

"CEAUȘESCU'S LAND" – ROMANIA OF THE '80S AS SEEN BY THE FOREIGN WRITTEN PRESS. STUDY CASE: "THE NEW YORK TIMES" NEWSPAPER

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Abstract: The name chosen for this article it is not a coincidence, regarding the fact that almost all the Western press was debating the Ceausescu's policies and politics acting like he and his family were the landlords of Romania, with the citizens obliged to bring them never ending homages. It is clear, even at a superficial browsing of the international Western press, that everybody was distress by the hardship of the Romania's people. The many shortages, disguise in several so called social policies, made life almost unbearable for the citizens in a country which in reality was full of natural resources. It is obvious the fact that nobody believed that the Genius of the Carpathians is going to put Romania on the map of the highly developed countries while Ceausescu is sacrificing his own people and presenting himself as a genuine patriot. This paper aims to offer a picture of how the Romanians social and economic issues were seen in the Western mass-media, having as study case The New York Times newspaper.

Keywords: Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, communism, propaganda, mass-media, foreign press.

Romanian communist propaganda, through written press and other mass-media channels, aimed to promote Romania's great achievements on the international political scene. Thus, propaganda was looking forward to create an image of Romania, so the West could make a real and clear picture of the communist regime benefits, and last but not least, the major difference between the socialist world and the capitalist one. Indeed, differences existed, but not in the way they were presented by the communist propaganda. The West, however, has not been deceived by the achievements of communism, nor has it been blinded by the pacifism of the Romanian leader, in the same way that not all Romanians have been convinced that the West only means degradation and corruption.

In this paper we are going to focus on the articles which appeared in the foreign press, more accurate in *The New York Time* journal, regarding the economy, society and politics in Romania during the last years under the Nicolae Ceaușescu's leadership. Not in least, it has the role to put forward the way in which communist Romania really appeared to the Westerners especially in the '80s.

The debated topics were various, but most of them rely on the social situation in Romania, or on the rationalization of food and other daily needed items which made even the quotidian chores to be very difficult the '80s. The rationalization of electricity, hot water, the houses' heating during cold periods, and perhaps most important, food shortage, were the most discussed topics on several pages in the foreign newspapers, and last but not the least, the censorship of literature and the banning of particular authors or movies were, likewise, seen as an abuse of culture. Another filed was the communist propaganda and the cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu's personality; the authors often wondered how in a country similar to a "third world country" in which almost everything is limited, people still bring their homage to a real life tyrant- leader.

Aware of the real situation in Romania and the fact that the communist propaganda managed to mask the economical gaps and the social problems very well, the American

journalists often made it clear that people who are seen at public events in the street, paying homage to the leader, are most likely forced to be there by Security and party activists. Thus, communist propaganda created the image of a happy country, with citizens which are enthusiastic to bring homage to the leader.

The deepening of Romania's isolation from both Western and Eastern countries has also been a subject of great interest in the Western press, or the lack of reforms which had been adopted even in the neighbouring communist countries. Although economic, social and political reforms, as well as an opening to the West, began to emerge in the rest of the Eastern Bloc countries, Nicolae Ceaușescu's refusal to comply was a question mark that pondered upon the country's future. The general opinion that we can deduce from foreign articles is that through this isolation, Romania only succeeds in taking steps backwards and the debt payment was seen only as an excuse for the austerity policy, by the ambitious Romanian leaders.

In an article in *The New York Times*, the journalist reports Gorbachev's visit to Romania as being a thoroughly prepared event, the author's focus does not necessarily fall on the visit of the Russian leader, but on what happens when the official column passes along stores, apparently full of food. He reports that Gorbachev's visit was painstakingly prepared so that the Russian leader could see a flourishing and well-supplied Romania. The shops next to the diplomats' cars were closed to customers and shelves were supplemented with commodities therefore the officials would not notice the shortcomings that were normal for the Romanians.

