

Perceptions of Social Security in Communist Romania

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1. The Communist Crisis in Romania

In 1947 Romania was the last monarchy within the new Soviet sphere of influence. However, on 30 December 1947 King Michael was forced to abdicate. On the same day, the Communists proclaimed the Romanian People's Republic, and from 1947 to 1989 Romania was under Communist control. From the late 1970s, in many countries of the Eastern bloc, including the USSR, dissident 'movements' began to develop – partly as a consequence of the Helsinki Process. During the next decade, two other phenomena, glasnost and perestroika, brought new significant changes to Eastern Europe. However, in this changing socialist world, the Communist regime in Romania remained unreformed. Moreover, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ceausescu decided to pay Romania's Western loans and to build a series of colossal and extremely expensive architectural projects, such as the House of the Republic. Consequently, after a few years, Romania faced a dramatic shortage of consumer goods, and, in 1984, large-scale food rationing was reintroduced – after more than twenty years.¹ Thus, during the 1980s, Romania had the lowest standard of living in Europe (Albania excluded), and misery spread across the entire country, since not only food was rationed, but also hot and cold water, electricity and methane gas.

1.1. *Explaining the longevity of Communism in Romania.* Considering this crisis, after 1989 many intellectuals raised the question of how to understand and explain why Romanians did not rebel against the regime earlier, why Romanians tolerated Communism for so long without any significant anti-Communist reaction.² Although to this day no systematic study has been conducted on the subject, many writers, sociologists, historians and politicians have advanced an explanation according to which, despite the profound economic and social crisis, Romanian society was incapable of organising any type of anti-Communist opposition.³ The explanation rests on the Romanians' purported metaphysical passivity. (In this context, the term 'metaphysical' refers to a priori specula-

¹ Gheorghe Rafael Ștefănescu, *Amintiri din România socialistă [Memories from Socialist Romania]*, Arad 2005, p. 87.

² Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste în România, *Raport Final*, București 2006, p. 366.

tions about questions that are unanswerable by means of scientific observation, analysis or experiment.) Thereby, the entire nation has been made responsible for accommodating Communism, since society's passivity was a form of complicity with Communism and the Communists. For example, Paul Goma (a writer and famous Romanian dissident of the 1970s) accused Romanian society as a whole for not having supported the actions of the few who openly opposed the Communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s. Where was the rest of Romanian society in 1977 when the miners rioted in Valea Jiului, Goma asked in a newspaper article in 1990. What happened in 1987, during the workers' riot in Brasov? Where were the remaining Romanians then?⁴ Had the Romanians joined the miners of Valea Jiului in 1977 or the workers of Brasov in 1987, Communism in Romania would have ended sooner, Goma implied.

The sociologist Radu Clit, Ruxandra Cesereanu, a literary critic, and Stelian Tănase, a writer, historian, journalist and political analyst – to give just a few examples – have also tried to identify and analyze the causes of 'the state of lethargy' and 'passivity' that – according to some interpretations – characterized Romanian society and its people during the Communist period.⁵ Tănase, for instance, suggests that the Romanian nature is 'obedient and melancholic': 'The Romanian is willing to lose everything if you let him live.' Romanians were 'the most obedient people in Europe', able to adapt to any circumstances [read Communism] in order to survive or save their assets. They had no national consciousness.⁶ The poet, essayist and translator Ana Blandiana, stressing the same Romanian passivity and non-reaction to Communism, wrote about Romanians as a 'vegetal nation',⁷ meaning that they were unable to react, to rebel, to oppose.

Referring to passivity in one way or another is the most common answer to the question of how to explain the longevity of Communism in Romania. However, in my opinion, this is a passionate, subjective and non-scientific approach which needs to be balanced by further research, both extensive and

³ In the 1980s, Western European media wrote about the Romanian 'totalitarian masses', describing them as 'passive, stupefied, incapable of any reaction, incapable of freeing themselves of the Communist nightmare'. Radu Clit, *Frica de zi cu zi* [The Daily Fear], in: Adrian Neculau (coordinator), *Viața cotidiană în comunism* [Daily Life in Communism], Iași 2004, pp. 59-69.

⁴ Paul Goma, *La o aniversare* [Anniversary], in: *Romania Liberă*, 16 November 1990; republished in: Paul Goma, *Scrisuri, II, 1990–1999. Interviuuri, dialoguri, scrisori, articole* [Writings, II, 1990–1999. Interviews, Dialogues, Letters, Articles], București 2009, pp. 25-26.

⁵ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Contra-spălarea creierului ori contrareeducarea ca posibil concept* [Against brainwashing or against reeducating as a possible concept], in: *Revista 22*, 21 April 2003, online edition: <<http://www.revista22.ro/contra-spalarea-creierului-ori-contrareeducarea-ca-posibil-concept-410.html>>.

⁶ Stelian Tănase, *Acasă se vorbește în șoapta. Dosar și jurnal din anii târzii ai dictaturii* [At home we speak in a whisper], București 2002, pp. 27-37, 83.

