

# **Anti-Judaism without Jews – the Paradoxical Nature of the Contemporary Romanian Anti-Semitism (1990-2015)**

## **1. Introduction**

Although this year Romania celebrates 27 years since the „triumph of the democracy” and the fall of the Communist regime (since the 1989 events) and also 9 years since the UE integration, the democratic behaviour still seems to be difficult to assimilate for quite a large part of the Romanian citizens. Of course, a lot of progress has been done in the last 20 years especially taking attitude towards corruption, developing a civil consciousness, demanding freedom of speech and other civil rights. Despite these optimistic steps made by the majority of the Romanian society, there are still segments of population maintaining inadequate predispositions, (publicly!) promoting non-democratic discourses and casually manifesting crude attitudes of xenophobia, racism, chauvinism and anti-Semitism.

This type of manifestations has a long history not only in Romania, but also in other countries located in the Eastern Europe (for example Hungary, Poland or Slovakia to name a few). ~~For my research I will use the case of Romania because being part of this society brings me the advantage that I can take a closer look at its issues, I can explore easier the historical causes for today’s xenophobic behaviour and I can understand the nowadays realities.~~

In Romania, there are almost 20 national minorities – Albanians, Armenians, Bulgarians, Croats, Jews, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Macedonians, Hungarians, Roma, Serbs, Slovaks, Turks, and Ukrainians – which next to the Romanian community maintain their own cultural, linguistic and religious specific traditions. The Romanians’ chauvinistic discourse is directed towards some of these national minorities, especially the Hungarians, the Roma population and, surprisingly, towards the Jews. The most hostile attitudes (usually towards the Hungarians) are manifested in the region with the least cultural diversity and the most positive perception of alterity is found in the multicultural areas. But anti-Semitism is an exception, because it can be found everywhere, even in places where the Jewish community is absent or is extinct for many years.

Using a large variety of sources (history and anthropology works dealing with the Romanian Jewish community, written press, new media and also direct interviews) I am trying to analyse the situation of the Romanian anti-Semitism. Besides the causes for such behaviour, in my paper I will try to identify the promoters of such a discourse but also the target of the anti-Semitic propaganda. Also, in the last 10 years, new media became the most important device for disseminating anti-Judaic content. Because of this, my main focus will be on the web pages of extremist organizations, ~~sensationalist~~ blog posts written by obscure intellectuals but also sites belonging to influential opinion leaders.

## 2. Historical Overview

In the past, Romania had a numerous Jewish population of about 750.000 people, before its pro-Nazi regime and the beginning of the Holocaust. The community was diverse, with roots in the history of Habsburg Austria, pre-war Hungary and also the Czarist Empire. ~~Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the anti-Semitic literature was extremely prolific and today, this type of written material is used now as a source for legitimizing the past (the pogroms made by the local communities, the atrocities and the Holocaust).~~

~~The origins of Romanian anti-Semitism are in correlation with the origins of the modern Romanian state and the emergence of the national-cultural tradition that accompanied unification of the principalities, independence, and the creation of Greater Romania (1918). The anti-Semitism manifested on the Romanian territory in the interwar period grew directly from seeds sown at the major turning points of the country's development starting in the mid-nineteenth century. For many different causes strong anti-Semitic currents were present in various forms and with varying intensity in the political, cultural and spiritual life of Romanian society for most of the century that preceded the accession to power of the National Christian Party in 1937, the installation of the Royal Dictatorship in 1938, and the Antonescu-Iron Guard National Legionary State in 1940 – that is, for most of the century that culminated in the Holocaust.~~

As Zeev Barbu has remarked in the preface of a study regarding anti-Semitism, the Romanians did not hate the Jews because they were Jews, but mainly because they were „different”, less assimilated and hence, more foreign than in most other European countries”.

True, from a wider perspective anti-Semitism was part of a xenophobic mentality that characterized Romanian nationalism; however, taking into consideration other essential components of Romanian anti-Semitism, such as the traditional religious motifs, it assumes different forms that simply a manifestation of xenophobia, in which Hungarians or Bulgarians and others can be lumped together (Vago 1995, iii).

The resurgence of anti-Semitism in contemporary Romania (along with other expressions of Romanian nationalism and xenophobia), is not only a clear feature of the transition to a post-Communist society, evident in the other former Communist states, but also a clear expression of the continuation of the Ceausescu form of nationalist Communism (Vago 1993, 107). Thus, the return to history in the Romanian case indicates a strong pattern of continuity, as nationalism, which was used by the Ceaușescu regime and served as a primary source of legitimation, continues to function as a main driving force in the post-Communist era.

