

# NATIONAL SENTIMENT AND POLITICAL PRAGMATISM. THE PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVE CONSTANTIN BURDIA AND THE “ROMANIAN PEOPLE AFFAIR”\*

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Some few years prior to the onset of the First World War, in one of the earliest historical accounts focused on the Romanian press in Transylvania and Hungary, Ilarie Chendi offered a promising view of the situation: “nowadays the Romanian press has attained a level equal to that of other cultivated peoples, at least in form; a respectable number of political gazettes and literary reviews contribute to the best of their ability to the cultural and political emancipation of our people, regardless of where it lives”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, numerous Romanian gazettes were published in Dualist Hungary; some had become daily newspapers<sup>2</sup>, while others, such as *Tribuna* in Sibiu, or *Patria* and *Viitorul*, published in Budapest<sup>3</sup>, had grown into the centre points of major political orientations.

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<sup>1</sup> Ilarie Chendi, *Începuturile ziaristicii noastre* (Orăștie: Minerva, 1900), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Popa, Valentin Tașcu, *Istoria presei românești din Transilvania* (București: Tritonic, 2003), 94–114.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed overview of the political current that coalesced around the *Tribuna* gazette in Sibiu was offered by Vlad Popovici, *Tribunismul (1884–1905)* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008). On the role held by the two Romanian gazettes published in Budapest, which formed the centre point for the pro-governmental Romanian camps, see Vlad Popovici,

The history of the Romanian press in Transylvania and Hungary certainly deserves particular attention, especially seeing as this complex historical thread intermingles with so many other aspects of political and social life in the region. What is more, although studies on the matter have increasingly flourished, this research orientation is still insufficiently developed. The present paper intends to shed light on a revealing episode in the history of what was likely the most broadly distributed Romanian gazette of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This brief chronicle will help to illuminate a series of interconnected issues: the relations between the Romanian political and cultural elites in the area, and the essential political-electoral role held by the national press in the context of a multi-national state.

### *Political Background*

The political scene in Budapest witnessed an acute crisis around the middle of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This situation had been engendered by the ascension of opposition parties, which had been enabled by the voters' gradual loss of trust in the Liberal Magyar Party, which had been governing since 1875. The political scene was in danger of further deteriorating, given the tense debates on the question of the army. Finally, the monarch and the leaders of the opposition would reach a compromise: the latter renounced their pretences, and Franz Joseph agreed to the establishment of a coalition government that would exclude the liberals. Thus, the tense situation had been temporarily alleviated, and as a result, the Parliament was dissolved and new elections were called.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the political life of the Romanians in Transleithania was experiencing its highest effervescence, and undergoing essential transformations. The National Romanian Party had renounced its passivist tactic and had adopted political activism, which entailed nominating its own candidates and participating in the parliamentary elections in Hungary.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this new strategic direction, Romanian politicians adhering to different political orientations would be pitted against each other in the electoral process. Prior to the 1905 and 1906 elections, the supporters of both the activist-national and the

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"Publicații activiste progubernamentale românești din Ungaria dualistă. Discursul politic al ziarelor *Patria și Viitorul*," *Revista Bistriței*, 20 (2006): 293–300 and more recently Ovidiu Emil Iudean, *The Romanian Governmental Representatives in the Budapest Parliament (1881–1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2016), 66–77.

<sup>4</sup> László Katus, *Hungary in Dual Monarchy 1867–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 410–417.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Hitchins, *A Nation Affirmed: The Romanian National Movement in Transylvania 1860–1914* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1999), 161–162.

activist-governmental programmes would organize ample electoral campaigns, aiming to draw the highest percentage of voters to support their own candidates. The electoral constituencies in Banat would not escape such political confrontations. The electoral competition between these factions was marked not just by ideological differences, but also by the employment of strategies that repeatedly breached the limits of legality, in the service of political and group interests.

The elections that took place in the spring of 1906 would cement the victory of the coalition of former oppositional parties, and, within this construct, the primacy of the leaders of the Independence and Constitutional Parties.<sup>6</sup> Although this had been the expected result, the electoral rolls had also included a high number of Romanian candidates, a few of which had managed to win deputy mandates. In the Banat counties, five such mandates were won: one by a candidate running on the lists of the Constitutional Party, and four by adherents of the NRP.

