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PAUL GOMA AND THE LIMITS OF DISSIDENCE IN COMMUNIST ROMANIAN

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Abstract

Background: The history of dissent in communist Romania presents a significant paradox. Although individual acts of intellectual and civic opposition occurred throughout the communist period, Romania did not develop a durable opposition network comparable to Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia or Solidarity in Poland. Paul Goma's 1977 human rights initiative represents the most relevant case through which this discrepancy can be examined.

Aims: This article investigates the relationship between moral resistance, intellectual solidarity, state repression, and political effectiveness in communist Romania. It asks why an authentic act of public dissent, formulated through the international language of human rights, failed to develop into a sustainable form of organized civic opposition.

Methodology: The study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative approach combining contemporary history, security studies, intellectual history, and discourse analysis. The source base includes documents from the archives of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), Paul Goma's published writings and correspondence, contemporary accounts, international human rights documentation, and relevant Romanian and international historiography.

Results/Findings: The analysis demonstrates that the limited organizational development of Romanian dissent cannot be adequately explained through individual passivity or a lack of moral opposition. The decisive factors included preventive surveillance, institutional repression, the fragmentation of intellectual communities, dependence upon state-controlled professional structures, and the weakness of autonomous civic spaces. At the same time, the Goma Movement introduced an important innovation by transferring political contestation from explicitly ideological opposition to the language of legal rights and international commitments established by the Helsinki Final Act. Although the authorities succeeded in containing the movement domestically, repression increased the international visibility of the Goma case.

Conclusion: *The article proposes the concept of the "illusion of dissidence" as a distinction between the moral authenticity and symbolic legacy of dissent and its limited capacity to generate immediate institutional transformation. Paul Goma's historical importance therefore lies not in having created a durable political organization, but in exposing the structural limits of collective action under Romanian communism and challenging the regime through its own internationally declared commitments.*

Keywords: *collective memory, communist Romania, dissidence, human rights, Paul Goma, political repression.*

1. Introduction

One of the enduring questions in the history of communist Eastern Europe concerns the striking differences in the development of organized opposition across the region. Poland witnessed the emergence of Solidarity as a mass social movement, while Czechoslovakia developed Charter 77 as a durable civic network. Romania, by contrast, produced predominantly fragmented and short-lived forms of public dissent despite the existence of intellectuals who openly challenged the communist regime.

This discrepancy has frequently encouraged comparisons in which Romanian opposition appears marginal when measured against the Polish or Czechoslovak cases. Such comparisons are useful, but they can obscure the specific institutional environment in which Romanian dissent developed. The absence of a durable collective opposition should not automatically be interpreted as the absence of opposition itself. It requires examination of the mechanisms through which individual protest was isolated before it could develop into sustained collective action (Deletant, 1995, pp. 183–210; Petrescu, 2013, pp. 145–170).

Paul Goma occupies a central position in this debate. In 1977, inspired by Charter 77 and by the normative framework created by the Helsinki Final Act, Goma publicly challenged the Romanian communist authorities over their failure to respect rights to which the state had formally committed itself. His initiative represented one of the clearest attempts in communist Romania to transform individual moral protest into public civic solidarity (Bălănescu, 2022, pp. 15–52).

The political consequences were nevertheless limited. The emerging network was subjected to surveillance and intimidation, Goma was arrested, supporters were pressured, and the movement failed to acquire a durable organizational structure. Yet the same episode attracted significant attention outside Romania and exposed tensions between the regime's international image and its domestic practices.

This article asks: why did an authentic and internationally visible act of dissent fail to develop into durable collective opposition in communist Romania?

The argument advanced here is that the explanation lies primarily in the relationship between individual agency and the institutional environment of authoritarian control. Extensive surveillance, preventive repression, dependence upon state institutions, fragmentation of intellectual communities, and the weakness of autonomous civic spaces severely restricted the transformation of individual protest into organized opposition (Deletant, 1995, pp. 183–210; Tismăneanu, 2003, pp. 257–274).

The article consequently distinguishes between three dimensions that should not be treated as synonymous: moral legitimacy, collective mobilization, and political effectiveness. This distinction provides the basis for the concept of the "illusion of dissidence,"

which is used here not to question the authenticity of dissent but to examine the discrepancy between its retrospective symbolic significance and its immediate capacity to produce institutional political change.

