

Parallel Destinies : Romania and Poland towards the 20th century totalitarianisms

For Romania, as well as for Poland, the 20th century or ‘the short century’, as it has been named by historians, starts in 1918, once the World War I comes to an end. Then, Romania and Poland stepped into a new era that has as goal the accomplishment of the national ideal: the Polish state – after the three desintegration in the 18th century and a persistent diplomatic and military battle – regained its unitary and independent form (11th of November, 1918). The Romanian state accomplished its national unity (1st of December, 1918), as a consequence of the liberation and reunification of the historical provinces found under the occupation of the neighbouring empires. Thus, Poland and Romania become neighbours. Common destinies placed those two countries, as a barrier against the Soviet world, of the Bolshevik Communism, and the European world, the world of the most advanced civilization.

From its very re-birth, the Polish state faced difficult problems, having territorial disputes with all neighbours, excluding Romania. After a heroic battle fought against the Bolshevik forces, the Polish obtained one of the most brilliant victories in the history (‘the miracle on the Vistula River’), thus playing a decisive role in blocking the road of Communism in Europe and, practically saving, the European countries from ‘the red danger’¹.

On the World War II eve, Romania and Poland lived dramatic moments, being threatened by the big totalitarian powers from the Eastern and Western Europe: USSR and Germany. The Molotov – Ribbentrop treaty – ”the most sinister diplomatic alliance of the 20th century“, on 23rd of August, 1939, created an extremely difficult situation for the two countries. By signing the non-aggression pact, accompanied by the unfortunate secret protocol, Molotov and Ribbentrop were in fact signing the division of the Eastern – Central Europe under German and Soviet influence spheres.

Under the comunism, Romanian and Poland’s destinys had many points in common. Through a strange history game, both Romania and Poland were invaded at the beginning of the war - in September 1939 and June 1940 – by USSR

In both cases, the Red Army partially occupied them at the beginning and then totally. Romania and Poland will be ‘released’ in 1944, again by the Red

¹ See Leszek Kolakowski, *Printre patetice ruine*, în vol. *Revoluțiile din 1989. Între trecut și viitor* (Coord. Vladimir Tismăneanu), Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999, p. 69.

Army, so that later, the two nations to be forced to raise praise anthems to the 'liberating soviet people'².

The communism set up in Romania and Poland, as in other countries in the central and South East Europe, had serious consequences for the peoples involved. Both countries were integrated, economically, in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (C.M.E.A), created in 1949 based on the soviet model and theories, and military in the Warsaw Pact, formed as an organization through which the command of all the socialist states armies was given to USSR, being actually a counter part of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO), formed in 1949 under USA command.

During the process of the Soviet invasion and dominance that affected Eastern and Central Europe, Poland undergone a worse treatment, due to its geographical position, but also because of its size it was one of the main factors that ensured Moscow total dominance, strategic and political, of that zone. After 1948, terror intensified, in Romania and also in Poland. The elite was suffered physical extermination or were totally isolated from social life. All ex-political leaders who did not manage to go in exile were arrested and imprisoned, many of them lost their lives in prisons. The same thing happened to the churches, many priests being imprisoned

After 1948, the terror against the enemies of the communist regime increased, both in Romania and Poland. The elites were physically exterminated or totally excluded from the social life.

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Starting with 1954, Polish people started to show their reluctance towards the Stalinist methods. The gradual unveiling of the aftermath of the 'personality cult' created the favourable basis for the developing of the reformist currents in Poland. In 1956 Władysław Gomułka rejoins the political scene. The more freedom that Poland got after 1956 created the opportunity of an authentic process of reconstruction of the Polish civil society.

