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The elections in interwar Romania. Case study – parliamentary elections from 1937

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Abstract

The elections in the interwar period from Romania were a special chapter in the Romanian political history. In comparison with the pre-1919 period, the parliamentary elections from this period functioned based on the universal vote, adopted after the First World War, when Bessarabia, Bukhovina and Transylvania provinces united with Romania in 1918. These provinces came from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires and had different administrative traditions, as well as different electoral rules. These newly united provinces needed an administrative unification with the Old Kingdom, as in 1926 there was adopted a single electoral law, in force for the entire territory of Romania. The 1926 gave an electoral bonus to the party that gained 40% of the votes, with the aim to provide electoral stability. The 1937 parliamentary elections were the last organized under the 1926 electoral law. The National Liberal Party, which organized the elections, failed to gain 40% of the votes and the elections were considered lost, even though this political party was on the first place. Beside the failure of the National Liberal Party, another relevant result was the rise of the Legionary Movement as the third political force in Romania.

Keywords

Electoral bonus, electoral law, parliamentary elections, universal vote

Introduction

This paper is dedicated to the subject of elections from the interwar Romania, with focus on the parliamentary elections from November 1937, the last call to polls before the establishment of the personal dictatorship of King Charles II in February 1938. As a methodological perspective, this paper is based on a mix of primary and secondary sources. As primary sources, there are taken into account memoirs from the contemporary relevant political figures and articles from the press of that period. As secondary sources, the research is elaborated based on various analyses concentrated on the Romanian political environment and situation from the interwar period.

On the 1st of December 1918 Romania fulfilled its objective for which entered in the First World War on the Entente side, along with France, United

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Kingdom and Russia¹. On that day, the Great National Assembly from Alba Iulia declared the unification of the former Austro-Hungarian provinces of Ardeal, Crișana, Maramureș and Banat (Transylvania for coherence purposes)² to the Old Kingdom of Romania, after the previous unification of Bessarabia (March 1918)³ and Bukhovina (November 1918)⁴. After these successive unifications, in Eastern Europe a medium-sized state appeared, namely Great Romania, with a population of around 16,25 million and an area of around 296,000 km² in 1919⁵. Moreover, initially, before the Romanian-Hungarian frontier was set after the post-war negotiations⁶, the Western border, with Hungary, was on the Tisa River, meaning that the territory from Transylvania was larger⁷. For all of these newly acquired territories, the administrative core was the Old Kingdom of Romania, comprising Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldova and Dobrudja provinces, with a population and area of 137,000 km²⁸. It is worth emphasizing that the new provinces were united to Romania based on the principle of nationalities, one of the guiding principles of the Versailles post-World War I negotiations. The principle of nationalities involved the dissolution of the great European empires – such as Austria-Hungary – which backed the creation or reunion of smaller states in Europe, such as Poland, the Baltic states or Romania⁹.

1919 parliamentary elections

After the unification, the old parliament elected under the census vote in 1918, under prime minister Alexandru Marghiloman, in the Old Kingdom, was

¹ Glenn E. Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1. For the issue of Romanian entering in the First World War, see also Glenn E. Torrey, “The Rumanian Campaign of 1916: Its Impact on the Belligerents”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Mar., 1980), 27-43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2497300>, Glenn E. Torrey, “Romania's Entry into the First World War: The Problem of Strategy”, *Emporia State University*, vol. XXVI, no. 4, Spring 1978, <https://esirc.emporia.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/311/136.pdf?sequence=1>

² Mihail E. Ionescu (coord.), *Românii în „Marele Război”: anul 1918: documente, impresii, mărturii*, Bucharest: Editura Militară, 2019, 525-7

³ Ionescu, *Românii în „Marele Război”...*, 305-8

⁴ Ionescu, *Românii în „Marele Război”...*, 495-7

⁵ Keith Hitchins, *România: 1866-1947*, trans. from Eng. George G. Potra, Delia Răzdolescu, 4th ed., Bucharest: Humanitas, 2013, 331

