

Acțiunea Românească (1923–1925): The Circumstances of Its Establishment

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“Whoever controls the government, now or in the future, will have to solve two major problems: the problem of the public servants and that of the Jews...”

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ON 7 June 1923, “19 Romanian intellectuals from Cluj—professors, lawyers, physicians, teaching assistants, and students—founded an organization which they called *Acțiunea Românească* (The Romanian Action).” The name was obviously inspired by the model provided by a country which the Romanians of that time called “our older sister, France.” The similarities included, apart from the name, the reasons behind the establishment of the organization and, in part, its agenda.¹ In the words of the Romanian founders,

We took this initiative for two reasons: 1. The inertia, the recklessness, and the shallow egotism of those insensitive Romanians who not only remain indifferent to all general problems, but also take nefarious action and utter reckless words, and who, in order to satisfy their vanity and greed, join forces with the enemies within and without or nation and sully the name of Romania and endanger the greater interests of the

*state. 2. The tendencies of political, economic, and cultural expansion—to the detriment of the political, economic, and cultural unity of this state—displayed by elements foreign to our race and by those who, after a superficial rather than an authentic assimilation, only pretend to be Romanian. In the course of time, amid policies favorable to them and inimical to us, and somewhat favored by a specific instinct, radically opposed to the Christian generosity of our nation, these elements have managed to gain economic superiority and thus a position which runs counter to the general interests of our new state. The initiatives and the struggle of **Acțiunea Românească** are the natural consequence of these defining causes: . . . we shall struggle to reduce the economic, cultural, and political power of these foreign elements, and especially of the Jewish element, to their just size.²*

The unworthy Romanians, “deliberately or unconsciously serving foreign interests,” and especially the dangerous foreigners, were the targets and the declared enemies of the new organization, the focal point of a “great and comprehensive program of intransigent nationalism.” And by foreign they meant Jewish. Thus, in the aftermath of the Union, the Romanians did not establish anti-Hungarian organizations, as one might have believed, but rather one whose declared enemies were the Jews and whose founding members were mostly university professors.

Apart from the imitation of the ideas and models circulating in Europe at that time, the reasons behind the creation of *Acțiunea Românească* also had to do with the situation at Central-European, national, and local level. However tempting the Western models, they also needed a fertile ground in the local context. After the war, the wave of anti-Semitic nationalism which had first emerged at Prague University spread across the whole of Eastern Europe, eventually reaching the University of Cluj. In fact, the university professors who took this initiative basically threw their weight behind a movement started by their students, seeking to organize it and use it in their own interests. They were walking on a minefield: in the years following the war, the city of Cluj had witnessed spectacular reversals of fortune. Transylvania had only recently come under a Romanian administration. Its major urban centers, as opposed to the rural environment, were inhabited mostly by Hungarians, Germans, or Jews, more educated, wealthier, and usually in higher socio-professional positions than the Romanians.³ The new Romanian elites—administrative or intellectual—often found it difficult to take up residence in the cities. Cluj was no exception, and its university circles were fully aware of the smoldering tensions.

In November 1922, incidents broke out in the laboratories of the Cluj Medical School that would cause the situation to erupt.⁴ It all started when a group of

Jewish students refused to dissect the body of one of their co-religionists, stirring the anger of their Romanian colleagues, who brought classes to a standstill, irritated that “you can desecrate the body of a Christian, but not that of a Jew.” Quite rapidly (it took only a few days), the protests that had started at the Medical School spread to the whole university, and then to other universities in the country. The main requests made to the Senate by the local student organization, the Petru Maior Student Center, were the following: *numerus clausus*, a solution to the body dissection issue, a mandatory Romanian language test before admission to the Medical School, as well as a number of social and material demands: student residences, canteens, reading rooms, books, laboratories, scholarships, etc. These were soon adopted at national level by the students whose general strike brought all Romanian universities to a standstill in early December.

