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## Thinking the Future through the Past

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in a historical place of Romania: Hațeg Country  
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Edited by  
OANA-MIHAELA TĂMAȘ

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# The Involvement of Romanian Candidates in the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections during the Last Decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Reflected in the Transylvanian Romanian Press

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OVIDIU EMIL IUDEAN\*

**T**HE LAST decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a series of events that deeply affected the political evolution of the Romanian nation in Hungary. These were studied in depth by Romanian historians in several studies and articles whose focus ranged from moments such as the *Reply* of 1892 and the *Memorandum* (1892–1895) to the crisis within the national movement and the disputes about the necessary tactic that was to be adopted by the Romanian nation in response to the policy of the central authorities in Budapest. However, several aspects relating to the participation of Romanians living within Hungary's borders in the parliamentary elections that took place in the periods mentioned above have been given less attention from a historical perspective.

One finds that this subject should be approached, especially due to the Romanian involvement in the elections of 1892 and 1896. Whether one aims to analyze the participation of a part of the Romanian nation in the aforementioned elections, or to clarify—for the first time in Romanian historiography—the activity of Romanian politicians in Hungary, who ran for representative office in the Budapest Parliament on behalf of Hungarian parties, this study offers new information concerning the political history of Romanians from Hungary at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the fact that the political context was marked by governmental instability—between 1890 and 1896 Hungary had three different governments—that fol-

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lowed a lengthy period during which prime minister Kálmán Tisza was in charge of the Transleithanian part of the Dual Monarchy, the policy set forth by the central authorities in Budapest was constant in one respect: the Magyarization of the different nationalities that inhabited the land of St. Stephen's Crown. The Hungarian prime ministers from this period—Gyula Szapáry (1890–1892), Sándor Wekerle (1892–1895), Dezső Bánffy (1895–1899)—persisted in pursuing a “*complete Magyarization of public life*” and an “*infringement of the political and cultural development of non-Hungarian nationalities*” which had been characteristic of the government of Kálmán Tisza (1875–1890). The Romanians in Hungary were severely affected by this policy, especially from an educational and religious point of view.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the Romanian national movement in Hungary was also struggling with a series of dissensions, caused by the different positions upheld by its members precisely on the two main issues which preoccupied it in the first part of the 1890s. The first issue was that of the strategy that was to be adopted by Romanians on the Hungarian political stage, while the second one concerned the moment when the *Memorandum* was to be presented to the emperor Franz Joseph.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of passivism as a result of the 1881 National Conference held in Sibiu—and its expansion to include the entire Romanian-inhabited territory in Hungary, in 1887<sup>3</sup>—as well as the termination of the *Memorandum* movement, as a consequence of the emperor's refusal to see the Romanian delegates, followed by the trial of the main members of the R.N.P and the latter's interdiction to participate in any political activity in 1894, deeply affected the national movement.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, there were some Romanian politicians who held other views than the N.P.R leaders and who took an active role in Hungarian political life, participating in the parliamentary elections on behalf of Hungarian parties. They would then represent in the Budapest Parliament those electoral districts that had a majority of Romanian inhabitants. For the most part, these candidates ran on behalf of the Magyar Liberal Party, which was governing at the time. As a matter of fact, these Romanian governmental delegates were, for more than a decade and a half, the only representatives the Romanian nationality had in the Lower Chamber of the Hungarian Parliament.

