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Ceaușescu’s National-Communist Populist Turn of the 1970s: A Failed Charisma?

Introduction

Ceaușescu’s name is linked to his Promethean attempt to both secure Romania’s independence from the Soviet tutelary power and to build a modern industrial State out of the agricultural and Stalinist industrial Romania of the 1950s. This represents an international risk and a social effort which common wisdom attributes mainly to Ceaușescu in the Eastern Block, leaving aside the institutional dissents such as Tito’s Yugoslavia or Hodja’s Albania.

The ideological foundations of this project have been summarized by Catherine Durandin’s oxymoron “National Communism” (Durandin 1992; Tismăneanu 2003); some of its doctrinal expressions have been revealed through Katherine Verdery’s analyses about the 1970s protochronism (Verdery 1995), Alina Tudor-Pavelescu’s insights on the storytelling about an egalitarian people in the Carpathian area elaborated by Court poets and historians (Pavelescu 2009), Lucian Boia’s deconstruction of the myth of a united and socially homogenous nation (Boia 2017). The concrete policies and mass manifestations of all these themes have already been analysed, whether if addressing Ceaușescu’s home cult (Cioroianu 2005; Marin 2016) or the mobilization for international sovereignty (Gridan 2011).

In order to avoid repeating the above-mentioned authors, my approach will focus on the populist meaning of Ceaușescu’s dubious and ambitious project. It is caught between the Communist-repressed Romanian agrarian ideology (*poporanism*, from Romanian *popor*, people, later *țărăanism*, from Romanian *țară*, country and, as here,

countryside) and the evident populist need of direct political legitimization. Populism will receive here the second meaning.

In my papers, I will use several notions often mobilised by the populists: the concept of “society”, an intermediary category of the “people” and its related notion of identity (Ban 2008). But contrary to politicians, for the social scientists the people’s identity represents a moving and historically contextualized variation of some supposedly permanent features, mythic heroes and places as conceptualized in Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1997). Finally, the “nation” is the people becoming self-conscious thanks to national elites’ engineering – through education and military training for patriotic purposes – and ready to actively cultivate their supposed “national” features under the authority of its “elites”. One of their main characteristics is to be anti-elitist elites, as they are supposed to be the true ones doomed to replace the old and fatally false ones. From this point of view, Marxism has some arguments to put forward with its theory of the succession of the domination periods, the Communist elites presenting themselves as the new saviour of the people thanks to the *sui generis* iron law of historical science. It would be easy for Ceaușescu to attribute a positive dimension to these historical periods, defined following the Marxist ideology, and to their glorious heroes, converging towards the last and the most beloved “son of the people”, Ceaușescu himself.

Ceaușescu’s charisma does not refer to any “objective” and inner quality in order to attract the masses, but to his capacity to concentrate on oneself and to manipulate the aspirations of a large part of the society thanks to industrialization, housing policy and nationalism. Max Weber attributed this phenomenon to the need to re-enchant a world drained of its supernatural charm by scientific rationalism and technical control (Weber 1995: 320). Romania was not directly concerned with such an analysis as far as its peasant masses living in backward rural society were concerned (Murgescu 1999: 94). Moreover, the charismatic hypnosis is also related, according to Max Weber, to the lack of concrete socio-economic prospects for jobs and responsibilities. It is even one of its conditions, since total surrender to a leader is much less possible when professional or family interests are at stake. But Ceaușescu could not benefit from the victimization of an opponent to an unfair power. Thus, he used another impulse for his charisma: perpetual economic and social revolution in order to improve – at least in his opinion – and – more certainly – to upset Romanian social and cultural life. The story of this action is the object of this paper.

Nationalist mobilization on agrarian themes has a long tradition in Romanian political history, on the left-wing (populist Constantin Stere), on the right-wing (nationalist Nicolae Iorga and anti-Semite democrat Alexandru Cuza) and on the left-right synthesis of generic Fascism (Corneliu Zelea-Codreanu) (Sandu 2014). They have all stressed the importance of Peasantry and, after 1918 and the universal suffrage, they have moreover used it as political legitimization for a democratic vote. But at the same time, socio-economic modernization moved the political agenda towards urban and industrial categories, favoured by young Fascists of the Iron Guard and openly promoted by victorious Communism with the help of the Red Army after 1945. Therefore, the legitimization mix encompassed agrarian tradition officially promoted but harshly repressed through collectivization and industrial revolution.

This kind of legitimization became useful and even necessary to Ceaușescu's project for two reasons: to mobilize the society in favour of its brutal modernization, which needed a good deal of consent expressed through slogans of national unanimity on behalf of the people's interest; but also, to shortcut the Marxist-Leninist structures of the party (Werth 2001) which could have been subverted by a Soviet *coup* against troublesome Ceaușescu. Consequently, nationalist populism represented for Ceaușescu the ideology of mobilization for development and happiness and an instrument to avoid the institutional risks of the Leninist party and Soviet intervention.

