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What Exactly did Romanian Post-War Nationalism Mean?

Abstract: In the last century nationalism as a spiritual element – according to the 1919 statement of the historian, archaeologist and philosopher Vasile Pârvan – was a blessed plant grown on Romanian soil during the '48 revolution, the '59 union under Prince Cuza, the '77 war of independence and the preparation of such a national project as the Union with the Romanian Kingdom of several Romanian-speaking provinces dominated by two empires – the Austrian and the Russian – epitomized by Transylvania which came finally to the motherland on the 1st of December 1918, the same day when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was born. In the nationalism project, the Union Transylvania was a political priority. But we must add immediately that in the events of 1914–1916 in the neighbourhood of Romania a symbol of the national struggle became what Nicolae Iorga, in a famous lecture of 1915, called “the heroic and martyr Serbia”.

Keywords: nationalism, Romania, Transylvania, Nicolae Iorga

Used for the first time on the 4th of July 1892 by Maurice Barrès in his article “La querelle des nationalistes et des cosmopolites” in *Le Figaro*, the word “nationalism” was employed by the interwar and post 1945 dictatorship regimes of Central and Eastern Europe on several occasions in the twentieth century. The same word, becoming a concept, reappeared in national enthusiasm in the former communist countries after the collapse of so-called “proletarian internationalism”. After 1990 this “nationalism” was quickly denounced in a superficial if not malevolent manner by West-European print and audio-visual media, which entirely ignored an important body of academic literature, from Ernst Gellner’s *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford 1983) to Michel Winock’s *Le XXe siècle idéologique et politique* (Paris 2009).

In that way politicians and journalists of the West – obsequiously imitated by some politicians and journalists of the countries in question – ignored “nationalism” as a positive and patriotic doctrine including in its history the Italian and German “unifying nationalism” of the time of Cavour and Bismarck, the “republican nationalism” of General de Gaulle, the Jewish, Armenian and Greek “diaspora nationalism”, completely different from “populist nationalism” which has recently emerged in France, the Netherlands, England and Austria, from

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Fascist and Nazi nationalism or from the “totalitarian nationalism” of the Iron Guard in Romania.

In the last century nationalism as a spiritual element – according to the 1919 statement of the historian, archaeologist and philosopher Vasile Pârvan – was a blessed plant grown in Romanian soil during the 1848 revolution, the 1859 union under Prince Cuza, the 1877 war of independence and the preparation of such a national project as the Union with the Romanian kingdom of several Romanian-speaking provinces dominated by two empires – the Austrian and the Russian – epitomized by Transylvania which finally came to the motherland on the 1st of December 1918, the same day when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was born.

In the nationalist project, the Union Transylvania was a political priority. But we must add immediately that in the events of 1914–1916 in the neighbourhood of Romania a symbol of the national struggle became what Nicolae Iorga, in a famous lecture of 1915, called “the heroic and martyr Serbia”.

The struggle of the South-Slav people of the West Balkans against the invasion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – the same that dominated the Romanians in Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina – was, from the 28th of July of 1914, when Serbia was attacked, followed with sympathy and solidarity by the Romanians led by the already mentioned professor Nicolae Iorga.

The list of Iorga’s lectures and articles devoted to Serbia is most impressive. On 10 November 1913 – not many months before the outbreak of the world war – he spoke at the Royal Serbian Academy about historical relations between Serbs and Romanians.¹ “Les deux nations serbe et roumaine sont particulièrement faites pour s’entendre et se soutenir” was the statement of Iorga who, a year later, on 21 November 1914 – when Belgrade was on the verge of being seized by the Austro-Hungarian army – delivered a speech at the Institute of South-East European Studies about the history of the Hungarian and Austrian pretensions towards the Balkan Slavic world, from the Anjou dynasty to the Peace of Karlowitz.²

A week later, on 28 November, at the Romanian Academy, Iorga evoked again the Romanian-Serbian contacts and underlined the fact that “our relations with the Serbs in fear and hope are closer than ever”.³ The place of national culture in Serbia was commented in a lecture at the “Casa Școalelor” (The House of Schools) in Bucharest,⁴ and the dual face of the same Serbia – “the Adriatic”

¹ Nicolae Iorga, *Relations entre Serbes et Roumains* (Vălenii de Munte 1913).