⁷ Ana Blandiana, *La cules îngerii* [Collecting Angels], București 2002, pp. 201-206.

comparative. Romanian sociologists have only recently started to study Romanian Communist society, tangentially also addressing explanations for the longevity of Communism in Romania. Hence, Adrian Neculau explored the role of the 'new social identity' created by the Communists using different methods of oppression, repression and/or social manipulation.⁸ Adrian Cioroianu and the above-mentioned Tănase discussed the role of elites in leading society towards anti-Communist manifestations.⁹ These studies have raised different questions: Why were the elites unable to organize Romanian society into an anti-Communist movement? Why were the Romanians not able to produce a strong anti-communist movement like the Polish Solidarity (*Solidarność*)? And why was civil society so weak in Communist Romania?

Within this social and sociological perspective on Romanian Communism, I propose a new angle from which to explain the longevity of the Communist system in Romania: the role of people's perceptions of social security under Communism. Although I advance the thesis that promising and providing social security for the Romanian population helped the Communist system survive longer in Romania, I do not argue that this is the only, or even the main explanation for this phenomenon. In my opinion, the Romanian anti-Communist resistance and opposition were significant, but less visible within the general system of ferocious oppression.¹⁰

1.2. *Social security and the 'Communist welfare state'*. The term 'social security' primarily refers to programs providing social protection against different social conditions such as poverty, unemployment, disability or old age. However, today it has attained a universal and non-discriminatory meaning, and social security programs are generally designed to provide social protection to the entire population against different social and economic risks. As Victor George stressed, social security is 'a new concept' that 'represents society's answer to the problem of economic insecurity'. Initially, social security programs were intended to offer protection to different disadvantaged social groups, but after

⁸ Adrian Neculau, Cum s-a construit o nouă identitate socială [How a new social identity was constructed], in: Neculau, *Viața cotidiană* (fn. 3), pp. 11-17.

⁹ Adrian Cioroianu, *Videologia* lui Nicolae Ceaușescu. Conducătorul și obsesia autoportretului [Nicolae Ceaușescu's Videology. The Leader and the Obsession of Self Portrait], in: Ruxandra Cesereanu (ed.), *Comunism și represiune în România. Istoria tematică a unui fratricid național [Communism and Repression in Romania. The History of a National Fratricide]*, Iași 2006, pp. 251-265; Stelian Tănase, Scriitorii și securitatea [The Writers and the Securitate], in: Romulus Rusan (ed.), *Anii 1973-1989: Cronica unui sfârșit de sistem [The Years 1973-1989. The Annals of the End of the System]*, in: *Analele Sighet* 10 (2003), pp. 639-641.

¹⁰ Ionuț Dogaru, Securitatea în anii '80. Aspecte ilustrative de poliție politică [The Securitate in the 1980s. Illustrative Accounts of the Political Police], in: CNSAS, *Totalitarism și rezistență, teroare și represiune în România comunistă [Totalitarianism and Resistance, Terror and Repression in Communist Romania]*, București 2001, pp. 159-163.

the Second World War, the meaning of the concept widened. Whereas before the war social security plans dealt with individual problems (sickness, old age, unemployment), after the war they were designed to provide adequate protection to the entire population against the whole range of risks of the economic system. The old view on social security dealt with problems of minority groups, i.e. education and housing for the poor, social insurance for low-income groups or public assistance for the 'worthy needy', while the new concept envisaged the provision of social services, universal and non-discriminatory in character.¹¹ Concerning the functions of social security, in the sense of what social security actually does and what its outcomes are, Roy Sainsbury emphasizes its political nature, showing that it is actually one of many instruments of policy that are used by a government to pursue certain goals. It is therefore a flexible and powerful tool in the hands of those who wield political power.¹²

Commonly, the programs of social protection against major social and economic risks are referred to with the term 'welfare state'. After 1945, East-European countries demonstrated that it is possible to adopt welfare-state policies without being a democracy.¹³ Communist regimes were formally committed to the universal provision of education, health care and social security through the state. The state's actions that are concerned with welfare provision to all citizens are referred to with the term 'social policy'.

In socialist states, social policies had various functions. On the one hand, social policy 'was a defensive measure – a way of mitigating the rigours of market capitalism by providing some degree of security and equality'. On the other, it was 'a means for advancing society along the road to socialism'.¹⁴ Then, the ultimate objective of socialism was the realization of the Communist welfare state,¹⁵ 'a society in which people are rewarded according to their needs and contribute according to their abilities'.¹⁶ Many scholars have emphasized that 'communist regimes used welfare spending as a means of buying legitimacy

¹¹ Victor George, *Social Security. Beveridge and After* [1968], New York 2003, pp. 1-5.

¹² Roy Sainsbury, The Aims of Social Security, in: John Ditch (ed.), *Introduction to Social Security. Policies, Benefits and Poverty*, London 1999, pp. 34-47 (pp. 34-35).

¹³ It has been also shown that 'an undemocratic welfare state can deny democratic and political rights' and in the same time 'defend such actions in terms of collectivist values'. Richard Rose, Bringing Freedom Back In. Rethinking Priorities of the Welfare State, in: Catherine Jones (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Welfare State in Europe*, London 1993, pp. 222-228.

¹⁴ Ramesh Mishra, Social Policy in the Postmodern World, in: Jones, *New Perspectives* (fn. 13), pp. 21-25.

¹⁵ János Mátyás Kovács, Introduction: A Cushion That Suffocates. Transforming the 'Communist Welfare State' in East-Central Europe, in: Helmut K. Anheier/János Mátyás Kovács (eds), *Small Transformations. The Politics of Welfare Reform – East and West*, Münster 2003, pp. XIII-XLII.

