

Challenging Systematization in Romania: Human Rights, Transnationalism, and Dissidents in Campaigns by Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR), 1989–1990*

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Accounts of popular opposition to the systematization project in Romania have predominantly focused on organizations concerned with cultural heritage preservation and the plight of Hungarian minorities in Transylvania. As a result, the Belgian-born initiative Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR) has been largely overlooked, despite growing into the largest transnational opposition movement against systematization by 1989. Unlike other organizations, OVR primarily denounced Ceaușescu's totalitarian grip on society, with systematization being its most significant manifestation. This article investigates OVR's philosophy, methods, and objectives during its formative period from 1988 to 1990. OVR's challenge to systematization reveals how human rights were strategically implemented at chosen moments, the emergence of several transnational dimensions, and the unique roles played by exiles and dissidents. Through this case study, OVR's approach uncovers the evolving notions of human rights and transnationalism in the 1980s and highlights how these differed from other well-known Western European challenges to the practices of State Socialist regimes.

Keywords: Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR), cultural heritage preservation, human rights, transnationalism, dissidents, exiles

In the second half of the 1980s, the favorable reputation of Romania's leader Nicolae Ceaușescu in Western Europe as an idiosyncratic leader who defied Soviet policy steadily crumbled. Notably, the juxtaposition between Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist aura and Ceaușescu's pertinacity accentuated the authoritarian character of the Romanian regime.¹ Although international condemnation of Romanian repressive state policy steadily increased following the dispersal of

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1 Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 462.

worker demonstrations in Brasov by Romanian military forces in 1987, the country only became front-page news in Western media after the so-called project of systematization entered a new phase in March 1988.² Systematization was a project by the Romanian state which had been launched in 1974. The aim of the project was to transform the rural areas of the country into large agro-industrial sites, while the urban centers underwent serious infrastructural changes. The project's international and domestic notoriety stemmed from the destructive measures accompanying the restructuring. Historical centers in Bucharest were demolished, and rural villages were essentially demolished to make way for the industrialization of the local economy.³ Additionally, Hungarian minority groups in the Western part of the country (principally Transylvania) felt that the measures and the demolition campaigns were specifically targeted against them.⁴ Given the ecological, cultural, and humanitarian repercussions of systematization, Romanian critics (including some Romanians living in exile) dubbed it the "ghettoization of the Romanian countryside" or "Ceaushima."⁵

As the pace of demolition steadily increased in Bucharest and Ceaușescu announced the restructuring of almost 8,000 villages,⁶ organizations concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) started to raise awareness in Western Europe of the events taking place in Romania. Both UNESCO and ICOMOS had been alerted of these events by the Association for the Protection of Historic and Artistic Monuments and members of *La Ligue pour la défense de Droits de l'Homme en Roumanie* (LDHR), two Romanian exile organizations based in Paris. In spring 1988, the first demonstrations against the destruction of historic buildings and neighborhoods in Bucharest were held in Paris. In parallel, with the support of the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation based in New York, Hungarian dissidents from Transylvania organized protests abroad, lobbied the United Nations, and even held a march in Budapest.⁷ As the news of demolished cultural heritage and violations of minority rights spread across Western Europe,

2 Petrescu, *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote*, 95.

3 *Ibid.*, 94.

4 Partie II Textes adoptés par le Parlement européen. Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028; The correspondence of Susana Szabo to Opérations Villages Roumains, March 2, 1989. Mundaneum, CC OVR 0004; Petrescu, *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote*, 94.

5 Tiu, "Ceausescu și problema sistemătizării rurale," 2.

6 Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 462.

7 Demeter, "Transnational activism against heritage destruction."

a group of Belgians who were active in the media sector became dissatisfied with the lack of interest their government and international bodies had shown in the situation. They decided to take action, and they established an organization that campaigned against the project of systematization. In February 1989, they organized their first press conference in Brussels as Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR) was born. OVR was founded in a basement in Brussels, but it rapidly grew into the most important voice against systematization. By the end of 1989, more than 2,000 local committees had been established in Belgium, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the UK.⁸

OVR differed from other organizations condemning the project of systematization in its scope, methods, and objectives. Whereas UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation focused on certain aspects of systematization (cultural heritage preservation in Bucharest or minority rights in Transylvania), OVR called attention to a myriad of distressing cultural, humanitarian, and ecological repercussions of the project. In particular, OVR sought to defy Ceaușescu's totalitarian grip on society by mobilizing a multitude of local actors in its endeavors. Hence, OVR's operations, initially coordinated out of a small basement in Brussels, were an outspoken challenge to state socialism that developed during the last months of the Cold War.⁹ OVR quickly grew into a transnational organization which drew support from groups residing in countries as far as Hungary, Canada, Finland, and Poland.¹⁰ The Fédération Internationale des Droits Humains (FIDH) played a key role in this process and provided OVR with what scholars have referred to as the infrastructure of solidarity.¹¹ For example, the FIDH mediated OVR's first contacts with the Romanian dissidents and exiles with whom it cooperated since its inception. Most importantly, OVR did not merely differ from the other organizations condemning systematization policy but significantly stood out from earlier campaigns denouncing state socialism in Western Europe.¹²