As a matter of fact, between the people and the leader, there was the party. And that is a theoretical and practical problem for their articulation in a totalitarian context, as traditional totalitarian theories define the totalitarian state as partly or completely digested by the party, as a terrorist party-state. In a more concrete approach, for Ceaușescu, the party was supposed to become the frame for the first ideological legitimization and political seizure of power and for social mobilization as well as a barrier between the leader and the people.

The solution for a direct populist relation was two-fold: the discrete purge of the old cadres and the promotion of the new ones faithful to him; then the increase of the party's membership in order to integrate a huge representative part of society in this mass organization. Thus, Ceaușescu could pretend that the Secretary-General was both at the head of the party as a vanguard formation and at the head of the whole state, mostly after his election as President of the Republic in 1974 – a function created especially for him and surrounded by an *Ancien Régime* ceremony with scepter.

Ceaușescu's populism thus presented different facets. As for his charisma, his populism could hardly pretend to respect a classical definition, which links directly a charismatic leader to his people protesting against social domination by unfair elites – generating a vertical cleavage between the *demos* and the elites and between the *ethnos* and its contradictors (Taguieff 2007: 19-20). Since the communist regime embodied internationalist ideology and Ceaușescu succeeded another Communist leader, he could hardly pretend to solve urgent social or ethnic problems – even if traditional anti-Russian and anti-Hungarian resentment could be re-activated, as well as constant denunciations of corrupted or voracious elites.

My intention is to follow a chronological appraisal of the four-fold meanings of the people, as indicated in the rationale of the conference – the word, the political object meant through it, its emergence on the political stage and its manifestations – through Ceaușescu's lenses and his enlarged experience as his importance grew.

I will consider 1970 as a turning point, following a break in the conduct of power and Ceaușescu's cult with the "mini cultural revolution" following Ceaușescu's 1971 trip to China and North Korea. However, several analysts, including Alina Tudor-Pavelescu, think that this break is an optical illusion, as the liberalization of the years 1965-1971 was also a sham and that a hardening of the regime was underway since 1969 (Tudor-Pavelescu 2009). Nevertheless, it has to be considered.

The heirs of the Romanian peasant doctrines such as Ion Mihalache have been among the noticeable victims of the proletariat-leaned Stalinism in the late-1940s and early-1950s in Romania. Young Ceaușescu was personally involved in the

collectivization process and thus took part to the anti-agrarian drive of the young communist regime. Such politics could hardly claim a populist trend, rather a class struggle and terrorist one.

But the term “people” had a changing meaning for Ceaușescu during the late 1950s, as the need for political legitimization shifted from proletariat to nationalism after the withdrawal of the Russian occupation troops in 1958, and heavily after the official end of the collectivization in 1963. The unity of the Romanian “People” against Soviet pressure for the so-called re-ruralisation of the Valev plan in 1964 (in fact a mere pretext for Dej to break with Moscow), inaugurated another period, the building of Ceaușescu as a charismatic leader of a united nation, supposedly transcending “class oppositions”. Not only the Valev plan simply included the creation of a transnational boarder cluster for economic development, but as Elena Dragomir clearly demonstrated, it was known in Bucharest as late as June 1965: it could not have influenced the decision of the so-called “Declaration of Independence” of April 1964, even if it has been interpreted as its cause afterwards (Dragomir 2015).

This opens the way to the second meaning of populism and its link with totalitarianism, understood in the modern sense of neo-totalitarian school represented by Roger Griffin and Stephen Kotkin. Indeed, Kotkin’s definition of the process of bolshevization is very close to that of fascist mobilization: it is an ideological, cultural, global and revolutionary project of popular enthusiastic upheaval, embodied by and embedded in a leader’s cult, cutting off all the other elites and intermediary bodies (Kotkin 1997; Soulet 1996; Durandin 1995; Durandin 1990). This period is mainly represented by the last chronological part, after 1970, called “Ceaușescu’s Golden Epoch”.

1. Reconnecting with the People: Ceaușescu’s Lessons from Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej

1.1. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s investment...

At the beginning of 1963, as the collectivization came to an end, so did the main fight of the proletariat against the rural propriety. Petty-bourgeois minded peasants were supposed to have reintegrated the socialist collective project. The society became consonant with the party’s ideology and so reciprocally, the party could supposedly rely on it to broaden its legitimization.

After the Marxist legitimization, Dej could mobilize them into the next fight, for national legitimization, in order to avoid the second destalinization of the beginning of the 1960s, even more radical than the first one of 1956 and even more dangerous for the Romanian Stalinist regime. Nationalism and centrifugal tendencies became congruent with the Stalinist perpetuation in Romania. But as the country’s experience in democratic regimes was less than meagre – and even less in liberal ones – the anti-Russian sentiment and the independence from Moscow could replace the fight for freedom characteristic to the Central European societies in 1956 and 1968.

Dej put some advantages into society's basket. He proceeded to the total liberation of political prisoners and distanced Romania from the Soviet Union and Russian culture, a modest start of a consumption policy and a rapprochement with China and the West (mainly for economic reasons, but also after the nuclear risk of the Cuba crisis and for some ephemeral cultural freedoms too). Ceaușescu's success story in the initial period of his reign was that he strengthened all these initiatives.

