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THE EUROPEAN IDEA AS A POLITICAL PROJECT AND POLITICAL ACTION

IN MEMOIRS OF ROMANIAN INTERWAR ELITE

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SUMMARY

The present research paper has the starting point in the statement that Romania did not find the right path after leaving the bitter communist period. The right path was meant to reintegrate the country in the European culture and civilization in fullness.

Unfortunately, Romania remains a marginal country, at the European periphery, economically underdeveloped and politically obedient even after ten years after the European integration in the ambitious constructive project of European Union.

Even worse is the fact that within the European political milieu there are questions concerning the decision to accept Romania in European Union. It may seem that our country is in many regards incompatible with Europe. And that may be seen from the cultural, civilizational and political perspective.

Romania's incapacity to enter the direction of social and economic development, like other former communist states from central Europe (see the case of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland), as well as the growing gap between these countries and Romania concerning the indicators of daily life of citizens deepen this perception of incompatibility.

The question that rises: Is Romania compatible with the European Union? If the answer is affirmative, then the wrong steps in the process of adhering should be identified, corrected and removed. And since I used the term *reintegration*, this fact is due to the past European adventure undertaken by Romanians in modern history, which was abruptly ended by the Second World War and its nefarious consequences. Understanding this first attempt of European integration after the Paris Peace Conference in 1919-1920 might shed light on a different approach and path to follow so that Romania would occupy its well-deserved place in the European context.

There was a democratic tradition of critical thinking in interwar Romania, which lost its fight with the anti-democratic, anti-western and anti-modernist forces. However, it should be known and assumed by all those who aim at continuing this tradition. This is necessary in order

to bring Romania on the European path or, in Adrian Marino's words, "To bring Europe home, in Romania, at any cost"¹.

The "European Idea" was not discovered in Romania only after 1989, as some state. Otherwise, it would be believed that the entire Romanian thinking and ideology concerning the relations between the Romanian and western spaces may be reduced to ideas and theories supported by intellectuals at the end of the interwar era. They are known as members of the "bombastic generation", republished and promoted in post-communist period.

The aforementioned Romanian history was not dominated by these nationalist-mystical ideologies; there were also promoters of democratic, liberal, European ideas. Some of the fundamental works of Romanian culture with pro-European orientation have been published recently: *Istoria Civilizației Române Moderne [History of the Romanian Modern Civilization]* by Eugen Lovinescu, three volumes (1924-1926), *Burghezia Română [Romanian Bourgeoisie]* (1925) and *Neoliberalismul [Neoliberalism]* (1927) written by Ștefan Zeletin, *Partidele Politice [Political Parties]* (1926) by P.P. Negulescu etc. It is also in this period that a series of journals and newspapers appeared, where the supporters of the European idea could publish their opinions, theses and views. Among these are *Cuvântul liber*, *Viața Românească*, edited by Garabet Ibrăileanu and then Mihai Ralea, and *Ideea europeană* (1919-1928) edited by Constantin Rădulescu-Motru.

Reviving pro-European traditions may serve in avoiding the mistakes of the past and may help in discouraging ethno-centered and autarchic tendencies in a country with a low standard of living. Moreover, the frequent attacks at national identity and pride, as well as humiliations endured by Romanians abroad could be maneuvered by some political leaders to start another form of dictatorship. And that would be facilitated by modern technology of supervision of human behaviour and communication.

The European idea represents in our analysis a corpus of values, principles, institutions, procedures and mechanisms, along with social behaviour, mores and habits that define the western culture and civilization. It offers elements of institutional architecture and decision-

¹ Adrian Marino, *Pentru Europa. Integrarea României. Aspecte ideologice și culturale*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1995, p. 110.

making procedures for the democratic state. It also organizes and regulates social and economic life in modern and contemporary society.

Having this definition as the starting point, I intend to research if the European idea was among the preoccupations of Romanian cultural and political interwar elite. Moreover, if such a project was a true political project of society necessary in building the new Romania after the unification of all Romanian provinces, territories inhabited predominantly by Romanians. The objective in those circumstances should have been the insurance of a space of Liberty where the new Romanian political community could exercise its pluralism in a democratic way.

