

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OPTIONS IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

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Abstract: In the interwar period, as Romania crystallized its conception of a national state, the options for political, economic and social development matured. The two decades (1919-1939) represented an era full of vitality and creativity, in which Romanians from all social strata experienced new ideas in most areas of life. But, at the same time, it was also an era of disputes and divisions, because the Romanians were forced to reorganize institutions established a long time ago and to face the problems of a bourgeois society on the rise, on the way towards urbanization, a phenomenon common to all of Europe.

In politics, the main concern was the survival and strengthening of parliamentary democracy faced with serious challenges from the forces of authoritarianism.

From an economic point of view, agriculture remained the basis of the Romanian economy, continued to be the main occupation of the majority of the population and provided significant amounts of money through exports. At the same time, industry has made substantial progress, constantly increasing its contribution to national income. Regarding the social structure, as before the First World War, the peasantry constituted the majority of the population. The urban working class continued to grow as industry and commerce increasingly attracted the interest of politicians. However, the social category that left its mark on the interwar period was the bourgeoisie, which, although it was reduced in number during this period, managed to become the leading force in both political and economic life.

Keywords: interwar period, democratic institutions, political, industry, social structures.

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As a result of the 1918 Union of Bessarabia, Bucovina, Transylvania and Banat, Romania changed its geopolitical status in Europe, becoming a medium-

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sized country with a total area of 295,049 km² and a population of approximately 14.7 million inhabitants¹.

A characteristic feature of the agitations and regroupings that took place on the political scene in the first years after the First World War was the disappearance of the Conservative Party, a traditional exponent of landlordism, which for several decades had been one of the partners of the so-called “rotational government” from the reign of King Carol I². The profits made by a part of the bourgeoisie in the conjuncture of the war years and the period that followed, the expansion and consolidation of the control of the bourgeoisie over national life after the completion of the Romanian unitary national state, the growth of banking capital and its participation in the development of industry and transport contributed to the strengthening substantial change in the positions of the bourgeoisie in relation to landlordism, whose political and economic strength has constantly weakened, especially following the application of the agrarian and electoral reform laws³.

In November 1919, the first universal suffrage elections in the history of Romania took place, following which a single Parliament was elected, and Alexandru Vaida-Voevod was appointed to head the Council of Ministers⁴. The existence of the Parliament, which brought together the representatives of citizens from all over the country, made the maintenance of provincial administrative institutions unnecessary and ensured a better functionality of the state apparatus⁵.

During the analyzed period, the system of political parties diversified⁶. Thus, alongside the old ruling parties, the People’s (League’s) Party, the Peasants’ Party, the Nationalist-Democratic Party, the Social-Democratic Party, which became the Socialist Party, carried out their activities. They were joined by the parties from the united provinces: the National Party of the Romanians from Transylvania, the Peasant Party from Bessarabia, the Democratic Party of the Union from Bucovina, which in the period 1920-1923 merged with parties from the Old Kingdom. In addition, national minority parties were also established: the German Party, the

¹ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII – *România întregită (1918–1940)*, coordinator: Prof. univ. dr. Ioan Scurtu, secretary: dr. Petre Otu, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2003, p. 31.

² Marcela Sălăgean, *Introducere în istoria contemporană a României*, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj University Press, 2013, p. 21; For the disappearance of conservative political organizations, see Ion Bulei, *Conservatori și conservatorism în România*, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2000, pp. 653–659.

³ Mircea Mușat, Ion Ardeleanu, *Viața politică în România 1918-1921*, Bucharest, Political Publishing, 1971, p. 35.

⁴ Ioan Scurtu, Ion Bulei, *Democrația la români: 1866–1938*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1990, pp. 101–102; Anastasie Iordache, *Ion I.C. Brătianu*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing, 1994, pp. 467–468; Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Partidului Țărănesc (1918–1926)*, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 2002, pp. 42–47.

⁵ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, p. 39.

⁶ Mircea Mușat, *România după Marea Unire*, vol. II, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1986, p. 395.

Hungarian Party, the Union of Jews, etc. Later, left-wing (Romanian Communist Party) and right-wing (Christian National Defense League, Legion of the Archangel Michael, etc.) parties also appeared. In this way, the political regime in Romania evolved along a democratic path, specific to the vast majority of European states⁷.

The period 1922–1927 was the “era” of the greatest liberal successes. The dominant element within the National Liberal Party was the financial oligarchy led by the Brătianu family⁸. In order to expand its organizations in the united provinces, the National-Liberal Party merged with the Peasant Party from Bessarabia and the Democratic Union Party from Bucovina. In Transylvania, the liberals attracted the collaboration of some of the personalities of the Romanian elite, Ion I.C. Brătianu being seconded by other leading members: Vintilă Brătianu, I.G. Duca, Constantin I.C. Brătianu, Gheorghe Brătianu, Constantin Angelescu, Gheorghe Tătărescu and others. The most important newspaper of the party was “Viitorul”.

