

The Congress That Never Was The General Congress of the Press, Cluj, December 1923

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DECEMBER 1923 marked the first anniversary of the “student movement” in Romania. As stipulated in the resolution of the Delegates’ Congress in Iași (August 1923), 10 December was declared a “student holiday” and was celebrated in Cluj, as elsewhere, with “cancelled university classes and activities,”¹ but also with other events, held outside the academic framework: a religious service, a conference delivered by Octavian Goga at the National Theater, and street demonstrations that turned violent.² By operating more and more outside the university, the student movement aimed to expand its avenues of action.

The student movement spectacularly seized this opportunity to capture the public attention at any cost, even with violent means, to relentlessly promote its agenda and to severely censor those who dared to oppose its ideas and actions. Its intentions were clear, for instance, in regard to an important event the city was preparing to host: the General Congress of the Press, hoping that “Cluj will, no doubt, once

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again rise to the occasion.”³ This was to be the first event of this kind in Transylvania, with the participation of both Romanian and Hungarian journalists and spanning a three-day period (16, 17, and 18 December 1923). Some activities were to be hosted by the Hungarian Theater in the city. It was envisioned as a grandiose event, which the city was proud to organize and for which it would prepare accordingly.

However, a strange thing happened. Before reports on the congress proceedings could be issued, a press release signed by numerous trade union and press association representatives “from all over Romania” (from all the historical provinces, including a minority press association from Transylvania and Banat), protested and demanded its cancellation:

*Considering the unabating hostility of some of the population, the violently abusive demonstrations against the press, the threats made at the train station by the students’ president, and the authorities’ condoning attitude, the acts that followed, the brutal restrictions, from the very outset, against the program of the Congress, we publicly protest against this attack on the freedom of thought, carried out in the name of nationalism, which is holy to us all, and declare that the Congress can no longer be held, with the permission of the authorities, in this atmosphere of intolerance and savagery.*⁴

An adjacent news story added information about other serious incidents. Not only had the Congress of the Press been obstructed by violence, but “the windows and storefronts of Jewish banks and shops were broken,” and although “the entire police force was mobilized, nothing could be done against the mob of several thousand operating at the same time in different parts of the city.”⁵ In addition to the image of a city devastated by intolerance and savagery, Cluj was also accused of ignorance; it had not recognized and treated properly “an old and valuable journalist,” Constantin Bacalbaşa, the president of the Bucharest Journalists’ Trade Union, who had been prevented from “delivering his conference”:

*Unfamiliar with Mr. Bacalbaşa’s profession, the students showed hostility against a journalist who has always done his duty as a good Romanian. By demonstrating against Mr. Bacalbaşa, the students committed an act that offended the prestige of the Romanian press and endangered the freedom of speech.*⁶

The protest issued by the journal *Înfrățirea* (The brotherhood) ended on a note that emphasized, once more, that every “acceptable” limit of juvenile action had been exceeded:

*On this occasion, we want to protest against the acts of violence committed yesterday against our civilized nation and the rule of law, as we must all understand that violence can only compromise a just and beautiful cause.*⁷

Quite ironically, and in order to illustrate the consistent position of the newspaper on this matter, a domestic news report regarding the far too large number of “foreign” officials in Cojocna County bore the subtitle “Enough with Tolerance.”⁸

A RECONSTRUCTION OF the succession of events that took place on Sunday, 16 December, the first day of the Congress of the Press, shows that the incidents began as early as 11 o’clock in the morning, when the delegates were greeted by the local authorities and... by the students in the reception hall at the railway station. During those welcome speeches, “the students in the hall loudly cheered for the Romanian press, showing hostility against the Jewish and the alienated press.”⁹ Moreover, in his welcome address, “Mr. Mica, a doctoral candidate in law and president of the Cluj students,” openly expressed his intentions (threats): “The students of Cluj can give no guarantee on how the representatives of the press who are not to their liking will be received.”¹⁰ To make their intentions clear, once they reached Union Square, “the students set fire to all the copies of *Dimineata* [The morning], *Adevărul* [The truth], *Lupta* [The fight], and *Presa* [The press] that they could find at the six newspaper stands.”¹¹

The congress opened in the afternoon, at four o’clock, in the Prefecture Hall, in the presence of all high local officials (mayor, prefect, generals, magistrates, rector, representatives of the religious denominations, deputies and senators, etc.).

