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## TRANSSILVANICA

# Political Activism in the Romanian Countryside of the 1930s

## The Peasants from Hunedoara County and the Ploughmen's Front

SORIN RADU

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*“The clock strikes twelve,  
wake up ploughmen!  
Mr. Groza has raised  
the peasant community  
of Transylvania as Jesus  
raised Lazarus from  
the dead.”*

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**T**HE PLOUGHMEN'S Front was a minor organization on the Romanian political scene of the 1930s. Nevertheless, in order to understand the political engagement of the peasants and their connection to political life, we have to realize that the founding and the development of the ploughmen organization, particularly in this county, represents a special case in the history of interwar Romania and a model for the political mobilization of the peasants. Without minimizing Petru Groza's involvement and the impact of certain local personalities in the organizational process, our thesis, based on the currently available information, claims that there was a direct involvement of the peasants in the organization of the Ploughmen's Front, with great enthu-

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siasm on their part, which may partially refute the dominant thesis in Romanian history which states that the peasants were an unstructured, uneducated, easily manipulated crowd, freely recruited in a political maneuver conducted by a sort of dandy of Romanian politics. In this respect, two theses are clashing in the current historiography: on the one hand, the classical thesis of communist historiography, according to which the Ploughmen's Front was the result of a communist project to transfer the "class struggle" to the rural society through the political organization of the peasants under the strict supervision of the communist regime,<sup>1</sup> and, on the other hand, the thesis which claims that the ploughmen organization was rather the initiative of a marginal political figure, Petru Groza, who directed his material resources towards regaining the spotlight in politics.<sup>2</sup>

In this article we will try to highlight another aspect of this problem. Our thesis is that the effort of organizing and developing the Ploughmen's Front, even if it was first limited to Hunedoara County, represents a case of political engagement and activism in which the peasants showed that they could surmount political passivity, understanding that in order to overcome the underdevelopment of the rural world and the economic decay, voting and ballot participation were not enough; that is why they decided to adhere to a political structure. The question that arises is to what extent the political engagement generated by the Ploughmen's Front can be understood as a successful form of integrating the peasants in party organizations and implicitly in politics. This is a justifiable question especially in the context of the interwar period: the peasants, those from the Old Kingdom, as well as those from the provinces that joined Romania in 1918, took part enthusiastically in the ballot and frequently with joy, at least in the first ten years after the Great War. However, they did not show the same enthusiasm when it came to enrolment in party organizations. At the end of political campaigns and elections, the peasants went into a state of political apathy until the next elections. There were a few political organizations in the rural world but they had no stamina. Such a discussion is important since researching the connection between politics and the Romanian rural society between the two World Wars has only been declared as a goal, but not actually pursued.<sup>3</sup>

## Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania

**T**HE RESEARCH of the way in which politics has been perceived in the Romanian rural society represents a side note in historiography, since historians, sociologists and political scientists have focused on the government's activity, on the analysis of political institutions etc. The scientific literature is dominated by the portrayal of the village as an economically backward

structure, with illiterate peasants who lack political education and are profoundly religious and mystical people. Despite the fact that it is generally accepted that the Great War, the union of Transylvania with Romania and the postwar electoral and land reforms radically changed Romania, with the peasantry coming to represent more than two thirds of the electorate, experts have analyzed the attitude of peasants towards politics only by accident. The founding of political organizations in the rural society and the participation of the peasants in electoral campaigns were mostly perceived as tragicomic events, which was, of course, only an incomplete portrayal of the political realities. The success or the failure of integrating the peasants in the politics of Greater Romania still remains an open matter.

As in most Central and Southeast European states, the Romanian intellectual elite was also obsessed with the “peasant question.”<sup>4</sup> Intellectuals and politicians alike saw the peasant population both as the cultural and social pillar of the nation and as an obstruction in the process of modernization and westernization, which were major objectives in the process of nation-building. The debate on this issue in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between liberals, conservatives and socialists, with populist and peasantry undertones, was not just a regional exception. In a society marked by a profound gap between the rural and the urban spaces, socialist and nationalist thinkers were convinced that only by bringing these two realities closer together would social change be possible. The peasants were the subject of major political debates that either idealized them or described their lives as gloomy cases of decline, social disruption and social disorder. From this point of view, the peasants became representatives of the opposite of modernity, which was associated with the urban space. The peasants were seen as a major obstacle to social change. The idea of such a rupture was formulated in the theory of the “Two Romanias,” which presented an urban, Westernized sphere inhabited by a minority of the Romanian society and a rural, backward sphere, disconnected from the alert pace of urban development.<sup>5</sup>

The Great War, the land and electoral reforms and the union of Transylvania with Romania created not only a brand new political reality but also an auspicious climate for reducing the gap between the rural and the urban world. For the first time in Romanian history, the socio-political integration of the peasant population became a political reality. The reforms introduced a marginalized social body on the political scene, one that was often mentioned in the discourse of political parties and became a key political actor overnight: the peasantry. The village, a place of endemic backwardness, was no longer preferred to the city, which was the center of electoral activities. Mostly illiterate and disinterested in public affairs, the peasant now had the power of universal suffrage. This new

