

Communication and Propaganda in Romanian Interwar Politics

The Election Campaigns of 1919 and 1922

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“I wanted to produce this image, to convey the symbol of the forces whereby we can master today’s needs.”
(Ion I. C. Brătianu)

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THE YOUNG Romanian democracy was, at the beginning of 1922, faced with a difficult challenge: the third election held in less than four years since the introduction of universal suffrage, by a decree-law of Ion I. C. Brătianu’s government, in November 1918.¹ It is useful to note that the birth of universal suffrage democracy in Romania was forced and illegitimate, occurring through a “political and institutional Caesarean section”: this modernizing reform was not adopted by Parliament, but by the executive power, represented by the government.² At the time when universal suffrage was introduced, liberal propaganda had been supporting the government’s decision by claiming that Romania was in a situation of force majeure and that its Western modernization would serve the national interest. The same reasons were invoked to justify the exclusion of Parliament from adopting important reforms, such as the agrarian and the electoral reforms. Historical reality

shows that these modernizing reforms were carried out based on the will and to the political and symbolic advantage of a single political party—the Liberal Party. Having been imposed by a government that was vehemently contested by the other political forces, both the agrarian reform and universal suffrage were born under the seal of sin, being regarded as Brătianu’s political bastards rather than as the legitimate offspring of parliamentary democracy. This original sin was the source of unprecedented political and media violence on the domestic political scene, which generated political instability. The situation was illustrated throughout 1919, when a 333-day campaign for the first parliamentary elections based on universal suffrage was held in Romania and when a press trust staged the first media lynching of the new Romanian democracy, going after Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu.³ The accusations brought by the anti-liberal opposition marked, on a daily basis, the tense and violent campaign of that year, targeting not only the authoritarian and hegemonic abuses committed by the party and government leader, but also the immeasurable arrogance of the liberals’ political-electoral propaganda. The National Liberal Party (NLP) and its leader, Brătianu, were loudly reproached for having abusively appropriated these great social reforms into their symbolic patrimony and for having evinced immeasurable arrogance in tying and making the modernization and development of the Romanian national state conditional upon the existence and activity of a sole family (the Brătianus) and a sole party (the NLP).

It was obvious that such a gesture of self-serving political misappropriation would be a source of political envy and retaliation for the political adversaries and their affiliated press organs. The revolt of the opposition against the Brătianu government, fuelled by the media pressure exerted by a coalition of anti-liberal broadsheets, led by the influential newspaper *Adevărul* (The Truth), combined with the pressure of the great Entente Powers regarding the signing of the Minority Treaty at the Paris Peace Conference, caused the fall from power of this government on 12 September 1919, as well as the liberals’ losing the first universal elections in November of the same year.

The reproaches and attacks of the anti-liberal propaganda⁴ were resumed, within almost the same framework and scenario, during the election campaign from the spring of 1920, when the result was catastrophic for this party. The NLP sent only seven deputies and two senators into Parliament, registering the worst electoral result in the history of the party.⁵ The causes of these election disasters were multiple, foremost amongst them being serious errors of organization, strategy and, above all, the deficient political and electoral communication.⁶ In addition, during the election campaign of 1919, Brătianu and his party had to deal with profoundly aggressive anti-liberal public resentment and with a tremendously deficient public image and confidence. These collective attitudes

had been engendered by the serious responsibilities of the Brătianu administration for the “admirable disorganization” of Romania during the war and for the immense loss of lives and material resources. To all this was added Brătianu’s superficiality and even political arrogance: these were uncalled for from such an experienced and realistic leader, who was defined as a Realpolitiker by Alexandru Vaida-Voevod.⁷ Thus, despite this essential quality of the politician and as a result of the excessive political centralism within the Romanian parties,⁸ the liberal strategist and his entire party committed an inexcusably arrogant political error. During the 1919 campaign, the liberals simply demanded the voters to express their gratitude and give their votes to the NLP on several grounds: for the major social reforms it had accomplished, for building Greater Romania, and even for the sheer existence of this party, which, according to the liberal strategists, rendered any initiative or reason to form another party redundant.⁹ At that time, the NLP had entered a state of political self-sufficiency, which turned into electoral paralysis, caused primarily by the “Phoenix bird political syndrome.”¹⁰ The party entered that state of numbness despite the fact that at the end of November 1918, Brătianu had energetically urged his colleagues to make a political effort, telling them: “Do not think that you may rest on the laurels you have reaped. The work of propaganda and organization must begin.”¹¹ His departure to the Paris Peace Conference and his absence from the helm of the party paralyzed its organizational and electoral-propaganda activity. The NLP had embarked on a downward electoral trend that had been amplified by the “Averescu effect.”¹² Given his tremendous popularity, Alexandru Averescu and his party—the People’s League—won the elections with a landslide victory in the spring of 1920, obtaining absolute majorities in both Parliament Chambers, leaving the liberals in a state of “electoral knockout.”