### **3. Abhorring an Absence: The Imaginary Jew**

Even since the early 90s, the paradoxical nature of the Romanian anti-Semitism was noticed by scholars. In a study published in 1995, Raphael Vago mentioned the surprising conservation of the anti-Judaic manifestations: “Anti-Semitism without Jews – there are only about 20.000 Jews left in Romania – is not unusual in Eastern Europe; however, the resurgence of the anti-Semitic traditions, the growing hero-worship of anti-Semites and, perhaps most significant, the identity of the carriers of the old-new anti-Semitic line – former members of the Communist nomenklatura – indicate the special-case status of Romania.” (Vago 1995, 4).

Unfortunately, the situation has perpetuated alarmingly until nowadays, when recent surveys indicate that the Holocaust denial and different anti-Jewish discursive manifestations are present at various levels of the Romanian society. According to official community membership, some 12.000 Jews live in Romania today, but the country's census in 2002 showed a total of 6.200 persons wishing to identify as Jewish. Most of the members are concentrated in Bucharest, and the rest are spread in several big cities (Iasi, Cluj-Napoca, and Brasov). The reduced dimension of the Jewish community seems to not be an impediment for the development of anti-Semitic attitudes. The paradox of an anti-Judaic public discourse in a country with almost no Jewish community seems not to cross the minds of those who promote it.

The anti-Semitic behaviour comprises a wide range of manifestations: hate speech on social media, Nazi propaganda, street art, marches and sometimes conferences. Although it is rarely accompanied by violent accidents and sporadic acts of vandalism against Jewish targets such as synagogues and cemeteries, in Romania, the anti-Semitism is characterized by a continuing trend justifying the wartime regime of Antonescu, revival of groups spreading the ideas of the pro-Nazi Iron Guard, various forms of Holocaust denial and constant blaming the Jews for invented crimes. As an evidence for the existence of such attitudes, last year, nearly a quarter of Romanian respondents on a survey on Jews said their country should have no Jewish residents. The Elie Wiesel National Institute for Holocaust Studies in Romania (INSH-EW) released a poll according to which 11 per cent of the Romanians believe the Jews are a problem for Romania, while 22 per cent would like them only as tourists. ~~The research was conducted by the Centre for Opinion and Market Studies in June on a commission by the Elie Wiesel Institute, with 1,000 persons interviewed.~~ It was aimed at revealing the way Romanian citizens relate to minorities and to the Romanian Holocaust, their opinion as regards Marshal Ion Antonescu (military dictator from 1940 to 1944) and the far-right interwar and World War II Legionnaire Movement, as well as their attitude towards the State of Israel and their exposure to similar events.

In 2015, in July, a law which forbids the fascist, xenophobic and racist symbols was finally synchronized with the EU norms. This Law (217/2015) represents a very useful tool for preventing some far-right manifestations and also opens the public space for promoting the memory of Holocaust victims. The text of the law is actually an addition to a 2002 Law, stating that the organizations with an extremist/fascist component and their symbols are illicit. The fact that this law was enacted now can also be a signal that anti-Semitism continues to be an issue in Romania and unfortunately, there is still a need for such measures.

#### **4. New Media and the anti-Semitic Propaganda**

In Romania, like in other Eastern European countries, new media holds the supremacy for dispersing all kinds of propaganda. The presence of anti-Semitism and xenophobia is still growing on Facebook pages, in the extreme-right blogosphere but also in some apparently neutral sites. Finding such examples is not a very difficult task as they are constantly posting content in spite of the 217/2015 Law which aims to penalize this kind of sites. Regrettably, everyone seems to acknowledge their existence and even though these sites are reported and taken down, they somehow “return from the dead”.

The continuing forms of Holocaust denial, the myth of the Red Holocaust caused by the Jewish communists, figure frequently in the Iron Guard's (now called “The New Right”) internet publications, such as "Cuvântul Legionar". An article in “Revista 22” from 15 May 2014 called attention to various anti-Semitic publications and web sites, which should not exist in a normal country which is a member of the EU. The author, Anca Manolescu presented some quotations from such sites, including allegations that “Nazi Germany was provoked by the Jewish mafia”, and reference to “the Zionist paranoia called Holocaust” (Manolescu 2014).

In the report published by The Center for Monitoring and Combating Anti-Semitism in Romania (MCA Romania) are mentioned over 65 sites and blogs which are the main devices for promoting anti-Jewish articles. 27 of these sites are constantly updating their content and almost all of them have their articles shared on social media. The majority of this kind of sites is hosted on servers located the U.S. where they are protected by the U.S Constitution and also outside the territory of Romania where the legislation cannot be applied (MCA Romania, Raport de Monitorizare 2009-2014/Monitoring Report 2009-2014).

The web-sites and blogs belong to different kinds of people from students, leaders of far-right parties to even university professors, which mean that anti-Semitism is a generalized attitude. Although not even one author of the 65 sites provides any reasonable historical data to sustain their arguments, the recurrent themes and slogans are always reiterated: “Jews stole – and continue to steal – our country”, “the Jews are those who brought the Communism in Romania” (they being responsible for a “Judaic-Communist Holocaust”), “The Jews want to extinguish the Christian Orthodox Romanian people” and “the Jewish Freemasons are ruling the entire world” – which makes them the culprits of all the economic, political and social calamities (<http://anti-zionism.blogspot.ro/>, <http://bratuldefier.blogspot.ro>, <http://www.apologeticum.ro>, <http://www.buciumul.ro>, <http://listanationala.ro> ).

