

“OUR STRUGGLE FROM IGHIU” – PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, RURAL ELECTORATE AND ROMANIAN NATIONALISM IN A TRANSYLVANIAN CONSTITUENCY (1905–1910)*

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes – from a micro-historical perspective – the electoral dynamics in the Magyarigen/Ighiu constituency (Alsó-Fehér county, Transylvania) in the period of 1905–1910. The research captures the strong mobilization of the Romanian electorate with the emergence of a nationalist candidate, but also the limits of national solidarity and of ethnic-based electoral involvement at the rural level. It highlights the electoral tactics, abuses and administrative pressures as well as their impact on voting behaviour, demonstrating that the success of the ruling party depended not only on fraud, but also on the dynamics of absenteeism and ambivalent or undecided voters. The relationship between nationalist discourse and electoral mobilization is questioned, suggesting the need for a nuanced approach to the social, professional and identity constraints that shaped the electoral choices of the time, including those behaviours that fall into the analytical category of “indifference,” whether national or political.

Keywords: parliamentary elections, Transylvania, rural voters, nationalism, political indifference.

* This study was published in the framework of the project UEFISCDI PN-IV-P1-PCE-2023-1202. Intricate Entanglements: Associational life, Nation-building and Democracy in Transylvania. The Romanian Case (18th Century to 1920s). The associated dataset can be accessed at <https://opendata.opensciencce.ubbcluj.ro/datasets/knvfcpv2x8/2> [accessed: 24th October 2025].

INTRODUCTION

Alexandru Vaida Voevod had been one of the most important Romanian politicians of the first half of the 20th century, to whom the historiography has paid special attention. This heightened visibility is due both to the significant public roles he held throughout his life, and to the considerable volume of ego-historical sources he had left to posterity.

Prior to 1918, Vaida Voevod was actively involved in the political movements of Romanian nationalism as a student. He was one of the prominent leaders of the Romanian National Party in Transylvania and Hungary (RNP) and held three consecutive terms as a member of the Hungarian Parliament between 1905 and 1918. He was involved in Franz Ferdinand's Belvedere group, representing the political interests of Romanians in Hungary and displaying strong nationalist convictions, his firm positions sometimes even leading to physical altercations in the Parliament. In 1918 he was one of the most important figures in the Transylvanian Romanians' achievement of ethnic self-determination. After an upward political trajectory, which included representing Romania at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and serving as Prime Minister (1919–1920), his differences with the leaders of the RNP led him down a radicalized nationalist path. Although he remained prominent on the political scene, his influence waned after the 1920s, and at the end of his life, in early communist years, he found himself in a forced residence.¹

This article, however, is not about Vaida Voevod, but focuses on one of the constituencies in which he won his parliamentary mandate, during the period of his candidacy, and the mentions of him on the following pages reflect only his involvement as a candidate for a parliamentary seat. Although he provided much of the primary source material under analysis, Vaida Voevod is not the main actor in the present analytical endeavour. In fact, the central actor is not an individual, but a collective one: the voters of the electoral constituency of Ighiu/Magyarigen, located in the county of Alsó-Fehér (central Transylvania), in the period of 1905–1910. During these years, Alexandru Vaida Voevod had run for a parliamentary seat in that constituency three times, winning once (1906) and being defeated twice (1905 and 1910) by Hungarian candidates representing the government parties, by relatively small margins. After each of those two electoral failures, Vaida Voevod and his campaign team published a booklet describing in detail the electoral campaign and the conduct of the elections, including nominal lists of Romanian voters, who represented the majority of the constituency's electorate, and their electoral choices: vote for Vaida, vote for his

¹ Biographies (selective): L. Maior, *Alexandru Vaida-Voevod între Belvedere și Versailles (însemnări, memorii, scrisori)*, Cluj-Napoca 1993; M. Racovițan, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod între Memorand și Trianon (1892–1920)*, Sibiu 2000; F. Salvan, H. Salcă, *Dr. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, europeanul 1872–1920*, Brașov 2002; I.A. German, *Alexandru Vaida Voevod și Francisc Ferdinand de Habsburg*, București 2021; *Alexandru Vaida Voevod și Marea Unire: Repere istorice*, ed. M. Vaida Voevod, Cluj-Napoca 2018. In Polish: L. Maior, *Alexandru Vaida-Voevod. Między dwoma światami*, trans. by I.A. Diaconu Mureșan, Cluj-Napoca 2017.

opponent or no-show. This detailed account of the electoral process is the starting point of our analysis, since in its absence, archival and journalistic sources allow for a reconstruction of the events, a few nominal landmarks, but not a detailed analysis of the electorate and its choices.

Based on the two brochures, supplemented with information extracted from the press of the time and from memoirs, this article aims to analyze the electoral process in the aforementioned constituency. Given that the official primary sources (e.g., election minutes, nominal elections rolls for the studied period, post-election official reports) are completely lacking for Ighiu, and are usually a scarcity for Transylvania in general, having a nominal evidence of hundreds of voters and their choices provides a rare opportunity for a micro-historical dive into the grassroots mechanisms of parliamentary elections and voters' choices in that region. The analysis covers, among other things, the way in which the rural population exercised its franchise, the importance of the ethnic factor and nationalist propaganda in the formation of voting options, the legal and illegal electoral tactics of the time, as well as a brief discussion of the applicability of the concept of “national indifference” in this electoral case study.

ADMINISTRATIVE, GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Ighiu/Magyarigen was a sprawling constituency in the Alsó-Fehér county in central Transylvania, which functioned with an unchanged structure between 1878 and 1918. Its territory covered the central and north-western part of the county, with two geographical sub-areas: a hilly and sub-mountainous one, and a mountainous one – the latter with numerous hamlets and settlements scattered on hills and plateaus. It was made up of 34 localities in the administrative districts of Ighiu, Vințu de Jos/Alvinc and Roșia Montană/Verespatak.² In 1905, one of the Romanian nationalist newspapers noted: “The constituency of Ighiu is one of the most unfairly cut out. Romanian voters from the remote mountain villages have to come a day and a half’s journey to Ighiu to vote.”³ This contorted electoral geography was typical of many constituencies in Hungary after the administrative reform of 1876, and was frequently criticized even by contemporaries, who argued that it was designed in such a way as to favor the ruling party by allowing electoral manipulation.⁴

According to the 1900 census, 43,034 of its inhabitants spoke Romanian as their first language (93.3%), 2741 Hungarian (6%), 222 German and 107 other languages

² I. Szivák, *Az Országgyűlési képviselőválasztás és curiai bíraskodás codexe – közjogi anyaggyűjtemény*, Budapest 1901, pp. 614–615.

³ *Gazeta Transilvaniei* (Braşov) 1905, no. 8, p. 2.

⁴ J. Pál, “Parliament and the Political System in Hungary During the Dualist Period” [in:] *Parliamentary Elections in Eastern Hungary and Transylvania (1865–1918)*, eds. J. Pál et al., Berlin 2018, pp. 35–40.

