

Romania. A Kafkian Democracy and an Inherent Authoritarianism

Mara Magda Maftai-Bourbonnais¹

Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest

Abstract This paper deals shortly with two key periods in the modern Romanian history: the communist and post-communist ones and tries to speculate on how trained, ideologically speaking, and how ready, from the psychological point of view, Romanians are to welcome capitalism.

The paper results in showing that Romanians are unable to exist, but in an authoritarian regime. The method used is the descriptive one, with Romania as a case study, the goal being the acquisition of factual data used to draw personal conclusions.

The modern Romania started from an authoritarian environment, during the between wars period, consolidated it for around fifty painful communist years and tends to regret its totalitarian past, nowadays when the global context urges state intervention and signals the very weak position of liberalism.

Keywords: authoritarianism, liberalism, national identity, economic and political policy, historical periods

1. Communism in Romania, 1944 – 1989. The Shock Therapy

During half a century Romanians indulged themselves properly in communism. They had to deal with a new domination. They were supposed to step into capitalism, endeavor stormily interrupted by the Russian invasion. Germany lost the war and Antonescu made a wrong alliance. Some voices said that he was also an opportunist as all the political class in Romania, be it democratic or authoritarian. At the Conference in Yalta, three mad and sick men, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin cut Europe in two parts, the East and the West, informs us E. Deletant. Only luck saved Greece or Italy, for example, from communism or France from being Germanized. The Second War World was even harsher than the first one as it ended up in cruelly deciding the destiny of so many nations for so many decades.

Communism was like a plague in the Romanian history, which made nothing but launching the country into an even harder isolation than before and it destroyed the whole class of intellectuals. After 1944 only those who had “good origins”, namely whose parents were workers or peasants could have access to education and occupy important positions. All the intellectuals died in prisons or building the famous channel Danube – Black Sea by digging it with the shovel (the idea of building it came as an instrument of punishing the Romanian intellectual elite); professors were deprived of their positions in the universities, being replaced by the communist proletarians “teaching” with their guns on the table. Nationalism was at that time understood as confiscating all private property and transforming agriculture into nationalized farms. Villages were destroyed, young people forced to move to town in order to “build communism”. In the same time, as some scholars sustain (e.g.: Dragan, 1993: 134), the coming of communism (especially when the first years of confusion and dark sufferance passed) meant for Romania a big step forward. Communism installed itself in a medieval country, from the economic point of view, relying on primitive agriculture and with a population which was in its majority illiterate, as education was quite expensive. The modern Romania was built by communism when giving poor people the possibility to study. After the first several years of bewilderment, in the 1960s, Romania found it itself in a full process of renovation, starting from the basic layers of the society to the top; everybody had a job, a salary and a purpose. But communism wiped out all the intellectuals, the Romanian elite stopped existing on 23 of August 1944 and it never came out since.

¹ Corresponding author. Tel: +4 0740247678, E-mail address: mmmaftei@yahoo.com

Romanians also inherited a political and administrative class which was educated in communist times, on the Stalinist model, meaning once a person is invested with power, s/he truly believes that s/he can dispose of the others, colleagues included, as s/he likes, acting in accordance.

Along their history, Romanians were always paying debts to their masters. The historian Burakowski informs us that this time the war debt fixed by the Russians was 300 million dollars, but *de facto*, it was increased to 7 billion dollars. The debt was paid more than once.

