

The Relevance of Family Background and Personal Networks in the Development of Vasile Mangra's Political Career (1850–1918)

MARIUS EPEL



VASILE MANGRA
(1850–1918)

Marius Eppel

Lecturer at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca and Researcher at the Department of Modern Political and Intellectual History, Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague.

Introduction

IN A person's life, several factors influence, to a lesser or greater extent, his or her trajectory. Family, kinship and friendship relations, together with the pursuit of a vocation, were the main elements that defined the professional trajectory of the members of the Romanian elite in the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, beside those mentioned above, external, unforeseen or accidental factors lead a certain individual to adopt, in a certain situation, a different attitude from the initial one. At a certain moment, feelings such as admiration,

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confusion, anxiety, fear, joy, sadness, and sympathy generated decisions that were contrary to reason, as they were opposite to the objectives set out in the initial individual or group plan.

From previous research, we have observed that in the milieu of the Transylvanian Orthodox and Greek Catholic elite, several factors supported an individual to climb the social ladder, namely, the socio-economic background, the family network, and confessional cohesion. This rule also applies to the case of Vasile Mangra. He was a teacher, academician, politician, and metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Transylvania between 1916 and 1918. In this study, we intend to present the main moments in his life and to analyze how Mangra accepted or not to be conditioned by these factors. His extroverted personality and constant search for personal and professional progress, with all the efforts that this entailed, determined his contemporaries to regard him as an intelligent, strong, ambitious, courageous, responsible, loyal but also recalcitrant and irascible person. His entire correspondence depicts a person who did not give up his goals easily, and who preferred the company of people with strong personalities, deeply attached to family and friends.

Sources and Methodology

THE CHOICE of Vasile Mangra as a case study to illustrate how family and personal networks helped build a political career is no accident. The reason lies in the fact that in many ways, Mangra's life story has all the elements I have outlined above. The main sources I have consulted in writing this study are the correspondence of the metropolitan and other actors of the time, documents, memoirs, the ecclesiastical and political press in Transylvania and Hungary, as well as some editions of documents meant to complete the picture of this personality.¹

From a methodological point of view, my aim was to follow the life of Metropolitan Mangra by stages of age or personal development, constantly comparing it with the intellectual developmental trend of the Orthodox ecclesiastical elite. More specifically, we divided the research matter into the following parts: family life, then friendship relations and political collaboration with Ioan Slavici and Eugen Brote. It is necessary to point out that, due to the complexity of the analyzed character, we cannot describe the entire network of relations built by Vasile Mangra in the pages of a single study. This time, we have chosen to outline the relationship with his family and to analyze his connections with his closest friends, Slavici and Brote.

The Relationship with His Family

IT IS known that among the first role models an individual follows are those close to his or her upbringing, i.e., one's parents, relatives, and neighbors. Vasile Mangra was no exception to this rule. Born on 25 May 1850, in Săldăbagiu Mic (Körösszáldobágy) in Bihar (Bihor) County, Mangra was influenced by the way his parents, Maria Ceontea and Mihai Mangra, viewed the world and life in general.² His father was a priest and came from a multi-generational priestly family.³ It is noteworthy to mention that, in Mangra's case, we can see the same general tendency of the Romanian Orthodox elite, namely, that most of those who came from priestly families pursued theological studies. Beside this trend, we would also like to mention that legal studies were another preference for the children of priests. As far as Mangra is concerned, his first choice was the Academy of Law in Oradea (Nagyvárad, Großwardein), from which he withdrew during the academic year 1872–1873.⁴ We suspect this was due to financial reasons, because during that year, he received a small scholarship from the Emanuil Gojdu Foundation to continue his legal studies. As a result, he enrolled at the Orthodox Theological Institute in Arad, where he started his exceptional ecclesiastical career. His professional reorientation was regarded by his family, especially by his mother, as an act of divine will or as the hand of destiny and a confirmation of something predicted many years before. The story, told by Mangra late in life, is that after finishing the fifth grade at the gymnasium in Beiuș (Belényes, Binsch), he took a trip through the Bihor Mountains and, upon arriving in Călugări (Kalugyer) village, he saw a crowd of people from different regions gathered in front of a peasant house. After talking to some of the peasants, he learned that a famous soothsayer lived in that house. His curiosity led him to test the soothsayer's skill, which involved placing a coin on the table and going out into the courtyard to decipher the message of the stars. After reentering the house, he would pick up the coin to see what had appeared beneath it. But Mangra did not wait for the soothsayer to return and, without his knowledge, he lifted the coin to see the images that had appeared, namely a snake and a loaf of bread. Then he placed the coin back in its initial position. The soothsayer saw the same thing and, knowing the meaning of the symbols, told the young man that two paths lay open before him, that of the serpent and the bread, respectively. His life would be beset by great torment and many troubles, but he would overcome them all and receive his reward. When he returned home, the young Mangra told his mother the story and the prophecy, which his mother, Maria, wrote down, so that it would not be forgotten.⁵

