

CONDUCTOR: NICOLAE CEAUSESCU AND THE APPROPRIATION OF ROMANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY UNDER SOCIALISM

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In 1968, the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia to counter the liberal reforms of Alexander Dubcek.¹ Of the Warsaw Pact Leaders, only Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania publicly condemned the invasion, winning praise from the West and China. Even though he was, in this one instance, willing to oppose Soviet domination of the Eastern bloc, he was no reformer. Ceausescu truly believed in the Stalinist cause. His harsh domestic policies reflected the simple, ideological thinking of his revolutionary peasant heritage. Born impoverished, Ceausescu joined the communists upon moving to Bucharest and because of this political activity, spent much of his youth in Romanian prison. After WWII Soviet troops elevated the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) to power in the country. As a result, Romanians widely viewed the RCP as illegitimate and foreign dominated due to its external imposition. The RCP struggled to change this view. Starting in 1964, after Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death, Ceausescu energetically pursued Stalinist policies at home while attempting to appeal to Romanian nationalism abroad. Rejecting internal reform, the RCP under Ceausescu attempted to assert its political legitimacy by acting independently in foreign policy for the Romanian national interest.

The origins of Ceausescu's independent foreign policy lay in the policy of his predecessor, Gheorghiu-Dej. Gheorghiu-Dej became General Secretary of the RCP in the wake of the 4th Party Congress of 1928 held in Kharkov, USSR. Soviet Comintern officials ran the congress and forced Stalinist modes of control upon the Romanian communists, purging many of the party's social democrats.¹ Given his foreign political origins, many

¹ Alexander Dubcek was the reformist leader of Czechoslovakia 1968-1969. His policy of "socialism with a human face" drew the ire of the Soviet Union when he threatened to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, precipitating Soviet intervention.

¹ Tismaneanu, Vladimir. *Stalinism For All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 64-69. A Stalinist party ran on a principal of party discipline and unity. Most party decisions were made behind closed doors in the central committee and deviation was not tolerated. Additionally, party leaders could destroy rivals and remove opposition members from office without recourse for the snubbed.

Romanians suspected that Gheorghiu-Dej represented Moscow's interest. Under Soviet General Secretary Iosef Stalin, that assessment appeared correct. After Soviet troops arrived in Bucharest in 1944, the NKVD under Lavrentiy Beria prepared the communist takeover of Romania. By 1945 the political situation remained fractured and the communists struggled to gather the necessary support to assume control by democratic means.¹ When popular support failed to materialize by 1947, Gheorghiu-Dej along with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky forced the Romanian King Michael from the throne and proclaimed RCP rule.² Given the assistance Gheorghiu-Dej received from the USSR, naturally, the RCP thanked Stalin for its ascendancy. Once in power, the RCP initiated a campaign of political terror to solidify its political control while pursuing collectivization with the help of Soviet advisors, transforming Romania into a Stalinist industrialized socialist state. Since Moscow and Bucharest's national security interests aligned in the late 40s and early 50s, Gheorghiu-Dej strongly supported the USSR's foreign policy.

The special relationship between the USSR and the Socialist Republic of Romania broke down after Stalin's death. Khrushchev's de-Stalinization of the USSR greatly worried Gheorghiu-Dej and the RCP as it threatened to weaken their domestic grip on power. In order to prevent the liberalization of Romanian communism, the RCP appealed to the people's traditional nationalism by publicly asserting its independence from Moscow.³ Gheorghiu-Dej's first demonstration of autonomy came in 1958 when, after the RCP demonstrated competence in containing the Hungarian crisis of 1956, he negotiated for the removal of Soviet troops

¹ "Report to L. P. Beria about the Political Situation in Romania," March 05, 1945, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, GARF, fond 9401, op 2, d 93, ll. 264-267. Document No. 51 in *Vostochnaia Evropa*, edited by G.P. Murashko, et al, vol. 1. Translated for CWHIP by Svetlana Savranskaya. Reporting to NKVD chief L. P. Beria of the worsening problem of worker unrest in Bucharest, the NKVD hinted at the possible need to use force to maintain control. If the coalition is formed the Zemlyaki (meaning communists) would get majority. The Soviets clearly would prefer a democratic coalition to a hostile takeover due to the problems of legitimacy. National-Democratic Front was the most powerful party. The question was how to defeat them and make it look good?

