

The Continuity of the Romanian Populism: The Legionary Movement as a Connection Between Fortyeighters and National-Communism*

***Abstract:** The present paper is a stage in the wider process of analyzing the evolution of Romanian populism in the last century and a half. Although the semantic content of populism is a very broad one, the present observing a constant dynamic of the concept, I will show in this article that there is continuity in the Romanian space of the ethnic and national idea from mid 19th century to 1989, different instrumentalised on 4 major areas of thought: fortyeighters, junimists, legionaries and the Ceausescu era. Moreover, I believe that this continuity comes to strengthen a morphological conflict of the period of updating and modernizing the Romanian society: In the last 150 years of Romania's history, there is an antithesis showing the almost constant instrumentalisation of a right-wing populist-conservatory rhetoric by the political elite in order to achieve the popular support of the left-wing development-progressive projects. As we cannot talk about populism, with all its avatars, earlier than the 19th century, in the absence of the psycho-sociological and identity content of the term nation and the modern doctrinal axes that appeared after the French Revolution, we selected only a few theoretical landmarks from the category of definitions. The main emphasis is on the national idea and its continuity, because, as I show from the title, this ideological ferment brought together extremely contradictory phenomena: from the liberal and democratizing Fortyeighters romanticism, we reach the critical and conservative junimists, reactive to the romantic populism of the Fortyeighters, then to the fascist extreme right, in order to jump to the opposite pole of Nicolae Ceaușescu's almost Stalinist extreme left. In all this journey that the national idea goes through, in crescendo, I will put in the center of the analysis the Legionary Movement, in order to prove that it processed an existing land, transforming it into an extremely fertile one for Nicolae Ceaușescu. Moreover, I believe that we have a substantial intensification, over time, of the instrumentalization of this national idea, depending on the political needs of the authors and their capacity to exercise power.*

***Keywords:** populism, romanticism, fascism, nationalism, national-communism*

I. Populism

The social transformations of the last decades, the change of the international paradigm at the end of the Cold War, the economic globalization and the liberalization of communication have profoundly marked all spheres of life. The new realities have caused substantial changes not only in the morphology of the political mechanism, but also in the political-electoral processes, advancing new formats, new reports and new approaches. They come to replace the old ideological dichotomies, bring to the fore less visible political manifes-

Bogdan JELEA

PhD Candidate,
National University of Political Studies
and Public Administration,
Bucharest, Romania
bogdan_jelea@yahoo.com

tations, less obvious so far, but favored by new social circumstances, and especially media, bringing “on stage” new actors, different types of players from what we all knew or were used to see (from civic movements that appeared online, to atypical *influencers*, and from formations that appear overnight, to celebrities turned into politicians). In this context, the phenomenon of populism is advancing as an inherent prerogative of current political life, making the transition from the marginal periphery to the *mainstream*, manifesting itself fully, especially in electoral campaigns.

However, what interests us in the context of this analysis are the main characteristics identified in the literature: the cleavage between the pure people and the closed caste of the corrupt elite, the feeling of revolt against the “establishment”, democratic vindication of validation, teleological discourse, reliance on various crises of contemporaneity (identity, distribution, representation), the identification of an adversary, on whose defeat the fate of the people will depend.

Putting together these data, of the present general situation, together with some theoretical aspects, we can start a real recourse to history, to explain the phenomenon of the continuity of populism, as it was described above. Considering this, the approach will be a chronological one, as follows: I will review the specifics of Fortyeighters romanticism, as an ideological source of Romanian national populism, then I will briefly clarify the specifics of the Junimea Society, to move to the analytical and comparative presentation of the Legionary Movement, as a source of inspiration for the leadership of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

II. Fortyeighters romanticism

The relevance of the romantic cultural current in the context of populist evolution can be considered a major one, from the temporal perspective of the 18th – 19th centuries, somehow prefacing its “national” contents, through the almost obsessive recourse to “mystical people” and “people’s soul”. Pointing out the French revolutionary moments of 1789 and 1848, the current spread to Europe as early as the end of the 18th century. Conceptually, but also extremely useful to be used by populists, the romantics focus on the conservative-patriarchal approach by which they capture the local color, the internal life of the national community, to resurrect their glorious, authentic past as an impetus for the present, often defined as fallen. The assumed purpose of the romantic approach, through specific melancholy and nostalgia, was to indicate the greatness of the past, as a comparative landmark and aspirational example for the decadent present.

The writings of the romantics are full of life, they live the events emotionally and effectively, like active fighters on the battlefield of history; they not only talked about the past, but called on the reader to participate, not just to imagine¹. A strong feature of it, is the vehemence of the critique of classicism, paradoxically not in the ideological sense of its conservatism, but by eliminating the rational element and proclaiming the “rights of the heart”, of sensibilities and burning imagination.