Higher education had experienced unique developments in postwar Cluj. It was finally open to the young Transylvanian Romanians, who could now study at home, in their own language. The system of scholarships introduced by the Romanian government gave access to higher education to a significant number of students coming from the rural areas. Alongside them, the university had another significant group of students: young Jews driven eastward by the gradual imposition of the *numerus clausus* restriction in many Central European universities. Most of them were studying medicine. In the year of the student revolt, the Medical School had 355 Romanian students (50,5%) and 300 Jewish students (42,7%).⁵

Practically, the 1922–23 academic year was spent entirely on student strikes and protest movements. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the University Senate made repeated attempts to resume classes and restore order, but it was all to no avail, as the protesters refused to give up on the idea of the *numerus clausus*. Faced with this show of student solidarity, the management of the university demanded equal solidarity on the part of the academic staff, during the long negotiations that followed. In March 1923, when a new Constitution was soon to be adopted—a Constitution that granted civic rights to the Jews—, a delegation which included Professors I. C. Cătuneanu, Iuliu Hațieganu, and Traian Pop (from the Law School and from the Medical School) went to the students carrying a message different from the official line of the Senate and of the Ministry of Education.

Invited to address the students at the Petru Maior Student Center, I. C. Cătuneanu confessed that he saw them as both students and citizens. In the first case, he spoke to them as their professor, appreciating their solidarity in the struggle for “student dormitories, libraries, laboratories, Jewish corpses.” On behalf of the university, he promised that their demands would be met, and invit-

ed them to return to the lecture halls: “therefore, I ask you to contribute to the re-opening of the university, alongside your professors, because the only relationship possible between professors and students is one of mutual respect.”²⁶

Up to this point, the speech made by the professor of Roman Law had reflected the position of the University Senate, which had in fact repeatedly sent faculty delegations to talk to the representatives of the students. In what followed, however, I. C. Cătuneanu presented his own opinion concerning the “civic” side of the student struggle: “As citizens, you were quite right in approaching the Semitic issue, an issue which, after the World War, has been the concern of countless patriots from the most civilized countries in the world. In any part of the world, the Jewish element has traditions, a religion, mores and characters different from those of the nations in whose midst they live. They are inassimilable by any nation and always bring disaster to their countries of residence.” The nefarious effect of the Jewish presence was then illustrated with examples coming from the USA, Britain, France, Germany, and Russia, without forgetting the existing situation in Romania: “Today’s Jewry, drawing strength from the fortunes accumulated during the war, is more daring and brazen than ever before. Today they grumble, tomorrow they are making threats, and the day after tomorrow the Romanians are no longer masters of their country. Invoking the principle of humanity, they now come to demand equal rights, but they have not fulfilled their obligations the way we have.”²⁷

The meeting that took place in early March of 1923, between a group of professors and the students who were still on strike, already announced the main items on the agenda of the future *Romanian Action*, and foreshadowed its leadership structure. The three professors present on that occasion—I. C. Cătuneanu, Iuliu Hațieganu, Traian Pop—became part of the leadership of the organization on June of the same year. Its chairman was the rector of the Academy of Commerce, Aurel Ciortea. Ion I. Moța, who had become in the meantime the unofficial leader of the Petru Maior Student Center, was also one of the leaders of the organization.

The special relationship between the student movement and *Acțiunea Românească*, manifest from the very outset, would always remain present. The professors and the intellectuals who led the organization realized, however, that they could not set any social restrictions when it came to membership in *Acțiunea Românească*. Their goal was to reach as many layers of society as possible, in keeping with an illuminist belief which, although seemingly obsolete, was still relevant in the context of Transylvania, especially when it came to the relationship between the elites and the Romanian masses. Animated by the courage and the purity of their age, the students had set in motion this “comprehensive program of intransigent nationalism.” Still, their message was to be structured

and disseminated by their professors, given their superior education and life experience. According to the initiators of the project, this was not a possibility, but actually an obligation: “the university professors of today can no longer limit their toil, however fruitful it may be, to the dedicated investigation and promotion of science, for that would turn him into academic fossils. Their hard work must also be put in the service of the national cause, thus keeping their soul fresh and sensitive to the joys and the pains of our nation, ready to act and to react.”⁸

The members of *Acțiunea Românească* claimed that they had more than just a political agenda, acting in response to a civic and national imperative. The nationalist message gained a lot of credibility when coming from a learned person or a scholar, receiving thus “scientific validity.” Also, the social prestige enjoyed by professional categories such as the academics, the physicians, or the lawyers elevated them in the eyes of the general public.

