

Romanian Writers and the Securitate. Excerpts from a Debate

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The past years have seen a growing public debate among Romanian writers both in Germany and Romania, and increasingly a wider public, over the nature and extent of certain writers' collaboration with Ceaușescu's secret police, the Securitate. This article traces the key positions and characteristics of that debate, offering insights into Romania's present-day process of confronting its communist past.

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Romanian Writers and the Securitate. Excerpts from a Debate

Especially among German-Romanian writers, the year 2010 saw much debate and emotional discomfiture over the nature and extent of certain writers' collaboration with Ceaușescu's secret police, the Securitate. Initially limited mainly to Germany, in 2011 these discussions were taken up by writers within Romania itself. Three Romanian authors found themselves confronted, in very different ways, with their onetime cooperation with the Securitate, leading to a debate pursued in various print publications.

The present article traces the key positions and characteristics of that debate, offering insights into present-day Romania's processes of confrontation with its communist past. More broadly, this complex of issues is part of larger debates around Romania's own identity, a discussion marked, as Larisa Schippel has put it, "by attempts to come to terms with the past, the study of causes, and varying attributions of blame."^[1] Schippel was writing in 2000, but more than a decade later it seems that the level of discussion would have advanced little if it had not received fresh impulses from the new generation of intellectuals - in this case, mainly in the shape of young literary critics. The resulting conflict allows conclusions to be drawn regarding the self-image of intellectual circles in post-communist Romania.

Points of Debarment

In 2005, the board of the Writers' Union of Romania (Consiliul Uniunii Scriitorilor din România) decided to have checks carried out on the members of the Union boards of 2005-2009 and 2009-2013, along with all the editors-in-chief of Union publications, to see whether they had collaborated with the Securitate. The request was submitted to the body responsible, the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (Consiliul Național Pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, or CNSAS).

According to the Writers' Union, by June 2011 the CNSAS had examined sixty-five of the total of eighty-eight relevant files and discovered three Securitate collaborator files among them. One of these involved the writer Ioan Groșan, whose work for the Securitate had already come to light earlier that year. In April 2011, the CNSAS also accused Nicolae Breban, one of Romania's most important novelists, of collaboration with the Securitate. Poet Ioan Es. Pop made his Securitate involvement public himself, with an April 2011 article in the Writers' Union magazine *România literară* (Literary Romania) entitled "From Now on You Will Be Called Marton."^[2]

The same month Nicolae Manolescu,^[3] editor-in-chief of *România literară* and a distinguished figure in Romanian literary circles, set out his position on these three revelations. In an editorial headed "How We Deal with Our Past"^[4], he compared the different stances that the three writers had adopted toward the accusations.

Manolescu commended the admission of Ioan Es. Pop, whose personal difficulties the Securitate had exploited to gain his collaboration and who had, wrote Manolescu, now felt a deep need to disburden his conscience. As for Ioan Groșan, Manolescu had addressed his case some weeks previously in a *România literară* article,^[5] and in the editorial he limited himself to the brief comment that Groșan had lied continually since being exposed. In contrast, he passed exhaustive judgment on Nicolae Breban.^[6] The Breban case is unusual in that no signed declaration of consent to Securitate collaboration was found, only a file note that refers to such consent. The CNSAS's inference that Breban

collaborated with the Securitate was based on the records of interviews between Breban and Securitate officers, especially General Nicolae Pleșiță, who was responsible for the surveillance of intellectuals in the 1970s and became very well known after 1989 due to numerous television appearances.

Manolescu's censure was directed less at Breban's Securitate involvement itself than at the way he was handling it in the present day. Breban repeatedly portrayed his relationship with the Securitate as one in which he had manipulated and outfoxed the secret service - but according to Manolescu the files tell a very different story: the Securitate had detailed knowledge of Breban's weak points, which it exploited effectively to its own ends. There could thus, wrote Manolescu, be no question of the author having "played" with the Securitate. The tone of Manolescu's article is highly polemical, as the following excerpt may show: "Like the hero of Perrault's fairytale, Breban turned three somersaults and was transformed from a downcast little mouse, anxiously nibbling at General Pleșiță's ear, into a great big anti-Communist ogre. I repeat: the only one who considered himself bound by his own conscience and who admitted he had done wrong in collaborating with the Securitate is Ioan Es. Pop. I hereby express my admiration for him. I wonder if others will follow his example?"^[7]

Nicolae Breban responded to Manolescu's attack with an open letter entitled "Shame on You, Mr. Manolescu!"^[8] which he posted on the blog of the publisher Ideea Europeană on 1 May 2011. In this lengthy, and also highly polemical, letter, Breban repudiated his characterization as an "agent de influență"^[9] and announced his resignation from the board of the Writers' Union. He also leveled numerous accusations at Manolescu, for example regarding the latter's political activities. Recently, Breban wrote, Manolescu had become a kind of "buffoon" who was busily pretending to defend writers and their "poor Union", whereas in fact his activities were contributing significantly to the erosion of the Union's prestige. Manolescu and his people were pursuing a sensationalist campaign to poke around in other people's dirty laundry and draw premature conclusions based on skimpy evidence. Breban stressed that in 1977 he had managed to get his novel "Bunavestire" published in the face of harsh criticism from the censors - and Manolescu had praised the controversial novel so fulsomely that he had been temporarily banned from publishing book reviews under his own name.

