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The Ex-communist's Policy of Forgetting in Romania after 1990

ALEXANDRU GUSSI

After any radical political change, there inevitably occurs some form of "recollection of memories"¹, a process through which the past is reevaluated in the light of the values privileged by the new political regime. The fall of communism, for all countries involved, presupposed a rupture at both the discursive and the symbolic level. An entire system of legitimacy and its views on history became unusable. As Katherine Verdery has observed:

"In Eastern Europe, rewriting history has been perhaps unusually necessary because of powerful pressures to create political identities based expressly on rejecting the immediate past. The pressures came not just from popular revulsion with communism, but also from desires to persuade Western audiences to contribute the aid and investment essential to reconstruction"².

The new political parties play an important part in the conflicts that developed following that shift in collective memory. The logic of memory entails that one should start in the present to look at the past, which is regarded as the cause of this present. As prior to 1989 communism was regarded as irreversible, an unsurpassable horizon, its fall forcibly brought a different interpretation of its significance. This newly emerged process could not develop independently of antagonist political interests associated to the redefinition of the country's national identity. Geoffrey Pridham has previously pointed out that "national identity expresses a basic form of collective experience, while parties are important as agents for transmission, but also transmutation of historical memories"³.

If collective memory is "not a memory, but a discourse that takes place in the public arena"⁴, that discourse builds the image that a society (or a group within) wants to create for itself. The aspect that needs to be brought into focus is not the debate on competing images of the past *per se*, but the influence of such images on the political forces (as a factor of identification, of convergence, and of divergence) through the entire transition period undergone by Romania⁵.

¹ Paul CONNERTON, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 6.

² Katherine VERDERY, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 52.

³ Geoffrey PRDHAM, *The Dynamics of Democratization. A Comparative Approach*, Continuum, London and New York, 2000, p. 35.

⁴ Tsvetan TODOROV, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien. Enquête sur le siècle*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2000, p. 144.

⁵ On the subject of collective memory, I am referring to the following works: Maurice HALBWACHS, *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en terre sainte*, PUF, Paris, 1941, p. 118; IDEM, *La mémoire collective*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1997, first edition published in 1950; Pierre NORA in IDEM (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire vol. 1-2. La République. La Nation. Les France*, Gallimard,

The absence of a multi-party system – together with that of any form of alternative discourse¹ – prior to the fall of the communist regime caused the dawn of Romanian post-communism to take the shape of a quest for an alternative legitimacy as well as that of a rush to reinvent the foundations of a pluralistic political discourse. Vladimir Tismăneanu argues that:

“Left, right, center: all these notions have strange and elusive meanings under post-communism. Using interpretative Western paradigms would simply create false analogies and would explain little, if anything”².

In fact, there are at least two main explanations why post-communist political culture reserves doctrines a minor role. First, the totalitarian period undermined the importance of convictions. At that time, it would have been absurd to seek any coherence between what one thought and how one acted, or between how one acted and what one said. The second explanation is that all main political actors share, to different degrees, the same views on the progress of democratization: the necessity for a market economy and the rule of law. Consequently, the direction of the transition is not in question, but its pace and its means are. In other words, the conflict has taken place over what is to be done with the communist legacy.

Originally, the right and the left were two divergent visions on the past³. The circumstances of the main political rift of 1990-1992, therefore, are the key to understanding post-communist Romanian politics, as it is based on them that traditions have been founded. As a result of the political confrontation, two distinct memories emerge. The initial distinctions are defined and become a central issue of the political debate.

The political utilization of the past is central in the process of refashioning political culture and adopting democratic values, a process which has proven problematic for the Romanian political elite.

The dangers of a decommunization through forms of collective justice have often been emphasized. At the same time, “the presence of regime alternatives to democracy depends very much on perceptions of the authoritarian past. Historically based anti-authoritarian attitudes continued to delegitimize a possible return to non-democratic rule”⁴. Romania provides us with a case of decommunization in which the society has played a central role, by means of its 1989 uprising and its remarkable evolution that followed and which has taken place mainly in spite of the policy of the State, while the State, at a discursive level, has used this process to appropriate *a posteriori* this progress that has not been the result of its actions.

Paris, 1997, pp. 16 and 188-189; Paul RICOEUR, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, Paris, 2000; Jean CANDEAU, *Mémoire et identité*, PUF, Paris, 1998; and Tsvetan TODOROV, *Les abus de la Mémoire*, Arléa, Paris, 1995.

¹ For the Stalinist character of the communist Romanian regime, see Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2003.

² IDEM, “The Leninist Debris or Waiting for Peron”, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 1996, pp. 504-535/p. 504.

³ François FURET “L’Ancien régime et la Révolution” and Marcel GAUCHET, “La droite et la gauche”, in Pierre NORA (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire. Les France vol. 1. Conflicts et partages*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, pp. 106-139 and 394-467.

⁴ Geoffrey PRIDHAM, *The Dynamics of Democratization. A Comparative Approach*, Continuum, London and New-York, 2000, p. 226.

The present text argues that political pluralism in Romania took shape when the intensity of this battle for the past was at its peak. For that reason, the identity of Romanian political parties reveals itself mainly in those parties' attitude towards the communist past. The first part of this text illustrates the conditions and the context in which this rift occurred. The second part refers to the manner in which the newly emerged post-communist power has represented and referred to the communist past, while the last part analyzes the role and the identity of the political party that played the main role in the Romanian transition, namely today's PSD, the Party of Social Democracy.

Observations on the Context

One cannot possibly ignore certain characteristics of the former communist period. Unlike other political traditions that appeal to the collective memory of a group, the official memory of the communist regime had no connection to any collective or individual form of memory, as it found justification in an allegedly scientific reading of history. Thus, the very concept of "memory" was a useless and even dangerous one, as the entire history of dissident movements demonstrates.

