

# OVERCOMING THE LONG DÉTENTE: THE CASE OF BELGO-ROMANIAN RELATIONS 1984-1990

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During the Cold War, Western European civil society played a key role in the development of public attention for dissent, dissidents, and opposition to the practices of state socialist régimes more generally.<sup>1</sup> This was also the case in Belgium. In 1988, the Belgian journalist and filmmaker, Josy Dubié, had filmed a documentary on the precarity of living conditions in Romania, in which he had also included testimonies of dissidents.<sup>2</sup> His goal was to signal the country's humanitarian and political problems, as the film was titled: *'Le Désastre Rouge'*. However, right before the documentary aired on one of Belgium's public broadcasts, RTBF, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Leo Tindemans, obstructed the emission. Tindemans claimed the documentary would have harmed Belgium's diplomatic relations with Romania, because it exclusively focused on the negative aspects of the Ceaușescu regime.<sup>3</sup> Yet, after several discussions between the RTBF and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the documentary aired in December 1988. The film was an immense success, as it was sold to broadcasters from over thirty countries and sharpened public attention to the situation in Romania.<sup>4</sup>

## I. Introduction

The story of ‘Le Désastre Rouge’ is highly emblematic for the state of East-West relations during the last years of the Cold War. On the one hand Tindemans’ attempt to conceal criticism and preserve friendly diplomatic ties to Romania epitomizes the political outlook of several Western European leaders during the 1980s, which scholars have framed in the so-called ‘long détente’. A historiographic concept that accentuates the long lasting character and impact of East-West rapprochement in Europe and configures détente as a cornerstone for the Cold War’s peaceful endgame.<sup>5</sup> An innovative bundle of scholarship has now explored the multitude of varying ‘Ostpolitiks’ developed by Western European governments, as well as the Central and Eastern European policies built on the notion of peaceful co-existence.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Dubié’s documentary reveals the ways in which non-state or civil society actors engaged in activities across the East-West divide, the role they played in challenging state socialist regimes, and supported dissidents. During the long 1970s a plethora of social movements inter-

acted in varying ways with actors and organizations from the opposite side of the Iron Curtain.<sup>7</sup> Also in Belgium social movements engaged in a wide range of East-West encounters, for instance, while some organizations mobilized on behalf of the oppressed Polish trade union Solidarność, others developed contacts with Soviet-sponsored peace movements.<sup>8</sup>

What scholars seem to have overlooked are the ways in which different approaches to East-West encounters collided, challenged one another, and shaped relations with post-socialist states after 1989. The story of ‘Le Désastre Rouge’ already reveals the way in which civil society actors collided with the Belgian government and challenged European détente. Uncovering these overlaps has become increasingly pressing since Idesbald Goddeeris, Maud Anne Bracke and James Mark have stressed the so-called ‘limits of transnational activism’.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, this article will analyze Belgo-Romanian relations between 1984 and 1990 from both governmental and civil society perspectives. Belgo-Romanian relations provide an excellent case, as Belgium was home to one of the larg-

1. JULIA METGER, “Writing the Papers: How Western Correspondents Reported the First Dissident Trails in Moscow, 1965-1972” in ROBERT BRIER (ed.), *Entangled Protest: Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Osnabrück, 2013, 87-108; KACPER SZULECKI, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe: Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors*, London, 2019, 3-4.

2. CRISTINA PETRESCU, “A Genderless Protest: Women confronting Romanian communism”, *Annals of the University of Bucharest. Political Science Series*, 16/2, 2014, 91; RUXANDRA PETRINCA, “Radio Waves, memories and the politics of everyday life in socialist Romania: The case of Radio Free Europe”, *Centaurus*, 61, 2019, 189.

3. JULIEN WEVERBERGH, *Nacht in Roemenië*, Baarn, 1990, 241.

4. Embassy of Belgium in Bucharest, *175 years of Belgian Romanian diplomatic relations: Shades in the Belgian Romanian relations after the Second World War: from Cold War antagonism to an EU and NATO common agenda*, Bucharest, 2015, 51.

5. OLIVIER BANGE & POUL VILLAUME, “Introduction”, in OLIVIER BANGE & POUL VILLAUME, (eds.), *The Long Détente: Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s and 1980s*, New York, 2017, 3-7.

6. POUL VILLAUME, ANN MARIE EKENGREN & RASMUS MARIAGER, *Northern Europe in the Cold War, 1965-1990: East-West interactions of Trade, Culture and Security*, Helsinki, 2016; GOTTFRIED NIEDHART, “East-West Conflict: Short Cold War and Long Détente: An Essay on Terminology and Periodization”, in OLIVIER BANGE & POUL VILLAUME, (eds.), *The Long Détente*, 23-26. SIMO MIKKONEN & PIA KOIVUNEN, *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*, New York, 2018; ANGELA ROMANO & FEDERICO ROMERO, *European Socialist Regimes’ Faithful Engagement with the West: National Strategies in the Long 1970s*, New York, 2021.

7. SARI AUTO-SARASMO & KATALIN MIKLOSSY, *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, London, 2011; ROBERT BRIER (ed.), *Entangled Protest: Transnational Approaches to the History of Dissent in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Osnabrück, 2013.

8. KIM CHRISTIAENS & JOS CLAEYS, “Forgotten Friends and Allies: Belgian Social Movements and Communist Europe (1960s-1990s)”, in KIM CHRISTIAENS, JOHN NIEUWENHUY & CHAREL ROEMER (eds.), *International Solidarity in the Low Countries during the Twentieth Century: New Perspectives and Themes*, Berlin, 2020, 160; KIM CHRISTIAENS & MANUEL HERRERA CRESPO, “Failures, Limits, and Competition: Campaigns on behalf of Eastern European dissidents in Cold War Belgium, 1956-1989”, *East-Central Europe*, 50/3, 2023 85-114.

9. IDESBALD GODDEERIS, “The limits of the transnational”, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 89/3-4, 2011, 1237-1240; MAUD ANNE BRACKE & JAMES MARK, “Between decolonization and the Cold War: Transnational activism and its limits in Europe, 1950s-90s”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50/3, 2015, 403-406.

est transnational initiatives against the Ceaușescu regime: Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR), which contrasted with the détente-prone attitudes of Belgian politicians.<sup>10</sup> The article will principally ask to what extent did the Belgium government develop a long détente approach to East-West relations and how did these interactions shape civil society initiatives? How did state representatives perceive the transnational success of activists challenging the Romanian regime? And what does this uncover about Belgium as an actor in the Cold War? The duality of perspectives reveals the limits of a long détente, and the ways in which civil society actors and organizations sought to overcome the boundaries set by diplomatic East-West rapprochement.

