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From the Coup to the Escalation of Violence: the Transition to Democracy in Romania

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Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.

From the Coup to the Escalation of Violence: the Transition to Democracy in Romania

Federico M. Rossi

Cosmos Working Paper 2012/13

Abstract: Romania was the only example of violent regime change in the central and south eastern European milieu, with massive mobilizations both in favour and against change and the execution of the dictator. In other words, there seems to have been an attempted coup d'état in Romania, one that was successful thanks to the unplanned escalation of violence organized from below without any links to the intra-elite disputes. This process started locally in a community linked with the outside world able to draw on supportive networks. Contention quickly scaled up to the capital city and produced a vacuum of power as a result of the anti-Ceaușescu communists' decision to immediately topple and execute the dictator. This opened the way to a chaotic moment of violence that was not organized by supporters or opponents of the regime, but rather produced by the vacuum of power in a collapsed sultanistic totalitarian regime. The lack of international support for democratization, weak local civil society and unorganized violence allowed the neo-communists to settle in power. However, a revolution was already ongoing, notwithstanding the neo-communist elites' wish to merely modify the previous regime. This led to the emergence of a democratic setting.

Keywords: democratization, religious movement, political violence, coup d'état, post-communism, Romania

Introduction

Romania was the only example of violent regime change in the central and south eastern European milieu, with massive mobilizations both in favour and against change and the execution of the dictator. Two main interpretations of the process of regime change in Romania are in circulation. First, one group of authors define it as an elite coup by anti-Nicolae Ceaușescu sectors of the Romanian Communist Party (Chilton, 1994; Haerpfer, 2009; Roper, 2000) or a coup accompanied by a popular uprising (Verdery and Kligman, 1992). Second, others speak of a revolution (Hall, 1999; Siani-Davies, 2005). In this last perspective, the best documented research is reported in Siani-Davies' book, in which the author argues that because the events were determined by massive mobilization and the narratives were built on the myth of a liberation revolution, the events are better defined as such.

Periodization

The event that initiated the democratization process was the jailing of pastor Lázló Tőkés in Timișoara, the main city of the Transylvania region (populated by the Hungarian ethnic minority) on December 15th 1989. Tőkés was a pastor who organized the local community in anti-regime activities without the support of the authorities of the Hungarian Reformed Church (Deletant, 2006; Siani-Davies, 2005: ch. 2). Events unfolded quickly following his imprisonment. Transition, according to Siani-Davies (2005), followed two phases. The first phase was concentrated in Timișoara until a diffusion process began on December 15th, lasting until the 22nd (from the first protests in Timișoara to the execution of Ceaușescu). The second phase lasted from that point until February 9th 1990, moving from the vacuum of power to the constitution of the Provisional Council of National Unity. This second stage was characterized by violent clashes in the capital between security forces, rumours of terrorists from the Middle East attacking regime change and the consolidation of the anti-Ceaușescu communist elite in power.

First phase: localized contention

The first phase was linked to the mobilization of the local community of Timișoara in support of Tőkés. These events began with a massive gathering in front of Tőkés' house in order to prevent the authorities from taking him to jail. Initially there was no repression, but after three days of local protests, riots spread across the city in the night between the 17th and the 18th of December 1989 and the military killed several protestors. On December 18th Timișoara workers protested against the repression, initiating a de facto strike. The local authorities' response was to stop repression, which produced an increase in protest and the closure of all factories in Timișoara on 19th and 20th December (Siani-Davies, 2005: ch. 2). From December 20th on, a process of diffusion of protest to other towns in Transylvania started with Cluj and Sibiu, and eventually reaching Bucharest. However, protests were irrelevant in all cities outside the capital.

Second phase: contention in Bucharest

From the 20th to the 22nd December massive protests and riots spread across the city centre of Bucharest. The protests were not organized by any political actor, and were mostly characterized by an escalation in violence. On December 20th, Nicolae Ceaușescu returned from a visit to Iran and delivered a televised speech against the Timișoara demonstrations. Ceaușescu's discourse was directed at the population and elites of Timișoara, accused of disregarding his order to repress protestors.