Manolescu did not leave Breban's letter unanswered. In his magazine *România literară* he reacted with a further editorial, "On Dealing Responsibly with Our Present"^[10], deepening the rift between Breban and himself. With his claim that Breban had been failing to fulfill his duties as a member of the Writers' Union board for many years, Manolescu finally drifted into personalized and inward-looking petty warfare.

This exchange of sallies generated broader debate in the Romanian press and literary scene, which took very different directions. On the one hand, there was vocal support for Manolescu, emphasizing, for example, that - especially in the 1980s - it had been perfectly possible to resist Securitate pressure to collaborate without fear of serious consequences.^[11] Other commentators spoke up for Breban and against Manolescu, bringing forward detailed historical points regarding the context of the events and criticizing Manolescu for the drastic tone of his invective. This, in turn, prompted Manolescu to observe in an interview with the journal *Revista 22* that "the traitors have become the accusers."^[12]

As these examples indicate, the debate has been marked by a polemical style, the conflation of very different levels, and a high degree of emotionality.

Observatorul cultural

In this conflict, a special part is played by the work of the young critics writing in the literary magazine *Observatorul cultural*. Their age enables them to contribute a more distanced and dispassionate perspective.

Along with *România literară*, *Observatorul cultural* is currently Romania's most important literary weekly. Unlike the former, it is not an organ of the Writers' Union.

The main participants in the current debate have been the authors Paul Cernat, Daniel Cristea-Enache, and Bogdan Crețu. All three were born after 1970, teach Romanian literature at the University of Bucharest, and work as literary critics. Cernat and Crețu are far less interested than their elders in taking a stand on one or the other side of the argument; instead, they consider the wider dimensions of the problem.

As early as September 2010, in his article "Revisionismul est-etic" (Aesthetic Revisionism),^[13] Paul Cernat wrote that the time had now come to stop judging the literature of Romania's socialist era purely according to the author's political implications and instead to reinstate aesthetics as the focus of every literary analysis. In May 2011, Cernat's piece "Operating Instructions for the Exposure of Writers"^[14] once again argued that conflating an author's literary oeuvre with his or her political and moral commitments was profoundly problematic. Rather, the prime question must be how such revelations ultimately interacted with the author's literary work - to what extent, in other words, they genuinely compromised its validity.

Cernat asked for proper account to be taken of the political context of the past. In those days people were dependent upon the communist regime, and it played on their vulnerability, making merciless and unscrupulous use of any Achilles' heels it found. In Cernat's opinion, furthermore, it was logical enough that the post-Stalinist writers had tried to find themselves a place inside the system in order to be able to publish their writing and to work from within, under the given conditions, for a great national culture whose end was not yet in sight in the late 1970s.

If Cernat objected to complex biographies being reduced simply to the story of Securitate collaboration, he also cast doubt on the entire machinery that was powering the exposures. He warned that this apparatus might be used to buttress the ideological interests of the day, and suspected that the highly selective revelations were driven by an intention to control and instrumentalize - directed at a present-day Romania in which writers appeared less as artists than as media opinion makers. Cernat argued that judgment should be left to the victims, the judicial system, and the historians, also observing that the people who were really guilty - the highest ranks of the Securitate - appeared to have completely escaped scrutiny in these debates.

Cernat's colleague Bogdan Crețu joined him in forcefully addressing this point. Crețu also asked an intriguing question: What would happen if all writers owned up to their presumably very complicated pasts? He conjectured that the resulting act of solidarity between writers would pose far more acutely the question of who was actually responsible for the current political and moral predicament.^[15]

A Generation Conflict?

Manolescu's reaction, again highly polemical, to these statements by the young generation of critics is telling: "Because nobody betrayed them, because before 1989 they were still playing in the sandbox, the

young critics under the Observatorul cultural's roof noisily side with the older ones who [...] are afraid of the CNSAS. The older writers probably hope the din will help everyone forget that they are clients of an institution on which everybody's moral health depends. And the younger ones hope all this will help them to attain a professional authority they have not yet been able to reach through literary criticism."^[16]

In response, the young critics asked whether their youth meant they were not permitted to hold opinions of their own. They further noted that far from being at the bottom of the career ladder, as Manolescu implied, all three were already Writers' Union prizewinners.^[17]

There appears to be a generation conflict in dealing with the problems around Romanian writers' Securitate involvement inasmuch as the young critics are evidently far better able to distinguish between author and work; they do not presume to take up a moral position on the literary work or the author in pre-1989 historical contexts. They leave unanswered the question of how they themselves would have acted in a totalitarian society, a fact that reveals their different biographical anchorage.

The contemporaries of the exposed writers, in contrast, are - in very different ways and for very different reasons - apparently themselves far too entangled, and too personally affected, to be able or willing to take up a truly detached perspective. The polemical clash between Nicolae Manolescu and Nicolae Breban indicates the emotionally charged atmosphere among authors of the older generation. As a result of the tensions, this generation will probably continue to find it difficult to admit that they may have collaborated with the Securitate, and thus to open up more a sophisticated understanding of the connections between writers and the political system.

