

# UNDERSTANDING PRESENT-DAY ROMANIAN REALITY THROUGH THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE PRESENTED BY THE CARICATURES OF *GURA SATULUI* SATIRICAL MAGAZINE

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims at giving an insight on the fact that the history of a nation undoubtedly records the mirroring of its past into its present. Thus, one cannot clearly understand the social and historical peculiarities of a certain people without thoroughly analyzing its past. Gura Satului magazine represents a worthy exponent of the Transylvanian satirical press in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the early beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. It is a publication which, through its satirical articles and great number of caricatures, exposes the social-political realities lived by the Transylvanian Romanians during the harsh period of the Austro-Hungarian regime. Playing the role of satirizing the criticizable aspects of a society during a very important period in its history, this magazine approaches a wide range of subjects in its caricatures, from social and political issues to cultural, religious, educational ones. The themes tackled by its illustrations are characteristic of that time but they apply to our contemporary society, as well. This article intends to analyze some of these caricatures with a view to proving that the present of a nation should always be interpreted in terms of its past.*

**Key Words:** *Gura Satului, caricatures, satirical press, Transylvania.*

All the political, social, cultural aspects of a nation in contemporary times cannot possibly be analyzed without a thorough understanding of their features in the past. When doing that, historians and sociologists discover that the traits of a nation, regardless of domain, remain permanent along its existence and history somehow repeats itself at some point or other.

The nineteenth century probably remains one of the most remarkable periods in the Romanian history, a time which has had a great influence on the subsequent evolution of our nation, in all domains of life, and whose comprehension clarifies many of the uncertainties related to the contemporary period.

Ion Breazu said: „The press of Transylvania has been, for one whole century, the huge laboratory of the national consciousness”.<sup>1</sup> This metaphor, as penetrating as it is truthful, shows the indisputable role that the Transylvanian press has had in achieving the ultimate goal of the Romanian people of Transylvania, namely, its struggle for social and national liberation.

In those years imbued with crucial events that have decisively determined the fate of the Romanian people, as the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the life of the Romanian press was truly thriving due to the wealth of the topics discussed in the pages of the newspapers of the time and its role was essential in objectively mirroring the realities of the epoch.

In such an effervescent period from a political, social and cultural viewpoint as it was late XIX<sup>th</sup> and early XX<sup>th</sup> century, *press* was the one that assumed the role of displaying, in the most direct and veridical manner, the realities of the time. Press then represented the most important means of informing and educating the public, the mirror of all the events occurred or that were to take place. This vital function that press performs in the life of society is impressively well captured in the words of the great poet Octavian Goga, who said: "I have always seen in press a lung that breathes public awareness and, at the same time, a means of guiding masses".<sup>2</sup>

The same essential role was played by press all over the world, first in England, France or Germany of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, where it showed its first signs of life, then all through the rest of Europe, so that, only around late XVIII<sup>th</sup> century - early XIX<sup>th</sup> century, it made its presence felt in the Romanian space, too, delay due to the tumultuous events that our history has witnessed ever since immemorial times.

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Breazu, *Literatura Transilvaniei: Studii. Articole. Conferințe.*, București, Ed. Casa Școalelor, 1944, p.11, apud Mircea Popa, Valentin Tașcu, *Istoria presei românești din Transilvania de la începuturi până în 1918*, București, Ed. Tritonic, 2003, p. 254.

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<sup>2</sup> Ion Breazu, *Literatura Transilvaniei*, p.11, apud Mircea Popa, Valentin Tașcu, *Istoria presei românești*, p. 254.

Fulfilling multiple roles, press, in general, and satirical press, as its important branch become, for the Romanians, means of informing, educating, raising awareness on the realities of time, entertaining and perhaps above all, tool of combat and support of the struggle of the Romanians to acquire national liberties and unity in a time when our nation's fate has decisively been decided.

Crucial historical events in the life of the Romanian nation in Transylvania such as the Revolution of 1848-1849, the conclusion of the Austro-Hungarian agreement regarding the creation of the dualistic state of Austro-Hungary in 1867, the setting up of the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and Romanian People's Culture (ASTRA) in 1861, the setting up of the Romanian National Party in 1881, the elaboration of the "Memorandum" in 1892 as well as other events of political, cultural, religious or economic importance testify the effervescence of the last decades of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and sketch the complex profile of a landmark century in the history of Transylvania. On this background, there appears a periodical which successfully records the social, political, religious and moral pulse of the time in Transylvania.