Even before the organization officially came into being, meetings were held in several Transylvanian towns, in order to assess the public response to such a discourse. Other public meetings were held in the second half of 1923, when the program of the organization was presented. The account of the meeting held on 30 December 1923 in the Redoubt building of Cluj might give us an idea about the nature of these meetings and of the speeches held on such occasions. Professor Ciortea, the rector of the Academy of Commerce and also the chairman of *Acțiunea Românească*, opened the meeting and spoke about the purpose of the organization, related to the “inferiority of the Romanian element in relation to the foreign elements that have invaded the country” (he was referring to the massive influx of Jews in Romania, during the last part of the war and after its end). In brief, “*Acțiunea Românească* shall seek, through legal means, to rightfully restore the dominant position of the Romanians.”⁹ Lawyer Valer Roman, a member in the organization committee, talked about the relationship between *Acțiunea Românească* and the various political parties which had once done “truly good things for the country,” but which had presently come to “divide the Romanians, making solidarity impossible even when it comes to important matters that go well beyond party interests.”¹⁰ Valer Roman pointed out that, although *Acțiunea Românească* was not inimical to the current political parties, it would “demand” that the parties demonstrate solidarity against the “foreigners.” Professor I. C. Cătuneanu spoke about “*Acțiunea Românească* in connection to the minorities and especially to the Jewish elements,” while physician and professor Iuliu Hațieganu indicated that the situation in the country, involving widespread corruption and shameless materialism, found “its main cause in the foreign elements that have invaded the country in the place of the 800,000 who died on the battlefield. In their stead we have received twice as many parasites.”¹¹ A. Gocittan took the floor on behalf of the students, explain-

ing why his colleagues had “massively” joined *Acțiunea Românească*: “this organization is driven by the same ideas that university students embraced one year ago.” Those present at the meeting decided that the *numerus clausus* demanded by the students was justified and had to be supported. Furthermore, lawyer Valeriu Pop even stated the need for a general *numerus clausus*, “applied to all foreigners present in the productive sectors of our country.”

HOWEVER SUCCESSFUL the meetings between the members of the organization and its potential sympathizers (the source quoted above also indicates that the meeting in question gathered a “huge audience”), its expansion also required other methods, and *Acțiunea Românească* acted in consequence. Beginning with November of 1924, it had its own periodical, a bi-monthly called, of course, *Acțiunea Românească*. The featured articles were signed by the leaders of the movement (Iuliu Hațieganu, Traian Pop, I. C. Cătuneanu), as well as by younger or anonymous contributors. Its editor-in-chief was Valeriu Pop, with Ioan Istrate as the editorial secretary.

The founders of the periodical had realized that the success of the new organization depended on the existence of a press organ and were aware of the importance of such an instrument in modern society. The programmatic statements made in the first issue are quite clear in this respect: “As today we do not have a public opinion, we must create one . . . Until now, *Acțiunea Românească* has operated without a powerful propaganda tool: a publication. The few truly Romanian newspapers have sporadically given us the opportunity to communicate with the general public, but the vast majority of newspapers—of doubtful Romanian allegiance—have tried to put us down, either through violent libel, or through silence. The situation had to change. Therefore, we spared no effort in order to acquire the powerful weapon represented by a publication of our own.” All this followed by an obvious statement: “The program of the review is the program of *Acțiunea Românească*.”¹²

The content of the featured articles naturally came to confirm the statements above. The relatively elevated target readership (the Romanian urban and, in part, rural elite) is indicated by the elaborate discourse and by the aforementioned social position of the main contributors. Still, they were not writing about the disciplines taught at the university or about their work in the court of law, claiming instead to be specialists in “the actual magnitude of the Jewish issue.” Thus, they discussed and recommended books that allegedly proved “beyond any doubt” the presence of a world-scale Jewish plot. The long list of recommended titles included Henry Ford’s *The International Jew*, Isaac Blümchen’s *Le Droit de la race supérieure*, Samuel Gompers’ *Ligue des nations et Ligue de financiers*, Roger Lamblin’s *L’Impérialisme d’Israël*, etc. The periodical saluted the publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, “translated into Romanian by Ioan