The article will be divided into three chronologically structured parts. The first part will start with a brief history of bilateral relations focusing on the phenomenon and theorization of a long détente in Belgium from 1984 until 1988. Recently disclosed documents at the Belgian diplomatic archive, as well as the personal archives of prominent Christian democratic politicians offer a unique perspective in the East-West strategies envisaged by the Belgian government. Moreover, this section aims to produce a chronological extension of the existing literature on Belgo-Romanian relations. While Idesbald Goddeeris, Silvia Marton, Andrei Niculescu, Raul Carstocea and Maarten Van Gin-

derachter have focused on Belgo-Romanian relations during the long nineteenth century as well as the interwar period, this article explores these relations during the final Cold War years.<sup>11</sup> Here, Belgo-Romanian relations will be re-visited from the perspective of state representatives

The second part investigates the civil society perspective by focusing on the political activist organization OVR. In retrospect, OVR members structured their activism into three phases: the adoption phase (1988-1989), the humanitarian phase (1989-1990), and the development phase (1990-...). While much scholarly attention has been paid to OVR's humanitarian efforts in early 1990, this article will predominantly focus on the so-called adoption phase.<sup>12</sup> During this period OVR rallied against the project of systematization through a grassroots approach. The project of systematization was a notorious plan of the Romanian state in which it drastically re-structured the rural areas of the country into large agro-industrial sites. The advancement of the project in March 1988 became front-page news in many Western European countries and triggered the attention of various activist organizations, such as the in Brussels founded organization OVR.<sup>13</sup> The chapter will not provide an exhaustive history of OVR. Rather, it will focus on the methods, objectives and ideas that shaped the organization during its first months of existence. OVR's documents have

10. VINCENT DUJARDIN, "Go-Between: Belgium and Détente", 1961-73, *Cold War History*, 7/1, 2007, 108-109; ANGELA ROMANO, "Pan Europe, A continental space for cooperation(s)", in ANGELA ROMANO & FEDERICO ROMERO, *European Socialist Regimes' Faithful Engagement with the West: National Strategies in the Long 1970s*, New York, 2021, 32-33; SUSAN COLBOURN, "Debating détente: NATO's Tindemans Initiative, or why the Harmel Report still mattered in the 1980s", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43/6-7, 2020, 897-919.

11. RAUL CASTROCEA & MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "Smallness and the East-West binary in nationalism studies. Belgium and Romania in the long nineteenth century", in SAMUEL KRUIZINGA (ed.), *The Politics of smallness in modern Europe: size, identity and international relations since 1800*, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, 55-71; IDESBALD GODDEERIS, "The relationship between Belgium and Romania, 1859-1939(-1989)", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 1, 2008, 45-55; ANDREI NICULESCU, "Andrei Rădelescu, la Belgique et la constitution roumaine", *Studia Politica Romanian Political Science Review*, 1, 2008, 189-206; SILVIA MARTON, "La Belgique de l'Orient" et les chemins de fer: les raisons d'une comparaison", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, 1, 2008, 27-44.

12. GAUTIER PIROTTE, *L'épisode Humanitaire roumain: construction d'une "crise", état des lieux et modalités de sortie*, Paris, 2006; NICOLETA SERBAN, "Un episod umanitar European: 'Opération villages Roumains' se pamant romanesc, ianuarie-martie 1990", *Archivele Totalitarismului*, 2020, 3-4, 200-219.

13. LAURA DEMETER, "Transnational activism against heritage destruction as a human rights violation in Romania before and after 1989", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2-3/2, 2020, 121-150; MANUEL HERRERA CRESPO, "Challenging Systematization in Romania: Human Rights, Transnationalism, and Dissidents in Campaigns by Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR), 1989-1990", *Hungarian Historical Review*, 12/4, 2023, 576-598.

been consulted at the Mundaneum in Mons and supplemented with publications of and interviews with the organization's main protagonists.<sup>14</sup> The oral history component primarily functions as a lens on the archival materials.

The final part will zoom in on a controversial fundraiser that aired on national television on 31 December 1989 and embodied the tension between OVR and the Belgian government. Archival materials and interviews shed a new light on this essential event in the Belgian mobilization on behalf of Romania. It highlights how both a long détente and OVR's mobilization firmly shaped the humanitarian aid on behalf of Romania that emerged in the advent of 1990.

## II. The Long Détente in Belgium 1984-1988

Bilateral relations between Belgium and Romania pre-dated the First World War. Although Romanian elites were inspired by Belgium's constitutional model and positioning in international relations during the second half of the nineteenth century,<sup>15</sup> exchanges between the two countries were predominantly of an economic nature, as Belgian private investments were made in tramways, oil, cement and sugar refineries. This was extended after 1918. The Belgian oil company Petrofina extracted its oil in Romania and the country was broadly seen as an emerging economy.<sup>16</sup> In the 1940s fascist and communist rule disrupted the lion's share of bilateral ties.<sup>17</sup> Diplomatic relations after 1945 became characterized by early Cold War antagonism and only re-emerged in

the early 1960s. Economic interests continued to shape bilateral contacts. In 1961 a group of Belgian investors was formally invited to Romania and in 1964 Belgian minister of Economic Affairs Antoon Spinoy attended the opening of the *Union chimique belge's* phosphor plant in Ploiesti, just north of Bucharest.<sup>18</sup> On the multilateral level Belgian and Romanian officials cooperated in the so-called Group of Nine. This alliance between three NATO, three Warsaw Pact and three neutral European countries envisaged an informal discussion of pan-European interest, but ceased to exist following disagreements concerning the invasion of Prague in the summer of 1968.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Group of Nine was a prelude for Belgo-Romanian dialogue and cooperation under the impetus of an emerging détente and peaceful co-existence.<sup>20</sup> East-West cooperation played an important role in the foreign policy of both countries which resulted in several economic agreements in 1967, 1968 and 1970 as well as agreements on tourism in 1969. According to members of the Belgian diplomatic corps who reported on the state of Belgo-Romanian relations, the renewed exchanges were particularly Romania's effort.<sup>21</sup>

Harmel's report to NATO received great attention in Bucharest while Romania's refusal to join the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague was lauded in Brussels. Corneliu Mănescu, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ion Gheorghe Maurer, the Romanian Prime Minister, visited Belgium on several occasions in the late 1960s and were welcomed by King Baudouin in 1969. Romanian president Ceaușescu received Pierre Harmel in 1968 and paid a visit to Brussels in October 1972. According to Belgian ministers at the time,

14. Two interviews have been conducted, one with Paul Hermant (founder) and another with Daniel Wathelet (International coordinator).