Basic exponent of the Transylvanian satirical press, both through its articles and through its graphical representation, *Gura Satului* magazine is a journal which deserves special attention due to several reasons. First, because, despite the historical adversities from Transylvania of the last decades of the nineteenth century, this publication has fiercely been issued, without interruption, for fourteen years and then, resumed after a break of twenty years, out of the same wish to offer the reading public hours of "distinguished delight" and fragments of objective reality. The four periods and places of occurrence of the magazine, that is Pesta (1867-1871), Arad (1871-1879), Gherla and subsequently Gherla and Arad (1879-1881) and again Arad (1901-1903) testify to the consistency and seriousness with which the magazine has left the light of printing. Another reason for appreciating this periodical is due, unequivocally, to the personalities of the time that it has collaborated with and who gave its pages samples of literary-artistic talent, displaying a wide range of topics related to political, social or cultural events specific to various moments, rendered through a variety of epic, lyric or dramatic literary genres and forms, dressed in the cloak of satire with moralizing purposes.

This satirical tone of the writings which emerge from the pages of *Gura Satului* magazine is, on the one hand, left to the interpretation of parodies, cartoons, epigrams, fables, ballads, reports, epistles, etc. and, on the other hand, expressed directly, as a clear intention of the articles'

authors, people "always happy and smiling"<sup>3</sup> of spreading their lightning over all cowards and unjust, hypocrites and traitors<sup>4</sup> whose actions they intend to combat through their writings.

Names like Ioan Slavici, Alexandru Macedonski, G. Sion, Grigore Alexandrescu, A. Depărățeanu, Ion Creangă, Iosif Vulcan, M.V. Stănescu, I. Russu-Șirianu etc. are living proof that this magazine has enjoyed literary collaborations with personalities of the finest of the time, many of them doing their apprenticeship in the pages of this paper, and whose value acknowledged them in time among the great classics of Romanian literature.

*Gura Satului* is a magazine that enjoys an extremely large and diverse public, consisting both of Transylvanian Romanians and Hungarians and Germans in Austria-Hungary, who are responded to in the mail columns in their native language. The social strata the readers of this magazine belong to are fully represented, from the clergy, lawyers, teachers, students, officials, to townsmen, merchants and peasants, too. In their turn, the columns of the magazine are also complex. They approach topics of the most diverse ones, from rendering the social-political realities through poetry, stories, epistles, sketches or cartoons to advertisements or other types of announcements, or direct mail with readers. The blending, in the pages of the magazine, of creations inspired by Romanian folklore with essentially literary passages and with cartoons whose expressiveness often surpasses the written language grants it an originality that attracts the nowadays reader, too, even more as many of the topics discussed, especially those in the social sphere, find their similarities with realities of our century.

One of the basic components of the satirical press is illustration, most often caricatural, which forms, together with the word, a humorous - satirical whole meant to harshly criticize, to correct but to cheer up, too. Consequently, in order to understand the artistic, journalistic and social valences of caricature, it is essential to approach this artistic genre and trace its origins and its evolution in space and time. Thus, at first, the role of caricature was to relax, to entertain the viewer and its creator, too, who sketched characters or scenes from the contemporary reality emphasizing aspects of their criticism. Gradually, caricature receives social - moralizing valences which outline to this type of art a completely different status. Regarding the chronology of the evolution of this artistic genre, the first

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<sup>3</sup> *Gura satului*, Nr. 28, Gherla, 1880, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

manifestation signs of caricature date from the remote Antiquity but, the birth of caricature in the true sense can be traced in the seventeenth century Italy, followed by France or England, where caricature becomes an art dedicated to people. Later, the success of the illustration is ensured in the nineteenth century by the evolution of the technology simultaneously with the general development met by the countries where the first signs of industrialism are developing. This century represents, in fact, the period of the supreme flourishing of journalism and lithography which acted as a fertile land in the unprecedented development of caricature. In the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, caricature is openly acclaimed for this is the most thriving moment of the illustrated satirical press. This genre continues its representation, with the same success, in the XX<sup>th</sup> and XXI<sup>st</sup> centuries, too, when it continues to be widely practiced within press, in addition to the easel caricature and comic strips cartoon which are also practiced in a quite non-negligible manner.

