It was seen [during the events in Hungary] that there remain in the party inappropriate, former Iron Guard [fascist] elements. The party must be cleansed of such elements. Likewise, in connection with admission to the party, social background must be tightened and more workers admitted”<sup>29</sup> In fact, Ceaușescu set the tone for the campaign of expulsions from university.

The purges were to include all the party and state structures, to ensure that all “counter-revolutionary” hotbeds were eliminated. In previous years, some persons from the old elite had been allowed to reintegrate into public life, especially in the field of economics, where the shortage of specialists had been acute. Moreover, released political detainees had managed to occupy various unimportant functions or been admitted as students. These were to be the authorities’ prime targets in the new campaign of repression.<sup>30</sup>

23 ANIC, RWP CC, Organization Section, file 45/1956, f. 49.

24 ACNSAS, Documentary Fond, file 114, f. 226.

25 Ibid., f. 230.

26 Ibid., f. 226.

27 Ibid., f. 267.

28 ACNSAS, Documentary Fond, file 53, f. 79.

29 ANIC, CC of the RCP, Chancellery, file 139/1956, I, f. 77.

30 “The problem of the use of old specialists: attempts were made in a series of factories to apply these CC guidelines in a liberal manner, which might cause harm... as some of them have displayed enmity to party members and strike out at them in all kinds of ways.” Ibid., f. 55.

The wave of arrests in 1958–9—unleashed as a reaction to the protests of 1956 and as a preventative measure in the context of the withdrawal of Soviet troops—was reminiscent of the terror of the early 1950s. The victims of this belated Stalinist repression included intellectuals, students, peasants and former political prisoners. To give one statistic as an indication of scale, 18 529 persons were arrested between 1957 and 1959, according to official figures.<sup>31</sup> To this number can be added a further 3659 persons who, in the period 1958–1963, had obligatory places of work imposed upon them, in accordance with the provisions of the Romanian National Assembly Decree no. 89 of 17 February 1958<sup>32</sup> (which completed the order of 12 September 1957<sup>33</sup>, whereby obligatory places of domicile were imposed upon all those who, by their actions, endangered the regime of the people's democracy).

The unrest in Romanian society in the autumn of 1956, which culminated in the open protests of the students, demonstrated that, ten years after taking power, and in spite of an aggressive policy to inculcate new values, Romanian society still had the potential to revolt, even if this did not manifest itself on the scale of the revolts in Hungary, Poland or Germany.<sup>34</sup>

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