Obviously, after suffering such heavy defeats at the hands of his opponents in politics and the media, the liberal strategist Ion I. C. Brătianu realised how things stood in the new era of universal suffrage and mass political communication, and decided to do his homework. The unexpected electoral failure¹³ from 1919 and the predictable one from 1920 led the liberal politician and his party to re-invent themselves and to improve their management and organization. The NLP president sent the defeated and demoralized liberal army a short encouraging message in March 1920: “Together we have a duty to rally our forces, to *cultivate the deep masses of the people*, preparing ourselves for the day when we are called to take up the reins of government.”¹⁴ As can be seen, he relied on two fundamental levers in his action of political reinvention and recovery: on rebuilding the morale of the party and on political communication. The most remarkable event, in terms of the modernity and political efficiency of a Romanian party was the establishment, in 1920, of the Central Propaganda

Department (CPD) of the NLP. Under his personal supervision this body coordinated all the propaganda and communication activity of the party at both the central and the district branch levels. Thus, the CPD took over the coordination of the editorial policy of the party's newspapers and publications: *Viiitorul* (The Future), *Democrația* (The Democracy) and *L'Indépendance Roumaine*. In addition, it was decided that several liberal regional newspapers should be founded: *Înfățișarea* (The Brotherhood) in Cluj, *Nădejdea* (The Hope) at Timișoara and *Dreptatea* (The Justice) in Kishinev, their editorial policy being coordinated by the CPD. Similarly, Brătianu paid particular attention to the techniques of communication with the public opinion, reviewing his attitude towards the role and power of the press in society. While in 1919 he had believed that the press was of no use in influencing political acts and decisions,¹⁵ at the height of his political and governmental activity he acknowledged the role and immense influence that the press had on the public opinion.¹⁶ Illustrating even better the attitude of the NLP chief and of the liberal leaders towards the press was the excessively abusive and brutal manner in which the Brătianu administration sought to make use of censorship and the state of emergency law to strike a blow, in 1919, against his critics in the media, and especially against the newspaper *Adevărul*.¹⁷ The lesson that both he and his brother Vintilă received during the media lynching of 1919 had been effective. The two political strategists realized that in the era of universal suffrage, a politician's most important advantages which ensured the voters' support were his public image and credibility. These values could be destroyed or augmented by a single force: the power of the press. That is why the liberal strategist paid special attention to the liberal official newspaper—*Viiitorul*—and acknowledged the fact that the electoral battle of 1922 would be waged not only over party organization and competitive political management, but also over communication and image. And in the media confrontation, an instrumental role would be played by the defamation and political delegitimation of the political opponents in the eyes of the voters, obviously by applying political labels to their rivals. The Brătianu brothers had felt first-hand the effects of the defamatory political label “rats,” appended to their image even before the Great War, but especially during the media lynching of 1919.¹⁸ Brătianu was the first amongst the Romanian politicians of the time who understood that the Romanian mentality cherished public scandals and political gossip, and therefore he found a solution that would satisfy this craving for scandal and for crucifying political personalities in the public square. That is why the liberal leader deemed that the operation of branding his opponents as traitors or Bolsheviks was the most efficient way to compromise and delegitimize them. This is what happened to Alexandru Marghiloman: although he had saved the existence of the Romanian state and dynasty, he was dubbed a “traitor”; so was Take Ionescu,

who “sold the Banat”; General Averescu was declared a “traitor” by Brătianu’s moral instance, while Vaida-Voevod, Lupu and Mihalache were branded as “Bolsheviks.”¹⁹ “In his well-selected journalists, Brătianu had a general staff of magic quills excelling in the art of smearing without seriously poisoning the opponent. Thus he would not bar the latter from joining the Liberal Party and metamorphosing from a Takist, Conservative, Averescan, etc.—somewhat of a traitor, with somewhat greasy palms, and somewhat of a thief—into a pristine liberal,”²⁰ as it was the case of J. T. Florescu, C. Argetoianu, Stelian Popescu, N. Lupu, etc.

At the same time, in the spirit of the strategy defined ever since March 1920, that was to bring his party back in power, Brătianu invented and used the efficient political label of the “good Romanian.” This label that was launched on the public stage counter-balanced, especially in Transylvania, the effect of the disparaging “Phanariot Wallachian,” applied by the Transylvanians to the liberals and to the Averescans.²¹

The results of the NLP’s political effort and its new techniques of political communication were seen during the partial elections from the autumn of 1921, when the liberals had a landslide win in all the colleges declared vacant. It was clear that the impending electoral battle would be particularly violent, creative, inventive and devoid of any scruples.