On December 21st, Ceaușescu organized a televised pro-government rally that generated anti-regime protests by some participants, causing the official television station to stop broadcasting. That same day, the Minister of the Interior committed suicide, but was thought to have been killed by forces loyal to Ceaușescu because he had refused to repress protestors (Siani-Davies, 2005). During the day there was an increase in violent contention in Bucharest, with riots, lootings, cross-shootings, tank attacks and thousands of killings.

The turning point of the process was on December 22nd, when the regime broke down and a vacuum of power was produced as a result. A second attempt by Ceaușescu to give a speech in Bucharest, this time from the RCP headquarters, failed as the dictator was stopped by people throwing shoes and potatoes at him. On that same day military troops refrained from repression and the people entered the RCP headquarters. Ceaușescu and his wife escaped by helicopter from the roof of the RCP building, producing the virtual end of the regime.

After just one day of the power vacuum the National Salvation Front (NSF) was created. The NSF was an anti-Ceaușescu coalition of RCP elites, with Ion Iliescu, an anti-Stalinist RCP leader, as its main figure. On the same day, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were captured in Tirgoviste. The NSF subjected them to a two-hour fake trial where they were declared guilty. They were executed on December 24th.

Meanwhile, from the 23rd to the 25th of December, the *Securitate* (secret police) entered into open and violent confrontation with the military, the demonstrating masses and the anti-government troops. No security force remained loyal to Ceaușescu. However, they may have profited from the chaotic situation to control specific state areas and resources during the transitional period. The cause of the violence was a rumour spread by the NSF about Middle Eastern terrorists entering Romania to promote chaos and profit from the vacuum of power created by the sudden demise of Ceaușescu and the chaotic attempts by uncoordinated security forces to stop violence in the streets (Siani-Davies, 2005: ch. 3; Verdery and Kligman, 1992: 121-122). Violence ended on December 25th, though some isolated events continued until January 4th 1990.

After the end of violence the NSF attempted to consolidate itself as the new government. After some initial hesitation it called elections, participating as a party. However, on January 28th and 29th 1990 smaller and non-violent mobilizations were organized by anti-NSF forces (traditional pre-communism parties and the student movement) against the NSF's participation in the elections. These protests were completely ineffective as the NSF did not change its position (Siani-Davies, 2005: ch. 5).

The end point of the revolutionary process according to Siani-Davies (2005) was February 9th 1990, when the NSF founded the Provisional Council

of National Unity with all anti-Ceaușescu political sectors to govern in the transitional period until elections. However, a few additional protests were organized by (small amounts of) students on April 22nd. Some few hundred students organized a sit-in at the University of Bucharest to ask the NSF to accept the Timișoara Proclamation (a pro-democratic document). This protest was completely ignored by the NSF and had no influence on the transition process (Tismaneanu, 1997).

The first free and open elections took place on May 20th, as planned, and were won by Iliescu's NSF with 85% of the votes. Concerning contentious politics, Iliescu made use of the Jiu Valley miners as a demobilizing force against the few remaining student protests on two occasions after the elections. These two events closed off any further attempts by anti-NSF forces to push for further democratization. The first event was from the 13th to the 15th June, when Jiu Valley miners were mobilized in Bucharest by the NSF to demobilize the student protests against Iliescu's government. The second event was held from the 24th to the 28th June to coincide with the end of the Petre Roman government, consolidating Iliescu's hegemony until 2004 (Verdery and Kligman, 1992: 130-137).

Structural conditions

The Ceaușescu regime is unanimously defined as a personalized dictatorship, and conceptualized as –following Linz and Stepan's (1996) categories- a sultanistic, neo-patrimonial, totalitarian neo-Stalinist regime (Carey and Eisterhold, 2004, Siani-Davies, 2005: 16, n. 30; Tismaneanu, 1997: 410-411). Romania's communist regime never underwent meaningful de-Stalinization after Stalin's death in 1953. According to Roper,

There were three reasons why de-Stalinization did not occur: firstly there were no ardent anti-Stalinists in the leadership ... secondly, the party feared the consequences of de-Stalinization because the party's support among the population was so tenuous ... Party members feared that the population would interpret de-Stalinization as de-communization ... Thirdly, de-Stalinization propaganda was not successful with the people because of the PMR's [RCP] policies. Romanian leaders anticipated a challenge from Moscow and used economic incentives to increase their support among the people (2000:30).