Beyond these generalities, Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet are two major personalities of French history, both in the cultural and political spheres, their influence on nineteenth-century Romanian political thought being undeniable. Moreover, the stake of analyzing the role of each of the two is to highlight the paradigm shift of European historiography, with the emphasis shifted to the people, in the context of building the concept of national identity – a context strongly related to the phenomenon of populism of that period.

Referring to the theoretical elements by which we identify populism, we can say that Michelet's perspective is easy to categorize: in addition to the central placement of the virtuous people, creator of history, through the courage shown in the revolution, national ideology must be based on a "legend", the education of the people will be based on it. In the case of the French, the legend is equivalent to the revolution, as a phenomenon that amplifies in perceptions and by intensifying the admiring emotions, regarding nostalgically and retrospectively the greatness of the forerunners.

Edgar Quinet's connection is also due to the introduction of the German *Volkgeist* model in the Romanian environment, Hegel's ideas reached Nicolae Bălcescu and Mihail Kogălniceanu through the partial translations prepared by the French historian. Here is the influence of the two authors on the writings and thinking of the two Romanian Fortyeighters.

III. Junimea

If the Fortyeighters historiography somehow bases, on the French romantic chain, the ideological body of a national populism with reference to the golden age, to mythical personalities, to the role of the traditional peasantry, a part of the conservative intellectuals reacts by founding the Cultural Association in Iași, in 1863 *Junimea*. It presents several characteristics from the sphere of cultural currents, but not only as a collection of authors and their writings, but also as a doctrinal reference of its founders: Titu Maiorescu, Petre Carp, Iacob Negruzzi, Theodor Rosetti, Gheorghe Racoviță and Vasile Pogor. If in other cases, historiography or literary criticism frames, for methodical reasons, a thinker or a work in a certain current, without any connections between its "members", the junimists were characterized by assuming both a cohesion based on contemporaneity, as well as a programmatic elitism. His deeply elitist character is made known by adopting the saying "Many can enter, but only few can stay". Moreover, Tudor Vianu strengthens this idea, defining 5 features of junimism: philosophical spirit, oratorical spirit, critical spirit, irony, taste for classical and academic. Only from their analysis, we see that the selection filter was very fine. Only authentic intellectuals, with solid education, could confirm these expectations, not the peasant majority of the population, or even the townspeople, craftsmen or merchants.

In reaction to the local romanticism, the Junimists question both the political and cultural successes of the Fortyeighters, militating against the emotional interpretations of history, superficiality and mediocrity. Promoting the prevalence of the quality of literary production over quantity, names such as Titu Maiorescu or Mihai Eminescu assess that the renewal went so fast, by implementing forms taken from Western democracies, that it exceeded the natural stage of social development.

Here is the first philosophical and conceptual paradox: if the generation of revolutionary intellectuals took over, through the historiography of Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, the Hegelian concept of *Volkgeist*, used as an argument for national claims, its implementation. If the legitimation of the efforts and the struggle for independence in 1848 was made starting from the people, from the supposed desideratum of it and of its identity, the junimist Eminescu mentioned critically, 3 decades later (in 1876) the revolutionary year "From this year the Romanians have lost historical sense. New words without content, new people without past and without value, a bird language instead of the worthy language of the ancestors, institutions incompatible with the moderate needs of the Danube peasant have stifled the beautiful and

strong beginnings of a truly Romanian literature, of a nationalism not of banal phrases, but with a real content”².

If the fortyeighters enthusiastically take the method of French historiography, putting soul and emotion in glorifying the glorious past, in identifying the great voivode figures, in the idyllic description of the peasants, Eminescu, using the same instrument, proposes a different dimension, through which the inherent errors and exaltations of predecessors from the Romanian cultural phenomenon, already mature in his opinion, more critical spirit. As we see in the text of the great poet, he condemns the contradiction between the authenticity of the rural spirit and the socio-political mechanisms insufficiently adequate to it.

IV. The legionary movement

In the presentation and analysis of this phenomenon of interwar Romania, we will consider the aspects described above, emphasizing the continuity of cultural mechanisms related to the national idea, especially given their location in time. If in the middle and end of the 19th century, the concept of national identity was at the beginning or only in formation, in Romania in the 3rd decade of the last century, the national idea began to take shape, especially in the post-Versailles context, influenced by Wilson doctrine.