The same elections also witnessed the fervent electoral activity of one of the Banat's most influential Romanian politicians, namely Constantin Burdia. Born on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1861 in Caransebeş, to a Romanian family of modest means, Burdia's educational and professional pathway was shrouded in controversy. Some of his contemporaries, situated on the opposing side of the political spectrum, claimed that the young Burdia had mainly his collaboration with the Hungarian authorities to thank for his spectacular ascendant social mobility. What is more, it was argued that despite his personal qualities, he had reached a political office that clearly exceeded his intellectual training. However, this narrative warrants a reconsideration in light of the events surrounding the 1906 elections and their aftermath. What is certain is that Burdia pursued secondary education in Budapest, where he also successfully passed a baccalaureate examination. His next step was to enrol at the Law Faculty in the capital, following in the footsteps of many other Romanian individuals in Hungary, who recognized that training in law opened numerous gateways towards social ascension. His studies would enable him to accede to various administrative offices, such as that of chief of police in Caransebeş (1885), first senator (*locum tenens* for the mayor) of the town of Caransebeş (1888) and then mayor of the same town (1895–1904). His final office was that of president of the Wealth Community (1904–1910). In 1906 he won his first parliamentary mandate, and was also appointed privy councillor.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Dániel Szabó, "The Crisis of Dualism and The New Compromise, 1895–1914," in Mária Ormos, Béla K. Király, eds., *Hungary: Governments and Politics 1848–2000* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 130–132.

<sup>7</sup> Caraş-Severin County Service of the National Archives, Archival Fund *Primăria Oraşului*

“*Romanian People* affair” would arise as a consequence of Burdia’s involvement in the electoral campaign of 1906.

The high number of Romanian voters in the Caraş-Severin County, where all of the five abovementioned Romanian mandates were won, would turn this administrative unit into the setting of a sharp electoral confrontation. The electoral agents of the Hungarian and nationalities’ parties would canvass extensively in order to secure the highest possible number of votes for their respective candidates.<sup>8</sup> An essential role in this confrontation was played by the press, which became one of the principal means of disseminating and popularizing the candidates’ electoral programmes and their activity. Given the fact that the majority of the Romanian gazettes circulating in the Banat were stark supporters of the NRP’s national political programme, the pro-governmental Romanian milieus in the area sought to win at least one of these press outlets to serve their own interests. It was in this context that Constantin Burdia, taking advantage of favourable circumstances, began negotiations with Dimitrie Birăuţiu for the purchasing of the *Romanian People* (*Poporul Român*) gazette.

### *The Romanian People gazette and its editor*

“Political, social, and economic sheet”, the *Romanian People* had been published in Budapest since 1901, in Dimitrie Birăuţiu’s printing press. Birăuţiu also owned the gazette and was responsible for its editorship.<sup>9</sup> The *Romanian People*’s highest number of subscribers and readers were located in the villages of the Banat: at least a hundred issues were distributed in each of the important communes in the area. The gazette’s wide circulation was due at least partly to the popularity enjoyed in the Banat and beyond by its owner and editor-in-chief.<sup>10</sup>

Born on September 12<sup>th</sup> 1875 in the commune of Ghioroc, Arad County, Birăuţiu had grown into a leading figure of the Romanian community in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Budapest. Owning the *Romanian People* printing press enabled him

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Caransebeş, register 3/1876, f. 6., register 160/1892, f. 16–17, register 197/1895, f. 53, register 373/1904, f. 21–22; Ferenc Végváry, Ferenc Zimmer, *Sturm-féle országyűlési almanach 1910–1915* (Budapest: [s.n.], 1910), 250; Constantin Brătescu, *Oraşul Caransebeş între 1865–1919. File de monografie* (Caransebeş: Dalami, 2011), 37–38.

<sup>8</sup> Ovidiu Emil Iudean, *Deputaţi guvernamentali români în Parlamentul de la Budapesta*, PhD thesis (Cluj-Napoca: Babeş-Bolyai University, 2012), 336–342; Stelian Mândruţ, *Mişcarea naţională şi activitatea parlamentară a deputaţilor Partidului Naţional Român din Transilvania între anii 1905–1910*, PhD thesis (Cluj-Napoca: Babeş-Bolyai University, 1991), 164–170.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Petcu, *Istoria jurnalismului din România în date: enciclopedie cronologică* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2012), 218.

