
P A R A D I G M S

ASTRA A Model for the Organization of Romanian Civil Society in Transylvania During Dualism

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UNDOUBTEDLY, AFTER 1989, one of the notions that became quite topical in Romanian political science is that of civil society. The mass-media significantly contributed to this spectacular evolution. Civil society could be defined very simply as the system of intermediate associations that are neither the state, nor the extended family. Consequently, civil society includes associations based on voluntary activity, businesses, and other corporative entities. It is represented by the social and civil institutions and organizations which are the basis of a functioning democracy. Civil society organizations

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participate in the decision-making process underpinning social development and in all public decisions. Actually, according to a widespread formula:

*Civil society is a notion referring to apolitical associative forms which are not part of any fundamental institution of the state or of the business world. Thus, NGOs, associations or foundations, trade unions, businessmen's unions make up civil society. They intervene with the decision-making factors and the institutions supporting the rule of law in order to influence them with a view to defending the rights and the interests of the citizens that they represent.*¹

Modern society is structured into three components: the economic component, the political element (the fundamental institutions of the state), and the civil society, the non-profit sector which legitimizes and amends the other two components. In other words, civil society includes a whole system of structures allowing citizens new roles and social relationships through various forms of participation in public life. Beyond its institutional level, civil society is made up of citizens who associate under various forms and participate in public life, influence policies, defend and promote the people's interests. The well-known specialist Sergiu Tămaș stated that

*the formation of civil society is the result of the spontaneous and creative movement of the citizens willingly instituting various forms of political, economic, and cultural association. Within civil society, citizens become part of a network of social relationships, voluntarily participating in the activity of many associations, organizations, clubs, in pursuit of various objectives and interests. The organizations of civil society are autonomous in regard to the state, as they represent multiple centers of power, a system of non-state powers.*²

It is Liviu Maior, a well-known historian of Transylvania, who has recently introduced in Romanian historiography the notion of "Romanian civil society." During dualism, as a consequence of the Romanians' status in Transylvania, hundreds of professional and cultural, regional and local institutions were created: cultural associations and societies, women's associations, primary school teachers' organizations, school and student reading clubs, choirs, economic associations, etc. They helped strengthen the Romanian national conscience. This associative emulation led to the emergence and consolidation of the Romanian nation and it represents a genuine "Romanian civil society" adapted to the political, cultural, and economic conditions of that time.³ Consequently, it is my contention that the "Romanian civil society" in Transylvania exhibited a peculiarity that resulted from the Transylvanian Romanians' living conditions between

1867 and 1918. This does not minimize in any way its value and importance for the Romanians in this province. The contribution of the Romanian civil society to the modernization of Transylvania during the decades preceding World War I was manifest and undeniable. The model followed by the Romanians was quite widespread in the Dual Monarchy, as some peoples had begun the associative process earlier, the Czechs being the most advanced in this respect.⁴

The Austro-Hungarian Dualism made Transylvania lose any trace of its autonomy, as this province was integrated, from the political and the administrative point of view, into Hungary. The legislation passed by the Hungarian Parliament after 1867 was meant, explicitly or not, to create a homogenous Hungarian national state. By assimilating ethnic groups and through a demographic policy that met the interests of the administration in Budapest, the percentage of the Hungarian population increased. The Romanians' reaction to dualism was not slow in coming. First came the representative national assemblies, a formula consecrated during the 1848 Revolution. On 3/15 May 1868 thousands of Romanians celebrated two decades since the Great National Assembly of 3/15–5/17 May 1848. A political document entitled *The Pronouncement* was also adopted on that occasion. Then, at the beginning of 1869, the city of Timișoara hosted the National Conference of the Romanians in Banat, where Alexandru Mocioni proposed the creation of a party-like modern political organization and the National Party of the Romanians in Banat and Hungary was founded. Their preferred tactic was political solidarity with the other nationalities in Hungary and with the Romanians in Transylvania. The stated political program accepted dualism, but challenged it from democratic and liberal positions. In the spring of 1869, at the initiative of Ioan Rațiu, Ilie Măcelariu, and Visarion Roman, the National Conference of the Transylvanian Romanians was convened and the National Party of the Romanians in Transylvania was founded under the leadership of I. Măcelariu. The program of the Party relied on the principles of the revolutionary program presented at Blaj, in 1848, and it included provisions on the autonomy of Transylvania, equal rights for all nationalities, the democratization of political life and of the administrative and judicial institutions, etc. The tactic proposed was one of passivism, followed until 1905, when the Romanians returned to political life and participated in the elections for the Parliament in Budapest.⁵

Besides political manifestations (the Memorial, the Memorandum, parliamentary struggle etc.), the Romanians resisted dualism especially through their cultural institutions. Nowadays nobody doubts that the strategy of the nineteenth-century movements for national emancipation in Central and Southeast Europe relied on culture as a decisive element in the process of fostering national

solidarity. This cultural component included, among many other things, the regional associations founded before the *Ausgleich* of 1867.