¹⁶ Jozef M. van Brabant, *Political Economy of Transition. Opportunities and Limits of Transformation*, London 1998, p. 28.

and popularity', especially 'when they failed to deliver the goods of economic prosperity or political acceptability'.¹⁷ In this regard, under Communist rule, 'social policy was part and parcel of a tacit social contract. It was a price the nomenklatura had to pay to pacify the citizens who suffered from the double burden of economic irrationality (including welfare waste) and political oppression'.¹⁸ However, I do not agree with the idea that the Communists initially advanced social policies in order to gain (buy) legitimacy and popularity among the population.¹⁹ They initiated those policies because the ideology stressed this means in the process of building communism. Toward the end of the Communist regimes in Europe, however, when they faced a deep economic and social crisis, the Communist authorities indeed tried to use different social measures to continue to ensure people's obedience.²⁰

As far as Communist Romania is concerned, information about the regime's social policy is still scant. Studies that briefly address this topic are in most cases concerned with the trajectory of welfare state development in post-Communist European states generally. Only within this context is the subject of the Romanian Communist welfare state and its social policies briefly analyzed or described.²¹ A detailed historical analysis has never been conducted. Another subject that warrants further research is the social and/or political impact of these policies within Communist Romanian society. How were Communist social policies perceived by the population? What did the consequences look like? Did those policies create a sense of social security and, if so, when, how and with what sorts of implications? How is the relationship between 'reality as it was' and people's perceptions of social policies to be understood? Is there a connection between the end of the Communist system in Romania and the fact that by the end of the 1980s Romanians had no sense of social security at all? With this paper, I will outline my hypothesis concerning the role of social perceptions of social security in explaining the longevity of the Communist system in Romania.

¹⁷ Rudolf Klein, O'Goffe's Tale or What Can We Learn from the Success of Capitalist Welfare State, in: Jones, *New Perspectives* (fn. 13), pp. 8-19.

¹⁸ Kovács, Introduction (fn. 15), p. XIV.

¹⁹ Holger Daun/Dana Sapatoru, Educational Reforms in Eastern Europe. Shifts, Innovations and Restoration, in: Holger Daun (ed.), *Educational Restructuring in the Context of Globalization and National Policy*, New York 2002, pp. 147-179 (p. 154).

²⁰ See, for instance, the speech of Nicolae Ceausescu from 21 December 1989: <http://www.adevarul.ro/actualitate/eveniment/VIDEO-Ceausescu-Discursul-decembrie-mitingul_0_142785766.html>.

²¹ Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos/Ileana Neamtu/Maya Stoianova, The Trajectory of Post-Communist Welfare State Development. The Cases of Bulgaria and Romania, in: Peter Taylor-Gooby (ed.), *Making a European Welfare State? Convergences and Conflicts over European Social Policy*, Malden 2004, pp. 114-130.

2. A Sense of Social Security?

The Romanian welfare regime focused on assuring an optimal and relatively homogenous level of welfare to all citizens through subsidised social services and free access to education, health and housing. Social policies emphasized citizens' equality, at the same time reducing the vertical inequalities among them.²² The state was the main provider of collective welfare, and Zamfir and Zamfir distinguish four types of welfare benefits for social support: universal transfers of benefits and services; income-related benefits according to work contributions (the social insurance system); social transfers imposed by needs but conditioned by participation to work (free health care, housing, child benefit, and free or subsidized health treatment tickets or holiday tickets); and unconditioned transfers targeting for those in need based on means tests. Thus, welfare policy was more or less a mix between universal social benefits and special benefits, related either to employment in general or to the employment in one particular economic area.²³ The core of social policy was oriented towards work and workers' protection. Besides the institutions at the central level (such as the Ministry of Labor), enterprises and trade unions were formally involved in managing the distribution of social services or family benefits depending on political decisions.

2.1. *Some empirical evidence.* After a few decades of relative social and economic improvements, in 1982 the economic and social living conditions of the majority of Romanians started to decline. People were told that they lived the best possible life, but in reality their standard of living was decreasing every day. How did people react to this? Could one conclude that as long as people felt socially safe they put up with Communism, and when they lost their sense of social security they concluded with it? Based on some empirical evidence, I argue that people highly appreciated the Communist social policies in the 1960s and 1970s, and that the substantial decline in the benefits they yielded in the 1980s had a significant effect on people's everyday lives as well as their perceptions of social security.

Studying Romanians' perceptions of Communist social security raises some fundamental questions. Whose perceptions are relevant? How can one gain an impression of these perceptions, since the workers, the peasants, the masses did not keep diaries or write memoirs? Moreover, people did not maintain unaltered perceptions across the decades, so how can we today study people's perceptions in the 1950s or 1960s? In order to support my thesis, according to

²² Still, social problems continued to exist, but they were not officially recognized.

²³ Cătălin Zamfir (ed.), *Politici Sociale în România 1990–1998 [Social Policy in Romania 1990–1998]*, București 1999.

which the perception of social security is responsible to a great extent for the longevity of Communism in Romania, I will refer to a series of interviews I conducted in the summer of 2009 in Romania, and a number of public surveys conducted between 1999 and 2009 by different agencies.