Regarding the categories of caricature, one can speak of social caricature, which focuses particularly on the criticisable aspects of society, of political caricature, which addresses issues of political importance in a particular stage of a nation, of the caricature of manners, which aims at the moral conduct of the members of a society, of the portrait caricature with exclusively entertainment purposes etc., any of these types of caricature being determined by social and historical events in their sequence rather than by the different stylistic valences.

Since caricature is undoubtedly an art of the laughter, the comic of caricature represents its sine qua non condition. Primarily, caricature highlights physical flaws or character traits worth criticism, however, entering its deep meanings, behind displaying these flaws, the caricaturist criticizes, beside a particular human typology, a social class, too, or a social-historical event, a political party etc. Thus, the comic remains the concept underlying caricature, any caricatural drawing lacking comic accents being an incomplete artistic creation.

Regarding the manifestation of this artistic genre in Romania, caricature is born here in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, together with the development of the illustrated satirical press, its tradition being continued in the XX<sup>th</sup> century, too, when they place a lot of emphasis on portrait caricature but nowadays, too.

*Gura Satului* satirical magazine displays caricatures on various themes, from social, political, educational to religious and national subjects. The cartoons on political themes highlight internal political

problems current to each moment they are published, from various laws, Diet activity, the non-participation of the Romanians in the political life of the state, certain figures of politicians and the reception of their role in the Transylvanian society, and very rarely, foreign policy matters. The cartoons on social themes, very numerous, actually, focus on caricaturing women and their role in society and highlighting here the superficiality, the hypocrisy, and generally, the weaknesses of most of them, especially representatives of the bourgeoisie. Also, a considerable number of the illustrations on social themes caricature the institution of marriage, satirizing the materialism of youth in choosing partners. Human flaws and bad morals are also brought into focus by the cartoon pen, trying thus their correction. Interethnic social relations are also subject to the caricature drawings of the magazine given the historical period in which it occurs. Thus, the attempt of living together in the same territory of the Romanians with the Hungarians revealed as great a number of differences in character as to constitute the subject of many of the cartoons in *Gura Satului* magazine. Religion and church-related problems are also not forgotten, especially since the constant attempt of the Hungarians to denationalize the Transylvanian Romanian population was achieved through the church, as well. Due to the fervour of this desideratum, the idea of nationality and national identity preservation are also constant among the illustrations of the magazine in question. Regarding the use of the Romanian language or, rather, the ban to use it, as well as the right of the Romanians to perform an uncensored education in their mother tongue, there is also a significant number of cartoons on this subject.

The complexity and truthfulness of the subjects tackled by the articles and caricatures of *Gura Satului* magazine are, in broad lines, reflected in our present-day Romanian society. That is because, on the one hand, we would not be what we are today if our ancestors had not fought for our national identity and liberty, for our social and political rights, for the preservation of our dignity as a nation and, on the other hand, because certain realities of those times, especially social ones, resemble realities of our times to a considerable extent.

In its sixteen years of publication, *Gura Satului* offered its reading public more than one thousand five hundred caricature illustrations out of which, a certain number displays issues that fit our contemporary realities.

For instance, even though the political situation that our nation is experiencing at present does not resemble that of the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the satire of the politicians of those times and its grounds are just as appropriate for nowadays politicians. One of the illustrations that satirizes the politicians of those times is the one entitled „The Troubles of a Deputy” (fig. 1). This caricature ironically illustrates, under the form of six small

cartoons, the way a day in the life of a deputy runs. The politician is constantly “disturbed” by someone who, by means of an invitation, telegram or different documents, reminds him of the political position that he is holding. Thus, at dawn, at seven o’clock, the Dietary servant brings him an invitation to a conference, surprising him while he was getting dressed. Two hours later, at nine, while he was having breakfast, another servant brings him Dietary documents from the President. Then, in the afternoon, during his siesta, he is disturbed by someone else in view of a philanthropic activity. Later, he unpleasantly meets by chance the person who has lent him money to pay for the wine offered to his voters and to whom he owed money. In the evening, when having dinner, again, the deputy is disturbed by a beggar who asks for almsgiving. And, finally, even at night, the deputy receives a telegram, which drives him out of his minds, making him throw his boots at the messenger. This series of cartoons describing a day in the life of a deputy is intended to highlight the fact that, instead of exerting his duty towards his voters, the deputy has got a domestic life, spending his time at home or in town, together with his wife, and moreover, feeling downright annoyed when certain interventions remind him of meeting his political obligations.

