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Students' perception about de-communicization: the case of Romania¹

1. Introduction

By all accounts, in the last two decades Romania has remained a laggard in terms of its efforts to come to terms with the abusive communist past, although Eastern Europe as a whole has engaged in a wide variety of transitional justice methods ranging from lustration and property restitution to the opening of secret archives and commemoration/memorialization of former political prisons.

Romanian exceptionalism with respect to transitional justice, the sum of governmental and civil society efforts to investigate, redress and prevent recent human rights infringements, is somewhat puzzling, given the fact that the country had more reasons than many of its neighbors to confront its recent past. First, Romania has endured one of the strictest Stalinist rules in the region, which extended well into the 1980s, at a time when other countries had embraced, at least partially, Gorbachev's political and economic reforms. Second, the country was the only one in the region to effect its exit from communist rule through a bloody uprising pitting the forces loyal to communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu against the second-echelon communist officials seeking to overthrow Romania's peculiar sultanist-cum-totalitarianist government.² Third, calls for a resolute break with the past and for the renewal of the political class by sidelining

communist decision-makers and secret agents figured prominently in the Romanian Revolution and in the April 1990 Timișoara Declaration and its famous Article 8.

Compared to the literature on transitional justice in other Eastern European countries, the literature on Romania is rather slim, and it exclusively deals with the interplay between state (political elites) and society (civil society groups) in deciding the direction and speed of the process, and the adoption and implementation of relevant legislation. To date, no study has teased out the attitudes and opinions of the Romanian general population relative to specific transitional justice methods or de-communization in general. As far as we know, this presentation is the first to report such attitudes in a systematic way. We do not claim, however, that we are the first to pose questions and propose questionnaires to ordinary Romanians. The October 2006 *Barometrul de Opine Publică* reported two separate sections titled “Dosariada” and “Ecourile sociale ale persecuțiilor din perioada comunistă.”³ This is just the latest report in a series of similar public opinion studies bearing relevance to the politics of memory in Romania.

While the communist past has remained a sour point in Romanian political discourse, and has led to a number of high-profile scandals involving politicians and critical intellectuals who tried to cover up their former ties to the Securitate, transitional justice has not figured among the priorities of any high-ranking post-communist politician until the 2004 presidential election. Is this general apathy toward the subject reflective of the attitudes of the political class or of the general Romanian population? How do ordinary Romanians see this topic? Is it important to them? Where do people get information from? Are there differences between the way they see, and the importance they attach to, de-

communization, lustration, file access, and the condemnation of the communist regime? More importantly, are there differences between Romanians residing in the more affluent, Western-oriented Transylvania, the economically-backward and Eastern-oriented Moldova, and the bustling, corrupt and politically dominant Wallachia (including the country's capital, Bucharest)?

2. Research design

Opinion polls offer political analysts and policy makers information on how the general population, or a designated segment of it, relates to specific political topics. Using samples representative of the general population, opinion polls may tell us something about people's attitudes, opinions and behavior toward the political process, legislation, public policies, ideological orientation, or intention to vote in upcoming elections or referenda. If repeated over longer time periods, opinion polls can allow us to discern patterns and trends in public opinion. But because samples are small, polls cannot tell us anything significant about the differences between social segments, regions, age groups or social categories. If, for example, the poll shows general apathy with respect to the topic of de-communization (as the September 2006 INSOMAR and October 2006 Opinion Barometer did), we are at a loss specifying if apathy extends uniformly across all the country's social categories or geographical regions.

Our study is different. Rather than proposing an opinion survey providing a glimpse on the subject at a particular point in time, we employ a quasi-experimental design which controls for some variables, but not for others. For reasons of expediency and access, we “controlled” (that is, kept constant) for age and education by asking university students to participate in the study. We also made sure to include students from the three historical regions of Romania: Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldova. During the first two weeks of March 2007, we arranged for the administration of questionnaires at the University of Bucharest (obtaining a total of 52 completed questionnaires), the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest (58 questionnaires), the Media University in Bucharest (6 questionnaires), the University of Pitești (52 questionnaires), the University of Brăila (43 questionnaires), the University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Gr. T. Popa” in Iași (48 questionnaires), the University “Petre Anghel” in Iași (23 questionnaires), the University “Transilvania” of Brașov (39 questionnaires), and the University of Oradea (22 questionnaires). Thus, our study included a total of 211 respondents in Wallachia (Bucharest, Brăila and Pitești), 61 in Transylvania (Oradea and Brașov), and 71 in Moldova (Iași). The grand total is 343 respondents selected from both private and public Romanian universities.

