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Petrescu, Cristina; Petrescu, Dragoş

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How Communism Turned into History

Vladimir Tismăneanu as Historian of Romanian Communism

CRISTINA PETRESCU, DRAGOȘ PETRESCU

Vladimir Tismăneanu needs no introduction to the Romanian public: his name is unequivocally linked with the post-communist (re)birth of political science in this country. After many years of ideological submission, political science was established as an academic discipline in post-communist Romania through the joint efforts of some émigré specialists and a few innovative local scholars. If from the latter category, the new generation of political scientists is intellectually indebted to professors such as Alexandru Duțu and Daniel Barbu, from the former, aside Ghiță Ionescu, Vladimir Tismăneanu features prominently as a mentor of the post-1989 generation of students in the field. As a professor at the University of Maryland at College Park, he has had the opportunity and willingness to train quite a number of emerging scholars from his native country.

If his reputation as one of the founders of political science in post-communist Romania is generally acknowledged, his contribution to the field of recent history is less taken into account. Together with Vlad Georgescu and Dinu C. Giurescu, Tismăneanu was among the Romanian-born authors who, having the chance to emigrate while communism was still in power, could thoroughly study the nature of communism in western libraries and archives, and freely write about it. Since up to 1989 such endeavors were reserved only to those who lived outside Romania, after the collapse of communism contributions by such émigré scholars have been instrumental in shaping knowledge on the "Old Regime" among locally based scholars, as well as laypeople. Tismăneanu, in particular, – through his studies on Romanian communism published in international journals or via broadcastings by western radio agencies before 1989 and articles in the Romanian media afterwards – has made known to a large audience his critical analyses of communism Bucharest-style for more than twenty years. At the time when his major work on the history of the Romanian Communist Party, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, was published, his main ideas had already become common knowledge¹. Looking retrospectively to his oeuvre, this essay highlights Tismăneanu's major contributions to the study of Romanian communism.

Such reflection is occasioned not only by the above-mentioned volume, but also by the specific context of its publication. Since the ongoing process of European enlargement will gradually obscure the West-East divisions from a political perspective, it is the high time to evaluate the historical basis of the public memory

¹ Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles & London, 2003, translated into Romanian by C. and D. Petrescu as *Stalinism pentru eternitate. O istorie politică a comunismului românesc*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2005.

that will continue to divide the continent for some time. In this respect, it is emblematic that Vladimir Tismăneanu's volume dedicated to the Romanian communism closes the prestigious series "Societies and Culture in East-Central Europe", edited by Irena Grudzinska Gross and Jan T. Gross with the University of California Press. With the enlargement, the rationale behind this series, which aimed at highlighting that, in spite of political adversities, the region behind the Iron Curtain has always been part of Europe, is now disappearing. No other book could have been more appropriate to end a series opened by three volumes dedicated to the emergence of civil society in Poland, the country that led the way out of communism in 1989, than one dedicated to the last and the most resilient Stalinist regime in the region.

Compared to Vladimir Tismăneanu, no other author has ever consecrated so much time, energy and intellectual efforts to explain how a tiny group of believers with practically no support within the country could not only gain control over the entire society, but also maintain power in spite of successive waves of change throughout the Soviet bloc. At the same time, his perspective on this topic is enriched due to his privileged position as insider: a part of the history of the Romanian communism is also a part of his family history. Thus, his writings have a rare quality among academic studies: characters are not pale, bookish descriptions, but real human beings, in whom great ideals encounter petty ambitions. The main question that Tismăneanu has tried to answer over the years is why the Romanian communist elite never abandoned Stalinist dogmas, continuing to act according to them even after Moscow discarded such dogmas. Putting the concept of political culture in the center of his analysis, Tismăneanu defines three major features of Romanian communism: (1) its weakness in relation to the Moscow center – the pariah syndrome – hence the desire to assert its independence; (2) the precarious ideological background of the most prominent party members, from here their dogmatism, and rejection of revisionism; and, last but by no means least, (3) the monolithic character of the political elite, forged in a ruthless struggle for power between three factions, which dominated the party life until the late 1950s.