The literature on Western European opposition to state socialist regimes in the 1980s has tended to focus on the development and instrumentalization of a human rights discourse entangled with the rise of dissident opposition and

8 Molitor et al., *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 102–3.

9 Interview with Paul Hermant, 10 December 2020.

10 Molitor et al., *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 101–9.

11 Christiaens et al., "Introduction," 10.

12 Demeter, "Transnational activism against heritage destruction"; Christiaens and Herrera Crespo, "Failures, Limits and Competition."

transnational links.¹³ Much scholarly attention has been devoted to Poland and Czechoslovakia, where the emergence of an internationally acclaimed human rights discourse played a determining role in Western support for Solidarity and Charter 77 members. Academics have claimed that, following the fiercely debated Helsinki Accords, human rights were established as a lingua franca that provided a basis for denouncing the repression of Solidarity and Charter 77.¹⁴ How Western activists perceived and sought to assert these human rights has fueled academic debate ever since. While some authors stressed the apolitical nature of human rights, as if these notions were derived from some broad moral consensus, others have been keen to describe Western support for Solidarity or Charter 77 and the human rights vernacular in which this support was expressed and interpreted it as a vessel for domestic or international political objectives.¹⁵ Whatever the case, Western support for the Czechoslovak and Polish opposition seems to have played an instrumental role in the historiography on human rights. Furthermore, scholars have highlighted the transnational character of support for the highly divergent Central and Eastern European oppositions, who fostered close contacts across the Iron Curtain.¹⁶ During this period, human rights became entrenched in the operations and discourse of transnational activism. Alongside a set of (apolitical) moral values, human rights offered Western activists the necessary pieces to build a global puzzle of activism in which the East was connected to the South.¹⁷ In this regard, the “transnational” was trans-European and global at the same time. Finally, scholars have underlined how dissidents and exiles benefited, if in some cases quite unevenly, from these transnational links, which were simultaneously strengthened by the incorporation of a human rights discourse. These developments went hand in hand with the attention they received in the Western media.¹⁸

This burgeoning scholarship has played a key role in shaping notions of human rights, transnationalism, and dissident and exile activity in the East-West

13 Miedema, “The Transnationality of Dutch Solidarity with the Polish opposition 1980–1989”; Brier, *Entangled Protest*; Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War*; Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe*; Goddeeris, *Solidarity with Solidarity*.

14 Richardson-little, Dietz, and Mark, “New perspectives on Socialism and Human Rights”; Brier, *Poland’s Solidarity movement and the Global politics Human Rights*, 201; Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect*.

15 Brier, *Poland’s Solidarity movement and the Global politics Human Rights*; Eckel, and Moyn, *The Breakthrough*.

16 Brier, *Entangled Protest*; Demeter, “Transnational activism against heritage destruction”; Badalassi and Snyder, *CSCF and the end of the Cold War*; Kenney and Horner, *Transnational Moments of Change*.

17 Christiaens, “European Reconfigurations of Transnational Activism,” 414; Christiaens, and Goddeeris, “The East versus the South,” 174–75; Brier, *Poland’s Solidarity movement and the Global politics Human Rights*, 190–91.

18 Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe*.

encounters of the late Cold War period. Nevertheless, it is the product of Western attention to a few *causes célèbres* situated in Central Europe. This contrasts with the heterogenic nature of Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁹ Additionally, the focus on Poland and Czechoslovakia has led to analyses of events which took place within a limited timeframe, principally between 1976 and 1982. Therefore, this article focuses on the Brussels-born challenge to the project of systematization in Romania issued by OVR in 1988–1990, while also assessing the infrastructure provided by the FIDH. The Romanian case differs in several ways from the circumstances in Central Europe. Ceaușescu’s plans to transform both the urban and rural environments of Romania received plenty of criticism from the West, but systematization never appeared on the global stage with the same prominence as Solidarity or Charter 77.²⁰ Similarly, Romania’s authoritarian regime was not immune to the rise of dissident protest, although the actual number of dissidents never grew substantially and received little media coverage in the West. According to Dragoș Petrescu, many of the Romanian dissidents, such as Doina Cornea, Gabriel Andreescu, and Dan Petrescu, experienced the loneliness of radical dissidence.²¹ Furthermore, Romania enjoyed comparatively friendly relations with Western European governments which were characterized by détente efforts, continuous dialogue, and reciprocal state visits.²² Many of these contacts were of an economic nature, through which the Ceaușescu regime hoped to gain more independence from the Soviet Union and thus bolster its domestic legitimacy.²³ Indeed, Romania and its Conductor, had a very different place in East-West relations than the Central European countries. Hence, the question: how does the Romanian case alter our understanding of Western European challenges to the practices related to state socialism?

