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Abstract of the Ph.D. thesis

***Adult Education in Romania Under the
Communist Regime (1948-1958)***

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Abbreviations

ANIC – Central National Historical Archives, Bucharest.

CC – Central Committee.

CFR – Romanian railways.

GMA – Ready for Work and Defence.

PMR – Romanian Workers' Party.

CIM – General Confederation of Labor.

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

SJAN – County Service of National Archives.

UFDR – Union of Democratic Women in Romania.

UPM – Hungarian People's Union.

UTM – Workers' Youth Union.

SJAN – Alba County Service of National Archives.

CGM – General Confederation of Labor.

GAC – Collective Farm.

GAS – State Farm.

PCR – Romanian Communist Party.

CCS – Central Council of Trade Unions.

IICCMER – Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of the Romanian Exile.

SRȘC – Society for the Promotion of Science and Culture.

Keywords: *adult education, communist regime, legitimacy, cultural leaders, cultural home, library, mobilization, literacy, the Soviet model, mass sports, atheism, ideology, the local space, the post-war world.*

Introduction

Immediately after the end of the First World War, there were extensive debates in both the United States and Europe about the traits of adult learners. These ideas formed the basis for emerging concepts that later evolved into an integrated adult learning framework. The establishment of the *American Association for Adult Education* in 1926, as well as the allocation of substantial funding for research and publications by Carnegie Corporation of New York, were the prerequisites for research in this field.

On a different note, the Bolshevik regime became preoccupied with this field of education immediately after taking power in Russia. On May 6-19, 1919, the first Congress of Adult Education was held in Russia, in the still turbulent conditions of the civil war. At the beginning, it was recalled that “in no other field of activity of the Soviets has there been such significant progress as in that of adult education”. Among the most important topics discussed were free education, library reorganization, with Bolshevik leaders' speeches focusing largely on ideological issues. The Russian *intelligentsia* was accused of using institutions for adult education as tools for disseminating new ideas about philosophy and culture, being a repository of ideas considered absurd¹.

Of course, the conditions in which Russia found itself immediately after the end of the First World War prevented taking significant actions in this field, but they will be the premises of what would be later called the „cultural revolution”. The use of the phrase during the first five-year plan

¹ *Lenin's Collected Works*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1972, pp. 333-376, www.marxist.org, reached May 1, 2021.

described the confrontation between the communists and the bourgeois *intelligentsia*, the ultimate goal being that of creating a new elite, the proletarians, by relying on class struggle².

The term *kulturnost*, which can be translated simply as culture, has broad meanings in the Soviet sense, taking shape in a wide range of behaviours and social patterns as part of adult education, being considered an antonym for the lack of culture associated with the absence of good manners. It differed from the term *kultura*, associated in the 1920s with the concept of high culture, which included literature or the arts and which was the privilege of Russian elites³.

The purpose of initiating a discussion on the interwar period seeks to examine both the connection and disconnection between the interwar and post-war political regimes in the field of adult education. We will also be able to see how the model of late Stalinism overlapped with elements from the period before the outbreak of World War II.

As the historian Bogdan Murgescu⁴ recalled, although such ideas began taking shape during the time of Nicolae Ceaușescu, a genuine mythology of the interwar period took hold after 1989, and is still seen as a landmark in national history. Of course, recent historiography refined this meaning, holding apprehensions about the actual success of that historical period. Dragoș Sdrobiș appreciates that the interwar period was transformed into a “struggle of the present, a temporal transfer of the disputes of the past”⁵. In these circumstances, we will examine the temporal transfer between the two historical periods marked by the Second World War. Adult education or “people's culture” is a segment of education inextricably linked to political and economic realities.

The sociologist Dimitrie Gusti offered a definition of adult education as follows:

² Sheila Fitzpatrick, editor, *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 17.

³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 1.

⁴ Bogdan Murgescu, *Romania and Europe, The accumulation of economic gaps (1500-2010)*, Iași, Polirom, 2010, p. 212.

