

# A New Academic Year (1923–1924) A New Year of “Student Movements” in Cluj

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(Iacob Iacobovici)

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**T**HE OPENING of the new academic year took place at the end of October 1923 and could not disregard what had happened previously at the University of Cluj and around it. The ceremony, which had once been an occasion for festive assessments and exhortations to new achievements, now had to remind the attendees of the serious disturbances that had marked the previous year. In the speeches they gave on that occasion, the former and current rectors referred, each in their own way, to the recent university experiences.

Although he had faced some of the most difficult moments as a result of the manifestation of the students' youthful zeal, the former rector, Iacob Iacobovici, displayed a remarkable ability to use generalizing statements, completely avoiding personal notes or moralizing attitudes. Speaking about what had happened during his term in office, the renowned doctor and professor placed the events in the broader framework of the process of national construction following the Union:

*The youth, with their characteristic élan and impetuosity, wanted this constructive creation to come to fruition as fast as possible, but it would have been fatal to embark on unknown or very difficult roads.<sup>1</sup>*

Moreover, he was tempted to see the manifestations of the youth as the symptom of a more general condition: “The sudden growth of the country has caused an acute crisis.”<sup>2</sup> A remarkable sociological observation, this statement outlines not only the intellectual, but also the human profile of the author. The former rector did not publicly quarrel with his recalcitrant students,<sup>3</sup> but was capable of performing a deeper and better analysis of the facts by contextualizing them. This was, of course, a nonconformist observation, but one that was all the more valuable in the postwar environment, in which temptations to mimetically celebrate the fulfillment of the national ideal rarely gave way to analytical thinking. The union had come not only as a glorious apotheosis, “bathed in the blood of heroes” and fulfilling the “dream of ages,” but also as a huge concrete task to solve so many economic, social, ethno-cultural disparities, etc. The University of Cluj was a place that highlighted these problems even more acutely.

Nicolae Bănescu, the new rector, a Byzantinologist and a professor at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, did not hesitate to call the previous academic year a year of crises, a year that had been out of the ordinary compared to the previous ones, a year in which the university had functioned according to a convention that was well understood by its members:

*Our university started from the beginning as a rather cohesive body and, thanks to the precious collaboration of its component elements, its powers have increased from one year to the next.*

By contrast, the previous year had broken “the unity of fruitful action.”<sup>4</sup> The University of Cluj was in danger of failing to carry out the great cultural-national project in Transylvania, paradoxically not because of external factors, of “enemies from outside,” but because of too much youthful nationalism, expressed with growing vehemence here. The new rector resumed his pedagogical exhortations, which had been reiterated so many times:

*The youth should be trained not in noisy sterile assemblies, not through conspiracies and revolutionary parodies, but quietly, in study rooms, which we would like to be as full of students as possible, in the company of library books, those secret counselors of wisdom.<sup>5</sup>*

Due to the holiday, the resumption of school had become a cause for concern. Would the new Romanian university in Cluj be able to return to the good path



scholars. He was, at that time, imprisoned at Văcărești, following his participation in the plot that targeted several leaders of the Jewish community and several Romanian ministers considered “traitors.”

Even more important for the student association was the recovery of the Petru Maior Student Center, with everything it entailed: tradition, fame, and resources. A new memorandum to the rector tried to persuade him to reconsider a decision that had had “disastrous effects in terms of both moral and material losses.”<sup>10</sup> Without the verbal and conceptual virulence of the similar petition previously written by Moța (in which terms such as “illegal,” “fatal,” “unjust” were used to describe the university’s action against the Center), the new memorandum also considered the act to be questionable (“open to many and varied refutations”).<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the opportunity was seized to apologize for the “vigorous idealist movement,” “which last year included thousands of Romanian students, in whom only the holy love of nation and homeland burned,” a love that was so little understood by “our leaders and politicians, who could not or did not try their best to understand the spirit of the times.”<sup>12</sup> What was supposed to be a plea to the relevant authorities increasingly proved to be a manifesto, a protest. The memorandum also attacked the “Regulation concerning Order and Discipline in the University,” “vulnerable to criticism in its entirety or in general and condemnable for the multitude of penalties,” since the Romanian students in Cluj, as well as in the whole country, “had not been consulted at all” when it had been drafted.<sup>13</sup> Those who were theoretically asked for something (help, guidance, approval) practically received a devastating criticism. They were directly reprimanded, while the final appeal was to “the soul” (theirs and “ours”):

