

Laughing for the state: the amateur Rural Comedy Brigades in the Vaslui county of communist Romania in the 1970s and 1980s

Asavei, Maria Alina

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Asavei, M. A. (2017). Laughing for the state: the amateur Rural Comedy Brigades in the Vaslui county of communist Romania in the 1970s and 1980s. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 17(3), 337-356. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-55932-0>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0>

Laughing for the State

The Amateur Rural Comedy Brigades in the Vaslui County of Communist Romania in the 1970s and 1980s

MARIA-ALINA ASAVEI
(Charles University in Prague)

Introduction

Russian born and University of California, Berkley bred cultural anthropologist Alexei Yurchak posits that humor in the form of jokes (*anekdoty*) eventually aided in undermining the Soviet Union hegemonic power. As he puts it, uttering jokes “became a ubiquitous part of daily conversations; and it became a custom to tell *anekdoty* during all cigarette breaks at the university”¹. Thus, the folkloric genre of *anekdoty* became, according to Yurchak, a “new form of art” that fostered a collective ritual of “reeling out” until as late as the 1980s². By the same token, Siniavskii points out that the “ritual became common in all Soviet republics and socialist countries of Eastern Europe during this period”³. Romania was no exception. Every informal meeting, family reunion or dinner with friends ended up with a session of jokes (political or otherwise).

Some of these jokes have been collected and published immediately after the fall of the communist regime. Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu collected anecdotes and jokes uttered during the communist regime and published the first inventory of communist jokes called *10 ani de umor negru românesc*⁴. He collected more than 950 jokes and concluded his book by stating that the large majority of joke-tellers were bureaucrats and intellectuals and only a small percent of the joke-tellers were pensioners and under thirty years old. According to Ștefănescu, humor in communist Romania metamorphosed over the years and the Romanians’ sense of humor become darker and darker in the late 1980s. However, not all humor of those years was “black”. Some Romanians still remember the jokes of the communist era as a window to “small freedoms”. As

¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005, p. 274.

² According to Yurchak all kind of jokes (political, ethnic, sexual...) were narrated in a loop for a long time interval. *Ibidem*, p. 275.

³ Siniavskii quoted in Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever...cit.*, p. 274.

⁴ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc*, Paideia, București, 1991.

a young PhD student recalls, her father (a Romanian/Hungarian veterinary physician from Cluj Napoca) used to talk with his best friend on the telephone almost every day. At that time – in the 1980s – everybody knew that the phone was tapped (“listened to”) by the *Securitate* (especially when it came to intellectuals). Her father always started the conversation with his friend addressing some “warming up” words to the invisible spy. The conversation usually was commencing with the following words: “Hi there! How are you?”. Then, without waiting for his friend’s answer, he used to add “Hi unknown comrade! Nice to know you here! So, let’s have fun together, all three of us!”⁵. As this example reveals, humor in the form of jokes was ubiquitous during Romanian communism. The production of jokes and anecdotes was part of Romanians’ daily life. As Cristina Petrescu points out, jokes like “in Romania, colder than the cold water is the hot water” epitomize “the humor of communist times, which was present throughout Central and Eastern Europe and helped individuals to laugh the communist system out of existence”⁶. A special category of political jokes, widespread all over the country during Romanian communism, was represented by the “clandestine” jokes about Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena. The *Securitate* (the communist secret police) had a special interest in monitoring and documenting the political jokes about Ceaușescu and the communist regime⁷. Although the political jokes about Ceaușescu circulated from mouth to mouth and every Romanian knew at least a couple of anecdotes and jokes addressing the life and accomplishments of the communist leader, nobody dared to tell them publicly. Children were told to never mention these jokes at school or outside the house but inside the private walls of Romanians “small world” political jokes occupied a very important place.

Yet, in addition to this “informal” genre of political humor, there was also state supported humor. As Ghighi Bejan, a former amateur comedian from “*Arh Comedy Group*” Bucharest mentions during a televised interview for the documentary dedicated to student’s political humor before 1989, “the system paid people to make fun of the system”⁸. This statement seems perplexing at first glance. In what follows, this paper will attempt to disentangle this convoluted assertion. Toni Grecu points out, in the same documentary, that Nicolae Ceaușescu told himself only one joke in his official public discourses:

⁵ From the author conversation with C L, Budapest, 17 October 2009.

⁶ Cristina Petrescu, “Nostalgia, Irony and Self-Irony in Remembering Communism”, in Lavinia Stan, Lucian Turcescu (eds.), *Justice, Memory and Redress in Communist Romania: New Insights*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2017, p. 204.

⁷ According to Christie Davis, political humor is a “thermometer” which measures the “temperature” of a group. For more on this argument see Christie Davies, “Humor and Protests: Jokes under Communism”, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52, 2007, pp. 291-305.

⁸ See the documentary *Puterea Râsului*, realized for the Romanian National Television (TVR 1) by Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, min. 0. 56-1.00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8>. (accessed 10 May 2017).

“Capitalism will come back to Romania when pigs may fly. The audience started to laugh and applaud loudly. Then Ceaușescu said ‘Wait a second! Do not rush to applaud! Modern genetics made huge progress, and the day might come when pigs do fly...’”⁹.

Romanian communist apparatus required amateur comedy brigades to perform – in line with collectivism – humoristic spectacles all over the country. Thus, these comedy brigades were state supported amateur artist collectives from various backgrounds (students, factory workers, teachers, nurses, medical physicians and peasants). Although the phenomenon of (artistic) agitation brigades was widespread after the 1960s in Romania, there is a lacuna in addressing this issue in the academic research on the communist period, especially in the rural settings. The topic of the artistic brigades during Romanian communism is tackled in very few studies. Ionuț Stan conducted research on students’ comedy brigades in the 1980s Romania for his Master dissertation and devoted a chapter to the first student comedy brigade entailed “*Ars Amatoria*”¹⁰. He quotes Adrian Cioroianu who dedicated a few pages to the Festival of Art and Students’ Creation – where students’ comedy brigades used to perform their humorous sketches – but does not elaborate on the topic of the artistic brigades¹¹. Cristian Vasile tackles the amateur art movement in the Ceaușescu’s regime in the time interval 1965-1971, mentioning the activity of the trade unions’ artistic brigades¹².

