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# **STUDIILE ROMÂNEȘTI ÎN ANUL CENTENARULUI**



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## **THE SOCIETY FOR ROMANIAN STUDIES, 1973-2019: THE GLOBALIZATION OF ACADEMIC ASSOCIATIONAL CULTURE**

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*Augerot and Michael Impey established the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS) in 1973 as a vehicle for North American scholars to network and share their passion for Romanian language and culture. It has evolved dramatically over the past 46 years, embracing the digital age and developing new ways to engage and connect members across disciplines, career stages, and continents. As academia becomes increasingly global, the SRS has striven to integrate East European scholars into its activities and governance, transforming both Romanian and North American associational culture in the process.*

*Key words: Society for Romanian Studies; Associational culture; Volunteering; Academic organizations; East European Studies*

Established in the midst of a North American Cold War academic culture at a time when national conferences and paper newsletters were the only way many academics stayed in touch, over the last decade the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS) has expanded outside of North America involving large numbers of European scholars in its activities, and making effective use of social media and the internet to connect specialists in Romanian history, language, and culture across the globe. These transformations have not always come easily, and the organization continues to discern how best to adapt the North American associational model to a global marketplace. Academics working in a variety of contexts have different motivations and incentives for engaging with organizations such as the SRS, and activities that benefit one group may be superfluous to another. As Philip Altbach and Jane Knight note, the globalization of the academic marketplace and the increasing focus on international initiatives “tends to concentrate wealth, knowledge, and power in those already possessing these elements” (Altbach and Knight 291). The challenge for the SRS is to integrate Romanian and Moldovan scholars as equal partners in a way that empowers them within their own academic contexts, forging new norms and a new, global associational culture in the process.

When Jim Augerot and Michael Impey established the Romanian Studies Group (RSG), as it was known in 1973, they envisioned it as a way of bringing together North American academics with an interest in Romanian language and culture. Both had recently returned from Fulbright exchanges in Romania, and

Augerot writes that he wanted to maintain the connections with other specialists he had established at the 1970 conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) (Augerot). At first the RSG was made up mostly of scholars of Romanian language and literature, but it quickly expanded to embrace other disciplines such as History, Anthropology, and Political Science. It built on an established associational culture in North American academia that saw such organizations as crucial for stimulating the exchange of ideas, disseminating knowledge, and encouraging the development of personal relationships between specialists in a given field (Newman 138-139). They had a clear and well-tested formula to build on. The AAASS had been established in 1948 as part of a general push by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) to encourage knowledge of the rest of the world, and especially of Eastern Bloc countries (Burkhardt; Harris). Originally set up as an umbrella organization that provided a legal basis for the journal *Slavic Studies*, in 1960 the AAASS reorganized as a professional association (History, ASEES). Its goals were “to advance scholarly study, publication, and teaching related to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Communist bloc,” and “to encourage cooperation and exchange of information among scholars and institutions concerned with Slavic, East European, and Soviet studies” (Fisher). The AAASS held its first convention in 1964, and Augerot hosted a “Conference on Romanian Language and Literature” in 1972 at the University of Washington. Impey held another conference at the University of Kentucky the following year, at which 41 inaugural members founded the RSG and elected the first officers (Michelson).

As its mission statement makes clear, the primary goal of the RSG, which was renamed the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS) in 1977, was “to promoting the professional study, criticism, and research of all aspects of Romanian culture and civilization.” This was not intentionally a Cold War project, and Augerot makes clear that his experience of Romania at the end of the 1960s was “fascinating and delightful.” He was enamored with Romanian language and culture, as were many of organization’s founding members. Indeed, North American historians of this period such as Keith Hitchins, Frederick Kellogg, and Paul Michelson were tireless in publishing English-language reviews of new Romanian books. Their goal was to build connections with specialists both inside and outside Romania in order to develop and enrich the field. A number of early RSG members had been Fulbright or IREX scholars in Romania during the 1960s and 1970s, however, and the Communist regime viewed them as potential spies (Verdery). During the 1980s representatives of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime pressured the SRS leadership to stop allowing discussions of post-1945 realities at its conferences. Successive presidents, Mary Ellen Fischer, Rodica Boțoman, and Walter M. Bacon Jr., refused to restrict freedom of discussion, and Romanian delegations to SRS conferences were promised, withdrawn, promised again, then absent (Michelson).

At the time, conferences were the most effective way of creating a community of like-minded academics scattered at institutions across the United States and internationally. Of the 34 SRS conferences and meetings held between

1972 and 2000, all but three were held in the United States. They accompanied a growing presence of Romanian specialists in North American academia, illustrated by the success of the Romanian Culture and Civilization Program that Rodica Boțoman began at Ohio State University in 1975, which boasted 360 students by 1980. Unable to collaborate extensively with scholars inside Romania, the SRS reached out to colleagues in France, such as Catharine Durandin, Claude Karnoouh, and Sorin Alexandrescu. The result was an international conference organized together with the Asociația Internațională de Studii Românești (AISR) at the Sorbonne in France in 1986. Selected papers from the conference were published in *The International Journal of Rumanian Studies (IJRS)*, with several SRS members joining the *IJRS* board (Michelson).