*Through our voice, the students of Cluj ask you to give them the possibility to hold a plenary session, so that their soul may be made known to everyone as soon as possible. Convinced that our just wishes will resonate in the souls of your Lordships, we ask the Rector to receive the assurance of our highest respect.*<sup>14</sup>

The signatories presented themselves as presidents and first representatives of all student organizations in Cluj. At their head was Emil Pascu, who, as vice president, provided a kind of interim leadership of the student organization. The text was also endorsed by older members of the former committee of the Petru Maior Center, such as Victor Șuiaga or Gheorghe Ionescu, but also by new members: Felician Zaciuc (from the Faculty of Law), Ioan Săroiu (from the Faculty of Medicine), Ion Muntean, Valer Moldovan etc.

It may be assumed that such a memorandum did not make a good impression on Rector Nicolae Bănescu. According to one of those sent to personally

### Proces verbal

Luat la cunoaștere intimă a Comitetului Centrului Stud. Petru  
Maior "ținută în ziua de 3/III. 1923.

Prezenti: Horia, Breazu, Butea, Hoxian, Săraș, Precup  
Chirca, Rotaru, Pascu.

D. Horia: deschide ședința la ora 9. seara. -  
D. Săraș: La delegația primită dala Os. nu am prezentat cu D.  
Pascu la D. Rector în chestiunea admiterii unei  
ședințe. Or: D. Rector a refuzat, prin un mod cate-  
goric această ordine, recâștând că nu vrea să mai aude  
de existența Centrului Stud. Petru Maior. Comitetul  
actual al Centrului își va face raportul - după ce  
și-a ridicat actele necesare din localul Centru-  
lui și le va depune la Secretariatul Universității -  
care îl va depune la Rectorat care oșigură îl  
va absolve, iar o ordine va admite atunci când  
dărușul va afla de bine. -

Lucian Blaga Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca,  
Petru Maior coll., Ms. 5993, doc. 14/3 Dec. 1923.

present him with the students' request, "The rector categorically refused this meeting, saying that he did not want to hear about the existence of the Petru Maior Center, and that he would accept a meeting when the news was better."<sup>15</sup> His counter-proposal concerning the end of the current committee's mandate was for the latter to draft their report on the basis of the necessary documents that could be picked up from the Center's headquarters, and to submit it to the university secretariat, which would then send it over to the rector "who will surely absolve them."<sup>16</sup>

The decision to suspend the functioning of the former committee was thus in the hands of the rector, and setting up a new committee was out of the question. The glorious time of the formation of the governing body of the Petru Maior Society by submitting candidacies that were subsequently validated in general elections (with the participation of a large number of students) seemed to have passed. The members of the Center—who were asking for a plenary meeting to renew their mandates—had not gone through what had been an ordinary election process until February 1923. As they wrote to Ioan Moța in Orăștie, in mid-December 1923, they had come to operate "undercover":

*We wish to inform you that, since our center is no longer operational, we are encountering difficulties in cashing the stipends, as our committee can only function clandestinely.*<sup>17</sup>

(Moța's father had asked them for information on the status of the receipts for several types of works he had done at the "Libertatea" printing house, from the

Romanian translation of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, to printed pamphlets about the Congress in Iași or the dissolution of the Center.)

The rector tried everything in his power to separate the name Petru Maior from the “current student movement” and to oust this movement from the university. He no longer wanted a prestigious name to be associated with an increasingly problematic activity. On the other hand, the university aimed to protect its usual activity (teaching) from the intrusion of an increasingly politicized and troublesome organization. In short: he simply wanted the university to work! As one of the participants (by the name of Buta) explained at a “private meeting” held on 3 December:

*I believe that the rector is simply demanding the removal of the movement from the University . . . The student movement is linked to the Center and the rector fears that the student movement may resume its activity around the Center in the way it was conducted last year.*<sup>18</sup>

The Senate meeting held on 14 December 1923 reinforced this perception:

*Regarding the Student Center, it will be called the Cluj Student Center in the future. The old Petru Maior academic society will no longer be confused with the Student Center, but will resume its past activity, without involving the students. It will be a simple academic or cultural society.*<sup>19</sup>

