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A POLITICAL ACCOUNT OF ROMANIAN POLITICAL POLICE (1968)

Abstract

The article represents a brief presentation of the political tensions of 1968, when the political police of the communist regime in Romania, named Securitate, celebrate 20 years since its establishment.

The main thesis of the article is that the Securitate tried to counter the criticisms of its activity over the fifth and sixth decades. The criticism was expressed public at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) on April 22-25 1968, when it was exposed, also, so-called “victories against the internal enemies of the communist regime”.

This action was directed from the highest command levels of Securitate. In anticipation of the 20th anniversary of its establishment, the president of the State Security Council, Ion Stănescu, ordered the central directorates and the county inspectorates to identify in the archives, in order to popularize them, the officers and non-commissioned officers who distinguished themselves in the battles on the defense of so-called “revolutionary conquests of the people”. The result of Ion Stănescu's initiative was a belated and rather approximate assessment of the confrontations with the partisans. Also, several photo albums reflecting the activity of the Ministry of the Interior were made.

Like 1956, the 1968 was a year of crisis for the communist system in Europe. Paradoxically, perhaps, although the moment marked the end of illusions for many Communists, the danger of the system's dissolution was now less significant than it had been twelve years earlier.

The political upheavals of 1968 is a topic often approached in the last years historiography, but still insufficiently known and explained.

Keywords: *Securitate/Security, Romanian Communist Party, political prisoners, internal enemies, political account, Ion Gavrilă, Ion Stănescu, Romania.*

For more or less explicit reasons, the communist regime in Romania has always been concerned with accounts. However, this concern was not limited, as would have been natural, to drawing up statistics in order to assess the state of the nation and the (non-)achievement of the set objectives, and then to set other objectives, in line with the conclusions drawn from the previous account. On the contrary, the accounts were most often seen (at least from the point of view of the ordinary spectator, who rarely had access to the concrete, non-ideologised information of the accounts) as an opportunity to (only) show off achievements, to defend the regime and to proclaim its superiority. This generalised habit inevitably led (especially under pressure from political contexts) to similar behaviour on the part of the Securitate/Security (the political police of the communist regime, set up in 1948). In fact, in the early days of this institution, even... the «socialist race» in this field was started, as in a report of November 1949 a «ranking» of the Regional Security Directorates was compiled, "taking into account the number of detainees investigated and sent to court" (Oprea, 2002: 108–112). Moreover, it was openly stated that the class enemy, if it did not exist, would have to be invented, since its absence would be tantamount to an "absolutely unscientific thing". For example, Colonel Alexandru Gutan, at a meeting with the Regional and County Security Commanders in March 1950: «Comrades, we have almost reached the end of our discussion. A conclusion must be made to these discussions. Comrades, in my speech, in the conclusion I am making, I will not come up with new things that you have not heard, that you do not know. As a picture after this whole Conference, which is already lasting for the fourth day today, let us see what lies before us, what lies before Security, what is the central task, the general objective of Security, with what forces we are setting out to achieve them and under what circumstances. You have heard about the sharpening of the class struggle and this topic is not new to you, it is not new, as we all feel its effects, it is the class struggle. But within this class struggle, every day we are however entering deeper into a more acute phase of the class struggle. We are entering a more acute phase as new progress is being made in our country, as new changes, new transformations are being introduced, as we move towards socialism. A whole series of problems have already begun on the Party line, on

the Government line, on the line of the General Confederation of Labour (C.G.M.), on the production line, a whole series of new problems, changes, transformations, are already on the agenda. First of all, we are facing a more profound strengthening of the socialist transformation of our agriculture, with more and more collective farms starting to be set up. In this respect, the Central Committee (C.C.) and the government have taken precise decisions, they have already mapped out the way forward. That is a few words on agriculture. We have the State Plan, in connection with the achievement of the State Plan, the Government has again taken a number of decisions, the C.G.M. has also taken a number of decisions. The implementation of all these measures for us the Security means a whole series of tasks, of professional work. There is no decision, no transformation, no economic, social or political event, which for us, Security, does not represent an objective, a concern. The class enemy is in charge with this. If they were not concerned with all these transformations, changes, all these events, we would have no work to do. If they simply left us alone like that, we would not have work to do, we would go on the road of socialist construction quietly and peacefully, which is absolutely unscientific, which in reality cannot happen. In reality the changes, the transformations, they go on a familiar road of leaps, of clashes, of increasingly sharp collisions. The more we realise, the more we strike blows at the enemy, the more he loses ground in our country, the more the enemy's hatred against us grows, the more he seeks new means to hinder, to stop us from our quest. We must prevent precisely his attempt to stop us, to undermine. The enemy does not act in isolation in our country, he is not left abandoned. (...) Why did I want to show you this? Because I thought that the weather outside was warming up, that the forests would soon be greener, that it would become easier, and last summer we also had a general aspect of the battle becoming more intense, and under these conditions we can expect this battle to become more fierce again, for this situation to become more acute. We must consciously be aware of what we have in front of us, so that we are prepared to meet these situations, these circumstances, and to meet them not as firefighters, as we were last summer, but to meet them as the People's Security Forces. In order to how to prevent all these situations, we must foresee them. That is why I put this picture before you and why

