

## Romania:

### *Moving in the Right Direction?*

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### *Religious Liberty Alert*

## Romanian Churches Struggle for Freedom

In December 1989, the Rev. Gheorghe Calciu, a Romanian Orthodox priest in exile in the United States since 1985, was forced into hiding in Pennsylvania. He had been informed that Nicolae Ceausescu had dispatched agents from Romania to kill him. Just a few weeks later, much had changed. Calciu suddenly was free to travel to University Square in Bucharest, the site of last December's massacre, where he led thousands of Romanians in a memorial service for those who died during the uprising that led to Ceausescu's overthrow.

In an amazing moment, the masses in attendance -- including even the police and military -- knelt and prayed the Lord's Prayer. Interestingly, there were no representatives of the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy in attendance. Calciu, in fact, was the first Romanian Orthodox cleric to offer a memorial service remembering those who were brutally slain.

The memorial service -- and the conspicuously absent Orthodox leaders -- reveal the ambiguity of the Romanian "revolution." The transitions to democracy in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia have demonstrably moved in the direction

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## IRD's 1990 Religious Liberty Award Recipient:

### **Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita**

Regardless of theology and tradition, churches in the forefront of spiritual renewal in Eastern Europe share one important thing in common: credibility. Churches where the leadership became deeply compromised by its accommodation to repressive Communist regimes generally have not experienced the growth of those churches that courageously fought for the freedom and integrity of the Christian faith in spite of the costs.

Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita, an internationally recognized Romanian endocrinologist, is an example of this devotion to the church and religious liberty. The IRD Board of Directors was proud, on April 19, to present Gheorghita with the 1990 Religious Freedom Award at a reception on Capitol Hill.

When the Rev. Josef Tson, pastor of the fast-growing Second Baptist Church of Oradea and an open critic of the government, was exiled in 1981, Gheorghita and Dr. Paul Negrut, a clinical psychologist, were called to be its pastors. Gheorghita's ordination, to the irritation of Romanian officials, was carried out by a visiting American clergyman.

Subsequently, Gheorghita was refused a license to pastor by the government-approved Romanian Baptist Union.

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**Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita**

Romania: Upcoming Elections

# Goodbye Ceausescu, Hello . . . ?

The Big Brother regime of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu was overthrown in Romania on December 22. After a week of remarkable and unexpected popular uprisings following the arrest of Hungarian Reformed Pastor Lazlo Tokes, the dictators were apprehended and quickly executed. The Ceausescus' executors not only acted summarily against the old despots, but were able quickly to gain control over the levers of power in Romania by forming the National Salvation Front (NSF) junta. This has proved to be only the opening salvo in Romania's peculiar political transformation, which has been so different from developments elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Five months later, some observers wonder if Big Brother is really gone. The NSF provisional government is composed mainly of career communists who opposed Ceausescu. The Front's leaders are keeping control over the broadcast media, the economy, electoral mechanisms, and have maintained a secret police network. It is a viable question to ask: Is the NSF simply acting in the interests of the Romanian people to keep order while democracy can take root? Or is the NSF an embryonic totalitarian regime which has stolen the revolution from the Romanian people?

The behavior of the NSF before and after the elections scheduled for May 20 will be central to resolving this dilemma. A new president will be chosen, along with a bicameral parliament that will immediately begin work on a new constitution. Since opposition groups have restricted resources and are



**M**oving Lenin to Storage: Workers began demolition of this huge Lenin statue in Bucharest, Romania, in March. The question remains, however, as to whether the Communist legacy has been dismantled, too. RNS Photo / AP / Wide World

poorly organized, the Romanian people may not be presented with clear and honest choices for leadership or regarding the structure of the polity and the economy.

On the other hand, the NSF did implement a number of social reforms after it took power: the "leading role" of the Communist Party was abolished, the death penalty was revoked, and the program to export 80 percent of Romania's food production to pay off foreign debt and raise hard currency for Ceausescu's grandiose construction schemes was ended. Many Ceausescu cronies have been tried and imprisoned.

