

Research Article

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Student Assessment of Professors in Revolutionary Context. Case-Study: The History Faculty of the University of Bucharest (1989-1990)

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Abstract: Student assessment of professors emerged in the context of university democratization and increasing involvement of students in the management of the higher education institutions. It was institutionalized mainly as an instrument to gradually improve the quality of teaching, and only rarely used as an element determining the hiring and firing of the academic staff. In Romania, it came to the forefront only in the context of the Revolution of December 1989, when students started to question the competence of their professors and asked for the removal of those whom they considered unfit. The article focuses on the concrete case of the “black list” issued by the history students in the University of Bucharest, and on the way this revolutionary challenge shaped the institutional governance and the further development of the Faculty of History. The analysis refutes attempts to consider this episode as a politically-motivated purge and to integrate it in the master-narrative of post-communist lustration. While highlighting the particularities of this case, which allowed to professionally-motivated students to initiate a major reshuffle in the functioning of a higher education institution, the authors argue that such a syncretical evaluation pattern may in fact be one of the not so uncommon ‘revolutionary’ paths towards establishing a regulated system of student assessment of professors.

Keywords: student assessment of professors; higher education; University of Bucharest; post-communism; student movements; transitional justice.

Introduction

Nowadays, the student assessment of professors is generally considered as an established and regulated part of the quality assurance processes, providing significant feedback for faculty and management in order to gradually improve the quality of teaching. This perception obscures the often conflictual nature of establishing the right of students to assess university professors. It often needed a lot of social pressure and special circumstances to determine faculty and university management to yield and to accept this student request. In the following, we analyze the student blacklisting of a number of professors of the History Faculty, University of Bucharest, in 1989-1990. We start by providing information about the historical background and continue by presenting the facts of this particular form of student assessment, the conflict and realignment in faculty politics it has caused, and the institutional outcomes of this conflict. Finally, we analyze this particular case in relation with the narratives of politically motivated lustration and transitional justice, and outline its significance for both the Romanian post-communist transition, and for the diverse patterns of student assessment of professors.

Results and Discussion

Student Assessment of Professors - Historical Background

Traditionally, higher education institutions have been hierarchical, reflecting the asymmetries of the teaching process, as well as the strong position acquired by university professors in the long 19th century. This pattern has been challenged in the second half of the 20th century. There were several processes which led to change. First of all, larger shares of the population gained access to higher education, and the universities had to adjust to a

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significant massification process, which also challenged the established institutional patterns. Educational research also insisted on the benefits of a more balanced exchange between teachers and learners. In the West, an increased number of people became vocal in the public sphere, and the student movements of the late 1960s were a constitutive part of a larger democratization process. During these movements, the students asked for a general renewal of higher education. Their demands covered a wide range of topics: political, social, human rights (see Altbach: 2006; Klemenčič: 2012). Alongside these protests, the student unions began to play a more important role within universities and became more involved in the university management. According to Altbach, “student unions [...] have both political and service functions” (Altbach, 2006: 333–334). Altbach distinguishes between the services offered by student unions which have a national coverage and student unions which operate at university level. At the national level, Altbach defines the political functions as the provision of “represent[ation of] student interests to academic authorities” (Altbach, 2006: 333–334). At the institutional level, Altbach outlines three categories of functions: representation, political and services. The representation function is defined for the national level, as “represent[ation of] student interests to the university and often appoint[ment of] student representatives to academic committees (sometimes even to governing boards)” (Altbach, 2006: 333–334). On the other hand, as partners of student organisations, Klemenčič includes the state, universities and academics, as well as the involvement of students in the process of university management, of drafting policies and educational processes (Klemenčič, 2012: 6)¹. The student demands for the improvement of the educational process aimed both at the curriculum and at the quality of the teaching staff (Ruegg, Sadlak, 2011: 104–113). The student assessment of professors was a crucial issue, both because it challenged the established habitus of the universities, and because it often became very personal. Yet, even if many higher education systems limited the say of the students in the hiring and firing of the teaching staff, they nevertheless accepted that the student assessment is a legitimate tool for the improvement of teaching and institutionalized it (Miller, 1988: 3–15; Ory, 2000: 13–18).