Therefore, I intend to point out the manner in which the concept of European idea was perceived, promoted and developed in Romanian intellectual milieu and if it was understood as a political project that should have been extended to the entire European continent. The political dynamics of the concept of European idea is important in the light of building a modern state of all Romanian provinces with different cultural spaces and different political and administrative traditions. The thesis aims at identifying those who understood that principles of democracy, fundamental freedom and rights as the basis of the new Romanian state as they were elaborated and implemented in western Europe.

I will reveal the way in which political men, as well as Romanian men of culture understood to be part in the projects of political integration at a regional level: central-European, Balkan and eastern, as well as at the level of the entire European continent.

These integrating demarches were necessary for developing new relations between the European states that started on the basis of dialogue, collaboration and cooperation. Their objective was maintaining peace on our continent.

The memoirs written in the first part of the previous century that were published for the first time during the last years or were re-edited was my main source of documentation and research. Many similar texts wait to be rendered to the nowadays reader.

All these memoirs constitute the living memory of the author from his hypostasis of actor and/or spectator of historical events and processes of the past. The multiple perspectives of these narrations are offered by their position within the Romanian society, their cultural level, their

ideological views, political actions they undertake or support explicitly, on the one hand, and their way of understanding and attitudes toward the main events of the period both on internal and external level, on the other.

The exploration and valorization of these memoirs will contribute to the reconfiguration of the Romanian identity and change some perceptions regarding their ideals and behaviour, which have already been settled as accepted clichés. Moreover, this will enrich the cultural and political patrimony, facilitating the reintegration in the European space.

This plurivocal cultural memory will enter on the path of historical epistemology, deploying lies and fake aspects. In this way, it will contribute to a rewriting of a history of Romanians that will value the past events from all the available perspectives to come closer to an image that is as truthful as possible.

Prohibitions, dogmas, ideological perversions, half-truths have cast a long shadow over the recent decades of the Romanian history, with no significance in our becoming a European nation. The first years after 1989 attempted to present the antithesis between the interwar period and the communist one. That led to idealization, as I show in the dedicated chapter of my work, paving thus the way of some politicians to instate dictatorship and totalitarianism, alienating Romania from the European path.

Given all these reasons, the present thesis combines the research of memoirs and the public declarations of the main political actors, as well as political, electoral and governing programs, juridical and constitutional acts, decisions taken by the executive power, along with initiatives and diplomatic actions undertaken on regional and European level. All these are analysed in order to reveal the great public debate of the Romanian society concerning the path to be followed by Romania in the new European context. In that background, there were two main ideological parties: the pro-European or the modernists versus traditionalists. The thesis has four chapters and conclusions.

The first chapter delineates the work in the space of contemporary historiography by defining some key-notions and identifying some theoretical and methodological references. These were useful in the analysis of memoirs as an alternative to the official history elaborated by the communist regime, which is largely used to this day.

The beginning of the first chapter establishes the relations between Memory, History and Identity in the process of knowing the past. Among the consulted philosophers and researchers, I mention Paul Ricœur, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Raymond Aron, Neagu Djuvara and Doru Radosav.

The relations between the aforementioned aspects – Memory, History, Identity - will form a tensed triangle thus maintaining the balance between the three components.

The second part of the first chapter approaches the memoirs as a huge archive where the authors' memory was stocked. Some steps were made before the analysis that would clarify aspects concerning the memoirs' form and background.

The place of memoirs within the space of written culture is to be established first. Refusing the phrase "frontier literature" I propose the phrase "Memoirs as a space of confluence". This space was born by unifying some areas pertaining to literature and history, as well as other domains, such as sociology, ethnography, philosophy etc.

The valorization of these writings from two perspectives – literary and historical – is completed even though each of those tries to claim memoirs entirely. This type of literature is based on memory, linked to facts and events of the past, and it is validated by its documentary nature in the historical space. This is the main argument used by historians when claiming memoirs as theirs'.