To create this false picture of life in Romania, people were subjected to even worse torments, as the author continues to exemplify, not only they have had to wait for the shops to reopen, but they were forced to bring home food to work, because the factories' cafeterias would be close to rationalized food and to be prepare for the diplomat's visit: "When Mr Gorbachev and his wife visited a new supermarket during a city tour Wednesday, they saw richly stocked shelves. As their car left near the head of the motorcade, hundreds of onlookers - presumably not those who had been marched there from their places of work to provide a backdrop for the visit - surged through the departing security cordon and the waiting tail section of the long cavalcade of cars to get at the food they assumed had been stocked for the visit"¹.

Through this account, the author brings to light the desperation of the Romanians to acquire food in a country which boasts that it offers everything to the citizens, and promises that they can live without the worries of tomorrow. Dividing family members at different food queues, taking advantage of pregnant women or mothers with young children who were entitled to more food and easier access, lists made by people who were waiting in queues hoping to succeed to purchase at least something or the image of those who stand in the queue although they did not know about what is being sold, shows us a world more primitive than civilized.

The article also highlights the increasingly cold relationship between the Romanian and Soviet leaders, due to the lack of reforms and the refusal to liberalize the income. At the same time, he remembers that, according to sources, most Romanians, especially young people, put all their hopes in Gorbachev regarding the liberalization and the future of Romania. To emphasize more the social problems, the journalist ends his article with the remark that "few Romanians have seen coffee"² (*he refers to the fact that Romanians did not have access to the purchase of real coffee, which was replaced by other products that imitated the taste of the coffee*), coffee being a product so common in Western country but vanished from Romanian markets. The shortages were chronicle and people begun to make jokes about it like in the following situation: in a student theatre in Iasi, near the Soviet border, visitors reported peals of laughter when a

¹ Henry Kamm, In Rumania, "Gorbachev is gone; so is food", in *The New York Times*, 31 May 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/31/world/in-rumania-gorbachev-is-gone-so-is-food.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

² John Tagliabue, "Rumanians Riot Over Pay Cut and Shortages", in *The New York Times*, 22 November 1987 <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/22/world/rumanians-riot-over-pay-cut-and-shortages.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

woman on stage picked up a phone to order meat from a butcher. Staples such as ham, salami and canned meats are now only found for hard currency, which Rumanians, unlike citizens of other Eastern bloc countries, are still forbidden to hold.³

The food problem was indeed a great issues in the last years of communism in Romania, and under the name of *scientifically alimentation*, in fact, the citizens were deprive of common goods like meat, milk, eggs, oil, etc. Of course, the so called care for the Romanian health of not eating too much sugar and fats remains only a propaganda strategy. In reality, because of the scarcity of some products, the producers replaced the missing ingredients with other, so the salami was made with a great quantity of soya beans; the poultry meat was sometimes uneatable or the promoting of untraditional dishes like fish, which was not very loved by the Romanians. In the end, the food product were sold on the black market and used to ease certain services like doctors or lawyers services⁴.

Another article gives us a picture from the perspective of a Westerner who had the opportunity to witness a moment of popular tribute to the Romanian president, noticing the inconsistency between the facts: although lacking the minimum living conditions, the Romanians overestimate Ceaușescu, who is raised to the same rank as one of the most loved historical figures, Dracula. Concerning about Dracula's adoration by propaganda and people, he reports that the historical ruler, Vlad Tepes – also known as Dracula is considered to be a national hero, and somehow resembles Nicolae Ceaușescu, politically speaking. Of course, the image of the past rulers and Nicolae Ceaușescu's are overlapping all the time, propaganda, in the end, creates a hero-like icon to the modern ruler. Moreover, continues the author of the article, the Romanians call themselves the direct descendants of the Dacians, the idea being greatly promoted by the Romanian historiography, which also supports the Latinity of the Romanians.

