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FIFTY-SIX AS AN IDENTITY-SHAPING EXPERIENCE
The case of the Romanian communists

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FIFTY-SIX AS AN IDENTITY-SHAPING EXPERIENCE

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METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTS

48 Nineteen fifty-six was indeed a year that left its mark on world communism. Three major events—Khrushchev’s secret speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the “Polish October”, and the Hungarian Revolution—showed that communism was not so “victorious” in East-Central Europe as the region’s communist leaders would have their peoples believe. This paper focuses on a rather under-researched side of Romanian communism: what influence 1956 had on values and on attitudes to the political system, among the Romanian communist elite.

The issue is approached from the angle of political culture, for cultural values and attitude patterns are essential to any thorough analysis of the communist regime in Romania that seeks country-specific attributes of Romanian communism. In other words, it is argued that values, beliefs and emotions marking not only the political elite but the ordinary people were factors determining the characteristics of the political regime in power from 1945 to 1989, as were the patterns of compliance and conflict with authority discernable in the public. As Gabriel Almond once noted, the relation between structure and culture is interactive: “One cannot explain cultural propensities without reference to historical experience and contemporary structural constraints and opportunities, and that, in turn, a prior set of attitudinal patterns will tend to persist in some form and degree and for a significant period of time, despite efforts to transform it.”¹ This certainly applies to the communist elite and the public.

Thorough analysis of recently published documents, memoirs and eye-witness accounts indicate that Romanian communists such as Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and his followers did not come to power with a clear agenda. Their main political purpose was to gain and retain power at all costs. The issue was the political survival

1 Cited by Almond 1990, 157–8.

of a tiny, frustrated, uneducated group of ex-prisoners, as Vladimir Tismăneanu aptly remarked, also known as “Dej’s men”, dependent on the Red Army, which had brought it to power, unprepared to govern, with simplistic ideas of what politics meant, and equally importantly, with no popular support. The only chance for such a group to stay in power lay in subservience to Stalin. Until Soviet troops were withdrawn from Romania in the summer of 1958, it was an issue of paramount importance to Dej and his men to legitimize the party leadership in Moscow’s eyes, not the eyes of the population. After July 1958, the situation changed entirely: the party and its paramount leader now had to legitimize themselves in the people’s eyes. The experience of 1956 was a factor that shaped the strategy of Romanian communists for taming and co-opting the population, to ensure political survival.

The political socialization undergone by the general public under the communist regime showed two contrasting sides, in Romania as in the rest of East-Central Europe. Traditional values were handed down in childhood within the family environment, while new, “sound” values were inculcated during adolescence and adulthood by schooling, the socialization processes of official organizations, and the centrally controlled mass media. Some traditional values, concealed and preserved, nurtured political cultures of resistance and led to silent or overt opposition to the regime. The process by which the regime co-opted various social groups was eased by adding new values to certain old, enduring “dissimulative postures”.

This writer agrees with Archie Brown’s assertion that the concept of political culture is especially useful for analysing the relationship between values and political structures in a communist society, where there has been (1) “a radical break in the continuity of political institutions,” and (2) “an unusually overt and conscious attempt to create new political values and to supplant the old.”² Kenneth Jowitt has argued that many approaches to communist regimes “tended to discount or neglect the role of culture, largely because the relationship between regime and society was viewed simply as a pattern of domination–subordination.”³ One can add that in reality, the picture was much more complex, especially because the communist regime in Romania, as elsewhere in East-Central Europe, lasted long enough to evolve and change (in terms of ideology, party membership, and social, cultural and economic policies) after the moment of “breakthrough”.

To this writer, Archie Brown’s definition seems the more appropriate, especially for studying former communist regimes in East-Central Europe. He interprets political culture as “the subjective perception of history and politics, the fundamental

2 Ibid., 12.

3 Jowitt 1992, 51.

beliefs and values, the foci of identification and loyalty, and the political knowledge and expectations which are the product of the specific historical experience of nations and groups.” He also puts forward an analytical framework for studying communist political cultures, based on such (1) previous political experience, (2) values and fundamental political beliefs, (3) foci of identification and loyalty, and (4) political knowledge and expectations.⁴

Jowitt insists on the necessity, when studying communist regimes, to analyse “the visible and systematic impact society has on the character, quality, and style of political life,” in order to explain the nature of communist structures and cultures. He argues that the violent character of the 1989 Romanian revolution was determined by the “character, quality and style of political life” in communist Romania. He defines political culture as “the set of informal, adaptative postures—behavioral and attitudinal—that emerge in response to, and interact with, the set of formal definitions—ideological, policy and institutional—that characterize a given level of society.” He goes on to identify three types of political culture, related to the different levels of society: elite, regime, and community political culture. *Elite* political culture is defined as the set that emerges “as a response to and consequence of a given elite’s identity-forming experiences,” *regime* political culture is the set emerging “in response to the institutional definition of social, economic, and political life”, and *community* political culture as the set emerging “in response to the historical relationships between regime and community”.⁵