electoral actor entered politics in Greater Romania thinking that it had carried most of the weight during the war and that the electoral reform as well as the assignment of property was legitimate. The peasants from the Old Kingdom as well as those from the provinces that joined it in 1918 took part enthusiastically—at least in the first decade after the Great War—in politics but they remained reticent towards political parties. As opposed to the urban working class, which was inclined towards social-political movements and that had at least in part followed the social-democratic political organizations, the rural class lived in seclusion, apparently, without understanding the purpose of political parties and disinterested in issues of local and central government and politics. The agrarian reform seemed to have discouraged the peasants, directing most of their attention to land and to the social issues generated by the reform. From this point of view, the paradigm of the “agrarian issue” that had marked Romania before the war continued to manifest itself at a lower level. To an observant researcher of interwar political realities it is obvious that the political parties were not concerned with the political integration and the civic education of peasants. In general, the candidates for the eligible positions and the notable members of the community (teachers/schoolmasters and priests) did not become agents of change within the village. There are a few counterexamples to this but they are irrelevant at state level.<sup>6</sup> Mattei Dogan noticed another phenomenon: the priests and teachers from the rural society occupied a marginal position on the electoral lists of political parties and those who managed to reach a position of power at a local or central level quickly experienced a sort of alienation from the peasantry.<sup>7</sup> Not much can be said about the representation of the peasantry in Parliament and the appearance of peasants on the electoral lists, since these cases were extremely rare during the interwar period.<sup>8</sup> Even if the peasants represented 80% of the population, they had a parliamentary representation of no more than 0.4% in the Assembly of Deputies and 0.2% in the Senate. Dogan calls this phenomenon “the inverted pyramid.”<sup>9</sup>

To conclude the brief description of the peasants’ path towards the interwar political scene, we may introduce another issue: political and intellectual elites as a whole did not believe in the project of Western democratization. A significant part of the militant elite was passionately opposed to the liberal model of political modernization, supporting instead a so-called national model of political state development in which the virtues of the village and of the peasantry were highly praised and idealized and turned into the keystone of the national edifice. The country was held together by the peasant, the keeper of the moral values of Romanian society.<sup>10</sup> This trend grew stronger during the 1930s, and the nationalist, extreme nationalist and ethnicist discourse increased the doubts towards democracy, the Western model, and political liberalization. In such a climate

and especially in an atmosphere heated by ethnicist-Orthodoxist rhetoric, it was extremely hard for the politically emancipated peasant, enfranchised and granted a patch of land, to understand his purpose within a parliamentary democracy. We may conclude that during the time when the universal vote was applied in the constitutional monarchy of Romania (1919–1937) the peasants were not able to learn and play the part that the universal suffrage had offered them.

## The Peasants from Hunedoara County and the Ploughmen's Front

**W**E CAME back from the war and we found that everything was ruined back home. We accumulated debts to set everything straight. There was money but not for long. We wanted to pay. We were eager to earn something just as a child is anxious before the arrival of his father. We are poor and impoverished. We're not able to pay our taxes, certainly not on our assets. (Speech given by peasant Moise Gheorghe from the village of Nojag)

*I am a successful peasant. I own land, cattle, I've traded, I had money. Today I am poor, having everything does not pay for everything. But what will do those of us who are poorer? In this country the foreigners have more rights than the Romanians. Let's take a different path today, let's not fight, we are so many and yet so weak. The hour of change has come.* (Speech given by peasant Nicolae Bembea from the village of Bampotoc)<sup>11</sup>

These quotes are excerpted from the speeches of two peasants who participated in the ploughmen's assembly in Deva on 8 January 1933. On Sunday morning, significant groups of peasants from the region of Hunedoara gathered in the city of Deva, in the city theatre hall and outside it. It is not very clear who gathered the peasants; the most circulated version of the story is that a group of peasants from the area of Deva had the initiative of spreading the word and distributed flyers in December 1932 calling the ploughmen to an assembly where they would discuss the tough situation that the peasantry was facing, the issue of converting agricultural debts, as well as the next steps they would have to take to improve their lives. Among the ones that had the initiative were Ion Moga-Fileriu, Miron Belea, Guia Petru Moșu, Tudor Cionca, Ioniță Dumbravă, Dănuț Șotângă etc.<sup>12</sup> The peasants who came to the assembly had also read the calls published in the *Horia* gazette, edited by liberal attorney Aurel Filimon.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the simplicity of the speech, the message was clearly directed towards the idea of peasant civic engagement, since the responsible actors (political and

governmental) had not solved the economic and social problems of the peasantry in an efficient manner. The assembly only ended on the evening of 8 January after a long list of speeches. In the end, the peasants decided that they “support the movement,” they declared their “resignation from all the political parties in which they were members” and that they would start “organizing from one village to the next,”<sup>14</sup> without clearly specifying what they were referring to. Moreover, a 19-point document was adopted (“Cererea-hotărâre”) that was meant to be sent to King Carol II. Essentially, the document described the state of economic decay that the peasants were facing, it identified the main causes of economic and cultural backwardness (mainly the lack of ideas and the inaction of the political class) and it urged local personalities to join the ploughmen in the fight against injustice, finally confirming their loyalty towards the king.<sup>15</sup>

The measures taken in Hunedoara County after the peasants gathered in January 1933 are important for our analysis. Responding to Petru Groza’s call and to other messages published in the *Horia* gazette—for “a new life”—in the second half of January, several groups of peasants took the initiative of creating committees in the villages and communes of Hunedoara County. On 1 February, the representatives of peasants from 45 villages from the district (“plasa,” county administrative subdivision) of Deva elected an action committee. The name of Ploughmen’s Front is mentioned for the first time: “We have decided to organize as all guilds are organized, forming a tight front to include all ploughmen that, in turn, will know how to lay out its demands in order to get rid of its troubles.” This statement is attributed to Miron Belea, “ploughman and the president of the committee of Deva district, the Ploughmen’s Front.” He argued that “the idea to form this organization stemmed from the sufferings and the troubles that united us at the great assembly of 8 January 1933, and the seed that was planted then has started to take root. *Conscious of its needs, the peasantry is organizing*” (emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup> Two days later, the committee of Brad district was created in an assembly of over 3,000 *moți* (motzen, inhabitants of the mountain area).<sup>17</sup> Another large assembly of the peasants took place on 19 February at Țebea. The gendarmes closely monitored the proceedings of the assembly that was presided by peasant Ioan Moga. A large number of ploughmen insisted once more upon the issue of the economic and political crisis that was affecting the country, declaring that “Today the times have once again become rotten!” (sic!). Miron Belea explained the program and the purpose of the ploughmen organization to the participants. The participants shouted slogans that expressed their loyalty to the Crown: “Long live the King and the Ploughmen!” Petru Groza had also been present at this gathering of the *moți*.<sup>18</sup> In March, peasant assemblies were organized in a number of towns from Hunedoara County. The national-peasant authorities were concerned about these manifestations, sus-

pecting them of communist interference, and prohibited some of them (the case of the assembly that had been announced for 19 March in the town of Hunedoara).<sup>19</sup> The region of Hunedoara seemed to have been seized by a civic fever.