15. RAUL CASTROCEA & MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "Smallness and the East-West binary", 98.

16. IDESBALD GODDEERIS, "The relationship between Belgium and Romania", 51-52.

17. Embassy of Belgium in Bucharest, *175 years of Belgian Romanian diplomatic relations*, 18.

18. DRIES PAESEN, "De evolutie van bilaterale relaties tussen België en Roemenië: Een politiek-economische analyse van 1960-1977", onuitgegeven Bachelorscriptie, KU Leuven, 2024.

19. ARYO MAKKO, *Ambassadors of Realpolitik: Sweden, the CSCE and the Cold War*, New York, 2016, 93.

20. Embassy of Belgium in Bucharest, *175 years of Belgian Romanian diplomatic relations*, 18-19.

21. Roemenië en de Belgisch-Roemeense Betrekkingen April 1978 (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.251).

Romania conspicuously increased economic relations with Western European countries in order to become less dependent on the Soviet Union. During the 1960s and 1970s many Western European observers, politicians, and diplomats perceived Ceaușescu, as a maverick seeking political and economic independence from the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> In 1969 Mănescu and Maurer aimed to increase Romanian import to Belgium, while also hinting at interstate loans.<sup>23</sup> These visits were followed by a visit of King Baudouin to Bucharest in 1976.<sup>24</sup> During this period both countries contributed to the Helsinki final act and the creation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The latter was a series of follow-up meetings after the success of the Helsinki Accords, which scholars have framed as a cornerstone of a 'long détente' in Europe.<sup>25</sup>

The limited literature that exists on Belgo-Romanian relations after the second World War often portrays an end to these close contacts after Belgium expelled 14 Romanian diplomats, Eugène Michiels among others, who were accused of espionage in 1982-1983. Indeed, this would comply with the traditional reading of a crisis of détente during the early 1980s produced by the repercussions of the NATO double track decision. Nevertheless, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs made several attempts to revitalize Belgo-Romanian relations only one year later. In

1984 Leo Tindemans travelled through Central and Eastern Europe to meet several state socialist leaders. After meeting János Kádár in Budapest, talks with Ceaușescu were set to take place from 30 July until 2 August, while meetings with Gustáv Husák and Erich Honecker were planned for the latter part of the year.<sup>26</sup> These meetings framed in Tindemans' foreign policy in which he tried to restore East-West dialogue against the backdrop of deteriorating superpower relations. Ceaușescu valued the initiative, as he reasoned that the international situation had not produced so much tension since the end of the Second World War. Reports of these meetings reveal that Tindemans and Ceaușescu agreed that the present state of conflict was the result of the aborted Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) talks in 1983. Nevertheless, both of them also agreed that their respective countries and their bilateral cooperation could play a major role in regaining momentum for détente and instigate renewed INF talks. They concluded that both countries would insist on the restart of the INF talks and contribute to a fruitful outcome at the Stockholm Conference on Confidence and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe, which was connected to the CSCE.<sup>27</sup> In addition they proposed to explore alternative forums for international East-West dialogue.<sup>28</sup> A day later, Tindemans was invited by the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Stefan Andrei, with whom he discussed the possibility

22. PATRICIA GONZALEZ ALDEA, "The Identity of Ceaușescu's Communist Regime and its Image in the West", *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques* 33 & 34, 2012, 24; CALIN GOINA, "Ceaușescu's finest hour? Memorialising Romanian Responses to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia", in KEVIN McDERMOTT & MATTHEW STIBBE (eds.), *Eastern Europe in 1968: Responses to the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion*, 2018, 195.

23. GASTON EYSKENS, *Gaston Eyskens*, 731.

24. Embassy of Belgium in Bucharest, *175 years of Belgian Romanian diplomatic relations*, 19.

25. POUL VILLAUME, "Pathfinders and Perpetuators of Détente: Small States of NATO and the Long Détente: The Case of Denmark, 1969-1989" in OLIVIER BANGE & POUL VILLAUME (eds.), *The Long Détente*, 205-207; MAXIMILIAN GRAF, "European Détente and the CSCE: Austria and the East-Central European theatre in the 1970s and 1980s" in NICOLAS BADALASSI & SARAH B. SNYDER, *The CSCE and the end of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Society and Human Rights, 1972-1990*, New York, 2019; LAURIEN CRUMP, LENNA LAMMERTINCK & EVA ZEILSTRA, "Ferm, doch onopvallend. Nederland en de Conferentie over Veiligheid en Samenwerking in Europa (1973-1983)", *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 132/2, 2019, 257-279.

26. Tindemans bij Ceaușescu voor "Oost-West gesprek" (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.898/32, Voyage Tindemans 1984).

27. DAVID BARTON, "The Conference on Confidence and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe", in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Arms Race and Arms Control*, London, 1984.

28. Votre visite en Roumanie du 30 juillet au 2 août 1984 (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.898/32, Voyage Tindemans 1984, 2).

of increased bilateral economic relations, which had been in decline over the last two years, as well as a wide range of international affairs. For example, both ministers condemned the apartheid regime in South Africa and shared similar stances regarding Namibia's independence.<sup>29</sup> A couple of months later Mark Eyskens, Minister of Economy, and Frank Swaelen, president of the Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) the Christian Democratic party in Belgium, also visited Ceaușescu.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Belgo-Romanian contacts and cooperation in the multilateral sphere seem to have increased in the mid-1980s. This evolution, that contrasts with the so-called "Second Cold War", was an integral part of Tindemans' strategy to play a significant role in, what he called, the "post-deployment era". This referred to the NATO double track decision and the consequent waning of East-West dialogue. Inspired by his West German colleague Hans Dietrich Genscher, Tindemans advocated the continuation and intensification of dialogue with Warsaw Pact and non-aligned countries against the backdrop of a wide range of pan-European meetings, of which CSCE was the most important.<sup>31</sup> On the multilateral level Tindemans' visits corresponded with the so-called Tindemans Initiative, an appraisal of East-West relations by NATO in 1984. The latter eventually resulted in the Washington Statement on East-West relations, affirming the continuity of 'a balanced approach to East-West dialogue'.<sup>32</sup> According to Tindemans, rapprochement was not only a reaction to the Euromissile crisis but also a continuation of typical Belgian foreign policy that fell in line with the approaches of his predecessors, among others Pierre Harmel.<sup>33</sup> Tindemans referred to his own policy as the opposite of confrontation,

which produced opportunities for a small country to make contributions in international relations according to its size, and once in a while punch above its weight.<sup>34</sup> Having a parley with, among others Ceaușescu, corresponded with his attempts to improve bilateral diplomatic and economic relations with Central and Eastern European countries. In turn, the latter was part of Belgium's strategy to contribute to ameliorated East-West relations and consequently configure a role for itself in the international and multilateral sphere. Clearly, the notion of détente was perceived as an answer to East-West tension. For some it was the sole right answer.