The two elections in which Romanian politicians with moderate views participated took place during January and February 1892 and in October 1896. These were organized according to the provisions of law no. XXXIII of 1874, which regulated the electoral process on Hungarian territory. The Hungarian electoral legislation, through its stipulations, had been characterized by the English intellectual R. W. Seton-Watson as “*possibly the most un-liberal one in all of Europe,*” an idea that was also embraced by a part of the press in Budapest, which saw this legislation as a “*Babelic confusion.*”<sup>5</sup>

In essence, it was precisely the minimal conditions that allowed Hungarian citizens to vote—so elaborate and detailed—that were the cause of these harsh characterizations. One earned the right to vote when one had the appropriate financial situation, enjoyed certain ancient privileges, paid the necessary amount in taxes and

the required tax on the land he owned. The provisions in Hungary differed from those in Transylvania and, as a result, in rural Transylvanian areas only those homeowners that paid an annual income tax of 168 crowns could vote. In Hungary it was enough for a citizen to own a property of approximately 5 hectares (one fourth of the regular territorial unit used for measure in this case)—an area that differed from county to county, so as to correspond to government interests. Consequently, only 3,3% of the population in Transylvania could vote, whereas in Hungary this category reached 5,8%.<sup>6</sup>

Other elements that contributed to the development of electoral strategies that were fully embraced by the agents of Hungarian parties concerned, for instance, the electoral provisions regarding the division into districts, where only one voting centre existed, which was oftentimes placed marginally in those districts that had a majority of non-Hungarian voters, precisely in order to make voters' access more difficult. The division into districts itself was made in a manner characterized by Seton-Watson as being "*arbitrary, not taking into account geography, population, nationality, with the sole purpose of favoring the Magyar element.*" A further difficulty was posed by the manner in which the voters' lists were drawn up—this was a task left to local civil servants, who, in the attempt to favor the success of certain candidates, would make use of a variety of means to exclude from these lists the voters who had different views. Moreover, the compulsory public and direct expression of one's vote—in front of the district's electoral committee, which comprised civil servants described by Seton-Watson as "*local demigods, [who] can take revenge for the refusal to support their candidate,*" constituted yet another aspect that had to be taken into account when devising an electoral strategy.<sup>7</sup>

It was in this internal political context and on the basis of these provisions that the Romanian politicians with moderate and pro-governmental views announced their candidacy in the 1892 and the 1896 elections.

In the 1892 elections Romanian candidates obtained a number of eight seats: Ioan Beleş and Virgil Bogdan in Arad county, Silviu Rezei and Gellért Véghsö in Bihor county, Petru Vuia and George Szerb in Caraş-Severin county, Nicolae Şerban in Făgăraş county and Petru Mihalyi in Maramureş county. The first seven of these adhered to the Liberal Magyar Party's program, while the latter was a candidate of the National Party led by Count Apponyi.<sup>8</sup>

The Romanian press in Transylvania dedicated ample space to the electoral campaign and to the elections proper. The success of the governmental representatives was harshly criticized in the newspapers that supported passivism and discussed in a moderate tone in those that had an activist orientation. Papers like *The Tribune* of Sibiu and *The Transylvanian Gazette* of Braşov discussed in detail the victory of each of the eight candidates, and at the same time insisted upon the weak support given by the Romanian voters and the abuses that were committed.

The two representatives elected in Arad county, Virgil Bogdan (the district of Iosăşel) and Ioan Beleş (the district of Radna), were compelled to organize an ample electoral campaign, that was sometimes marked by events that breached the bound-

aries of legality, in order to draw in their voters.<sup>9</sup> While it was easier for Virgil Bogdan to gain his seat—he was unanimously elected owing to the fact that he had no opponent<sup>10</sup> –, Ioan Beleş had to face a political struggle with his opponent Méray Horvát. Although labeled by Romanian newspapers as an “*eater of Romanians*,” Horvát managed to attract a part of the Romanian electorate. However, this did not ensure his election, the representative office going to Beleş, who had been supported by an important number of intellectuals from Arad—who had established themselves in a local club of the ruling party—, and who had also benefitted from the influence exerted on the clergy by his brother, the archpriest Vasile Beleş of Radna.<sup>11</sup>

In Bihor, the electoral district of Beiuş was represented in parliament by Gellért Véghsö—a politician considered to be of Romanian nationality by all Transylvanian newspapers, despite his controversial origin (Romanian–Rutenian). He managed to be elected by unanimous vote, being the only candidate.<sup>12</sup> In the same county, the Ceica electoral district designated as its delegate Silviu Rezei, a “*governmental devoted to liberal politics*.” According to *The Transylvanian Gazette*, this choice was supported by “*most of the Romanian intelligentsia that wasn’t lying under outside ‘influence’*.”<sup>13</sup>

