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AN EPITAPH FOR THE THIRD WAY**

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THE END OF ROMANIAN EXCEPTIONALISM? AN EPITAPH FOR THE THIRD WAY²

VLADIMIR TISMANEANU³

ABSTRACT

The November 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections in Romania have ushered in a new stage of that country's democratization. The new leaders have announced their decision to pursue radical and political reforms, oppose corruption, and consolidate pluralist institutions. Ion Iliescu's defeat symbolizes the end of his policies of procrastination and neo-authoritarian restoration. The victory of the democratic forces can be described as an electoral revolution that allows for the radical disbandment of the Leninist legacies in that country.

Until very recently, Romania was widely perceived as the odd man out of the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe. This fact has undeniable historical precedents. In a way, one may argue, Romania has always been different. A Romance-language nation with an predominantly Greek Orthodox population; a latecomer in independence (conquered from the Ottomans in 1877), a main beneficiary of the post--World War I Trianon Treaty who allied itself with Germany during World War II; a country where, during the interwar period, the radical Left was peripheral and reduced to a pariah condition, and the extreme Right developed into Europe's third largest fascist movement, the Iron Guard, also known as the Legion of Archangel Michael: Romania was a country of enormous paradoxes and disparities. And it remained so, during and after communism. Under Ceausescu, Romania developed an autonomous foreign policy and challenged the Soviet claims to hegemony with the Warsaw pact. At the same time, the domestic policies were more repressive than in any other East European country, with the exception of Albania, and the cult of Ceausescu's personality surpassed anything known in Europe since Stalin's times. In December 1989, the end of Ceausescuism was ensured by a popular uprising from below, violence, and bloodshed. But the initial euphoria and the high expectations of the revolutionaries were followed by disappointments and countless frustrations.

Instead of a resolute break with the past, the post-Ceausescu leadership headed by Ion Iliescu, a former communist ideologue with Gorbachevite leanings, decided to keep much of the entrenched nomenklatura in office. Iliescu's condemnation of the Stalinist past was perfunctory and inconclusive. Pluralism remained more a facade than a substantive reality. Most political parties were fragmented, provisional alliances of individual vanities rather than relatively stable associations based on the

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aggregation of common interests. The epithet of "neo-communism" was perhaps excessive since Iliescu is not an ideologically driven zealot. His purpose has been rather to maintain a status quo, neither traditional communist, nor liberal democratic. His ideal was to replace Ceausescu's erratic autocracy (which I once called "dynastic communism") through a self-styled version of enlightened despotism, which he described as an "original democracy." Iliescu's defeat in the November 1996 presidential elections showed that he failed.

The legacy of Ceausescuism

A country where communism literally came with the Red Army bayonets in 1944, Romania's Stalinization was particularly cruel. For decades, national traditions were denied and slandered. No genuine reforms were permitted and no reformist group emerged within the party. After Ceausescu's arrival to power in 1965, Romania tried to distinguish itself from other Warsaw pact countries through vocal, if not very effective anti-Sovietism. De-Stalinization was shunned in the name of de-satellitization. Ceausescu strove to emphasize the uniqueness of his socialist experiment by resorting to all sorts of nationalist myths. Not only did he claim to be the embodiment of the national genius of the Romanian people, but he portrayed the communist party as the "continuation" of the Thracian and Dacian struggle against foreign oppressors. Ethnic minorities, and especially the 1.7 million Hungarians, were supposed to become part and parcel of the "homogenous socialist Romanian nation." As Ceausescu's personality cult developed to grotesque proportions, the party oligarchic rule was replaced by a dynastic clique composed of the leader, his wife, their youngest son, Nicu, and a few relatives and professional sycophants. The economy was a shambles because of the leader's obsession with heavy industry and compulsive desire to become independent in finances and energy. By the end of Ceausescu's rule, Romania had paid all its foreign debt. The result was scarcity of food, underheated apartments, endless lines, and a widespread climate of despondency. Dynastic socialism resulted in one of the worst crises ever experienced by a Leninist regime. No wonder that the Gorbachev effect made Ceausescu paranoid and exhilarated many Romanians.

