Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania
Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania:

*Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda*

Edited by Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1  
Sorin RADU, Oliver Jens SCHMITT

*Chapter One* ........................................................................................................... 25  
“Peasant Democracy” or What It Was Like to Practice Politics  
in Countryside Romania between the Two World Wars  
Sorin RADU

*Chapter Two* ........................................................................................................... 59  
Communal Political Cultures in Interwar Romania  
Stelu ȘERBAN

*Chapter Three* ........................................................................................................... 99  
Mayors and Local Elite in the Interwar Period: Case Study – The Bordei Verde Commune, Brăila County  
Cornel MICU

*Chapter Four* ........................................................................................................... 125  
The National Liberal Party and the Failure of Political Integration of the Rural World in the Interwar Romania  
Ovidiu BURUIANĂ

*Chapter Five* ........................................................................................................... 187  
What was the National Peasant Party? Internal Division and Organizational Conflict, 1900-1947  
Daniel BRETT

*Chapter Six* ........................................................................................................... 215  
The Bessarabians “between” the Russians and the Romanians: The Case of the Peasant Party Deputy Vladimir V. Țîganko (1917-1919)  
Svetlana SUVEICA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>Orthodox Priests on the Necessity of Building a Political Culture</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in Interwar Transylvania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valeria SOROȘTINEANU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>A Socio-Professional Analysis of the Candidates in General Elections</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1926-1937): Case Study – Agriculturalist Candidates on the Lists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of the Assembly of Deputies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Florin-Răzvan MIHAI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>The Road of Transylvanian Romanian Farmers to Greater Romania’s</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Arena</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valer MOGA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>The Reorganization of the Romanian National Party in Rural Areas</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Lower Alba County prior to Parliamentary Elections in 1919</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vlad POPOVICI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleven</td>
<td>At the Edge of the Political World: Interwar Election Campaigns</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in Rural Bihor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gabriel MOISA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve</td>
<td>Suspicious beyond Imagination: Constructs of Ethnicity and the Rural</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World in Interwar Transylvania</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gábor EGRY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteen</td>
<td>The Cooperation between the Hungarian Party and the Hungarian</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peasantry in Romania: Election Campaigns in Rural Areas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Hungarian Peasantry Involvement in the Interwar Elections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Szilárd TOTH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteen</td>
<td>Considerations on the German Peasants of Romania in the First Decade</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of the Interwar Period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vasile CIOBANU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Fifteen......................................................................................... 483
Corneliu PINTILESCU

Chapter Sixteen ..................................................................................... 513
Policy Options of the Bulgarians of Bessarabia during 1918-1940
Ivan DUMINICA

Contributors.................................................................................................. 543
INTRODUCTION

SORIN RADU AND OLIVER JENS SCHMITT

Like most countries in East Central and Southeast Europe, until the Communist take-over Romania was a predominantly peasant society. As in most countries of this region, the Romanian elites were almost obsessed with the “peasant question”.1 Intellectuals and politicians alike saw in the peasant population both the cultural and social backbone of the nation and a source of backwardness preventing modernization and occidentalization, major goals of the nation-building processes in the area. The Romanian debate in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century does not constitute a regional exception. In a society characterized by a deep gap between the rural and the urban sphere, social and national thinkers were convinced that only bridging this divide would make major social change possible. Free trade, the economic pressure to export grain as a cash crop, and the rationalization of the administration of large estates by huge (often foreign) trusts shook traditional ties between landlords and tenants, created a new class of land leasers and managers and put traditional

society as a whole under enormous stress. The crisis of the pre-modern village society was all too visible and provoked reactions by the political and intellectual elites. This social crisis in the rural area coincided with the creation of strong national identities built upon an idealized rural space and peasants as the incarnation of national virtues. The decline of this social group frightened national activists, such as the historian Nicolae Iorga, who propagated an image of the peasant world which tended to conserve features he considered traditional and typically Romanian. Leading writers and poets fused national and social aspects of the rural crisis and directed their critique against what they called a superposed intermediary class which had allegedly disrupted traditional social networks; since many estate managers were Jews, especially in Eastern Romania (Moldova), anti-Semitism was fuelled in this context by writers such as Mihai Eminescu, Bogdan Petriceicu-Hasdeu or Iorga’s party comrade Alexandru Constantin Cuza, professor at the University of Iași. Under the influence of Russian agrarian socialism, left-wing theoreticians like Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea developed the theory of “neo-serfdom”, or, like Constantin Stere, propagated ideas resembling those of

the Russian Narodniki and Social Revolutionaries. The peasant uprising of 1907 marked a deep caesura in Romanian political life. Mass unrest provoked by intensified rural capitalism gained a dimension which threatened the very existence of state and society. The brutality of its suppression shocked important sections of the Romanian establishment, and the reform discourse which had existed since the unification of Moldova and Wallachia intensified. Still, its principal promoters were not peasants, but urban intellectuals and members of the “village intelligentsia”, i.e. teachers and priests. In both cases, peasants remained the objects of a major political debate which idealized them or portrayed their lifeworld with grim images of decline, social disruption, widespread diseases like tuberculosis or pellagra and alcoholism. In the latter view, peasants constituted the converse of modernity, which was linked to the urban space. Peasants were considered a major obstacle to social change, an analysis shared by Russian Bolsheviks. The idea of such a cleavage was expressed by the theory of “Two Romanias”, which portrayed an occidentalized urban sphere inhabited by a minority of Romanian society — and, especially in Moldova, a majority of minority groups such as Jews — and a backward rural space which was disconnected from the pace of development in the towns.