In November 1927, the death of Ion I.C. Brătianu left a huge void in the leadership of this political party. The head of the party was taken over by Vintilă Brătianu, but in November 1928, the liberals withdrew from the leadership of the country. The disappearance of Ion I.C. Brătianu was followed by the manifestation among the liberals, of several dissident groups⁹. Although the party went through a process of reorganization, the year 1930 continued to be marked by splits¹⁰. In December 1930, I.G. Duca was elected president of the National-Liberal Party, who tried to restore his prestige, but was assassinated three years later by elements of the extreme right¹¹. The National-Liberal Party returned to the leadership of the

⁷ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria contemporană a României (1918-2005)*, Bucharest, „România de Măine” Foundation Publishing, 2005, p. 13.

⁸ For the context of the establishment of the liberals in power, see: Ioan Ciupercă, *Opoziție și putere în România anilor 1922–1928*, Iași, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing, 1994, pp. 64–66.

⁹ Among them was that of the former Minister of Justice Ioan (Jean) Th. Florescu who, in 1929, established the “Omul Liber” group, and in November 1931, founded the Liberal-Democratic Party, a party that failed to establish itself in the Romanian political life; Ioan Scurtu, *Ion I.C. Brătianu*, Bucharest, Museion Publishing, 1992, p. 97.

¹⁰ Gheorghe Brătianu formed “PNL – Gheorghe Brătianu” and Constantin Argetoianu, who also left the liberals, founded his own political group, entitled “Agrarian Union”; Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner (coordinator), *Istoria Partidului Național Liberal*, word before by Constantin Bălăceanu-Stolnici, Bucharest, Bic All Publishing, 2000, p. 227; Ion Bitoleanu, *Din istoria României moderne, 1922–1926*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1981, p. 55.

¹¹ Sorin Iftimi, *I.G. Duca (1879–1933). Medalion biografic*, in “Annals of the University of Craiova”, History Series, Year XI, no. 11/2006, p. 186; see also, Gheorghe Matei, *Cum a fost asasinat I.G. Duca?*, in “Magazin istoric”, no. 3/1967, p. 13; Francisco Veiga, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier (1919–1941). Mistica ultranaționalismului*, translation by Marian Ștefănescu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1993, p. 198. For the entire activity of I.G. Duca, see Eliza Campus, *I.G. Duca (1879–1933)*, in „Diplomați iluștri”, vol. V, Bucharest, Political Publishing, 1986, pp. 367–431.

country in 1934, but King Carol II appointed Gheorghe Tătărescu, a member of the “liberal youth”, as prime minister and not the party’s leader, Constantin (Dinu) I.C. Brătianu¹².

At the beginning of the interwar period, the National Liberal Party had no strong political rivals, which protected it from external pressures and made internal tensions less obvious. This situation changed in 1926, as a result of the appearance on the Romanian political scene of the National-Peasant Party, resulting from the merger of the National Party of Transylvania (led by Iuliu Maniu) with the Peasant Party of the Old Kingdom (led by Ion Mihalache)¹³. Iuliu Maniu was elected president of this party, other prominent representatives being Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, Ion Mihalache, Nicolae Lupu etc. Although it had a wider electoral base than that of the liberals, the National-Peasant Party only governed in the periods 1928–1931 and 1932–1933¹⁴. Their main press organ was the newspaper “Dreptatea”. Led by morally and patriotically outstanding political leaders, but lacking the political skill of the liberals, the national-peasants made several tactical mistakes, such as the 1937 electoral alliance with the extreme right. Added to these was the lack of chance to be in government during the great economic crisis¹⁵.

The political program of the National-Peasant Party included a whole series of modern stipulations, among which: ensuring citizens’ rights and freedoms, an administrative reform based on the principle of decentralization and local autonomy, removing justice from the influence of political factors, developing education (especially the agricultural), granting credits for peasants, developing industry based on the country’s energy resources, supporting peasant industry, stimulating trade, monetary stabilization, etc¹⁶.

The National Peasant Party proposed to pay special attention to agriculture, starting from the concept that Romania was and should remain an agrarian country. After the loss of government, the National-Peasant Party remained one of the strongest opponents of the authoritarian regimes, campaigning for the maintenance

¹² Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner (coordinator), *op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹³ For the main aspects of the program of the National-Peasant Party, see: Ioan Scurtu (coordinator), Theodora Stănescu-Stanciu, Georgiana Margareta Scurtu, *România între anii 1918–1940. Documente și materiale*, Bucharest, University of Bucharest Publishing, 2001, pp. 59–62.

¹⁴ Stelian Neagoe, *Istoria guvernelor României de la începuturi-1859 până în zilele noastre-1995*, Bucharest, Machiavelli Publishing, 1995, pp. 95–100, 103–109.

¹⁵ Marius Mureșan, *Guvernările Partidului Național-Țărănesc din timpul marii crize economice*, in “Hiperboreea. Journal of History”, vol. I, no. 2, Bucharest, 2014, pp. 189–200; see also: Vasile Arimia, Ion Ardeleanu, Alexandru Cebuc, *Istoria Partidului Național Țărănesc. Documente, 1926–1947*, Bucharest, ARC 2000 Publishing, 1994, p. 173; Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Partidului Național Țărănesc*, 2nd edition, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing, 1994, p. 168.

¹⁶ For the political program of the National-Peasant Party from October 1926, see: Gheorghe Sbârnă, *Partidele politice din România, 1918–1940. Programe și orientări doctrinare*, Bucharest, Sylvi Publishing, 2001, pp. 146–154.

of the democratic system based on the provisions of the 1923 Constitution¹⁷. In turn, the party was not spared from dissensions and rivalries, a part of the personalities from its composition moving to other parties or forming their own political groups¹⁸.