By investigating OVR’s philosophy, objectives, and methods of mobilization, I argue that campaigns on behalf of Romania in the late 1980s reveal the flexibility and instrumentality of human rights, the extent and limits of transnational contacts, and the varying degree to which dissidents and exiles were integrated. Moreover, the case of OVR also explores how European imaginations and anti-totalitarian ideology interconnected with a multitude of Western European *Ostpolitik*s in the last decade of the Cold War and shaped

19 Siefert “East European Cold War Culture(s),” 28–30.

20 Tiu, “Ceausescu si problema sistematarii rurale,” 2.

21 Petrescu, “One Bloody Regime Change,” 125.

22 Dragomir, “Romania Turns West”; Gonzalez Aldea, “The Identity,” 24.

23 Dragomir, “Assymetric Cold War Trade.”

the organization's political activism.²⁴ Finally, an inspection of OVR's operations reveals how opposition to the project of systematization evolved and gathered strength over the course of the 1980s and was co-created by the networks of the FIDH, which in its turn accentuates the importance of the so-called Helsinki effect.²⁵ Laura Demeter has already indicated the emergence and importance of transnational networks in campaigns on behalf of Romania. She has demonstrated how organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation were often informed by Romanian and Hungarian dissidents, voiced opposition against systematization, and framed the destruction of cultural heritage as a human rights violation.²⁶ While Demeter convincingly sketched the first traces of transnational resistance, this article offers insights into the proliferation of international condemnation produced by OVR, which in contrast with earlier voices of denouncement, vociferously challenged Ceaușescu's totalitarian grip on society, of which systematization was the most prominent symptom.²⁷ This also strengthens Demeter's argument that the transnational networks concerned with cultural heritage preservation laid the foundations for international delegitimization of the Ceaușescu regime. All in all, this research perspective contributes to a broader understanding of the opposition that emerged against the project of systematization.

In the discussion below, I analyze OVR's philosophy, objectives, and methods on the basis of its archival documents held at the Mundaneum in Mons. These materials have been supplemented by interviews with the founder of the organization, Paul Hermant, and the organization's international coordinator, Daniel Wathelet. I focus explicitly on the period beginning with OVR's establishment in December 1988 and concluding with the accomplishment of its founding goal: the abolishment of the project of systematization in Romania, one of the first decisions taken by Petre Roman in 1989–1990.²⁸ This period has been referred to as the “adoption phase” by OVR members, and stands in contrast with the so-called “humanitarian phase,” which began shortly after the country's 1989 transition.²⁹ This humanitarian phase, which was characterized by Western European aid for Romania, has received the bulk of historiographical

24 Westad, and Villaume, *Perforating the Iron Curtain*.

25 Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect*.

26 Demeter, “Transnational activism against heritage destruction,” 127–28.

27 Lambriu, “Opération Villages roumains”; Interview with Paul Hermant December 10, 2020.

28 Pirotte, *L'épisode Humanitaire roumain*.

29 Exposé 6 mai 1990. Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028.

and societal attention due to the resonance it created across Western Europe, while the period before the implosion of the Ceaușescu regime has been largely overlooked.³⁰

The article is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on OVR's strategies, objectives, and methods. It assesses the role and incorporation of human rights into the organization's communication and discourse by examining how OVR framed the project of systematization as well as the challenge to it. The second part investigates the transnational dimension of OVR's undertaking by taking a closer look at the self-proclaimed philosophy of the organization. It reveals how trans-European connections stood at the heart of OVR, which explicitly distanced itself from other global causes. Finally, the third part assesses the integration of Romanian dissidents and exiles who interacted with one another and within the organization. This framework reveals how a focus on Romania during the final Cold War years contributes to our understanding of human rights, transnational dimensions, and dissident and exile activities and how the incorporation of these three key elements differed from earlier protest campaigns against state socialist regimes.

Opérations Villages Roumains and the Evolving Role of Notions of Human Rights

Apart from the denunciations by UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, West European reactions to the project of systematization were fairly limited. Notably, West European governments remained awkwardly silent. Many West European politicians had continued to prioritize East-West dialogue throughout the 1980s and identified Ceaușescu as a partner in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).³¹ In Belgium, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reasoned that an untimely condemnation of systematization could hinder the diplomatic talks at the CSCE in Vienna between 1986 and 1989.³² Indeed, for several years, organizations concerned with cultural heritage preservation and minority rights in Transylvania

30 De Vogelaere, "Wallonie : l'opération Villages roumains ou 30 ans de solidarité"; "Opération Villages Roumains: 20 ans d'aide et d'amitié"; Pirotte, *L'épisode Humanitaire roumain*; Pirotte, "L'influence Belge," 113–15.

31 Graf, "European Détente and the CSCE."

32 Projet de systematisation en Roumanie, September 14, 1988. FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatique, 18.370, Correspondance diplomatique 1984–1985.

were the only voices condemning the plans of the Romanian state. This steadily changed as rural systematization plans entered a new phase in March 1988 and Ceaușescu proclaimed, “We must radically reduce the number of villages from 13,000 at present to about 5000–6000 at most.”³³ When he made this statement, a few Belgian journalists and television producers, who felt indignant at the lack of any appropriate international response, decided to take matters into their own hands.³⁴ Paul Hermant and Eric Masquellier, two Belgians who were active in the media sector, launched their own initiative in December 1988.³⁵ Together with ten other founding members, they established Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR). What all twelve had in common was their leftist, anti-totalitarian, anti-communist, and even anarchist inspirations.³⁶ Their initiative emerged independently from the other organizations condemning systematization. UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation provided key information, however. The most important difference between earlier challenges to systematization and OVR was the fact that OVR was not merely concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage in Bucharest or violations of minority rights in Transylvania, but rather unambiguously condemned urban and rural systematization across the whole country. According to the founders, OVR was an anti-totalitarian political activist movement concerned with a myriad of cultural, ecological, and humanitarian causes in Europe.³⁷