Because de-communicization, lustration and secret agent identification were prominent in public discourse more than they had been at any other point in time after the collapse of the communist regime, we expected respondents to report higher rates of familiarity with the topic and to attach greater importance to it. It is important to note that our methodological choice to include students means that levels of interest in, familiarity with, and knowledge of de-communicization will probably be higher than those of the

general population. De-communicization as a topic has time and again proven to be more important for residents of urban areas, who are also better exposed to mass media, especially the printed press where these topics have been widely debated. Arguably, students will also have greater chances to be exposed to the topic through their courses, their discussions with professors and fellow students, and their participation in intellectual and civil society groups. It is also likely that student levels will be lower than those registered by older respondents directly affected by communist experiences and human rights abuses.

3. Major findings and conclusions

The students' interest in de-conspiracy is relatively limited. 58% of respondents said they took a slight and very slight interest in these topics, while 42% were highly or very highly interested. This lack of interest was motivated mainly through the fact that

“Romania should look towards the future, not towards the past”. Even if the future cannot be built without knowing the past, we consider that this opinion originates in the frustration (which partly justifies it) with the Romanian political leaders' tendency to blame former governors once they come to power. This aspect can be observed on an historical scale (Christian democrats, liberals, legionnaires and communists) as well as after December 1989. After the Revolution, a lot of energy was spent trying to demonstrate how bad and destructive the previous government was. The general

perception is that this energy would have been more effective if used to solve present and future problems, in other words if it had been more constructive and less vindictive.

Those who take a high or very high interest in these issues (105 students) link their position to Romania's need "to be governed by clean people". It is a desire specific to young people, who are less inclined to compromise and more idealistic. At the same time, this is a principle one cannot ignore or disrespect regardless of age.

Regarding the level of information related to the concepts analyzed in our study, the majority of respondents declare a medium level of knowledge. If the students showed a slight tendency to consider themselves fairly well informed in the case of communism, in the case of "Securitate" they tended to say "little information" was available. A possible explanation for this difference is that of "collective memory", which seems to be stronger in the case of "communism" than in the case of "Securitate". We consider that this is normal, before 1989 communism was a daily life reality, while the "Securitate" was less visible and, probably, less present in Romanians' life. Meanwhile, after 1989 the press has emphasized communism-related aspects rather than "Securitate"-related problems.

It is interesting to analyze the sources of information regarding communism and "Securitate".

The main source of information is the press, mentioned by 9 out of 10 respondents. On the second place come family discussions (58%). Both sources have in common the fact that they are passive sources in the sense that nobody asked or looked for them. Those kinds of sources which involve an applicant's initiative (the Internet, specialized

literature) are less mentioned by respondents (24%, and 33% respectively). The conclusion is that “scientific interest” in these issues is pretty much limited in the case of students because only 1 from 4 respondents considered searching extra information on the Internet for these topics a worthwhile enterprise. Knowledge about these aspects has been gained as a result of a more or less voluntary exposure to different sources of information rather than due to a systematic research process.

A second important aspect related to sources of information is the considerable gap between mass media and family (30%). In fact, over 40% of undergraduates have no information about communism and “Securitate” from their family, which means that these aspects have not been discussed inside their home. What would be the reason? Over and above daily problems which make life difficult enough, citizens are not willing to think too much about the past; there is a certain reserve in approaching an unpleasant issue as if the problem had ceased to exist if left untouched!