² Tismaneanu, *Stalinism For All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, 86-90.

³ *Ibid.*, 187-189. Gheorghiu-Dej claimed to have a cult of personality but it proved to be a mere fantasy and his real power came from the Stalinist machinery of the state.

from Romania.⁴ In the eyes of Romanians, Gheorghiu-Dej had liberated Romania from Russian occupation. To defeat the pro-Russian wing of the party, the RCP vociferously condemned any resistance to Gheorghiu-Dej's new policy of public independence from Soviet influence.⁵ Another challenge to RCP authority was Khrushchev's proposed new role for COMECON. Under his proposal, the RCP's economic program would be subordinate to the USSR's global security objectives. In response to the proposed agricultural role for Romania in a united COMECON economy, the RCP cited "historical circumstances" as guaranteeing its right to independent economic planning for Romania.⁶ Gheorghiu-Dej appealed to Romania's historical independence to maintain Romania's right to pursue heavy industry along Stalinist lines in Romania and used it as a tool to limit the impact of Khrushchev's ideological changes in Romania.

Romanian nationalist resistance to Russia enabled the RCP to bolster popular support while resisting "imperialist" Moscow's reform communism.⁷ Romania used nationalism to prevent domestic change. This policy contrasted with other communist nations in Eastern Europe, which used nationalism to justify domestic reforms. Understanding this trend, the West mistakenly viewed Gheorghiu-Dej as a reformer resisting Stalinist Russia. Radio Free Europe targeted Romania to promote not just further independence from the Soviet Union, but sweeping reforms at home.⁸

⁴ Fischer, Mary Ellen. *Nicolae Ceausescu: A Study in Political Leadership*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1989), 258.

⁵ Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 120. "Dogmatism" was used by Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceausescu to purge those who deviated by accusing them of Stalinism or the willingness to subordinate Romania's national interests to Moscow.

⁶ Rumanian Party Statement (26 April 1964), translated in the BBC Monitoring Service's Summary of World Broadcasts, EE/1539/C/I; reprinted by permission of the BBC; Steele, Jonathan. *Eastern Europe Since Stalin*. David & Charles (Holdings) Limited: South Devon house Newton Abbot Devon, 1974. Romania must maintain its sovereignty from COMECON by possessing planning capabilities. The letter asserts that Romania has the right to develop socialism in whatever way it sees fit. The historical circumstances of each country must be taken into consideration when deciding economic direction.

⁷ Kotkin, Stephen. *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*. (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 2009), 78.

⁸ "Romanian Securitate Report on Radio Free Europe's Encouragement of Romanian Independence from the USSR," January 30, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, ACNSAS, fond SIE, file 16, p. 110.

American intervention in Romanian politics unsettled the RCP. RFE's intrusion into Romanian political discourse threatened the party's messaging monopoly. Outside support for independence diluted the RCP's identity as the sole defender of Romanian independence. Because of RFE's initiatives and RCP propaganda, public opinion turned sharply away from Soviet cooperation and towards foreign policy independence. Romania-USSR relations went cold in the decade preceding the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, presenting an opportunity for Romania's new leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, to expand upon the work of his predecessor and solidify the RCP's nationalist mandate.

When Ceausescu became General Secretary of the RCP in 1964, his political vulnerability compelled him to assert his nationalist credentials just as Gheorghiu-Dej had in the previous decade. Like Gheorghiu-Dej, Ceausescu combined nationalist populism, social demagoguery, and the basic tenets of Stalinism into an ad hoc political ideology.⁹ Ceausescu's dogmatic adherence to domestic repression pigeonholed RCP policy in this sphere. Stalin's interpretation of power stressed the unity of ideology and politics insofar as they cannot be reformed separately. Without room to compromise on ideology, Romanian national communism tended toward extremes of both national chauvinism and Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy.¹⁰ This transformation of traditional ideology had pragmatic roots. Based on experience, the RCP understood that the public could never be energized by international communism and that nationalism had a pre-eminent position within Romanian political life.¹¹ Thus, to preserve the consistency between ideology and political realities, Ceausescu focused public attention outwards onto Romania's international posture. Ceausescu appealed to Romanians' centuries-old desire to resist Russian domination in order to legitimize his regime.¹²

Translated by Mircea Munteanu. RFE used precise language in its broadcasts to target specific weaknesses within communist regimes. "The Central office in New York directs [the Paris RFE office] to refer to our country as Romania rather than PRR in its future broadcasts." The use of the term "Romania" instead of the "People's Republic of Romania" attempts to de-communize the state and hints at total separation from the Warsaw Pact.