## Cause for Concern?

But the composition of the NSF is a cause for concern. From the beginning, its 11-member executive council has included no non-communists. The histories of some of the Front members, their post-December 22 actions, and their execution of the Ceausescus without public trial suggest they may not intend to be accountable to democratic processes.

The NSF record on human rights and political freedoms is mixed at best. Demonstrations have been restricted, some violently repressed. Another concern is the presence of former Securitate officers in the government, and the continuation of secret police activities in censorship and monitoring

communications. Yet the freedom of expression, movement, worship and organization relative to the previous period continues to impress returning exiles. The churches and other independent groups are emerging with surprising strength.

One such group is the newly recognized Evangelical Alliance, one of whose founders is Dr. Joseph Tson. Tson, who nearly a decade ago said the death of communism in Romania was inevitable, believes that the recent popular repudiation of socialism, the desire of Romanians to integrate into the Western economy through the European Economic Community, and the new experiences of freedom are sufficient to ensure the success of democracy in Romania regardless of who wins the elections.

The Front responded positively to an invitation from the United Nations to send international observers to the May 20 election, and in February expanded participation in the provisional government's council to include least 35 newly-formed parties. These groups still are not represented on the executive council, however. The Front also announced in February, contrary to its initial promise only to operate a caretaker government until elections could be held, that it would field candidates in the May 20 election. Given its control over communications and resources, opposition groups are concerned the NSF will have an unfair advantage. Its election platform remains unarticulated; the NSF bases its appeal solely on its role in overthrowing Ceausescu.

#### **Parties to Challenge the NSF**

Many of the newly formed political parties appear to be Front creations designed to fragment the opposition. However, in early April, some larger parties announced they would form an electoral coalition around one presidential candidate, perhaps Liberal Party leader Radu Cimpianu. The record of recent elections in formerly totalitarian states gives hope that the people of Romania also can rise above electoral obstacles and demand fair democratic process.

Contending parties in the election include reconstituted traditionalist groups, such as the National Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party -- which existed before World War II and include many Romanians recently returned from exile -- and a new Christian Democrats Union. Evangelicals are involved in all of these parties. Some traditional elements appear to be interested in re-establishing an official state church, perhaps at the expense of the

rights of Catholic, Reformed and evangelical groups. Much of the Orthodox hierarchy accommodated itself to the Ceausescu regime, and may be looking for a similarly favored position.

Primary opposition groups on the "left" include the Social Democrats, who call for European-style parliamentary social democracy, and the anti-Ceausescu but communist Socialist Democratic Party.

What are Romania's greatest needs at this time? Some observers have called for a "second revolution" through a decisive democratic election in which legitimate leadership and regular political processes are established. Certainly a social consensus

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regarding the legitimate place of all religious, ethnic and political groupings is required for civil order and peace. Romania needs a constitutional structure which will define the role and duties of the state and provide for legitimate devolution of power; it cannot remain at peace with *ad hoc* oligarchy. Churches and Christian groups ought to encourage reconciling practices among their members, such as between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians where tensions are high, as well as seek to advance responsible practices in the political sphere. As Romanians look for morally sound leadership in an environment where so many have been tainted, this is an opportune moment for a positive Christian contribution within this brutalized society.