⁵ Dragoș Sdrobiș, *The limits of meritocracy in an agrarian society. Intellectual unemployment and radicalization of youth in the interwar period*, Iași, Polirom, 2015, p. 8.

”The term “culture of the people” is not and should not be what is usually understood as extracurricular activity, since the culture of the people, together with school of all grades, forms a superior construct that includes both of them, namely the School of the Nation”⁶.

He noted the superficiality of the authorities vis-à-vis this segment of education, inextricably linking it to institutionalized education. The importance given to adult education is also related to the reverberations coming from the western space, especially the Anglo-Saxon one, where the preoccupations in the field were notorious.

The approach of the concept in Greater Romania was outlined on several levels. The first stage overlaps with the Romanization policies in the new provinces integrated into the Kingdom of Romania after the Paris Peace Conference, nationalism becoming a factor of internal cohesion, followed by a process of political and administrative centralization. Western influences reached the Romanian elites travelling to the West and the USA, but a unitary concept on adult education did not crystallize. The ideas were not the subject of any “national project”, and the state never managed to accomplish it⁷.

The preoccupations of local personalities focused on the education of adults starting with the interwar period, these also being the starting point in the beginning of the analysis of the theme chronologically anchored in the post-war history of Romania. Until the proclamation of the Republic in 1948, we witnessed a preparatory period, with the communist regime then taking full control of the education of the masses, building on the heritage of the previous period. The paper will analyse how this transfer occurred and the regime subsequently enforced its own agenda. The chronological timeframe analysed is that of the 1948-1958 decade, the final year also witnessing the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

The questions we want to find answers to in this study are: Did the post-war regime make a complete break with the previous period or did it borrow some elements to its advantage? How did the adult education policies materialize in this chronological interval? To what extent can we separate the positive elements from the negative ones, thus drawing another approach to this much disputed period?

⁶ Dimitrie Gusti, „Science and pedagogy of the nation”, *Romanian Sociology*, Institute of Social Sciences of Romania, no. 7-12, 1942, p. 368.

⁷ Dragoș Sdrobiș, *The limits of meritocracy*, p. 8.

The first years after the end of the Second World War depict a local society built on deep social cleavages. One key cause of trailing behind Western societies, but also some Central European countries, was the high prevalence of illiteracy. This fact was a consequence of the failure of literacy efforts carried out thus far. The Communist regime decided to implement a different approach that would significantly reduce illiteracy in the short term. The success of this campaign depended on the new social construct envisaged by the regime.

The paper proposes a multi-pronged approach to adult education. Therefore, we will try to paint a broad picture that includes both the vision of the center, from the institutional and legislative point of view, and particularly the actual implementation of such policies at the local level. The intention is to gain an image of the microsocial space through the attitudes, reactions, but also the wishes of all the actors involved in this process. The analysis focuses on both rural and urban areas, the results of the literacy campaign, but also the evolution of mass culture among the urban proletariat, largely formed in the post-war era.

The transformations brought by the change of the totalitarian paradigm in the studies dedicated to the communist period determined its reconsideration, outlining the premises for the emergence of new approaches. Vera Dunham recalled that the widespread acceptance that the Stalinist regime was maintained only by terror could no longer be validated even for its darkest years. After the Second World War, the regime chose the path of reconciliation on some social levels in order to continue its existence⁸. Its validation is attributed to the middle class formed in the years of the interwar Stalinist regime, when several promotions took place in the professional and social hierarchy. Moreover, Vera Dunham explained in detail the role assigned to the middle class in the Soviet space, thus arguing the continuity of the regime after Stalin's death⁹. On the other hand, Sheila Fitzpatrick's studies analyse the changes in human typology, being the author of the phrase "homo sovieticus", which means "new man", whose main quality is their instinct to survive during difficult times¹⁰. For his part, Steven Kotkin argued that Stalinism was not the product of an all-powerful state, created only by the liquidation of previous social structures, and that free space was covered by the creation of new social layers. The foundation on which the new

⁸ Vera Dunham, *Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1990, p. XXI.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Everyday life in Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Bucharest, Corint, 2016, p. 420.