The national history, the heroic deeds of the Romanian's ancestors and their leaders were used to sustain the cult of personality. As a result, it is not rare that Nicolae Ceaușescu is presented as a continuator of the millenary struggles for the national liberation and independency of the Romanian nation. Certainly, propaganda striped the national history from all the unwanted moments so that it complied with the demands of the *national-communist* ideology. The image of the most important characters of the Romanians' history, from antiquity to Nicolae Ceaușescu, had been shaped for propagandistic purposes, and so eventually Nicolae Ceaușescu could find a well-deserved place into the Pantheon of the country-makers. So, the resemblance to Vlad Tepes was neither coincidence nor the memory of other mighty ancestors, the Dacians, or the Latin roots heritage. Of course, all this served finally, to build and maintain the socialist nation⁵.

The article's author remarks the facts that at this ceremonial, which looks like a festival meant to worship Nicolae Ceaușescu, the participants were constantly shouting "Ceaușescu! Peace!" and more interesting the Communist leader is surrounded by self-paintings where he appears to be "frozen in time" at the age of 47 years old, and obviously he does not look like the grizzled man he really was. It was a sign that propaganda is well fulfilling its mission, even when it comes to the leader's signs of ageing or the possible illness that the international world was talking about. The propaganda's mission was, in fact, to keep a representation of an ever young Ceaușescu, healthy and powerful.

Propaganda also promoted the God like image of the Romanian leader, his image was in fact the symbol of success of the socialist policies, the humankind happiness and the country's progress as Raoul Girardet stated: "The Provident Man always appears as a fighter, as a combatant. Being always threatened, always at the edge of the abyss, he refuses to obey his destiny. [...] His legend is always associated with the same images, the same symbols of

³*Ibidem.*

⁴See more in Lavinia, Betea, Florin Razvan Mihai, Ilarion Tiu, *Viața lui Nicolae Ceaușescu. Tiranul*, Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2015, pp. 146-149.

⁵See more in Emanuel Copilas, *Natiunea socialista. Politica identitatii in Epoca de Aur*, Polirom, Iasi, 2015.

verticality, light, the torch that burns and lights the lighthouse, the rising column, the sun rising, the tree that rises and protects"⁶.

This article presents, among others, a scenario in which the absolute leader, who is awarded with various titles such as "The hero between heroes", "Worker's worker" etc., actually leads a dynasty with a despotic attitude, placing family members and close friends in high-ranking political and economic position. The cult of personality, the author notes, is everywhere: "Piles of books by and about the President are heaped in every bookstore, the daily newspapers are largely devoted to his exploits, and his daily schedule is the lead item on the evening television news."⁷

The personality cult obsession is debated in an article in the foreign press in the spring of 1989, in which the author shows a lot of sorrow about what is happening in Romania. The journalist seems to have compassion for the Romanians, who are condemn to wait in queues for food, to live in cold and dark homes in favour of redesigning Bucharest with typical social buildings. In his megalomania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, states the author, destroys everything that has remained beautiful in Romania, and yet on the occasion of his birthday anniversary he was proclaimed "The Great Leader", "The Genius of the Carpathians" etc.: "As a gesture of sympathy for Rumania's people, foreign leaders could forthwith return to Mr Ceaușescu the medals and gewgaws he bestowed on them. Let the *Genius of the Carpathians* explain that to his people."⁸

The personality cult rose to a level that even those from his entourage saw that some attitudes were inappropriate and this only gave Ceaușescu trust in his own person, so that he could no longer make the difference between real and false data in the official biography for the past years of his leadership. Opinions like the previous ones are shared in an interview by Alexandru Barladeanu: "Ceaușescu was seen among the rulers. And Dumitru Popescu, in the speech that gave the tone of his glorification, made Ceaușescu equal to Caesar, Napoleon, Macedon, Pericle and Peter the Great. Only together, all together, the world's rulers barely valued as our Ceaușescu"⁹.

