Nationalism From Below in the East European and Soviet Borderlands

Popular Responses to Nation-Building, 1900–1940

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Cover image: Străjere [female scout members] at a village celebration in Vadul-lui-Vodă village, Bessarabia, Romania, 1938. © Petru Negură

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Treasonous Stripes: Embracing and Banning the Romanian Colors in Dualist Hungary

Ágoston Berecz

Visitors to some parts of Transylvania, the Banat, and the lower reaches of the Mureș/Maros River in the last twenty years of Hungarian sovereignty called attention to Romanian peasants wearing the red, yellow, and blue Romanian national colors on tricolored ribbons and other clothing accessories, on holidays and market days.[1] Nicolae Iorga, visiting the region after the Romanian National Party's run for parliamentary elections had made a stir, mentions church fences painted in the three colors and tricolored ribbons on coachmen's hats and in a girl's hair, despite the fact that she attended Hungarian school. The same year, an ethnic Hungarian (Magyar) head forester testified that he had not paid attention to these colors during the elections, because "Romanians use them on Sundays and holidays".[2] Other Hungarian accounts were tinged with a hint of outrage or alarm. When a kindergarten teacher bemoaned in a specialized journal that some Romanian children went to the Hungarian kindergarten with tricolored sashes, the underlying message was about the threat these displays posed to Hungarian sovereignty.[3]

Around the same time, a Romanian contributor to a progressive Hungarian sociological review asserted that red, yellow, and blue manufactured goods were available in a wide selection at markets: "At this year's fair in Găina, where all the vendors were Magyar and Slovak, I did not see a single piece of clothing where the three colors were missing."[4] While peasants bought some clothes and fabric from the market, they often still wove linen at home. David Prodan's (born 1902) memoirs, aside from describing the use of the tricolor at weddings in his home village, recalled how his mother decorated home-made textiles with the Romanian colors.[5] Two local monographs from the 1900s and 1910s, one from the foothills of the Southern Carpathians and the other from the southern Banat, specify that Romanian tricolored embroidery, belts, and sashes were recent additions to the peasant costume.[6]

Although histories of the French revolution mention peasants wearing the cockade, I am not aware of any study of an East-Central European analogy of this trend.[7] What makes the topic more intriguing, Romanian colors had been under a ban since the 1870s. In this chapter, I describe the complicated story of the ban's implementation,

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examine the changing uses of the Romanian tricolor from the 1850s to the First World War and interpret its spread based mostly on stories about conflicts between peasants and law enforcers. Aside from a few personal recollections, I rely on the descriptions of 95 incidents in over 175 different reports by Romanian and Hungarian newspapers and surviving government sources.

Press reports raise issues as sources, and the journalistic coverage of incidents with apparent nationalist motives has in particular drawn sharp methodological comments from historians. It had a sometimes openly performative intent, it reduced messy events to their elements that fitted a nationalist narrative, while press reports of the same occurrences from the opposite camps reinforced each other's nationalist framing.[8] Hungarian coverage tried to whip up moral panic about what they presented as the brazen disloyalty of ethnic Romanian citizens. It could even feature calls for stern measures from state officials. Romanian papers, on the other hand, were constrained under a system of state press monitoring and press trials. They applied the master narrative of national oppression and suffering but diplomatically avoided exposing the public display of the Romanian tricolor. Reporting about its persecution, they ostensibly tried to downplay its political content and cautiously called it "the tricolor." Nonetheless, such incidents allowed them to present it as an important identity symbol.

However, the idea that such accounts can be verified against the objective benchmark of the archives, as if the authorities conducting the investigations had been free from national and other biases, is problematic at the least.[9] It becomes patently untenable when the authorities were involved in the incidents themselves, as was typically the case in Dualist Hungary. Representatives of the Hungarian state power openly took a side, acting on behalf of state nationalist agendas. Much of the press coverage revolved around their response, citing the fines imposed and sometimes the reference number. In fact, the news published in Hungarian journals could well go back to the officials seeking publicity for self-promotion.

Moreover, the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior launched at least six investigations to check the truth behind specific reports by Romanian papers.[10] The gendarmes denied allegations of rudeness and, in the case of an incident in a Transylvanian village leaving two dead, they added a new, different version to the ones circulating in the press.[11] However, all these investigations confirmed that gendarmes had taken action against peasants wearing the Romanian colors in public. Hence, should one feel skeptical about nationalism from below, there is no reason not to extend this skepticism to the official accounts.

