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The group for social dialogue

Ovidiu Caraiani, PhD lecturer, 50 years old
Interview done by Vlad Manoliu



‘The Group for Social Dialogue’ was founded in January 1990, as a group of critical reflection, organized mainly around a strong nucleus gathering together several intellectuals from Păltiniș (and around the philosopher Constantin Noica) such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Andrei Cornea, Radu Bercea alongside with dissidents of the communist regime such as Gabriel Andreescu, Doinea Cornea, Radu Filipescu, Stelian Tănase, Dan Petrescu. The main aim of the group was trying to lay the foundations of a civil society in Romania, society which was quasi-inexistent till 1989, during the socialist regime. Its members were aiming at critically discussing and analysing the fundamental concepts of a democratic society: the rightful state, freedom for the press and for television, the problem of the social and national minorities. The group was thus trying to recreate an underground network of the civil society (which successfully functioned in countries such as Hungary, Poland, The Czech Republic). The lack of civil society central nodes was a huge handicap. The Group for Social Dialogue considered the remedy of this handicap to be an essential, major responsibility.

Initially, the group was quite heterogeneous, intellectually speaking, having various drives. It changed on the long run. In the last years, new

members joined the afore-mentioned ones. This is the case of Marius Oprea, Alexandru Lăzărescu, Alexandru Tocilescu or Andrei Oișteanu. The main form of manifestation of the group was constituted by various and in the majority of the cases quite heated debates and round tables on complex themes and I would like to randomly mention some: in 1994, G.D.S¹ together with Anna Frank Foundation, organized ‘It May Be Your Turn Before You Know It’ or ‘The Freedom of the Press and the Protection of the Private Life’ or ‘The Right of Possession over Land, a Fundamental Human Right’; a round table which gathered important personalities of the Romanian exile (Matei Călinescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Ion Vianu), entitled ‘The Exile and the Kingdom’; an important debate on the education law and on the student manifestations. In 1995, another round table, ‘The Problems of the Creation of a New Civil Society in Central European Countries’ where they invited Jacek Vodz, the manager of the Political Sciences International School in Katowice.

Beginning with 1997, there was initiated a series of meetings dealing with the problem of revealing the files of Security as political militia, actually a crucial problem for the organization of the civil society in the attempt to create a mo-

¹ G.S.D.- The Group for Social Dialogue (translator’s note)

dern Romania.

The creation of an ideological movement in this direction was an important task assumed by The Group for Social Dialogue.

Then, there followed 'Bucharest and Its Spiritual Referential Points', a discussion on the project dealing with The Cathedral of the National Redemption and also discussions on the alternative manuals and the reforming of the secondary school education according to European standards. Of course, there are many things worthy of being mentioned and I may have accidentally left out certain themes. According to the necessities, there were organized conferences or round tables. I don't think that there was any programmatic regularity. When a crucial issue for the Romanian society came up, there was a meeting.

The influence of The Group for Social Dialogue was important. In the first years it actually generated a sort of fascination among the Romanian cultural milieu. If I were only to mention it, starting with Victor Ciorbea, Emil Constantinescu and ending with president Traian Băsescu, I might say that more or less all the important political actors have faced the G.D.S' 'panel of judges'. This turned G.D.S into a sort of entity with moral and intellectual posture. At the same time, it became a kind of court of justice for the civil society. The politicians wanted to be acknowledged, to be endorsed by those pertaining to the G.D.S. This has been Iliescu's major frustration, that of not having been legitimised by the Romanian intellectuals. Miron Mitrea represented one of the interesting experiments of the G.D.S, since they thought that they might turn him into a sort of indigenous Lech Walesa. It didn't work.

The Romanian society was so ill so that it was only normal to express great opposition against the civil society. I think that this is the reason why The Group for Social Dialogue has been lately given more or less the second place. Gabriel Liiceanu was saying last night, during a TV show, that he was going to try to relaunch

The Group for Social Dialogue, even if the members had changed and the group hadn't been spared some inner conflicts. I would only like to mention Gabriel Andreescu, who was excluded from The Group for Social Dialogue because of a press conference where he sustained the fact the main reason why the truth regarding the former Security political militia couldn't be exposed in time was Andrei Pleșu. Having no evidence to sustain this theory, he obviously placed himself in a difficult situation and was excluded.