Following Roper's historical narration, the RCP remained nationalist throughout its history. Romania was among the few countries that stayed outside the Warsaw Pact, and foreign policy after Stalin's death was not close to Moscow's. Rather, Gheorghiu-Dej and later Ceaușescu invested heavily in their relations with China in order to balance Russia's influence. There was even an anti-Russian element to their discourse, and they guarded their autonomy from Moscow. Economically, Romania also stayed away from the COMECON. Dej's

efforts to industrialize the country broke the traditional division of labor that Moscow wanted to impose on the Eastern bloc, where Romania and Bulgaria were to remain de-industrialized and act mainly as the bread baskets of the more industrialized nations of East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Instead, Dej and Ceaușescu maintained close economic ties with the West, mainly through trade.

As a result of these policies, Romania experienced a huge industrialization process during the 1970s, but in the 1980s the socioeconomic context was depressed due to the oil crisis of the 1970s that had led the government to take austerity measures resulting in a lack of products to consume (Kaser, 2010). According to Siani-Davies:

The spark of the crisis of the early 1980s largely came from adverse developments in the global economy. Building on Romania's traditional interests in the oil industry, a great deal of investment had been poured into facilities for the processing of secondary petroleum products as well as other energy intensive sectors, such as steel manufacturing and aluminium refining ... The Romanians intended to cover the cost of these new investments by exporting the goods produced to the West, but not only was this fateful decision made at a time when reliance on oil imports was decreasing because of decline in domestic production –this fell by 20 per cent between 1982 and 1988- but also the new plant began to come on stream just as the price of oil tripled during the second OPEC crisis. This was largely caused by the revolution in Iran, a country that had traditionally been an oil supplier to the Romanians ... The result was that in 1980 the spectacular growth of the 1970s was brought to a shuddering halt. Ceaușescu's reaction to the crisis was belated but, when it came, it displayed the same single-mindedness which had earlier driven his quest for industrialization. A massive campaign of export promotion and import substitution was launched in which the most marketable products, especially foodstuffs, were shipped abroad, leaving only 'patriots' such as pig's feet at home (2005: 32-33).

In addition, Ceaușescu decided to pay the totality of Romania's foreign debts, drying out the domestic economy for this purpose. While the country's debt stood at US\$ 11 billion in 1982, by 1986 it had already been cut to US\$ 5.5 billion (Siani-Davies, 2005: 33).

Way (2008), in an article that studies several cases of the collapse and survival of autocrats, states that the main explanatory dimension in the removal of autocrats is not regional diffusion, nor the opposition's capacity to mobilize, but the links between the authoritarian regime and the west. In his words:

Authoritarian stability is most affected by: 1) the strength of a country's ties to the West; and 2) the strength of the incumbent regime's autocratic party or state. In a nutshell, post-communist autocrats have been more likely to hold onto power when their countries have weaker ties to the West and when they have access to at least one of the following sources of authoritarian organizational power: a single, highly institutionalized ruling party; a strong coercive

apparatus that has won a major violent conflict; or state discretionary control over the economy (Way, 2008: 60).

Following this argument, it may be said that due to the lack of extra-economical contacts with the west among Romanian elites, the post-communist Iliescu elites were able to control power, blocking the pro-liberal democracy sectors.