In his book about Belgium's relations with Central and Eastern Europe, Tindemans highlights how the ambiguous discourse of the Soviet Union's new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, marked a pivotal moment for Belgian foreign policy. In 1986 he warned about the misleading character of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.<sup>35</sup> Belgium's foreign policy diverted from bilateral exchanges with Central and Eastern Europe, and re-instigated a focus on multilateral exchanges. It seemed like the country's bilateral contacts paid off and provided a basis for multilateralism. During the period from 1986-1989 Belgium's efforts in East-West cooperation predominantly took place at the multilateral level. The country's foreign policy and contribution to East-West dialogue orbited around the third follow-up meeting of the Helsinki final act, the CSCE meeting in Vienna which took place from November 1986 until January 1989. Here, Belgium encouraged conclusions that related to security, economic relations, cultural relations and topical issues such as human rights and humanitarian aid. Considering the twentieth anniversary of the Har-

29. Verslag van werkvergadering gehouden tussen Minister Tindemans en Andrei te Boekarest op 31 Juli 1984 (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.370, Correspondance diplomatique 1984-1985).

30. Bezoek van de heer Frank Swaelen, Voorzitter van de CVP (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.370, Correspondance diplomatique 1984-1985).

31. Nota aan de Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken: Genscher die met de pers sprak over zijn persoonlijke visie op de mogelijke en wenselijke ontwikkelingen van de Oost-Westverhoudingen na de invoering van de INF (KADOC, Archief Leo Tindemans, 1357).

32. SUSAN COLBOURN, "Debating détente", 898-899.

33. LEO TINDEMANS, *Oost-Europa vanuit Brussel*, Antwerpen, 1988, 102.

34. *Idem*, 103-104.

35. *Idem*, 105-108.



mel Report, Tindemans reasoned that Belgium had always played an important role in the development of East-West dialogue and will continue to do so in the future.<sup>36</sup>

The notion of a long détente provides a useful framework to understand the positioning of Tindemans and Belgium's diplomatic corps during the 1980s. These accounts reveal how Belgium continued its détente-prone attitude well beyond the traditional waypoint for Belgian détente of 1973, when Renaat van Elsslande replaced Pierre Harmel as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, the bilateral and multilateral efforts during the 1980s provide new insights in the phenomenon of a long détente. Firstly, Tindemans and Ceaușescu clearly disconnected the 1980s from an earlier period of détente. In 1984 the two politicians framed their meeting in the restoration of East-West dialogue, which had been disrupted following the repercussions of the Euromissile crisis. Paradoxically, bilateral and multilateral East-West dialogue were considered a remedy for the aborted summits and deteriorating superpower relations. This connects with Gottfried Niedhart's reading of détente as non-linear.<sup>37</sup> The continuation of détente policy in the 1980s was an answer to the international situation. The so-called crisis of détente actually engendered a new wave of bilateral and multilateral exchanges initiated by several Western European states. Détente-oriented strategy continued to play a principal role in the foreign policies of small and medium sized NATO allies, from the 1960s until the end of the East-West conflict. As several scholars have argued, détente strategies crafted a role for countries such as Belgium, Norway or Denmark to position themselves on the highest echelons of international politics.<sup>38</sup> This remained so until 1989. While the two superpow-

ers re-fortified the Iron Curtain, Belgium's bilateral efforts bridged the East-West divide. These kinds of foreign policy strategies supplement the often overly nation-centered Belgian diplomatic histories that still too often neglect international economic and political structures.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, a long détente approach inherently turned a blind eye towards the practices of state socialist regimes. Western European politicians and diplomats only scarcely criticized their Central and Eastern European colleagues, because many of them prioritized bilateral and multilateral rapprochement. For example, in March 1988 Ceaușescu announced the next phase in the project of systematization. This was a notorious project of the Romanian state which entailed the destruction of almost 6,000 villages as well as enormous forests and green lands. Given its ecological, cultural and humanitarian repercussions, critics dubbed it the 'ghettoization of the Romanian countryside' or 'Ceausima'.<sup>40</sup> Notably, minority groups in the western part of the country would suffer the most under these measures.<sup>41</sup> The matter raised eyebrows all across Western Europe, and the Belgian government was keenly aware of the project's consequences. In a telegram to the Belgian CSCE legation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the project of systematization would have a major humanitarian backlash. Nevertheless, the Ministry advised the Belgian legation not to take any action, nor to make a statement towards the Romanian CSCE delegates at the conference in Vienna. A badly timed and critical intervention, they reasoned, would create a tool for the Romanian legation, who had been known for their obstructive attitude, to hinder the proceedings of the CSCE.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, no action was to be taken until the CSCE conclusions had

36. LEO TINDEMANS, *Oost-Europa vanuit Brussel*, Antwerpen, 1988, 118.

37. GOTTFRIED NIEDHART, "East-West Conflict: Short Cold War and Long Détente", 23.

38. POUL VILLAUME, "Pathfinders and Perpetuators of Détente", 206; VINCENT DUJARDIN, "Go-Between: Belgium and Détente", 96.

39. MICHAEL AUWERS, "Koele minnaars van de Koude Oorlog? De Belgische historici en het Oost-Westconflict na de Tweede Wereldoorlog", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 52/3, 2022, 34-64.

40. ILARION TIU, "Ceausescu si problema sistematizarii rurale" *Sfera Politicii*, 178/2, 2014 2.

41. Partie II Textes adoptés par le Parlement européen (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

42. Projet de systématisation en Roumanie, 14 September 1988 (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.370, Correspondance diplomatique 1984-1985).

been adopted. This reveals how Belgium prioritized progress in CSCE meetings and détente-oriented undertakings over criticism on Ceaușescu's project of systematization. The East-West dialogue that continued in the 1980s limited any form of opposition to state socialism coming from the government. The following sections will demonstrate how the phenomenon of a long détente also impacted those who envisaged to vociferously challenge the Ceaușescu regime.