In fact, in Romania, transparency has never been official policy, nor have there been any efforts to return to the public space what was previously hidden in private space, and hence to extend acknowledgment of communist crimes from the level of underground communication to the official level. Thus, the entire endeavor of salvaging the memory of the communist crimes has been subject to politicization, either through confiscation or through denunciation. Further on, it will publicly appear only in the context of political discourses of legitimacy for certain political parties.

Given the fact that the characteristic conflict of the communist period was between memory and forgetting, and that immediately after 1989 the same type of conflict lay at the center of the public debate, I shall further argue that Romanian political parties will take a stand on either side of a divide that does not oppose different images of the fallen regime, but sets of images that correspond to those built before 1989. In other words, the issue is not a "battle of memories". Rather, we are witnessing a confrontation between political discourses that approach the memory of the communist regime differently, one trying to build a partisan memory, the other – typical to the FSN (The National Salvation Front) and to its successor, the PSD, as I shall try to describe later – embracing a very flexible vision of the past.

The most important difference between Romania and the Central European countries is, most probably, the use of violence, not only during the events at the end of 1989, but also in their immediate aftermath. The fall of communism generally surprised through its non-violence – a fact credited to the communist rulers of the moment, which goes a long way to explain their subsequent return to power via the mechanism of free elections. However, the presence of violence in Romania during the days that brought forth the fall of communism raises the question of its communist past on other grounds. The violence during the process of liberation from the totalitarian regime, partly a consequence of the fear of a violent decommunization, explains why the issue of the relationship with the recent past has served for so long as the main rift in Romanian politics during the first decade of its transition.

The power instated immediately after December 22, 1989 was the expression of a type of conversion undergone by the former communist elite, which adopted

the "pro-democratic revolutionary" image imposed by the fall of the communist regime, and which was later to bring arguments for a policy of forgetting. It is this policy that was – at least for seven years, between 1990 and 1997 – the main argument for contesting Ion Iliescu's team (one regarded as a continuator of the former "unique" communist party), despite its considerable popular support.

For the entire first decade of democratization, it was the political usage of the recent past that defined the main parties: on the one hand there were the historical parties and their 1991 alliance – the CDR (the Romanian Democratic Convention) – which were anti-communist and supporting radical change, and, on the other hand, there were the parties that were against all types of radical reform and were fundamentally opposed to the logic of decommunisation, such as the PDSR (the Romanian Social Democrat Party), later converted into the PSD (the Party of Social Democracy), along with the PRM (or the GRM, "Great Romania" Party). This political polarization played its part in the shaping of distinct collective memories by specific emerging groups that aimed to impose "their truth" as the official memory of the entire population, thus gaining – in retrospect – a privileged role in the process of redefining national identity. This redefinition, as well as the reconsideration of the past, is – and will certainly continue to be – one of the main coordinates of politics in Romania.

While it is not only in relation to the recent past that Romanian political parties have taken stand, it is certain at least that they define themselves and shape their identity with respect to it. The anti-communists stand firmly in opposition to the recent history, whereas their opponents have a particular type of discourse that redefines totalitarian practices with the intention of justifying the part they personally played during the communist regime and assisting the quiet conversion of the *nomenklatura* from the status of a forcibly invested elite to that of a financial and political elite legitimated through democratic and capitalist mechanisms.

Another trait of the Romanian political life is the important role played by personalities, a fact augmented by the insufficient institutional and doctrinal strength of the political parties. Consequently, the relation to the past is often viewed in the light of the personal life experiences of the political actors, who can range from *ex-nomenklatura* second rank members to political convicts with long prison terms behind.

The National Salvation Front, between Succession and Rupture

I focus instead on how the new Romanian leaders defined themselves in relation to the fallen regime. The National Salvation Front, the FSN, established in the early days of the "Romanian Revolution", did not form an institutional continuum with the former Romanian Communist Party, the PCR, but was to act subsequently as a conservative force. The first retrospective image of the communist past occurred on December 22, 1989, in the first official statement of the FSN, which declared, in the ambiguous terms of the rigid communist idiom, that "a new page is turning in the political and economic life of Romania"¹, yet also specified that "all ministries and central organs of the state are to continue their normal activity"².

¹ *Monitorul Oficial*, vol. I, no. 1, December 22, 1989, p. 3. Translation from Romanian by the author, IDEM for the following footnotes.

² *Ibidem*.

The Romanian Communist Party and its ideology were not specifically mentioned and the text does not represent the emerging political future as being opposed to the past 45 years of communist rule, but rather to the "structure of power of the Ceaușescu clan". The Communist Party is invisible to the authors of the declaration stating that "the entire power of the State is in the hands of the National Salvation Front". The FSN did not mention a transfer of attributions from the PCR, but only from the structures of power of the "Ceaușescu clan", as if it had been not the Communist Party, but the "Ceaușescu clan" that previously held power. Thus, the FSN came into power with a discourse that largely ignored the very existence of the former unique party. In the same statement, the "Ceaușescu clan" is held solely responsible for the communist crimes.

On December 25, 1989, in the statement regarding the oncoming trial of the Ceaușescu couple, the Council of the FSN (CFSN)¹ appears to have already reached a decision: "The culpability of the dictator and his acolytes before history and the laws will be established in Court, which will scrupulously decide due sentences for the destruction of the country"². The very next day, the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu was publicly announced.

During his first televised appearance, Ion Iliescu accused the Secretary General of the Communist Party (i.e., Ceaușescu) of "giving offence to the socialist ideals"³. A few weeks later, Iliescu declared his attachment to "the communist values that are impregnated by European humanism"⁴. On the question of responsibilities, Ion Iliescu made a triple distinction between the faith (in the communist ideals), the fact of belonging to the unique party, and one's individual actions, regarded as inevitable under the communist regime⁵.

The issue of competence was also raised, as competence in the affairs of the State was presented as the monopoly of former party activists. Ion Iliescu stated:

"Former activists, even those with important responsibilities, are people that did not identify themselves with Ceaușescu's dictatorship or its methods, but, on the contrary, took a stand and tried to save what was left to be saved, themselves becoming targets of repression and marginalization"⁶.

