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Peak Dictatorship: Ceaușescu's State Visit to Great Britain, June 1978

GAVIN BOWD and MIOARA ANTON

THE State Visit of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the United Kingdom in June 1978 has not left commentators indifferent. It has been seen as a dark moment in British diplomacy, indulging a regime whose evil nature was fully revealed in December 1989.¹ The most balanced and well-documented study of this notorious high-point of Great Britain's 'political romance' with Romania in the 1970s is by Mark Percival, published in 1995. But if Percival provides valuable geopolitical and economic insights, he remarks with regret that 'it is extraordinarily difficult to establish the exact objectives of British foreign policy prior to the release of classified material under the Thirty-year rule'.² In this article, we aim to expand upon Percival's description and analysis of this pivotal event, drawing on declassified documents in both London and Bucharest, as well as the contemporary press and recently published sources. We examine the motivations of both sides and the influence of political, geopolitical and economic factors. We argue that Ceaușescu's State Visit marks not only the high-point of Anglo-Romanian relations, but also the apogee of his dictatorship, bringing international recognition and tangible economic gains.

Ceaușescu at the height of his power

At the beginning of the 1970s, the name of Nicolae Ceaușescu became known in all the diplomatic chancelleries of the world. His popularity was especially due to his opposition to the Soviet Union, which culminated in the public condemnation of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August

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¹ See John Sweeney, *The Life and Evil Times of Nicolae Ceausescu*, London, 1991, pp. 110–20; Mark Almond, *The Rise and Fall of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu*, London, 1992, pp. 110–16.

² Mark Percival, 'Britain's "Political Romance" with Romania in the 1970s', *Contemporary European History*, 4, March 1995, 1, pp. 67–87 (p. 68).

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1968. Romania succeeded in attracting the attention of the Western world from 1967 onwards through foreign policy decisions which singled it out in the Communist bloc through the almost simultaneous establishment of diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany and the refusal to categorize the state of Israel as aggressor during the Six Day War.³ Similarly, the diplomatic tours of Asia (1971), Africa (1972) and Latin America (1973), as well as the high-level visits to Bucharest by Western leaders (Willy Brandt in August 1967, Charles de Gaulle in May 1968 and Richard Nixon in August 1969), contributed to the accumulation of impressive image capital. To this was added the Bucharest leader's visits to a series of Western capitals, such as Rome, the Vatican, Paris, Vienna and Bonn, which led in turn to visits by heads of state, ministers and party leaders.⁴ Campaigns for the organization of the conference for European security, appeals for nuclear disarmament and proposals for dismantling the military blocs consolidated his international reputation. Also not without importance were developments in international relations (East-West relations, the Sino-Soviet dispute, the USSR's opening to the West) which increased considerably Romania's room for manoeuvre both within and outside the Communist bloc.

The development of relations with the Western states was one of the main objectives of Ceaușescu's foreign policy programme. Invoking the principle of 'reciprocal advantage, the respect for independence and non-interference in internal affairs',⁵ Ceaușescu announced to the Tenth Congress of the PCR, in August 1969, that Romania aimed to extend economic and technico-scientific links with the Western and developing states. Behind this decision were both political (the widening of autonomy in the Soviet bloc) economic reasons. The programmes for the country's accelerated industrialization as laid out in his five-year plans explain Ceaușescu's interest in the intensification and diversification of trade

³ See the assessment by Ceaușescu's first foreign minister, Corneliu Mănescu, in *Convorbiri neterminate. Corneliu Mănescu în dialog cu Lavinia Betea*, Iași, 2001, pp. 172–73.

⁴ For example, according to a report by the British ambassador to Bucharest, Leslie Glass, for the period January–November 1966, more than 140 Romanian delegations visited countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America and Australia. In response, more than 152 foreign delegations had visited Romania. In the ambassador's view, behind the Romanian actions were economic interests. See Mihai Retegan, *Ambasadorii Majestății Sale în România. Relațiile dintre Regatul Unit și România, 1964–1970*, Bucharest, 2017, pp. 203–04.

⁵ Nicolae Ceaușescu, 'Raportul Comitetului Central al Partidului Comunist Român cu privire la activitatea PCR în perioada dintre Congresul al IX-lea și Congresul al X-lea și sarcinile de viitor ale partidului', in *Congresul al X-lea al Partidului Comunist Român, 6–12 august 1969*, Bucharest, 1969, p. 43.

relations with the Western states. His objectives were as ambitious as they were daring: Ceaușescu wanted to close the technological gap and create productive industries that, in the long term, would enable Romania to go beyond its status as a developing nation. For this was needed advantageous credit, flexibility on the international markets, technological and cultural exchanges and access to international trade organizations. The liberalization of world trade was an opportunity that Romania had to profit from. The first results of his endeavours appeared at the beginning of the 1970s, when the Bucharest regime became a member of GATT in November 1971, then was formally accepted into the IMF and the IBRD in December 1972. Thanks to these successes, Romania pulled off the exploit of being a member of both Comecon and the IMF. But by far the biggest success of Ceaușescu was when, in July 1975, President Ford granted Romania 'Most Favoured Nation' tariff status.

However, these foreign policy successes were not echoed in Romania's internal situation. Distancing from Moscow, the cultivation of anti-Russian sentiment amongst the population, the condemnation of the Securitate's abuses and the rehabilitation of the persecuted had led, in the early years, to an increase in Ceaușescu's popularity and generated socially a feeling of trust. Although at the beginning of his leadership, through his relaxation of terror and liberalization of the system, Ceaușescu seemed to be a reformer, within only a few years he was building the road towards absolute dictatorship. Changes took place gradually, but inexorably extended his control over the party and state apparatuses. The development of the cult of the personality, the ideological freeze that came with the Theses of July 1971, the nationalist rhetoric, the propaganda excesses and the deterioration of living conditions were defining traits of the Ceaușescu regime. The accumulation of party and state offices conferred on him absolute power: Ceaușescu took over, in turn, leadership of the State Council in 1967, the Socialist Unity Front, created in September 1968 as a formula for the political organization of society, and the office of party general secretary. He was also made supreme commander of the armed forces, and became president of the country's Defence and National Workers' Councils. The formal creation of the dictatorship took place on 28 March 1974 when, in a special ceremony, Ceaușescu was made President of the RSR, taking a sceptre as symbol of presidential power. The Party, Securitate and army were now in his hands. So as not to be accused of breaking with the principles of collective leadership decided at the Ninth Congress in 1965, Ceaușescu institutionalized the accumulation of party

and state offices at all levels, which meant that party first secretaries or secretaries could hold office as mayors or prefects. At the same time, Elena Ceaușescu began to be more present in the political life of Communist Romania, accumulating offices in both party and state. The Eleventh Congress of November 1974 marked the Bucharest regime's entry into the sign of dynastic Communism.