⁶ Regarding the subject of Romanian negotiations at the general peace after the First World War from Versailles, see Hitchins, *România: 1866-1947*, 322-31

⁷ As was negotiated with the Entente before entering the war in 1916 in the political convention signed between the two parts: “Convenția politică dintre România și Antantă (4/17 august 1916)”, in Bogdan Murgescu (coord.), *Istoria României în texte*, Bucharest: Corint, 2001, 272-3

⁸ Ion Bulei, *O istorie a românilor*, third revised edition, Bucharest: Meronia, 2007, 153

⁹ Ion M. Anghel (coord.), *Tratatul de la Trianon – Document esențial care stă la baza Marii Uniri*, Bucharest: Pro Universitaria, 2021, 41-43

dissolved in November the same year¹⁰, therefore the need for new elections, to form a legitimate parliament for Great Romania, became urgent, to offer internal legitimacy and international recognition of the new territories¹¹. In 1918 Romania emerged larger and stronger, but all of these provinces came with different administrative traditions¹² and different electoral systems, such as proportional vote - for Deputies Chamber in the Old Kingdom, Bessarabia, and some cities from Transylvania (Arad, Cluj, Oradea Mare, Timișoara) and Bukhovina (Cernăuți), relative majority – for Senate in Old Kingdom and Bessarabia and absolute majority – both chambers in Bukhovina and Transylvania plus senators elected by universities¹³. On the other hand, the meaning of electoral circumscription was different, as in the Old Kingdom and Bessarabia a county represented one circumscription, while in the other provinces the circumscriptions were designated based on population, according to the Austro-Hungarian legislation¹⁴. The 1919 elections were announced on 2 October 1919 and programmed to take place between 2-4 November for Deputies Chamber, 7-8 November for the Senate and 9 November for universities¹⁵.

Moreover, the political landscape of the Old Kingdom was enriched with parties from the newly united provinces, which came with local political elites, with their own interests. In 1918, the parties from Great Romania were National Liberal Party (PNL), People's League/People Party (LPop/PP), Peasant's Party (PȚ), Conservatory-Democratic Party, socialists Romanian National Party (PNR) from Transylvania, Bukhovina and Bessarabia¹⁶. However, the parties were not organized at the local level in every county¹⁷, while some parties boycotted the elections, such as People's League, Constitutional Democratic Party, the political group led by Iancu Flondor in Bukhovina and the Socialist Party¹⁸.

Besides the enrichment of the political spectre with new political parties, the Romanian political system also underwent other transformations. In 1918 were applied the constitutional reforms assumed in 1917, namely the agrarian

¹⁰ Bogdan Murgescu and Andrei Florin Sora, "Contextul politic," in *România Mare votează: alegerile parlamentare din 1919 „la firul ierbii”*, coord. Bogdan Murgescu, Andrei Florin Sora, Iași: Polirom, 2019, 25

¹¹ Murgescu and Sora, "Contextul politic"... , 26

¹² Before 1918, Transylvanian territories were under Austro-Hungarian administration, more exactly in the Kingdom of Hungary, Bukhovina in the Austrian Empire, while Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire.

¹³ Andrei Florin Sora, "Cadrul legislativ", in *România Mare votează: alegerile parlamentare din 1919 „la firul ierbii”*, coord. Bogdan Murgescu, Andrei Florin Sora, Iași: Polirom, 2019, 48

¹⁴ Sora, "Cadrul legislativ"... , 48

¹⁵ Sora, "Cadrul legislativ"... , 58

¹⁶ For an extensive analysis of the parties from the Romanian political landscape after the end of the First World War, see Mircea Mușat, Ion Ardeleanu, *Viata politică în România 1918-1921*, second ed., Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1976

¹⁷ Murgescu and Sora, "Contextul politic"... , 27-28

¹⁸ Murgescu and Sora, "Contextul politic"... , 34

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reform and the adoption of the universal vote for men over 21 years and 40 years for the election of the Senate, which replaced the census vote¹⁹. In electoral terms, the voting basin was enlarged on two spheres. In one sphere, the voting base was enlarged given the unification of the provinces that were part of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires prior to 1918. On the second sphere, the voting base was enlarged by the effects of the universal vote for men, as the number of electors increased after the new voting rules were applied²⁰.

