

Romanian State Fears Too Much Believers' Independence

As this article was going to press Keston College was awaiting news of the outcome of the Romanian Baptist Congress, which was held 12-14 April 1984. A constitutional amendment was due to be put before the Congress, the effect of which, if passed, would be a further serious erosion of the traditional Baptist principle of local church autonomy. State involvement in Baptist affairs is of course no new thing (see Alan Scarfe's article "Romanian Baptists and the State", *RCL* Vol. 4 No. 2, 1976, pp. 14-20), but this latest move is best seen in the light of events over the past eighteen months, during which time the Romanian authorities have evidently been seriously concerned about the possibility that certain groups of believers might be slipping through their network of controls which operates through the Department of Cults and the national church leaderships.

The State's (and also the Baptist Union's) dealings with two Baptist churches and their pastors bears this out. The two churches had — for different reasons — decided to employ their pastors direct, by private contract, instead of using the normal arrangement in Romania whereby a pastor becomes, in effect, a state employee.

In the case of the Baptist church in Mediaş, the institution of a private contractual arrangement between church and pastors had been precipitated by the Baptist Union's decision to dismiss the two pastors, Ioan Stef and Benjamin Cocar, and withdraw their licences. Pressure, exerted initially through the Baptist Union and then more directly by the police, had failed to persuade the congregation itself to dismiss the pastors. This independent employment arrangement had been in existence a few months when, on 10 May 1983, Stef and Cocar were called to the police station and warned that they could be imprisoned for preaching without licences. On 11 May representatives of the Braşov Baptist Association attempted to persuade them to give up their jobs as pastors temporarily; the same day they received a summons to meet the Chief Prosecutor in Sibiu. On 13 May the Chief Prosecutor informed them again that they could face imprisonment if they continued to preach. As a protection against harassment, members of the 600-strong congregation began to sleep in the garden of

the pastors' home. The two men have continued to serve as pastors and have not been arrested.

Unlike the Mediaş pastors, the two pastors of Josif Ţon's former church in Oradea, Paul Negruţ and Nicolae Gheorghişa, were employed directly by their church right from the start. Both left successful secular careers in order to become pastors, and they bypassed the usual full-time seminary training to be ordained into the ministry in Oradea. Negruţ, formerly a clinical psychologist, was the first to come under attack. In April 1983 a case against him was prepared under the charge of "usurping a function" (i.e. performing a pastoral function without a licence). He was questioned, had his house searched and was asked to make certain undertakings — including, significantly, an undertaking that he would in future obey orders from the Baptist Union — in return for the promise of a licence. He refused. The case was dropped, following a public outcry in the West at the time when Romania's "Most Favoured Nation" status was under review.

Once the "Most Favoured Nation" trading status had been granted by the USA, pressure on the Oradea church and its pastors could be resumed. Dr Gheorghişa, a medical doctor and endocrinologist of some eminence, had been refused permission to move from Deva, 85 miles away, to take up residence near his church in Oradea, so he was obliged to travel several times a week in order to fulfil his duties as pastor. On 7 December he was called in by the police and told he must report all foreign visitors to his home (this is in fact a legal obligation in Romania). He refused to promise to do so.

On 27 January 1984 Gheorghişa was called in again; this time his identity documents were confiscated, and he was told not to leave Deva. He is therefore now unable to carry out any duties in Oradea and it is thought that he may consequently sooner or later face a charge of "parasitism" (being unemployed).

The most obvious common factor in the cases of the Mediaş and Oradea churches is that both churches have achieved a degree of local autonomy in employing their pastors direct. Too much autonomy cannot be tolerated in a system which relies on the denominational organisation to exercise

control at the local level, and one purpose of the proposed constitutional change is to give the Baptist Union the power to place a pastor in a local church, a move which, besides being contrary to fundamental Baptist principles, would considerably reduce that local autonomy and would almost certainly make it impossible for any more churches to do what Mediaş and Oradea have done.

Another common factor is that both churches are particularly large and successful ones. Another large Baptist church, the Mihai Bravu church in Bucharest, had been threatened many times with demolition but had survived because of protests from the West. By August 1983 all the surrounding buildings had been demolished for a road-widening scheme while the church building was left standing, since the pastor, Vasile Taloş, had obtained an undertaking that the building could remain until alternative premises could be found.

On 11 September Taloş was told that documents granting permission to renovate a house (which the congregation had already purchased) and to convert it and register it for church use were ready to be collected. On 12 September the old building was demolished; and on 13 September, when the pastor went to pick up the documents, it was discovered that one signature was missing and that they were therefore invalid. The church is now meeting in four rooms of the house, with the doors removed but with the walls between the rooms still standing. In this way 200 people can be seated, the majority of whom cannot see the preacher; the church's congregation is 700 adults and 150 children. News came through in April 1984 that permission to convert the building for church use has been granted again. It remains to be seen whether or not the work can now go ahead without any more technical hitches.

In another denomination, the Hungarian Reformed, Pastor Ferenc Wisky was forced by his bishop to retire in April 1983. The pattern is a familiar one: the higher authorities in the Church were instrumental in removing an unwanted figure, and the fact that he had been leading house groups (not subject to formal church control and supervision) was evidently one matter which had provoked the authorities' displeasure.

Any group holding meetings in homes, where neither State nor Church can easily monitor their activities, is singled out for special attention. One such movement is the Orthodox Lord's Army, which has a long history of persecution, both by the Orthodox hierarchy and by the State. Its independence from the Orthodox Church, which for obvious reasons is relatively privileged and whose hierarchy is considered by many to be almost a branch of the country's civil service, is a cause of particular concern to the authorities. The Lord's Army has frequently been attacked in the Romanian press, where it is lumped together with "sects" (a term normally reserved for the "neo-Protestant" denominations: Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren). One recent example of such an attack appeared in the Communist Youth Union's daily *Scinteia tineretului* (21 January 1984) in which the priest Fr Cornel Avrămescu (who was one of the signatories to the "Testimony of Faith" addressed to the Romanian Patriarch in 1981 criticising the hierarchy's subservience to the State and calling for, among other things, the release of Fr Calciu) is described as "self-styled Lord's Army Metropolitan of Dobrogea".

This is just one of many examples of anti-"sect" propaganda in the Romanian media, which has been stepped up during the past twelve months. This propaganda has included the circulation, with official encouragement, of the most outrageous rumours, including the allegation that the "sects" are involved in the ritual murder of children. Schoolteachers are not expected to discourage their children from believing such stories.

But teachers who are considered to be having a harmful effect in their schools are liable to be dismissed. According to the official report of the School Inspectorate of Bihor County, grammar school French teacher Florica Farcas was dismissed on 9 September 1983 by the General Assembly of working staff at her school in Oradea "as a result of [her] adherence [. . .] to the Baptist Denomination and on account of the mystical propaganda that she spreads at school as well as outside the school."

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