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Overcoming Communism's Dysfunctional Legacy: The Romanian Case

Paul E. Michelson

Abstract

The paper develops the idea that post-communist societies are dysfunctional societies and applies this analysis to a study of contemporary Romania, 1989-2011. It looks at how the historical experiences of Romania both before and during communist rule created such a society, the development of Romania as a dysfunctional society between 1989 and 2002, and assesses the progress Romania has made in dealing with its legacy between 2002 and 2011 on the basis of several international indices.

The Dysfunctional Society Syndrome¹

Many observers were surprised at how slowly civil societies emerged in Romania and other post-communist states following the fall of the wall two decades ago. This was in part due to the prevalence of a kind of *tabula rasa* approach, which assumed that somehow the pasts of these countries had been swept away in the dramatic moments of 1989. The euphoria unleashed by the events of 1989-1990 caused many to forget that the past is more often than not a significant prologue to the present and future and that continuity is just as important a factor in historical study as discontinuity.

Much wishful thinking to the contrary notwithstanding, not only the legacies of communism but also the checkered heritage of pre-communist development simply did not disappear. Analysts were soon giving a lot of attention to institutional, political, social, and economic continuities and discontinuities. Less was said about the psychological dimension. It is the contention of this paper that we can get a better handle on the recent past of post-communist countries as well as insights into their present and future through the prism of what we have described elsewhere as the Dysfunctional Society Syndrome.²

What is this syndrome? The social historian Mikhail Heller (1988) has pointed out that in Soviet systems, "the human relations that make up the society's fabric—the family, religion, historical memory, language" were targeted with such ferocity that society was "systematically and methodically atomized and the individual's chosen relation-

¹ This paper was prepared for the Kennesaw State University Year of Romania Lecture series, delivered March 17, 2011, and has benefitted from a number of questions raised and comments made in the discussion which followed and by the subsequent referees.

² For more detail and discussion, see Michelson & Michelson, 2002. Much of what follows is adapted and developed from this study.

ships” were “supplanted by others chosen for him, and approved by the state” (pp. 29-30).³ Just what, Heller asks, was “the destructive effect on the human organism of...permanent forms of stress...and the feeling of total isolation” which characterized these Soviet systems (p. 32)? One effect was to make these societies dysfunctional or more dysfunctional than they had been.

We do know that Soviet-style systems functioned “like a gigantic ghetto” and that those who inhabited it developed “special qualities” of adapting to life in such perverse conditions. We also know that while the “obsolescent *homo sapiens*” was not completely or even largely done away with in such systems, *homo sovieticus* did begin “to think and feel in a new and different way” (Heller, 1988, pp. 31-32). The Romanian-born 2009 Nobel Prize winner for literature Herta Müller’s book, *The Appointment* (2001), is a gripping Kafkaesque depiction of life under the Romanian securitate.

Finally, we also know that these qualities and these ways of coping are not, in general, the sort of qualities conducive to free societies, democratic political orders, or their supporting market economies. In short, they are obstacles to the emergence of a functioning, democratic civil society, perpetuating a dysfunctional institutional and political culture.

By “Dysfunctional Society,” therefore, we mean that the societies of post-Communist Eastern Europe do not function normally, that their social, political, and economic systems suffer serious impairments or deficits, and that their political and institutional culture is maladaptive for democratic political order. This dysfunction is the result of the interplay of the historical experiences, institutions, and traditions of each people in the region with their Stalinist/Sovietized recent pasts.

It must, however, be emphasized, as David Hackett Fischer (1970) has written, that while “analogy is a useful tool of historical understanding” it is only “an auxiliary to proof. It is never a substitute for it, however great the temptation may be...” (p. 255). Thus, the intention here is not to demonstrate that post-communist countries are dysfunctional, but rather to show ways in which the Dysfunctional Society Syndrome is useful in coming to grips with a diagnosis of and the prognosis for such societies in general and Romania in particular (Antohi, 1999, p. 264 ff.).

What are some of the analogies that might be useful here? Let’s begin with a description of a typical dysfunctional environment, this from a study of the adult children of alcoholics:

Adult children of alcoholics grew up in an environment of madness. ‘Reality’ was, and continues to be chaos. Children of alcoholics...attain their identity through blurred parental vision and poisoned parental verbiage....In such households, children don’t know where they stand....Uncertain of what will happen next, many of these children become tiny, stiff soldiers always on guard, alert, anticipating problems for self-preservation....The alcoholic family’s cohesion is [based on] criticism, violence, inconsistency, denial, and overwhelming stress. Survival replaces growth. (McConnell, 1986, p. 26)

³ On the Romanian case, see Kideckel, 1993, pp. 101-137, 204.