The chapter identifies the forms of memoirs as personal narration, taking into account the closeness or distance during the writing process and the time of living. From this point of view, a link may be traced between the memoirs written from the temporal perspective (as an attempt of reconstructing personal history and era) and the pages written daily and placed in the public space of the era.

Memoirs, autobiographies are included in the first category; they register events and narrate portraits, writing about feelings, experience, ideas, states of mind as confessions after all these events. This is thus the case of historical reconstructions from the present perspective of the writing process.

The second category comprises daily notes, political diaries, diaries; all of them are characterized by the fact that the distance between the narration time and confession time is minimal. That ensures the high level of authenticity. The daily notes leave the event unspoiled, as its representation is not influenced by subsequent facts and events. Both memoirs and daily notes project the dynamic framing in everyday life of the author.

Finally, I will approach the subjective dimension of memoirs in the first chapter. I attempt of establishing the dimensions of subjectivity and limits of objectivity in the case of memoirs, which is indeed a difficult process. In the best case it may be stated that these memoirs have a meandering path between subjective and objective modes. None of these extreme traits characterises the memoirs; in this case, the writing would be an atemporal essay. Because I have already showed that memoirs in all its forms highlight the man and the era in which the man lives, but in different degree from an author to another, that is one of the causes that will establish the place occupied by the writing on the axis subjective-objective. Author's temper and traits of the period influence as well the position between the two modes. The general view upon one era projects a dynamic panoramic perspective that makes sense for a majority, determining thus its objective character.

The second chapter sets the background of the Romanian society in its complexity, given the provinces inhabited by Romanians that became part of the united Romania after being part of the Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist Empires. The Documents of Unification were expressions of Romanians' will to become one and they asked a Constitution to lay the basis of the new state. In addition, this unification asked for democratic institutions, inspired by European tradition, culture and civilization. This chapter also points out the reception of the European idea in building one European political democratic state.

The great ideological controversy between pro-Europeans and traditionalists, initiated in the Romanian society in the second part of the 19th century gained in the interwar period new valences and dimensions, reaching its climax. It will influence in a great way the direction in building the modern Romanian state. In the first decade of the interwar period, the forces engaged in promoting and supporting the European idea predominated in the Romanian society. Thus, this political party experienced a series of successes on the path of Romanian modernization and Europeanisation. The Constitution of 1923 projected the image of a country

that seemed to have finally occupied its deserved position in democratic and civilized Europe forever. Then the great worldwide crisis followed and the come back of Prince Carol on the throne of the country. These events marked the Romanian political path by restricting the civic rights and pluralism in society, at the end of which democratic governing was replaced by dictatorship.

The second chapter presents the way in which the European idea was promoted in the Romanian society theoretically by the main representatives of the pro-European party that set the analyses and investigations in historical, sociological, cultural and political areas. That was necessary in order to identify the influences and historical moments that marked the path to Romanian modernization and its European integration for the implementation in society and institutions of the newly founded Romanian state.

At the beginning of the second chapter I will present the theoretical demarche initiated and supported by the literary critic Eugen Lovinescu in his valuable work *Istoria civilizației române contemporane* [*History of the Romanian Contemporary Civilization. 3 volumes*], published in 1924-1925. This was the first ample analysis dedicated to the modern Romania from the sociological and philosophy of culture perspective.

The main idea that permeates Lovinescu's work is that the modern Romanian civilization is the result of propagation and taking over the liberal ideas from western Europe in the Romanian society. At the same time, the economic relations established and the birth of the local bourgeoisie are subsequent occurrences of this process (the preeminence of ideology over the economic area).