Vasile Mangra's relationship with his family was solid. He had three brothers, Romul, Arsenie, and Gheorghe, of which the former followed the family tradition by becoming a priest. He also had three sisters—Iuliana, Elisabeta, and Ana. The latter two married priests, namely Pavel Moga, a priest in Tornia (Tornya, Turn), and Gheorghe Blaga, a priest in Homorog (Oláhhomorog), respectively. Therefore, at first glance, the Mangra family had become a real dynasty of priests, with influence in their circles. This could be seen later, when the whole family was mobilized in the electoral campaigns of Vasile Mangra, be these ecclesiastical (in 1900, he was elected vice-bishop of the Oradea Consistory; in 1901 and 1902, he became bishop of Arad; in 1916, he was elected metropolitan bishop of Transylvania) or political (in 1910, he became a deputy to the Hungarian Parliament). The almost 16 years Mangra spent in Oradea as vice-bishop strengthened the family ties even more. His closest connection was with Romul,⁶ perhaps also because of the profession they both shared. As such, he benefited from Vasile's support when it came to the question of moving to a better parish. Initially, following his marriage to Ecaterina Ardelean, Romul was appointed priest in Rontău (Rontó),⁷ and after his brother became an influential person in the Diocese of Arad, he received the parish of Giriş (Körösgyères) (today, Girişu de Criş commune), which was superior to the former in terms of resources.

The family's deep attachment to the person of Vasile Mangra continued after his death, especially in the context of his canonical and historical rehabilitation. The process was started by Ioan Mangra, the metropolitan's grandson, and by Gheorghe Liţiu. This process was joined by several intellectuals, priests, and university professors, including Mircea Păcurariu.⁸

The Relationship with Ioan Slavici

AS AN outstanding student at the Theological Institute of Arad, Mangra became known mainly for his published articles, and as a columnist and editor of the magazines *Lumina* (The Light) and *Biserica și Școala* (Church and School). Those years shaped Mangra's intellectual profile and were fruitful in terms of personal connections, some of which were to last a lifetime. It was at that time that he befriended Ioan Slavici (1848–1925), who was to become a famous writer. Their friendship began in 1872, when Slavici sent Mangra a series of articles for publication in the pages of the *Lumina* magazine. Soon the two began to team up, as can be seen from the support that Mangra and Slavici gave to Bishop Miron Romanul for his election as metropolitan. Both were under Miron's wing in 1873, when Mangra published in *Lumina*

Slavici's article titled "Ad rem," in which Slavici supported Miron's candidacy for the Metropolitan See.⁹

Slavici's departure to study in Vienna crystallized his friendship with Mangra. From this point of view, the year 1874 can be considered a landmark in the relationship between the two. Mangra tried to pay Slavici, who had a serious health problem, for the articles published in *Lumina*. Slavici refused Mangra's help, stating stoically that