The dialogues between Tanda and Manda represent a constant of the pages of *Gura Satului* magazine. The next caricature (fig. 2.) illustrates a drawing bearing the title of this pair of characters, „Tanda and Manda”, where the distinguishing marks of the caricatural genre are very obvious. Looking at a man who is sitting on two chairs stuck to each other, the two characters initiate a conversation regarding him. Thus, Tanda asks Manda the reason for which this gentleman holds two chairs. Manda’s answer is prompt and ironic, saying the he holds two chairs as he is the fattest of all the ministers. Obviously, in terms of their social status, Tanda and Manda, the representatives of the common Romanian people, are drawn a lot more undersized as against the minister whose physical and political weight, is highlighted by a body and a head which are oversized to his feet, who is holding two seats, each representing a ministry: that of communications and of trade. Dressed up, the Minister of the two ministries displays an uncompromising look and his mustached face is accompanied by two extremely large whiskers which reach almost his shoulders, insignia of the high social rank that he is holding. The cartoon in question, however, has got a specific purpose: to satirize the greed of politicians who hold several positions at the same time instead of giving the others the opportunity of holding a place on the political scene.

The caricatures which offer most similarities between the XIX<sup>th</sup> century realities and those of our times are, indisputably, those on social themes. For instance, the woman has always represented one of the great

inspirations of caricature, holding a constantly present place all along the whole existence of this artistic genre. The attention granted to women and to their role in society, to the extent that it is captured by the magazine in question, is rooted in the broader context of the existence of a social movement related to the woman and her role in society, specific to the XIX<sup>th</sup> century namely feminism. So, when it stops over women, the caricature in *Gura Satului* satirizes mainly those from the city who, less concerned with household maintenance, such as women from the countryside, spend their time with superficial preoccupations, long talk, gossip and infidelity. Indisputably, many such cases are to be found in the portrait of our contemporary society.

For instance, the last page of Number 7 of 1869 (fig. 3), displays a series of six caricatures entitled „Calumny on Women”, component parts of the journal calendar, which highlight various flaws or bad habits of women, generally of those from the city. So, the first caricature banter the legendary curiosity of women. Here, sticking her head to the door of a room, a woman is trying to eavesdrop to what is being discussed beyond the walls, but vainly, because the persons having the conversation are talking in too low a voice for the nosy woman to be able to hear. The second caricature stops over the married women who do not like their husbands to miss home. In this hypostasis, the woman is very worried that her husband is late for home and she is exclaiming self-ironically “Enjoy it, she who is a married woman!” The next caricatural drawing banter slanderers, a category of women who have often been found in all times. Thus, one neighbour is gossiping with another neighbour a third one saying that the food prepared by the latter at the dinner where she had been invited, had been unsalted. The fourth caricature shows the curiosity and distrust of women in their husbands. The wife, taking advantage of a moment of absence of her husband, is checking the pockets of his trousers to see how much money he has spent the previous night when he has missed home. The next image refers to the shallowness of certain women for whom the sole purpose in life is to arouse the envy of the other women. Here, a plump woman is admiring herself in the mirror, imagining how another one, probably her rival, will "burst of envy" when she sees her new dress. The last caricature emphasizes the hypocrisy of women, who, even young, hide their age considering that they are too old. So, on her anniversary, the woman in the picture calculates the number of years that she has to decrease from her new age so that people should not know that she is thirty years old. Summarizing, therefore, the ideas transmitted by these six caricatures, one can see a wide range of female typologies whose character and bad habits outline, broadly, the main reasons that make them worthy of criticism, especially male criticism.

