

LUCIAN-VASILE SZABO

**MIRCEA ELIADE, MOSHE IDEL AND THE NEW  
SOVEREIGNTIST IDEOLOGIES**

**Lucian-Vasile Szabo**

West University of Timișoara, Department of Philosophy and Communication Sciences,  
Timișoara, Romania.

E-mail: [vasile.szabo@e-uvv.ro](mailto:vasile.szabo@e-uvv.ro)

**Abstract:** The disclosures made by Leon Volovici and other researchers about Mircea Eliade's (and other generation colleagues of his) during his youth led to the discovery of important elements regarding the adherence to the extreme right of the time. Moshe Idel performs an analysis of what remained after these compromising discoveries, trying to outline a portrait of Mircea Eliade, analyzing his entire career and setting the limits of the errors of his youth, investigating with finesse the accusations of anti-Semitism, legionary beliefs and fascism. The purpose of this study is to reanalyze the facts in the context of the epoch, to determine what led to the mass expansion of the concept of Romanianism and of the elitist concept of Romanian exceptionalism. These are the foundation for a study that tries to see to what extent the ideology of the extreme right is found today in Romanian and European politics, where sovereignist and nationalist conceptions are increasingly present.

**Key words:** Moshe Idel, Mircea Eliade, Leon Volovici, Iron Guard, extreme right, Romanian exceptionalism, sovereignism

## 1. Required recontextualizations

In the first years after the 1989 Revolution in Romania, the portrait of the scholar and prose writer Mircea Eliade was consolidated in an expressive manner, almost a cult-like one, shaped ever since the last communist decade. The transition to a democratic regime allowed the free circulation of his work, as well as the rediscovery, in previously hidden archives, of older works from the interwar period. Some of them, especially those in the socio-political field, would designate him as an adherent to far-right ideology. The prestige of the historian of religions and writer began to be overshadowed by these associations. Moshe Idel carefully traced all these transformations and gathered his observations in several studies, but especially in the volume *Mircea Eliade: from magic to myth* [*Mircea Eliade: de la magie la mit*]. It is a book that settled after the debates subsided, allowing the author to draw some conclusions. The work does not deal exclusively with the excesses of the youth of Eliade and his generation colleagues, but manages to offer a new portrait, closer to reality, of the man, the writer and the historian of religions, emphasizing, for example, that at the time he was very interested in deciphering the energies and connections of the world, that is, in the magical universe, where, in connection with it, the scholar at the beginning of his career is intensely concerned with "the existence and efficacy of techniques for obtaining forms of extraordinary experiences or techniques of salvation" (Idel 2014, 27). Idel deals with his work, creative stages and scientific method and system. It is a profound and delicate undertaking, requiring a method that may be that of a recovering hermeneutic (Tracy 1987, 100). When approaching the subject of Eliade's adherence to the Iron Guard, Idel does so from the position of a "scholar, and not from a political perspective" (Tolcea 2014).

What Moshe Idel proposes is to analyze the Eliade "case"/"file" from all relevant angles, but especially to do it without bias, without starting with preconceived ideas, accepting that nuances are important and that facts must be put into context: "I start from the assumption that we must be cautious, so as not to reduce his thinking to the adoption of far-right clichés and not to describe him as 'fascist' or 'anti-Semitic', but, on the contrary, to understand both him and his sources as belonging to a much wider variety of cultural and religious trends, some of which predate his rapprochement to the Iron Guard at the end of 1935" (Idel 2014, 12).

The problem of context is a fundamental one. The investigation must become more detailed, because the dominant ideology of the epoch, with adherents who are more or less involved, with more enthusiastic or

cautious theorists is one thing, and the subsequent path, generating another, broader, more comprehensive context, where Eliade's achievements are profound, is another matter. Other researchers have conducted research on the epoch, trying to map the emergence of the *Generation '27* and its role in Romanian culture and politics. Eliade is seen as the initiator of the debate in *The Word [Cuvântul]*, especially by self-defining as innovative and authentic elite (Ornea 1980, 391). He would also point out that Eliade's publishing interests at that time are diverse, therefore not dedicated to a single subject.