Student activity outside the university did not take long to appear. 10 December marked one year since the beginning of the movement at the national level, and the students of Cluj were preparing to celebrate the moment, complying with the decisions of the Congress of Delegates in Iași, which had begun the process of canonizing the movement (or, in secular terms, of sanctifying it):

*In memory of 10 December 1922, when the Romanian students fought for the first time throughout the country to defend the nation from the danger of alienation and disintegration, and when the delegates of the national movement of all Romanian students met in Bucharest for the first time, taking the first important step in our holy struggle, this day is declared a student holiday. The presidents of the Centers will make sure that university classes and activities are suspended every year on this date.*<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the students in Cluj knew that their revolt had started almost two weeks earlier (27–28 November), but they had generously accepted the anniver-

sary to be held on a date of national significance and greater importance. The success of the movement was due to the solidarity expressed throughout the country, and a regional overtone was not desirable here. At the already mentioned “private meeting” (the one that took place on 3 December), the scenario of the day had already been outlined: “A memorial for the students killed in the war, a beautiful demonstration, and then a meeting to highlight the significance of this day.”<sup>21</sup>

As can be seen from the program of events, the first anniversary of the student movement actually combined the activity at the university with that outside it. The removal of the “movement” from the university, desired by the rector, was a simple desideratum as long as this very celebration began with the “suspension of classes and activities.” External (outdoor) activities included street demonstrations and student gatherings, as well as a religious service. Now part of the set of options for the students in Cluj, religious service was already available to the students in Iași. It would become, in time, an unavoidable ritual, which proved the unification of the “movement’s” means of expression.

On the eve of the anniversary, the students in Cluj received an additional gift: the conference delivered by the poet and politician Octavian Goga at the National Theater. He had supported the student cause in press articles. Now he did it in a festive setting, in the presence of a large audience and in a doctrinal setting. The conference was entitled “The National Idea” and made a connection with the past. According to Goga, the current young generation was creating a work similar to the one the poet himself had carried out more than two decades before, during his own student days, when he had struggled with the gloomy and hostile atmosphere of Budapest. It was then that the foundations had been laid for the *Luceafărul* (The Evening Star) magazine and for the generational success of 1918. Now, through the youth movement, achievements of the same great desideratum could be seen: the national idea. In it were placed the hopes of the present dominated by the foreign press, by a painting<sup>22</sup> and literature<sup>23</sup> that lacked “national specificity.” It was an opportunity for Goga to display his own doctrinal options in the field of art and society and to propel the student movement into the realm of ideas (in fact, ideologies!): “Your inspiration is from the normal work of our past, you are the national idea in marching progress, the new goal for tomorrow.”<sup>24</sup> The national idea had found not only a new form of expression, but also a new personification.

The conference had echoes in the local press, eager to convey the core messages: “Students represent the national idea in marching progress,” and “their movement is a prologue to the constructive work of tomorrow.”<sup>25</sup> These are formulas meant to be imprinted in the public perception and to ensure their collective validation. But, above all, they are phrases that caught on: the national

### **Aniversarea începutului mișcărilor studentești**

Ieri s'a împlinit anul de când s'au început mișcările studentești, o zi pe care studențimea a hotărât să o serbătorească. De dimineața deja mari grupuri de studenți s'au adunat în fața căminului, de unde în rânduri ordonate au plecat la biserică unde s'a oficiat un serviciu divin. Studențimea a plecat pe urmă în număr foarte mare prin Piața Unirii și str. Regina Maria în fața Teatrului, unde trebuia să vorbească mai mulți studenți. Abia a început însă să vorbească studentul Botez când apare odată prefectul poliției, dl Popoviciu și declară, că nu mai admite nici un cuvânt, întrucât intrarea nu a fost aprobată. Se naște o agitație foarte mare. Toată studențimea strigă, se agită și amenință cu un enorm scandal. Adunarea nu s'a putut continua și studențimea s'a hotărât să se retragă la Universitate pornind pe Calea Victoriei către Piața Unirii. Înaintea Lupoalcii studențimea se oprește din nou și cu toate protestele poliției se țin înflăcărâte cuvântările de către dnl Mica, Săroiu, Crășmaru, Crișan, Bota, Precup, Munteanu. Pe urmă studențimea se împărște în regală fără să se provoace vre-o disordine.