The surveys point to people's attachment to the Communist welfare system.²⁴ If twenty years after the fall of the Communist regime people are still fond of the Communist social policies and their principles, I can at least formulate the hypothesis that they highly appreciated these policies when they were adopted. Thus, according to a public opinion survey conducted in November 1999 by the Center for Urban and Rural Sociology (CURS), 49.7 percent of the Romanian population considered that 'the state should provide everyone with a job and a decent standard of living', while 57 percent considered that 'communism was a good idea wrongly put into practice'. The majority of those who gave this answer was represented by people with a low level of education, by elderly people, women, workers and peasants, while among intellectuals these tendencies were rarer.²⁵ In 2006, a similar survey showed that 53 percent of the population still considered communism a 'good idea'. The survey revealed that the poor and the low-educated continue to consider communism in positive terms.²⁶ These were the social groups that benefited the most from the social policies adopted by the Communist state. These are also the social groups that continue to feel the need for social protection against different types of social and economic risks. I also argue that the lack of a feeling of social security today is to a large extent responsible for the exaggerated 'appreciation' of Communist welfare.

In 2008, a study of the Agency for Governmental Strategies showed that over 30 percent of Romanian students considered that 'it was better before 1989 in Romania' because the educational system and the standard of living were qualitatively superior.²⁷ According to a 2009 CURS survey, 86 percent of the Romanian population consider that 'the state should provide everyone with a decent standard of living', while 84 percent consider that 'the state should provide everyone with a decent job'. These answers are generally interpreted as people's attachment to 'socialist principles', 'communist mentality' or 'communist nostalgia'. Many high-educated and young people supported these views in 2009 as well. The survey shows that the difference between young and

²⁴ Some scholars consider that the concept 'communist welfare state' implies a contradiction in terms.

²⁵ Septimiu Chelcea, *Justiția socială socialistă și comunismul rezidual în România după un deceniu de tranziție. O analiză secundară* [The Socialist Social Justice and the Residual Communism in Romania after one Decade of Transition. A Secondary Analysis], in *Sociologie Românească* No. 1/2000, pp. 125-141.

²⁶ Fundația Soros Romania, Comunicat de presă, 19 December 2006.

²⁷ Alina Gavrilă, *Studenții regretă perioada comunistă* [Students Regret the Communist Period], in: *Adevărul*, 13 August 2008.

old, low-educated and highly-educated, active and inactive population groups have decreased in regard to people's positive appreciation of different communist and socialist social principles.²⁸ Those who still find 'some good aspects in communism' underscore their opinions with elements that are specific to the social policies of the Communist welfare state. Moreover, those who still consider 'communism a good idea' refer to the social policies of the Communist rule. According to the 1999 survey, intellectuals mostly did not support the idea of the 'benefits' of Communism, while according to the 2009 surveys, many had changed their minds in this regard. For this contradiction I advance the explanation that, in recent times, people have felt increasing social and economic pressures and therefore their desire for social security guarantees has increased, regardless of educational levels, age or social status. In Romania the social policies are currently addressing the needs of the disadvantaged social groups: unemployed, elderly, sick etc., while the middle class is not considered as subject for social policies. That is, social security is not addressed from the universalistic post-war perspective, but from the limited, interwar perspective. However, in Romania, only 23 percent of the people belong to the middle class (according to a 2006 study), if the criterion taken into consideration is the level of income.²⁹ Therefore, the need for social security is acute in Romania nowadays, and this is the need that brings together low- and high-educated, elderly and young in 'remembering' – in my opinion reconstructing, reimagining – the benefits of Communist social policies.³⁰

To better understand these attitudes, I interviewed twenty people over eighteen years of age in Romania, using a probabilistic sample design and the face-to-face mode. Using the interview method for gathering information, my purpose was to see how these individuals perceive the social policies of the Communist welfare state in order to construct a working hypothesis for future research. The interviewees were asked to answer a set of questions concerning their memories of the communist ideology and Communist regime. Since I am interested in establishing not only how people remember Communism, but mainly why people remember Communism the way they do, I asked them to explain or motivate their answers.

For instance, I asked whether they agreed or not with the statement that 'Communism in Romania had a good side and a bad side', a frequent question in public opinion surveys. Twelve of the interviewees agreed, while the rest disagreed to varying degrees. For those who agreed, the second question asked

²⁸ Ionela Sufaru, *Românii nu regreta comunismul* [Romanians Do Not Regret Communism], in: *Jurnalul Național*, 7 November 2009.

²⁹ Gabriela Neagu, *Din ce clasă socială faceti parte?* [To What Social Class Do You Belong?], <http://www.business-adviser.ro/analize_din_ce_clasa_sociala_faceti_parte.html>.

³⁰ See, for instance, Elena Dragomir, *Explaining Communist Nostalgia in Romania. Some Empirical Evidence*, in: *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies* 12 (2009), pp. 7-28.