All of them, including the delegated journalists, were surprised by the students’ forced entry, barely slowed down by the feeble resistance of the cordon of policemen and gendarmes (there were about a hundred policemen but over a thousand students):

*Their entrance was rowdy and drew the attention of the attendants, who were stunned by what had happened. Booming the Jews, the students filled half the hall within moments and started singing the students’ anthem. Seeing the attitude of the students, most of the public and the journalists went home.*¹²

The noise and the booming continued for a long time and could hardly be toned down, so as to allow the few introductory speeches to be given and to declare the congress proceedings open. The festive opening of the congress had therefore been compromised.

But the day was not over. In the evening, at 9 p.m., the festivities moved to the National Theater Hall, where the President of the Romanian Journalists' Union, Constantin Bacalbaşa, was to give a speech entitled "How to Become a Journalist." The scenario from the Prefecture was repeated in aggravated form: "Mr. Bacalbaşa had hardly stepped on stage, when the students began to show their hostility," and the speaker, exasperated, believed, as he later confessed, that "this was a demonstration against the Old Kingdom."¹³ The hall was occupied by the students who had stormed in, while the congress participants left. After staying for more than an hour in the invaded hall, singing and demonstrating, the students set off "in a compact group on the streets."¹⁴ There were "break-ins at companies and windows were broken, with damages said to amount to one and a half million lei."¹⁵ As a result, General Nicolae Petala, commander of the 6th Army Corps, issued an ordinance renewing and tightening the curfew in the city (on 17 December).¹⁶

Given the magnitude of the events and the extremely violent attack against the press as an institution for the free expression of opinions, the echoes of what had happened in Cluj were simply colossal. For the delegates from the country who were still unfamiliar with the student movement and who thought that they were coming to a city known for its peace and civilization standards, this must have been a huge surprise. Hence their failure to understand what was happening to them, as in the case of Bacalbaşa, who believed he was witnessing a demonstration against the Old Kingdom. C. G. Costa-Foru, secretary general of the Human Rights League, also found out, with amazement, that some of those who were breaking windows and vandalizing businesses were looking for him: "Where is he, who is Costa-Foru?"¹⁷ Dismissing the reasons why they might oppose him, he was willing to give a conference in front of those students to clarify the meaning of words such as "patriotism," "nationalism," "chauvinism," and "humanitarianism," because he had heard one of the students shouting in the station hall,

*among other slogans against the best interests of the Homeland, We don't want humanitarianism! Of all the sad things seen and heard during yesterday's ugly events, nothing was more sad, more painful, more terrible than that utterly eerie slogan shouted by a university student.*¹⁸

Gathering outside the universities, where they had been unable to obtain the "numerus clausus," the students diversified their arsenal and ways of fighting; they found new institutional, human and ideological targets. Some, like those indicated by Costa-Foru, were downright hilarious, and he was ready to enlighten them with a conference. But hadn't some of their professors and university

leaders tried the same? It was to no avail. The youth had their own agenda, their own ideological and organizational affinities, some barely understood, others assumed. They (still) had role models and some respect for representatives of the older generation, those with whose ideas they agreed. As to their modes of public expression and calls for violence, they were in tune (perhaps quite unbeknownst to them) with similar movements in the West. Noisily interrupting the opponent, forcibly seizing the conference hall and making him unable to express his ideas¹⁹ had been used by the Italian fascists since the start of the movement (before they came to power),²⁰ while arson, storefront vandalism, assaults on rivals of any kind, but especially on the Jews, were also used by other contemporaries of the Cluj protesters.²¹ In addition to the mature voices that tried to temper them, to make them see reason (in the sense of a non-violent but active nationalism), there were also ideological mentors willing to steer the students towards other currents of ideas and to tolerate, or even encourage, manifestations envisaged by the students as the “brutalization of society/politics”²² after the First World War. That’s what Professor A. C. Cuza and the National Christian Defense League did in Iași. That’s what some local university professors and intellectuals had started to do in Cluj, where they met in order to establish a new organization: the Romanian Action.

