THE END OF THE CEAUŞESCU REGIME – A THEORETICAL CONVERGENCE

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bstract
Abstract

More than two decades after the collapse of the communist regime in Romania, the political events of 1989 remain salient for political scientists. Several approaches attempt to explain why in Romania the regime was ready to use violence against its opponents. The points of convergence suggest that there are significant bridges between the various research programs that investigate the collapse of East-European communism and the subsequent process of transition.

The main purpose of this article is to draw a parallel between three different types of theorizing that addressed the issue of regime change in Romania: Jonathan Eyal's account of totalitarian (Stalinist-type) decay, the totalitarianism-cum-sultanism framework devised by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, and the legitimation crisis model developed by Leslie Holmes.

The conclusion of the study is that the efforts made by the Ceauşescu regime to gain legitimacy using official nationalism and the personality did not prevent the totalitarian decay, among others by the incorporation of sultanistic elements. In turn, this process increased the propensity of the regime to use force against society.

Keywords: communism; totalitarianism; sultanic regimes; post-totalitarian regimes; legitimation crisis; pluralism

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Jonathan Eyal's explicit question – why Romania could not avoid bloodshed in 1989? – has illustrated the concerns of many analysts of the Romanian transition. More than two decades after the fall of Communism, the theoretical focus has shifted, as post-communism or transitology have ceased to be useful paradigms for understanding the political dynamics in East-Central Europe. However, their legacy must not be discarded, especially since many features of the new democracies are still related to aspects and events of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the case of Romania, the relative setbacks on the road to economic and political reform are often (partly) attributed to such causes.

The violence that accompanied the demise of Ceauşescu's regime made Romania a rather uncomfortable deviant case in East-Central Europe. Now, political scientists tend to leave the issue to the historians and to other scholars that can provide new insights regarding those events. However, the theoretical salience of the Romanian revolution is not necessarily exhausted for political scientists. A better understanding of those events is necessary for anyone that adopts a broader temporal perspective in theorizing about the Romanian political system. Moreover, the literature on democratic transitions and post-communism should bring its contribution to the development of new approaches, more adequate for the study of other non-democratic regimes – and possibly of their downfall.

The main purpose of this article is to draw a parallel between three different types of theorizing that addressed the issue of regime change in Romania: Jonathan Eyal's account of totalitarian (Stalinist-type) decay, the totalitarianism-cum-sultanism framework devised by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, and the legitimation crisis model developed by Leslie Holmes. Other relevant contributions and arguments are also reviewed, in an attempt to explain the choices of the Romanian communist elite and of its challengers, in December 1989.

Eyal argues that the communist regimes in Eastern Europe were able to choose among various combination of consumerism and nationalism, in order to preserve and enhance their legitimacy. Romania was an exception, insofar as the Ceauşescu regime gradually came to rely almost exclusively on nationalism, eventually supplemented by the personality cult of the leader.[2] The "exasperated Romanians" and their "exasperated President" would eventually clash, and the ruling elite made the choice to use coercion, which eventually degenerated in violence.

This approach reflects the pattern of totalitarian decay, illustrated by the last minute rift between the repressive structures. Totalitarianism is a concept that largely applies to Ceauşescu's Romania, according to Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, albeit supplemented by elements of sultanism.[3] The personality cult and the unpredictable intervention by the supreme leader in the working of institutions are two of the defining features of sultanism, adding to the difficulty of the Romanian party and state authorities to develop peaceful strategies and avoid the use of violence.

Leslie Holmes's argument is that the Romanian regime refused to consider any move toward a rational-legal legitimation (a socialist rule of law), choosing instead to strengthen official nationalism and the cult of personality as means of legitimation, and relying on a higher degree of coercion than other East-European communist regimes. When the attempts to gain legitimacy failed, Nicolae Ceauşescu and his associates came to rely exclusively on coercion, precluding any peaceful solution and precipitating the final crisis of the regime.[4]

All three approaches generate insights about the dynamics of the Romanian communist regime, including – most importantly – its final days. Each of them tells a story about decay and collapse, attempting to explain why the choice of violence did not meet any significant opposition within the elite, at least until its final moments. In terms of theoretical focus, they complement one another, suggesting that there are significant bridges between the various research programs that investigate the collapse of East-European communism and the subsequent process of transition.

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[2] Jonathan Eyal, "Why Romania Could Not Avoid Bloodshed", in Gwyn Prins (ed.), *Spring in Winter*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 145

[3] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 52-53.

[4] Leslie Holmes, *Postcomunismul*, Iaşi: Institutul European, 2004, p. 95.