An excerpt of the official birth act of the independence policy, the famous *Declaration of Independence* of April 1964, must be quoted here for the definition of the new deal between the Soviet Union, the Romanian party, its leadership and the People:

No party can go over the direction of a party's leadership in one country or another, and even more so it is not allowed to call for the removal or change of the party's leadership. Unrespectful appreciations and manifestations towards a Communist party and its leadership can be interpreted as a lack of respect for the working class, the people trusting the party and the leadership of the Communist party in its country, and this aggravates even more the relations between parties, between socialist states, affects the friendship of the peoples concerned.

From there on, the different Communist Parties were representatives and guarantors of the international autonomy, but also of the right ideological line of their own respective countries as the best knowers of their needs. And this knowledge was grounded in their anchorage in the country, mainly in its history and habits, more broadly and fundamentally in the attachment of the people, the reference to which progressively replaced that of the sole working class.

1.2. Ceaușescu's benefits ...

After he came to power in March 1965, Ceaușescu used the same recipe as Dej, and Alina Tudor-Pavelescu has rightly concluded on the so-called Ceaușescu's liberal period that: "That did not mean the subordination of the party to the Nation, but the subordination of the Nation to a political project defined and led by the party" (Tudor-Pavelescu 2009: 187). Nevertheless, the period 1965-1970 appears to be a true "golden age" of the reign of Nicolae Ceaușescu, which culminated with the public criticism of the invasion of the Czechoslovakia in August 1968, the keystone of the union between people and its charismatic leader backed by the party.

During this so-called liberal period, Ceaușescu managed in fact to get rid of some barriers between him and the "people", playing each of them against the other, always on behalf of the "people".

The first obstacle were the Soviets: Nicolae Ceaușescu met Anastas Mikoyan, the chief of the Supreme Soviet, during Dej's funerals on March 25, 1965, and defended the party's positions in front of the senior members of the Politburo. His answer to a remark of the Soviet ambassador was that "everyone does as he thinks it is best because, eventually, the judge is the working class, the people" (Berindei, Dobrinu & Goșu 2012: 33-39). At the beginning, Ceaușescu still invoked to protect his party's positions, both hypostasis of the legitimizing category, the proletariat and the people.

Five years later, the working class would often be forgotten, replaced by the leader's name.

The instrument of the widening of his legitimacy went through the party, and especially the 9th Congress in July 1965. The very long speech he held on 19th July in front of thousands of persons was enthusiastic and the references to the people expressed in almost biological terms: "The people have been convinced by his own experience that the policy of our party expresses its vital interests and aspirations".¹

A further step towards the identification between the party and the people was the acclamation of his initiative to rename the Romanian Workers' party in the Romanian Communist party and to impose its massification through the elimination of the stage of candidacy.² This allowed the integration of lots of new militants who owed him their position, notably based on the return of the nationalist ideology related to the populist method of linking to the leader. This leader embodied this nationalism and dismissed the old guard responsible for purging and screening the members for social and ideological reasons. Ceaușescu justified this decision through the disappearance of the exploiting classes and the rise in competence of the militants. The price of this massification was the demand of perfection and constant mobilization of the militants: the society had become perfect thanks to the party, which was rewarding it back by magnifying the identity of its people. At the beginning, Ceaușescu avoided the cult of personality inside the party, because it would have led to Dej and his barons; but not for a long time, as the best was yet to come: his own personality of the most beloved son of the people.

One of the relays between the party and society were the mass organizations which framed it to its most intimate activities and represented the instruments that the advocates of totalitarian theories rightly put forward. But these organizations, more than tools of constraint, were also the place of mobilization, therefore of enthusiasm and construction of a new ethos for a new man. Ceaușescu evoked the trade unions and their four million members, whose primary concern was not the defense of the workers, but "to mobilize the workers more widely to achieve the objectives of the state plan".³ The Union of the Communist Youth (UTC) counted 2.2 million members and, under the close supervision of the party, should have continued with "the affirmation of its impetus and enthusiasm". Women's organizations were called for the advancement of women, but under the pretended egalitarianism one felt the relegation to the domestic activities and, in reality, the combination of these traditional activities with professional work and ideological activism, a triple task very burdensome for the women in the communist regime – and the worst was yet to come in 1966 with the forced natalist policy on behalf of the nation.

1 *Report by Ceaușescu to the 9th Congress of the PCR on activities between the 8th and 9th Congress of July 1965*, accessed on January 15, 2013 <http://www.cnsas.ro/ist_comunism.html#1>.

2 *Ibid.* See also the new Status of the Communist Party of Romania, presented on 21 July 1965 by Gheorghe Apostol, accessed on January 15, 2013 <http://www.cnsas.ro/ist_comunism.html#1>.

3 *Ibid.*: 82.