In 1958, at the time The Socialist Republic of Romania was ruled by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Hruscirov retired the soviet troops from the Romanian territory. Beginning with 1962, Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej and the political class at the time started struggling for the economic independence of the country, ignoring thus the small role given to Romania by Hruscirov, namely to remain a mainly agrarian country, obliged to promote a political policy of isolation. Gheorghiu-Dej stepped forward and he developed economic relations with Western countries: “in 1961 an economic agreement with Hungary, in 1963 an economic agreement for three years with France, renewed and amplified in 1965; also, in January 1965, there is concluded an agreement with the free Germany, FRG and in July, a different one with the USA. There also followed a closer policy with China in December 1963, settled by signing a Romanian - Chinese economic treaty. This treaty meant a first gap in the economic circle imagined by Moscow” (Dragan, 1993: 278). According to the historian Dragan, Moscow accused Romania of dogmatism and eliminated Gh. Georghiu-Dej, possibly poisoned by the Russians, who died thus on 19 of March 1965. Nicolae Ceausescu was firstly elected because he was thought to be young enough and easy to be manipulated. This man, bestially killed on 25 December 1989, ruled Romania for 25 years and he proved not to be so unwise in his political decisions, despite his lack of institutional education. Starting with 1971, he applied a policy of independence at all levels. His refusal to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, created him the reputation of a dissident and he finally convinced the West to adopt a favorable policy as regarding Romania. Therefore, Romania received large credits, money used to further industrialize the country, even if not in a very efficient manner due to the lack of expertise of the local people. Beginning with the 1980s, Ceausescu had in mind to pay all the external debt Romania had. This measure exasperated his people. Upon the Chinese model, the bread was rationalized; people received a small and yellow card, a bit larger than a banking card with all the days of a month. Each member of the family had the right to consume only half of bread daily. The happiest moment of a day was when, for example, meat was delivered to the store, sometimes this could arrive spontaneously. Usually, people were queuing for hours, even from 3 p.m., children also. Also the running water was delivered on program, couple of hours in the morning and another couple of hours in the evening, the cold running water, because the hot one was distributed only on Sundays. People had electricity few hours a day, especially in the morning, when most often it did no longer matter. This inconvenient was quite hard to be tolerated during winter, when life was passing alongside a candle in a single room. The temperature in the apartments was almost the same as outside, extremely cold, 6, 7 degrees, and the gas was provided only after 24 p.m. when the domestic consumption calmed down a bit. This daily torment is not written in any history and it does no longer matter for anybody now, but it mattered for so many intellectuals killed in prisons, for women dying in hospitals with the doctors at their sides, but unhelpful to intervene and save them from the evil done by themselves when trying to abort, as the Security man was surveying that the women dies and pays for not respecting the decree of Ceausescu which forbade abortion. It mattered for all the generations forced to starve so as to accomplish an ideal. When Ceausescu died, the external debt of 14 billion dollars was fully paid, capital and interests, as no other communist nation had done it, but at what social costs and with what purpose if a few months later Romania started to accumulate huge external debts? According to many historians and politicians, in December 1989 the state strike perfectly harmonized itself with the fury of the masses. When people calmed down, they started to regret a lot the unemployment, the only 8 hours working day, the apartments received from the state and the possibility to change them if any inconvenient, the holidays spent each summer and the access to education. It is hard to imagine nowadays the isolation, lack of utilities, the number of people shot when trying to get out of Romania or mysteriously dying in prisons. It is hard to imagine that people suffered for no purpose. For half a century, Romania was the accurate image of Orwell’s book *1948*, with the voice coming out of a box, the TV, two hours a day each evening, instructing people to submit and praise their leader.

The scenario worked. It still works as the generation ruling nowadays the administrative, political and educational systems is brought up with communist values and it respects faithfully the doctrine of Ceausescu. It worked for the children taught to be proud when wearing their pioneer uniforms and to love Ceausescu, to tell their teachers whatever parents were whispering in their houses against the leader or whether the parents were listening to *Europa libera (Radio Free Europe)*, the Radio of the American propaganda financed by CIA with East Europe as a precise destination (where most exiled Romanians worked, such as Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca, etc.).

Obviously, historians may note a liberal period in the nationalist policy of Ceausescu between the years 1965 – 1974. In 1971, Romania was received in GATT and in 1972 it accepted help from IMF and IBRD. Ceausescu continued the same policy promoted in the period between the two wars by the liberal party, namely the policy of neutrality on the international scene. He would have never reacted against Moscow, as Czechoslovakia or Hungary, but he tried to impress the West, benefiting in the same time from its tacit protection and esteem, and not getting out of the limits imposed by the Russians. In 1974, the statistics show a shy era of consumption, especially for domestic goods, around 260.000 refrigerators, 149.000 washing machines, 395.000 television sets etc (Dragan, 73). The elements of a free market could have created the illusion of a socialist market economy, even if, for example, there was no competitor for the famous car producer Dacia, nowadays bought by Renault. Ceausescu wanted to deregulate the markets so as to gain more power in front of his own people, but especially in front of the West. When he found himself saturated of this policy, in the last ten years of his life, he turned to two other key elements: the cultivation of nationalism among Romanians and the enforced cult of personality. Real facts show us that he was the first Romanian ruler who invented and invested so much energy in praising himself. Unfortunately, he empoisoned a whole society of the maniac cult of personality, because every person, occupying a however important position in Romania ever since, suffers dramatically from the same mental disturbance.