This is as good a description of Communist Romania as one could want. In such an environment of maximum uncertainty and arbitrariness, the name of the game became survival and self-preservation. It is clear that such drives continue to shape and motivate the thinking and decisions of a substantial proportion of the Romanian population after 1989, as epitomized by the electoral success at the outset of the neo-Communist Front of National Salvation (and its various subsequent incarnations), by strong showings of the extremist Romania Mare Party, and by the ongoing instability of the post-1989 Romanian political system.

The children of alcoholics and the children of communism also have in common living in an extensive denial system, with an orderly public facade of progress covering a private chaos:

The pretense that everything is all right in the 'for visitors only' living room reflects the pretense that everything is all right in the family [or country]. Outsiders must see only what has been arranged for them to see; the chaos has to be hidden; the boat must not be rocked and everything must look fine....nothing is predictable. At the same time, unpredictability is not something you can count on. And that is what makes it so excruciatingly confounding for children who are left in the dark as the family secret is fiercely guarded and all members join in the conspiracy of silence. (Seixas & Youcha, 1985, pp. 3-4)

Compare the words of the Romanian poet Ioana Ieronim (2000): "Don't say anything in anyone's presence. Don't speak when the child might hear,' my mother whispered. 'Don't speak out loud. You never know what might happen. And leave those things be...'" (p. 35).

Such an "environment of madness" has other dysfunctional dimensions as well. There is the habitual failure to recognize reality, one of the most readily apparent difficulties facing contemporary Romania. The psychic damage done by their totalitarian regimes was reinforced by the pattern of life under communism—that is, the institutionalization of lying behavior, of saying one thing and meaning another, of what Czeslaw Milosz calls "*ketman*" (Milosz, 1953, pp. 51). These are habits not easily abandoned.

The loss of contact with reality was further strengthened by the harm done to one's perceptual faculties by repeated public lies. Here are some illustrative examples: the bizarre claims that Ceaușescu and his wife were world-prominent thinkers, writers, leaders, scientists, philosophers, or whatever; the argument that the drastic reduction of calories in the Romanian diet in the 1980s owed to the Party's solicitude for a healthier diet on the part of the population; the constant assertions in the mass media that things were getting better and better when clearly they were getting worse. In such an environment, one tends to lose one's grip on reality.

Finally, there is the effect that dysfunction has on the victims' perceptions of truth. Kaminer (1993) has written, "Truth is highly subjective to people whose central experience is victimization: the details, the facts of any particular instance of oppression, don't matter to those who are sure of their oppression in general" (p. 156) The image that Romanians have traditionally held about themselves and especially their geographical situation is revealing in this respect: they see themselves as the age-old victims of place and

circumstance. Thus, they are fond of describing their country as located on the “Road of All Misfortunes,” both figuratively and literally. If we consider that Romania is located at the intersection of some of Europe’s premier invasion routes, and that there have been more than a dozen Russian invasions of Romanian territory during the last two centuries, this image is not completely delusional. But it also has become an alibi. The obvious question for post-communist Romanians is: what were the compensatory reactions that they have made over the last two centuries because of an overly-developed pursuit of nationalism, a royal dictatorship, fascism, military rule, and totalitarianism, all culminating in the potent brew of “National Communism” under the Ceaușescu and how can these be overcome?⁴

In addition to creating a crushing atmosphere of denial, organized chaos, an inability to cope with reality, and other deficits, there are other aspects to Romanian societal dysfunction. Fatalism—both as destiny and as passive acceptance—is an important component of Romania’s cultural baggage. One cannot study Romanian civilization and culture very long without encountering the folk myth of *Miorița*, the essence of which is that resignation in the face of life’s difficulties is not only the best course, it is the only course of action (or rather, inaction) (Blaga, 1994, pp. 7-25; Călinescu, 1941, pp. 62-64; Latham, 1999, Husar, 1999).

George Friedman (2010), a recent visitor to Romania, writes

In school, many of us learned the poem *Invictus*. It concludes with the line, ‘I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.’...It is not a line that resonates in Romania. Nothing in their history tells Romanians that they rule their fate...Everything in their history is a lesson in how fate masters them or how their very soul is a captive of history. As a nation, Romanians have modest hopes and expectations tempered by their past.

Following World War II, this was transmuted into what the Romanian literary critic Adrian Marino labeled “the myth of the irreversible situation,” a prevalent and profoundly demoralizing conviction that nothing would ever change in Communist Romania (Marino, 2001, p. 105; Marino, 1996, p. 104). The increasing isolation of Romania from the West contributed to this sense of fatalism, especially because there were no longer realistic terms of comparison. It has to be added that Western analysts themselves seem to have accepted this myth. How much effort was devoted by scholars prior to 1989—even of a hypothetical nature—to consideration of what would be needed for the process of “decommunization” and the potential difficulties of a transition from communism to a free society? Almost none. There was a great deal said about the process of communization (and even how communist and Western societies were converging), but few even bothered to speculate about decommunization. If outsiders seemed to think communism would last forever, is it any wonder that people actually afflicted by communism came to see it as irreversible?

