INDEPENDENT GROUPS IN EASTERN EUROPE URGE SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE OF ROMANIA

by Vladimir Socor

Summary: At the request of Charter 77, human rights activists and unofficial groups and intellectuals in Eastern Europe called for a day of European solidarity with the Romanian people. In Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest proclamations were issued and demonstrations, vigils, and fasts were held. Andrei Sakharov and other dissidents from the USSR endorsed the action. The events underscored the growing trend toward international coordination among independent groups in Eastern Europe.

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The recent protests in Romania and the deepening material deprivation of its populace have aroused the collective conscience of the democratic opposition and other independent groups in Eastern Europe.

Charter 77 Calls for Solidarity with the Romanians. The Czechoslovak Charter 77 human rights movement announced on January 29 that several dozen of its supporters would stage a 24-hour hunger strike in Prague on February 1 in solidarity with the Romanian people. The move grew out of the Charter's appeal, dated January 2 and distributed on January 10, urging European solidarity with the people of Romania—the European nation "that has to fear winter and hunger," where "43 years after the war, basic food staples . . . are either rationed or unavailable," "a European country where people have neither heat nor light." Moreover, the appeal continued, "their government denies them elementary freedoms to an extent unparalleled in any other country of the Soviet bloc." Hence, "despair drove the Romanian workers to demonstrate." The appeal suggested that all Europeans turn off heating and dim lights in their homes on February 1 as a token of sympathy and that they stage peaceful
protests outside Romanian diplomatic missions; and it called on the European public "not to forget Romania" and to support "Romanian society's opposition to the autocrat responsible for its suffering."³

A Young People's Vigil in East Berlin. A dozen young members of independent and Church-related groups attempted to hold a candle vigil in front of the Romanian embassy in East Berlin on Christmas Day 1987, prior to the Charter appeal. They said they were "affirming their solidarity with the Romanian people in its suffering under the burdens of economic crisis and [adverse] political conditions." The police extinguished the candles and ordered the participants to disperse. The East German authorities' crackdown on independent groups in the second half of January 1988 precluded a public response on February 1 to Charter 77's appeal on Romania. The crackdown also put a stop to a series of articles on social protests in Romania that the samizdat journal Grenzfall had begun publishing.⁴

Polish Trade Union Activists and the Independent Press Focus on Romanian Protests. The recent protests over social conditions in Romania were widely reported in the Polish independent press, which carried numerous stories and news items on the demonstration in Brasov and its aftermath, the student protests in Brasov and Timisoara, other incidents in Bucharest and elsewhere, and the appearance of leaflets at several locations in the country. Also mentioned were statements issued by dissidents, especially those by Silviu Brucan, Doina Cornea, and the groups known as Romanian Democratic Action and Free Romania. Several editorials concluded that the Romanians were "awakening" and that the protests in November and December 1987 could well mark the end of a long period of political stability in Romania.⁵ In a statement released on December 18, the founder of KOR and prominent Solidarity adviser Jacek Kuron noted that the extensive coverage of the Romanian events in the Polish underground press reflected a strong sense of identification by the Polish opposition with the emerging "social resistance" in Romania.

On January 22 the recently revived Polish Socialist Party (PSP), whose leaders include the prominent Solidarity figures Jan Jozef Lipski and Jozef Pinior, became the first independent group to take up Charter 77's call for a day of European solidarity with the people of Romania. It announced that PSP members would try to demonstrate outside the Romanian embassy in Warsaw on that day to protest "the party dictatorship" that had pushed Romanian society "to the edge of civilization and toward biological disaster" and to show "support for the right of the Romanian nation to a better life, freedom, justice, and democracy."⁶

