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THE COMMUNIST PAST, TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER

CRISTINA PETRESCU, DRAGOŞ PETRESCU

The twenty-fifth celebration of the collapse of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe has passed rather unnoticed in united Europe. This year, the competing anniversary – one hundred years since the outbreak of the Great War (which subsequently became WWI) – channeled professionals' research, politicians' attention and laypeople's curiosity towards the common European past. One might say that the commemorations related to the beginning of what Eric Hobsbawm calls the short twentieth century of the extremes overshadowed the festivities dedicated to the end of this period of bloody conflicts and ideological confrontations between democratic regimes and right-wing, then left-wing dictatorships. While WWI represents a common past experience for almost all European countries, the postwar existence of Soviet-type communist regimes divided the continent and implicitly the memory of the recent past on the two sides of the Iron Curtain. Twenty-five years ago, the collapse of these communist regimes ushered the reunification of the continent around common values. Nowadays, the countries which went out of communism in 1989 are already included in the European Union. Yet, the radically different postwar experiences in the West and the East are still dividing the continent. Thus, the demise of the communist dictatorships is not a European anniversary, but an Eastern European celebration, although the Cold-War Eastern Europe no longer exists as such for twenty-five years.

The present issue of the *Analele Universităţii Bucureşti – Seria Ştiinţe Politice* proposes a selection of methodologically diverse studies related to the communist past and its legacy. Although there is an inevitable focus on Romania and the multifaceted experiences of its population under communism, the studies included in this issue cover several countries in the region. Some of these studies engage in comparisons, either systematically or by stressing the similarities or differences between the case study under discussion and relevant others. An ambitious comparative approach is certainly that of José M. Faraldo, since it represents a pioneering attempt at juxtaposing two phenomena which had been hitherto considered as fundamentally different: the resistance against fascism and the Nazi occupation, and the resistance against communism and the Soviet occupation. In both parts of Europe, individuals and groups engaged in

particular circumstances in fighting an illegitimate occupying force and/or a non-democratic political regime. According to the author, such a decision represents a conscious act of opposition, which is socially binding in a given milieu and at the same time emotionally driven. Instead of approaching recent European history from the traditional perspective of a continent divided by the Iron Curtain, the author proposes a comparison which demonstrates that this kind of experience in Western and Eastern Europe during and immediately after WWII presents many similarities. Seen from this perspective, this study reminds of the common European values which did not vanish completely even behind the Iron Curtain, but survived and inspired those who struggled to overthrow the communist regimes in 1989.

The study authored by István Ötvös brings again to the fore the issue of resistance against fascism during WWII and explains how this common European experience generated a different postwar evolution in the Soviet-occupied part of the continent. The increasingly divergent paths undertaken by the countries which came under Stalin's direct influence is illustrated by the case of communist Hungary. Accordingly, the author examines the transformation of the largely inclusive wartime anti-fascist popular front, which comprised communists and non-communists alike, into an exclusive communist-dominated postwar political organization. As it is well known, the ultimate purpose of this process was the elimination of non-communists and the purge of those fellow communists who could have contested the legitimacy of the party leadership. Focusing on the famous show trial of László Rajk, which opened the wave of Stalinist terror against high-ranking communists in the entire Soviet bloc, this study also addresses the practice of successively rewriting history, which represented the essence of single-party political systems where the supreme leader defines the ultimate "truth" about the past in accordance with his constantly changing future-oriented political goals.

While the communist takeover is exemplified by the case of Hungary, the communist project of radically transforming society into a homogeneous community is illustrated by the case of neighboring Romania. This process was in theory defined as the building of a classless society, which should have ideally comprised only the friendly groups of workers, peasants and intellectuals. However, it involved in practice the more or less brutal elimination of culturally different groups by means which ranged from expulsion to forced assimilation. Romania represents an interesting example in this respect, for it did not expel its ethnic minorities after the war like other communist countries in the Soviet bloc, yet it came by the end of communist rule to be known worldwide for its policies directed against the Hungarian minority. The study by Tamás Lönhárt examines the evolution of the relationship between the elites of the Hungarians living in Transylvania and the Bucharest-based and increasingly Romanian-dominated communist leadership.

Beginning as valuable "fellow travelers," the true believers inside the Hungarian community eventually turned against the Romanian-style communist rule because it denied them the right to cultural reproduction. It was from inside the Hungarian community that the first open critics of the Ceauşescu regime emerged and subsequently formed the best organized network of opposition in this country, which was capable of producing samizdat before 1989 and a political party after 1989.