Apart from the local initiatives of organizing peasant committees, the initiative group became preoccupied with the explanation and the programmatic definition of the new movement. One of the initiators of the movement, Romulus Zăroni,<sup>20</sup> had argued that the Ploughmen's Front wanted to become a "professional ploughmen organization that intends to defend its interests and support our rights," as well as a means of expressing "the will [of its members] in general matters." Zăroni had urged the peasants to leave their political parties since "they have long exploited the country and us peasants so that now we are dirt-poor." The affirmation that stood at the basis of the whole political movement of the ploughmen—"our rise to well-being can be accomplished only by ourselves"—was especially interesting. Romulus Zăroni criticized the policy promoted in the rural society by political parties, such as the creation of Agricultural Chambers seen as "nests where politicians get their own way." In addition, he claimed that the ploughmen movement must also aim to send representatives of peasants in the state's Parliament, in the county committee or in the Agricultural Chamber because "[our] rights and dignity must be respected regardless of the fact that one is wearing a 'șuba,' a sheepskin or a coat."<sup>21</sup>

The organizing group continued to take action and the *Horia* gazette would declare its direct support for the new movement. Since the authorities were extremely suspicious of the initiative to establish a peasant organization, the initiative group decided to send a statement to the Minister of Internal Affairs in which they wanted to specify "the kind of organization, which is established only in accordance to the law and does not intend to go against it, that is: to organize ourselves in the same way as all the guilds in the country." The minister had to be informed that this movement had no connection to the communists and that its members were not "instigators." The participants had also conducted an analysis of the number of registrations in the organization. From the quoted report, 3,000 members were registered in district of Deva and 4,000 members were registered in the other ones.<sup>22</sup>

On 19 February, a programmatic document entitled "The Ploughmen's Front: Our Program" was published. This manifesto was signed by the Committee of the Ploughmen's Front, district of Deva, Hunedoara County. Generally, the programmatic points were those included in "Dorința țăranilor" (Wishes of the peasants) manifesto, published on January 31. These were some of the most notable provisions: the waiver of 3/4 of the peasants' debt, the stamping of money, people should not hold multiple offices, the reduction of ministries by half and the dissolution of state sub-secretariats, the reduction of the num-

ber of MPs by half, the cancellation of allowances and attendance fees in the administrative councils, the regulation of industrial production and commerce for the people according to everyone's needs.<sup>23</sup> Between 4 February and 18 April 1933—when the first congress of the organization was held—the draft program had been the subject of “peasant debates” during public assemblies where it was improved and expanded. Petru Groza played a significant part in explaining and disseminating the programmatic principles of the Ploughmen's Front to the peasantry.<sup>24</sup> Letters from peasants who showed their support to the Ploughmen's Front were published regularly in the *Horia* gazette. There were also calls to “join the Ploughmen's Front.”<sup>25</sup> The initiators of this organization had repeatedly expressed their belief that “the road we have taken is difficult and treacherous,” but they were convinced that this “road of suffering can only lead to salvation.”<sup>26</sup>

After an intense organizational effort, the first congress of the ploughmen organization was held on 18 April 1933. In the courtyard of Decebal Bank in Deva, where the main shareholder was Petru Groza himself, approximately 12,000 peasants gathered from most villages in Hunedoara County.<sup>27</sup> The congress drew the attention of the press in Transylvania and also in Bucharest.<sup>28</sup> Miron Belea was elected president of the congress.<sup>29</sup> A 17-point program was adopted.<sup>30</sup> All articles were followed by explanations and substantial arguments. The style of argumentation and the legal terms proved that this was not the work of peasants but of people familiar with the legal and economic language. The last article emphasized the idea that the Ploughmen's Front wanted to be an organization that would represent the interests of all peasants, irrespective of language, race and religion: “This is why the Ploughmen's Front from Hunedoara County, which was created from the bottom up, based on the sufferings of people, without the artificial and compromised intervention of party-makers . . . feels entitled to shout from one border to the next: *Ploughmen from all corners of the country, join us!*” At the end of the congress, the peasants were extremely agitated, emotional and fretful, and some of them demanded that the programmatic provisions be enforced immediately. This can be considered to be the moment of the official founding of the Ploughmen's Front. It is interesting to observe that Petru Groza appeared in the texts and the documents of the Front as an “animator.”<sup>31</sup> The message at the end of the works of the congress was that the Ploughmen's Front had set its objective of fighting “against politicians, or the tools of capital, who cheated the peasants; . . . against the capital and the order based on it since it is the root of evil...” The means with which the organization was meant to fight consisted of “uniting the groups of peasants and putting aside the feud stirred among them by politicians; it will organize these groups

from top to bottom; it will request the enforcement of the law and the right to improve its condition, rights that are written down in the Constitution.”<sup>32</sup>