Hungarian Intellectuals Reach Out to "Romanian Friends." At a news conference held on January 19 in a private home in Budapest and boycotted by the official Hungarian media, Miklos
Vasarhelyi (a close associate of the late Imre Nagy and spokesman in his government in 1956) released a statement of solidarity addressed to "Romanian Friends" and signed by some 350 Hungarians; the number of signatories doubled within a week. Most of the authors and the signers belonged to the dissident and the independent intellectual scenes, but some establishment intellectuals were also involved in the effort. The prominent writers Sandor Csoroi, Istvan Csurka, Gyorgy Konrad, and Miklos Meszoly were among its initiators. Saying that "the political will of the Romanian populace has spoken in the streets of Brasov and Timisoara" as well as in Cluj, Bucharest, and Iasi (the scenes of protests by workers and students during the past two winters), the statement blamed "Ceausescu and his clan" for "disregarding their own nation, its most basic interests and needs," and for having created conditions for material, intellectual, and moral deprivation, the grave consequences of which will affect several generations and endanger the people and the fate of the country [Romania].

With regard to the historic tension in Hungarian-Romanian relations, the statement spoke of the need for both peoples to overcome that heritage by building upon common aspirations, which it defined as the creation of democratic conditions in social life, including that of the national minorities. The authors expressed their conviction that the situation of the Hungarian minority could only be resolved as part of general democratic changes in Romania.7

At the same press conference, the small and anonymous Free Romania group, which draws its members from among ethnic Romanian economic emigrants to Hungary, distributed a statement lauding Charter 77's initiative and urging a strong public response.9

Demonstrations in Three East European Capitals. In Warsaw members of the PSP, joined by those of the Freedom and Peace movement and by Solidarity activists, converged on the Romanian embassy on February 1. Among the demonstrators were the Solidarity leaders Zbigniew Bujak, Zbigniew Janas, and Jan Litynski, as well as PSP leaders Lipski and Pinior. Banners proclaimed "Solidarity with Brasov" and "Human Rights for Romanian Citizens."

Two written statements prepared for delivery to the embassy were addressed to the Romanian authorities and to the Romanian public, respectively, and were signed by nearly 50 prominent members of the Polish opposition, including Kuron, Wladyslaw Frasnyiuk, and KPN chief Leszek Moczulska, as well as the leaders present at the demonstration. The message to the authorities protested the repressive measures against "all who are fighting in Romania for their rights" and expressed the hope that Romanians "will gain the rights that are due to them,
including the right to organize trade unions, and that other human and civil rights will be respected." The message to the Romanian public said that "We are with you, listening intently for your voice, which [echoes] the struggle that we have waged here in Poland for 30 years." The message also expressed confidence in the attainment of "our shared dream for a free and democratic Central Europe." The two messages could not be delivered to the embassy. The police who were waiting in force broke up the demonstration after only about 15 minutes and held more than 50 of the participants, as well as several Western journalists, in custody for several hours.9

A day earlier, demonstrators in Warsaw protesting the latest price increases had carried banners displaying the single word "Brasov." In the wake of the day of solidarity with Romania, Solidarity's National Executive Commission announced through its official spokesman Janusz Onyszkielewicz that it would seek ways of sending "material assistance" to the victims of repression in Romania.10

In Prague about 60 members and supporters of Charter 77 held a 24-hour hunger strike as a token of solidarity with the people of Romania. Charter signatories Vaclav Havel (the playwright), Anna Sabatova, Ladislav Lis, Libuse Silhanova, Vaclav Maly, Martin Palous, Jiri Vonka, and Petr Pospichal were among those who fasted. A large police contingent blocked an attempt to hold a vigil outside the Romanian embassy. The police held and interrogated for several hours at least 10 Charter signatories, including its three spokesmen for 1988 and a group that tried to hand over a message at the Romanian embassy protesting social conditions and repression in Romania. Also arrested were several members of the Jazz Section (an independent jazz group that is engaged in the struggle for human rights), who attempted to unfurl a banner saying "light and bread for the Romanian people."11