The very practical objective of the organization was to “save all Romanian villages under threat of destruction.” Given the state of European politics, the opaque positioning of the Ceaușescu regime, and the limited societal knowledge in Belgium about humanitarian problems in Romania (at least in comparison with knowledge concerning humanitarian causes in what was then called the third world), the OVR founders came up with the idea of disseminated opposition reinforced with permanent anti-totalitarian education.³⁸ Practically, disseminated opposition meant that the agency of opposition was installed at the level of the local community (municipality) and the citizen. Inspired by Amnesty International’s methods of adopting a prisoner, the organization set up a framework in which Western European villages or towns could adopt a

33 Deletant, *Romania under Communism*, 462.

34 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 10, 2020.

35 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 10, 2020; Toespraak door de heer L. Van Velthoven. Mundaneum, CC OVR 0001.

36 Hermant, *Au Temps Pour Moi*, 11.

37 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 10, 2020.

38 La coordination, “Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d’une action,” 9.

Romanian village.³⁹ Adoption installed a symbolic bond between a Western European and Romanian village. The symbolic relation between the two villages would principally be represented by the local (Western European) committees founded on behalf of the Romanian villages. These committees included aldermen, representatives of the local center for public welfare, and engaged citizens. Their main task was to raise awareness concerning the project of systematization by organizing events, exhibitions, and fundraisers. These local committees were guided by the coordination team, which consisted of the twelve founding members. They encouraged the multitude of local OVR committees to write letters to the authorities in Romania in which they condemned systematization.⁴⁰ Several committees also addressed Ceaușescu, and some even wrote to international politicians like Gorbachev.⁴¹

Because the organization initially had little information concerning which of the 13,000 villages would be demolished, they decided to adopt them all. This meant they had to find an equal number of villages willing to adopt a Romanian one. Hence, during the first months of 1989, the OVR coordination team had to raise awareness about the project of systematization and its sense of urgency. In order to do this, they framed their own initiative as an “urgent intervention on a European level” against what was seen as “a crime against memory, cultural genocide and a human scandal.”⁴² Moreover, systematization was framed as a plan “that eradicated all traces of the Romanian past, to root out culture and tradition, to rewrite history in order to fit the coming of ‘the new man.’” The plan was described in some detail:

Most of the time, the inhabitants are warned only the day before the arrival of bulldozers. A real cultural genocide is hidden behind the official justification (a gain of 3.3 percent farming land). Trees, churches, schools, houses, historic edifices, even graveyards must disappear. An important part of the European inheritance will disappear simultaneously.⁴³

Indeed, the severity of systematization was illustrated first and foremost by the destruction of Romanian villages. Moreover, the destruction of these

39 Emsellem, “L’opération village Roumains, une coopération locale transeuropéenne,” 118.

40 Interview with Daniel Wathelet, April 12, 2023.

41 Correspondance OVR-committee Belmont-sur-Lausanne to Paul Hermant. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

42 La coordination, “Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d’une action,” 9.

43 Correspondence Paul Hermant and Vincent Magos to Yolanda Stanescu March 14, 1989, 1. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

villages was presented as an attack on European cultural heritage, due to the fact that “Most of these villages are older than several hundred years, they bear the markings of successive invasions that swept through the country, they are proud of a ‘Baroque’ style architecture very often decorated with fresco paintings.”⁴⁴ Incorporating cultural heritage preservation as a motive and concern made sense, since systematization had always been framed in these terms by its earliest denouncers.⁴⁵ This attracted the support of architectural, rural, and cultural heritage groups such as ICOMOS, Ecovast, and Europa Nostra, which had already been challenging systematization in Romania.⁴⁶ Somewhat striking, in comparison, was the absence of any appeals to human and minority rights, nor was there mention of Transylvania or German Saxons. This corresponds with Demeter’s conclusions, according to which a narrative touching on human rights concerns was only gradually incorporated into the appeals based on fears concerning the destruction of the built environment. It was only in late 1988, under the impetus of human rights activists focusing on Transylvania, that human rights gradually became part of the discourse used in the campaigns.⁴⁷

When OVR attempted to convince local municipalities to support their efforts during their first months of operations, they often made a few suggestions concerning how letters could be sent to Ceaușescu and other Romanian authorities. For instance, they suggested the following phrasing: “I ask you to register my vigorous opposition to the projected annihilation of the village and the thousands of others considered. I intend to do anything possible to contribute to the preservation of the rural European inheritance and to the defense of the inhabitants.” Again, the emphasis was placed on the destruction of the village and the protection of European cultural heritage.⁴⁸ The framing of systematization and communication with Belgian municipalities contained no real appeals to human rights issues. This also translated to the way Belgian municipalities framed their own solidarity. The town of Mons, for example, stated that “in Hainaut and due to our recent history we know the fragility of local agriculture.” They added that their initiative contributed to “the springtime of European relations”, referring to the self-perceived watershed momentum

44 Correspondence Paul Hermant & Vincent Magos to Yolanda Stanescu March 14, 1989, 1. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

45 Demeter, “Transnational activism against heritage destruction.”

46 Campaign for the Protection of Villages in Romania, Hans de Koster and Michael Dower. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

47 Demeter, “Transnational activism against heritage destruction,” 138.

48 Roemeense Dorpen Operatie, flyer voor gemeenten 3. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

of pan-European affairs.⁴⁹ Wathelet also observed that the image of a village on the verge of destruction had a tremendous effect on the public opinion.⁵⁰ Only one month after the launch of the initiative, 220 Belgian villages had adopted a Romanian village.⁵¹ Indeed, the image of a village on the verge of destruction successfully encouraged a remarkably high percentage of Belgian, notably French-speaking municipalities to adopt a Romanian village.