AT THE beginning of 1922, although only three years had passed since the end of the Great War, the state of Romanian society and public opinion were quite different than during the first electoral campaign of universal suffrage, held in the immediate aftermath of the great conflagration. It had been three years since the war, and the country had been ruled by three governments, formed by two parties and a political coalition. Because of the disastrous and corrupt governments that came to power after the liberals, the voters cast into oblivion Brătianu and the liberals’ responsibilities for organizing and waging the war, and focused on: the difficulties and even the famine generated by the supply chaos in Transylvania;²² the huge frauds in the supply services, and those committed during the exchange of crowns and roubles into lei;²³ not to mention the immense budget deficit and the rampant inflation caused by the erroneous economic and budgetary policy of the Averescu government.²⁴ All these were signs of new domestic political circumstances that were favourable to the liberals’ return to power. At the same time, these new social-economic and political realities posed a big problem to the electoral strategists and political communicators who were opposed to the liberals: in view of the imminent election campaign of February–March 1922, they found their anti-liberal public indictment halved. The removal of the caustic journalist C. Mille from the leadership of the *Adevărul–Dimineața* Trust (1920) represented an important handi-

cap for the opposition to the new Brătianu government, installed in late January 1922, and for the anti-Liberal propaganda.²⁵ It is true that Mille, the venerable founder of the modern Romanian press,²⁶ returned to the anti-Brătianu media battlefield at the beginning of 1922, but he was in charge of a publication that no longer had the force and impact of the *Adevărul-Dimineaza* Trust. However, the anti-liberal opposition and propaganda launched an anti-Liberal onslaught using the obsessive theme of Brătianu's responsibility for the murder of 11,000 peasants during the repression of the 1907 uprising. Ever since the beginning of February, after the new liberal government was installed, the leftist papers of Bucharest, seconded by the publications of the Peasant Party and the National Romanian Party, together with *Chemarea* (The Call) and *Aurora* (The Dawn), began to smear the public image of the new prime minister with the undried blood of the peasants massacred during the "unnecessary horrors." Once again, the large-type headlines revealed the disparaging label of "sadistic murderer" that N. D. Cocea and C. Mille had appended to Ion I. C. Brătianu during the vicious media campaigns of 1908.

The fact is that Brătianu was uncomfortable with this label, as proved by his public reaction from the end of February 1922. In a speech he gave in Braşov, on 26 February 1922, he declared himself outraged by this allegation, defining it as a "slandorous legend" and offering the public an official record of the peasant casualties back then. "They have invented the legend that I killed 11,000 peasants in an uprising in which 340 died because of someone else's fault."²⁷

To counter such attacks on his public image, Brătianu resorted to the arsenal of Romanianism and patriotism. Thus, as prime minister of Greater Romania, he decided to use the Romanian symbols and to provide the public conscience with the key political message that he and his party were the political guarantors of long-lasting national unity and internal development and modernization. In this respect, Brătianu decided to run in the parliamentary elections in two Romanian constituencies that were symbolic for the unity of the Romanian state: Făgăraş and Braşov. Here he also gave, on the very same day, his first election speeches. Brătianu offered an explanation of his political gesture to the public, on 26 February 1922: "I wanted to produce this image, to convey the symbol of the forces whereby we can master today's needs. Not by isolating ourselves in separate tents, not by fighting amongst ourselves, but by uniting within the new borders of the country," he said. A few hours later, he told the people of Făgăraş that "I took this candidacy as a symbol. It is the most energetic disavowal of those who say *we* and *you* and still think that the Carpathians between you and us can still be anything but a source of wealth and brotherhood."²⁸

The liberals' political and propagandistic gestures were carefully monitored by their political opponents, who may not have had access to opinion surveys like today, but could sense the ascending trend of public sympathy for the liber-

als. In addition, the opposition did not have the support of the administrative and state apparatus that the Brătianu government had made available to the NLP, in keeping with the convenient Oriental anti-democratic traditions. Consequently, the few weapons the anti-liberal opposition and propaganda could resort to were those in the field of public communication. It was in this area that the terrible ideological and electoral confrontation would be waged during the campaign for the March 1922 elections.²⁹

Unscrupulous manipulation, imagination, forgery, abuse, barefaced lies and media violence knew no limits during the electoral battle of March 1922. The main theme of the attacks and polemics from the last days of the campaign was Brătianu's anti-Semitism. The opposition parties, and the Peasant Party in particular, which had made an electoral agreement with the Jewish Union, led a harsh and creative campaign against the "tyrannical liberal oligarchy," which they accused of being "bloodthirsty" and obsessed with the abusive domination of the Romanians and of the national wealth.

On the one hand, in this campaign there was the "truth" of the opposition, voiced by the official mouthpiece of the Peasant Party, *Aurora*, which, in its issue of 2 March 1922, printed the following: "The terror the liberals have unleashed on the country today has not been seen in these lands ever since the time we thought it had been definitively buried—the barbarian invasions." Faced with these abuses, the members of the Peasant Party responded by announcing that they would take up arms to defend the ballots. In addition, Ion Mihalache, the Peasant Party leader, demanded that his activists and candidates should sleep in the polling stations, requesting the written consent of the minister of Justice for this. Minister Jean T. Florescu sent him a telegram, in which he informed Mihalache that "we have brought your fears or the rumours you have voiced regarding the ballot safety issue to the attention of the local authorities. We cannot, however, tolerate the armed threat you have informed us about. Should any illegality be committed, the legal sanctions will be abundant." He also informed Mihalache that he could not grant the latter's request to sleep by the ballot boxes.³⁰ There was undoubtedly much physical violence during this election campaign, the best proof being the *Circular* sent by the Ministry of Interior to all the prefects, which stated that, according to the information that the government had, in some regions of the country, "because of the passion that is put into the electoral battle, the partisans of different parties and currents get engaged in fierce discussions, which often degenerate into acts of violence." He requested the prefects to give urgent and strict orders to ensure the public order and safety.³¹