How the Romanian Colors Found Their Way to the People

Although Romanian journalists liked to suggest that the three colors had permeated Transylvanian Romanians' lifeworlds for centuries, it is fairly clear that their tradition was of recent vintage. The colors had not appeared before the 1850s, and it took decades until peasants embraced them in their sartorial choices. Triggered by the explosion of Hungarian cockades in the spring of 1848, Romanian patriots of Transylvania had improvised blue and white, red and white and, later that year, red-blue-white badges as Romanian symbols. A proposal to use the blue-red-yellow of the Transylvanian coat of arms—fixed in 1765 following early-modern antecedents—was still voted down with

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the argument that red, blue, and white predominated in peasant costume.[12] Only after 1849 were these colors replaced with those of neighboring Wallachia in the then-official, horizontally striped version.[13] West of the Carpathians, this horizontal arrangement prevailed until 1918–20.[14] The united Principality of Romania, however, chose a vertical design in 1866, leaving Romanian flags in Transylvania and Hungary halfway between the official Romanian and the old Transylvanian versions. They shared the order of colors with the former, but the colors were arranged horizontally, as on the latter. This situation provided ground for confusion and sometimes intentional ambiguity.

In 1848, then, yellow was not yet among the Romanian peasants' preferred colors. The first references to peasants wearing the Romanian tricolor in normal life date from the turn of the century, almost in parallel with Romanian intellectuals' first claims that this custom had existed "since time immemorial," as a Romanian lawyer reportedly wrote to the Minister of Defense in a wire of protest.[15] In fact, the tricolor had been familiar to peasants for forty years by then, and the sources give hints about its top-down spread and gradual embrace by the people.

For more than a decade after 1861, when Romanian nationalists could enter the political fray with relative freedom, Romanian colors appeared at campaign rallies and on public signs. The new Romanian leaderships of Zarand County and the District of Năsăud started to repaint black-yellow road signs with Romanian colors, which the former also declared its official colors and adopted on the uniform of bailiffs.[16] At electoral rallies, the display of the Romanian flag emulated the similar use of the Hungarian and Serbian flags.[17] In Kolozs County in 1863, one Romanian district administrator had a Romanian electoral flag produced with public funds and deposited it in a Greek Catholic church.[18] According to a Hungarian daily, the Mocsonyis, a landowning family and patrons of Romanian ethnic politics, commissioned one hundred Romanian flags from Pest before the 1869 elections.[19]

Canvassers paraded the flags across the villages, but the electorate was small. Romanian nationalists then also lost their clout in county affairs in the early 1870s, and starting with 1867, mostly boycotted elections in Transylvania proper. Church agency was thus more important in naturalizing the Romanian colors among the people. The three colors adorned some churches from the inside and out; tricolors were consecrated as church banners and carried around in processions since the 1860s.[20] The Romanian flag of the Făgăraș/Fogaras Orthodox school, fashioned between 1870 and 1873, even had a cross on the tip of its staff.[21] Further, when escorting a visiting bishop or a new priest on horseback, the youth also commonly sported the Romanian colors.[22] Church autonomy provided some protection from the interference of state authorities; district administrators and gendarmes might seize Romanian flags outdoors, but they did not invade the sanctity of the church.

In his reminiscences, a Romanian bishop recalled how some peasants greeting him on his canonical visit made an implicit link between confession and nation by referring to their tricolor bands as "Greek-Oriental [= Orthodox] ribbons": "The peasant's logic is simple: if the Church is national and the nation is Greek-Oriental, then the Church and the nation are the same in the eyes of the people, and the nation is holy, too."[23]

Its involvement in ritual acts could, in the space of two generations, endow the secular flag with the halo of the sacred and even invest it with the status of a magical object. By the 1900s, the Romanian colors had achieved an established place in wedding

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rituals in some localities.[24] In 1905, a Romanian daily and the local Hungarian paper covered an incident from southwestern Transylvania involving the tricolored ribbons stitched on a flag that the best man carried at the front of a wedding procession. When the district administrator ordered them to hand over the flag, the people reportedly begged him not to confiscate it, because that would spell bad luck for the new couple.[25]

The church was also instrumental in introducing the tricolor to primary schools, since most Romanian schools were confessional and operated under the auspices of the local parish. By the time Serb elders ousted it in 1862, the tricolor of the Romanian school in the Fabrik/Fabric/Gyárváros suburb of Temeschwar/Timișoara/Temesvár had been reportedly kept for "many years" in the precinct of the Orthodox church.[26] There is also information on village schools from southern Transylvania that acquired Romanian flags in the late 1860s and 1870s.[27] These were raised in front of children lined up at ceremonies and school hikes, like in the future journalist Valer Braniște's school in Sălișteː "The red-yellow-blue Romanian flag stood in the school's festive hall, and on school outings, when we looked for branches for Palm Sunday or went a-maying, the flag proudly flew at the head of our convoy."[28] This early exposure to the Romanian colors built a life-long attachment in Braniște. Aged 17, he would enter the following in his diary on Queen Elisabeth's name day:

> On all the public buildings, there are Saxon and Hungarian flags, even Austrian ones, but my beloved tricolor, for which I would sacrifice everything, even give my life, my beloved tricolor I have not seen. When will come a time for us to see it waving proudly and majestically in all places?[29]

Although Braniște was not a peasant boy, he was not alone in Sălișteː to develop a deep attachment to Romanian national symbols—at least the Romanian press reported two local clashes with state authorities on this account in the next fifteen years.[30]

Peasant women may have started to weave tricolored home textiles on their looms, but most tricolored accessories were mass produced. These became available long before the turn of the century. In 1886, a pharmacy clerk from Hălmagiu/Nagyhalmágy was arrested for handing out cockades of blue, yellow, and red to the craftsmen and peasants pouring in on a market day.[31] Before ordinary peasants started to wear them, the authorities already cracked down on church processions, May or June school festivals and carousers on Easter and Pentecost who attached tricolored tapes to various structures, like maypoles or fair roundabouts.[32]

Demand for tricolored goods seems to have increased around the turn of the century, as attested by news about their sale at markets.[33] Based on my sources, it was in those years that peasants acquired the habit of incorporating mass-produced tricolored sashes, hair ribbons, and headscarves in their Sunday best. The monographer of Nicolinți in the Banat credits two tailors who put up shop in the village around 1900 with making tricolor garments and accessories popular.[34] In the 1900s, gendarmes already raided crowds assembled at markets in anticipation of finding Romanian national symbols.

Peasants followed the lead of the intelligentsia, who had worn some of the same accessories and decorated household items with Romanian colors since the 1860s.[35]

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In Năsăud, according to a memoir from 1878, students of the local Romanian grammar school purchased tricolored armbands from peasant women.[36] From early on, peasants in some regions also performed staged *căluș* or other folk dances for elite audiences donning tricolored sashes or ribbons in order to highlight the authenticity of the shows.[37] Their fashion seems to have grown apace, and schoolchildren already wore tricolored ribbons or sashes on weekdays around 1906.[38] On the other hand, the geographical distribution of the reported incidents is somewhat restricted. They concentrated along the southern strip of Transylvania, in the western Transylvanian mountains, along the Mureș River and in the southeastern Banat, with none recorded in the northeastern Szatmár, Szilágy and Máramaros Counties, the Szeklerland, and Nagy-Küküllő County in the former Saxon Land (*Fundus Regius*).[39]

The normativity of a world where everyone is member of one nation and nations fill all the space under the sky was a fundamental mainspring behind the spread of national identifications and national cultures.[40] This normativity became encoded in forbidding foreign nationalisms in the first place, whose models their opponents inadvertently copied. For the Romanians in Hungary, of course, the most obvious constitutive other was Hungarian/Magyar state nationalism. I already referred to the Hungarian model behind the electoral use of Romanian flags. By the 1900s, the presence of Hungarian flags had become such an entrenched custom at canvassing events that Romanian candidates need not muster the Romanian colors to come in for reproach, it was enough if they flew no flag at all.[41] Moreover, since the 1860s, Romanians were time and again expected to display the Hungarian flag during national celebrations. In 1861, the Romanians in Sărăuad/Tasnádszarvad placed the Romanian flag on the tower of the Uniate church as a sign of defiance, after local Calvinist Magyars had displayed the Hungarian one on their church and demanded that the Romanians follow suit.[42] Around the same time, Hungarian national symbols were caught up in a wave of anti-Habsburg protest, which reached the Magyar peasantry. The Hungarian tricolor and coat of arms (often without the crown) appeared on embroidered sheepskin coats, trimmings, pottery and furniture items, and home-made personal belongings in the Hungarian Grand Plain and later, driven by pro-Independence activism, in Transylvania.[43] In the hills of central Transylvania, where Romanians and Magyars often lived together in the same village, it was in binary opposition to the red-only ribbons in Magyar girls' plaits that the red-yellow-blue ones came to denote Romanian ethnicity.[44]

After the *Ausgleich* of 1867 granted far-reaching autonomy to a Hungary expanded with the annexation of Transylvania, the state reasserted Hungarian rule by covering the land with scattered emblems of Hungarian sovereignty and hammering into people's minds the link between national colors and political ownership of the territory. Village entry signs and kilometer stones were gradually repainted in the Hungarian colors.[45] In 1895, the government dusted off a law from the time of the 1848 revolution that ordered the Hungarian flag to be hoisted on public buildings during national holidays.[46] Romanian nationalists were not alone in perceiving this as a provocation. According to the village secretary's son, locals literally laid siege on the village hall in a Transylvanian Saxon village on March 15, 1904, after the village secretary defiantly raised the Hungarian flag, despite the Saxon pastor's protest.[47] A decree from 1898 even