We must finish this study of his first great speech as the new master of his country with the excerpt about the teaching, both traditional and revolutionary:

The teaching of our country's history plays an important role in the formation of generations and the education of the new man, in raising the cultural level and conscience of the whole people in the spirit of the high ideas of Socialist humanism.⁴

Ceaușescu inscribed the patriotic historical dimension of accumulation of national knowledge and prestige in a socialist tradition, thus anticipating the theory of the Romanian people with old social preoccupations, elected to a certain extent to become socialist as its manifest's destiny and realizing itself in the Communist party, mainly in his leader. Later during this speech, he demanded that "the most important stages and events of national history and of the Romanian people must be deepened from the positions of historical materialism".⁵

But these were also explicit words of individual, social and national regeneration, which relates it to the revolutionary ideologies of the left and of the right. It is due to a totalitarian interpretation of the making of the "new man" and of the "whole people". He thus uses a language comprehensible for a generation having studied in the 1930s and 1940s, when the students were often influenced by the fascist ideology of the Legionary Movement (or the Iron Guard). And Ceaușescu would soon use a certain number of legionary philosophers released from prison to contribute heavily to this national-communist synthesis. Nichifor Crainic or Constantin Noica thus participated to the great reconciliation around the modernizing and nationalist project whose fascism had been one of the hypostases two decades earlier (Iordachi 2004). The imagery of the *Conducător* [Guide] resumed that of the fascist leaders – founders of a new world, builders *ex nihilo* of the Romanian agriculture and industry, but at the same time incarnation of mythical historical heroes resurrected by the national gesture. In 1962, Nichifor Crainic became the director of the propaganda magazine *Glasul Patriei* [The Voice of the Fatherland], Ion Dumitrescu-Borșa renounced his legionary convictions and wrote propaganda articles, and especially Constantin Noica, freed from prison in 1964 to receive a position at the Logic Center, then opened a seminary in Păltiniș, near Sibiu, through which, between 1975 and 1987, many of the post-1989 elites passed (Laignel-Lavastine 1998).

However, when it came to art, the creators were invited to choose their style, the socialist realism was not compelling, but a general theme was suggested in a lyrical tone during the 9th Congress: "Sing the country and our wonderful people, those who have devoted their whole lives to the flourishing of Romania! (Prolonged Applause)."⁶

It is thus clear that soon Ceaușescu would not need the barons of Dej anymore, as he was at the head of a party predestined to rule Romania by a scientific necessity.

4 *Ibid.*: 61-62.

5 *Ibid.*: 91.

6 *Ibid.*: 95.

As a matter of fact, his speech of 6 May 1966 for the 45th anniversary of the creation of the party was entitled:

The Romanian Communist Party – the continuation of the revolutionary and democratic struggle of the Romanian people, of the traditions of the workers' and socialist movement of Romania. [...] for the independence of the country, for the formation of the Romanian nation and the national unitary state, for the acceleration of social progress and the advance of Romania on the road to civilization (Ceaușescu 1968: 336).

And here comes naturally the historical populism, the *poporanism*:

The history of the struggle of the working classes, of the socialist movement and of the Communist Party must be presented [...] in close *connection with the activities of other revolutionary, democratic and progressive forces* [author's underlining] which have contributed to the development of the society (Ceaușescu 1968: 335-415).

In this way, all the progressive movements were enrolled in the heroic and social Romanian history in order to put them at the level of the Romanian people (Ornea 1970, 1971).

The Romanian people were generously rewarded with “assiduity, inventive spirit and creative capacity” and it is not clear if the other cohabiting nationalities had also inherited these, especially since in some contexts they belonged to the “exploitative” categories, such as the Magyar nobility of Transylvania. Moreover, “foreign imperialist trusts” were made responsible for the exploitation of the national wealth in contemporary times, with the complicity of the ruling classes (Ceaușescu 1968: 340).

The Third International was also responsible for the diversion of the legitimate ethno-national concerns of the PCR: “[t] here must be added the negative consequences of the Comintern's practice of appointing senior leadership of the party, including the general secretary, among strangers to the country, who did not know the life and concerns of the Romanian people” (Ceaușescu 1968: 357). The anti-Slav, anti-Magyar and anti-Semitic vein of the re-nationalization of the party was clearly visible here.

He also criticized the Comintern's policy regarding the Romanian annexations of 1918–1920 “on the basis of the principle of the right of nations to self-determination until their total separation from the existing state”(Ceaușescu 1968: 360). It is noteworthy that among these provinces one could find Bessarabia, which Ceaușescu was therefore tacitly using as a means of nationalist mobilization.

And if it were not enough, he also added the historical distortion of the supposedly huge role of the Romanian people and the Romanian Communist Party in the alliance reversal of August 23, 1944, which he presented as a national revolution when it was a mere *coup d'état* with the Red Army *ante portas*, so he symbolically threw Romania into the camp of the victors and legitimized the taking of power by the PCR.