2. Historiographical and Conceptual Framework

Dissidence in communist Eastern Europe cannot be reduced to conventional political opposition. Václav Havel's influential interpretation emphasized the moral significance of refusing participation in the ideological rituals through which communist regimes reproduced their authority. His notion of "living in truth" located resistance not exclusively within organized politics but within the individual's refusal to reproduce institutionalized falsehood (Havel, 1985, pp. 23–96).

This interpretation is particularly useful for the Romanian case because it separates the existence of resistance from its capacity to acquire organizational form. A dissident action may possess considerable moral and symbolic significance even when it cannot alter institutions.

Romanian historiography has increasingly emphasized the distinctive conditions under which opposition operated. Deletant's analysis of the relationship between Ceaușescu's regime and the Securitate demonstrates the importance of coercion, surveillance, and institutional control in limiting dissent (Deletant, 1995, pp. 183–210). Tismăneanu similarly situates Romanian communism within a political culture characterized by ideological rigidity, personalized authority, and the systematic restriction of autonomous political activity (Tismăneanu, 2003, pp. 257–274).

Petrescu's work provides an especially important contribution by differentiating resistance and dissent rather than incorporating every form of nonconformity into a single heroic narrative (Petrescu, 2013, pp. 145–170). This distinction makes it possible to recognize the significance of Romanian dissent without retrospectively transforming isolated acts into a coherent opposition movement.

The Paul Goma case stands precisely at the intersection of these problems. It combined individual moral resistance, an attempt at collective mobilization, international human rights discourse, institutional repression, and subsequent memorial reinterpretation.

The analytical concept proposed here—the illusion of dissidence—refers to the retrospective tendency to attribute transformative political capacity to dissident acts whose contemporary institutional effects were substantially more limited. The "illusion" therefore does not belong to the dissident. It emerges from retrospective interpretation when moral significance, symbolic memory, and political effectiveness are treated as equivalent categories.

Such a distinction avoids two symmetrical errors. The first is the romanticization of dissidence through the attribution of political influence unsupported by historical evidence. The second is the dismissal of dissidence because it failed to produce immediate institutional transformation. Romanian dissent could simultaneously be morally authentic, politically constrained, internationally visible, and historically consequential.

3. Sources and Methodology

The research employs a qualitative historical case-study design. Paul Goma is not approached simply as a biographical subject but as a case through which the relationship between individual agency, institutional repression, intellectual solidarity, and international visibility can be examined.

The primary source base includes informative and penal files preserved by CNSAS, documentary materials concerning the surveillance of intellectuals, Goma's published writings and correspondence, contemporary accounts, and international human rights documentation. Among the archival materials used are documents from the CNSAS Informative and Penal collections relating directly to Goma and the authorities' response to the events of 1977.

The study combines three methodological perspectives. First, historical source analysis reconstructs the interaction between Goma, his supporters, and state institutions. Second, discourse analysis examines the transformation of political contestation from ideological criticism into a language of legal rights and international obligations. Third, an institutional perspective derived from security studies considers the Securitate not merely as an instrument responding to opposition but as an apparatus engaged in preventive identification, isolation, and neutralization of potential networks.

The methodology also requires critical treatment of Securitate documents. Such sources are not transparent representations of social reality. They reflect institutional categories, operational objectives, ideological assumptions, and the security apparatus's perception of threats. They are therefore read both for the factual information they contain and for what their language reveals about the regime's interpretation of dissent.

4. Paul Goma and the 1977 Human Rights Movement

The emergence of Paul Goma as a public dissident must be situated within the political transformation of Romania during the 1960s and 1970s. Ceaușescu's condemnation of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia temporarily strengthened Romania's international reputation for independence from Moscow. This image, however, did not correspond to sustained domestic liberalization. Ideological control intensified during the following decade, while independent civic organization remained severely restricted (Verdery, 1991, pp. 184–214; Tismăneanu, 2003, pp. 257–274).

Goma's earlier experience of repression contributed to his subsequent political trajectory. His confrontation with communist authority was not created suddenly in 1977. His imprisonment following the events of 1956, later professional marginalization, conflicts concerning publication, and continuing surveillance formed part of a longer relationship between the writer and the state.