At the beginning of 1978, Ceaușescu was reaching the peak of his power, with his birthday transformed into a national celebration. The forms of glorification of the *Conducător* reached paroxysmic levels. This event was analysed attentively by the British Embassy in Bucharest, which reported on 8 February:

The celebration of Ceausescu's birthday [...] merits some closer examination. At first sight we have seen the practical expression of a personality cult which must have few equals in the world. As a propaganda campaign it has been spectacular. The entire country was mobilized to pay tribute to the President. There is not an organization or factory in the country which has not sent its message of congratulation (and often gifts) to the leader. There is not a poet, artist, sculptor, intellectual or historian who has not willingly or unwillingly provided his own testimony or loyal admiration.⁶

Behind the propaganda campaigns depicting a radiant future hid social realities that Ceaușescu ignored until his fall in December 1989. The Romanian economy began to show obvious signs of crisis from the beginning of the 1970s. Romania was affected by a series of natural disasters (two waves of flooding in May 1970 and July 1975, and an earthquake in March 1977), which led to a worsening of the economic situation. Mass industrialization consumed the majority of economic resources, the population being obliged to pay the price of pharaonic planning. A lack of food products, rationing, shortages and pressure from the repressive state apparatus became a constant of everyday life in Ceaușescu's Romania.

Having reached the peak of his power, Ceaușescu found himself confronted by his first critics. Respect for human rights became problematic, despite Romania being one of the signatories of the final Act of Helsinki. Ceaușescu proved to be ruthless when the foundations of his personal dictatorship were attacked. This was illustrated in the cases of the writer

⁶ London, The National Archives (hereafter, TNA), FCO 28, 3444, R. A. Burns, British Embassy Bucharest, to D. G. Lambert, FCO, 8 February 1978.

Paul Goma, the historian Vlad Georgescu and the worker Vasile Paraschiv, all of whom were victims of psychiatric repression. Dissidents were arrested and investigated, freed only as a result of international pressure and then obliged to leave Romania. The series of challenges to the regime continued with the miners' strike in the Jiu Valley, a rebellion against working conditions and the economic situation, which only calmed down after Ceaușescu visited the Jiu Valley on 2 August 1977 and promised the miners that some of their demands would be met (a reduction of the pension age, a salary increase, reduction of the working day and free meals).

Romania and Great Britain: A case of mutual attraction

In spite of the obvious deterioration of the internal situation in Romania and increasing ideological dogmatism, Ceaușescu continued to enjoy international prestige until the end of the 1970s. Relations with the Western states followed a rising curve, Ceaușescu showing a particular interest in normalizing relations with Great Britain, which had supported Romania's joining GATT and the IMF. Signals had been made by the Bucharest leadership right after Ceaușescu came to power, while the visit to London by a delegation led by Alexandru Bârlădeanu in February 1966 seemed to indicate a similar interest from the British side. The technological needs of a Romania which wanted to become an industrialized power could not go unnoticed by one of the most advanced economies in the world. During the discussions, the British assured the Romanian delegation that British industry disposed of sufficient resources to deliver to Romania the goods and equipment it needed.⁷ There remained, however, the unresolved problem of the debts and arrears Romania owed Great Britain. Despite the assurances given by Alexandru Bârlădeanu that the Romanian government sought solutions to the debt payments, in 1978, more than ten years later, Foreign Office reports showed that they had not yet been paid.⁸

British interest in Romania must be seen in the wider context of the redefinition of UK foreign policy regarding the countries of Central and South-eastern Europe. The positions lost in the Mediterranean and the Balkans at the end of the Second World War had to be recovered through the promotion of a more active policy towards the Communist bloc. The British had understood that the Communist regimes had become more interested in the development of their own economies and in the

⁷ *Ambasadorii Majestății Sale în România. Relațiile dintre Regatul Unit și România, 1964-1970*, pp. 104-14.

⁸ TNA, PREM 16, 638, Record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and emissaries from president Ceaușescu in the House of Commons on 23 April 1975.

rejection of economic and political dependency on the Soviet Union. Such tendencies served the long-term interests of the British, and was an idea supported by Julian Amery, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who made an official visit to Bucharest on 23 June 1973. In the course of an interview with Ceaușescu he discussed collaboration on an international level (supporting common projects in the framework of preparation for the European conference) and bilaterally. The Bucharest leader accused the British of being reserved on the question of developing economic relations with Romania. In comparison with the FRG, statistical data indicated a reduced presence of Great Britain in the trade activities of Romania. In Ceaușescu's opinion, economic collaboration played a primary role in the promotion of a new policy in the solution of political problems.⁹ Amery assured him that British foreign policy aimed to improve economic relations with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe¹⁰ — Great Britain's joining the European Economic Community, in January 1973, showed that British policy was adapting to the new political and economic realities. However, it was not an argument that convinced Ceaușescu, who saw in the EEC an obstacle to the development of economic relations between European states of different systems of organization. In his opinion, the division of the continent was accentuated with the appearance of this organism, while penetration of Western markets would only happen on the basis of individual agreements, which excluded belonging to the blocs. The interview ended with Julian Amery's invitation to Ceaușescu to visit Great Britain: 'It will be a great honour and a great pleasure for us to see you in London.'¹¹ Thus began a major diplomatic campaign which led to the organization of the State Visit of June 1978. Beginning with this invitation, a Foreign Office report emphasized that 'politically our interest in Romania is to support and encourage her independent stance. This requires visits, and we shall not be able to take back from Ceaușescu the bone that Mr Amery offered him'.¹²

Great Britain's attraction to Romania can also be placed in the context of its own internal affairs. From the early seventies onwards, the country was in deepening economic and social difficulties, the first major manifestation of which was the sterling crisis of 1972. If Ceaușescu was challenged by the miners of the Jiu Valley, the Conservative government

⁹ Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (hereafter, ANIC), Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 109/1973, f. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 18.

¹² TNA, FCO 28, 2549, J. L. Bullard to Sir J. Killick, 18 October 1974.

had already been humiliated by the miners of the Rhondda Valley. Against a backdrop of industrial unrest, sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, a rising Far Right and cultural revolt — symbolized by the Sex Pistols' anarchic 'God Save the Queen' released during the Jubilee Year of 1977 — the fragile Labour government was eventually forced to ask for a bailout from the IMF. In such a troubled context, economic opportunities in Romania, however modest, could not be sniffed at.

The number of British officials and delegations visiting Romania increased significantly. Among those who met Ceaușescu were John Gollan, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Margaret Thatcher, Secretary of State for Science and Education, Lord Drumalbyn, Minister without Portfolio, Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party, General Michael Carver, head of the high command of British land troops, Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, John Payton, Minister for Transport, as well as delegations from the British Parliament, the Labour Party and the Confederation of British Industry.¹³ In June 1972 a long term economic cooperation agreement was signed which settled the frameworks for collaboration in industry and agriculture. In accordance with this agreement, Romania would manufacture Islander BN-2 planes and gas turbine plane engines in cooperation with Rolls-Royce; installations would be acquired for the construction of irrigation systems; glasshouses for vegetables and flowers would be built, and a British-Romanian bank would be founded with its headquarters in London. There were negotiations for the manufacture of Ford vans, electric furnaces for heating, and on-board protection for the crews of planes and helicopters.¹⁴ In December 1972, a Rolls-Royce delegation was received by Ceaușescu, who did not hide his interest in British technology, declaring that he wanted to have manufactured in Romania 'a son of the Rolls-Royce'.¹⁵ Ceaușescu's intentions were not limited to the construction of civil aircraft, but aimed at a wider range of engines and technologies necessary for the aviation industry, including the military. Development of the Romanian aeronautics industry was one of Ceaușescu's ambitions, and he tested both the British and French markets with a view to acquiring technologies and licenses. The conditions offered by the British were more advantageous, which explains his choice of the British company.¹⁶

¹³ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 109/1973, ff. 20–21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 149/1972, f. 3.