On the one hand, our doctrinal landmarks have adapted to great local peculiarities the great European themes such as nationalism, anti-Semitism, moral crisis or the instrumentalization of religious mysticism. It will also be easy to identify the line of continuity of ethnocentric ideas, as we have reviewed in the past. In the beginning, a short ideological incursion is required to place the Legionary Movement in the current era. About fascism, Professor Andrei Țăranu says³ that it is *the only one of the modern ideologies, which was born with the century*. Finding its origin in the Latin term *fascis* (connection with twigs, the symbol of the Roman inhabitants), it is perhaps the most debated phenomenon of the last century, in most humanist's disciplines, from history to sociology, and from political science to literature. And the controversies surrounding it concern both the complexity of the expressions and the speed of their propagation, at a previously unknown rate, a sign that society claimed a set of expectations to which fascism seemed to respond. If we look at things from the perspective of the dichotomous duality of the concepts of doctrine and ideology, the first comprising rather the philosophical ideas on a government system of thinking, and the second practical illustration, its operative implementation, we can say that the interwar period was strongly marked by the double dimension of fascism. Due to its mass character, the number of adherents, the violent discursive approaches, the cleavage generated in society by the expression of a unique radicalism of the middle classes, the fascist phenomenon can be translated on both levels: both as extremist political doctrine and as movement policy or form of government.

Returning to etymology, the term *fascist* also manifests itself in a double semantic area, from the doctrinal general (Pan-European phenomenon, later taken over in Latin America or Asia), to the specific particular (the ideology of Mussolini's Italian regime). Its generalizing use is explained precisely in the pioneering and articulate influence of the Italian movement, which served as a model in other countries for the aversion to aversion to existing political currents (left, center, right), through secularism, revolutionaryism, idealism.

Andrew Heywood⁴ also enters the sphere of conceptual clarifications when he defines several themes of fascism: anti-rationalism, struggle, socialism, elitism, militant-nationalism. He

identifies in fascist ideology the organic stake of the society that absorbs the assumed individual (power in unity), the new man being willing to sacrifice in the name of duty, country, race and, last but not least, the commands set by the absolute leader.

Subsumed to most of the above characteristics, the Legion of Archangel Michael, often mentioned in historiography as the Legionary Movement, also appears as an effect of the different visions that the professor from Iași A.C. Cuza Alexandru and the recently released Corneliu Zelea Codreanu show them about the political approach necessary for society. We are almost 10 years old from the end of the Great War, on June 24, 1927, when Codreanu summoned in his house former detainees with whom he had been imprisoned and some students, with whom he shares a common founding creed⁵: *Our intimate state of mind from which the Legion was born was this: we did not care whether we would win, whether we would be defeated, or whether we would die. Our goal was different: to move forward, united. Going together, united, with God before and with the justice of the Romanian nation, any fate would be given to us, defeat or death, it will be blessed and will bear fruit for our nation. There are defeats and there are dead that awaken a nation to life, as there are victories among those who put it to sleep, as Professor Iorga once said.* Only from this short paragraph are sufficient elements capable of placing legionarism in the wider current of fascism: the idea of patriotic sacrifice, shrouded in a mystical aura over vocation.

If we refer only to this short programmatic quote, we identify the quasi-romantic approach: the claim of the people, the availability to heroic sacrifice, the emotional recourse to the determinism of destiny, the national idea and messianism.

Neagu Djuvara⁶ makes the same assessment, defining the Legion as *a nationalist-fascist-oriented terrorist paramilitary organization, with a mystical-religious, violent anti-communist, anti-Semitic and antimasonic character*; having an ideology related to values such as nation, suffering, sacrifice, courage, salvation.

Since the purpose of this paper is related to the historical-ideological approach, we will not deal with organizational or political issues. It is enough to know that, in the desire to transform society according to his own beliefs, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu will form an organization that will be a political means of struggle. Thus, in June 1930, the Iron Guard was established, which wanted a kind of common platform for the training of other nationalist and anti-communist formations, choosing as a symbol a cross inspired by prison bars¹⁰. As the Legion was the only structure that joined the Iron Guard, before the 1933 elections the same Codreanu founded the All for the Country Party, whose ideological laboratory will be the Legion and which will be led by engineer Gheorghe Clime. It should be added that Codreanu's intuition exploited the strong social upheavals caused by the Great Depression. The workers' revolts found sympathy in the West, and the Legion undertook the distribution of various aids throughout the country, wanting to electorally train socio-economic difficulties, gaining a diversity of followers (police, municipal councilors, state lawyers, state employees). Railways and many other categories, assigning them tasks of information sources or activists. However, despite the efforts made and the context mentioned, the liberal prime minister IG Duca forbids the participation of the Iron Guard in the 1933 elections, by outlawing, which will produce the first major political assassination executed by legionaries, who will kill the prime minister. just 19 days after his decision, on December 19, 1933. Four years later, with the end of the mandate of the liberal government, Carol II, before consolidating his power by establishing the royal dictatorship, advanced the proposal for Zelea Codreanu to form a legionary government,