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ordered Romanian churches to fly the Hungarian flag on three public holidays a year, although it is unclear to what extent this order was enforced.[48]

The same provisions from 1879 that banned Romanian symbols also punished offences against the Hungarian tricolor with higher penalties.[49] In the Dualist era, the most consequential assault on the Hungarian flag occurred in Belényes/Beiuș in 1888, when the Romanian grammar school hoisted a Hungarian flag in honor of the visiting Roman Catholic bishop, and a day laborer tore it down at a student's urging. As a punishment, the student was permanently expelled from all schools in Hungary, three teachers were fired, and the Hungarian medium of teaching was introduced to the upper years of the school.[50]

Stories about the defilement of the Hungarian flag tend to be messier than crackdowns on the Romanian colors, and the political motivation less transparent.[51] What to make of the following, for instance: in 1904, a Hungarian newspaper reported from Lăpușnic, Hunyad County, that three boys of twelve had pelted the Hungarian flag with stones on King Francis Joseph's birthday, tore it up and sprinkled it with thistles. The boys confessed to their actions but insisted that they had "thrown stones at the German flag because it has no business in a Romanian village."[52] This and other incidents suggest that children dared each other to vandalize intrusive flags as a test of courage.

Hungarian governments lacked the institutional power to suppress other national colors. This did not apply solely to Romanians. Because of the political weight of the Transylvanian Saxon elite, the state could not even afford to ban the Transylvanian Saxon colors, which could hardly be declared a foreign symbol. Thus, after the police arrested parishioners from the Hermannstadt/Sibiu downtown Orthodox congregation for escorting their new priest to his residence under Romanian and Hungarian flags, the archdiocesan newspaper could justly object that they had simply followed the example of local Saxons.[53] Serbian flags could also set a model for the Romanians in parts of the Banat. According to an administrative report from Kubin/Kovin/Cuvin/Temeskubin from 1904, "at weddings, parties and public celebrations, you can only see the Serbian national colors, and people even combine them in their costumes."[54]

Fighting the Three Colors

Until the mid-1870s, and sometimes much later, Magyar notables were happy to accept the Romanian tricolor as an ethnic symbol that could signify cordial interethnic relations or even a token of respect from the Romanian population. In 1862, the people of majority Romanian Hațeg/Hátszeg greeted the Calvinist bishop (a Magyar-associated confession in Transylvania) with a triumphal gate featuring Hungarian and Romanian flags.[55] The two flags were hoisted next to each other in Brașov/Brassó/Kronstadt in 1871, as local Romanians and Magyars ran a joint candidate for parliament against Transylvanian Saxons and sealed their agreement with a so-called "fraternization ceremony."[56] There are also references to Magyar candidates being greeted with Romanian flags or using one themselves.[57] At the Romanian ball during

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the 1873 Budapest carnival season, Magyar noble ladies pinned Romanian tricolored ribbons as a gesture of goodwill.[58] As late as 1880, a band of mounted guards still escorted the Minister of Worship and Public Education to Braşov with Romanian flags, by then under an official ban.[59]

The Hungarian authorities first moved against the Romanian colors in 1872. As these colors were on full display at the 1848 guerilla leader Avram Iancu's burial, the Minister of the Interior called on the local prefect (*főispán*) to no longer tolerate them: "displaying the Romanian flag, the emblem of a separate neighboring nation, on any occasion, is considered a demonstration against Hungarian citizenship."[60] Two years later, amid the birth pangs of an independent Serbia, the display of Serbian flags at canvassing rallies prompted his successor to implement a blanket prohibition on foreign colors in public. His decree gave an even more dramatic justification: "The unauthorized use of foreign flags and emblems on the territory of another country constitutes an attack on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of that country."[61] The Misdemeanor Code of 1879 stipulated a detention of up to fifteen days and a fine of up to two hundred forints for violators.[62] Revealingly, the minister saw it necessary in 1885 to reiterate the ban.