In post-Communist Romania, unhappily, Romanians continued to almost revel in fear and fatalism. “People fear each other. They are suspicious...” a Romanian historian

⁴ For a survey of this history, see Michelson, 2000.

with extensive international experiences wrote in 1991 (Giurescu, 1991, p. 8). These fears were not only or even primarily related to the obvious and imposing unknowns which really confronted contemporary Romania, but were largely focused on imaginary apprehensions similar to those of small, terrified children huddled in the dark. Combine this with a survival mentality that severely affects character growth, and you have a society virtually unprepared for decision making, even of the simplest variety.

McConnell (1986) characterizes the abused child as being dominated by "fear, guilt, anger, emptiness, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, depression, sadness, worthlessness, suspiciousness, and a sense of being different from others" (pp. 28-29). Grayson and Johnson (1991) describe adult children of dysfunctional families as being alienated, self-condemning, tense, distrustful, and dishonest. "We overreact to change over which we have no control....We lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth....We lock ourselves into certain courses of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or consequences" (pp. 70-79). In short, people and societies overwhelmed by dysfunction tend toward a very short run, fatalistic view of things.

What are the long-term effects of dysfunction? Research suggests that dysfunction shadows abuse victims into maturity. What the victim "saw as a child is what she often grows into as an adult and all too often, she marries a man very similar to her father who betrayed her" (Life Skills Education, 1984, p. 5). Why does this continue? Though it is hard for the outsider to comprehend, and specialists have no difficulty understanding this at all. The familiar can seem safe. The reality is that the risk of change is more frightening than no change. A dysfunctional family fears change, fears the risk of the unknown and in the end usually does not have the ability to make sound decisions (Grayson & Johnson, 1991, p. 42). Lastly, the phenomenon of codependence—in which dysfunction is enabled because it perpetuates clientage and/or dependence relationships—is active here.

All of this had parallels in contemporary Romania. For example, many observers of the initial elections in Romania were puzzled by victories in the first presidential races of a man who was once one of Ceaușescu's closest lieutenants. It was as if the deposed father figure needed to be replaced by another. It is easy to see the parallels here with the case of the abused woman "freely" marrying what is only a copy of her former abuser or the case of the child of an alcoholic who marries an alcoholic.

The post-Communist Romanian population as a whole appeared to fear change more than they fear the status quo or the past. Psychiatrists suggest that the abused person has to have the courage to initiate the process of change, to realize there will be bad times and upsets, to decide that the pain of honesty is better than the pain of dishonesty about what life and society can really be like (Keith-Lucas, 1972).

But courage and honesty are not—in spite of the splendid and remarkable displays of these virtues by Romanian students and intellectuals in December 1989 and June 1990—commonplace values in the dysfunctional society, which had developed in the Socialist Republic of Romania and earlier. At the same time, post-1989 regimes in Romania, dominated by former members of the nomenclatura, have continued the codependency relationships created in the communist epoch as a means of perpetuating their power. One such enabling strategy is nationalism. By wrapping themselves in the mantle of the national mythos, Romanian regimes have diverted attention from the present to the distant

past while marginalizing those who dissented as traitors to the fatherland and so forth.⁵

Lastly, a sense of purpose was lost through the continuous denigration of traditional Romanian Christian values and blatant distortion of the essential virtues necessary for life (Michelson, 1999; Stan & Turcescu, 2007). Small wonder that the study of dysfunction presents so many analogies for us today. At the same time, the Romanian people need to realize that they “need not remain passive, helpless victims. They can learn to understand...they can be instruments for constructive change—and be victims no more” (McCabe, 1978, p. xii).

As Romanians tried to rebuild and reconstruct in the face of intense disarray and disintegration, they continued to be confronted by chaos. But what they have not yet found is an exit from an atmosphere of denial. Unfortunately, the rehabilitation process continues to be flawed by a widespread lack of candor and integrity at the both highest and lowest levels of society.

Romania, 1989-2011⁶

The lesson of the last 20 years has been that Yergin and Gustafson’s (1993) “Triple Transition”—moving from dictatorships to democracies, from centralized command economies to markets, and from Soviet Empire to nation-states—has proven to be much more difficult than we thought in 1989-1990. The social pathologies of dysfunctional post-communist countries have been much stronger than expected. Vladimir Tismaneanu (1991) saw this earlier than most: “...the legacy of the Leninist system, including its cultural and moral elements, is much more complex and stubborn than anyone had foreseen” (p. 676).