<sup>10</sup> Aurel Cosma, *Prin Timișoara de altădată* (Timișoara: Facla, 1977), 160–163.

to edit and publish some of the most important Romanian gazettes, newspapers, books and leaflets of the time. Although he had become one of the leading figures in the field of national publishing, Birăuțiu had initially been drawn to the field of education. Because his family had been firmly set against his wishes to embrace a career as a teacher, Birăuțiu saw himself compelled to run away from home to Arad. His expectations would remain temporarily unfulfilled, as he was too young to enrol in the school for teachers, and had not completed the four years' education which were a prerequisite for this pathway. In order to support himself, he found employment at the diocesan printing press, where he became familiar with the printing trade, which he entered as an apprentice. Gradually learning to appreciate the trade and seeing its potential, he renounced his earlier aspirations and dedicated himself fully to the dream of owning a printing press, where he could publish a gazette that would help raise the cultural level of his Romanian co-nationals in Hungary. His attachment to his national background was made manifest when Birăuțiu finally settled in Budapest and laid the bases for the *Romanian People* printing press. This institution was not only a vehicle for spreading Romanian culture and news, but also a centre for aiding his co-nationals. Many Romanian peasants traveling to the Hungarian capital in order to resolve various personal matters found a helpful benefactor in Birăuțiu, who intervened on their behalf with the authorities and mediated official contact, often even providing temporary housing for those in need of it.<sup>11</sup>

The events unfolding during 1906, which featured Constantin Burdia and Dimitrie Birăuțiu as main actors, were closely tied to the political-electoral situation in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary. The "*Romanian People* affair" became known to the public in 1906, after the gazette was purchased by the NRP leaders Alexandru Vaida Voevod and Aurel Vlad, who intended to transform it into the official mouthpiece of the party. The turning point in the situation was reached in December of the same year, with the publication of the leaflet entitled "Politikai rókák a csapdában" (Political foxes ensnared), which circulated in ten thousand copies, and which was authored by Dimitrie Birăuțiu. The leaflet offered a first-hand account of the events that had led to an exchange of ownership over the *Romanian People* gazette and printing press between Burdia and Birăuțiu, an agreement that had been ultimately broken. By divulging the entire affair, the leaflet exerted a profound impact on the public opinion in Hungary. The involvement of key political figures, including members of the government, provoked the harsh criticism of the Hungarian process, while the matter escalated to the Budapest Parliament, where it occasioned ardent debate.

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Berényi, *Personalități marcante în istoria și cultura românilor din Ungaria (Secolul XIX)* (Giula: Publicația Institutului de Cercetări al Românilor din Ungaria, 2013), 357–358.

*The legal actions against the main editor of the Romanian People gazette*

The beginnings of the “affair” can be traced back to the decision made on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1906 by the newly-invested Minister of Justice Géza Polónyi, a decision according to which all press-related legal actions begun during the tenure of Géza Fejérváry (18<sup>th</sup> June 1905 – 8<sup>th</sup> April 1906) were annulled.<sup>12</sup> The *Romanian People* gazette had been the target of five such legal actions: two had been resolved with the articles’ authors assuming responsibility for the content – D. Stoica and D. Lascu; a further three suits had found the accountable party to be D. Birăuțiu, as main editor with legal responsibility for the gazette’s content. Of the five actions, the new ministerial decision only touched upon the first two, and the respective authors were granted amnesty. The other three suits concerning Birăuțiu maintained their status, and the lead editor was cited to appear in court on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June to receive his sentence.