The First World War proved to be the decisive stress test for such a divided society. Romania entered the war on the side of the Entente with the declared aim of annexing Austro-Hungarian territories with a strong

---

Romanian population (the Banat, Transylvania, Bucovina). Even among the elites, enthusiasm for such a step was far from unanimous. Peasants had to bear the burden of warfare, which quickly developed into an utter disaster for the Romanian army, which had entered the war badly trained and for the larger part poorly equipped. In December 1916, the capital Bucharest fell, and only important defensive successes in the Southeastern part of the Carpathian Mountains saved Romania from a complete collapse. In 1917, the Russian Revolution also involved the Romanian population in Bessarabia. Since massive contingents of Russian troops supported the Romanian army, there was a clear danger of the Bolshevik revolution spilling over to Romania. Defeat and socio-political stress explain why the Romanian political elite decided to placate peasants by offering them both universal suffrage and a radical land reform. For the first time in Romanian history, the socio-political integration of the peasant population became a political reality.

In late 1918, Romania seemed to be one of the biggest benefactors of the Entente victory. The country almost doubled in size and population and gained not only the aforementioned former Austro-Hungarian territories, but also Bessarabia, whose integration into what was now called the Kingdom of Greater Romania was never acknowledged by the Soviet Union. The Romanian elites had to cope with regional cleavages and a national and confessional heterogeneity that had hitherto been unknown to the leaders of the Regat.

---

The social and political emancipation of peasants in “Old Romania” (the Regat, i.e. Moldova and Wallachia) coincided with a major national and social revolution in the newly acquired territories in the West (and to a lesser degree in the East), where social, economic, national and confessional cleavages had marked the relations between Romanians and mostly Hungarians since the 18th century. In the Regat, the deep change did not have such a national dimension, its society being ethnically very homogenous – the socio-cultural divide ran along the rural/urban gap.

The implementation of the radical reform agenda took place in a geopolitical constellation marked by enormous upheaval: civil war in Russia, Communist revolution in Hungary, eventually put down by Romanian troops occupying Budapest (August 1919), and a radical Peasantist government in Bulgaria: in the early 1920s, Romania was surrounded by unstable neighbors. But its internal political life too was marked by instability – the enormous difficulties in homogenizing the currency, the administration, the legal system, transport, and education in a post-imperial state like Greater Romania have often been somewhat overlooked by historians focusing on the teleological narrative of the “Great Unification”. The very fact that the crucial question of the integration of ca. 80% of the population, peasants, into the Romanian political system has never been systematically addressed is telling in this respect.

The reasons for this astonishing lacuna in a country whose elite cultivated sophisticated discourses on peasants are manifold: in the interwar period, a genuine interest and knowledge in peasant society, beyond superficial political rhetoric, was already slowly emerging, eventually crystallizing in the sociological school of peasant studies led by Dimitrie Gusti. This village sociology stood very much in the service of state interests, and Gusti himself cultivated close relations with the royal dynasty and leading political circles. His and his colleagues’ findings

---


troubled all those who took acceptance of the new political system for granted. To this day, historians overlook rural mass movements such as the “Stylists” (old calendarists, followers of the “old-style calendar”) in Bessarabia, numbering over one million, mainly ethnic Romanians who distanced themselves from the very idea of the Romanian nation state.11

Village sociology and historical research have seldom been interconnected for the interwar period. This is in striking contrast to the highly sophisticated interdisciplinary studies on forced collectivization of agriculture in the 1950s and early 1960s and the impact of Communist rule in rural areas: social anthropologists and historians have joined forces and produced a series of monographs and collective studies which could serve as theoretical and methodological models for similar incursions into interwar rural society.12 This approach provides important inferences for interwar studies which so far have not produced a firm foundation for peasant studies focusing on the Communist period. In fact, research on Communist rural society still has to extrapolate its findings for the period 1918–1940.

Studies on Romanian interwar history flourished immediately after 1989, when intellectuals and historians tried to bridge the gap between the post-revolutionary system and the 1920s and 1930s, which were perceived as a golden age of Romanian democracy. However, until 2007, rather restricted access to archives prevented many historians from making full use of the enormous wealth of documentary evidence. When the archives eventually opened fully, the interest of most contemporary historians had shifted to the Communist period. Those working on the period 1918–1940 mostly followed a Bucharest-centered perspective and concentrated on topics like the institutional history of parties or national minorities. Historians interested in social conditions in interwar rural Romania still have to rely mainly on evidence produced by Gusti’s school.