Yergin and Gustafson’s transitions provide an analytical framework for this part of our analysis, revolving around the following questions: First, how well has Romania done in moving from dictatorship to democracy? Secondly, how successful has Romania been in moving from a command economy to a market economy? And thirdly, what progress has Romania made in the process of moving from being a part of the Soviet Empire to becoming a functioning state in Europe and the wider world? This process can be divided into two phases: Romania as a dysfunctional society, 1989-2002; and overcoming dysfunction, 2002-2011. Whether Romania has moved out of the transitional stage to a “new normal” is as yet uncertain.

How well has Romania done in moving from dictatorship to democracy?

At the ten-year mark of Romania’s post-communist development in 1999, the situation was far from promising. Glenn Firebaugh and Dumitru Sandu observed in a 1998 study that “At this point in time it is by no means certain that the overthrow of communism will result in either a market economy or a stable Western-style liberal democracy in East and Central Europe” (p. 522). This raises the question of what conditions are needed to promote the development of liberal democracy.

The answer, according to Ralf Dahrendorf (1969), lies in four areas of social structure: 1.) Citizenship rights, that is “the ways in which individuals participate in the life of their society;” 2.) How a society deals with conflict; 3.) How diverse the elite of the soci-

⁵ For a case study, see Verdery, 1991.

⁶ This segment draws on Michelson, 1999; Michelson & Michelson, 2002; and Michelson, 2004.

ety is, that is “their uniformity or diversity in relation to the social interests and groupings reflected by them...;” and, finally 4.) The societal atmosphere, “the extent to which a society is dominated by public virtues.”

The reality is that “liberal democracy can become effective only in a society in which, 1) equal citizenship rights have been generalized; 2) conflicts are recognized and regulated rationally in all institutional orders; 3) elites reflect the color and diversity of social interests; and 4) public virtues are the predominant value orientation of the people” (Dahrendorf, 1969, pp. 27-29).

Mention of public virtues leads naturally to consideration of the concept of civil society that is the degree to which social organization and life lie outside of politics. Civil society, in Ernst Gellner’s view, exists when private associations and institutions are strong enough to counterbalance the institutions of the state. This usually involves a society in which economic activity is relatively free from state control, individual autonomy is valued, and success is based on competence not on birth, connections, or tradition. It is a society in which private enterprise rather than political power is the principal path to wealth and influence. Finally, it is a stable society, “one which does not rechristen all its railway stations and boulevards and issue a new city plan each time the government changes” (Gress, 1998, pp. 504-507).

Analysts are also agreed on the importance of societal volunteerism for democratization and building civil society. Thomas Sowell (1998) writes,

...a spirit of cooperation enables many resources to be combined for projects ranging from neighborly maintenance of local streets to combining to form business partnerships and industrial corporations. Where such voluntary cooperation is easy to organize, many activities can go on that would be more costly if they could only be undertaken through the more cumbersome machinery of large formal organizations, such as those of government or a national church. ...the larger point here is that a spirit of cooperation is an economic as well as a social asset [and].....Like other forms of capital, cooperative spirit is neither evenly nor randomly distributed among peoples or nations. (pp. 344-345)

This has been developed through the Civic Virtues approach advanced by Robert D. Putnam’s landmark *Making Democracy Work* (1993). Putnam emphasizes the impact of social capital, especially civic engagement and volunteerism. This contributes to fostering 1.) political equality, where “citizens interact as equals, not as patrons and clients nor as governors and petitioners”; 2.) a communal sense of solidarity, trust, and tolerance; and 3.) the creation of a society in which “the norms and values of the civic community are embodied in, and reinforced by,” voluntary associations (p. 88).

Volunteerism addresses some of the problems of a dysfunctional society. At the same time, it provides prime building blocks for a free society. Putnam also argues that it is very important to understand the barriers that exist to voluntary activity in a culture and the need to rediscover positive traditions and foundations on which to build the future.

The Romanian pre-Communist volunteer civic tradition was one mainly expressed by society ladies and *noblesse oblige*. We don’t really have a clear idea of what organizations and associations in the Romanian past can serve as role models. Nor is it clear to

what extent equal citizenship rights are now being generalized in Romanian society or the diversity of its elites are being expanded. The Romanian political order and society traditionally have dealt with conflict somewhat poorly, though this rarely degenerates into violence.