The same chapter analyses two other reference works of Romanian culture: *Burghezia română. Originea și rolul ei istoric* [*Romanian Bourgeoisie. Its origins and Historical Role*], published in 1925, and *Neoliberalismul. Studii asupra istoriei și politicii burgheziei române* [*Neoliberalism. Studies on History and Policy of the Romanian Bourgeoisie*], published in 1927 as a sequel. The author, economist and philosopher Ștefan Zeletin, a true European, wanted to prove the fact that Romania's path is inextricably linked to western capitalism. His works add the economic dimension, completing thus the ideological and cultural aspects underlined by Lovinescu. Zeletin considers that the forces that manifest in the economic area are those that give

birth to Romanian bourgeoisie and prepare the way for modernization of the country. In this process, the western liberal ideas play no particular role, as economic relationships between Romania and European countries are primeval.

Nicolae Iorga is probably the most prominent Romanian personality of the interwar period, an encyclopedic personality that dominated the cultural and academic milieu. Such an energetic and dynamic man of culture required the implementation of ideas in everyday life. His second work is entitled *Lupta [Fight]* from his autobiographical work *O viață de om – Așa cum a fost [Life of a Man – As It Was]*, published in 1934, 3 volumes, under the main title *Orizonturile mele [My Horizons]*.

I appreciated Iorga for his vast erudition and encyclopedic culture, for his work as a researcher in his quest for documents about the Romanian history, for his impressive number of works of Romanian history (700 titles and 1.200 published works), for his work as a teacher establishing a Romanian school of history who loved his country and nation deeply. This profound love represented the binder between all his actions. It was only after perceiving this truth that I could understand the essence of Iorga's cultural and political demarches. All these were subordinated by the great Romanian historian to one objective that he followed his entire life – to watch over the unified Romania, the greatest achievement of his generation, so that it would consolidate and become a political, social, economic and cultural reality recognized as a component of the civilized world.

That is the reason for including N. Iorga in my research and not the idyllic direction or his idealist vision about the Romanian patriarchal state impossible to revitalise in the 20th century. His vision about nationalism, national state and Europe of the national states that were born after the Great War is of great interest to our study.

Iorga perceived quickly the fact that the new Romania must establish relations with Europe presented as a culturally and civilizationally superior entity. At the same time, he expressed against any nationalist excesses in building the national states during the interwar period.

The great Romanian historian pointed out not only the connections between European peoples, but also the existence of common elements between east and west, contributing to

defining traits of European culture and civilization. Iorga's philosophical conception rejected the westerners' view according to which the east is just an annex, a periphery of the west.

He was fully convinced even in the '30s of the last century that it is possible to articulate a unified Europe in which all the states would have the same rights, while the bigger and stronger states would not oppress the weaker and smaller ones. This Europe of numerous national states in which the rigid nationalism of some countries leaves no space to other nationalities must be changed with one to promote consideration and tolerance toward ethnic diversity. That would contribute to the complex development of the national idea, refusing the narrow idea of uniformity and erasing of national identity.

Another state man, Iuliu Maniu, would hardly fill in the milieu of Romanian political men due to his complex thinking and political actions. His principles were enlightened nationalism, perfect democracy, social justice and Christian morals; these had guided his entire political activity. He did not stray even in the most harsh and dramatic moments after facing his adversaries. This also happened when he engaged in a political fight with the Hungarian leaders for gaining political and national rights for all Romanians from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Iuliu Maniu confronted even Ionel I.C. Brătianu, the political leader from the Old Kingdom when it came to respecting Romanians' wishes from Romanian provinces united with the Romanian Kingdom after World War I. Constitution of 1923 contains Founding Documents of the new political state adopted within representative assemblies in 1918 at Chişinău, Cernăuţi and Alba Iulia.

But maybe the most important moment in defining the profile of the democratic political man is his position in defending the freedom and rights of citizens, respecting thus the Constitution and separation of powers in a democratic state when King Carol II abrogated the Constitution of 1923 in order to disband political parties and to enact a new fundamental law on 27 of February 1938. By that Constitution the king became head of the state and then head of the National Rebirth Front founded by decree-law on 16 of December 1938.