Some within the bureaucracy were ready to use a popular explosion of rage to get rid of the Ceausescus. This was the meaning of the December 1989 rebellion: a spontaneous outburst of antidictatorial rage forced Ceausescu out of power, but it failed to result in a systemic revolution. Instead, a group of seasoned apparatchiks found their way to the helm, unleashed a war of nerves, invented a "terrorist threat" and justified their coup invoking a vacuum of power. From the onset of his rule, Romania's first post-Ceausescu President, Ion Iliescu, felt confident that he was the only person able to guarantee the country's stability and order. In most other former Warsaw Pact states, the 1989 upheavals resulted in the elimination from power of the old communist elites. In some, the former communists returned later to power, but in a fundamentally different system and after having unequivocally abandoned all Leninist illusions. In countries like Poland and Hungary, the

consolidation of democratic institutions and procedures allowed for a normal alternance in government between former communists (rebaptized socialists) and their opponents. No matter what one thinks about Aleksander Kwasniewski's or Gyula Horn's democratic credentials, there is no doubt that they do not intend to restore an authoritarian, ideologically-based monolithic order. Meanwhile, Romania, the one country where the demise of the old regime was accompanied by mass violence and the physical elimination of the dictator and his wife, Iliescu's presidency provided the region's least determined institutional break with the communist past.

For many Romanians, the revolution appeared as having been derailed, abducted, or betrayed by the cynical operators who took over power during the hazy moments that followed the collapse of Nicolae Ceausescu's despotism in December 1989. It was as if by shooting Ceausescu and his wife and getting rid of their immediate associates, the new leaders, headed by Ion Iliescu, discovered a way to prolong the political and economic hegemony of the party-state nomenklatura. National salvationism became the ideological underpinning of a semi-authoritarian order with a democratic facade beneath which the nation's rulers continued to resort to non-democratic means to intimidate the opposition. In June 1990, Iliescu brought coal miners to Bucharest to ransack the headquarters of opposition parties and independent media. His political campaigns, which revised and promoted populist, anti-Western and anti-market slogans and played on fears of sweeping changes, won the 1990 and 1992 elections. As in Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia, national television became an instrument of the ruling group to manipulate public opinion and foster the president's paternalistic image. Subsequently, like his predecessor, Ceausescu, in the end Iliescu became a hostage of his own propaganda.

Instead of Western-style pluralism, he advocated an "original Romanian democracy." After six years of Iliescu's originality, even the workers lost patience with him and his cronies. During electoral rallies for the 1996 presidential race organized in factories, Iliescu was booed, and those who once lionized him chanted the slogans of his opponents, former prime minister Petre Roman and Democratic Convention presidential candidate, Emil Constantinescu. At the end of his rule, there was an eerie resemblance between Iliescu and Ceausescu: both men used the language of nationalist panic in a fruitless effort to generate mass support. Both refused to see that their time was over. To his credit, at the last moment, when the preliminary result of the second round arrived (and just before the official result), Iliescu realized that he had lost. Instead of using violence, he conceded defeat.

The November 1996 denial of a third presidential term to Iliescu and the parliamentary victory of the democratic forces in Romania have completed the cycle inaugurated during the miraculous year 1989. A country apparently doomed to stagnation and torpor is once again in the forefront of the never-ending struggle for pluralism and democracy. The politics of creeping restoration and the blatant clientelism characteristic of the Iliescu regime which ruled Romania for so many years finally

have been rejected by a majority of the Romanians. The overblown anti-intellectual and anti-capitalist rhetoric of the incumbent did not resonate. On the contrary, the new president, Emil Constantinescu, an intellectual known for his modesty and decency, was supported precisely because he played the cards of truth and tolerance. At a moment when in other countries many former dissidents seem to be increasingly marginalized, Romanians have brought to the government and to the presidential office people long associated with the struggle for an open mind and society. A geology professor and rector of the University of Bucharest between 1990-95, 57-year old Emil Constantinescu has been actively involved since 1989 in the efforts to reconstitute the country's civil society. His main appeal consisted of the emphasis on the need to ensure accountability of all public institutions, eliminate corruption, consolidate the rule of law, and speed up long delayed economic reforms, especially privatization.

