

## **A country everyone wanted to escape**

Adrian Schiop & Vlad Levente Viski

A country everyone wanted to escape. A generalized societal failure with an unbelievable media fervor, selling hundreds of thousands of copies. Cuponiada, Caritas, the miner movements, bribes worth hundreds of thousands of Deutsche Marks, facts and unveilings that held headlines for weeks on end, and an idle judicial system. Society as hoax, worth the country's entire gross domestic product.

This is the context in which *Prostituția*, an erotic magazine printed on ordinary tabloid paper, published a letter in which a gay man, living in America, expresses his intention to set up a correspondence club. He gives his real name and his address from San Francisco. The same letter is printed in the *Evenimentul Zilei* newspaper, while an ad for this pen club also appears in the recently launched *Gay45* magazine.

Starting from there, the American formerly based in Bucharest, begins to receive tons of letters from Romanian gays. Some attempt a personal analysis of the political situation. Others discuss the section of the penal code that criminalizes homosexuality (Article 200). Some gossip about various politicians who are supposed to be gay. Others ask for material to jerk off to – but most of them simply want to escape the prison which Romania had become.

One surprising thing about the letters sent to Adrian Newell Păun is the certainty of personal identity. The homosexuals who write to Păun are very sure about their homosexuality. Many of them appear to have origins in the lower bourgeoisie, as much as this term describes social classes in those years, definitely having an intellectual discourse; in an age dominated by Francophone preferences, we actually find lines written in varying degrees of proficiency in English. These are isolated voices of a community that hadn't yet congealed, going through its founding stages.

Letters poured in from all over the country, from Baia Mare, Arad, Galați – or even from abroad, sent by those who managed to emigrate to the West. One of them is stuck indefinitely in a refugee camp – sexual preference is not considered sufficient reason for granting political asylum, despite the gays beaten and imprisoned by Romanian authorities. Another had succeeded in navigating the procedural maze used by the French authorities to try and stop the incoming waves of desperate people from the East, and had started a happier life there. He says – “of the gay compatriots from Paris I know only a few people, old mates from Bucharest, not many of them, but the general tendency is to forget what has happened in the hopes of making up for lost time... You can very well imagine what the possibilities of an absolutely free life can offer us here.”

Anything – from the West – is better than the desolate and punitive Romania of the first years of freedom: “In Romania I've been arrested and sentenced to 5 years of prison,

together with 33 other intellectuals (doctors, professors, engineers, jurists, students etc.) in 1987, and released on grounds of a decree of general amnesty issued by Ceaușescu. (...) since 1991 an intense campaign has begun on TV, radio, in newspapers and magazines, in the Parliament and even within the Presidency, against homosexuals and ‘apparently’ prostitution. In March 1992, they began arresting gays again, in Timișoara, Arad, Deva and Bucharest”, somebody else complained.

Until the middle of the decade, when the gay club *Sherlock Holmes* appeared, gay meetings retained their illicit and precarious stance. A letter reviews Bucharest meeting places for gay men, from the early 90’s – with the National Opera Park at the head of the list, followed closely by the waiting platform in front of the Gara de Nord train station. Other sites listed included, the nudist zone of the Toboc private pool, as well as more civilized hook up spots like the Odobești restaurant or the Facenda bar, where, we are told, police raids are an everyday reality. “Lesbians are totally absent from the daily landscape of Bucharest, because they are so secluded,” a gay man originally from Galați writes.

But Bucharest is the acceptable case – the gloom is even worse in other parts of the country. “In Baia Mare everything is ‘brown,’ just like in Bacovia’s poetry, including my loneliness, because the city is so small, we don’t have places to meet (bars, sauna), which sometimes makes me lose it, and run as far as my eyes can reach, because our life in all aspects is extremely bitter.”

In a sense, this is the more fortunate case. Back then – similar to now – many gays had already been through a heterosexual marriage, as we can see in this example: “What could I say about myself; I am 30 years of age, I’ve studied History in Bucharest, I’ve been married, and what makes me happiest is that I have a seven-year-old boy.”

This is still the acceptable scenario; back then most gays imagined themselves being bisexual and were struggling to keep their marriages alive. Here’s the example of a dancer who even daringly tries to seduce the eccentric American, describing himself like in a marriage ad – “(...) I’m 28 years old, 1,8 meters tall, 75 kg, brown eyes, brown and curly hair. (...) I am a professional ballet player (freelance dancer) and I dance in a night club in Bucharest. I’ve been away on two tours, one lasted 10 months (...) in Yugoslavia, the other lasted 6 months, in Cyprus. (...) I am bisexual, I like to make love to both women and men.”

Even the *Prostituția* magazine (which in 1993 changed its name to a lesser provocative one, *Pasiunea*) writes to Adrian Newell Păun, to inform him that they are being sued for the dissemination of obscene materials – and also to ask for help: “maybe some other organizations and *committees* will protest against this violation of press-freedom!”