social construct was based rejected the capitalist model, accepting socialism as the foundation of a new regime¹¹. Moshe Lewin recalled that the principles of egalitarianism established during Leninism had been largely abandoned after 1932. If until then a party member's earnings could not exceed those of a skilled worker, regardless of their position in the Soviet state hierarchy, the regime, in order to motivate the party apparatus, decided to increase the amount of privileges to reflect one's responsibilities¹². To a large extent, these historians argue in favour of the social transformations that led to the emergence of a new social layer, which formed the foundation of the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. In witness to that, the Communist regime did not collapse and did not undergo significant changes after Stalin's death, continuing its existence for several decades.

The political and social changes brought about by the events of 1989 paved the way for the debates on the communist period, facilitated by the access of historians to the official documents of the Party. A real Pandora's Box was opened, historical writing witnessing a flurry of topics on this subject. The reconstruction of the Communist past underwent changes over the three decades since the fall of the regime. Although many studies remained loyal in the first years to totalitarian conception, which was replaced in the Western space by revisionism, today the local historical writing is very close to the two post-totalitarian currents, revisionism and post-revisionism. Bogdan Murgescu offers a different perspective on the post-war era, providing an analysis of economic factors in which he noted the role of the literacy campaign and particularly of urbanization in the modernizing of society¹³. An interesting vision of mass sports and its contribution to adult education, but also of performance that has become one of national interest, is offered by Valentin Vasile. The author also mentions the social role of physical culture, driven by increasing efforts to involve the rural population¹⁴. The evolution of the regime's relationship with national minorities contributed to shaping the regional policies of the literacy campaign¹⁵.

¹¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University Of California Press, 1995, p.2.

¹² Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, London and New York, Verso, 2005, p. 84.

¹³ Bogdan Murgescu, *Romania and Europe. Accumulation of economic gaps (1500-2010)*, Iași, Polirom, 2010, pp. 348-355, pp. 386.

¹⁴ Valentin Vasile, *Among athletes. Security actions in the issue of "Sport"*, Bucharest, Eikon, 2020, pp. 15-16, pp. 49.

¹⁵ Stefano Bottoni, *Red Transylvania. Romanian communism and the issue of minorities 1944-1965*, Cluj-Napoca, Publishing House of the Institute for the Study of National Minorities, 2010.

Interviews conducted in several counties in the south of the country gave us an empirical perspective on the post-war period, refining the information collected from official sources¹⁶.

Dennis Deletant argued in favour of an interdisciplinary study of the communist period, which had the advantage of providing a complex perspective of this period. The same author also mentioned that the Communist regime, although it failed to democratically take over the reins of power, it built a legitimacy that allowed it to retain power for four decades¹⁷.

The cultural studies about Romania, among which we mention those of Cristian Vasile¹⁸ or the volume coordinated by the same author¹⁹, illustrate the relationship between the new and old elites with the Communist regime, marginally approaching the education of the masses. The IICCMER-edited volume reveals the relationship of the post-war authorities with the most important religious cults, thus contributing to one of the themes addressed in the third chapter of this paper²⁰. An overall study of adult education in all its aspects has not been the subject of extensive research to date.

New approaches to adult education by the Communist regime

The paper follows the evolution of the regime's policies for mass education during the first decade of 1948-1958, but also the response of the subjects in a microsocial context. Framing the subject of cultural studies, we consider that it marks the beginning of an interdisciplinary research, a topic that can make important contributions in the field of anthropology, sociology or demographic studies. Each of the topics relating to adult education may be the subject of a separate study.

The official ideology of the regime places adult education at the center of its concerns, while the resulting social transformations will contribute to the legitimation effort. In this study

¹⁶ Nicolae Drăgușin, *Peasant Life in Communism*, Bucharest, Civic Academy Foundation, 2019.

¹⁷ Dennis Deletant, *Romania under communism. Paradox and degeneration*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 1.

¹⁸ Cristian Vasile, *Communist cultural policies during Gheorghiu-Dej's regime*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2011.