Nonetheless, human rights were given a prominent role when the OVR coordination team addressed the European Parliament in March 1989. In order to gain support from the European Commission (EC), OVR contended that “the Romanian government aims to annihilate the societal tissue of the Romanian population, which is a major violation of human rights and the Helsinki Accords.”⁵² Along with the incorporation of references to human rights in its appeals, the OVR coordination team underlined the real reason behind the project of systematization, i.e. the restructuring of rural society with the ambition of dismantling the socio-cultural networks that could possibly harbor pockets of opposition.⁵³ This was a very different discourse than encountered in the flyers and campaign letters directed to the Belgian municipalities.

Moreover, the international success of the organization prompted it to rethink and recraft its discourse. From the beginning, OVR’s initiative, objectives, and methods attracted a lot of international attention. Notably, in France and Switzerland, two countries particularly interested in the plight of Romanian villages for several reasons, curiosity swiftly transformed into mobilization, as national branches were established during the first half of March 1989. For OVR, the question remained how to internationalize their initiative without creating an unmanageable network of towns and villages all over Europe. In order to do this, the coordination team decided to cooperate with the FIDH, which functioned as an international umbrella organization for national human rights initiatives. The OVR executive committee decided that the establishment of a national OVR branch had to be in cooperation with a national human rights organization affiliated with the FIDH. Cooperation with the FIDH boosted and coordinated the proliferation of interested towns and villages all over Europe,

49 Correspondance Cabinet de l’échevin de la famille et de la jeunesse du village de Mons to OVR coordination team. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

50 Interview with Daniel Wathelet, April 12, 2023.

51 Correspondence Paul Hermant & Vincent Magos to Yolanda Stanescu March 14, 1989, 4. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

52 Compte 001/Villages Roumains/Ligue des Droits de l’Homme. Mundaneum, CC OVR 004.

53 Emsellem, “L’opération village Roumains, une coopération locale transeuropéenne,” 117.

but it also meant a more prominent role for appeals to human rights in the discourse. A wide range of members from national human rights organizations and Helsinki committees were increasingly incorporated, and they framed the project of systematization first and foremost as a violation of human rights and the principles of the Helsinki Accords.⁵⁴ For example, an OVR committee from Switzerland argued that they felt a duty to make sure human rights were respected, especially by CSCE member states.⁵⁵ Their emphasis on human rights was no coincidence, since the Swiss branch had been established and supported by Le Comité d'Appui, L'union genevoise contre l'intolérance and La Ligue Suisse de Droits de l'homme.⁵⁶ OVR's connections with these kinds of organizations and its modification of its own discourse better to echo the discourses of these organizations were a result of its integration in the networks of the FIDH. The latter became a key partner for the internationalization of OVR, but it also influenced the way in which systematization was framed, perceived, and denounced.

Partly as a consequence of OVR's cooperation with the FIDH, human rights became more visible and increasingly instrumental. Yet, the cooperation also underlined the importance and existence of human rights networks established in the aftermath of the Helsinki Accords. Over the following months, national branches were established in the United Kingdom, Flanders, Norway, and the Netherlands, and contacts were also formed with human rights organizations and social movements, peace organizations, and activists in Hungary, Canada, Spain, the USA, Italy, Poland, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Luxemburg. By late 1989, over 2,000 Western European towns and villages had adopted a Romanian village.⁵⁷ In retrospect, Romanian dissidents claimed this was a pivotal moment in which the opposition against the Ceaușescu regime finally broke its traditional boundaries delineated by the critical Romanian diaspora.⁵⁸

In sum, appeals to human rights were used unevenly in OVR's communication during the first months of operations. While systematization was strategically framed as a violation of human rights when addressing international institutions

54 Helsinki committee in Poland. Mundaneum, CC OVR 004.

55 Correspondence OVR-committee Belmont-sur-Lausanne to Paul Hermant. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

56 Rapport general de l'opération Villages Roumains Suisse. Mundaneum, CC OVR 004.

57 Molitor et al., *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 102–3.

58 Lambriu, "Opération Villages roumains."

such as the European parliament, Belgian municipalities were more moved by images of villages on the verge of destruction. Here, the language of human rights was conspicuously absent. Framing systematization as a threat to European cultural heritage seemed to make more sense because it stressed the European dimension of the project and corresponded with the interests and worries of rural villagers in Belgium. Only after OVR had expanded through the networks of the FIDH and human rights activists had lobbied the networks of cultural heritage groups did the OVR coordination team frame the repercussions of systematization as a violation of human rights. The emphasis on the European scale and context of the issue, which was present in many of OVR's promotional materials, underlined Romania's European character and its geographical proximity. What happened in Romania, OVR proclaimed, "belonged to all of us, Europeans."⁵⁹