In fact, we see that two different topics are debated, linked by the personality and activity of the historian of religions. The main theme of the analysis in Idel is Eliade's journey from "magic to myth", that is, his scientific activity. The second topic is that of the ideological contributions of the far right. The topic cannot be avoided, it demands attention, but it cannot exceed, as it happened, the serious investigation of Eliade's contribution to the field of comparative religion (Idel 2014, 10). There are two stages in his earthly existence. The first is the one that went until the end of World War II, that of journalism, the first prose works and small scientific studies. It is the period of direct involvement with newspapers and journals. The second stage is that of definitive settlement in the West (first in France, then in the USA) and consolidation of scientific and literary activity. During the second period Eliade is no longer present in popular journalism, as his research career was a priority. It is the "decadent" phase (Ciachir 2007). In his approach, Moshe Idel is circumspect and attentive, arguing and always bringing evidence, and this approach comes from the fact that he is always aware of the fundamental contribution made by Eliade in the history of religions (Idel 2007, 2015). However, appreciations cannot mask some moments of superficiality.

## 2. Back to the facts

The researcher's return to the age of facts is complicated, and Moshe Idel is not always convinced that it is a complete one, that covers the essentials. He identifies most of them, opens angles of approach, and investigates seemingly small issues that may prove relevant. It is essential that in approaching the topic, he does not limit himself to incriminating examples, such as other researchers, a practice not to be condemned after all, but sets the framework for the emergence of those texts. Thus, the image of an Eliade concerned not only with Romanian exceptionalism, but especially with his studies on yoga and magic in general emerges. He also writes a lot of literature, often capitalizing on extraordinary experiences, from those also appearing in the scientific area. Thus, his literary pages are complex and uneven, on a fantastic note, relying on elements of the popular

novel (Ungureanu 1995, 177) or even speculative fiction (Szabo 2021). Eliade was also interested in existential issues. He always wanted to be a professor in the United States, particularly at Harvard. Attempts to secure a position date back to his internship in India. The American dream becomes reality only later, being put between parentheses in 1933, when he joined the University of Bucharest as Nae Ionescu's assistant (Bordaş 2023).

Moshe Idel insists on receiving the ideas of Eliade, his colleagues and of Nae Ionescu, the mentor of *Generation '27*. But surprises can also occur at a later date. The researcher seems to believe that there is a massive, mass overlap between the positions expressed by Eliade and the others and the ideology of Romanian exceptionalism associated with the Iron Guard one, and that their influence is profound in society and among elites (Idel 2014, 249-250). But the younger generation manifested their points of view in magazines that did not circulate much or in university lectures attended by too few people. Of course, there is evidence that Professor Nae Ionescu had a high audience in academia, as well as during the public conferences he held. But it was a select and self-selected audience, and even among students the enthusiasm and adherence were not total. The polemics were also intense, Şerban Cioculescu, among others, mocking the claims of the young people from *Generation '27* (Milivoiević 2020).

Under Nae Ionescu's influence, Eliade adheres to the ideology of the legionary right, in an effervescent and elitist environment, combining naivety and political ineptitude with faith in the values of the (Romanian!) nation, needing to perform personally and as a people, or even under the empire of fashion, as Ioan Petru Culianu believed, a generalized language akin to a trap, the context being systematized by Liviu Bordaş (2013). Marta Petreu (2014, 155) would synthesize the opinions of Jeni Acterian, who attended courses at that time, convinced that Nae Ionescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu or Constantin Noica could be in ridiculous situations or could do idiotic things. A naïve but angry Eliade also discovered Mihail Sebastian, and the debates between the two were heated (Călinescu, 2001). By 1934, Eliade himself (Ornea 1980, 29) considered his positions of 1927-1928 to be the expressions of a "juvenile febricity". However, Idel considers that Dacianism (as an ideology and purveyor of elements of authenticity) fueled Eliade's scientific work (Idel 2014, 249).