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the hierarchical patterns were reinforced by the general

features of the communist regimes. Although the student movements were not absent in the socialist world (Vos, 2011: 306–312; Ivan, 2009: 376–404; specifically for Romania, see Bădescu, Șincai, 1995: 6; Cioflâncă, Șincai, 2006), overall the authorities managed to control student organizations and integrate them in the communist power structure. Student organizations were not only compelled to be ‘communist’ and to share the official ideology, but its leaders were co-opted in the party establishment, and the party decided on the positions each individual was allowed to obtain, either in the leadership of the student organization or in the bodies governing the universities. Therefore, student representation was usually formal, and the students had almost no say in shaping the functioning of higher education.

This situation changed radically in 1989. The demise of the communist systems gave voice to large parts of the society, including the students. In Romania, the students were active participants in the revolution of December 1989, both in the manifestations before the fall of Ceaușescu and in the groups of people who organized to defend the revolution against ‘terrorists’. Besides being active and represented at national level, the students turned quite fast to the problems of the institutions where they were enrolled, with the obvious goal to fix all the shortcomings which they had noticed during their studies. This pattern was consistent with the founding of National Salvation Councils in almost all enterprises and institutions, which replaced the party organizations and tried to implement revolutionary ideals and change at institutional level (Siani-Davies, 2005: 219–222). The role of the students and of their emerging organizations was recognized also by the Ministry of Education. In the election methodology for the management of higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education granted students a series of rights, among which a minimum of 30% of the places in the membership of representative bodies (Faculty Councils, University Senate), as well as the right to block decisions which they considered inappropriate: “in problems regarding the activity of students, including the actual election of governing bodies, decisions are taken by the means of simple majority [...] with the condition that those decisions are to be voted by at least the simple majority of students” (OMI 24484/13.01.1990). This decision introduced the veto right of students, which was extended to cover all decisions, so that students became a powerful voice within the governing and representative bodies of universities.

¹ See also a general discussion of the collective movement of students in this issue: Proteasa V., Andreescu L., *On revolutions and structural holes: a framework for the analysis of students’ collective action and organization in Central and Eastern Europe*

In the University of Bucharest, students began to organize informally at the level of Faculties² already on December 23, but soon there emerged also more formal associations, among which the most important was the League of Students, which included student clubs in each Faculty. The students adopted a set of governing principles for their organization, among which “the principle of freedom; the principle of democracy; the principle of competence, understood as such: occupying educational positions only via contest, with periodic verification in regard to their professional and scientific competence, with no probation time; the principle of non-politisation – the separation of scientific and professional values from the political ones and the refusal to politicise the educational environment” (League of Students Manifesto / Programme – UB, December 29, 1989). Thus, the manifesto adopted by the League of Students expressed very clearly which type of organisation it wished to be and within what type of university it wished to operate. The involvement of students was an important factor in redefining the critical and free spirit of the University.

Even before the founding of the League of Students, several increasingly powerful student voices raised the issue of an assessment process for the university teaching staff. This request was particularly acute in fields which had been subject to the ideological pressures of the communist regime, especially philosophy (which included in the 1980s also sociology, education sciences and psychology), history, and letters.

The ‘black list’ in the Faculty of History

The situation in the Faculty of History was particularly strained. Since 1977 the Faculty of History had been unified with the Faculty of Philosophy, and the joint institution offered only double-specialization programs history-philosophy and philosophy-history. This unification decided at national level was resented by most of the teaching staff and by the students, inter alia because it meant diminishing the share of courses for the major in order to allow a share of about 40% of the curricula for the minor specialization. Besides, the intellectual exchange

between historians and philosophers was minimal, especially because of a diffuse, but persistent, anti-theoretical bias in the professional tradition of Romanian historians (Murgescu, 2000: 39-55). Another cause for discontent was the process of quantitative contraction, particularly severe in the field of humanities, which included the reduction of the number of study-places and the blocking of faculty renewal and career advancement. Even a party loyalist like Gheorghe Ioniță, who later became dean, had to wait almost 2 years before his appointment as full professor was finally approved by the authorities in September 1981 (Ioniță, 2007: 159). He was the last historian to be appointed full professor in Bucharest until the demise of the communist regime, and other members of the faculty (e.g. Constantin Bușe) were denied even the appointment to the position of *conferențiar*, i.e. associate professor (Scurtu, 2000: 14). From 1982 to 1989, only 2 teaching assistants were hired in the whole history department, and no one of the existing staff was allowed to advance to a higher position³. Therefore, most of the teaching staff who were in their forties and fifties in the 1980s remained at the rank of lecturer, and some even retired as lecturers (Murgescu, Bozgan, 2014: 319). Frustrated in their professional ambitions and concerned about the future of their profession in the University of Bucharest, the members of the Faculty dared in 1986 to send a memorandum to the minister of education, highlighting the process of ageing and gradual disappearance of the faculty (according to the projection, the chair of history was expected to lose due to retirements more than half of its staff in the late 1980s and in the 1990s) and the risk to be unable to continue teaching the full program; the memorandum asked for new positions of teaching assistant and for the opening of opportunities for career advancement for the existing faculty (AFIUB). In spite of the arguments, there was no change of the trend in the next years, and the faculty continued to shrink in the later 1980s. The students had also serious reasons for discontent. After having faced tough competition at the admission (in some years there were even 15 candidates for a study place in history-philosophy), they were unhappy with a large part of the curriculum and the way it was taught, resented the lack of new academic resources in the libraries and the fact that