¹⁶ See Petre Opreș, *Licențe străine pentru produse civile și militare fabricate în România (1946–1989)*, Bucharest, 2018, p. 168.

The Communist regime in Bucharest had not wished for the defeat of the Heath government at the elections in 1974. It did not want an official visit against the background of a miners' strike in which the significant role of the CPGB was a major media story. Ambassador D. R. A. Ashe reported: 'In their opinion, a victory for Mr Wilson would be disastrous; they considered him utterly untrustworthy, a friend of the hard-line organizations of international Communism and an opponent of the Anglo-Romanian relationship which they hoped to achieve.'¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite Labour's narrow victory, diplomatic efforts intensified. A new high-point of British-Romanian relations was reached in September 1975, when Ceaușescu received in Bucharest two of the most important figures in British politics: Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party (2 September), and Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister (16 September). This was not Margaret Thatcher's first official visit to Romania. In September 1971 she had spent two days in Romania as Secretary of State for Education and Science, but had not received special attention from the party leadership. The second visit to Romania came shortly after the end of the Helsinki Conference, and the meeting with Ceaușescu offered a good opportunity to understand where the Bucharest leader stood on the conference decisions. Ceaușescu did not hide his unhappiness with the general character of the understandings signed by the participating states in Helsinki in August 1975. Security and disarmament took priority, in his view, over humanitarian cases. In reply, the Conservative leader insisted on the freedom of movement that the countries had to ensure all citizens.¹⁸ The continuation of the arms race, the existence of military blocs and domination by the great powers were, in Ceaușescu's opinion, the main threats to general security. Thatcher was interested in the rhythms of development of the Romanian economy, and especially the rate of investment in the internal situation after the floods of June 1975. The Conservative leader seemed impressed by the economic progress achieved by Romania:

The secret of your success resides in the fact that you have managed to convince the people to postpone until tomorrow expectations of a more substantial improvement in their living conditions. We too have difficulties concerning this, because the majority of people want to have an improvement of living conditions today, and do not understand that by consuming more today they will have less tomorrow.¹⁹

¹⁷ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, D. R. Ashe to J. L. Bullard, 21 January 1974.

¹⁸ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 153/1975, f. 3f/v.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 8f/v.

This renunciation of comfort was not, however, the result of a voluntary act, as Ceaușescu tried to present it; on the contrary, the population was feeling acutely the negative effects of his economic policy. Romania was confronting an accelerated deterioration of the trade balance and a growing budget deficit, caused by realities that Ceaușescu was unable to understand: on the one hand, the rules of the Common Market, which limited the circulation of Romanian products and, on the other, the technological gap and problems with the quality of Romanian finished products. Ceaușescu responded by massively reducing imports of consumer goods and rationing consumption. As for Margaret Thatcher, she would have to wait until 1979 to apply her monetarist medicine to the economy and society of Great Britain.

The development of trade with Great Britain remained a priority for the Bucharest regime, which desired a considerable increase in commercial exchanges and the elimination of existing restrictions on the British market.²⁰ The Bucharest government sought a special increase of £1 million in the amount of Romanian textiles exported, the importation of five BAC planes, the granting of government credit at a preferential rate, the increase of lines of finance for the importation of installations, tools and machines, the regulation of imports of coke and cokeable carbons and active collaboration with British firms on third markets.²¹ The visit by prime minister Harold Wilson to Bucharest, the first of its kind since the Second World War, gave Ceaușescu another opportunity to discuss widening the framework of economic collaboration.²² It was not the leaders' first meeting. Wilson had visited Romania in June 1972 as leader of the Labour Party, and had a short interview with Ceaușescu on 12 June 1975, when the latter stopped off in London after a trip to Mexico and Brazil.

Harold Wilson was familiar with Romanian diplomatic efforts to improve relations with Great Britain, having received all the official delegations which had arrived in London since 1966. In Bucharest, the British prime minister was interested to find out Ceaușescu's opinion concerning the political changes taking place in the Soviet Union, the evolution of Sino-Soviet relations, Europe after Helsinki, and the situation in Spain and Portugal. Political discussions were complemented by talks about economic collaboration. Ceaușescu returned to Romania's desire to develop the aviation industry, which would extend the partnership with

²⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, f. 15 f/v.

²² ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 164/1975, f. 3-4/f/v.

Rolls-Royce.²³ For an economic collaboration ‘advantageous to both sides’, he proposed the creation of joint companies and common actions on third markets. Ceaușescu did not hide his discontent with Britain’s refusal to grant Romania credit at a preferential rate: ‘I would like to mention that Romania had a right to receive from England a certain support, as a developing country, given the fact that England made profits from Romania over quite a long period, especially in the domain of oil.’²⁴

Once the agenda for economic collaboration had been settled, Harold Wilson sought to clarify the conditions on which the State Visit could be organized. Following consultation with the Queen, it was decided that the State Visit would take place in 1978, ‘including a parade through London in a gold carriage with white horses’. Wilson reported back to Ceaușescu that ‘[s]uch a visit will not be announced a long time before, but at a given date. This means that everyone will wear short trousers, with the exception of you and Prince Philip’.²⁵

The bone and burden of a State Visit

Harold Wilson’s outline for the State Visit came after Romanian officials’ insistence that the event be organized as soon as possible after the invitation was first given, in June 1973. The ‘bone’ offered by Julian Amery was as much a burden for the Romanian diplomats as it was for their British counterparts. There was the option of a simple working visit, suggested by the Foreign Office, but which would not have benefited from the attention attracted by a State Visit. Ceaușescu made it known that he wanted to be received with full honours.²⁶ J. L. Bullard, for the Eastern European and Soviet Department, expressed reservations as to the opportuneness of a State Visit:

I can believe that a State Visit by Ceaușescu would not be particularly welcome to either the Palace or to the British public. Nevertheless, I fear we are committed to it. Further delay in offering a date could cause the Romanians to question whether our present Ministers are as interested in Romania as their predecessors. In other words, the matter could become a grievance.²⁷

²³ Ibid., f. 12v, f. 16v.

²⁴ Ibid., f. 16f.

²⁵ Ibid., f. 26/v.

²⁶ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, J. L. Bullard to Sir J. Killick. State visit and outgoing royal visits 1974 and beyond, 18 October 1974.

²⁷ Ibid.