There is the practical agenda of devising and implementing strategies and policies in contemporary Romania which will foster and encourage volunteerism as well as other civic virtues, such as disinterested competence, and the direction of entrepreneurial effort into productive spheres rather than into political rent-seeking. The road has been definitely uphill. "Citizenship" was never a strong concept in this area of the world; and people tended to prefer patronage politics to commerce and industry (Michelson, 2000, pp. 674-676). It was further stunted during the communist era, which taught people that force was the way to resolve the problems of life and where what civil society that had existed was completely annihilated. The negative image associated with the pseudo-volunteerism of communist "munca patriotică" ("patriotic work") will need to be overcome as well as the traditional suspicion of altruism in Romanian culture. Romanian society is beginning to nourish public virtues along with the panoply of voluntary activities that such imply. The progress being made in most of these areas is slow, but promising.⁷

How well has Romania done in reducing corruption, recognized as the bane of democratic development and obviously key to building trust in political and economic institutions? Transparency International (2000) emphasized "that where corruption is at its worst, disillusionment with democracy is at its highest. This is shown to be particularly so in Central and Eastern Europe". TI's 2000 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) showed Romania in 69th place (of 91) with a score of 2.8 (with 10 being clean and 1 being highly corrupt), rating below Senegal and Zimbabwe. They concluded that

The failure of former Romanian president Emil Constantinescu to achieve success in rooting out corruption was a key factor contributing to his defeat in the November 2000 presidential elections. ...Iliescu has yet to demonstrate any anti-corruption resolve. Analysts worry that the former president's failure to reform, and the return to power of an ex-communist leader under whom corruption had earlier flourished, may prevent Romania from pulling itself out of poverty and into the EU.

Fortunately, this turned out to be a bit premature. By 2011, Romania had already successfully become a full member of the European Union (EU). This contributed to changes over the 2000-2010 interval which resulted in Transparency International's CPI showing a much more positive perception (Transparency International, 2010). Romania still ranked 69th (of 178), but its score had improved significantly to 3.7, ahead of Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia in Southeastern Europe.

This was mitigated by the publication in the same year of a detailed, 231-page "National Integrity System Study" by Transparency International of Romania which concluded that Romania was,

⁷ There are promising examples such as the Center for Volunteerism in Cluj-Napoca, which this year held its Tenth National Week of Volunteerism (<http://www.centruldevoluntariat.ro/>, accessed May 4, 2011), and an extremely successful Habitat for Humanity affiliate, also located in Cluj-Napoca (<http://www.habitatcluj.ro/>, accessed May 4, 2011).

...characterized by a weak National Integrity System. While the legal and institutional setting provides to a certain extent the premises for the fight against corruption, the practical arrangements do not allow an effective application of these institutional rules. The effects of legal improvements, adopted during the EU accession, were somewhat limited since laws have not been fully or well implemented. Romania's National Integrity System is still weak.... Pillars playing the most important role in issuing and enforcing anti-corruption measures have not kept the pace with the required development of their own capacity and governance. The Executive has had an average performance, despite the fact that, theoretically, it enjoys a leading role in anticorruption activities. The judiciary has had an even weaker capacity and governance, which undermined its contribution to the public integrity... [and] anti-corruption agencies have lacked public commitment and institutional support for performing according to their objectives. (Transparency International Romania, 2010).

Further comparative data is provided by the Freedom House annual assessments of Freedom in the World. In 2002, Freedom House gave Romania a Political Rights score of 2 (on a scale where 1 is high and 7 is low) and a Civil Liberties Score of 2, for an overall status of "Free." This looked pretty commendable, but the report wrote that Romania "continued to lag behind the 12 other countries negotiating for membership in the EU (Freedom House, 2002).

Freedom House (2002) also cited an EU study on Romania showing "that corruption within the judiciary 'remains a serious problem' while "Two-thirds of the economy is still government controlled." While this EU report "highlighted Romania's progress towards establishing a functioning market economy," it wondered if Romania could "withstand market forces and competition within the EU." In spite of this, the report believed that Romania was on the road to admission to the EU, something validated in 2007 when Romania cleared the final hurdles to EU membership.

In 2010, Freedom House gave Romania identical scores: a Political Rights score of 2 (on a scale where 1 is high and 7 is low) and a Civil Liberties Score of 2, for an overall status of "Free." Freedom House still had reservations, noting that "a European Union progress report in July [2010] found that Romania's efforts to reform its judicial system and combat corruption were being hindered by political infighting and procedural delays" (Freedom House, 2010). Nevertheless, Romania's scores were strong, even if they could have been higher. Given what has been said above about dysfunctional societies, this progress is actually pretty remarkable. Though it is not definitive, it is promising. It was arguable that Romania was making the transition from political dysfunctionality to becoming a normal society.

How successful has Romania been in moving from a command economy to a market economy?