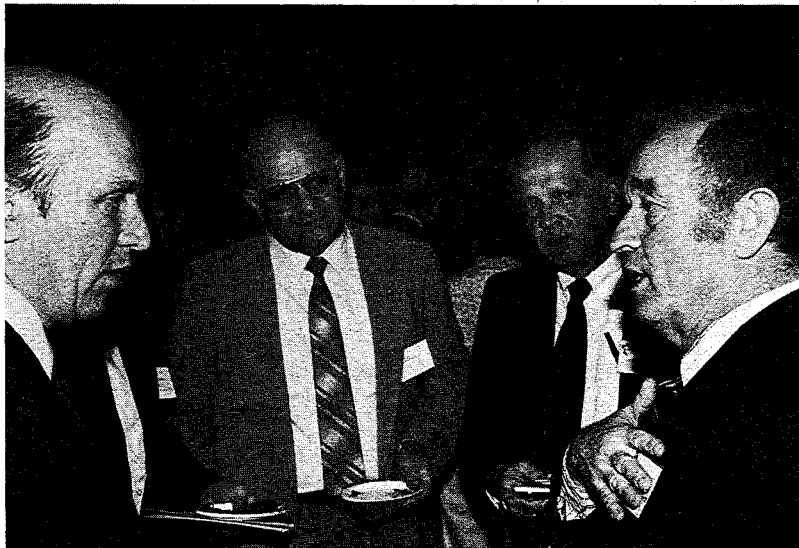
Right: Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita discusses the Protestant churches in Romania. He was joined at the conference by his children Corina and Radu, who are both studying theology in the United States.



Center: Rep. Frank Wolf expresses his concerns for free and fair elections in May. Seated to his right is Dr. Josef Tson, Director of the Romanian Missionary Society.

Below: Gheorghita (right) with representatives of Baptist organizations – Dr. Denton Lotz of the Baptist World Alliance, an honorary host of the event, Dr. Keith Parks and Dr. Isam E. Ballenger, both of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. James Dunn of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and an honorary host, and Dr. Ralph McIntyre of the Baptist World Alliance also were present.

Photos by Lonni Jackson



## IRD Conference Highlights Changes, Concerns in Romania

When the Institute on Religion and Democracy Board of Directors decided last fall to present its 1990 Religious Freedom Award to Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita, Romania looked as closed and entrenched in Communism as ever.

From the vantage point of late April on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., at the IRD-sponsored conference on "Religion, Democracy, and the Future of Romania," Romania looked quite different. Gheorghita called April 19 the "most miraculous day of my life." Had dictator Nicolae Ceausescu not been overthrown, Gheorghita, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Oradea, Romania, said he would have spent the day in a Romanian prison. The overthrow,

from his perspective, was not "spontaneous" as people were led to believe. It "was a direct intervention of God."

Dr. Juliana Geran Pilon, Executive Director of the National Forum Foundation, characterized the situation in Romania now as both "desperate" and "hopeful." On the desperate side, Pilon quoted Silviu Brucan, spokesman for the ruling National Salvation Front, who has said that the upcoming elections are a gift from the Front, which "single-handedly made the revolution." "This," Pilon said, "is the language of autocracy." Many of old communists remain in their jobs and the clique of Front members afraid to "give the keys to the people" for fear that the Front wouldn't last

long in power, she explained.

Dr. Joseph Tson, who was exiled under Ceausescu and now is President of the Romanian Missionary Society in Wheaton, Illinois, exemplified the "hopeful" aspect of Romania's future. Because Romania needs to be linked to the West and institutions such as the European Economic Community, whoever wins in the May elections will have to follow through with democratic and market-oriented development that includes respect for human rights. As evidence, Tson cited changes in laws allowing private ownership of business and foreign investment. Increased freedom to publish and distribute Christian literature also must be seen as a positive sign, Tson said.

Tson was more concerned about the role the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy would play in Romania. His suspicions were reinforced by testimony from the Rev. Gheorghe Calciu, pastor of the Holy Cross Romanian Orthodox Church in Arlington, Virginia. Calciu spent 21 years in prison for opposing the Romanian government, a battle that also brought him into conflict with his own church hierarchy's support for Ceausescu. Calciu characterized his Patriarch's January apology (see page 1 article on religion in Romania) for lying about church persecution under Ceausescu merely as a continuation of the lie.

"The hierarchs assumed that with this [the apology], the people will be satisfied and will respect them and that no one had to leave his throne," Calciu said. Calciu has protested the hierarchy's maintenance of power, and as a result, the government accused him of trying to split the church (not to mention overthrow the government). "I am trying to purify the church, not to split it," Calciu said.