The end of Ceaușescu's dictatorship in December 1989 opened doors for further collaboration between North American specialists and their Romanian counterparts. The SRS was now able to hold conferences inside Romania itself, which it did in Iași (1993), Cluj-Napoca (1997), Suceava (2001), Constanța (2007), Sibiu (2012), and Bucharest (2015 and 2018). These were major conferences, with large numbers of panels attracting younger scholars and PhD students as well as established academics. Location did make a difference, with the Suceava conference suffering from the difficulty that many Romanian scholars were less inclined to travel to Suceava than they had been to Iași or Cluj-Napoca (Michelson). All of these conferences relied heavily on the support of local institutions, who provided rooms and helped with logistics. Despite the increasing ease of international travel and online communication, SRS conferences continue to produce new relationships and collaborations that otherwise would never have seen the light of day.

SRS members also collaborated with other Romanian studies initiatives aimed at bringing Romanian in the United States. The SRS has been affiliated with the American Association for Southeast European Studies (AASES), now the South East European Studies Association (SEESA), since 1977, and began offering joint memberships in 2000. It held business meetings in conjunction with AAASS – now the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) – conferences from 1978 until 2018, and organized Romanian studies panels at the annual Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) conferences. It became affiliated with the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1990, the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 2000, and the Balkan History Association (BHA) in 2019 (Michelson). The SRS helped advertise the annual conference of the Romanian Student Club at Columbia University between 2003 and 2009, as well as the annual Romanian Studies Conference that has been held at Indiana University since 2008. The Romanian Studies Association of America (RSAA) has existed as an affiliate of the Modern Language Association (MLA) since 1973, but remained separate from the SRS until 2012, when RSAA members attended the SRS conference in Sibiu. Since then the two organizations have supported each other's endeavors and offer a joint membership. Organizational affiliations have allowed the SRS to promote Romanian studies initiatives wherever they might appear. Apart from the collaboration with the AISR in 1986 and the BHA in 2019,

however, such collaborations have primarily been restricted to North American associations. The SRS did introduce institutional sponsors in 2011 and organizational memberships in 2015, which allowed it to form relationships with institutions such as Ovidius University in Constanța, the Political Science Faculty at the University of Bucharest (FSPUB), the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies (ASE), and the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA). These collaborations have primarily focused on advertising the partner organizations in SRS newsletters, rather than producing new scholarly initiatives.

Alongside conferences, newsletters were the primary way that SRS members kept in touch for several decades. Jim Augerot and Radu Florescu edited RSG newsletters for the first four years, until Paul Michelson took over in 1977. Michelson stayed on as the newsletter editor until 2007, producing and mailing roughly 60 issues – two every year (Michelson). Michelson's newsletters proved to be the backbone that held the SRS together. They included messages from the president and secretary, bringing members up to speed on recent developments within the organization, as well as obituaries for colleagues, information about conferences and events, funding opportunities, and a bibliography of recent publications. Roland Clark introduced an electronic format when he began editing the newsletter in 2011. Members now received the newsletter via email, which allowed more color, photos, and pages. In addition to the existing rubrics, academics wrote short "Soundbites" about Romanian and Moldovan politics, economics, and the arts. The Soundbites recognized that some SRS members taught about Romanian realities in the US but were not always up to date with recent developments within the country. As Lara Putnam has noted, one of the side-effects of the widespread use of digital research is that scholars can increasingly become "experts" on a field that they lack a deep knowledge of (Putnam 2016). Database searches and information that is accessible at the touch of a button mean that people no longer need to spend time searching through archives or building relationships with informants before they are able to write on a topic. Written by locals or by people who closely followed Romanian and Moldovan news, the Soundbites made US scholars conversant with changing circumstances and helped embed them in local realities. Further innovations emerged when Cristina Plămădeală and Ana Fumurescu took over in 2016. Interviews with SRS members now became a regular feature of the newsletter, as did short highlights of important new books by SRS members.

The turn to an electronic newsletter reflected a broader transition as the SRS embraced the digital revolution. Paul Michelson created a website for the SRS in 1995, the same year that commercial restrictions on internet use were first lifted and Microsoft launched the browser Internet Explorer. Ashby Crowder took over the website in 2010, sparking the first of several major overhauls of the website that took place over the next decade. Successive webmasters experimented with various platforms and designs, attempting to keep up with rapidly evolving software while ensuring it was user-friendly enough for non-specialists to update. Not only digital literacy but the ability to design and manage websites and online

payment systems such as Paypal has increasingly become crucial for scholars wanting to run international associations such as the SRS.