Yet, although some local public libraries in Romanian cities and villages still keep the so-called “Manuals for Artistic Brigades of Agitation” published in 1963¹³ or 1973¹⁴ – and Romanians preserve the memory of these performances by storing it on online platforms of remembrance – there are no comprehensive academic studies devoted to this topic¹⁵.

This paper aims to partly fill this gap. To this end, it addresses the topic of amateur rural comedy brigades in communist Romania, focusing on one rural

⁹ *Ibidem*, the documentary *Puterea Râsului* min. 2.43-3.46.

¹⁰ Ionuț Stan’s unpublished MA dissertation is entitled *Youth Cultures in 1980s Romania: Students’ Comedy Brigades*, Central European University, 2009. www.etd.ceu.hu/2009/stan_ionut.pdf. (accessed 11 May 2017).

¹¹ Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx: o introducere in istoria comunismului românesc*, CurteaVeche, București, 2005.

¹² Cristian Vasile, “The Amateur Art Movement at the Beginning of the Ceaușescu Regime, 1965-1971”, *Studii și materiale de istorie contemporană*, no. 1, 2012, pp. 126-142.

¹³ Aurel Martin, *Îndreptarul instructorului Brigăzii Artistice de Agitație*, Comitetul Central pentru Artă și Cultură, București, 1963.

¹⁴ For example, the Library “Petre Dulfu” in Baia Mare keeps a manual published in 1973 entitled *Cu Brigada...: Culegere de texte și fragmente pentru Brigăzile Artistice de Educație*. The manual was published by Centrul de Îndrumare a Creației Populare Maramureș.

¹⁵ Just to mention an online source where various memorabilia related to Romanian artistic brigades can be explored see “Brigada Artistică”, <http://brigada-artistica.blogspot.com/feeds/posts/default?alt=rss>. (accessed 10 May 2017).

brigade from Vaslui County which performed for comedy festivals organized by the state. The choice of Vaslui County is not inadvertent. From 1970 until 2016 Vaslui has continued to host the international Comedy Festival “Constantin Tănase”. The methodology of this paper consisted of four interviews conducted with the amateur actors – from rural settings who performed in comedy brigades – and with their spectators. The interviews were realized between 2012 and 2014. Other primary sources consulted are photographs displaying sequences of the amateur artists’ performances, newspapers addressing the achievements of the “Constantin Tănase” Comedy Festival held from 1970 in Vaslui, and various “Manuals for Artistic Brigades of Agitation” published in 1963, 1973 and 1976. The particular methodological approach of this paper draws on microhistory by zooming in on the “micro” level of the communist cultural activities (namely on a rural comedy brigade)¹⁶. At the same time, this paper does not aim to present a “local history” related to the communist past but rather to address “large questions in small places”¹⁷.

Dannagal G. Young points out that political humor “is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. Within that broad category, political *satire* occupies a specific role”¹⁸. Although we can approximate the meanings of this type of humor, “political humor” understood both as a form of art and as a form of persuasive discourse refuses a definitive definition. Yet, as Charles Schutz argues “humor in politics is a significant phenomenon, both for understanding politics and for understanding humor in its most social role”¹⁹. The academic literature on political humor usually tackles humor’s impact, audience, and content. In the Romanian context, political humor is usually addressed from the perspective of humor’s

¹⁶ Microhistory is loosely defined as a type (method) of historical investigation which focuses on “micro” units of research (such as a person, a single event or a village). In this type of research the knowledge the historian gets is partial. Yet, according to Thomas C. Cohen, microhistory is a practice rather than a field of social and political inquires. He points out five traits of microhistory: “its insistence on the dense connectedness of things; its professed ignorance or very partial knowledge; its invitation to the reader to share doubt; its bridled intimacy with the elusive past; its half-baffled engagement with story as device and historical fact”. (For more on this issue see Thomas C. Cohen, “The Macrohistory of Microhistory”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2017, p. 53.

¹⁷ Charles V. Joyener, *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1999, p. 1.

¹⁸ Dannagal G. Young, “Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities”, in Kate Kenski, Kathleen Hall Jameison (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199793471-e-29>. (accessed 12 May 2017).

¹⁹ Charles Schutz, *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, 1997, p. 9.

content whereas the other two perspectives (impact and audience) remain less explored. A few academic studies focus on the counter-part of the official humor (underground, clandestine political humor) while official, state-supported humor during Romanian communist regime is much less addressed.

The main purpose of the state-supported humor was to integrate the people (“the proletariat”) into artificial organizations. Thus, state-supported humor was used as a persuasive force to influence and “educate” audiences. Unlike the clandestine humor, the official one was not a “thermometer” of society because the society’s answer to it was a form of euphemized submission to authority and not a genuine reaction²⁰. Correspondingly, “laughing for the state” represented a form of euphemized submission to authority whose political dimensions have been many times overlooked in the studies dedicated to the communist culture.

The Romanian communist *status quo* feared (political) popular humor and this might be the reason why the production of humorous materials was strictly supervised and censored by authorities. The clandestine political humor was carefully monitored by *Securitate* and in some cases the most “dangerous” joke tellers were even imprisoned or put under constant surveillance. At the same time, the so-called “comedy brigades” were supported and encouraged by the regime on the grounds that official political humor can function as a weapon of social correction. In addition to amateur comedy brigades, the state also organized humor festivals, competitions and salons all over the country.