Cleavages

There were two main cleavages relevant under the Ceaușescu regime. The first was between the political elite (i.e., the RCP leadership) and the workers, and the second between the technocracy and the political elite (Datculescu, 1999: 102-104). According to Datculescu, the first cleavage grew with the economic difficulties of the 1980s: “Until the ‘70s, the Communist Party lived up to its commitment made to the workers, while the workers accepted the leading position and the self-assumed objectives of the Party. The economic deterioration in the ‘80s led to a crisis and a major cleavage between the workers and the communist political elite” (1999: 102). And he continues: “The first signs of the incipient cleavage appeared in 1977, when 35,000 miners in the Jiu Valley went on a strike that could be stopped only by promises made personally by Ceaușescu to the miners and after the strike leaders had been arrested. But the most dramatic illustration of the cleavage that separated workers and the political elite was the revolt of the workers in Brașov on November 15, 1987” (1999: 103).

The second cleavage, again according to Datculescu (1999: 103), was based on the “... policy [of the regime] oriented against the intellectuals” with the purpose of delegitimizing their role in society. According to the author:

In his effort to preserve the loyalty of the working class, Ceaușescu tried to glorify manual work by granting it a higher social importance than that of intellectual activity... The anti-intellectual policy materialized in lower pay for intellectuals in comparison with qualified workers in top industries and the reduction of their share in the social structure. Between 1961 and 1985, the number of high-school graduates decreased by 14 percent, while that of higher education graduates decreased by 13 percent. Meanwhile, the number of vocational school graduates increased by 44 percent (Datculescu, 1999: 103),

Since democratization several new cleavages have emerged. Bakke (2010) points to the emergence of an ethnic Hungarian party in Romania, but in her opinion the main cleavage in Romania since the first free and open elections is a left-right one, while during the transitional period the most important cleavage was between regime change and regime continuity.

Tismaneanu (2007: 36) holds that the shaky character of the post-communist regime is explained by the vacuum left by the “ideological

extinction of Leninist formations”. This vacuum was filled by syncretic constructs that drew on the region’s pre-communist and communist heritage (nationalism in both its civic and ethnic incarnations, liberalism, democratic socialism, conservatism, populism, neo-Leninism, and even more or less refurbished fascism). Accordingly, the collapse of Leninism opened the door for many ideological streams, some of which were anti-modern, illiberal and authoritarian in character.

According to Whitefield (2002), the emergence of socially based cleavages during the post-communist period (age, regions, education, ethnicity among Hungarians, and a regional one in Transylvania) may be the result of the expression of cleavages that were not previously officially recognized. In addition, regime change has produced the emergence of new ideological cleavages: social and political liberalism versus the recovery of the illiberal roots of the previous regime, economic liberalism versus a state-centred economy, pro- versus anti-western positions, ethnic pluralism versus monism, etc.

International context

At the international level, crucial shifts in geopolitical alliances left Ceaușescu isolated in the midst of a deep economic crisis. There were four main changes in this respect. The first was a permissive context for regime change due to the USSR’s decision not to intervene, a result of Gorbachev’s new foreign policy which put an end to the Cold War strategy. However, Gorbachev put no pressure on Ceaușescu to quit, and Red Army troops had not set foot in Romania since 1958. In addition, Romania was politically irrelevant for the USSR, though there had been an improvement in diplomatic relations. A second important change was that the West stopped supporting Romania’s independent strategy within the bloc due to the changes in the USSR. In addition, Romania lost its status of “most favoured nation”¹ for trade with the US in 1988. Finally, there were bad diplomatic relations with Hungary due to the ill treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, which led the Hungarian government to be more protective than usual of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Transylvania following its own regime change (Siani-Davies, 2005: 45-52).

Protests

Democratization began with the jailing of pastor Lázló Tókés. Prior to this, there is almost no information on resistance struggles due to the regime’s censorship. The only relevant events are the 1977 miners strike in the Jiu Valley, the 1983 miners and metalworkers strike in Cluj, the 1987 workers and students

¹This is a category of trade given by the US Congress to non-Western European nations for the promotion of bilateral trade agreements.

protests in Iasi and the anti-austerity protests in Braşov in the same year (Deletant, 2006: 85-90). However, due to high censorship under the Ceauşescu regime, there is no information available on these events. According to Siani-Davies (2005:35), the Braşov events were relevant for the democratization struggles initiated by the Hungarian minority because the Hungarian Reformed Church and its local networks were behind these first claims against the regime.