Nicolae Ceaușescu aspired to have his status as an international leader reconfirmed, especially in the context of the deterioration of Romania's internal situation. The missions of Ștefan Andrei, secretary of the PCR's Central Committee, to London in spring 1974–75 aimed to persuade Great Britain to support a common agenda concerning the CSCE, but by far the most important aim was to ensure the organization of a State Visit. If this visit could be planned to coincide with the finalization of the Helsinki conference, Ceaușescu's international prestige would be fully recognized. However this was precisely what British officials feared: 'I suspect that the message may in fact be connected with CSCE and possibly with President Ceaușescu's persistent wish to be invited to Britain on a State Visit. The Embassy in Bucharest have been asked if they can discover anything more about the purpose of the proposed visit.'²⁸ But the British official calendar did not allow for the organization of such an event in 1974–75. Ștefan Andrei had already been informed of this situation in May 1974:

Mr Andrei said that President Ceaușescu would also like to visit the Prime Minister in London, but for this purpose would need an official invitation from the Queen: all the President's official visits to constitutional monarchies had followed a similar invitation from the Head of State. The Prime Minister said that President Ceaușescu would be a most welcome visitor in this country. A state visit was slightly more difficult to arrange than a more informal visit, since the former category was planned several years ahead, and decisions had already been taken for the next few years.²⁹

A similar response was received by Vasile Pungan, Romania's former ambassador to London (1966–72), during an interview with the Lord Privy Seal in Bucharest in August 1974.³⁰ For the visit to take place in 1975 and be included on the official agenda, Vasile Pungan suggested a reduction in the duration and a simplification of the ceremonial element. The Lord Privy Seal invoked the very strict protocol of the Court, which did not allow the organization of more than three visits per year. Moreover, giving up the ceremonial element would not resolve the problem. A. F. Green, of the

²⁸ TNA, PREM 16, 638, Emissaries from President Ceausescu, 19 March 1975. See also, *Stăpânul secretelor lui Ceaușescu. I se spunea Machiavelli. Ștefan Andrei în dialog cu Lavinia Betea*, Bucharest, 2011, p. 198.

²⁹ TNA, PREM 16, 638, Record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and Mr Ștefan Andrei (secretary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party) at no 10 Downing Street, at 3.00 p.m. on Friday 3 May 1974.

³⁰ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, Note of a meeting between the Lord Privy Seal and Mr Pungan in Bucharest, 21 August 1974.

Eastern European and Soviet Department, informed the British Embassy in Bucharest on 15 July 1974 that there was no possibility of organizing a visit in 1975 or 1976, while 1977 was totally taken up by ceremonies for the Silver Jubilee. Therefore, Ceaușescu's visit could, in all probability, be organized in 1978, if other events did not intervene.³¹

The official invitation finally arrived on 14 September 1977, transmitted by the British ambassador, Reginald Secondé, to the Romanian Foreign Minister, George Macovescu.³² In London, the official announcement was made on 25 October 1977.³³ Unlike in 1973, when the invitation was first mooted, the external context had changed considerably. East-West relations had entered a new phase, while the Helsinki conference had introduced, as an obligatory norm, respect for human rights, which made the Bucharest regime vulnerable.

The Foreign Office analysed closely the impact of Ceaușescu's visit, which was considered to be of 'special significance'. Through it the British government wanted to encourage Romania to follow the same line of independent foreign policy, create new bases for growth in exports to Romania, maintain at a high level the bilateral relationship in the spirit of the joint declaration signed by Harold Wilson with Ceaușescu in 1975, promote British positions concerning East-West relations and the future of the CSCE process and obtain a positive attitude to issues of free movement of people. On the other hand, Romanian interests were as much political as economic. Ceaușescu continued to emphasize the importance of the development of relations with Western states, in order to give more weight to his independent policies in the Communist bloc. Relations with Great Britain served Romanian interests well, thanks to the British government's positions in the Common Market, NATO, the UN Security Council and in the general global processes of disarmament and detente. It was expected that Romania would insist on growth in Romanian exports to the British market and the relaxing of existing restrictions, and that it would request advantageous credit for the purchase of British equipment and technology.³⁴

³¹ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, A. F. Green, Eastern European and Soviet Department, to D. R. Ashe, Bucharest, 15 July 1974.

³² Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (hereafter, AMAE), Problema 220A/1978, vol. I, f. 43–46.

³³ TNA, FCO 28, 3080, K. B. A. Scott, Eastern European and Soviet Department to Mr Whyte, News Department, 21 October 1977.

³⁴ TNA, PREM 16, 1838, State visit of President Ceausescu to the United Kingdom 13–16 June 1978: talks with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. Brief no 1, 6 June 1978.

In part, the invitation is intended to recognise the special position of Romania as a Communist country with an independent foreign policy and one which, by maintaining good relations with countries of all political persuasions, has a unique contribution to make to the solution of international problems (the Middle East is an example). It is also hoped that the visit will encourage closer commercial relations between our two countries and thereby increase the opportunities for British exporters in Romania.³⁵

According to Foreign Office summaries, the volume of commercial exchanges had by 1977 reached its highest level in the history of bilateral relations: £100 million. Romania occupied fifth place in the ranking of the most important trading partners Great Britain had in Eastern Europe. British exports to Romania amounted to £80.6 million, with Romanian imports at £52.5 million. The figures were optimistic and met the level of growth that Harold Wilson and Ceaușescu had agreed upon in 1975 (from £68 million in 1974 to £170 million in 1980).³⁶ Even if the balance was favourable to Britain, British officials were not confident that it would continue to evolve, as there were many variables which influenced the balance of trade — prices, the evolution of markets and technological development. Officials noted that 'the Romanians are anxious not only to expand their exports but also to develop their technological and managerial infrastructure. They propose to achieve this through association with advanced companies in projects which Romanians would not themselves be able to perform'.³⁷ Romania exported chemical and metallurgical products, wood, furniture and construction materials, light industry and food products. It imported technology needed for the manufacture of cars, planes, electrical and electro-technical products, chemical products and raw materials for the food and pharmaceutical industries. Romania was also interested in obtaining an advantageous price for the manufacture of BAC 1-11 Series 475 planes with British Aerospace; producing plane engines in collaboration with Rolls-Royce; collaborating with Dowty for the manufacture of hydraulic components for aviation; manufacturing precision-engineered parts for the aviation industry with High Duty Alloys Ltd; manufacturing cars benefiting from British technology, and creating a joint company based in Romania to produce and sell Shell lubricating

³⁵ TNA, FCO 28, 3436, David Owen to Sir Derek Walker-Smith QC MP, 12 May 1978.

