

**‘Secret’s Documents:’ Historical Memory, Freedom of Research,
and the Policies Regarding Public Archives in Romania
(discussion)
(Abstract)**

Participants: Cătălin Botoșineanu¹, Adrian Cioflâncă²,
Mihai Demetriade³, Dorin Dobrincu⁴, Elena Dragomir⁵, Florea
Ioncioaia⁶ (moderator), Dumitru Lăcătușu⁷, Flavius Solomon⁸,
Lucrețiu Bîrliba⁹, Alexander Rubel¹⁰, Marius Diaconescu¹¹, Sorin
Radu¹², Livia Ardelean¹³, Mihai Mîrza¹⁴.

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Free, unrestricted, extensive, and legally sanctioned access to all historical documents has been a constant aspiration in post-1989 Romania. Debates around this topic, held within various professional groups, institutions, and throughout society as a whole were frequent and often resulted in open tensions during the first post-communist decade. Ultimately, by the late 2000s, in the context of broader political, intellectual, and institutional changes, the archives became open to the public. Previous restrictions on access to historical documents were lifted, the discriminatory provisions based on various criteria were eliminated, the institutions managing historical sources and archival holdings were forced to change older practices, making significant efforts in this respect, while their employees discovered the benefits of a friendlier approach to their customers and the wider public. The impact of these shifts upon historical research was palpable. Romania gradually became, for many observers, an example of good practices in the field of managing and granting access to the written records of the past. The situation seemed predictable and the future direction appeared clear and firmly established.

However, underneath and behind this seemingly favorable line of development, certain trends emerged which, initially, raised alarm bells among a part of the professional community of archivists, later involving some professional historians and,

¹ Arhivist la Arhivele din Iași.

² Director al Centrului pentru Studiul Istoriei Evreilor din România „Wilhelm Filderman”.

³ Consilier superior la Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității – CNSAS.

⁴ Cercetător la Institutul de Istorie „A. D. Xenopol”, Academia Română, Filiala Iași.

⁵ Universitatea Valahia din Târgoviște.

⁶ Profesor la Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași.

⁷ Cercetător la Centrul de Consultanță istorică.

⁸ Cercetător la Institutul de Istorie „A. D. Xenopol”, Academia Română, Filiala Iași.

⁹ Profesor la Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași.

¹⁰ Director al Institutului de Arheologie, Academia Română, Filiala Iași.

¹¹ Profesor la Universitatea din București.

¹² Rector al Universității „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu.

¹³ Arhivist la Arhivele din Cluj.

¹⁴ Arhivist la Arhivele din Iași.

eventually, impacting the broader public. The first worrying sign concerned the practice of destroying certain historical documents that were preserved in the depositories of their institutional creators or of the latter's successors/descendants. These 'creators' included, in particular, state institutions, secret services, or various structural divisions of the central administration. Later on, certain measures were taken which gravely and severely restricted public access to historical documents. The most surprising and unexpected step in this regard was the decision of the leadership of the Romanian National Archives announced on May 26, 2022. Reversing a seemingly irreversible trend, which had gained the upper hand during the previous fifteen years, this decision effectively restricted or denied access for interested researchers to certain archival files. The official reason invoked was "to ensure the adequate enforcement of the measures regarding the protection of classified information". This restrictive provision, which was applied and implemented immediately, caused bewilderment and outrage among the concerned professional audience. Thus, several historians published articles or opinion pieces in the print and online media, as well as on social networks. A petition was launched, which was signed not only by a significant number of professional historians and archivists, but also by members of the broader public interested in the past and preoccupied by historical memory. Certain institutions involved in the production of historical knowledge expressed their critical position and professional opinions. A number of events and debates were organized within this professional framework.

On June 30, 2022, the Romanian Society for Historical Studies (SSIR) organized a discussion and round table, together with the "A. D. Xenopol" Institute of History in Iași, the Department of History of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, the German Cultural Center Iași, and the Humboldt-Club Iași. Several historians and archivists were among the event's participants (in a hybrid, live and online, format), including: Cătălin Botoșineanu, Adrian Cioflâncă, Mihai Demetriade, Dorin Dobrințu, Elena Dragomir, Florea Ioncioaia, Dumitru Lăcătușu, Flavius Solomon, Lucrețiu Bîrliba, Alexander Rubel, Marius Diaconescu, Sorin Radu, Livia Ardelean, Mihai Mîrza.

The speakers presented relevant facts and expressed various points of view concerning the management of the Romanian archives and the intrusion of the secret services in the process of granting access to historical documents by excessively invoking and manipulating the legal provisions relating to classified documents and data. The participants particularly emphasized the destruction of certain categories of written sources as troubling signs of institutional abuse and ignorance, pointing to the re-introduction of some arbitrary practices of restricting or denying access to historically relevant documents of special interest to researchers. The speakers also criticized the fact that the leadership of the Romanian National Archives succumbed to the pressure exerted by the secret service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as the lack of any meaningful reaction from prominent Romanian politicians. They also agreed that there was an urgent need for a new and updated law regarding the functioning of the Romanian archives to be passed by Parliament, especially taking into account that several projects to that effect had already been submitted to the legislature. The participants also highlighted the importance of a fundamental institutional change, i.e., of the urgent need to remove the National Archives from the current stifling jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ministry promotes and fosters an institutional culture which blocks any real understanding of the Archives' role and relevance. Moreover, high-ranking officers from within the Ministry's secret service frequently have a final say in matters that are clearly beyond their reach, as they lack any competence, expertise,

and legal authority in this respect. The public debate concerning the freedom of research and the unrestricted access to historical documents should be continued. It should involve all those directly interested and should aim at identifying and formulating concrete proposals which might allow and result in the elaboration and implementation of coherent public policies, worthy of a free and democratic society.