During the following months, the initiative groups of the ploughmen organization went from village to village in Hunedoara County with the mission to recruit as many members as possible. The local manner of organization was very simple and it copied the way in which mass political parties (national peasant parties) would organize: the ploughmen in a commune gathered in the same place, they drafted a *report* signed by everyone and they chose a *delegate* and an *alternate* (*deputy*). In large communes, each settlement chose a liaison and together they formed the *communal committee*. At the level of district, a president, vice-president and a district committee (8–12 people, according to the size of the district) were elected. At the county level, a county committee was founded with 5 delegates from each district. “This being a ploughmen organization only—a memorandum stated—the delegates of communes, the members of the district and county committees *can only be ploughmen themselves*. Intellectuals and friends of the front with a spotless past and who are known to fight the good fight may be elected as honorary members of the commune, district and county organizations, *without the right to vote*, acting as *animators* and *guides*.”<sup>33</sup> According to this statement, Petru Groza could not occupy an active position in this organization. Any peasant who embraced the program and the struggle to accomplish it could have become a member of the Ploughmen’s Front to the extent of his abilities and strengths. Each member had to pay a one leu membership fee.<sup>34</sup> On 10 May 1933, the first county Committee of the Ploughmen’s Front was founded in Deva. Its members were: Miron Belea, Tudor Cionca, Gheorghe Borca, Adam Mariș, Nicolae Bembea, Petru Malița etc.; Petru Groza, Aurel Filimon and Petru Guia-Moțu became honorary members.<sup>35</sup>

The *Horia* gazette claimed that the organization of the Ploughmen’s Front had spread so much and so fast due to the poverty that most of the rural class was facing. The peasants had understood that this movement had nothing in common with the actions of political parties. The members of the Front referred to their opponents as “the network of leeches, exploiters, big financiers who hold the banks,” and to the political parties and politicians as “the tools they use against us.”<sup>36</sup> The organizational activities of the Ploughmen’s Front drew the attention of the provincial press and of the central newspapers. Thus, the *Temeswarer Zeitung* of Timișoara, *Gazeta comercianților* of Oradea, *Déli Hírlap* of Târgu-Mureș and *Reggeli Újság* of Cluj had commented upon the actions of the peasants from Hunedoara County. Without any evidence, the Bucharest newspaper *Epoca* declared that the ploughmen’s movement had Bolshevik origins. The Bucharest magazine *Realitatea ilustrată* dedicated several pages of its

27 April 1933 issue to the congress held on 18 April 1933 including pictures from the event. The Bucharest newspapers *Lupta*, *Dimineata* and *Universul* had widely reported on the assembly in Deva on 18 April. The editor of *Adevărul* made some meaningful remarks, saying that “what happened in Deva with the Ploughmen’s Front is a warning for the political parties that still hope to conquer villages with a few long talks, with several phrases that have flexible meanings, with a few last-minute promises. . .”<sup>37</sup> The founding of “a new kind” of group was also noted by the right wing press. For example, in his article published in *Cuvântul* on 11 May 1933, Nae Ionescu, discussing the stages of peasant movements in the Old Kingdom that were successful in Transylvania, said: “Now, finally, [there is] the founding of the so-called ‘ploughmen’s front’.”<sup>38</sup>

The commotion caused by the ploughmen organization and by Petru Groza drew the attention of the authorities and alerted the Police, Gendarmerie and “Siguranța” (State Security). The *Horia* gazette regularly reported on the abuses that the gendarmes or policemen committed against peasant groups and on the arrests of Front leaders or propagandists. Moreover, the Front gazette and the propaganda brochure *What Do We Want?* were seized by the authorities repeatedly.<sup>39</sup> During the year 1933, authorities in Hunedoara County had regularly pointed out the agitated state induced in the rural society by the initiative groups of the Ploughmen’s Front.<sup>40</sup> The notary in Rîșculița commune reported to the prefect that “the peasants are driven by dreams and ideas which . . . the way we see it, could be easily considered to be of a communist nature. They flatly refuse to pay their debts and are starting to refuse paying taxes. They absolutely believe that a government should come and eliminate such high taxes since they no longer have the money for that.”<sup>41</sup> The Minister of Internal Affairs, a member of the National Peasant Party, Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, characterized the ploughmen organization as a “dangerous and subversive movement.”<sup>42</sup>

By the autumn of 1933 the Ploughmen’s Front had already become a consolidated organization within the rural world of Hunedoara County. Even if the involvement of Petru Groza was obvious, the organization still did not have an elected leader. The explanation lies in the fact that Petru Groza preferred to stay in the shadow of the organization, simply to confirm the fact that the initiators had founded the organization “from the bottom to the top.” Perhaps he feared that the movement would turn out to be a failure and so he hesitated to take the reins of the organization. Dorin-Liviu Bîțfoi believes that Petru Groza’s hesitance to officially become the leader of the new organization was due to the fact that he secretly wanted to make Marshal Alexandru Averescu the leader of the Ploughmen’s Front.<sup>43</sup> Finally, on 8 November, Groza was elected president of the Ploughmen’s Front in an assembly of representatives from 12 district committees.<sup>44</sup>

In the years that followed, the rhythm of political activities in Hunedoara County slowed down, but other concerns surfaced, such as extending the ploughmen organization to the neighboring counties and beyond. It is extremely difficult to approximate the number of members of the Ploughmen's Front, as is the case with every political party at that time. In July 1936, the Ploughmen's Front had organizations in 122 communes of Hunedoara County.<sup>45</sup>