I wanted to show you these situations. This means strengthening our ranks, reviewing our work, reviewing all the directives, all the instructions we have received. This means preparing ourselves» (Oprea, 2002: 195-198). We note that Alexandru Gutan had been invested with the role of «moderator» of the discussions during the meeting mentioned above. In this capacity, he drew the speakers' attention to the fact that, "in general, I ask you to take the floor to such an extent that by noon we can finish, so that you can leave and leave me time to speak" (Oprea, 2002: 174). The result is a peculiar example of ineptitude, quite representative however of the atmosphere in which the Security Police's account sessions took place, at least in that period, and an illustration of the "banality of the baffle gab" in the communist regime.

In what follows, we will not insist on this type of account, but only on the 1968 moment. It was a special moment for Romania, both internally and externally. Internally, because of the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (P.C.R.) on April 22–25, 1968, when the crimes of the Security during the Dej era were discussed and the Minister of the Home Office, Alexandru Drăghici (in office since 1952), was dismissed from all positions and expelled from the party. Moreover, on the occasion of a visit to the University of Cluj, Nicolae Ceaușescu, the new secretary general of the Romanian Communist Party, elected in 1965, repeated to the university students, words capable of instilling in them an overflowing optimism: «Don't be afraid anymore» (Duplan, Giret, 1997: 385). Although throughout this period the focus was mainly on the crimes and abuses against communists and left-wing personalities, with no attempt to rehabilitate victims of other political orientations, as things had begun to happen in Budapest in the summer of 1956, the hopes of those concerned were very high, and even the follow-up documents drawn up by the Security prove it. Many of the «counter-revolutionaries» convicted during the Dej period believed that the massive rehabilitation of former political prisoners would follow, the delay being merely a tactic of the P.C.R. to appease Moscow's hostile reactions. In Imre Nagy's Hungary, too, rehabilitation had begun with Laszlo Rajk (communist, former Minister of the Home Office, a figure somewhat similar to Lucretiu Pătrășcanu). Externally, the situation was special because of the invasion of Czechoslovakia (which was

experimenting with 'socialism with a human face') by the united forces of the Warsaw Treaty and the uncertain situation in Romania, which had opposed the intervention.

On August 30, 1968, the Security celebrated its 20th anniversary under this name (until 1948, the political police had been known as the Siguranță/Safety, inherited from the interwar period). To mark the anniversary, the President of the State Security Council, Ion Stănescu, ordered the central directorates and county inspectorates to identify in the archives, for the purpose of popularising them, "figures of security heroes killed on duty, as well as of other officers and non-commissioned officers who distinguished themselves in the fight against the enemy in defence of the people's revolutionary conquests" (A.M.I., D.M.R.U., 34, 11). These instructions were reinforced, after a while, by the telegraphic order of the vice-president of the State Security Council (C.S.S.), Nicolae Doicaru, who lowered the lower limit of the reference period from 1948 to August 23, 1944 and specified the categories of personnel targeted for popularization, including «party, state and public members and activists assassinated by counter-revolutionary elements» (A.M.I., D.M.R.U., 34, 12). Nicolae Doicaru's order is dated August 23, 1968. Two days later, Ion Stănescu signed an order declaring heroes a number of officers and non-commissioned officers who had fallen in the fighting with the anti-communist resistance. The President of the CSS did not miss this opportunity to point out that the actions of the Security Service fell within the limits set by the policy of the Romanian Labour Party (the official name of the Communist Party between 1948 and 1965): «In carrying out the policy of the Romanian Communist Party and of our socialist state of defending the revolutionary conquests of the Romanian people, the state security organs have honourably fulfilled their mission of preventing, discovering and liquidating the enemy plots and actions directed against the Socialist Republic of Romania» (A.M.I., D.M.R.U., 34, 1–3).