Two weeks after the outcry that terrified Costa-Foru (“We don’t want humanitarianism!”), a possible explanation came from one of the leaders of the new organization:

*The League for the Defense of Human Rights is an organization diametrically opposed to the Romanian Action. It is based on the falsification of ideas of democracy and humanitarianism. This is how the socialist movement is driven asunder from the Romanian Action.*²³

The one who made these doctrinal delimitations was none other than the leader of the Cluj bar, Valer Roman, a lawyer and former socialist, in one of the first public speeches of the organization, whose establishment and ideological positioning were under way. He firmly supported the student movement, while Iuliu Hațieganu, a professor of medicine and a member of the new organization, argued that “the university students, in whom the whole nation has placed its hopes, will have to continue their nationalist movement.”²⁴

The illusory press guild solidarity, seen during the days when it was badly hit in Cluj, quickly evaporated. Commenting on the situation, *Patria* (The country) advanced the hypothesis that the Liberals had every interest in the failure of the congress, because it was attended by publications hostile to them,²⁵ so the local

authorities had done little to ensure order. The government, however, sent a commission of inquiry to the scene, which questioned some representatives of the authorities, students, and delegates of the Press Union, and then presented its findings in Bucharest.²⁶

The other camp defended itself by claiming that there had been too few police officers and too many demonstrators. The police prefect had done everything “humanly possible,” with “the means available to him,” and it was clear that these should be improved and increased, since “it is well known that Cluj had seen the fiercest student movements against the Jewish element.”²⁷ This was also a way of recognizing an existing state of affairs. The Transylvanian city was also engaged in an—undesirable for some, desirable for others—competition of student events with an anti-Semitic tinge, in which Iași was usually considered the winner, but in which Bucharest²⁸ also had its “moments.” In fact, the entire university atmosphere in the country (regardless of the city) had been tainted by that vicious behavior, which would continue to manifest itself with varying intensity in the years to come.

THE EPISODE (in several acts) that occurred during the Congress of the Press showed the direction in which the movement was heading and could be considered an inflection point. From demonstrations in or around the university, operations expanded to other points in the city, with new means of expression and with new targets. As the goal of “nationalizing Cluj” was difficult to achieve overnight (or in a time that was compatible with juvenile haste), it was replaced by that of “brutalizing Cluj.” The academic “numerus clausus,” whose effects concerning the nationalization of the Transylvanian elites were to be seen only in the years to come, was no longer a sufficient goal for the radicalized young activists; it was never abandoned, but rather set aside because of new demands. The students wished to show that they hadn’t failed their imprisoned heroes, whom they not only did not forget, but could fill with pride through their actions. And with such actions they managed to put constant pressure on the authorities, including for the benefit of those detained “illegally,” “unjustly,” etc.²⁹

The reactions of the other journalists to “certain newspapers,” after the violent attack in Cluj, showed how fractured the society actually was. The “student movement” simply brought this rift to the fore. Not only did the main political parties repeatedly miss the opportunity to show solidarity in the face of such violent outbursts and intolerable abuse, but the press—the independent one (not explicitly affiliated politically), which reflected and reinforced public opinion—also failed to put up a common front. The great achievements of modernity

(the press, the public opinion, the political involvement of new categories of population, etc.) were themselves about to exceed their limits and reveal massive cultural cleavages.³⁰

Feeling, perhaps, the need to overcome the defensive phase and to cease justifying what had happened in Cluj, the local newspaper affiliated to the Liberals (in power) gave a response (to an article by Constantin Mille, published in *Lupta*), which revealed that this was more than a simple polemic exchange. “Hate” and other words were used to suggest the nature (actually the culture!) and the extent of that fracture:

*Under the pretext of wanting to make us more democratic, “certain newspapers” have always aimed to make us less Romanian. Hence, the hatred that is levelled against them today and that Cluj expressed in such a form and with such drastic means.*³¹