Moța, with a letter to Romanians by Roger Lamblin. Comments by two distinguished Romanian experts in the Jewish question, Orăștie, 1923, 264 p.”¹³ (One of the experts was none other than I. C. Cătuneanu!) Elsewhere in the same issue readers were given a list of other recommended publications (a sort of “ideological sisters”), because “the press exerts considerable influence upon national awareness and beliefs.” The nationalist catechesis accepted the following titles: “*Universul, Libertatea, Unirea, Lumea și Țara, Apărarea Națională, Țara Noastră, Gândirea, Cosânzeana, Gazeta de Duminică*.”¹⁴ At the opposite end came the “Jewish” publications, criticized on various occasions and usually mentioned as “a certain press.”

Public servants, craftsmen, priests and schoolteachers were also part of the intended target readership of the periodical, which also published short stories about greedy Jews, notes and small chronicles, plus domestic and international news related to the specificity of the publication.

Quite notable is the capacity—also manifest with other nationalist or anti-Semitic movements—of manipulating real issues and of relating them to real or imaginary enemies, who otherwise had little to do with them. The insufficient wages received by public servants, the difficulties encountered by them in the attempt to take up residence in the newly-acquired territories, the poor Romanian representation in the cities and in the dominantly urban professions, many other social or economic problems of the Romanians were gradually associated with the agenda of *Acțiunea Românească*, in the attempt to gain additional supporters. Here is an example in this respect: “Whoever controls the government, now or in the future, will have to solve two major problems: the problem of the public servants and that of the Jews . . . Our thoughts go to the honest Romanian public servants who fight for the cause of *Acțiunea Românească* even if they are not listed among its members, and who will need great strength to properly celebrate, with their meager resources, this Holy Christmas.”¹⁵

The present paper is not meant to analyze the various kinds of nationalist and anti-Semitic discourse present in the publication *Acțiunea Românească*. We shall only mention here the general context in which the “Jewish question” was discussed. Allegedly, in the modern era the international Jewish plot operated at all levels (examples were given coming from various countries and supported by an international bibliography). The danger was particularly great for a country like Romania, struggling after the war to achieve national unity and threatened in this attempt by the foreign invasion (that is, by the Jewish immigration, whose figures were always exaggerated). In fact, foreigners controlled key sectors in the country (banks, the press, etc.). Special attention was given to Transylvania, where the Jews had supported the Hungarization policies (another argument against them) and where they continued to threaten the position of Romanians in the urban areas. At the same time, in the rural areas (Maramureș

or the Western Carpathians), they were corrupting the population (encouraging alcoholism) and exploited the local resources. However, the main focus of *Acțiunea Românească* was not at regional level. Just like its program transcended party interests, it also had to go beyond regional borders. The (false) nationalism versus regionalism issue had to be solved following the model of the student movement, which had demonstrated solidarity at a national level.¹⁶

The authorities responded to the initiatives of *Acțiunea Românească* just as ambiguously as they had in the case of the student movement.¹⁷ However, when they became themselves a clear target and public order was threatened, they took firm action. On 30 October 1924, Secretary of State Tătăărăscu from the Ministry of the Interior banned a conference scheduled to be presented by I. C. Cătuneanu. This probably came as a consequence of what had happened a few days earlier in Jassy, where Corneliu Zelea Codreanu had fired a gun at police prefect Manciu. The vehement protests published in the magazine and the appeals to the “enlightened patriotism” of I. I. C. Brătianu failed to bring any results.¹⁸ A few issues later, in late 1924, the Ministry of the Interior notified the editorial staff that they were no longer allowed to publish the magazine, no explanation for this ban being given. The publishers adapted quickly to the new situation, published two issues under the title of *Calendarul românesc* (The Romanian calendar) and, starting on 1 February 1925, using a nearly identical format and with practically the same staff, the magazine was published under the name *România Întregită* (United Romania), with the same editorial program and with an edifying subtitle: “Official organ of *Acțiunea Românească*, a national Christian association.”