In those times not only Romania, but several European states with a long democratic tradition abandoned the democratic parliamentary political system in favour of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. The way in which Maniu defended fundamental freedom situates him in the

valuable list of European statesmen, defenders of principles of liberty and democracy, patriotism and nationalism, social justice and Christian morals.

The third chapter is focused on the Peasants' National Party – Promoter of Romania's Europeanisation. I tried to highlight the role played by this political party on the inter war political scene as the main modernising and reforming institution of the unified Romania regardless of their position – governing or opposition party.

The third chapter is structured in three parts. The first part presents the path of the party after the fusion that took place on 10 of October 1926 of the two political parties – National Party and Peasants' Party. The second part of this chapter is dedicated to the political actions of the National Peasants' Party as governing party in 1928-1933, with the interruption of one year – 1931-1932 when the country was conducted by technicians with Nicolae Iorga as their leader.

The governing path of this party, with legislative acts, laws and decisions to reorganize the state and its main institutions, from the economic and social to education and cultural areas, army reorganization and aspects of internal and external affairs, may seem tiring to the reader. However, these facts need to be pointed out as steps of state modernization from that period were silenced afterwards.

We have to remind the fact that the governing was overlapped with the great economic worldwide crisis of the fall of 1929 from the New York stock market, with devastating effects for largely agrarian countries like Romania.

As if those aspects were not enough, Prince Carol became King Carol II of Romania on the 8th of June 1930. Iuliu Maniu and leaders of the aforementioned party considered the event favourably, given that the Regency proved its incapacity as institution. Nevertheless, King Carol II became a disturbing factor soon enough for the good functioning of the state institutions and democracy in general.

After becoming a party in opposition at the end of 1933, Ion Mihalache became the president of the party, while Iuliu Maniu withdrew to Bădăcin, but continued the political fight. As the liberal governing presided by Gheorghe Tătărescu in 1934-1937 was influenced by King

Carol II and did not respect entirely the rights and freedom of citizens of the Constitution of 1923, the National Peasants' Party became a fierce defender of Romanian rights and liberties.

The fourth chapter is entitled *Political integrating projects in interwar Europe* and comprises shortly the European political projects and their accomplishment in the interwar period at the regional and central-European, Balkan and continental level.

The European idea is understood as a process that needs to be promoted at continental level for articulating a coherent political ensemble formed by European compatible states that share the same fundamental values and want to collaborate in a political project for achieving the same common objectives.

I will analyse Romania's participation in the political alliance Little Entente in all its dimensions – political, economic, military and cultural. This political alliance was convened and signed between Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and three states of the central Europe. Seen as an attempt of reassembling this political central-European space, the new political structure was meant to oppose the attempts of revisionist states to change the territorial *status-quo* of the region. Little Entente has values and equally shared principles by all its participants.

The same chapter analyses other European projects launched by French political men eager to start a voluntary unifying movement of Europe. This is the case of Briand and Tardieu plans. Aristide Briand, Prime Minister of the French government, launched the idea of Europe's federalization on the 5th of September 1929 when he held a speech in front of the Assembly of Nations' Society. The project of federalization of Europe was based on a postwar French-German agreement that had to become the starting point of European integration.

Briand's plans proved to be too grand for European political men of the interwar period and they could not match the level of American politicians of the end of the 18th century in harsher and more difficult times. Another French man of politics, André Tardieu, was not discouraged and proposed another plan of European construction on a smaller scale. Thus, Tardieu project gave up the federalization of the entire European continent and proposed the federal plan of the central-European space as the first step. This central part was under Habsburg Dynasty authority till the Great War and seemed a great start for the project. Tardieu's project was not that different from the federalization plan proposed in 1906 by Aurel Constantin

Popovici, Romanian citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, expressed in his monumental work *Die Vereinigten Staaten Von Gross-Österreich [United States of Great Austria]*. The project proposed federative political structures in the Danubian space by reforming the Austro-Hungarian Empire, extending then to larger continental units.