² In order to avoid misunderstandings due to the different meanings of the word in Romanian and English, in this text “Faculty” (with capital letter) indicates an administrative unit, e.g. Faculty of History, as is usual in Romanian, while “faculty” (with small letters) indicates the teaching staff, as is usual in Anglo-Saxon contexts.

³ During the 1980s, the positions in the Romanian university system were: full professor, associate professor (*conferențiar*), lecturer and teaching assistant. The advancement from one position to another depended on the prior approval of the higher position to be opened for competition; only afterwards an appointed committee examined the credentials of the applicant(s) and submitted its assessment for the final decision of the management.

during winter the teaching spaces were often frozen, and were frustrated by the fact that after graduation they had to take jobs as history teachers in secondary education institutions located only in small towns or villages⁴.

Under these circumstances, it was natural that both the teaching staff and the students would seize the opportunity opened by the revolution to start changing things comprehensively in the University, according to their perceptions about how an institution of higher education should normally function. The first decision was to restore the institutional framework which had existed before 1977, i.e. to separate the Faculty of History and the Faculty of Philosophy. Besides, immediately after the shootings ended and the overall situation began to normalize in Bucharest, the students started to organize and to set up their improvement requests. On December 28, 1989, a group of history students who were present in the University in spite of the fact that officially it was winter holidays, issued a list of professors whom they considered unfit to continue to teach (the wording of the resolution was somehow more diplomatic, the students asking that those named “should be discussed for professional incompetence”) (AFIUB). The list was a shock for a large part of the faculty, because, besides 7 names from the “philosophers”, it included 12 members of a history teaching staff which comprised at that moment less than 30 people. This unprecedented challenge set up the agenda in the Faculty of History and became the crucial element for the positioning of all members of the institution, students and professors alike.

Obviously, the students who had issued the list of December 28, 1989, had been a radical minority. Therefore, in January 1990, when the courses resumed and the students who had been absent during the winter holidays returned to Bucharest, the whole issue was put to debate once more. The students gathered in the Iorga Amphitheatre and, according to the recollection of a participant, assessed the teaching staff according to a set of criteria which combined professional aspects with the ideological bias of their teaching before the revolution and their improvement prospects (Interview 1). Obviously, the students from the last (fourth) year had the greater say, as they had direct experience with most of the concerned professors, while the freshmen and sophomores generally followed their lead. The whole group was somehow less radical than in December, and therefore the new list was a bit shorter, including only 9 members of the existing

teaching staff: Adina Berciu, Vasile Budrigă, Nicolae Ciachir, Gheorghe Ioniță, Gheorghe D. Iscru, Vlad Matei, Doina Smârcea, Maria Totu, and Zorin Zamfir. Three professors who had been black-listed in December 1989 (Constantin Corbu, Gh. Z. Ionescu, and Nicolae Isar) were no longer included, but nevertheless the January 1990 list consisted of almost one third of the existing teaching staff in the Faculty of History. The students allowed to the black-listed professors to argue their case in the Iorga Amphitheatre, but the discussions did not change the outcome, and in fact hardened the opposing positions. Student participants recollect the radical and/or out-of-touch attitudes of some of the challenged professors (Interview 1), while the memoirs of participating professors label these meetings as humiliating “frame-ups” and “masquerades” (Ioniță, 2007: 183).