*Whoever has not proved that he can be useful by the age of 26 does not deserve to reach the age of 27, especially not when he can reach it only aided by others . . . I myself have never worked to earn money, but only because I wanted to, because my soul was full of thoughts. I work and I will work without thinking of the benefits that my work can bring to myself or to others. I seek only one profit—the pleasure I find in my work.*¹⁰

Slavici's concern for the less advantaged social classes was shared by his friend. In fact, their exchange of letters formed the basis of their future common cultural and political ideas.¹¹ They both represented the new generation of young people who gave a more pragmatic, clear and energetic direction to the national movement of the Romanians in the Arad area. This movement coalesced around the *Tribuna* (The Tribune) newspaper, in support of the Romanian political goals. Mangra saw Slavici as one of the possible leaders of the Romanian National Party in the Arad area, and he was promoted as such in the circles of friends and close associates. This is indicated by letter sent by Mangra to Mihail Veliciu, dated 10 June 1887.

The forthcoming parliamentary elections required a candidate from the younger generation, and Mangra regarded Slavici as the most suitable choice. Therefore, Mangra tried to promote Slavici in local politics not only out of friendship, but also because they both shared the political views of the *Tribuna* supporters in Arad, who suggested innovative political strategies, including cultivating relations with politicians in Romania, who could intervene with the Triple Alliance, which in turn could campaign for more rights for the Romanians in Transylvania before the government in Budapest.¹² Mangra's plan to promote Slavici politically failed in the spring of 1887, because the National Party group in Arad fragmented after the resignation of its leader, Ioan Popovici-Desseanu, and many of its members, including Iosif Gall, George Șerb, and Dimitrie Bonciu, went over to the government side. Without attempting to describe the entire atmosphere in the Romanian political circles of Arad, it is worth mentioning that the Austro-Hungarian authorities had noticed that the two leaders, Slavici and Mangra, could orchestrate a large-scale counter-reaction

to state policies in the future. Thus, in 1887, Slavici came to the attention of the Austrian Intelligence Office, which described him as follows:

*Editor-in-chief of Tribuna, the main press organ of the Romanians in Hungary and Transylvania; he lived for many years in Bucharest, and is now a member of the Central Committee that holds the leadership of the Romanians in Hungary and Transylvania. He is an enemy of the Hohenzollern and Habsburg families, and an enemy of the Hungarians.*¹³

Shortly after these informative notes, Slavici was sentenced to one year in prison in Vác for his political activity and especially for his articles published in *Tribuna*. Around the same time, in May 1888, Mangra was dismissed from his position as professor at the Theological Institute in Arad, for his connections to *Tribuna* and to certain politicians, including Slavici. The latter expected this and still seemed optimistic about their political future: “The situation for us is not as bad as many would think.”¹⁴

After being released from prison, Slavici returned to Sibiu to the *Tribuna* editorial office, where he continued to express his political ideas as energetically as before. However, in the spring of 1889, he left the editorial office and returned to Romania. Together with Eugen Brote, he continued to advise Mangra throughout the period when the initiators of the 1892 Memorandum were imprisoned in Vác and Szeged, in 1894. As a result of this unprecedented situation, Mangra was elected vice president of the Romanian National Party. Although his mandate lasted only until July 1894, when the Ministry of Interior Affairs banned all Romanian National Party activities, Mangra mobilized the population and the civil society to protest against this situation. All this time, he was in constant contact with Slavici and Brote, the Transylvanians exiled to Bucharest, who did not expect much from the government in Budapest.¹⁵ Beyond these aspects, after the authors of the memorandum were released from prison in 1896, the differences in political views between the old and the new generation became more and more evident, triggering the *Tribuna* crisis, which later turned into a major political crisis of the entire national movement of the Transylvanian Romanians.