In addition to the two major political parties mentioned, other political groups also tried to lead the country, such as: the People's Party (led by marshal Alexandru Averescu, who was in government in the periods 1920–1921 and 1926–1927)¹⁹, the Nationalist-Democratic Party of the historian Nicolae Iorga (1931–1932)²⁰ and the National-Christian Party of Octavian Goga and A.C. Cuza (1937–1938)²¹.

Due to external influences, far-left parties (the Romanian Communist Party)²² and far-right parties (the Legionary Movement) appeared in Romania as well, parties that in the interwar period never managed to win the necessary votes to be able to come to power. Considering the political programs and ideologies they promoted²³, these parties were outlawed several times²⁴.

The main aspects of internal and external policy were included in a wide national debate regarding the development paths that Romania had to follow. The question was whether Romania should follow the Western model and thus quickly join the modern European states or preserve its peasant, agrarian and orthodox traditions and, in this way, remain faithful to itself, or whether there was a third way, which it offered Romanians the opportunity to preserve all that was best in their traditional way of life, giving them the opportunity to participate in the general economic and social progress of Europe²⁵. The issues under discussion attracted politicians and sociologists with the most diverse ideological convictions in a wide effervescent intellectual debate which, through its enthusiasm, constituted

¹⁷ Florin Ionuț Stancu, *Modernizarea administrativă a României din perspectiva Constituției din 1923 și a legilor de organizare administrativă*, in „Stat și societate în Europa”, vol. IV, coordinators: Mihai Ghițulescu and Lucian Dindirică, Târgoviște, „Cetatea de Scaun” Publishing, 2012, p. 174.

¹⁸ Thus, Nicolae Lupu founded a new peasant party, proposing to restore the old party with the same name and Eugen Filipescu switched to the People's Party; Marcela Sălăgean, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ For the constitution of the People's Party, see: Ioan Scurtu (coordinator), Theodora Stănescu-Stanciu, Georgiana Margareta Scurtu, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁰ For the program of the Nationalist-Democratic Party, adopted at the February 1928 Congress, see: Gheorghe Sbârna, *op. cit.*, pp. 210–214.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 215–219 (The political program of the National Christian Party).

²² Unlike other European states, the influence of left-wing parties on Romanian political life in the interwar period was very limited.

²³ It should be mentioned here that the extreme left promoted a profoundly anti-national ideology, while the extreme right promoted intolerance, anti-semitism and anti-westernism.

²⁴ The Romanian Communist Party was banned by the liberal government led by Ion I.C. Brătianu in April 1924, while the Legionary Movement (the Iron Guard) was outlawed by the government of I.G. Duca in December 1933.

²⁵ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *Istoria României*, revised and added edition, Bucharest, Corint Educațional Publishing, 2014, p. 347.

the essence of the interwar period. In this way, several groups were distinguished, among which the most important were the Europeanists (neoliberalism), the traditionalists (nationalism) and the peasants²⁶.

In the first decade of the interwar period, the National Liberal Party considerably strengthened its economic base, being the main beneficiary of the acceleration of the country's development process. At the same time, it should be noted that this party and especially its president, Ion I.C. Brătianu, had a broad, coherent and firm vision on the organization and development of the Romanian unitary national state. The imposition of a certain model of evolution – the one predicted by the liberals – was made in the context of a fierce political struggle, in which the very form of government was put into question. The National-Liberal Party, which represented the interests of the big industrial and banking bourgeoisie, succeeded in subordinating, for the most part, even the institution of the monarchy²⁷.

The neoliberal concept, with a European nuance, which placed the individual at the center of society, had a significant evolution after the First World War. Neoliberalism emphasized the intervention of the state, appreciating that the general interest came before the individual interest²⁸. This concept was promoted by famous personalities, such as: Ștefan Zeletin, Eugen Lovinescu, Mihail Manoilescu, Vintilă Brătianu and others. They made important contributions to the theory and practice of industrialization. In Eugen Lovinescu's opinion, expressed in the work "History of Modern Romanian Civilization" (3 volumes, 1924-1925), Romanian society modernized as a result of contact with the Western world, however, in the interwar period, a selectivity of the values that were adopted was imposed. Therefore, synchronism did not mean imitation, but the integration of local society into the life of Europe²⁹. In turn, Ștefan Zeletin supported in his works "Romanian Bourgeoisie. Its historical origin and place" (1925) and "Neoliberalism. Studies on the history and politics of the Romanian bourgeoisie" (1927), the fact that the modernization process had its origin in the Romanian society after 1829, and after the Union it accelerated, the future being in industrialization and urbanization³⁰.

²⁶ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, pp. 40–41.

²⁷ In many of the industrial enterprises and banks owned by the liberals, the king had important stakes, so that an identity of interests was created between the liberal bourgeoisie and the sovereign, which provided the material basis for their close political collaboration; See Ioan Scurtu, *Contribuții privind viața politică din România. Evoluția formei de guvernământ în istoria modernă și contemporană*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1988, pp. 166–167.