The excerpt reproduced approvingly from *Universul* (The universe, an important central daily) served as an additional comment on the events. What had happened at the Congress of the Press should have entailed a sharing of responsibility (and also a coordinated effort!) between the students and the authorities. However, “one cannot assume such broad cooperation without acknowledging the existence of motives, without which, maybe, peace would have been obtained.”³² This was an insidious way of transferring responsibility from the aggressors to the victims, from the authorities to the injured party; a strategy that had been used before in history and would be used again, including in the case of the “student heroes.” Successively or simultaneously “heroes” and “victims,” the students were constantly kept in the public attention, through what might be called today a PR campaign.

The year did not end without a discreet appeal to public charity, published in both newspapers, which otherwise had so many divergent views. In one, the appeal was made “on behalf of university students” (*Patria*), while in the other, “on private initiative.” It referred to “helping the students imprisoned at Văcărești,” whose Christmas could be “sweetened” by the sensitized readers (*Înfrățirea*). Gifts for them were to be sent “to the address of Miss [Elena] Ilinoiu, the boarding school of Gh. Barițiu High School, King Ferdinand Avenue.”³³ Always on opposite sides of the barricade, the two newspapers—one in the opposition, the other a mouthpiece of the government—had now struck a momentary peace, supporting the cause of the “poor” imprisoned students.

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Notes

1. Lucian Blaga Central University Library, Cluj-Napoca, Petru Maior coll., Ms. 5993, Posters submitted, “Hotărârea Congresului de la Iași.”
2. Maria Ghitta, “A New Academic Year (1923–1924): A New Year of ‘Student Movements’ in Cluj,” *Transylvanian Review* 30, 4 (2021): 55–65.
3. “Congresul general al presei la Cluj,” *Înfrățirea* (Cluj), 13 December 1923: 5.
4. “Suspendarea Congresului general al presei din România,” *Înfrățirea*, 18 December 1923: 1.
5. “Manifestările antisemite de ieri,” *Înfrățirea*, 18 December 1923: 1.
6. “Constantin Bacalbașa,” *Înfrățirea*, 18 December 1923: 1.
7. Ibid.
8. “Ardealul românesc administrat de unguri și de evrei,” *Înfrățirea*, 18 December 1923: 3. According to the article, only 11 of the county’s 170 officials were Romanian.
9. “Congresul general al Presei din România,” *Patria* (Cluj), 17 December 1923: 1. On the events that took place in the city and the significance of the Congress of the Press, see also Marian Petcu, “Istoria unui eșec: Congresul General al Presei din România (Cluj, 1923),” *Revista română de istoria presei* 6, 1 (11) (2012): 122–135.
10. “Congresul general al Presei din întreaga țară ținut la Cluj,” *Înfrățirea*, 18 December 1923: 5.
11. Ibid.
12. “Congresul general al Presei din România,” 1.
13. “Congresul general al Presei din întreaga țară ținut la Cluj,” 5.
14. “Congresul general al Presei din România,” 1.
15. “Stare de asediu înăsprită,” *Patria*, 19 December 1923: 3.
16. Ibid. The ordinance prohibited any assembly in the city that did not have the approval of the military command, and any assembly of more than four persons; any destruction or intent to destroy state or private property was punishable. Those violating this ordinance were to be tried by military tribunals.
17. “Scrisoare deschisă către domnii studenți din Cluj,” *Patria*, 19 December 1923: 2.
18. Ibid.
19. This had happened, for example, in Bucharest, at a conference N. Iorga was giving. As Șerban Cioculescu recalls, “on 24 January 1923, he gave a speech at the Athenaeum to mark Union Day. I was there. When he uttered the name of the celebrated ruler, a group of students, who were there deliberately to cause havoc, shouted ‘Long Live Professor A. C. Cuza.’ A compact group of demonstrators started clapping and cheering the professor who had for several months been endorsing the hooligans’ goal of introducing the so-called *numerus clausus* in the University. Then the professor came down from the rostrum, left the hall, returned home and wrote his resignation as chair.” Șerban Cioculescu, *Amintiri* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), 222.