The consequences of the “black-list” were manifold. It antagonized not only the professors on the list, who obviously took it personal, especially when they had a good opinion about their own professional competence, but also other members of the teaching staff, who considered that the students have no right to assess and/or challenge professors. There emerged three groups, two more radical and homogenous (the professors who were black-listed and a small group of professors who considered that the students were right in their assessment), and a third one who was larger and more diverse, including all those who felt uneasy about the whole situation and avoided to take sides. At the same time, what had been the opinion of a few dozens of students in December 1989 was now a position backed by a large majority of the students in the Faculty of History, part of a larger phenomenon which occurred also in other parts of the University of Bucharest and in other institutions of higher education. The contestation of teaching staff included the refusal of the students to attend classes taught by the professors considered incompetent and this boycott shaped in a visible manner the whole functioning of the institution. Last, but not least, like the whole higher education system, the Faculty of History was heading for snap elections in order to acquire a legitimate leadership.

The order 24484/13.01.1990 (copy in AFIUB) issued by the Education Ministry regulated that each Faculty will have a council consisting of representatives of the staff and of the students (who were to make up at least 30%), who would elect the executive leadership (dean, vice-deans and/or scientific secretary). For a small unit of less than 50 teaching staff (the Faculty of History had 29), the council was set at 15 members, among which 5 students.

In the Faculty of History, the elections were organized in the next week. At student level, the members of the

⁴ From 1981 to 1989, the largest 14 cities of the country were “closed”, i.e. excluded from the list of positions assigned for university graduates (Rotaru 2014: 166).

council were elected by each year of study, with one representative for each of the first three years and two representatives for the fourth year; all 5 students who were elected were staunch supporters of the “black list”. The election of the representatives of the teaching staff was more competitive (the ballots and record of the election of January 18, 1990, are preserved in AFIUB). According to the official regulation, the 29 members of the teaching staff had equal voting rights, independent of their academic rank. All names were put on the ballot, and each voter had the right to choose ten names from the list. The outcome of the first round reflected the major divisions inside the faculty. Some of the professors who had avoided to take sides garnered most votes (e.g. Constantin Bușe 29 votes of 29, Radu Manolescu 27 votes of 29), but pro-student minded professors also got elected (e.g. Stelian Brezeanu 16 votes, Lucian Boia 16 votes), while from the black-listed professors no one received enough votes (Gheorghe Iscriu had 11 votes, while the other members of his group garnered even less votes). Quite more, for the last two places allocated to the staff in the council, three candidates (Mihai Maxim, Zoe Petre and Ștefan Ștefănescu) were tied with 14 votes, so there was needed a second round. Although Ștefan Ștefănescu tried to withdraw in order to allow the other two colleagues to be elected, the majority decided that his name should remain on the ballot, in a desperate attempt to block the election of Zoe Petre, who was considered the most dangerous of the pro-student professors. The second round ended with Mihai Maxim receiving 21 votes, Ștefan Ștefănescu 16 votes, and Zoe Petre 14 votes. At this moment Ștefan Ștefănescu decidedly withdrew, and Zoe Petre was finally elected as member of the council of the Faculty of History.

The next day, Friday January 19, 1990, the council convened, but the coalition of the students and the professors who supported them had already a rather thin, but solid, majority. Therefore, in spite of the attempt of a part of the professors to prevent her election, the council elected as dean Zoe Petre with 9 votes, to Constantin Bușe 5 votes and Ioan Scurtu 1 vote. Subsequently, Stelian Brezeanu was elected scientific secretary (practically vice-dean), and Zoe Petre, Constantin Bușe and Ioan Scurtu were voted to represent the Faculty in the University Senate, besides the representatives of the students who were elected separately. Two weeks later, the moderate Constantin Bușe was elected as one of the three vice-rectors of the University of Bucharest (Murgescu, Bozgan, 2014: 386), with the support of Zoe Petre and of the representatives of the Faculty of History in the Senate.

One of the main tasks of the council and of the newly elected dean was to solve somehow the problems

raised by conflict between the students and the black-listed professors. In its first meeting after the elections, the council accepted to organize closed-door meetings with the boycotted professors, in order to see whether a mutually acceptable conciliation was possible. On February 3, 1990, seven of the black-listed professors came to make their case before the Faculty Council. In order to prevent the escalation of the tension, they were invited successively into the council meeting, and the dean started the discussion by announcing to each of them that the Ministry of Education had accepted to pay their wages (as also those of boycotted professors in other higher education institutions) until the end of the academic year (September 1990), provided they continued to fulfill their tasks which did not imply direct contact with the students. Thus, the financial dimension of the conflict was somehow set aside, and the fact that the discussions did not change significantly the pre-existing positions was more easily accepted by most of the participants. The written record of the meeting indicates the efforts to polite interaction, but at the same time testifies the differences of attitudes, with an embittered Zorin Zamfir announcing briefly that he has decided to retire, while others (like Gheorghe Iscriu and Gheorghe Ioniță) tried to argue more substantively and to invoke the fact that they had suffered political persecution also during the Ceaușescu regime; the representatives of the students replied that they resented as insulting any association between their legitimate action and the communist persecutions, and argued that their boycott was motivated professionally (AFIUB).