²⁸ Nicolae-Emanuel Dobrei, Andreea Molocea, *Liberalismul*, in "Ideologii politice actuale", Mihaela Miroiu (coordinator), Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2012, p. 48.

²⁹ Alexandru Radu, *Eugen Lovinescu – de la sociologia beletristică la modelul cultural al modernității românești*, in "Revista Română de Sociologie", new series, Year XI, no. 5–6, Bucharest, 1998, pp. 446–447.

³⁰ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, p. 41.

The representatives of neoliberalism developed the theory regarding protectionism, which in their conception acquired a special scope, embodied in the formula “by ourselves”, of superior valorization of national resources, primarily through our own forces. They paid special attention to the role of the state in the economy, especially after a war that caused great damage to the country and in a stage of consolidation of Romania as a whole³¹. For Ștefan Zeletin, the Constitution of 1923 represented the official act of birth of Romanian neoliberalism, the political regime having a democratic character being based on the principle of separation of powers in the state³².

Neoliberalism claimed that the decisive role in the development of Romania belonged to the autochthonous bourgeoisie, the industrial-banking one in particular. The motto of the liberals was not and could not be conceived as an exclusivist attitude, to remove foreign capital, but as a collaboration with it under more advantageous conditions than before. Promoter of this policy, Vintilă Brătianu admitted the foreign competition through in-kind deliveries, especially of machines, equipment and raw materials that Romania did not possess. However, foreign capital could also come in the form of state loans, without affecting the country's sovereignty. According to him, the interest was to leave the domestic capital the ability to participate as much as possible in the development of the economy and to use the intervention of the state in the relationship with foreign finances³³.

For his part, Mihail Manoilescu openly proclaimed the necessity of protectionism and fought the agrarian orientations³⁴. What individualized and distinguished Mihail Manoilescu from the other industrialists of the 19th century and the interwar period, was the fact that, for the first time in the history of Romanian economic science, he put a personal doctrine on the basis of the theory of industrialization, new and in many ways original regarding protectionism and international trade³⁵. He attempted a quantification through scientific criteria according to which industrialization had to be carried out, he outlined a territorial and branch profile of industry in Romania, much closer to the real requirements and possibilities than those of other industrialists and he strove, as a dignitary, to reduce the existing gap between economic theory and practice³⁶. In his work,

³¹ Thomas Saalfeld, *The impact of the World Economic Crisis and political reactions*, in “Authoritarianism and Democracy in Europe, 1919–39. Comparative Analyses”, edited by Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell, Palgrave Publishers Ltd., 2002, p. 216.

³² Ștefan Zeletin, *Neoliberalismul. Studii asupra istoriei și politicii burgheziei române*, 3rd edition, preface by Ionel Nicu Sava, Bucharest, Editura Ziua Publishing, 2005, p. 84.

³³ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, pp. 42–43; Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner (coordinator), *op. cit.*, p. 208.

³⁴ Mihail Manoilescu, *Memorii*, vol. I, preface, notes and index by Valeriu Dinu, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing, 1993, p. 173.

³⁵ Sorin Șuteu, *Mihail Manoilescu și teoria protecționismului*, in „Revista de Management și Inginerie Economică”, vol. 15, no. 4, Cluj-Napoca, 2016, pp. 808–810.

³⁶ Mihail Manoilescu, *Forțele naționale productive și comerțul exterior. Teoria protecționismului și a schimbului internațional*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1986, pp. 150–160.

“La Roumanie économique”, published in 1921, he emphasized the need for industrialization in order to increase the national income. It was stated that in old Romania, large industry used 60,937 workers, who produced 9,000 lei per year per person, while agriculture used 3,106,725 people, who produced 410 lei per year per person. For the same number of people, large industry produced almost 23 times more than agriculture. These data clearly showed that Romania’s progress and modernization were conditioned by the development of industry³⁷.

Most of the writers grouped around the magazine “Viața românească” can also be considered Europeanists, with the clarification that they paid more attention to local realities than Lovinescu and Zeletin. First of all, they kept certain elements from the antebellum poporanist conception, a fact particularly evident in their opposition to large-scale industrialization. The prominent representatives were the literary critic Garabet Ibrăileanu and the sociologist Mihai Ralea, who carefully separated themselves from the radical agrarians, declaring themselves in favor of the triumph in Romania of the great principles of European liberalism (freedom and equal rights for all citizens) and for the spread of humanistic learning and technology of the more advanced West³⁸.

The Europeanists were opposed by personalities and groups who looked for Romania’s development models in the autochthonous past, real or imaginary. Traditionalists, in general, shared the belief in the predominantly rural character of Romania’s historical development and firmly opposed any “inorganic” institutional and cultural imports from the West. All of them were inspired by currents of ideas that had appeared in the intellectual life of Europe in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Among all the traditionalist currents of the interwar period, none had a greater influence on intellectual or cultural life and contributed more to the debate on Romania’s national development than the one created by the founders of the literary magazine “Gândirea”. Its representatives were attracted by speculative thinking, by mystical and religious experiences, by the primitive spirituality of folklore, and were eager to communicate their own ideas in a completely modern form³⁹. Nichifor Crainic was the representative of one of the two main currents within the “Gândirea” circle. A supporter of traditional values, he was alarmed by what he perceived as the continuous moral and spiritual decay of Romanian society and sought to change this trend in the opposite direction, predicting a return to the “authentic values” of the Romanian spirit, more precisely to the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy. The emphasis he placed on Orthodox spirituality differentiated

³⁷ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, p. 43.