It remains to be seen how the situation will develop - and, of course, it remains to be hoped that Romanian writers succeed in overcoming this crisis and finding a constructive way to confront the past.

Translated by Kate Sturge

Footnotes

1. Europa - eine intellektuelle Inszenierung: Der symbolische Okzidentalisierungsdiskurs und seine kommunikativen Folgen, in *Okzidentbilder: Konstruktionen und Wahrnehmungen*, edited by Ute Dietrich and Martina Winkler, Leipzig: 2000, pp. 159-172.
2. See Ioan Es. Pop, *De acum încolo, te vei numi Marton*, *România literară* 16 (2011). For the official website of the magazine, see URL: <http://www.romlit.ro/>.
3. Nicolae Manolescu wurde 1939 geboren. Er ist Literaturkritiker und Literaturhistoriker, Literaturprofessor an der Bukarester Universität, seit 1990 Chefredakteur der *România literară* (Literarisches Rumänien) und seit 2005 Vorsitzender des Schriftstellerverbandes.
4. See Nicolae Manolescu, *Cum ne asumăm trecutul*, *România literară* 16 (2011).
5. See Nicolae Manolescu, *Un dosar de Securitate și învățăturile lui*, *România literară* 9 (2011).
6. Nicolae Breban gehört zu den wichtigsten Romanciers Rumäniens nach 1945. Er war im Zuge der Julithesen Ceaușescus 1971 von seinen Funktionen (Mitglied des ZKs der Kommunistischen Partei und Mitglied im Büro des Schriftstellerverbandes) zurückgetreten, konnte aber dennoch seine Romane in Rumänien veröffentlichen.
7. "Breban s-a dat de trei ori peste cap, ca personajul din basm lui Perrault, și s-a transformat în ditamai căpcăunul anticomunist dintr-un amărât de șoricel ronțăindu-și lașitatea la urechea generalului Pleșiță. Singurul care, repet, obligat doar de propria conștiință, și-a asumat vina de a fi colaborat cu Securitatea, a fost Ioan Es. Pop. Îi exprim aici toată admirația mea. Oare îi vor urma și alții exemplu?"
8. See Nicolae Breban: *Rusine, dle N. Manolescu! Ideea Europeană* (1 May 2011), retrieved 24 February 2015, URL: <http://blog.ideeaeuropeana.ro/rusine-dle-n-manolescu-367.html>.
9. "Agent de influență" müsste eigentlich als "Einflussreicher Mitarbeiter" übersetzt werden. Es gibt aber im deutschen Sprachgebrauch kein Äquivalent. Aufgabe eines solchen "agent de influență" war, auf das Denken und Handeln seiner Mitmenschen Einfluss zu nehmen. Vielleicht trifft sich das am ehesten mit dem "Inoffiziellen Mitarbeiter im besonderen Einsatz."
10. See Nicolae Manolescu, *Cum ne asumăm prezentul*, *România literară* 18 (2011).
11. See e.g. Dan Alexe, *Și turnători, și mincinoși: Intelectualii români sub Ceaușescu sau cum se putea rezista în fața Securității*, *Revista 22* (31 May 2011). For the official website of the magazine, see URL: <http://www.revista22.ro/>.
12. Andreea Pora, *Turnători au devenit acuzatori*: Interview with Nicolae Manolescu, *Revista 22* (7 June 2011).
13. In *Observatorul cultural* 539 (27 August 2010) and 540 (3 September 2010). Dieser Titel ist ein Wortspiel mit dem Begriff "ästhetisch", der im Rumänischen "estetic" lautet und in die Komponenten est (Ost) und etic (ethisch) zerlegt werden kann. Im Beitrag setzt sich Cernat mit einem bestimmten Kritikerkonzept von Monica Lovinescu und dessen Übertragbarkeit auf die Gegenwart auseinander. For the official website of the magazine, see URL: <http://www.observatorcultural.ro/>.
14. See Paul Cernat, *Deconspirarea scriitorilor, mod de întrebuințare*, *Observatorul cultural* 574 and 575.
15. See Bogdan Crețu, *Scriitori și Securitatea: Probleme spinoase*, *Observatorul cultural* 573.
16. "Fiindcă nu i-a turnat nimeni, jucându-se încă în țărână înainte de 1989, criticii tineri oploșiți de 'Observatorul cultural' se alătură zgomotos celor mai puțin tineri cărora, ..., le e frică de CNSAS. Sperând, probabil, cei mai puțin tineri, că hărmălaia îi va face uitați pe clienții unei instituții de care depinde sănătatea morală a tuturor, iar cei mai tineri, că le va aduca o autoritate profesională pe care nu le-a adus-o scrisul despre cărți." Nicolae Manolescu, *Cui i-e frică de CNSAS?* *România literară* 21 (2011).
17. See Bogdan Crețu, *USR în criză (?)*, *Observatorul cultural* 582 (2011).