Why were the 1980s mostly quiet until the events of 1989? According to Siani-Davies (2005: 36-41) the key here is the change in the international context along with a military that was not willing to repress citizen protests. In addition, “The homogenized structure of the state, which was characterized by an absence of differentials and an ideological stress on egalitarianism and centralized decision making, produced a commonality of experience, which during the 1980s became a commonality of grievance” (Siani-Davies, 2005: 42). According to Sampson (1984-6), the crucial moment was the cold winter of 1984-5 when the regime decided to save fuel and stopped providing heating.

However, this common grievance was not enough to produce demonstrations. First, the Hungarian Reformed Church provided the organizational structure for the initial protests (Siani-Davies, 2005: 43). Second, the tradition of football hooliganism in the region (which generally had political connotations with chants against the regime) provided the protesters with a well-known repertoire of actions used during the democratization struggles. Sampson (1984-6) suggests that football clubs were the only institutions with any mobilizing potential, and football matches were often characterized by violence. Third, the factory was the main organizational environment for the creation of common grievances and the organization of mass demonstrations: “Thus, with some irony, it can be said that Ceauşescu was toppled by mass protests that stemmed from an organizational form, the factory, that communism had elevated to be both the actual and also the mythical heart of the state” (Siani-Davies, 2005: 44).

As mentioned, contentious politics arrived in the capital on December 19th 1989, and continued without much violence until Ceauşescu escaped in a helicopter from the roof of the RCP headquarters (cf. Periodization). The end of the Ceauşescu government on December 22nd produced a vacuum of power as a result of his personalized type of leadership, and this led to a violent clash between security forces and the armed population resulting in over 1000 deaths in around three days (Verdery and Kligman, 1992; Siani-Davies, 2005).

Mobilizations against the neo-communists

Pro-democracy and NSF supporters clashed between January and June 1990. The main disputes were over the NSF’s refusal to call elections, finally held in May 1990. Second, the NSF’s decision to participate in the elections was

rejected by the rest of the political forces, as Iliescu and most of the NSF leaders were neo-communists.

The mobilizations against the NSF were organized by the three traditional pre-communism parties and the student movement, and were not repressed by the security forces (from the end of January 1990 onwards). However, they produced clashes with pro-NSF workers, mostly miners from the Jiu Valley (in June 1990). The first mobilization pushed the NSF to share power until the elections in 1990. The second mobilization failed in its attempt to stop the NSF from participating in the elections. Moreover, the NSF won the first free and open elections with 66% of the votes. After the miners' violent demobilization of the students of the University of Bucharest, the student movement ended its role in the transitional period (Verdery and Kligman, 1992: 130-136; Siani-Davies, 2005: 247-252; Tismaneanu, 1997: 430-431).

International support

International support for democratization in Rumania was almost inexistent. This was a result of the lack of an organized civil society in Romania during the Ceaușescu regime. According to Chilton (1994: 170), "Romania is the purest example of an extremely strong and repressive state apparatus and a very weak civil society" (cf. also: Pralong, 2004).

During the resistance period, Romanian dissidents were isolated from the main transnational coalitions against authoritarianism in the region. Prior to 1989 there was no Romanian participation in the transnational human rights coalition in which Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian dissident organizations participated. In addition, before 1989, there were no Romanian signatories to the Helsinki Memorandum of 1986. The only transnational links were those between the Hungarian Protestants and Hungary, which allowed some human rights protections for this ethnic minority (Chilton, 1994).

Concerning US support, the best analysis of the topic eloquently affirms that: "Prior to December 1989, there was almost no US assistance, governmental or non-governmental, relating to the promotion of democracy or human rights in Romania. The complete absence of any liberalization movement in the country meant that Romania, unlike some other countries of the region, had no human rights groups, independent unions, environmental groups, or other entities that Western organizations could support". And continues: "US democracy assistance was limited to a few small grants to expatriate groups, such as NED's support for Agora, a quarterly intellectual journal in Romanian edited by prominent Romanian émigrés, and for the London-based Mihai Eminescu trust for independent cultural activities in Romania" (Carothers, 1996: 19).