The result of Ion Stănescu's initiative was a belated and rather approximate assessment of the confrontations with the partisans. What caused the Security to suddenly rediscover the «gang problem»? In my opinion, this phenomenon was not due to a sudden interest of the institution in history (be it its own history), but to a need to react against

the conclusions of the P.C.R. plenary session of April 1968. Although Nicolae Ceaușescu took advantage of the situation to consolidate his personal power, and the rehabilitations were partial, by tending to ignore the sufferings of those "on the other side of the political fence" (the assurances of respect for «socialist legality» in the future were just as one-sided), the Security felt obliged to respond, and could obviously only do so indirectly. Avoiding open polemics with the party, the intention was to demonstrate the usefulness of the institution and its merits in establishing and defending the socialist order. A reading of the documents reinforces the impression that the account of August 1968 was largely a response to the accusations made against the Security at the Plenary Session of the Romanian Communist Party. In a summary of August 6, 1968, it is even explicitly stated: «From the data presented by the units, it can also be concluded that there has not been sufficient concern for the knowledge and study of the facts and positive aspects of the work carried out by the subordinate staff over the years, nor is there a clear record of those who lost their lives during the execution of various missions» (A.M.I., D.M.R.U., 34, 448–472). The reports of the various units also reveal, at times, frustration at the insufficient rewarding of the military staff who distinguished themselves during battles or arrests related to partisan activity.

From a *Note* of the Personnel Department of the State Security Council (dated August 28, 1968), we learn that the events dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Security were more extended; it also mentions an exhibition dedicated to the heroes of the Security (A.M.I., D.M.R.U., 34, 406–409). We were also able to consult, thanks to the kind permission of the management of the M.J.R., some albums with photographs which reflect the activity of the Ministry of Internal Affairs/The Home Office. These albums are maintained in the same spirit of declaring a number of soldiers as heroes, without any concretization of their deeds. After all, the situation of the security troops was paradoxical: practically no one knew what they were fighting for, who the enemies so often mentioned were. It was not known whether these enemies were real or just hypothetical. The citizens could not find out more either from the official positions or from the historiography of the time, which remained at the level of general and sporadic state-

ments, out of a kind of superstitious fear (only documents published in the last few decades have made the idea of enemies more concrete).

The albums are not dated, but they were certainly subsequent to the account made in August 1968, according to some documents. Directly related to this account is the *Album of Heroes of the Ministry of Internal Affairs*, which contains photographs of the fallen, 55 in all, without any explanation. Among them we found many names known from the documents of the mentioned account, but also some later victims (*post-mortem* major Ștefănescu Virgiliu, who died in 1970, or *post-mortem* colonel Mocanu Petru – 1971), whose deaths certainly have nothing to do with the «gangs» problem.

The album with aspects of the activity of the Securitate Troops, also undated, but dating from the period when Ion Stănescu was President of the State Security Council (from 1967), was more special. The photographs reproduced in this album were obviously taken in 1968-1969, therefore after the known account. On tab 1, we see a picture of an armed soldier (with a machine gun in the "shoulder" position), against a background of cranes and construction sites, with the following caption next to it: «The Security troops, created and led by the Romanian Communist Party, educated in the spirit of patriotism and burning love for the working people, have made an outstanding contribution throughout the entire period of the struggle against reactionary elements, in defence of the revolutionary conquests of the working people. They are ready at any time, at the call of the Party and the Government, of the State Security Council, to carry out the combat missions entrusted to them». On tab 3, a panel of honour with the caption «Glory to the Heroes of the Security Troops» is photographed. On the panel we can see the coat of arms of the Socialist Republic of Romania and photographs of five heroes (now known from documents): Dumitrache I. Gheorghe, Orosz N. Ioan, Belate Alexandru, Vălimăreanu D. Mihai and Popescu I. Ioan. Under the panel, two tricolour flags framed with two red flags and another caption: «Imbued with a deep patriotic feeling and boundless devotion to the cause of socialism, the heroes of the security troops who fell in the line of duty, have enriched with new deeds the fighting traditions of the Romanian people». The photo has no explanatory text. On the same tab of the album there are four other photographs with

equally vague explanatory texts: «Security subunit moving to the scene of action», «The battle order has been established», «Attack group in action», «Mission accomplished». There is no picture of the opponents, no explanation, but it seems to be a reconstruction of the murder of the Şuşman brothers, known members of the anti-communist resistance (1958).