In Budapest organizers, including the samizdat authors and editors Miklos Haraszti and Gyorgy Gado, issued an appeal for a silent vigil outside the Romanian embassy. The half-hour vigil on February 1 was attended by as many as 500 people. The philosopher Gaspar Miklos Tamas, a dissident who moved to Hungary from Transylvania, made a brief speech calling for "compassion and solidarity with the Romanian people, not only the ethnic Hungarians but the whole Romanian people." The police removed banners saying "Down with Dictatorship" and "Human and Civil Rights for All Romanians" and asked the crowd to disperse, but they did not otherwise intervene.12 Some Romanian embassy staff members came out to kick and extinguish candles that had been placed on the sidewalk and to harangue the participants. Radio Budapest mentioned both the vigil in Budapest, without saying why it took place, and the attempted demonstration outside the Romanian embassy in Warsaw, which it said had been held to "protest against the oppressive system" in Romania.13
In a statement relayed from Moscow, Andrei Sakharov said that he "regarded Charter 77's idea to draw the attention of Europe to the situation in Romania as topical and important," that he was "very moved" by it, and that he "fully supported" the initiative. The noted Moscow dissidents and members of the Glasnost' Press Club Larissa Bogoraz, Lev Timofeev, Sergei Kovalev, and Naum Meiman endorsed Sakharov's statement. In another message responding to Charter 77's appeal, Nijole Sadunaite, the Lithuanian Catholic nun and leading campaigner for religious rights, said that prayer services would be held in Lithuania to mark the day of solidarity.

Vigils organized by Charter 77 and Solidarity supporters, the World Union of Free Romanians, the League for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania, and local human rights, labor, and Church groups were also held outside Romanian embassies and ambassador's residences in London, Paris, Rome, Bonn, and the Hague on February 1.

Toward "Genuine Internationalism" in Eastern Europe? The Budapest samizdat journal Beszelő said last December that mutual support among democratic movements in Eastern Europe was paving the way toward "a genuine internationalism of the peoples in the region." The day of solidarity with the people of Romania was a further step in the process of international coordination among the democratic movements in Eastern Europe. It is a process that began with the joint statement by 128 dissidents from four East European countries in October 1986 on the 30th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution. It continued with the joint petition to give "real life to the Helsinki accords" by human rights activists from Eastern Europe, the USSR, and the West to the CSCE meeting in Vienna; the coordination meetings held and publicized by Polish Solidarity and Czechoslovak Charter 77 representatives along the border between their countries in 1987; and the recent strengthening of the organization Polish-Czechoslovak Solidarity. The various groups have been entirely open about their endeavors to communicate and cooperate across frontiers. The London-based East European Cultural Foundation and its journal East European Reporter have done much to promote the flow of information both on an East-East and East-West basis, acting, in the words of organizer Jan Kavan, as "a sophisticated mailbox" helping the various democratic movements exchange information and coordinate their initiatives. The protests against repression in Romania marked the first time that independent groups have been able to organize simultaneous public actions in several East European countries; but only three days later, human rights activists in four East European countries and the USSR made public a petition against the repression of dissidents in the GDR. The trend toward international coordination among independent groups in Eastern Europe seems to be accelerating.

APP (Prague), 29 January and 1 February 1988.


DPA (East Berlin), RIAS, and SFB, 25 December 1987; Grenzfall, nos. 11-12, 1987.


AP and DPA (Warsaw), 22 January 1988.

AP and UPI (Budapest), Reuter and APP (Vienna), 19 January 1988. See also Hungarian Situation Report/2, RFER, 15 February 1988, item 9.


UPI, Reuter, AFP, and DPA (all from Warsaw), 1 February 1988; AP, Reuter, and UPI (Warsaw); and The Washington Post (Warsaw correspondent's report), 2 February 1988.

AP (Warsaw), 31 January 1988; ZDF (West German television), 1 February 1988, 1:00 P.M.; and UPI, Reuter, and AP (all Warsaw), 8 February 1988.

AP, AFP, UPI, and Reuter (all from Prague), 1 February 1988.

AP (Vienna) and AFP and Reuter (Budapest), 1 February 1988.

Radio Budapest, 2 February 1988, 4 and 6:30 P.M.


Beszeló, no. 22, December 1987, pp. 151-152.


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