The target audience of new/social media is usually the younger generation. Thus, the anti-Semitic propaganda can be seen as a form of “counter-attack” to the recent apparition of educational programs about the Holocaust which are currently developing in the Romanian schools. Unfortunately, the propagandistic material distributed online seems to be effective because many youngsters have adopted the same stereotypes in their daily conversations. Based on casual interviews I made for my research, the lack of historical data for sustaining anti-Semitic affirmations seems to not be a problem for my younger interviewees (B. D. E. Interview, December 2015, Cluj-Napoca<sup>1</sup>). They echo the false information they find on nationalistic and xenophobic blogs, justifying their discrimination towards Jews without any historical evidence. They are not able to identify the real causes of the current problems and blaming the alterity is the facile way to deal with the frustration.

In fact, the Romanian anti-Semites – old and young – are incapable of admitting their own fault for the country’s situation and also for the atrocities Romania made and/or allowed in the interwar period. The denial of the Romanian pogroms and Holocaust is still very strong, even at the level of Academia, showing that the Romanian society is not yet ready to call itself “democratic”.

## **5. Conclusions**

As one can see, ever since 1995 the paradoxical nature of “anti-Semitism without Jews” in Romania was noticed and problematized by historians and sociologists. But since then, 20 years have passed; 20 years in which Romania had to align to specific norms in order to enter EU. After decades living under the dictatorship of the Communist regime, some features of democracy still seem to be hard to achieve. For an EU country where the Jewish community makes less than 0, 1 % of the total population, the persistence of anti-Semitism is quite a surprise.

Finding solutions for eliminating the anti-Semitic cells which linger over internet (and not only) still needs to be one of the priorities of the NGOs, academic institutions, schools and also media. Without a proper education in this sense, there is a risk that the discursive xenophobia will translate into action and will grow in the recent context of the refugees’ crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> The identity of the interviewees is confidential.

When doing my interviews a few interviewees asked why I consider the rise of anti-Semitism to be an alarming signal because the absence of Jews makes it irrelevant. I replied that if some people can hate an absent, abstract and imaginary Jew, I wouldn't want to know what happens if that Jew became real.

### **Resources:**

Finkelstein, Norman – *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, University of California Press, 2005.

Finkielkraut, Alain – *Le Juif Imaginaire*, Éditions du Seuil, 1983.

Florian, Alexandru - *Anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denying Topics in the Romanian Media*, Romanian Journal of Political Science, vol. 9, no.9, 2009.

Foxman Abraham – *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism*, Harper, 2003.

Laqueur, Walter – *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Lendvai, Paul – *Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe*, Macdonald, 1972.

Oisteanu, Andrei – *Inventing the Jew. Anti-Semitic stereotypes in Romanian and other Central-East European Cultures*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2009.

Rosenfeld, Alvin – *Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism*, American Jewish Committee, 2006.

Vago, Raphael – *Anti-Semitism in Romania: 1989-1992*, Tel-Aviv University, 1995.

Vago, Raphael – *The Traditions of Anti-Semitism in Romania*, Patterns of Prejudice, vol.27, no.1, 1993, 107-119.

### **Online Resources:**

Actmedia. *Opinion poll: 11pct of the Romanians believe the Jews are a problem for Romania*, Accessed January 03, 2016. <http://actmedia.eu/daily/opinion-poll-11pct-of-the-romanians-believe-the-jews-are-a-problem-for-romania/59239>

Haaretz. *Strong Popular Support for 'Jew-free' Romania, Survey Suggests*, Accessed December 02, 2015. <http://www.haaretz.com/beta/1.669699>

Halpern, Micah. *Hashtag of Hatred: Anti-Semitic Social Media Campaign Shames Palestinians and Google*, Observer News, September 10, 2015. Accessed December 28, 2015.

<http://observer.com/2015/10/hashtag-of-hatred-anti-semitic-social-media-campaign-shames-palestinians-and-google/>

Manolescu, Anca. *Pe site-urile ultranaționaliste, "evreu" continuă să fie folosit ca etichetă infamantă*, Revista 22, May 15, 2014. Accessed December 28, 2015. <http://revista22.ro/41602/.html>

Farkash, Tali. *Holocaust denial on the rise in Eastern Europe*, YnetNews, December 29, 2015. Accessed December 29, 2015. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4745850,00.html>

### **Interviews:**

B.D.E. – former member of a Nationalistic/Far-Right organization, 1 hour interview, Cluj-Napoca, December 2015.

G.C. – member of a Far-Right organization, 40 minutes interview, Cluj-Napoca, December 2015.