With no conciliation in sight, the dean and the council had to find solutions to ensure the functioning of the teaching process, i.e. to replace the boycotted professors both at the exams of the first semester, and at the courses scheduled for the spring semester. This proved to be easier than expected, because several scholars from various research institutions jumped in to teach and examine the students, even on a pro-bono basis.

One of the major grievances of the teaching staff had been the fact that the advancement opportunities had been blocked in the 1980s. Obviously, this became a major issue in 1990, and the Ministry of Education accepted to open the process, mainly by transforming existing positions into higher ones. The decision had set a quantitative limit to about one third of the existing positions, which meant that the Faculty of History had the possibility to open for advancement 10 positions. The decision regarding which positions will be opened for advancement was taken by the Faculty Council, with the subsequent approval of the University Senate. The discussions regarding advancements reopened the debate regarding the black-

listed professors, and the Faculty Council decided to put on open competition no advancement positions for them. This decision generated various resentments, and in April 3, 1990, a general assembly of the teaching staff was convened, with the aim to discuss the competition for the advancement positions and the composition of the academic committees which were to assess whether the candidates fulfilled the requirements for the opened positions. The discussions were long and often confusing, with several of the black-listed staff refusing to accept the possible transformation of their lecturer positions in conferențiar positions because they feared that the academic committees nominated by the Faculty Council would then declare them unfit and thus eliminate them from the institution. Therefore, several colleagues tried to comfort them by acknowledging their academic worthiness, and in several cases such acknowledgements were even voted with few or no abstentions (AFIUB). In spite of this conciliatory mood, the general assembly had in fact no decision-power, and at the end the advancements operated in spring 1990 reflected the will of the council, with three lecturers advancing directly to full professor, other four lecturers to conferențiar, one teaching assistant to lecturer, and two deputy teaching assistants to the status of full teaching assistant.

Frustrated by the fact that the institution continued to function and even prosper in spite of them being boycotted by the students, some of the black-listed professors tried to rally support from outside the faculty. This support was limited, in spite of the fact that several articles which criticized the situation of the Faculty of History appeared in various newspapers, instigated and/or signed especially by Gheorghe Iscriu and Vasile Budrigă. The attempts to obtain the intervention of higher authorities also failed, and the fact that the University Senate discussed more than once the fate of the black-listed professors (Udrescu, 2011: 90-104) did not help them to improve their position. A more serious attempt to change the power relations in the Faculty of History occurred in the second half of June 1990, immediately after the miner invasion in Bucharest, when five professors resigned from the Faculty Council, and the black-listed professors asked for snap elections (AFIUB), hoping to eliminate from the governing body the professors who were close to the students. This endeavor also failed after the rector and vice-rectors convened the members of the council for a meeting and persuaded the resigning professors to resume their membership; thus, the Faculty Council resumed its activity on July 4, 1990, and continued to function till 1992, with a solid majority formed by the representatives of the students and a number of professors allied with the students. This

episode highlights the support of the university leadership for dean Zoe Petre and the coalition lead by her, as well as the neutrality of the ministry of education, which refused to become part of the internal conflict inside the Faculty of History.

Outcomes of the conflict

No one of the black-listed professors was fired because of being declared incompetent by the students. All of them continued to receive their wages for the whole period when they could not teach due to the student boycott. Nevertheless, the situation of the black-listed professors was certainly uncomfortable, and some of them decided to put an end to it. From the nine professors who were on the final “black list” of January 1990, two (Vlad Matei and Zorin Zamfir) had reached the retiring age and, considering that the Faculty Council would reject any attempt to continue activity, retired. Maria Totu, wife of previous Politburo member Ioan Totu, who was convicted in early 1990 and later died in prison, made use of the opportunity for early retirement, while Doina Smârcea decided to continue her activity as teacher in a Bucharest high school. Besides, other members of the teaching staff, who were not on the students’ “black list”, either chose early retirement (Elisabeta Alecu and Gheorghe Z. Ionescu) or changed profession and abandoned completely the education system (Ioan Bălgrădean). Thus, by the end of the university year 1989/1990 the Faculty of History “lost” 7 from 29 professors, i.e. almost a quarter of its teaching staff.