³⁶ TNA, PREM 16, 1838, State Visit of the President of the Socialist Republic of Romania and Madame Ceausescu, 13–16 June 1978. Background note (undated).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

oils. The development of commercial exchanges between 1971 and 1978 indicated a rising trend (see table below).³⁸

	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	March–June 1978
British exports to Romania	31.2	38.9	34.2	35.5	39.8	48.9	80.6	18.1
Romanian exports to Britain	21.2	25.4	31.8	34.3	36.1	49.4	52.5	11.1
Volume of trade	52.4	64.3	66.0	67.8	75.9	98.3	133.1	29.2
Trade balance	+10.0	+13.5	+2.5	+1.2	+3.7	-0.5	+28.1	+7.0

In terms of foreign policy, the first half of 1978 was a successful one for Ceaușescu. To Bucharest came the German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (January) and Egypt's Mohammed Anwar el-Sadat (February). At the same time, the diplomatic apparatus worked on preparing two extremely important State visits on the Romanian president's agenda: to the USA in April and Great Britain in June. Internally, however, the economic situation had not recovered, while Ceaușescu's solutions — increased social control and a reduction in domestic consumption — only served to increase discontent amongst the population. The drawing up of new directives in March 1978 for the planning and administration of the economy did not have the desired effects, aggravating the chaos in industry and agriculture. A direct consequence of the deterioration of the economic situation was the negative balance in external trade, with Romania registering the lowest level in its entire post-war history.³⁹ That said, the birthday of 'the most beloved son of the people' was marked by Ceaușescu being awarded honorary doctorates in politics and economics for his 'inestimable contributions to the development of the concepts of economic and political science' by the Academia 'Ștefan Gheorghiu' and by the Academy for Economic Studies.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Adam Burakowski, *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceaușescu. 1965–1989. Geniul Carpaților*, Iași, 2011, pp. 242–43.

Western governments had by now become much more preoccupied with Romania's internal situation. The hardening of the dictatorship, the excesses of the cult of the personality and human rights abuses were constant themes in reports from foreign diplomats in Bucharest, and the British were no exception. The British Ambassador, Reginald Secondé, reported to the Foreign Office on 24 April 1978 that few people who dared speak about Ceaușescu — fear of punishment made them very cautious. Fear had become a state of mind in Communist Romania. The long speeches, crammed with clichés from Marxist philosophy, the extended ovations and adulation of the Conducător perplexed the British ambassador:

It is not just boredom at these marathon speeches, or the bobbing up and down. One can even accept the huge picture of the President smiling equably from behind the podium. The uncomfortable sight is that of Ministers, Generals and high officials, whom one knows to be intelligent and cultured men, clapping and chanting 'Cea-u-șes-cu-P-C-R' to the rhythm of 'Sing a Song of Sixpence, A Pocket full of Rye'. The sinister aspect is that a shrewd and experienced statesman like Ceaușescu can accept such orchestrated adulation.⁴⁰

Behind the collective hysteria, which was difficult for a foreign observer to understand, lay the discipline and total mobilization that Ceaușescu had successfully engendered around him. In May 1978, a Foreign Office analysis by K. B. A. Scott for the British ambassador described the situation in Romania in precise terms:

Ceaușescu is a despot but the Romanians find nothing unusual in having such a figure at the helm. His internal policies are unsavoury and repressive, and have provoked considerable criticism abroad, but he has brought about a remarkable degree of economic advancement at home and has shown great skill and wisdom in international relations. His great merit in Romanian eyes is his nationalism and the extent to which he has been able to assert Romanian independence from the Russians; this too is of considerable merit to the West.⁴¹

For the Foreign Office, preparing the first State Visit of the Bucharest leader to London was not an easy mission. The British press showed little

⁴⁰ TNA, FCO 28, 3407, Reginald Secondé to David Owen MP, 24 April 1978.

⁴¹ TNA, FCO 28, 3407, K. B. A. Scott to Reginald Secondé, 11 May 1978.

sign of goodwill towards him. Foreign Office experts expected that the issue of human rights would be used as the main argument in negative press campaigns. On the announcement of the visit, in October 1977, the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* criticized the authorities' decision to invite Ceaușescu to the United Kingdom.⁴² It was rumoured that other negative articles were going to appear in the British press. In the Foreign Office, there were many reservations about a positive press coverage of the visit. The British ambassador in Bucharest signalled that the Romanian side already got off to a bad start with the British press by forbidding entry, in April 1978, to *The Times* correspondent, Dessa Trevisan.⁴³ A report from the Romanian embassy in London emphasized the efforts made to promote positive news about Ceaușescu's policies in the British mass media. The Bucharest authorities tried to win the goodwill of the British press and invited more than thirty journalists and radio and television commentators to Romania. As a result, a series of positive articles had appeared in respected national broadsheets including the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Financial Times* and *Observer*.⁴⁴

Another source of disquiet came from representatives of Hungarian émigrés in London, as well as 'Romanian reactionary immigrants', who announced that they would organize protests while Ceaușescu was in London. The Hungarian émigrés protested the lack of rights and freedoms enjoyed by the Magyar minority in Romania and distributed hostile propaganda material. In their support, Lord Balogh, former adviser to Harold Wilson, planned to bring up in official discussions the issue of the Hungarian minority, who also received support from Hungarian émigrés in the USA, Italy and Switzerland. On the other hand, Romanian émigrés in the Western states announced that they would protest against human rights abuses and the lack of religious freedom in Communist Romania. Among the main activists were Ion Rațiu in London, Alexandru Guga in the FRG, the Greco-Catholic bishop Vasile Cristea and the Greco-Catholic priests Ion Tăutu, Pamfil Cârnațiu and Ilie Mercaș.⁴⁵ The Bucharest authorities had requested that the Foreign Office prevent the organization of demonstrations, so that Ceaușescu would not be disturbed by hostile actions.⁴⁶

⁴² TNA, FCO 28, 3080, Mr Whyte to K. B. A. Scott, 21 October 1977.

⁴³ TNA, FCO 28, 3407, K. B. A. Scott to Reginald Secondé, 11 May 1978.

⁴⁴ AMAE: Problema 20/1978, f. 57.

⁴⁵ TNA, FCO 28, 3427, Ceausescu State Visit: Security, 6 June 1978.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Respect for human rights was to be one of the most sensitive subjects of the State Visit. Reports by Amnesty International gave the Foreign Office information about the Romanian authorities' use of psychiatric treatment against those who exercised their right to freedom of expression and conscience. According to Amnesty, over thirty people had suffered psychiatric abuse, the most well-known being Ion Vulcănescu, who had left Romania in 1977 after being arrested, investigated and interned in a psychiatric hospital.⁴⁷ Another sensitive issue was that of people who wished to marry British citizens or leave Romania to be reunited with relatives in exile. The British authorities had received assurances from the Romanians that all requests would receive a positive response.