### III. Overcoming the Long Détente: Opérations Villages Roumains 1988-1989

During the last years of the Cold War, increasingly alarming sounds emerged out of Romania. Dissidents expressed their discontent on Radio Free Europe and the claims of human rights observers echoed all across the transatlantic world.<sup>43</sup> Notably the project of systematization was widely condemned.<sup>44</sup> Still, many Western European governments reasoned that the best way to challenge the persistent authoritarian character of the Ceaușescu regime – which contrasted with the reformist aura of the Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary during these years – was through multilateral engagement at the level of CSCE meetings. This was certainly the case for the Belgian government, that advocated precaution regarding the interstate condemnation of systematization.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, these long détente attitudes contrasted with the increased concerns of civil society actors. The story of *Le Désastre Rouge* exemplified the growing tension between vociferous challenges to the Ceaușescu regime and détente-oriented approaches. Notably Belgian civil society became dissatisfied with the limited efforts of Western European governments and international institutions.<sup>46</sup>

In the summer of 1988 systematization in Romania was the subject of a conversation between Paul Hermant, a Belgian cultural journalist, and Eric Masquellier, a Belgian photographer. They were aware of the situation in Romania and fantasized about an intervention from Gorbachev, given the direction he had taken with the Soviet Union. Subsequently, they joked that neither of them had Gorbachev's phone number. Still, both of them wanted to take action against Ceaușescu's plans. After concluding that a centralized approach, in which they applied for NGO and development subsidies, would turn out in vain due to the current state of Belgo-Romanian affairs, they came up with a grassroots approach in which opposition to the Ceaușescu regime would be disseminated across large strata of the Belgian population. The concrete implementation of the opposition was devised by twelve activists from varying disciplines on which the project of systematization would have an impact, such architects, biologists, engineers etc. Also the Romanian exile Mihnea Berendei, who lived in Paris was included. What these twelve 'founders' had in common were their leftist, anti-totalitarian, anti-communist and even anarchist inspirations.<sup>47</sup> By 22 December 1988, Opérations Villages Roumains (OVR) was founded as a political activist organization that challenged the project of systematization in Romania. The next few paragraphs will explain the organization's methods and reveal the inherent tension with government officials.

OVR's opposition to Ceaușescu's plans aimed to surpass the traditional and centralized approaches to solidarity both in terms of objectives as well as methods. This was important because they realized the initiative contradicted with the state of Belgo-Romanian relations. Hence, a centralized approach installed with government support

43. DENNIS DELETANT, *Romania under Communism: Paradox and Degeneration*, London, 2018.

44. PATRICIA GONZALEZ ALDEA, "The Identity of Ceaușescu's Communist Regime and its Image in the West", 24.

45. Projet de systematisation en Roumanie, 14 September 1988 (FOD Foreign Affairs, Archives Diplomatiques, 18.370, Correspondance diplomatique 1984-1985).

46. GAUTIER PIROTTE, "L'influence Belge sur la constitution d'une société civile en Roumanie post-communiste", 113; DENNIS DELETANT, *Romania under Communism*, 462.

47. PAUL HERMANT, *Au Temps Pour Moi: Journal intime d'une association d'idées 1989-2004*, Val-de-Reuil, 2004, 11.



would be out of the question. OVR shifted political opposition to the project of systematization towards the level of communes and citizens.<sup>48</sup> Inspired by Amnesty International's methods of adopting a prisoner, the twelve founders of the organization set up a framework in which Belgian villages or communes could adopt a Romanian village, starting February 1989.<sup>49</sup> The adoption was a commitment that had to be considered by the municipal council. The adoption primarily entailed the creation of a municipal committee on behalf of the adopted Romanian village. The committee included aldermen, representatives of the local center for public welfare and engaged citizens. Their main task was to raise awareness concerning the project of systematization by organizing events, exhibitions and fundraisers. Although the adoption was a unilateral affair, through cooperation with covert radio stations, OVR attempted to inform Romanian citizens of the activism taking place on their behalf.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently a letter-campaign was initiated in which the Belgian municipalities and citizens were encouraged to send multiple letters of support to their respective Romanian villages, but also to challenge the Romanian authorities involved.<sup>51</sup> Hermant recalled that many of these letters failed to reach their destination because they were intercepted by Securitate officers when they arrived at the postal distribution center in Bucharest. Nevertheless, he added that a large amount of letters did block the Romanian postal service for several days, triggering frustration among the Romanian authorities.<sup>52</sup> More importantly, these letter campaigns gained traction among Romanian exile communities all across Europe and brought the atrocities related to the project of systematization

right under the noses of Western European citizens whose governments had prioritized dialogue rather than condemnation. This was the first part of the political activism that OVR envisaged among large groups of engaged and active citizens.<sup>53</sup>

The second part of the activism concealed in their methods of opposition was what the founders dubbed the *aller-retour* principle. The logo of OVR contained two arrows. One arrow pointed to the right and represented the mobilization of Western European activists on behalf of Romania. The other arrow pointed to the left and represented the reciprocal effect of the citizen's activism. The founders of the organization thus attached a boomerang effect to the mobilization. In this regard, Paul Hermant described a municipality's commitment for a Romanian village as a tool for local citizens or opposition figures to contest domestic deforestation projects, demolition of cultural heritage or endangering of minority interests.<sup>54</sup> It was an instrument designed for local citizens who could argue that their local governments had advocated against the wide range of repercussions of the project of systematization in Romania, but neglected the values within this mobilization in their actions in Belgium. When a local government would chop down a local forest, demolish local cultural heritage or endanger minority interests, citizens were equipped with an instrument and rhetoric to challenge these matters.<sup>55</sup> At the heart of this reciprocal dimension there was a notion of European connectivity across the Iron Curtain. The founders of OVR critically asked how Western Europe was able to uphold its humanitarian engagement in the so-called 'Third World' when it could not guarantee these supposedly global values in its own geo-

48. Opération villages roumain : pour solde de tous comptes (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

49. KARINE Emsellem, "L'opération village Roumains, une coopération locale transeuropéenne", *Revue Géographique de l'Est*, 35/2, 1995, 118.

50. JACQUES MOLITOR, FABIO PIRAS, ISABELLE ROMAIN & MARC VANHOVE, *Une Utopie Citoyenne : dix ans d'Opérations Villages Roumains 1989-1999*, Editions OVR, Charleroi, 1999, 34.

51. GAUTIER PIROTTE, "L'influence Belge sur la constitution d'une société civile en Roumanie post-communiste", 114; JACQUES MOLITOR, FABIO PIRAS, ISABELLE ROMAIN & MARC VANHOVE, *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 23.

