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Ten years of SCI activities in Romania 1991 - 2001

The beginning of SCI Romania 1991-1994

Interview with Mihai Crisan by
Philipp Rodriguez, 20.May 2001,
Antwerp



1991, ten years ago the first SCI workcamp was organised in Romania. In 1994 there were already twelve workcamps and a group of enthusiastic and motivated Romanian volunteers applied to get the group status within our movement. How was this impressive growth of SCI activities possible just after the end of the communist reign where voluntary work had still bad connotation?

Mihai Crisan, today European Development Worker at International Secretariat of SCI in Antwerp, was closely involved in the development of this young SCI branch. He was interviewed by Philipp Rodriguez from the SCI Archives.

*Mihai, from where do you come from?
What kind of education did you follow?*

I was born in Bucharest, in a middle-class of Romania; we lived in a good area of the city. My father is an engineer at a research institute of metallurgy; my mother also worked in an institute. If you like, it was an almost typical family for Romania where both parents work full-time; at home the father does technical things while the mother the household. I went to the

high school of informatics in Bucharest. Later on I wanted to study mathematics but I failed the admission exam for a very little. So I was taken to the army. In order to leave it I tried the exam again, this time for the faculty of metallurgy, and I passed it. Later it turned out that I wasn't keen to work as an engineer.

How was your time in the army?

I didn't like it at all also because we were badly treated there. Actually I had luck that I could leave it in September 89 in order to start my studies at University. Otherwise I would have been involved in the fights in Bucharest two months later. In December 1989 was, what we call, the Revolution against the communist regime and Ceausescu.

What changed with this revolution in Romania?

Well, before it was quite an oppressive regime. I didn't feel it myself too much, apart of some short interviews with the Securitate because I was visiting the British and French libraries. Obviously there was something in the air, which stopped us from being open to people. We were even suspicious about friends, sometimes. That was terrible! After the revolution life changed, but it was a sudden change. We realised that we had freedom to talk, to act and to travel abroad. We had an inflation of newspapers and other medias. But apparently the economical conditions become worse. I think this change confused many people.

1990 : “To be honest I wasn't impressed about SCI”

In 1990 you were at University and you became an active member of MER, the ecological movement in Romania ?

I often went to the mountains because I like to be in the nature. Before the Revolution I heard about the Green movement in Western Europe and I was impressed that people were aware of ecological problems. I told you, I didn't fight with the gun during the revolution, but I felt I had to do something for the society. I became then member of the youth group of MER, a political party. We sticked

posters at the University and in the streets, we had debates about the environment and we got in touch with foreign ecological organisations. We were very enthusiastic to do something new and good. In August 1990 the Dutch branch of PAX Christi organised a study tour to Romania. SCI was present there too.

I see in the documents, that you were there also ?

Yes I was. I had heard that a group of young people from the Netherlands would visit us. I remember that I was mostly interested about environmental organisations. Anneloes den Hengst from SCI and also Willem Oostenbrink were there. To be honest I wasn't impressed about SCI. I got a leaflet telling about workcamps and my first impression was that this organisation has communistic nostalgias by promoting voluntary work. You have to know that before 1990 voluntary work had a bad connotation in Romania because people were forced to do voluntary work. I wasn't interested in that.

Nevertheless one year later you went to your first workcamp. How did this happen?

Together with two other members we were sent to Norway in order to attend a meeting of ecological NGOs in 1990. It was the first time that I was abroad. Today I laugh about it, but it was a shocking experience to realise how poor Romania was. I wanted to go abroad again, but there were not many possibilities. Cristian Croitoru from MER told me in 1991 about two workcamp places in Europe for MER activists. I didn't know then, that SCI had organised an own study tour to Romania in February 1991 in order to initiate a volunteer exchange. Well it was a possibility to do something

special. The fact that I had to pay my travel costs was quite a challenge for me and my family. Nevertheless I went to the ecological camp on Texel Island in the Netherlands.