² Nicolae Iorga, *Politica austriacă față de Serbia* (Bucharest: institutului Sud-Ost-European, 1915).

³ Nicolae Iorga, “Din legăturile noastre cu Serbia, Corespondența românească a voievozilor din Cladova”, Bucharest 1915, 3.

⁴ Nicolae Iorga, “Pagini despre Serbia de azi”, Bucharest 1914.

and the “Rascian” Serbia – was the topic of another lecture at the Romanian Academy on 9 October 1915.⁵

Two weeks later, on 24 October, at the Romanian Athenaeum, amidst an overflowing enthusiasm, Nicolae Iorga gave his famous lecture devoted to Serbian courage and martyrdom,⁶ greeting the “sublime unfortunate heroism in the face of the triumphant impudence of a stronger enemy”.

A month later, in Craiova, Iorga gave a charity lecture for the benefit of “Serbian refugees” about the contacts of the Romanian province of Oltenia with Serbia,⁷ whose “noble people” was living through a tragic moment, and exclaimed: “Serbia can live only undivided... I believe, gentlemen that Serbia cannot die.”

Even in more general debates on such a moment of European tensions, Iorga, speaking about the Balkan peoples at the Romanian Athenaeum on 13 December 1915, or about the ongoing war on 21 December, constantly proved his friendly feelings for the Serbs “who are the enemies of our enemies”.

The symbolic meaning of Serbian resistance in the struggle for the national idea was turned by Iorga into a symbolic Romanian meaning.

If Serbian nationalism confronted with Austro-Hungarian imperialism became a major impulse for the completion of Romanian nationalism embodied at a highest level by the “national teacher” Nicolae Iorga, the main nationalist project of the Union of Transylvania was the absolute priority in the neutrality years, during the war and – once the project was carried out – a recurrent theme in the national debate to a certain extent. The reason was that, twenty years after 1918, the Transylvanian tragedy (August 1940) made the intra-Carpathian space the main topic of reflection for several Romanian historians, men of letters, thinkers and politicians.

Again and again Nicolae Iorga spoke with a strong and decisive voice, when he evoked (8 September 1914) “the unifying vision of Transylvania”⁸ or when he spoke (December 1915) about “a part of our nation which is bleeding today in Transylvania”.

The Union achieved, Iorga welcomed on behalf of the Romanian Academy, on 31 May 1919, the return of Bessarabia and Transylvania to the national body and remarked the perfect geographical unity between the Dniester and the Tisza, “the two great rivers from East and West running in the same direction

⁵ Nicolae Iorga, *Sârbi, bulgari și români în Peninsula Balcanică în evul mediu* (Bucharest 1915), 8.

⁶ Nicolae Iorga, *Serbia eroică și martiră* (Vălenii de Munte 1915).

⁷ Nicolae Iorga, *Oltenia și Serbia* (Vălenii de Munte: Neamul Romănesc, 1915).

⁸ Nicolae Iorga, *Războiul actual și urmările lui pentru viața morală a omenirii* (Vălenii de Munte 1916), 36.

like the rivers flowing between, compose one of the most perfect geographical configurations in the world, imposing a political unity without fail.”⁹

In the year of the Romanian national triumph, the young Eugen Lovinescu, destined to become a prominent literary critic and historian and dramatically opposed to Iorga in the following period, saluted the national victory with an explanatory sentence: “The Carpathian mountains disappeared”, from a separating wall they became the backbone of our space, virtually chairing “the great feast of the Romanian nation, gathered from everywhere in a commanding Latin unity”.¹⁰

Even before the war, some European studies issued from the so-called “Völkerpsychologie” inspired Romanian scholars and, above all, the future president of the Romanian Academy, Constantin Rădulescu-Motru. As early as 1910 he wrote that the Romanian people as seen by others was a “religious and nationalist people”¹¹ and later, in 1924, that the State itself must favour the doctrine of nationalism “grown from the soil of the country”.