The mixture between liberalism and nationalism in the 1960s was possibly due also to a kind of prosperity derived from the development of the hard industry and of oil (Romania inherited an important number of refineries and a petro-chemical tradition from its past). The equilibrium between the hard industry and the domestic production of consumption was destroyed once the world was submitted to the oil shock in 1973. This event, coupled with Ceausescu's idea of reimbursing (starting from 1981) the debt Romania had to pay to the West, pushed the country into isolation and despair. Ceausescu imagined that Romania had the necessary resources and political importance to afford making new enemies. His cult of personality became even more acute as he got older and once he made his voyages in China and North Chorea in 1971. Deletant shows that the famous "17 thesis of July", who scared so many intellectuals and determined them to exile, aimed at ameliorating the political-ideological activities, the Marxist-Leninist ones, inspiring himself from the Maoist cultural revolution, a mixture of doctrinal purification and active depuration of heterodox members. Therefore, after the shy deregulation of markets and a false friendship with the West, Ceausescu was suddenly revitalized by the idea of nationalism on the Chinese model.

Ceausescu had his acolytes, false intellectuals, but ready to serve the system in exchange of immediate recognition and material comfort. Thus, second-hand writers like Adrian Paunescu, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, Eugen Barbu, and so many others, published in reviews like *Saptamana (The Week)* or *Lucefarul (Hyperion)* important odes to the Leader. All of them will turn, after the death of Ceausescu, from the most ardent supporters into the most acid attackers of the regime, pretending they were forced to support Ceausescu, even if largely paid during communism; they launched after into business, having their own publishing houses, newspapers and even political parties. They were responsible for developing before 1989 a new movement in culture, named protochronism, an ideology stipulating that the Romanian culture was never submitted to influences and it is, on the contrary, the one to generate disciples!

In the same time, many true intellectuals, like Ion Ianos, a local scholar, wrote about Ceausescu: "He was a monomaniac. A one, nothing, nobody. He was repeating like a broken gramophone the same words, formulas. He refused to get out of the identity he created for himself. He believed only in his own truth" (Ianos, 2006: 55). Ceausescu repeated daily on TV the same speech like a broken machine, making the same gestures, trapped into his mental disease of imagining himself the unique leader of all times. Nevertheless, the

scene of his cruel death created but pity and generated the question: was it indeed possible for a whole nation to tremble in front of such a weak old man, who was saying, during the masqueraded process intended to him on 25 of December, that the Romanian Revolution has been set up by CIA? At the time, nobody believed him. Once he was shot, the historical period of communism ended up, but the cult of personality is still alive.

2. The Fall of Communism, 1990-2008 or Practicing Illusions

The fall of communism brought in confusion. Romanians suddenly found themselves without masters. They were ardently looking for a new one. They had no idea what inflation was (which reached at 222% in 1991, 295% in 1993 etc), unemployment or competition (Popescu, 2004: 167). Their money suddenly lost its value, they found themselves on a market where there was a choice but no capital to buy with. Being a fresh market, Romania, as all Eastern European countries, became of real interest to the West. The period after the so called Revolution can be pinned down to three moments:

- 1990 – 1996: Iliescu playing a false democracy, because he did not have the skills, knowledge and instruments for adopting a real one; he refused to introduce free market elements, being afraid of the social costs to be paid by people losing their jobs and thus causing him losing the next election
- 1996-2000: theoretically a center-right government, in the person of Emil Constantinescu as president, a puppy figure
- 2000-2004: the revival of nationalism with Iliescu as president
- starting with 2004, an amusing president in the person of Traian Basescu

All of them mimicked liberalism and democracy, but unable to properly exercise them, due to private interests. Since the death of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Romania has been governed by *-escu*: Ceausescu, Iliescu, Constantinescu, Basescu, simulating liberalism within the strict limits of authoritarianism.