1991 : “From the very beginning this told me, you do things in a different way..”

How was your first SCI Workcamp?

It was not so easy to go there due visa problems. Neither the embassy nor the Dutch branch did react. Now, looking back, I think that we are much more aware of the visa problems. The workcamp itself was in a museum on the island. But soon I had my first little shock. I just arrived, people said who they were and after some time sitting around the table and talking I was asked to cut some vegetables. Now you have to imagine that I come from a family where mostly the mother was cooking and sometimes my father. The most I did was making a tea or an omelette. First I felt a little bit strange to do this, but as everybody did it, I

concluded that I have to do it also; it turned out to be fun in the end. From the very beginning this told me, you do things in a different way here and I didn't find it bad at all.

How did you stay in contact with SCI later on?

During the workcamp we went once to the office of VIA in Amsterdam. There I saw a map of Europe with SCI activities and I looked at Romania. I was amazed that there was already a workcamp there. Another thing that happened to me wasn't so pleasant. I was robbed in a tram. It was not much money but for me it was a lot. I was very angry. Then the workcamp decided to contribute some money in order to compensate my loss. This was a really touching gesture of solidarity of the group. The experiences in the Netherlands convinced me that I wanted to do the same in Romania and I told that to the camp leaders who renewed my contact to Anneloes. She informed me about the Youth League (the link of SCI in Romania) and advised me to get in touch with them.

Later I got an invitation to an evaluation meeting in Bucharest in February 1992. I went there and I met Christof Jakob, secretary from SCI Switzerland, Anneloes and other Romanian volunteers from 1991. It was a typical SCI evaluation weekend with games, discussions and working groups. Although I found some games childish, I was quite enthusiastic about what Christof and Anneloes were telling us. I remember that I got from Anneloes a box of pins for a pin board at the end of the meeting. She said that this should be the first stationary for the office of SCI Romania. I don't know whether she made a joke or not, but I took it for



SCI Workcamp in Bazna July 1991

serious and I kept them for many years untouched.

1992 : "I felt very much obliged to learn things"

How did you become a Medium Term Volunteer (MTV) for SCI in Switzerland?

Two days after the weekend I got a phone call from Christof and he told me that they want to meet me later on that day. We went for a walk and they asked me, if I would be interested in being an MTV in the office of SCI Switzerland for three months. Well first I wasn't that enthusiastic about it because I had other plans. But I thought that it would be more interesting to work in the office and to learn more about this organisation. So I agreed to become an MTV. For sure this upset a little bit the Youth League as no member of them were chosen.

What did you learn in Switzerland about SCI?

In the office one of the first job was given to me, was to put in order the medical boxes for the workcamps. Later on I was dealing with the placement of volunteers in Romania. But from the very beginning Christof told me, maybe jokingly, that I should be aware of the effort that SCI is doing to have me here and that they expect that I use my knowledge for developing SCI activities. I don't know how much he believed in it, but I felt very much obliged to learn things. I remember spending late hours in the office just looking around in the files of SCI Switzerland. Probably I read some papers about ECM, Action and lots of other things. It was exciting.

Then you went to the camp in Berzona in order to be a camp leader together with Christelle Wick?

Yes, but first I was sent to a camp in St.Gallen in a Steiner School as normal participant. Christof thought I would learn a lot from the camp leader Bernhard Müller. Berzona itself was a



Evaluation week-end in Bucharest, February 1992 :
I.r : Anca Lupu (Youth League), Mihai Crisan, ?, Cristian Mihail, ?

bilateral workcamp between Switzerland and Romania in a alternative community in the Ticino Alps. Well it's difficult for me to talk about it because there was a fatal accident of a Romanian volunteer.

Back in Romania you stayed in contact with SCI. Already in October there was an evaluation meeting. I read that you were asked to take responsibility for the contacts to SCI.