(0.7% in total).⁵ The data does not change substantially in 1910, when the census recorded 46,429 inhabitants, of which 42,809 (92%) spoke Romanian as their main language.⁶ In 1905 it had 870 registered voters, of which 537 Romanians (61.7%),⁷ and in 1910, 974 – of which 620 were Romanians (63.6%).⁸ The difference between the demographic weight of Romanians and the percentage of Romanian voters was significant and characterized many more constituencies with a Romanian demographic majority in Transylvania and Hungary. The situation was broadly similar to that of the early 1880s. A questionnaire of the Romanian National Party in 1881 identified 526 voters there, of whom 321 were Romanians (61%) and 205 Hungarians (39%; the latter also included Jews, whose everyday language was Hungarian).⁹

Between 1878 and 1910, 11 parliamentary elections were held in the constituency: 10 general elections and one by-election (1901). Voter turnout before 1905 was generally low: 56% (1896) and 49% (1901). Between 1896 and 1905 the constituency's representative in Parliament was Gyula Werner (1862–1926), a civil servant and writer. A native of Ónod (Borsod County, northern Hungary), Gyula Werner was a graduate in political and administrative sciences and he was a sheriff (*szolgabíró/pretor*) before becoming a Member of Parliament, an official of the county orphanage see, and then secretary of the Lord Lieutenant of Alsó-Fehér County.¹⁰ As a politician he was affiliated with the Liberal Party, which was in power in Hungary at the time, and was elected by acclamation in the two rounds of elections in 1901.¹¹

Until 1905 there were no Romanian nationalist candidates in the constituency, because the electoral tactic of the RNP was passivism. The rationale behind this option, initiated in 1869 and reconfirmed in 1881, was that, by officially participating in the parliamentary elections, the RNP would *de jure* recognize the Dualist Compromise of 1867, and with it the loss of Transylvania's autonomy. From 1905 onwards, the RNP officially re-entered electoral activity and placed candidates in several dozen constituencies in which it considered that there was a realistic chance of success.¹²

⁵ *A magyar korona országainak 1900. évi népszámlálása 1. A népesség általános leírása községenként*, Budapest 1902, pp. 372–378.

⁶ E.A. Varga, *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája, Addatár. 4. kötet, Fehér*, <https://www.kia.hu/kiakonyvtar/konyvtar/erdely/vallas.htm> [accessed: 20th June 2025].

⁷ Calculations after: *Lupta de la Ighiu: Dată în ziua de 26 ianuarie 1905 în jurul d-lui Alexandru de Vajda-Voevod pentru a zmulge cercul electoral din mână străină și a'l cuceri pentru un deputat cu program național român*, Orăștie 1905, pp. 19–32.

⁸ Calculations after: *Lupta noastră de la Ighiu, în 1 iunie 1910. Alegerea de deputat*, Orăștie 1910, pp. 38–52.

⁹ Romanian National Historical Central Archives in Bucharest, Fund: Romanian National Committee, file 2, s. 5.

¹⁰ “Werner Gyula” [in:] József Szinnyei, *Magyar írók élete és munkái*, Budapest 2000, digital ed.: <https://mek.oszk.hu/03600/03630/html/w/w30513.htm> [accessed: 28th June 2025].

¹¹ *Parliamentary Elections...*, p. 109.

¹² The situation in 1905 and the electoral and parliamentary activity between 1905–1910 are analyzed by S. Mândruț, *Mișcarea națională și activitatea parlamentară a deputaților Partidului Național Român din Transilvania*, Oradea 1995. A synthetic study: O. Iudean, A. Onojescu, “Politics, Nationalism and Parliamentarianism: Romanian Representatives in the Budapest Parliament (1861–1918),” *Transylvanian Review* 2013, vol. 22(4), pp. 3–16.

The electoral events that we aim to analyze thus took place in a constituency with a predominantly Romanian population (over 90%), which was not proportionally represented in the electorate, but which has a comfortable majority (over 60%). However, no Romanian candidates took part in the elections between 1878 and 1905, the incumbent MP was a former county clerk supported by the ruling party, the population was of relatively low social and economic status, the illiteracy rate was very high, and the geography was difficult (scattered localities, mountain roads). Even under those conditions, the entry of the official RNP candidate onto the scene, who was also a well-known public figure of the Romanian national movement, stimulated voters' interest, with voter turnout in the elections between 1905 and 1910 reaching 85–87%, well above the average in Hungary at the time.

The electoral system in Hungary has been thoroughly researched. We provide in what follows a concise overview meant to support the analysis, based on the most recent literature.¹³ In Hungary, the franchise was rooted in the legislation of the year 1848, with differences persisting between Hungary proper and Transylvania. At the time of the revolution it was liberal and progressive but remaining almost unchanged until the First World War placed it among the most restrictive electoral systems in Europe. Attempts at modernization, such as Law XIV of 1913, and Law XVII of 1918 remained far from universal franchise and were rendered ineffective by the wartime measures anyway. The right to vote was census-based and available only to men. The census was based on several criteria, of which at least one had to be met: value of property (land, house or capital), tax threshold (8 Gulden without the head-tax), conducting trade or having at least one apprentice, educational attainment and nobility – this latter category being available only in Transylvania and only for those who had enjoyed it prior to the 1870s (the so called “old right,” whose pool of beneficiaries diminished naturally due to biological factors). Property- and tax-based census were rather high and were kept higher in Transylvania than in Hungary proper, which was the main reason for the difference in share of voters in the overall population: only about 3.2% of Transylvania's population could vote, compared to roughly 6% in Hungary. All higher education graduates enjoyed franchise. So did the priests and primary school teachers (rural and urban alike) – this provision basically forged the backbone of the nationalist grassroots electoral agents, moreover as many of the primary school teachers (which otherwise would have had a hard time meeting the census criteria) were still employed by the confessional schools, thus tied to the church-backed nationalism. There was also a fifth category of voters, specific only to Transylvania: voters “by chimney,” i.e., in communes where nobody had the right to vote, two voters were delegated for every 100 households.

Voting took place in the main locality of the constituency (which was not always its geographical center) and travel to the voting place could sometimes take more than one day. The voting procedures made the elections neither free nor secret: voters

¹³ J. Pap, *Parliamentary Representatives and Parliamentary Representation in Hungary (1848–1918)*, Frankfurt am Main 2017, pp. 129–153; J. Pál, “Parliament and the Political System...,” pp. 25–30; J. Pap, “The Development of Representative Suffrage in Hungary in the mid-19th Century,” *Studia Universitatis Cibiniensis. Series Historia* 2018, vol. 15, pp. 137–158.

had to declare their choices aloud before the electoral commission, which made them vulnerable to political pressure and bribery. Literacy was of no importance but emphasis was placed on formalities which allowed the commission to selectively cancel votes (e.g., if the name spoken by a voter did not match perfectly the registered name of the candidate).

