

**IOSUD – „DUNĂREA DE JOS” UNIVERSITY OF GALAȚI**

**Doctoral School in Humanities and Social Sciences**



# **Ph.D. Thesis**

## **THE CITY OF GALAȚI DURING THE PERIOD 1918-1948: POLITICAL ACTIVITIES, ADMINISTRATIVE PRIORITIES, CULTURAL INITIATIVES**

**Summary**

**Ph.D. Candidate**

**Valentin Bodea**

**President**

Professor Nicoleta Ifrim Ph.D.

**Ph.D. supervisor,**

Professor Constantin Ardeleanu Ph.D.

**Peer reviewers**

Ph.D. Associate Professor Andrei Florin Sora

Ph.D. Associate Professor Emanuel Plopeanu

Professor George Enache Ph.D.

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## Summary

The present paper aims to analyse three aspects related to the history of Galați from 1918–1948. We shall give more details about the political situations, the administrative priorities of councillors and the main cultural projects which empowered the local elite. For each dimension, we shall try and catch the continuity elements and the way in which older ideas and projects were recast so as to fit the new historical, geographical, political or national context.

One of the important concepts we are going to use in this paper is elite, by which we understand the social actors having influential positions within the local community. Regarding the local elite, the paper will try to explain, through full biographical references, related to these important actors' professional paths, which were the sources of reputation and power these leaders enjoyed. The paper will give details about different paths and mechanisms through which different professional skills belonging to some visible social categories (such as teachers, lawyers or doctors) led the way to an important political career. Thus, while researchers tend to divide the elite into different categories (intellectuals, religious, political etc.), this paper will show the fact that the local elite was extremely active on all levels under discussion: political, administrative, cultural, as well as economic, because all these local leaders were also quite well off.

The analysis through the perspective of localism is also important and the paper will try to understand, from a cultural, political and administrative point of view, how this leading elite has tried to define and apply the idea of a local identity. The most obvious example is given by the effort of the local cultural nucleus to valorise some sort of local creative representations, such as setting up cultural associations, museums, publications, etc. able to prove that Galați was not only a „terrible trade city”, but also a fortress of ideas, culture and national projects.

The paper is made up of three chapters. The Romanian political life was profoundly transformed after the First World War. The introduction of the universal suffrage brought along a full reformation of the political system, some political parties ending up modifying their electoral approach and intensifying their presence in the rural area; the establishment of Greater Romania brought along new political parties, while the interwar electoral laws favoured the big political parties, with national representation. First chapter analyses the evolution of political life in Covurlui county from 1918 to 1948. The paper shall insist on our parliamentary elections which took place in 1922, 1928, 1937 and 1946.

Each of these four ballots is illustrative for more complex political processes happening in Romania. The ballot in 1922 took place within the incipient phase of the new electoral system, accompanied by the specific political frenzy of the readjustment period after the Great Union. The elections in 1922 will help present the way in which the political environment was readjusting to the interwar reality in Romania, the conservative factions trying to find their place at a national level. The elections in 1928 took place in a calmer environment as far as the democratic rules were concerned, but also in a period when the most important Romanian political Party, the National Liberal Party, which dominated the political life the previous years, was torn apart. The dynastic crisis made the political situation more fluid, thus allowing the formation of an anti-liberal opposition which was going to give life to the second most important Party of that period, the National Peasants' Party.

The paper shall analyse these changes from the local perspective, as it was seen in Covurlui county. The elections in 1937 happened as the 'traditional' parties faded away, challenged by the radical right factions, highly powerful in Galați too, as well as within the context of an insecure international politics. The king was more involved in politics and the democratic system seemed to be failing. Thus, regarding this ballot, the paper shall take into consideration the position which more important and less important parties took facing a more acute political crisis. Last but not least, the 1946 elections, held when Romania was under the occupation of the Red Army and the country's communisation was in full swing, shall present the mechanisms through which the communist forces took over power.

The paper shall examine the political life during all four ballots and try to understand the way the political mechanisms worked by using some perspectives. The first perspective involves the relation between centre and periphery, both terms having a double meaning. On the one hand, the paper would like to research the way in which the decisions regarding Covurlui county were imposed by Bucharest, as well as the manner in which the local 'capital', Galați, coordinated electoral activities on-site, i.e. in the county's communes. The second perspective addresses the role different personalities had in these elections, starting with the representatives of those political elites which had the most electoral influence. The paper is trying to see which were those leaders' professional paths, what occupations gave public notoriety and represented a „springboard” towards a political career. This is the reason why we shall have brief biographical descriptions of the most important „heroes” of this chapter, trying to place their involvement within a political context. The third perspective aims at presenting the electoral persuasion mechanisms used by the parties from Covurlui county, as well as the way in which the leaders mobilised the people during election years. We shall thus better understand how local power networks work, the ones in Galati having a

bigger influence. The main sources used in drawing this chapter were the local press and memoirs which gave both rich and subjective information. We hope that, even though lacking these sources, our approach will be a useful guide for a subsequent subjectivism regarding these events and based on other sources.