However, since Ceaușescu's fall, US support emerged and unfolded in

three stages that corresponded to the US's perception of the process: 1. from December 1989 to the May 1990 elections; 2. from mid-1990 to the 1992 national elections; and 3. from late 1992 to 1996. During the first phase, USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy sent funds quickly to support pro-democratic actors, but no actors received support before 1989. The second stage was marked by the NSF's electoral triumph, which increased US support to anti-communist actors. All the opposition parties, the student movement, the Făția trade union and România Liberă (the largest opposition newspaper) were supported by US funds, including support for electoral reforms. Finally, in the third phase, the focus was put on NGO support, parliamentary capacity-building and continuity in support for the main actors of the previous phase (Carothers, 1996: 19-22).

Finally, there were no private funds for Romanian NGOs, and the main non-US support came from the Soros Foundation, but this also emerged after the fall of Ceaușescu (Carothers, 1996: 22-24).

Actors in the transition I: the elites

The clashes in Timișoara and later in Bucharest quickly brought about the end of Ceaușescu's rule. The anti-Ceaușescu neo-communist elites were quite compact in their rejection of his authority. This meant that once protests emerged there was no elite resistance to the decision to topple and execute the dictator. Since the physical demise of Ceaușescu, differences among the members of the NSF emerged, but they were not influenced by the violence in the streets. Instead they were based on their perspectives on the process and their prior involvement in the communist regime. The three main sectors among NSF members were: 1. the old guard, the only RCP members who publicly expressed their rejection of Ceaușescu during his regime, and still considered the USSR a relevant actor for solving the problems of the transition; 2. the highly educated technocrats who had opposed the Stalinization of Romania and Ceaușescu but were isolated during the authoritarian period and did not participate in any western-based coalition for democracy; and 3. the sector most open to the west, mainly made up of intellectuals that were however highly divided among themselves (Siani-Davies, 2005: 195-199). After internal conflicts, the second sector dominated the NSF and Romanian politics for the next decade.

The neo-communist elite that took power after the fall of Ceaușescu was opposed by the student movement and the few other parties that had begun to emerge (cf. next section and the section on the student movement).

The anti-communist elites

One part of the anti-communist elites was formed by the three re-emerged pre-

communism parties. These three parties had been minor forces during the pre-communist era, with very little mobilization or electoral power, but allied to the student movement. The first of these was the National Peasant Party, a Christian Democratic-style party, conservative and peasant-based. The second was the National Liberal Party, a liberal, not anti-RCP, centrist and pragmatic party. The third was the Romanian Social Democratic Party, a small and irrelevant party both before and after communism (Siani-Davies, 2005: 238-243).

The military and the secret police

The military did not intervene during the struggles against Ceaușescu, but after his regime collapsed violence emerged between the military (in support of regime change), the *Securitate* (secret police) and the mobilized population (armed by the NSF to support regime change) (Watts, 2004). However, the military was not particularly repressive of pro-democratic forces, allowing the NSF to mobilize miners to demobilize the claims for further democratization posed by the student movements and the opposition parties (Siani-Davies, 2005).

Why did the military not repress civilian protests? According to Siani-Davies (2005: 36-40) the military were not willing to do so because they were not institutionally separated from civilian society, the armed forces being mostly staffed by conscripts. In addition, the military suffered the same economic hardships as the rest of the population, with no privileges. Finally, in 1986 there was a huge cut in military expenditure which left the military ill-equipped and demoralized.

The militia and the *Securitate* (secret police) were under the personal control of Ceaușescu, but they had little commitment to their leader and – according to Siani-Davies (2005)- might even have attempted coups against Ceaușescu. They were not then loyal to the dictator when he started having problems controlling social unrest. Additionally, they may have known that the government was weak, and hoped to control business under a capitalist economy (as then happened) (Siani-Davies, 2005: 40-41).