The technical details of the visit, especially concerning the strict protocol for the treatment of guests, was another reason for disquiet amongst British officials. In diplomatic circles there were numerous rumours about the attitude and behaviour of the Ceaușescu in various capitals of the world. The gravest incidents had apparently taken place during the Romanian leader's tour of Latin America. According to reports, Ceaușescu had hysterical fits, insisted on last-minute changes to the programme, and drank excessively at official dinners, while his bodyguards were violent towards the hosts.⁴⁸ There was also concern about the personality of the Romanian first lady, who, it was reported, had been irritable and sulky at official dinners. However, in October 1974, Richard Fletcher tried to give assurances to the Foreign Office:

Since the Latin American trip of 1973 she has been prominent in nearly all the major State occasions and it is noticeable that efforts have been made to improve her outward appearance — a new hair style and allegedly crates of long evening dresses flown in from Paris. Whether this transformation from ugly duckling to swan has been successful is hard to say, but in political terms there is little more she has to aspire to. [...] Relying on diplomatic gossip and appearances on television and in the press, I judged Elena to be a very hard, severe woman of immense ambition. But only two days ago I had my first opportunity, at the opening of the Bucharest International Fair, to see Elena close to and I confess that she did not match up to her reputation. She was very plainly and inexpensively dressed; she wore no make-up at all. She has a quiet, pleasant voice and looks like

⁴⁷ TNA, FCO 28, 3436, Amnesty International on human rights violations in Romania, 12 June 1978.

⁴⁸ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, D. R. Ashe to J. Killick, 2 August 1974. See also, FCO 28, 3407, Reginald Secondé to David Owen MP, 24 April 1978.

someone you would expect to see selling poppies on Remembrance Day around St George's Square.⁴⁹

Another related problem which the British authorities were confronted with was how to give due recognition to Elena Ceaușescu's achievements in science. In December 1977, the British Embassy in Athens reported that Greek President Tsatsos had 'told the Ambassador with a smile that he had "acted unconstitutionally" by signing a decree appointing Mme Ceaușescu a Corresponding Member of the Athens Academicians, who noted that her only published works are on chemistry written by herself and other workers'.⁵⁰ The signals received from Bucharest in the months preceding the visit to Great Britain indicated that there was a similar express desire that she receive a title or even more from a prestigious British university. A first test of British intentions came on 3 April 1978 from the Romanian ambassador to London, Pretor Popa, during discussions with British officials about the visit's programme. In Bucharest, it had been decided that Elena Ceaușescu would visit the Royal Society, which strongly implied that she wanted to receive an honorary distinction. Ambassador Popa 'wondered whether it would be possible for Madame Ceaușescu to receive some academic award in addition to any ceremonial award. [...] It was explained that British academic institutions were inclined to be rather touchy about their independence and it was not in the gift of Government to arrange an academic award. It was felt that the FCO should explore the possibilities. It was, however, made fairly clear to the Romanians that we were unlikely to be successful'.⁵¹ Visibly irritated, a few days later K. B. A. Scott wrote to the British ambassador in Bucharest that the Romanian side had to understand that the British government could not pressurize universities into giving academic distinctions. Their independence was fully respected in Great Britain.⁵² Subsequently, the issue was resolved by making Elena Ceaușescu an honorary member of the Royal Institute for Chemistry. The Polytechnic of Central London also conferred upon her the title of 'Professor Honoris Causa' (both the School of Slavonic and East European Studies and the University of Bradford refused to give her an award).

⁴⁹ TNA, FCO 28, 2549, Richard Fletcher to Foreign Office, 15 October 1974.

⁵⁰ TNA, FCO 28, 3080, Brooks Richards to R. W. H. du Boulay, 6 December 1977.

⁵¹ TNA, FCO 28, 3424, D. G. Lambert to Mr Battscombe and Mr Scott, 6 April 1978.

⁵² Ibid.

The State Visit

On 13 June 1978 Nicolae Ceaușescu became the first Communist leader to make a State Visit to the United Kingdom. As Harold Wilson had promised, the Ceaușescus were met with full honours. From the airport, the guests boarded a train for Victoria Station, where they were greeted by Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip, Prime Minister James Callaghan, Foreign Minister David Owen and other top officials. After reviewing the guard of honour, hosts and guests were led to the royal carriages. The Queen and Ceaușescu led the cortege across central London towards Buckingham Palace.⁵³ The Visit's calendar included banquets, receptions, official meetings and visits to industrial facilities.

Back in Romania, the millennia-old friendship with Britain was emphasized in the cultural media. In the preceding months, *Magazin istoric* ran several articles on this theme: Anglo-Saxon exiles to the Black Sea after the Battle of Hastings; 'Daco-British confluences' after the Roman Empire; Dumitru Brătianu's diplomatic mission to Great Britain in 1848–58; English merchants in sixteenth-century Moldavia; Britain's heroic six-year war against Hitlerism and, of course, the history of Buckingham Palace.⁵⁴ *România literară* published a eulogistic article about the Brontë sisters and reminded readers of the honorary degree conferred upon Nicolae Iorga by the University of Oxford in 1930, while a British cinema week was organized to coincide with the visit, showcasing films such as *Bugsy Malone* and *A Bridge Too Far*.

The first evening opened with a state banquet held at Buckingham Palace. The Queen's toast referred to common Roman origins which linked the British and Romanians and declared her admiration for the independent policy pursued by Ceaușescu, 'a statesman of world renown'. The Queen declared herself delighted with the development of trade with Romania and its openness to Great Britain: 'Let us hope that many more Romanians will come to Great Britain. They will be very welcome.'⁵⁵

The second day of the State Visit opened with a meeting between Nicolae Ceaușescu and Edmund Dell, minister for trade, also attended by representatives of British companies planning to extend business in Romania. At the same time, Elena Ceaușescu was received by the Royal Institute of Chemistry, where she received the title of 'fellow', then the title of professor honoris causa from the Polytechnic of Central London.

⁵³ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 82/1978, f. 3–4.

⁵⁴ See *Magazin istoric*, February–June 1978.

⁵⁵ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Relații Externe, dosar 82/1978, f. 13.

Ceauşescu's programme continued with a meeting with James Callaghan at 10 Downing Street. The programme included three interviews with the British prime minister, two in *tête-à-tête* and one as a plenary.⁵⁶ The main themes touched upon were the evolution of East-West relations after the CSCE conference in Belgrade; Romania's relations with the USSR, USA and Western European states; the Middle East; tendencies in the world economy; disarmament and the control of nuclear weapons; problems in Africa; cooperation between the Balkan states, and the situation in the Far East (China, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia). Discussion of bilateral issues covered commercial and cultural relations and collaboration in agriculture, transport and oil technology.