Economic capital is associated with cultural and legal frameworks. According to Sowell (1998), "At the national level, human capital includes not only particular skills

and general work habits among the people, but also institutional arrangements and social and political traditions which facilitate the production of wealth." Among these would be a stable framework of law ("Governments likely to confiscate wealth are unlikely to find much wealth to confiscate in the long run") and regulations, which encourage rather than discourage entrepreneurship. On the other side, corruption and unpredictable tax systems undermine commerce and economic development (p. 343; 376).

Another key factor in the development of free markets involves attitudes toward property. Richard Pipes (1999) writes that "property, in both the narrow and the broad senses of the word, provides the key to the emergence of political and legal institutions that guarantee liberty.... there is an intimate connection between public guarantees of ownership and individual liberty: that while property in some form is possible without liberty, the contrary is inconceivable" (pp. 116-120). Pipes notes that the existence of private property rights do not, of course, mean that one will have a free economy, but the lack of the former is a fatal barrier to the latter (p. 281).

What are Romanian attitudes toward property and property rights? The picture is mixed. On the one hand, property rights and rule of law have improved. On the other hand, the rights of those dispossessed between 1945 and 1989 were only very grudgingly recognized and in some cases disregarded on the amazing grounds that to do so would hurt those who had profited from the dispossessions! The failure of a genuine rule of law tradition to appear and take root in the development of modern Romanian society has had grave consequences.⁸ This is especially true in connection with neutralizing what economist Gordon Tullock (2005) has called "rent-seeking" (pp. 23 ff.) Strengthening such rights is making headway, but very slowly.

With regard to economic freedom, in 2002, the Romanian balance sheet was pretty dismal. According to the *Wall Street Journal*/Heritage Foundation "2002 Index of Economic Freedom," (O'Driscoll, Holmes, & O'Grady, 2002, pp. 339-340), Romania ranked 131 of 161 countries rated, at the tail end of the "Mostly Unfree" category. This was a decline from the 2001 Index for Romania, which had ranked it at 124 (O'Driscoll, Holmes, & Kirkpatrick, 2001, pp. 311-312). The 2002 Romanian score of 3.70 was its worst ever in the eight years this survey had been compiled (1 is the best; 5 the worst score). Declines included: trade policy (from 2 to 3; moderately protectionistic); capital flows and foreign investment (from 2 to 3; moderate barriers); banking and finance (from 3 to 4; high level of restrictions); wages and prices (from 2 to 3; moderate level of intervention and an adjusted inflation rate in the 1990s of over 50%); rising black markets (from 3 to 4; high level of activity with perhaps half of the GDP off the record; and government intervention in the economy (down to 2 in 2001 from 3, back up to 3 for 2002. This had been the one area in which Romania was doing reasonably well previously).

These declines were not balanced out by slight improvements in the fiscal burden of government (4 down from 5; very high) and property rights (4 improved from 5), leading the report to comment that while,

Romania is beginning to establish a system of property protection, ...the legal system remains unable to arbitrate property rights disputes. Ac-

⁸ F. A. Hayek, 1960, among others, has stressed that without a reasonably firm rule of law, the chances of establishing or maintaining a free society are slim. See also Treadgold, 1990, p. 5.

ording to the U. S. Department of State, “Bureaucratic red tape and uncertainties in the legal framework make doing business in Romania difficult. There is little experience with Western methods of negotiating contracts and, once concluded, enforcement is not uniform.” (O’Driscoll, Holmes, & Kirkpatrick, 2001, pp. 311-312)

The bureaucracy, the report concluded, continues to be both cumbersome and inefficient. According to the U. S. Department of State, Romania has an ‘unpredictable legal and regulatory system. Tax laws are changeable and unevenly enforced.’ The U.S. Trade Representative cites excessive bureaucracy, lack of a transparent, consistent application of the rule of law, and overregulation as problems. (O’Driscoll et al, 2001, pp. 311-312)

In contrast, the United Nations Development Program issued a report on Romania in summer 2001 which was “moderately optimistic, showing that the government performance so far was better than predicted last fall and more reform-oriented than electoral slogans would have led observers to believe. Privatization is on the right track and the economy is pursuing its positive trend of 2001. However, inflation [the highest rate in Europe] is likely to remain high....” (p. 2).

This optimism was borne out over the next decade, despite the world economic downturn of 2008 and following. In comparison with 2002, in the 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (Miller & Holmes, 2011), Romania had jumped from 131 to 64th place, ahead of France, Slovenia, Poland, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. Pretty impressive on the whole, especially when coupled with a current inflation rate of 5.6%. Detailed comparison between 2002 and 2011 is difficult because the scoring scale was changed, but Romania was above average on six of the ten categories, except for government spending (owing to the economic events of the last few years and to “sluggish” privatization), property rights (owing to weak enforcement), freedom from corruption, and labor freedom (owing to rigid regulation).