them to enumerate and comment on 'the good' and 'the bad' aspects of Communism. All specified as the 'bad' aspects of Communism in Romania the shortage of available goods, the low standard of living and the general misery of the 1980s, the systematization, urbanization and, occasionally, demolition of villages, the abridgement of human rights, illegal imprisonments, deaths and the methods of the secret service (Securitate) of the Communist state. Among the good aspects of Communism they enumerated elements of the Communist social policies: 'we had a decent job', 'we had the financial resources to go on vacation', 'we had money... but in the 1980s we didn't really have anything to buy', 'young people got a house', 'we were not afraid to walk at night anywhere in this country', 'young people had the possibility to go to university', 'we were all equal'. Eleven interviewees stated that under Communism they had felt socially more safe (compared with the present situation): they feared less for their jobs, they felt less poor, they felt less 'despised by the system' and its authorities, the state provided medical care, social assistance, education. Only five people, however, considered that 'life was better under Communism'. The difference between these two figures shows that people are less attached to Communism as a political ideology or a regime than was previously considered, and more to the welfare the Communist state provided. Most of them do not regret the abolition of the Communist system, and they do not want to reinstitute it. However, they do have some good memories of the past because they feel that the Communist system provided them with social security and welfare. These answers suggest how important the perception of Communist social security was (and still is) in the appreciation of Communism in Romania. Moreover, twelve interviewees believed that during the 1980s the Communist regime was responsible for the decline in the standard of living in Romania, while nine declared that in the 1980s the regime negatively affected individuals' personal security and social stability.

Some examples will help to further elaborate this point by showing how exactly people remember Communism and how important perceptions of social welfare are in people's positive memories of the Communist regime or their appraisals of the communist ideology. For instance, P.V., a fifty-six-year-old female school teacher, asked if 'life was better under Communism', answered that 'Communism had good aspects and bad aspects', motivating the 'good' aspects in these terms: 'When I left school late in the evenings I was not afraid to walk home alone. Even though the power was often off, I got home safe. Public transport between towns and rural areas functioned properly. In hospitals you were respected and you did not have to pay. The young were respectful and education was serious. The pension after a lifetime of working was not that big, but you could live decently. Today I feel sorry for you, the young. I feel sorry for my children too: no job, not proper education, no vacation, no proper health care system...' Asked 'what was the worst aspect of the

Communist system in your opinion?’ she answered that ‘the 1980s had become unbearable. In the 1970s we pretty much had everything we needed: a good salary, a decent job, we, my husband and I, were granted a house, we could then afford to furnish it... My parents were peasants and we had been very very poor, and now I had a TV, a cooking stove, a phone, a car, I was a teacher and I lived in the city. The stores were well supplied and we could buy everything we needed: chocolate, chicken, cheese, everything; and it was not that expensive. We used to go on holiday, we could even travel abroad. But then the 1980s came, and it was impossible to buy even the most ordinary thing. No food, no clothes, no shoes, huge queues in front of shops for virtually everything. No gas, no hot water, no cold water, no electricity... We couldn’t believe what was happening to us. My husband’s salary at the factory was reduced. We even started to have problems with money. In hospitals children started to die from the cold or lack of medicines. Ambulances refused to take calls from the elderly. It was unbelievable... My sister and her husband died of asphyxiation by gas in the winter of 1986, I believe, because they fell asleep on the chairs in the kitchen with the stove on. They had tried to heat the house this way because there was no heat. Their daughter, just a few months old, almost died then too...’

This example shows how important the pre-Communist situation was in people’s positive assessments of the Communist social policies, and how successful these policies were compared with the interwar situation. It also reveals the importance of the 1980s social and economic crisis – regarded as the ‘worst aspect of the Communist system’ – for how people retrospectively evaluate. Some of my interviewees even considered that, had the shortage of available goods not occurred in the 1980s, the Communist regime would not have collapsed in 1989.

In their work ‘The day we won’t forget. 15 November 1987, Brasov’, Marius Oprea and Stejarel Olaru present a series of interviews they conducted with the workers who revolted in Brasov in 1987. These interviews show that people revolted firstly because of the shortage of available goods and the rationing of food, hot and cold water, electricity and methane gas. As one worker declared: ‘My participation in the uprising of 15 November 1987 was due to the poverty in which we lived: without human rights, in cold, without electricity and – worst of all – without daily food and bread. And all of this in a time called the Golden Age.’ Another worker motivated his revolt in these terms: ‘We worked like slaves and we did not have anything to eat.’ According to Toma Gheorghe, another worker, ‘we had no option but to rebel’, because, while the workers ‘barely lived’, ‘the party members³¹ were privileged: they got food from the party canteens, they were granted houses, they had the option of attending

³¹ He refers to nomenklatura, not to ordinary party members.

high school'.³² Thus, it seems that the end of people's sense of social security dealt the Communist system a fatal blow.

In May 2004, even the President of Romania Ion Iliescu noted the role Communism had played in the development of the Romanian village: 'That [Communist] regime meant a chance for the Romanian village. Schools were opened for peasants' children in the countryside; medical attendance was provided there too; the children of the poor had access to education. Before the war one third of the population was illiterate and lived in the countryside. Today we are assisting in the degradation of what has been done before 1989: libraries are being closed and poor children do not have access to education in the same degree...'³³

Thus, people today seem to want a state that would provide them with a proper health care and education system, with a decent standard of living, with a safety net in case of illness or unemployment. People seem to want a state that assumes responsibility for the welfare of its citizens. Dissatisfied with the current situation and under the impression of the recent experience of a different political and social order, they tend to exaggerate the benefits of the Communist past. People's positive evaluation of the past is thus related to their present lives and perceptions. The Communist past is reflected positively only when comparing it with the present situation or the pre-Communist era. Social discontent prevails today,³⁴ and social discontent prevailed before Communism. Hence the superiority of the social security net under Communism – at least prior to the 1980s – is amplified.