In December 1989, Iliescu created *The Front of the National Saving*, entertaining the illusion of pluralism when in reality the power was concentrated in the hands of one unique party and one man who was elected on 20th of May 1990 in a percentage of 87% (sign of an unhealthy society from the ideological point of view) by a population used to praise one leader and urged to have one. Iliescu will use all the repressive measures to stick to power and will always postpone reforms, not for the sake of protecting the population, but for fear of losing votes.

Romania's position has started to change from 1999 when in a deep crisis, it longed for financial need from international creditors, but the conditions imposed by them in exchange of financing, were hard enough for the population. Also, the economic landscape was and still is far from offering job mobility and a satisfying social net. In addition, the socio-political background at the time was an authoritarian one.

In 1999, the most dramatic year, financially speaking, after the fall of communism, Romania was in an extremely difficult economic situation and it was advised to introduce the currency board on the example of Bulgaria, which had pioneered the system in 1997. Fortunately, the specialists managed to avoid this drastic measure. The Romanian external debt could not be paid, both production and investments were dropping, even if the inflation diminished somehow (from 150% in 1997 to 41% at the end of 1998). The Kosovo conflict made the precarious economic situation even more problematic. The trade between Romanian and its neighbor countries, especially the trade on Danube was affected. The exports were to suffer immediately. In the first quarter of 1999, Romania was merely on the point of default, unable to pay the external debt (IMF, 2004).

The evolution of Romania between 1999 up to 2006 is an atypical one. In 1999 Romania was coming up against an acute lack of money and in 2006 against an increasing money supply, the market being unable to absorb the funds received from international creditors.

The funds received by Romania practically helped the country to pass over the economic deadlock, even if the social costs were high. But the political environment was not a democratic one (if we are to think at the fiscal system, hostile to foreign investors, the massive subsidize of some enterprises with the postponement of arrears year by year, the incentive given to some producers thus disfavoring others, the old problem of corruption, the hard bureaucracy which made any business difficult to start). The social democratic government in the period 2000-2004 was accused of postponing the privatization of former state-owned companies. The social costs were felt immediately once the privatizations were finally made,

privatizations necessary to a functional market economy, but damaging for most Romanians. The workforce resulted from the privatization of state-owned companies, was then picking up strawberries in Spain or working in the construction sector in Italy.

Probably being afraid of the costs the population would have again be forced to support, unable from the psychological point of view to bear more the infinite transition which followed after the death of Ceausescu, the National Bank of Romania and the 2000 - 2004 government decided, at the beginning, not to accept more funds from the IMF, with large interests to be paid in the end by an exhausted population. Even if Ceausescu announced proudly that Romania paid all its external debt, even if before 1944 Romania had oil resources, an agriculture which was productive and good standards of living, in 2008 the medium salary for intellectual work did not reach 250 Euros per month! All the funds received from international creditors were wrongly used, privatization was done for pennies. The country has been confronting with the same old problems: corruption of the political class, poverty at all levels, monopole of one political leader and one political party, a president suffering from the cult of personality. According to specialists from international credit institutions, the perception Romanians have about democracy and capitalism is poor enough. When the political class deregulated a virgin market allowing the invasion of foreign products, it suffocated the local producers, unhelpful and in need of subsidies, which never appeared. 15% of the active Romanian population used to work overseas before the 2008 crisis, sending Euros back home and thus supporting the Romanian economy. But the 2008 crisis brought in unemployment, an inflation of around 6,7%, an increase of the reserve requirements in December at 18% and a referential interest rate established at 10,25%, according to the reports of the NBR at the time. These figures show an economy which has stepped into recession since then.