The ban stemmed from Hungarian state nationalist considerations, but was also in agreement with similar imperial policies in the emphatically supranational Austria (Cisleithania). As a rule of thumb, the emblems of neighboring nationalizing states were viewed as a security threat and prohibited in the public space, while the symbols of national movements fully operating within the empire received green light. The Habsburg Monarchy fought tooth and nail in 1858 against united Wallachia and Moldavia adopting its own flag because of the effect that such a symbol of Romanian unity would have on its own Romanians.[63] Romanian symbols were also under a ban in the Bukovina, where Romanian nationalists had otherwise more leeway in the political arena than in Hungary.[64]

The Viennese authorities' hard line regarding the Romanian colors made it easy for Hungarian governments to declare them the symbol of a foreign state and brand their use as a sign of irredentist designs. As Hungarian government politicians later admitted, this was just one possible meaning out of several options, and not an interpretation that flag-bearers typically foregrounded. A rare story of local solidarity from 1885 suggests that not even the Transylvanian Magyar elite fully shared this intransigence toward Romanian colors, especially when displayed in a non-confrontational way. The story also shows how long it took to enforce such a ban in smaller towns, let alone in the villages. Visiting trilingual Orăştie/Szászváros/Broos as honorary chair of the local fire brigade, subprefect (*alispán*) Barcsay showed little appreciation for the Romanian flag planted on the triumphal gate in his honor, alongside the Hungarian and the Transylvanian Saxon flags.[65] He ordered it taken down, in response to which a Saxon watchmaker also tore down the Hungarian flag.[66] As this story was making the rounds in national news, two local Magyar notables, the district administrator and the headmaster of the local Calvinist grammar school, defended their fellow townspeople from the charge of sedition in an open letter. They blamed the incident on the police department which, they insisted, should have alerted the locals to the illegality of Romanian colors:

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> The flying of the Romanian flag was not initiated by the Romanians, but by a man of German origin, and was warmly supported by the Magyars. (…) Thus, people did not consider the Romanian flag an expression of Daco-Romanian aspirations, but the three flags together were meant to show the friendly understanding between the three nationalities. The majority of the firemen, being simple craftsmen or smallholders, were unaware that the Romanian colors constituted the colors of a foreign state and that their display was against the law.[67]

It is quite possible that the regular presence of the Romanian tricolor at Romanian church and school events, which had predated the creation of an independent Romania, had accustomed the two signatories to regard it as an ethnic symbol, merely standing for the Romanian "nationality." However, the editors of the Kolozsvár/Cluj-based newspaper were of a different view and expressed their anger in a commentary to the letter, calling Orăștie Magyars' support for the Romanian flag "deplorable."[68]

Until the 1900s, the enforcement of the ban remained fitful and uneven, and the chances of being caught, let alone punished, for flying the Romanian colors or wearing them on one's chest were slim. If passers-by or neighbors could be counted on to report a Romanian flag in a majority Hungarian-speaking town, things were different in the former Saxon cities, in the Banat and especially in the countryside. Apart from descriptions of entire crowds of violators who got away scot-free, there are also clear signs that the Romanian flag was displayed regularly on holidays. In 1903, Sándor Szobotka's Temeschwar-based firm still made one for a Romanian choir.[69] Allegations also arose that the administration imposed the sanctions selectively, with ulterior motives. According to the school inspector, even a red-yellow-blue village entry sign left a district administrator in Bihar County unperturbed.[70] However, when inhabitants of a village in the neighboring Hunyad County voted for the wrong candidate, the result allegedly unleashed a hunt on their tricolored trimmings, headscarves, belts, and aprons.[71] In 1894, one peasant, freshly returned from the sympathy rallies in Kolozsvár over the Memorandum Trial, publicly dared the gendarmes to tear the Romanian rosette off his chest because, as he was quoted bragging in the prosecution files, not even the Kolozsvár police had the courage to do so. He received three months in jail for insulting the Kolozsvár police captain and for a telegram he sent, but he was not punished for his Romanian-colored cockade.[72]

Zealous administrative officials, on the other hand, dispatched gendarmes to school festivals, kermesses, political celebrations, and burials where national activists could be suspected of displaying Romanian symbols. They also sent patrols to inspect Romanian gathering places on Orthodox Easter and Pentecost. Most news reports mention no fine or arrest; the gendarmes simply removed and confiscated the illicit symbols, which the civil authorities often returned to their owners.[73] In one case, a mason's wife in the old Romanian suburb of Brașov got her tricolored curtain band back from the police department after a policeman leaned in through the open window and cut it off with his sabre.[74] In slightly less than half of the registered cases, the district administrator or district court handed out penalties, which varied over a wide range but were far below the maximum of fifteen days in detention and two hundred forints in fines, especially when the offender was lower class. Approximate statistics are only available for 1902,

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before the persecution of Romanian colors picked up. While the press covered just two cases that year, the administration charged ninety-three persons with misdemeanours against the state. However, this figure also included offences against Hungarian state symbols and the use of unauthorized teaching material.[75]

Three incidents in 1895 and 1897 reached all the way up to Hungarian cabinet meetings because neither the administration nor the judiciary took up their prosecution.[76] Locals in the village of Broșteni in the Banat erected a wooden crucifix along the road, placed a few benches next to it, and encircled the area with a picket fence. They painted the crucifix and the fence in blue, red, and yellow and, probably as a bow to state sovereignty, painted the benches in the red, white, and green of the Hungarian flag. When a road mender lodged a report against the Romanian colors, the district administrator had the whole construction demolished, but both he and the district court shifted the onus onto the other and tried to wriggle out of the responsibility of punishing the locals.[77]