### 3. Disclosures and points of view

Moshe Idel was not surprised about M. Eliade's belonging to the extreme right, but he had not been aware of the extent of his involvement in building and motivating this ideology. After the investigations and

revelations of Leon Volovici and Ioan Petru Culianu, not only about Eliade, but also about other important names of the Romanian culture in the interwar period, the cabal specialist felt compelled to leave the comfort of somewhat abstract scientific studies and to enter the arena, trying to systematize the enormous wave of information, coming with a deep emotional component as well, sometimes obvious, on the surface, at other times masked, acting and undermining from the underground. These were the years after 1989, when the fall of communism in Romania allowed the knowledge and recognition of the profound thinking of the great scientist and his scientific work, a phenomenon doubled (at first not very obviously) by critical positions, referring precisely to the support of the Iron Guard organization.

The "case" of Eliade and her generation colleagues was not a surprise for Marta Petreu either. Adopting the tools proposed by M. Idel and developing her own working system, the researcher from Cluj would open research folders for several prominent figures of the *Generation '27*, as it would be named. And the overwhelming surprise: Mihail Sebastian collaborated. Not only did he collaborate, but the young author, during fragile beginning of his writing career, expressed opinions in support of themes and positions of the radical right! The experience of this discovery and the need to investigate and reveal this aspect put a lot of (ethical) pressure on the author (Petreu 2014, 358). M. Petreu confesses that she had been confused by the discoveries made, and before making them public she had consultations with various people that had a cultural standing. And the decision to talk about the "unveiled" past of Sebastian, one of the main witnesses in the case of Eliade's right-wing excesses, was made with sufficient caution. M. Petreu motivates her gesture by appealing to academic ethics, and she does so by invoking a "God of scientific research". The expression, plastic and funny, should not obscure its depth. The meaning is comprehensive, speaking of the fundamental principle of truth told and assumed at any risk, in all existential contexts of life.

The delimitations proposed by Idel seem to induce the idea that the discussion can be limited to the events of the epoch, to the interwar period. Eliade's refusal to continue with the nationalist line, and his efforts to keep his actions of the time in the pages of old newspapers, appear to be necessary steps and an acceptable conduct. Things would change after 1989, when the ideas of *Generation '27* would not only be rediscovered in order to establish the truth, to be combated, but also to be invested with renewed value. It was a danger sharply perceived by Leon Volovici (1995, 13). They would become sources for the revival of sectarian nationalism and the Romanianism at the core of sovereignist ideologies.

#### 4. Romanian exceptionalism and sovereignism

The rise of the extreme right in interwar Romania was a natural phenomenon. Of course, national politics had also been influenced by European developments. The emergence of authoritarian regimes, in Italy at first and then in Germany, stimulated indigenous transformations, but had internal origins and causes. The difficulties of governing Greater Romania (highly composite), the economic crisis, corruption and the lack of solid institutions, despite the democratic and liberal constitution of 1923, allowed the development of extremist ideas en masse. Salvation came not from strengthening Romania's fragile democracy or strengthening the rule of law and institutions, but from authoritarianism, messianism and Romanianism. This explains anti-Semitism, xenophobia and chauvinism (towards Hungarians and Russians, Slavs in general) or racism (Gypsies being the main target). It was a Greater Romania and a homeland tormented for the others, whose refusal to integrate amplified nationalist anger (Idel 2014, 220).

At that time, there was a belief in a Romanian exceptionalism, manifested by bringing historical figures to the forefront, resuscitating the Latin, but also the Dacian, heritage and by highlighting some (alleged) merits in the field of sciences, the case of the so-called scientist Nicolae Paulescu as discoverer of insulin being eloquent, in fact himself a notorious anti-Semite. By 1938, the radical right managed to dominate politics and popular consciousness, stifling the voices of democratic parties, inducing the idea that they were outdated, and that young energies were needed to revive society, abandoning old institutions, such as the Parliament, as they were considered inefficient. The idea of social change as something that brings improvements is not faulty, but it should not lead to the collapse of democratic institutions, because then it leads to authoritarianism and dictatorship.

Idel insists on the theme of Romanian exceptionalism, Romanianism, a spiritual and practical zone from which the others are excluded. It starts from the Latin heritage and, taking advantage of Vasile Pârvan's research, brings to the stage the Daco-Getae foundation, as an embodiment of autochthonous values (Ornea 1980, 381). It is a legacy of the interwar period that is still very active today, used in politics as well. The theory, more of a popular superstition, was not only combated, but also ridiculed by Mircea Eliade in his scientific work (1980, 85). In his youth, however, things were different. The subject was theorized insistently, Eliade speaking of messianism in a... messianic tone, adding the concept of megalomania, borrowed from Emil Cioran. Obviously, the meaning of the term in that context was of greatness or exceptionalism. In this context, Idel has the opportunity to make a spectacular pun in Romanian, but

difficult to render in translation, namely "megaloromania" (Idel 2014, 251).