The SRS created a Facebook page in 2010 and has 2,799 followers in 2019. It further expanded onto Twitter, Academia.edu, and LinkedIn in 2014 and Instagram in 2019. Social media has proved an invaluable resource for connecting scholars across the world. Far more people engage with the SRS through social media than through conferences, newsletters, or email lists. Moreover, the nature of social media means that people who discover each other through the SRS page then go on to develop productive relationships independently of the organization. Whereas the newsletter invariably carries the strong voice of the editor(s), a number of different people are engaged in curating SRS social media pages. The result is a polyphony of views from diverse disciplines, geographies, and career stages. More than any other medium, social media has allowed the SRS to engage Romanian and Moldovan academics in discussions with their counterparts in North America and Western Europe. English remains the lingua franca of the SRS on social media, but increasingly posts are appearing in Romanian, German, French, and Italian, reflecting the organization's new global diversity.

In 2013 the SRS launched H-Romania as another attempt at building an online community of academics interested in Romanian studies. H-Romania exists as a H-Net network, and as such is officially separate from the SRS. Nonetheless, it was established as an SRS initiative, most advisory board members are also actively involved in the SRS, and one of its editors, R. Chris Davis, sits on the SRS Board as an ex officio member. In addition to publishing news, calls, and proposals of interest to SRS members, H-Romania actively solicits and publishes academic book reviews. As such it helps promote the best that the field has to offer and holds authors to high critical standards.

Other initiatives aimed at promoting excellence in the field include essay and book prizes, a book series, and a new journal. One of Irina Livezeanu's key agendas when she became president in 2010 was to increase the involvement of graduate students in the organization. To this end she offered free student memberships for the first year and personally invited large numbers of graduate students to join. The fruits of this policy can be seen in that every newsletter editor since 2011 has been a graduate student, as have several of the webmasters. The SRS launched its first graduate student essay prize in 2009, and has awarded one every year since, with the exception of 2016 when the committee felt that none of the submissions met the high standards expected by the prize. The first biennial book prize was awarded in 2011, and the prize has recognized seminal books in the field every two years since. In collaboration with the publisher Polirom, Irina Livezeanu and Lavinia Stan established a new SRS book series in 2015. Although the series welcomes submissions written in Romanian, all five of the books published in the "Studii Românești" collection to date have been Romanian translations of books by scholars based in the West. All have been of high quality and represent the best the field has to offer. By offering new scholarship in Romanian for a Romanian market, the SRS/Polirom series is able to enrich Romanian studies inside the country as well as abroad. Building on the success of

the book series, in 2019 the SRS launched a new *Journal of Romanian Studies*, published by Ibidem Press. The editors Lavinia Stan and Margaret Beissinger explain that the journal “considers theoretically informed manuscripts that examine political, socioeconomic and cultural developments in Romania and Moldova, the situation of their ethnic minorities and their relations with the ethnic majority, as well as the position, culture, and history of Romanians and Moldovans living outside the shifting boundaries of those countries” (Stan, Beissinger). With a rigorous peer-review process, the journal hopes to create a forum for promoting excellent article-length scholarship just as the book series has done for longer works.

In 2018 – the organization’s 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary – the interviews that Plămădeală and Fumurescu had begun in the newsletter gave way to a series entitled “45 for 45,” published in *La Punkt*, a prominent Romanian website dedicated to discussions about cultural and intellectual issues. Anca Şincan, the series editor, states that the interviews “showcase 45 junior and senior academics who are working in Western universities, centers or institutes and have devoted their research to the field of Romanian Studies, broadly conceived” (Şincan). The series has produced a number of stimulating discussions that illustrate how deeply Romanian heritage, family connections, or personal relationships have shaped the studies of foreign specialists studying Romania. Although the interviews exclusively featured scholars working in the West, they are published in Romanian and frequently carried out by scholars based in Romania, testifying to the growing presence of Romanian scholars in the organization. As the SRS shifts from being an organization rooted in North American academia and becomes truly global, it has had to confront the challenges of translating the assumptions and values of the associational culture that it grew up in onto a global stage. Many SRS members straddle Romanian and Western cultures. Living and working in the West, they nonetheless retain close family or friendship ties in Romania or Moldova. As a result, they have embraced what Katalin Szelényi and Robert Rhoads call “global citizenship,” which involves “seeking to balance social, civic, and economic rights and responsibilities in a local/national sphere of existence with those in a global/transnational domain” (Szelényi and Rhoads 2006: 42). The SRS provides a unique opportunity for the “hybridization” (Szelényi and Rhoads 2013) of Western and East European academic and professional cultures that contributes positively to all members.