The national, monthly official humor magazine *Urzica* (the Nettle), published from 1974 to 1989 attempted to control the production of humorous creations and to delimitate “healthy” humorous productions (considered by the regime useful weapons of social correction) from “reactionary humor” (regarded as a treason against the nation). By the same token, the comedy festivals organized by the State attempted to also control the production of popular humor. *Urzica* Magazine for Satire and Humor was edited by the Romanian Council for Socialist Culture and Education while other magazines for humor – for instance the bi-monthly publication *Moftul Românesc* (The Romanian Mood) – was edited by the Romanian Ministry of Culture. Both official magazines for humor and satire, and the comedy festivals functioned as official channels of communist humor dissemination. Nicolae Ceaușescu was quoted in the official humor magazine *Urzica* (February, 1979) asserting that the weapon of humor can function as a critique directed against the defects of society: “Make your art a tool for continuous improvement of society and human being, a tool of affirmation of justice and social equity!”²¹.

²⁰ Christie Davies, “Humor and Protests: Jokes under Communism”, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52, 2007, pp. 291-305.

²¹ Nicolae Ceaușescu quoted in “Editorial în Asociația Umoriștilor Români&CCES”, *Urzica*, no. 652, 1979, p. 5, <https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/umorul-din-vremea-lui-ceausescu>. (accessed 10 May 2017).

Against this background, the communist regime wanted all the flaws of “society” to be addressed by these artistic brigades, whose main task was to first “increase awareness” of past and present misconducts and eventually to amend them. The didactic function of the comedy brigades’ performances was also put forth by officialdom at the local level. Not only were the big, industrialized cities supposed to have their comedy brigades but also the remote villages of communist Romania. After the 1950s the rural comedy brigades started to take part in competitions of humor and satire organized by the state within the large festivals of comedy across the country. This production of state-supported humor increased after the 1970s and more and more artistic brigades changed their formal status from (artistic) agitation brigades to comedy brigades.

Constantin Tănase and the Vaslui Comedy Festival

Vaslui is a county in North-Eastern Romania, mostly known as being a rather poor area, and for the biannual “Costantin Tănase” Comedy Festival organized since 1970, and until the present. These types of politically backed festivals existed in Romania since the 1950s. Yet, this festival in Vaslui is one of the few communist cultural events that focused exclusively on comedy and its multifarious manifestations. Like the Festival of National Culture “Song to Romania” (1976-1989), this Comedy Festival aimed at bringing to the fore front amateur artists whose performance of humor worked as an ideological tool within the larger picture of the communist culture. The fact that the festival was named after Constantin Tănase is not without significance. As I will show in what follows, the festival needed a local, “tutelary personality” to be named after.

Constantin Tănase (1880-1945) was a Romanian comedian and writer who firstly initiated an amateur theatre group in Vaslui, where together with his friends performed on improvised stages such as a barn, or a cellar. Meanwhile, he worked as a primary teacher in several villages from Vaslui. In 1899 he moved to Bucharest and in 1919 he established the Variety Theater “Cărăbuș”. Although he was born in Vaslui it seems that after 1899 he visited his home town only a couple of times – on tours with his comedy theatre – until his death in 1945. In spite of not so many documented ties with his home town, the Vaslui municipality has decided to name a House of Culture (inaugurated in 1972), a biennale comedy festival (inaugurated in 1970), and a street after Constantin Tănase’s name. Parts of his personal belongings are currently hosted by the Vaslui County Museum. His death in 1945 is veiled in mystery and rumors: some voices claim that the comedian was assassinated by the Red Army; others assert that heart attack or an untreated lung disease constituted the

real cause of his death, while there are other opinions according to which Tănase died of complications from an untreated tonsillitis²².

The hypothesis according to which the Red Army's actions were related to his death is backed by a series of suppositions and coincidences. According to some news agencies

“in a presentation of the ‘Constantin Tănase’ Variety Theatre in Bucharest, it is revealed that Tănase was still performing in Bucharest a year after the Soviet invasion, and that, during one of his shows, he even satirized the obsession the invaders had with watches of any kind, for which they even plundered people walking on streets, in broad daylight, saying: ‘Dava! watch!’ (Give me your watch!)”²³.

Whatever was the real cause of his death, it seems that the fatidic day of 29 August 1945 when Constantin Tănase was found dead, was only at a couple of days distance from the evening when he performed at “Cărăbuș” theatre a subversive parody of the Soviet invaders. His last performance is described as follows:

“After being banned from performing this show, Tănase presented himself before the audience with tens of watches hanging over the sleeves of his trench, but without saying a word. Then he pulled out from the pocket of his coat a big watch and addressed himself to an already ecstatic audience: ‘He says ‘tick’, I say ‘tack’ [in Romanian the word for ‘tack’ is homophone with the word for ‘I keep my mouth shut’]”²⁴.

Although the hypothesis of the political assassination has never been officially confirmed or supported by evidence-based statements, those who knew Tănase perpetuated this rumor because they wanted to make him a “free spirit” and hero.

The first “Constantin Tănase” Comedy Festival took place in Vaslui in July 1970 on the improvised stage of the I.C. Frimu cinema house. According to Dumitru V. Marin the comedy festival emerged in a moment when the communist power decided that Romanians needed a culture which reflects the

²² Aurel Storin, the literary secretary of Constantin Tănase's theater is the author of a monograph about this institution (Aurel Storin, *Teatrul de Revistă “Constantin Tănase” 1919-2000: De la “Cărăbuș” la “Savoy”*, Fundația Stelar, București, 2001). He points out that all the hypotheses regarding Tănase's death are unfounded. Storin claims that the comedian passed away in August 1945 because he drank a cold glass of beer in a very hot day. This difference of temperature in his body allegedly triggered an old lung disease. For more on this issue see Aurel Storin in Dana Mateescu, Răzvan Mateescu, “De ce a murit Constantin Tănase?”, September, 2011, <http://edituramateescu.ro/2011/09/de-ce-a-murit-constantin-tanase/>. (accessed 9 May 2017).