Until 1926 there were successive elections under different electoral rules, as in Transylvania and Bukhovina was in force a majority vote, while in the Old Kingdom and Bessarabia the proportional vote was applied. As, Cristian Preda argued, the first three parliaments after 1918 were under a geographical mixt regime, as “one country, two systems”²¹. To unify the voting rules under a single regulation, in 1926 was adopted a new electoral law for the entire Romanian territory, of a proportional type, on lists²². The most important change introduced by the 1926 electoral law was the electoral bonus, designed to produce stability of the government, by assuring a comfortable majority in the parliament. Therefore, the political party that obtained 40% of the votes, automatically received 50% from the total, while the other 50% was shared among the winning side and the other parties²³. The 1926 electoral law failed to fulfil its purpose to create governmental stability. In 1918-1940 there were appointed 33 governments, with only two longer – under National Liberal Party in 1922-1926 and 1934-1937 – while 11 parliamentary elections were organized in 20 years²⁴. Moreover, the proper functioning of the political system was affected by the constitutional provision that the king first designated the prime minister with his ministerial team, a group which was in charge to organize the elections²⁵. As designated by the king before the elections, almost all the time the winner was the organizer, a situation that transformed in a paradoxical issue, as in one year the organizing party won the elections with a large majority, while in the next turn the former organizer gained very few votes²⁶.

¹⁹ Hitchins, *România: 1866-1947...*, 144

²⁰ See the royal decree which introduced the universal vote – “Decretul-lege privind reforma electorală (14/27 noiembrie 1918)”, in Bogdan Murgescu (coord.), *Istoria României în texte*, 291

²¹ Preda, *România fericită. Vot și putere de la 1831 până în prezent*, Iași: Polirom, 2011, 168

²² Preda, *România fericită...*, 157

²³ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria românilor în timpul celor patru regi (1866-1947)*, second revised and added version, vol. II, Ferdinand, Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2004, 162. See also Preda, *România fericită...*, 158-159

²⁴ Bogdan Bucur, *Sociologia proastei guvernări în România interbelică*, foreword Ioan-Aurel Pop, backword Hans-Christian Maner. Bucharest: RAO Distribuție, 2019, 168

²⁵ Constituția României din 1923, Chap. III, Art 93, available at http://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.htp_act_text?id=1517

²⁶ Preda, *România fericită...*, 163

The parliamentary elections from December 1937

The last so called free parliamentary elections were held in December 1937, based on the 1926 electoral law. The government led by Gheorghe Tătărăscu – from the National Liberal Party - was not able to obtain 40% of the votes, just only 36,46%, which was insufficient to obtain the electoral bonus, one of the causes being the fact that Tătărăscu was the first prime minister in charge with organizing the elections after a long administration, which eroded the governmental authority²⁷. King Charles II was involved in the discussions regarding the elections. The president of the National Liberal Party, Gheorghe Tătărăscu told in a private discussion to Armand Călinescu that he intends to retreat for two or three years in opposition to reform his party and come back with a new program²⁸. Therefore, the next option for the king was the National Peasants' Party, with its leader, Ion Mihalache to become prime-minister, as the king promised him in 1935, which had to face the opposition of the National Christian Party and the Legionary Movement, accusing that the Peasants' Party was under collaboration with the communists, under soviet command²⁹. In his discussions with Mihalache regarding the future government, the king proposed him in November 1937 a cabinet in collaboration with Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, offering no choice in this matter, but the Peasants' Party did not agree such a combination³⁰.