The materialism of women existed in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century just as commonly spread as it does in our present-day society and, therefore, subject to the critical eye of caricaturists. The caricature entitled „Along the Promenade” (fig. 4) captures a scene from the high society of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, which emphasizes again the weakness of women that cannot be ignored by the critical spirit of the artist. Consequently, the drawing shows two elegant young ladies, with impeccable dress code, walking through a park and being addressed by a certain gentleman, elegant as well, with top hat, cane and pipe in hand who initiates a friendly conversation with them. Although captivated by him at first, their attention suddenly changes on other two gentlemen, who were coming from behind, and who, one count and the other baron, symbolize a socializing opportunity with much more fruitful perspectives for them given their social rank. Thus, for them, the first young man becomes a "civilian cad" who rudely "beating about the bush", prevents them from being wooed by the other two, reason for which he is quickly sent away on the grounds that their walk is over. The whole scene, both graphics and the dialogue between the characters clearly suggests the materialism of women of that time and their insatiable interest in occupying as high a social rank as possible through marriage. Obviously, such feminine attitudes have persisted ever since old times and are more and more accentuated nowadays.

Human flaws are often satirized in this magazine. Called "A Hungry Family", the caricature in figure 5 is also particularly expressive in the unmasking of two defects present in the society of any time, namely hypocrisy and greed. In this particular image, a couple is sitting at a table on which there are all kinds of food and drinks. The man is eagerly partaking of food and the woman is pouring drink into the glass, without any small detail betraying the shortage. However, the message accompanying the caricature appeals to the honored public to take pity on this miserable family facing poverty and expecting support from their fellow citizens. Obviously, the irony is here in the fullness of its power, aiming at touching with this caricature all those who want to seem what they are not, mimicking shortcomings that do not actually exist just to get more, without even beyond measure. Therefore, this drawing is meant to criticize all those members of the nineteenth century society to whom falsehood, stupidity and greed represent a *modus vivendi*.

Education and the institution where it takes place, the school, represent a subject that is prevalent among the cartoon drawings of this publication.

As the title says, "Diogenes and the Lamp" (figure 6) illustrates a caricature which introduces a famous character of the Greek philosophy, namely the philosopher Diogenes, thus underlining the intention of the anonymous cartoonist of educating the readers by offering in his caricature a character from ancient philosophy, in addition to raising their awareness on criticizable issues. Thus, the famous Diogenes who is walking with his lamp looking for political agents is met by Gura Satului who suggests him that, instead of wasting money on politicians, he could better use it to help the Romanian schools that are in an advanced state of decay, with broken roofs, cracked walls, loose shutters, etc., reality evoked by other caricatures of the magazine, too. This caricature tackles the problem of the desire of the Transylvanian Romanian people, represented by Gura Satului, not to abandon school that was wanted to be let perish, and therefore, to continue developing intellectually – this one being the only way of maintaining the power to intelligently breakthrough in those hard times for the Romanian nation in Transylvania.

Both in the past and at present, clergymen are a category that cannot be omitted by the scrutiny of the caricaturist.

The caricature in figure 7 appears under the form of a story ("Old story"), in two episodes, entitled "Conferring a Parish". Here, a priest comes with his eight children to his fellow greater rank, asking him to grant him the vacant parish on grounds of his seniority in job and of his difficult material situation. However, this one refuses him, claiming that there are also other priests who are "worthier and more burdened" than him and who ought to get this job. The second part of the caricature fully explains this refusal as the same clergyman is visited by a very elegant, hence wealthy couple. This time the priest who asks the favor of being granted the parish is his brother-in-law and the reason for the request is of an outrageous superficiality, relying on the simple satisfaction of his wife's fashion needs for whom dresses have become too expensive ("farthingales are too expensive!"). Following this explanation, the priest offers the parish to his brother-in-law without hesitating for a moment the correctness of the choice made ("That's fine, my son! The parish required will be yours!"). Thus, the caricature easily emphasizes the injustices and work abuses performed even on ecumenical level where, fear of divinity and social justice should prevail. Also, "the idea that priests in the countryside are starving regardless of rite, while the high clergy representatives succeed due to opportunism and rapacity, is very well

captured in this picture."<sup>5</sup> Last but not least, these two episodic cartoons want to whip the idea of nepotism, superficiality and lack of impartiality demonstrated by some people of those times who are in leading ranks, message which is as sad as it is contemporary.