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The author has mentioned earlier that the main sources for this article are the two booklets published by Vaida Voevod after the electoral defeats of 1905 and 1910, as well as the lack of official sources. Unfortunately, the author has not identified a similar booklet published after the 1906 victory, which would have helped to analyze the electoral choices more accurately. Incidentally, somewhat strangely, the 1906 election is also much less well covered in the press of the time. The brochures contain a description of the electoral campaign, the voting process (the most detailed section) and the participants (only the lists of Romanian voters, as the brochure was primarily addressed to the Romanian public). The focus, in the tradition of the nationalist political literature of the time, falls on the efforts to mobilize the electorate on ethnic bases; on the legal and especially illegal impediments raised by the ruling party through the administrative apparatus; and on the abuses and acts of violence during the election. The brochures are full of ethnic labels, which, at least in the case of those identified as Romanians, there are no reasons to question genealogically (it was public information whose falsity would have generated a response, if not a scandal, at the time), and there are no sources available to question them culturally, so the base premise is that those nominated in them can be considered, and did consider themselves, ethnically Romanian.

The lists of voters published in the two booklets were extracted and checked; the names were standardized and then comparatively analyzed to identify the persons of Romanian ethnicity present in both elections. Given the variations in the way names were recorded, even for some given names or surnames considered common, where identity between 1905 and 1910 could not be established with certainty, these cases were treated as separate individuals.

Another important source of information was the press. All three elections were covered journalistically by correspondence from the field, detailing the stages of the election, the national heroes and the “traitors,” thus the information in the pamphlets could be corroborated in part by that in the press, at least where existing newspaper collections allowed this.¹⁴

A third source of information are the memoirs of Alexandru Vaida Voevod, in which he describes in some detail the 1905 electoral campaign, makes some references

¹⁴ For example, the collection of the most radical Romanian newspaper in Hungary, *Tribuna*, has gaps exactly during the 1910 elections (first half of June).

to 1910, but completely ignores the 1906 one.¹⁵ From a psycho-historical perspective, one would say that failures seem to have marked the political actors more strongly, and thus generated more sources than electoral victories. As the volume of published material is quite large, amounting to well over 100 printed pages, the study will not focus on each election, but will comparatively follow their main stages (electoral campaign, voting day, and the subsequent reactions) and will try to divert the analysis towards the electoral choices of Romanian voters.

ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

Election campaigns for the parliamentary elections in Hungary usually started with the closing of the previous Parliament and gradually intensified until the run-up to the elections. The situation of candidates was quite fluid, with “official” candidates being announced even on the day of the vote, before the casting of votes started, which led to the flourishing circulation of various names of possible candidates. Of these, some did not even really intend to run, others dropped out on the way (sometimes selling their votes-to-be to another candidate), and others withdrew on the eve or even on the election day, again following deals with better-placed opponents.¹⁶

In 1905, for example, the newspaper *Gazeta Transilvaniei* was writing:

In the Ighiu constituency we know that the ‘electoral committee’ (of the RNP, n.n.) has nominated Dr. Vaida Voevod. ‘Magyarország’ and other Hungarian newspapers now report that ‘in this constituency the Romanian voters have grouped around Dr. L. Nestor, a lawyer in Blaj/Balázsfalva, who has only just recently become a candidate’. The government candidate is Gyula Werner, in whose favor no stone rests unmoved. The independentist Schubert also runs in this constituency.¹⁷

Lawyer Laurențiu Nestor had never run for a parliamentary seat, and Ferenc Schubert withdrew before election day. However, the rumor initiated by *Magyarország* seems to have spread and caused reactions in the radical Romanian nationalist press:

The national candidate from the Ighiu constituency, the worthy Dr. Alexandru Vaida Voevod, kicked Werner Gyula, Tisza Pista’s satellite, out of the constituency. Now the government has sent to Ighiu an unfortunate Romanian from Blaj, the lawyer Nestor (Pilu), to beg for the votes of Romanians against the ardent nationalist, Mr. Vaida Voevod.¹⁸

Leaving aside the fact that Vaida Voevod had not “kicked out” anyone from the constituency (on the contrary, he was about to lose the elections), the placement of

¹⁵ A. Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, vol. 1, preface, ed., notes and comments A. Șerban, Cluj-Napoca 1994, pp. 153–160, 167–171.

¹⁶ A. Gerő, *The Hungarian Parliament (1867–1918): A Mirage of Power*, New York 1997, pp. 57–105; J. Pál, “Parliament and the Political System...,” pp. 30–35.

¹⁷ *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 1905, nr. 1, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Tribuna* (Arad) 1905, nr. 3, p. 3.

lawyer Nestor in the government camp also raises questions, as in 1907 he is mentioned among those who speak at a Romanian nationalist assembly against the Ap-ponyi school laws.¹⁹ Thus, not only were the candidacies fluid, but the information circulated in the press was often erroneous or deliberately misleading, but at least some of the public certainly believed it to be true.

In 1906, the information on the electoral campaign in Ighiu was much more scarce, and much sketchier, announcing only Alexandru Vaida Voevod running as a candidate in the election.²⁰ Not even the radical nationalist newspapers insist on the details, probably because, as the long-governing Liberal Party dissolved and the challenger was from the Independence Party and lacked the support of the entire administrative apparatus (which remained attached to a particular party during the respective elections), victory was considered certain. In contrast to Gyula Werner, Pál Jeszenszky – the 1906 Hungarian candidate – came from what today we would call a “civil society” and lacked the support of the local administration. At the time of his candidacy, he was a secretary of the Hungarian Agricultural Association and an agricultural expert involved in numerous cooperative projects, but without strong links with state institutions.²¹ The election result (444 votes for Vaida Voevod vs. 275 votes for Jeszenszky) only confirmed these expectations.²² Instead, the attention of the press was primarily focused on another constituency in which Vaida Voevod was running, in Șomcuta Mare/Nagysomkut, where he was finally defeated by Count Pál Teleki.

In 1910, the Ighiu candidacy again received increased journalistic attention. Popular gatherings were mentioned just before the start of the candidate’s official campaign,²³ and correspondence was published accusing the government candidate’s election agents of “terrorism.”²⁴ The optimism was similar to that of 1905 – when the Romanian press took Vaida’s victory for certain weeks before the elections²⁵ – which in hindsight was an ominous sign.

As in 1905, the candidates were uncertain. Rumours circulated names of candidates who had never made it to the polls (Aurel Simon, a Romanian-speaking pharmacist from Szatmár, on the Hungarian independentists’ side),²⁶ and even the candidacy of the main opponent was questioned: Pál Szász, son of the Lord Lieutenant of Alsó-Fehér County and former electoral agent for Gyula Werner in 1905. At the same time, a potential “traitor” surfaces again, this time Nicolae Pop – financial official in Bihar County. Interestingly, similar to Laurențiu Nestor, he too had no dubious political antecedents, the correspondent himself admitting that “it would be very painful if a man like Mr. Pop, who until now has been well known both as a civil servant

¹⁹ *Dimineața* (Bucharest) 1907, nr. 1098, p. 3.