On the same theme, another article written in early December 1989 suggests that the Romanian Communist Party supplemented the Bucharest stores with various goods, because there were foreign delegates and reporters in an official visit. The reason for supplying the stores was made exclusively for this occasion, and had nothing to do with the desire to offer more goods to the Romanians, at least now, during the winter holidays.

As in the previous article, the author is amazed that, although everything is rationalized, the country's president continues to believe that his actions are justified, and he expects to be even stronger appreciated by the people: "Mr. Ceaușescu once declared that Rumanians ate too much, but that problem was resolved through individual monthly quotas of 2.2 pounds of meat, 2.2 pounds of meat products, 10 eggs, 1.1 pounds of cheese, 2 pounds of sugar and some cooking oil and butter - when they are available, of course "¹⁰.

The low standard of living but also the rationalizations of goods were subjects over which foreign journalists often stopped. The scenarios presented by them give important details about the austerity with which the Romanians were dealing. Some of the scenario depicted a portrait of Romania where the temperature inside the apartments was the same as outside during

⁶Raoul Girardet, *Mituri și mitologii politice*, Institutul European, Iași, 1997, pp. 61-62.

⁷ John Kifner, "In Rumania, all hail the chief, and Dracula, too", in *The New York Times*, 24 December 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/24/world/in-rumania-all-hail-the-chief-and-dracula-too.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

⁸ "The Genius of the Carpathians", in *The New York Times*, 15 March 1989, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/15/opinion/the-genius-of-the-carpathians.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

⁹Lavinia Betea, *Partea lor de adevăr*, Compania, București, 2008, p. 174.

¹⁰ Alan Riding, "Clamor In Europe; Where All Is Rationed But Praise for the Leader", in *The New York Times*, 3 December 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/03/world/clamor-in-europe-where-all-is-rationed-but-praise-for-the-leader.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

winter because of a plan initiated by the Romanian government to rationalize the use of the city's heating system. On the other hand, the Bucharest regime promote the highly urbanization during the Romanian Communist Party to be a success of welfare leadership. The principal responsible for this situation, the journalists consider, is none other than Nicolae Ceaușescu who, in order to satisfy his ambition to pay the country's foreign debt, resorts to austerity policies, and the price that the Romanians pay is too great.

For example, fragments such as "Men, women and children returned from cold and dimly lighted places of work or study to unheated homes, where they were told to light no more than one room, with a single bulb of low wattage"¹¹, offered to the readers a good and a very eloquent picture of the real situation of Romanian society concluding that Romania was a country where "even in summer, when fruit and vegetables are plentiful even for the Rumanian consumer - exports always enjoy priority - lines at food stores begin early in the morning and resume at peak hours at midday and the end of the workday."¹².

At the same time, Romania was seen as a country of paradox, where only some have to pay off debts, while others enjoyed privileges just like the bourgeoisie that the Communists blamed on. The author remarks with a note of irony: "Street lighting is so sparse that wartime memories are evoked by viewing the city from a high building. Walking after dark is risky not because of street crime but because in the gloom it is easy to trip on the badly maintained sidewalks."¹³, ironizing that for the sake of economy even the street lighting it was rationalized. In fact, the author continues to describe, nor are there any reasons to walk out at night as long as nightlife ends at 22:00.

There is a (in) famous dialog retrieved from the Communist's National Archives where we can learn the fact that even if Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife are informed about the heating situation in the houses or working places, and about the outside temperature, they replayed ironical: " they (the citizens) must go to sleep with a pullover, this is the way that everyone around the world does it!"¹⁴.

Other journalists draw attention to the fact that things are even worse in Romania than in one of the most obedient countries, Bulgaria, so bad that because of the lack of TV channels, Romanians improvise their antennas to catch Bulgarian television stations. The Romanian television program was of no interest to the Romanians considering that most of the programs had Nicolae Ceaușescu in the spotlight. Moreover, the author wonders what purpose all these sacrifices have, when even the most elementary human needs can no longer be fulfilled.