11 The Stylists are currently the focus of a PhD thesis by Andreea Petruescu, University of Vienna, supported by a Grant of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

It is against this background that the idea of the present volume was born. It aims to structure this field of research, its main goal being to bring together historians working on the political and social history of the Kingdom of Greater Romania in the period 1918–1940. The contributors and their contributions represent different approaches and strands of the scholarly debate. Contrary to research developments in recent years, this volume does not concentrate on agrarianism as a third-way path to modernity. Agrarianism was interpreted in post-1945 historiography primarily as a source of extreme right-wing radicalism and an obstacle to modernization processes; especially after 1989, it was rehabilitated as ideological and social potential for democratization. It was of great import to the contemporary Romanian political discourse and thus attracted the interest of scholars.

We decided however to focus on the social and political dimension of peasants and their integration into a national and social project of state- and nation-building in a single state, Greater Romania. While many comparable approaches are characterized by their comparative framework, we deliberately limit our endeavor to a single national case. This is explained by the astonishing lack of relevant detailed studies on rural Romania. This volume advocates an approach with a clear focus on social and cultural practices in the process of the national and social integration of peasants in Greater Romania. Moreover, in the context of modern Romanian history, it advocates a clear shift from a multiple top-down perspective (capital–province, urban political elites–rural voters) to an analysis focusing on regionally diverse rural societies with a special focus on the predominantly ethnic Romanian population. The latter element is explained by our interest in mechanisms of the social and national integration of peasants into the Romanian nation- and state-building project. It is evident that peasants belonging to one of the many national minorities were mostly excluded from this endeavor by the Romanian political elites. They are however quite prominent in this volume. This reflects the state of the art in interwar minority studies, and the readiness of colleagues working in this field to react to our call for papers.

Social and ethnic categories of identification prove to be much less clear than one might assume. A police report from the 1930s on the

---


emerging fascist Legionary movement pointed to the fact that its activists adapted their message to urban and rural voters; while the former were receptive to nationalist messages with anti-Semitic undertones, the latter did not show much interest in national slogans, but were very receptive to anti-Semitic ones. The anti-Semitic League of the National Christian Defence (LNCD) led by A.C. Cuza did not hesitate to address voters in Bessarabia with bilingual (Romanian and Russian) election posters. Cuza appealed to the “Christian (Orthodox)” identity of his voters and adapted his anti-Semitic nationalisms to the regional peculiarities of his electoral stronghold. These examples demonstrate that nation and social class had a very different meaning and importance in the “Two Romanias”. While urban elites focused on establishing a homogenous national body, the objects of this strategy often pursued very different goals: redistribution of land resources, local self-administration, and regional and especially confessional identities. Historians therefore have to be careful when adopting a top-down perspective that is dominant in our written sources, newspapers, propaganda pamphlets and police reports, which privilege a national over a social reading of political processes.

This volume has to reckon with a state of the art which does not really favor a bottom-up perspective, ideally operating with local and regional case studies linking institutional party history, the analysis of social and cultural practices in political life, and concrete social environments on a local level, combining reflections on state and elite actors and agencies and on peasants as a new political subject in a changed constitutional and political environment. At the present stage of the research however, the volume rather reflects a mixture of traditional approaches and first attempts to combine the dimensions we have referred to. The integration of peasants into a new constitutional system with universal male suffrage was implemented by state institutions and political parties.

In his chapter, Sorin Radu outlines an image of the impact of the universal suffrage on the countryside after the Great War and analyzes the way democracy was understood and applied by the peasants. In the new political world in which the peasants represented more than two thirds, political elites introduced to their political discourse the concept of “rural democracy”. The author argues that the enactment of the electoral reform had the impact of a true revolution that generated radical changes both in the electors’ behaviour and in the practices and the political discourse of the political parties. As sociologist Mattei Dogan argues, universal

suffrage transformed the peasants from subjects into citizens. Largely illiterate and uninterested in public business, the peasant suddenly found himself armed with political power. The peasants, at least in the first elections, were enthusiastic and quite often happy to participate in electoral campaigns, but they perceived the political actors, the political parties, with reservations and mistrust and thus hesitated to become members of the party organizations. The information concerning the party political organizations in villages is extremely poor and does not provide a coherent image of political activity on this level. At the end of campaign seasons, peasants returned to a kind of political lethargy until the next elections. The few local party organizations that existed in the countryside lacked vitality. Unlike the urban working classes, which were predisposed to socio-political change and at least partially followed social-democratic political organisations, the rural world was withdrawn, appeared not to see the point of political parties and was uninterested in administration and politics on the local and central levels. Sorin Radu concludes that the land reform seems to have demobilized the peasants, persuading them to mostly concentrate on the soil and social problems generated by reform, and that the peasants did not successfully learn to play the role offered to them by universal suffrage.