²⁰ *Telegraful Român* (Sibiu) 1906, nr. 39, p. 2.

²¹ “Jeszenszky Pál” [in:] *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*, <https://mek.oszk.hu/00300/00355/html/ABC06879/07058.htm> [accessed: 12th July 2025].

²² *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 1906, nr. 86, p. 1.

²³ *Tribuna* 1910, nr. 86, p. 7.

²⁴ *Tribuna* 1910, nr. 104, p. 4; *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 1910, nr. 110, p. 1.

²⁵ *Telegraful Român* 1905, nr. 3, p. 1.

²⁶ *Tribuna* 1910, nr. 37, p. 3.

and as a Romanian, for the sake of the Munkapárt,²⁷ were to inflict a wound on the Romanian nation, of which until now we knew he was a part.”²⁸ The journalistic scenario is therefore quite similar to the 1905 one, the roles are the same, only the characters differ – except for Vaida Voevod.

Comparing the journalistic coverage of the three periods prior to the voting days, it can be concluded that they were characterized by a moderate optimism, largely based on the electoral majority of Romanians combined with a rather high public profile of the candidate. Not everyone was equally optimistic,²⁹ but this was probably the majority opinion judging by both the press and memoirs. Speculation about the candidates highlights the limits of information, the ever present rumours, but also possible strategies to mobilize/radicalize the electorate by nominating potential “traitors” – Romanians supported by the government to run against their ethnic kin. The same image of the danger posed by Romanians supporting Hungarian political parties is explicitly reflected on the first page of the 1905 electoral brochure and is thus included from the outset among the justifications for failure: “[...] faced with the legions of [government, n.n.] agents and courtiers – the most dangerous were those of our blood!”³⁰

What is most interesting, however, is that the sources covering the pre-election phase almost completely lack references to the bulk of electoral actors, those in whom the nation’s political hopes rested: the voters. Their presence, in the few cases in which it can be identified, is in the form of a collective character, carved as either an ethnic (“Romanians”) or as a regional group (“Moşii” – inhabitants of mountain villages, considered less influenceable by the Hungarians). Groups of opposing voters are also mentioned as collective characters, such as the workers at the factory in Zlatna/Zalatna, compelled by their professional relationship with the factory management to vote for the governmental candidate. Under the circumstances, it is curious and equally telling, that in his memoirs Alexandru Vaida Voevod does not mention any peasant by name. His reference points are priests and teachers, whose names he writes down in the notes that later became the memoirs.³¹ From the point of view of the national elite, as reflected in the press and memoirs, politics was seen as the business of the party leadership and local agents (mostly petty intellectuals), with the role and responsibility of the broad mass of voters considerably diminished. When occurring, the “betrayal” was seen as coming not from the peasants who gave their votes to the candidate of another nationality, but from the agents who made it possible – usually civil servants or renegade priests and teachers.

The condescending attitude towards the rural electorate is also evident from the only more detailed moment whose main actor is a peasant, recounted in Vaida Voevod’s memoirs. When he and the village priest arrive at the peasant’s house, the latter – to welcome the “gentlemen” properly – takes three bottles of beer out of the

²⁷ Nemzeti Munkapárt (The National Party of Work), led by István Tisza.

²⁸ *Tribuna* 1910, nr. 85, p. 6.

²⁹ *Telegraful Român* 1905, nr. 14, p. 58.

³⁰ *Lupta de la Ighiu* [1905], p. 1.

³¹ A. Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, pp. 153–157.

well, which have been left to cool, but he cannot find any clean glasses. Finally, he cleans three glasses found in the kitchen on the spot, using a cloth soaked not in water but in his own saliva to thoroughly wipe away the traces of fly droppings. The lesson of the incident, according to the candidate for the parliamentary seat, was that “we both laughed at this electoral incident, which taught us not to ask for drinks at houses where the wife was absent.”³²

Beyond laughter (the incident has its undeniable savor), however, one glimpses a whole world full of social stereotypes summarized in the paragraph humorously recounted by Vaida, as well as the social imaginary fault line between the middle class (the nationalist elite) and the rural population of the same ethnicity. The limitation of the peasants’ presence in Vaida Voevod’s 1905 electoral memoirs to the aforementioned moment, whose main actor is not even identified by name, says enough about the distance between the two social spaces that were trying to be merged under the nation-building umbrella, but also about the lack of experience of nationalist Romanian politicians in interacting with the electorate. Or, as one of the press correspondents of the time notes with regret: “it comes to be considered that we do not know from our own experience the practice of elections in our happy country – we do not know ourselves well enough – nor the voters [...]”³³

The same memoirs provide a glimpse into how the electoral campaign was organized. Alexandru Vaida Voevod was a figure with public visibility among his fellow countrymen, but without any direct connection to the constituency in which he had been sent to run. Therefore, the entire electoral organization was carried out by the local structures of the RNP, and the first objective was to “introduce” Vaida to the constituents. At that point, the situation was no different from many other cases in Hungary at the time. “Importing” MPs was a massive practice, especially among the ruling party, but not only.³⁴ Vaida himself ran during that period in three constituencies in different parts of Transylvania, which was the only way he managed to ensure a constant presence in the Hungarian Parliament.

As the constituency of Ighiu was geographically divided into two large areas, each of them was managed by a local party leader: priest Ioachim Totoianu from Chişfalău (Mihălţ)/Mihálcfalva for the hill area, and lawyer Laurenţiu Popa from Abrud/Abrudbanya for the mountainous area. Not only the professions, but also the patterns of organization and involvement were different. The Greek-Catholic priest Ioachim Totoianu was more of a landowner, with a fortune accumulated over generations by well-off peasants, and this position, together with that of a priest, led him

³² Ibid., p. 171.

³³ *Telegraful Român* 1905, nr. 14, p. 58.

³⁴ For Transylvania, the import of deputies is discussed in: J. Pál, “‘mind jobban kezd divatba hozatni Erdélybe a Király-hágón túli képviselőjelölti bécsempészés’: Magyarországi képviselők Erdélyben a kiegyezés után,” *Történelmi szemle* (Budapest) 2010, no. 4, pp. 549–561; idem, “Representation of the Transylvanian Towns in the Hungarian Parliament and Town MP’s after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (1866–1875)” [in:] *Elites and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe (1848–1918)*, eds. J. Pál, V. Popovici, Frankfurt am Main 2014, pp. 225–248; idem, “Választók, választási részvétel és választói magatartás Székelyföldön a dualizmus korában,” *Aetas* (Szeged) 2016, no. 1, pp. 45–75.

to become directly involved in the campaign, leading Vaida Voevod through all the villages of the area. Lawyer Laurențiu Pop, jurist and man of office, adopted a different model: "from his office, he led the organization of the communes around Abrud. His authority was quite high. He only made his presence felt once, coming to the assembly in Bucium-Izbita." The role of guides was mainly played by the priests. The distribution was micro-zonal, each one of the zones covering several villages, like the priest Emanuil Beșa from Zlatna area.³⁵