One can easily recognize in that portrait that of Ion Iliescu himself, who used this method to facilitate the a posteriori creation of the image of a dissident past for the former top activists of the communist party.

The inventory of descriptions of the fallen regime in the official statements of the CFSN and its leaders includes almost exclusively formulas like "Ceaușist dictatorship" and "Ceaușist regime"⁷. The image of the past proposed by the CFSN made

¹ The CFSN was formed on December 22, 1989, and functioned thereafter as a leading institution of the State. Later on, in January 1990, the FSN emerged from the CFSN.

² Statement of the CFSN, *Monitorul Oficial*, vol. I, no. 2, December 25, 1989.

³ Domnița ȘTEFĂNESCU, *Cinci ani din istoria României*, Mașina de scris, București, 1994, p. 24.

⁴ Interview in the *Figaro* magazine, issue of January 6, 1990.

⁵ "My departure from the communist dogma came long before December 1989 and was fundamental", a departure from the "inhuman character and rules of the State that declared itself socialist, but represented instead a form of pre-feudal despotic rule", TV interview with Paul Șoloc, October 6, *Dimineața*, October 11, 1990, p. 3.

⁶ Discourse of the president of the CFSN at the Free Romanian Broadcasting, *Monitorul Oficial*, January 27, 1990, pp. 1-3/p. 3.

⁷ *Monitorul Oficial*, collection of February-June 1990.

the Communist Party invisible because the core process of power transfer took in fact place within the elite of the PCR, the 22 December moment was part of the history of the PCR.

In fact, the institutional disappearance of the Communist Party in those moments is not a sign of the revolutionary intentions of the newly emerged leading team, but rather a method through which the disappearance of a political structure was used as substitute to the real change of political elite. We witnessed an institutional revolution that allowed for a form of continuity at the level of the political elite. The PCR was not removed from power in condemnation for its multiple crimes. The discourse of the leaders of the new National Salvation Front (the FSN) eluded such a reading of the communist realities, describing the former regime as a familial dictatorship during which the Communist Party, in whose name power was exercised, had practically disappeared.

Similar scenarios can be observed in neighboring countries like Bulgaria¹. For the Bulgarian communists,

"the thesis of the personal responsibility of Zvykov becomes the official position of the Bulgarian Socialist Party on the communist past. This thesis permits condemning deviations without denying the entire communist legacy"².

Still, the original model is the de-Stalinization that occurred during the time of Khrushchev³, when the strong denunciation of Stalin's personality cult also had the function of reorienting the issue of responsibility from the former communist leaders to the masses, the latter depicted as accomplices in the achievement of a personality cult of such proportions. The Romanian FSN also used that type of argument in order to obtain popular support for the newly installed power, to the detriment of fear-mongering anti-communist forces. A corollary to the above thesis is the idea that former key party members suffered under the personal dictatorship as much as the masses, which allowed the nomenklatura to become undistinguishable from the mass of regular party members and pretend that they were also victims of the authoritarian system. This scheme of argumentation is to be found in the official biographies of Ion Iliescu, former Minister of Youth and Secretary for Propaganda of the Central Committee of the PCR, under Ceaușescu, in the early '70s.

That type of thinking has several major implications. First, this initial declaration of the CFSN proclaimed the official dissolution of the Communist Party, while stating that its removal from power was performed well before 1989 by the clan dictatorship. As the dissolution thus proclaimed was neither a formal interdiction legally stated, nor a mere notice of a state of fact – as in those days the structures of the Communist Party still existed –, one can interpret this declaration rather as the statement through which a faction decided the dissolution of the party from within the party structures.

The first official declaration of the CFSN sought to reconcile two opposing imperatives: that of gaining the acceptance of the revolted masses in the street and that

¹Rumyana KOLAROVA, Dimitr DIMITROV, "Bulgaria", in John ELSTER (ed.), *The Roundtable Talks and the Breakdown of Communism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 178-212.

²Marta TOUZKOVA, "The Genesis of a Successor Party in Bulgaria", *Raisons politiques*, no. 3, Aug.-Oct. 2001, pp. 127-138/p. 130.

³Kathleen E. SMITH, *New Russia Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002, p. 31.

of ascertaining the loyalty of the members of the former administration. By not condemning the PCR, the CFSN was reassuring the members of the administration, while by not mentioning it it achieved the adherence of the masses.

The attitude implicit in the first CFSN statement was only reinforced by what was presented as an imminent threat of civil war, made more vivid by the existence of armed guerrillas loyal to the former dictator and ready for combat in the streets. Facts were presented in such a manner as to ensure the rapid acceptance of the new political structure as a guarantee for stability, not only because it responded to the claims of the revolted masses, but also because it represented a form of continuity with the former structures.

Another important implication of this type of approach transpires from the membership list of the new Council of the FSN, as certain conclusions can be drawn simply by analyzing the composition of the new power. Petre Roman, first post-communist prime minister, claims in his memoirs that even since the night of December 22nd to 23rd,

"the power has been monopolized, or at least extremely influenced, by former communists that had no other desire but to restore to the fallen regime a pseudo-legitimacy that Ceaușescu had destroyed, through an operation almost entirely 'cosmetic'"¹.

The first declaration of the FSN states that

"all ministries and central organisms in their present form are to continue their normal activity and acknowledge the control of the National Salvation Front, in order to ensure the normal course of the entire economic and social life"².

Only a few days later, regional bureaucracy was to be regulated in a similar manner:

"The specific apparatus of the committees and bureaus of the former Popular Councils, of the local administrative organisms, and also of the local socio-cultural institutions are to continue their activity with the present structures"³.