The county of Caraş-Severin was represented in parliament by the delegates George Szerb and Petru Vuia. Owing to the fact that he was the sole candidate in the Zorlenţul-mare district, Szerb invested less financial resources in his campaign, a fact that was also mentioned by the contemporary press:

*running unopposed, he found no reason to spend his money and . . . the poor [Romanians] bemoaned such an election, because the saying of the time was ‘if one is bought, then one can eat and drink’, or in other words, I had no need for you now, the notaries and the president would have been enough.*

In fact, among Szerb’s supporters the Romanians were represented by a small number of peasants, some “*more modern*” teachers, but mostly by civil servants.<sup>14</sup>

In Caransebeş, the representative office was won by the district protopraetor Petru Vuia. Despite the fact that during the electoral campaign several civil servants had announced their candidacy, Petru Vuia won the elections by unanimous vote, without an opponent. The Romanian press pointed out the low level of support from Romanian voters, in spite of the fact that many of these voted for Vuia, for instance in Mehadia, Teregovă and Iablaşiţa, thus occasioning severe criticism about a part of

*our intelligentsia [that] through this kind of habit leans towards the Liberal Party, and also for love of their candidate, with whom it has lived in ‘friendship’ and through whom it has gained many ‘benefits’—did not dare to take upon itself the responsibility of guiding our supporters along the right path.*<sup>15</sup>

In the Arpaș district of Făgăraș county, the seat was won by Nicolae Șerban, the son of the priest from Voila. He profited from the favorable circumstances which arose from the misunderstandings between the former district representative, the Jewish delegate Ullman, and the local Romanian political leaders that had abandoned passivism in order to gain financial advantages through collaboration with Ullman. In the context of Ullman's withdrawal, Șerban, being the only candidate left, was given great support by Romanian voters. The information offered by the contemporary press concerning his political views is diverse and contradictory. However, it is certain that at the moment of his entrance in parliament, he declared himself to be a supporter of the Liberal Magyar Party.<sup>16</sup>

The only Romanian representative that obtained this office while running for parliament on behalf of Count Apponyi's National Party was Petru Mihalyi, a politician of remarkable experience, earned in his more than twenty years of activity in the Budapest Parliament. In addition, the close relations he had cultivated with the representatives of the local administration, as well as his noble descent—he was the son of the former supreme county chief of Maramureș and the brother of the bishop of Lugoj, Victor Mihalyi of Apșa—, an aspect which gave him considerable influence among the voters from the electoral district of Șugatag, facilitated his reelection as a representative in parliament.<sup>17</sup>

The political struggles in the Magyar parliament between the supporters of the new prime minister, Deszdö Bánffy, and his powerful opposition—which included mostly the Kossuthists, the Apponyists and the supporters of the popular program—would cause the dissolution of the parliament in 1896. Bánffy thus sought to secure, through an energetic electoral campaign, a parliamentary majority—something which he had not benefitted from at the beginning of his term—that would have allowed him to institute an authoritarian government. Consequently, in October 1896, parliamentary elections were held all over Transleithania.<sup>18</sup> When these were over, eight Romanian candidates had managed to win seats. As in the previous elections, the majority of these opted for the ruling Liberal Magyar Party's program, whereas only two of the delegates managed to obtain their seats while running on behalf of Count Apponyi's party. The situation from the 1896 elections is very similar to the events that occurred during the 1892 elections. The Romanian governmental representatives announced their candidacies on behalf of the same counties: Arad, Bihor, Caraș-Severin, Maramureș, Făgăraș, with the addition of two other counties—Bistrița-Năsăud and Timiș. Furthermore, the majority of these representatives won by unanimous vote, running unopposed.