What distinguished 1977 was the attempt to move from individual protest toward public solidarity. The Helsinki Final Act offered an important normative opportunity. Romania had formally accepted international principles concerning fundamental rights. Goma's strategy was therefore to demand compliance with commitments already acknowledged by the state rather than to formulate a conventional ideological program against socialism.

This represented an important change in the grammar of political opposition. The question was no longer simply whether citizens could reject communist ideology. It became whether the Romanian state could legitimately deny rights that it had publicly undertaken to respect.

The movement remained limited in scale and lacked a formal long-term organizational structure. Nevertheless, its significance derived from the explicit use of an international legal framework to contest domestic practices. The initiative demonstrated the potential of human rights discourse to connect individual grievances with broader questions of political legitimacy.

5. Intellectual Solidarity and the Limits of Collective Action

The central problem raised by the Goma Movement is why the initiative did not develop into a durable civic network.

An explanation based exclusively on individual courage is insufficient. Collective action requires more than the existence of individuals willing to protest. It requires communication, social trust, organizational continuity, access to relatively autonomous spaces, and mechanisms capable of protecting or reproducing networks.

These conditions were exceptionally weak in communist Romania.

The state's influence over professional careers, cultural institutions, publishing, universities, and public communication made intellectual autonomy structurally precarious. Surveillance intensified the problem by introducing uncertainty into interpersonal relationships. Potential participants could not easily determine whether colleagues were supporters, informants, or individuals likely to withdraw under pressure.

Consequently, the reactions of Romanian intellectuals to Goma cannot adequately be reduced to a binary opposition between heroism and cowardice. The historical evidence reveals a wider spectrum: explicit solidarity, private sympathy, cautious distance, withdrawal, and silence.

Silence under authoritarianism does not necessarily demonstrate consent. Participation carried risks extending beyond the individual to employment, professional status, family life, mobility, and personal security. The decision not to participate therefore occurred within a political environment deliberately designed to increase the cost of solidarity.

This structural interpretation helps explain why direct numerical comparisons with Charter 77 or Solidarity can be misleading. The relevant question is not simply how many people signed or publicly protested, but which institutional conditions allowed—or prevented—public commitment from becoming organizationally sustainable.

The Goma Movement thus exposed a fundamental paradox. It demonstrated that civic solidarity was possible while

simultaneously revealing how effectively the Romanian state could prevent such solidarity from becoming durable.

6. Repression and Political Containment

The authorities' response provides particularly strong evidence for this interpretation. Archival documentation shows that the regime did not treat Goma merely as an isolated writer expressing unacceptable opinions. The authorities were concerned with the possibility that his initiative might acquire supporters and develop a wider network.

Goma was arrested on 1 April 1977, and a criminal case invoking "propaganda against the socialist order" was opened against him. At the same time, the regime faced an international constraint: Romania was approaching the Belgrade follow-up meeting concerned with implementation of the Helsinki agreements. A highly visible political trial risked undermining the international image cultivated by Bucharest.

Repression therefore combined coercion with political calculation. Surveillance, intimidation, administrative pressure, arrest, and isolation served not merely to punish existing dissent but to prevent its reproduction. The objective was to interrupt the transition from individual action to collective organization.

This preventive dimension is central to understanding the effectiveness of the Securitate. Surveillance identified relationships; intimidation increased the cost of participation; professional and administrative sanctions reduced the resources available to potential supporters; and pressure on the emerging network undermined mutual trust.

The subsequent removal of Goma from Romania followed the same logic. Exile reduced his ability to remain at the centre of an internal solidarity network while avoiding some of the international consequences of a prolonged political trial. The immediate result was favorable to the regime: the emerging network fragmented and the movement did not survive as a permanent organization. Yet this success was incomplete.

7. International Visibility and the Helsinki Framework

The Goma case demonstrates the increasingly important relationship between domestic dissent and international human rights politics during the 1970s.

The Helsinki Final Act created a contradiction that East European dissidents could exploit. Communist governments had formally endorsed principles whose domestic implementation remained highly restricted. Dissidents could consequently challenge governments not only through ideological opposition but through demands for compliance.