claiming instead the leadership of the Legionary Movement. Following the Captain's refusal, elections were held on December 20, 1937, won by the Liberals, but with an insufficient score to form the government. *The All for the Country Party* gets 3rd place. To temper the legionary zeal (they obtained 15.5% in the election), but possibly also as revenge for the refusal of the royal offer, Codreanu was arrested in 1938, accused of conspiracy against the state, and assassinated at November 30, 1938 (being strangled, then shot to stage an escape attempt)¹¹. After Horia Sima took over the leadership of the Movement, the legionaries avenged the death of the Captain, assassinating in September 1939 the Prime Minister Armand Călinescu. It will be the beginning of a spiral of political violence, continued by Carol II, from whose order will be assassinated, in just 2 days, immediately after the disappearance of the head of government, without trial, over 250 members and legionary sympathizers from across the country.

Returning to the assumed goal, in order to analyze the political manifestations of the Movement, an analysis of the morphology of the intimate ideological framework is required, public actions being, in fact, animated by shared ideas, internalized, assumed by members and followers. The mission is not very difficult, the works of the legionary leaders being true documents-manifesto of the current: Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – The book of the nest chief and Horia Sima – The legionary doctrine.

From the first reading, we find out that the organizational model involves a conglomerate, like a nest, composed of 3 to 13 members, led by a leader. According to the operational priorities, aiming at the effectiveness, but also according to a hierarchical rigor, the mentioned manual stipulates the absence of any deliberative collegial forum: “the nest does not have a committee. He has only a boss who orders, a correspondent who carries the correspondence, a cashier who collects dues and a courier who connects with other nests or the head of the county. All of them, like true brothers, listen to their comrade, who acts as the head of the nest.”¹² Starting from the archaic terminology, the organization is called nest, a word with rural, zoological values, from the animal kingdom. The symbolism of this closeness to nature, showing a certain nostalgia for the romantic relationship with nature. Also, another specific aspect of personal populism of the 19th century is the authority of the sole leader. The models revealed by the romantic historiography are those of the idealized voivodes, who do not need to share power with someone, their only and sufficient ally being the people. The internal mechanics of the organization of the nests confirm the procedure of the unique hierarchy: the actual establishment of the nest was done only at the initiative of its future head, and only with the express consent of Codreanu. The young people under 19 could not acquire the quality of legionnaire, but they were constituted in the Brotherhood of the Cross, a kind of transition organization of the Legion for teenagers. It is estimated that at the height of popular sympathy, the number of nests had exceeded 20,000⁷. Later, Carol II will establish the Organization of *Guards*, for young people, and Nicolae Ceausescu the *Falcons of the Fatherland* and the *Pioneers*. Regardless of the title, the national idea transpires both in the sense of belonging and of the objective to be defended. The guards are the quintessential defensive military, the hawk embodies surveillance from on high, and the pioneers anticipate danger.

From an ideological point of view, similar to the Marxist and communist ideas, which they otherwise fought, the legionaries aimed at creating the *new man*. That is why they relied on the recruitment of many young people, due to their malleability. And the filter of the selection was quite severe, the Movement promoting initiation rituals having a double role: both symbolically, through its meanings, and practically, through the realism of the attempts meant to test the

vitality of the candidates. Not coincidentally, the number of tests was 3, in the mystical spirit already established. The first attempt – entitled the *mountain of suffering* – checked the perseverance and determination of the candidate, consisting in climbing a mountain, with the ascent more and more difficult. Once this test was passed, he followed the test of fear and its defeat by courage, in which the aspirant crossed the forest with wild beasts. The last attempt – called the *swamp of despair* – went to the next psycho-emotional level, the ability to overcome mental abandonment, to overcome hopelessness, in parallel with testing physical ability. “Whoever has not gone through all this, cannot be called a legionnaire, although he is enrolled in the organization, has a badge and pays the membership fee”⁸.