Local, Romanian, European, but not Global Activism

As the organization gained traction all over Europe, Paul Hermant was often asked by journalists and fellow activists, "why Romania, and not Chile or South Africa?"⁶⁰ He repeatedly replied by asking "why not Romania, Czechoslovakia, or Bulgaria?"⁶¹ To the OVR founding committee this question depicted the stalemate of European relations characterized by what they called "peur de la proximité." In other words, Western Europeans were eager to intervene in human rights affairs all over the world but refrained from doing so when humanitarian problems emerged in their neighboring countries.⁶² OVR was an explicitly European project. It differed in this significantly from the Western supporters of Solidarity or Charter 77, who sought to globalize their support by creating connections with causes in the global south.⁶³ Conversely, OVR did not connect with the opposition against the Pinochet regime, nor was it allied with the anti-apartheid movement. OVR rejected these global transnational connections altogether and reasoned that Western Europe should be more concerned about the state of its own geographical sphere.⁶⁴ OVR was a European movement.⁶⁵

59 Correspondence OVR-committee Belmont-sur-Lausanne to Paul Hermant. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

60 La coordination, "Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d'une action," 10.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Christiaens and Goddeeris, "Competing Solidarities"; Christiaens et al., "Connecting the East to the South."

64 La coordination, "Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d'une action," 11.

65 Rapport general de l'opération Villages Roumains Suisse. Mundaneum, CC OVR 004.

For the OVR coordination team, European identity was linked to the notion of “Europe of the Regions.” According to this ideologically divergent interpretation of European structures, which geographers and political thinkers from the French speaking world found particularly entertaining in the early 1990s, regions should replace nation states as the primary political units.⁶⁶ OVR also held that European identity blossomed because of its regional diversity and local specificities. Romania and the rest of Central and Eastern Europe were unambiguously incorporated in OVR’s “Europe of the Regions.”⁶⁷ The safeguarding of Romanian cultural heritage, which was always described as part of European cultural heritage, was part of these visions of European structure. The inclusion of Romania in this “Europe of the Regions” not only defied Cold War logic and détente mentalities but also drew attention to the precarious conditions of minority groups in Romania. Because the notion of “Europe of the Regions” was often linked to the ideas of ideologically separatist regions, such as Brest, Corsica, Sardinia, or Catalonia, it highlighted the political impact systematization would have on the two million Hungarians living in the northwestern part of the country, around the city of Cluj, and in the so-called Székely Land, roughly in the middle of Romania. Hence, Hungarian human rights organizations were extremely eager to adopt a (Hungarian) Romanian village.⁶⁸

As different branches were established in several Western European countries, the OVR founders believed that the adoption of a Romanian village should also have a reciprocal transnational dimension. They therefore came up with what they called the *aller-retour* principle. The logo of OVR contained two arrows. One arrow pointed to the right and represented the mobilization of Western European activists on behalf of Romania. The other arrow pointed to the left and represented the reciprocal effect of the activism. The founders of the organization aimed to achieve a kind of boomerang effect through mobilization. In this regard, a Western European municipality’s commitment to a Romanian village was at the same time a tool with which local citizens or opposition figures could contest domestic deforestation projects, the demolition of cultural heritage, or anything endangering minority interests.⁶⁹ It was an instrument designed for local (opposition) groups who could argue that their

66 Cepaz, “Europe of the Regions.”

67 La coordination, “Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d’une action,” 11.

68 Correspondence Susana Szabo to Opérations Villages Roumains March 2, 1989. Mundaneum, CC OVR 001.

69 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 11.

local governments had spoken out against the wide range of repercussions of the project of systematization in Romania but at the same time had neglected the values within this mobilization in their actions in Belgium or France. When a local government would chop down a local forest, demolish local cultural heritage, or endanger minority interests, these groups were equipped with a tool with which to challenge these acts.⁷⁰ Indeed, the adoption of a Romanian village had a practical reciprocal dimension. The OVR founders also hoped, however, that the adoption of a Romanian village would enhance critical thinking on the level of policy making and democratic structures in Western Europe.⁷¹ Challenging systematization became a means with which the political ideas of the OVR founders resonated across a multitude of local branches across Western Europe. This corresponds with Brier's analysis of American Labor's support for Solidarity, in which the wider instrumentality did not jeopardize the sincerity of the initiative.⁷²

In the words of the OVR founders, the adoption of a village consisted of three levels of activism: local, Romanian, and European. Firstly, the local level of activism was introduced by the *aller-retour* principle. Secondly, the letter-writing campaigns fueled the Romanian level of activism. And finally, the European level of activism was created by two elements, the unambiguous inclusion of Romania in any notion of Europe and cooperation among Western European towns and villages. Romanian municipalities often consisted of four or five different villages. Each village nevertheless had to be adopted by a municipality from a different country. This means that in one Romanian municipality you would have different Western European adopters who could cooperate, share experiences, and exchange information.⁷³ OVR founders believed this cooperation would create a stronger sense of connectedness across Western Europe. Obviously, they also wanted to include Romanian villages in these cooperative efforts, but this was not possible, since the most of the country was still isolated and the Securitate had been Argus-eyeing the OVR founders ever since the letter-writing campaigns had begun.⁷⁴ Before the revolution, in the case of Romania, the only real exchanges taking place across the Iron Curtain consisted of a few Western European activists who had traveled to Romania. After the revolution, which had not been anticipated