Nevertheless, five of the black-listed professors were resilient enough to continue being part of the institution at the start of the academic year 1990/1991. The student boycott continued, and the students of the Faculty of History were supported also by the Student League at the level of the University of Bucharest (AFIUB, letter from October 6, 1990). The boycotted professors continued to receive wages even if they did not teach, but their professional perspectives were quite bleak. It is true, most of them were members of the chair of Romanian History, headed by Ioan Scurtu, who tried to protect them, but any advancement suggested by the chair needed the approval of the Faculty Council, which successfully blocked the attempt to advance Adina Berciu from the position of teaching assistant to lecturer. Under these circumstances, in 1991 two other black-listed professors left the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest, Gheorghe Iscriu going to the newly-established private university “Dimitrie Cantemir”, and Adina Berciu to the National

Archives, before returning in 1997 to another Faculty of the University of Bucharest. Nicolae Ciachir retired in 1993, when he reached 65 years, as well as Constantin Corbu and Titu Georgescu. At the same time, the situation evolved. The generations of students changed, their numbers increased, and other issues than the historical conflict of 1989-1990 became more important. Gheorghe Ioniță managed to put an end to the student boycott by agreeing to teach history didactics, a discipline which no other professor wanted to teach. Later, students started to attend also other courses of his, and even Vasile Budrigă managed to attract a few students, who nevertheless discontinued to attend his courses after the first disappointing meetings (Interview 1). So, one can say that the resilience of the remaining two professors from the nine who had been black-listed in January 1990 finally overcame the student boycott. Nevertheless, both Ioniță and Budrigă remained marginal in the massively changing institution, and were only half-heartedly accepted by the students and by the majority of the renewed faculty. Vasile Budrigă died in 1999, and Gheorghe Ioniță retired in 2002, when he reached the age of 65 and the Faculty Council refused his request to continue activity. With this last act, the conflict of 1989-1990 became just history.

Yet there were also other consequences of this conflict. Many of the contested professors became pillars of the new private universities in Bucharest (e.g. the “Dimitrie Cantemir” University, the “Spiru Haret” University, or the “Hyperion” University), or of the new state university in Târgoviște. At the same time, the gradual removal of a large part of the teaching staff which had been active before the December Revolution of 1989 combined with the quantitative expansion of the Faculty of History (which more than doubled its number of study places in 1990, while the study program was temporarily extended from 4 to 5 teaching years) and provided unexpected career opportunities (i.e. teaching positions) for both a small number of new graduates and various outsiders who previously had either been active in research institutes or had taught in secondary education institutions. The renewal of the faculty was massive, and by the mid-1990s the number of the teaching staff had more than doubled in comparison with 1989. The gains were significant also in quality, with several respected scholars joining the faculty (e.g. Dinu C. Giurescu, Alexandru Vulpe, Petre Alexandrescu, Andrei Pippidi, Mihai Retegan), while others were active as associated teaching staff. The curriculum also changed significantly, incorporating more specialized lectures and seminars, and allowing for student options among these. Therefore, one can say that the student contestation of a large part of

the existing teaching staff in 1989/1990 helped to clear the way for a significant improvement of the curriculum and of the learning opportunities, and thus contributed to the progress of the Faculty of History.

Significance of the conflict

The challenge of a significant number of professors by the students has shocked the *habitus* of the university, as well as the way large sections of the society conceived the relations inside the education system. There are several patterns of remembrance, which try to explain the genesis of the conflict.