The owner of the *Romanian People* was likely fully aware that the sentence to be given in these trials would effectively ruin him financially and probably also land him in detention for some considerable time. Attempting to preclude this result, Birăuțiu appealed to his acquaintances and friends in the ministries and parliament in order to obtain a pardon. At the end of May, accompanied by a “national representative”<sup>13</sup>, Birăuțiu solicited information regarding the legal actions brought against him from Anton Günther, the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Justice. Beforehand, the editor of the *Romanian People* had been informed by the prosecutor charged with investigating the case that “the suits were not annulled intentionally, and not out of some error”, because Birăuțiu was regarded as “a very dangerous man”. The Secretary of State would answer Birăuțiu’s enquiry with similar words, noting that the accusations lodged against him were “exceedingly harsh”, and that therefore the suits could not follow the path of amnesty. Given that the situation was growing increasingly dramatic, the Romanian representatives in the Budapest Parliament would themselves intervene, trying to plead his case. Even their attempts were wholly unsuccessful. Although the minister Polónyi made some promises that the accusations against Birăuțiu would be retracted, these did not materialize, and the causes simply witnessed protraction. In order to buy some time, Birăuțiu left Budapest, so that the court hearings were delayed until October of 1906.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Cassarea proceselor politice,” *Tribuna*, 67 (1906): 1.

<sup>13</sup> In the leaflet *Politikai rókák a csapdában*, Birăuțiu did not nominate the Romanian representative who accompanied him in his visit to the Secretary of State Günther.

<sup>14</sup> “Vulpi politice în cursă,” *Poporul român*, 152 (1906): 2.

*The representative Burdia, co-owner of the Romanian People*

The solution to Birăuțiu's problems emerged in the person of the newly-elected parliamentary representative Constantin Burdia. The circumstances under which the two key figures met, as well as which party had initiated the compromise constituted the object of competing narratives: Burdia permanently maintained that the editor requested his help in the matter, while Birăuțiu repeatedly stated that the Romanian representative offered his services without being asked. In the editor's view, this was all part of a plan conceived by Burdia and the minister Géza Polónyi as a means of gaining control over one of the most popular national Romanian gazettes in Hungary.

Regardless of where precisely the truth laid in this matter, it is certain that Burdia succeeded in convincing the editor of his solution's merit. In exchange for a more helpful attitude exhibited by the *Romanian People* towards Burdia himself and the Hungarian government's policies, the parliamentary representative for the constituency of Caransebeș persuaded Birăuțiu that the accusations against him would be retracted:

“With a protective air he touched my shoulder and told me that it was a very easy thing to escape the predicament. He would manage the retraction of the suits, which was easy enough for him, seeing as he was an influential person at the government, Andrásy's favourite<sup>15</sup> [...] He told me that he would solve everything, if I chose to change my ways. I wouldn't have to turn the page completely, but merely to be more equable and amicable towards him. He, Burdia, was still a faithful son of the Romanian nation and wished to foster its' development, but through other means. You will see, he said, how many favours and benefits can be gained from the government with a peaceful policy and by bargaining. He ensured me of further favours, promised to settle my debts, and to even provide a subvention.”<sup>16</sup>

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1906, Constantin Burdia and Dimitrie Birăuțiu would appear before the notary public Géza Cottely and sign the contract by virtue of which they became co-owners of the *Romanian People* printing press and gazette. The nine-point contract contained provisions concerning the two parties' legal duties, and detailed the sanctions that would apply in case these were not upheld. Birăuțiu would still manage the printing press, but would handle the editing of the gazette “in the spirit and direction tailored and settled

<sup>15</sup> Gyula Andrásy (1860–1929), Minister of Internal Affairs between 1906 and 1910 and one of the most influential politicians in the coalition government led by Wekerle.

<sup>16</sup> “Vulpi politice în cursă,” *Poporul român*, 152 (1906): 2.

by Constantin Burdia.” What is more, he vouched to neither publish nor edit any other gazettes, nor to become an associate in such an enterprise without the knowledge and approval of the governmental parliamentary representative. In exchange, Burdia engaged to pay approximately 2/3 of the debts incurred by the gazette and the printing press, amounting to some 14.000 Crowns out of a total of 19.000 Crowns owed. The contract was valid exclusively for the duration of Constantin Burdia’s lifetime, and any descendants had no legal claim to compensation from Birăuțiu. In exchange, the editor’s descendants would enjoy full rights over the printing press and the gazette. All of the income generated by these enterprises would rightfully devolve upon the editor. In the event of one of the parties breaking the agreement, a monetary penalty would be incurred: Constantin Burdia would lose the entire sum offered to Birăuțiu, while the editor vouched to repay the entirety of the same sum, with an added compensation of 8%.<sup>17</sup>