In 1896, Arad county elected for Parliament only one politician of Romanian nationality, namely Ioan Beleş, in the Radna electoral district. As in the previous elections, Beleş's success owed much to the support of the clergy and of the

schoolteachers, both categories being members of the liberal county club, but also to the influence of his brother, archpriest Vasile Beleş.<sup>19</sup>

In Caransebeș, the office of parliamentary representative was won by the incumbent Petru Vuia. As in the 1892 elections, the former district protopraetor benefitted from the support of the district's civil service, a noticeable fact during his campaign. In the communes where he presented his political program he was greeted by the majority of the local intelligentsia, Romanian or belonging to the other nationalities. It was in this context that Petru Vuia won his seat by unanimous vote, following his acclamation by the crowd of voters—among whom many Romanians—that had come in order to elect their delegate in the Hungarian parliament.<sup>20</sup> Caraș-Severin county was also represented by the incumbent delegate, George Szerb, who was elected unanimously in the district of Zorlențu-mare, in the legislature of 1896-1901.<sup>21</sup>

Bihor county also elected only one delegate for the 1896-1901 legislature. This time it was the vicar of Oradia, Iosif Goldiș, who announced his candidacy and supported a governmental program. His political campaign was not lacking in crises, caused, on the one hand, by the fact that the Romanian press campaigned vigorously against him, urging the Romanian electorate from Ceica not to vote for Iosif Goldiș, and on the other hand, by the lack of support shown by the county liberal party club. Consequently, the vicar saw himself compelled to face the pressures coming from the members of this club, who supported the candidate of Armenian descent, Korda Bandi. Finally, owing to the support shown by the leaders of the governing party in Budapest, Iosif Goldiș won the elections by unanimous vote, as the sole candidate.<sup>22</sup>

In the district of Năsăud, until the elections of 1896, Romanians—the majority of the population—had never sent one of their own candidates to the Hungarian parliament. This opportunity came when the principal of the superior gymnasium of Năsăud, Professor Ion Ciocan, announced his candidacy. The political leader from Năsăud ran on behalf of Deszdö Bánffy's ruling party. Ciocan was in close relations with this politician, who had been once at the head of Bistrița-Năsăud county. It is interesting to note the manner in which the leaders of the former border regiments decided to recalculate their political tactics, after almost three decades during which they had preferred to place themselves outside the political struggle. These leaders offered Ciocan their complete support during his entire campaign, a fact that facilitated the governmental candidate's success. Despite the information circulating in the county and in the contemporary press about other candidates, the principal of the gymnasium of Năsăud was unanimously elected, without an opponent.<sup>23</sup>

Costi Ioanovici managed to win his only mandate in the 1896 elections. Having had an oscillating political trajectory until this moment—he had ran in



1892 on behalf of Count Apponyi's party –, Ioanovici adhered to the political program of the governing party in 1896, a fact that led to his unanimous election in the electoral district of Moravița.<sup>24</sup>

In the electoral district of Arpaș, the seat was won in 1896 by the incumbent candidate, the lawyer Nicolae Șerban. After a campaign that was marked by a series of violent events, which necessitated the intervention of the gendarmerie, the election itself took place in an atmosphere of national celebration. This time, running on behalf of Count Apponyi's National Party, Nicolae Șerban had to face the electoral mechanism of the government that had previously facilitated his victory in the elections. However, benefitting especially from the support of the Romanian voters—the majority of the population in the Arpaș district—the former representative managed to win a new seat in the legislature of 1896-1901.<sup>25</sup>

Also running on behalf of Count Apponyi's party was Petru Mihalyi. His election in the electoral district of Șugatag took place exactly the same way as in 1892, and the influential politician from Maramureș won his seat in the Budapest Parliament by unanimous vote.<sup>26</sup>

