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1919-1938. Romania's internal affairs and culture in the interwar period

The evolution of Romanian political life during the interwar period was influenced by several factors: formation of the national unitary state in 1918, the country's social and economic features, certain specificities of Romanian society and especially of the political class, political mutations and events happening at international level.

United Romania's political configuration was sanctioned by establishing the universal, equal, direct and secret vote and the adoption of the 1923 constitution, a fundamental document which remained in force until 1938 and ensured a democratic setting for the practice of Romanian political life. Within the democratic political system, the monarchy and the parliament played a significant role.



The monarchy had a constitutional character with the king, coming from the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty, exercising his prerogatives on the basis of the 1923 constitution. Under the rule of Ferdinand I (1914-27), known as 'the Unifier,' the historical act of the Great Union was achieved and, through a broad policy of reforms, the democratic programme contributing to the consolidation of national unity was put into practice.

With the beginning of the dynastic crisis, caused by the renunciation of Crown Prince Carol to succession as heir to the throne (1925) due to an affair, and especially during the regency period (1927-30), monarchy became an instrument of political parties and affected the normal development of the country. However, in June 1930 the 'Carlist Restoration' took place. With the complicity of some Romanian politicians, the former crown prince despite his scandalous past was proclaimed King of Romania under the name of Carol II. The former under-age sovereign, Michael I, became crown prince and received the title of Great Voivode of Alba Iulia.

The new monarch had a poor opinion of political parties and considered that to speed the progress of Romanian society the sterile political infighting with its objective of conquering power should be replaced with strong rule unaffected by constitutional norms. As a result, he would frequently get involved in the political game and would lead a systematic policy of undermining political parties in order to eventually replace the democratic system with an authoritarian regime or royal dictatorship. The latter became effective with the coup d'état of 10 February 1938, by which Carol II established an authoritarian monarchy which was legitimised through the Constitution adopted ten days later. The new fundamental law gave the king increased powers, banned the activity of political powers and severely limited the

activity of parliament. The authoritarian regime of Carol II fell on 6 September 1940 with the monarch carrying the main responsibility for the loss of the country's territorial integrity.

Until 1938 the parliament as representative of the legislative power was the most important body of Romania's interwar democratic system. This bicameral forum hosted broad debates that resulted in important decisions concerning major issues of Romanian society: ratification of peace treaties signed after the First World War, adoption of the land and voting reforms, the 1923 constitution, the law of administrative and judicial organisation, prioritising directions of economic evolution, the progress of education and culture, etc. The parliament also had control over executive power with deputies and senators enjoying parliamentary immunity.

After the Great Union the political party system witnessed significant transformations. Following the achievement of the land and voting reforms conservative parties left the political scene making room for some new parties with broad electoral appeal. The National Liberal Party dominated the political scene during the first interwar decade but was increasingly challenged, starting in 1926, by the National Peasant Party. Emerging after the union of the Romanian National Party of Transylvania with the Peasant Party of the Old Kingdom it became the second great party of the country and the only one capable of successfully challenging the liberals' political dominance.

There was also integration into Romanian political life of parties leading the fight for the union of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania with Romania and also the emergence of parties representing the interests of ethnic minorities, such as the Hungarian Party, the German Party and the Jewish Party of Romania.

International political evolutions were also reflected in the Romanian political scene through the emergence of extremist organisations: the Communist Party of Romania, subordinated to Soviet interests and supporting the idea of dissolution concerning Greater Romania; the Legion of Archangel Michael, later becoming the Iron Guard, an anti-democratic extreme-right party, with a mystic, xenophobic and anti-Semitic ideology, much like Italian fascism.

Although the 1923 constitution had broad democratic provisions, their application in practice was often perverted by politicians of the time. For example, after 1918 the practice established by Carol I was preserved according to which the king appointed the government after which the parliament was dissolved and new parliamentary elections were called. Elections were always won by the government organising them (with the exception of the December 1937 elections) as they were always rigged using various procedures. Thus, although the constitutions provided for parliamentary control over the executive power in reality things were exactly the opposite.

The rise of the Iron Guard was a good pretext for King Carol II to abandon the democratic system based on political parties. On 10 February 1938 the Romanian monarch decided to save the country, as he wrote in his journal, 'from the often unpatriotic tyranny of mean party interests' and establish an authoritarian monarchical regime. On 20 February a new constitution was adopted which ended the parliamentary regime and on 31 March 1938 political parties were banned. The royal dictatorship was preserved until 6 September 1940 when it was replaced with another authoritarian regime, led by the then Marshal (soon General) Antonescu (1940-44).

Benefiting from a favourable framework created after the Great Union of 1918, Romanian culture made remarkable progress. The interesting debates taking place at the level of elites concerning cultural development paths and the relation between Romanian and European spirituality generated two main currents. Traditionalists, including Nichifor Crainic, the mentor of *Gândirea* (The thought) review and Lucian Blaga, pleaded for the conservation of local values and did not agree with foreign influences. These were joined by the generation of the 1930s (Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Eugene Ionesco, Constantin Noica, Mircea Vulcanescu) who militated for ‘affective Christianity’ and the promotion of the spirit as the supreme value. The second current was represented by modernists or Europeanists such as Eugen Lovinescu, Stefan Zeletin and Tristan Tzara who considered that the process of developing Romanian society started under European influence and had to include an openness towards new mutations in western civilisation. Its engagement with modernism, especially as it was manifested in literature, architecture (cubism), arts, saw Romania in sync with cultural experiments taking place in Europe.

Science and technology witnessed astonishing progress by the affirmation at the international level of the Romanian schools of chemistry (Stefan Odobleja, Petru Poni, Eugen Edeleanu, Gheorghe Spacu), mathematics (Gheorghe Titeica, Traian Lalescu, Grigore Moisil), physics (Stefan Procopiu, Horia Hulubei), medicine (Gheorghe Marinescu-neurology, Dimitrie Gerota-surgery, Constantin Parhon-endocrinology, Victor Babes-bacteriology), history (Vasile Parvan, Constantin Giurescu, Nicolae Iorga), philosophy (Petre P. Negulescu, Constantin Radulescu-Motru), geography (Gheorghe Valsan, Simion Mehedinti), sociology (Dimitrie Gusti), architecture (Grigore Ionescu, Octav Doicescu, Ion Mincu, Petre Antonescu), painting (Nicolae Tonitza, Francisc Sirato, Theodor Pallady), sculpture (Constantin Brancusi) and music (George Enescu).

Among other remarkable achievements was the establishment of the Romanian school of geography (Simion Mehedinti), the creation of the first institute of bio-speleology in the world (Emil Racovita, 1920), the establishment of the Oceanography School (Ion Borcea) and the establishment of the Institute for Serums and Vaccines (Ioan Cantacuzino, 1921). Important successes were also scored in the field of technology with practical applications: airplane construction, aerodynamics, radio and astronautics. Other notables of the period included Nicolae Paulescu, who discovered insulin, Stefan Odobleja, a precursor of cybernetics, Hermann Oberth, the inventor of rockets destined for use in space flights, Gogu Constantinescu who linked his name to the discovery of sonicity and Aurel Persu who patented the aerodynamic car.

Interwar Romania’s cultural achievements equally managed to capitalise on national specificity and to connect Romanian spirituality to the values of European spirituality. However, cultural achievements were only the privilege of cultural elites while most of the population experienced poverty and illiteracy.

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