⁹ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism For All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, 215-217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 217-218. Romanian chauvinism emphasized anti-Hungarian and anti-Russian sentiments, antagonizing Romania's allies.

¹¹ Verdery, Katherine. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, 124-125.

¹² King, Robert R. *History of the Romanian Communist Party*. (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, California, 1980), 125-128.

Opposition to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia presented Ceausescu with a readymade opportunity to nominally oppose Russia and justify his power.

The Soviet Brezhnev Doctrine, justifying the use of military force to prevent communist regimes from failing, compelled the Warsaw Pact to arrest Dubcek's reforms in Czechoslovakia. The Soviets, along with the militaries of the Eastern bloc, invaded Czechoslovakia and deposed Dubcek, replacing him with the Slovakian hardliner, Gustav Husak. Of the Warsaw Pact nation's only one publicly condemned the operation. On August 21, 1968, Ceausescu delivered a combative speech in which he argued that Romania and the other socialist countries should be free to pursue their own national interests, without the threat of military intervention. In so doing, he cast himself as the defender of Romanian sovereignty.¹³ Was this move a sign of a thaw in Romania? Moscow certainly thought so and anxiously viewed Romania's declaration of opposition as consistent with its recent relaxation of censorship. Mass printing of "ideologically harmful" material in the SRR entered the USSR and threatened to de-stabilize ethnically Romanian Moldova.¹⁴ If Romania's contamination destabilized the USSR, an invasion of Romania to reassert socialist discipline could have been justified by the Brezhnev Doctrine. To assuage Moscow's fears of Romanian separatism, Ceausescu assured Soviet Ambassador Alexander Vasilievich Basov that he only wanted peace among socialist nations.¹⁵ On the other hand, Ceausescu

¹³ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism For All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, 200-203.

¹⁴ "KGB Border Report to P. Shelest," May 22, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 25, Spr. 65, Ll. 41-46. To combat ideological contamination, the KGB proposed increased border security measures. "29 April 1964 by Directive No. 0122 of the KGB under the USSR Council of Ministers, the registration and reporting of citizens of socialist countries passing through border-control checkpoints into the USSR on official business, and the registration and reporting of tourists on single-entry visas who arrive on the basis of invitations and telegrams or in transit, are not being carried out with the necessary oversight by the border guards, state security organs, and police."

¹⁵ "Cryptogram No 10456 from Polish Embassy in Bucharest, Ambassador Ochęduszek's Meeting with the Soviet Ambassador," August 28, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland, D-I-R-0-2420-19/68, 24. Obtained and Translated by Adam Burakowski. Speaking to the Soviet ambassador, "Ceausescu insisted that military intervention was a mistake, referring to Marx and Lenin and thought that a different solution to the problem of

created the perception in the West that he was a maverick. They believed this, even though Ceausescu showed no sign of wavering from his neo-Stalinist line.¹⁶ He deftly succeeded in charting an independent course in foreign relations without provoking a military response from an increasingly assertive Moscow.

Ceausescu's maneuvering was possible because of the Warsaw Pact's military structure. The Warsaw Pact Treaty united the Eastern Bloc in a collective defense agreement that emphasized unity in the face of outside aggression. Codified within the treaty was a nominal respect for the sovereignty of all members and the establishment of principles of non-interference in their internal affairs by other member states.¹⁷ Moscow maintained the implicit right to intervene. While originally intended to formalize Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, the WARPACT eventually grew to reflect a more diverse set of interests.¹⁸ The degree to which the various allied countries could enact individual foreign policy depended on the relative importance of that nation to WARPACT's overarching security infrastructure. The WARPACT's military organization reflected the Soviet Union's premier position as founder of the European communist movement. The United Armed Forces under Soviet command was the most important defense organization. The UAF combined forces from allied countries and placed them under Soviet command to fight as unified formations. Because of the importance of the UAF, the number of troops the different WARPACT countries contributed to it indicated their importance. Romania did not contribute any troops to the UAF whereas the GDR and Czechoslovakia both contribute significant troops. Therefore, if Romania pursued independent foreign policy, it was less concerning for the Soviets.¹⁹ WARPACT nations with less troops, like Romania, were less vital to Soviet defense interests and could pursue a more independent foreign policy. It was simply not worth the Soviet Union's time to enforce compliance of minor allies.