Article 7 of the contract contained highly interesting information, which suggested the breadth of the political and administrative experience amassed by Constantin Burdia during his extensive career, as well as his pragmatic spirit. Birăuțiu would declare that the agreement had been arrived at “at his own initiative exclusively”, a provision through which the former mayor of Caransebeș safeguarded himself from potential accusations in case his endeavours failed.<sup>18</sup>

Although the contract did not refer to the legal actions against Birăuțiu, the editor had obtained Burdia’s promise that the accusations would be retracted. Making use of his friendly rapports with important members of the Budapest government – the Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle and the Minister of Justice Géza Polónyi – Burdia kept his promise, and intervened in order to ensure that his new associate was granted amnesty. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, the date of the final case hearing, the supreme prosecutor formally retracted the accusations lodged against Birăuțiu. In motivating his decision, the prosecutor unwittingly suggested that the matter had drawn the attention of higher forums from the Ministry of Justice. The jurists in the Hungarian capital could find only hilarity in the prosecutor’s mention that “it is in the spirit of the law to punish only the true perpetrator, the author of the offending articles”. The law concerning the press also very clearly stated that in the event the author of a certain article could not be identified, the person held accountable for its content would be the lead editor, who bore legal responsibility for the gazette.<sup>19</sup> Despite the thinly-veiled retraction, Burdia’s promise was upheld, and Birăuțiu was pardoned.

<sup>17</sup> “Scandalul Birăuțiu-Burdia,” *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 272 (1906): 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Vlad Popovici, “Jurnalele politice românești din Transilvania și Ungaria și procesele lor de presă (1867–1914),” in *Diversitate culturală, realități politice și multiconfesionalism în Transilvania*



The denouement of the legal actions as well as the favourable attitude which the *Romanian People* gazette had begun to exhibit towards Burdia and the adherents of the moderate pro-governmental orientation would not however elicit merely hilarity. It did not take long for the main Romanian gazettes in Hungary to react forcefully to this unexpected development. Vitriolic articles appeared in *Libertatea* (Orăştie), *Gazeta Transilvaniei* (Braşov), *Drapelul* (Lugoj), and even in Birăuţiu's former alma mater in the printing trade, the *Foaia Diecezană* (*Diocesan Sheet*) in Caransebeş, where the former editor was forcefully condemned by Petre Barbu.<sup>20</sup> Birăuţiu was particularly censured for the fact that he sought to be pardoned by the central Hungarian authorities instead of honourably accepting the sentences to come from the judges, as well as their inevitable consequences. Many other editors of Romanian gazettes who had been in much the same situation served as powerful counterexamples of moral behaviour and sacrifice.

“How many Romanian editors have not tasted the bitterness of prison for others’ articles! But none of them went begging to the ministers, or to their instruments, imploring grace.”<sup>21</sup>

In order to counteract this campaign, Birăuţiu sought to organize a gathering of supporters in Caransebeş on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1906. Constantin Burdia's faithful collaborators in the town would inform the population regarding the planned event in the coming days. Their efforts were successful, as the gathering was attended by a numerous audience.<sup>22</sup> However, the audience was split in two, divided by their attitude to the matter in which Birăuţiu had become embroiled. Among his supporters the lawyer and local political figure Nicolae Ionescu would take the stand, while the opposition was voiced by the parish priest Tătucu of Iablaniţa. The most eagerly expected speech was given by Birăuţiu himself. He would argue that his efforts to be granted a pardon and his collaboration with Constantin Burdia were caused by the exceedingly dire situation in which he had found himself. He maintained that all of his previous endeavours in the service of the cultural betterment of the Romanians in Hungary would have been for naught, should the trials have ended in his

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şi Banat (sec. XVIII-XX). *Cercetătorului științific gr. I Dr. Dumitru Suci* la împlinirea vârstei de 70 de ani, Varga Attila, Iosif Marin Balog, eds. (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2014), 277–279.

<sup>20</sup> “Care e prețul?” *Libertatea*, 43 (1906): 2–3; “Hărțuierile din Cameră,” *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 270 (1906): 1; “Istoria duor palme,” *Drapelul*, 129 (1906): 2.

<sup>21</sup> “În antișambra lui Polónyi,” *Tribuna*, 192 (1906): 1.