Since Mihalache was not able to come to terms with the king, he resigned from his position as the president of the National Peasants' Party, Iuliu Maniu replaced him³¹. In fact, in his proposition to Mihalache to collaborate with Vaida, the king had in mind to politically destroy Maniu, who was in conflict with Vaida, and to humiliate Mihalache, to show his willingness to compromise the position and unity of his party to become prime-minister³². According to the memoirs of Constantin Argetoianu, after the discussion with Charles II, Mihalache considered that the king mocked him and his party and became furious³³. Therefore, the king appointed Tătărăscu again as prime-minister to form a government with a larger basis, to resist beyond elections. In this instance, the parliament was dissolved by royal decree and the elections were programmed on 20th of December for the Deputies Chamber and 23-28th of December for the Senate³⁴. In order for Tătărăscu to win the elections, the king instructed him to

²⁷ Preda, *Rumânii fericiți...*, 142

²⁸ Armand Călinescu, *Însemnări politice, 1916-1939*, ed. and preface. Dr. Al. Gh. Savu, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990, 331

²⁹ Scurtu, *Istoria românilor...*, 213-14

³⁰ Călinescu, *Însemnări politice...*, 358

³¹ Călinescu, *Însemnări politice...*, 359-60

³² Scurtu, *Istoria românilor...*, 214

³³ Constantin Argetoianu, *Însemnări zilnice*, volumul III, 1 iulie – 31 decembrie 1937, ed. by Stelian Neagoe, Bucharest: Editura Machiavelli, 2001, 236

³⁴ Scurtu, *Istoria românilor...*, 215

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make electoral cartels with the Nationalist-Democratic Party, Romanian Front and German Party, the last two with right-wing totalitarian views, which triggered some hostile reactions from some members of the National Liberal Party³⁵.

After assuming the leadership of the National Peasants' Party on 23 November, two days later Iuliu Maniu signed a non-aggression pact with the right-wing organization of Legionary Movement, together with the National Liberal Party faction represented by Gheorghe Brătianu, to assure the freedom and fairness of elections, while parties abstained from reciprocal adversities, with the expression of their own ideology³⁶. We reproduce below the text of the pact:

An agreement is concluded between the undersigned parties with the aim of defending freedom and ensuring the fairness of the elections. These parties conclude a non-aggression pact for the duration of the electoral elections in view of the proposed goal.

The non-aggression pact means surrounding acts and language of violence and denigration; but it does not prevent the assertion of one's own ideology and the discussion in good faith.

A call will be made to the other parties to join this agreement.

A joint commission will establish the procedure and the steps that will have to be implemented in case of crimes that would occur.

Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Head of the Legionary Movement

Iuliu Maniu Gh., President of P.N.Ț.

Gheorghe I.C. Brătianu, President of P.N.L.

("Dreptatea", November 26, 1937)³⁷

As a fervent critic of the parliamentary system³⁸, Constantin Argetoianu regarded this pact as useless, but chose to take part in it³⁹. As Argetoianu reported, the electoral campaign was marked by violence from the parties, deaths and wounded, as well as interference from the state authorities – which proclaimed curfew, banned street manifestations, operated arrests and repressed the opposition forces - in the favour of the government, which had to be victorious, even by fraud⁴⁰.

³⁵ Scurtu, *Istoria românilor...*, 215-16

³⁶ Traian Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier: Un fascism românesc*, trans. from Fr. by Simona Modreanu, Chișinău: Cartier, 2019, 156

³⁷ Our translation Romanian, as was cited in “Pactul de neagresiune electorală din 25 noiembrie 1937”, in Bogdan Murgescu (coord.), *Istoria României în texte*, 319

³⁸ In his memoirs, Argetoianu expressed his conviction that the party rule is tyrannic and the universal suffrage is folly, while the current political system is worthless, as some changes in Romania would have been generated from the top to the base – Argetoianu, *Însemnări zilnice...*, 233 & 241

³⁹ Argetoianu, *Însemnări zilnice...*, 252

⁴⁰ Argetoianu, *Însemnări zilnice...*, 272, 278-9, 283, 289, 292-3

The results of the elections were detrimental to the government, which organized the elections. Even though the National Liberal Party gained the most votes – 36,46% as we mentioned above – the elections were considered lost, meaning that the mandates would have been distributed according to the proportionality of the votes – a provision not applied by the king -, meaning that the electoral bonus was not activated for the party from the first place⁴¹. The second political force, according to the results, was the National Peasants' Party with 20,4%, the third was the Legionary Movement with 15,58%, while the National Christian Party led by Octavian Goga gained 9,15%⁴².