Before the first free elections of May 20, 1990, Ion Iliescu, then candidate for the Presidency and acting President, explained this continuity thus, "They could not be blamed merely for the reason that they were part of the former administrative structures"⁴. Concurrently, Ion Iliescu was voicing strong criticism against the "political amateurs"⁵, such as were promoted by the Petre Roman government: "They found themselves minister or prime minister when they had not even run a workshop before"⁶. In this view, only those who have previously occupied executive

¹ Petre ROMAN, *Le devoir de liberté*, Payot, Paris, 1992, pp. 118-119.

² Communicate of the CFSN, *Monitorul Oficial*, vol. I, no.1, December 22, 1989.

³ "The Decree-Law on the Formation, Organization and Functioning of the CFSN and of the Regional Councils of the FSN", *Monitorul Oficial*, December 27, vol. I, no. 4, 1989, pp. 2-3/p. 3.

⁴ Ion Iliescu, interview in *Tineretul Liber*, May 9-10, reproduced in IDEM, *Momente de istorie. Documente, interviuri, comentarii, decembrie 1989-iunie 1990*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1995, pp. 270-284/p. 278.

⁵ Ion ILIESCU, *Revoluție și reformă*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1994, p. 94.

⁶ *Adevărul*, October 9, 1996, p. 1.

positions, i.e., in the communist structures, could be considered competent. Thus, the Romanian acting President of the moment (May 1990) was deploring what he considered to be the undesirable effect of an excessive purge. In a post-election analysis performed two years later, after the conflicts within the FSN were extinguished, Ion Iliescu denounced the following:

"What has grown into a serious handicap was the fact that we backed down in front of certain pressures and anarchic and demagogic actions, which resulted in the dismissal of qualified persons, trained and experienced in economic and managerial activities. The sustained campaign of inducing general culpability in society and in its members is profoundly damaging, and of a destructive nature"¹.

From this standpoint, the failures of the post-communist period came as a result of the will to replace former activists. This type of discourse was joined together with a particular interpretation of the relationship between the former Communist Party and society:

"The party membership card only attested that its owner knew the rules of the totalitarian society. In fact, every individual who had a minimal competence, who wanted to succeed professionally, had to become a member of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), which, therefore, comprised our entire society"².

This vision, however, assumed that the totalitarian project was fulfilled.

On the second anniversary of the fall of the communist regime, Ion Iliescu declared before the Parliament: "The Communist Party has disappeared from the political scene of the country. This was not as a consequence of violent actions, but a step in a new historical age"³. Thus the former unique party was not condemned in the name of certain values, but rather on account of a historical juncture. Following this logic, Iliescu also stated, "we have the duty to build, and not to destruct"⁴, because "we cannot ignore the constructive activities and all the efforts of the people for the past 45 years"⁵.

In an official biography of Ion Iliescu, published before the elections of May 1990, we read, "when Ceaușescu started putting his diabolic projects into practice [...], Ion Iliescu said NO. For almost 20 years afterwards, Iliescu suffered direct and indirect pressures, open or hidden threats"⁶. As Iliescu stated, "Many are those who accuse my past. I have no shame of my past. Let the supreme judge be the citizen, the electorate of this country"⁷. The refusal to feel regret for the past corresponds to the refusal to condemn the communist past as a whole. Ion Iliescu's position, therefore, was to influence the official position of the State and to crystallize the discourse

¹ Ion ILIESCU, "Discourse Two Years after Elections", May 20, 1992, IDEM, *Momente de istorie...cit.*, vol. III, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1996, pp. 162-170/p. 168.

² IDEM, *Revoluție și reformă*, cit., p. 108.

³ Discourse before the Parliament, December 1991, IDEM, *Momente de istorie...cit.*, vol. III, pp. 113-127/p. 115.

⁴ Speech given by Ion Iliescu, *Azi*, December 18, 1990, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Biography of Ion Iliescu, *Dimineața*, May 18, 1990.

⁷ Discourse of Ion Iliescu in the district of Teleorman, *Dimineața*, April 19, 1992.

of the opposition, defined as a counter image to it. Iliescu addressed his message especially to former party members and their collective memory, reminding them of their past position¹:

"The danger came from the setting loose of visceral tendencies in the context of a passionate exaltation, which could transform the popular discontent into a bloodshed, a time when everyone would seek to 'pay back debts' and when the general exasperation could turn against party members and the armed forces, risking a justified defense reflex. The risk of a civil war was to be avoided at all costs"².

Almost everything could be justified in this way, from the violence against the opposition parties (January 29, 1990) to the summoning of the miners to Bucharest and the repressive stance taken against the demonstration that occurred in the University Square. In brief, throughout the transition period that type of logic justified what was to be called the "policy of forgetting". The best way to make such leniency the rule was to present it as a process in the best interest of all. Lucian Boia mentions a "method of ignoring" applied by the Romanian post-communist power³. Shortly before the 1990 elections, the daily newspaper of the FSN published a column entitled "The temptation and the illusion of revenge"⁴, which argued: "Under the mask of anti-communism they accuse the masses, the direct manufacturers of general goods"⁵. The memory of communism was presented as essentially dangerous for the majority. From then on, the exculpation of the PCR and the former political police, the Securitate, went hand in hand with the incrimination of the majority, so that any kind of accountability became virtually impossible.

The status of former Communist Party members, and of their higher ranks, is, accordingly, a central element in the shaping of a post-communist order⁶. The same as in Russia,

"one consequence of the relatively peaceful transition from communism to post-communism is, therefore, to leave the remnants of a large and powerful elite in their positions of privilege: a potent source of cleavage in the emerging politics"⁷.

A trauma such as a revolutionary event can cast doubt on the very pillars of a political culture⁸. In this context, the continuity of the PCR was completely redefined by the fall of communism. The relationship of the FSN with the former structures must

¹ These allegations chose to ignore the fact that even the most radical anticommunist statements of certain CDR members never referred to this global category, but only to the activists of the former unique party. The same idea is flaunted in 1996, when they claimed that "the CDR will introduce certain restrictions for the former members of the PCR", Electoral advertising for Ion Iliescu, *Adevărul*, November 7, 1996.