Jerking the Wheel

After the turn of the century, a new generation of Romanian activists returned to parliamentary politics. They resorted to self-referential stopgap devices in their electoral campaigns, directing attention to the empty space of the Romanian colors: they displayed white flags, no flag at all, or green boughs as their emblem.[78] At some assemblies, they also risked less sophisticated references dividing up the colors of the tricolor according to deliberate choreographies—a stratagem that Hungarian reports on Romanian celebrations had denounced since the 1880s.[79] At Aurel Vlad's 1905 campaign rally in Romos/Rumes, for instance, local riders took part in a pageant with red flags, while those from two neighboring villages with yellow and blue ones.[80] Inevitably, the Hungarian administration could still find and confiscate Romanian tricolored flags or ribbons during the campaigns.[81]

The 1900s brought other momentous political changes as well. For the first time in thirty years, the Hungarian nationalist opposition rose to power in 1906 after jettisoning those elements of its program that Francis Joseph found beyond the pale. In a bid to divert attention from this turnaround, the new government was all the keener in pursuing symbolic nation-building policies where it had free rein. It was in such a juncture that county officials escalated the persecution of forbidden national symbols. Reports on incidents became more frequent and their content changed. Aside from the usual wedding processions and school May Days, gendarmes in some areas would now also harass people at or on their way to the market.[82] Although gendarmes had always guarded markets as a routine task, only a couple of such incidents had emerged earlier.[83] In another novel development, gendarmes were also accused of inspecting trunks and personal belongings and even of undressing women in search of blue-red-yellow garments, as well as imposing heavier fines.

The campaign against Romanian colors peaked in 1910–11, during the downfall of the so-called coalition government and the former Liberals' return to power under a new façade. In 1910, this persecution also claimed a death toll. Given that young men

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could find defying law enforcement as a test of manliness, it may seem surprising that the press had recorded just two instances of bloodshed related to the Romanian colors until then. One of these involved forty-nine young men from Sălişte refusing to hand over their flags, while the other, reportedly a full-scale brawl between Arad policemen and a group of villagers arriving to a conscription center under a Romanian banner, triggered the intervention of the prime minister and ended in the dismissal of a local official.[84]

Several versions circulated about the events that took place in the village of Ţelna on Sunday, August 28, 1910.[85] According to the government report, four young men were singing forbidden songs in the street and refused to take off their tricolored badges when ordered to do so by the gendarmes. Villagers gathered around them and started throwing stones at the gendarmes, in response to which one of them fired a warning shot. One of the boys tried to wrest the rifle from the gendarme's hand, who stabbed him with his bayonet. The youth ran away wounded, and the crowd again surrounded the gendarmes and pelted them with stones. When they hit a rifle, the sergeant ordered his men to fire a volley, which left one more person dead and four wounded.[86]

What the reporter of the Romanian daily *Tribuna* put forward as the locals' version cast the gendarmes in a more sinister light and failed to account for the wounded. In this account, the youths were coming from church when gendarmes from the neighboring market town stopped them at the cemetery and made them take off their tricolored belts. As fate would have it, the two groups of men crossed each other later in the pub, the boys sporting the same belts. As one of the boys resisted the order, a gendarme raised the butt of his rifle to hit him, and this resulted in a scuffle over the guns. Once the gendarmes regained control of their weapons, they resorted to deceptive tactics. Feigning escape, they ran one or two hundred steps and, after a sharp about-face, shot dead one of the young men chasing them from behind. Then they ran after another young man and murdered him inside a house. The administration deployed forty troops in the village and dispatched a team of investigators, who justified the use of firearms as legitimate self-defense.[87]

Tempers were thus frayed over the issue when István Tisza, the backstage leader of the party that defeated the coalition in 1910, made overtures to the Romanian national movement in preparation for electoral reform and asked the landowner Ion Mihu from Hunyad County to draft a list of Romanian demands. No wonder the question was also on Mihu's mind, who formulated his memorandum just two weeks after the Ţelna incident. He added as his last point:

> It is an ancient custom in some parts of the country to use red-yellow-blue ribbons as parts of the national costume, with no anti-state tendencies, and for this reason, it is necessary to order the gendarmerie and police authorities not to harass the people on this account.[88]

In October 1910, the Minister of the Interior confidentially instructed the gendarmerie to take the display of Romanian national colors lightly when they were part of one's outfit.[89] Incidentally, one *subprefect* had already drawn this distinction at the turn of the century and overturned his own sentence on this rationale.[90]