Along history, Romanians managed to conserve the same political minuses, despite some short and neurotic searches for capitalism. The world has been always balancing between authoritarianism and democracy, some being disposed mostly to the former or to the latter. The mischance of Romania is its position, close to the Russians and Russia cannot be but totalitarian. In Romania, democracy has a more utopian face than anywhere in the ex-communist bloc. The pluralist constitution hides the oligarchy of political monopolies; the political magnates have their own profitable businesses using public money. Romania is still within an authoritarian regime, which only pretends to be democratic. Most big companies use public money, the state is not separated from the ruling political party's policy.

But the darkest sides of communism are probably less the effects of the centralized system, but the damage done at the level of individual psychology. It is about brain washing, which is transmitted from generation to generation, a sort of schizophrenia of the man engendered with power, who has to be followed and listen. In Romania nowadays, we come across a kind of terror, very well conserved, unfortunately, a kind "a legal terror" (Aron, 1965: 272) as Raymond Aron used to call it when referring to the authoritarian system, the terror of the state, playing the role of master, assuming the right to judge in favor or in disadvantage of its own citizens. As Hannah Arendt wrote, one of the most vicious harms done by communism is initiating the idea of a "worldwide conspiracy", remodeling personalities, reeducating people under the pressure of fear, fear which is professionally turned into conviction, as people end up fully believing some ideas, forced to swallow them up (Arendt, 2002). The worst parts of communism are to be found at the psychological level.

On the other hand, the 2008 crisis proved that the market equilibrium is very fragile, that pure liberalism is unmanageable and that the economy needs the strong intervention of the state. Social liberalism is needed in the 21st century, in order to get the society out of the deadlocks of a free market. Technocrats call for a socialism which must be democratic, for separating powers and for the distinction between different levels of activities in a perspective which does not have to ignore social conflicts. A regime is totally compromised when the political class influences the economic elites or when the political class has key positions in the economic sector. Social liberalism should make the separation between political, economic, cultural elites, obstructing that private economic interests decide for the masses. Unfortunately, in Romania, the tradition of the personality with multiple abilities, excellent in all the domains, an all capable intelligent person, is the prototype inherited from the 18th century, when the academic professor was also the best

politician and obviously a good writer and a wealthy man, a tradition naturalized and conserved even in time.

Another element proving that in Romania democracy is not mature, is that the middle class does not exist, there is a huge gap between the very few having outrageous good standards of living and the most class of poor people used to survive. Anyway, communism did not end up in Romania in 1989, it only changed its face. Mentally speaking, Romanians are addicted to state protection; they seek it, need it and blame it when it is not extremely obvious.

Therefore, the question which arises is: are Romanians keener on, authoritarianism or capitalism? The question is worthy in the context of the current financial crisis, when liberalism proves to be weak enough.

3. References

- [1] Aron, R., *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, Editions Gallimard, 1965
- [2] Arendt, H., *Les origines du totalitarisme*, Eichmann a Jerusalem, Quarto Editions Gallimard, 2002
- [3] Burakowski, A., *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceausescu (1965-1989). Geniul Carpatilor*, translation by Vasile Moga, Polirom, 2011
- [4] Denize, E., *Comunismul românesc de la începuturi până la moartea lui Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej* in *Memoria, Revista gândirii arestate*, Uniunea Scriitorilor, no. 29, 2005
- [5] Deletant, D., *Romania sub regimul comunist*, Academia Civica, 2006
- [6] Dragan, J.C., *Istoria romanilor*, Europa Nova, 1993
- [7] Enache, G., *Ortodoxie si putere politica in Romania contemporana*, Nemira, 2005
- [8] Ianosi, I., *Eu si el, insemnari subiective despre Ceausescu*, Ideea Europeana, 1996
- [9] International Monetary Fund, *Review of Romania's Performance Under Past Fund Support Programs*, IMF, 2004.
- [10] International Monetary Fund, *Too Much of a Good Thing? Credit Booms in Transition Economies: The Cases of Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine*, Working paper WP/05/128, June 2005
- [11] Popescu, D., *Economie politica*, Continent, 2000
- [12] Stoenescu, V.M., Magureanu V., *De la regimul communist la regimul Iliescu*, All, 2008