The lessons of these speeches are the transition from the imitation of the Soviet Union (until the beginning of the 1960s) to the endorsement of the Declaration of Independence by Ceaușescu. The consequences were international diversification and, above all, nationalist populism from within, thanks to the massive opening of the party to militancy of various horizons and the support given by the discourse to both traditional-historical themes and a revolutionary prospective. The new Secretary-General passed the examination before the militants whom he intended to make his

allies against the old team by constructing a new legitimization and a new mode of leadership. But his power was also based on the ideology and the repressive system. The new leader was at the beginning of the construction of his charismatic aura based on nationalism.

From 1966 to 1970, we find two of the most important manifestations of the direct popular link between Ceaușescu and the people: De Gaulle's visit of May 1968, which allowed Ceaușescu to get rid of old Dej's barons – excepting the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ion Gheorghe Maurer – and the peak of his popularity, backed by the party for once but with full visibility for him, the public criticism of the Warsaw's Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Ceaușescu's capacity to take the decision not to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in spite of the risk of a Soviet invasion of Romania, permitted him to take a definitive advantage over the party in those dramatic hours, opening the direct link with the people during the famous speech at the balcony of the Central Committee. The decision to resist has been taken at 4.00 AM by a the Permanent Praesidium of the Executive Committee (in fact Ceaușescu, Bodnăraș, Maurer and Apostol). When the Executive Committee (former Politburo) met at 6.30 AM, the members of the Executive Committee contented themselves with repeating in a manner both sincere and incantatory what Ceaușescu had said at the opening (Ceaușescu 1968: 422-434). The editors of the volume of documents rightly consider that this outbid of aggressive criticism of the Soviet Union was both a fear that the same thing would happen to Romania and a group therapy (Berindei, Dobrinu & Goșu 2012). Tetanized by the risk they had run, they clung to the highest official, the General-Secretary who, it must be admitted, held a speech to the level of his responsibilities.

The meeting brought together the Central Committee, the Government and the Council of State. It lasted until 1.10 PM when Ceaușescu and all the participants crowded onto the balcony to talk to a crowd of Bucharest people attracted by the mobilization of professional organizations and through word-of-mouth. The commentator of the television report estimated the public to more than 100,000 people.⁷ In a guttural voice marked by fatigue and emotion, he addressed the “comrades”, but also the “citizens of the Romanian country”. The general themes were known, but denunciation and decisions pronounced in phrases and on tones to raise enthusiasm, recalling reconciling the anti-Soviet nationalists of 1941 and the party's leadership, which however included many of their tormentors after 1947.

The penetration of the troops of the five socialist countries into Czechoslovakia constitutes a great mistake and a danger for peace in Europe, for the fate of socialism in the world. [...] We have decided that, beginning today, we shall pass to the constitution of the armed patriotic guards, composed of workers, peasants and intellectuals, for the defense of the independence of our socialist homeland. (Enthusiastic applause, cheers). [...] We reply to all: the Romanian people will not allow anyone to tread the territory of our homeland. (Stormy applause, prolonged cheers)” (Ceaușescu 1968: 415-418).

Stalinism and nationalism had already mixed up into warm popular enthusiasm on 3rd July 1941, during Stalin's broadcast appeal to resistance against the German invasion.

7 Accessed on June 27, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpL8U-A_-IE>.

The same happened here and Ceaușescu was more than a political and military leader, mixing both into the armed patriotic guards.

The year following this outburst he tried to calm down the stress with the Soviets, went on improving relations with the West, while collecting the laurels of his popularity on the inner stage during the week of the 10th Congress of the party, opening on August 6, 1969. But all this was only the Promethean discrepancy between a small delayed power and the outrageous ambitions of a peasant *upstart* or a Rastignac of periphery, whose only muse was Elena. It would not have been too serious, since reality often brings back on earth the over-dimensioned ambitions. But Ceaușescu was moved, as a son of the totalitarian revolutions of the 20th century, by the project to realize happiness on earth. He began to martyr the people in the name of the happiness *hic et nunc*.

2. People's Symbolic Triumph: Ceaușescu's Golden Era after the Repressive Turn

For this period of routinization of Ceaușescu's charisma, I will also choose some significant steps in several fields until his election as President of the Republic in 1974 – a function created especially for him and framed in an *Ancien Régime* ceremony with scepter. During this period, Ceaușescu combines different policies, most of them restrictive and traditionalists, with the promotion of his personality and that of his wife, while following the trends of the former period which had assured his success and popularity.

2.1. The Dark Side of Ceaușescu's Populism: Repressive Policies

Two of the best-known policies of the period – the natalist and the refusal of emigration – are related to each other and contribute to the active definition of the people by its intrusive engineering of social life. Once sure of his right to represent the people, Ceaușescu esteemed he could also change and that these policies, although repressive, could encounter the approval of the conservative part of the society.