Ceauşescu openly displayed an interest in strengthening links with Britain, particularly through the aerospace industry, proposing that commercial exchanges reach £600 million in 1980 and grow to £1 billion by 1985.⁵⁷ He wanted the British market to be more open to Romanian products and imports to be liberalized. Another theme was the evolution of North-South relations and the potential for development implied by the New Economic Order. Disarmament was also on the agenda for discussions with the British prime minister, as one of the favourite themes of Ceauşescu's foreign policy programme. The inconclusive results of recent discussions in Vienna on the reduction of nuclear arsenals, tensions between the superpowers and especially NATO's decision to increase its arms budget, followed by a similar measure by the Warsaw Pact, encouraged, in Ceauşescu's opinion, the arms race and created a climate of instability. The British prime minister was interested to hear Ceauşescu's opinion on Soviet-American relations, which were at a 'moment of tension'. According to Ceauşescu, these new tensions affected the entire international climate and it was necessary for all states to participate in the quest for acceptable solutions. The discussion also covered issues in Africa, the Middle East, human rights and the need to respect the decisions of the Helsinki Conference. Special attention was given to relations between China and the Soviet Union, with Ceauşescu expressing confidence that, in spite of some difficult moments, there existed conditions for normalization. The prime minister's concerns were linked to China's wish to acquire warplanes from Great Britain, which could provoke a negative reaction from Moscow: 'President Ceausescu told the Prime Minister that he was

⁵⁶ TNA, FCO 28, 3439, The Prime Minister's Discussion with President Ceausescu of Romania on 14 and 15 June, 1978.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

aware that the Chinese would like to purchase Harrier, and personally saw no harm in such a deal going ahead: if the UK did not sell Harriers to China, the Chinese will be sure to buy a similar aircraft elsewhere.⁵⁸ At the same time, Ceaușescu made it clear that Romania was not interested in acquiring warplanes.

The situation in Korea and South-East Asia was also on the agenda for bilateral discussions. Ceaușescu was confident about the two Koreas' desire for unification and Vietnam's intention to normalize relations with the USA. Concerning relations with the Communist countries in Europe, the British prime minister considered that there existed conditions for improvement, but went on to say that, in his view, the UK's relations with Romania 'would be deeper and more substantial than with some of the Socialist countries'.⁵⁹

The British prime minister identified three factors that were a negative influence on detente: Soviet initiatives to increase the cost of armaments; the situation in Africa, and respect for human rights. James Callaghan did not insist strongly on the latter, knowing full well that it would touch a raw nerve. However, Ceaușescu felt obliged to reply, even if only in a general way. In his opinion, the situation had not improved since the Helsinki conference and he was not convinced by the functionality of human rights principles:

On the question of human rights President Ceaușescu asked whether it was sufficient to indulge in statements and writings on these issues. He would not claim that everything was proceeding smoothly in Romania, or indeed in any other Socialist country; but equally it could not be said that everything was perfect and beyond criticism in the countries of the West.⁶⁰

There was no return to this issue in further discussions.

The series of official meetings continued on 15 June with morning talks at Buckingham Palace with Margaret Thatcher and the Liberal Party leader, David Steel. The presidential couple then travelled to Bristol to visit industrial facilities and had meetings with representatives of British Aerospace and Rolls-Royce. Ceaușescu declared himself delighted that an understanding had been reached on the manufacture of the BAC 1-11

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ TNA, PREM 16, 1838, Record of the Prime Minister's Discussion, in plenary session, with President Ceausescu of Romania at 10 Downing Street on 14 June 1978 at 15.00.

plane and Spey engine in Romania. The visit ended with the signing of agreements on political, economic and cultural-scientific collaboration. On 16 June, the Ceaușescu returned to Romania, their departure being 'greeted with relief. Though the public reaction was lukewarm and there was some criticism of Romanian internal policies, there was no serious hostility. [...] Ceaușescu may have gained in international respectability, thus masking his harsh regime at home; but we can go along with the Romanian formula that nations with different social systems can collaborate for peace and their mutual advantage'.⁶¹

The reactions of the British press were closely monitored by the Romanian embassy in London. The press report of the first day of the visit concentrated on positive news, reproducing extracts favourable to Ceaușescu. However, it was remarked that *The Times* had published a 'slandrous article' by Bernard Levin, described as a hard-line anti-Communist, which easily explained his criticisms of the Bucharest regime. It was not the only one: 'some tendentious appreciations, especially concerning the internal situation of our country, come through in commentaries published by *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*'.⁶² Press coverage of the visit was, generally speaking, mild without being overly indulgent. As the Romanian embassy noted, Bernard Levin attacked Ceaușescu's dynastic Communism and religious persecution. That said, this was balanced in *The Times* by the radical clergyman Mervyn Stockwood's article on 'big improvements' in Romania:

The country has no long tradition of unfettered freedom. The present Communist Government is not the first to use methods which are repugnant to us in Britain but which we ourselves have used in the past. [...] One is grateful that the terrible persecution of the Church at the time of the Russian occupation is over and that the Christian faith provides an inspiration and an influence for millions of the Romanian people. We in Britain might well be envious!⁶³

If the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* regretted the Romanian dictator being received with full honours, it bowed to *Realgeopolitik*:

Mr Ceaușescu's trip's only defence against Russia's growing impatience is the ties he so sedulously and multifariously establishes with countries

⁶¹ TNA, FCO 28, 3429, Reginald Secondé to David Owen MP, 4 July 1978.

⁶² AMAE, Problema 220A/1978, vol. VI, f. 76.

⁶³ Mervyn Stockwood, 'The big improvements', *The Times*, 12 June 1978, p. 9.

outside the Soviet bloc. 'If you eat me you will be blackmailed in the United Nations', he says like a Daniel to the Russian lion. [...] It can well be argued that Mr Ceaușescu should at least not be the Queen's guest. Yet the full works are essential for his prestige survival act.⁶⁴

In the centre-left *Observer*, Mark Frankland pointed to the burden placed by massive industrialization on the Romanian population, comparing this unfavourably with the situation in Hungary and Poland, but placed the policies of 'a Latin in a sea of Slavs' in historical perspective:

His patriotism seems widely shared among educated Romanians. The Communist Party, with such feeble Romanian origins, had to identify with the nation. The theme of Romanian history has been to move towards independence, not the liberal development of luckier nations to the West. Ceaușescu has simply taken up that theme again.⁶⁵

Finally, the Communist *Morning Star* gave little coverage to the visit, something which could be explained by its pro-Soviet tendencies as well as by the low intensity of exchanges between British and Romanian Communists: Ceaușescu did not have the briefest of courtesy meetings with the CPGB general secretary Gordon McLennan, let alone the moribund British-Romanian Friendship Society. But, in good republican and dialectical materialist fashion, the *Morning Star* cut through the pageantry to praise the economic results of the visit: 'Eastern European Socialist countries as well as the Western powers will study with great care the extensive areas of cooperation agreed, and the positive prospects this offers to East-West relations.'⁶⁶ None of these newspapers mentioned Elena Ceaușescu's scientific honours. Also absent from Romanian embassy press reports was coverage by the BBC and tabloids of the Ceaușescus making off with various objects found at Buckingham Palace.

The tone of the British press also attracted the attention of the Foreign Office. Despite the measures taken, Ion Rațiu, leader of Romanian émigrés in Great Britain, managed to organize a protest in front of the hotel where Ceaușescu hosted a reception in honour of the Queen. The police intervened and arrested him. However, a British diplomat expressed relief that the press's tone was not too severe:

⁶⁴ 'Ceausescu at the Palace', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 1978, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Mark Frankland, 'A Latin in a sea of Slavs', *Observer*, 11 June 1978, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Martin Gostwick, 'Romania trade will grow', *Morning Star*, 16 June 1978, p. 1.