The totalitarian decay

The outbreak of violence could not be avoided, according to Jonathan Eyal, because Romania was characterized by a conjunction of factors that precluded the adoption of a peaceful solution: the absence of a coherent opposition; the continuous conflict between interest groups within the Romanian Communist Party; economic and social decay; and the atrophy of the leadership.[5] Nicolae Ceauşescu collapsed thinking he was the victim of a plot orchestrated by Mikhail Gorbachev and the West, an idea that went along easily with the nationalism and personalism that dominated the final years of his rule.

The break with the Soviet Union that occurred under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej led to the defeat of the pro-Soviet faction of the party and allowed the leader to mount a stronger resistance against the calls for de-Stalinization. The Soviet plan for a division of labor within the Communist camp was a major threat to the project of modernization via industrialization, advanced by the Romanian regime, and generated a hostile reaction, leading to a more independent line. Nicolae Ceauşescu strengthened this approach, promoting an even higher pace of transformation, which seemed to derive from a political and social messianic vocation: the only possible result could be either success, or oblivion.[6]

The subsequent opening toward the West carried out by Ceauşescu had both economic and security reasons: it was not only about Western technology, but was meant to increase the costs the Soviet Union would pay, in case of a Czechoslovak-style invasion. Moreover, the Secretary General sought to capitalize on what he admitted to be the pro-Western and anti-Soviet (and also anti-Russian) sentiments of the public opinion, especially of the intellectual circles. This led to an official nationalism that was unique in Eastern Europe, at that time. It was meant to coexist with the new consumerist orientation in domestic policy (which, in turn, was closely connected to the process of relative political liberalization). However, soon enough the reforms were abandoned, and official nationalism was complemented by the cult of personality.

Within the party, the elite response to the growing social diversity was "incorporation without representation".[7] The membership increased dramatically, but the real power of the party diminished and eventually collapsed: the Secretary General became totally unaccountable. In the meantime, he took advantage from the inner tensions among the interest groups within the party, and fuelled them in order to increase his control over the organization, acting as the highest referee.[8]

As the rift between the party and the society deepened, against the background of economic failure, Nicolae Ceauşescu faced the challenge of *glasnost* and *perestroika* advanced by the new Soviet leadership, under Mikhail Gorbachev. The experience of many other Socialist states led Ceauşescu to believe that such attempts would lead to new claims of liberalization, challenging his power monopoly. Thus, in December 1989, the Secretary General believed that the fate of communism was at stake, and was not prepared to consider any type of power-sharing or "socialism with a human face".[9]

Totalitarianism-cum-sultanism

Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan seek to establish a correlation between the type of the *ancien régime* and the path of post-communist democratization, and suggest that Romania's perspectives are less favorable than those of its Eastern European neighbors, due to the fact that the Ceauşescu regime was a combination of totalitarianism and sultanism. Linz and Stepan's typology of non-democratic regimes

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[5] Eyal, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.
[7] *Ibidem,* p. 147.
[8] *Ibidem,* p. 148.
[9] *Ibidem,* p. 156.

derives from their lack of satisfaction with the conventional authoritarian – totalitarian divide. There is a need to account for those regimes that do not fit in either of the two categories.[10]

Starting from a set of four major variables – pluralism, ideology, leadership , and mobilization – they identify four types of modern nondemocratic regimes: authoritarian, totalitarian, post-totalitarian, and sultanistic. A totalitarian regime is a regime that "has eliminated almost all pre-existing political, economic, and social pluralism, has a unified, articulated, guiding, utopian ideology, has intensive and extensive mobilization, and has a leadership that rules, often charismatically, with undefined limits and great unpredictability and vulnerability for elites and nonelites alike".[11]

In a sultanistic regime, "there may be extensive social and economic pluralism, but almost never political pluralism, because political power is so directly related to the ruler's person. . . All individuals, groups, and institutions are permanently subject to the unpredictable and despotic intervention of the sultan. . . There may be highly personalistic statements with pretensions of being an ideology . . . but this ideology is elaborated after the ruler has assumed power, is subject to extreme manipulation, and, most importantly, is not believed to be constraining on the ruler and is relevant only as long as he practices it. . . Any mobilization that does occur is uneven and sporadic".[12]

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, Romania missed the path toward post-totalitarianism, which might have facilitated a peaceful transition. Instead, it went on to add sultanistic elements to a resilient totalitarian regime. The de-Stalinization scenario was avoided under Gheorghiu-Dej, and Ceauşescu ably used nationalism to assert his primacy within the party, during his early years in office. After 1974, the regime acquired more and more sultanistic features, without ceasing to be totalitarian.[13] Linz and Stepan interpret from a dynastic angle the rise of Elena Ceauşescu toward the highest party and state offices, as well as the positions held by Nicolae Ceauşescu's four brothers. The personalization of the leadership was illustrated mainly by the launching of Ceauşescu's personality cult, and also by his growing involvement in public policy, bypassing any technocratic obstacles.[14] Mobilization in Romania under Ceauşescu also approximates the totalitarian type, in the sense that the elite sought not necessarily to foster the enthusiasm, but to ensure that the regime exerted its control over the population.