70 Molitor et al., *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 33.

71 La coordination, "Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d'une action," 12.

72 Brier, *Poland's Solidarity movement*, 145–46.

73 La coordination, "Opérations Villages Roumains, philosophie d'une action," 15–16.

74 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 10, 2020.

by the OVR founders, contacts proliferated as a result of the tremendous wave of solidarity and humanitarian aid with which the dramatic changes were met. Western European towns and villages sent trucks filled with humanitarian goods to the village they had adopted. In a later stage, OVR members even attempted to set up tourist networks to continue contacts with Romania.⁷⁵ In this regard, one of the remarkable achievements of OVR is that, despite its reorientation towards Yugoslavia from 1992 onwards, contacts have survived to the present day. In the Belgian town of Geel, for example, the activists involved in OVR still meet with their Romanian counterparts every two years.

Configuring the Roles of Exiles and Dissidents

Through its cooperation with the FIDH, OVR came into contact with La Ligue pour la défense de Droits de l'Homme en Roumanie (LDHR). This organization, which was based in Paris, had been founded in 1977 by Romanian exiles who saw new possibilities in the political infrastructure provided by the Helsinki Accords.⁷⁶ The organization raised awareness concerning human rights violations in Romania.⁷⁷ Their biggest challenge was to close and condemn the gap between the positive image Romania enjoyed in the West and the actual experiences of Romanian citizens.⁷⁸ The vice-president and cofounder of the LDHR, Mihnea Berindei joined the OVR coordination team in January 1989. More importantly, Berindei had been a vocal critic of systematization since the early 1980s. He predominantly focused on the infrastructural changes in Bucharest.⁷⁹ His role proved essential. Berindei's exile and dissident networks provided OVR with important information on the situation in Romania. By skimming through the official Romanian press and other propaganda materials, the team at LDHR continuously provided the latest updates on the project of systematization. Translation work, which was essential for the functioning of OVR, was done by the LDHR team. To get the job done, they even took out advertisements in a Transylvanian newspaper calling on Romanians in France to help them. They also decided which villages would be up for adoption. Each of these villages needed a designated file containing information on the location of the village,

75 Interview with Daniel Wathelet, April 12, 2023.

76 Badalassi and Snyder, *CSCE and the end of the Cold War*.

77 Berindei, "Operation Villages Roumains 1989–2005."

78 Scutaru, "La Roumanie à Paris."

79 Demeter, "Transnational activism against heritage destruction," 132.

the source that mentioned its imminent destruction, details concerning churches and monuments, demographic information, and information concerning local agricultural practices.⁸⁰

The second part of their job was to inform the rural villages in Romania about the moral support they had been receiving from OVR. Again, LDHR's network was immensely useful, as OVR's operations were announced on Radio Free Europe. To what extent these radio emissions reached their destination remains unclear. However, Radio Free Europe received one letter in the summer 1989 from a group of farmers living in Iași County expressing their gratitude.⁸¹ In general, while the Iron Curtain was still intact, OVR's endeavor was largely politically symbolic. Most of the villagers in Romania had no clue they were being adopted by West European towns and villages. Moreover, during the adoption phase, the lack of a Romanian response created uncertainties about the real value of the initiative. Exiles, however, helped explain the isolation and limited infrastructure in rural Romania, which was one of the main causes of the lack of responses.⁸² Furthermore, the writings of exiles were frequently published by OVR. Their accounts attempted to link the experiences of Romanians with the actions of OVR. For example, someone writing under the pseudonym Dinu Flamand authored a chapter titled "Un peuple adopté." Someone using the pseudonym Pe(t)re Stroïca, wrote about how OVR offered new possibilities to oppose Ceaușescu.⁸³

Some less established exiles, such as Dan Alexe, who had only recently fled Romania, were quickly integrated into OVR's organizational practices. Alexe became the Romanian Brussels correspondent for Radio free Europe shortly after his arrival. In retrospect, Berindei's team was small and certainly did not represent a large group of Romanian migrants. Yet those who wanted to be involved were given a crucial task in OVR's functioning. Moreover, the unambiguous involvement in OVR's practices of Berindei and other exiles, such as Ariadna Combes (the daughter of Doina Cornea who lived in Paris), Mariana Celac, Dinu Zamfirescu, Lia Constantinescu, Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, Dan Alexe, and many others, is remarkable and shows the importance of exiles and their networks when challenging the Ceaușescu regime. This ties in with the important roles other scholars have attributed to Romanian exiles. Not only did

80 Berindei, "Operation Villages Roumains 1989–2005."

81 Ibid.

82 Berindei, "La naufrage planifié," 41–43.

83 Flamand, "un peuple adopté," 68–71. Stroïca, "Dés-espoirs d'un exilé," 72–79.

Romanian and Hungarian exiles contribute to the incorporation of a human rights narrative into OVR's discourses, they also filled in key positions in the organization and helped coordinate initiatives. This suggests that perhaps OVR should not be conceptualized as a solely Western initiative. Among the twelve founders, two had a Romanian background.