The electoral and media aggressiveness of the opposition was matched by the abusive aggressiveness of the state apparatus that was in the service of the liberal candidates. The last days of this campaign generated the manifestation of true

electoral dementia amongst the ranks of the opposition, which produced and disseminated abroad a hideous and anti-national electoral fabrication, eventually leading the US Government to seek clarification from the Romanian Government regarding the gravity of the accusations brought against it. *Viitorul* announced that the US Government had contacted the Romanian Government, demanding explanations about the accusations that had been spread among the American workers by electoral activists from Romania, who had organized public meetings in the Romanian communities from the USA and had distributed leaflets and a shocking electoral poster. The poster, entitled “Crucified People in Greater Romania,” invited—on behalf of the Group of Industrial Workers in the World—the American Romanians with the right to vote to a big rally that took place after the Brătianu government was installed in office. Those who were invited were promised that there would be a disclosure of the “bestialities happening in Romania today,” which would make a “child [tremble] in its mother’s womb.” The poster mentioned that people were burned alive in Romania, that “people were crucified on the cross, crushed and boiled alive. Children’s brains scattered on the streets of Bucharest. Come, everyone, and you will be convinced.” The liberal mouthpiece deemed that this poster had been created by N. Lupu and that it was the best evidence of the links between the Peasant Party and the revolutionary groups elsewhere.³²

The conflict between the liberal power and the opposition Peasant Party on the anti-Semitic battlefield worsened especially after the appearance of an anti-Semitic campaign poster with the NLP insignia on buildings in the Capital and after the controversial Jewish businessman, Aaron Schuller, the protégé of the former Interior Minister C. Argetoianu, and of the General Averescu, was arrested. The most vehement in legitimating this thesis was the newspaper *Adevărul*, which considered that the arrest of Schuller was a case of anti-Semitic persecution. In turn, *Viitorul* insisted on stating that the arrest of the controversial businessman “who defrauded the country by hundreds of millions” was not related to the fact that “he is a Jew, or that he was the businessman of the People’s Party. This crook has been arrested because he embezzled many millions from the country’s treasury and because he discredited the Romanian state abroad.” The controversial businessman Schuller had received from Octavian Tâslăuanu, the minister of Industries in the Averescu government, the permission for a massive corn export, exempt from the payment of customs duties, in exchange for bringing oil extraction pipes in Romania, at the equivalent value of the exports he had made. Schuller exported the corn, but did not bring into the country the necessary equipment for the oil wells, treasury bonds being at stake and the state incurring the loss of almost 27 million lei from this deal. Thus, in mid-February 1922, the minister of Industry in the Brătianu government, V. Sassu, submit-

ted a request to the Ilfov Chief Public Prosecutor, in which he demanded that Schuller should be placed under criminal investigation. The ministry was also a civil party to the trial and claimed damages amounting to 26,763,118 lei, based on an expert appraisal conducted by the lawyer Istrate Micescu, employed by the ministry. Following this claim, the Prosecution took immediate measures to prevent the controversial businessman from leaving the country.³³ On 27 February, Schuller was summoned to the City Prefecture, where he underwent a long interrogation. Besides him, the former Interior Minister, C. Argetoianu, was also subpoenaed and he gave a statement incriminating the businessman. Under an ordinance, the latter was detained for 24 hours by the examining judge and was presented with an arrest warrant the next day,³⁴ being remanded in custody. *Adevărul* considered this gesture as a sign of the onset of anti-Semitic persecutions, a reason and a pretext for not acknowledging in the Constitution the rights of the Jews that had been sanctioned in the peace treaties.

In fact, this was the real stake of the hostile media and political campaign against the Brătianu brothers and the liberal government. Seen through the lens of military strategy, the Jewish lobby in Romania waged a preventive battle intelligently and as professionally as possible in order to prevent Brătianu from committing such an act and to determine him to publicly declare that these rights would be guaranteed. In fact, this preventive battle continued until the moment when the Brătianu government gave a public statement, *via* the Minister I. G. Duca, that it would sanction the Jews' rights in the new Constitution. To use a Romanian popular expression, once the Jews had got scalded by the unfulfilled promises made on behalf of the Romanian state after the Treaty of Berlin, they were cautious even about the cold liberal waters and tried to make sure that they would not get scalded again.