Party politicians and state representatives aimed to integrate the peasants into the political life of Greater Romania. They viewed them as voters, taxpayers and recruits. In this perspective, peasants remain objects, and studies on rural society should avoid reproducing this approach. They should rather ask how peasants can be analyzed as political subjects. How did the (Romanian) peasants react to the great reforms, how did they respond to the messages and promises of political parties? To what degree were they integrated into party structures? Which factors influenced political life on the village level? Despite its declared intention to change perspectives on peasants in Romanian interwar politics, at the present

16 Mattei Dogan, *Comparării și explicații în știința politică și în sociologie* (Comparison and Explanations in Political Science and Sociology) (Iași: Institutul European, 2010), 281.

stage of research this volume can offer only some clues which will hopefully serve as a point of departure for more detailed studies. Stelu Șerban’s chapter on two villages in the Northern region of Maramureș comes closest to what a bottom-up perspective might achieve in terms of new insights: there was no compact rural block in Romania, but even in micro-regions the socio-economic and political situation could vary from village to village. There was, as he demonstrates, resistance to state-induced change, but it cannot be associated exclusively with extreme right-wing movements such as the Legionaries or with anti-modernist utopian ideas. He is equally reluctant to adopt mechanically powerful concepts such as “civil society” and “parochial society” for studying social and political mechanisms on the level of villages. He is interested in “communal villages” characterized by kinship ties, a set of shared values, and local patterns of political life which are however not isolated from external developments, but closely linked to the failed modernization which the state tried to enforce. His two case studies illustrate the importance of local patterns of dependence, both economic (credit, debts) and socio-cultural (ritual kinship). But there were perceptible differences between the neighboring villages of Dânești, where moderate parties prevailed, and Cetățele, which tended to the extreme right. While in the latter parochial and political society overlapped, both spheres were far less interlinked and competition for local power was less fierce. The dominance of the anti-Semitic National Christian Party in Cetățele is interpreted, due to the lack of documented conflicts between ethnic Romanians and Jews, rather as opposition to the central state authorities. Legionaries were compared to Communists because of their propaganda aiming at improving rural living standards. The high degree of politicization in Cetățele is explained by the fact that local politicians made full use of local fiscal autonomy granted by the state. In Dânești, on the contrary, less developed institutions, stronger traditional kinship ties, traditional forms of sociability, and a much higher rate of alphabetization (74.4% compared to only 41.8% in Cetățele) are responsible for a minor degree of modern political activism and polarization. The Church remained important, and established peasants voted for the National Peasant Party. Only youngsters were attracted by the violent party life of the National Christian Party of A.C. Cuza and Octavian Goga. While there is ample evidence of political radicalization in rural Romania, Șerban

---

convincingly shows that sweeping generalizations are not only impossible, but even theoretically dangerous: they might cement the idea of a backward society open to extremism from the right and later from the left. We still need many more studies like Şerban’s before we can really consider the weight of Legionary and Cuzist extremism in rural Romania. Dâneşti is not the only example of a village with high potential for developing a democratic political life.

Party history plays an important role in Romanian historiography. But often monographs remain rather descriptive, and most of them focus on party leaders and party politics in the Bucharest parliament. Very few party histories, such as Ovidiu Buruiană’s thorough two-volume monograph on the National Liberal Party in the years 1927–1933 take up major currents in international research.19 Even scarcer are studies on the regional or even local level of party life. We still do not possess monographs on all the important political parties in interwar Romania, not to mention more recent foci such as social and cultural practices. Against this background, chapters in this volume address the integration of peasants into the parliamentary system, and this means essentially party life, from different angles: party history as institutional history in a perspective from above, party history as part of the political self-organization of ethnic minorities, and first attempts to link party institutions, party activists and local contexts (see the chapter by Stelu Şerban).

An institutional approach can thus be found in several contributions. They make clear how little we know about party structures and activists on a local level. We have only vague ideas about the number of party members, the social structure of candidates in regional and national elections, or the socio-professional profile of regional and local party leaders.

The collective biography of leading party politicians is a helpful approach in these circumstances. It fits well into an important bibliography zu faschistischen Kadern im ruralen Umland von Bukarest (1927-1941),” Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte 64/3 (2016), 419-448.
on parliamentary life in interwar Romania.20 The case of ethnic Romanian Transylvanian leaders reveals the importance of a small group of large estate holders who combined ownership of real estate with key positions in banking and cultural sociability.21 The Transylvanian case also makes it quite clear that regional case studies cannot be extrapolated to a national level; the cleavage between the historical regions was simply too deep. The National Liberal Party with its stronghold in the Regat had difficulties in really penetrating power structures in the former Hungarian regions, where prior to 1918 the Romanian National Party had built up a tight system of political, economic and cultural control and where Romanian politicians had been trained in the stiff wind of the Budapest parliament. Whereas in the pre-1918 Regat parliamentary and generally political opposition had been the privilege of a small social, mostly urban elite, national mass mobilization against Hungarian dominance had reached a high level of organization in Transylvania. However, despite the lack of aristocratic Romanian elites in Transylvania and the Banat, the Romanian MPs in the Budapest parliament clearly came from elite families and did not represent the predominantly rural society. This did not change in the interwar period, as Florin-Răzvan Mihai’s chapter demonstrates. Lawyers clearly dominated parliamentary life (constituting 35–46% of MPs in the various parliaments elected between 1919 and 1937), followed by university professors (ca. 6.5%), high school teachers (6.2%), primary school teachers