Goma's initiative made this contradiction visible in Romania. The authorities could repress the individual, but they could not entirely control the international circulation of information concerning that repression.

Western broadcasting, émigré networks, intellectual circles, and human rights organizations contributed to transforming an internal security case into an international issue. Amnesty International documented Goma's arrest and detention, while Western attention increasingly complicated the image of Romania as a comparatively

independent and therefore implicitly more tolerant member of the Soviet bloc (Amnesty International, 1977, pp. 1–15).

The international consequences illuminate another paradox. Domestically, repression reduced Goma's capacity to organize. Internationally, the same repression increased the visibility of his case.

Exile further intensified this divergence. Removing Goma from Romania weakened the possibility of maintaining an internal network around him. Yet physical removal did not eliminate his public voice. It relocated it into an environment in which Romanian authorities exercised substantially less control.

Political effectiveness must therefore be evaluated according to the arena in which consequences occurred. The Goma Movement had limited capacity to transform Romanian institutions, but it had greater significance in exposing the contradiction between the regime's international commitments and domestic practices.

8. The "Illusion of Dissidence"

The preceding analysis provides the basis for a more precise definition of the concept proposed in this article. The illusion of dissidence does not mean that dissidence itself was illusory.

Paul Goma's opposition was real. The personal consequences were real. State repression was real. The attempt at civic solidarity was real.

The illusion emerges when later interpretations collapse three separate historical categories into one: moral authenticity, symbolic significance, and political effectiveness.

The moral authenticity of a dissident action concerns the individual's willingness to challenge an authoritarian system despite significant personal risk. Symbolic significance concerns the meaning subsequently attached to that action by communities, historians, political actors, or public memory. Political effectiveness concerns the measurable capacity of the action to alter institutions, policies, political relationships, or organizational structures.

These categories may overlap, but they are not identical.

Measured by immediate institutional transformation, the Goma Movement achieved little. It did not produce a permanent organization, force systemic political reform, or threaten the Communist Party's monopoly of power. The security apparatus succeeded in dismantling the emerging network.

Measured according to moral and normative significance, however, the result was different. Goma publicly challenged the fiction of unanimous political consent and used the state's own international commitments as a source of legitimacy for civic opposition.

Measured internationally, the consequences differed again. Repression amplified attention to human rights violations and complicated the Romanian government's carefully cultivated Western image.

The concept therefore describes a discrepancy rather than a deception. It warns against retrospective narratives that transform morally important individuals into actors possessing political capacities unavailable to them under the historical conditions in which they operated.

This interpretation also avoids the opposite danger: assuming that limited immediate political effects render dissent historically insignificant. Such a conclusion would reproduce the authoritarian state's own definition of political relevance, according to which only institutional power matters.

The Goma case suggests instead that dissent may be consequential by introducing alternative normative languages, revealing institutional vulnerabilities, preserving forms of political imagination, and exposing the mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes prevent collective action.

9. Discussion

The Romanian case contributes to the comparative history of East European dissent precisely because it did not reproduce the Polish or Czechoslovak trajectory.

The absence of a Romanian Charter 77 should not be treated merely as an absence requiring moral explanation. It is itself a historical phenomenon requiring institutional explanation.

The evidence examined here suggests that Romanian dissent operated within a particularly unfavorable configuration: extensive state control over professional and cultural institutions, preventive surveillance, weak autonomous civic structures, fragmented intellectual networks, and substantial personal costs associated with public solidarity.

Under these circumstances, the state did not need to eliminate every critical opinion. It needed to prevent critical individuals from becoming a stable collective actor.

This distinction changes how repression should be understood. The success of authoritarian control cannot be measured exclusively by the number of arrests or convictions. A security apparatus may be more effective when potential collective action is disrupted before it acquires formal organizational expression.

The Goma case illustrates precisely this mechanism. The regime recognized the danger not simply in what Goma said but in the possibility that others might publicly associate themselves with his claims. The target of repression therefore became the emerging relationship between dissident voice and social solidarity.

At the same time, 1977 demonstrated the limits of authoritarian containment. Once dissent entered transnational communication networks, domestic repression could generate external political costs. The regime could remove Goma from Romania, but it could not entirely remove the Goma case from international debate.