In the chapter "Eliade, the Iron Guard and some of the undead", M. Idel analyzes I. P. Culianu's position in relation to the *magister*, including adherence to legionary ideas, as well as his relationship with the "undead" elders, that is, members of the Iron Guard settled in Chicago. The hypothesis of a possible involvement of the organization in the assassination of Culianu, a scientist with a trenchant stance against the movement, seen as the promoter of a "brainless" paper waste, is explicitly formulated. From this essay published posthumously, Idel also notes the warning that the fundamentalist danger has not died down and that it seems stronger than ever. Then Idel wonders if the Iron Guard was still strong enough to eliminate the scientist in 1991 (Idel 2014, 239).

The problem does not necessarily reside with the old undead, decrepit soldiers of the Guard, but with the new adherents, able to resuscitate the ideas of the extreme right in contemporary Romania. The persistence of these clearly anti-democratic ideas is not negligible, as the Iron Guard played an important role in the history of religions, as Idel shows, as irrational obsessions and fears can lead to acts of extreme violence. The Iron Guard would be subjected to repression by both King Carol II and Ion Antonescu, the head of state during World War II. The two felt threatened in their control of power by the Guard and frightened by their extreme violence (Gheorghiu 2000). The repression of the legionnaires was not done in the name of freedom and democracy, because the two were themselves promoters of legislation that suppresses citizens' rights, promoting racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism.

## 5. A new far right

Other researchers have analyzed the past (Finkenthal 2012), but identifying the ideas of the radical right in the present and projections for the future are cautious. The danger of extreme (right or left) is a permanent one. Today we can observe authoritarian excesses even in the member states of the European Union. At the beginning of 2024, Hungary, Italy and Slovakia had governments anchored in the ideology of the radical right, with numerous sovereignist overtones, anti-migration policies and restrictive policies towards gender ideology. An extremist party became the main political force in the Dutch parliament, and in Poland, in December 2023, a liberal government replaced an eight-year conservative government, known for frequent attacks on the foundations of the rule of law, imposing the primacy of Polish law over European treaty law, with cruel anti-abortion legislation, bans for LGBTQ people. Strong far-right parties existed in France, Germany and Spain as well, and the danger of their accession to power through a populist popular vote was very real.

At the end of 2023, the data contained in the Eurobarometer regarding the European Parliament elections showed a substantial increase in voting intention in Romania, but also a trend towards the political right, an increase of 8% compared to the spring Eurobarometer. The options for the EP trends, which do not differentiate the radical right, show 22% vote from the left, 31% for centrist politics and 36% for the right. The figures are in line with polls conducted in Romania, where political parties of this type register steady increases. It is interesting to note that the extreme right, nationalist, sovereignist and xenophobic, AUR party and other smaller parties manage to surpass the classical right, represented by the National Liberal Party (INSCOP 2023).

## 6. Open conclusions

The conclusion that emerges is that Moshe Idel intervened energetically in the Eliade file, carrying out a much-needed context analysis. His studies provide a more realistic picture of the great scientist of Romanian origin, whose work is seen in its entirety. In this way, undoubtedly valuable interventions are amended, such as those of Leon Volovici or Marta Petreu, who tended to contextualize Eliadesque work only through the prism of its (undeniable) adherences to the ideological current of the (extreme) right. Idel manages to impose not only this context analysis, but also to provide criteria for a phased understanding. The rupture between the interwar and postwar Eliade, between his Romanian past in the country and the subsequent decades of the Western period, is a radical rupture. With the settlement in France, the scholar Eliade was born, concerned only with studies on religions and literature, without any direct ideological involvement. Basically, the journalistic approach disappears from his life, the attention paid to the immediate event, time being dedicated to in-depth study. As Moshe Idel suggests, it is also a tacit acknowledgment of the wrong positions in his Bucharest (and Portuguese, to a certain extent) youth and a tendency to take distance from a period when facts were turbulent and the moral balance difficult to upkeep.