The rhythm was intense: "we roamed 5–10 villages a day." The social hierarchy dictated the order of the visits: "first we went to the priest, the notary and then to the peasant voters." At this first stage, the campaign was based on the rituals of sociability typical of the petty bourgeoisie: the invitation to the house, the serving of alcoholic drinks (from which the candidate soon abstained because of the effects of alcohol: "after the first day of practice I gave up for good to give in to the kind invitation to empty my glass, to say goodbye"), a discussion of principles, followed by the next local notables or the presentation of the program to the voters. Alongside the priests, the relays of this network were schoolteachers, some small local officials (notaries, mayors) and wealthy influential peasants. Visits were made to both supporters and local representatives of the opposing party. The latter ones were done out of politeness, with no hope of gaining any electoral advantage: "among the Hungarian officials, I also visited the director of the state factories, the chief engineer, the Catholic priest and, of course, the head forestry official, who was appointed *ex officio* as chairman of the electoral commission." Usually, these courtesy visits to political opponents also involved an exchange of pleasantries and the toasting of a glass of wine, each one for the camp they supported.³⁶

The campaign was conducted both through public meetings and house-to-house visits led by the local election agent. In scattered mountain villages with few voters, meetings were often held at the parish house. The individual tour did not bypass the local pubs either, with the local agent leading the conversations, which were otherwise fairly perfunctory: "On the main street there was pub by pub, laid like a string of beads. I went into the first one. Father Gomboș: 'Hello! Here is Mr. Candidate for deputy, wanted to do the honor to meet him. We finally have a Romanian to defend our rights.'" The agent's family relations also played an important role in the electoral ritual: "How is the goddaughter? How is she? Well, we'll sit down just for a moment, so we don't disturb your rest."³⁷

On the other hand, the campaign for the government candidate followed the same pattern, the difference being that most of the election agents in this case were local officials (the notary, the mayor), and less often the priest or the schoolteacher. If the nationalist discourse is to be believed, the way Romanian voters were persuaded to vote for the Hungarian candidates was a mixture of pressure and promises, mostly related to small daily problems (taxes, loans at the local banks, fines for various breaches of

³⁵ A. Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, pp. 153–156.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–159.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

municipal regulations, the military status of sons, the right to brew alcohol), and the consequences of this difficult decision involved public and even family opprobrium. Moving towards the voting day, however, the mention of the sums of money paid in hand, on the spot, to the voters, completes and clarifies the motivational spectrum of the “traitors.”³⁸

In this context, it is easy to understand why Vaida Voevod’s landmarks are still the priests and teachers, whose names he wrote down in the notes that later became memoirs.³⁹ The relationship with them was both a national matter and a matter of honor, as they belonged to the same social stratum, unlike the peasant voters. In 1905, the Greek-Catholic archpriest Ioan Montani from Zlatna, having warmly welcomed Vaida Voevod during the election campaign, had voted in the end for Gyula Werner. A year later, in 1906, at the festive dinner after the election victory, although the same archpriest hastened to deliver a speech praising the newly elected deputy, Vaida Voevod explicitly refused to raise a glass with him, twice.⁴⁰ It was not a national matter, Vaida states in his memoirs, but a matter of honor: the fact that the archpriest had broken his word.

ELECTIONS

Most of the information about the actual conduct of the elections in Ighiu comes from the post-election brochures. For this reason, less is known about the 1906 elections than about those of 1905 and 1910. What is essentially different from the campaign accounts is the shift of focus from election agents to voters. Of course, the latter do not disappear completely, and references to the loyal or treacherous priests, mayors and teachers abound. But ordinary voters also find their place a little more often – it is true, rather as a collective character (“the famous Moții,”⁴¹ or nominated by village of residence), than being individually named. In 1905, the situations in which the author of the booklet moves down the social ladder below the schoolteachers to the wealthier peasants in the area, whom he nominates, are those in which the latter had betrayed the cause, either by voting for the Hungarian candidate or by not casting their vote, although they were physically in the locality.⁴²

In retrospect, both brochures narrate the story of an ordinary election day in the Hungary of the time, from the perspective of the opposition (this time – the nationalist opposition). The one from 1910 is much more detailed on how the elections were rigged, but this is because times had also changed, and the pressure was greater than

³⁸ *Lupta noastră de la Ighiu* [1910], pp. 6–10.

³⁹ A. Vaida Voevod, *Memorii*, pp. 153–157.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴¹ *Lupta de la Ighiu* [1905], p. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

in 1905.⁴³ The movement of voters from the villages to the polling center (Ighiu) was done the day before, either by cart or on foot. In 1910 an attempt was even made to block the departure of voters from some mountain villages and to prohibit them from entering the villages neighboring the polling center, with the result that voters set off through the forests. Voters were not the only ones traveling to the polling center. Like the election banquet, voting was also a spectacle, ending with a party at the winner's expense, so people from the surrounding villages, including women and children, would come out to the gates to watch the processions of voters or even travel to the polling center.⁴⁴ After winning the election in 1906, one of the press accounts read: “The jubilation was great. In true triumph of victory, we retreated to Șard. Over 5,000 men filled the moor between Ighiu and Șard.”⁴⁵ The children seem to have been particularly interested in those events, integrating them into their games: in 1905, in parallel with the official polls, a children's ballot was held at the primary school in Ighiu, won by the Romanian candidate.⁴⁶

There were risks involved. In some cases, voters were subjected to violence when passing through other localities – which was not the case in Ighiu. Most of the time, the problems came from the forces of law and order who supervised access to the polling center and who abusively stopped voters known to support the opposition. In 1910, of the 103 Romanians who did not turn up to vote, 16 were in fact forcibly stopped before entering the polling station. If the post-electoral brochures are to be believed, the strategies went so far that the written passes issued to voters in the communes of residence, on the basis of which they arrived in front of the polling commission, bore hidden marks so that the gendarmes could differentiate and withhold them according to their electoral choice (of course, the gendarmes at the center had no way of knowing a person's political views, but the notary of the commune of residence did). Sometimes even small onomastic errors slipped (deliberately or not) into the official voters' lists were used to deny them the right to vote.⁴⁷

Within the locality where voting took place, groups were camped separately, but polling agents continued to move around freely, making promises and bribing voters, especially those who strayed away from their group. Voting was done by locality, with voters expressing their choice one by one, by word of mouth in front of the commission. Temptations and pressure were exerted even in the anteroom of the polling room, either in the form of electoral bribes or physical violence and abuse. The tighter the group remained, the less likely it was to succumb to pressure. One

⁴³ For electoral corruption in Dualist Hungary: A. Cieger, *Politikai korrupció a Monarchia Magyarországon. 1867–1918*, Budapest, 2011; J. Pál, “Electoral Corruption in Austro-Hungarian Transylvania at the Beginning of the Dualist Period (1867–1872)” [in:] *Patronage et corruption politiques dans l'Europe contemporaine. 2. Les coulisses du politique à l'époque contemporaine XIXe–XXe siècles*, eds. F. Monier, O. Dard, J.I. Engels, Paris 2014, pp. 107–126; idem, “Korrupció vagy ‘hazafias cselekedet’? Választási korrupció Erdélyben a dualizmus kor elején” [in:] *Rendiség és parlamentarizmus Magyarországon a kezdetektől 1918-ig*, szerk. T. Dobszay et al., Budapest 2013, pp. 388–404.