The comparison between domestic weakness and international visibility therefore offers a more nuanced measure of dissent than the conventional opposition between "success" and "failure."

10. Conclusion

This article has examined the 1977 Paul Goma movement as a case through which to reconsider the relationship between moral resistance, collective mobilization, state repression, and political effectiveness in communist Romania.

Its principal conclusion is that the limited development of organized Romanian dissent cannot be adequately explained through the absence of civic courage or through an assumed political passivity of Romanian intellectuals. The decisive explanatory variables were structural. Extensive surveillance,

preventive repression, dependence on state-controlled institutions, the fragmentation of intellectual communities, and the weakness of autonomous civic spaces significantly reduced the possibility that individual protest could develop into durable collective opposition.

Paul Goma's initiative nevertheless represented an important transformation in the history of Romanian dissent. By invoking the Helsinki Final Act and the language of internationally recognized human rights, the movement shifted contestation away from an exclusively ideological confrontation with communism. It demanded instead that the Romanian state be held accountable to principles and commitments that it had formally accepted.

This distinction had important consequences. It created a normative contradiction that could not be resolved simply through ideological denunciation. The authorities could describe Goma as hostile to the political order, but doing so did not eliminate the question of whether Romania respected the international commitments it publicly endorsed.

The state's reaction demonstrates the importance it attributed to the possibility of collective mobilization. Surveillance, intimidation, arrest, administrative pressure, and ultimately exile functioned not only as instruments of punishment but also as mechanisms of political prevention. The immediate objective was to isolate the dissident before individual protest could become a reproducible form of civic action.

In this respect, the regime succeeded. The 1977 initiative did not develop into a Romanian equivalent of Charter 77, nor did it produce a permanent opposition organization. The emerging solidarity network fragmented under pressure, confirming the considerable capacity of the Romanian security apparatus to contain organized dissent.

Yet the same conclusion changes when the movement is examined beyond the domestic institutional arena. International attention to Goma's arrest and treatment exposed the discrepancy between Romania's diplomatic image and its internal political practices. Exile removed a source of mobilization from the country but simultaneously transferred the dissident voice into transnational networks that were considerably more difficult for the Romanian authorities to control.

The historical significance of the Goma Movement therefore cannot be captured through a simple classification as either a success or a failure.

This is the analytical purpose of the concept of the illusion of dissidence proposed in the article. The concept does not deny the reality or authenticity of dissent. Instead, it separates moral legitimacy, symbolic significance, and political effectiveness. The illusion arises retrospectively when these different dimensions are conflated and when individual acts of exceptional moral courage are attributed a capacity for structural transformation that the institutional conditions of the period did not permit.

Such a distinction also prevents the opposite analytical error. Limited political effectiveness does not make dissent historically irrelevant. Dissidents could challenge authoritarian legitimacy without possessing the organizational resources required to transform the political system. They could expose contradictions, introduce alternative normative languages, establish precedents of civic responsibility, and undermine the regime's claim to unanimous consent.

Paul Goma should therefore be understood neither exclusively as a heroic figure reconstructed through post-communist memory nor as the leader of a politically unsuccessful movement. His historical importance lies precisely in the tension between moral achievement and institutional limitation.

The events of 1977 revealed both the possibility and the fragility of civic solidarity in communist Romania. They demonstrated that public opposition could emerge, but also that the regime possessed effective instruments for preventing such opposition from becoming institutionally durable. At the same time, they showed that the internationalization of human rights created a political arena in which domestic repression could no longer remain entirely domestic.

The Romanian case consequently contributes to a broader interpretation of dissent under authoritarian regimes. Political opposition should not be evaluated exclusively according to numerical participation, organizational survival, or immediate regime change. Its historical significance may also reside in its capacity to challenge the normative foundations of authority and to expose the institutional mechanisms through which collective action is prevented.

From this perspective, Paul Goma's most important achievement in 1977 was not that he transformed communist Romania. He did not. It was that he demonstrated publicly that the regime could be challenged through the language of rights it had formally recognized, and that individual moral resistance could momentarily create the possibility of collective civic action.

The distance between that possibility and its realization constitutes one of the central characteristics of Romanian dissent—and one of the principal keys to understanding the durability of the communist political order.

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