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Drawing on the conceptual frameworks just discussed, this writer would argue that two of the political subcultures—regime and community—are essential to explaining the specific features of Romanian communism. The 1956 Hungarian Revolution was a major identity-forming experience for the Romanian communist elite and so had a significant impact on what has just been termed the regime political culture. In the terms of the present paper, regime political culture is understood to be the official political culture and defined as the *political culture of Romanian communism*. As far as community political culture is concerned, the most significant for this discussion are the sub-cultures of it that can be defined as the *political cultures of resistance* against the regime. Yet it should be said from the outset that thorough analysis of both political sub-cultures—the political culture of Romanian communism, and the political culture(s) of resistance to the regime—would go far beyond the scope of this paper.

4 Brown 1997, 16–20.

5 Jowitt 1992, 51–2 and 54–6. Some criticized Jowitt’s taxonomy. For instance, Ronald H. Chilcote argued that Jowitt’s three types of political culture “are described in jargonistic terms and not effectively utilized in his analysis.” Cf. Chilcote 1994, 197.

So it will be confined to the impact that the year 1956, and in particular the Hungarian Revolution, had on the political culture of Romanian communism.

THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF ROMANIAN COMMUNISM

Analysis of the identity-forming experiences of the elite of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) is of paramount importance to understanding the main attributes of the political culture of Romanian communism. Tismăneanu, in his *Phantom of Gheorghiu-Dej*, has provided a masterful analysis of the power relations within the party, by pointing to three centres of power within the RCP after 1933: (1) the Muscovites—the Romanian communist émigrés in Moscow, (2) the Central Committee led by Ștefan Foriș, and (3) the “ex-prisoner centre” led by Gheorghiu-Dej.⁶ He rightly asserts that psycho-biography makes a useful tool for explaining Gheorghiu-Dej’s leadership style and the intricate relations within the RCP (old and new hatreds, shifting alliances within the party, etc.) A further task is to identify the hidden mechanisms (characteristic of a sect or secret society) that enabled the Stalinist experiment in Romania.⁷

Tismăneanu argues that the Romanian communists suffered from an inferiority complex and a legitimacy complex. Lack of legitimacy remained “the open wound of Romanian communism, from its inception to its ghastly demise.” He puts forward as the third main feature of Romanian communist political culture the failure to de-Stalinize. Real de-Stalinization and the emergence of Marxist revisionism in Romania were hindered, he says, by the weak tradition of Marxism in Romania, combined with a low intellectual profile and an unsophisticated mentality in the overwhelming majority of the communist elite. This also explains the salience of Stalinism (primarily cultural and economic) as the operational ideology of the Romanian communist elite, up until the regime’s collapse in December 1989.

Another important aspect of the identity-forming experiences of the RCP elite relates to the period of common socialization of those who were to compose that elite. Sociologist Pavel Câmpeanu has recently given insightful analysis of the prison terms served by a group of communist militants that included Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Gheorghe Apostol, Iosif Chișinevschi, Miron Constantinescu, Nicolae Ceaușescu,

6 See Tismăneanu 1995a, 91–3. Tismăneanu’s seminal work on Romanian communism is *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of the Romanian Communist Party*, Tismăneanu 2003. Of his studies of the political culture of Romanian communism, see especially Tismăneanu 1991 and Tismăneanu 1992. Other works in Romanian: Tismăneanu 1998 and 1995b.

7 Tismăneanu 1993.

and Câmpeanu himself.⁸ His detailed account explains how important the period of common socialization in prison was in determining the nature of the political culture of the Romanian communist elite, especially for the present analysis, as the crucial features of regime's political culture remained unchanged until the demise of the system. As already mentioned, the Romanian communists, after their takeover, had no other way of retaining power than to be subservient to Stalin and emulate the Soviet model. Drawing on the interpretations of the power relations within the RCP mentioned, this writer considers that the demise of Romanian communism is best explained by two concepts characteristic of its political culture: (1) the monolithic nature of the party, and its self-assertiveness.

Preserving the party's monolithic nature was central to the regime's political culture. Factionalism was to be avoided at all costs. This precise feature of the Romanian communist regime precluded any negotiated solution between an enlightened party faction and opposition elites, so predetermining the sudden, bloody collapse of the regime in December 1989. In Ceaușescu's case, his fear of the mortal sin of "factionalism" survived unaltered until the very end of his rule.⁹

Born of a "pariah communism" developed in the underground years, the tiny sect of Romanian communists that had gained power made a strong myth out of self-assertiveness. Of prime importance to exploring this are the testimonies of members of the *nomenklatura* closest to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1948–65) and Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–89). These concur to the point of acknowledging the existence of two conflicting camps within the Politburo: Muscovites—blind appliers of Soviet policy—and locals (*pămînteni*), proponents of the "national line", headed by Dej himself. Once the Muscovites were defeated, Dej and his followers could pursue their policy of emancipating the RCP and communist Romania from Soviet hegemony. But the process could still be hampered by the "Moscow centre" and by neighbouring communist regimes. Fears of alleged "imperialistic" stances by Moscow and "irredentist" action by Budapest remained major features of the political culture right up until December 1989. Crucial reinforcement of this feature was given by 1956.