⁴⁴ *Lupta noastră de la Ighiu* [1910], pp. 10–15.

⁴⁵ *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 1906, nr. 86, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *Telegraful Român* 1905, nr. 14, p. 58.

⁴⁷ *Lupta noastră de la Ighiu* [1910], pp. 17–19, 33–34, 47–49.

highly problematic aspect was alcohol, which was served by election agents before the negotiations to buy votes began.⁴⁸

More problematic, however, was the question of the name of the person elected. One of the most common methods of election fraud was the separate registration of a candidate's name in different languages or even in different spellings in the same language, based on pronunciation, thus splitting the votes between two or more candidates of which only one was real. In 1910, 24 of the Romanian voters voted for "Alexandru Vajda" and not for "Dr. Alexandru Vaida," the two names (obviously referring to the same person) being registered separately and contributing (together with the 16 stopped on the way) to the difference of 17 votes in favor of Pál Szász.⁴⁹

Comparing the two elections lost by Vaida, the way they are depicted in the brochures, it is quite clear that in 1905 the failure was largely due to the inexperience of the Romanian candidate and his campaign team, who facilitated the attraction of a large number of Romanian voters to Werner's camp, almost exclusively through non-violent persuasion (alcohol, money, or promises of material advantages). Only 42 Romanians were absent from the polls in 1905, compared with 59 voters of other nationalities (the numbers also include the unaccounted-for dead people listed in the electoral rolls). It must be kept in mind however, that Vaida, a stranger to the constituency having had to mobilize an electorate unaccustomed to nationalist candidates, also fought against electoral inertia, which favored the incumbent.

In 1910, on the other hand, when two camps with sufficient experience were already facing each other, it was electoral violence and outright abuse that made the difference. This is not a local situation, as similar violence has been recorded since the 1870s in other constituencies in Hungary. The stakes were simply so high and the vote so tight, that the candidate who had the backing of the administration (incidentally the son of the Lord Lieutenant) did not want to risk failure, preferring to employ the full arsenal of illicit techniques to rig the election. In fact, the results proved him right: without drastic measures, Vaida would have won with a much higher number of votes (see Table 1).

In 1910, however, Romanians were even more absent from the polls. Between 1905 and 1910, the number of voters in the constituency had increased by 104 people, of whom (according to the brochures) 96 were Romanians. However, this ethnic increase was diminished by the fact that 74 Romanians chose not to vote, double the number of non-Romanians who did the same (the dead and those who were improperly prevented from exercising their right to vote have not been counted here). It is true, we do not know how many of them had accepted to be paid for being an absentee by Szász's electoral agents, as the 1910 brochure accuses that 50 crowns were paid for absenteeism and 100 crowns for voting in favor of Szász.

⁴⁸ *Lupta de la Ighiu* [1905], pp. 9–11.

⁴⁹ *Lupta noastră de la Ighiu* [1910], pp. 25–27, 38.

Table 1. Electoral results in the constituency of Ighiu (1905, 1906, 1910)

Year	Total voters/ Romanians	Votes to Vaida	Votes to Hungarian counter- candidates	Other votes	Voter turnout	Absentees (RO/ Others)
1905	870/536	367	402 (127 Romanians)	–	88.4%	42/59
1906	822/?	444	275	–	87.4%	–
1910	974/632	395	412 (110 Romanians)	24 (Vajda)	85.3% (87.4% with those stopped)	103 (20 stopped, 9 dead) / 40

Source: *Parliamentary Elections...*, p. 316.

In the 1905–1910 period, although Romanians made up more than 60% of the electorate, nationalist voters accounted for only three-quarters of them, with the remaining quarter choosing to vote for the Hungarian candidate or to abstain. In 1906, when the mobilization of Romanians reached 54% of all voters (444 out of 822) and 90% of all Romanians, amid the dissolution of the Liberal Party and the easing of pressure from the administration (and possibly also linked to the universal suffrage debates of the time – existing sources are silent in this regard), Vaida won. In 1910, when it dropped again to 45% of all voters and 70% of all Romanians, he lost.

Can one conclude from all the above that the pressure of the administration (weak in 1906, after the dissolution of the Liberal Party) and electoral bribery kept a sizeable percentage of the Romanian electorate from voting? The arguments in favor of a positive answer are relatively strong, but still contextual. Lacking ego-historical sources from the voters, the real reasons behind the individual choices remain hidden behind a scholastic and arid taxonomy, which raises more questions than it explains, as the discussion below will show.

If the ethnic Romanian electorate is divided into three categories:

- 1) nationalist voters,
- 2) voters of Hungarian candidates and
- 3) absentees – the last category remains by far the most variegated, including: dead, emigrants, people who had accepted payment for not voting and people who absented themselves without having been paid.

Leaving aside those who objectively could not vote (the dead and emigrants), the reasons for the choice of each of the dozens of absent Romanians remain purely speculative. The acceptance of the payment did not necessarily mean the dissociation from the nationalist political ideal, which could be overridden, in the tense moments of the campaign, either by objective reasons (e.g., a mortgage whose forfeit would have destroyed the life savings, the desire to bring home one’s son from the army) or by subjective impulses (e.g., fear of becoming the target of the administration’s

agents or simply a non-conflictual and pragmatic nature). Likewise, absenteeism without accepting pay may be indicative of national or political indifference, but it may just as well be caused by an unexpected event (e.g., illness, death in the family) or by a desire not to be labeled a “traitor.”

But, under the above conditions, can the choice to vote for the non-Romanian candidate or even the absence at polls be taken as a sign of national indifference?⁵⁰ In order to use this analytic category, which is extremely situational, in an electoral context, various forms and degrees of manifestation should be delineated:

- 1) those who vote for the non-nationalist candidate,
- 2) those who choose to be paid to be absent but do not accept to vote for the candidate of another ethnicity, and
- 3) those for whom national indifference is intertwined with political indifference and therefore choose to stay home unpaid.

These choices certainly signal both indifference and ambivalence, but, as stated above, in the absence of sources documenting individual electoral motivations it remains difficult to draw the line between national indifference as an act (ignoring for pragmatic reasons the political appeal of the nationalist party), national indifference as an ideological choice (ignoring nationalism and ethnic demarcations in general on principle), and political indifference (ignoring the electoral act and the political system as a whole).

For reasons of space and method, the analysis of these options, at the level of the entire constituency and the hundreds of people involved, will be the subject of a separate study, pending on the availability of sources. Remaining within the thematic and methodological scope of the present research, the author proposes in the following an analysis of the Romanian voters in the constituency and their electoral options, as they appear in the sources of the time, trying to identify potentially useful aspects in outlining some answers to the issue of national or political indifference.