Another bright spot for Romanian economic development was education. Robert Reisz (2006) writes that the Romanian “higher education system was...probably the best-functioning of all civil institutions, as well as being the closest to Western systems” Statistics bear this out: In 1989-1990, Romania had 44 public institutions of higher education with 164,500 students and no private institutions; by 1994, it had 48 public institutions with 250,100 students and 66 private institutions with 110,900 students. (Reisz, 2006, pp. 73, 81) By 2010, the number of public institutions had grown to 56 and accredited private schools numbered 53. The number of university-level students was over 600,000 (Romanian International University Fair, 2011; List of Romanian Universities, 2007). Recent problematic reform proposals do, however, have the potential to undermine the success of Romanian higher education (Shafir, 2011).

The *2011 Index of Economic Freedom* (Miller & Holmes, 2011) did voice some concern over Romania’s development since 2008. Romania’s budget deficit was climbing (though not as fast as some others in the EU); this was forcing the government to rein in expenditures. Structural reforms had, included privatization in the banking sector, a reduction in the public-sector wage bill, and tax administration reform. However, deeper reforms in areas such as public finance management and the labor market are now required. Institutional challenges that persist include widespread corruption and a rigid labor market. The judiciary remains inefficient and vulnerable to political interference.

Romania hasn't done badly under the stress test of the 2008 downturn so far, but more time will be needed to determine if they have moved from dysfunction to normalcy in this area as well.

What progress has Romania made in the process of moving from being a part of the Soviet Empire to becoming a functioning state in Europe and the wider world?

The blunt necessities presented by NATO and EU membership requirements had a significant positive impact on Romanian development between 2002 and 2007. In 2002, we saw Trond Gilberg's assessment of the late Ceaușescu era as apt for post-Communist Romania: a country in which "the quixotic disregard of existing realities...characterizing the present leadership" and "dysfunctional policies in socioeconomic, cultural, and religious affairs" making for a poor prospect for the future (Michelson & Michelson, 2002, pp. 74-75). This turned out to be much too pessimistic.

After 1989, Romanians (and Europeans) came to place a lot of faith in the "redemptive powers" of membership in NATO and the EU. Accession was seen primarily as the goal and not as the means for improvement: "Once in NATO and the European Union, all would be well" (Friedman, 2010). However, this was not entirely misguided. By 2007, the two goals had actually been achieved: Romania became a part of NATO in 2004 and a member of the EU in 2007. As with most such hopes, these events were both real achievements—marking substantial changes in Romania's commitments to Western military, political, and economic standards—and a bit disillusioning at the same time. NATO membership meant that the Romanian military had undergone socialization into Western military norms, practices, and doctrines, but events in Georgia and elsewhere also demonstrated that NATO is a somewhat thin reed in the face of the emergence of Russian assertiveness in the region. On the other hand, the Romanians have been assiduous in their support of United States policy and their relationship with the United States has been generally positive and encouraging.

As for the EU, the past four years have been a mixed bag. Romanians, faced with the choice between Westernization or going forward as a third-world type country, opted pretty clearly for the former. Indeed, the situation in Romania began to turn around "only after Romania was invited to start accession talks with EU in 1999. It was also the moment when the international agencies...started to show interest in Romania's public integrity and initiated programs and exerted political pressure in order to speed up the reform drive" (Transparency International Romania, 2005). Accession to the EU was used by internal reformers skillfully to rewrite Romanian laws, reorganize Romanian institutions, and bring Romania into some semblance of conformity with European norms (Pușcaș, 2003-2005; Pușcaș, 2006; Pușcaș, 2007).⁹ However, as R. W. Seton-Watson (1934) wrote about Romania a decade after World War I, it is "not enough to pass enlightened laws; it remained to enforce them and to imbue public opinion and the governing class with respect for the principles they embodied" (p. 319).

It is doubtful that Romania has entirely managed this by 2011, though progress has been made. Transparency International of Romania's latest "Romanian National Integrity

⁹ Pușcaș was Romania's chief negotiator with the EU. In a number of personal conversations with me, he described how he viewed EU accession as a vehicle for forcing change on Romanian bureaucrats and bureaucratic structures.

System” report stated that,

With the mechanisms of monitoring and verification in place, a rather tight oversight of the reform progress was put in place by the EU. After Romania joined the EU, some reforms were slowed down. The EU benchmarking procedures to monitor Romania’s progress proved not to have the expected effectiveness, measuring merely the adoption of laws. (Transparency International Romania, 2010).