³⁸ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

³⁹ Keith Hitchins, *România 1866–1947*, 4th edition, English translation by George G. Potra and Delia Răzdolescu, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 2013, p. 340.

his type of autochthonism from sowerism and poporanism, which had emphasized the cultural and economic means of national regeneration⁴⁰.

The poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga was the leading representative of the other main current within the “Gândirea” circle. He looked beyond orthodoxy, looking for even deeper sources of the autochthonous tradition and the most appropriate path of national development, having a more European approach to the national character and development paths⁴¹.

Along with Europeanism and traditionalism, there were other currents of ideas trying to find a third way of development, which would combine Romania’s agrarian heritage with the need to assimilate from Europe what was more useful to the peasant and in harmony with the culture of the village. Among all these currents, the peasants were the most consistent and effective supporters of a Romania in accordance with its “eminently agrarian character”. They pleaded for an economic and social system that they sought to base on local traditions and institutions, looking with suspicion at the bourgeoisie, industrial society and the city. Although the supporters of this current had massively borrowed poporanist elements, they were also strongly influenced by the advances in economic and sociological thinking from the interwar period⁴². The most original contribution they brought to Romanian social thinking was probably the systematic elaboration of the doctrine of agrarian Romania as a third world, located between capitalist individualism in the west and socialist collectivism in the east. This doctrine, in turn, was based on two fundamental assumptions: first, that the family household was a distinct mode of production and constituted the very foundation of the national economy, and second, that the existing system must be replaced by the “peasant state”, a political entity administered by and accountable to the majority of the population⁴³.

The peasant conception was based on the contributions of Virgil Madgearu, Constantin Stere, Ion Mihalache, Gheorghe Zane and others, who argued that Romania, like the other agrarian states, was evolving on a non-capitalist path, based on small peasant property. Unlike the pro-industrial positions, strongly supported politically by the National-Liberal Party, which considered the agrarian problem solved, in general terms, by applying the agrarian reform after the war, the Peasant Party and, then, the National-Peasant Party paid more attention for the

⁴⁰ Nichifor Crainic, *Ortodoxie și etnocrație*, introductory study, care of edition and notes by Constantin Schifirneț, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing, 1997, pp. 153–170.

⁴¹ Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, p. 346; For Lucian Blaga’s memories of the beginnings of „Gândirea” magazine, see: Emil Pintea, *Gândirea. Antologie literară*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing, 1992, pp. 425–426.

⁴² Viorel Crăciuneanu, *Teorii și doctrine economice de la Aristotel la Samuelson*, Bucharest, University Publishing, 2013, pp. 231–232.

⁴³ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

peasant household and agriculture⁴⁴. Peasantism supported the primacy of the peasantry, as a homogeneous and independent social category, with a special role in the further evolution of Romanian society. This conception predicted the improvement of the situation of the peasantry, its elevation to a material and spiritual life corresponding to a civilized state. Concern for the situation of the peasant household, for cooperation in various forms, for the granting of cheap credits, for the provision of cattle and tools, for the food and health of the peasant responded to urgent needs of the Romanian village. It was stated that, by applying the peasant doctrine and, then, the “peasant village”, as the most authentic expression of democracy, the lasting peasant household could be realized, based on “labour ownership”⁴⁵.

Between the two world wars, Romania witnessed striking contrasts between deeply rooted underdevelopment and the flourishing, even if uneven, of industrialization and urbanization. On the one hand, its economic and social structure largely preserved the configuration it had before the war. Agriculture remained the basis of the country’s economy, and its organization changed very little, despite the large-scale agrarian reform. The vast majority of the population continued to live in the countryside and to obtain their income mainly from agriculture⁴⁶. In international relations, Romania remained dependent on the Western states as a market for its agricultural products and raw materials, and as a source of various finished products and capital for investments⁴⁷.

Industry developed and became increasingly able to meet the needs of consumers, and imports of raw materials and semi-manufactured goods grew at a faster rate than those of finished goods. Even agriculture has shown signs of change: traditionally, it was based on the production of cereals, and now there has been a slight shift towards the cultivation of vegetables and industrial plants. In all branches of the economy, the state has assumed an increasingly pronounced leading role. Although it respected private ownership of land and the means of production and guaranteed private capital, either domestic or foreign, and the many advantages, the state had arrogated to itself the responsibility of planning and controlling the components of the national economy⁴⁸.

In the first interwar decade, the economic fate of Romania was in the hands of the liberals. The ideas of politicians regarding some fundamental problems of development were strongly influenced by the great theoretician of Romanian

⁴⁴ Virgil N. Madgearu, *Evoluția economiei românești după războiul mondial*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing, 1995, p. 91.

⁴⁵ *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, pp. 43–44; Viorel Crăciuneanu, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ Gheorghe Dobre, *Producția și consumul de cereale în România interbelică (1920–1939)*. *Caiet de studiu nr. 121*, Bucharest, 1987, p. 16 and the following.

⁴⁷ Vasile Pușcaș, Vasile Vesa (coordinators), *Dezvoltare și modernizare în România interbelică, 1919–1939. Culegere de studii*, Bucharest, Political Publishing, 1988, pp. 156–158.