The rationalization was probably one of the most debated topics of the Western press, articles informing readers that, although Nicolae Ceaușescu succeeds in record time to pay the external debt, Romanians are in fact the ones who pay the price of success: "As winter closes in, energy rationing is becoming just as painful. Heating is turned on in most buildings for just seven hours a day, while hot water is available for three to six hours, depending on the day of the week. Gas for cooking often comes on only late at night "¹⁵. Contrary to appearances, the extraordinary and fulfilled life of Romanians, promoted by Romanian propaganda, did not exist given that goods such as sugar or oil were not only rationalized, sometimes they were totally absent from the shops.

Thus, journalists pointed out, the Romanians are obliged to wait for endless queues, but without any guarantee, to buy food, otherwise there is a chance to remain without the basic food,

¹¹ Henry Kamm, "Chill in Bucharest brings a whiff of harder times", in *The New York Times*, 24 October 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/24/world/chill-in-bucharest-brings-a-whiff-of-harder-times.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ ANIC, Fond CC al PCR-Cancelarie, dosar 2/1985, f.18, *ap.* Lavinia, Beta, Florin Razvan Mihai, Ilarion Tiu, *Viața lui Nicolae Ceaușescu. Tiranul.*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun, 2015, pp.

¹⁵ Alan Riding, "Clamor in Europe; Where All Is Rationed But Praise for the Leader", *op.cit.*

having no certainty that they may find it tomorrow or next week. This rationalization, as already known, aimed at exporting as many food items and goods as possible to the detriment of the population in order to pay off the external debt. Therefore, in order to avoid riots, Romanian propaganda, the foreign press remarked, always had an explanation for food shortages, and the explanation always referred to the "mother nature" or the foreigner exploiters, and never the communist leader.

For example, an article entitled *It's Mother Nature, Not Ceaușescu, Who Relents*¹⁶, with a note of irony, remark that this year (1988) the life of Romanians seems to have improved, but everything is an illusion given that, in reality, the improvement is due to a particularly easy winter and not due to Nicolae Ceaușescu's disavowal of the austerity plan. The article's author also notes that "there is still almost no heating in Bucharest's apartments, but at least temperatures have been above freezing. Lighting remains too dim for comfortable reading. It is hard to find bulbs stronger than 30 watts in the stores, and officially a family is supposed to light only one room."¹⁷

However, at the exit of the winter, the prohibition to travel by car was lifted, the author stating that this ban, although presented as a way not to hinder winter traffic, actually reduces fuel consumption. Another negative effect of austerity observed by the journalist is related to the television transmission that was limited to 2 hours in Romania, mostly speaking of Nicolae Ceaușescu, while in Bulgaria, one of the least developed Eastern European countries, existed TV channels and diversified broadcasts. As a result, for the Romanians, "the joy of Bulgarian television"¹⁸, as the author of the article calls them, were represented by the capture of the T.V. in Bulgaria, using antennas, a practice considered illegal in Ceaușescu's Romania.

Even the cultural life did not appear to be better, remarked another author, intrigued by the fact that the Romanians have no access to the foreign press, not to mention books, and those that are allowed are carefully inspected by security and censorship. Prohibiting access to foreign culture is closely linked to the phenomenon of Western Romania's isolation, another subject debated by the foreign press. For example, an article titled *For Bucharest a great jump back*, is analysed the resistance of the Ceaușescu's regime to any kind of reforms that were taking place, even if they already took place in the Soviet system. The more the world around Romania opens to the new and to the reforms, the more the Romanian leader isolates it.

