Twenty-Five Years After: Romania and Its Uncertain Past
By Claudiu Craciun

In 1989 the Romanians took to the streets in Timisoara and later in Bucharest to protest against the communist regime and its heavy handed ruler, Nicolae Ceauşescu. Because of its violent nature, its structural conflict and results, this upheaval against Ceauşescu can be considered as one of the last European revolutions. At first the regime answered with repression, but it proved too weak to resist or even negotiate a peaceful transition once the unrest reached the capital Bucharest. From that duality two major narratives of the these events emerged: one which highlights the protests, their fortuitous character and decisive nature and the other the possible plots, conspiracies and interests leading to the fall of the regime. The first interpretation treats the events as a revolution, the latter as a coup d’état.

Why is that still important after 25 years? Romanian society has many other challenges and dilemmas to deal with than the events of the increasingly distant past, but the relevance of the interpretation of those events becomes clear when one considers how the communist regime and the events in 1989 are seen by public opinion. Surely, it is surprising to see that the theory of a coup d’état is gaining ground. Romanians, as any other people facing transition would normally consider the future as uncertain. Instead, they feel uncertainty towards their past. In retrospect more and more Romanians believe that their democratic regime originated in conspiracy and force rather than in popular mobilisation and sacrifice. Why doubt such a powerful, inspiring and rare historical event, one which gave Romanians a new place in Europe and the world? In a nutshell, the doubt concerns not so much the nature of the revolution per se but the capacity of regular citizens and civil society to influence let alone determine history; and, actually, the transition towards democracy offered many good reasons for this doubt.

Brăşov 1987: a warning and a choice
On 22 December 1989 Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife fled the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in downtown Bucharest by helicopter as protesters were storming the place. Later on, the pilot told the story of the escape journey which eventually led to the couple’s death. They went to Targoviste not far from the place where Ceauşescu was caught when seeking help from the workers at the local industrial plant. Even though he had seen the furious crowd demanding his resignation with his own eyes he still believed that the workers would help him. After all, the entire communist narrative was built around workers, their rights and their role in the economy, society and even politics. It was one of the last surprises of the head of the party that no one defended him; his very last surprise was that he was put on trial by the same people he considered loyal supporters of the regime and of himself. What had happened to the regime and his power base, the workers?

An early warning already came in 1978 when the miners in Valea Jiului, the main extractive-industrial basin in Romania, went on strike. A miner in the late 1970s had a harsh life and the
strike was about better working and living conditions. Ceauşescu made a real impression by going there himself to talk to the miners, at some point even without any protection by police or state security. He promised better conditions and the miners went back to work. After his departure a campaign of 'soft repression' started in the area. The strike leaders had to undergo harsh questioning by Securitate, the infamous and very powerful secret police. The area was then severely infiltrated with undercover officers whose mission was to prevent similar outbursts. The situation of the miners in the area did not improve. Instead, they became the target of the secret services.

The choice of the regime became clear. Instead for reforms and negotiations it had chosen for repression. More than anywhere else this was felt in Braşov, an industrial city in central Romania, where in 1987 a revolt erupted against the poor quality of life. For the first time ordinary citizens, workers and their families, voiced a collective opposition to the regime. It was not a move by dissidents or the democratic intelligentsia, who were too weak to act. A large part of the population participated in the revolt. This time Ceauşescu did not go there but instead unleashed the full force of the regime on the protesters. Hundreds were detained and beaten, a dark prelude to the killings in Timișoara two years later. Most of the leaders of the revolt faced prison time. The party helped by the law enforcement institutions turned against the average citizen, a huge part of the large urban strata working in various industries.

This alliance became key in the survival of the regime, yet it is fair to say that decades earlier Ceauşescu had been a very popular figure. A young man, not really an intellectual but skilled in politics, he was not associated with the post-war repression introduced by his predecessors. He played a 'national' card by dissociating himself from the Soviet Union. In international politics his soft form of dissidence was manifested during the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia when he voiced his opposition. His economic policy was directed against the Comecon arrangements according to which Romania had to specialise in agriculture and instead pursued an aggressive industrialisation policy. This strategy was welcomed by national elites and population alike. This way Romania could follow a distinct path of development, (national) communist, strictly controlled but open for cooperation with countries outside the ideological bloc.