⁵⁰ Selectively, from a rapidly growing literature: T. Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 2010, vol. 69 (1), pp. 93–119; M. Van Ginderachter, J.E. Fox, “Introduction: National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe” [in:] *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, eds. M. Van Ginderachter, J.E. Fox, London–New York 2019, pp. 1–14; G. Egry, “Beyond Politics: National Indifference as Everyday Ethnicity” [in:] *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism...*, pp. 145–160; M. Van Ginderachter, “Possibilities and Pitfalls of the Concept of National Indifference,” *Nations and Nationalism* 2023, vol. 29 (3), pp. 831–836; P.M. Judson, “Making Minorities and Majorities: National Indifference and National Self-determination in Habsburg Central Europe” [in:] *Sovereignty, Nationalism and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe*, eds. E. Dalle Mülle, D. Rodogno, M. Bieling, London 2023, pp. 21–38.

THE ROMANIAN ELECTORATE IN IGHU – A GRASS-ROOTS ANALYSIS

Research on the voters in Transylvania and Hungary is limited, both because of the nature of the statistical sources and the difficulty of identifying biographical information of the ordinary people. A large part of the nominal lists of voters are available in county archives and contain information on profession and basis of franchise, but the amount of work to process and analyze them is daunting. In the particular case of Ighiu, however, voter lists for the years 1905, 1906 and 1910 were not kept, which poses a strong limitation to the current research.⁵¹ Leaving aside the problems of preservation, sources explicitly mentioning the electoral option for large groups of voters, in order to be corroborated with ethnic and social profiles, are rare. This was the main reason why the author chose to use the two electoral brochures: the fact that they provide, in two relatively close chronological moments, in the same constituency, the possibility to follow the electoral choice of hundreds of people whose ethnicity and residence (and, partially, to a lesser extent, profession) is known.

Based on these premises, the author expected that the voter lists in the two booklets would contain approximately the same people, i.e. the village well-off figures, whose wealth allowed them to pay the electoral census. This expectation, rooted in the stereotype of a more socially stable rural environment, with more clearly defined hierarchies, was shattered by the results of the nominal analysis. The figures show that at the level of the whole constituency the average of Romanian voters retaining the right to vote from 1905 to 1910 was only 32%. The turnover rate of the electorate varies from commune to commune, between 25% and 100%, without being influenced by the demographic size of the localities or by the demographic percentage of Romanians.⁵² The main factor that seems to shape this indicator is the geographical area: most localities with a renewal rate above the average of 68% are located in the mountainous area, while those with a higher voter stability are located in the hilly and sub-mountainous areas, closer to the large urban centers of the county: Alba Iulia/Gyulafehérvár and Aiud/Nagyenyed. The influence of the urban center also seems to be felt in the two rural localities in the mountainous area with a lower voter turnover rate: Abrud-sat (in the immediate vicinity of Abrud/Abrudbánya) and Bucium (a few kilometers away).

Of course, between 1905–1910 some of the voters had died, others had passed their wealth (and taxes) to their children's names. However, it is also clear that the fluctuation of income from agriculture was higher in mountainous areas than in hilly areas, and that the proximity of an urban center and major communication routes had a stabilizing effect, with repercussions on the configuration of the electorate. Under these circumstances, it might be possible that in Transylvania (and Hungary) the actual percentage of people familiar with the electoral practice and with a much

⁵¹ Alba County Service of the National Archives, Alba County Prefecture Fund, inventory 366.

⁵² In order not to clutter the text, all statistical information, including nominal lists of voters, is accessible in the dataset: V. Popovici, “Romanian voters and options at polls in the constituency of Ighiu / Magyarigen (1905 & 1910),” Digital Commons Data – Babeş-Bolyai University, v.1, 2025, <https://opendata.openscience.ubbcluj.ro/research-data/> [accessed: 2nd August 2025].

wider political horizon of expectation surpasses the 3–4% indicated by the statistics of the time.⁵³

As for the profession of the voters, unfortunately the information that the two brochures provide is fragmentary, even as far as priests and teachers are concerned. Out of 1156 names, only 154 (less than 15%) feature a professional label. Under those circumstances, it is impossible to associate the professional profile of voters with their electoral choices. Partial data confirm what is already known: local civil servants (mayors, notaries) and small entrepreneurs whose licenses depended on the authorities (tavern keepers, millers, blacksmiths) usually voted for the government representative, while priests and teachers voted massively for the nationalist candidate. Of course, there are exceptions in both camps, and the categories are not completely stable, but by and large, nothing new from this point of view.

The most relevant type of analysis that can be carried out on the existing sources is the one involving the relationship between electoral choices and ethnicity. The Hungarian counter-candidates (Werner and Szász) totalled 237 Romanian votes in the 1905 and 1910 elections, respectively, of which only 231 are recorded by name in the booklets. Out of these, only 50 votes did not change their owner (25 loyal voters), the other 187 were distributed as follows: 139 votes from 139 voters who were entitled to vote in only one or the other of the elections (76 in 1905 and 63 in 1910) and 48 votes from voters who participated in both elections but voted for the Hungarian candidate in only one of them. Of the 48 voters, one died between 1905–1910, 17 voted in 1905 for Werner and in 1910 for Vaida, 15 in 1905 for Vaida and in 1910 for Szász, 12 were absent in one or the other of the votes, and the rest are not nominated in the booklets.

The only reason for detailing all this numerical Babylon was the desire to illustrate the particular patchwork and fluid situation of the “national indifferent” electorate (in electoral size), which can be reduced, after all, to the hard core of 25 voters loyal to government candidates. Moreover, taking a look at the distribution by locality of the votes given to Hungarian candidates in 1905 and 1910, the same kind of fluctuations surface: in some localities where Werner had won Romanian votes, Szász received none, while in others the number of pro-Hungarian voters increases from 1905 to 1910, including in mountain villages such as Bucium.

Turning to the absent Romanians, in 1905 and 1910 this category has a total of 151 listings, of which only 16 are occupied by voters enjoying franchise and choosing to be absent in both elections (8 constant absentees), 29 voters who did not show up for one of the elections but voted with Vaida in the other (13 voted in 1905 and 16 in 1910), 12 voters who did not show up for one of the elections but voted for the Hungarian candidate in the other one, and 94 voters who only had the right to vote in one or the other of the elections, choosing not to exercise it (30 in 1905 and 64 in 1910). Once again, the category that retained the right to vote and chose not to exercise it in both elections (the hard core of the “politically indifferent”) represents an absolute minority (8 people), while for most absentees the right to vote is transitory, the reasons for not exercising it remaining difficult to identify. Even the fluctuation

⁵³ J. Pál, “Parliament and the Political System...,” p. 27.

of Vaida's voters is quite strong: his mandate between 1906 and 1910 seems to have succeeded in convincing in 1910 a number of 16 fellow countrymen undecided in 1905, while at the same time losing 13 of the voters of 1905.