Czechoslovakia could have been found. He stressed that his goal was sovereignty, unity and friendship with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.”

¹⁶ Tismaneanu, *Stalinism For All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, 200-203.

¹⁷ Robin Remington, "The Warsaw Pact: Institutional Dynamics Within the Socialist Commonwealth." *The American Journal of International Law* 67, no. 5 (1973): 61-64, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

¹⁹ Stephan Tiedtke and Michel Vale. "Military Détente and Differences on Military Policy within the Warsaw Pact." *International Journal of Politics* 13, no. 1/2 (1983): 44-61, 9.

Romania's perceived independence from Moscow provided Ceausescu with economic benefits. In the aftermath of Czechoslovakia, the United States approached Romania for bilateral negotiations. Equal dealings with America validated Ceausescu's policy of independence. President Richard Nixon visited Romania in 1973 as part of his initiative to improve relations with communist nations. The Romanian leader congratulated Nixon on his rapprochement with the Soviets and promptly signed a bilateral agreement supporting the rights of small nations to pursue their own goals.²⁰ Freedom from Soviet domination enabled Ceausescu to develop rich, bilateral relationships like the Romania-USA understanding. Relations with America fit well into Ceausescu's domestic program. At the 10th Party Congress, Ceausescu emphasized Romania's need to assert itself and reach parity with the industrialized West.²¹ Ceausescu's independence from Russia bought him access to an eager West, from which he received loans and other economic aid. The Romanian economy improved in the 1970s as Ceausescu tightened cultural control at home. In Romania, it appeared as if Ceausescu not only was a committed nationalist, but a gifted economic manager as well. His foreign adventurism allowed him to increase political repression in the short run without significant backlash, bolstered by American economic aid.

Ceausescu centralized control of culture, education and mass media. He used his power to promote his own synthesis of nationalist Marxism-Leninism.²² In a communist nation, the past is never certain and history is manipulated to meet the policy goals of the state.²³ The RCP's official nationalist myth traces the origins of the party back to the Dacians in their struggle to achieve social justice and resist Roman domination in the first century. Characters like Prince Michael the Brave who united Romanian principalities at the end of the 16th century were re-

²⁰ "Memorandum of Conversation between Nicolae Ceausescu and President Nixon," December 04, 1973, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 59, Subject Numeric Files (SNF) 1970-1973, POL ROM-US. Obtained by Iulian Toader and Laura Deal. Ceausescu argued for equal treatment as an independent power by the United States. "Recognizing this I still think that there is justification for the thought that one must not lose sight of the fact that there are a number of other states in various stages of development. These other states must not be ignored, and Romania is one of them."

²¹ Fischer-Galati, Stephen. "The Socialist Republic of Romania" in *The Changing Face of Communism in Eastern Europe*. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1970), 36.

²² Fischer, *Nicolae Ceausescu: A Study in Political Leadership*, 180.

²³ King, *History of the Romanian Communist Party*, 1.

mythologized. Even Vlad the Impaler was reappraised as a progressive prince like the great Nicolae Ceausescu.²⁴ Official communist literature emphasized the historic greatness of the Romanian nation and presented the events of 1944, the communist seizure of power and the subsequent SRR as the inheritance of past Romanian glory.²⁵ Memories of the true circumstances of the 1947 communist takeover threatened the regimes totalizing narrative and were systematically targeted for deletion. Using the 1968 incident as a running justification for his policies, Ceausescu radically expanded his historical propaganda efforts to solidify the political legitimacy of the RCP.