The second chapter shall present the activity of the municipal power of Galați. We shall identify the main problems of the local community, we shall recall the debates within the administrative organs and we shall refer to the solutions found by the city leaders. During the interwar period, Galați faced important problems determined by the social and economic crisis which happened in Romania, as well as by the geopolitical reorganisation after each world conflagration. From a border city neighbouring one of the most vulnerable Romanian frontier lines, after 1918, Galați turned into a city having a relatively central position within a complete State, whose economic priorities changed dramatically. The role of the Danube as the main Romanian trade road, already decreasing towards the end of the 19th century, decreased even more as Constanța was becoming the main import and export centre of the country. There were many economic, transportation, hierarchical changes in Romania and all these made Galați (as other Romanian cities) rethink its position and determine again its role within the interwar Romania.

The Second World War and its territorial changes repositioned on the map and made its situation difficult again, more so taking into consideration the other political, economic and social issues. The administrative organisation of Romania during that period made local authorities completely dependent on the political situation from Bucharest. Thus, the economic instability at a national level, made visible by the fact that Galați had 39 mayors during the 30 years under research in this paper. The lack of continuity, even during the period when the same party was ruling, affected putting in place the projects meant to solve the most pressing issues of the community of Galați.

As far as personalities are concerned, the people which were part of the local administration reflect the same reconfiguration of the city's power, as key administrative positions are not only occupied by important traders or entrepreneurs, but moreover by lawyers, (more often than not representatives of important trade houses), teachers from important high schools and doctors. An important issue we would like to discuss is funding public expenses and the investment done in order to develop and modernize public services. The city's budget, depended on the local economy, touched by the economic, political or military crisis from that period. In this context, the chapter will look over the main issues debated, according to the meetings of Communal Councils. The debates were divided into four main categories: urban renewal and embellishment (local works, constructions, public



monuments), reorganisation of public services for citizens (water distribution, public street lighting, public transport) and help granted to school, medical, clerical institutions or institutions with a growing social component caused by wars and the economic crisis.

In the third chapter, we shall present some cultural reference points in Galați from 1918 to 1948. We shall analyse the effort of the local cultural nucleus of encouraging some forms of creative localism. Thus, we will examine their effort to set up in Galați cultural associations, museums, to print magazines and build public and architecture monuments, all this meant to connect the cultural movement of the Lower Danube region to the one taking place in the whole country.

The localism in education aimed at getting ready the province for culture. The objectives of the program owned by the artisans of the creative localism were: regaining local cultural values, regaining the dignity of the province by having a cultural life and helping the people to be in the spirit of culture. At the beginning of the 20th century, cultural life in Galați was inspired by the movement supporting athenaeums, by the initiatives of Spiru C. Haret and Nicolae Iorga. Cultural life was favoured by the existence of some valuable elites, gathered around some school institutions („Vasile Alecsandri” High school, Normal school for boys „Costache Negri”), religious institutions (Community centre „Sfinții Împărați”) or cultural societies (Cultural society „V.A. Urechia”). These were the places which made possible the first shows and artistic festivals and the printing of different cultural magazines. These institutions also triggered the development of a national awareness, tried to create different cultural associations and educate the people through culture.

Some of these teaching staff centres also attracted personalities belonging to other fields (artists, lawyers, librarians, traders, pharmacists, engineers, doctors, priests, officers). Many of the initiatives didn't last for too long, but some of them were able to carry out a programme and have a rich activity and even print publications. In this chapter, we shall present the most important ones, starting and ending with two emblematic buildings of Galați: the current „Fani Tardini” theatre and „Cuza Vodă” building, part of the History Museum „Paul Păltănea”.

Before mentioning each of the three chapters in this paper, we should draw some general conclusions. The period from 1918 to 1948 witnessed profound changes of the situation of Galați, city which had to reinvent itself from an economic point of view and find its position on the map of greater then shorter Romania. The local elite faces numerous challenges. Whereas from a political level, a rapid adaptation to the electoral system based on universal suffrage was needed, the local administration needed a balanced budget and investment in order to renew the services for the local community. Last but not least, the

citizens of Galați were trying to prove that the city was not only a business and industrial centre, but a valuable cultural one as well.