² Ion ILIESCU, *Revoluție și reformă*, cit., p. 51.

³ Lucian BOIA, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, Humanitas, București, 1997, pp. 183, 186.

⁴ Marin BADEA, *Azi*, May 18, 1990, p. 3.

⁵ BT, "Warning", *Azi*, July 4, 1990, p. 1. We could also interpret this as a new sign of blackmailing with the *Securitate* files.

⁶ Ian Mc ALLISTER, Stephen WHITE, Richard ROSE, "Communists, Privilege, and Post-Communism in Russia", *International Politics*, no. 34, March 1997, pp. 79-95/p. 86.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

⁸ Serge BERNSTEIN (ed.), *Les cultures politiques en France*, Seuil, Paris, 1999, p. 29.

be regarded as a component of this transformation, which translated as a genuine difficulty for the FSN to claim any political tradition for its own.

Nationalism and the Issue of the Continuity of the State

The denunciation of political adversaries as enemies of the nation was a very frequent occurrence in the publications of the FSN and its allies. They launched claims that what known anti-communists, like the dissident Doina Cornea or the president of the National Peasant Party, Corneliu Coposu, wanted was to "sell the country"¹. The FSN daily *Azi* suggested that such political players would best leave the country and "form a government in exile"². The anti-communist danger and the threat of a Hungarian invasion in Transylvania were presented as two faces of the same medal.

Katherine Verdery observes that the people in power in post-communist Romania

"would have seen no risks, in 1990, to imitate the democratic and civil-society rhetoric of their analogues in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. As it happened, that calculation proved erroneous. The Romanian Communist Party, in alliance with some of the same nationalists who now support the PDSR, had substantially strengthened the already potent political symbol, 'nation', increasing its capacity to structure fields of discourse. In making use of it in post-1989 struggles, the PDSR and their nationalist allies were wielding the most powerful weapon in the symbolic arsenal of Romanian politics"³.

Following the nationalist tradition, the FSN/PDSR obtained an identity – which it would never openly admit – as a *de facto* successor of the Romanian Communist Party. However, Ion Iliescu's supporters on the one hand would profit from their legitimacy as active participants in the "Romanian 1989 Revolution", while on the other would use the discursive legacy and the terms of social capital of the former Communist Party, thus truly establishing themselves as the cultural, if not the institutional, heirs of the Communist Party.

The relationship of the FSN with the institutional legacy of the communist State was marked by the absence of a clear demarcation between the concept of the party of the FSN, which was formally founded on February 6, 1990, under the presidency of Ion Iliescu, and the structures of regional and central administration that were components of the National Salvation Front up until its conversion. The FSN was not an ex-communist party, but was the direct product of the structures of the communist state as they were at the moment of the changes of December 1989. This propinquity of the FSN to institutions run by the logic of the Unique

¹ Dan ZAMFIRESCU, "Sfârșitul lambadei", *Azi*, May 10, 1990, p. 1. In the press affiliated to the power, Corneliu Coposu was accused, in "letters from the readers" published on the front page, to have been "sold the country" (*Adevărul*, January 30, 1990, p. 1); similar accusations were launched against Doina Cornea (*Adevărul*, February 18, 1990, p. 1).

² *Azi*, July 8, 1990, p. 1.

³ Katherine VERDERY, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, p. 44.

Party made its discourse directly dependent on the communist past and questioned its autonomy.

The discourse that pictured the State as sole guardian of the national interest provided the former political elite with comfortable positions as servants of the State, and therefore servants to the interests of an eternal Romania. These arguments sum up the source of the anti-anti-communist attitude of the FSN/PDSR, later to become the PSD, which held that any form of criticism of the communist past was against the national interest, a position which was consequence of the newfound legitimacy of the former political elite and of the noncritical inclusion of the communist period in the very definition of the country's national identity.

The most important institutional "product" of the FSN was as ambiguous as the discourse of the FSN on the past. Still, it, too, came as a solution to the issue of constitutional continuity. The article 151(1) of the 1991 Constitution stated, "the institutions of the Republic that are in existence at the moment when the present Constitution comes into force shall remain in existence until the formation of new institutions", which is as if the "Republic" was defining the communist regime and the following period at the same time¹. Daniel Barbu observes that

"the Constitution of December 1991 is conceived so as to ensure the continuity of the State and of the former elite, who had already learned how to govern it, and not to facilitate the development of a political function within the Romanian society, thus preventing the emergence of a different type of elite"².

The Romanian Communist Party elite perceived the Revolution as the moment of an abrupt change in their symbolic system of representation, but they were rewarded for it by persisting in political power. Thus, continuity and change proved to be not only compatible, but also complementary to one another.

The strategy of reinstating and remobilizing ex-PCR members was a constant preoccupation of the FSN/PDSR and the PRM, while presenting the democratic opposition parties, especially the historical parties, as a direct threat to such ex-members. In the enumeration of various actions of decommunization presumably intended by the historical parties – even if never acknowledged –, accusations often sprung up to the effect that the lives of the 4 million ex-communist members would be put in danger. Thus, Iliescu and the PDSR/PSD were the only guarantee for the "peace of Romanians".

The strategy of forgetting was not the consequence of a necessary reconciliation, but the continuation of a totalitarian type of strategy of legitimacy that revealed mass culpabilities and made alleged accomplices out of common citizens. It was a form of legitimacy that had its roots in fear and constraint. The success of this strategy is illustrated by the apparent popularity of the "cleaning-up" actions carried out in the University Square on June 13, 1990, first by the police forces and then by the miners – both of them extremely violent. It reveals to what extent the University Square manifestation was perceived as an accusation against the rest of the population. This effect is comparable to the success that the former communist regime had registered in transforming its silent victims into so-called accomplices.