The strategy also had social consequences. The industrialised economy had to fill many positions and as a result a new and powerful managerial-technocratic class emerged. The Communist Party did not only act as the political leader, engineering social peace among various groups and interests, but also as economic manager. It is likely that this managerial turn weakened the links between the party and the 'communist' blue collar workers. As in the 1960s and 1970s the regime was rather strong and the social groups and institutions in relative balance this did not appear to be a problem. The armed forces were connected to the regime and believed in the independent trajectory of the country. But they were not entirely happy as the regime favoured the police and especially Securitate, the secret police. The army was huge and a conscript army, more linked to the regular citizens than to the regime. Being forced to participate in the harvesting of crops, it also fulfilled an economic role. The 'popular' nature of the army and its relative frustration with the regime later on proved to be a key factor if not the key factor in the fall of the regime.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s however, the situation changed. The regime turned from openness to isolation and autarchy, Ceauşescu embarking on the major task to repay the debt of the country. This stripped the economy of financial resources and pushed the society into poverty. The managerial and technocratic elite felt the technological lag and the poor performance of the economy. The blue collar workers became more and more dissatisfied with the lack of food and the worsening of their living conditions. As the social environment was deteriorating, the Communist elite increasingly based its leadership on the law enforcement and propaganda institutions: Securitate, police and the controlled mass-media.
Alarm signals were already present and the social forces later involved in the upheaval had already defined their structural positions; all it needed were internationally favourable conditions and an internal trigger for the revolution to happen.

1989: the revolution and the origins of the democratic regime
The spark was ignited in Timisoara, in the western part of Romania, when in mid December the authorities wanted to evict an ethnic Hungarian protestant pastor. The initial protest of the members of his congregation was soon joined by other Romanian citizens. The revolt spread across the city in a similar way as in Braşov. This time the regime did not want to take chances and sent in the army. The international situation was different as compared to 1987 and Timisoara was almost a border city. The army shot directly at the protesters in what turned out to be the beginning of the revolution. Several hundred people were left dead and injured. The revolt was crushed. The rest of the country did not know what happened in Timisoara as only Radio Free Europe was airing information about it. A key moment came when the revolt spread to Bucharest, the capital. This would have been impossible without the (involuntary) help of the government, which practically dug its own grave. Nicolae Ceauşescu went on a state visit to Iran and when after his return he was informed about the massacre in Timisoara, he wanted to quieten the rumours and reassert his control. The Party summoned a citizen rally in Bucharest aimed at showing the citizens that its rule was still popular and legitimate. Without this mistake history probably would have looked a lot different. The rally took place in front of the main party building and Ceauşescu stood on the balcony to address the crowd as he had done many times before. But instead of chanting the usual party slogans people started shouting and whistling, which was sent out live on national TV. Those seconds with Ceauşescu unable to speak to the crowd capture in full the historical moment: an autocratic leader, living in a bubble of power and control, is being confronted by 'his' people.

Between 19 December, the day of the rally, and 22 December, when the Ceauşescus fled Bucharest, the city descended into violence. The protesters were attacked by both army and Securitate troops but they still took to the streets day after day. Most of the victims fell in those days. But soon the army switched its loyalty from the regime to the protesters. Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife were caught, put on trial and executed, a hasty and symbolical action. Far from being a fair trial, it was an act of revolutionary justice. The execution took place on 25 December-- on Christmas Day.

In the days of the revolution a group of leaders emerged, a mixture of reformed communists and democratic contenders. This new leadership forged in the bloody days of the revolution did look neither new nor radical. Many members of the past communist regime changed sides and supported the inchoate democratic regime creating the impression that Romania did not really part with its past, but instead changed the rules of the game rather than exchanging the holders of power. The new regime quickly applied itself to restoring political pluralism and announced free elections in the next spring. Even though tens or even hundreds of new parties were formed, the main cleavage and tension in the democratic politics remained the same. ‘Communist/anti-communist' became the main axis of political conflict. The ‘communist' camp refused to be branded as such and renamed itself social-democratic. Its links with the past regime were obvious, whereas its political programme was far from left-wing. The anti-communist camp was in fact a larger civic, liberal and conservative coalition of groups and parties which wanted to break with the past. This essential difference showed itself in the economic and social policy of the two camps. The left was in principle for a slow transition and reforms while the right advocated quick transition. That meant for example pushing for land reform and the rollback of nationalisation and privatisation in the economy. In foreign policy, both camps were pro-Western, the only difference being in tone rather than substance. A major stake of the transition was the relation between the Hungarian minority and the Romanian majority, a relation which reached its low point with the violent inter-ethnic clashes in Targu Mures. One could say that
the origins of the democratic regime were just as violent as the preceding revolution. The most notable events in the initial years were the repression of the ‘Piata Universității’ pro-democracy protests taking place in Bucharest in 1990. The protests were suppressed not only by the state police but also by organised miners recruited from Valea Jiului at the call of Ion Iliescu, the main figure of the new political establishment.

**Transition and the Euro-Atlantic integration**

After the fall of communism, the integration of the country became the main narrative and political strategy. There was an almost full agreement between elites and population, but more than anything else this was an indicator of the desire for independence from the Soviet Union and departure from the communist regime. When the reforms were unfolded it became clear that they would create tensions at the social level: after all, complicated political and economic reforms had to be implemented in a limited amount of time.