Slavici’s departure for Bucharest in the spring of 1890 marks the beginning of a new phase in his relationship with Mangra. They cultivated a so-called long-distance relationship, the only one able to ensure the contact between the two and, implicitly, between the two political environments, of Transylvania and Hungary, on the one hand, and of the Kingdom of Romania, on the other. As indicated by the epistolary dialogue with his friend, Slavici was fully involved in sup-

porting Mangra, by opening opportunities for future collaborations with prominent political leaders and intellectuals, such as Titu Maiorescu, D. A. Sturdza, and V. A. Urechia. Slavici always searched for new solutions and contexts through which the issue of the Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy could be made known to the international public opinion. The Congress of Nationalities in August 1895 was largely prepared in Bucharest by Mangra, Slavici, Brote, Aurel C. Popovici, and Septimiu Albini, under the patronage of Dimitrie A. Sturdza. Thus, from a certain point of view, Slavici's physical absence from Transylvania seemed to be more propitious for the national aspirations. The success of the Congress of Nationalities in concluding the alliance between Romanians, Serbs, and Slovaks supports this idea.¹⁶ Slavici's correspondence with Mangra reveals that he took over much of the work for organizing this event.

We believe that Slavici's presence in Mangra's life was of overwhelming importance, especially in the first part of the metropolitan's life, more precisely until around 1895. Even though he was only two years older than Mangra, Slavici had always shown the ability to open new horizons for his friend, guiding not only his literary but also his ecclesiastical and political activity. It is relevant to mention that Slavici became a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, which also opened the way for Mangra to collaborate with this high forum, first by donating old Romanian books, awarding prizes to Mangra for his historical works, based on which he was elected a full member in 1909. It is noteworthy that Slavici enjoyed a reputation within the Romanian Academy not only as a writer, but also as a good teacher and administrator. His appointment as director of the Ioan Oteteleşanu Girls' Institute in Măgurele by a commission nominated by the Academy, which included Ion Kalinderu, Ioan C. Negruzzi, Dimitrie A. Sturdza, and V. A. Urechia, is significant in this respect. In this context, we learn that Mangra had a granddaughter who intended to attend this institute. Slavici wrote to his friend that he had introduced in the school's regulations the article that provided that those candidates who came from outside Romania should be exempted from the entrance exam, and that their school certificates issued in their places of birth should be accepted. Therefore, Slavici asked Mangra to send to the Romanian Academy

the application accompanied by a baptismal certificate, a school certificate, a certificate of poverty, a vaccination certificate, and a confirmation issued by a Romanian physician that the girl is healthy . . . I will do my best to get her admitted, and I hope I will succeed, because we have no other girls from Hungary. It is obvious that I cannot be certain of this, because we are dealing with people like Mr. Sturdza, Mr. Kalinderu, and King Carol.¹⁷

Of course, Mangra also looked for contexts and pretexts to reward his friend. One such moment was in the summer of 1909, when Mangra sent Slavici several documents, left by Moise Nicoară, to examine, transcribe, edit, and draw up a study based on them. For all the work, Slavici received one thousand lei.¹⁸ Mangra's interest in Moise Nicoară's personality was a long-standing one, and he intended to piece together not only his life and activity, but also the collaborative relationship between Moise Nicoară and Petru Maior, the two leading figures of the Transylvanian School.¹⁹

His friendship with Mangra was defined by loyalty and self-sacrifice, and in this respect, it was quite special. Slavici always appreciated Mangra's leadership qualities and his intelligence, as indicated by the more than 50 letters between the two. Although their correspondence stopped in June 1911, Slavici declared his solidarity with Mangra in all the political decisions he took, especially the one concerning the change to the government side in the 1910 parliamentary elections. As someone who knew Mangra well, Slavici was convinced that his friend's political reorientation was for the good of the Romanian cause, because Mangra's declarations "are at the disposal of His Majesty's government, to which I and my friends have always been committed." However, Slavici also did not overlook the possibility that Mangra would end his political life as a "victim" of Bucharest politics, as his sacrifice "could be in vain."²⁰

The Relationship with Eugen Brote

THIS FRIENDSHIP can be considered one of the most fruitful that Mangra cultivated in the political sphere. It started in 1891, and at a certain point it took Mangra's political career from the initial stage, characterized by local involvement, with few echoes in the higher Hungarian and Romanian political circles, to a superior one.