¹ See Eleodor FOCSĂNEANU, *Istoria constituțională a României 1859-1991*, Humanitas, București, 1998.

² Daniel BARBU, *Republica absentă*, Nemira, București, 1999, pp. 126-127.

In sum, the legacy appropriated by the FSN when using a nationalist discourse was a valorization of one of the main themes of Ceaușist propaganda¹, and subsequently a revalorization of the communist past. Therefore, when the discourse openly addressed the issue of the past, it always remained ambiguous. The recent past was mainly represented as a celebration of the moment of the "December Revolution", but the significance of the moment was never discussed. Remembering the revolutionary moments was not supposed to mean anything; it was only a ritual that could "serve political organizations by producing bonds of solidarity without requiring uniformity of belief"². Thus the ambiguity proved to be politically productive, but the scores would be settled at the moment of the FSN rupture in 1992.

Ion Iliescu's Party and the Communist Legacy

The present PSD is the result of an internal clarification that took place between the conservatives and the reformists within the FSN, when, in 1992, the FDSN – later to become the PDSR – (and Ion Iliescu) detached themselves from the FSN, on a political platform that criticized the reformist FSN leader Petre Roman.

At first glance, the PSD appears neither nostalgic, nor anti-communist. It is, in fact, employing both types of discourses depending on the context, as it does not have a clear view on the past, one that could be used to legitimate its own actions. What I am trying to argue next is that this point of view is challenged by the way in which the party defined itself and shaped its identity. The call for the formation of the new party focused on the refusal to copy the model of liberal democracies, a model that, in contrast, had been praised by the reformist leaders of the FSN and the "historical" parties:

"Our fundamental idea is that the forms of political, economic and socio-cultural organization could not be imposed by force, could not be copied mechanically, as they need to correspond to the tradition, habits, and level of culture and consciousness specific to the people"³.

This fundamental act of the PDSR is an illustrative example of post-communist conservatism and helps understand the link between Ion Iliescu's ideas about an "original democracy" and his party's search not for a social democracy, but for a "social" democracy. In other words, people around President Iliescu wished to apply a distinct model, different from the Western one, explicitly expressing their intention to take "what was good" in the communist system.

Iliescu's party ambition was to formulate a program of limited reforms and then to validate it as the "program of the Romanian Revolution". Ion Iliescu stated: "Aren't we fed up with 45 years of applying foreign models? Those who have rejected imposed models now come to us and ask us to copy other models?"⁴, while

¹ Katherine VERDERY, *Compromis și rezistență*, Romanian transl. by Mona Antohi, Sorin Antohi, Humanitas, București, 1994 (1991), p. 22.

² David I. KERTZER, *Rituals, Politics and Power*, Yale University, New Haven and London, 1989, p. 67.

³ "Appeal of the Provisory National Council of the FSN on December 22", *Dimineața*, April 8, 1992.

⁴ Ion ILIESCU, *Dimineața*, March 27, 1990.

also claiming, "we have made a despotic, authoritarian, totalitarian, regime fall, a regime that had nothing to do with the generous ideas of socialism"¹.

Not surprisingly, in 2000, the then president of the PDSR turned PSD, Adrian Năstase, still believed in the unity of the whole society behind the party, "we need gradual political openings, in order to ensure the solidarity of the public opinion as well as more prestige on the international scene"², since "lasting paths demand consensus"³.

After 1992, one could see that the reconsideration of the past served as a direct argument for choosing the future path imagined by Ion Iliescu and his supporters, a path explicitly non-capitalistic⁴ and politically symbolized by the FDSN/PDSR alliance with extremist parties like the Great Romania Party (PRM), the PUNR and the PSM. The rejection of the Western model is a choice that can only be understood in the context of the nationalism and xenophobia put forward in official discourses. Purporting to be on the side of those who suffered during post-communism, the FDSN/PDSR criticized this period, thus rehabilitating the former regime. This rehabilitation gave some legitimacy to the radical nostalgic discourse of its political allies, the PSM (the Workers' Socialist Party), and the PRM (the Great Romania Party).

The FDSN/PDSR's attachment to the continuity of the State institutions was not only a way to justify the continuity of the political elite, but also a way to accuse the main adversaries (the CDR) by alluding to an incompatibility between anti-communism and national interest:

"Despite the regime, the political and social structures on this world, the Romanian people have accumulated a patrimony that could not be sacrificed for ideological reasons. It would be an attack against our national as well as human identity, because all these people have paid enormous prices and that is why no one could confiscate their achievements"⁵.

The rehabilitation of the global reality of the communist period is made impossible by the unfavorable comparison with the present. However, some realities of the communist period can be qualified as positive, and therefore the transition period can be presented as guilty for destroying them. That type of argument strengthened the opinion that one cause for the difficulties encountered after 1989 was the destruction of certain pre-1989 institutional mechanisms, consequently attacking the arguments that supported that change. As a corollary, this discourse refuted the positive grounds for incriminating the people with a political carrier under the communist regime.

For the political supporters of Ion Iliescu belonging to that political spectrum, the communist past is clearly split in two: the period prior to the '60s – a period of political prisons, crimes, Sovietization, obedience to Moscow – and that following, during which the national sentiment started to be praised by the Romanian communists. Relevant for this point of view is the position of the PSD former Minister of Justice,

¹ IDEM, *Dimineața*, October 1, 1990.

² Adrian NĂSTASE, *Bătălia pentru viitor*, New Open Media, București, 2000, p. 21.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Even in the electoral campaign for the 2000 elections, the PDSR press release demanded that the privatization of State factories should be stopped, arguing that "capitalist economy has social polarization as its main target", in *Adevărul*, October 5, 2000.

⁵ Ion ILIESCU, *Revoluție și reformă*, cit., p. 198.