## The Ploughmen Organization and the Elections

**T**HE POLITICAL aims of the new organization were clear and the historical sources confirm the idea that the peasants were enthusiastically involved in the election campaign of December 1933, even if the organization had neither a solid basis, nor substantial financial support. The political mobilization of ploughmen organizations became apparent through the initiation of various election assemblies, man-to-man propaganda, as well as the distribution of election flyers including short messages or poems about the election.<sup>46</sup> The Ploughmen's Front submitted an electoral list with nine candidates for the Assembly of Deputies and another list with three candidates for the Senate.<sup>47</sup> The election program was the one adopted by the congress in April 1933 and the brochure *Ce vrem?* (What do we want?) represented a fundamental element of propaganda. The electoral symbol of the Ploughmen's Front assigned by the Central Election Commission was two horizontal parallel lines.<sup>48</sup> The allocated symbol had been assigned during the previous parliamentary elections to the communists; therefore, the members of the Front showed their disapproval and filed a protest with the Commission. The leaders of the organization from Hunedoara stated that "our enemies will try to raise a new army against us" by assigning them such a symbol. The new electoral symbol was defined as the "New Path." In the Senate, Petru Groza was first on the list for Hunedoara County, followed by ploughmen Ion Fărcaș and Aron Baicu, and in the Assembly of Deputies, Miron Belea was at the top of the list, followed by ploughmen Ion Moga, Guia Petru Moșu, Romulus Zăroni, Trifon Costache, Miron Cranciova, Aurel Saturn, Remus Lula, and Ion Cazan. The candidate for the college of municipal and county councils was peasant Ion Păsculescu.<sup>49</sup> The entire election campaign revolved around Groza, portrayed as the "great man of our nation, our worthy president..." The message sent by the leader of the organization focused on the idea of his sacrifice for the peasants and not for his own interests; he was fighting "for everyone's cause, for a sacred cause," for the creation of a "new world."<sup>50</sup> The image of the president of the organization created by the propaganda that surrounded him was that of the savior of the peasantry, a new

Messiah of the rural world: “The clock strikes twelve, wake up ploughmen! Mr. Groza has raised the peasant community of Transylvania as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead . . . The president of the Ploughmen’s Front, Dr. Petru Groza, did not go to Monte Carlo or to bathe at Karlsbad, he bowed neither to Hitler, nor to Mussolini, neither did he seize the power from the French, nor from the English, he empowered the soul of the life of ploughmen, he strengthened his health with water from our country’s springs, his luxury baths were the cold waves of the Strei River in the Hațeg Mountains, he rejoiced in the exploration of our mountains, always keeping an eye on our fate.”<sup>51</sup> The percentage of votes obtained by the Ploughmen’s Front was 0.27%, but in Hunedoara County the results were surprising: it came second in the Assembly of Deputies, after the National Liberal Party which had organized the elections, and in the Senate it got 13.47% of the total number of votes.<sup>52</sup>

In the partial elections of Hunedoara County held on 18 February 1936, the Ploughmen’s Front supported the National Peasant Party candidate, Ghiță Pop.<sup>53</sup> Some members were not satisfied with this. Miron Belea publicly expressed his objections during an assembly in Deva.<sup>54</sup> Groza argued that the alliance with the National Peasant Party could be justified by the changes that Romania was going through at that time, by the danger of fascism and far right movements.<sup>55</sup> Ghiță Pop participated in several meetings organized by the Ploughmen’s Front. Pop won the elections with 31,965 votes, almost 7,000 more than the candidate of the liberals and almost 25,000 more than the candidate of the Goga–Cuza group.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the victory obtained by Ghiță Pop in the partial elections of Hunedoara County had only been possible with the extremely significant support of the Ploughmen’s Front. Consequently, a large number of peasants joined the Ploughmen’s Front following its indirect success in the elections. This also became apparent when, during a gathering of the Agrarian Union Party from Târnava Mare County at Rupea, Constantin Argetoianu observed with sadness that the Ploughmen’s Front was animating the people in his own organization.<sup>57</sup>

The participation of the Ploughmen’s Front in the election for the City Council of Deva in 18 April 1937 represented a failure. The main reasons for this were the alliance with MADOSZ (Magyar Dolgozók Szövetsége/the Union of Hungarian Workers), as well as the coalition of the Liberal Party with the National Peasant Party and the Goga–Cuza Group.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the Ploughmen’s Front did not obtain a favorable result in the communal and county elections that were held on 25 July 1937. The results were as follows: the common list obtained 15,458 votes and the liberal government got 24,648 votes.<sup>59</sup> The number of votes obtained by the ploughmen organization is not to be neglected.

To be able to take part in the elections of December 1937, the Ploughmen’s Front joined an alliance which supported the National Peasant Party.<sup>60</sup> Romulus

Zăroni was a candidate on the National Peasant Party list.<sup>61</sup> The ploughmen organization published the propaganda brochure *De ce nu trebuie să fie plugarul român fascist* (Why the Romanian ploughman must not be a fascist) signed by Romulus Zăroni. Conceived in the wake of an antifascist national-peasant-party discourse, the brochure included the following chapters: “Parliamentarism”; “The period of false democracy”; “Election Law”; “The Parties”; “The election proceedings”; “Politics”; “Dictatorship”; “The slogan of dictatorship”; “The ploughman in fascist countries”; “Capitalism”; “What does the Ploughmen’s Front do?”; “Right and Left.”<sup>62</sup> Romulus Zăroni justified the brochure by the fact that, at that time, a part of the peasants had been lured “unknowingly” in the trap of certain fascist organizations. The author believed that “the salvation of ploughmen under the dictatorship of the rich is a deceptive illusion which will cost us dearly.”<sup>63</sup> Zăroni employed Groza’s discourse regarding the political organizations that were threatening Romanian democracy and declared that the National Christian Party, the Romanian Front and the *Totul pentru Țară* (All for the Country) Party are the main agents of fascist dictatorship: “They promote the fight against the kikes [Jews] so that they may install the dictatorship, to lead us, Romanians, by force. They say that the people are too dumb and should not decide their own fate, they must be led by force and they also say that only the kikes are supporters of democracy since they reap all the benefits of it” (sic!).<sup>64</sup> These parties would not be able to solve the peasants’ plight. “It is our duty to find the cure in ourselves and by our own means, seeking the single recipe that could cure our diseases.” The Ploughmen’s Front was the only organization that tried and managed to find a healing recipe for the maladies of the Romanian peasantry included in their program *What Do We Want?*.<sup>65</sup> Romulus Zăroni’s conclusion was that “all the points of this program can only be accomplished if the system of false democracy changes so that the ploughmen and those that try to live by their own physical and intellectual means have the possibility of directing their own fate and household. That is to say, the introduction of a clean democracy would prevent the installation of a personal, party or military dictatorship of racketeers. Serious democracy in our country can only be achieved when we ploughmen are more organized, united together in a tight bond.”<sup>66</sup>