There was [...] a real risk that the visit itself could have been marred by incidents and by the way the media handled it. We were lucky. Perhaps the journalists were able to let off steam at the preparatory press briefing and then cooled down. Perhaps (hard boiled in theory though they may be) they and their editors did not want to embarrass the Queen. Perhaps it was something to do with the Ceaușescu themselves. I don't know. But if the State Visit is to be used again as a tool in our relations with similar sensitive countries, where perhaps is particularly valuable, my own feeling is that something needs to be done to shorten the time-scales between invitation and visit. We could be less fortunate in the future (Saudi Arabia? Poland? Indonesia? Philippines?).⁶⁷

A Visit too far?

Back home, Ceaușescu immediately communicated the results of his visit at a meeting of the CPEX on 16 June 1978. A great lover of crowds, Romania's leader expressed delight at his welcome by British officials: 'I think it was a good, attentive welcome. There were also enough people on the streets.'⁶⁸ Other reasons to be cheerful were the concrete results of the visit, among the most important of which were agreements signed with British Aerospace, BAC and Rolls-Royce. To this were added eleven other partnership agreements with British firms. Ceaușescu wanted to manufacture his own aircraft fleet with the help of British technology: 'The agreements with BAC and Rolls-Royce create the conditions for production of the BAC plan in two variants and the Spey engine. [...] These agreements are good, but for now they are only on paper; we must turn them into reality.'⁶⁹ The costs amounted to £175 million, a sum which Ceaușescu considered acceptable. British experience in engine manufacture would also be used for other branches of industry. Through the contract signed with British Aerospace, Romania would acquire three fully-equipped BAC 1-11 planes, and receive assistance for the manufacture of another. The complete programme foresaw a collaboration over fifteen years and a total production of eighty-two planes. The value of the contract was over £200 million. At the same time, the value of the contract signed with Rolls-Royce was estimated at £100 million.

Another gain was the signing of export contracts valued at over 190 million lei, which practically meant the fulfilment of the export plan for the entire year. Confident in the capacity of the Romanian economy to

⁶⁷ TNA, FCO 28, 3429, E. A. J. Ferguson to Lord Goronwy-Roberts, 17 July 1979.

⁶⁸ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Cancelarie, dosar 47/1978, 2v.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 2v.

produce quality goods, Ceaușescu wanted the export figure to reach £600 million in 1980 and £1 billion in 1985: 'We need to reach this figure; we need to import and export at the same time. The credits are only a provisional solution in solving the problem. The problem is that by selling we can cover this credit. This was the clear understanding.'⁷⁰

The Visit had, it seemed, been a complete success, with Ceaușescu accumulating impressive symbolic capital. Ștefan Andrei emphasized this, even claiming that the Queen had particularly enjoyed the President's company:

The most important thing was that comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu is the first Communist leader to be invited by the Queen of England. The English themselves said that the Queen had not done such a thing until now. In the evening, she stayed a long time at the reception. Callaghan himself said that the Queen stayed a long time, which is unusual, that she felt good, and wanted to emphasize the importance she gave to Romania and its President.⁷¹

But Ceaușescu's optimism about the accelerated growth in commercial exchanges was not shared by the British ambassador to Bucharest. In his opinion, the visit itself had certainly been a success, with the Ceaușescu couple delighted with the welcome and the result of economic negotiations. However, the British ambassador had no reason to believe that the value of economic exchanges would reach £600 million in 1980, which meant a growth of 65 per cent each year. The figure looked 'totally unrealistic, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that the President simply plucked the figures from the air. It seems more practicable to concentrate on the target figure of the trade turnover of £170 million by 1980 which was agreed by President Ceausescu and Sir Harold Wilson in 1975 and reaffirmed in the joint statement issued in the President's talks with the Prime Minister during the visit.'⁷²

Even if London did not insist on the issue of human rights, its very mention seems to have irritated Ceaușescu, who related in Bucharest that the British had been interested in the rights and liberties of the population. Ceaușescu gave assurances that 'the building of socialism' met no such difficulties:

⁷⁰ Ibid., f. 3v-4f/v.

⁷¹ Ibid., f. 6.

⁷² TNA, FCO 28, 3429, C. C. R. Batiscombe to Mr Ferguson, 12 July 1978.

We discussed many things about the problems of building socialism in Romania, and the Prince [Charles] was particularly interested to know if people in Romania could have their own property and income, and when I told him that they could have their own homes, deposit money in the CEC bank, and receive an interest rate of 5%, all was made clear.⁷³

The pageantry, however, met his ambitions: 'I rode in the carriage. They looked like something out of the theatre. You saw all these long ceremonials, with their fancy outfits, their bright colours. Some of them were even laughing, especially those industrialists who said: we are interested in aircraft engines, not costumes.'⁷⁴

Officials in Bucharest considered the visit to the British capital a real success, both from the political perspective, given the public recognition of the merits of Ceaușescu, and economically, due to the large number of agreements signed. The priorities for the Romanians were aviation, car manufacture and the chemical industry. Another important achievement was the signature of a cooperation agreement in science, education and teaching, which led to the reciprocal opening of cultural centres in Bucharest and London. Being open to Western cultural values was a simple strategy enabling Ceaușescu to distract attention away from the problems that Romanian society was beginning to confront: the restriction of civil rights and freedoms (as seen in the cases of the dissidents Paul Goma and Vlad Georgescu); excessive ideologization and the deterioration of living standards. Economically, the regression of the Bucharest regime became evident from the beginning of the 1980s. As British experts had already observed, Romania was unable to keep up with technological modernization, whilst big industry was directly affected by decisions to limit the import of technology from the West. Consequently, Romanian products disappeared from Western markets, while many of the contracts signed in June 1978 became inoperable. To this was added Ceaușescu's decision to pay off the entire foreign debt, which had direct consequences for relations with the Western states. A massive growth in exports, especially of agricultural products, and a reduction in imports did not lead to economic recovery, but accelerated the production of fictional reports and the falsification of data at a central level. On top of this economic failure, the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev in Soviet Russia made Ceaușescu seem an unacceptable form of 'maverick'.

⁷³ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR, Secția Cancelarie, dosar 47/1978, f. 7f/v.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 7v.

In December 1989, the West's favourite anti-Soviet gadfly and bearer of modest economic opportunity was now portrayed as a bloodthirsty tyrant overthrown then executed by his downtrodden people. The Presidential couple were stripped of the honours received only eleven years previously, while the State Visit was now reviled as a sordid episode in British diplomacy. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* could not leave uncommented such a dramatic reversal of opinion. On its front cover, under the headline 'It's Ciao-sescu!', Prince Philip asks Elena Ceaușescu: 'And does he have any hobbies?', to which she replies, 'He's a mass murderer'. A beaming Queen Elizabeth II comments, 'How interesting!'⁷⁵ At the end of the 1980s, Ceaușescu had lost all credibility, being as isolated in the Communist bloc as in his relations with the West. By the force of history, the dictatorship, whose deficiencies were only partially evident in the heady days of 1978, reached the end of the line in December 1989.

⁷⁵ *Private Eye*, 5 January 1989.