Referring to the political level, the most influential parties in Covurlui county during the interwar period were the National Liberal Party and the National Peasants' Party. These parties had well-established associations in Galați and its main communes and their aim was to get the electorate on their side. The professional categories which were most involved in politics were lawyers, teachers, schoolmasters, business people, journalists, priests and even simple workers. The main local political personalities were Mihail G. Orleanu, Ion Măgură, Christake Teodoru, Gică Simionescu, Grigore P. Mihăilescu, George Deleanu or Vlad Dimitriu. Some of them went from one party to another, trying to take advantage of the national political changes. Christake Teodoru, who went from being a Takism supporter to the National Liberal Party, then to the Romanian Front, Grigore P. Mihăilescu who went from the People's Party to the National Christian Party, or even George Deleanu who went from the National Liberal Party to the National Liberal Party-Bratianu (Georgists) are just a few examples of the way in which local politics was closely connected to the political games of Bucharest.

The political instability at a national level meant frequent government changes and new parliamentary ballots. These events allowed experienced politicians to apply classical strategies and mechanisms in order to win the elections. At the local level, the electoral campaign was led by influential people. Both Galați city and Covurlui county were divided into districts controlled by the most active members of the party. The parties had political leaders locally imposed on top of the list and the candidates with a renown negotiated a place on the list.

The Parliamentary elections of 1919–1920 showed that traditional parties in Covurlui county were powerful. The political parties which were active were the National Liberal Party, Partidul Conservator Progresist, Iorga's supporters and the socialists. The results of the 1919 elections showed that the electorate voted for the National Liberal Party for the reforms promised before the First World War and the Democratic Nationalist Party as a way of expressing sympathy towards the leader of the party, Nicolae Iorga. During the 1920 elections, the People's Party, the organiser of the elections, replaced the administrative bodies set up by the Bloc of Democratic Parties. Then, it managed to attract numerous voters through meetings, visits to Galați, villages and communes of Covurlui county. The winner was the People's Party both locally and nationally. The socialists also got a deputy place in Covurlui, proving that workers politically organized were a weapon.

In order to prepare the electoral campaign for the 1922 elections, the National Liberal Party dissolved the old structures of the local administrations and replaced them with other members of the party; at the same time, it limited electoral debates and meetings and named new prefects within the party. During the electoral campaign from Covurlui county, the National Liberal Party, accused by the local press of abuses and lies, comfortably won the elections, through its leader Mihail G. Orleanu. There followed a relatively stable period until 1926, when the liberal party passed important laws meant to modernize the country, a new constitution and a new electoral law.

After a liberal political domination, the People's Party organised parliamentary elections in 1926 and won them by using the same strategies used by other governing parties: it dissolved local counties and adopted other abusive measures. In 1927, the parliamentary elections were organised by the National Liberal Party who won the local and national elections through promises and abuses (it forbade meetings, distributed propaganda materials). The Peasants' Party forced the resignation of the liberal government through big electoral demonstrations. Thus, the 1928 parliamentary elections, were organised and won by the National Peasants' Party led by Iuliu Maniu. During the electoral campaign in Covurlui county, the National Peasants' Party, led by Ion Măgură, managed to better mobilise the electorate from Galați through meetings and better kept promises. The strategies of the Legionnaire Movement also deserve special attention and they were extremely efficient in delivering their political message to the categories unhappiest with the social and economic situation. This helped Corneliu Zelea Codreanu's party to get a deputy place in Covurlui for the 1932 parliamentary elections.

The government of the National Peasants' party from the end of 1920 to the beginning of 1930 deepened even more the instability which was also highlighted by the return to the throne of King Carol II. From 1934 to 1937, liberals dominated the Romanian politics, but they didn't have the same result for the 1937 parliamentary elections. The liberal crisis was also felt in Galați, where the party was led by Victor Slăvescu, named by Bucharest, who was less familiar with the county's specific than his predecessor, Mihail G. Orleanu. The National Peasants' Party of Covurlui was also led by a politician named by Buchrest, Grigore Gafencu. Slăvescu and Gafencu tried to approach the electorate by promising a better life for the citizens from the city and the county. The parties organized numerous political meetings, public demonstrations, deliberations, district and party meetings, they also delivered speeches and made electoral tours to the villages and communes of the county. The schoolmasters and priests from the rural area were the main electoral tools.