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8 Câmpeanu 2002. Câmpeanu also provided an original analysis of the communist system, *The syncretic society*, which was sent abroad and published under the pseudonym Felipe Garcia Casals. See Câmpeanu 1980, the Romanian version Câmpeanu 2002. This was published in Romanian only recently. He saw Stalinism as the only economic and social organization of society to offer stability to a "syncretic society": prematurely implemented socialism as envisaged by Lenin in Russia, based on political grounds, not a result of historical evolution, as Marx once foresaw.

9 An old-timer himself—though not so important earlier as he claimed—Ceaușescu was afraid up to his

FIFTY-SIX IN ROMANIA: ELITE REACTION TO THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

The Romanian communist elite condemned the Hungarian revolution at once and succeeded in convincing the Soviets of their deep loyalty. After all, the 1956 events in Poland and Hungary favoured the efforts of the Romanian Stalinist leader, Gheorghiu-Dej, to retain personal power and avoid de-Stalinization. The Romanian communists took rapid measures to stanch information about the real significance of events in Hungary.

On October 24, 1956, a meeting of the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) CC Politburo devised an 18-point plan for keeping the situation under strict control. Top communist officials were sent to Transylvania to discuss the situation in Hungary with the public. Miron Constantinescu, for instance, was sent to Cluj, while János Fazekas was sent to the Hungarian Autonomous Region. Other *nomenklatura* members were sent to calm the German community, which was agitated by rumours that reunification of families—mass emigration to West Germany—was to be allowed by the Romanian communist authorities as a result of the events unfolding in Hungary (Point 10).

The party was facing for the first time the major problem of ignorance of the public state of mind. Point 13 stated that the situation in Hungary should be explained to the workers through the trade unions, but this had to be done gradually, to assess the reaction, and the official approach later amended to avoid unrest. Special heed was to be paid to young audiences, especially students. But it was specified that supplies of staple foodstuffs such as bread, meat and cooking oil were of prime importance (Point 14).¹⁰

Gradually, from October 26 onwards, Romanian communists to refer plainly to events in Hungary as a “counter-revolution.” Meetings were ordered throughout Romania, where workers and clerks, young and old, would condemn the “reactionary and fascist forces in Hungary and express solidarity with the heroic struggle of the Hungarian working class to crush the counter-revolution as soon as possible.”¹¹ The RWP had sided unhesitatingly with the Soviets and given immediate support.

downfall not of popular revolt, but of an intra-party coup, as Silviu Curticeanu—Ceaușescu's presidential secretary from 1975—aptly observes: Curticeanu 2000, 322 and 363.

10 Protocol No. 54 al Ședinței Biroului Politic al CC al PMR din 24 octombrie 1956 (Minutes of RWP CC Politburo meeting, October 24, 1956). See Stănescu 2003, 396–402.

11 This was stated clearly on October, 26 1956: Protocol No. 55 al Ședinței Biroului Politic al CC al PMR din 26 octombrie 1956 (Minutes of RWP CC Politburo meeting, October 26, 1956). *Ibid.*, 403.

Gheorghiu-Dej could proudly claim at the Politburo meeting of December 1, 1956, “We are happy to say that we did not look passively as spectators on the events in Hungary. We were directly interested that the unfolding of events should be in the interest of the Hungarian people and the future of socialism in Hungary, as well as in the interest of our camp; so we did not stay passive or let the Soviet Union manage as it could, and we therefore contributed a lot.”¹²

Among the most telling documents about the reaction of the Romanian communist elite to the Hungarian Revolution is a report by two senior officials, Aurel Mălănașan and Valter Roman, on the visit by a RWP delegation to Hungary, to assess the course of events in Budapest.

On November 2, 1956, Roman emphasized before the RWP Politburo two major elements that had, in his view, contributed to the “counter-revolution”: (1) The HWP under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi had failed to gain the acceptance of the Hungarian people, because of its arrogance and disregard for national traditions, and its total subservience to Stalin and the Soviet Union. (2) The HWP leadership had displayed an “anti-Romanian spirit” and “never taken a rightful stance on Transylvania.” On this, Roman quoted János Kádár, whom he had met during his Budapest, as advising, “Give autonomy to Transylvania!”¹³ These statements furthered what are outlined below as major elements in the political culture of Romanian communism: fear of Moscow and distrust of Budapest.