A second conclusion that emerges is that, despite Eliade's adherence to far-right movements, his influence was limited. He theorized elements of Romanian exceptionalism without obviously claiming this to the detriment of others, and his ideas circulated in relatively small circles, namely in magazines with reduced circulation and few readers, in the university environment, where the number of students was not very high, or in cultural circles with a small audience. Eliade has never been, according to Moshe Idel, a public market leader. And these things happened while the protagonist had other concerns, some quite



demanding. The first was that of completing studies, culminating with the defense of the doctorate. Then there were his scientific preoccupations, which involved spending long periods in libraries, but also research trips. He devoted many hours to writing the novels and short stories of that period, so little time remained for ideological work, also important.

Eliade, Moshe Idel points out, was also a victim of fashion. The radical right was the dominant current in an extremely delicate and complex era, with the repression of the left and increasingly abusive limitations on "others", "foreigners", including Jews, but also those of other religions. It was a time when a large part of the Romanian intelligentsia, but also among the representatives of the popular masses, the nationalist current, often associated with xenophobia, anti-Semitism or chauvinism, was seen as a natural thing (Volovici 1995, 12). The fashion of the time, the current of the era or the course of the weather are expressions that define the same thing, that is, what becomes prominent at a given moment. And then we see an abandonment of traditional nationalism, an intensive exclusion and persecution of the others, under the umbrella of orthodoxy and the need for ethnic cleansing (Pop 2014). Idel is not a researcher of anti-Semitism. Or, more accurately, he is not just investigating anti-Semitism. Contrary to the efforts of Leon Volovici, who devotes all his investigative impetus to anti-Jewish positions, Idel prefers a broader approach, being interested in the whole, contexts and depths, finding broader meanings. Thus, the portrait made of M. Eliade is much closer to reality, from the balance of errors and achievements, the scientist having to gain over the occasional ideologue.

The rediscovery of the past and its analysis with modern tools of political science, history, sociology and communication sciences allows not only the contestation of facts and ideas, but also an analysis of the perspective and viability of right-wing extremist ideology in the current era. Moshe Idel devotes relatively little space to this pressing issue, especially since other researchers have insisted more on the subject. For Idel (2014, 214), Eliade's membership in the Iron Guard cannot be disputed, but he has serious reservations about seeing him as anti-Semitic and fascist. However, the researcher is especially interested in how he positions himself towards the movement as a historian of religions, concluding that his attitude was incoherent and oscillating. The same indulgence is not manifested towards mentor Nae Ionescu, demasked as a supporter of the final solution (Idel 2014, 216). Mac Linscott Ricketts (1988, 123) notes that Ionescu played an important role in Eliade's formation, being often mentioned in his writings, but without him noticing the refined moments of distance (Rennie 2013).

After 1989, the image of Mircea Eliade and other generation colleagues experienced contradictory developments. The cult for his

scientific work was amplified, he was very well valued as a prose writer, but the ideological complications of his youth were also brought to light. It is obvious that Idel's analysis summarizes all the accusations made by Leon Volovici and others, but also makes a rehabilitation operation, not denying his enrollment in the current of the radical right, but recovering the image of the scientist and literate, obviously overshadowed by the rediscovery of the sins of youth. In the subtext, there is a barely masked polemic with researchers (such as Volovici) who focused only on the presentation, very useful, in fact, of the period of legionary attachment, whereas for Idel the elements and explanations of context being the most important. Not to excuse or diminish guilt, but to paint a portrait closer to reality.

The discovery of far-right "collaborationism" had consequences for Eliade as a historian of religions, his public image was damaged and his scientific legacy overshadowed. And this happened especially in the last years of his life, after he had written much of his work and had become a scientific celebrity of sorts, and after 1990, when the archives could be researched and the accusations of collaborationism intensified. There was another phenomenon that manifested straight away, namely the far right past of *Generation '27* having a positive echo in some academic spheres and mass culture, proving, at least in Romania, that there is a populist and sovereignist current (and electorate!) that still adheres to the ideology of the radical right.

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