Many of these political strategies and mechanisms were also used for the 1946 elections. If we compare the 1922 elections to the 1946 elections, one can notice a significant increase of voters. This can be explained by the fact that the communist leaders mobilized new electoral categories, such as women and national minorities, mainly Jews. The government led by Petru Groza made a move early, purging the administrative system, intimidating the free press and acting violently to limit electoral actions of opposing parties. The governors marched with some imposed democratic measures (agrarian reform, electoral law etc.) and promised to supply those affected by the food crisis with everything necessary for a living.

The Bloc of Democratic Parties organized protests and had meetings, assemblies and rallies, whereas the „old” parties had to organise secret meetings, write messages on walls and fences against The Bloc of Democratic Parties and the government led by Petru Groza; they also distributed manifestos and used propaganda. The propagandists of the Bloc of Democratic Parties urged the peasants from the county not to pay their taxes and menaced the civil servants who didn't campaign for the government with removing them from their positions. Notorious politicians also joined the Bloc of Democratic Parties. The liberal Constantin Ignat, former deputy and prefect of Covurlui, joined the Bloc of Democratic Parties coming from the National Liberal Party (Gheorghe Tătărescu) and used, during the campaign, the methods of old reactionaries Iuliu Maniu and Constantin I.C. Brătianu. The same happened with Haralamb Șerbănescu, former deputy, prefect and senator of Covurlui, who joined the Bloc of Democratic Parties coming from the National Peasants' Party (Anton Alexandrescu) and, during the electoral campaign, made serious accusations to Iuliu Maniu and Ion Mihalache.

The abuses carried out during the campaign also continued on election day. The polls were guarded by gendarmes and guards part of „Tudor Vladimirescu” and „Horia, Cloșca and Crișan” divisions. The Bloc of Democratic Parties forged the results of local and national 1946 parliamentary elections and came first. Although the suspicions of electoral fraud were shown by opposition parties, the government covered everything up.

The national governmental instability also affected the local administration, thus leading to a number of 39 mayors for Galați from 1918 to 1948. Five of them had two mandates each (lawyer Grigore P. Mihăilescu, lawyer Christake D. Teodoru, lawyer Emil Codreanu, doctor Alexandru Nestor Măcellariu, Ilie Gheorghiu). The life of these mandates greatly varied from several days to a maximum of 2 years. The leaders of the community came from the business environment, but especially from those having liberal professions (teachers, doctors, lawyers).

The political life left its mark on the local administration, the majority of mayors being from the National Liberal Party and thus, they had the support of liberal governments for their local projects. The mayor worked together with the local councillors and the latter rarely opposed the former's plans for the well-being of the citizens. The mayor closely worked with the president of the political branch that promoted him and who was in charge of making up the Interim Committee, along with the county's prefect. The local administration services and offices varied according to needs and budget. Mayors generally approved a balanced budget with which they made municipal works, schools, kindergartens, churches, medical clinics, public baths, power plants. At the same time, there were granted subventions for care homes, orphanages, libraries, churches, schools and hospitals. The city hall bought and donated land for new cultural buildings, funded the construction of new ecclesiastic buildings, acquired public monuments and donated money for other monuments.

After the economic recovery of the city, the City Hall appointed properties to discharged people, built the airport and renewed the city by building cultural, administrative and municipal buildings. The municipality took over the water exploitation and the tram, previously leased to foreign companies, and decided to invest into public lighting with electric power. In 1931, during Christake D. Teodoru mandate, backed by the National Peasants' Party, the water, electricity and public transport services were leased to *Brown-Boweri* (Joint administration Municipality of Galați – Brown-Boweri), even though the counsellors of the National Liberal Party opposed the concession, arguing that the City Hall's revenue would decrease. The concession improved some public services supplied by the Power Plant, Tram Plant or Water Plant.

The two world wars (1914–1918, 1939–1945) and the economic crisis (1929–1933) led to the stagnation of the growth of Galați. The First World War turned the city into a refugee centre and the economic crisis raised the cost of living and this led to a high unemployment rate. No matter their political credo, the mayor and local counsellors helped the people in difficult times, giving them money, food and land. The Second World War brought important damages to the city, following the Soviet and Anglo-American bombings and German fires and dynamite. It was a period when people suffered of hunger, especially after the communists came to power with the help of the Soviet Army.