¹⁹ Cristian Vasile, coordinator, *"We need people!" Intellectual elites and historical transformations in modern and contemporary Romania*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun, 2017.

²⁰ Cosmin Budeancă, Florentin Olteanu, *Stalinization and de-Stalinization. Institutional evolutions and social impact* (volume published under the auspices of IICCMER), Iași, Polirom, 2014, p. 225-359.

we aim to uncover the gap between the discourse and the actual implementation of the authorities' plans, highlighting the contribution of adult education to the modernization of an agrarian society.

The structure of the paper includes the most important topics that reconstruct the image of adult education during the Communist period. With the conceptual delimitations of the phrase as a starting point, the study draws a parallel between the interwar and the post-war period in terms of evolution and discontinuities of this field. We will analyse the avatars of the new regime and especially to what extent we can identify the actors involved in this process.

One of the most important initiatives of the post-war authorities was the literacy campaign. The advantages consisted not only in its coercive character, but especially in a different approach in contrast to the interwar political regimes. The energetic campaign benefited from the establishment of a large number of literacy schools, but also from the contribution of a significant number of party members eager to demonstrate their loyalty. Throughout the study, one of the most difficult steps was to separate the political-ideological dimension from the practical aspects of mass education that contributed to the modernization of society as a whole. It is essential to remember, however, that the success of the literacy campaign created the conditions for the emergence of a new social class that would be the cornerstone of the new post-war regime.

The relationship of the authorities with the most important cults was one of the topics that received the attention of researchers in extensive studies. That is why we wanted to approach the subject from another perspective, that of the regime's policies towards religious manifestations as a whole, along with the reactions of those involved. All Communist states, except Albania, provided a framework for religious worship²¹. Although they chose a different approach to relations with Orthodoxy as compared to the Soviets, the authorities undoubtedly linked secularism to the project of modernization.

Building on the efforts of Iuliu Hațieganu from the interwar period, efforts were made to transform sports into a mass phenomenon, but this aspiration will only be achieved after the end of the Second World War. Sports are an important element of an adult's education, a factor of internal cohesion and a catalyst for emotions, giving those involved the opportunity to escape from

²¹ Sonja Luehrmann, "Antagonistic Insights: Evolving Soviet Atheist Critiques of Religion and Why They Matter for Anthropology," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, no. 2, "Being Godless: Ethnophies of Atheism and Non-religion", 2015, p. 97-113.

the stressful daily life. The development of mass sports, offered, from the point of view of the official ideology, an alternative to the capitalist model of professional sports, dismissed as one whose premises led to the exploitation of performance athletes. The authorities committed themselves to de-professionalization of sport to placate official dogmas, but in practice, the situation continued in a disguised form. The regime needed professional sports, which would bring it international prestige. During the Cold War, it became an occasion for confrontation between the two ideological camps²². Mass sport had also been assigned a social role in the communist regime, contributing to improving the health of the population, but also to increasing productivity in the planned economy²³. Regardless of the objectives pursued by the regime, sports would become a mass movement in the post-war era, being transformed into a factor of internal cohesion.

At the end of the fifth decade of the twentieth century, Romania offered the image of a predominantly rural society, similarly to other Communist states, with the exception of the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia²⁴. Given the fragile position of the Communist regime in rural Romania, one can understand the interest in cultural homes, which had been taken over after 1948. Their contribution to the dissemination of official ideology in rural areas would be fundamental. If mass education in rural areas revolved around the cultural homes, in the cities, the workers' clubs would be assigned the same role for educating the urban proletariat. Although their origin could be traced before World War II, while cultural centres only began to function during the interwar period, workers' clubs were largely neglected. Following the Soviet model, their goal was to replace religious practices and institutions²⁵. Following a comparative analysis, we can argue that both homes and clubs had the role of substituting religious life, but they represented more than that. Aiming to combat alcohol or gambling addictions, they offered an alternative for peasants and workers alike, but their activities were closely monitored to avoid any deviation from official dogmas.