The report noted that since 2007, the reform process has lost momentum as the political elite began to drag its feet. Put bluntly, once Romania was in the EU, the EU’s leverage over Romanian policy and behavior was significantly less (Gallagher, 2009).

It is true that there is not a good fit between EU regulations, which were created for its advanced core countries, and not for a developing polity such as that in post-Communist Romania. George Friedman’s (2010) claim that “A Romanian entrepreneur rigorously following EU regulations would rapidly go out of business” may be a bit extreme, but it is true that layering European bureaucratic protocols on top of indigenous Romanian customs, habits, and procedures has tended to stifle rather than promote entrepreneurship and development.

Do the deficits of being in the EU and NATO outweigh the benefits? By no means. Participation in both “do something important.... With membership in the European Union and NATO, Romania has affirmed its modernity and its democratic institutions” (Friedman, 2010). Romanians have generally seen themselves as part of the West: membership in NATO and the EU are concrete steps toward that aspiration and away from dysfunction (Michelson, 1997).

What Lies Ahead?

What about the future? Will the Romanians complete the transition from dysfunction to normalcy? They are a resilient people, and they are survivors. If the incentives are right, they respond—as they did to the challenge of EU membership, which seemed a pretty long shot in 1991. Now they need to respond consistently over the long run. Vasile Pușcaș, Romania’s chief EU negotiator, stated their challenge clearly:

One thing couldn’t be clearer: to function as efficiently and effectively as possible in both the EU and a global context, our identity or brand needs to be expressed coherently, flexibly, quickly, and convincingly.... We will not be credible if we continue to invoke our contextual difficulties, the conflict of external or internal interests, or historical or contemporary exigencies and influences. What counts the most in this case is an opportunity once more offered us by the world. (Pușcaș, 2007, pp. 21-22)

This says it well: Romania needs consistent performance, not excuses.

People in Eastern Europe are fond of asking whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about the future. As the story goes, the Romanian optimist thinks that this is the best of

all possible worlds...and the Romanian pessimist is afraid the optimist may be right. There are certainly considerable historical and rational bases for being pessimistic about the Romanian case, but a reasonable argument can be made for what one might call “pessimistic optimism,” that is, though things are not going to be easy in the short run, in the long haul they will get better. Romania is now at a place where it can “rebrand” itself in Europe and the world. Between 2007 and 2011, they surpassed not only Russia and Zimbabwe, but also some of its EU colleagues in regards to economic and political development.

Why should anyone care? It is sometimes overlooked that Romania is the ninth largest EU country by size and the seventh largest by population. It has considerable human and material resources, it has a lot to offer the new Europe, and it is beginning to learn from its past. Europeanization will raise some serious identity issues, but the fact that Romanians are facing these openly, not sweeping them under the carpet bodes well for the future.¹⁰

Beyond this, Romania’s problem is not that it is unimportant, but, rather, as the geopolitician George Friedman (2010) writes, it is strategically located: “empires collide where Romania is. The last iteration was the Cold War.... the great powers are sorting themselves out again and therefore Romania is becoming more important to others....I suspect that history is reaching for Romania again”. Unfortunately, as Romanian history has repeatedly demonstrated over the last 500 years, geopolitics is a two-edged sword, both an opportunity and a catastrophe in the making.

Donald Treadgold wrote in 1990:

[I]t is a remarkable phenomenon of the early 1990s to see an unmistakable, worldwide trend toward democracy—even if in many cases the direction was clear, the goal was still distant or elusive. Past history should inculcate a healthy skepticism concerning whether democracy is about to be attained everywhere in the world....The whole story, with its fits and starts and triumphs and tragedies, deserves the thoughtful reflection of everyone who, in the wish to establish and protect freedom, would avoid needless disappointment and despair and desires to act intelligently to attain the attainable. (p. 10)

However, he notes, actually crossing the divide to becoming a sustaining free society is very difficult (pp. 413-416). Opportunities are not enough; it’s what people do with them that counts (Sowell, 1998, p. 379). Will Romania make it over this institutional divide? Will they finally be able to overcome the impediments of societal dysfunction? The jury is still out, but there is no doubt that they have begun to break the cycle of abuse, escape the hostile pedigree which has plagued them for so long, and justify some degree of optimism about the future. In twenty years, they have moved from dysfunction to the verge of normalcy (King & Sum, 2011). The Romanian people and their civilization have a lot to offer. There is hope that their future will be as beautiful as their geography, their art, their culture, and their hospitality are today.

¹⁰ An example of this was the symposium at Cluj-Napoca in 2008 on Romanian identity. See Boari and Gherghina, 2009, for the papers.

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