In April 1925, *România Întregită* was itself banned at the order of the Cluj Police Prefecture. The periodical (the organization behind it) and the authorities were playing a game of cat and mouse. This time, it seemed that the ban had been caused by a few lines written by Ion Istrate against I. I. C. Brătianu, which were considered insulting. Whatever the reasons for the ban, the publishers used the old recipe and once again re-invented the publication. On 1 May 1925 they published the first issue of the *Înfrățirea românească* (Romanian brotherhood), a “national science and social issues review.” The new issue hailed the historic moment of the union of all nationalist organizations into a political party called *Acțiunea Național Creștină* (The National Christian Action) (ANC) led by Professor A. C. Cuza and having its headquarters in Bucharest.

Some fragments from the constitutive document provide information about the preliminary stages in the establishment of the organization:

The undersigned . . . , fully authorized representatives of the Democratic Nationalist Christian Party with the headquarters in Jassy, united with the Christian National Defense League, with the headquarters in Bucharest, and with the Romanian

Action, having its headquarters in Cluj and also including the former Social Christian Party of Gherla, gathered in Jassy on 12 April 1925, Palm Sunday, and today, Monday 13 April 1925, under the presidency of Professor A. C. Cuza, at his house at No. 3 Codrescu Street, after discussions concerning the need for stronger joint action and driven by the same beliefs, have decided the following: 1. The aforementioned organizations will unite into a political party named The National Christian Action (ANC), having its headquarters in Bucharest and with Professor A. C. Cuza as its chairman; 2. the ANC will be led by a committee of eight, including the party chairman. Four of the members of this committee will be appointed by the Christian National Defense League and the other four by the Romanian Action.¹⁹

This was basically a step towards the full merger of those organizations, which took place in September of the same year under the name of the organization that had had its first headquarters in Jassy. The LANC (Christian National Defense League) merged with the *Acțiunea Românească* of Cluj and moved to Bucharest. The relocation was only theoretical, but it did have a symbolic function. Bucharest was the capital of united Romania, the place where any national or nationalist program received validation. Full nationalism could not be promoted by regional organizations. Among the leaders of the new organization we find many Cluj activists: Valeriu Pop (deputy chairman), V. Roman (general secretary), I. Istrate (assistant secretary), and professors I. C. Cătuneanu, Iuliu Hațieganu, Titus Mălăiu (members of the Executive Central Committee).

In November, A. C. Cuza made an equally symbolic visit to Transylvania. Caius Bardoși, one of the leaders of the nationalist students of the 1922–23 academic year, saluted the visit as a historic moment. The unification of the country was now complete, at least in the eyes of the national-Christians. Coming to take possession of the newly-acquired territories, A. C. Cuza was presented in a series of articles as a political celebrity, and poems were written especially for him.²⁰ He was the new national leader, and a new page had been turned in the history of nationalist organizations. *Acțiunea Românească* officially ceased to exist, changing into something else.

Many of the former members of *Acțiunea Românească* remained active in the new organization, while others turned towards other pursuits and other political movements. For some, *Acțiunea Românească* had been only a stage in a greater journey, to others it had meant the beginning of the road. In the history of Cluj city, Iuliu Hațieganu is remembered as an outstanding physician and an illustrious professor, the founder of the university clinics and later a member of the National Peasant Party (just like jurist and professor Traian Pop). The name of I. C. Cătuneanu is practically unknown today, despite his continuing activity with-

in the LANC and for the review *Înfrățirea românească*, which lasted until his death in 1937. Ion I. Moța also made his political debut in *Acțiunea Românească*, but, together with other members of his generation, he would gain fame with another political organization, established in 1927 after their separation from the generation of their professors.

The *Acțiunea Românească* of Cluj enjoyed only a very short life as a distinct political organization. Despite this fact, its medium and long-term impact upon the general nationalist movement of interwar Romania makes it worthy of considerable attention.