Ten years after 1918, Iorga’s article “What Transylvania received and what it gave” commenced the work on the book in three volumes and 1600 pages, with several Romanian and foreign contributors, devoted to the western provinces incorporated into Romania.¹² Twenty-two years after the moment of jubilation in Alba Iulia, the Vienna Dictate caused a national trauma by the rape of northern Transylvania. That is why the Romanian intellectuals once more, from 1940 to 1944, made Transylvania the main topic of the nationalist debate and movement, where we find side by side such outstanding personalities as the Transylvanian priest-academician Ioan Lupaş and the philosopher Vasile Băncilă, born in a Danubian town.

The former, in a lecture – initially forbidden – in November 1940, with the provocative title “To whom does Transylvania belong?”¹³ – and three years later (after his *La Transylvanie, cœur de la vie roumaine*, 1942), in his fundamental study devoted to Transylvania as the vital centre of the Romanian spirit,¹⁴

⁹ Nicolae Iorga, “Drepturile românilor asupra teritoriului lor național unitar”, Bucharest 1919, 4.

¹⁰ Eugen Lovinescu, *În cumpăna vremii. Note de războiu* (Bucharest 1919), 5–6.

¹¹ Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, “Sufletul neamului nostru. Calități bune și defecte” (1910), 14.

¹² *Transilvania, Banatul, Crișana, Maramureșul. 1918–1928* (Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1929), among foreign authors being Emmanuel de Martonne and R. W. Setton-Watson.

¹³ Published six years later: Ioan Lupaş, “Cui aparține Transilvania? O conferință nerostită”, *Revista Economică* 24–25 (1946).

¹⁴ Ioan Lupaş, *Importanța istorică a Transilvaniei ca centru vital al românismului* (Sibiu 1943).

considered the troubled province as “the cradle of the Romanian people”, a kind of a “beehive” from where Transylvanians swarmed, from school teachers to shepherds, and concluded: “Transylvania ... is the most essential part of the territory and ethnic capital of the Romanian State, which is the basis of the existence and future of the State.”

The latter was a thinker whose place in the cultural history of Romania is assured with his essay *The Significance of Transylvania* (*Semnificația Ardealului*) written in 1936–1939 and published in 1944. It is a text which I compare with the final chapter of George Călinescu’s *History of Romanian Literature* of 1941 devoted to the “national specificities”, where the famous critic evoked the “specific primordial note of the writers from Transylvania”, just after an important statement he made in 1940: “my idea is that the centre of our literature is Transylvania” and “I prove that Romanian literature has its headquarters especially in occupied Transylvania”.¹⁵ Returning to Vasile Băncilă, I think that *The Significance of Transylvania* is an outstanding text of Romanian nationalism, writing about “the mystic of Transylvania”, about the medieval origins where “Wallachia and Moldavia became the delegates of Transylvania in history”; saying that “Transylvania is history”, “Transylvania is a Romanian essential form”, that “Moldo-Wallachian heroism in 1916–1918 ... is a quite normal tribute of gratitude to Transylvania, is a result of our love and appreciation for the province which was for us the beginning of history”, because “at the basis of the Union of Transylvania with Romania lies the most profound thing in human life: pain. And the most beautiful: youth”.¹⁶

Certainly, wars and revolutions were, in the twentieth century, a catalyst of European nationalism. For sure, in the Romanian case, the attack on Serbia was, at the outbreak of the First World War and in the neutrality years, an impulse for the Romanian national idea. But – more than Bessarabia, more than Bucovina – with the tradition of the Memorandist movement at the end of the nineteenth century Transylvania became the stimulus of Romanian nationalism and, in the age of the Vienna Dictate, the supreme issue of struggle and debate.

In a way, it is the last such topic in Romanian history. Because a theme involving national projects and aspirations was entirely missing in the totalitarian age and, unfortunately, is entirely missing in post-communist period too.

¹⁵ *Corespondența lui G. Călinescu cu Al. Rosetti (1935–1951)*, ed. Al. Rosetti (Bucharest, Eminescu, 1977), 134, 142.

¹⁶ Vasile Băncilă, *Semnificația Ardealului* (Bucharest 1944), 10, 16, 23, 33, 59, 61.

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