*Gay45* appears in April 1993, the first gay newspaper in Romania. It survived two issues and represents an attempt to produce an identity discourse with surprisingly political and not so apologetic undertones. The newspaper speaks critically about the situation of the imprisoned gays – but it also comments on Article 200, HIV, translates articles about

homosexuality and offers the forsaken horoscope, an actual red herring which will cut across the press written by gays from its origins to its demise in the second half of the 2000's, when it will melt into the informational vortex of the internet age. Published by a small collective, with a circulation of a few thousand copies (insignificant in a time when even the simplest rag sold for hundreds of thousands of copies), it was first refused by a printing press and distributed manually through the city; a copy even reached Braşov.

There are also myths about *Gay45* that deserve to be mentioned because they say something about those wild years. The financial aspects of the magazine are unclear even today, the stories just don't add up. Some texts were written by the same person under a pseudonym to give the impression of a larger editorial collective. Despite the above mentioned issues, maybe the most interesting aspect is the transcript of a broadcasted-debate on the topic of homosexuality, from Delta Radio. The guests: representatives from the government, the church, the pro-gay intellectual community, a few foreigners. 10 people in all, including a representative (anonymous) from *Total Relations*, the first gay organization, created at the start of 1992 as a for-profit (SRL) company, because it was easier to register such an entity. What is left of this interview, something mentioned many times in the letters to Adrian Newell Păun, is the fact that a certain colonel Ioan Ciobanu, a representative of the Police, admitted that the Romanian government actively punished homosexuality and declared there were 47 individuals under investigation in accordance to Article 200. Although the authenticity of this interview could not be confirmed, the *Gay45* interview had a powerful social impact, as activists used it in their discussions with international entities to put pressure on the Romanian government to decriminalize homosexuality.

The second issue of *Gay45* had already become more commercial, containing sexy pictures with undressed / barely dressed men. About the same time, in 1993, the erotic media launched the gay porn magazine *Hot Boys* and a generalist porn magazine, *Al treilea sex*, with a gay section. In those times of entrepreneurship pioneering, people madly hoped to make money off of anything – from subscriptions to porn magazines, orders of the *Gay Dictionary*, or hot lines. Capitalism and the free market were entering Romania and all its social avenues were being feverishly exploited. While these magazines and venues emerged as a result of the exploitative side of capitalism, they also achieved positive results. *Hot Boys* allowed for a significant discussion of “community issues”, emerging discourses of non-discrimination, Mending the Wounded Self. Simply said, it sent messages for gays, not to consider themselves sick or abnormal. The magazine also held a *personals* section for men; it was the first time gays could avoid shielding their lustful sexual appetite behind shy ads like “lonely man, looking for a male friend to spend my spare time, go out, go hiking” and could instead let it all out: “Bisexual, married, intellectual, 28/170/62, pleasant look, joyful, discreet, looking for a friend, necessarily married, no more than 30, for a long term relationship. Compatibilities are to be discussed. No adventurers or emasculated men – I am not interested in fast food relationships.” Like now, the ads surprise through the abundance of married passive bisexuals.

Doubts about the validity of certain things are part of the 90's atmosphere. We find, in the press, fictional interviews with gays. In *Jurnalul de Galați* (May 1993) we find an article in which interviewees' answers appear to be the fabrication of a heated heterosexual mind, one that tries to sell the paper as a tabloid fire cracker. In *Un bărbat fericit* magazine (1993) we find the *Confessions of a homosexual*, from which we can hardly tell if the author is gay or transgender. "Nights spent on the streets and in public toilets. Bullying of all sorts. Humiliations. Deceptions. There aren't words to describe this nightmare. I have been pushed away and mocked at, blackmailed, possessed with force by neighborhood gypsies, spat at by children."

The anonymous letters sent to the editor, using the mailing box as a filter for identity protection, sound more authentic.

A somewhat natural alliance was forged in those years between gays and 22 magazine, at the time the standard of urban intellectuals. Western Europe had already opened up towards gays and was imperatively asking eastern states to stop persecuting them, which is to say, westerners were already in the loop. As early as 1992 22 magazine published a public protest signed by Adrian Newell Păun, together with writer Gabriela Adameșteanu's response and a full page of articles and modest & useful information concerning homosexuality. In February and June 1999, the magazine publishes special editions concerning homosexuality, in a time of a more coherently developed gay activism that existed towards the end of the 90's. On the first page of this cultural publication, above the editorial signed by Emil Hurezeanu, *To be or not to be Iliescu*, an insert: *Gay and lesbians*. These inserts, let's call them Vitamins for the Soul, try more decidedly to fuel a political gay identity, through the restitution of a shared history, by the endeavor to reconcile the Christian religion and homosexuality, and also by highlighting the texts of allied personalities. In short, in 1999, the discourse is much more structured.