The contested professors, as well as their allies inside the University, argued that the whole episode was a politically motivated purge and that the students were manipulated by a small group of professors who wanted to eliminate rivals and conquer power inside the Faculty of History. For example, Vasile Budrigă wrote in a nationalist magazine in 1991: „The new „revolutionary” leadership, elected by manipulating the leaders of Students League, whom it simply „instigated” against professors of Romanian nationality [...] placed on a „blacklist” [...] Mrs. Dean, Zoe Petre-Condurache, is followed closely by the two axtails - Dr. Stelian Brezeanu and Dr. Lucian Boia [...] former Communist Romanian Party secretaries, who cut into flesh when it comes to professors of Romanian nationality and defense of their own interests” (Budrigă, 1991: 3). Another member of the faculty also focuses on the role of professor Zoe Petre, arguing even that her birth was one of the most fateful events in the history of Romania: “I am not malicious if I state that August 23 was thrice a nefarious day in the history of Romania: first, in 1939 when the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was concluded, which led to the amputation of the country; second, August 23, 1944, when the establishment of communism started with the entry of the Red Army in Romanian territory; last, third, August 23, 1940, when Zoe Petre was born” (Ciachir, 2001: 18). According to the main opponent of Zoe Petre in the 1990s, the students were “gathered during the night in the Faculty, treated with coffee and whisky, and instructed how to act the next day” (Scurtu, 2000: 18). So, according to this narrative, the challenge of professors was part of an anti-national conspiracy, stimulated with the use of imported beverages. Such tropes were used widely in the Romanian public sphere in 1989-1990 (and even much later) in order to put the blame on various groups which challenged various forms of traditional authority. The analytical limits of such conspiracy theories are obvious.

Another line of interpretation puts the conflict in the context of lustration and transitional justice. The concept of Transitional Justice is used to encompass a variety of forms and stages of cleansing a society after the overthrow of totalitarian regimes, which emerge when revolutionaries, lacking usable legal procedures and well-defined authorities, implement ad-hoc institutions and judicial processes, based on their own criteria (see Kritz, 1995: 293; McAdams, 1997: 193-196, Groșescu, Ursachi, 2009; Stan, 2009). The idea of lustration was put on the public agenda in several former communist countries, “as the main device of “decommunisation”, that is, of cleansing the public sphere of newly democratized society of those who have shown their utter disregard for the values of democracy and liberty, while suspension (or reinstatement) of statutes of limitation is seen as the removal of self-serving immunity conferred upon themselves by the perpetrators of crimes” (Elster, 1998: 7-48; Sadurski, 2005: 3). In Romania, it came to the forefront in March 1990, in the context of the political conflict between the National Salvation Front of president Ion Iliescu and a variety of opposition parties and civil society organizations. The main document which asked for political lustration was the article 8 of the Timișoara Proclamation (March 12, 1990), which proposed: “the electoral law should deny the former party workers and Security officers the right to be nominated as candidates on any list for the first three running legislatures. Their absence from public life is absolutely necessary until the situation has been settled and national reconciliation has been effected” (The Timișoara Proclamation). Integrating the Faculty of History conflict in the broader framework of the lustration debate and of the political conflict between alleged neo-communists and anti-communists is intellectually tempting. Quite more, such a line can find arguments also in the narratives of some of the black-listed professors, who consider that they were challenged on political grounds, because they had cooperated with the communist regime and because they were left-minded intellectuals (see especially Ioniță, 2007: 188-191). Yet, there are several objections against such an interpretation. First of all, the timing of the events. The first black-list was issued on December 28, 1989, long before the national discussion regarding lustration. Second, the idea of a political black-listing does not appear either in the documents, nor in the records of the Faculty of History. The first black-list states merely that the professors “should be discussed for professional incompetence” (AFIUB). This insistence on professional competence/incompetence is consistent both with the general principles championed by the League of Students

in December 1989 and with the general mood of the public discourses in the aftermath of the December Revolution in Romania (Siani-Davies 2005: 215-217), which was gradually replaced in 1990 by the political divide between the followers of Ion Iliescu and his opponents who united under the flag of anti-communism. Of course, one may argue that the wording of the documents reflects only the rhetoric of the students, and not their actual motives. Therefore, it makes sense to analyze the composition of the black-list, considering both the people included and those who are absent. Gheorghe Ioniță and Doina Smârcea had taught the history of the communist party, while Maria Totu was the wife of a major communist dignitary. Yet, the most prominent party dignitary in the faculty was at that moment Ștefan Ștefănescu, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, who was not black-listed by the students. Some of the black-listed professors tried to turn the students against him by bringing quotes from Ștefănescu’s pro-Ceaușescu texts, and also published an open appeal to strip him of the quality of Academy member, but the students refused to comply and continued to attend his courses. The fact that the students had not black-listed Ștefănescu was one of the main arguments of articles published in staunchly anti-communist newspapers that the student challenge against a part of the professors was illegitimate and damaging (Andreiță, 1990). Other significant absences (Ioan Scurtu, secretary of the party organization at faculty level; Titu Georgescu, former vice-rector and deputy director of the Party History Institute), as well as the fact that some of the black-listed professors had not distinguished themselves through obedience towards the regime also indicate that the black-list was not based on political criteria. In fact, the conflict inside the Faculty of History of the University of Bucharest did not fit into the emerging political divides of post-communist Romania. While Zoe Petre and the Student League positioned themselves in opposition to the NSF and Ion Iliescu, the black-listed professors were supported by articles in major opposition newspapers like „Dreptatea” and „România liberă”, and only in the second half of 1990 managed to publish attacks in pro-government press, before shifting to the extreme nationalist weekly „România Mare” and alike publications. Therefore, labeling the black-list at the Bucharest Faculty of History as a politically motivated purge and/or integrating it in the framework of anti-communist lustration is both inaccurate and misleading.