The electoral proceedings discussed provide a general image of the elections of the Romanian representatives that had seats in the Budapest Parliament in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1896 elections, as in 1892, Romanian politicians managed to win the same number of representative offices, namely, eight. Nevertheless, the fact that in both elections a greater number of Romanians running on behalf of Hungarian parties announced their candidacies should be taken into consideration. However, all of the other candidates withdrew in the day preceding the elections. An example that may clarify the reasons behind this political behavior is that of Ioan Farcaș. Descending from a family of priests, he declared his candidacy in the electoral district of Lăpușul-unguresc in 1892 as well as in 1896, adhering to a governmental program, despite the fact that there already was a candidate supported by the liberal party. The contemporary press offers clues on the electoral strategy that was at the basis of Ioan Farcaș's candidacy. After a brief campaign, he would offer the governmental candidate an electoral agreement whereby, in exchange for a sum of money, Farcaș agreed to withdraw from the political contest. His tactic was not entirely successful. The support that the governmental candidates had in the electoral districts with a non-Hungarian majority was sufficient to neutralize the threat that a candidate like Ioan Farcaș represented. However, the existence of this kind of "*politicians*" contributed to the even greater depreciation of the image that the Romanian candidates that adhered to the programs of the Hungarian political parties had, an image that was created by the contemporary national Romanian press.<sup>27</sup>

In essence, the political ideas put forth by the parliamentary representatives, despite differing in certain respects from those upheld by the N.R.P. leaders,



were decidedly favorable to the Romanian nation. Their activist option was also determined by the electoral behavior of the Romanian voters. Despite the political agenda of passivism, established during the national conferences in Sibiu—events that usually preceded the parliamentary elections—and the campaigns in the national press that advised Romanians to abstain from voting, most of the Romanian electorate participated actively in the elections. In addition, the political program presented during the campaigns by the Romanian governmental candidates concerned a series of problems that the Romanian nation faced, generally as well as locally. Perhaps the most eloquent material regarding the political options of the governmental representatives that was published in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the article written by the lawyer and great landowner Iosif Gall, a former governmental representative in 1881-1887 and a member of the House of Magnates from 1887 until his death. As a result of the events surrounding the *Memorandum* and the trial of those who had signed it, events that he had interpreted as “*the Crown’s disapproval of nationalistic Romanian politics,*” Iosif Gall felt compelled to present his political ideas to his fellow nationals with “*the best and most useful intentions in mind.*”<sup>28</sup>

Gall began his article by underlining that it was necessary for Romanians to adopt political activism, and, most importantly, that they should participate in the elections. The magnate from Banat justified these opinions in two ways: firstly, it would be impossible to fulfill any kind of national ambition without an active involvement in parliamentary life; secondly, through passivism the Romanian nation would “*make its situation not only harder, but downright impossible, because it will be considered as enemy of the constitution.*” Passivism per se, as a tactic that had dominated the political life of Romanians in Hungary for the past fifteen years, had proven to be ineffective. In addition to this was the fact that “*the people are participating more and more in the elections, as well as the intelligentsia, so the circle of those who embrace passivism is ever tightening*”—an easily noticeable fact in the campaigns and the elections that have been discussed in this paper. The other important element brought into discussion by Iosif Gall in support of activism was the external policy of the Dual Monarchy toward the Kingdom of Romania. Following the reciprocal visits of their sovereigns, a certain improvement in bilateral relations was noticeable. In order to support his ideas, the magnate of Lucareț invoked the political expertise gained by Romanians from 1867 to 1881, a period marked by an intense Romanian participation in the Hungarian parliament. This participation had led to a whole series of successes, materialized in the provisions of the law regarding the rights of the nationalities, of that concerning the Romanian Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan See, sanctioning the separation of Romanians from Serbians and the autonomy of the Ortho-

dox Church, as well as the law concerning the popular educational system that supported the religious schools.<sup>29</sup>