²³ “Destination Romania/Vaslui: The County where Humor Feels Like Home”, *AGERPRES*, April, 2014, pres.ro/engleza-destinatie-romania/2014/04/03/destination-romania-vaslui-the-county-where-humour-feels-like-home-12-18-48. (accessed 12 May 2017)

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

values of the “new man”²⁵. As part and parcel of the communist party’s cultural directives, each Romanian town and village’s culture house was supposed to display for its public “site-specific” artistic activities and to cherish a local personality (artist, scientist, worker, collective farmer and so on). In the wooden language of communist propaganda each town or village was supposed to put forward a “tutelary personality” – usually someone who had some biographical ties with each specific location – on the condition that Nicolae Ceaușescu remained *primus inter pares* of all “tutelary personalities” of the nation. All cultural production (comedy art included) was scrutinized for removing “bourgeois” blemishes within the communist process of cultural re-valorization. In the given ideological context Marin argues that choosing a “tutelary personality” for Vaslui’s Comedy Festival had been rather convoluted and Constantin Tănase seemed for that moment the best choice. Yet, the comedian’s “aura” was not fully illuminating the “new man” ideal type. His personal history, performances, and, more importantly, the rumors surrounding his death recommended him much less than other Vaslui-born artists and intellectuals. However, after some deliberation, the local heritage called “Constantin Tănase” has been accepted and cosmetized to look “communist enough”.

The first Comedy Festival gathered a reduced number of spectators. The organizers could not find an appropriate location for the festival and many shows took place on the improvised scene of an old cinema house. The amateur comedians invited to perform at the first edition of the festival presented various humorous sketches and theatrical plays whose texts were not thoroughly scrutinized by censors. The second edition in 1972 was organized with more “care for details” in light of the July Theses in 1971²⁶. The Vaslui born theater critic Valentin Silvestru accepted the proposal to become the president of the comedy festival. For the second edition of the festival “even the caricatures were conceived as odes for authorities”²⁷. The official political humor dominated all cultural production of the moment. The journalists Mihail Harea and Mircea Coloșenco wrote an article in the local newspaper *Vremea Nouă* (number 1348, 27 June 1972) in which they revealed the names of the individual winners of the amateur artists’ contests and the (artistic) agitation brigades, which won prizes and distinctions at the Comedy Festival Constantin Tănase both in 1970 and 1972. According to Dumitru V. Marin, only starting with 1974 (the third edition of the comedy festival), the phenomenon called

²⁵ Dumitru V. Marin, *Festivalul Național al Umorului “Constantin Tănase” Vaslui*, Editura Pim, Iași, 2010.

²⁶ “July Theses” (in Romanian “Tezele din iulie”) refer to Nicolae Ceaușescu’s nationalist cultural policy formulated in 1971, and reiterated in 1983 (the so-called “Mangalia Theses”). The aim of these “theses” was to impose an ideological program for all cultural/artistic production of the Romanian socialist society.

²⁷ Dumitru V. Marin, *Festivalul Național al Umorului...cit.*, p. 52.

“artistic agitation brigade” reached its “heights of glory”, displaying for the public sketches performed by forty people accompanied by musical instruments. For the inexperienced public of those years, seeing these shows was entertaining and a way of evading from the everyday tediousness.

The state financed the décor, the performers’ costumes and all the other elements related to stage design and choreography. The humorous repertoire was very strictly regulated by the state and the only jokes accepted were those about everyday life happenings and undesirable behaviors. The fact that only in 1974 the artistic brigades gained popularity and consistent state financial support is also confirmed by Cristian Vasile who claims that: “In the first years of the Ceaușescu regime the amateur performing arts were not a political priority for the leadership of Romanian Communist Party”²⁸. Yet, after 1972 the festival’s popularity and state support increased dramatically. Although the “Constantin Tănase” Comedy Festival mostly focused on amateur comedians, professional actors also performed on the festival’s stage and in various villages and cities of the Vaslui County. The professional actors Doru-Octavian Dumitru, Dan Puric, Radu Beligan, Corneliu Palade, Romică Țociu, Dem Rădulescu, Tamara Buciuceanu-Botez, Draga Olteanu-Matei and Mitică Popescu (among others) participated to the festival activities, either as jury members or as performers. In 1982 the official name of the festival was changed to the “Constantin Tănase” Humor Biennale. According to the authorities of the time, the denomination of “festival” was reserved exclusively to the Festival of National Culture “Song to Romania” (1976-1989).

Amateur Rural Comedy Brigades

In Sheila Fitzpatrick’s glossary of terms used in her book *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, brigade (*brigad*) is defined as “main kolkhoz unit”²⁹. The culture of communist brigades is also analyzed in George Last’s study on collectivization in the German Democratic Republic. Last tackles the tactics of the agitation brigades in rural areas, emphasizing the deleterious consequences of the forced collectivization. As he points out, the agitation groups were made up of local inhabitants whose mission was to ensure that all the villagers joined the collective farms. The brigades of agitation’s campaigns were sometimes disregarded by the villagers: “They avoided entering into conversation with the

²⁸ Cristian Vasile, “The Amateur Art Movement at the beginning of the Ceaușescu Regime, 1965-1971”, *Studii și Materiale de Istorie Contemporană*, no. 1, 2012, p. 126.

²⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p. XIII.

brigades by shutting doors, disappearing into the fields, and avoiding or keeping quiet at public meetings”³⁰.

In line with these agitprop goals, the communist brigades in the former Eastern bloc also focused on the cultural-artistic aspects of the socialist lifestyle. In this framework, the culture-agitation brigades allegedly performed a “crucial” role in people’s civic and moral education. Correspondingly, the communist brigades were described by the poets and artists of the former Eastern bloc as a “Forge of Dreams”³¹. In a similar vein, Vladimir Brovkin points out that “the concept that art had to be useful to the masses logically led to the conclusion that, the only way it could be useful was if art production was performed by the Communist Party-led artistic brigades”³². The official function of these artistic brigades was actually to “agitate” the masses against the “old man” and its values. At the same time this re-valorization of cultural production also considered the new ways for people to spend their free, non-working, “*loisir*” time. In other words, the state wanted to control and regulate every sphere of daily life, including the moments when people needed some leisure time and entertainment. For this purpose, the party engineered the creation of the so-called agitation (artistic) brigades. The artistic brigades were widespread after the 1950s in all the Soviet states and the socialist countries of the former Eastern bloc, and they functioned similarly to a “cultural kolkhoz unit”³³.