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But the Romanian public displayed sympathy for the Hungarian revolutionaries and numerous individuals expressed solidarity with the revolution at the time,¹⁴ most virulently in the city of Timișoara. As one participant confessed, students were listening avidly to foreign radio stations, including Radio Budapest, seeking news about the events in Hungary. Unrest developed slowly from October 23 to 30, when a mass meeting was called. The regime then reacted swiftly and ruthlessly to hamper the spread of the protest. The army and secret police occupied the student campus on October 30–31 and arrested about 3000 students, of whom 31 were put on trial and sentenced to terms of 2–8 years imprisonment.¹⁵ Despite the savage suppression,

12 Stenograma Ședinței Biroului Politic al CC al PMR din data de 1 decembrie 1956 (Minutes of RWP CC Politburo meeting, December 1, 1956). Ibid., 472.

13 Stenograma Ședinței din data de 2 noiembrie 1956 cu tov. Aurel Mălănașan și Valter Roman (Minutes of meeting of November 2, 1956 with Comrades Aurel Mălănașan and Valter Roman). Ibid., 409–27.

14 See especially reports by Securitate informers on popular reaction to the Hungarian Revolution: Lungu-Retegan 1996.

15 A valuable eye-witness account of '56 events in Timișoara: Baghiu 1995, esp. 7–24.

the people of Timișoara kept alive a spirit of anti-communist resistance, and it was there that the Romanian Revolution began in 1989.

NATIONAL COMMUNISM: FEAR OF MOSCOW, DISTRUST OF BUDAPEST

The monolithic nature and the self-assertiveness of the party have been shown to be crucial concepts in the political culture of Romanian communism. It can also be argued that the events of '56 increased two Romanian communist perceptions of enemies within the communist camp: fear of Moscow and distrust of Budapest.

To be sure, these perceptions rested on a long process of Romanian identity building from the mid-19th century onwards, in opposition to two strong neighbouring empires—the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian. But these features were strongly reinforced by the strategy of political survival devised by Gheorghiu-Dej in 1956, in the aftermath of the CPSU 20th Congress and the Hungarian Revolution, which was based on returning to traditional values associated with the Romanian identity and on extensive industrialization. This strategy was strictly adhered to by Ceaușescu, who had internalized the crucial elements during a long process of political socialization in Dej's inner circle, although he was less imaginative and flexible in his domestic and international policies than Dej had been.

As Ronald H. Linden correctly observed, “Romanian leaders have successfully capitalized upon the non-Slavic identity of the population.”¹⁶ It should be added that this nationalism, combined with a slight living-standard improvement beginning in the early 1960s, gained some appreciation from most of Romania's population. But to understand the roots of Romanian national communism and the way fear of Moscow and distrust of Budapest developed in the Romanian communist elite it is necessary to explore the elite's relationship to nationalism, or more precisely, Romanian national identity.

Here the accounts given after 1989 by former members of the *nomenklatura* are revealing, but at the same time puzzling, as they present the so-called internationalist phase of Romanian communism as far less “internationalist” than had been thought. For instance, Romanian communists were already being pushed into nationalist arguments by controversy over contested territories—notably Transylvania—even before they came to power in 1948. One former high-ranking communist official, Gheorghe Apostol, recalls a meeting with Stalin in December 1944, at which only he, Gheorghiu-Dej and Ana Pauker were present. The Romanian delegation prepared

16 Linden 1981, 229.

its plea for Transylvania on the grounds of history, from the Roman conquest onwards. That cut little ice with Stalin, but he decided Transylvania should go to Romania anyway, as a reward for switching sides in the war in August 1944. But Apostol's story is significant because it shows that even in front of Stalin, the Romanian communists were basing their arguments not on the theses of the 5th RCP Congress, but on a short-lived union of Transylvania with Moldavia and Wallachia under the medieval ruler Mihai Viteazul around 1600.

Such accounts raise doubts about the depth of the Romanian communists' commitment to the Comintern-instigated theses of the 5th Congress of 1931, which emphasized the multinational character of Greater Romania. Another prominent *nomenklatura* member, Ion Gheorghe Maurer, himself no ethnic Romanian, stressed he had never heard any Romanian communist apart from Ana Pauker and the Muscovites argue that Bessarabia should be Soviet or Transylvania Hungarian.¹⁷ The former problem was obviously more delicate than the latter. Clear references to Soviet-occupied Bessarabia could have damaged relations with the Soviet Union, yet recent testimonies show the Romanian communist elite still saw the territory as part of historical Romania.

56 As mentioned before, another crucial moment for the Romanian communists' strategy of taking an "independent road" within the world communist movement was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Romania in 1958. Apostol remembered the issue being first raised in 1955, after the Soviet troops had been from Austria. It was not Dej, but Emil Bodnăraş who opened the discussion, during a private talk in the garden of Dej's villa. Bodnăraş was ideal for the purpose, as he enjoyed the trust of Dej, as a member of the Muscovite ex-prisoner group and a defecting officer of the Romanian army, who had left for the Soviet Union between the wars. The Romanian communist request enraged Khrushchev at the time, but he permitted the withdrawal in the summer of 1958. But regardless of how the decision was reached, it marked a new era for the RCP.