Unsurprisingly dissidents had a very different role in OVR's campaigns. The writings by and interviews with dissidents were predominantly used and spread to underscore the severity of the situation in Romania. By providing a rostrum for dissidents such as Doina Cornea, Gabriel Andreescu, and Dan Petrescu, OVR furthered the struggle to destroy Ceaușescu's positive image in the West once and for all. The British embassy in Bucharest, for example, persistently denied that villages were being demolished.⁸⁴ The local branches in Belgium, France, and the UK managed to get the testimonies of dissidents broadcasted on national television.⁸⁵ According to the president of OVR France, these broadcasts had an enormous impact on mobilization in France.⁸⁶ Television coverage and recognition across Western Europe helped transform Doina Cornea and others into dissidents, as scholars have argued this was one of three prerequisites to be labeled a dissident.⁸⁷

All in all, OVR's relations with dissidents weren't always easy. In the interview, Hermant clarified this by affirming that OVR was not just an organization that supported dissidents or trade unionists. What OVR envisaged was more complex, provocative, and effective. It aimed to rearrange European relations and connections starting at the most local level.⁸⁸ When Ariadna Combes approached them in January 1989 and asked for humanitarian aid and financial support for Romanian dissidents, the OVR coordination team rejected this proposal and explained this was not OVR's main objective.⁸⁹ After the revolution, OVR had established contacts with Petre Roman to discuss OVR's plans for the future. This infuriated Doina Cornea, because she felt Roman had always belonged to the Ceaușescu regime. Once again, Hermant and others explained that they had not been converted into puppets of Roman and continued to work on the local

84 "The bulldozing of Romania's past," *The Times*. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

85 Communiqué de presse hebdomadaire de la Coordination de l'Opération Villages Roumain, paraissant exceptionnellement le lundi. Mundaneum, CC OVR 002.

86 Berindei, "Operation Villages Roumains 1989–2005."

87 Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe*.

88 Interview with Paul Hermant, December 10, 2020.

89 Interview with Daniel Wathelet, April 12, 2023.

and rural level. This is remarkable, especially when juxtaposed with the ways in which exiles were incorporated into the organization.

Conclusion

By steering away from the more conventional Western European challenges to state socialism, both in chronological and geographical terms, this article highlights the very late integration and conscious incorporation of a human rights language, transnational perspectives, and dissident and exile perspectives into the opposition discourses crafted by OVR. The OVR coordination team was aware of the strategic uses of these three indispensable elements of any challenge to Ceaușescu's totalitarian grip on society, but it also recognized their limits. Appeals to human rights were used strategically to condemn systematization in communications with the European parliament. Systematization was portrayed as the annihilation of small peaceful villages that were sites of European cultural heritage. These kinds of narratives corresponded with earlier denunciations coming from heritage preservation groups. Romanian villages were portrayed as part of a shared Europe and similar to their West European adopters. During its first months of operations, OVR specifically targeted rural Belgian villages with less than 15,000 inhabitants, or in other words, communities that could relate to the Romanian villages. Hence, a great deal of effort was put in by the LDHR to provide reliable, detailed information concerning the Romanian villages.

Secondly, the transnational dimension of OVR's philosophy allows one to interpret the organization as a challenge to the stalemate in East-West relations characterized by détente mentalities. By decisively building links across Europe, that unambiguously included the world behind the Iron Curtain, and by not developing its support through centralized channels, OVR confronted the status quo of European relations, which had been epitomized by the persistently friendly ties towards the Ceaușescu regime. It is thus hardly surprising that OVR collided with the Belgian détente-prone government. In this sense, OVR was explicitly trans-European, but it declined to connect with causes in the global south. The OVR leaderships reasoned that the global south was already taken care of by numerous organizations with a north-south orientation. Moreover, OVR's successful transnational development was clearly supported by a multitude of organizations that had been established in the aftermath of the Helsinki Accords. This contrasts with the tendency to deny the so-called Helsinki effect in the secondary literature. The accounts of OVR underlined

how the Helsinki Accords created opportunities for activists, dissidents, and exiles who increasingly organized themselves. Notably, the crucial role played by the FIDH and its infrastructure clearly reveal the importance of these networks. Although organizations varied in size, their networks, operations, and willingness to participate all contributed to the success of OVR. Notably the unambiguous incorporation of the LDHR was remarkable. In contrast with many Western supporters of Solidarity and their exile offices abroad, OVR did not merely support or financially supply LDHR. They were given a precise task and even included at the decision making level. OVR's relations with dissidents and exiles reveals how challenges to systematization were not merely driven by actors in the West but were also issued by Romanians themselves, which problematizes OVR's conceptualization as Western-led.

OVR's first year of operations reveals an unconventional challenge to a state socialist regime that was shaped by the Cold War logic of the late 1980s and characterized by elements researchers have only recently started to uncover, such as the long *détente*, the limited apolitical nature of human rights, and the importance of exile and dissident networks..

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