The rapprochement between the two took place in adulthood, unlike Mangra's friendship with Slavici, which began in his student days. Mangra considered Eugen Brote (1850–1912) to be experienced in administrative matters and in coordinating the *Tribuna* newspaper. In fact, the correspondence between the two began around the time of the Memorandum and the ensuing crisis in the Transylvanian national movement. Initially rather formal, since the two addressed each other with "Sir," the correspondence after 1895 begins with "Dear friend."

When the Romanian National Party was outlawed, and Brote and Slavici were away in Romania, there appeared the intention to set up a new newspaper

to promote the ideas of political activism. In 1896, Brote suggested to Mangra that he should meet Dimitrie A. Sturdza, the only person who could help the Arad group. Mangra's contact with Sturdza and the liberals in Romania was mainly through Brote, and less through A. C. Popovici. Through Brote, Mangra obtained concrete help from the liberal leader in Romania, D. A. Sturdza, namely, financial support for the creation, in 1897, of *Tribuna Poporului* (The People's Tribune), which also shifted the center of the national movement from Sibiu (Hermannstadt, Nagyszeben) to Arad.²¹

Mangra found in Brote one of his most important advisors on political issues. After being elected vicar in Oradea, Mangra entered an environment that required official collaboration with government representatives. In other words, as a representative of an institution whose budget depended to a large extent on the collaboration with state authorities, Mangra could no longer afford to react as before, although he was discontent with the state's attitude towards the Romanians in Transylvania. In his search for answers, Brote was the perfect partner for an epistolary dialogue. The frequent letters that arrived at the vice-bishop's residence from Brote contained exhortations and were meant to constantly remind Mangra of the real political situation. Brote had given Mangra confidence that the time for negotiations between Romanians and Hungarians was coming, but 1906 was not the time he meant. Brote felt that Mangra was at the right time and in the right place:

*The Bishop's See of Oradea Mare offers such a wide and important field of activity that any man of substance can dedicate himself to it. With no other aspiration than success, Your Grace can carry on the activity without any embarrassment, as you have no needs, neither to harass the government, nor to humiliate yourself before it. Any existing generous Church has given you everything, and there is no power nor means to turn the Hungarians away from their course. Regardless whether the government is named after Deák or Tisza or Kossuth, we Romanians are still the competitors and the rivals of the Hungarians. The Vice-Archimandrite of Oradea Mare may become of a significantly greater importance for his Church and people than the Metropolitan of Sibiu, because everything depends on the man, not on the See.*²²

Soon after these words, Brote suggested that Mangra should go to Sturdza's estate at Găiceana. Under the pretext of his daughter Lidia's christening, Brote had invited Mangra, Slavici, and Roman Ciorogariu to this secret meeting at the beginning of August 1907. The nine points adopted in the so-called Pact of Găiceana referred to the support of the Romanian representatives in the Hun-

garian Parliament, to contacting the Hungarian Social Democratic Party for future collaboration, to the establishment of political connections with the Croats, which could strengthen the ties between nationalities in 1895, the care for the relationship with the political parties in Romania so as not to be drawn into any dissension, the attempt to contribute to the solution to the agrarian issue in Romania, keeping the king and D. A. Sturdza posted about all their political actions, making subscriptions for the *Tribuna* magazine in Romania, and offering material support to the Romanians in the Vicariate of Oradea, which was under the assault of the socialists.²³ Their action plan was followed only partially, because of its magnitude.