The leaders of the Ploughmen’s Front participated alongside the leaders of the Hunedoara County organization of the National Peasant Party at several assemblies that were organized during the election campaign. Thus, on 17 December 1937, an assembly was organized in Deva and held in the courtyard of Decebal Bank with the participation of over 1,200 peasants. Iuliu Maniu was also among the participants.<sup>67</sup> The National Peasant Party list, also supported by the Ploughmen’s Front, was voted by 13,733 people in Hunedoara and only came in third place after the liberals and the legionaries.<sup>68</sup> Groza’s hopes had not been based on a realistic assessment of the force of the Ploughmen’s Front.

## Conclusions

THE ESTABLISHMENT of the regime of authoritarian monarchy would end the first stage in the short history of the Ploughmen's Front marked by the attempts of a group of peasants led by Petru Groza to establish a ploughmen organization, an alternative to the National Peasant Party. In the early years, the Front was only limited to the Hunedoara County where the rural population (in 1930) represented 85.82% of the total population.<sup>69</sup> There it succeeded to attract a significant number of peasants, attempting to extend its reach to the nearby counties or even to other areas of the country. Although its impact on the country was insignificant, we could say that the organization led by Petru Groza was a serious competitor of the political parties in Hunedoara County, especially of the National Peasant Party.<sup>70</sup> The loss of trust in the National Peasant Party's message became apparent in the early 1930s and was generated by the economic crisis as well as by the party's unsuccessful governments. The erosion of Iuliu Maniu's popularity, the lack of profound connections between the local national-peasant elites and the peasants and the demagoguery of party agents led to the dissatisfaction of many peasants who sought other ways to solve the economic and social problems they were facing.

The organizations of the Ploughmen's Front were founded rapidly in Hunedoara County and within three years there were 120 organizations in communes and villages. Despite the fact that we do not have exact figures on the size of these organizations, the documents of that time show that peasants had enthusiastically joined the organizational structures of the Ploughmen's Front. In this case, the peasants were important actors in the process of building a political organization and not just the subject of political rhetoric and propaganda. Also, during the interwar period, the turnout in elections for Hunedoara County was high and it often exceeded the national average, standing as evidence of the high level of political activism in the area. If we add another ingredient to all these realities—the political project of Petru Groza, a charismatic leader who was willing to spend resources—we get the appropriate conditions for the birth of a rural political movement, with an agrarian orientation, an alternative to the National Peasant Party. At the same time, this political activism led to the emergence of local peasant leaders (Romulus Zăroni,<sup>71</sup> Ion Moga-Fileriu, Miron Belea, Guia Petru Moțu, Tudor Cionca, Ioniță Dumbravă, Dănuț Șotângă etc.) who played a major role in building the ploughmen organization and who would also become part of the leadership of the Ploughmen's Front in its second stage of development, from 1944 onwards. These local leaders were the core members of the Front until the party's dissolution in 1953.



## Notes

1. Mircea Valea, “Înființarea organizației ‘Frontul Plugarilor’ și primii ani de activitate (1933–1935),” *Sargetia* (Deva) 8 (1971); Gh. I. Ioniță and Gh. Țuțui, *Frontul Plugarilor (1933–1953)* (Bucharest: Institutul de Studii Istorice și Social-Politice de pe lângă CC al PCR, 1970).
2. Dorin Liviu-Bitfoi, *Petru Groza, ultimul burghez: O biografie* (Bucharest: Compania, 2004). In recent years, more has been published on the postwar activity of the Ploughmen’s Front: Vasile Ciobanu, Sorin Radu, and Nicolae Georgescu, eds., *Frontul Plugarilor: Documente*, vol. 1, 1944–1947; vol. 2, 1948–1951 (Bucharest: INST, 2011, 2012); Gabriel Moisa, *Frontul Plugarilor din Regionala Crișana-Maramureș (1945–1953)* (Oradea: Ed. Universității din Oradea, Ed. Muzeului Țării Crișurilor, 2012); Sorin Radu, “‘Tovarăși de drum’: Frontul Plugarilor și Partidul Comunist în anii 1944–1947,” *Revista istorică* (Bucharest) 23, 1–2 (2012): 107–138; id., “The Political Organization of the Peasantry in Communist Romania: the Ploughmen’s Front (1945–1953),” *Bulgarian Historical Review* 1–2 (2013): 79–101; Sorin Radu, Cosmin Budeancă, and Flavius Solomon, “The ‘Comrades,’ Propaganda and the Collectivization of Agriculture in Eastern Europe: The Ploughmen’s Front in Romania,” *Historický časopis* 63, 1 (2015): 113–135.
3. See Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt, eds., *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania: Perceptions, Mentalities, Propaganda* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).
4. Stephen Fischer-Galati, “Peasantism in Interwar Eastern Europe,” *Balkan Studies* 1–2 (1967): 103–114; Heinz Gollwitzer, ed., *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1977); Eduard Kubů et al., eds., *Agrarismus und Agrarreliten in Ostmitteleuropa* (Berlin-Prague: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2013); Helga Schultz and Angelika Harre, eds., *Bauerngesellschaften auf dem Weg in die Moderne* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010); Dietmar Müller and Angelika Harre, eds., *Agrarian Property and Agrarianism in East Central Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Innsbruck-Vienna-Bozen: Studienverlag, 2011); Liviu Neagoe, *The “Third Way”: Agrarianism and Intellectual Debates in Interwar Romania* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008); Hannes Siegrist and Dietmar Müller, eds., *Property in East Central Europe: Notions, Institutions and Practices of Landownership in the Twentieth Century* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Publishing House, 2015).
5. Sorin Radu and Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Introduction,” in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania*, 2–3.
6. Ibid.
7. Mattei Dogan, *Comparații și explicații în știința politică și în sociologie* (Iași: Institutul European, 2010), 267.
8. Răzvan Florin Mihai, “A Socio-Professional Analysis of the Candidates in General Elections (1926–1937): Case Study: Agriculturalist Candidates on the Lists of the Assembly of Deputies,” in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania*, 271–293; Valer Moga, “The Road of Transylvanian Romanian Farmers to Greater Romania’s Political Arena,” in *Politics and Peasants in Interwar Romania*, 295–327.
9. Dogan, 267, 272.