Tismăneanu's theory of the three centers, in particular, is of crucial importance in understanding the nature of these confrontations within the Romanian Communist Party¹. A common place in the history of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) was the idea that, after the seizure of power, two factions confronted each other on ideological grounds. A Muscovite group that had spent the war years in the Soviet Union and comprised many "alien" elements – including prominent militants such as Ana Pauker (of Jewish origin) and Vasile Luca (of Hungarian origin) – confronted a local one that had been imprisoned during the war and comprised mainly communists of Romanian ethnic origin. The first would have supported, not surprisingly, Stalin's interests, whereas the second, which incidentally was the winning team, represented above all the national interests, and allegedly opposed to the Stalinization of the country.

Few remember that this view, which became in the meantime common knowledge, was initially promoted by no other than the leader of the prison faction,

¹ Tismăneanu first proposed the idea of the three centers within the RCP in his article "The Tragicomedy of Romanian Communism", in *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 3, no. 2, Spring 1989, pp. 329-376. See esp. note 46, pp. 349-350. See also Ferenc FEHÉR, Andrew ARATO (eds.), *Crisis and Reform in Eastern Europe*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1991, pp. 121-174.

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, during the Plenum of November-December 1961, at a time when the power struggle was already over and his supremacy within the party secured. During the following years, the Romanian leader indeed seized the opportunity to assert his party's independence from Moscow, a political turn that seem to support his claims of embodying a national and, at the same time, anti-Stalinist line. In a slightly different version, his interpretation survived under his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who, although obscured Gheorghiu-Dej's role, perpetrated this version of party's history in order to asserting himself as the supreme leader who accomplished full independence from Moscow for the benefit of his country. This perspective continues to survive even after the fall of communism due to the memoirs of, and the oral history interviews with, the former *nomenklatura* members. Obviously, beyond their unrealistic, fairy-tale like style, shaped by a conflict between good and evil, such interpretations fail to explain the key question: why the Romanian communist regime, while asserting its right to follow a national path to communism, remained Stalinist in essence up to its very end.

In opposition to such a view, Tismăneanu argues that during the war there were not two, but three factions within the party – one in the Soviet Union, one in the prisons, and one in the underground¹. In this way, he stresses that the rivalry among them represented a brutal struggle for power, which had nothing to do with any alleged polemics over ideas. Initially, the first two centers united to destroy the third and, in a second phase, the members of Muscovite faction and their allies were purged by the most coherent of all factions, which comprised those party members who socialized themselves together in the adverse environment of the prisons. This was not, therefore, a struggle in which Stalinists were defeated by anti-Stalinists, would-be supporters of the national interests, but a conflict in which neither ideology nor even ethnicity played any role. A monolithic – though frightened and insecure – elite, incapable of questioning the views of the supreme leader, Gheorghiu-Dej, emerged from this savage power struggle.

The theory of the three centers explains why splits within the RCP were avoided at all costs but, taken alone, does not explain why the Romanian communist leadership never ventured on a reformist path. In this respect, Tismăneanu demonstrates that it was the weak ideological training of the Romanian leading communists that hampered the emergence of genuine debates over the validity of Marxist-Leninist dogmas in party circles as well as in intellectual milieus². None of the Stalinist leaders across the entire Soviet bloc was a great Marxist theorist; the vulgarization of Leninist teachings by Stalin himself was the only basis of their education. However, Krushchev's de-Stalinization allowed critical Marxist thinking be heard and adopted by reform-minded factions of the communist parties. In the Central European countries, circles of intellectual debates preceded and even generated the turmoil of 1956 in Hungary and Poland, or the 1968 Prague Spring. The very existence of such debates depended on the presence of intellectuals with

¹ In this respect, see also the polemics between Tismăneanu and Pavel Câmpeanu. Câmpeanu has argued that there were only two centres that really counted: the group in prisons and that from Moscow, while the third, the underground group, was in fact subordinated to the former. See Pavel CÂMPEANU, "Note asupra PCR în anii '40-'50", in *Sfera Politicii*, nr. 2, 1993, pp. 18-19, and Vladimir TISMĂNEANU, "Chestiuni de metodă", in *Sfera Politicii*, nr. 3, 1993, p. 29.