The leader had always defended a militant natalism combined, on the one hand, with the anti-hedonistic and reactionary morality of a simple man and, on the other hand, with modern and scientific ideologies, such as hygienism and eugenics. But if Romanian eugenics were supposed to belong to the Latin area of Lamarckism, which claimed to improve the race by a hygienic environment, the racism of Anglo-American and Germanic eugenics had sufficiently infiltrated Romanian medical and philosophical thought for a radical practice, which founded the natalist thought of the Danubian *Conducător* (Gillette & Turda 2014: 225-235 and 242-245). The natalist policy was based on the restriction of abortion and divorce rights (Kligman 1998). This regression regarding the liberation of morals must be related to nationalism and the politics of grandeur, whose demographic dynamism is one of the conditions. During the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of August 2, 1966, Ceaușescu concludes at length the debate on increases in abortions and divorces in the most stigmatizing way, assimilating them to mere “legalized prostitution” (Berindei,

Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 165). In fact, abortion, although facilitated, had become a common contraceptive practice for some Romanian women in the absence of other means. But Ceaușescu took up hygienist and nationalist positions on the duty of the political authorities to control this development, which was nevertheless a private matter: “are we an institution to encourage prostitution or do we have a responsibility to maintain the health of the people, the natural growth of the people, defend the morality of the people?” (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 170).

After a period of a few months of liberalism begun in October 1968, the gates closed for tourism and emigration to the West in the early months of 1969 in order to avoid the brain drain (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 521-529). During the discussion in the CC secretariat, Ceaușescu analyzed these defections as the work of propaganda networks that indoctrinated Romanian tourists: “we must discover the network [...] first to get hold of them” (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 530); the antidote he envisaged was that “the press, radio and television intensify the propaganda activity for the education of the citizens in the spirit of patriotism and love with regard to the SR of Romania” (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 539). He swept Dumitru Popescu’s, a former editor-in-chief at the party’s daily *Scînteia* and soon after in charge of propaganda and censorship.

Thus, the citizens had to be educated, transformed into patriots in order to be worth being true Romanians, otherwise they did not really belong to the people. His policy consisting in “selling” the native Germans and Jews to the Federal Republic of Germany and to Israel while trying to bring back the Romanian born emigres demonstrates that there was an ethnic side to this migratory policy.

As a matter of fact, in 1974, Ceaușescu found that demands have risen in 1973: “25,000 who asked to leave, about 6,000 more than in 1972. 25,000 have requested and 14,000 left. 6,000 Germans and 4600 Jews.”⁸ More than 2,300 ethnic Romanians left, mainly by marriage. As for the Germans and the Jews whom he “sold” to the respective Western countries (Ioanid 2005: 162-163), he insisted on the case of the Jews: “let them go. They complain everywhere”. He was more circumspect towards the Germans: “We must also see the political and educational activity among the ranks of the Germans.” Thus, a distinction was made between the Jews, of which he openly suggested the embarrassing lobbying activity, particularly with the powers and institutions that Ceaușescu needed for his Western policy and loans, and the Germans, who were reputed good professionals and he wanted to keep a part of them. But all of them had to lose their jobs in the civil service – that is, most jobs in a socialist system – if they had applied for a definitive departure.

8 “Protocol No. 4 and transcript of the meeting of the Permanent Bureau of the Executive Committee of the PCR Central Committee of 22 April 1974”, Central National Historical Archive (ANHA), f. Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party – Chancellery, 1974, map. 46, f. 1-19 verso, here f. 10 verso - 13 recto.

2.2. Populism and Cultural Reaction: The Retrograde Cultural Turn of February 1970

On February 9, 1970, Ceaușescu showed two different aspects of his conception of the people's representation by artists, in two different places. The General-Secretary meeting in the morning had also to deal with the scandal of the movie *The Reconstitution* by Lucian Pintilie, and Ceaușescu apparently adopted a moderate position; in reality, it was a fundamental opposition, not to the social and even political criticism, but to the criticism of what he perceived as the Romanian people, in fact the whole of humanity:

Concerning this film, *The Reconstitution*, I think we exaggerate a little. He criticizes the militia. So what? In the capitalist countries, the policemen are criticized every day. What is negative, in my opinion, is the fact that it presents our youth as a primitive youth, which is not real, as well as the way he presents the public, this shapeless crowd (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 558-571).

Ceaușescu hesitated like any leader with a charismatic pretension, between systematic indoctrination with the help of repressive means, on the one hand, and ideological enthusiasm at the cost of a relative freedom, on the other hand. In this second option – which he seemed to choose here – the people were not the unformed masses led by an abusive dictator and bestial sentiments against arbitrarily chosen scapegoats, but a people mobilized for the noble cause of the anthropological and social revolution, eliminating all those accused to prevent the process.