In the sense of national ideas, against the background of the assumed ethical approach of the Movement, which politically capitalized not only social dissatisfaction, but also of a moral nature, the Captain wanted the Legion to have a didactic role at the level of the masses, to build the *new man*. This vision exceeded the usual political role of a party, assuming a kind of messianism dedicated to Romanians. The fundamental laws of the nest, six in number, could be extrapolated with the intention of training the whole people: the law of discipline (a legionary must be disciplined); labor law (brought a philosophical perspective in the evaluation of effort: the reward of labor does not consist in gain, but in the satisfaction of completing the tasks entrusted); the law of silence (both general, detention and private, non-disclosure of activities); the law of education (aimed at good knowledge of the legion); the law on mutual assistance (provided for the obligation to help); the law of honor (instrumentalize the principle of fairness, which excluded any form of deception, success must be exclusively the result of their own strength). From this internal organization we conclude substantial similarities with the communist period: discipline is an essential condition of socialist development, work ethic becomes an omnipresent slogan of the proletariat, discretion and reserved conduct were the imperative prerogative of the “party staff”, political education was done at all levels, from at the Bureau of the Basic Organization, the comrades relied on camaraderie, socialist morality was promoted programmatically.

In the same messianic spirit, the Legion also promoted 10 of its own commandments: *1. It does not believe in any information, opinions about the Legionary Movement, read in any paper, even if it seems to be nationalist, or whispered in the ears of agents, or even by nice people. The legionary believes only in the order and word of his boss. 2. Realize who is in front of you and weigh him properly either when he is an enemy who wants to deceive you or either when he is a bad friend, who was deceived before by an enemy. 3. Beware of a great misfortune of a stranger, who urges you to do something. 4. If someone wants to seduce you or buy you: spit in his eyes. Legionnaires are neither stupid nor for sale. 5. Flee from those who want to give you gifts. You don't get anything. 6. Get away from those who flatter you and praise you. 7. Where you are only three legionaries, live as brothers among yourselves: union, union and union again. [...] 8. Do not speak ill of your comrades. Don't give up. 9. Don't be scared if you don't receive orders, news, answers to letters; or if you think the fight is stagnant. 10. In your safety pray to God, in the name of our dead, to help us suffer all the blows to the end of suffering and to the great resurrection and legionary victory.*⁹

It results from the discipline imposed by these commands – beyond their mystical character – a paranoid suspicion on those outside the Legion and their intentions. Beyond the reasonable size of any precaution that a group with paramilitary accents is natural to take, the share of the isolationist accent is, however, very high.

V. Conclusions

Leaving behind the period of the 19th century, which prepared a cursive approach to the national idea and the idealization of the glorious voivodship past, in parallel with the mystique of the countryside, we can say that the 20th century enshrined the ideological methodology of totalitarianism, of which we evoked the Legionary Movement and national communism. It can be said that the legionaries wanted to create a new ideology, unprecedented in the history of Romania. Corneliu Zelea Codreanu combined his attention on the nation, as a people and not as a state, as a union of individuals, not of institutions. His aspiration was to succeed in awakening the Romanian nationalist spirit and to unlock the minds of the Romanian people in the face of the politician who no longer has anything of the nobility of our race, who dishonors and kills us, who, if he will be in a position to lead us, will lead us to perdition.

Nicolae Ceaușescu, in turn, emphasized the claim of the people and the glorious forerunners. From propaganda texts, which inevitably included association with the people, to historiography that accentuated the cleavage between the people and the oppressive political class (the boyars, the bourgeoisie or even the intermediate party apparatus), the supreme leader was a successor to the voivodes. Like them, in the official speech he was loved by the people, but detested by the secondary political level, both for his fairness and intransigence towards dishonesty, and because he is the only one validated by the great masses of the people.

Finally, the cult of personality as a method of strengthening authority was not a novelty for Romania, the first royal dictatorship, followed by the practice of Stalinization being only the operational side of patriarchal cultural concepts, in which, due to the hereditary-elective system for the country's throne, political instability favored conspiracy and corruption.

Notes

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¹ Al. Dima, *Romantismul european și trăsăturile lui dominante, în Romatismul românesc și romantismul european*, volum apărut sub îngrijirea unui colectiv de redacție alcătuit din: Alexandru Blaci, Al. Dima, Yvette Nafta, București, 1970, p.10

² [https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Testament_\(Eminescu\)](https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Testament_(Eminescu)), accesat la 24.09.2021

³ Andrei Țăranu, *Doctrină politică contemporană*, 2001, p. 111

⁴ Andrew Heywood, *Fascism*, 2016, pp. 213-217

⁵ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru legionari*, Ed. Totul pentru țară, Sibiu, 1936, pp. 295-296

⁶ Neagu Djuvara, *O scurtă istorie a românilor povestită celor tineri*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2010, p. 97

⁷ Armin Heinen, *Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail. Mișcarea socială și organizație politică. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 271

⁸ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Cărticica șefului de cuib*

⁹ Idem