The communist regimes aimed not only at rendering cultural differences insignificant, but also at erasing all other social differences related to origin, place of residence, level of education or gender. The redefinition of gender roles under communism had certainly controversial results. While legally and institutionally women became equal with men for the first time in this part of Europe, the traditional patterns of patriarchal thinking did not disappear. The study by Cristina Petrescu argues that the communist policies oriented towards gender equality had different effects among different social strata, for only women in the urban and educated groups seized the opportunity and, consciously or not, succeeded in redefining gender roles inside their own group. This thesis is supported by several examples from among women who criticized more or less openly the Ceauşescu regime, while the author also explains the difference between this emancipation granted "from above" and the rights-oriented feminist movements in the West. Thus, an appalling issue such the interdiction of abortion, which caused many family traumas in Romania, was never on the agenda of these critical women, who took for granted gender equality, but never conceived themselves as feminists fighting for rights. Finally, the comparison between these seemingly emancipated Romanian women and those in the Polish Solidarity, who occupied only subordinate positions in this opposition network, highlights that gender roles outside the urban educated strata barely changed under communism.

If the imposition of communist rule is illustrated by the case of Hungary, its dissolution is rightfully presented by the case of Poland. The breakdown of the communist regimes attracted throughout the years the interest of many researchers and generated valuable, often interdisciplinary, studies. While before 1989, few anticipated the collapse, after this miraculous year, the authors interested in the topic discovered a cluster of causes that determined the initiation of this unexpected chain of events. Dragoş Petrescu proposes a three-layered model which takes into consideration structural, conjunctural and nation-specific factors in order to explain the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989. Although the author makes a point that the model is applicable to all the six countries that underwent a regime change in that year, his study focuses on the inception of the 1989 revolutionary wave. In fact, as the author argues, the key questions with regard to the collapse of the communist regimes in these countries refer to the moment, i.e., the year 1989, the place, i.e., Poland, and the

subsequent sequence of what he calls entangled revolutions, i.e., Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. Accordingly, this study focuses on explaining the momentous decision of the Polish communists led by General Wojciech Jaruzelski to engage in roundtable talks with the leaders of the Solidarity movement in 1989 instead of resorting again to repression, as in 1981. In doing this, they opted for path departure instead of path stabilization and set in motion a chain of events which determined the regime changes in Poland and five other countries in the Soviet bloc, and ultimately led to the unification of Europe.

Once communism collapsed, the study of this epoch became the domain of historians, while political scientists focused on the transition to democracy. From among the topics related to democratic consolidation, one of the most disputed refers to transitional justice and in particular to its retributive aspects, i.e., the punishment of those responsible for past wrongdoings. This process is by its nature problematic, for it requires the removal of the human remnants of the former non-democratic regimes from public life by applying the rule of law principles. Thus, the results were rather meager and certainly far below the societal expectations even in the former East Germany, in spite of the advantage of having previous experience and adequate personnel due to the unification with West Germany. The study by Monica Ciobanu offers an overview of this process, which focuses on the other former Soviet bloc countries which, unlike Germany, engaged in transitional justice with local resources, little expertise and unreformed professionals, i.e., Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The author examines the multiple paths followed by these countries in applying lustration and allowing access to the files of the former secret police agencies. She explains these differences by taking into account their variety regarding the nature of the former regimes, their break with the communist past and the changing politics in the transition period. The second part of her study focuses on Romania, which represents a special case in the above-mentioned terms. The author argues that the delayed application of transitional justice in this country ultimately failed in the attempt of encouraging accountability and promoting the rule of law. For the number of those effectively removed from public life is insignificant, trust in state institutions remains low in spite of some notable efforts in exposing former collaborators and officers of the secret police.

The memory of the communist past is the great absentee from among the topics addressed by this issue of the *Analele Universităţii Bucureşti – Seria Ştiinţe Politice*. While memory studies are flourishing and generating quite a consistent line of research in the countries which once represented the Soviet bloc, the memory of communism as such seems now at crossroads. Over the years, the plurality of recent past experiences surfaced publicly and challenged the initial narrative which emphasized the criminal nature of the former

regimes. Recollections of everyday life, with its leisure activities and socializing events, memories related to the communist-type of social benefits and the remembrance of the vanished items which once represented daily routines triggered nostalgia for a bygone past all across the former Soviet bloc. In countries where the communist regimes were successful in establishing welfare dictatorships, these diverse individual experiences enriched and refined the professional reconstructions of the communist past, but implicitly marginalized the memory of repression. This phenomenon of selective remembering was belated in post-1989 Romania, where the communist regime utterly failed in its attempt at improving the living standard in the long run and in a sustainable way. For more than two decades, public memory referred solely to what was considered worth remembering in the transition from dictatorship to democracy: the victims and the heroes of the non-democratic past. Yet, the never-ending challenges of transition, in particular the problems related to the ongoing economic crisis, on the one hand, and the coming of age of a new generation who never experienced communism, on the other, blurred the negative image of Romanian communism too. Gradually, the thick line of 1989 which separated the dictatorial past from the democratic transition has become also blurred. For it is the role of political science to clarify and canonize the fundamental differences between democratic and non-democratic political systems, this issue is dedicated to communism, a topic which normally concerns only historians.