*Patria*, 12 Dec. 1923, p. 2.

The student demonstration that took place the next day (Monday, 10 December) was also seen somewhat differently by the opposing political camps. A divine service, a speech in front of the National Theater (delivered by the student Botez), a peaceful demonstration in the streets, patriotic songs, were all without problems for the newspaper *Înfrățirea* (The Brotherhood).<sup>27</sup> The newspaper *Patria* (The Country) viewed the events through a different lens:

*In the morning, large groups of students gathered in front of the dormitory, from where they walked in files to the church, where a divine service was officiated. The students then went in large numbers, through Unirii Square and Regina Maria Street, to the front of the Theater, where several students had to speak. However, hardly had the student Botez started talking when the police prefect, Mr. Popoviciu*

idea, the young generation, the march (movement) made up the new triad of social dynamism. What the students were doing was valuable and looked further towards a brighter future. How could one not appreciate them? As for the image that personified the national idea in marching progress, it had, of course, the endorsement of a poet; a poet who proved to be knowledgeable of the contemporary political trends, those that capitalized on the triumphant dynamics of the march.

This was also an opportunity for the newspaper that supported the government to attack the opposition, more precisely the “national party,” the only one that had not attended the big demonstration at the National Theater: that is, the party that “puts itself above public sentiment” and lacks the “national idea” (!)<sup>26</sup> Ironically, such an accusation was brought against the party that had long represented the national ideology of the Romanians in Transylvania. The very content of the national idea seemed to be changing.



*stated that he would not allow any more speeches, as the meeting had not been approved. There was a great deal of agitation. All the students shouted, got upset and threatened with a huge scandal. The assembly could not continue and the students decided to withdraw to the University.*<sup>28</sup>

The offensive of the *Patria* would intensify in the coming days. Seeking to take advantage of the moment by amplifying it, it used these events as a good opportunity to attack the government and... defend the student body.

*The youth, who were aware of their purpose, would have manifested in silence . . . The Liberal government has once again taken on the role of bullfighter, hurting and shaking the innocent bull . . . We cannot approve of the violent demonstrations, but at the same time we will not approve of equally violent reprisals.*<sup>29</sup>

The next day's editorial gloomily announced: "We are on the verge of another lost year for Romanian education," and for this "the students are not to blame," as the blame "falls on the government, which has waged a policy of complicity throughout the whole student movement."<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, as had once been the case with the press endorsing the Liberals—which soon received violent blows after chanting similar odes to the students—the turn of *Patria* would soon come. The much touted but improbable solidarity of the press guild was to be put to the test in Cluj during the same month (December 1923). The newspaper *Patria* was to organize the first general Congress of the Romanian press in the capital of Transylvania. Prepared as an event of utmost importance, the congress would also see the participation of newspapers that did not support the "student movement." This was enough to cause manifestations of extreme violence, which simply prevented the event from taking place and besmirched the reputation of the city: Cluj, a city of student devastations.<sup>31</sup>

More than a year had passed since the beginning of the student movement, and some of its characteristics continued to manifest themselves. The students seemed determined to continue their struggle, and the university authorities were trying their best to save the academic year by ousting the movement from the university. The initial student program was increasingly converted, with the help of various ideological friends, into a new nationalism. Sensing or just inferring the potential significance of the process, political actors (parties, personalities, media, etc.) positioned themselves in relation to this topic, in the (sometimes vain) hope of securing their own advantage.