Comedy brigades also played an important ideological role in the mandatory mobilization of the masses on the road to communist cultural production and consumption. Hungarian historians András Gerő and Iván Pető point out that brigades were organizational units in factories

“under the socialist economic regime; in line with the concept of collectivism, brigades were required, in addition to performing their allotted role in the production process, to undertake other, lifestyle related tasks (for instance cinema and theater visits) as required of a true ‘socialist’”³⁴.

In trying to create a “national communist style” in artistic production, the Romanian cultural hegemony of the moment decided to bridge the gap between amateur artists (so-called artisans) and professional artists. While the artisans’ category was regarded as the depositary of ethnic and cultural

³⁰ George Last, *After the “Socialist Spring”: Collectivization and Economic Transformation in the GDR*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford, 2009, p. 17.

³¹ Carol S. Lilly, “Problems of Persuasion: Communist Agitation and Propaganda in Post-war Yugoslavia”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 53, no. 2, 1994, p. 395.

³² Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia after Lenin: Politics, Culture & Society*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p. 15.

³³ A kolkhoz unit was a form of cooperative farm in the Soviet Union.

³⁴ András Gerő, Iván Pető, *Unfinished Socialism: Pictures from the Kádár Era*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 1999, p. 244.

Romanian traditions, the professional artists' experimentation with multimedia techniques was considered as "Western" and "not Romanian"³⁵. Thus, "folk art" (*arta populară*) has been used as a political instrument in advancing the ideology of the party and the image of the nation. The amateur artists (called in Romanian *popular artists*) were expected to create for the state and to advance the "authentic Romanian folk ethos". Against this background, special Centers of Guidance for Folkloric Creation (*Centrul de Îndrumare a Creației Populare*) were created in all major cities of the country. These centers regulated the cultural production of the amateur artists and conceived "Manuals for Artistic Brigades of Agitation". The manuals consisted of repertoires of topics and anecdotes considered adequate for the process of building the "new man". Each artistic brigade had an instructor who was expected to follow the prescriptions stipulated in manuals (the so-called "The Instructor's Guide to the Artistic Brigade of Agitation"). Cristian Vasile argues that 1968 represented "a turning point for the amateur art movement" in Romania, pointing out that "especially after 1968 the party and governmental authorities have introduced administrative and social structures that encouraged and demanded mass participation within the frame of amateur art movement"³⁶.

As any other official show taking place in communist Romania, comedy brigades' performances were organized and supported by the state. This does not mean that the actors were remunerated for this type of "creative" work. As amateur artists, the comedians performed "*pro bono*", for the state. Yet, the amateur artists received free accommodation, transportation and food in the cities or villages where they were touring. Rural comedy brigades in Vaslui – e.g. Laza, Ferești, Puiești – were formed of five up to fifteen amateur actors. Their shows took place in front of a large public (in the 1970s almost "all inhabitants of the village" attended their shows)³⁷. Unlike the students' comedy brigades or worker's comedy brigades in the big cities of Romania, which had their own publications (small magazines, booklets), rural comedy brigades relied heavily on the oral transmission of their performances. As one of the inhabitants of Laza village recalls:

³⁵ For more on the preference of artisan artists over professional artists during Ceaușescu's regime in Romania see Alice Mocănescu, "National Art as Legitimate Art: 'National between Tradition and Ideology in Ceaușescu's Romania'". Paper presented at the Conference "The Contours of Legitimacy in Central Europe: New Approaches in Postgraduate Studies", St. Antony's College, Oxford, May, 24-26, 2002. http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oaces/conference/papers/Alice_Mocanescu.pdf. (accessed 11 may 2017).

³⁶ Cristian Vasile, "The Amateur Art Movement...cit."

³⁷ In an interview conducted by the author with CA on 16 December 2013 in Poienești (Vaslui), the respondent mentions that "aproape tot satul venea să vadă brigada în 1970" (almost all inhabitants from the village came to see the comic brigade's show in the 1970s).

“After collectivization the mayor decided to install a local radio station. Each citizen of our village had a radio at home when many of us had no TV sets yet. The leader of the agitation (artistic) brigade of our village used to invite us to attend their performances and sometimes he even told some anecdotes to warm us up”³⁸.

These artistic interventions were quite well-received by the locals who kept reproducing the brigade’s anecdotes on various occasions, and even enriched the repertoire with new humorous elements.

The state wanted the comic brigades to perform on topics which satirized laziness, ignorance, drunkenness, women’s obsession with makeup, “religious obscurantism”, the vice of avarice, students cheating during exams, small bribing for some administrative or medical favors, the passion for luxury goods and other “mores” of the “old man”. For instance, one of my interviewees recalls a particular humorous sketch which occasioned in the 1960s a lot of collective laughter. The sketch put forth the bad habit of a collective farm’s member who used to get drunk every single day. He had a horse-drawn carriage which served him as a means of transportation from the Agricultural Production Cooperative (CAP) to his home and back. One day, he fell asleep (after a drink session) in the cart and the horse took him on a long journey, up to three remote villages, until the peasant woke up in a lake full of raucous frogs and rats. The spectators were not necessarily amused by the sketch’s message or by the actors’ performance. What aroused their laughter was the association of the drunkard image with that of certain comrades who were in important positions in the Agricultural Production Cooperative, being the only holders of horse-drawn carriages in the whole village. Thus, the spectators’ laughter can be interpreted as a form of euphemized obedience to authority’s didactic purposes regarding the mis-education of the masses. Yet, the same laughter can be also understood as a critique directed against the “new man” of communism, who was in charge with administrating the freshly born Agricultural Production Cooperatives.