(5%), priests (4.5%) and members of the higher clergy (4.2%). The “village intellectuals”, teachers and priests, were thus certainly a strong group, but numerically much smaller than lawyers. Peasants and estate holders represented between 8% and 16% of MPs, but among them small landowners constituted only a modest group. An analysis of peasants among candidates in national elections reveals that even those parties which advocated a peasantist discourse were over-whelmingly dominated by elite professions. Even in the case of the National Peasant Party, no more than 2.79% of its candidates were peasants when it achieved a landslide victory in the 1928 national election. Among the candidates of the National Liberal Party, traditionally considered as the party of urban elites in the Regat, only 0.58% and 3% of its candidates in the elections of 1926 and 1928 were actually peasants. The People’s Party, a mass movement rallying around General Alexandru Averescu, a war hero venerated by mainly peasant voters, was far removed from its rural voters, despite its political rhetoric.\footnote{See the rather uncritical biography by Petre Otu, *Mareșalul Alexandru Averescu: militarul, omul politic, legenda* [Marshal Alexandru Averescu: the Soldier, the Politician, the Legend] (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 2009).} In 1924, at a party meeting, only 63 out of 1,050 participants were registered as peasants. The highest percentage of candidates with an agricultural profession can be found in the radical anti-Semitic League of the National Christian Defense (LNCD) (6.87% of candidates running in the 1928 election). LNCD had its stronghold in Bessarabia, the most backward region of rural Romania. In 1928, it did not benefit from the slightly higher number of peasant candidates, but was literally crushed by the National Peasant Party. In conclusion, in interwar Romania peasants constituted no more than 10% of the candidates nominated by any of the political parties. Although peasants dominated much of the political discourse, they did so merely as objects, not as subjects of parliamentary political life.

These findings have to be nuanced by studies of the kind Ovidiu Buruiană provides for the National Liberal Party. He makes it clear that Liberals had a differentiated perspective on rural communities and deliberately chose their cadres among village elites and opinion-makers as mayors, notaries, teachers, priests, large and medium estate holders, innkeepers and civil servants. Since Romanian party politics were mainly centered on leading figures, personal ties played an increasingly important role within Liberal power structures, allowing significant space for village elites in an enlarged party organization. These elites served as a transmission belt between the central party institutions in Bucharest and the village level of power. However, as in the case of state institutions (see
below), the extreme centralization of Romanian politics and of the constitutional system gradually transformed local power brokers into mere proxies of the national party leadership. Daniel Brett’s study also takes political science as its point of departure; using theoretical frameworks developed by Maurice Duverger and Angelo Panebianco it attempts to deconstruct the National Peasant Party as a political organization. It argues that internal division which had its roots in ideological conflict concerning the status of the peasantry prevented organizational reform of the party. The failure to reform in turn denied the peasantry active agency within the party and hence hampered the effectiveness of the latter in representing peasant interests. Brett argues that the National Peasant Party was not exceptional in suffering from these problems, comparing and contrasting it with examples from Ireland and Scandinavia. He argues that the post-1918 period needs to be contextualised by a deeper analysis of founding moments and decisions made during the early developmental stages of the parties. Doing so will deepen our understanding of peasant politics in Romania but also situate the Romanian case within the wider family of rural/agrarian parties that were emerging across Europe during this period.

The same theme of agrarianism is present in Svetlana Suveica’s study, which reconstructs the beginnings of the Peasant Party in the political scene in Bessarabia during the transitional period when the territory passed from the Russian to the Romanian regime, marked by the activity of Vladimir Țiganko, the president of the Peasantry Faction of the Country Council (Sfatul Țării). His activities have long gone ignored, due to the fact that they were not intended to support the perspective Bessarabia developed when it belonged to Romania after the Great War. Suveica argues that not only public opinion supported Țiganko, but his thoughts on the destiny of Bessarabia also reflect the hesitation of the representatives of the local elite during the transition from the Russian imperial to the Romanian national regime, a period of brief regional autonomy in the Federative Russia before an era of illusory, merely ostensible independence. The latter ended with the vote of the Country Council (Sfatul Țării) for the status of a Romanian province, intensifying the oscillations of the Bessarabians “between Russians and Romanians”, characterized not only by expectations and failures, but also by the construction of an alternative perspective on the status of the region, the active involvement in negotiations, and in controversies in the international media, which became propaganda instruments.

If we turn to state institutions such as prefects, the security forces (in the rural areas the gendarmerie), representatives of the justice system, local stakeholders such as mayors, and the local “intelligentsia” (teachers
Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania

and priests), the evidence derived from newspapers mainly concerns discourse and offers much less hard data on their social profile. There is an ongoing debate as to whether the Romanian state was a strong or a weak institution in the rural areas. Cornel Micu argues in his contribution that the state authorities failed in collecting basic data on the village population. Since there are hardly any studies on major state institutions, we can hardly answer questions concerning professional training, payment, public morale and the efficiency of civil servants. Questions about the methods used for collecting taxes or enforcing public security in rural Romania have only rarely been asked, and evidence available on individual local cases should not be generalized in such a regionally heterogeneous country as interwar Romania. In his chapter on the village of Bordei Verde in Brăila County (Regat), Cornel Micu observes that due to the subordination of village mayors to county prefects appointed by the governments and the transformation of the heads of local communities into pure representatives of the central state, peasants were simply excluded from direct relations with the state.