Rep. Frank Wolf (R, Va.), talking about the U.S. role in Romania, described past difficulties in getting Reagan administration officials to look beyond economic ties to Romania and see the serious human rights problems there. Though Romania's Most Favored Nation (MFN) status was eventually suspended in 1988, Wolf warned that it should not be restored until "open, free, fair and verifiable" elections are held. Wolf would neither condemn nor endorse the National Salvation Front, but hoped that the people would rally as they did in Nicaragua to rid the country permanently of Communist rule. Dr. Ernest Gordon, President of CREED, added to Wolf's description of U.S. efforts by explaining the role private groups played in publicizing the horrific problems in Romania.

The critical questions to be answered about Romania's future, according to IRD Executive Director Kent Hill, are not about long-standing theological differences between the Orthodox and Protestants. What must be resolved is whether one religious group politically "has the ability to stack the deck, so to speak, against other groups." A new pluralism must emerge, Hill said, with new alliances among religious groups who will work for each other's religious freedom.



Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, on behalf of the IRD Board of Directors, presents Dr. Nicolae Gheorghita with the 1990 Religious Freedom Award at a April 19 reception in the Hart Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill. Photo by Lonni Jackson.

### **Gheorghita**, *from page 1*

For years Gheorghita had offered quiet, steady support for Tson's efforts to expose religious repression. Then, in 1982, Gheorghita gave up his prestigious and lucrative professional career to nurture and protect a church that the government saw as threatening. The fact that an internationally known medical doctor would become a pastor infuriated Communist authorities who feared that other intellectuals might follow suit.

The authorities would not allow him to live in Oradea; he continued to minister by covert means, disobeying government restrictions on his travel. According to Tson, "Everybody understood his act of defiance of the police and the inspiration and encouragement for the church was enormous."

In 1984 he was placed under house arrest for a month after refusing to report foreign contacts. Police confiscated Gheorghita's identity papers and books, thus making it impossible for him to travel from his home in Deva, 120 miles from the church. He continued to resist offers to return to medicine or to take a pastorate in another region.

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## Struggle, *from page 1*

of legally based religious freedom. But in post-Ceausescu Romania, the future is less clear.

### After the Revolution: More of the Same

During the Ceausescu regime the Romanian churches were under the control of the Department of Cults, which worked in close association with the Securitate (secret police). All church life was strictly regulated, with the Romanian Orthodox Church, the largest of all churches, enjoying a privileged position.

The Romanian Orthodox Church leaders followed a policy of supporting and praising the policies of the Ceausescu government, and Ceausescu personally. Two days after the Timisoara massacre, Patriarch Teoctist Arapas issued a statement praising Ceausescu for his "brilliant activity, wise guidance, and daring thinking." Teoctist also hailed his re-election as party leader, proclaiming that the Romanians were living "in

a Golden Age."

But shortly after Ceausescu's overthrow, Teoctist addressed the Romanian people on television saying that he had been a prisoner in his patriarchal palace and had been forced to support the government. Teoctist subsequently resigned his office. For a period, the church was led by three archbishops who also supported the Ceausescu regime. Then, in early April, the Patriarch was reinstated.

The National Salvation Front (NSF), which quickly solidified control of the government during the uprising, upgraded the Department of Cults to a higher status as the Ministry of Cults, and appointed Nicolae Stoicescu as its new head. Stoicescu is himself Romanian Orthodox, and a former dissident and political prisoner. While under Stoicescu's leadership the government has eased many restrictions on religious groups, other policies established under

## The WCC: Repentance?

The World Council of Churches is not exactly sure how repentant it should be in light of its tepid public stand against the Ceausescu dictatorship in Romania. Some within the WCC feel it should offer an explicit statement of repentance, while others believe it wasn't really at fault.

WCC general secretary Emilio Castro has confessed that the organization "didn't speak strongly enough, that is clear. That is the price we thought we needed to pay in order to help the human rights situation inside Romania."