⁴⁸ Keith Hitchens, *op. cit.*, p. 374.

neoliberalism, Ștefan Zeletin. Like him, the liberals attributed to the bourgeoisie the leading role in the transformation of the country into a modern European nation⁴⁹. The main promoter of Ștefan Zeletin's theories was Vintilă Brătianu, the one who held the finance portfolio in the liberal governments from 1922–1928 and who not only pursued economic goals, but was also concerned with the consolidation of the Romanian national state⁵⁰. Confident that under the leadership of the bourgeoisie and liberals, differences would gradually disappear as the economy developed, he predicted that ultimately a society free from social conflict would be created, based on an inclusive middle class, and state intervention for the achievement of these economic and social objectives was more than necessary⁵¹.

Manifesting nationalism in the economic field, the liberals were determined to share their power with foreigners as little as possible. Although they recognized the need to maintain good relations with the industrialized states of Europe, for the simple fact that they dominated international trade and financial markets, the liberals wanted to avoid economic subordination to the West and insisted that the infrastructure and the main industrial branches be in the hands of Romanians. In accordance with their motto, the liberals even flirted with the idea of financing their ambitious economic program exclusively with domestic capital⁵².

The National-Peasants, who came to power in 1928, pursued economic objectives apparently very different from those of the Liberals. Of course, their major interest was agriculture, but they also recognized the importance of a modern infrastructure and healthy finances. In order to implement their ambitious plans, they encouraged foreign investment under a policy that came to be known as "Open Gates to Foreign Capital". The motivation came partly from the awareness of the fact that domestic sources of capital were insufficient, but also from the desire to deal a blow to the power accumulated by the liberal industrial and financial oligarchy⁵³.

Agrarian reform, along with industrialization, had a significant role in determining economic development in the interwar period. The agrarian reforms promised in 1917 were carried out in 1918 and 1921 and had a different character from one province to another, in terms of some details, a fact that reflects the

⁴⁹ Ovidiu Buruiană, *Liberalii. Structuri și sociabilități politice liberale în România interbelică*, Iași, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing, 2013, pp. 76–77.

⁵⁰ Costin Murgescu, *Mersul ideilor economice la români. Epoca modernă*, vol. I, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, 1987, p. 392.

⁵¹ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

⁵² Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner (coordinator), *op. cit.*, p. 210; For the contribution of foreign capital to industry in interwar Romania, see Florin Georgescu, *Capitalul străin în industria românească interbelică*, in „Acta Moldaviae Meridionalis”, Yearbook of the County Museum „Ștefan cel Mare” from Vaslui, „Cutia Pandorei” Publishing, 2001–2003, pp. 388–389.

⁵³ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Partidului Național Țărănesc*, p. 53.

specific economic and social conditions in which each of them had evolved⁵⁴. In essence, the agrarian reform achieved a massive transfer of land from the property of large landlords to that of small households. About 6 million hectares of land were expropriated to be distributed to the peasants and about 1.4 million peasants received land. The most obvious result was the decrease in the number and size of large properties in favor of small and medium-sized households. But the change did not bring prosperity to agriculture because many properties were too small to be economically viable and continued to be divided by inheritance⁵⁵.

The effects of the land reform laws on the organization of agriculture are difficult to measure, but they do not seem to have radically changed the existing structures. The remaining large landowners used agricultural machinery and hired labor to a greater extent to compensate for the lack of work of the peasants. But over time there was a return to the pre-reform situation, as an increasing number of peasants were forced to lease land from landlords to supplement what they had received from expropriated estates, and thus returned to the state of economic dependence. And the permanent shortcomings in agriculture were not exclusively due to the agrarian reform. There were forces at work that determined the economic development of Romania that had very little to do with the legislation of 1918-1921, and among these were the rapid growth of the population, the permanent fragmentation of peasant properties through inheritance and partial sales, the fluctuations of the international market, the slow development of industry and the Bucharest government's own economic priorities. The agrarian reform did not decisively affect the preponderance of cereal production in Romanian agriculture either, although the tendency, within different categories of peasants, to diversify crops was manifested. However, in 1939, grains occupied 83.5% of arable land, compared with 84.7% in 1927⁵⁶.

In the 1920s, the industry experienced a rapid and substantial recovery after the destruction caused by the war. Its progress owed a lot to the liberals and the new provinces, especially Transylvania and Banat, which contributed significantly to the increase in productivity. The dynamism of this period is suggested by the increase in production between 1924 and 1928, in mining by 189% and in the manufacturing industry by 188%⁵⁷. The development of the oil industry, stimulated by capital investments, especially foreign, was spectacular. Production increased from 968,000 tons in 1918 to 5.8 million tons in 1930, Romania occupying sixth

⁵⁴ For the agrarian reform legislation in the Old Kingdom, Transylvania and Bucovina, see D. Șandru, *Reforma agrară din 1921 în România*, Bucharest, Academy Publishing, 1975, pp. 42–79.

⁵⁵ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁵⁶ Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, pp. 391–392.