The study by Valer Moga shows the way in which the Transylvanian farmers integrated into the political life of Greater Romania. In this context, the term ‘farmer’, as defined by the documents of the time, meant landowners who belonged to the rural middle class and had some income with which to sustain themselves and their access to education and cultural goods. The author begins with the hypothesis that the farmers did not have a conservative attitude towards joining a political party. Indeed, it appears that they were eager to sign up. Moga’s research undertakes quantitative analysis of a sample of delegates who took part in the Great Assembly of 1 December 1918. Out of 1,633 participants, the farmers numbered 372 and were the best-represented category, with 22.78%. Most of them were members of the Romanian National Party. After the unification of


24 In the Romanian Central State Archive in Bucharest, the archival fond Inspectoratul general al Jandarmeriei provides ample evidence.
Transylvania and Romania, monolithic membership disintegrated and the farmers, like the other social categories, split into the most important political parties.

The main goal of Vlad Popovici’s study is to offer a complete set of prosopographic analyses of party membership, accompanied by an image of the Romanian National Party in the reorganization process that took place in Alba County in August 1919. Such analyses seek to reveal through sampling the socio-professional composition, educational background and denominational distribution of the local party leadership and identify the main characteristics of the body of peasant members (level of literacy, denominational distribution and relation to the demographic structure of the area, ratio of the local electorate, blood- and kinship-related patterns of political behaviour). Popovici concludes that the backbone of the local organization was constituted by priests, regardless of denomination, supported by the rural intellectual elite (primary school teachers, notaries) and members of the liberal or technical professions. Peasants were represented in leading local committees as secretaries and (more infrequently) as cashiers or (commonly) as committee members. They formed the great mass of members, over 90%, of which approximately 50% were illiterate.

Gábor Egry’s chapter points to the cultural gap between Romanian gendarmes and the Hungarian population in Transylvania, but it also shows how ethnicity was mobilized as a political resource in petty everyday conflicts. Archival evidence from different regions illustrates how gendarmes interfered in election campaigns by favoring government candidates and impeding the political activities of their opponents. Existing research equally shows that governments tended to manipulate elections in rural areas e.g. by imposing quarantine law during election periods. In the years of the Great Depression, which severely hit rural Romania, the fiscal system collected taxes ruthlessly and provoked small-scale local uprisings which have yet to be the focus of historical research. State repression similarly contributed to the emergence of the Stylists (supporters of the Julian calendar, which was replaced by the Gregorian calendar in 1924) in Eastern Romania, mainly in Bessarabia. In the mid-1930s, the rural mass movement numbered over one million and according to recent research by Andreea Petruescu even organized a territorialized parallel administration on a local level in Northern Bessarabia. State and Church institutions failed to explain the calendar reform to peasants, who followed a traditional religious time system. What was considered by elites to be a symbolical shift towards the West was seen by peasants as a Western, “popish” conspiracy against their most sacred religious traditions. Since state and Church institutions reacted with a mixture of repression
and provisory compromise, ethnic Romanian peasants were virtually driven into a parallel society which severely challenged the project of national integration and homogenization. It was not until 1936 that the state forceful dissolved the Stylist parallel state. 25

Political parties had to address and attract millions of men who before 1918 had never participated in parliamentary elections and, especially in Southern and Eastern Romania (Wallachia, Moldova, Bessarabia), had never actively taken part in political life. In Bucovina, which had the Austrian system of general male suffrage (since 1907), and in a much more limited way in Hungary with its census system, ethnic Romanian peasants had either been voters or at least could consider themselves part of a well-organized national entity. Especially in the Banat, cultural associations such as choirs essentially contributed to a politicized Romanian sociability in a multiethnic environment characterized by a high degree of institutionalized self-organization. Once again, observations on peasants and rural society in Greater Romania must not be generalized, but should be adapted to regional specificities.

Political sociability and cultural practices in political life were far from homogenous. This aspect constituted a considerable obstacle for political parties which claimed a nation-wide political mission. Political expectations, but also capacities for receiving and understanding political messages differed widely from the Banat to Bessarabia. Most parties and party activists applied traditional methods of political mobilization such as speeches, printed brochures and election posters. Written propaganda material was distributed among peasant voters, but it is not known how these messages were actually received on the ground; most probably, bearing in mind the high degree of illiteracy in Southern and Eastern Romania in particular, these propaganda texts were read out. Most parties tried to adapt to rural lifeworlds by using not only prose, but also verses which took up elements of popular culture, especially folk songs. 26 Images, photos of

25 This paragraph is based on research by Andreea Petruescu, University of Vienna, especially a paper presented in November 2016, and her forthcoming article in Revista istorică.