As the party cast desperately around for support to legitimize its independent stance, it found some unexpectedly in one of Karl Marx's works. Some light has been shed on the illuminating circumstances in which Karl Marx's *Notes on the Romanians* were published. Paul Niculescu-Mizil was heading the Propaganda Section of the RCP Central Committee at the time and became directly involved. He provides interesting detail on how the manuscript was discovered in 1958 by a Polish historian in Amsterdam, translated for the use of the party leadership, and finally, published in 1964 with an elaborate critical apparatus recommending the book as a purely

17 For Apostol's story, see Betea 1995, 160. For Maurer's affirmation: *ibid.*, 147.

scholarly work. It should be mentioned, however, that Marx's critical stances towards Russia were in line with Romanian communists' strategy of independence from Moscow, as stated in the Declaration of April 1964.¹⁸

Thus the major issues related to Romanian national identity, especially emotional attachment to lands seen as part of the "national territory" from time immemorial, were internalized by the communist elite very much along interwar lines, i. e., in the time of Greater Romania. Reading between the lines reveals elements of continuity between the identity politics of Greater Romania and that of Gheorghiu-Dej's Romania as early as February 1949. For instance, concern about communist Romania's cultural policy towards the Hungarian minority in Transylvania was expressed at a meeting with a delegation of the RWP headed by Gheorghiu-Dej, Ana Pauker, Vasile Luca and Iosif Chișinevschi, by a delegation of the Hungarian Workers' Party, led by Mátyás Rákosi, Ernő Gerő and László Rajk, and the answers received were rather unconvincing.¹⁹

At the famous RWP CC plenum of November–December 1961, which issued a definitive version of Gheorghiu-Dej's vision of party history, top communist officials made recurrent references to "just" stances over Transylvania, i. e., along the lines of national communism. Gheorghiu-Dej himself stated bluntly that "the chief preoccupation of Rákosi and his group" immediately after World War II had been the question of "who Transylvania would belong to."²⁰

More importantly, some people took the opportunity to refer to the '56 Hungarian Revolution in the context of the savage power struggle within the RWP taking place at that time. CC Secretary János Fazekas, addressing the plenum on December 4, 1961, recalled that Iosif Chișinevschi had taken an equivocal position during the '56 Hungarian Revolution and been reluctant to define the events as a "counter-revolution", whereas he, Fazekas, and Nicolae Ceaușescu had taken the "correct" stance at the time and squarely identified them as such. But Miron Constantinescu, sent by the party to address students in Cluj, had not dared to "unmask" events in Hungary as a "counter-revolution."²¹ It should be added that Constantinescu and Miron Constantinescu, and another top communist official, Josif Chișinevschi, had

18 See Marx 1964.

19 Stenograma ședinței Biroului Politic al CC al PMR la întâlnirea cu delegația Partidului celor ce muncesc din Ungaria, condusă de Mátyás Rákosi—19 Februarie 1949 (Minutes of RWP CC Politburo meeting with HWP delegation led by Mátyás Rákosi—February 19, 1949). *Arhivele Naționale ale României...* 85–115.

20 Neagoe-Pleșa–Pleșa 2006, 251.

21 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 187–8.

criticized Gheorghiu-Dej's Stalinism in the aftermath of Khrushchev's "secret speech", but had lost the battle within the Party and been demoted in 1957. What is important here is that in 1961, at the most important RWP plenum of the Dej regime, Fazekas referred to the 1956 events in Hungary in relation to the fierce power struggle within the RWP. This supports once more the assertion that the '56 Revolution had a major influence on the Romanian communists' mindset.

Let us turn to Nicolae Ceaușescu and look more closely at how he applied the lessons of 1956 once in power. In August 1968, ten years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, Ceaușescu gave his famous "balcony speech", condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces. Historically, it can be argued that this had an enormous effect on the Romanian public, offering, for many, proof that Ceaușescu had charismatic qualities.²² Simply put, this author agrees that Ceaușescu's "charismatic leadership"—to use Reinhard Bendix's concept—did indeed emerge under the dramatic conditions of that time.²³

After that juncture in August 1968, far stronger emphasis was put on the Romanian ancestors' heroism and struggle for independence. The equation was simple: Romanians had had to fight against the Ottomans, and now, under Ceaușescu, they had to oppose the Soviets, while more oblique reference was made to alleged irredentism in Hungary. As George Schöpflin aptly says: "Mythic and symbolic discourses can thus be employed to assert legitimacy and strengthen authority. They mobilize emotions and enthusiasm. They are a primary means by which people make sense of the political process, which is understood in a symbolic form."²⁴

Resorting to historical myths came almost naturally in Ceaușescu's Romania. Ceaușescu displayed from the outset his interest in the heroic deeds of the medieval rulers of the Romanian principalities, and his appreciation for them. Furthermore, his style of leadership differed from that of his predecessor in being based on a systematic programme of domestic tours that regularly included the main monuments and historic sites in each area.²⁵

22 Max Weber defined charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Quoted in Bendix 1973, 619. Ceaușescu's speech of August 21, 1968 appeared in the party daily *Scînteia*, August 22, 1968, 1, and in Ceaușescu 1969, 415–8.