With such a stake, the electoral political battle on the topic of anti-Semitism was amplified. At an electoral meeting held in Bucharest on 26 February 1922, the Peasant Party brought extremely serious accusations against the liberal government from the time of the refuge to Moldavia and against the Minister of War, Vintilă Brătianu. Dr. N. Lupu brought Victor Marinescu to the rostrum of the party meeting: a former prosecutor from the Court Martial of the Second Army Corps during the Iași refuge, he said he had witnessed the execution of some Jews by the army for no other reason than being Jews, based on an order personally issued by the Minister of War, V. Brătianu. Marinescu claimed that "please believe me that I . . . saw terrible things! Orders were given that Jews be convicted, although they were not guilty. I remember that sad day of Christmas, when I was crushed under the weight of the horrors I had witnessed the night before. People who had no other fault than that they were Jews had been executed." At the time he was making these allegations, Victor Marinescu

was a retired major and promised that in a few days he would present evidence that would substantiate his allegations. In turn, climbing to the rostrum, Dr. Lupu said he would appeal to the League of Nations and “will show all the horrors that are happening in our country.”³⁵ Obviously, Victor Marinescu’s statements were taken over by the mouthpiece of the Peasant Party, *Aurora*, and by *Adevărul*, *Luptătorul* (The Fighter) and *Dimineața*. Realizing the—especially external—danger of this media campaign, Ion I. C. Brătianu quickly mobilized to counter the serious accusation and discredit the accusing major. In its issue of 3 March 1922, *Văitorul* revealed shocking details of Marinescu’s life and made compromising documents public. Thus, its readers found out that the said Marinescu had been the trusted man of the former Interior Minister, Dr. N. Lupu, who had promoted him as head of the street sergeants in Bucharest in February 1920. The newspaper disclosed the fact that Dr. Lupu had promoted the former major despite having received Address no. 1118 of 16 February 1920 from the Court Martial in question, which stated that the officer had been demoted, being placed under criminal prosecution in three criminal cases, on charges of abuse in office, striking a subordinate, slander and complicity to bribery.³⁶ Then, in each issue, the NLP mouthpiece urged the accusers to present the promised evidence, which led to the newspaper *Dimineața* publishing, in its issue of 5 March, a letter from the former major, who denied having said, at the meeting, what the newspapers had claimed: “The accounts have not conveyed my words exactly. In my speech I did not and I could not say that orders for the mass massacre of the Jews had been given, but I showed that at the Court Martial where I was present the injustices that were committed impressed me, because I believed, and I still believe, that mistakes were made.” Evidently, *Văitorul* also published this letter, stating that “*Aurora*, *Luptătorul* and *Adevărul*, which infamously circulated the slander against the Romanian army, in order to undermine the Liberal Party, will have to answer in court for the allegations they have made but cannot prove.”³⁷ On the other hand, to tone down the accusations that he was anti-Semitic, Brătianu also imposed Jewish candidates on the eligible lists of the NLP. One of them, Ely Berkovitz, ran in Bucharest, where he sought to win the votes of his conationals. The politician must have had a terrible shock on the morning of 2 March 1922, when he laid hands on the newspaper *Adevărul* and saw an electoral ad representing him—although he had not solicited this—and the slogan accompanying it. To understand the finesse of the manipulation conducted by Berkovitz’s electoral opponents it should be noted that the NLP election logo was the *Cross*. The anonymous creator added to this election logo the slogan: “Jews, by the logo above we shall prevail upon you. Ely Berkovitz, candidate of the Liberal Party.” It is clear that the insidious and playful electoral ad achieved its purpose, because *Văitorul* was forced, in its issue of 4 March 1922, to publish

the retraction of the vexed candidate: “The form in which the wretched call is reproduced gives the impression that I might be the author this sort of electoral insanity, designed to mystify and confuse the Jewish public opinion about my heart-felt honesty in the struggle I have always waged for the Jewish cause.”³⁸ In its turn, joining this preventive campaign, the newspaper *Dimineața* presented the case of the Senate candidate Moses Schwartzfeld, who had allegedly been politically persecuted and imprisoned for his views. To counter the effect of this attack, *Viitorul* published the opinion of a former magistrate, who claimed that the honourable candidate had been sentenced to a month for libel, hence for a civil law offence.³⁹

The liberals also did not waste any time, resorting to spying upon their most virulent opponents. In its issue of 27 February 1922, *Viitorul* revealed an unpleasant incident that had happened in the printing press of the newspaper *Aurora*, between N. D. Cocea—the manager of the newspaper—and Dr. N. Lupu, its director. The reason of the violent verbal dispute between the two was the directive Cocea had given for inserting an advertisement containing the communist electoral list in the 26 February edition. The pressmen informed Dr. Lupu, who came to the printing press and removed the electoral ad from the page layout. In the morning, Cocea found that the ad was missing and the following discussion, rendered by the NLP publication, took place. When Cocea asked why the ad had been removed, Dr. Lupu said, “Such an ad must not be published because while it would . . . compromise us completely among the voters in the villages. The entire liberal propaganda regarding our cahoots with the communists would be believed and we could no longer disavow it.” The answer did not satisfy Cocea: “The liberals can say what they want, but I know that we have the obligation to publish this advertisement.” From this dialogue, the NLP mouthpiece concluded that the publication supporting the Peasant Party was most likely funded by the Bolsheviks, since there could be no other explanation for its daily circulation of tens of thousands of copies, in the absence of any commercials to support it.⁴⁰