Maybe I should give you for the SCI archives a paper from my notebook, where I made a budget for SCI Romania, while I was still in Switzerland. So for me it was quite clear that I would go back to Romania and start an SCI group. This was my mission, if you like.

It wasn't possible for you to attend the GATE Meeting in Belgium, but you

went to European Committee Meeting (ECM) in Hungary. How was your first international SCI meeting?

I was absolutely impressed by the welcoming atmosphere towards me as delegate on behalf of a group of people interested in having SCI in Romania. I realised that there was a lot of support from branches to start a 'real' SCI. Further I met there interesting people. E.g. Richard Williams sent me later the constitution of IVS Great Britain.

What were the problems with the Youth League (YL)?

The YL, who was in charge of the volunteer exchange with SCI in 1992, felt threatened by me. I was supported by SCI Switzerland. Christof wrote them in the beginning of 1992, that it was planned that a group of volunteers shall start doing SCI-work. So they had to accept to cooperate with me in order to keep contacts to SCI.

1993 : “SCI wasn't prepared to welcome new branches in the early 90s”

Were you thinking to be independent of the YL?

At that stage, probably we didn't even think of leaving the YL. Because we didn't have anything: no money, no office, no experience. For us it was important that we, a group of volunteers, and not the YL should organise the workcamps in 1993. As they were interested in SCI activities we agreed on a compromise to work together and they offered us a little space in their small office. Important were their good contacts to the Youth Ministry. Most of the volunteers, who went to SCI camps in 1992, had the travel paid by the ministry and it was essential to get it also in 1993. We formalised the existence of an initiative

group of SCI within the YL and I became the coordinator.

What were the next steps in 1993?

In spring 1993 there was GATE meeting in Poznan (Poland). I and Simona Popovic from the YL went there as Romanian delegates. Fortunately we had about the same aim: start an SCI branch. But it wasn't the same atmosphere like at the ECM in Hungary. The attention was given to partner organisations of SCI. The people weren't so much keen to listen to our dreams of becoming an SCI branch. I even was approached by some partners and being told that it's no use to become an SCI branch as you can deal also with other organisations (e.g. The Alliance) and get the advantages of both. However I managed to find out the procedures to be accepted as SCI branch. I think, SCI wasn't prepared to welcome new branches in the early 90s, because the contacts with partner organisations in the East were well established. But at the end we managed that the GATE commission agreed to support the creation of a SCI group in Romania and also with some funds.

How was the workcamp season in this summer?

In the beginning of May Denise Lüthi came to Bucharest to be our office MTV. This was part of a bilateral project between us and SCI Switzerland. She supported the development of activities in Bucharest during the workcamp season. As foreign volunteer in the office she made us, the YL and SCI, behave much friendlier, although Denise felt quite soon that there were some tensions.

Finally the SCI office moved to your house. Was this still in 1993?

Yes that was still in 1993. The workcamp season went quite well with the help of Denise. Together with other engaged people we created a core group of activists who organised the workcamps and took care of the administration. It was the time to think about the independence from the YL, because it was difficult working with them. We started to draw our own constitution in September. Around then we decided to move out of the office of the YL. I think they expected that, because we had different opinions and we had now our own contacts to the Youth Ministry.

In order to form an association in Romania you needed 21 members. Was this a problem?

We got the signatures to found SCI Romania from the volunteers at the workcamp evaluation meeting in autumn 1993. This was our constitutional assembly. In November 1993 we got officially registered as a Youth NGO after we had received the approval from the Youth Ministry, as required by law. We applied as youth organisation as we expected to get funds. In practice we didn't have any age restriction.

1994 : “We were a group of students, who were neglecting their studies”

Why did you chose SCI as name for the organisation? Why not another one?