23 For detail, see Bendix 1973, 616–29.

24 Schöpflin 1999, 89.

25 In the period when Ceaușescu was consolidating personal power (1965–9), such visits were meant to convey an image of a popular leader always ready to consult his people, especially workers and peasants. For more, see Petrescu 1997, 107–9.

In the aftermath of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, Ceaușescu began what can be termed “itineraries of national cohesion”, designed to ensure popular backing for the RCP’s independent policies. More importantly still, Ceaușescu’s strategy was heavily influenced by the lessons the RCP elite had learned from the Hungarian Revolution of October 23–November 4, 1956. Let us follow the events through.

The balcony speech of August 21, 1968, condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troops of five “fraternal” countries, the Soviet Union, the GDR, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, was followed next day by an extraordinary session of the Romanian Grand National Assembly (GNA). There Ceaușescu said, “In our opinion, a great and tragic mistake has occurred, with heavy consequences for the fate of the unity of the socialist system and the international communist and workers’ movement.”²⁶ Two days later, on August 24, Ceaușescu had talks with the Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito. (Ceaușescu had visited Yugoslavia on May 27–June 1 that year.)²⁷

On August 26, 1968, Ceaușescu embarked on an extensive domestic tour. It is important to note that the regime’s propaganda efforts were aimed primarily at Transylvania. Romanian communists had learnt from the ’56 Hungarian Revolution and the responses to it among Romanians that Transylvania’s Hungarian minority needed close watching, as a source of potential unrest. So Ceaușescu’s attempt to enhance “national cohesion” began there. On August 26 alone, Ceaușescu visited three counties with large ethnic Hungarian communities—Brașov, Harghita and Covasna (the second two with Hungarian majorities)—and held four mass meetings—in the cities of Brașov, Sfîntu Gheorghe, Miercurea Ciuc and Odorheiul Secuiesc.

After the lessons of the ’56 Hungarian Revolution, Ceaușescu seems to have feared in August 1968 that the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia would stir up unrest among Romania’s Hungarians. This sounds reasonable, as he ended his speeches at the mass rallies in Sfîntu Gheorghe, Miercurea Ciuc and Odorheiul Secuiesc with a few words of Hungarian—the only occasions on which he is known to have spoken the language.²⁸

26 On the same day, the GNA adopted a document of importance equalled only by that of the Declaration of April 1964: *Declarația Marii Adunări Naționale a R.S.R. cu privire la principiile de bază ale politicii externe a României* (Declaration of the Great National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Romania on the fundamental principles of Romania’s foreign policy). See *Principiile de bază ale politicii externe a României...* 21.

27 Constantiniu 1997, 509–10.

28 Cuvîntare la mitingul din municipiul Brașov—26 august 1968 (Speech at rally in Brașov), see Ceaușescu

In terms of reviving historical myths as a means of gaining popular support for RCP policies, the most important rally was held in the Transylvanian city of Cluj on August 30, 1968. Ceaușescu, in a flamboyant speech before a huge crowd, referred for the first time to the RCP as the direct continuer of the heroic deeds of such medieval Romanian rulers as Stephen the Great, Mircea the Old and Michael the Brave.²⁹ Thereafter, the cult of ancestors and manipulation of national symbols became important ingredients of Ceaușescuism. At the same time, he made appreciable efforts to attract Romania's national minorities and convince them that his party's minority policy was not aimed at assimilation. A further tour followed on September 21–22, 1968, in the ethnically mixed region of the Banate, to the counties of Caraș-Severin, Timiș and Arad, where he delivered speeches at the mass rallies in the cities of Reșița, Timișoara and Arad.³⁰

Statesmen, politicians and scholars alike seem to have been misled by Ceaușescu's posture of defiance towards the 1968 Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. With the Romanian majority, Ceaușescu was aiming at radical reinforcement of ethnic ties, a stance made clear in his "Theses of July 1971". This rather brief document including 17 seventeen points, issued on July 6, 1971, embodied Ceaușescu's rigid attitude towards education and cultural productions. He reiterated the document's main ideas on July 9, at a meeting of the party agitprop activists. The "Theses of July 1971" constituted a radical attack on cosmopolitan, "decadent" and pro-Western attitudes in Romanian culture,³¹ and a return to cultural autochthonism. Thereafter,

1969, 422–30; Cuvîntare la mitingul din orașul Sfîntu Gheorghe—26 august 1968 (Speech at rally in Sfîntu Gheorghe), Ceaușescu op. cit., 431–8; Cuvîntare la mitingul din orașul Miercurea Ciuc—26 august 1968 (Speech at rally in Miercurea Ciuc), *ibid.*, 439–48; Cuvîntare la mitingul din municipiul Odorheiul Secuiesc—26 august 1968 (Speech at rally in Odorheiul Secuiesc), *ibid.*, 449–54.