Another electoral and media battlefield was that of Transylvania, the conflict revolving around the decision reached by the Brătianu government to summon a part of the National Romanian Party (NRP) candidates and activists to military conscription. A media battle that was just as fierce was waged around the case of the politician Voicu Nițescu’s rejected candidacy. The NRP and its newspaper *Patria* (The Fatherland) treated this case as a serious abuse, which made A. Vaida-Voevod publicly condemn the “terror of the liberal oligarchy.” In a speech delivered in Timișoara, he stated that in his opinion, which was also that of the party he represented, there was no difference between Tisza’s and Brătianu’s governments insofar as the Transylvanian elite was concerned, since both oppressed the Transylvanian Romanians in equal measure.⁴¹ On the other hand,

following the huge scandal related to the conscription of the Transylvanian leaders and activists, the Brătianu government was forced to back off. General Petală from Cluj asked Iuliu Maniu to present him with the list of conscripted NRP supporters, so that they could be discharged.⁴² Meanwhile, the newspaper *Adevărul* accused Vintilă Brătianu that during his visit to Cluj he had allegedly concluded an electoral agreement with the former Hungarian prefect of Cluj, I. Kincsig, who was accused of high treason against the Romanian state. *Viitorul* replied immediately, stating that “we do not know what the conspiracy of the said Kincsig entailed, but we are authorized to state that Mr. V. Brătianu is unacquainted with this gentleman and has not had to conclude any regular agreements.”⁴³

Another topic used against the Brătianu government, transformed into an acidic media campaign with accusations of governmental corruption, was that related to the transfer, by the government, of 14 million crowns in gold coins from its custody into the vaults of the National Bank. The opposition newspapers concluded unanimously that this was the first in the endless series of costly business deals that the liberals would make to the detriment of the Romanian state and that the Brătianu brothers had done nothing but transfer the state wealth into their property *via* the Romanian National Bank (RNB), a private bank they controlled. It became necessary for M. Oromolu, the governor of the RNB, to give an interview on this subject to the most aggressive newspaper, *Aurora*, and clarify this affair. The RNB governor stated that the Averescu government had concluded the agreement with the RNB, under which the Brătianu government transferred the gold crowns to the bank. In exchange for the gold, the government received 10 million in currency and 42 million lei. The governor also said that the arrangement was beneficial to the Romanian state in light of the fact that this ensured the hoarding of the “gold coin that all countries are after.”⁴⁴

The electoral battle of February–March 1922 also targeted the votes of the civil servants and tenants. The opposition media warned these social categories with huge headlines that the Brătianu government would operate massive layoffs among the civil servants and would not extend leases. Issue after issue, during the two months after the investment of the Brătianu government, *Viitorul* was forced to publish materials that categorized these accusations as manipulations and gross forgeries.⁴⁵

Another technique of electoral manipulation that affected the liberals in the constituencies of Transylvania may be seen in the report prepared by the first-praetor of the Năsăud *plasa* (administrative unit) of Bistrița-Năsăud county, Ioan Păcurar, who on 22 February 1922, found in the matter of the complaint filed by the liberal leaders from Bistrița that at a rally held in the commune of Telciu, the NRP candidate to the Chamber, Laurențiu Oanea, “spread seditious

and outrageous words among the people; namely, he told the people that the citizens of the Old Kingdom do not pay any taxes and that the current government has decided that only the Transylvanians should pay taxes, including for those in the kingdom.⁴⁶ This phrase contains the obsessive and haunting theme, present even today, of the collective manipulation to which the hardworking and tax-paying Transylvanians are subjected, in an attempt to drive them against the lazy population of the Old Kingdom, which eschewed paying state tax. In addition, the contemporary codicil of collective manipulation made reference to those taxes—paid by the conscientious Transylvanians—failing to return to Transylvania.

From the point of view of public communication, the essential feature of the election campaign undertaken by the liberals in 1922 is that NLP promoted a positive campaign, characterized by political messages that appealed to the Romanians' unity, order, work and responsibility, and especially to the promise of ensuring welfare and stability. Both Brătianu and other important liberal leaders refrained from personal political attacks. There was no speech during this period in which a prominent leader of the Liberal Party attacked any political leader from the opposition. The same attitude was adopted by the mouthpiece *Văitorul*, which limited itself to reacting and counter-attacking the aggressive statements of the opposition, in particular those made by Dr. N. Lupu. While Brătianu and the liberals talked with seriousness and concern about the vast projects of state construction—the Constitution, the economic laws, the stabilization of the national currency, job security and the timely payment of wages—as well as re-launching the Romanian transport system and financing the industry and agriculture, the opposition focused its public discourse on aggressive and violent personal attacks, especially against the Brătianu brothers—presented as the quintessence of absolute evil. Moreover, the tone of this public aggressiveness was set by the opposition leaders, in particular by those of the Peasant Party, at the end of 1921, when the perspective of a long-lasting Brătianu administration was clearly foreshadowed. Thus, at the end of 1921, Dr. Lupu declared that “the most fierce battle must be waged against the assassins' dictatorship and that he cannot admit that the Constituent Assembly of Greater Romania is free from Mr. Brătianu's bayonets and machine guns.” In turn, Ion Mihalache stated then that “the king is in conflict with democracy.”⁴⁷ This was only the tone given to the violent and boisterous political-propagandistic concert, which is bound to have deafened the ears of the poor Romanian voters and taxpayers, who were then, as they are now, in the time and under the rule of corrupt politicians. The fact is that all this outburst of Romanians against Romanians did not change the predictable outcome of the elections, which the liberals won by an overwhelming majority.⁴⁸ Although the opposition continued to accuse the Brătianu