But in the afternoon, Ceaușescu set the tone of an authoritarian evolution in the more restricted Executive Committee. The theme was also cultural, but fundamentally focused on the doctrine of “improving the atheist-scientific education of the masses” (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 571-578). Ceaușescu concluded and his arbitration set the authoritarian and ultra-conservative turn of the national-communist mobilization. As he did no longer benefit from the dread of the imminent Soviet threat, his charisma entered this stage of routinization evoked by Max Weber, which obliged him to compel society to mobilize for the chief whatever he did during moments of danger. He thus shortened the doctrinal front and refused to openly wage war against religion: “let us remove this formula of atheist-scientific education” (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: pp. 580). All the levers to mobilize society in favor of the regime, even the traditionalists ones, were good, especially when it was necessary to reduce the liberal and consumerist levers. He knew that the energy crisis and the shortages due to the excessive industrialist projects were soon to overcome the brief improvement in consumption. A brutal social discipline would soon take precedence over the voluntary adherence to the choices of the regime:

Let us introduce decency, respect for our institutions. The attitude of hooliganism, contempt for property is more dangerous than leading a child to be baptized. [...] I prefer the party member who goes to church but who is disciplined at work, tidy and who fulfills his obligations to one who does not go to church but introduces disorder, indiscipline, chaos in the society. That is the way to look at things. [...] So let's not take this problem unilaterally, consider it in a complex way and prepare material for the Central Committee

in a few months so that in May we can debate this problem seriously to introduce order and discipline into our work (Berindei, Dobrinicu & Goșu 2012: 551-582).

Obviously, one must read metonymically this requirement: it is not within the party that “order and discipline” would be introduced, servile obedience had never left him! Ceaușescu was preparing for a takeover of the entire society – “the whole people” as he liked to say – after the tactical relaxation of 1965. The journey in Asia came later, in June 1971, when the traditionalist and authoritarian turn had already been imposed for almost one year and a half.

Another milestone on this cultural evolution came one year later: it was the “speech at the meeting with artists and people of culture” on February 10, 1971 (Ceaușescu, 1971: 415-418 and 456-474). As usual in public, Ceaușescu did not present himself univocally as a narrow ideologist or a repressive Stalinist. He recognized the value of creative freedom and juvenile innovation in art and literature, as well as the importance of openness to international exchanges.

Nevertheless, when he tackled the source of inspiration and the matter of the works, he could not help but return to the socialist realism revised by nationalist enthusiasm:

We believe that the duty of writers and artists is to contribute actively to the realization of the new man, to the formation of socialist consciousness, to the development “of socialist humanism” to those moral virtues which we wish to cultivate in every citizen and *which the Romanian people holds in its very psychic structure* [author’s underlining] (Ceaușescu 1968: 463).

Ceaușescu took up the regressive revolutionary nationalism of Legionaries, consisting in projecting, at the end of a process of radical transformation, the reunion with a timeless national structure: in short, to return to a mythical golden age that after the elimination of parasites, bourgeois exploiters and Religious mystics in National-Communists’ case.

When in power, the communist leader was in the risk of the broken spring in view of a palingenetic utopia: how to mobilize the society in order to create a new man, when communism has been installed for twenty-five years and had enough time to do it? The answer is known, it is the instillation of nationalism in communism. It was made not only by the international struggle against Moscow but also against Soviet Stalinism within, denominated, as Katherine Verdery has shown, dogmatism. Defining, in literature and art, the “communist spirit [Ceaușescu recalls that it] does not mean [...] rigidity, nor dogmatism, but creative spirit, opening the way to the imagination, praises to everything That we dedicate to the people, to their happiness. (Powerful applause)” (Ceaușescu 1971: 469).

2.3. “Ceaușescu and the People!” The Explicit Expression of the Populist Link

The floods in May and June 1970 affected virtually the entire country and officially killed 170 people. On 18 May he visited four Moldavian departments and held a speech in Iași, where he thanked the people for their courage and unity in the face of adversity. But this discourse is important in two other respects. The natural catastrophe

functions as a nationalist catalyst and Ceaușescu evokes, one of the first times it seems to us, his popularity, beyond the party itself:

Dear comrades, everywhere – both in the departments I visited today, and in other areas in which I was a few years ago – many of you whom I met have claimed my name. [...] I want to assure you that for me there is nothing above the interests of the party, of the people, but the struggle for the triumph of socialism and communism in our homeland, in the whole world! I will do all that is possible for that! (Strong applause: ‘Ceaușescu and the people’).

So, “Ceaușescu and the people” had replaced the usual “Ceaușescu-RCP”; It is difficult to determine precisely the dynamics or the agents of this populist mutation of the slogan, its more or less spontaneous character, but it is clear that the natural catastrophe had welded the nation. Subsequently, in his birth town Scornicești, he chose an imaginary enemy to strengthen the national unity around his person:

But it seems that there are still men who have not understood what the Romanian people is capable of – a people who, with the transition to socialism, have become fully master of its destiny and is determined to overcome any difficulty, to ensure the flourishing of socialist, free and independent Romania (Strong applause, cheers, one claims ‘RCP-RCP’) (Ceaușescu 1971: 575-579).

Here we have another testimony of an evolution towards a voluntarism of war: a war against underdevelopment and a war against the libertarian degeneration of youth, in addition to the war against the Soviet guardian. Prometheus unbound opened all fronts at the same time.