26 The Legionary movement was by far the most successful political force to use songs for rural mass mobilisation; Oliver Jens Schmitt, “‘Heilige Jugend der Nation’. Das Lied als Mittel und Essenz rechtsextremer politischer Mobilisierung im Rumänien der Zwischenkriegszeit,” in Das politische Lied in Ost- und Südosteuropa, edited by Stefan Michael Newerkla, Fedor B. Poljakov and Oliver Jens Schmitt (Vienna: LIT, 2011), 87-112; Roland Clark, “Collective Singing in Romanian Fascism,” Cultural and Social History 10/2 (2013), 251-271.
party leaders, caricatures denigrating political opponents27 or, mostly in the case of anti-Semitic parties, minority groups such as Jews, slowly emerged. But until the early 1930s, when parties such as the fascist Legionary movement developed an expressive and deliberately modernist and almost futurist visual language, parties rather underestimated the impact of visual propaganda.

Although national homogenization was one of the main goals of interwar Romania, one has to ask to what degree political parties really converted this intention into practical politics. In this respect, a case study by Wolfram Nieß on the Legionary movement in Bessarabia in 1930 offers important insights: while traditional anti-Semites targeted their voters using bilingual propaganda material, the Legionaries aimed to construct a homogenous ethnic body in an endangered frontier area.28

Party rallies played an essential role in rural political life. Again, government parties were favored and supported by state institutions, while opposition groups often encountered serious obstacles. In the 1930s, the radical Legionary opposition waged a small-scale war on the gendarmerie forces, which traditionally enforced government policies in rural Romania. Especially establishment parties such as the National Liberal Party or the People’s Party recruited election agents who distributed alcohol and small gifts among rural voters, but very often they also intimidated voters and contributed to a high degree of violence in election periods. The 1926 election was one of the most violent events in Romanian interwar political life. As in other countries, paramilitary groups connected to political parties emerged; the Iron Guard, founded in 1930 as the armed branch of the Legionary movement, is by far the best known; but other paramilitary formations such as the Peasant Guards of the National Peasant Party, the Blueshirts (a kind of Romanian SA, part of the anti-Semitic National Christian Party) or the Stylist guards in Bessarabia have barely attracted the interest of scholars. However, research on interwar elections provides us with an initial idea of political violence in rural Romania. Election days were characterized by clashes between the gendarmerie, party activists and

dissatisfied voters (e.g. when they were illegally excluded from elections) and conflicts between party activists, often with firearms. They still call for detailed study.  

Party propaganda was very much a phenomenon of election campaigns. There are many sources pointing to peasant voters’ rapid disillusionment with political life in interwar Romania. They soon felt manipulated by party activists during election campaigns and immediately forgotten afterwards. Frustration grew, and it was alimented even further by the poor performance of state institutions in the rural area. “Politicianismul”, a term describing corrupt practices of the political elites, became a key slogan not only of radical opposition forces, but also of more moderate political parties. While it is evident that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the political system of parliamentary democracy, we still do not know much about the realities of “politicianism” in rural Romania. The violent discourse about the shortcomings of the system is sometimes repeated in modern scholarship, which rarely goes beyond the discourse level. This level however has to be linked with a more down-to-earth approach of social history.

Political practices on a local level still need to be studied in more detail: they have hitherto been examined primarily on the discourse level of newspapers and party propaganda. We know the tools party activists used in order to convince rural voters. There is however little data concerning which political messages really reached their addressees and how the latter understood them. Studies on the concrete interaction between party activists and rural voters are scarce. The same holds true for mechanisms of opinion-building in villages, the role of opinion leaders such as teachers, priests, notaries and doctors. Gabriel Moisa’s chapter offers first glimpses of an answer. What can be deduced from an analysis of the existing source evidence is deep disenchantment on the part of rural voters, mainly after the failure of the National Peasant Government. In fact, founded in 1926, this Party had embodied the alternative to the authoritarian political model of the National Liberal Party: a decentralized, democratized society. Newspapers in Bihor County, studied by Moisa, reveal that peasant voters were disgusted by the aggressive language during election campaigns and repulsed by the general lack of interest in rural areas once the elections were over. They felt that party competition divided village communities, and sometimes even attacked unwelcome political activists from outside. The failure of political parties to win the confidence of their rural voters led to a political apathy and general

29 Cf. the studies by Radu, Maner, and Florin Müller cited above.
disinterest in parliamentary democracy which considerably facilitated the 
instauration of an authoritarian royal dictatorship in March 1938.

The role of the local elite, priests, on the political education of the 
peasants in rural Transylvania is examined by Valeria Soroștineanu, who 
argues that the Orthodox Church in Transylvania had to continue the 
religious and cultural effort of educating the Romanian village. It was 
indeed a continuation of an older practice, after which the priest continued 
to be an advisor in the political sphere. The peculiar Transylvanian 
political culture was focused on supporting a type of party with an ethnic 
component, which saw many transformations and confrontation with other 
possible political models. The Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan established the 
idea that a party with a clerical basis could not find its place in the 
Romanian space, but he was reticent to grant priests permission to enter 
politics. Bălan later developed a short political handbook for priests so that 
they could serve as advisors to their communities. Institutionally speaking, 
the Orthodox Church and the Romanian state shared common causes, the 
most significant being the lessons of religion as a means of promoting 
sincere patriotism, promoting a cult of royalty in Romania and opposing 
Bolshevik propaganda. Another interesting aspect concerning the 
relationship between priests and political culture is the intervention of 
intellectuals in the dialogue between the Church and the state during the 
interwar period. As the prominent intellectuals were genuinely interested 
in Romanian society’s evolution towards modernity, predominantly in 
rural areas, they had to choose between the model of exaggerated 
modernity and the maintenance of traditional structures, closer to the 
concept both Nichifor Crainic and Dumitru Stănioae called a “Romanian 
Christian state”.