government of Balkan-style fraud and abuse—as was the regrettable case from Iași, where the commander of a cavalry unit had dispersed this rally by a cavalry charge—what is nonetheless essential is the fact that Ion I. C. Brătianu and his program of government were invested with the nation’s confidence, expressed in the ballots.⁴⁹

As it can be seen, there are not too substantial differences—in terms of manipulation techniques and political and media aggressiveness—between an election campaign from the third decade of the last century and one held at the beginning of the third millennium. At the same time, we can grasp the bitterness of the political-electoral confrontation, which we may also see in contemporary Romania. Obviously, it could not be otherwise, given the enormous political and economic stakes of the first parliamentary elections held in Greater Romania, after the introduction of universal suffrage. These stakes—represented by the political and economic control over Romania’s resources, in particular oil—generated the emergence of two blocks of power on the domestic scene. On one side there was the Brătianu complex, consisting of the NLP, the liberal financial oligarchy, which was headed by two banking citadels: the National Bank of Romania and the Romanian Bank, along with the entire constellation of banks and industrial and commercial enterprises which revolved around them, as well as the liberal institutions and the press. All this political-economic complex was animated by the “By Ourselves” doctrine of Romanian economic nationalism. In the opposite camp there was the power group consisting of the parties of Take Ionescu, Alexandru Averescu, Iuliu Maniu and Ion Mihalache, funded by foreign-owned banks, represented by the Marmorosch-Blank Bank. The interests of this group were supported and protected especially by the *Ad-evărul-Dimineța* Trust (controlled by the banker Aristide Blank), alongside the party mouthpieces and other newspapers. The doctrine that animated this power bloc was expressed through the “open doors” formula, meaning the removal of all political and administrative obstacles in the way of foreign capital investing in and exploiting the Romanian resources. Well, since the players were great and the new Romanian Country was great, the financial and material interests and opportunities could only be enormous. What mattered was only who managed to get the power and maintain it for as long as possible. This is what caused the collisions between the two major associations of private and group interests. Similar to a scene of military operations, the public stage saw the deployment of political forces for the big confrontation, which would determine the winning group that would establish the rules whereby the country’s resources and opportunities would be exploited. The rules were laid down in the new Constitution of Greater Romania and this explains the enormous interest for influencing

public opinion and winning the majority of votes in these elections. The two political-economic blocs were aware that the 1922 elections would entail the election of the Constituent Assembly of Greater Romania, whose M.P.s were to propose, debate and vote on the rules of the political, economic and administrative game. Therefore, what mattered was which party would manage to send most members under the dome of the Constituent Assembly, as those M.P.s were to adopt the Constitution and the law that would govern the leasing and exploitation of the Romanian oil fields. This occurred during the 1922–1926 term, at the initiative of the Brătianu government.

As regards the liberal politician, he declared at one point: “I care not about the stones that are cast at me in life; what I care about is the stone that will be laid over my grave,”⁵⁰ indicating thus to posterity what his purpose and mission in the political life of the country had been.



Notes

1. The decree-law published in the Official Journal of Romania no. 291 of 16 November 1918; Claudia Gîlia, *Sisteme și proceduri electorale* (Bucharest: C. H. Beck, 2007), 104.
2. Because of Romania’s special situation at the end of World War I, when, over the course of a few days, it had switched from the status of a defeated country, occupied by the Central Powers, to that of a co-belligerent, the collaborationist Parliament—the “Shameful Peace Parliament”—elected at the beginning of 1918 (the Marghiloman administration), was dissolved by King Ferdinand at the beginning of November 1918.
3. See Ion Novăcescu, *Linșajul mediatic în politica românească, 1919: Adevărul versus Ion I. C. Brătianu* (Bucharest: Adevărul, 2013), 101–421.
4. The main attack themes were: Brătianu’s responsibilities in waging war; the absolutist and authoritarian spirit of the NLP leader in politics; the occult connections with the Palace; favouring the liberal oligarchy, etc.
5. I. G. Duca, *Amintiri politice*, vol. 3 (Munich: Ion Dumitru Verlag, 1982), 192.
6. *Ibid.*, 191–192.
7. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, ed. Alexandru Șerban, vol. 2 (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1995), 76.
8. Constantin Argetoianu, *Memorii pentru cei de mâine: Amintiri din vremea celor de ieri*, vols. 3–4, pt. 5, 1916–1918 (Bucharest: Machiavelli, 2008), 602–603.
9. See the article “Partidele de clasă,” *Văitorul* (Bucharest) 12, 3461 (17 September 1919): 4.
10. By the “Phoenix bird political syndrome” we mean the state of euphoria, complacency and arrogance that gripped the liberal leaders in the immediate aftermath of the war, when the NLP was simply reborn from its own ashes. I. G. Duca (100–101) reveals that in his memoirs.