⁵⁷ Mircea Baron, Oana Dobre-Baron, *Caracteristici ale mineritului românesc din perioada interbelică*, in "Annales Universitatis Apulensis", Series Historica, no. 4–5, Alba Iulia, Mega Publishing, 2000–2001, pp. 191–193.

place worldwide⁵⁸. Also, the metallurgical industry experienced an impressive development, with steel production increasing from 38,000 tons in 1925 to 144,000 tons in 1928⁵⁹. The promising development of the industry was temporarily halted by the economic crisis, although between 1934 and 1938, after the industry countered the effects of the world depression, it reached new levels of productivity. By the end of the interwar period, many branches of industry had progressed sufficiently to be able to meet almost all domestic needs for food, textiles, and chemicals⁶⁰.

Despite the impressive growth of several branches of industry, the basic economic structure of the country has not changed radically. In 1939, 78% of the working population continued to rely on agriculture as their main source of income, while only 10% were employed in industry. Romania was still dependent on imports for industrial equipment and the supply of a wide range of goods⁶¹.

The Romanian society of the third decade differed significantly from that of the pre-war period. First of all, the population was larger and more diverse from an ethnic point of view⁶². Population growth was the result of a high birth rate, almost double that of western and northern Europe, and a slight decline in the death rate. However, the death rate remained the highest in Europe⁶³. From an ethnic point of view, Romanians formed the substantial majority of the population; in 1930, they totaled 71.9% of the total, while the largest ethnic minority, the Hungarians, represented 7.2%, followed by Germans, 4.1%, Jews, 4%, and Ukrainians, 3.2%⁶⁴.

After 1918, the life of Romanians became much more complex and differentiated, depending on the living environment (urban or rural), material condition or mentality. In general, daily life oscillated between traditionalism and modernity. While in the rural environment traditions prevailed, in the urban

⁵⁸ *Enciclopedia României*, coordinator: Dimitrie Gusti, vol. III – *Economia națională. Cadre și producție*, Bucharest, The National Printing Office, 1939, p. 650.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 850–851.

⁶⁰ Marcela Sălăgean, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–63.

⁶¹ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

⁶² In 1930, when the only complete census of the interwar period was carried out, the total population of Romania was 18,025,237 inhabitants, a figure that represented an increase of approximately 2.5 million compared to the estimated population in 1920; The figures are taken from *Populațiunea actuală a României. Cifrele preliminare ale recensământului dela 29 decembrie 1930*, Bucharest, 1931, Appendix no. 1, p. 31. According to other sources, the total population of the country in regard to the same general census was 18,057,028 inhabitants; See *Istoria românilor*, vol. VIII, p. 33; Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, 3rd edition revised and added, Bucharest, Univers Encyclopaedic Publishing, 2002, p. 300.

⁶³ *Populațiunea actuală a României ...*, p. 29.

⁶⁴ For the situation of national minorities in the interwar period, see *Istoria minorităților naționale din România*, coordinators: Doru Dumitrescu, Carol Căpiță and Mihai Manea, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing, 2008, *passim*.

environment – especially among intellectuals and the bourgeoisie – modernism gained ground, being visible in all areas⁶⁵.

Agriculture remained the main occupation of rural residents between the two world wars. Among the landowning peasants, social differences were precisely defined. A few more or less hectares could place an individual in a different category. At the top of this social hierarchy were the *chiaburi* (with properties of over 50 hectares), who used paid labor and had a lifestyle similar to that of the village intelligentsia. Immediately after them, came the wealthy peasants, who owned 10-50 hectares and who had a typical peasant lifestyle, limited, working alongside their paid employees. Smallholders, owning between 3 and 10 hectares, maintained their independence and usually had sufficient beasts of burden and tools, but were rarely able to employ paid labour. Dependent households, having between 1-3 hectares, did not have enough animals and agricultural tools and, to a much greater extent than small households, had to look for work outside of agriculture. Such sources of income were vital for those agricultural laborers with land who owned less than 1 hectare. At the bottom of the social ladder were the landless agricultural workers⁶⁶.

About 10% of the active rural population was dependent, as the first source of income, on activities other than agriculture. Those in this segment were employed in various industrial activities as craftsmen, miners or unskilled workers, or were employed in trade, often as itinerant merchants, or in transport, especially as railway workers⁶⁷.

Throughout the entire interwar period, strong forces acted against change in the villages. Traditional culture retained its dominance in important sectors of rural life, such as food, hygiene and health care. It was the field of action of women and old people who rarely left the village and read less than other groups. No major progress has been registered in terms of improving the methods of cultivating the land, raising animals or marketing agricultural products⁶⁸.

Rural education, in which the promoters of the agrarian reform had placed high hopes for change, had a smaller impact than expected. Although the number of literate people has grown steadily since the beginning of the 20th century, in 1930, 48.5% of the rural population over the age of seven was still illiterate. The primary school thus played a key role in opening the village to the outside world, but, for various reasons, it failed to fulfill its role. Although primary education was

⁶⁵ Ion Aग्रigoroaiei, *Modernizarea societății românești în perioada interbelică. Propuneri pentru o dezbatere*, in “Xenopoliana” – Bulletin of the Academic Foundation “A.D. Xenopol” from Iași, Tom VI, no. 1–2, volume edited by Mihai-Ștefan Ceașu, Lucian Nastasă and Cătălin Turliuc, Iași, 1998, pp. 46–47.