20. See, for example, Robert O. Paxton, *Le Fascisme en action*, translated by William Olivier Desmond, in collaboration with the author (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 151–157; Mimmo Franzinelli, *Fascismo anno zero: 1919: la nascita dei Fasci italiani di combattimento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2019), 17–22; id., *Squadristi: Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista, 1919–1922* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2019), 139–166.
21. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Allen Lane, 1998); id., *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London: Allen Lane, 2000); Ernst Nolte, *La Guerre civile européenne 1917–1945: National-socialisme et bolchevisme*, translated by Jean-Marie Argelès, foreword by Stéphane Courtois (Paris: Syrtes, 2000), 151–160; Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
22. The discussion on the “brutalization” of European societies after the First World War was launched in the historiographical work of a classic scholar of fascism, George L. Mosse. It was then revisited by numerous commentators. See, for instance, the volume edited by Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson, *Sortir de la Grande Guerre: Le monde et l’après-1918* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008).
23. “Adunarea Acțiunii Românești,” *Patria*, 1 January 1924: 2.
24. Ibid.
25. “Anchetarea turburărilor din Cluj,” *Patria*, 22 December 1923: 1.
26. “Anchetarea turburărilor din Cluj,” *Patria*, 26 December 1923: 2.
27. “Dezordinele de Duminică și autoritățile locale,” *Înfrățirea*, 22 December 1923: 3.
28. A news story published in March, on the eve of the vote on the new Constitution, describes such an episode, when students acted outside the University: “Last night at 9 o’clock, after the students’ meeting in the ‘Amiciția’ hall, they gathered in front of Eforia, by the Charles the Great Theater, where a Jewish company was staging a performance. A group broke into the hall preventing the performance from continuing. After the hall was evacuated, at around half past 10, the students took to the streets inspecting the trams and kicking out all the Jews. They then raided the cafes...” (“Manifestațiile studentești din Capitală,” *Patria*, 24 March 1923: 3).
29. In a letter sent to several of the plotters’ defense lawyers, one of the local student leaders referred to the “4 [Cluj students] who are imprisoned at Văcărești”: theirs was, therefore, the most important and greatest sacrifice to the cause. What happened was that besides those who had travelled to Bucharest and were placed into custody (Ion Moța, Aurel Vernichescu, Corneliu Georgescu), Traian Breazu was also called in for questioning at some point. Their presence there was seen as “confirmation of the truth that only through sacrifice and suffering do souls harden.” The claim was that their fault was an imaginary one, and that they were victims of “truly unworthy schemes of today’s country leaders [who] accused the students of seditious intentions.” Lucian Blaga Library, Petru Maior coll., Ms 5851 (Scrap paper ledger), letter of 22 November 1923, 193/1923.
30. On the cultural derailments of the pre-Nazi period in Germany, see Evans, or the classic study of George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, translated by Salvator Attanasio et al. (Madison, Wisconsin: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966).

31. “Anumita presă,” *Înfățișarea*, 22 December 1923: 1.
32. “O părere obiectivă asupra zădărnicii Congresului Presei,” *Înfățișarea*, 22 December 1923: 1.
33. “Pentru studenți,” *Patria*, 28 December 1923: 2 and “Ajutorarea studenților de la Văcărești,” *Înfățișarea*, 28 December 1923: 3.

Abstract

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December 1923 marked the first anniversary of the “student movement” in Romania. The student movement spectacularly seized this opportunity to capture public attention at any cost, even with violent means, in order to relentlessly promote its agenda and to severely censor those who dared to oppose its ideas and actions. Its intentions were clear, for instance, in regard to an important event the city was preparing to host: the General Congress of the Press. Gathering outside the universities, where they had been unable to obtain the “*numerus clausus*,” the students diversified their arsenal and ways of fighting; they set themselves new institutional targets. Not only did the main political parties repeatedly miss the opportunity to show solidarity in the face of such violent outbursts and intolerable abuse, but the press—the independent one (not explicitly affiliated politically), which reflected and reinforced public opinion—also failed to put up a common front.

Keywords

Romanian press, Cluj, students, nationalism, anti-Semitism