The local cultural elite started an important cultural activity at the premises of. The creative localism came through the activity of some cultural institutions smoothed the way for the reception of values and authentic creation. The Library and Cultural Society „V.A. Urechia” and the „Popular University” of Galați were among the most important.

V.A. Urechia founded the first public library in Galați, an institution which was necessary to a cultural place such as Galați. He thought that Galați was a bridgehead for Romania, a key to its development, to an economic and spiritual access to and from European countries, having a role in influencing Romanians from Dobruja and Bessarabia. The aim of the Cultural Society „V.A. Urechia” was to disseminate culture at large and Romanian culture in particular, through all means and forms possible; to this respect, he intended to build a national palace to shelter the library, a national museum and conference halls for public courses and conferences. The Society managed to give life to local cultural life and collected the necessary amount to build the cultural palace. The „Popular University” of Galați carried out its activity within the Library and, in order to organise some activities, attracted popular cultural athenaeums („Spiru Haret”, „Ștefan Octavian Iosif”, „Mihai Eminescu”, „Dr. Constantin Angelescu”), „Alexandru Vlahuță” Cultural Centre, „Max Nordau” Cultural Institution, Library and Cultural Centre „Lyra”, Library and Cultural Centre „Ranetti Roman”, all these contributing to a powerful cultural local movement.

The educational institutions were important cultural centres both through teachers’ and schoolmasters’ activities, as well as through school and pupil’s councils. Teachers and schoolmasters brought to life cultural and scientific life; thus, they printed publications („Curentul Nou”, „Dunărea de Jos”, „Dunărea”, „Moldova de Jos”), some of them making a mark by their scientific and artistic content; popular athenaeums and museums were founded (Regional Museum „Ecaterina and Paul Pașa”, Museum „Cuza Vodă House”), public monuments in the memory of local personalities were built (in the memory of doctor Alexandru Carnabel) and national personalities (the poet Mihai Eminescu). The activity of intellectuals from Galați gathered around „Vasile Alecsandri” High school. This high school was a starting point for a lot of efforts to develop national awareness, enlightenment ideals of citizens, as well as the attempt to institutionalise the local cultural movement. Pupils from „Vasile Alecsandri” High school, motivated by their teachers, organised cultural activities (literary soirées, artistic festivals, literary reviews „Licăriri”, „Luminișuri”).

The Lower Danube diocese represented another active source for cultural initiatives and supported the Cultural centre „Sfinții Împărați”, the library „V.A. Urechia”, organised conferences with local guests and important local and national personalities (Nae Ionescu, Gala Galaction etc.), founded a religious music school, built clergy houses, the cathedral, the episcopal palace, a girls’ boarding school, two boarding schools for poor and diligent Romanian children, created magazines („Căminul”, „Vestitorul”), founded again the Theological Seminary „St. Andrew”, bought back the houses of Alexandru Ioan Cuza and founded a museum in his honour. Pupils and teachers from the Theological Seminary ’St.

Andrew' got involved into local cultural activities, contributing to mass culturalization and stimulating local cultural creation.

The Society „Solidaritatea” organised conferences and cultural soirées. The priest Ludovic Cosma was one of the most active participant to local culture and he contributed to the cultural, financial and spiritual life of one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Galați by paving the streets in the parish, founding a library, two schools, an adult school and a tailoring school, a kindergarten and a popular bank. Cosma founded the Cultural Centre „Sfinții Împărați”, where he organized conferences where took part the local elite as well as important national personalities (Nicolae Iorga, Simion Mehedinți, Gala Galaction etc.) and artistic shows were performed by the pupils from Theological Seminary „St. Andrew”, „Vasile Alecsandri” High school, Normal school for boys „Costache Negri”, and from the Normal School for girls „Regina Elisabeta”, from The Higher School of Business, pupils from other secondary and vocational schools, members of the Cultural Centre „Sfinții Împărați”, as well as children of churchgoers. The Cultural centre „Sfinții Împărați” was a good example regarding culturalization and mass education.

The localism and cultural movement created the necessary environment for some cultural personalities who found Galați a good place to express themselves. Thus, teacher Gheorghe N. Munteanu-Bârlad wrote the monography „Galații” because an important economic centre such as Galați needed to be known in the economic and cultural growth of Greater Romania, and Teodor Iordache in his „Albumul Galaților 1935-1936” outlined the most representative things of Galati. Local cultural life was brought to life according to a well-defined programme and the intention to create institutions to coordinate it (Palace of Culturei „V.A. Urechia”) outlined the effort to connect the movement happening in the Lower Danube region to the events happening in the entire country.

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