The fall of the socialist economic regime caused a decline in industrial output and the destruction of several key industries. As the communist modernisation paradigm had linked urban development to urbanisation of the country, a significant number of small and medium cities which had grown due to the industries were now ailing. With the exception of a few big cities, most of these cities never recovered and provided the huge reservoir for economic migration towards the European Union. The new economic system was put in place after several shocks and experiments. The major privatisation process was a combination of destruction, corruption and some success stories, too few to bring the economic boost expected in the early days of the revolution.

Romania had to go simultaneously through three inter-linked processes: internationalisation, liberalisation and democritisation. All social relations needed reorganisation: those with other countries, the relation between state and economy and the relations between citizens and state. In 1989 Romania was a relatively isolated country. After the Second World War it had become part of the ‘external Soviet empire’ in eastern Europe. For more than two decades it had been an economic, political and cultural partner of the Soviet Union, part of the economic flows organised by Comecom, the communist correspondent of the European Communities. The leadership of the young Nicolae Ceaușescu marked a turning-point. The ideological narrative became more ‘national’, departing from the internationalist vision of the Soviets and their partners at national level. In international politics Romania started playing an almost non-aligned card, a strategy which turned the country into a preferred partner for the West. The industrialisation process within the country found an international outlet, as Romania became a player in several industries in developing countries. But as the regime started to show signs of fatigue the foreign policy key advantages began to fade away. The regime turned inwards and pursued an isolationist if not autarchic policy. One of the main goals of the Communist government was to repay all the foreign debts, an objective which was attained at great social and economic costs. The revolution in 1989 marked the return of Romania to international politics mainly at a symbolical level. The violent scenes of its revolution were broadcasted globally manifesting the darker side of the otherwise peaceful anti-communist ‘revolutions’.

The foreign policy of Romania re-oriented toward the West, even though in the early transition there were no spectacular steps. A renewed drive came in 1996 with the electoral victory of the democratic opposition against the more prudent social-democratic party led by Ion Iliescu. The mandate of Emil Constantinescu, the centre-right president coincided with the continuation of the war in ex-Yugoslavia. The United States and their partner countries in Europe realised that they needed stability at the borders of this complicated region and they welcomed the support of the Romanian government. The situation in former Yugoslavia, especially the war in Kosovo and the events in Iraq and Afghanistan paved Romania’s way to joining NATO in 2004. The accession to the European Union proved more difficult. The centre-right government ceded power to the centre-left in 2000 with Ion Iliescu returning as
His party ruled for four years and the big narrative of the new government led by Adrian Nastase was NATO and EU accession. The problem with EU accession was that Romania was progressing but not as well as the central European countries. Together with Bulgaria it lagged behind in closing negotiation chapters and reforming key institutions. Political corruption and administrative weaknesses made things problematic even though there was a clear direction accepted by all the social actors.

Romania (and Bulgaria) eventually became part of the EU in 2007 three years after the other countries joined. The insufficient reforms in the area of justice and home affairs prompted the European Commission to devise a follow-up instrument – the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification (MCV) – to ensure that there is continuous pressure to continue the reforms. Even though Romania became a full member, the MCV raised doubts over its institutional capacities and political desire for reforms. However, Romania’s fragile position in the EU is caused by other reasons too. Together with Bulgaria it is the country with the largest number of citizens moving to other EU member countries, the figures being somewhere around 2.5 to 3 million citizens. This migration, especially of citizens of Roma origin, became an electoral issue for the centre-right governments and parties in France and Italy and nationalistic/extremist parties at the fringes of the political system also made it their target. But apart from the negative reactions to immigration in other EU Member States, this migration also highlighted the inability of Romania to provide enough economic and social opportunities for a significant number of its citizens.

The liberalisation process
The Western internationalisation is very much linked with the process of liberalisation, the transition from state-led socialism to market economy. The Romanian economy was developed during communism favouring intense industrialisation which included the rural economy. The strategy was to avoid dependence on Soviet industry and technology. This meant that Romania built everything from cars and planes to agricultural machines and heavy weapons. During the 1970s and 80s it found several outlets for its exports inside and outside the communist camp. But the regime could not support the uniform development of all industries on long term and in the late 1980s the technological and managerial gap was keenly felt. In 1989 the industry was developed but poorly adapted for the competition and conditions of global markets. With the fall of the other eastern economies, the exports which were the lifeline of the Romanian industry disappeared.

Liberalisation and privatisation found less support in the country than abroad. Inside the country, the political elite were reserved as they understood that privatisation would cut their economic power. Many major companies in Romania directed resources toward the political elite, giving preferential contracts of having very well paid seats on the company boards. Moreover the people still working in these companies could prove valuable supporters during electoral campaigns. On the other hand, privatisation was a difficult temptation to resist. Many politicians organised the transfer of property and technology to the newly forming party clientele. Some companies were privatised only to be sold afterwards for land or scrap metal. The quick and comprehensive transfer of property and resources from the state to the private sector was in practice not a re-launch of the economic sector but its demise. There were some success stories but limited in number. Only when the companies were taken over by people with managerial experience and available capital privatisation proved successful.