In Romania, unlike Poland, the unfreezing process generated by Nikita Hroustchev was much slower, the leader of the Romanian Working Party, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, understating that that change had already took place. Removing the Stalinist influence meant, in fact the elimination of the tough factions or of some rival personalities from inside the party. Very significant is the fact that, when Gomulka was freed and acquitted from all charges (1954), in Bucharest, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu was murdered, being one of Gheorghiu Dej rivals for the party leadership. The false removal of Stalinist methods and the

² See Mihai Dorin, *România de la comunism la mineriade (Romania from communism to Mineriads)*, The Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing, 2006, page 26.

more emphasized nationalism that characterized Dej eliminated once more the chance of the affirmation of civil society. In these conditions, no theoretical political project could be designed even in subsidiary.

In Romania, unlike Poland, the thaw initiated by Nikita Hruščiov was much slower, the Romanian Worker's Party leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, leaving to understand that this change already happened. The de-Stalinisation meant, actually, the elimination of the difficult factions, like the group Ana Pauker, Teohari Georgescu, Vasile Luca (1952) or the elimination of some rival personalities inside the party.

Significant is that, in the year when Gomulka was released and all the deviationism charges against him were cancelled (1954), Lucretiu Patrascanu, the only important communist intellectual and one of the possible rivals for Gheorghiu-Dej at the party leadership was murdered in Bucharest.

In March, 1965, the Stalinist heritage that belonged to Dej was totally assumed by Nicolae Ceaușescu. For a short period (1965-1971), he will mime the somewhat independence towards Moscow and a liberalization of the political, social and cultural climate. However, gradually, a new dictatorship regime will be installed that will promote, very close to paroxysm, the cult of the personality of the leader.

The appearance of the 'Solidarity' syndicate in Poland, in 1980, managed to arise vivid emotions in the entire world, Romania included. Here, large categories of the population were following the Polish events using foreign media, even if the Communist regime exerted a total control over the Romanian media channels. From the very start of the 'Solidarity', a Romanian, Iulius Filip, military specialist from Cluj-Napoca, found the courage to send a letter of solidarity to the Polish Free Syndicate. This was quoted at the first Congress of 'Solidarity', from Gdansk, from 27th September, 1981. The Polish evolutions were also carefully followed and interpreted in the publications of the Romanian exile.

In a country where the civil society reaction was modest, for the Stalinist regime in Bucharest, was relatively easy to mobilize the society around its leader and nationalist mythology, as in times of history tribulation. Gheorghiu-Dej used this occasion, in 1957, to remove the last Mohicans suspect of prohrušciovism – Iosef Chișinevschi and Miron Constantinescu – to start a massive party purge against the potential reformists and with a legendary ability to obtain, in June 1958, the retreat of the soviet troupes from Romania.

After this triumph, Gheorghiu-Dej would nourish up to the end of his career, his gesture having the same weight as Ceausescu's in 1968.

Without soviet troupes, Romania could hope to legitimate the right to build its own communist regime. After the liquidation of every form of contamination with the Hungarian revolution's ideas, action finalized trough a new wave of excessive and useless imprisoning, Gheorghiu – Dej discovered the national ideas strengths.

These ideas were used exclusively to benefit the flourish of the communist domination. The false de-Stalinization and Dej's emphasized nationalism, eliminated once again the chance for affirmation of the civil society.

The Romanian society was so overwhelmed of this false nationalist offer, that it couldn't knit together not even one theoretical project or a drawer alternative.

In March 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu took over all Dej's Stalinism legacy. For a short period (1965-1971), he will mime some independence towards Moscow and a political, social and cultural freedom.

Gradually though, he will install a dictatorship regime through which will promote the leader's cult of personality, an emphasized tradition and specially, the national values. Ceausescu's new cultural policy had as a basis the idea of Nation, State, and Party. In this new context, literary and artistic works, history values and so on, will start being emphasized and oversized, together with an isolation process into the external policy. Under the command of the party ideologists, and due to over-zealous Romanian intellectuals for a better international representation, the Romanian past is transformed into a myth.

In the first decade of communism, the almost total absence of criticism, made the society to choose the old way of burning stages, i.e., short term and common ideas and actions agglutination, which meant generating improvised and cascade solutions. This reflex extended in the next years, up to 1989.