10. Alex Drace-Francis, *The Traditions of Invention: Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context* (Leyden–Boston: Brill, 2013).
11. “Deșteptarea țăranilor români: Măreța adunare din 8 ianuarie la Deva,” *Horia* (Deva) 2, 1 (14 January 1933).
12. Valea, 224; Ioniță and Țuțui, 13–16.
13. The first issue of the *Horia* gazette was printed on 25 June 1932.
14. *Frontul Plugarilor: Cum s-a născut. Ce este. Ce vrea?* (Bucharest: n.p., n.d.), 18.
15. Nicolae Georgescu and Sorin Radu, “Întemeierea și organizarea Frontului Plugarilor (1933),” in *Stat și societate în Europa*, eds. Sorin Damean and Lucian Dindirică, vol. 4 (Târgoviște: Ed. Cetatea de Scaun, 2012), 187–188.
16. Miron Belea, “Democrația național-țăranistilor,” *Horia* 1, 1 (19 February 1933).
17. “A treia mare adunare a plugarilor ținută la Băița,” *Horia* 1, 1 (19 February 1933).
18. “Marea adunare de la Țebea sub gorunul lui Horia,” *Horia* 1, 5 (26 February 1933); the proceedings of the assembly are also widely described in no. 6 of 1 March 1933.
19. “Moartea minciunei,” *Horia* 1, 8 (22 March 1933).
20. Sorin Radu and Cosmin Budeancă, “Romulus Zăroni: un personaj politic atipic de la jumătatea secolului XX,” in *Marginalități, periferii și frontiere simbolice: Societatea comunistă și dilemele sale identitare, Anuarul Institutului de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului Românesc* (Bucharest) 9 (2014): 59–86.
21. “Să părăsim partidele,” *Horia* 1, 1 (19 February 1933).
22. “Proces-verbal,” *Horia* 1, 5 (26 February 1933).
23. Ibid.
24. *Horia* 1, 8 (22 March 1933).
25. An example of a call: “Attention, ploughmen! There is no law that stops citizens from organizing as they wish and the freedom of belief is sacred in our Constitution and laws. Our program is completely legal and constitutional. *Organise!*” *Horia* 1, 6 (1 March 1933).
26. “Credeul nostru,” *Horia* 1, 7 (11 March 1933).
27. *Ce vrem? Istorical. Programul. Organizarea* (Deva: Tip. Decebal, 1933), 5. In a later paper, the approximate number of participants was exaggerated to 20,000: *Primul Congres general al Frontului Plugarilor* (Bucharest: Ed. Frontul Plugarilor, 1945), 31.
28. News correspondents from Bucharest, Timișoara, Brașov, Târgu-Mureș, Arad, Oradea, and Cluj were present. *Dimineața* (20 April 1933) described the enthusiasm of the participants; for hours “peasant speakers hold speeches in turn on the improvised platform. All of them criticize petty politics and point out the evil caused by politics since the war.”
29. *Horia* gazette had widely covered the proceedings of the Congress in no. 11 of 22 April 1933 (“Botezul Frontului Plugarilor”). In the same year, this article was published in a brochure entitled *Ce vrem?* (What do we want?).
30. Central National Historical Archives, Bucharest, Archive of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (hereafter cited as CNHAB, ACCRCP), coll. Frontul Plugarilor, R. 430, c. 54–57.
31. Georgescu and Radu, 47–50.
32. CNHAB, ACCRCP, coll. Frontul Plugarilor, R. 430, c. 54.
33. Ibid., c. 56, 57; *Ce vrem?*, 63–64.
34. *Frontul Plugarilor: Cum s-a născut. Ce este. Ce vrea?*, 28–29.