Then, there is Dan Oprescu, whom was later exposed as Security stool-pigeon and even as fervent sneak of his good friend Stelian Tănase.

These things indubitably showed that, any of the groups founded in Romania after 1989 had its people with concealed stories, with various 'backgrounds', who were filled by great enthusiasm after '89 but who were also driven by personal interests. This sometimes made G.D.S look like a non-unitary group, torn apart by inner conflicts. It is difficult to say how they managed to gather their protagonists and guests. Their meetings were announced post-factum in '22' magazine. They used to publish summaries of the meetings, of the most important ones, on a page or two of this magazine. They were available to the public, but unfortunately only to a certain public, the one reading the magazine. Invitations were sent on an institutional level. But, if you weren't invited, you ran the risk of being denied the entrance. It happened to me once. I gave them a phone call because '22' magazine, distributed on a Tuesday morning, stated it that we were invited on the same Tuesday afternoon at a round table, debating the theme 'Romania and the Rightful State', chaired by Gabriel Liiceanu.

I was surprised by that public invitation and, instead of having a normal reaction and going according to the invitation, I called and asked if it was possible to take part in the round table. They asked me for my name, told me to hold on for a moment and afterwards informed me 'we are sorry, but you cannot join us unless you have

an invitation'. The unpleasant feeling that I experienced was that I had been sort of checked... I told this to Gabriel Andreescu after a month and he very elegantly apologised on behalf of The Group for Social Dialogue, inviting me there. I only took part in a meeting dealing with the access to the Security files. Of course, if you had gone there directly, nobody would have stopped you. I was the one who had made the phone call so it was a misunderstanding.

Another intensely debated subject within The Group for Social Dialogue was that of the dissident engineer Gheorghe Ursu. There was even a foundation named 'Gheorghe Ursu' which tried to find out the truth and to find the guilty ones in order to be brought to justice. Sorin Vieru is the president of the foundation.

Various important political subjects and cultural as well as institutional events were discussed. I thought that due to their way of being, by means of various articles published in '22' magazine and due to the direct influence that they had on various decisional factors in Romania, they would influence democracy for the better. At the round table which debated the issue of the rightful state, Costin Georgescu was invited, and that was during the miner riot in January 1999. He was the second boss of the Romanian Information System, preceding Virgil Măgureanu.

Alongside round tables, meetings and conferences, political debates, the main instrument of manifestation was '22' magazine, founded by The Group for Social Dialogue. It had a significant influence on a great part of the Romanian intellectual milieu, dealing with issues such as: the problem of communism, of the Holocaust, Mircea Eliade's case within the Romanian culture (this had been one of the most debated cases because of the apparition of several articles written by some Romanian commentators from abroad, like Norman Manea). The same magazine publicly acknowledged Horia Roman Patapievici's value. Thus, the magazine kept on maintaining its position within the public con-

science also due to several virulent articles against Ion Iliescu's neo-communist regime.

G.D.S's decline started around 1999-2000. First of all, it had been that very tense and difficult to manage the moment constituted by Gabriel Andreescu's statement concerning Andrei Pleșu, a founding father of the group. Afterwards, one or two years later, there was the tension between Gabriela Adameșteanu, managing editor of '22' magazine' and Gabriel Liiceanu, regarding Constantin Noica's case, another hugely debated situation. It is more than normal for a group of social reflection to be very difficult to organize, being a big utopia. But if you set such utopia as a target, you must act accordingly. The Group for Social Dialogue made its point on several occasions by means of various manifestations, being a co-organizer of many protests against the ruling group. You kept on hearing of them in the first years. But now... I questioned the students and practically only 2% knew something about the group. There is also that 'Green House' where you can listen to jazz or blues concerts, you can watch theatre plays... 'Humanitas' bookshop... could gradually turn into a special attraction for the youngsters with cultural preoccupations.

'22' magazine made it possible for an important debate among the Romanian culture within '97-'98- 'Between the Grotto Nationalism and the Nowhere-land Europeans'- to take place, debate which involved writers, men of letters like Gabriel Andreescu, Horia Roman Patapievici, Alexandru Paleologu, Octavian Paler. A dispute by means of which each part involved was trying to impose its own image about a fair and eventually veridical Romania.

Practically, each of us has his very own country. We cannot say that we have an absolute image. The Group for Social Dialogue, as well as '22' magazine' filled this huge emptiness. What will be their future? We shall see.

Translated by Raluca Vîjia