The hard core of Vaida's faithful voters consisted of 96 people eligible to vote in both elections (and probably in 1906 as well), many of them priests and teachers. Most of them came from the mountain area, but the hill villages also contributed substantially. The reappearance of the proportion of ca. 25% (25+8) compared to approx. 75% of the nationalists (96), at this point, is staggering. The fact that the same proportion is maintained in the electorate as a whole (as mentioned above), whose composition fluctuates, but also at the core of those whose professional and social situation allows them to retain their franchise in the long run, suggests that there is a good chance that we are dealing with a quantitative indicator that reflects a reality of the times. Without opening a conceptual debate on the most appropriate label for these people (“national indifferent,” “politically indifferent” vs. “traitors,” “renegades,” “opportunists”⁵⁴ vs. “pragmatists,” etc.)⁵⁵ their existence is dully noted, together with the fact that there are enough of them to tip the electoral balance to the limit.

The reality on the ground therefore partly contradicts the nationalist discourse of the time. The author has mentioned earlier the exaggerated optimism that characterized the discourse of the Romanian press before the elections, both in 1905 and in 1910, based on the Romanian demographic and electoral majority in the constituency. After the major defeats suffered by Romanian nationalist candidates in June 1910 in Ighiu and in many other constituencies in Transylvania and Hungary, party leaders continued to promote the image of a monolithic ethnic body and to blame the illicit practices of the ruling party. One of the main leaders of the RNP, Iuliu Maniu, wrote:

For Vaida and I had secure majorities. Very few Romanians, a few absolutely indecisive exceptions, were not with us: a few mayors and pub owners. After that, the entire priesthood and the teaching profession and the peasant voters were with us, but absolutely all of them, so that we had a secure majority. Therefore, our downfall was due to the atrocities committed by the administrative organs on election day.⁵⁶

The true politician talk: no reference to the absenteeism that tipped the scales in favour of the Hungarian candidates, no reference to the Romanians who had chosen not to turn out to vote. And this at a time when Ighiu was one of the constituencies with one of the highest turnout rates, while in other places Romanian candidates mobilized their own ethnic electorate to an even lesser extent.

⁵⁴ On the “renegade” Romanian MPs, elected on Hungarian party lists: O.E. Iudean, *The Romanian Governmental Representatives in the Budapest Parliament (1881–1918)*, Cluj-Napoca 2016. On the historiographical perspective on “renegades”: V. Popovici, “‘Patrioți’ și ‘renegați’: Reprezentanții politici români din Transilvania și Ungaria perioadei dualiste în istoriografie” [in:] *Școală, Biserică, Stat și Națiune în istoria României: Omagiu profesorului Cornel Sigmirean la împlinirea vârstei de 65 de ani*, coord. L. Boar, I. Bolovan, L. Stanciu, Cluj-Napoca 2021, pp. 127–140.

⁵⁵ On the complicated relationship between nationalism and journalism as a business see: O.E. Iudean, “National Sentiment and Political Pragmatism: The Parliamentary Representative Constantin Burdă and the ‘Romanian People’ Affair,” *Banatica* (Reșița) 2018, nr. 28, pp. 737–750.

⁵⁶ *Gazeta Transilvaniei* 1910, nr. 120, p. 1.

Indifference, absenteeism, and disinterest in the nationalist political agenda were not peculiar to Romanian voters only in the early 20th century. The difficulty of mobilizing its own electoral base was a problem that the Romanian National Party had been facing since the early 1880s⁵⁷ – or even, apparently, since the 1860s. And even if pressure from the authorities has always been invoked as an umbrella-explanation, a not inconsiderable percentage of voters seems to have been genuinely disinterested in the nationalist agenda or even in politics and the electoral process.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the Romanians' electoral struggles in Ighiu, as recorded in the sources of the time, provides a few lessons about the functioning of the electoral process and the limits of the impact of nationalism on the electorate in dualist Hungary.

On the one hand, the analysis proves (if proof was to be needed) that the series of complaints voiced by nationalist leaders, both at the time and later in the historiography, was largely justified. Electoral abuses were the order of the day, whether promises and persuasions beyond the bounds of the law or violence against voters. Profession, or rather professional dependence on the authorities also played a role in electoral choice. Representatives of public authority – from mayors to sheriffs and to the Lord Lieutenant – a key position at county level – played a decisive role in influencing the electoral outcome. Most civil servants had no real choice, while small local entrepreneurs dependent on state licenses were also among the swayable. Not only nationalist parties, but all non-governmental parties – including Hungarian independentists, socialists or agrarians – faced these difficulties.

However, the same analysis shows that, at least in Ighiu, electoral fraud would not have been sufficient to ensure a comfortable victory for government candidates if it had not been accompanied by the political and national indifference of a part of the electorate. In the 1905 and 1910 elections, about a quarter of Romanian voters either abstained from voting or voted for Hungarian candidates. When the difference between the candidates was less than 20 votes, it was the absentees who ultimately made the difference. Their presence could easily have turned the result.

It remains difficult to say whether the absenteeism was due to fear of administrative reprisals, which would indicate an indirect effect of electoral manipulation, or whether it reflects genuine electoral (national or political) indifference, potentially built on or at least favored by the longstanding National Party's passivity before 1905. Also, absenteeism had less to do with the level of experience of the nationalist leaders, the problem being decades old and statistical data indicating that, at least in Ighiu, the accumulation of political experience over three elections did not bring about significant changes in voter turnout. Vaida's campaign team has managed to

⁵⁷ V. Popovici, R. Rus, "Romanian Voters in Transylvania and Hungary: The 1881–1884 Electoral Survey by the Romanian National Party," *Acta Marisiensis. Seria Historia* (Târgu Mureș) 2024, vol. 6(6), pp. 29–59.

reach one of the highest turnout rates in Hungary (from 49% in 1901 to 88% in 1905), to keep it relatively stable over three elections (see Table 1), and still lost two out of three runs and failed to mobilize the probably decisive indifferent. Had they made mistakes? Certainly: not all voters were aware of the “official” name of the candidate and Romanian voters’ discipline was sometimes faltering, allowing them to be persuaded by the agents of the Hungarian candidates even during the election day. But the most important, by far, was the overconfidence in the unifying and persuasive force of nationalism. There was only so much that nationalist rhetoric and mobilization could achieve, and they had likely already reached that limit.

The above-mentioned category of absentees, ambivalent, undecided and/or indifferent, hidden both by the political discourse of the time and by nationalist historiography, fits at least to some degree the analytical category of “indifference;” it deserves more attention and, insofar as the sources allow, a focus of analysis on the individual and collective reasons for absenteeism. To what extent the respective indifference was national or political (or both) remains a different topic, which is worth a more in-depth discussion. Only such an approach can push knowledge beyond the level of generalizing categories (nationalists, “renegades” and indifferent), with a chance to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the social, political and identity constraints that shaped voting behavior, beyond reductive explanations focused only on fraud, administrative pressure or propaganda and nationalist spirit.

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