And, finally, the third interesting and even surprising aspect is the school contribution to students’ information regarding our recent past, which is very low. “High school” and “university” are among less important sources of information. There are several possible explanations for this situation. One is given by the belief that it is necessary to have a temporal distance before properly analyzing such delicate aspects. This is partly true; in fact, behind this attitude there lies the same restraint in tackling something unpleasant or embarrassing. Another possible explanation is “we don’t go into political talk at school”. The fear from accusations as to the particular treatment of a problem determines a lot of professors to avoid debates upon these issues. You can never know who the parents or

grandparents of the children were, if somebody from the authorities was involved or who was messed up! These suspicions have been maintained by the press, too, so everybody suspected everybody and after a while everybody was bored, and nobody cared about either communism or the “Securitate” any longer!

To find out how academic debates influence students’ opinions, respondents were asked to characterize their colleagues’ and professors’ attitude towards communism. 44.1% (149 from 338) declared that they were unable to comment upon their colleagues’ attitude, which means that this is not an issue that preoccupies them. Moreover, 88 respondents chose to answer “indifferent”, and this led the number of those who cannot tell if their colleagues are in favor of communism or not to 70%!

From those who expressed an opinion, only 6 consider that their colleagues’ attitude is rather favorable; meanwhile 95 responded that this attitude is rather unfavorable, or totally unfavorable.

As a conclusion, the attitude that Romanian students have towards communism is mostly indifferent, but out of those who did express an opinion, most have an unfavorable opinion.

The same situation occurs in the case of professors’ attitude towards communism as perceived by undergraduates. The largest part of respondents (45%-50%) is not in a position to express an opinion, maybe because this issue is not discussed during courses. On the other hand, the professors’ degree of indifference seems to be lower, those who do

talk about communism are perceived as having more clear-cut positions either in favor or against communism.

Interestingly enough, but not surprisingly though, there is a link between the professors' age and their attitude towards communism. So, in the case of professors over 50 years old, there is a balance between undergraduates who consider them having a positive attitude towards communism (21.1%) and a negative one (23.3%). But in the case of younger professors, negative attitudes towards communism are prevalent (38.2% versus 7.1% in the case of professors between 30 and 50 years old and 36.9% versus 2.4% in the case of professors younger than 30 years of age). From the subjects' point of view, negative attitudes towards communism are even stronger with these last two categories of professors than in the case of their fellow students.

It could appear significant that the perception of "indifference" grew from 7.3% in the case of professors over 50 to 9.5% for professors between 30 and 50, and to 11.5% in the case of professors under 30 years respectively. In other words, we can consider that there is a strong direct correlation between the age of professors and a more favorable attitude towards communism and a soft direct correlation between the age of professors and their involvement in approaching communism-related issues in their teaching activity.

The last topic in the questionnaire is about the ending of the process of communism condemnation and "Securitate" de-conspiracy, eventually a lustration law, which is in Parliament at the moment. The lustration concept is even less known, only 10% of the respondents stated that they are very well informed or well informed. At the same time, half of them accept that they are very little informed. As to the usefulness of that kind of

law, 50.4% of the students consider that it is necessary, 15.2% consider it unnecessary, and 34.3% are unable to comment upon this subject.

From those 172 students who consider that a lustration law is necessary, 108 consider that this law should target individuals who have harmed others, no matter if they were members of PCR or the “Securitate”; 105 consider that this law should be applicable only to members of the political police.

From the students’ viewpoint, the positions that should be covered by the lustration law are the following: the president of Romania (140 respondents), Members of Parliament (139), members of Government (136), leaders of public institutions (123) and, to a smaller degree, journalists (59) and professors (54). Regarding the length of the interdiction, the respondents demonstrate the same intransigence, 58% consider that it should span a life time.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that communism, “Securitate” and lustration are not very important topics for the students. In fact, it seems to be a logical conclusion to say that students are disappointed by the political class’s post-1989 performance therefore they concentrate on the future. 17 years after the Revolution the young generation tends to be more concerned about daily life problems and about the future because it is in their power to control the future.

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¹ This paper is part of a larger research, which covered also other countries from Eastern Europe. The results will be the subject of future articles. The research project was coordinated by dr. Lavinia Stan.

² The term was coined by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

³ Mircea Comsa, Andrei Gheorghita and Ovidiu Voicu, “Barometrul de Opinie Publică,” (Bucharest: Fundația pentru o Societate Deschisă, 2006).