2.2. Social policies in Communist Romania. As Bob Deacon has shown, all former Communist states promoted welfare systems characterized by strong state paternalism, exerted through the Communist Party and the work place. The general characteristics of Communist social policies were valid in the Romanian case as well: stable jobs for a large part of the working population, good salaries for the working class, free health services, state-funded pension systems, subsidies for dwellings and cheap housing.³⁵ The ultimate aim of the Romanian Communist welfare state was the 'creation of a prosperous socialist society'.

³² Marius Oprea/Stejărel Olaru, *Ziua care nu se uită, 15 noiembrie 1987, Braşov [The Day We Won't Forget, 15 November 1987. Braşov]*, Iaşi 2002, pp. 13-57.

³³ Irinel Rădulescu, Preşedintele Iliescu a deplâns degradarea satului comunist [President Iliescu Deplored the Degradation of the Communist Village], in: *Adevărul*, 19 May 2004.

³⁴ As the 2009 CURS survey showed, more than 50 percent of the Romanian population (regardless of their social, economic, educational or professional background) is discontent with their lives, with the economic, social, political or even 'moral' situation of the country.

³⁵ Bob Deacon, Developments in East European Social Policy, in: Jones, *New Perspectives* (fn. 13), pp. 177-189.

The economic development and the social transformation in Romania under Communism were impressive compared with the previous period. As a result of the economic and social policies, during the Communist era, the rural population began to decrease and fell from 76.6 percent (in 1948) to 49.9 percent (in 1981) while the urban population increased from 23.4 percent (in 1948) to 50.1 percent (in 1981).³⁶ The rapid industrialization of the country resulted in a growing number of people working in industry and a significant decrease in those working in agriculture. Between 1950 and 1981, the number of people employed in agriculture decreased from 74.1 percent to 28.9 percent of the overall population; conversely, over the same period, the number of people employed in industry increased from 12.0 percent to 36.1 percent. This process occurred in the context of 'socialist industrialization', that is, the concentration of large masses of workers in huge factories in close proximity to urban areas.³⁷ All these trends entailed an improvement in the standard of living for the majority of the population. People could now consume more goods. They started to use domestic appliances such as radios, gas stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, TVs, telephones and personal cars. They could regularly go on vacations. The villages were provided with electricity. A network of paved roads was built. Public transportation was also developed. The state launched an ample program of building houses which were then given away for free to people, especially to the workers from the big factories. Medical care was generalized.³⁸ For instance, between 1966 and 1977 approximately one million new dwellings were built, which meant a total increase of 18.6 percent. 880,000 of these dwellings were built in urban areas, where the increase was 48.4 percent. At the same time, living conditions improved considerably.³⁹ In terms of electrification, the situation was also very poor when the Communists came to power: In 1945, only 535 villages from a total number of 15,000 were connected to the national grid. In 1965, the number had risen to 3,034 and to 10,591 by 1970.⁴⁰

Special social legislation developed after the war. These new laws focused primarily on work protection, and in 1950 the Labor Code was adopted. The main features of the social policy were the wide scope of social insurance schemes covering a broad set of risks related to income loss situations, work-

³⁶ Michael Shafir, *Romania – Politics, Economics and Society. Political Stagnation and Simulated Change*, London 1985, p. 47.

³⁷ Dragoș Petrescu, The Alluring Facet of Ceaușescuism: Nation-Building and Identity Politics in Communist Romania, 1965–1989, in: *New Europe College Yearbook* 11 (2003/04), pp. 241-272, here pp. 261-262.

³⁸ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria României în secolul XX [Romania's History in the XX Century]*, București 1999, pp. 146-149.

³⁹ The 1977 census in Romania, in: Ion Alexandrescu et al. (eds), *Enciclopedia de istorie a României [Romania's Encyclopaedia of History]*, București 2000, pp. 403-405.

⁴⁰ Petrescu, *Alluring Facet* (fn. 37), pp. 261-262.

based universal social benefits (in money or in kind), social benefits focused on children, preferences for providing social services rather than direct transfers of money, an – apparently – non-discriminatory ethnic policy and social housing support. The goal was to guarantee a relatively homogenous collective welfare in terms of the complete eradication of poverty and the promotion of an active policy to compensate differences between needs and resources through social benefits (applicable especially in the case of families with many children).⁴¹ In addition, new sanitary laws were promulgated with the purpose of improving the existing sanitary conditions.⁴² If in 1930 the infant mortality rate per 100 live births was 17.4 in Romania,⁴³ in 1965 this rate had decreased to 4.4, and in 1985 to 2.6.⁴⁴ If life expectancy in Romania was 42 years between 1930 and 1932, it increased to 63 years in 1956, and 68 years in 1989.⁴⁵

The education law from 1948 stated that of the seven years of available free education, only four were compulsory. However, by 1955/56 seven years of schooling became compulsory in urban areas, followed by similar provisions in 1959/60 for rural areas. In 1961/62 compulsory education was extended to eight years. Though only 14 percent of pupils in 1938/39 went beyond primary level, the implementation of Communist educational policies meant that this percentage had increased to 59 percent by 1965/66. Although the rate of illiteracy in Romania substantially declined between 1918 and 1948, the vast majority of the population had still not received more than four years of primary schooling before 1948.⁴⁶ For example, in 1930 the illiteracy rate was at 43 percent.⁴⁷ In 1948, 23.1 percent of the Romanian population over seven years of age was still illiterate, with women and girls representing 69.9 percent of the illiterate population for this year and 88.6 percent of the illiterate population living in rural areas.⁴⁸ According to the 1956 census, the illiteracy rate in Romania had decreased to 10.1 percent.⁴⁹

Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman identify three distinct periods regarding the evolution of Communist social policy in Eastern Europe, applicable also to the Romanian case. Thus, during the first period (the 1950s) the new Communist governments established basic social guarantees. Industrial and state workers were the initial beneficiaries of the employment guarantees,

⁴¹ Simona Vonica Răduțiu, Social Policy Reform in Post-Communist Romania. Facing the EU Changes, in: *CEU Political Science Journal* 4/2006, pp. 117-131 (pp. 119-121).