In his memoirs, Armand Călinescu signalled a regress in the results of the National Liberal Party in some local or partial elections, as he noted on 19 April 1937 that the National Liberal Party gained 30% in some counties, considering that 40% would have been gained in a coalition⁴³. On 30 May 1937 Călinescu noted that he won the elections against the government in Argeş county, with 26,000 votes to 9,500⁴⁴. Since the National Liberal Party was in power since 1933, the erosion and exhaustion its political base became somehow evident.

As a result, if the National Liberal Party was considered that lost the elections, while the National Peasants' Party had few votes and the Legionary Movement was an extremist organization, king Charles II chose as prime minister Octavian Goga, leader of the National Christian Party, with 9,15% of the votes⁴⁵.

Debates on foreign policy in 1937

Beside the fact that elections of December 1937 represented the last call to polls within the confines of the 1923 Constitution and 1926 electoral law, there are significant for another reason. In the second half of the 1930s the European international system faced multiple challenges and geopolitical reconfigurations, under the assault of revisionist players, with Germany on the forefront, corroborated with a weakening position and appeasement policies of France and Great Britain, as the main guarantors of the status quo established after the First World War⁴⁶. As the press of that time, the political leaders engaged in the electoral campaign expressed their visions related to foreign policy. The mainstream political elites, from the most important parties, were in favour of a continuation of the traditional foreign policy conducted by Romania in the

⁴¹ Preda, *Rumâniî fericiţi...*, 169. Traian Sandu advanced the proportion of 35,92% for the National Liberal Party, in coalition with the supporters of Vaida-Voevod and Nicolae Iorga – Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier...*, 162

⁴² Sandu, *Istoria Gărzii de fier...*, 162

⁴³ Călinescu, *Însemnări politice...*, 346-47

⁴⁴ Călinescu, *Însemnări politice...*, 350

⁴⁵ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria contemporană a României*, Bucharest: Editura Fundaţiei Europa de Măine, 2007, 40

⁴⁶ See Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations. An Introduction to Strategic History*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 109-12

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interwar period, along with France, Poland and the states from the Little Entente (in alliance with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) and the Balkan Entente (with Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia).

On 3 November 1937, in a report regarding the last four years of liberal government, Dinu Brătianu declared his fidelity towards Romania's regional alliances, based on the support of France, as a state with common political interests and united in spirit, while the League of Nations was the legal source of the basic principles of Romanian foreign policy⁴⁷. Gheorghe Tătărăscu, in his turn, as incumbent prime-minister since 1934, proclaimed on 21 November 1937 the continuation of the good relations policy with all states from the precedent four years, aiming to extend the collaboration with the Little Entente and Balkan Entente, as the relation with France was seen as indestructible, a stability element of Romanian foreign policy, while he remained devoted to the League of Nations⁴⁸. Alexandru Vaida-Voevod – the first prime minister designated after the first elections in the Great Romania – declared his devotion to the states that made their contribution to the unification of Romania and guarantee the integrity of the frontiers⁴⁹.

On 30 November 1937, Iuliu Maniu declared that Romania was to be along with France and England, as states which helped Romania to unify and defend the peace treaties, while he underlined the importance of the Little Entente, Balkan Entente and the alliance with Poland⁵⁰. As Corneliu Coposu – a former National Peasants' Party member – related in his interviews with Vartan Arachelian, Iuliu Maniu would have told Corneliu Zelea Codreanu – leader of the Legionary Movement – that an abandonment of Romania's traditional alliances for those with revisionist states would be criminal⁵¹. On 11 December 1937 Constantin I. C. Brătianu condemned the foreign orientation of Codreanu as contrary to the interests of Romania, which was to continue its alliance with France and England, which offered their help in the past and the present. Moreover, the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente represented anti-revisionist alliances, with small powers that, taken together, had a force similar to a great power⁵².