Out of regards for the social conditions in Romania, is important to take under consideration that, since the beginning of the 'Solidarity', a Romanian, Iulius Filip a military chief from Cluj Napoca, found the courage to send a support letter to the Polish Free Union. The letter was read in the first Solidarity Congress plenum, in Gdansk, on September 27th 1981.

Considered as a response to the Polish call to the other socialist countries workers, through which Solidarity pledged to support the establishment of similar organizations, the event created by Iulius Filip's letter was commented in complimentary terms by 'Europa Liberă' radio station and by the prestigious Parisian newspaper 'Le Monde'.

Although he became famous for his courage through the western press, in Romania, Iulius Filip was crossing the worse period of his life. Soughed by the Security, since February 1981, for 'extremely serious demonstrations against the socialist order', he paid dearly for his courage, being

convicted by the Military Court in February 1982, to 8 years detention, from which he will execute 5 years and 4 months³.

If the establishment of the 'Solidarity' union, in Poland, in August 1980, was received with reluctance and even hostility by the communist government in Romania, emerged into a strong process of degradation, the Romanian people in the country as those from exile, saw into the establishment of the first Free Union as an event likely to resuscitate the hopes of regaining the freedom for the peoples in South East Europe, that were under the soviet domination.

The Romanian exile publications closely watched and decoded Poland developments and amply presented all the dramatic moments that passed through the Polish people, with the establishment of the martial law in 1981; This moments are listed also in King Mihai's message to the exile, in 1982 New Year's Eve.

Because of a strong system crisis in Poland, in the early 80's, the relationship between Bucharest and Warsaw register a significant cooling. In the same time with Solidarity establishment, Ceausescu blames the 'negative phenomenon' from all socialist countries and denounces the 'lack of ideology' from the international relations.

So, Ceausescu reach's in 1980-1981, to repeatedly ask Moscow to organise a conference of the communist parties in order to adopt a single position regarding the events from Poland and the possible socialist intervention in this country if Warsaw would not be able to keep the situation under control.

Between 1980-1985, after 25 years of opposition to the soviet initiatives Romania joins the 'Breznev doctrine', showing a much more radical attitude in its proposal to restore the order than the Soviet Union.^{4 3}

The Poland developments, the difficulties of the communist regime and 'Solidarity's activity, were an important concern for Bucharest government and they were considered to be 'a big threat to the socialism values'. 'For the pro-Stalinist Romanian government- shows Vladimir Tismaneanu- Solidarity represented a deadly danger. On this matter there weren't differences between Ceausescu and the opinionated people in Prague(Gustáv Husák, Vasil Bilak,

³ See more Alina Ilinca, *Un român se alătură "Solidarității": "Cazul Iulius Filip"* (Romanian joins 'Solidarity': 'Iulius Filip's case'), in 'Dosarele Istoriei'. An XI, NO 3(115), 2006, p 57-60. At Warsaw and Gdansk manifestations, in August 2005, occasioned for the 25 anniversary of the Free Union, Iulius Filip was given a tribute alongside other "Solidarity" heroes, for his gesture in 1981, and on 13 December the same year, the Polish ambassador in Bucharest, Mr. Jacek Paliszewski handed him the "Cross of Virtue Order Knight of the of Poland Republic".

⁴ Cosmin Popa, *Fazele comunismului românesc* (The fazes of the Romanian Communism), in 'Dosarele Istoriei', Year VIII, No 8(84), page 19.

Milos Jakes) or in Eastern Berlin (Erich Honecker, Erich Mielke). The Romanian tragedy consisted in being the less affected country in the soviet bloc by the polish example; this happened because the official anti-soviet attitude, combined with specific techniques of intimidation and psychological conditioning, absorbed the radical Anticomunist consciousness.

The official relationships between Romania and Poland are considerable cooling after 1985, where the new soviet leader is starting his transparency and reconstruction policy.

