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REFLECTIONS ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN ROMANIA: A THIRTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Ionut Moraru

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1. Jehovah's Witnesses and Religious Freedom Prior to 1989

Before 1989, immediately after the Communists installed their regime, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned by a decision of the Ministry of Justice No. 86,310, August 8, 1949. Even before this date some Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned for their faith during World War II or immediately thereafter, but after 1949 *all* of Jehovah's Witnesses in Romania suffered cruel and intense persecution. Many of them were sentenced to 20-25 years of hard labor or prison; some lost their jobs; others were hounded by the Department of State Security and often had their properties searched; and still others had all their belongings confiscated.

We mention below the reasons for their sentences to prison or to hard labor:

- Conspiracy against social order and subversive activity in association with "Jehovah's Witnesses" organization (Sentence No. 868/12.09.1958 of Bucharest Military Law Court; Sentence No. 211/28.07.1961 of Bucharest Military Law Court),
- Meeting, discussing about "Jehovah's Witnesses" faith and promoting its life views (Civil Sentence No. 2006/7.08.1984 of Alexandria Court; Sentence No. 76/14.02.1959 of Cluj Military Law Court; Civil Sentence No. 218/29.01/1988 of Alexandria Court),
- Public instigation (Sentence No. 1238/20.09.1958 of Bucharest Military Law Court),
- Propaganda against the Socialist order (Sentence No. 662/19.11.1969 of Cluj Military Law Court).

In total, the sentences received between 1949 and 1989 add up to more than 4,000 years of detention, around 2,500 of them being in served in all Romanian prisons. The total fines

imposed on Jehovah's Witnesses in that period for practicing their faith amount to more than 1 million LEI (currently around 8.9 million EUROS). Also, a variety of goods were confiscated, from objects without value to their entire personal wealth and even houses.

Jehovah's Witnesses have always rooted their beliefs on the Bible. The Holy Scriptures clearly show that 'all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution' (II Tim. 3:12 *King James Version*). For this reason they knew that any change in the political regime could also bring with it religious persecution, as it did in Nazi Germany. They also understood that these trials would come because the new regime would not understand their Bible-based faith, which encourages political neutrality and love for neighbor.

Below we provide some examples of the extreme suffering of Jehovah's Witnesses. Mrs. Doina Cepănaru, a certified doctor, and her husband, Dumitru, a certified professor, were imprisoned respectively for seven and seven and a half years in the Communist prisons of Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Aiud și Jilava. Mrs. Cepănaru served her sentence between December 14, 1968, and December 14, 1975, and Mr. Cepănaru, between December 14, 1968, and June 12, 1976. Their detention was extremely difficult: they could not communicate with each other or their close family; they were denied the right to work in prison; and they suffered severe isolation, torture, and food shortage. In 2017, they were interviewed by Tudor Petcu, a Romanian historian. Here is how Mr. Cepănaru described the suffering he endured during the Communist regime: "It was an intolerable abuse of power, a limitless injustice, and a continuous hypocrisy worse than any hypocrisy in the human history. While the Romanian Constitution 'guaranteed' the freedom of faith and of expression, any 'heresy' from the Communist doctrine was suppressed much the same as the Catholic Inquisition suppressed heresies in the darkest times of history." But, even though he wanted to be released and all the persecution to stop, his main concern, as with other Jehovah's Witnesses, was this: "The most important lesson that I have learned during those times was that God is not an abstract notion, but a real Person and a live presence in the life of the loyal one who 'sees' him, although invisible. The love for Him and the vindication of his Sovereignty are the greatest gains anyone can have in this life."

Mrs. Cepănaru too expressed this way the aspirations of all Jehovah's Witnesses in those times: "To persevere as a Jehovah's Witness, it was necessary to fight for your faith by any means: spiritual conversations, prayer, memorized songs for worship, applying Bible principles daily, and preaching the Bible's message to the prison personnel (including Justice Ministry inspectors) whenever possible. I have learned to take into consideration any Bible

verses that I knew and to follow the Bible in any situation. I have also learned to trust Jehovah who is always loving, righteous, and powerful.”

Mr. Vasile Săbădăș, another Jehovah’s Witness imprisoned in many Communist penitentiaries, said: “The most important lesson that I have drawn was to patiently wait for God to solve all the problems.”

Jehovah’s Witnesses obey the Bible command from the book of Romans 13: 1, being “in subjection to the superior authorities” and ‘paying back Caesar’s things to Caesar’ (Luke 20:25, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*). At the same time though, they give to God the things that are his, namely, their worship, no matter the political regime they live under.

1. Changes in Hopes and Expectations After 1989

Other Jehovah’s Witnesses, who suffered greatly under the oppressive Communist regime, were interviewed in 2017 about the way they perceive the changes that were implemented in the Romanian society after 1989, especially those of a religious nature. Here are some of their answers.