<sup>22</sup> The various accounts of the meeting provide different numbers of participants: 7–800 according to *Poporul român*, 136 (1906): 1–3; only 200–250 according to *Libertatea*, 45 (1906): 2.

condemnation and imprisonment. He also expressed his support for Burdia's political conceptions, noting that the representative "was not as dreadful as his enemies envisaged him". What is more, in the editor's view, the representative's efforts to collaborate with the Hungarian authorities stemmed from a sincere desire to serve the interests of the Romanian nation, to contribute to its cultural standing, and to improve its economic situation. Following in this line of argument, Birăuțiu also invoked the activity of other Romanian moderate politicians, who had distinguished themselves through their efforts in the service of the Romanian people in Hungary: among this panoply of figures he invoked the benefactor Emanoil Gojdu, the jurist Iosif Gall, and George Szerb, to which he added his own patron, Burdia. The results of the gathering were, to say the least, mixed. Several participants attempted to disturb the meeting, while a series of local leaders tried to persuade those in attendance to condemn Birăuțiu's behaviour and the direction assumed by the *Romanian People*. His supporters similarly expressed their convictions. No firm conclusion could be reached.<sup>23</sup>

*The collaboration between Burdia and Birăuțiu and its political and electoral stakes*

Between July and November 1906, Burdia's intervention at the ministerial councillor Kornél Ábrányi was successful, and the *Romanian People* gazette obtained a stipend of 1250 Crowns, which were ceded to the editor. Meanwhile, Burdia made use of the prerogatives he had received as a result of the contract with Birăuțiu in several electoral matters.<sup>24</sup>

Firstly, he attempted to persuade the editor to serve as a witness in the trial concerning the election of George Popovici in the constituency of Lugoj. Popovici had initially won the elections with a majority of 421 votes against his counter-candidate, the adherent of the independent governmental party, Ágoston Makay<sup>25</sup>, but his mandate had been contested. One of the main accusations was that the *Romanian People* gazette, with the agreement and approval of the Romanian national leaders, had "agitated the spirits to such an extent, intimidating and pressuring them, that it had had a decisive impact on the results of the election." The local authorities would begin an inquest in the constituency of Lugoj in order to ascertain whether any illegal actions had occurred during the electoral process. It was in Constantin Burdia's interest that the elections be annulled, so that the government's candidate could receive a new chance to win the deputy seat for Lugoj. To this purpose, Burdia wrote to Birăuțiu in November

<sup>23</sup> "Lămuriri. Adunarea de la Caransebeș," *Libertatea*, 45 (1906): 2.

<sup>24</sup> "Vulpi politice în cursă," *Poporul român*, 152 (1906): 2-3

<sup>25</sup> "Alegerea de la Lugoj," *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 88 (1906): 2.

1906 cautioning him that he would soon be called to testify as a witness in the cause concerning George Popovici's mandate. Burdia also requested that, prior to the deposition, the editor should "visit me in Caransebeș to talk". Later Birăuțiu would state that he felt that "undoubtedly, they wanted to win a witness not in favour of, but against Popovici", and that therefore he had decided to extricate himself from the situation, justifying his inability to take the stand by claiming to have to travel abroad at the time.<sup>26</sup> George Popovici's mandate would eventually be annulled, but the new elections would bring similar results: the Romanian national representative would represent the constituency of Lugoj until the end of the parliamentary cycle of 1906–1910.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after these events, Burdia personally met with Birăuțiu to require his cooperation in a new electoral matter, concerning the mandate won by Coriolan Brediceanu in the constituency of Bocșa. Seeing as new elections were being held, the governmental constituencies were preoccupied with attracting the highest possible number of voters to support their own candidate, Gyula Weisz. To this purpose, Burdia aimed to make use of the *Romanian People* as a mouthpiece for the promotion of the governmental candidate, waging on the gazette's popularity and on the foreseeable impact its support of the candidate would have on the voters in Bocșa. Birăuțiu's energetic negative reaction and his categorical refusal induced Burdia to seek out a compromise: while the editor could not be compelled to support the governmental candidate, he should at least refrain from openly criticising Weisz.<sup>28</sup>