Other ideas and projects were launched in the interwar period that would lead to collaboration between European nations in the economic and political area. The Balkan Entente, a political understanding between Balkan peninsula – Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece – is another example. This agreement is almost entirely the work of a great Romanian political man Nicolae Titulescu.

An example of economic cooperation between the states of central Europe worth mentioning is the constitution of the Block of agrarian states – Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. This group of European states tried to promote a common commercial policy to get access on the market of industrial countries with their products during the great financial crisis (1929-1933). The economist Virgil N. Madgearu from the National Peasants' Party was the promoter of this project that was unfortunately unsuccessful.

At the end of this research concerning the Romanians' interactions in the interwar period I may conclude that the European idea, with all its cultural, civilizational and political components was perceived in a correct manner. It was promoted and supported in the Romanian society, as the multitude of memoirs, diaries and daily notes, along with political discourses and articles in the Romanian press underline.

There were Romanian political men and men of culture in the interwar period who were engaged to implement the defining values and principles of the European idea. They may be rightly named Europeans, as they were cherished and treated with the greatest respect in all European political and cultural circles. Political thinking and activity of Romanian cultural elites was influenced greatly by political ideas, principles, concepts and theories promoted by western Europe.

Thus, the European idea is not a new concept for the Romanian elite, but a rich and valuable tradition of the Romanian interwar period.

After researching an important part of interwar memoirs it is clear that the Romanian ruling elite understood European values and principles, as well as the function of democratic institutions that are the basis of western European societies. These values and principles were promoted in the Romanian space by those who loved their country and were involved in the political and diplomatic area, as well as in the cultural and social-economic one. They believed in the idea that Romanians are members of European family and Romania belongs to the European space through millennial history and rich culture that was born between Byzantine Orient and Latin Occident. This explains the behaviour, attitudes and manifestations in the public space of Romanians and contributed to their European status.

It must also be mentioned that Romanians' European becoming helped them to serve successfully their country. They understood that the European idea is inextricably linked to the existence of a free and pluralistic society and to the edification of a political democratic state governed correctly and transparently by its elected people. The Constitution of 1923, with its inherent lacks, configured a political community following the European model, capable of ensuring safety and generating wealth for its members. When this model was abandoned by limiting citizens' rights and freedom, giving up the political pluralism and shifting the political decision from elected representatives to obscure irresponsible political circles, the state was incapable of defending itself against the neighbouring attacks.

I may conclude that many of those who wrote in the interwar period about their thoughts, feelings and daily activities were aware of the fact that organized states conducted in a democratic manner may face challenges successfully. Unfortunately, there were Romanian intellectuals that did not understand that. They opted and supported authoritarian and dictatorial ruling that lead to weakening of the Romanian state with the already known consequences. History proves wrong the latter category that denies Liberty, does not accept pluralism in society and shifts the political decision to inaccessible areas to citizens' transparent observation. On the other hand, history is on the side of those who supported and promoted democracy.

The western European model of political state and civil society, with all its imperfections, is the only place where humanism is at home.

This statement does not mean the western idealisation, with all its political, cultural and economic-financial achievements. I do not plead for a copy-paste mimetic takeover of the European model, which will lead to a superficial Europeanisation of Romanian political and cultural elite with no deeper pervasion of European values and principles. I am fully aware that the European integration is a complex and difficult process sometimes humiliating for Romanians, but this is the path for our country to return home. On the other hand, it is necessary to refuse a blind following of directions and abandonment of national interest. The path of our European becoming should not suppose losing our identity, as no European people had done that. Our Romanian identity supposes European identity as well. The more delineated and personalized the first one, the more pervasive will be the second. I believe that bringing home the European model and its implementation in the Romanian society, in its institutional architecture and decisional flow of the state is the only way to follow in order to achieve wealth and respect, appreciation from other European nations and the entire civilized world.

Today Romania, with political men, cultural elite from the academic milieu, must harness this valuable tradition and partake, develop and enrich it so that the contemporary process of European integration will not present us as an incompatible country with European values. On the contrary, we deserve to occupy our place in EU structures, contributing to European construction.

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