The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA)—1861, the Society for Romanian Culture and Literature in Bukovina—1862, the Arad National Association for the Culture of the Romanian People—1863, etc., brought an important contribution to the assertion of national identity and, indirectly, to political militantism. Thanks to their regional character, these NGOs energized the cultural activity on a wide geographical area, coalescing the intellectual elite from several urban centers. At the same time, they granted rural communities access to culture.⁶ After 1869, ASTRA founded branches almost all over Transylvania, which favored and amplified the culture–society dialogue and brought the rural community into public life, even if sometimes this involved only the local elite (teachers, priests, public notaries). ASTRA made the Romanians visible in public life and involved them in the life of the national community that could, therefore, overcome the historical marginalization experienced for centuries.⁷ The periodical election of the leadership of all ASTRA branches meant that thousands and thousands of Romanians could exercise their right to vote, even if at that time they did not participate in political elections because of the income-based suffrage. For them, the election of the central and the local leadership of ASTRA was an extremely valuable democratic exercise, because it fostered and validated the political maturity of the Romanian nation in Transylvania for the autumn of 1918, when the county national committees and the local ones, as well as the delegates to Alba Iulia, were democratically elected.

The periodical meetings of the Board in Sibiu and the yearly general assemblies which were held in various towns were also opportunities when political leaders could meet and discuss their political and cultural strategy. The general assemblies also allowed for deliberations about the main problems of the Romanian political movement in a more intimate setting. For instance, in 1869, the leaders of ASTRA initiated and organized national conferences in Banat and Transylvania, which led to the founding of the two parties. The yearly general assemblies and the Board meetings were opportunities to express national solidarity and ensure the unity of the national cultural strategy that had been agreed upon by the regional associations. On the other hand, these general assemblies attended by the representatives of all Transylvanian Romanians were “a great parliament of Romanian culture which paved the way for a political parliament.”⁸ The political role of the regional cultural associations did not dwindle after 1869, when national political parties came into being. The activities of these parties were not permanent and most of the Romanian general public were not involved in them (except during the election campaigns and during some

exceptional events, such as the Memorandum). Every month the Transylvanian leaders attended the board meetings of the regional associations, where they could get information about the political developments within the Monarchy and about all the political and the national issues that concerned the Romanian community. Because of the strong presence of its members and of a numerous general public (diverse from the point of view of its social composition), the ASTRA yearly general assemblies fostered relations among the Romanians and fueled the enthusiasm for the great national ideals.⁹ Socializing during the general assemblies, the periodical contact between the elites and the base of the political, the cultural, and the national movement increased the solidarity specific to the institutional forms of modern civil society. The adage formulated by Slavici—"For the Romanians, the sun rises in Bucharest"—meant that general cultural Romanian values were promoted and that the Transylvanian Romanians' cultural and political evolution was in agreement with the realities in Romania. In fact, the Transylvanian Romanians' leaders constantly had in mind the Romanian Old Kingdom's general model of social organization. It is equally important that the 1859 Union, the creation of the national Romanian state and of its institutions, as well as the construction of civil society in the Romanian Old Kingdom, spurred the associationism of the Romanians living outside of Romania.¹⁰

The introduction of the dualist system influenced the cultural and the national strategy of the emancipation movement of the Romanians in Hungary and it called for new organizational forms. In 1870, Iacob Bologa suggested that ASTRA should have branches in various areas of Transylvania: Abrud, Alba Iulia, Blaj, Braşov, Cluj, Dej, Gherla, Făgăraş, etc. By the end of the nineteenth century, as the influence of ASTRA in Maramureş, Crişana, and Banat increased, the number of its branches and offices grew. Just before World War I, ASTRA had 87 branches. They ensured closer contacts between the leaders of the national movement and the rural community. The branches and offices of ASTRA, the social program of the Arad Association, considerably influenced the ordinary people's approach to public life. Romanian writings were disseminated among the peasants, conferences for the general public and literacy campaigns were organized, public libraries (about 600) opened before World War I, community centers and farmers' clubs were established. The aim of all these activities was to involve the rural community in national militantism. ASTRA also issued other publications, more or less long-lived, such as *Ţara Noastră* (Our country) or *Revista industrială* (The industrial magazine). Very popular in the villages were the series of pamphlets or booklets entitled *Biblioteca tineretului* (The youth library) and *Biblioteca poporală* (The people's library) which dealt with very diverse topics: literature, morals, hygiene, history, or farming. Among the authors there

were important personalities such as V. Alecsandri, O. Goga, G. Coşbuc, Ion Creangă, P. Ispirescu, I. Lupaş, Il. Chendi, M. Sadoveanu, C. Negruzzi, and I. Agârbiceanu. Printed in tens of thousands of copies, these publications developed the Romanian peasant's taste for reading and contributed to educating several generations in the national spirit. 165,000 copies had been printed by 1911.