Shortly after these two electoral events in the Caraș-Severin County, Birăuțiu decided to break the contract with Burdia, profiting from the favourable circumstances in which he then found himself: the NRP leadership had made an offer to purchase the *Romanian People* gazette. The publication of the "Political foxes ensnared" leaflet, the reaction of the public sphere in Budapest, as well as the information personally supplied by Birăuțiu to the Romanian national leaders moved the Romanian national parliamentary representative Aurel Vlad to discuss the matter formally during a meeting of the Hungarian Parliament. On December 4<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> 1906, the Romanian representative made a formal interpellation to both Burdia and the Minister of Justice Polónyi. The accusations lodged against them concerned the abusive and fraudulent use of governmental funds, and, more significantly, the unlawful intrusion of political reasoning in the realm of the administration of justice. Aurel Vlad emphasized the fact that public funds had been illegally used to purchase the gazette, in order

<sup>26</sup> "Vulpi politice în cursă," *Poporul român*, 152 (1906): 3.

<sup>27</sup> Teodor V. Păcățian, *Cartea de Aur sau Luptele politice ale românilor de sub coroana ungară*, vol. VIII (Sibiu: Tiparul Tipografiei Arhidiecezane, 1915), 229.

<sup>28</sup> "Vulpi politice în cursă," *Poporul român*, 152 (1906): 3.

to serve the interests of the governmental parties in Hungary. What is more, the NRP representative maintained that the Minister Polónyi had exceeded the boundaries of legal behaviour by involving himself directly both in the trials against Birăuțiu, for whom he had obtained a retraction of charges, and in the elections for Lugoj and Bocșa, where the results of the inquests had already been decided on beforehand, as the telegrams and the discussions between Burdia and Birăuțiu attested to.<sup>29</sup> In the parliamentary session on the following day, Burdia answered the accusations lodged by Vlad. The governmental representative admitted that he had purchased the gazette and printing press, but had it recorded that this had been done with personal funds and at Birăuțiu's own request. Moreover, Burdia argued that his intention to shift the gazette's orientation towards a more moderate one, set apart from the interests of the "nationalist agitators", had been in accordance with his own political programme and, more importantly, had served the interests of the Romanian nation in Hungary. Concluding his reply, Burdia denied any intention to convince Birăuțiu to testify against the election of George Popovici, maintaining that the meeting he had solicited with the editor concerned nothing more than establishing the gazette's attitude towards the matter.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Romanian People – the NRP's official gazette*

The denouement of the entire affair was the breaking of the agreement between Birăuțiu and Burdia, the purchasing of the *Romanian People* gazette by the Romanian national representatives, and its re-orientation as the official mouthpiece of the NRP. Aurel Vlad, who had drawn parliamentary attention to the matter, would be listed as editor and owner of the gazette beginning with the issue no. 153 of December 9<sup>th</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup> 1906.

Birăuțiu would retain ownership of the printing press, and repay Burdia the sum owed in accordance with the contract signed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July. These developments were not however easily forgiven by the national public sphere: the Romanian gazettes of the time would continue to catalogue his behaviour as national betrayal. What is more, the purchasing of the *Romanian People* by the Romanian national representatives and Birăuțiu's shift in allegiance were

<sup>29</sup> Interpellation by Aurel Vlad on December 17<sup>th</sup> 1906 held in the House of Representatives of the Hungarian Parliament, in *Az 1906. évi május hó 19-ére hirdetett. Országgyűlés nyomtatványai képviselőházak. – Napló.*, vol. V (Budapest: Az Athenaeum Irodalmi és részvénytársulat könyvnyomdája, 1907), 107–112.

<sup>30</sup> Speech by Constantin Burdia on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1906 given in the House of Representatives of the Hungarian Parliament, in *Az 1906. évi május hó 19-ére hirdetett. Országgyűlés nyomtatványai képviselőházak. – Napló.*, vol. V (Budapest: Az Athenaeum Irodalmi és részvénytársulat könyvnyomdája, 1907), 119–120.