Yet, ideology was not absent in the arguments of the history students against some of their professors. Besides accusations of mere professional incompetence (e.g. the teaching assistant who taught auxiliary sciences was

accused of the fact that she did not master any relevant paleography), several of the black-listed professors were accused that either in their teaching or in their writings they distorted historical truth by overemphasizing the national dimension. For example, the students accused Gheorghe D. Iscru of phantasizing opportunistically and being ferociously nationalist (Andreiță, 1990), *inter alia* because he tried to teach them that the national conscience was already formed at the ancient Dacians, and insisted that the peasant uprising led by Horea in 1784 was a modern revolution, putting the Transylvanian Romanians 5 years ahead of the French Revolution (Iscru developed many of these nationalistic ideas in subsequent publications – see especially Iscru 1995a, Iscru 1995b, Iscru 1997; for the discussions regarding 1784, see the analysis of Verdery, 1991). Basically, the students argued that Iscru, as well as other professors (Gheorghe Ioniță, Maria Totu, Vasile Budrigă) had tried to teach them the most blatant excesses of the national-communist ideology promoted by Ceaușescu and his cronies. The rejection of national-communism by most of the students of the Faculty of History in 1989-1990 needs some background information in order to be understood. The students of the Faculty of History were a rather small group of young people (about 50 per year, so around 200 in total), who had been selected through a fierce admission competition with large numbers of candidates per study-place. Many of them were intelligent, hard-working and passionate. They read not only the books suggested for classes, but also other publications available in libraries, in bookstores or in private collections. The course of general historiography, which was taught in the first semester by Lucian Boia, ended with the French School of “*Annales*”, which was widely respected at the time. Even more, several books written by “*Annales*” historians on medieval and early modern Europe had been published in Romanian versions, especially at the Meridiane Publishing House, and were considered by the students as masterpieces of historical scholarship. Such standards may help to understand why the more vocal students were so critical to the rude versions of the national-communist vulgate delivered by some of their professors, and why they so easily labeled these professors as “incompetent”.

We may conclude that the conflict at the Bucharest Faculty of History between on one side most of the students and a group of professors who were more open towards Western-influenced approaches to history and on the other side the promoters of nationalism anticipated the main historiographical conflict of the late 1990s

(Murgescu, 2003, 42-53), which started with Lucian Boia’s approach to deconstruct the myths of Romanian history (Boia, 1997) and continued with the massive counter-offensive of nationalist-minded historians (Pop, 2002).

Similar contestations of professors occurred in 1989-1990 also in other Romanian institutions of higher education and even in high schools (Teodorescu, 2016: 244-245, 249). Nevertheless, the situation at the Bucharest Faculty of History was somehow extreme in three respects: the magnitude of the challenge, which aimed at about one third of the existing faculty, the fact that professional criteria prevailed over political ones in the student assessment of professors, and the capacity of the student body to pragmatically interact with a part of the teaching staff and to form a coalition which acquired the majority in the Faculty Council, ruled the institution and shaped the improvement of the functioning of the Bucharest Faculty of History.

Conclusions

This case-study highlights also the fact that the dichotomy between ‘normal’, ‘business-as-usual’, quality-oriented teaching evaluation by students, and politically motivated purges does not account for the whole diversity of situations in which students assess critically their professors. Obviously, the black-listing of professors in 1989-1990 was not based on a detailed analysis of an officially established set of criteria. It was a syncretical assessment, as it often occurs in small communities. Yet, it was founded on professional grounds, it represented a major institutional innovation, and opened the way for faculty renewal and for a significant improvement of the teaching process. At the end of this paper, we may just speculate that such a ‘revolutionary’ model might not be just a special form of ‘transitional justice’ in higher education, but also one of the possible paths towards establishing student assessment of professors.

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