52. Interview Paul Hermant, 10 December 2020.

53. GAUTIER PIROTTE, "L'influence Belge sur la constitution d'une société civile en Roumanie post-communiste", 114.

54. Interview Paul Hermant, 11 December.

55. JACQUES MOLITOR, FABIO PIRAS, ISABELLE ROMAIN & MARC VANHOVE, *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 33.

graphical sphere. To them, a Europe, which unambiguously included Romania, should address its humanitarian problems. These ideas collided with the diplomatic strategies of several countries. Moreover, OVR's methods were an attempt to overcome the, what they called, the "immobile equilibrium" of a Europe that was divided into East and West, in other words the long détente. In 1989 OVR's founders referred to this as *peur de la proximité*. The latter underlined that Western Europeans were eager to intervene on human rights claims all over the globe but refrained from doing so when humanitarian problems emerged in their neighboring countries.<sup>56</sup>

The unique methods and objectives of the organization found traction among large groups in Western Europe. When the project was launched at a press conference in February 1989, five Belgian mayors presented their commitment and adoption of a Romanian village. Each of these mayors represented one of the five political parties in Wallonia, the initial nexus and home of OVR, with the exception of the right wing party *Front National Belge* (FN). For Hermant, the organization's external political pluralism, non-confessionalization and independence were deemed essential due to the agency attributed to the municipalities and the politicization of the citizen.<sup>57</sup> The reaction that followed was tremendous. In Wallonia 231 of the 281 communes expressed intentions of adopting a Romanian village by 1 April of the same year.<sup>58</sup> Notably rural communes felt discomforted by the destruction and disruption of everyday life in Romania and emphatically 'adopted' Romanian villages.<sup>59</sup>

Unsurprisingly, before the implosion of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, West-

ern European governments and politicians were the most outspoken critics of OVR. Certainly in countries that had been known for their détente-prone attitudes, such as Belgium, OVR's methods and ambitions provoked confrontation with government officials. Tindemans' cabinet demanded the dissolution of OVR, arguing that they interfered in international relations and obstructed negotiations on the issue of Romanian orphans. The Belgian government even made an attempt to prohibit the organization, but backed down when it became clear the initiative found ample traction among local governments. For Hermant this proved that a centralized approach to Belgo-Romanian solidarity would have been impossible.<sup>60</sup> The belligerent attitude of the government did not change after Tindemans was succeeded by Mark Eyskens, also a Christian democrat, in the summer of 1989. In a conversation with the Romanian ambassador to Belgium, who was interrogating Eyskens about OVR, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs reportedly stated that he "*would arrest these little bastards if I could. There are parents waiting for a child to be adopted.*"<sup>61</sup> Additionally, Cold War logic fueled suspicion and allegations regarding a supposed hidden agenda. While right wing parties related OVR with the KGB and a 'light communism', the Maoist-inspired *Parti des Travailleurs de Belgique* (PTB) accused OVR of ties with the CIA and underlined that systematization was a lifeline for the rural exodus and agricultural modernization in Romania.<sup>62</sup>

Despite OVR's discussions with the Belgian government, the organization swiftly grew into the largest and arguably most important opposition against the practices of the Ceaușescu regime. In cooperation with the *Fédération Internationale des Droits Humains* (FIDH) OVR was able to set up

56. *Idem*, 32.

57. Interview Paul Hermant, 10 December 2020; JACQUES MOLITOR, FABIO PIRAS, ISABELLE ROMAIN & MARC VANHOVE, *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 102.

58. GAUTIER PIROTTE, *L'épisode Humanitaire roumain*, 72.

59. Correspondence Cabinet de l'échevin de la famille et de la jeunesse du village de Mons to OVR coordination team (Mundaneum CC OVR 002).

60. Interview Paul Hermant 11 December 2020.

61. GAUTIER PIROTTE, *L'épisode Humanitaire roumain*, 82.

62. Correspondence Paul Hermant to Roger Romain 24 August 1989 (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

national coordination centers in France and Switzerland in March 1989. Later that year national centers emerged in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway and a regional section in Flanders. The only prerequisite for the establishment of a national center was the integration of the local FIDH branch. Support for these national coordination centers was widespread. *Médecins Sans Frontières* was a strong advocate of the cause in France, Swiss human rights organizations backed their national center, and in London the foundation of a coordination center was underpinned by a broad range of social movements and stimulated by an unprecedented speech from the Prince of Wales, affirming the precarity of the situation in Romania.<sup>63</sup> The early foundation of coordination centers in France and Switzerland buttressed by the *Ligue pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme en Roumanie* (LDHR), which was the most important organization for Romanian dissidents based in Paris,<sup>64</sup> as well as the organization's origins in Wallonia, reinforced the Francophone backbone of the organization. Additionally, many Romanian dissidents spoke a degree of French, because it had continued to be taught under communist rule.<sup>65</sup> By May 1989, 95 French municipalities had made a commitment towards a Romanian village. Five years later this would amount to 1500 municipalities.<sup>66</sup> Another reason that has often been overlooked for OVR's success in France was the favorable political climate under Mitterrand's second term. In this regard, Prime Minister Michel Rocard was one of the first and only high-ranking politicians to publicly denounce Romanian systematization.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Mitterrand had a distinct approach to détente. Notably in the latter years of

the 1980s, notions of a European community and re-Europeanization shaped the country's diplomatic relations with Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>68</sup> Mitterrand's so-called subversive visits to the East embodied this unique interpretation of détente.<sup>69</sup>

These political conditions emphasized the unique enthusiasm for the movement's French chapter, which contrasted with the restrictions placed upon OVR in other countries. In Denmark, Luxembourg and West Germany (FRG), three countries that had been key players in East-West dialogue,<sup>70</sup> OVR was prohibited, despite initial enthusiasm in those countries. The Danish government argued that citizens and communes should not intervene in international relations. Hermant also recalled that FRG ambassadors questioned the intentions of OVR and ultimately decided not to allow the organization, because it could potentially hinder the West German agreement with the Romanian government concerning the migration of Transylvanian Saxons.<sup>71</sup>

In retrospect, the period from February until November/December 1989 has been dubbed the adoption phase by OVR members. This period has often been overlooked in histories of the organization because after the implosion of the Ceaușescu regime, the networks of OVR produced a tremendous wave of solidarity. According to Hermant, the French municipalities connected to OVR funneled ten times more the amount of humanitarian funds and goods than the French state did.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the so-called humanitarian phase that emerged during the latter months of 1989 contrasted with the objectives of the twelve founders.

63. JACQUES MOLITOR, FABIO PIRAS, ISABELLE ROMAIN & MARC VANHOVE, *Une Utopie Citoyenne*, 102-103; DENNIS DELETANT, *Romania under Communism*, 463.

64. SCUTARU BÉATRICE, "La Roumanie à Paris: exil politique et lutte anti-communiste", *Histoire@Politique*, 23/2, 2014, 154-165.