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Notes

1. For the ideological profile of the organization known as Action Française, see P. Birnbaum, *“La France au Français” : Histoire des haines nationalistes* (Paris, 1993), passim.
2. “Cuvântul Acțiunii Românești către cetitor,” *Acțiunea Românească* 1, no. 1 (1 November 1924): 1.
3. For the situation in Transylvania after the Union, see also Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare 1918–1930*, trans. (Bucharest, 1998), 157–224.
4. For the events occurred at Cluj University during the 1922–1923 academic year, see Maria Ghitta, “The 1922–1923 Student Revolt at Cluj University and Its Anti-Jewish Aspect,” in *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 1–2 (54–55), 2005: 91–107.
5. Figures taken from the appendix to *Almanahul Societății Academice “Petru Maior”* (Cluj, 1929).
6. “Discursul Domnului profesor universitar I. C. Cătuneanu rostit în ședința extraordinară a Centrului studențesc Petru Maior în ziua de 7 martie 1923,” *Cuvântul studențesc* 1, 8–9 (8 April 1923): 5.
7. Ibid. The statements made by the professors who met with the students on that occasion were brought to the attention of the University Senate, which “unanimously decided to open an investigation under the current legislation in what concerns the attitude displayed by Professors I. C. Cătuneanu, I. Hațieganu, and T. Pop in the speeches held at those meetings.” See The National Archives, Cluj County Division, collection *Universitatea din Cluj. Ședințele Senatului Universitar, 1922–1923*, fol. 69.
8. I. C. Cătuneanu, “Anumită presă, conferință ținută la Târgul-Mureșului la începutul lunii martie 1925,” *Înfrățirea Românească* 1, 5 (1 July 1925): 1.
9. “Marea întrunire publică a Acțiunii Românești din Cluj,” *Cuvântul studențesc* 2, 1 (7 January 1924): 4.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. “Cuvântul Acțiunii Românești către cetitor,” 1–2.
13. *Acțiunea Românească* 1, 3 (1 December 1924): 15.

14. Ibid.
15. Dr. Iuliu Hațieganu, "Crăciunul funcționarilor," *Acțiunea Românească* 1, 4 (15 December 1924): 5–6.
16. Aurel Olteanu, "Rolul provinciilor unite în refacerea țării," *Acțiunea Românească* 1, 2 (15 November 1924): 2.
17. Relevant in this respect is the observation made by Armin Heinen: "They hoped to gain some advantages from the student unrest, as it served to distract the opposition from pursuing its own initiatives. When it realized the danger, in order to restore the order in keeping with the principles of the democratic Constitution and with the rule of law, the government found itself trapped by own nationalism, by its own stance towards the minorities, by its own authoritarian style of leadership, and by its exaggerated anti-communism." A. Heinen, *Legiunea "Arhanghelului Mihail," mișcare socială și organizație politică: O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, trans. (Bucharest, 1999), 115.
18. *Acțiunea Românească* 1, 2 (15 November 1924): 1.
19. "Un moment istoric: unirea organizațiilor naționaliste," *Înfrățirea românească* 1, 1 (1 May 1925): 1.
20. See the articles "Intrarea triumfală a dlui A. C. Cuza în Ardeal," *Înfrățirea românească* 2, 2 (15 November 1925): 8–11; "Drumul triumfal al dlui profesor A. C. Cuza în județul Cluj și Someș," *Înfrățirea românească* 2, 3 (1 December 1925): 10–14, or the poem by Justin Ilieșiu, *Bine Ați Venit!*, on the first page of the same issue.

Abstract

Acțiunea Românească (1923–1925): The Circumstances of Its Establishment

The paper examines the manner in which a number of university professors and leading professionals capitalized on the protest movement started by Cluj students and founded, on 7 June 1923, an organization inspired by the *Action Française*. Apart from the circumstances surrounding the creation of *Acțiunea Românească*, the author also discusses the atmosphere and the pervading mentalities in early interwar Romania, the agenda of the new organization, its ideology, as well as its initiatives, up to the point when, in 1925, it gave up its distinct identity and joined other nationalist organizations into a political party led by A. C. Cuza.

Keywords

interwar Transylvania, anti-Semitism, *Acțiunea Românească*, nationalism, student protests, *numerus clausus*