35. Ioniță and Țuțui, 37.
36. “Împotriva cui?” *Horia* 1, 16 (29 June 1933).
37. “Presa din țară despre Frontul Plugarilor,” in *Ce vrem?*, 58–63.
38. Nae Ionescu, “După demisia d-lui Maniu,” *Cuvântul* (Bucharest) 2887 (11 May 1933).
39. See *Horia* 1, 20 (11 September 1933).
40. National Archives, Hunedoara County Branch (hereafter cited as NAH), coll. Prefectura Județului Hunedoara, file 1/1933, fol. 76.
41. NAH, coll. Prefectura Județului Hunedoara, file 4/1933, fol. 23.
42. Mircea Chirițoiu, “Cine a fost dr. Petru Groza?,” *Dosarele istoriei* (Bucharest) 3, 2 (18) (1998): 4.
43. Bîțfoi, 157–158.
44. “Consiliul Frontului Plugarilor,” *Horia* 1, 24 (29 November 1933).
45. Ion Lungu, Vasile Radu, Mircea Valea, Gheorghe I. Ioniță, Liviu Mărghitan, and C. Enea, *Din trecutul de luptă al țărănimii hunedorene* (Deva: Muzeul Regional Hunedoara, 1967), 309, 405.
46. CNHAB, ACCRCP, coll. Frontul Plugarilor, R. 430, c. 126–127.
47. “Consiliul Frontului Plugarilor,” *Horia* 1, 24 (29 November 1933).
48. Sorin Radu, *Electoratul din România în anii democrației parlamentare (1919–1937)* (Iași: Institutul European, 2004), 194. The County Committee of the Ploughmen’s Front had proposed eight geometric shapes as an electoral symbol and none of them were approved by the Central Election Commission.
49. CNHAB, ACCRCP, coll. Frontul Plugarilor, R. 430, c. 50; “Chemarea Frontului Plugarilor!,” *Horia* 1, 24 (29 October 1933).
50. “Plugari Români, Plugari ai României!” *Horia* 1, 25 (16 December 1933).
51. “Bate ceasul al 12-lea,” *Horia* 1, 25 (16 December 1933).
52. Ioniță and Țuțui, 53.
53. Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria Partidului Național-Țărănesc*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1994), 296.
54. Gheorghe Micle, *Frontul Plugarilor și clasa muncitoare* (n.p.: Frontul Plugarilor, 1945), 13–14.
55. Ion Frățilă and Nicolae Wardegger, eds., *Documente hunedorene din istoria mișcării revoluționare 1920–1944* (Deva: n.p., 1971), 292–293.
56. Scurtu, *Istoria Partidului Național Țărănesc*, 298–299. Commenting on the results of the partial elections, Mihai Popovici, president of the National Peasant Party in Transylvania and Banat, said that the victories in the counties of Hunedoara and Mehedinți had been obtained due to the fact that Ghiță Pop and Nicolae Lupu “had the support of Romanian democracy, of the Ploughmen’s Front and the social-democrats.” *Dreptatea* (Bucharest) 10, 2502 (22 February 1936).
57. Constantin Argetoianu, *Pentru cei de mâine: Amintiri din vremea celor de ieri*, vol. 11 (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 59.
58. Lungu et al., 310.
59. *Adevărul* (Bucharest) 51, 16408 (28 July 1937); *Dr. Petru Groza, Articole, cuvântări, interviuri*, foreword by George Ivașcu (Bucharest: Ed. Politică, 1973), 191–195.
60. Involved in the alliance were also: the Socialist Party (Popovici), the Conservative Party, and the MADOSZ. Ioan Scurtu, “Lupta partidelor politice în alegerile parlamen-

tare din decembrie 1937,” *Studii* (Bucharest) 1 (1967): 153; Anghel Nistor, “Poziția forțelor democratice hunedorene în alegerile parlamentare din decembrie 1937,” *Sargetia* 14 (1979): 503.

61. NAH, coll. Chestura de Poliție, file 4/1937, fol. 117.
62. CNHAB, ACCRCP, coll. Frontul Plugarilor, R. 430, c. 159–193.
63. *Ibid.*, c. 162, 163.
64. *Ibid.*, c. 172.
65. *Ibid.*, c. 182, 183.
66. *Ibid.*, c. 190.
67. NAH, coll. Chestura de Poliție Deva, file 82/1937, file 4/1937, fols. 95–99.
68. Nistor, 505.
69. Sabin Manuilă, *Studiu etnografic asupra populației României* (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului Central de Statistică, 1940), 46.
70. Marcel Ivan observed that the strongest electorate favourable to the National Peasant Party (NPP) had been in the counties of Caraș, Alba, and Hunedoara: Marcel Ivan, *Evoluția partidelor noastre politice în cifre și grafice 1919–1932* (Sibiu: Krafft & Drotleff, 1934), 12. In Hunedoara County, the NPP was extremely sympathised during the interwar period, a fact confirmed by the large number of votes—more than the national results—obtained when the party was in power and also when it was in the opposition. The NPP obtained the following number of votes in Hunedoara County: 1926, 35,771 votes, 59% (national percentage 27.73%); 1927, 26,768 votes, 44.91% (national percentage 22.09%); 1928, 56,517 votes, 88.68% (national percentage 77.76%); 1931, 22,800 votes, 35.02% (national percentage 14.99%); 1932, 34,358 votes, 54.11% (national percentage 40.30%). Ivan, 48–65.
71. Radu and Budeancă, 59–86.

## Abstract

Political Activism in the Romanian Countryside of the 1930s:  
The Peasants from Hunedoara County and the Ploughmen’s Front

Our article contends that the effort of organizing and developing the Ploughmen’s Front, even if it was first limited to Hunedoara County, represents a case of political engagement and activism in which the peasants showed that they could surmount political passivity, understanding that in order to overcome the underdevelopment of the rural world and economic decline, voting and ballot participation were not enough; that is why they decided to adhere to a political structure. In this case, the peasants were important actors in the process of building a political organization, and not just the subject of political rhetoric and propaganda. Our thesis claims that there was a direct involvement of the peasants in the organization of the Ploughmen’s Front, with great enthusiasm on their part, which may partially refute the dominant thesis in Romanian history which states that the peasants were an unstructured, uneducated, easily manipulated crowd, freely recruited in a political maneuver conducted by a sort of dandy of Romanian politics.

## Keywords

political integration, Romanian countryside, electorate, Ploughmen’s Front, Petru Groza