One of the most enthusiastic artistic brigades in Vaslui County during communism was Laza village’s brigade. The amateur actors of Laza village won numerous prizes in almost all the editions of the “Constantin Tănase” Comedy Festival. The genealogy of this rural comedy brigade can be traced back to the beginning of the 1950s when a group of young citizens formed an amateur art collective called “Laza Agitation Brigade”. The initiative belonged to the medical assistant Gheorghe Vasiliu and the young teacher Constantin Bosânceanu. The brigade’s instructors Vasiliu and Bosânceanu advertised the ideas of the amateur art collective among their colleagues and neighbors and in a short time other teachers, peasants and workers joined the club. As in other rural (and urban) areas of Romania the purpose of these brigades of agitation

³⁸ The author’s discussion with FA, April 6, 2014.

was to address, in an artistic way, the “real life” of the communist citizens. Correspondingly, these brigades’ aim was to disclose – in a moralistic manner – both the “achievements” and the “failures” of the process of production and the citizens’ mores. Those who performed the moralizing sketches, songs and choreographies were called interpreters (in Romanian *interpreți*). At the beginning, these shows were not exclusively “humorous” but rather a mixture of storytelling, dances, and theatrical performances. Their stage was not only that of the Culture House (*Căminul Cultural*) but also the fields and the tractor trailers. Thus, the brigade performed in the “public space of the fields” getting out of the “white cube”³⁹ of the Culture Houses. Rather than presented as spontaneous artistic happenings, these spectacles were staged in advance. By the end of the 1950s the collective of interpreters increased and new members joined the initial brigade. Iulia Vasiliu, Ion Aprodu, Victor and Antonică Cozma and many others contributed with their performances to the artistic-political project put forth by the artistic agitation brigade.

Their cultural achievements started to materialize outside their village’s boundaries, and after winning numerous prizes – mostly for comedy performance – the brigade decided to change its status and name. In 1962 the old name “Laza’s Agitation Brigade” was changed to “Laza’s Satire and Humor Brigade”⁴⁰. From that moment on, the brigade’s activities dealt almost exclusively with comedic performances by amateur artists. Russian language teacher Alexandru Guzu became the new instructor of the brigade and a new series of intellectuals joined the collective. In December 2008 a six pages booklet distributed online and in hard copies for free – by the Village Hall and the Local Council of Laza – published a short article about the communist comedy brigades⁴¹. Under the title “Let’s get to know our past”, Alexandru Guzu (the former instructor of Laza’s comedy brigade) points out that Laza’s brigade won more than ten prizes in communist artistic competitions and participated to “all the final stages of the festivals organized in Vaslui and at the national level within the festival the ‘Song of Romania’”⁴².

He continues citing the theater critic Valentin Silvestru and the professional actor Horia Șerbănescu who both praised the comedy brigade in the local press of the 1970s. According to Guzu:

³⁹ The term the “white cube” usually refers to modern and contemporary art galleries, museums and other spaces where artistic production is displayed within the walls of the institutions of culture.

⁴⁰ Dumitru V. Marin, *Festivalul Național al Umorului...cit.*, p. 48.

⁴¹ “Info Laza: Buletin Informativ Editat de Primăria și Consiliul Local Laza”, no. 2, December, 2008, <http://primarialazavs.ro/media/Buletin%20info/Buletin%20informativ%20nr2%20Dec%202008.pdf>. (accessed 10 April 2017).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

“The brigade’s interpreters (teachers, employees, and peasants) often succeeded in making patriotic education, civic education, and in fighting against laziness, negligence, and theft, contributing to village’s beautification, children’s schooling and the good administration of the rural community”⁴³.

Guzu mentions all these “accomplishments” of the Laza brigade inferring that these artistic achievements of Laza’s amateur actors deserve to be acknowledged and remembered twenty years after the fall of communism. He continues his “*in memoriam*” article by stating that the performances had an “extraordinary impact on the spectators”. The short article ends up abruptly wishing “good health and happy winter holidays to all of you”.

The villagers assisted to the comedy brigade’s shows on a regular basis and some of them offered suggestions for creating the new sketches to be performed on the stage at various artistic competitions. For example, the shoemaker Mitică Asavei was called “the man with ideas” and his creativity and humor were well-known by all the brigade’s members⁴⁴. However, not all villagers appreciated this communist humor and some even remember the shows with bitterness. In a similar vein, some villagers claimed that they cannot remember anything related to these spectacles and refrained from talking about this issue, while others pointed out that although they cannot remember specific details, these brigades’ spectacles were “entertaining” and “funny” in an era when the national TV program lasted only almost two hours and those two hours consisted of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speeches.

The Vaslui based professor, TV moderator, patron and producer Dumitru V. Marin –former organizer of the Constantin Tănase Comedy Festival and from 2011 possessor of personal statue weighing no more than 130 kg⁴⁵ – also prizes the performances of the Laza Comedy Brigade in a monograph – published in 2010 – dedicated to forty years of humor at the Constantin Tănase

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Dumitru V. Marin calls the shoemaker Mitică Asavei “the man with ideas” in his monograph *Festivalul Național al Umorului “Constantin Tănase”*...cit., p. 84.

⁴⁵ Dumitru V. Marin is Professor Doctor in Humanities, sponsor, producer and moderator at TVV (TV Vaslui), writer, former candidate for the function of Mayor of Vaslui city and former responsible with the Communist Department of Art and Culture in Vaslui County. Alexandra Buzaș adds that Dumitru V. Marin has been also character in Cornel Porumboiu’s movie *12. 08 East of Bucharest* (in Romanian, *A fost sau nu a fost?*). According to her, the sponsor, moderator and producer of TV Vaslui was impersonated in Porumboiu’s notorious movie by the character Jderescu.(for more on this issue see Alexandra Buzaș, “Pe urmele lui Cornel Porumboiu la Vaslui cu întrebări și adjective”, <http://www.mediafax.ro/cultura-media/pe-urmele-lui-corneliu-porumboiu-la-vaslui-cu-intrebari-si-adjective-galerie-foto-4607266>. (accessed 10 May 2017). According to several Vaslui daily newspapers (*Vremea Nouă*, 9 March 2011; *Monitorul de Vaslui*, 14 March 2011, and *Agora Press*, 05 March 2011), Dumitru V. Marin paid an artist to have his own statue cast in cement. According to the same local newspapers he also published several self-congratulatory books about this own career’s achievements.