At issue is the WCC's "quiet diplomacy" approach towards religious persecution in Marxist nations. The cause for the attempted WCC soul-searching is a published statement by the Rev. Laszlo Tokes, the pastor who sparked much of the enthusiasm for the revolt against Ceausescu. According to Religious News Service, Tokes stated that "there was a refusal to present the true conditions of churches in

Romania and a pretension that in our country everything is fine, the churches perform their mission in peace and freedom." In an interview reported by *The Lutheran*, Tokes aimed his criticism at the WCC and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in particular.

Mr. Tokes said Romanian church authorities succeeded in "misleading their sister churches and the public opinion of the ecumenical movement abroad ...." He also accused them of being "deeply intertwined with state policy structure, and under the label of ecumenism successfully represented the direct interests of an inhuman, ungodly and oppressive regime -- all at the expense of their own believers."

In a "spirit of repentance," leaders of the Romanian Orthodox Church issued a statement in January expressing "regret that under the dictatorship some of us may not always have shown the courage of the martyrs, and have not publicly acknowledged the hidden pain and suffering of the Romanian people." The letter also apologized for "paying

the obligatory tribute of artificial praise to the dictator." (See page 1 article on religion in Romania.)

Full-fledged repentance has not been forthcoming from the WCC. There is still considerable internal debate as to how far-reaching the WCC's confession of complacency should be regarding cases of religious persecution in Romania.

Castro is convinced that much of the silence was due to fear of reprisals against the church. "What do we need to repent of if we were trying to help the Romanian people?" he said. "Let us confess our wrongness, but let us not go beyond that."

At its most recent meeting in Geneva, the WCC Central Committee approved a statement that said the committee "regrets its mistaken judgement in failing to speak adequately" about Romania. A statement calling on the committee to "confess our shortcomings to our Romanian sisters and brothers, repent of our failure to speak out forthrightly, and seek their forgiveness for our omission" lost by a 34-55 vote.

the Ceausescu's rule are being continued.

### **Elusive Freedom for Catholics, Protestants**

A key question for Catholics and Protestants is the degree of government-supported privilege the Romanian Orthodox Church will enjoy. The theological and ethnic differences are deep indeed. Will the large and powerful Orthodox Church also gain legal advantages through an intrusive Ministry of Cults?

The Vatican, taking advantage of what it thought was a reform-minded government, named 12 new bishops, seven Roman Catholic and five Eastern Rite, to head the dioceses that had been abolished by a 1948 Romanian government decree. The new government, however, condemned Pope John Paul II's recent action, saying that it violated a late 1920's agreement requiring government approval of new appointments!

On December 31, 1989 the new government lifted the ban on Eastern Rite Catholic Church, which was forcibly incorporated into the Orthodox Church in 1948. Following this action, the Eastern Rite bishops began requesting the return of confiscated church property. The new government responded by saying that although the ban had been lifted, the church was not yet legal. To become legal it must submit its bylaws for government approval and prove the apostolic succession of its bishops -- most of whom were consecrated clandestinely. It is not clear whether the government will recognize these consecrations. Furthermore, according to Calciu, a compromise which had been reached regarding returning at least some Eastern Rite properties was summarily overturned by Patriarch Teoctist upon his return to the throne in April. Making all of these conflicts particularly delicate are possible "turf" battles involving Orthodox leaders whose privileged position in relation to the former government would be threatened by greater freedoms given to other churches.

The Protestant communities are also hemmed in by the confusing and still-restrictive government policies. According to Janice Broun in *Conscience and Captivity*, the Romanian Baptist Church is "the most militant and fastest growing Baptist church in all Europe." It has taken a lead in organizing the Evangelical Alliance to provide for them a united voice as reforms take place. The Alliance is composed of Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals and the Lord's Army, evangelicals in the Orthodox church.