² This argument is best developed in his "From Arrogance to Irrelevance: Avatars of Marxism in Romania", in Ray TARAS, (ed.), *The Road to Disillusion: From Critical Marxism to Postcommunism in Eastern Europe*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk N.Y., 1992, pp. 135-150.

genuine knowledge of Marxism in official positions, which not only granted them access to a wider public through media, but also conferred their voice authority over party *apparatchiks*.

In Romania, persons with Marxist training, capable of pursuing an intellectual exercise of critical evaluation of these teachings, were either marginal or were marginalized by skilful maneuvers in order to avoid their gaining of influence. With the help of Leonte Răutu, a versatile personality in charge with the ideological apparatus, Gheorghiu-Dej was able to eliminate after 1956 all the possible initiators of a revisionist nucleus from party-affiliated intellectual circles. With the help of Nicolae Ceaușescu, he managed in 1957 to purge the party leadership of those who tried to seize the opportunity opened by Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" to trigger debates over the role of Gheorghiu-Dej in the Stalinization of the country, i.e., Miron Constantinescu and Iosif Chișinevschi. Such scheming opened the way to an even greater manipulation. As mentioned above, in 1961, after Khrushchev re-launched de-Stalinization, Gheorghiu-Dej, could present himself as the promoter of the Romanian de-Stalinization which, according to him, took place in Romania even before Stalin's death.

However, Tismăneanu convincingly shows that the Soviet-inspired model of organizing the society was never abandoned by Gheorghiu-Dej or by his successor. All the steps undertaken by Romania to assert its independence from Moscow – such as the diplomatic efforts meant to convince Khrushchev to withdraw the Soviet troops from Romania, the reluctance to cooperate within the COMECON, and the affirmation of RCP's autonomy from the Soviet Union in the "Declaration of April 1964" – must be seen from a new perspective. The manifest will of both leaders, Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceaușescu, to proclaim their independence within the bloc comes from the inferiority complex Romanian communists developed in their early relations with Moscow. The RCP was from its beginnings a peripheral, Cominform-dominated political sect which came to power in the aftermath of WWII only due to the support provided by the Red Army. Obsessed with its lack of legitimacy, the Romanian communist elite sought to achieve the support of the local population by mimicking independence from Moscow. Moreover, by acting in dissonance with the Soviet Union in the international arena, they were taking revenge for decades of dependency on the "Moscow center". By asserting RCP's independence, Gheorghiu-Dej opened the way for governing Romania undisturbed by evolutions in Moscow. This, however, did not imply a departure from the Stalinist model in domestic policy. In short, it was the "pariah syndrome" of a political culture obsessed with its own questionable heredity, argues Tismăneanu, that explains the unique mixture between the revolutionary external policy and the stagnation in internal affairs.

Although Gheorghiu-Dej apparently wanted to direct his country towards Yugoslavization, while Ceaușescu turned it to Albanization, there was perfect continuity between the two Romanian communist dictators, whose thoughts and actions were shaped by this inferiority complex in relations with Moscow. In this respect, Tismăneanu emphasizes that the latter, as a member of the prison faction, had socialized together with the former for many years until 1944. He had grown politically in the shadow of his mentor in the aftermath of the power struggle of 1952, rising to prominence after 1955, when appointed member of the Politburo responsible with the party apparatus. This position allowed him to gain an unparalleled influence among the cadres and ease his path towards succession. Stressing the political

continuity between the two leaders, Tismăneanu defines a spectacular gesture as Ceaușescu's condemnation of the Soviet-led Warsaw Treaty Organization invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 – invoked by many in order to support alleged achievements made under communism – as an expression of "anti-Soviet Stalinism".