Rodica Stănoiu, who claimed that in the 1969 Penal Code one could find "another example, as if we needed another one, as to how, and at whose hands, and why Sovietization took place"¹. This idea already appeared in 1990, when the official FSN daily, the *Azi*, criticized the anti-communist discourse by attacking the statement of the philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, who denounced "the past 40, not 20 years"² of dictatorship. For the *Azi*, "such a thesis will not stand the test of a socio-historic analysis, at least for the 1965-1971 period"³.

The severity of the current crises became the main argument for moving the issue of communist abuses down on the priority list. This discourse, which cast a shadow on all attempts to question the totalitarian past, emphasized the priorities of the present as prevalent over the issues of the past, which must remain protected through forgetting. The past was evoked only to avoid any lingering on this issue. In keeping with the attitude of the FSN between 1990-1992, the primacy of the present strengthened the policy of forgetting. For Ion Iliescu, the argument for forgetting and conservatism was the danger of a decommunization disorder: "We have succeeded in winning over chaos and anarchy. We have succeeded in avoiding civil war and the dismantling of the State and of the nation"⁴.

As Ion Iliescu further declared:

"While moving away from the past, it would be unjust and undignified to ignore the constructive efforts of the people for 45 years [...] our aim is to build, not destroy. It is time to have a balanced attitude, to use a responsible critical judgment when confronting the national destiny. To grant us the clause of confidence in ourselves"⁵.

Thus, the self-confidence of the people was presented as linked to a revalorization of the recent past, and a positive memory of this past was strongly encouraged.

The need for a positive version of the recent past is common among populations that have lived through a totalitarian period and do not want to simply turn their backs on their entire lives⁶. We must notice that all types of nostalgia are necessarily anti-democratic. The FSN tried to convert to democracy part of the communist legacy (people, institutions and attitudes) that it considered useful and positive.

As a conclusion to the above observations, one must admit that there have been some attempts to rehabilitate the communist regime, but since their aim was mainly to neutralize the discourse on the necessity for decommunization, they can be considered responses to the anti-communist discourse of the opposition.

The Policy of Forgetting

The policy of forgetting thus appears as a strategic choice made by Ion Iliescu and his supporters in the matter of their relationship with the communist regime.

¹ *Monitorul Oficial*, May 15, 1997, p. 2.

² Vladimir SOMEȘAN, "Paternalismul domnului Liiceanu", *Azi*, no. 1, April 11, 1990, p. 3.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Ion ILIESCU, The electoral program "I believe in Romania's change for the better", *Momente de istorie...cit.*, vol. III, pp. 313-331/p. 315.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 322.

⁶ Kathleen E. SMITH, *Mythmaking in the New Russia. Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002, pp. 75-83.

This policy is best summed up by the reflex of its architects to stop, or at least slow down, the open access to the archives of the former regime, especially those of the Communist Party and the political police. This attitude towards the past is also characterized by the fact that it admitted the abuses of the former regime, while deeming that such a recognition did not have to have practical consequences, as such actions would only be a mirror image of those of the past. This was how the *status quo* was justified by the very desire to avoid the past abuses, consequently turning the attitudes of condemnation of this past away from the idea of just reparation. The policy of forgetting was an expected result of the two-faced discourse of the PSD, which included slogans such as "we must build, not destroy", and "all collaborators, all innocents".

The PDSR also claimed that if Corneliu Coposu, the president of the democratic opposition, the CDR, would come to power: "He would attack 2000 persons of the former *nomenklatura*. This people will be purged"¹. In 1996, the PDSR electoral campaign asked voters to support their candidate for the Presidency "to avoid witnessing a wave of trials, witch hunts and reprisals"².

The PDSR attitude towards the laws of property restitution and towards those for open access to the secret police archives reveals the degree of influence that its relationship with the past had on its current actions. Although interpreted by some as a sign of financial interest, the desire to keep certain real estate in the possession of the former *nomenklatura*, thus maintaining a captive electorate, is above all consistent with the PDSR vision of history. The PDSR considered legitimizing some communist abuses as part of a more ample desire to legitimate the entire regime. This attitude also shows an attachment to the continuity of legislation from one regime to the other.

Ten years after the fall of communism, the suspension of the sentence pronounced against the communist generals answerable for the Timișoara crimes revealed a PDSR that feared to pronounce a general amnesty, but applied it *de facto*.

The PDSR strongly protested against all the sentences pronounced between 1996 and 2000, especially on the occasion when a sentence was uttered against the communist generals and former ministers of defense and internal affairs, generals Victor Atanasie Stănculescu and Mihai Chițac. Ion Iliescu, as President of the PDSR, appraised the sentence as a "judicial error"³ and accused the judicial system of being subordinated to the new political majority and of trying to "rewrite history while taking partisan positions"⁴. In his opinion, "we cannot ignore the complex character of the Revolution [...] these generals deserve our appreciation", since they supported the Revolution in the end⁵. It is to be noted that there is no law of amnesty either for the period prior to 1989, nor specifically for the misdoings of December 1989, when the army and the *Securitate* changed sides and finally supported the revolt. However, in the period 1990-1996, as well as after 2001, we have witnessed an informal amnesty, since the justice system has not handled any cases on the 1989 revolt or on prior abuses.

This *de facto* amnesty, along with the policy of forgetting, managed to suspend all debate on the communist past, and offered therefore the freedom to manipulate

¹ Ion ILIESCU, Interview in *Revista 22*, September 25, 1992, p. 7.

² Electoral advertising for the PDSR, *Dimineața*, November 13-14, 1992, p. 1.

³ Press agency Mediafax, July 15, 1999.

⁴ *Adevărul*, July 20, 1999.

⁵ Press Agency Mediafax, July 15, 1999.

the past. This shows the will of the PDSR to present the appeals for justice of the victims of communist abuses as politically driven. The absence of a *de jure* amnesty preserved the confusion between judging the events of December 1989 and judging those during the constant repression prior to 1989. Naturally, the arguments for an amnesty of deeds committed during the revolutionary events are more susceptible to obtain a certain consensus than those referring to the entire communist period. The focus on the issue of the legitimacy of the trial against the communist generals involved both in the repression of the December 1989 revolt and, after changing sides, in the fall of the totalitarian regime contributed to the confusion over the issue of legitimacy of any trial that implicated the totalitarian period.