1996 saw the emergence of the *ACCEPT* newsletter. Initially published in English, it counts among its authors important names in the field of public activism, people who later had a significant impact on the activist movement in Romania. Distributed for the civil society, this newsletter was the most expected envelope in the offices of non-profits in Bucharest. It was something else. It was spicy. News from the gays. Throughout the years it promoted various themes, from healthcare information, to empowerment editorials or organizational (self)promotion. New terms were introduced, *coming out*, *transgender* etc. After the money started flowing towards the LGBT movement, the *Inklusiv* magazine appeared (2005), born in a way out of the newsletter. In any case, in 2004 the newsletter is already color printed, looking more like a magazine.

Also in 1996, a text published in the *Privirea* magazine, *Article 200 C.P. seen through the naked eye*, stirred a lot of interest. Although with a faint homophobic air to it, a few embellishes and a lot of clichés, this text represents a rather in-depth investigation of homosexuality, shedding light on the *Sherlock Holmes* gay club on Kogălniceanu boulevard. With the opening of the *club* the gay community reaches its 2.0 phase: the first club for gays,

a space where they could manifest themselves openly as a group, beyond the fugitive 1:1 encounters in parks, toilets or bars that tolerate homosexuals.

In the first half of the 2000's money was merely trickling in over the activist wing of the community. Then slowly and majestically the gates closed until ultimately we came to the dramatic drought of today. Financing poured in both institutionally, through grants (see the Global Fund for the Fight Against HIV/AIDS) and privately, through donations. In this context, a second wave of gay press developed, which similarly tried to construct a commercial media model, capable of self-financing. But this is only the intention; the result – two magazines, *Inklusiv* and *Switch* (2005-2006), that sway charmingly between painstaking content proper to a school magazine and *wannabe-glossy* content. Some of the issues of these magazines have precious information about the meet up spots of gays across Romania. Otherwise we find pictorials, materials from allies willing to support the cause, articles about gay celebrities or *gay-friendly* celebrities, gay couples coming forward publicly. The (now) deceased David Bowie and George Michael are obsessively brought to the forefront. On the same thread of glossy teenager magazines, we find a puritan section, “readers ask, specialists answer”, which criticizes the community's national sport, fucking straight away, praising the benefits of couple life and of sex based on true love.

The story of *Switch* magazine (first issue published in July 2005) is also relevant for the muddy atmosphere of those times, shady and grey. Edited in Cluj, with private money, in the aftermath of the *Angelicuss* community website, it gave us three editions which we haven't forgotten so far, after which it was mysteriously sucked back into the fog. The first two were published – more or less – professionally, from a commercial standpoint. At that point a gay businessman from Bucharest made his appearance onto the scene and persuaded the American owner to completely move the magazine to Bucharest, where the FULL force of penetration was located. The story ends with a last issue of minuscule proportions, published in horrible comic sans fonts, with the bulk of the American's money spent generously. Beaten down by Romanian capitalism, the philanthropist left the country sullen.

Finally, a somewhat unique editorial presence is *Identități* magazine, the first lesbian magazine in Romania, published in 2003, using resources provided by a Dutch organization. It looks more like a *zine*, with a cultural profile, including poetry and numerous texts written under pseudonyms. It was an attempt to establish a rather alternative discourse concerning identity. With all its rough edges and mishaps, it was still the *coolest* publication in the gay media landscape, bringing it closer to an underground avant-garde magazine, without horoscopes or strains to deliver a *glossy* product.

In the August edition of the *Inklusiv* magazine we find an article arguing against having random sex, encouraged by a new high-tech platform like *mIRC*, taken up with enthusiasm by gays in early 2000s:

“in four years of being legal, between 2001 and 2005, *mIRC* has changed a lot. First of all, with the appearance of the #gaybucurești channel, at least people in Bucharest find it easier to pick out what they are looking for (...) we’ve all changed into #gayromania.”

Right from the beginning, *mIRC* spread like scarlet fever, it took a year, at most two, to contaminate the entire gay community.

*mIRC*, the popular chat platform, deserves a distinct mention – it took the community out of its neurotic sexual privation, especially in the small towns around the country, and connected it. *mIRC* became popular in a Romania overwhelmed by internet-cafés, at a time when the web was prohibitively expensive and few people could afford internet at home. In fact, this situation even entered the gay slang of the age: “what have you been up to all day?”, “I *mIRC*ed up, what the hell else.” Out of the shadows of the parks and the few profile clubs, the gays migrated to the internet-cafés that allowed them to find one another beyond the spatial constraints, but also keeping things clean, with guaranteed anonymity and no headaches:

“sal, avp?” “p,” “where from?” “sighetul marmăției,” “too far, cheers,” “picture,” “can’t show it,” “can you host?,” “only in the evenings.”

Restricted by their own condition, gays played their cards on the internet and the new technology from the very beginning, and these technologies brought the community to its 3.0 phase. From parks and public bathrooms, to clubs in the 2.0 phase, and in the end onto social media, via *mIRC*. It might be better to talk of life before and after *mIRC*, instead of life before and after the decriminalization of homosexuality. *mIRC* probably represented the community’s *Great Leap Forward*, to take up once again the expression used by Chinese communists.