National Festival of Comedy. He honors the memory of the former communist-backed comedy brigade as follows:

“Laza brigade members... had native talent. I convinced them to be sincere and straightforward. Their sketches’ direct criticism and generalization power revealed consistency and humor”⁴⁶.

To formulate his homage to the memory of Laza’s comedy brigade in a more persuasive manner, Dumitru V. Marin also quotes the reputable theater critic Valentin Silvestru and the actor Horia Șerbănescu, who allegedly pointed out in the local newspaper *Vremea Nouă* (on 8 October 1982) that “Vaslui is the national capital of humor while Laza is Vaslui’s capital of humor”. They also pointed out that “Laza comedy brigade is the prototype of Romanian humor, one of the finest brigades in the whole country”⁴⁷. The notoriety of this rural comedy brigade became considerable in Moldova (the region located in the north-east of Romania) but the claim that this rural comedy brigade “was one of the finest in the whole country” is certainly an overstatement. Conceivably, the artistic activity of the brigade was regarded as the “prototype of Romanian humor” because it met the requirements of the “national communist style” cultural production, deeply rooted in the Romanian “healthy folklore” and traditions. The amateur comedians and the folk ethos style inspired sketches satisfied the specific criteria of the national communist culture. Perhaps, in this specific, political sense, the rural comedy brigade from Vaslui was regarded as the “prototype of Romanian humor”.

However, it is difficult to disentangle who actually wrote the paragraphs referring to Laza brigade and its cultural merits. Both Alexandru Guzu and Dumitru V. Marin mention the same quotations from Valentin Silvestru and Horia Șerbănescu (quoted from the newspaper *Vremea Nouă*). After comparing the two texts, it seems that Marin actually quoted in his 2010 monograph a longer version of Alexandru Guzu’s text, adding his own views and memories related to this rural comedy brigade.

As mentioned earlier, the rural amateur artists who performed in comedy brigades had various professional backgrounds. Most of them were teachers, nurses, tailors, shoemakers and agricultural workers. Still, the majority of them were primary and secondary school teachers. The comedy brigades’ activities were not restricted to adults’ circles. Some teachers adapted the humorous sketches from the brigade’s repertoire to fit specific school festivities where children were trained to perform and interpret jokes and humorous

⁴⁶ Dumitru V. Marin, *Festivalul Național al Umorului...cit.*

⁴⁷ Valentin Silvestru and Horia Șerbănescu quoted in Dumitru V. Marin, *Festivalul Național al Umorului...cit.*, pp. 50-51.

sketches. A kindergarten teacher from Laza village (now retired)⁴⁸ recalls that the comedy plays were indispensable in all main school's festivities. On these occasions, the teachers used to consult "Anthologies of Anecdotes and Epigrams" whose content was specially designed to sustain the artistic education of the communist Romania's children.

For instance, a popular anthology of anecdotes in the 1980s was *Râdeți Copii! !* (You Children, Laugh!) whose "Forward" points out that:

"Laughter proved to be an excellent pedagogue who has a lot of effective methods against pride, ridicule, lying, gossip, demagoguery, imposture, servility, greed, speculation, naivety, trickery, rudeness, indolence, and other defects which are the main subjects of the chapters presented in this volume"⁴⁹.

On the inside back cover, it is written in bold the Latin apothegm *Ridendo Castigat Mores* (Laughing Corrects the Mores). The choice of this Latin motto emphasizes Romania's national cultural identity and its "Latin legacy (linguistic and supposedly ethnic)"⁵⁰. The moralizing character of the humorous sketches displayed in this anthology of anecdotes is transparent even from the titles of some chapters. For instance, Chapter 2 is entitled "Among the Qualities and Defects of Childhood" (*Printre Calitățile și Defectele Copilărești*), while one of its sub-chapters reads: "Politeness in Suffering" (*Politețea în Suferință*)⁵¹.

One of the anecdotes listed under the rubric "Politeness in Suffering" refers to the impoliteness when asking for more food:

"Cocuța: Can I have please a third slice of your birthday cake? Elvira: Were you not told at home that it is not polite to ask for food supplements? Cocuța: Of course I was told, but the advice was not concerning the very tiny slices"⁵².

Another anecdote reads:

"A child sees an old man crying on a bench in the park. The child asks: Why do you cry grandpa? The elderly man answers: My dad hit me because I behaved disrespectfully towards my grandfather"⁵³.

⁴⁸ Interview with AC, 24 December 2013.

⁴⁹ My translation from Romanian (Patița Silvestru, George Zarafu, *Râdeți Copii! Antologie de Anecdote și Epigrame*, Editura Ion Creangă, București, 1985, p. 5).

⁵⁰ Adrian Velicu, "Cultural Memory between National and Transnational", *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 3, 2011, p. 1.

⁵¹ Patița Silvestru, George Zarafu, *Râdeți Copii!...cit.*, p. 101.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 101-102.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

In the same moralizing register, the chapter dedicated to “Politeness in Suffering” reveals anecdotes whose message was meant to trigger self-criticism. For instance, an anecdote refers to those who speak of the faults of others but fail to acknowledge their own defects:

“An elderly gentleman on a bus says: The young people today show no longer basic good manners. A passenger replies: But why do you say that? I have noticed that somebody gave up his seat for you. The elderly gentleman answers back: Yes, but for my wife, poor thing, no one gave up his seat!”⁵⁴.

Pupils were expected to perform these sketches and anecdotes in front of their colleagues, teachers, parents, grandparents and other spectators from their village. The comic texts presented in these anthologies were usually rewritten and sometimes adapted by teachers in a manner which was suitable to reflect on the contextual situation and “moral defects” of the child-performer. In this way the most “serious defects” of the performer were underlined in a “humorous” yet supposedly, “self-critical” manner. Sometimes, the “comic effect” prolonged even beyond the school organized spectacle of comedy and children continued laughing and making fun of the performer. Thus, the effect of laughter did not trigger a collective ritual of “reeling out” (as Alexei Yurchak argued about humor’s effects in the Soviet Union), but rather functioned as a force which further disciplined and punished. As one of the children (now adult) recalls:

“The performance of these anecdotes was rehashed every single day, for about one week until the day of the spectacle. Each time, I rehashed my sketch I felt guilty. I knew I was a lazy pupil and I liked only playing chess. However, I did not like others to remind me that all the time and to laugh about it. I remember these school festivities and I have to admit that these memories are not very pleasant”⁵⁵.