It is particularly relevant that after this moment, Brote continued to impress upon Mangra that, given the context, only a rapprochement with the Hungarians would ensure the possibility of future political negotiations between the Hungarians and the Romanians. This view was also supported by Sturdza, who saw this as an opportunity to defuse the situation in Transylvania. Brote's letters on the eve of the 1910 parliamentary elections were encouraging and guided his friend towards making a political move that he had suggested to Mangra in the 1905 elections as well,²⁴ namely to run for a seat in the Hungarian Parliament on a government platform. All this, together with his belief that he would be able to obtain from the government as many political concessions as possible for the Romanians, led Mangra to participate in the 1910 elections, in which he obtained a seat as a deputy of István Tisza's Labor Party. Without going into details, we only wish to mention that Mangra's political reorientation triggered strong reactions from the Transylvanian politicians who disapproved of his gesture. Nevertheless, he did not lose the support of the clergy, of the teachers, and of his two Transylvanian friends in Romania—Brote and Slavici.²⁵

In the turmoil of those days, Brote remained the only confidant of Mangra, from whom he always needed guidance and support. We only have one letter written by Mangra, in which he states his decision to approach the governmental side. It is the letter sent to Brote on 16/29 March 1910.²⁶ Brote remained Mangra's only confidant in political matters until the end of the former's life in 1912. Just before his death, Brote received the happy news from Mangra that the strategy he had been guiding him towards had borne its first fruits, as he had obtained from the Ministry of Denominations and Public Instruction an increase from 12,000 to 29,000 crowns in the subsidy for the Oradea Consistory, whose vice-chairman he was.²⁷

Conclusions

AS WE have seen throughout this analysis, building a political career requires the presence of several mandatory factors. In addition to a family that supports the young man's aspirations, guiding him during his first steps on the road of life, it is also necessary to have an exceptional preparation, with the right people. All these factors create the perfect framework for the full development of a personality.

Of the many friendships that people make throughout their lives, in the case of Vasile Mangra we have selected those that defined his political career, namely his family, Ioan Slavici, and Eugen Brote. Mangra's grandparents and parents taught him to appreciate books and the Church, and he did nothing but follow their example. His friendship with Slavici from Arad gave Mangra the opportunity to better understand local political life and to become aware of his role as a leader, something that Slavici was not meant for. Thus, of all the friendships Mangra cultivated throughout his life, the singular one with Slavici was almost brotherly.

The relationship with the agronomist Eugen Brote from Sibiu began in Mangra's life in a certain logical succession of events, just after Slavici seemed to have ended his main role as Mangra's mentor—more exactly, after 1894, when he opened new avenues for Mangra in the high circles of the political class in Bucharest. The friendship with the liberal Dimitrie A. Sturdza, the financing of the *Tribuna Poporului* newspaper in Arad by the liberals in 1897, and the encouragement to move to the governmental side are just some of the facts that show that, with Brote's help, Mangra made the leap to "big politics."

The fate of the three friends was broadly the same. All three started out under the impetus of the political struggle for fulfilling the wishes of the Transylvanian Romanians. Together they became acquainted with the same personalities of the time, and supported each other politically, scientifically, and personally. People whose characters are as similar as theirs are rare. Men of few words who embraced stoicism, they created life stories that certainly impress those who study the political life in Transylvania in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While seeming to have joined the side of Francis Joseph's empire,²⁸ Brote and Slavici ended up in poverty, and Mangra died of heart disease at the Bristol Hotel on the bank of the Danube in Budapest, as confirmed by the report drawn up on the site.²⁹ The tragedy of their lives reminds our contemporaries of the importance of self-sacrifice in the key moments of history. After analyzing their work and the way they related to the world around them, in all three cases

we notice self-sacrifice, disinterest in pecuniary gain or material accumulation. The three were idealists who believed until the last moment of their lives that self-sacrifice would become the foundation for a new world and a new political reality that would be much better for all Romanians.



Notes

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Abstract

The Relevance of Family Background and Personal Networks
in the Development of Vasile Mangra’s Political Career (1850–1918)

In this study, we wish to determine to what extent Vasile Mangra’s political career depended on the education received in his family environment. We would also like to reveal the most important figures in the entire network of friends and acquaintances that parliament member Vasile Mangra acquired during his life, namely, Ioan Slavici and Eugen Brote. Based on published sources, this paper presents lesser-known details about the political life of the Romanians living in Transylvania and Hungary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords

family background, policy, personal networks, Transylvania, Vasile Mangra, Ioan Slavici, Eugen Brote