ASTRA also initiated cultural and social actions for the benefit of the whole national community. The teachers' prestige was very high and this professional group constantly supported the modernization of the Romanian society from all points of view. As recently noticed, through its numerous associations, societies, and clubs, the Romanian civil society in Transylvania intended to bring about and stimulate the secularization of the national ideology, modernize the nation and organize society.¹¹ We must also emphasize the very important role of ASTRA in supporting the students of vocational schools. Their number increased and this led to their more efficient integration for the benefit of the communities to which they belonged. The development of civil society is usually associated with a middle class that can afford to get involved in specific actions, benefitting from a certain economic and cultural position. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this Romanian middle class had gained visibility in Transylvania. All the associations and institutions that were the result of the appearance and development of the Romanian civil society in Transylvania were funded only by private donations and membership fees. They were associative forms relying on ethnic and socio-professional criteria, they were based on voluntary commitment and the desire to work within the community for its material, social, cultural, and also national progress. In conclusion, the massive integration of all the Romanian social classes in Transylvania in the society–culture–nationality dialogue was achieved, first of all, through ASTRA and all the associations functioning during dualism. This represents an undeniable proof of the political and national dynamism present at the level of all socio-professional structures of the Romanian nation in Transylvania at the outbreak of World War I. Generally speaking, at the end of the nineteenth century and during the decades preceding the war, not only in Transylvania but also in the extra-Carpathian Romanian territories there was an increase in the social groups connected to industry, trade, banking, etc. and a decrease in the percentage of the working population connected to primary production. It is common knowledge that, in general terms, it was not the peasantry who got involved in civil society, but other socio-professional groups from Transylvania. During the decades preceding the Union, education, increasing literacy, and better education had a very important role in the transition of the socio-professional structure of Transylvania from a quasi-agrarian model to an agrarian–industrial one. Without entering into a detailed analysis of this problem, I only want to point out that in 1869 only 311,847 inhabit-

ants of Transylvania (13% of the population) could read and write, whereas in 1910, there were 823,053 inhabitants (28,3%) who had these skills.¹² Within four decades, the population having received an education—of course, at different levels—doubled. It was against this framework that the professions specific to an open, capitalist economy (court clerks, the army, the administration, the banking system, trade, health, intellectuals, etc.) and implicitly, the headhunting for various organizational structures of civil society increased. When the war broke out, in spite of all the discrepancies that still characterized the province, Transylvania was irreversibly on the road to a modern society, with an occupational structure showing the remarkable progress made in the six decades since the abolition of feudal relations. The Romanian civil society experienced the same evolution.

The ethnographic exhibitions organized by ASTRA (in 1862, 1881, 1905), the balls, the activities intended to valorize and preserve the traditional heritage initiated in Sibiu, Arad, or Sighet were extremely popular among the Romanian general public. The impact of such activities was huge. They showed the Romanian people's progress in home industry and the trades, as well as the artistry of its traditional heritage. Obviously, the opening of the ASTRA Museum in Sibiu, in 1905, was one of the most grandiose Romanian national events. Built by the Romanians' own efforts, without any support from the Hungarian state, the ASTRA Museum became one of the most enduring national museum complexes.

Cultural societies and the professional institutions previously mentioned were due, first of all, to the evolution towards modernity of the Romanian society in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, although more than once the foreign domination proved to be intolerant to the manifestations of the Romanians' national spirit. It is obvious that, beyond their national component, they were all part of a genuine civil Romanian society where problems relevant for the general societal evolution of the time were approached and dealt with: women's emancipation, women's right to vote, universal suffrage, the industrial workers' social protection, the fight against illiteracy and alcoholism, specific professional rights, etc. A very important aspect of this problem is that, in most of these institutions functioning all over Transylvania, there were quite a lot of lawyers, which increased the prestige of these associations and also made it possible to secure funding for many initiatives.¹³

The general Romanian solidarity was very strong in the autumn of 1918 and this was largely due to the activities initiated during the five decades when professional associations and cultural institutions functioned and kept promoting the ideal of national unity. The contribution of the Romanian civil society to the national revival of the Romanians in Transylvania was acknowledged and appreciated by the entire Romanian political class. In the 7/10 November 1918