not “Birăuțiu’s merit, as he wants to depict it in his leaflet, but rather a merit of those who, as has been said, outbid Burdia and his own. Birăuțiu – a Romanian – although we don’t know whether he still deserves to be called thusly nowadays...”<sup>31</sup> The editor’s image would suffer greatly in the years to follow, as the Romanian public opinion would remain highly critical of his temporary involvement with the governmental Hungarian political milieu. The trust that Birăuțiu had enjoyed among his co-nationals would take a fall from which it would never recover, as many would continue to regard him as an “instrument” wielded by the central authorities in Budapest in order to undermine national solidarity.<sup>32</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The “*Romanian People* affair” offers a nuanced view of the entanglements of the Romanian intelligentsia in Hungary on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Far from remaining mired on an ideological level, political interests often interwove themselves with social, economic, and cultural aspects, creating complex circumstances, difficult to disentangle by both contemporary actors and current historiographic narratives. Though the grand narrative of the monolithic national solidarity promoted by the NRP in the context of the multi-national state of Dualist Hungary still largely prevails, the affair was merely one instance conveying the extent of the differences of opinion among the Romanians’ political leadership. This solidarity was often eroded by personal and group interests, as well as by political pragmatism. The latter was especially effective in determining an important segment of the Romanian nation to embrace the activist-governmental political orientation. Thus, the activity undertaken in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a series of politicians such as Emanoil Gojdu, George Szerb, or Iosif Gall showed the Romanian public sphere that the solution offered by this orientation could bring significant benefits for the Romanian nation in Hungary. Although a considerable part of this public sphere would continually choose to ignore this solution and the benefits it accrued, it is certain that the collaboration with the central authorities in Budapest, on the basis of a moderate policy involving compromises from both sides, would result in numerous local-level accomplishments in the service of the Romanian nation.

A similar political conception had been espoused by Constantin Burdia, who had however radicalised his means of action given the political situation

<sup>31</sup> “Hărțuiețile din Cameră,” *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 270 (1906): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Andreea Dăncilă, “Elite politice și culturale la începutul secolului XX în Transilvania. Aspecte din activitatea ziarului *Lupta* de la Budapesta,” *Annales Universitatis Apulensis. Seria Historica* 17/I (2013): 95–96.

witnessed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, as the status quo favoured a partial eschewal of moderate views. Regardless of their unyielding differences, the objectives of the NRP and the Romanian pro-governmental leaders were much the same: both groups aimed to foster the development of the Romanian nation in Hungary. However, the means by which they envisaged the accomplishment of these objectives were resolutely different, and along these differences the Romanian public sphere also divided itself. Burdia's involvement in the *Romanian People* affair as well as the backlash Birăuțiu incurred attest to these issues. The Romanian governmental representative's intent to gain control over one of the most popular Romanian gazettes, which had starkly supported the NRP programme, and to transform it into a personal mouthpiece that could serve his own political and electoral aims were clear examples of the radicalisation of his views. At the same time however, these actions reflect a pragmatic political view, rarely encountered in national Romanian politics in Hungary. If one were to draw the bottom line, Burdia's actions had effectively managed to rescue from ruin both the *Romanian People* gazette and the homonymous printing press, two essential vehicles in the cultural and social development of the Romanian nation in Hungary. While not necessarily arguing that the purpose excuses the means, it can be stated that from a typological perspective, Constantin Burdia was closer to the modern notion of parliamentary service, in that he placed the local and regional interests of his county and constituency over those of the abstract concept of the nation. He attempted to serve his constituency in the state's highest legislative forum to the best of his ability, and according to his own views, and thus to accrue maximal benefits for his voters by making use of the instruments he wielded best: influence and personal ties with the central Hungarian authorities.

SENTIMENT NAȚIONAL ȘI PRAGMATISM POLITIC.  
DEPUTATUL PARLAMENTAR CONSTANTIN  
BURDIA ȘI "AFACEREA POPORUL ROMÂN"

*Rezumat*

Criza guvernamentală de la Budapesta din primul deceniu al secolului XX a influențat semnificativ viața politică a românilor din Ungaria Dualistă. Adoptarea activismului de către Partidul Național Român a determinat o serie de confruntări electorale între oameni politici români cu opțiuni diferite. Aderenții colaborării cu autoritățile centrale maghiare și cei ai PNR și-au disputat rolul de reprezentanți politico-parlamentari ai românilor din Transleithania. Partitura pe care presa românească a jucat-o, prin poziționarea sa, a fost una esențială. Studiul își propune prezentarea unui episod din această confruntare politică, având în centru una dintre principalele gazete românești ale vremii, *Poporul Român*.