⁶⁶ Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

⁶⁷ Emanuel Copilaș, *România interbelică – noi evaluări*, in “Revista română de sociologie”, new series, Year XXVIII, no. 1–2, number taken care by Zoltán Rostás and Ionuț Butoi, Bucharest, 2017, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

compulsory and free for all children between the ages of 7 and 14, many of them were not even enrolled, and others did not attend classes for various reasons⁶⁹.

During this period, society moved more and more towards the cities, which constituted the environment conducive to the development of a modern life. In 1930, city dwellers represented approximately 20% of the total population. In the decade that followed, the pace of urbanization intensified, and the population of cities increased by over 14%. The increase was almost exclusively due to migration from the countryside, which had been the major source of the urban population even before the First World War⁷⁰.

At the end of the third decade, the world economic crisis⁷¹ stopped Romania's promising economic development and gave way to economic and political uncertainties. The crisis hit the country particularly hard, especially due to the fact that its economy was predominantly based on agriculture, and the lack of diversification reduced its ability to react to the crisis. Being dependent on the export of grain, Romania found itself at the discretion of the international market. The economic and financial stability of the country was put at risk not only by the drop in agricultural prices in the West, but also by the new high tariffs imposed by the industrialized states on Romanian agricultural products, in order to protect their own farmers. In addition, the dependence on foreign capital exacerbated the crisis. Foreign investors withdrew large parts of capital in search of a safer and higher income, which only increased the number of commercial, industrial enterprises and bankrupt banks⁷².

The great economic crisis had a deep and lasting influence on the economic thinking of Romanian liberal and peasant politicians. The country's dependence on

⁶⁹ Geanina-Cristina Cocuz, *Câteva aspecte privitoare la evoluția școlii românești în perioada interbelică*, in "Acta Moldaviae Meridionalis", Yearbook of the County Museum "Ștefan cel Mare" from Vaslui, XL, vol. I, Iași, Pim Publishing, 2019, p. 273.

⁷⁰ Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *op. cit.*, p. 362; Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

⁷¹ In foreign historiography, the "great economic crisis" was considered as the most severe, universal and long-lasting that the European continent has known; See, among others: J. Carpentier, F. Lebrun, (coordinators), *Istoria Europei*, preface by René Rémond, French translation by A. Skultéty and S. Skultéty, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1997, pp. 387–390; Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, *Istoria Europei*, volume 5 – *Secolul XX (din 1919 până în zilele noastre)*, translation by Monica Timu, edition, notes and comments by Doina Barcan Sterpu, Iași, European Institute, 1998, pp. 73–76; François Crouzet, *A History of the European Economy, 1000-2000*, The University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 179–181; Michel Beaud, *Istoria capitalismului. De la 1500 până în 2000*, French translation by Claudiu Constantinescu, Bucharest, Cartier Publishing, 2001, pp. 199–200; Hagen Schulze, *Stat și națiune în istoria europeană*, translation coordinated by Hans Neumann, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2003, p. 268; Nicholas Atkin, Michael Biddiss (editors), *Themes in modern European History, 1890–1945*, London-New York, Taylor&Francis e-Library, 2008, pp. 76–79.

⁷² Mariana Buican, *Confruntarea de idei privind dezvoltarea economică a României în perioada interbelică*, in "Revista Strategii Manageriale", Year VII, no. 1(23), magazine edited by "Constantin Brâncoveanu" University from Pitești, "Independența Economică" Publishing, 2014, p. 117.

the great industrial powers convinced the leaders of both parties to support a policy of accelerated industrialization. The Liberals, who were in government from 1934 to 1937, made industrialization a central concern of their domestic program, emphasizing heavy industry, which they intended to transform into the basis of a modern national economy⁷³.

The country's foreign trade throughout the interwar years followed the pre-war guidelines. Exports tended to remain those of a predominantly agrarian country, as grains, animals, wood, together with oil represented approximately 90% of total exports⁷⁴. However, in the course of time, notable changes were registered in relation to the importance held by each of these articles. Especially during the economic crisis, the Bucharest government encouraged the export of petroleum products, to compensate for the loss of grain markets, caused by the imposition of high customs barriers by most European states, as a means of protecting their own agricultural interests⁷⁵. Romania's main economic partner at the end of the 1930s was Germany, which took over 32% of the country's exports and was the main supplier, holding 39% of Romania's total imports⁷⁶.

In the period 1938–1940, the royal dictatorship regime of Charles II pursued the same economic goals as the liberals. State intervention became more pronounced as industrialization projects were accelerated, with special emphasis on national defense needs, Romania being drawn, like other states in the region, into the general political crisis at the end of the fourth decade in Europe.

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⁷³ Keith Hitchins, *op. cit.*, pp. 399–400.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 401.

⁷⁵ Gheorghe Buzatu, *O istorie a petrolului românesc*, 2nd edition revised and added, Iași, "Demiurg" Publishing, 2009, pp. 294–295.

⁷⁶ Nicolae Ciachir, *Marile Puteri și România (1856–1947)*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing, 1996, p. 229; Ioan Popa, *Relațiile economice externe ale României: între structură și conjunctură*, in "The Romanian Economic Journal", Year VI, no. 11–12, Bucharest, ASE Publishing, 2003, p. 93.

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