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Although the commander of the Kolozsvár gendarmerie district tried to sabotage the order saying that the popular attraction of Romanian symbols would have worn out after election season had he not been stopped from persecuting them relentlessly, reported interventions against peasants subsided.[91] On the other hand, the gendarmerie and the police continued to take action against the Romanian intelligentsia and visitors from Romania. Policemen escorted twenty-five students from Romania to the Brașov police station for refusing to take off some ribbons from their caps and pulled over the Romanian minister of the interior Take Ionescu's car to have its two pennants removed.[92] Because the Budapest flag was identical to the horizontally striped Romanian one, even the sports editor of a Budapest-based weekly was stopped in Arad as he was covering an automobile race (unless he fabricated this episode to add *couleur locale*):

> There comes the aforementioned Cunctator-like police officer and immediately demands my papers, announcing that a complaint has already been lodged against me,—because the display of this flag is prohibited.—Which one?—He points at the red-yellow-blue pennant.
> —But please, this is the flag of Budapest!
> The police officer saluted and let me pass, but I couldn't help but hear a *Se treaske domnule!* [Sic] [Rom. *Long live Sir!*] from the street.[93]

Then, as the war broke out, even this tacit differential treatment of vernacular and ostentatious upper-class uses of the Romanian colors ended. Taking its cues from the monarch, the Hungarian government lifted the sanctions against the horizontally striped Romanian flag, willingly reinterpreting it as a time-honored ethnic symbol different from the flag of Romania.[94] In a radical shift, Austria-Hungary made a bid to exploit its emotional power for the war effort. Since Romanian agitation in Hungary always had a pro-Habsburg dynastic streak, this was a relatively straightforward endeavor. The stories about recruits flying Romanian flags on their way to the mobilization point suggest that some villagers had already transferred the military connotations of a flag to the Romanian colors.

For Romanian men in Hungary, "rushing to the colors" in 1914 then often meant the Romanian colors, all the more often as the so-called Common Army assigned recruits to military units based on their languages. In Brașov, where the local police had waged a relentless and sometimes comical war against the red-yellow-blue tricolor, the Orthodox archpriest now consecrated a red-yellow-blue military banner.[95] (The local garrison had already hoisted a Romanian banner at its ceremonies at the turn of the century.[96]) Romanian flags flew alongside the Hungarian ones, recruits departed for the war with cockades and under Romanian colors, and some would wear tricolored ribbons on their kepis or chests at the front, allegedly including soldiers of a Hungarian Honvéd unit.[97] In 1916, the poet Lucian Blaga even spotted a Romanian flag at the train station of the western Hungarian town of Komárom, where ethnic Romanian soldiers were keeping guard.[98]

What made all this possible was that Romania was considered a neutral, if not a friendly, state. When Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary and invaded

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Transylvania in 1916, the status of the Romanian flag took another turn. It became an enemy flag in either variety, to be removed from public buildings as the Common Army, with critical German assistance, pushed back the Romanians beyond the Carpathians. Its persecution on the peasant attire also restarted.[99] Finally, when the new Romanian national guards adopted the flag in 1918, after the collapse of the Central Powers, that was already the fourth twist to its story in the span of eight years, coalescing its ethnic and political meanings irreversibly.

Toward an Interpretation

Born as a surrogate for closely knit, face-to-face communities, it is not obvious what nationalism offered for rural people who inhabited just such primary groups. The emergence of nationalist affinities in the villages before the First World War, while its official varieties retained an upper-class, broadly liberal cachet, poses a challenge to historians, most acutely to those who deny preexisting ethnic infrastructures. It is clear that people who displayed the Romanian flag on ceremonial occasions in the form of ornaments or accessories performed their own version of Romanianness.[100] According to an official report, six people detained at the annual fair of Lipova/Lippa in 1909 (among them two private soldiers and one market vendor) told the gendarmes that they were wearing tricolored ribbons around their hats because they were Romanian, and the colors stood for the Romanian nation.[101] But from this it does not necessarily follow that their version of Romanianness was similar to the vision of elite groups.

As condensed symbols, flags are inherently polyphonic, they can encapsulate rich arrays of meanings and are ideally suited for the kind of strategic ambiguity that underpinned the use of Romanian colors in Dualist Hungary.[102] After being introduced into their midst, ordinary Romanians could transfer some functions of church banners and military flags to the Romanian flag. In the 1900s, they also started to decorate more "normal" garments with the same colors in some areas. The visible surface of the body had traditionally been a central *locus* of identity marking, and the new fashion transformed the semiotics of local markers, which traditionally denoted age, marital status, ethnicity, and local belonging. But the Romanian colors did not acquire the taken-for-granted banality of an "unwaved flag,"[103] as they tended to appear on one's best clothes. Moreover, there are clues that people intended at least a pinch of provocation when donning them in front of gendarmes.