29 Cuvîntare la marea adunare populară din municipiul Cluj—30 august 1968 (Speech at rally in Cluj—August 30, 1968), *ibid.*, 478.

30 Cuvîntare la mitingul de la Reșița—20 septembrie 1968 (Speech at rally in Reșița), *ibid.*, 506–16; Cuvîntare la mitingul de la Timișoara—20 septembrie 1968 (Speech at rally in Timișoara), *ibid.*, 517–21; Cuvîntare la mitingul de la Arad—21 septembrie 1968 (Speech at rally in Arad), *ibid.*, 521–31.

31 Propuneri de măsuri pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninistă a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii—6 iulie 1971 (Proposals for measures to enhance political-ideological activity, for Marxist-Leninist education of party members and of the entire working people) and Expunere la Consfătuirea de lucru a activului de partid din domeniul ideologiei și al activității politice și cultural-educative—9 iulie 1971 (Exposé at meeting of party activists in the fields of ideology and political and cultural-educational activity), see Ceaușescu 1971. For more on this Petrescu-Petrescu 1996.

the regime placed still greater emphasis on the importance of historiography in building the “socialist” nation. The most important step to take was to provide party guidelines for writing a “national” history.

The founding document of Romanian national communism appeared three years later: the Romanian Communist Party Programme.³² Thereafter, the debates on the Romanians’ ethnic origins became still more prominent.³³ In fact, the 1974 Programme laid down a template for writing and teaching national history, based on four conceptual “pillars”: the Romanians’ ancient roots, continuity, unity and independence.³⁴ For historical studies, the problem was that these four aspects were imposed as a standard, a yardstick for historical interpretation. So one of the major lessons of national history as taught up to December 1989 was that the Romanian unitary nation-state had been continually contested and threatened, and all responsible Romanians had a patriotic duty to defend it at all costs. The RCP gained appreciable popular backing by depicting itself as sole guarantor of Romania’s independence and national sovereignty and warning against the perceived inimical stances of the neighbouring Soviet Union and Hungary.

32 See Programul Partidului Comunist Român... For a teleological approach to “national” history, see *ibid.*, 27–64.

33 Communist historiography went through three stages between 1948 and 1989 in its explanation of Romanian ethnic genesis. In the first, 1948–1958, the Russification campaign brought emphasis on the Slavs and their role in the formation of the Romanian people. The second, 1958–74, displayed relative ideological relaxation and a return to the theses of the interwar period, on the role of the Romans and how they mixed with the local Dacian population to produce the essentially Daco-Roman character of the Romanians. The third stage, 1974–89, was one of “Dacomania”: emphasis on the “autochthonous” Dacian element in the formation of the Romanian people. On the subject of politics and Romanian historiography in 1944–77, see Georgescu’s pioneer study: Georgescu 1991.

34 None of the four sacred themes of Romanian historiography was brand new. All had been present ever since the institutionalization of history as a discipline in Romania. The first two—ancient roots and continuity of the Romanians—developed out of late 19th-century polemics with historians from neighbouring countries, notably Hungary. Since the processes of state-building and of turning history into a professional discipline coincided in the second half of the 19th century, the third theme—unity of the Romanian people—was always present in historical writings of the period. But not until the advent of Ceaușescuism did it become axiomatic. The fourth theme—ceaseless struggle for independence—was typical of the historiographies of all small countries in East-Central Europe that were continually confronted with far more powerful neighbouring empires. As Romania strove for its independence within the communist camp, the way the struggle for independence became central to national-communist historiography was a natural reflection of current politics.

What the regime failed to foresee was the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev. By 1985, Ceaușescuism was undergoing structural economic and moral crisis, when the launch of Gorbachev's domestic perestroika radically reshaped the public image of the Soviet Union and its leaders. "Gorbimania" began to spread among Romanians exasperated by economic crisis and the orthodox socialist vision of the self-styled "Genius of the Carpathians". When Gorbachev paid an official visit on May 25–7, 1987, many nursed a vain hope he could persuade Ceaușescu to introduce economic reforms. Most importantly, Romanians ceased to see the Soviet Union as a real threat to Romania's sovereignty and began to look upon it as a potential liberator from the domestic tyranny of the Ceaușescu clan.³⁵ Gorbachev's reforms had robbed RCP nationalist propaganda of its key legitimating argument: the need for independence from Moscow.