summons to the Great National Assembly of Alba Iulia, there was an explicit provision about the presence of the elected representatives of the cultural associations: “Two representatives of the cultural associations (ASTRA, the Theatre Association, the Arad Association) shall attend the Assembly.” This means that the cultural and the national importance of these institutions was recognized.¹⁴ On 1 December 1918, in Alba Iulia were present delegates of the main institutions and associations that made up the Romanian civil society in Transylvania. ASTRA was represented by 2 delegates, the Arad National Association sent 2 delegates, the Society for the Assistance of the Romanian Journalists in Transylvania, Banat, and the Areas Inhabited by the Romanians in Hungary sent 2 delegates, etc. Although it was not as sizeable as the civil society in other areas of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Romanian associative movement in Transylvania was an element that cannot be neglected in the modernization of the Romanian society in this region and in the development of national identity. Especially after 1866, ASTRA was both a Romanian Academy for the Romanians in the Austrian Monarchy and the civic leader that awakened the civic and the democratic conscience of the Romanian population in Transylvania. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to those who founded ASTRA and then made it the most representative institution of the Romanian nation in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy till 1918.



Notes

1. For further details on this topic, see the following sites: www.fdsc.ro; http://www.fndc.ro/comunitate/societatea_civila.html; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society.
2. Sergiu Tămaș, *Dicționar politic: Instituțiile democrației și cultura civică* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 1993), 258.
3. Liviu Maior, *Habsburgi și români: De la loialitatea dinastică la identitate națională* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2006), 8. More recently, Professor Liviu Maior dealt with this topic in a fascinating study: *Asociaționism și naționalism la românii din Transilvania* (Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană, 2022).
4. Jan Havranek, “The Development of Czech Nationalism,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 3, 2 (1967): 239.
5. Dumitru Suci, *Mișcarea antidualistă a românilor din Austro-Ungaria și Ilie Măcelariu (1867–1891)* (Bucharest: Albatros, 2002), 194.
6. Ioan Bolovan, *Asociația Națională Arădeană pentru Cultura Poporului Român: Între local, regional și național (1863–1918)*, foreword by Nicolae Bocșan, preface by Liviu Maior, 3rd edition, rev. and enl. (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Academiei Române, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2023), 15.

7. Vasile Curticăpeanu, "Caracterul european și modernizator al concepției și activității ASTREI până la Unirea din 1918," in *Astra (1861–1950): 125 de ani de la înființare*, ed. Victor V. Grecu (Sibiu: Academia Republicii Socialiste România, 1987), 85 sqq.
8. Vasile Netea, *Spre unitatea statală a poporului român: Legături politice și culturale între anii 1859–1918* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1979), 74; Ioan Bolovan, "Raporturile ASTREI cu Asociația națională arădană pentru cultura poporului român (1863–1918)," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Historia* 32, 1 (1987): 36.
9. Mihai Sofronie, "ASTRA—promotoare a solidarității românești," *Transilvania* 4 (81), 5 (1975): 60; SJAAN, ASTRA Archival Collections, file 210/1907, fols. 108 sq.
10. Nicolae Bocșan, "Transilvania și unirea din 1859: Implicații culturale," *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie și Arheologie Cluj-Napoca* 27 (1985–1986): 487 sqq.
11. Maior, *Habsburgi și români*, 8.
12. Ioan Bolovan, *Transilvania între Revoluția de la 1848 și Unirea din 1918: Contribuții demografice* (Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2000), 235.
13. Dan Demșa, "Avocații români arădeni în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea," in *Societate și civilizație în Banatul istoric*, ed. Camil Petrescu (Timișoara: Mirton, 2003), 147 sqq.
14. *1918 la români: Documentele Unirii*, vol. 8, eds. Ștefan Pascu and Ion Popescu-Puțuri (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), 6.

Abstract

ASTRA: A Model for the Organization of Romanian Civil Society
in Transylvania During Dualism

Liviu Maior, a well-known historian of Transylvania, used for the first time in Romanian historiography the notion of "Romanian civil society," in order to depict hundreds of professional and cultural, regional and local institutions that were created before World War I: cultural associations and societies, women's reunions, primary school teachers' organizations, pupils' and students' reading clubs, choirs, economic associations etc. This associative emulation led to the building and the consolidation of the Romanian nation and it represents a genuine "Romanian civil society" adapted to the political, the cultural, and the economic conditions of the age. The contribution of the Romanian civil society to the modernization of Transylvania during the decades preceding World War I was visible and undeniable. The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA)—1861, the Arad National Association for the Culture of the Romanian People—1863 etc. had an important contribution to affirming national identity and to the extension of the cultural activity on a wide geographical area coalescing the intellectual elite from several urban centres. ASTRA made the Romanians visible in public life and involved them in the life of the national community that could, therefore, overcome the historical marginalization it had experienced for centuries. All the associations and the institutions that were the result of the appearance and the development of the Romanian civil society in Transylvania were funded only

from private donations and the members' fees. They were associative forms relying on ethnic and socio-professional criteria, they were based on voluntary commitment and the desire to work within the community for its material, social, cultural, and, not lastly, national progress.

Keywords

Transylvania, Romanian civil society, ASTRA, modernization