

Romanian Communism between Commemoration, Nostalgia, and Scientific Debate

Within a few days in December 1989 the Communist dictator of Romania, Nicolae Ceausescu, was overthrown and executed. In no other country in Eastern Europe, it might seem, was popular discontent with the socialist system and outrage over the limitations of the standard of living so great as in Romania. Yet in 2011, more than two decades after the fall of the communist dictatorship, Pepsi Cola has broadcast a commercial with the slogan “Today – the Same as Yesterday” (și ieri, și azi), with black and white images and a Pioneer song which should arouse nostalgic memories of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, when Pepsi was both the “first cola in Romania” and a “social currency”, as a person in charge of the advertising campaign stated.

Anyone who hoped at the end of 1989 that socialism had been lastingly compromised by the absurd Ceausescu regime soon realized that this expectation was too naive and that dealing with the past was for Romanians as complex as life itself. As in other Eastern European countries, one can observe that for quite some time in Romania there has been at least a superficial nostalgia for the socialist period among a broad segment of the population. In Romania in the eighties, it had been brand-name products from the “Capitalist Abroad” which were, as the vanguard of the western consumer world, regarded as a status symbol. Today, however, a profit-oriented group is advertising a symbol of the socialist consumer world of the Ceaușescu years – Pepsi has been since 1965 (the year of Ceausescu’s rise to power) manufactured under license in Romania for the domestic market.

The Pepsi example is by no means an isolated case, as Mirela-Luminita Murgescu shows in the introductory remarks of her contribution. And it’s not just memories from private and everyday life that have positive

connotations. A majority no longer judge Ceausescu himself, in 1989 probably the most hated of the Eastern European party leaders, entirely negatively. Based on survey results Murgescu demonstrates the ambivalent attitudes of many Romanians towards both the former dictator and the socialist system as a whole. Stability and security are the two central concepts around which nostalgia revolves.

One may, however, doubt with good reason how deeply felt this nostalgia is. Like some of the voices in the cited article argue, the glorifying perspective on the past probably depends more on the failure of post-communist elites than on the communist system as such. Another factor may also apply – that an astonishing number of young people who have no personal memories of the time before 1989 take an uncritical attitude towards communism. Here the discrepancy is noticeable between a publicly advocated anti-communism and the personal memories of the family. The debate over communism has remained essentially a matter for the elite, as is shown, for example, by the reception of the now numerous feature films about the communist era. These films, highly acclaimed and sometimes award-winning abroad, have received only moderate attention in Romania. For most Romanians, Murgescu concludes, communism is no longer an issue.

The refurbishment of the communist past is not really one of the broad priorities of the population. Nevertheless, while an at least rhetorical and symbolic anti-communism is a “politically correct” minimal consensus in public policy, this disintegrates as soon as it comes to concrete action. Due to public pressure, in 2006 the Romanian president assembled a commission of historians. Their task was to provide the basis for a report con-

demning communism as an “illegitimate and criminal regime.” As Martin Jung shows in his contribution, however, most of the commission’s proposed measure were either not implemented at all or implemented only insufficiently. He also concludes that a wider societal debate over communism has failed to appear following the report of the commission.

One consequence of the commission’s report, however, is that in recent years there has been considerably simplified access to the relevant archives, as Dorin Dobrinu outlines. Himself an expert on the commission and since 2007 the Director General of the National Archives of Romania, he has directed a substantial opening of the archives. As a historian, he was for a long time personally affected in his work by the fact that, often on very dubious pretexts, the archives were accessible only very selectively or only to selected persons. He describes the various obstacles that were placed in the way of researchers and

the current situation in the various institutions in which the archives of material on the socialist period are distributed. In addition to the National Archives there is above all the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, which manages access to the files of the former State Security Agency and which is the most recognized by the public, and in whose remit fall many personal records and reports of prominent persons. He concludes his remarks with the conviction that the past cannot be controlled in an open society.

The contributions show that dealing with the communist past is a painful, complicated, and sometimes contradictory process. Today, some 22 years after the fall of the communist dictatorship, this process is probably still in its initial phases.

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