Ceausescu's interpretations of history certainly were imaginative, but his Stalinist worldview greatly limited his options for practical domestic reform. Consistent with Stalinist principles, Ceausescu tried to connect to his people by building "socialist democracy." It being the implementation of state-organized, popular participation in communist projects. Through visits to factories and other sites, he "scientifically" solved the people's problems and made sure the television cameras saw him do it. The RCP routinely staged massive festivals in support of regime policies.²⁶ Like the festivals, much of Ceausescu's popularity was farcical. To train communist party cadres in the art of campaigning, multi-party public elections for communist party officials took place in 1975. Instead of the resounding validation sought by Ceausescu, the party lost many of the elections.²⁷ The election fiasco showed the volatility of popular opinion and Ceausescu's waning support after the euphoria of 1968. After electoral failure, the Ceausescu cult of personality intensified and the party expanded, deepening the illusion of popular involvement. By 1980, the RCP had 3.7 Million members, earning Romania the distinction

²⁴ Ibid., 120-124.

²⁵ Lieutenant-General Dr Ilie Ceausescu, Colonel Dr Florian Tuca, Major Dr Mihail E. Ionescu, and Captain Alesandru Dutu. *Romania and the Great Victory: A Remarkable Contribution to the Defeat of Fascism August 23, 1944-May 12, 1945*. Translated into English by Georgeta Blaj and Margareta Boaca. (The Military Publishing House: Bucharest, SRR, 1985), VII-IX. The preface outlines the long struggle of the Romanian people against oppression by Rome, Byzantium, Russia and The Ottomans. Ceausescu asserts that the Romanian revolution of August, 1944 was not "something imposed on the Romanian people by outside factors." Instead "The great rise-in-arms in 1944 of the entire nation against foreign occupation naturally was the climax of a multimillenary effort to defend independence and unity, the most sacred assets of the Romanian people."

²⁶ King, *History of the Romanian Communist Party*, 109-112.

²⁷ Fischer, *Nicolae Ceausescu: A Study in Political Leadership*, 237.

of having the most communists per capita in Europe.²⁸ However, without contemporary foreign policy victories and any further attempts at reform, the RCP remained stagnant and centralized while Ceausescu deluded himself.

Ceausescu believed nationalism could override the need for serious domestic reform indefinitely. By the end of the 1980s, Ceausescu's wellspring of patriotism finally dried up. On December 21, 1989, in response to civil unrest, Ceausescu gathered the citizens in a grand demonstration in Bucharest. Looking out over the sea of "adoring" people carrying banners and chanting slogans, he implored the citizens of Bucharest to rally behind Romania, not the communist party. Like a one-hit wonder, he unsuccessfully appealed directly to the memory of 1968, the legitimizing narrative for his entire regime.²⁹ This time, empty words and propaganda would not be enough to save him. Someone in the crowd caused a disturbance and the crowd turned on Ceausescu, calling for his ouster as he waved his arms, shouting at them "What? Shut up!"³⁰ The capital no longer safe, he fled by helicopter but was waylaid and brutally executed by military officers after a kangaroo court. Throughout his rule, Ceausescu tried desperately to be popular but his appeals to nationalism failed to generate lasting support in the absence of essential domestic reform.

The central question faced by Gheorghiu-Dej and Ceausescu, concerning the RCP's claim to legitimacy, was the dubious rise of Soviet power in Romania. Gheorghiu-Dej recognized the conspiratorial nature of the RCP's 1947 coup and took steps to use extreme repression to build a Stalinist state capable of ruling in spite of its origins. However, after Stalin's death, the RCP retained its harsh domestic policies and pushed for independence to preserve the status quo. Ceausescu charted a similar course and worked to increase popular mobilization in the name of Romanian nationalism. Nevertheless, after the debacle of the 1975 elections, Romania never again tried substantive domestic reform. Instead, Romanian policy was focused outwards, attempting to garner nationalist support for failing domestic policies. This strategy proved to be successful in the immediate post-1968 period when Romanian fortunes diplomatically and economically improved but, after the euphoria of 1968 wore off, the

²⁸ Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, 77.

²⁹ Ceausescu, Nicolae. Final Speech. Bucharest, Romania, December 21, 1989. Lybio.net.

³⁰ Kotkin, *Uncivil Society: 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, 87.

RCP's claim to popular support weakened and became superficial. In Ceausescu's drive to pursue his Stalinist agenda, he squandered the initial goodwill of 1968 and failed to convert nationalist rhetoric into genuine popular support. He paid for this oversight with his life.