The churches

The majoritarian (Romanian Orthodox) Church was co-opted by the regime and because of this it was a passive and irrelevant actor during the transition. In 1984 Greek Orthodox Church properties were expropriated (2500 church buildings) and all the assets given to the Romanian Orthodox Church, which remained the only legal one and completely subordinated to the RCP (Ramet, 2004; Deletant, 2006: 82). After the fall of communism the Church became more nationalist and started to claim more independence, but it remained compromised under the NSF and close to the state. In addition, although the

Greek Church was legalized, its properties were not returned (Stan, 2010: 386-7).

The intellectuals

According to Tismaneanu (1997: 414, 427), intellectual groups were among the few that promoted resistance during the Ceaușescu years (i.e. since 1971, one of these groups was the writers' union), and organized the Group for Social Dialogue during the transition with US support. In a different interpretation, according to Siani-Davies (2005: 30-31) the fact that no intellectuals were active in the resistance to the regime rendered them illegitimate as pro-democracy leaders, leaving Iliescu and other former anti-Ceaușescu RCP members as the only available leaders for the transition. Thus, there seems to have been only small scale and isolated resistance (nationally and internationally) to the regime organized by intellectuals, and these groups were not linked to the general population.

Actors in the transition II: civil society

The mainstream perspective is that civil society was weak and unorganized with no international contacts during Ceaușescu's regime, and that it was equally irrelevant during the transition period. Although no pro-democracy movement emerged, there were important disruptive events that impacted on elite attitudes. According to Pralong:

Unlike in Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary, there was no dissident movement and no organized civil society to speak of in Romania prior to 1989. No independent 'civil life' was claimed by the few who dared oppose ... society was atomized and the people were traumatized. Terrorized by the prevailing surveillance of the secret police, the Romanian people were fearful of getting together and speaking up. With the exception of a handful of state-run associations (Communist Youth, Writers' Union...) and a state-run labor union (2004: 231).

Thus, Romania had to start from a very weak civil society. As a matter of fact, Pralong continues, "Within the democratization literature, the Romanian case fits the ideal type of 'rupture' rather than that of a pacted transition. Yet the rupture itself was ambiguous. It was the incumbent 'soft-liners' who came to power, not the opposition" (Pralong, 2000: 231).

Labour movement

Within this context of a weak civil society, trade unions were the only actors to protest during the Ceaușescu era, as already noted in previous sections. However, there is no information about waves of strikes or similar larger labour

movement actions except for those already mentioned in Braşov (cf. Siani-Davies, 2005, the only author emphasizing these events as relevant).

Concerning the organizational dimension of the labour movement, during the Ceauşescu era there was only one attempt to create independent unions. This occurred in 1979 with the foundation of the Free Trade Union of Working People of Romania by workers and intellectuals in Drobeta-Turnu Severin and Bucharest, but it was quickly repressed by the regime (Siani-Davies, 2005: 35).

The labour movement was not relevant during the democratization struggles. On the contrary, it played a role in the demobilization of pro-democracy struggles. Following the consolidation of Iliescu's power, parts of the labour movement were used for demobilization purposes. In particular, the Jiu Valley miners were, as mentioned, used for demobilizing protests against the NSF twice in June 1990, on the 13th-15th and the 24th-28th (Siani-Davies, 2005; Verdery and Kligman, 1992).

However, since the opening of the regime, the labour movement has become more important and experienced a swift process of pluralisation: "As of 1997, Romanian commentators estimated that there were over 14,000 enterprise trade union organizations, 150 federations and 18 confederations in the country" (Bush, 2004: 422). Unlike other civil society actors, labor unionism has been an active sector in the post-communist period. According to Bush:

The absence of a dissident tradition was no impediment to the rapid development of trade unions when Ceausescu's iron hand was removed whether founding new organizations or attempting to restructure the institutions of the old regime ... while the street fighting raged outside their Bucharest office, he [Ceausescu] and fellow UGSR [General Union of Romanian Trade Unions] apparatchiks formed [the National Provisional Committee of Organization] ... this provisional committee had the blessings of the self-appointed leaders of the National Salvation Front, who had seized power following Ceausescu's flight. ... The committee's leaders treated the vast assets of the UGSR as theirs. They threw their support behind the National Salvation Front's program and offered money and vacation facilities for victims of the former regime and the recent fighting (2004: 420).