That left the regime in the mid-1980s with one effective target: the Hungarian minority in Romania and its "external mother country", communist Hungary. Again, the identity-forming experiences of the Romanian communist elite led Ceaușescu to search outside for ostensible causes of the country's deep problems. On December 20, 1989, Ceaușescu claimed that the revolt in Timișoara, which had sparked the 1989 Romanian revolution, was the result of activity by "hooligan elements, working in with reactionary, imperialistic, irredentist, chauvinistic circles... for the territorial dismemberment of Romania."³⁶

Such an assertion was supported in Ceaușescu's eyes by the fact that the popular uprising in Timișoara had begun on the night of December 16–17 with a peaceful demonstration by a small group of ethnic Hungarian religious believers, gathered outside the home of the rebellious Reformed Church minister László Tőkés. Tőkés was to have been evicted from his home, which belonged to the Reformed Church, by order of the diocesan bishop of Oradea, László Papp.³⁷ Tőkés announced to his

35 People were eager to know more of Gorbachev's reforms. Pamphlets and brochures published in Romanian in the Soviet Union by Novosti Press Agency circulated especially in Bucharest as a kind of dissident writing. People in 1988–9 avidly read Soviet publications with "restructuring", "renewal", "innovative", and "new vision" in their titles, e. g.: *Conferința a XIX-a a PCUS...*; *Cea de-a XIX-a conferință a PCUS...*; *Congresul deputaților poporului din URSS*; Smeliov 1989a; Smeliov 1989b.

36 For the text of Ceaușescu's televised evening discourse of December 20, 1989, see Perva–Roman 1991, 38–9.

37 Behind the decision lay Tőkés's religious activism and militant stance on Hungarian minority rights. Such activity erked the communist authorities and the collaborative leaders of the Reformed Church, leading to open conflict with the bishop. See Papp, László: "Scurtă caracterizare a preotului Tőkés László" (Short description of Rev. László Tőkés), August 14, 1989. In Mioc 2002, 144–5.

congregation after the church service on December 10, 1989 that he was required to leave his parsonage on Friday, December 15, 1989 and invited them to witness the eviction.³⁸ A fairly small group of ethnic Hungarians duly turned up before the three-storey parsonage and parish office in Timotei Cipariu Street on the 15th, to show support for their spiritual leader.³⁹

An eye-witness account recalls a crowd of about 100 in the front of the house: a few Hungarian-Romanian families and some Romanians, mainly men. At about 7 pm, some began to sing *Deșteaptă-te române* (Awake thee, Romanian!), a song of the 1848 revolution, but seen as dissident until the end of Ceaușescu's rule, after which it became the anthem of post-1989 democratic Romania. Many revolutionaries affirm that the point when the song was first heard proved to be crucial.⁴⁰ Yet there were few who could foresee how events would develop. Tőkés himself confessed his actions were not intended to provoke the downfall of the regime: "I am ashamed of not having such a bold-spirited idea, all the more so that the minority churches did not envisage such ideas. Our scope was to survive."⁴¹

After the long process of political socialization undergone by the Romanian communists since coming to power, events in Timișoara seemed to them clear proof that Transylvania's Hungarians were irredentists backed by neighbouring Hungary. Up to the last moments of his rule, it had not occurred to Ceaușescu there could be a genuine uprising of his people. It was all a plot engineered by Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Romania.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

National ideology in communist Romania provided a strong and enduring focus of identification with the regime and loyalty towards it. This did not build up overnight. It was a process initiated in response to the wave of de-Stalinization unleashed by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU. In this respect, the Romanian communists were skilful in exploiting the issue of national identity, which they rightly perceived as an enduring element of prime symbolic importance. The '56 Hungarian Revolution of 1956 proved an unexpected support for the Romanian communists in the sense of offering them a chance to display total loyalty to Moscow while desperately seeking to avert de-Stalinization and retain absolute

38 Ibid., 19. See also Milin 1990, 46.

39 For a description and photograph of the building: *ibid.*, 100–101.

40 See Daniel Vighi's comment in Milin 1997, 27–8.

41 "A Dialogue with László Tőkés." Interview by Marius Mioc (Timișoara, November 2, 2001). *Ibid.*, 77.

power. This worked wonderfully: Soviet military forces were withdrawn from Romania in the summer of 1958. Thereafter the RCP leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and his inner circle managed to pursue a bold strategy of independence from Moscow combined with a programme of extensive industrial development that gained the communists some legitimacy in the eyes of the public and kept them in power until 1989.

But it can be argued that Romanian communists deeply internalized the lessons of 1956, especially the Hungarian revolution. They were appalled to see a communist regime simply vanish in two weeks and communism restored by Moscow-led military intervention. This had a twofold effect on the Romanian communist mentality: (1) It increased old fears of Moscow, especially putative Muscovite intervention in struggles at the top of the RCP, leading to restoration of a faction faithful to the Kremlin. (2). It fuelled distrust of Romania's Hungarian minority and its "external mother country", communist Hungary. Right up to the regime's demise in December 1989, the Romanian communists took anti-Hungarian positions in foreign policy (especially in the 1980s) and devised assimilation strategies towards national minorities (of which the Hungarians were the largest). These effects on the Romanian communist mentality were arguably felt strongly even after the collapse of the regime.

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