In terms of pluralism, the totalitarian and the sultanistic drives converged, so that each and every institution became constantly subject to the arbitrary interference of the leader. The personalization of power precluded the emergence of any type of institutional pluralism, while the attempts to create independent groups were rapidly countered. The ideology that inspired the regime was sufficiently detailed, and asserted its mission of providing guidance to society: it included a focus on collective property, an avant-garde role for the communist party, and the articulation of utopian goals.[15] On the other hand, the strong sultanistic drives within the regime weakened its guidance function, so that the ideological statements of the regime became rather contradictory, incoherent and opportunistic. [16]

The legitimation crisis

Leslie Holmes starts from the assumption that governing a human community requires a variable combination of authority and coercion. As the political systems will cease to operate effectively if the degree of coercion is too high, the leaders seek to gain consent from the part of the citizens: the process by which they try to gain authority is called legitimation.[17] His account of the legitimation efforts in the communist world is based on three more important assumptions. Firstly, there was a certain dynamics in

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[10] Linz and Stepan, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

[11] *Ibidem,* p. 41.

[12] *Ibidem,* pp. 52-53.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 349.

[14] *Ibidem,* p. 350.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 354.

[16] *Ibidem.*

[17] Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

terms of legitimation, across the communist systems. Secondly, although power is exerted via a mixture of legitimation and coercion, one of them is dominant, at a certain point in time. And finally, the ruling elites try to use several modes of legitimation simultaneously, but one or two such modes will always be prevalent, along a given interval.[18] Starting from the well known Weberian typology, Holmes identifies several modes of internal and external legitimation, of which some are especially important for communist regimes.

His main argument is that after an initial phase, in which these regimes relied heavily on coercion in order to consolidate their rule, the need for authority was addressed using the teleological legitimation – where the future communist society is assimilated to the *telos*. During the 1960s, the importance of this mode of legitimation declined relative to that of eudaimonic legitimation, which emphasized the satisfaction of the material needs of the citizens. However, during the following two decades, the communist leaders concluded that the corresponding reforms had not brought the expected results, so that some of them turn to a particular form of rational-legal legitimation – apparently as a temporary solution, meant to alleviate the public discontent and to allow a subsequent return to eudaimonic legitimation. [19]

However, Romania adopted a singular path, for several reasons. First of all, in parallel with the legitimation efforts, the regime in Bucharest was applying a higher degree of coercion than did most of its neighbors. Secondly, the profile of the legitimation effort was different in the case of Romania, in the sense that instead of pushing through with the eudaimonic legitimation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Nicolae Ceauşescu made an ever bigger recourse to official nationalism. In the second half of the 1980s, most Eastern European regimes were encouraged by the presence of a new Soviet leadership to follow the path toward rational-legal legitimation, while Romania pushed ahead with official nationalism, later combined with a new type of charismatic legitimation – the cult of personality. There were strong links among these two political phenomena. For instance, Jean-François Soulet notes that this kind of nationalism has two major axes: the cult of the chief and the exaltation of patriotism; and the assertion of a kind of independence within the Soviet bloc (a formal, rather than a real independence, however).[20]

The failure of this shift in terms of modes of legitimation led to a renewed and intensified role for coercion, in the buildup to 1989. In Holmes's terms, that was a moderate form of legitimation crisis: to the extent that the leaders have not lost their self-confidence, as well as the confidence in their ability to rule, the system is not confronted with an extreme form of identity and legitimation crisis.[21] In Romania, however, the protests in Timişoara and later in other cities would lead to the next level. The specificity of the Romanian case lies in the fact that the transition between the two levels took place much more rapidly than was the case in the other Eastern European countries. Called in to exert coercion, the army, police and secret services were eventually confronted by numerous defections from their own rank. This led to the split and sudden collapse of the regime. On the other hand, the shift from the median to the extreme form of legitimation crisis can be approached from a more gradualist perspective, in the sense that the initial outbursts actually heralded the final stage of the crisis.