65. NICOLETA SERBAN, "Un model de mobilizare Europeana", 179.

66. KARINE EMBELLEM, "L'opération village Roumains, une coopération locale transeuropéenne", 125.

67. PAUL HERMANT, *Au Temps Pour Moi*, 10.

68. FREDERIKE SCHOTTERS, "Mitterrand's Europe: functions and limits of 'European solidarity' in French policy during the 1980s", *European Review of History*, 24/6, 2017, 973-990.

69. CHRISTIAN WENKEL, "Overcoming the Crisis of Détente, 1979-1983", 251.

70. POUL VILLAUME, "Pathfinders and Perpetuators of Détente, 206; ANGELA ROMANO, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente*, 155.

71. Interview Paul Hermant, 10 December 2020.

72. Interview Paul Hermant 10 December 2022.

The adoption phase encapsulated an idiosyncratic approach to political activism challenging a state socialist regime. The first months after OVR's foundation revealed how Belgian civil society actors were able to surpass the centralized framework of détente-oriented relations with Romania, but in doing so collided with the diplomatic strategies of Western European governments. The organization challenged the prioritization of East-West dialogue by enabling a grassroots approach that mobilized almost 2,000 municipalities all over Western Europe. It is important to keep in mind that this was occurring even before state socialist regimes had started to collapse.<sup>73</sup> When the whirlwind of changes eventually swept across Central and Eastern Europe OVR's networks facilitated the large wave of humanitarian aid – as Romania was one of the sole countries where bloodshed accompanied the 1989-transitions, while the Belgium government found itself between a rock and a hard place.

#### IV. After the long détente 1989-1990

On New Year's Eve 1989, the Belgian Radio and Television Corporation (BRT) broadcasted a show with the title 'Three Hours for Romania'. The country that had recently overthrown the Ceaușescu regime received ample attention in Belgium for several reasons: OVR had fostered bilateral relations at the level of the municipalities; the Belgian journalist Danny Huwé had been killed by a Securitate sniper on Christmas Eve, garnering a wave of public sympathy and outrage; and the media-tization of bloodshed in Bucharest and Timisoara had struck a nerve throughout Western Europe.<sup>74</sup> The fundraiser showed a plethora of initiatives

staged by a variety of organizations in Belgium on behalf of Romania. Supported by celebrities and political figures, organizations such as *Artsen Zonder Grenzen/Médecins Sans Frontières* (AZG/MSF), Oxfam, Caritas Catholica and the Red Cross were given a platform to promote their initiatives. Unsurprisingly the founders of OVR were not invited due to their strained relation with the government. The Flemish OVR section, *Adoptie Dorpen Roemenië* (ADR), was able to elaborate on its cause very briefly. This meant that the largest and most important organization mobilizing on behalf of Romania in the world was omitted from a major national fundraiser in their country of origin.<sup>75</sup>

Standing in front of a Romanian flag with a hole cut out in the middle, Prime Minister Wilfried Martens donated a cheque of 25 million Belgian Francs, more than half a million Euro, and elaborated on the efforts of the Belgian government.<sup>76</sup> Later in the show, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mark Eyskens was interviewed. The journalist stated that the 'West' had been too soft on the Ceaușescu regime and asked Eyskens why Belgium had never really criticized the Romanian regime. Eyskens replied by underlining the efforts made on behalf of Romanian orphans, the attempts that were made to meet with Doina Cornea in May 1989, and described the amplitude of economic and diplomatic relations with Romania as the *minimum minimorum*.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, it must be said that the international critique of the Ceaușescu regime dealt a blow to Belgo-Romanian relations during the very final months of the East-West conflict.<sup>78</sup> Still, large sections of the Belgian public opinion perceived the government's efforts against the Ceaușescu regime as the bare minimum. For example, in March 1989, five Belgian parlia-

73. NICOLETA SERBAN, "Un model de mobilizare Europeana", 179.

74. KIM CHRISTIAENS & JOS CLAEYS, "Forgotten Friends and Allies", 175.

75. Drie uur Jessie 31 December 1989 (VRT Archive).

76. The fact that Martens was standing in front of a Romanian flag was ironic because the flag with the hole had been a symbol of opposing state socialism and dissent since the Hungarian uprising in 1956. The flag be it a Hungarian or Romanian one had been carried by dissidents whom the Belgian government had neglected for over three decades. For more:

ANDREI CODRESCU, *The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian's Exile Story of Return and Revolution*, Avon, 1991.

77. Drie uur Jessie 31 December 1989 (VRT Archive).

78. Roemenië, Belgische delegaties 19 January 1990 ( Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Bulletin B100: Schriftelijke vraag antwoord nr 0179).

mentary representatives proposed a resolution in which they argued Belgium should reconsider its relations with Romania, given the humanitarian repercussions of the project of systematization. The proposal was rejected by the government, which caused discontent among large groups of the Belgian population.<sup>79</sup> Eyskens was being pushed into a corner during the interview, and in response he frustratedly clarified that if Belgium only wanted to have diplomatic and economic ties with countries that had a similar political system, it could only foster relations with ten countries all over the globe.<sup>80</sup>

Belgium's diplomatic relations with Romania during the 1980s brought the government in an awkward position during the first half of 1990. By visibly taking part in the fundraiser, Martens and Eyskens had tried to improve the cumbersome perception of the country's foreign affairs. However, their donation of 25 million Belgian Francs raised controversy in the following months. In May 1990 the Belgian media had pinpointed that the money promised by Martens and Eyskens had yet to arrive at its destination. In Parliament, the opposition framed the donation as showmanship in the media. Besides commenting on the hollow discourse of urgency propagated by Martens and Eyskens in December, the opposition had several questions concerning the allocation of the money.<sup>81</sup> From the 25 million that was promised, only one million went to OVR and another million to ADR. A representative of the *Parti Social-Chretien* (PSC) argued that these two organizations had played a key role in Belgo-Romanian solidarity and demanded an explanation. The Prime Minister replied that they intended the money for organ-

izations that worked directly with Romania.<sup>82</sup> Subsequently OVR and ADR joined forces and set up a campaign titled "*où est notre argent?*" (where is our money?) Eventually, AZG/MSF ended up donating a share of their four million to OVR and ADR.<sup>83</sup> The interaction and discussion between state-representatives and civil society clearly intricately Belgo-Romanian solidarity.