Still, for other former children, the supposedly humorous “defects of childhood” performed on the school’s stage were perceived as “one spectacle among others” where they were supposed to take part at least twice a year. However, not all pupils received these kinds of moralizing anecdotes to learn by hard and perform on stage. Only those who showed up their “bad habits” were selected to perform in this comedy shows. By the same token, the moralizing sketches performed by the comedy brigades were directed against all categories of people who did not conform to the image of the new, socialist man. Although, theoretically, every citizen could have been criticized for various “bad habits” *via* humorous sketches, the most of the humorous production was limited to satirizing the peasants, “lazy” pupils, and sometimes the factory workers. The scissors of satire were not supposed to touch upon the misconduct

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ The author’s interview with GA, 25 December 2013.

of those who had powerful positions in the hierarchy of the communist system. The mayor, the first secretary, the director of the Agricultural Production Cooperative (CAP), the most influential teachers in the village, the doctor and other medical personnel were not targets of the comedy brigade's sketches. All aspects of civic life and unwillingness to align to the norms of the communist lifestyle were scrutinized but critiquing the regime was strictly forbidden. The comedy sketches, epigrams, monologues and anecdotes conceived to be performed on stage (especially at the comedy festivals) were checked and censured in advance. As Călin Husar (a former performer of ASE Brigade Bucharest) recalls:

“Every text conceived to be performed on the stage was checked, altered, censured but also negotiated at certain moments with the censors. We deliberately offered them to read texts with very strong critiques against the regime hoping that they will concentrate on censoring these parts while other softer jokes could stay”⁵⁶.

The censors intervened in the humorous sketches' content and sometimes the outcome was even more laughable for the spectators who immediately understood which parts of the show belonged to the original script and which ones were “engineered” by censors to look humorous but politically acceptable. In other words, there was a certain degree of complicity between the amateur comedians (especially the interpreters of the students' brigades) and their public. After 1983, the communist authorities considered to give up supporting the students' comedy brigades and to require them to stop performing. Yet, this was not the case in what regards the rural comedy brigades.

However, although the clandestine, everyday humor was filled with criticism against the regime, the rural comedy brigades were not risking performing a comedy sketch which could slightly be interpreted as a straightforward critique against the communist regime and its leader. Yet, this does not mean that some comedy sketches did not put forth “lizards” (in Romanian *șopârle*) whose deciphering depended on the understanding the Aesopian language and its codes. Thus, the rural comedy brigades played the game of the euphemized submission to authority. This was their way of coping with the political-cultural requirements of the moment. However, it cannot be claimed that their humorous works were intentionally oppositional, rebellious or anti-system. In other words, in spite of the post-communist assertions of those involved in comedy festivals' organization, the humorous performances of the rural comedy brigades during communism displayed “critical” jokes (the so-called “lizards”) about the communist regime and not necessarily against it.

⁵⁶ See the documentary *Puterea Râsului*, realized for Romanian National Television (TVR 1) by Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, min. 17.09-17.22., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8>. (accessed 10 May 2017).

Conclusions

This paper addressed the underexplored topic of state-supported comedy brigades during Romanian communism by focusing on the amateur rural comedy brigades from the Vaslui county in the 1970s and 1980s. Although these state supported rural comedy brigades performed their shows under the strict supervision of the communist authorities and relied to a certain extent on the Manuals for Artistic Brigades of Agitation's instructions, those directly involved in this cultural production claim that their comedy shows were not necessarily performed "for the state".

On the one hand, by mentioning all the "accomplishments" of their brigade (local and national prizes, "civic education", the so-called "political jokes" about the regime and the "extraordinary impact on the spectators"), they infer that these artistic-political achievements deserve to be acknowledged and remembered positively twenty years after the fall of communism.

On the other hand, not all those who assisted to the comedy brigades' spectacles share this view. Moreover, both the amateur comedian artists and the organizers of the communist festivals of comedy fail to mention the advantages these comedy brigades enjoyed. What they mentioned instead is the fact that many times the humorous sketches put forth what they call "lizards" (in Romanian *șopârle*) against the regime and the public reacted overwhelmingly to this form of political humor. This aspect is also recalled by some spectators, although no one –from those interviewed – could remember a concrete example.

As this paper attempted to argue, the rural comedy brigades – or at least the one addressed in this study – played the game of the euphemized submission to authority which places their amateur artistic production in the grey zone of complicity/resistance to communist *status quo*. Perhaps, this was their strategy of coping with the political-cultural requirements of the communist regime. However, it certainly cannot be asserted that their humorous sketches were deliberately conceived as an anti-system cultural movement. In other words, in spite of the post-communist declarations of those involved in comedy festivals' organization, the humorous performances of the rural comedy brigades during Romanian communism displayed political jokes *about* the communist regime and not necessarily *against* it.

To conclude, the power of political humor during dictatorial regimes ought not to be underestimated or disregarded. Yet, humor's power to intervene politically cannot be simplistically divided into collaboration with and resistance to communist hegemony. In other words, it would not be accurate to distinguish two categories of political humor produced and disseminated during Romanian communism: clandestine humor against the regime and state

supported humor. Further studies on the topic of political humor during Romanian communism could illuminate the intricacies and the various nuances of what “complicit humor” and “resistance humor” can entail, ranging from complicit submission to authority, euphemized submission, resistance, antagonism and so on. This conceptual exploration can facilitate a clearer perspective on how humorous artistic production can illuminate both collaboration (complicity) with communist *status quo* and resistance to it without overlooking the in-between grey zone.