In recent literature, John Breuilly has formulated some of the most insightful reflections on the early phase of popular nationalism. Stressing the autonomous character of vernacular appropriations, he also distinguishes between what he calls motivational and structural nationalism, the latter being largely comparable to Michael Billig's banal nationalism.[104] It took a certain amount of elaboration, hegemony, and diversity of competing opinions for national projects to reach this stage and crystallize into self-evident national frames. Although Breuilly is mainly concerned with the titular majorities in nineteenth-century Germany and France, he contends that national activism in late Habsburg Austria was the best placed to transform into structural nationalism for the masses, as the Austrian state "structured nationality into its own politics."[105]

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In the Hungarian half of the empire, I might add, the Romanian minority elite could make use of ethnic church institutions and a network of associations grafted onto them, but the state and the ruling elite sought to curb their ideological power in order to prevent or reverse ethno-national pillarization. Thus, Romanian nationalism remained oppositional-"motivational." Breuilly characterizes the relationship between elites and popular politics in that stage as a brittle alliance, rife with misunderstanding and mutual manipulation, in which the national agenda could find popular resonance by establishing a pragmatic link with popular interests. The main takeaway is that Romanian minority nationalism could hardly impose self-evident frames and that, once again, popular and elite understandings did not coincide.

Short of interrogations and testimonies, I need to fall back on circumstantial evidence when probing the meanings that the Romanian minority elite (especially second-tier actors in regular contact with the people) promoted and the ones people actually associated with the Romanian colors. These colors defied the nationalizing Hungarian state, but were not generally directed against Habsburg rule. Around the same time, in Habsburg Galicia, Ruthenian-Ukrainian activists proudly used their own flag, while support for an independent Ukrainian state remained marginal on the political spectrum. In fact, their Romanian colleagues in Hungary exploited the common people's deep-seated loyalism to portray themselves as the true pillars of the monarchy, against the supposedly rebellious, secessionist and politically disruptive Magyars.

This said, the Romanian elite of Hungary did promote an attachment to neighboring Romania as an external homeland, expressed in an ambiguous mixture of a sense of spiritual unity, cultural deference, and irredentist fantasies. This ambiguity was abetted by the fact that Romanian has the same word for *unity* and *union*. Romania was not only a utopian place but also offered tangible material benefits, in the form of higher wages that attracted tens of thousands of Romanians from Hungary yearly. In Sălişte, on the Romanian border, the attachment to the Romanian flag cannot be separated from the fact that local men earned their livings in Romania. Through the master narrative of a supposed eternal longing for national unification, today's Romanian historical memory perpetuates this irredentist framing, which is not all that accurate, although not entirely false either.

Equally important, the Romanian tricolor's similarity to the Transylvanian colors endowed it with the potential to present the Transylvanian Romanians as the guardians of a beleaguered centuries-long regional identity, thus emphasizing Romanian antiquity in the region. Their proponents in the Romanian press and the courtroom brandished the claim that the incriminated colors had accompanied Transylvanian commanders and princes on the battlefield since the Middle Ages.[106] A related argument, also put forward by the Romanian ladies on trial before the Hermannstadt district court, was that red, yellow, and blue were not foreign colors and therefore did not fall under the ban. As the defense spelt out: "The Romanian tricolor is historical and expresses the continuity of the law for us."[107] As far as Romanian activists were concerned, the use of the tricolor demonstrated that the Romanians were the true heirs of Transylvanian history and, to the extent that the activists adhered to the demand of restoring Transylvania's autonomy, it could also embody a claim to historical state rights.

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Messy though many of them are, stories about tearing down flags suggest that some ordinary Romanians came to identify national colors as mutually exclusive territorial markers. They could gain this understanding primarily from the authorities' hostile reactions to displays of the Romanian, the imperial, and sometimes the Saxon flags. This tendency represented a step away from the less confrontational use of the Romanian flag in the 1860s and 1870s as standing for the ethnic Romanian population or the Romanian voters of a given place. Ironically, this ethnic significance of flags was not alien to the concept of "nationalities," the equivalent of the Austrian "Volksstämme," codified in the Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1868. Indeed, there is little in the sources about conflicts that would not be compatible with this concept. However, Hungarian governments soon moved away from such pluralism, and the state nationalist mainstream became increasingly intolerant of linguistic diversity. It reduced the meaning of flags to state symbols, strictly based on the principle of indivisible sovereignty: the red-yellow-blue flag was a symbol of the Kingdom of Romania; ergo, Hungarian citizens displaying it on Hungarian soil necessarily claimed the piece of land in question for another state.

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