The “red corners” were a novelty for post-war Romania, being inspired from the Soviet model. They were organized in the GAC or in the workers' clubs. Cultural leaders, especially in

²² Allen Guttman, „Sport, Politics and the Engaged Historian”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, July 2003, p. 363-375.

²³ James Riordan, “The Impact of Communism on Sport,” *Historical Social Research*, 32, 2007, p. 110.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Anna Bokov, “Soviet workers’ clubs: lessons from the social condensers”, *The Journal of Architecture*, no. 3, p. 403-404.

rural areas, knew little about setting up red corners, hence the impact on the masses remained small.

The period covering four decades in the history of Romania brought significant changes, being also the subject of disputes in the field of historiography, the main topic being related to the contributions linked to social progress. With these considerations as our starting point, it is our task to reconstruct recent history for the future to bring us a reconciliation with the past.

Sources

The research of the paper is based on a wide variety of sources, starting with archival documents, such as the funds of the *Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party*, the *Section of Agitation and Propaganda*, the *Ministry of National Propaganda*, the *Society for the Promotion of Science and Culture* and the *Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction*, but also *Alba PCR District Committee*. The fund of the *Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction* provided the opportunity to research a unique document, which made a significant contribution to shaping the way in which the literacy campaign was conducted. The archival sources consist largely of transcripts of the meetings of the *Agitation and Propaganda Section* of the CC of the PMR, reports of cultural officials in the territory, findings of controls of central authorities, but also the results of literacy campaigns, health or organization details conferences on adult education. The *Society for the Promotion of Science and Culture*, based on the Soviet model, includes the titles and topics of scientific conferences on the origin of man, technical discoveries, but also those with an ideological content. In a traditionalist society, the regime pitted deep-rooted beliefs among the masses against the scientific basis of new ideological meanings.

To the archival sources are added the printed volume of the speeches of the Secretary General of the PMR, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej²⁶, together with volumes I²⁷ and II²⁸ of Resolutions

²⁶ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, *Articles and speeches*, Bucharest, Politică Publishing House, 1955.

²⁷ *Resolutions and Decisions of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, 1948-1950, 1952*, Bucharest, Publishing House for Political Literature, vol. I.

²⁸ *Resolutions and Decisions of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party, 1951-1953, 1954*, Bucharest, Publishing House for Political Literature vol. II.

from the CC of PMR. In their pages we find the most important decisions of the Central Committee on mass sports²⁹, adult education in rural areas³⁰ or investments in cultural institutions for the peoples³¹. Along with these publications, the instructions for organizing and operating the GMA³² complex come to complete the documentation of the section dedicated to sports for all the people.

The press articles contributed to the reconstruction of this theme in the recent history of Romania, having as a starting point the most important daily of the regime, the newspaper *Scântea*, along with local publications such as the *Road to Socialism* in the Hunedoara region. The materials, otherwise of a pronounced propagandistic character, reveal interesting information about the way in which the official decisions were materialized, together with the local initiatives attributed to voluntary actions, in fact substituting the lack of necessary public funds. Moreover, the editorials support the comparative approach, providing information about the education of the masses in the other countries under communist regime.

Oral history interviews complete the documentary material by providing an empirical background on the topic, reconstruct the former reality and build the framework of a microhistory. At the same time, the interviews reveal the rift between the official discourse and the way in which decisions found their practical implementation. The contribution of “history from below” deserves to be utilized in the context in which latest researches tend to accept such sources. The interviews are reproduced according to their transcript, without correcting spelling errors, providing readers with a genuine account.

This entire wealth of sources has the merit of reconstructing the theme of adult education during the communist regime, as described in each chapter. The paper is not an exhaustive approach, but rather a starting point for further research. The general framework reconstructed in the paper could be downgraded to an in-depth study of several administrative-territorial units.

²⁹ "Decision of the Political Bureau of the PMR CC on the issue of stimulation and continuous development of physical culture and sports in June 1949", *Resolutions and Decisions of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, 1948-1950*, vol. I, p. 112-124.