“After Communism fell, we felt that Jehovah freed us of the dread instilled in society by those opponents. Now we can fulfill the sacred service that God entrusted to all of his servants. I actively take part in this work and I feel Jehovah gives me the power to persevere to the end” (Ilie Volintiru, imprisoned a total of one and a half years, 1976-1977, 1979-1980, 1985-1986).

“After being released from prison, I was sent to Șimleu Security. There I was again interrogated. They wanted to convince me to give up my faith. They kept me there to make me compromise. But I didn’t. I was always followed by the Security. They came from [the Romanian towns of] Petroșani, Timișoara and Șimleu. They felt pity for me. However, a security major said that, if it were up to him, he’d burn me and my entire family. Although those years passed by very slowly, after the Romanian Revolution I felt a change. We wouldn’t have to hide anymore. Since then, I preach about God’s Kingdom without fear. I love the spiritual paradise I live in and I can hardly wait the earthly one still to come” (Traian Tuns, imprisoned five years, 1959-1964).

“Freedom is a precious privilege. I am happy to see how the work of God’s Organization progresses in Oradea. In the year 1948, when I started studying the Bible truth, we were just a handful of Witnesses in Oradea. Now we have two Kingdom Halls and seven congregations. In 1993, at the Cluj-Napoca convention, I personally saw the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy

in Isaiah 49: 20-22: a stadium filled with brothers and 600 people symbolizing their dedication by Christian baptism. One of these was my youngest daughter who grew up as a Jehovah's Witness despite the struggles that we had with the Communists" (Gyulla Szell, imprisoned six years, 1959-1964, 1982-1983).

"After Communism there was a big change: from a dictatorship with the restraint of human freedoms, to a democracy guaranteeing the human freedoms. For this reason, the society came to be more receptive to our message. A proof in this regard is the large number of persons who embraced the Bible truth in Romania" (Vasile Săbădăș, imprisoned seven and a half years, 1948, 1956-1963).

"After Communism, the society changed quite a lot. This change is for the good. Even if the majority of people do not accept our beliefs, they don't believe all the lies about us anymore and they don't hurt us anymore. We are in good relations with our neighbors and colleagues and we are considered useful members of the society, although we are quite different than others" (Teofil Laza, imprisoned six and a half years, 1957-1959, 1960-1964).

"With the fall of the Communist regime we started to have freedom of expression. These were indeed thrilling times" (Ioan Ianc, imprisoned six years, 1958-1964).

"Speaking from a government point of view, the change for my faith was quite big. Jehovah's Witnesses have all the legal rights to practice their faith. From the Romanian society point of view, I cannot but see more and more indifference toward the true values and principles of humanity that we read about in the Bible and which are the foundation of all the nations' Constitutions" (Dumitru Cepănar, imprisoned seven and a half years, 1968-1976).

As these interviews emphasize, Jehovah's Witnesses are joyful that the current situation allows them to fulfill their Christian activities without constraints. As a result, from April 9, 1990, when the Religious Organization of "Jehovah's Witnesses" was again recognized as a religion, and until now, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses grew from approximately 19,000 to more than 40,000. Many of those who were imprisoned in the past were extremely happy to see with their eyes that the work they suffered for during the Communist regime now was being done in total freedom. It was no longer a long-awaited aspiration.

2. Religious Freedom in Romania Today

For the Religious Organization of "Jehovah's Witnesses," the period that followed the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989 was a very complex one, although the Organization regained its legal religion statute on April 9, 1990, by Sentence No. 1166 of the Bucharest District 1 Law Court.

Until 2006, when the Law No. 489/2006 on Religious Freedom and the General Status of Religions was issued (please see the attachment), the Charters of the religions and religious associations in Romania were regulated by the Decree No. 177/1948 on the General Status of Religions, expressly modified by the Decree No. 322/1948, the Decree No. 67/1956, the Decree No.410/1959 and the Decree No. 150/1974. Starting in 1949, the Religious Organization of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” was not included anymore on the list of the official religions recognized by the Romanian State. Moreover, when the Communist regime fell (December 1989), the Decree No. 177/1948 was still in force. It wasn’t explicitly abolished (namely, through Parliament law) neither after the change of the regime, nor after the new *Romanian Constitution* was adopted in 1991, although it was greatly modified, even indirectly abolished by the rest of the legislation adopted starting with 1990.

In 1990, the Ministry of Religions was established. (Note: For some months, this was its official name. Between July 1990 and 2000, it was called the State Secretariat for Religions. After 2000, the Ministry of Culture and Religions was established, and the State Secretariat for Religions became a part of it.) Since its establishment, one of the missions of the Ministry of Religions was “to assist all religions, according to their Charters for the organization and functioning, on the grounds of the Romanian Constitution, so that they could be involved in the social and spiritual life of the country; it keeps an eye on relations between religions, making sure there are no means, forms, and actions that could divide them, and mediates, at their requests, the issues that could arise.” Due to this favorable climate, between 1990 and 1997, the freedoms of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Romania were not violated.