⁴² Norman L. Forter/Demeter B. Rostovsky, *The Roumanian Handbook*, New York 1971, p. 275.

⁴³ Alexandrescu et al., *Enciclopedia* (fn. 39), p. 327.

⁴⁴ Stephan Haggard/Robert R. Kaufman, *Development, Democracy, and Welfare States. Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe*, Princeton 2008, p. 168.

⁴⁵ Gheorghe Boldur-Lățescu, *The Communist Genocide in Romania*, New York 2005, p. 118.

⁴⁶ Petrescu, *Alluring Facet* (fn. 37), pp. 261-262.

⁴⁷ The 1930 census in Romania, in: Alexandrescu et al., *Enciclopedia* (fn. 39), p. 314.

⁴⁸ The 1948 census in Romania, in: Alexandrescu et al., *Enciclopedia* (fn. 39), pp. 349-351.

⁴⁹ The 1956 census in Romania, in: Alexandrescu et al., *Enciclopedia* (fn. 39), p. 365.

pensions and access to public health services and education. In addition, the collectivization of agriculture played a major role in the spread of social welfare in rural areas. The Communists' interest in agriculture and collectivization went hand in hand with their interest in the social welfare of the rural population. Therefore, the rural sector was not neglected and by the early 1960s the Communist governments of Romania had brought basic health care, primary education and even pension to the countryside. The second period (the 1960s and 1970s) brought an increase of benefits and new social programs such as family benefits and unemployment insurance. Although by the early 1960s the basic entitlements were in place, this decade entailed a significant rise of wages, special attention to the provision of consumer goods, including durables, and a steady increase in real social spending. A new law on pensions was adopted in 1977, and the system became effectively universal in coverage. In 1970, pensions were at 69.7 percent of the monthly wage in Romania, and by 1978 the increase in pension benefits was 33 percent. Although Romania introduced a draconian anti-abortion law in 1967, a variety of compensatory measures were also adopted: an increase in family benefits, the expansion of child care facilities and part-time work opportunities for women. Thus, by the mid-1970s, the Romanian authorities had provided the population with a comprehensive system of social and medical benefits, pensions, day care, nursing homes and other provisions of the welfare state. The 1980s, the last period, brought economic stagnation and political decline. During this decade, in Romania, as in the other European Communist states, the quality of social services decreased. Especially in Romania the standard of living declined as a result of Ceausescu's decision to reduce domestic consumption in order to pay Romania's external debts.⁵⁰

In relative terms, Romania's development under Communism seemed spectacular, but in absolute terms it was not that impressive. To give just a few examples, in 1989 Romania had only 700,000 telephones for a population of 23 million and just one highway, București-Pitești, of only few tens of kilometers. In the interwar period, Romania's network of paved roads was deplorable. In 1956, after more than ten years of Communist rule, paved roads still made up only 4.8 percent of the total network of 76,000 km. By 1980, such roads made up 20 percent of the total.⁵¹

Despite this deficient modernization, the population felt in these conditions the improvement of its standard of living and started to develop a sense of social security. The more difficult people's social and economic situation was before and during the Second World War, the more they appreciated the modernization during the first three decades of Communist rule, despite the still

⁵⁰ Haggard/Kaufman, *Development* (fn. 44), pp. 143-178.

⁵¹ Petrescu, *Alluring Facet* (fn. 37), pp. 261-262.

prevalent scarcity. As Lucian Boia stressed, 'the period between 1964 and 1971 was the best in the history of communist Romania'. 'The best' in this sense means 'good' in relation to the other phases of the Communist period.⁵² By contrast, as Trond Gilberg has noted, 'the decade of the 1980s must be seen as a turning point in the history of communist Romania, when the trends of general achievements but occasional failures turned to general failure with occasional achievement'.⁵³

People's perceptions regarding their social security worked in tandem with the political propaganda to create a sense of personal security and stability. The state propaganda stressed the improvements of the quality of life and the regime's achievements. Hundreds of years of foreign power domination and extreme poverty for the majority of the population, with only short periods of freedom, followed by the destructions of the Second World War, left the Romanian people with an acute need for social security and stability.

Considering the pre-war situation, in which a high percentage of the Romanian population was rural, poor and illiterate, and the improvements of the first decades of Communist rule, people's genuine – even if exaggerated – appreciation of the achievements of Communism seems understandable. During the Communist era, the population perceived the regime as providing the advantage of assuring greater social security, which mostly meant assuring work, and in this way a chance for a better future. Even if this perception must to a great extent be attributed to the success of Communist propaganda, it was reinforced by people's personal experiences. Stability and security were achieved under Communism by means of economic development and social policies, and the population overestimated these achievements as a result of the limitations of Romania's pre-Communist modernization.