The problem for Romanian workers' organizations became fragmentation:

Rival trade union leaders and many international observers insisted that the CNSLR [National Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Romania] was simply a neo-communist successor of UGSR. The CNSLR did build directly on the organizational base of the Communist trade unions and its original leaders came from them. Nevertheless, a democratizing process of renewal took place within its constituent trade unions following the June 1990 congress (Bush, 2004: 421).

Religious movement

While the Romanian Orthodox Church was co-opted, the Hungarian Reformed Church in Timișoara (Transylvania) was more complex. Although its elites were supportive of the regime, there was some degree of autonomy provided by the nexus between Hungarians in Romania and in Hungary at the grassroots level (Siani-Davies, 2005).

Student movement

The student movement began to be mobilize during the vacuum of power, and became the main mobilized actor against the (successful) attempts of the post-communist NSF to take power. The movement was Bucharest-focused, and organized in two main social movement organizations, the Students' League (radical sector) and the Students' Union (Siani-Davies, 2005: 233). The first relevant protests by students were organized on January 29th and February 9th 1990 and called for the democratization of the mass media, and mainly television (Siani-Davies, 2005: 234-235). The most relevant protest event was the occupation of the square in front of the NSF headquarters to claim for elite renewal, pushing the NSF to renounce participation in the first free and open elections. Even though Iliescu received them and discussed their claims, the NSF finally decided to participate in elections (Siani-Davies, 2005: 244-246). This protest was one of the main events of the cycle of mobilizations against the neo-communist elites.

Demobilization

After the transition, Romanian society (as part of an overall trend in central and south Eastern Europe) demobilized during the 1990s. There are three main explanations for this, which Bernhagen and Marsh synthesize as follows: first, "According to Lewis, the impact of economic-structural change on civil society has led to the dissolution of institutions and the disengagement of people from political activity, as individuals reviewed their material situation and reassessed their personal priorities" (2007:50). In this regard, Lewis (1997) argues that some kind of individualization or atomization occurred in these societies as economic privatization took place. The same point of view is expressed by Rose (1995) who notes that part of the legacy of the artificially high voter mobilization in the Stalinist systems is that in post-communist societies "... 'people now appreciate the freedom not to participate in party politics'. However, we might conversely expect increased incentives to participate now that elections are genuinely competitive and democratic" (Bernhagen and Marsh, 2007: 50). Finally, after analyzing data on elections, the authors argue that the legacy of the previous regime is the most relevant explanatory variable, and that in the case of Romania the worst combination of factors for promoting

active and mobilized civil society was present.

Conclusion

The Romanian transition to democracy seems to be a case of unintended revolution. In this sense, Carey and Eisterhold give the most accurate synthetic definition that combines all the existing interpretations (presented in the introduction): “we can refer to the events of December 1989 as an unintended revolution in effects, which began as a palace coup in response to a civil uprising, which resulted in violence around the country for a few more days” (2004: 3). In other words, there seems to have been an attempted coup d'état in Romania, one that was successful thanks to the unplanned process of escalating violence organized from below without any link to the intra-elite disputes. This process started locally in a community better linked with the outside world and with a few supportive networks. Contention quickly scaled up to the capital city and produced a vacuum of power as a result of the anti-Ceaușescu communists' decision to immediately topple and execute the dictator. This opened a chaotic moment of violence that was not organized by supporters or opponents of the regime, but was rather produced by the vacuum of power in a collapsed sultanistic totalitarian regime. The lack of international support for democratization, weak local civil society and unorganized violence allowed the neo-communists to settle in power. However, a revolution was already ongoing, notwithstanding the desires of the neo-communist elites merely to slightly modify the previous regime. This led to the emergence of a democratic setting.

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