Still, in 1997, the State Secretariat for Religions, through the State Secretary, Mr. Gheorghe Anghelescu, a well-known Orthodox theologian, issued some official documents that denied the official recognition of Jehovah’s Witnesses, although the Romanian State considered it a legal religion. As a result, many city halls in Romania started to deny Jehovah’s Witnesses the right to build worship places. They justified their decision saying that Jehovah’s Witnesses are not included on the list of the religious organizations published by Order No. C/167 from March 25, 1997.

At the same time, the authorities refused to rent lands for cemeteries; there were cases in which some deceased Jehovah’s Witnesses could not be buried in the local cemeteries because of the hostility of the priests of the religions in those communities.

Moreover, the fiscal authorities began imposing taxes for the worship places. They invoked the same Order and concluded that those worship places could not be included

among those mentioned in the Appendix 2, point 3, of Law No. 27/1994 regarding Local Taxes and Duties.

Another problem was the fact that many public authorities and some citizens who had been misinformed by the priests, policemen, and others would oppose the peaceful gatherings of Jehovah's Witnesses. They tried to falsely represent Jehovah's Witnesses to the public as being an illegal religion. Also, there were many situations when Jehovah's Witnesses were threatened with death, and there were even organized slanderous campaigns under the umbrella of or with the direct help of the authorities. For example, the Interior Ministry agreed with the publication of a brochure entitled "Jehovah's Witnesses – A religious sect that aims to overthrow the Government." Different newspapers published biased, even derogatory, articles about Jehovah's Witnesses. These were not based on correct information and their purpose was to misinform the general public.

To put an end to these grave violations of religious freedom, Jehovah's Witnesses sued the Government, requesting that it be ordered to include Jehovah's Witnesses on the list of the official religions in Romania. Also, some Jehovah's Witnesses filed court complaints on the grounds that their exemption from military service was not respected on the erroneous grounds that now they were not a part of a recognized religion. Jehovah's Witnesses did not obtain any favorable court decisions in Romania and exhausted all appeals in the country. Consequently, 15 cases were filed against the Romanian State with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In May 2006, the Third Section of ECHR organized a preceding meeting for negotiations and for helping the parties solve their case. As a result, ECHR issued a decision regarding the request of Religious Organization "Jehovah's Witnesses" and of some other individual Witnesses. In this decision, together with the Government representative, they signed the declaration through which the Government recognized that Jehovah's Witnesses "are a recognized religion with all the rights and obligations granted to all religions recognized by the Government." Also, the Government recognized that it had violated the rights of those who were denied exemption from military service and accepted the responsibility to pay them compensation. ECHR accepted this friendly agreement through its decision dated July 11, 2006. The recognition was published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, February 9, 2007.

Nonetheless, before arriving to this friendly agreement before the ECHR, the Ministry of Culture and Religions (from 2000, the State Secretariat for Religions became part of this Ministry) issued Order No. 2657, confirming the Charter of religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. On February 6, 2004, the Religious Organization of "Jehovah's Witnesses" was included on

the list of recognized religions in Romania. Starting with June 18, 2008, by Government Decision No. 658, the new *Charter for the Organization and Functioning of the Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses* was recognized.

On June 19, 2019, the *Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* for 2018 was published. It confirms that in Romania the Constitution guarantees the freedom of faith and conscience and shows that all religions are independent of the State and are free to organize themselves according to their charters. Although the legal environment supports religious pluralism, many minority religions and religious groups, Jehovah's Witnesses included, continued to report harassments from the priests and adherents of the majority religion. According to a study done among the middle and high school teachers in Romania, approximately a third of them do not want for neighbors persons of other religions, says the same report.

3. Conclusion

Currently, the Romanian Constitution and the Law No. 489/2006 on Religious Freedom and the General Status of Religions guarantees freedom of religion. The same Law includes Jehovah's Witnesses among the 18 official religions recognized by the Romanian State. Moreover, because Romania is a member of the European Union, the regulations of the European Convention of Human Rights and of the European Court of Human Rights are part of its legislation.

Due to this favorable legislation, Jehovah's Witnesses in Romania, in general, do not have problems related to their activities. Still, there are incidents caused by Orthodox priests and adherents who instigate hatred and violence against Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, between January and April 2019, there were three reported incidents of this nature respectively in Bucharest, in Tilisca village (Sibiu County) and Livezi village (Dolj County). A positive aspect in all of these situations is the fact that the local police and the Romanian police (two different structures), when informed, acted to protect religious freedom. Therefore, after a complaint is lodged, the police solve the problem, and Jehovah's Witnesses can continue their activities unhindered.