When the reform promise of the National Peasant Party broke down 
under the weight of the Great Depression, internal strife and corruption, 
many peasants severely hit by widespread poverty, in extreme cases even 
famine, considered the revolutionary fascist Legionary movement as a 
political way out. The Legionary working camps tried to fuse rural 
populations and party activists into a single national and political 
community; they also demonstrated the inability of state institutions to 
guarantee adequate infrastructure in rural areas.30 As in the case of the

---

Man» in the Romanian Legionary Movement,” Historical Journal 54 (2008), 943-
967; Valentin Sândulescu, “«Taming the spirit». Notes on the shaping of the 
Legionary ‘New Man’,” in Vers un profil convergent des fascismes? edited by 
Traian Sandu (Paris: Harmattan, 2010), 207-216; Oliver Jens Schmitt, “«Eine 
mächtige Bewegung auf den Dörfern.» Mechanismen der politischen Mobilisi-

---
Stylists, an often overlooked parallel society emerged in the rural area, under the guidance of social and ideological forces which openly rejected the existing political order. When discussing capacities to receive political messages, one also has to reckon with the cultural and mental consequences of the economic crises in rural Romania. The Stylists were not the only spiritual mass movement in interwar peasant Romania. In 1935, the so-called miracle of Maglavit (a shepherd who pretended to have received messages directly from the Lord) shook all of Romanian society and mobilized hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who flocked to the new shrine on the shore of the Danube.31 This mass hysteria was interpreted by contemporaries as a direct reaction to a general socio-economic and cultural depression and the need and hope for immediate miraculous salvation and collective resurrection. While the state authorities succeeded in channeling this movement, they failed to contain the Legionary movement, which obtained ca. 25% (officially 15.5%) of the vote in the election of December 1937. The success of an openly anti-system party which unlike the established party did not offer resources and jobs was a clear indicator of the failure of the traditional party system controlled by Liberals and National Peasantists.

An important part of the volume is dedicated to the peasants belonging to the national minorities in Romania. The way in which the Hungarian minority from the countryside was mobilized politically by the Hungarian Party is shown – besides the study by Gábor Egry – by Tóth Szilard. The author analyzes the electoral campaigns organized by the Hungarian Party, the methods of electoral propaganda used by its candidates and the efficiency of these efforts, and he observes the national solidarity of the Hungarian peasants and their political discipline. Vasile Ciobanu investigates the degree to which the German peasants in interwar Romania took part in political life, examining their active presence in political parties and national organisations, but also their participation in local and...
parliamentary elections. Ciobanu observes that the introduction of universal suffrage was not a subject of great importance for the German peasants. The rural elite was more interested in participation in the local leadership than in parliamentary elections. The peasants made up the majority of the national-political organizations: the national communities (*Volksgemeinschaften*) organized in provinces and led by a National Council. These were the major decision-making bodies and were autonomous from the leadership of the Union of Germans in Romania. The national structure also had local organizations. These helped the peasants to participate in the national-political life of the German minority in Romania. The nationally renowned solidarity was destroyed in the interwar period due to some dissatisfaction, which led to the formation of some groups taking the shape of political parties. The peasants were also involved in these parties. The German parties formed a distinct social group within the German minority itself. After the Great War and the creation of a new state, following the Electoral and Agrarian Reforms, these peasants behaved the same as other peasants, retaining some specific elements of participation in national-political life and in elections. This peasantry had practised selection for centuries due to the fact that the priests, the chiefs of the neighbourhoods (*Nachbarschaften*) and the teachers were all elected. Another difference was the fact that the Germans attended primary school more than other people. They were members of some professionals associations, particularly relating to agriculture, and also had access to the newspapers of these associations. The emergence of Nazism in the rural world is analyzed by Corneliu Pintilescu, who researches its rise in the press. The Transylvanian Saxons were a main target of Nazi-inspired or controlled political organizations such as the *Nationale Arbeitsfront* and the *Deutsche Volkspartei Rumäniens* during the 1930s or the *Deutsche Volksgruppe in Rumänien* after 1940. Due to the fact that the majority of the Saxon population lived in rural areas, the propaganda of these organizations adjusted its message in order to gain support among the Transylvanian Saxon peasants. Also, these organizations, being inspired by the Nazi mass propaganda from Germany, radically modernized the methods and the instruments of political propaganda within the rural areas. This radical change attracted especially, but not only, the young population. Pintilescu argues that the success of the Nazi propaganda within the Transylvanian Saxon rural area could be explained partially by this revolution of propaganda methods, but also by ingrained prejudices among the local Saxon population concerning the other people living in Transylvania. These prejudices had been partially caused by the privileged status granted to the Transylvanian Saxons by the