³⁰ "Decision of the Central Committee of the PMR regarding the strengthening of the Central Village Committees of the party and the intensification of mass political work in the villages", September 26, 1952, in *Resolutions and Decisions of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party, 1951-1953*, vol. II, p. 241-260.

³¹ "Decision of the Extended Plenary of the CC of the PMR of 19-20 August 1953 on the party's tasks in the field of national economy development and continuous raising of the material and cultural standard of living of the working people", in *Resolutions and Decisions of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party, 1951-1953*, vol. II, p. 471-516.

³² *GMA Sports Complex*, Bucharest, Committee for Physical Culture and Sports, 1956.

Certainly other aspects of the topic can be identified that can generate either a broad or a very specific debate.

The modernization of society, closely related to the economic, social, political and cultural aspects was not achieved only by imposing models focusing on the center, being rather the result of a negotiated process in relation to local decision makers.

Despite efforts to integrate the topic of adult education into the established chronological range, we believe that there are still many other related topics prone to debate by researchers. The role of research is to open a door to another segment of cultural studies, by reconstructing a part of recent history that fulfils the general role of history, that of understanding the present in order to plan our future. In this note, Stephen Kotkin recalled that “despite the energy I devoted to the study of the city of Magnitogorsk and its inhabitants, I still feel that I was only able to scratch the surface”³³.

Epilogue

As we noted along the way, Soviet models were replaced by local peculiarities as the regime readjusted its cultural policies for adults. We followed both the evolution of the rural space, where the cultural home represented the depository of the peasant culture, and the culture of the masses in the urban environment, where the workers' clubs shaped the new identity of the proletariat. Within these cultural institutions for adult education, the literacy campaign, the transformations of mass sports, but also the affirmation of the new principles of Marxist atheism in the religious space of a traditional local society took place.

The literacy campaign was a real success for the authorities, thanks to exemplary mobilization, but also to the establishment of schools for adults, one of the methods that no longer depended on natural growth. The rapid process of modernizing society could only begin with adult literacy. The official ideology, on whose principles the legitimacy of the regime was to be built, could not be spread among a largely illiterate population. This could also encompass the activities of libraries, especially those in rural areas, meant as repositories of themes aligned with official precepts³⁴. All these stages of the modernization process set the stage for the displacement of the

³³ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 375.

³⁴ CC of PMR, *Resolutions and Decisions*, 1954, p. 257.

peasant population given the growing demand for labour in the industrial sector, which was to be later transformed into the new urban proletariat. One of the interviewees for this paper remembered that: “and then they were scattered around the factories, the ones where ... they earned more. Like now when they go abroad”³⁵.

Throughout this paper we noticed that the authorities managed to achieve their plans for mass education through cultural institutions, which could be traced back to the pre-war era, such as cultural homes or workers' clubs. On the other hand, the takeover of the Soviet models, such as the red corners, ended in failures for the regime. At the same time, entrusting certain ideological tasks with the cultural homes, such as the collectivization of agriculture, was met with rejection by the locals, who flatly refused to participate in their cultural activities. Another failure is associated with the effort to secularize the social space, by imposing atheism, as a trait of the new ideology. These failures can be attributed to the overestimation of the modernization ethos of the local society in such a short period of time, but also to the conservatism of the local agrarian society.

Under these conditions, the regime chose to follow a different path of accommodating conservative beliefs, somewhat different from the Soviet model, one of compromise also sanctioned by the party elite, especially after Gheorghiu-Dej became the all-out ruler. As most contemporaries of this period pointed out, the political establishment had remained devoted to traditional values, even if it practiced a double discourse.

Therefore, we can say that the communist regime followed a path rather built on local political models, thus ensuring their continuity in the post-war period³⁶.

³⁵ Interview no. 2, Alin Goron with Pavel Miklos attained on 30.03.2021, p. 16.

³⁶ Michael Shafir, *Communist Romania (1948-1985). A political, economic and social analysis*, Bucharest, Meteor Press Publishing House, 2020, p. 15.

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Serviciul Județean al Arhivelor Naționale, Alba, Fond Comitetul Raional al Partidului Comunist Român.

Press

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