Even today, the PSD (former PDSR) is trying to salvage the image of ex-leaders of the communist state. For example, in 2002 they included in the Gallery of Portraits that displayed the presidents of former representative assemblies the presidents of the communist Great National Assembly, an organ that used to validate the decisions of the Communist Party. That is how, indirectly, this communist institution found its place in the history of genuine representative assemblies of the periods before 1948 and after 1989¹.

It is to be noted that the PDSR feared that it was not perfectly controlling its political identity, and that the majority did not share its vision of the recent past. That is why the 2000 program stated that:

“Unfortunately the right wing succeeded to a great extent to influence ideologically the cultural and intellectual arena, through the mass media and the civil society. These forces try to impose their partisan criteria of legitimacy and of cultural and political progress. Their vision of modern history, profoundly deformed, is promoted in a non critical manner by the mass media and the educational system”².

Far from being a brutal nostalgic vision, this type of relation to the communist past sought to be consistent with the moment of the 1989 revolution, at the same time avoiding a total condemnation of the regime and its supporters like the one in the model of the Czech lustration. This partial condemnation of the communist past justified the chosen type of conversion of the *nomenklatura*, from within State institutions, and, from the public, ensured a respectability that, theoretically, could only have been gained after a clear separation from totalitarian practices.

After 2001, the moment of their return to power, Ion Iliescu and the PSD’s radical change of discourse and position concerning the past (as, for instance, towards the former Romanian king, the Radio Free Europe, etc.) appeared circumstantial and formal, intended to play down the theme of the communist past by supporting themes exclusively embraced by anti-communists in the early ’90s. This apparent “conversion” was challenged by the civil society in the face of attempts from the PSD/PDSR to prevent the proper functioning of the institution created to study the archives of the political police.

This ambivalent PSD policy of acceptance and utilization of the memory of the communist period is similar to the discourse of the political heirs of former

¹ The portrait of Drăghici, a figure definitely involved in the communist crimes of the ’50s, was kept on following a decision of the Permanent Bureau of the Chamber of Deputies on December 10, 2002.

² *The Political Program of the PDSR*, September 21, 2000, p. 13.

unique parties in Hungary or Poland. However, as the PSD does not take up this legacy, the nostalgic dimension of their discourse is even more striking, and the attempts to draw a line between the PSD and the PCR become even less credible. The lack of an institutional actor that, in the new democratic reality, should take responsibility for the communist past, the lack of policies of decommunization and the fact that access to resources is still under the influence of the former political elite, obliges us to identify the PSD as the genuine heir of the Romanian Communist Party, despite the nuances that must be taken into account. Regarding the attitude towards the past, this continuity is even more obvious than it was 19 years ago.

In these settings, the price that has to be paid is the incapacity to rewrite the history of Romania in view of the democratic values. As Jan Werner Muller pointed out:

"Political elites can play a positive moral role by establishing power over memory, and recasting historical guilt and grievances in such a way that they further rather than hinder the emergence of a democratic political culture"¹.

A major proportion of the Romanian political elite perceive such an enterprise as anti-communist and as threatening. At the same time, it makes efforts to increase the choices of mobilization and solidarity of those who, being linked to the communist system, feel compelled to support a leader like Ion Iliescu, even if he backs economic ideas that do not always correspond with the expectations of the new financial elite. All these things have already happened, bringing Romania closer to the situation in Russia than to that of other Eastern European countries.

The question is if this revalorization of the recent past, seen from a positive perspective constantly enhanced, is compatible with the process of democratization. Or does this grid of interpretation of the recent past reveal authoritarian urges? The answer is quite safely affirmative, if we are to take into account the political behavior of the PSD, its will to discourage the development of the civil society and the attitude towards the parliamentary opposition between 2001 and 2004.

The PSD's return to power in December 2000 caused a halt in the democratization process. The post-communist State seemed incapable of managing the changes and of translating into political terms the freedom of the society, a society that escaped its control because it did not try to govern it, but to include it. Nowadays the PSD, the Party of Social Democracy, is characterized less by the type of conservatism that initially defined it, and more by one of its components, the temptation of authoritarianism, explainable by the type of the relationship it developed with the State, as if the policy of forgetting was only meant to hide the institutional memory specific to the party-State.

Conclusions

It seems clear that democratic consolidation in Romania is no longer dependent on the manner of looking at the communist past, but this paper has reviewed the difficulties that Romanian political parties have encountered while building

¹ Jan-Werner MULLER, "Introduction: the Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory", in IDEM (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-war Europe. Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 1-38/p. 31.

an identity in the absence of a clear criterion, such as a definite attitude towards the recent past. If, after 1989, the absence of decommunization was symptomatic for the slow pace of democratization as compared to other neighboring countries, years later the same reality seems responsible for the lack of consolidation of the democratic process.

The rift created by the various attitudes towards the communist past has not been fading because the problem of the communist legacy is finally resolved, but rather because the main political actors carrying the anti-communist message are now compromised, following their unsuccessful administration of between 1996-2000.

Romanian pluralism, born and consolidated on the chasm between different attitudes on the communist past, suffers as a result of the difficulties that parties encounter in learning how to express the interest of the society and in defining their own doctrine's identity. The political attitudes towards the past that shaped the Romanian political scene before 2000 play a lesser role. But this is the sign of a crisis of Romanian pluralism, because there are no clear criteria based on which to distinguish between political programs. In 2004 elections, the civil society was mobilized on themes founded on this old rift.

In some kind of analogy with the places where monuments from the period of "socialist realism" lie side by side with monuments dedicated to anti-communist fighters, Romania is preparing to accept simultaneously radically different visions of the past, but the capacity to draw lessons from our communist past has proven politically limited.