The international pressure towards privatisation was significant. The European Commission closely followed the implementation of the economic conditionality. That meant that the economy had to be ‘functional’ in the sense that the government should ensure the economic process was free and granted legislative and institutional stability. It also meant that the government itself was not allowed to be a direct economic player. The last large companies in banking and energy were privatised during the final efforts to close all negotiation chapters.
Political and administrative reform

The political and administrative reforms were faster but equally problematic. The administrative system was traditionally used as a tool of the Communist party, with no autonomy or protection. Public servants before 1989 were completely subordinated to the party administration and intelligence agencies. It was however an extended system with specialised bureaucracies in all sectors of the government. The economic bureaucracy was notably powerful as it had to coordinate the activities of the industrial sectors. The health and education bureaucracies were also powerful. But their ethos was not so much one of public interest than of ideological nature. After 1989 the bureaucracy remained an important social actor but it lacked vision and a project. Ideally for the democratic transition the administration should have returned to the Weberian ideal of competence and independence – late in the transition the European Commission pushed the reform in this direction with as main aim to empower the administrative system to act successfully in a multilayer system of governance. But instead of becoming a modern and independent administration, the new Romanian bureaucracy soon fell under the competitive and conflictual influences of the political parties. The political parties tended to think that the administrative realm is naturally subordinated and subject to their influence. This tendency is particularly strong on local government level where the protection of civil servants is weak. Decentralisation which was supposed to work in favour of democratic ends failed in this respect. Power is easy to concentrate at local level and it is usually at the expense of the local administration, opposition and civil society.

Political parties organised themselves around and developed more in relation with to governmental activities and less as programmatic-ideological organisations. They neglected the organisation and regular members in the advantage of economic and administrative centres of power. This dynamic, together with the spread of corrupt and clientelistic practices brought the trust in political parties to worrying lows. The trust in parties as political institutions ranges between 10 and 15%. The current electoral and institutional systems work to the advantage of the main centre-right and centre-left parties. The formation of new viable parties is inhibited by very restrictive rules on registering and financing parties. The semi-presidential regime in which the president is directly elected and has reserved constitutional powers favours the large parties. The Euro-Atlantic integration did not affect directly the party system. No new parties were formed opposing the EU integration, which, on the contrary, offered the parties a project that would increase their legitimacy and political profile.

The Euro-Atlantic integration channelled these energies and resources even though it was not clear what the stakes and costs associated with the reforms were. For joining NATO the country had to downsize its military and normalise the relations with the neighbours. There was no significant opposition to the process. The European integration proved more problematic. It involved sectors which are notably difficult to reform like the economy. The fast transformation of the economy through privatisation encountered a natural opposition from the affected categories. The pressure was relieved only later as the opening of the borders allowed millions of citizens to move to other EU countries to work.

Still, the disappointment about the government did not turn into Euroscepticism. The integration into the EU remained an ideal path for development even though the economic benefits were not impressive. The EU integration acted as a stabiliser and gave the confidence to citizens and foreigners that the country cannot descend into instability or prolonged crises.

Disappointment and a fading memory

All difficult reforms were implemented before the EU integration. After 2007 Romania entered a phase where the key challenge was ‘to lock-in’ the reforms and reap the benefits of the membership. Billions of euros were supposed to be spent on development. It was the era many Romanians had hoped for. But, instead of development the country faced a prolonged
The financial and economic crisis in Europe spilled into Romania prompting the centre-right government to impose harsh austerity policies which severely affected the already vulnerable people. The impetus for reforms was lost after 2007 and it seemed that society and elites are unable to find a new consensus and a development trajectory for the country. Without the external factors the internal drivers for reform have become weak.

All the tensions and the disappointments of the transition are reflected in the mistrust of citizens in government, political institutions and, more importantly, in themselves. The early transition took place under the sign of severe transformation and sacrifices. The international institutions provided a key anchor in consolidating transition but left little room for participation and political alternatives. Once Romania was member of the EU and NATO people realised that membership grants stability but not development and social justice. The economic crisis found the country in a vulnerable position. Romania’s economy is dependent on the European economy and had little chance for autonomous recovery. All this time the political class became more and more distant. As administrators of the European integration they had legitimacy and a purpose. After accession it became clear that they were unable to be engines for democratic debate and economic development. Confronted with grim realities and lack of perspectives citizens turned inward towards their own past. And the memory of those moments in the past when Romanian people had the courage and the means to change history is slowly fading.

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