Beyond the people and their mere features, he was building nation by war. A few months later, in front of the Communist Youth, he explicitly reminded the duty of the supreme sacrifice of the “whole people”:

Our youth must at every moment be ready to safeguard the revolutionary conquests of the Romanian people against any attack, to defend – even at the cost of life – the integrity, independence and national sovereignty of the Socialist Republic of Romania. (Powerful applause)” (Ceaușescu 1971: 552).

And Romania was progressively assimilated to Ceaușescu. On March 26, 1974, during the meeting of the Central Committee Ion Gheorghe Maurer was removed from his position as prime minister, and was replaced by obedient Manea Mănescu; most of all the other baron Emil Bodnăraș announced that “The Executive Committee proposes the establishment of the office of President of the Socialist Republic of Romania [...] we propose to adopt the decision – that his candidate be the Secretary – General of the Romanian Communist Party.”⁹

Ceaușescu became President of the Republic, a representative function in a strong sense, which was supposed to arouse enthusiasm inside and inspire respect outside. Yet nationalist and even traditionalist decorum was not forgotten during the meeting of 28 March when Ștefan Voitec, the President of the Grand National Assembly, solemnly handed over the scarf with the national emblem and, above all, the famous scepter which attracted the telegram of congratulations from Salvador Dalí, which *Scântea* resumed on April 4, affecting to ignore the irony of it.

9 “Transcript of the plenary session of the PCR Central Committee of 25-26 March 1974”, ANHA, f. Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party – Chancellery 1974, dos. 29, f. 1-159, f. 23.

Ceaușescu concentrated the powers of a chief executive, with multiple attributions. The reason advanced was that of a better articulation between the powers of the party and the State, as well as greater efficiency, particularly international one. The other institutions were adapted to the situation during the same session of the CC. The Permanent Bureau was created, which enabled the coordination of party and state activities with members of the two entities. Ceaușescu placed in his hands a new institutional tool adapted to his new presidential dignity and articulating the two sources of legitimacy, partisan – with socialist ideology – and statist – with nationalist ideology.

The last question, the most important one in fact, is that of *the reception of this populist discourse*. In the Central National Historical Archives, I have found for example lots of denunciation letters which resumed the enthusiastic terms of the official media, no doubt for a utilitarian purpose of efficiency, but also as an incantation which had finally penetrated the simplest minds, anesthetizing the common moral sense, but mobilizing consciences:

As party members and workers of Vulcane Pandeale, county Dîmbovița, who with satisfaction read the press and the materials of the party in which we see that our ruling party, the organizer of all actions for the improvement of material conditions and cultural life for the transformation of the old man into a new man useful to the new society in the multilateral development of socialism in our homeland the Socialist Republic of Romania.¹⁰

This wobbly and heavy phrase, which opened a denunciation, was not a mere style figure to create connivance with the chief, but also testified that a support for the grand design had penetrated down to the bottom of the social ladder. The call to the supreme chief, who is supposed to love the common people and not being responsible of the defects of his subordinates, is an old impression of unsatisfied societies. It can be found in many other complaints, from authors of very different cultural origins. And it is at the core of the contradiction of a populist leader in power, who both uses and rejects the intermediary levels and levers.

Mioara Anton confirms in her book the effect of Ceaușescu's lasting popularity for some parts of the Romanian society, until the last days of his regime (Anton 2016). As the author leans mostly on anonymous letters, the true sentiments of the population are sincerely reflected. Her conclusions are unambiguous:

The common man of the 1970s-1980s felt safe under the protection of the state/leader/party. Some of them have assumed the laudatory themes generously proclaimed by the propaganda apparatus and have eagerly joined the support of the party's activities and that of the secretary-general. They have identified themselves with the Secretary-General's actions, have supported them and have unconditionally dreamed of the accomplishment of the golden dream, that of marching to the Communism (Anton 2016: 356-357).

10 Letter from Elisabeta Tîrlea to Ceaușescu, undated, transmitted by letter No. 27790 of 8 June 1972 from the Executive Committee of the People's Council of the Department of Dîmbovița to the Letters and Hearings Section of the PCR Central Committee, ANHA, f. Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party – Chancellery 1973, rev. 171, f. 42-43.

Conclusion

The Romanian populist leader had two faces not two bodies, like Kantorowicz's King, because populist leader's legitimization lies in the people, not in God, and his promises are those of Paradise on Earth. As the very nature of a system is best observed during a crisis, let us close this talk with Ceaușescu's successive faces during the miners' strike in Jiu's Valley in August 1977. For the first time and for social reasons, the slogan "Down with Ceaușescu" could be heard from popular categories, with no connection with the small political opposition in some big towns. At that moment, Ceaușescu still could show his two faces, the popular leader offering social concessions and the secret leader of the harsh repression at the head of the *Securitate*. Twelve years later, the inhuman efforts asked to the society had narrowed both the people's and the apparatus support, and in 1989, Ceaușescu could not play on both stages the one against the other. He was eventually trapped by his own populist ambition to embody the timeless people in order to mobilize the present brutalized society and aim at a future glorious nation. The simple-minded Prometheus could not place Romania on the new post-industrial globalization of the 1980s and the whole system collapsed.

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