## Notes

1. "Dare de seamă asupra anului 1922/23," *Anuarul Universității din Cluj anul școlar 1922/23* (Cluj: Imprimeria Dr. Bornemisa, 1924): 8–9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. A few months later, during the trial of the students accused of firing their revolvers at Professor Iacobovici's window, the professor, who had been called as a witness, stated that he did not know those who had fired, nor could he suspect who the culprits might be. The War Council of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, which heard the case (by virtue of the state of siege in the city), acquitted them of the charge of shooting at the rector's house, but sentenced them "to 15 days in prison for breaking the windows of the synagogue, but suspended the execution of the sentence." "Procesul studenților la Consiliul de Război," *Patria* (Cluj), 5 July 1924: 2.
4. "Cuvântarea inaugurală și raportul rectorului," *Anuarul Universității din Cluj pe anul școlar 1923–24* (Cluj: Institutul de Arte Grafice "Ardealul," 1925): 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 35.
6. "Noul an universitar," *Patria*, 27 Oct. 1923: 1.
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Reîncep tulburările studențești," *Patria*, 4 Nov. 1923: 3.
9. Cluj County Branch of the National Archives, Universitatea din Cluj coll., "Ședințele Senatului Universitar," file 5, p. 17.
10. Lucian Blaga Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca, Petru Maior coll., Ms. 5851 (Scrap paper register), Memorandum to the Rector, 17 Nov. 1923.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, Ms. 5993, incoming posters, doc. 14, 3 Dec. 1923.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, Ms. 5851 (Scrap paper register), letter of 15 Dec. 1923.
18. *Ibid.*, Ms. 5993, incoming posters, doc. 14.
19. Cluj County Branch of the National Archives, Universitatea din Cluj coll., "Ședințele Senatului Universitar," file 5, p. 32, meeting of 14 Dec. 1923.
20. Lucian Blaga Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca, Petru Maior coll., Ms. 5993, incoming posters, "Hotărârile Congresului de la Iași" (newspaper cutout).
21. *Ibid.*, doc. 14.
22. Goga is disappointed that he no longer finds in paintings the faces of peasants, ox-carts, mountains and birches, "the mystery of Grigorescu," or the "Romanian shepherd" of Ștefan Luchian, "our flowers," "but canvases painted by foreign brushes, revealing an other-worldly vision." Even the names of the artists are "exotic": Octavian Goga, "Ideia Națională: Conferință în fața studenților universitari din Cluj," in *Mustul care fierbe* (Bucharest: n.p., n.d. [1927]), 34.

23. Nor is literature better, dominated by “a hybrid production,” “pages of diaphanous poetry, a strange literary psychosis with various exotic labels: Expressionism, Dadaism, Rabindranath-Tagorism...” “The known leitmotif of the earth is no longer used, the peasant has long since disappeared as a literary object, our fields have ceased speaking.” “I find the explanation simpler and more painful. There are guests, gentlemen, who, after gaining control of the press, also settle in literature.” Goga, 36–37. Of course, the debate about the “national specificity” in art in the interwar period is endless... It also led G. Călinescu to include a special chapter in *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. and enl. edition, edited and prefaced by Al. Piru (Bucharest: Minerva, 1982), 973–976, and there are countless examples of references to this issue, including the important disputes between autochthonists and synchronists, between traditionalists and modernists. In most cases, the debate was not simply “literary”; it contained broader ideological implications, which could be channeled into the debate of nationalism v. anti-Semitism.
24. Goga, 39.
25. “Ideea Națională: Conferința Dlui Octavian Goga la Teatrul Național,” *Înfrățirea* (Cluj) 963, 10 Dec. 1923: 2.
26. “Ideea Națională și partidul național,” *Înfrățirea* 964, 12 Dec. 1923: 1.
27. “Manifestație studențească,” *Înfrățirea*, 12 Dec. 1923: 2.
28. “Aniversarea începutului mișcărilor studențești,” *Patria*, 12 Dec. 1923: 2.
29. “Conflicte studențești,” *Patria*, 14 Dec. 1923: 1.
30. “Din criză în criză,” *Patria*, 15 Dec. 1923: 1.
31. See Marian Petcu, “Istoria unui eșec: Congresul general al presei din România (Cluj, 1923),” *Revista română de istoria presei* (Bucharest) 6, 1 (11) (2012): 122–135.

## Abstract

A New Academic Year (1923–1924): A New Year of “Student Movements” in Cluj

The paper presents the events that accompanied the start of the 1923–1924 academic year at Cluj University, in the aftermath of the violent student unrest of the previous year. The students seemed determined to continue their struggle, and the university authorities did their best to save the academic year by ousting the movement from the university. The initial student program was increasingly converted, with the help of various ideological friends, into a new nationalism. Reference is also made to the manner in which various parties, public personalities, or media outlets positioned themselves in relation to this topic.

## Keywords

University of Cluj, Petru Maior Student Center, nationalism, Octavian Goga