To conclude, all the above-presented caricatures plainly demonstrate that realities of the past are mirrored into the present due to a cycle of features that historical events display along the time. In terms of politics, even though political data of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century does not overlap those of our XXI<sup>st</sup> century, the general traits of politicians and the way in which the political class acts and reacts are quite similar for both the past and the present. Greed, hypocrisy, superficiality, vanity are characteristics transmitted from one generation to another and the magazine in question, just like the satirical magazines of our times, do not hesitate in amending them sharply. In their turn, the social aspects of a nation find their roots in the trajectory of the social events that have influenced that certain people, in their mentality, in their education system and, not ultimately, in their character. Women's materialism, men's infidelity and inconstancy, couples' marriages of convenience alongside with many other faulty features cannot go unnoticed and not criticized. Also, religion and clergymen have been and still continue to be subject of criticism due to the discrepancy between the precepts that they preach and the way some of them behave. School and the educational system as well as cultural problems are, in their turn, a point of interest of both satirical publications and their reading public.

Mirroring social-historical truths of the second half of the nineteenth century, and those of our times, as well, is achieved by the press, in the most objective way possible, through satire, humor and irony whose relentless arrows criticize social injustices, whip swindlers' cunning, correct vices and human wickedness. They are those tools behind which the press has always been able to hide its readers' rebellion regarding the injustices of the time and through which the same press, can pass it on, elegantly and disguisedly, precisely to those that it intends to expose. Consequently, Tudor Mușatescu's words "True satire is like a needle. It stings in order not to poke, but to sew"<sup>6</sup> express the fact that the ultimate purpose of satire is therefore a constructive one.

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<sup>5</sup> Anca Elisabeta Tatay, *O privire de ansamblu asupra revistei „Gura satului” (1867-1881). Studiu de caz asupra caricaturilor „Gurii satului” din perioada pestană – ianuarie 1869 – martie 1871*, în vol. *Școala Ardeleană*, Nr. 3/2008 p. 436-470, p. 459.

<sup>6</sup> Tudor Mușatescu apud Elena Macavei, *Umorul în publicații astriste*, Sibiu, Editura Asociațiunii ASTRA, 2007, p. 433.

Annexes



**Fig. 1. The Troubles of a Deputy - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 14 of 20 April**

(2 May) 1869.

Tanda si Manda.



Tanda: Tre pentru ce ocupa chiar din acest'a doue scaune?

Manda: Pentru că între toti ministri din sula e celu mai grasu.

**Fig. 2. Tanda and Manda - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 19 of 7 / 19 May 1870.**

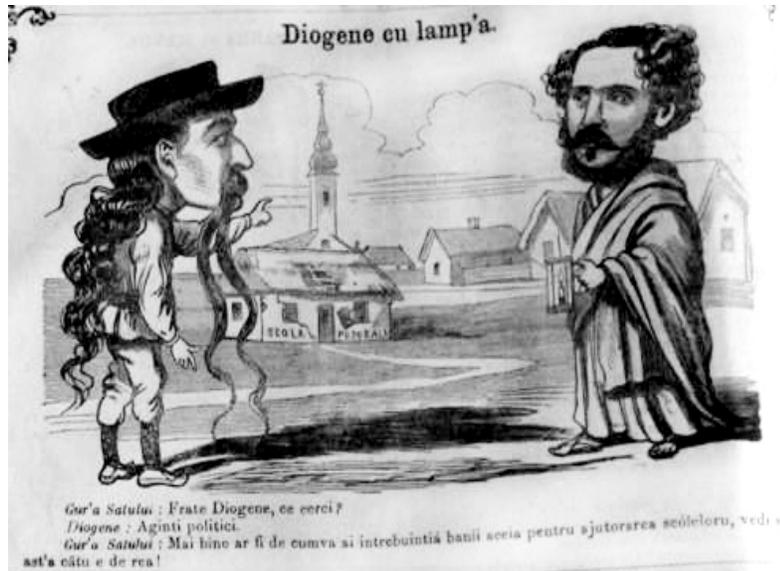




**Fig. 4. Along the Promenade** - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 19 of 9 / 21 May 1871.



**Fig. 5. A Hungry Family** - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 29 of 18 / 30 August 1869.



**Fig. 6. *Diogenes and the Lamp*** - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 4 of 28 January (9 February) 1868.



**Fig. 7. *Conferring a Parish*** - Caricature from *Gura Satului*, Number 34 of 27 September / 9 October 1869.

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