The album also includes numerous photos of the troops' regular training. For example, the phases of a mountain application (tab 5), including a photo of a soldier climbing a cliff, with the explanatory text "Even the mountains don't stand in their way". Anti-communist resistance fighters, however, one might add, have been in their way for a long time. Moreover, at the time of the application, the famous resistance fighter Ion Gavrilă was still free, in a place completely unknown to the Security. Pictures reflecting a different kind of activity carried out by the security troops are also interjected: 'With the help of the tracking dog «short», the perpetrator of a murder was discovered in 1968 ' (tab 5). It is a fact that the security troops carried out numerous missions in the service of the civilian population in the event of accidents and disasters after the end of the fighting in the mountains, but also in parallel with it. The archives I have consulted prove this, which should be dealt with in a separate work.

In the second part of the album, the effort to «positivise» the work in relation to Communist Party policy is visible (the link with the 1968 plenary session thus becomes transparent once again). Thus, under the caption «Living political work – closely related to the needs of the troop training process» soldiers working on construction sites are depicted. Indeed, in addition to the decrease in the number of troops in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the times «after the fighting» looked increasingly mundane for them. The use of troops in day-to-day economic work would increasingly become state policy. Finally, on tab 35 there is a photograph showing the panel of honour on tab 3 and several soldiers from the security troops, one of whom is in full display. Explanatory text: «Secretary of the party organisation tells the military about the combat traditions of the security troops». But lessons of this kind were increasingly weak and lacking in substance.

As for the definition of the enemy, I found a relatively clear one in relation to the language of the time, in the *Historical Register of the Security Troops Command*:

«The Ministry of Internal Affairs has regarded and still regards its troops, gendarmes, border guards and firefighters, as troops that by their mission have an overwhelming role in the work of democratic governance of the Romanian People's Republic.

These troops are those who are always, day after day, hour after hour, on the watch and fighting against the enemies of the Romanian People's Republic: reactionaries, saboteurs, instigators, alarmists, defectors, terrorists, smugglers, arsonists and destroyers of property, speculators and businessmen, criminals and law-breakers, propagandists of obscurantism, tools of enslaving imperialism, fascist remnants, plotters against the democratic regime, plotters of discord between nationalities, defamers of friendly and allied democratic states, etc.

The border guards and gendarmes are the first to fight, with the sacrifice of their lives, against the attempts of enemies inside and outside the country to enslave the Romanian people again.

This is why these troops must be “elite”, in the true sense of the word and in all areas of their activity: political education, training, discipline, appointment, equipment, accommodation, food, etc.» (A.C.N.J., *Historical Register of the Security Troops Command*, entry dated February 18, 1948).

To a large extent, although the above definition dates back to 1948, it fitted the situation created by the external context of 1968, due to which the state leadership attached greater importance to the armed forces, primarily to equipping them with modern and, to a much greater extent, domestically produced weapons. Within the new strategy, the security troops had a well-established 'elite' role (communist misgivings about anything reminiscent of inter-war society meant that this word had to be put in inverted commas!). The increased stability of the regime made it possible to refocus troops more on external «targets» and to narrow the categories of internal enemies.

Like 1956, 1968 was a year of crisis for the communist system in Europe. Paradoxically, perhaps, although the moment marked the end of illusions for many Communists, the danger of the system's dissolu-

tion was now less significant than it had been twelve years earlier. On the other hand, the Prague Spring unequivocally formulated the idea of reconciling socialism with humanism. Although suppressed by armed force by the Warsaw Treaty states (with the exception of Romania), this goal has left the illicit zone, remaining a subject of «unofficial» (sometimes quasi-subversive) discussions on the grounds of «inappropriateness», often in the spirit of "diplomacy that clenches its fists, but clenches them under the table" (as Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej put it).

In this context, the communist regime in Romania seemed to have a new beginning, and it was difficult to foresee the bottom into which it would gradually sink after 1971. For its part, the Security also tried to take advantage of the special context created in the autumn of 1968. Unfortunately, the manoeuvre did not include the necessary gesture of repudiation or, at least, of distancing oneself from the bloody history of the institution but, on the contrary, it tried to (re)valorise as positively as possible as many of the 'successes' of the pre-1964 era. The assessment of the battles in the mountains, carried out on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Security, is illustrative from this point of view.

However, the circumstances in which the communist regime gained unexpected popularity a short time ago, thanks to its resistance to Soviet interventionism, was also indirectly to the advantage of the Security, by legitimising those parts of it which, then and in the following period, served the national interest, being considered by the majority of citizens as continuators of the interwar intelligence services.

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