The alliance leaders submitted their bylaws to the Ministry of Cults for approval and recognition. At first, legal status was to be denied unless the evangelicals agreed to restrict all programs to church buildings and submit all decisions of the Alliance for government approval. The Alliance leaders refused and threatened to publicize the government's position widely in the West. In April, the government acquiesced.

Ethnic unrest has also led to some problems for religious communities. The unity of Romanians and

**B**ucharest, Romania: Fr. Gheorge Calciu, a formerly exiled Romanian Orthodox priest, leads a memorial service for those who died in the uprising that led to the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu.



Hungarians in protecting the Rev. Laszlo Tokes, a Hungarian Reformed pastor, from being removed by the government from his church in Timisoara was the catalyst for the overthrow of Ceausescu. Tokes subsequently was elected bishop of Oradea for the Hungarian Reformed Church. More recently, radical Romanian ethnic groups like Vatra Romaneasca have threatened to kill Tokes, who is now in Vienna. Many of these radical groups have not been condemned by the government and have even received favorable press and television coverage.

The change in government has brought about great improvements, but less than the full flowering of religious liberty in Romania. Mixed signals from the government, ethnic unrest, and the relatively privileged role of the Romanian Orthodox Church, indicate that it may be some time before full religious freedom is achieved.

**Taking Action:** Appeals for the legal status of Eastern Rite Catholics and the elimination of the Ministry of Cults (as was accomplished in Hungary) can be sent to the Romanian Embassy, 1607 23rd St., NW, Washington, DC, 20008.

Published materials from Keston College, The Puebla Institute, The Ethics and Public Policy Center, The National Catholic Register, Religious News Service and Christianity Today contributed to this article.

## **Gheorghita,** *from page 5*

His papers were returned finally and formal state licensing was granted after authorities saw that they could not break his spirit.

Gheorghita has continued to minister at the Second Baptist Church, which at one time was slated -- on four weeks notice and with no new building available -- to be demolished by the Ceausescu government. The church refused to consent to the demolition, and literally held its ground.

Also, despite threats that his license would be revoked, Gheorghita maintained his solidarity with Tson and Negrut. This cost him the presidency of the officially sanctioned Baptist Union in 1988, though according to Tson his "uncompromising attitude" and "diplomatic skill" continue to be felt on the Union's leadership committee (a position he holds as the president of the Oradea Baptist Association). Gheorghita also serves as the director of international relations



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Suite 900  
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(202) 393-3200

#### **Kent R. Hill**

Executive Director and Editor

#### **Diane L. Knippers**

Deputy Director and  
Managing Editor

#### **Lawrence E. Adams**

International Affairs Associate

#### **Alan F. Wisdom**

Research Director

#### **Fredrick P. Jones**

Research Associate and  
Assistant Editor

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for the Baptist Union, a position that involves oversight and coordination of relief services. In particular, Gheorghita is using his medical expertise to study the condition of Romanian hospitals and the needs of medical professionals.

Gheorghita's example of Christian devotion and resistance to repression has deepened the courage of Romanian believers. It also has contributed to the development of a new unity among scattered and harassed pastors and lay Christians. With the questionable commitment to religious liberty by the ruling National Salvation Front and the underdeveloped condition of Romanian civil society, the witness of Gheorghita and others like him stands as clear and needed signposts of hope for a new, revived Romania.

At a reception following the conference, Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, on behalf of the IRD board, presented Gheorghita with the Religious Freedom Award. Henry praised Gheorghita's "fidelity to Jesus Christ," which led him to resist "pressure after pressure" from the government and "attempts to humiliate after attempts to humiliate." Gheorghita said that his only purpose is to "reflect the glory and the beauty of Christ"; upon returning to Romania, he said he would give the award to his wife, who has stalwartly supported his ministry over so many years.

**Several IRD staff members made special research and writing contributions to this issue: Lawrence Adams, Steve Beard, Fr. Stan De Boe, Fredrick Jones, and Dana Preusch.**

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729 15th St., N.W., Suite 900

Washington, D.C. 20005