As a leader of the Legionary Movement, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, with the occasion of signing the electoral non-aggression pact, declared his adversity towards the Western democracies, Little Entente and Balkan Entente and

⁴⁷ Universul, “Patru ani de guvernare național-liberală. Expunerea d-lui prim ministru Gh. Tătărăscu, în ședința comitetului central al partidului. – Cuvintele rostite de d. Dinu Brătianu”, 3 November 1937, 10

⁴⁸ Universul, “Declarațiile d-lui Tătărăscu asupra politicii externe”, 21 November 1937, 11

⁴⁹ Universul, “Dr. Alex. Vaida Voevod: Manifestul „Frontului Românesc”, 3 December 1937, 12

⁵⁰ Dreptatea, “Declarațiile lui Maniu făcute presei străine”, 30 November 1937, 4

⁵¹ Corneliu Coposu, *Dialoguri cu Vartan Arachelian*, no place: Anastasia, no year, 44

⁵² Viitorul, “D-l Const. I. C. Brătianu despre: atitudinea partidului “Totul pentru Țară”. Împotriva Marilor Alianți și alături de revizionisti?”, 11 December 1937, VI

expressed his distrust in the League of Nations. Codreanu was in favour of an alliance with Germany and Italy and declared that within 48 hours after the victory of his party, Romania will be allied with these two countries⁵³.

As it can be observed, the 1937 parliamentary elections were highly disputed. On the one hand, the National Liberal Party was in power since 1934 – a rare situation in interwar Romania – resulting in an eroded position in political and electoral terms. On the other hand, there was the electoral assault of the Legionary Movement, an extremist political organization that chose to compete based on legal terms, even signing a pact with Iuliu Maniu, a leader of a democratic party, the National Peasant's Party. On the foreign policy realm, the mainstream political parties remained faithful to the traditional allies of France and Great Britain, as well as to the other forms of ensuring security, namely the League of Nations, Little Entente, Balkan Entente and the alliance with Poland. On its turn, the Legionary Movement was favourable to an alliance with Germany and Italy, two revisionist totalitarian powers.

Conclusions

The elections during the interwar period in Romania were highly disputed and were marked by an evolution in accordance with the consolidation of the post-World War I state, which had the mission to integrate the newly united provinces of Bessarabia, Transylvania and Bukhovina. The new provinces come with different administrative traditions, as Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire, while Transylvania (Kingdom of Hungary) and Bukhovina (Austrian Empire) came from the Austria-Hungary. Thus, until the adoption of the unified electoral law in 1926, in Romania were functioning two electoral systems, namely a majority vote in Transylvania and Bukhovina and proportional vote in the Old Kingdom and Bessarabia. The particularity of the 1926 electoral law was the bonus granted to the party that gained 40% from the votes, which was declared as majoritary, gaining 50% of the mandates while the other half was shared, according to the proportion of votes, between the winning party and the others. This electoral bonus was designed to offer governmental stability, but failed to fulfil this objective, as the people was called to polls multiple times. The last round of parliamentary elections from the interwar Romania were held in December 1937, after four years of government – a rare situation in the interwar Romanian politics - from the National Liberal Party, under Gheorghe Tătăărăscu, as prime minister, who organized the process of election. As the organizer of the elections, the National Liberal Party should have been the winner. In fact, the

⁵³ “Declarațiile făcute presei de Corneliu Zelea Codreanu cu privire la pactul de neagresiune electorală încheiat cu Partidul-Național Țărănesc și partidul Național-Liberal – Gheorghe Brătianu, la politica externă și internă a României?” in Ioan Scurtu (coord.), *Ideologie și formațiuni de dreapta în România*, vol, IV, 7 iulie 1934 – 30 martie 1938, Bucharest: Institutul Național pentru Studiul Totalitarismului, 2003, 357

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National Liberal Party gained most of the votes, but, since there were under 40% it was considered that the elections were lost. This was one of the surprises of the 1937 parliamentary elections. The second surprise was the emergence of the Legionary Movement as the third political force in Romania. Regarding the rise of the Legionary Movement, the danger was real, as its leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, was pro-German and took an anti-Western side.

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