While in Poland the new policy initiated by Gorbaciov accentuated the reforms, in Bucharest because of the Ceausescu's rigid and conservator regime, these changes were looked at with hostility.

The human rights from Romania are in a more obvious contrast to the evolutions from Poland, becoming subject for international protests, fact that shed a negative light over the regime from Bucharest. Extreme enemy of the revision of the existing structures, Nicolae Ceaușescu was more and more preoccupied with the situation from Poland, felt as a potential danger from the 'values of Socialism'. In the evening of 19th -20th of August, 1989, after the victory in Poland of the opposition and the nomination as Prime Minister of Tadeusz Mazowiecki – the first non-Communist PM in a country which is member of the Warsaw Treaty – , Nicolae Ceaușescu was addressing a letter to all leaders of the Socialist countries , where he expressed his concern for the fate of Socialism in Poland, for this country's obligations as an ally and the possible implications of the events in Poland for the common interests of the Socialist states.

With Gorbaciov's new international policy Ceausescu's positions and statements- once considered independent of Moscow - lost their originality and influence.

The events from Brasov, in November 1987, evoked a vivid feeling among public opinion in Poland and throughout the world. In several European capitals were held protest demonstrations in front of SR Romania embassies. In Warsaw, on 1st February 1988, militia intervned to block the demonstrators - including Zbigniew Bujak and Jan Józef Lipski, head of the illegally in Poland at that time, Socialist Party, to approach the SR Romania's embassy.

Fierce opponent of the idea of revising the existing structures, the leader in Bucharest was increasingly concerned about the situation in Poland, felt as a potential danger to the "socialist values".

In the evening of 19th -20th August 1989, after opposition's victory in Polish elections, Tadeusz Mazowiecki is appointed the head of government- the first not communist government head in a country member of the Warsaw Pact-N. Ceausescu was addressing a letter to the party's leadership in all socialist countries, in which he was expressing the concern regarding the fate of

socialism in Poland, the obligations of this country as an ally and possible implications of the events in Poland for the interests of socialist States⁵.

In autumn 1989 - when the extreme left totalitarian regimes in Europe fall - Romania was totally isolated worldwide, even from the countries part of the Warsaw Pact, and had a refractory regime to any democratic reform.

In December 1989 the wave of rage against totalitarian regimes reached the Romanian borders and needed just a spark so that the popular dissatisfaction to reverse, also here. That spark was ignited in Timisoara, on December 16th, and expanded 'in all the country'. Unlike Poland, the system transition in Romania was not peaceful and didn't cross the negotiation stage with the former power structures. "For the first time in history a communist regime was successfully removed in a violent manner."⁶

As a sign of solidarity with the revolutionary events from Romania, in the afternoon of 20th of December, 1989, in front of the Romanian embassy from Warsaw a manifestation took place, where 300 persons took part, representing parties and political organizations (The Confederation of the Independent Poland – KPN, The Independent Party of the Greens, The Independent Association of the Students – NZS), as well as representatives of the 'Solidarity'

The Epic of "Solidarity" proved the false in the assumption that totalitarianism can only be destroyed from the outside and there are no internal forces able to defeat the totalitarian system. On contrary, it was proved that constituting independent organization; the totalitarian society can erode from within. This was possible in Poland, because there the movement for self-organization of the society started many years before the Free Union.

The triumph of the Polish civil society set the final phase of the crash of the left Soviet totalitarianism.

Even if the years that passed since then proved that erosion rate is different depending on various international and domestic variables specific to each former communist country, from that moment on we can say that the meaning became clear and irreversible.

⁵ Dumitru Preda, Mihai Retegan, *1989 Principiul dominoului. Prăbușirea regimurilor comuniste europene (1989 The Domino principle The fall of the European communist regimes)*, Bucharest, The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing, 2000, page 165.

⁶ Jonathan Eyal, *Why Romania Could Not Avoid Bloodshed*, în Gwyn Prims (ed), *Spring in Winter*, Manchester University Press, 1990, p.141.