In the final part of his article addressed to the Romanian voters, Iosif Gall brought into discussion the problem of the political party which Romanians should support. Invoking the fact that “*all opposition parties always take a position contrary to the nationalities, namely the Romanians, attack the government and the majority in the Diet, accused of not taking harsher measures against them,*” Gall supported the collaboration with the Liberal Magyar Party, because there “*we will be well received, in a conciliatory spirit that will ensure the development of useful activities, of the capacity to win over the decision makers, paralyze opposing tendencies, bring about the widespread validation of the social interests of the Romanians and of the districts they represent.*” However, Gall stated that “*we cannot take any concessions for granted, not even from the Liberal Party.*”<sup>30</sup>

The ideas supported by Iosif Gall proved his in-depth knowledge and understanding of the political realities in Hungary at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His opinions, largely embraced by all of the Romanian governmental representatives, were also accepted and adopted by an important part of the Romanian intelligentsia from the counties, a fact that ensured the electoral success of the candidates discussed above.

One must however mention the fact that the discourses and political programs presented on these occasions would not have been enough to ensure victory in the elections for the eleven Romanian representatives that have been the focus of this study. Essential elements in the electoral campaigns were the strategies that the Hungarian political parties relied on in order to ensure the victory of their own candidates. From this perspective, the governing party benefitted greatly from the support of the civil service, which was transformed into a veritable “*electoral machine*” during the parliamentary elections. The foreign as well as the Romanian press severely criticized the abuses committed by the civil servants who had become efficient “*Cortesés*.” Despite the fact that the Hungarian legislation prohibited their involvement in the elections, the local civil servants managed, through blackmail, bribery and sometimes violent intimidation, to obtain a sufficient number of votes so that the governmental candidates would be elected to office.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, among the Romanian voters, one may easily notice the lack of a satisfactory political experience, likely to prevent them from voting for the most generous candidate. As a result, money and electoral celebrations seriously influenced their decisions. This resulted in the fact that the passivism established by the leaders of the national movement in Sibiu was not completely embraced by Romanian voters. They would then become an important electoral resource

for the Magyar Liberal Party, which won the majority of its seats in the electoral districts that had a non-Hungarian majority.<sup>32</sup> In this context, the following question may be raised: for whom should Romanians have voted? The existing alternatives, namely candidates of Hungarian parties of nationalities other than Romanian, or Romanian candidates running of behalf of Hungarian parties, may constitute strong arguments in the discussion of the rationale behind the support Romanian governmental representatives received from a great segment of the Romanian population.

Owing to the analysis of materials discovered in the main newspapers of the time, and also considering the noticeable lack of research conducted on this particular matter in Romanian historiography, we decided to offer an in-depth presentation of the two elections that took place in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on a variety of aspects such as those concerning the candidates themselves, the electoral strategies employed, the Romanian participation in the voting process or the principles underlying the governmental representatives' political behavior. The present study has hopefully provided new information likely to cast aside some of the existing historiographic stereotypes concerning the description of Romanian representatives as “*renegades*,” the supposed lack of support shown to these candidates by the masses of Romanian voters, and the fact that their electoral victories were only made possible by the abuses committed in their favor by the Hungarian authorities. Despite the fact that a series of undeniable realities existed—and they were not avoided in the present discussion –, it comes as a necessity for Romanian historiography to take into account the nuances of the political events, and to recognize the importance of this “*other option*” in Romanian politics in Hungary.



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### **Abstract**

#### **The Involvement of Romanian Candidates in the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections during the Last Decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Reflected in the Transylvanian Romanian Press**

The political events involving the Romanians from Hungary in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been constantly discussed in Romanian historiography. Despite this fact, a less researched aspect is that of the involvement of Romanian candidates in the parliamentary elections during the abovementioned period. The present study proposes to treat this subject starting from the information provided by the major Romanian newspapers of that time. Following the analysis of the obtained data, I have focused on certain aspects relating to the Romanian politicians who ran for office in the two elections held during this period, the political programs to which they adhered, the electoral strategies used and the attitude of the Romanian voters.

### **Keywords**

Romanian governmental representatives, parliamentary elections, electoral strategies, moderate political program