Sociologists often write about social capital, or the benefits and resources that individuals can draw on from their relationships with others. Jacqueline Butcher and Christopher Einolf distinguish between “bridging” social capital and “bonding” social capital, both of which can result from involvement in organizations such as the SRS. Bridging social capital, they argue, “links people from different backgrounds,” whereas bonding social capital “strengthens the links among people of similar backgrounds” (Butcher and Einolf 8). Bridging social capital expands one’s resources and networks, while bonding social capital is often exclusionary and endogamous. As the “45 for 45” interviews demonstrate, the SRS fosters bridging relationships that have resulted in particularly fruitful research,

benefiting both individual researchers and the field as a whole. The SRS mentoring program pairs junior and senior scholars who are sometimes working within the same academic context but also helps create relationships across borders. American graduate students conducting research in Romania or Moldova for the first time, for example, can appeal to a local mentor who can provide invaluable local knowledge. Similarly, scholars based in Romania or Moldova who want to publish in Western journals or apply for fellowships abroad can benefit from the knowledge of Western academics who are familiar with the requirements of their systems. Beyond specific questions related to publishing or research, most of the 26 mentors currently participating in the program are happy to use the mentoring program as an excuse to discuss the state of the field, theoretical or methodological approaches, or issues surrounding networking and academic culture. As mentors and mentees often work in different national circumstances, the result is often a fruitful exchange of knowledge and experience that flows both ways.

The vibrancy of associational life relies both on systemic or institutional incentives and on the desire of individuals to engage with groups like the SRS (Rochester). Whereas universities in North America value involvement in para-institutional associations by recognizing contributions to SRS committees as part of staff workloads, considering them as part of promotion and tenure applications and occasionally providing resources for conference organization or other related activities, European universities are much less likely to do so. Associational life is particularly weak in post-socialist countries. Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan and Valentina Gevorgyan write that state socialism was particularly detrimental to associational life as it purposively strived to ban any autonomous social life, and instead strived to supplant it with its own structures.” The result is that even decades later, “citizens still largely believe that the state is responsible for the overall wellbeing of society. Many are reluctant to take initiative, or fail to see it as legitimate, that an association rather than a state body should do something to alleviate social ills” (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 229). According to a European Values Survey from 1999, only 9.5 percent of Romanians did unpaid work for voluntary associations also the popularity of volunteering was on the increase (Voicu, Voicu 153). Research has shown that those who do volunteer are more likely to be young people and those with more education, income, and bridging social capital (Voicu, Voicu). As the culture of higher education changes in Eastern Europe we will hopefully see a rise in systemic and institutional support for associational life. An increasing number of academics based in Romania and Moldova have become actively involved in the SRS over the past decade, including serving on the Board, as executive officers, running the “45 for 45” series, and organizing conferences. One of the key challenges for the SRS is to determine how best to harness this energy and whether SRS governance needs to change to accommodate the new environment. Meanwhile, the election of Rodica Zaharia as Vice-President and Anca Şincan as Secretary in 2019 and having people like Marina Cap-Bun, Petru Negura, and Oana Suciú on the Board is a good step in the right direction.

Although scholars such as Robert Putnam have bemoaned the apparent decline of “social capital” in the United States as fewer people volunteer or join community groups (Putnam 2000), academic associational culture remains alive and well. Despite ever increasing demands on the time and energy of academic workers, there is still a strong ethos of volunteering that allows groups such as the SRS to flourish. Such an ethos emerges from within institutional cultures and from individual personalities and belief systems. Paul Michelson, for example, whose efforts behind the scenes contributed in no small measure to the survival of the SRS over a number of decades, draws on a deeply-held commitment to “servant leadership” (Roberts) that is part of his Evangelical Christian faith. The fruit of Michelson’s ethos was several decades of voluntary work for minimal professional recognition. A comparable volunteering ethos still remains underdeveloped in Romania and Moldova, and individuals who have the time, energy, and disposition to contribute to groups such as the SRS are in the minority. Nonetheless, more and more people have come forward in recent years who are eager to engage with SRS activities, reflecting a broad sea-change in attitudes towards associational life. Paturyan and Gevorgyan write that in post-socialist contexts “volunteers report being driven by career-oriented factors such as acquisition of knowledge, development of skills, and/or gaining work experience. They also place high importance on social functions, gaining new friends, sense of community, ability to interact and spend quality time with interesting people, having fun, trying out something new, and so on. The most frequently mentioned skills gained because of volunteering are communication skills” (Paturyan and Gevorgyan 238). As more people experience the benefits of SRS involvement, it is likely that we will see an increasing number of people willing to make the sort of commitments that associational life involves. The future for the Society of Romanian Studies as a vehicle for the globalization of academic associational culture has the potential to be very bright.

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