Conclusions: The path not taken

Returning to the theorizing of Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, a brief discussion of the concept of post-totalitarianism is necessary at this point. This type, one of the most useful devices in the literature on Communist collapse and post-communism, emerges following a number of transformations that may occur, gradually, within a totalitarian regime. In terms of the four main criteria used by Linz and Stepan, such a regime can be seen as a benign decay of its totalitarian predecessor. A certain degree of social pluralism may develop within the arenas of the secondary economy and secondary culture, but no institutionalized political pluralism is tolerated by the elite, at least until the final stages that might open

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[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 184-185.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 201.

[20] Jean-François Soulet, *Istoria comparată a statelor comuniste*, Iaşi: Polirom, 1998, p. 160.

[21] Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

the way for a democratic transition. In a post-totalitarian regime the official ideology becomes more and more isolated from society, while the ideological commitment of the party officials weakens. The imperatives of government can make them more responsive to technocratic, efficiency-oriented ideas. This attitude tends to permeate the recruitment mechanism within the single party, although the latter keeps its monopoly on the civil service and other administrative appointments. Finally, the ability and the will of the party-state to keep the society in a constant state of mobilization also declines.

In the case of Romania the initial steps toward liberalization taken by Nicolae Ceauşescu may be said to point in this direction. However, in the end that path was not taken. An impressive consensus has been built in support of the idea that the Ceauşescu regime remained a totalitarian, Stalinist enclave in a region that was starting to show signs of totalitarian decay. Vladimir Tismăneanu writes about the "mocked" de-Stalinization[22] of the early Ceauşescu years, and argues that the constant Stalinist foundation of the regime was later complemented by a nationalist one, in Ceauşescu's attempt to enshrine dynastic communism. Instead of turning to a less constraining ideological approach, the Romanian leader mixed the Stalinist faith in centralized industry and collectivized agriculture with a set of concepts and issues that were specific to the extreme right: the myth of the homogenous nation, the cult of medieval rulers and the aggressive assertion of the Thraco-Dacian origins of the Romanian people. [23]

The persistence of neo-Stalinism, as a combination of totalitarian and sultanistic features, obviously influenced the way in which opposition to the regime was channeled. Richard A. Hall starts from the assumption that each nondemocratic regime actually shapes the opposition to its rule: the regimes will determine whether there are channels for the expression of protest, and what channels will be used.[24] The missed transition to post-totalitarianism, alongside the addition of sultanistic elements and the antagonistic relationship between Ceauşescu and Gorbachev, had overwhelming effects on the emergence of the opposition: the atomization of society mirrored the atomization of the ruling party. Within the Communist party, the opposition remained clandestine and concentrated on toppling the Secretary General, rather than on reforming the system, and the distance between the party officials and society condemned such efforts to irrelevance. Within society, the nationalistic and anti-Soviet feelings had been already confiscated by the regime, so that they could not be used in order to strengthen the popular opposition.[25]

In Holmes's account, as the Ceauşescu regime decided to abandon any significant attempts of eudaimonic legitimation, and instead turn to official nationalism and the cult of personality, the possible evolution toward a more rational-legal mode of legitimation was removed from the agenda. The ruling parties in most of the other Eastern European communist states chose to adopt such a mode of legitimation after the disenchantment with their economic performance became widespread, and the civil societies had gained in strength during the late 1970s and early 1980s. For its part, Romania had abruptly abandoned its own attempt years before.

In Eyal's account, the failure of the economy led Nicolae Ceauşescu to resort to a much tougher control over society, reinforcing both the ideological and the repressive dimension of totalitarianism. However, his style of leadership brought about the decay of the regime, insofar as it could no longer find the inner resources to adapt. The crisis of the party and the new ideological inputs left the leader at odds with society, both incapable and unwilling to make any gesture of conciliation.

Linz and Stepan, for their part, illustrate the turn to a sultanistic complement in order to better preserve the totalitarian backbone of the regime. The perspective of a post-totalitarian evolution was preempted by Ceauşescu's policies, which, among other things, blocked the evolution of society toward pluralism and reasserted the strict control of the political leadership.

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[22] Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate: o istorie politică a comunismului românesc,* Iaşi: Polirom, 2005, p. 37.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

[24] Richard Andrew Hall, "Theories of collective action and revolution: evidence from the Romanian transition of December 1989", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 6, 2000, p. 1071)

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 1073.

Consequently, there were few chances for a peaceful transition in 1989. All three approaches, as well as many other types of theorizing applied to the December 1989 events in Romania, point to a much higher degree of violence than in the other Eastern European countries.

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