11. *Viitorul* 11, 3138 (20 November 1918): 1.
12. Duca, 191.
13. Constantin Argetoianu wrote in his *Memoirs* that the liberals were dominated by the delusion that their party would “acquire a serious majority throughout the Old Kingdom”; cf. Constantin Argetoianu, *Memorii*, vol. 6, pt. 6, 1919–1922 (Bucharest: Machiavelli, 1996), 190. In his turn, I. G. Duca described in his *Memoirs* (192) the deep state of panic and disappointment that had seized the NLP leaders.
14. *Îndreptarea* (Bucharest) 3, 61 (18 March 1920): 1.
15. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, *Scrisori de la Conferința de Pace*, ed. Mircea Vaida Voevod (Cluj-Napoca: Multi Press International, 2003), 123.
16. In the speech he delivered at the opening of the Latin Press Congress in Bucharest in October 1927, Brătianu told the European journalists present there that “the power you wield is fearsome. The ever more prevalent influence that democracy assigns to the public opinion has accordingly increased your strength”: *Viitorul* 20, 5804 (October 1927): 1.
17. Novăcescu, *Linșajul mediatic*, 168–185.
18. *Ibid.*, 121–421; Pamfil Șeicaru, *Istoria presei* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2007), 230; A. P. Samson, *Memoriile unui gazetar (1927–1937)* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1979), 66.
19. Ion Novăcescu, *Ion I. C. Brătianu: Concepție și management politic* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2011), 192.
20. Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, 97.
21. *Viitorul* 14, 4106 (20 November 1921): 3; see also *Viitorul* 14, 4189 (2 March 1922): 1.
22. *Înfrățirea* (Cluj) 1, 39 (18 September 1920): 6.
23. Ștefan Zeletin, *Neoliberalismul: Studii asupra istoriei și politicii burgheziei române*, 3rd edition (Bucharest: Scripta, 1992), 132, 138.
24. *Viitorul* 14, 4106 (20 November 1921): 3.
25. Samson, 68.
26. Novăcescu, *Linșajul mediatic*, 27–28; see also Tiberiu Avramescu, *Constantin Mille: Tinerețea unui socialist* (Bucharest: Ed. Politică, 1973); *id.*, “Adevărul”: *Mișcarea democratică și socialistă* (Bucharest: Ed. Politică, 1982).
27. *Viitorul* 15, 4189 (2 March 1922): 1.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Elections for the Chamber of Deputies were held between 5 and 7 March 1922, and for the Senate, on four days—1, 2, 9 and 10 March 1922—even though the law stipulated only two days.
30. *Viitorul* 15, 4188 (1 March 1922): 3.
31. *Ibid.*, 15, 4185 (25 February 1922): 3.
32. *Ibid.*, 15, 4188 (1 March 1922): 3.
33. *Ibid.*, 15, 4185 (25 February 1922): 3.
34. *Ibid.*, 15, 4188 (1 March 1922): 3.
35. *Ibid.*, 15, 4189 (2 March 1922): 3.
36. *Ibid.*, 15, 4190 (3 March 1922): 3.

37. Ibid., 15, 4193 (6 March 1922): 3.
38. Ibid., 15, 4191 (4 March 1922): 3.
39. Ibid., 15, 4190 (3 March 1922): 3.
40. Ibid., 15, 4187 (27 February 1922): 3.
41. Ibid., 15, 4196 (10 March 1922): 3.
42. Ibid., 15, 4190 (3 March 1922): 3.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 15, 4185 (25 February 1922): 3.
45. Ibid., 15, 4191 (4 March 1922): 3.
46. Ibid., 15, 4190 (3 March 1922): 3.
47. The Romanian Academy Library, MSS, The Ion I. C. Brătianu Fund, case 2, varia 3, fol. 14.
48. Of the total number of 2,908,015 voters, 2,210,370 citizens voted for the Chamber of Deputies, the National Liberal Party winning 227 seats.
49. *Viitorul* 14, 4195 (9 March 1922): 3.
50. Ibid., 20, 5931 (27 November 1927): 3.

Abstract

Communication and Propaganda in Romanian Interwar Politics: The Election Campaigns of 1919 and 1922

The electoral confrontation involved two political and media groups that vied for political power, as this would ensure their control over the Romanian resources, primarily over the oil reserves. On one side of the barricade were the National Liberal Party, the financial-banking oligarchy and the liberal press. This group was inspired by the doctrine of economic nationalism. On the other side were the parties and broadsheets that were opposed to the liberals and were financially supported by foreign capital, which sought to have open and unrestricted access to the Romanian mineral resources. Faced with such interests and realising, in the era of universal suffrage, that the party which would win the most votes would be in a position to draw up the Constitution and the mining laws, both groups made full use of political propaganda and communication to win the elections.

Keywords

communication, propaganda, election campaigns, political parties, the press, Romanian politics