

ROMANIA'S MINISTRY OF INTERIOR: IT'S CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL SOCIETY

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The Ministry of Interior, previously known as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, was long associated with some of the more frightening aspects of a dictatorship imposed by the Romanian Communist Party shortly after World War 2. Yet, in the quarter of a century since the death of Nicolae Ceausescu, this ministry has established a record of reforms and restructuring that has transformed it into one of the more remarkable instances effective democratic rule and civic society in Eastern Europe.

So exalted was the political position of the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the communist era that it enjoyed the status of being one of only three ministries represented in Romania's powerful Defense Council. While it directed routine police work and managed local fire departments, it was also associated with the suppression foreign espionage and any domestic challenges to the communist regime. It controlled security troops and the dreaded Securitate that inspired fear among Romania's population and even intimidated many employees of the Ministry of Interior. In 1972, the Ministry's internal focus led to the exposure of a deputy ministry, General Ion Serb, who was executed after being convicted as a Soviet spy. Following this incident, the Romanian government changed its name to Ministry of Interior in an effort to give the ministry a new look. However, intimidation of ministry employees continued and in 1982, there was a purge of officials said to be practitioners of transcendental meditation. There was an intense program of political indoctrination for the Ministry of Interior security troops. Discipline was strict and imposed by five times more political officers than Romania's other armed services.

The remarkable post-communist transition of the Ministry of Interior has focused on every aspect of the Ministry's work. Most relevant to the internal atmosphere of this organization was the work of the 65-year-old Cultural Center. The operative assumption of the Center is that personnel who are responsible for law enforcement must be an integral part of the civil society protected by the Ministry itself. In a recent interview, Colonel Fănel Mirică, Adjunct Director of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Cultural Center, explained the important contribution of the Cultural Center in building a relationship of trust between serving police officers and the public.

A fundamental part of the post-communist transition was recognition of the vital relationship between Interior Ministry personnel and their community. According to Colonel Fănel, the Ministry was created to serve Romania's citizens but, during the period of communist control, it often worked against both citizens and Romanian civil society. Such abuses were an inevitable consequence of the nature of the dictatorship during the years from 1946 to 1989. The regime's attitudes often colored relationships between officers serving in the Ministry of Interior who were themselves subject to the pressures of a totalitarian system.

Broadly speaking, the goal of the Cultural Center is to prevent the formation of a breach between the law enforcement community and the Romanian national community.

The Cultural Center works to balance the technical and judicial activities performed by uniformed personnel. Within this context, it focuses on the “sensitive attributes of human nature” which must be cultivated so those who are representatives of the law can be an integral part of civil society and thus identify with citizens in general. The logic of this policy is that law enforcement officers dealing with the public will recognize those individuals as part of their own community and not engage in the abusive behavior associated with the communist era.

The desired result of these endeavors is that law and culture join forces to be closer to the citizen. The specific beneficiaries of the cultural and artistic activities organized by the Center are Ministry employees, their families, and the citizens themselves. To insure that the Center reaches every demographic, these activities include a wide variety of programs, each of which will cultivate certain interests and aptitudes. Therefore, Ministry personnel and their families may select from programs focused on development of an understanding the institutional traditions of the Ministry itself as well as on traditional cultural events. Among the latter are art exhibits and related artistic activities as well as participation in book clubs. The Center’s involvement in book publishing has the added benefit of making available numerous studies of topics that would be of interest to the broader Interior Ministry community.

With this, there is a clear commitment to providing a link between the employees of the cultural center in the Ministry Of Interior and the cultural professionals outside of this institution. This includes artists and, in fact, all employees of the Culture Center. After 1989, the Ministry of Interior, like many state institutions started opening up to civil society, and, for the artistic and cultural scene, this meant intensifying collaborations between specialists of the Ministry of Interior Cultural Center and traditional Romanian folklore singers as well as the elite of Romanian society.

Employees of the Cultural Center organized symposiums, round tables and conferences which served as the interface between the MI and the Romanian cultural world. The literary circles, festivals and book fairs where the institution participated have proven, throughout all of these years, that the MI’s potential isn’t limited to the activity of applying the law but transcends these limits and displays, beyond the shoulders of its members in terms of depth, sensibility and culture.

Cultural Center artists use televised shows which are broadcast on channels specializing in promoting authentic Romanian folklore. This gives the artists at the Cultural Center of the MI the ability to not only demonstrate the reality of their artistic talent –which is just as priceless as the talents of prominent folklore music figures – but were also able to bring their contribution to the institutional stage, proudly promoting the MI as an authentic artistic and culture loving institution.

In order to consolidate this work, there are numerous international cultural ties that the Ministry of Interior has with other states. When it comes to the international element of the artistic and cultural acts developed within the Ministry of Interior, institutional and legal frameworks have been created. These collaborative ventures are important in making international cooperation a real possibility. This has been accomplished in spite of the fact that during the last 6 years there has been a difficult international economy, the economical problems which the majority of countries working with the MI Cultural Center were facing imposed drastic reductions in the funds dedicated to such programs.

Yet, most of these nations have recognized that, in the face of rising crime rates, it has been important for their citizens that the work of law enforcement has been enhanced by these activities. Such success, in the face of economic adversity, is a tribute to the efforts of the MI Cultural Center.

Because one does not usually think of a police organization being involved in these programs, it is important to ask how well culture and police work go together. In this context it is probably best to use the more general expression “law enforcement activity” since it more clearly defines these programs. This is the case even though this work also encompasses the military, gendarmes, firemen and aviators, all of whom have a role in providing for public order. What is true of the interaction between culture and police work is also true of the relationship between cultural work and those professions.

With that qualification in mind, it is clear that there is a strong bond between culture and the law enforcement activity that is reflected through police literature, painting, sculpture and even poetry. All of these are ways of expressing the fulfillment of the soul, the taming and humanizing what might seem as the otherwise mundane day to day activities of the law enforcement community in Romania. In this fashion, these endeavors contribute to the prestige and image of the Ministry of Interior, not just in Romanian society, but also all over the world where it is regarded as proof of the positive results of civil society in post-communist Romania.