We were never thinking of another name. It was very clear to become an SCI branch. In addition I was impressed by the history of

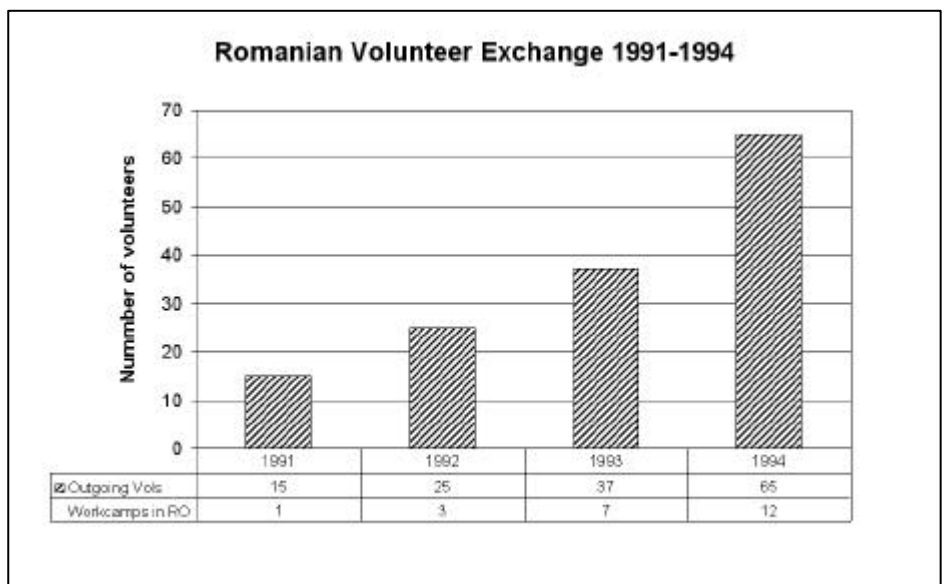
SCI and I felt having the name "Service Civil International" shows, how much we believe in the idea. We weren't even thinking that SCI branches might be disturbed by using the name. Meanwhile there were similar initiatives in Eastern Europe like in Poland and in Hungary. It wasn't that scaring anymore. It was a process that started to happen in SCI.

Back to constitution. Wasn't it a problem for the official registration, that 'conscientious objecting' was mentioned in the aim part of the constitution?

I think in the first version we wrote, probably translated from the constitution of SCI Switzerland, that we work for an alternative service instead of military service. I told you that the father of Christian Mihail was a lawyer and he advised us to not put in the constitution. So we had to find a way in order to hide it. The compromise was to mention voluntary civil service with no reference to military service. Otherwise we would have been refused.

From 1991 to 1994 there was an impressive growth of SCI activities in Romania. How would you explain this?

It had to do with dedication of a few people. I was not alone. We were a



group of students, who were neglecting their studies in order to spend days and nights in the SCI office. Fortunately we had a separate entrance to the office, so my family wasn't disturbed (they were even supportive). Well we had an incredible enthusiasm and the will to do things which you don't do in your normal life. I think that's the explanation.

need new branches in order to refresh our structure and our family.

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What role played the SCI branches and institutions in the development of the SCI Romania?

SCI Romania was founded and developed by Romanians volunteers. We had a strong relation with SCI Switzerland which organised for us funds for common projects while GATE offered us possibilities of sending people to trainings and involved us in other projects. It's not correct to say that one of them were more important for the development of SCI Romania, although SCI Switzerland had a mentor role thanks to Christof Jakob, the Swiss working group on Romania and my relation to Denise. Generally, I have to mention, all the branches supported us by managing the visa problems of our volunteers.

Do you think we should have more SCI branches in Eastern Europe or on other continents?

There was a questionnaire after the GATE meeting in Finland in 1993 and one of the question was "What is your vision of SCI in year 2000". And my vision was that there would be branches in almost every country of Eastern Europe. I still believe that this process shouldn't be stopped, if there's enough initiative and enthusiasm for creating SCI in any country. Romania, Poland, Hungary and Slovenia and recently in Belarus, with all the controversy, prove that we are able break our own stereotypes. I think we