Thus, people felt socially safe and this feeling created an element of security in an environment that otherwise fostered political and personal insecurity. Adrian Cioroianu has offered a similar explanation of why Romania's Communist modernization was overestimated by the population. According to him, the limits of the Romanian capitalist modernization of the interwar period allowed the Communist modernization to appear, beginning in the 1960s, as a historic, valid and irreversible gain. For a population that until then was predominantly rural and without high demands, the comfort of a house in a block of flats in the city and the supply from the store on their way to work represented the ultimate leap regarding their standard of living. The Utopia of social justice brought to Romania by the Communists was successful in this sense and appealed to those who had previously been socially disadvantaged.

⁵² Lucian Boia, *Romania. Borderland of Europe*, London 2001, p. 126.

⁵³ Trond Gilberg, *Nationalism and Communism in Romania. The Rise and Fall of Ceausescu's Personal Dictatorship*, Boulder 1990, p. 134.

Thus, according to Cioroianu, the Soviet model permitted a relatively rapid improvement of the standard of living for the majority, but with the price of sacrificing the minority that had socially ‘profited’ during the pre-Communist decades.⁵⁴ Cioroianu’s analysis seems to suggest that the majority of the population consciously sacrificed the anti-Communist ‘minority’ for their personal utopian comfort. However, the two phenomena – the positive perceptions of the population concerning the socialist welfare state and the oppression of the anti-Communist elites, especially at the beginning of the Communist rule – are not causally related, although occurred simultaneously. Moreover, workers and peasants also suffered from Communist oppression, for instance during the 1950s or 1980s. In addition, as already demonstrated, the ‘comfort’ – or, better to say, a decent living – provided by the Communist rule to a large part of the population, was not that utopian after all compared to the previous period.

3. Conclusion

According to some observers, Romanian Communism and its longevity are explainable through the Romanians’ ‘nature’ or way of being: passive, obedient, fatalistic, opportunistic or ‘vegetal’. Rejecting this interpretation, I argue that the social welfare provided by the Communist regime for the majority of the population, including people’s ensuing perceptions of social security, is an important factor when addressing the history of Romanian Communism. With regard to this thesis two new questions need to be asked. First: Were the Communist social policies such a major achievement (compared to the previous period) that they prompted the Romanian people to put up with Communist injustice even in the field of human rights? Or, to put it another way: Was this the Romanian version of the compromise that is discussed for the cases of other state socialist regimes in these times as well? And, second: Why did the Romanians not revolt when it became clear that the regime was no longer able to provide social security for the majority of its citizens in the 1980s? In this regard, I agree with the explanation that most people were convinced that the socialist system was ‘the best possible social system’. They were not aware of the existence of an alternative. Karl Lupșiasca, who revolted as a student in Timisoara in 1956, recalling the events in an interview, declared: ‘My generation already believed that socialism was a more evolved society. A few probably believed differently, but generally my generation believed that socialism was in principle good. We had no doubts that socialism was the soci-

⁵⁴ Adrian Cioroianu, *Socialismul – o variantă de modernizare* [Socialism – a Version of Modernization], in: *Dilema veche*, 26 January 2007.

ety of the future, only that socialism as we built it was not good. Generally the young believed that socialism was a better social order, but the authorities' abuses...⁵⁵ In another interview, a history teacher remembers, 'We had no terms of comparison, we did not know what freedom of speech meant.'⁵⁶

Thus, despite the profound economic crisis of the 1980s, the political Communist rule continued to last. It seems that the deterioration of living standards does not necessarily lead to upheaval, or if it does, then the upheaval occurs after a prolonged period of austerity. The question as to how one could explain the longevity of the Communist rule, considering the economic crisis of the 1980, can be addressed in my opinion from two perspectives. The first would assume that the economic crisis and the 'dry spell' did not determine any collective social and/or political reaction from the population. If that was the case, then the phenomenon would be explained either by the fact that the people felt they had no political and/or social alternative, or by the fact that they feared Securitate too much. Some of the interviewees stressed that they felt that there was no alternative or they knew no alternative and therefore did not know how to react. I tend to embrace the second perspective, according to which many people did react, both socially and politically, to the economic shortage. However, the Communist repression system seemed efficient enough to detain any act that was considered as possibly threatening for the existence of the system. This thesis is supported to a great extent by the case of the 1987 workers' riot in Brasov who explicitly said that they reacted to the deterioration of their standards of living. It should also be noted that people's judgements on Communist past or on the present are subject to different personal interpretations and evaluations of social security. One could not identify an absolute security, neither objectively nor subjectively.

It might be a long story cut too short to assume that a positive perception of the Communist social welfare system means a conscious rejection of democratic values and principles. Knowing no other alternative and remembering social benefits of the 1960s and 1970s, it took many people years to realize that the 1980s were not just a transitory stage.

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⁵⁵ Mihaela Sitariu, *Oaza de libertate, Timișoara, 30 octombrie 1956 [The Oasis of Freedom. Timisoara, 30 October 1956]*, Iași 2004, p. 18.

⁵⁶ Adrian Neculau, Context social și practici cotidiene – o rememorare [Social Context and Daily Practices], in: Neculau, *Viața cotidiană* (fn. 3), pp. 87-109 (p. 105).