The preservation of the values increasingly put under question in other communist countries by the proponents of the "socialism with a human face" definitely transformed Romania into an exceptional case in the Soviet bloc. It was the lack of reforms combined with corruption and stagnation – in short, of anti-Khrushchevism with Brezhnevism – that characterized Ceaușescu's dictatorship. Moreover, the concentration of power in the hands of Romania's last communist tyrant was not matched but by Stalin's own dictatorship after 1929. In order to define the peculiarities of Ceaușescu's rule, Tismăneanu has coined the concept of "dynastic communism"¹. In his view, this was not simple nepotism, i.e., simple promotion of relatives in key positions, but an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a single family combined with a flamboyant cult of personality that encompassed, besides the dictator himself, members of the kin next to him, in particular his wife and son. In fact, as the concept suggests, under this form of communism, a dynastic scenario was envisaged by the supreme leader, worried that his blueprints for Romania – the building of "socialism" at any costs – would not be continued otherwise.

Besides the preservation of the values that were questioned in other countries by such leaders as Imre Nagy, Alexander Dubček or Mikhail Gorbachev, it was the extensive use of nationalist symbols and rhetoric that constituted a fundamental pillar of *Ceaușescuism*. What began in 1968 as a courageous gesture against the Soviets, acclaimed at the time by the entire world, it developed into a very strange melange of Stalinism with nationalism. However, *Ceaușescuism* should not be understood just as an extreme variant of communist dictatorship, irrelevant for the evolution of the other Soviet-style regimes, but as an exacerbation of certain elements of the Stalinist political culture in the particular Romanian context. Thus, Tismăneanu has coined the concept of "national Stalinism" which captures best, in his opinion, the essence of Romanian communism². This term is appropriate because it avoids a possible mistake between the sense given to national communism in the literature on post-Stalinist Eastern Europe – designating the various paths of building socialism on which Soviet satellites embarked after 1953, and the sense given in the works dedicated to Ceaușescu's dictatorship – referring to the use of nationalism by a communist regime.

Tismăneanu's national Stalinism is defined in opposition to national communism as understood in the first case. Common to both national communism and national Stalinism is the revolt against the hegemony of Moscow, supported by leaders such as Imre Nagy, Alexander Dubček and Josip Broz Tito in the East, or Palmiro Togliatti and Santiago Carrillo in the West. Otherwise, where national communism is innovative, national Stalinism is dogmatic. While the former encourages reforms and intellectual creativity, the latter goes against structural changes or critical thinking. In short, national communism represents an alternative to the Stalinist

¹ This concept was elaborated in his "Ceaușescu's Socialism", in *Problems of Communism*, vol. XXXIV, January-February 1985, pp. 50-66, and "Byzantine Rites, Stalinist Follies: The Twilight of Dynastic Socialism in Romania", in *ORBIS*, Spring 1986, pp. 65-90.

² See his *Stalinism for All Seasons*, cit., pp. 18-36.

model implemented all across Eastern Europe after the Second World War, while national Stalinism is nothing else but the Stalinist blueprint in disguise.

To conclude, the very evolution of the RCP, especially during the 1980s, illustrates that it was the most dogmatic party in the region, which never revisited its ideological views in order to cope with the internal crisis or to confront the new international situation opened by Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts at reforming the system. The manifest autonomy from the Soviet Union helped the Romanian communists not only to gain some popular support in the 1960s, but also, in the late 1980s, to present the reformist impulses given by Gorbachev from Moscow as being directed against the national interests. In fact, despite their weak ideological base, the Romanian communists understood very well one single principle, which represented the very essence of Stalinism: any attempt to reform this model of organizing society would result, sooner or latter, in its collapse. The Revolutions of 1989 proved the validity of the Romanian communists' guiding principle, but this, however, did not help them to stay in power much longer than their colleagues in the other satellite countries. Nevertheless, second and third rank members of this party, having understood that time could not be stopped any longer, used the opportunity opened by the popular revolt to overthrow the last Stalinist regime in Europe, assuring for themselves a better place in the post-communist political and economic elite. In fact, Tismăneanu argues, the "Romanian exceptionalism"¹ consists in the fact that communism outlived the Romanian Communist Party.

¹ See also his "Romanian Exceptionalism? Democracy, Ethnocracy and Uncertain Pluralism in Post-Ceaușescu Romania" in Karen DAWISHA, Bruce PARROTT (eds.), *Politics, Power and Struggle for Democracy in South-East Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 403-451.