Conversely to AZG/MSF, the lion's share of social and developmental movements in Belgium, carefully observed the sudden attention for Romania. Pierre Galand, the secretary general of Oxfam Belgium at the time, was very cautious in voicing public support for OVR. Although he intrinsically supported the initiative, the East-West approach of OVR collided with the interests and priorities of Oxfam Belgium, which were directed towards the Global South.<sup>84</sup> The *Nationaal Centrum voor Ontwikkelings-Samenwerking* (NCOS), the Flemish umbrella organization for development cooperation, rejected the characterization of Romania as a 'Third World' country.<sup>85</sup> Which would be important for the allocation of funds. Moreover, the NCOS dismissed responsibility towards the East, recognizing the importance of the democratic evolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, but emphasizing that the most vulnerable countries were located in the South.<sup>86</sup> However, the NCOS did arrange a few offices for OVR.<sup>87</sup> The strenuous nature of Belgo-Romanian solidarity even after the implosion of state socialism underlines how East-West solidarity challenged the status quo of solidarity organization in Belgium.

During the latter months of 1990 public concern shifted away from Romania and fears about a

79. Voorstel van Resolutie over het probleem van de mensenrechten in Roemenië 19 April 1989 (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 760/ 1-88 / 89).

80. Drie uur Jessie 31 December 1989 (VRT Archive).

81. Vragen van de heren A. Léonard, R. Daems en X. Winkler aan de Eerste minister over "humanitaire hulp aan Roemenië" 9 May 1990 (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Parlementaire handelingen 2143).

82. Roemenië, Operatie Dorpen Roemenië, Nationale Lotterij 14 Augustus 1990 ( Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, Bulletin B123 : Schriftelijke vraag antwoord nr 0109).

83. Interview Paul Hermant 10 December 2020.

84. Interview Pierre Galand 28 January 2021.

85. Interview Erik Todts 30 November 2020.

86. Verslag van raad van beheer, 19 January 1990 (Amsab, Archief 11.11.11.).

87. Opération villages roumain: pour solde de tous comptes (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

self-absorbed Europe decreased. Nevertheless, OVR had constructed a sustainable framework for solidarity and continued its endeavor, albeit with the adoption of new tactics. The implosion of the Ceaușescu regime, and the consequent shut down of systematization, indeed signaled the start of a new phase in OVR's mobilization.<sup>88</sup> Among Western European communes there existed a strong sense of attachment towards their adopted Romanian communes. The bloodshed that had accompanied the revolution, together with the continuing poor living standards, fueled the urgency for humanitarian aid during the first months of 1990. Although Paul Hermant was initially against a humanitarian transformation of OVR because of its potentially ephemeral character,<sup>89</sup> the transnational municipality-networks of the organization produced a tremendous wave of solidarity. Already in December 1989, Belgian municipalities organized humanitarian convoys. According to OVR, by February 1990 the humanitarian goods that had been transported to Romania amounted to 5,000 tons.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, OVR received support from a wide range of private organizations. The Belgian oil company Petrofina (now operating under the name Fina), donated 45,000 liters of oil for the transport. Road assistance was supplied by the Belgian Touring assistance and the supermarket franchise GB offered logistic managers for the distribution of the humanitarian goods once they had arrived in Romania.<sup>91</sup> More importantly, during the so-called humanitarian phase, there emerged a unique partnership between OVR and the European Communities (EC). Primarily, any municipality that experienced lacked funds for a humanitarian convoy could count on financial support from the European Economic Community (EEC). Additionally, municipalities were encour-

aged to equip their convoys with European flags. These flags served as passports in a pre-Schengen Europe and aimed to guarantee safe travels in Romania.<sup>92</sup> On official OVR documents the support from the EC was proudly presented.<sup>93</sup> The •Flemish ADR even went so far to incorporate the European stars in its logo. Partnering up with OVR made sense for the EC, because the transnational municipality-networks neatly fitted in the EC's program of European integration in a post-Cold War world. Parallel to this, the organization's international coordinator revealed that OVR's ideals of European connectivity with a bottom-up approach corresponded with the objectives of the Jacques Delors commission.<sup>94</sup> According to OVR founding committee, *"something was moving in Europe, it was moving quickly and we want to move with it."*<sup>95</sup>

For OVR, cooperation with the EC during the humanitarian phase paved the way for new objectives. While many municipalities continued to provide the adopted villages with humanitarian goods, OVR aimed to contribute to the establishment of democratic institutions and the organization of civil society. During the so-called development phase, relations with the Belgian government ameliorated due to the cooperation with the European communities and the post-Cold War reality, as European integration, democracy, and civil society were the buzzwords that shaped East-West relations in the first half of the 1990s. When bloodshed casted over Yugoslavia, many of OVR's resources were directed towards the Balkans, although many Western European municipalities remained emotionally connected to the adopted Romanian villages and continued the flow of humanitarian goods.<sup>96</sup>

88. Exposé 6 mai 1990 (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

89. Interview Paul Hermant 10 December 2020.

90. Exposé 6 mai 1990 (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

91. Opération villages roumain: pour solde de tous comptes (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

92. Ma commune va sauver un village roumain (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

93. Document de prise contact (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

94. Interview Daniel Wathelet 12 April 2023.

95. Conférence de Presse 23 February 1990 (Mundaneum, CC OVR 0028).

96. Interview Daniel Wathelet 12 April 2023.



## V. Conclusion

By analyzing the diplomatic efforts of the Belgium government as well as civil society initiatives across the East-West divide this article has revealed the limits and tension inherent to a long détente. While scholars have predominantly focused on the encounters of Western European state representatives in configuring the historiographic concept of a 'long détente', this study focused on the entanglement between diplomatic relations and civil society initiatives in Belgium. The case of Belgo-Romanian relations uncovered the ways in which Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs developed a détente-centered policy, which was firmly challenged by the country's civil society. OVR's contention with several Western European governments displays how different conceptions of 'Europe' and approaches to East-West relations collided within one country, and decisively shaped the activism against a state-socialist regime.

The long détente produced a set of boundaries that limited the operations of civil society actors. The accounts of OVR, an organization that sought to overcome these boundaries, have underlined

that the long détente is crucial for understanding the methods and success of their activism. The organization's philosophy was inherently tied to the state of diplomatic Belgo-Romanian relations in the late 1980s. OVR's founders designed the organization in such a way that it bypassed centralized control on international relations, surpassed the long détente character of East-West relations and produced a bottom-up approach to East-West interaction.

Finally, the post-Cold War plight of Belgo-Romanian relations highlighted that the long détente firmly complicated the development of humanitarian aid initiatives in 1990. It brought the Belgian government into an awkward position. Thus, the long détente also engendered difficulties during the 'endgame' of the East-West conflict. The article suggests that in order to improve academic understanding of the long détente as well as its relation to the end of the Cold War, studies on the phenomenon should go beyond the world of diplomatic détente and explore how non-state representatives and civil society organizations were confined by, collided with, and burst out of the boundaries imposed by the long détente.

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