The article, as a matter of fact, presents some views of diplomats who consider unanimously that Romania is about to "albanize" itself, remembering the isolation that Albania has shown in the past. Even Moscow has lost confidence in a possible reform in Romania, as it appears in an article: "The 70-year-old Rumanian Communist Party leader, who has ruled unchallenged for 23 years, was described by analysts from both camps as totally convinced of the correctness and ideological purity of his policies. They said only his wife, Elena, appeared to have any influence over him, and her views coincided with her husband's."¹⁹

Foreign diplomats and analysts have often tried to negotiate with Ceaușescu, but the results have always been marked by a great reluctance on his part, being therefore considered to be "a self-willed leadership feudal, nepotistic and corrupt"²⁰. Consequently, the situation is getting tighter, the author of the article quoted above also points out, outlining the decrease in the quality of life due to isolation: there are fewer scholarships for Romanians abroad, the number of foreign correspondents decreasing drastically etc. To this is added the analyses of the experts

¹⁶ Henry Kamm, "It's Mother Nature, Not Ceausescu, Who Relents", in *The New York Times*, 18 February 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/18/world/bucharest-journal-it-s-mother-nature-not-ceausescu-who-relents.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

¹⁷*Ibidem*.

¹⁸*Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Henry Kamm, "For Bucharest, a Great Leap Backward", in *The New York Times*, 15 February 1988

<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/15/world/for-bucharest-a-great-leap-backward.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015, accessed in 15 October 2015.

²⁰*Ibidem*.

who say that at this rate, surely Romania will become one of the underdeveloped countries, a country from the 19th century, most likely.

Nicolae Ceaușescu arrived at a point when he was thinking that he does not need anybody to continue the socialist progress of Romania, that all the reforms that are happening around him are in fact anti-socialism. Indeed, the relationship between Ceaușescu and Gorbaciov was more and more tensioned, mainly because of the different point of view regarding the future of communism in Europe. Even more, as a consequence, Gorbaciov told this entourage that Ceaușescu is not going to end it well, because of its beliefs²¹.

This situation has not been left without any reaction by the Romanians, as evidenced by the revolt of November 15, 1987 in Brasov²², a reaction observed also by the foreign press. An article in the foreign press²³ noted that although one of the most popular revolts in the last ten years took place in Brasov, the Romanian press did not mention anything about it. On the contrary, given the fact that the revolt occurred at a time of electoral campaign, propaganda omitted to inform at national level the events that took place in the Brasov's factories: "Rumanian newspapers ignored the riots, but there were reports that food supplies had subsequently been increased. An editorial in the Monday edition of *Scînteia*, the party newspaper, while omitting any mention of Brasov, slapped the fingers of local officials, calling for "fruitful cooperation between citizens and elected officials"²⁴.

Romania was considered one of the last Stalinist countries, as even the Moscow leaders have implemented reforms that have considerably improved the lives of citizens. In other words, "the foreign diplomats who have watched Mr. Ceaușescu's growing self-obsession say there is a social vision at the root of it all - a wish to transform Rumania from a backward, agricultural society into a socialist, industrial nation much like the one Stalin tried to build, with the same totalitarian methods, in the Soviet Union"²⁵.

The foreign press presents us a picture of a society on the verge of collapse. Despite the attempts of the Romanian press and the propaganda to present a perfect and healthy Romania, the foreign press notices the arduous life. Beyond any shadow of doubt, the foreign press presented the image of a sick and suffering country that has lost its former charm from the times when it was called "the granary of Europe", and the capital was called the Paris of the East.

A real realm of natural riches that it is transformed under the leader's directions into a sterling realm. Unproductive was not only the economic system or agriculture, but also the intellectual sector. An educational system that has not provided the return of the Romanians anywhere in the past, being a system of indoctrination and a health system which boasts that it is offered free to the people, when in turn it is poorly endowed and out dated.

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²³ John Tagliabue, "Rumanians Riot Over Pay Cut and Shortages", in *The New York Times*, 22 November 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/22/world/rumanians-riot-over-pay-cut-and-shortages.html>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

²⁴*Ibidem*.

²⁵ Craig R. Whitney, "Stalinist Rumania Closes In on Itself", in *The New York Times*, 15 Julie 1989 <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/07/15/world/stalinist-rumania-closes-in-on-itself.html?pagewanted=1>, accessed in 15 October 2015.

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