The November 1996 elections represent a milestone in Romania's (and Eastern Europe's) history. It has been fifty years since the outrageously rigged 1946 elections, which were organized with the direct involvement of the occupying Soviet Army. It is the first time in almost sixty years that a genuine change at the top takes place normally, without violence and major turmoil. The same party that won the 1946 elections, but was denied the fruit of its victory, the National Peasants, is now the major partner in the new coalition government. This almost surreal return to power of a traditional, pre-World War II party, is unique in the region.

Nationalist and explicitly neo-communist parties have been voted into parliamentary insignificance (about 10 percent). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the people in the Western Romanian provinces of Transylvania and Banat voted for Constantinescu and his Democratic Convention. This geographic distribution indicates the persistence of democratic, state-of-law memories and pluralist "habits of the heart" linked to the legacies of Central Europe. No less important than memories of a "usable past" was the role played by those who imagine the future, i.e., much of the Convention's support came from the youth. Romania's younger generation got fed up with the demagogy and corruption of the Iliescu government. The vote was a vote for fundamental change, for a resolute divorce from the communist past, and for a revival of the revolutionary expectations of December 1989. It was a vote against the politics of oblivion and duplicity so much favored by Ceausescu's immediate successor. However, while the 1996 elections were unarguably a protest vote, popular hope and commitment to making the country work also played a role.¹

A Crisis of Legitimacy

From its very beginning, the Iliescu regime suffered from a deficit of legitimacy among Romania's educated voters while it enjoyed strong support from peasants, industrial workers and the state bureaucracy. It claimed to represent the aspirations of the revolutionaries who brought down

Ceausescu and his clique, but in reality it served the interests of the same strata that benefitted from the previous regime. Industrial workers were cajoled with promises to keep their bankrupt white elephant employers functioning. Former party apparatchiks were appointed prefects and ministers. Perhaps the most cynical example of the "same-old-faces syndrome" was the case of doctor Iulian Mincu: the same person who oversaw Ceausescu's insanely pro-natalist policies (abortions were illegal unless a woman had borne five children and contraceptives were deliberately unavailable) once again became minister for health under Iliescu.

Under pressure from international finance organizations, mild political and economic reforms were initiated in 1990, but they were arrested after September 1991. The first prime minister, Petre Roman, was ousted as a result of coal miners violence tolerated (if not directly instigated) by Iliescu and the secret police. The Iliescu regime exhibited a deep mistrust of the independent civic activities from below and a hostility to the increasingly outspoken media. The oppositional parties and movements were apriorically dismissed as anti-patriotic. Nationalist symbols were used to legitimize the regime, and some of the most vicious anti-Western and xenophobic parties joined the government coalition between 1994-95.²

After the 1992 presidential and parliamentary elections, Iliescu used his power to pursue his own vision of a Romanian "third way": for him a market economy was necessarily conducive to strong social tensions, unemployment and a Hobbesian state of universal strife. A seasoned Leninist, he had nothing but distrust for civil society and critical intellectuals. On various occasions, he attacked the opposition for lack of managerial skills, amateurism, and alleged intentions to bring back "the bankers and the boyars" or "selling the country out" to Western multinationals. The split of the ruling National Salvation Front in 1992 and the formation of Petre Roman's Democratic Party (of Western-style socialist orientation) eroded Iliescu's power base. In fact, this party evolved into a Romanian-style version of the reconstructed post-communist left in Poland and Hungary. In the meantime, the Democratic Convention (an umbrella formation uniting several parties and civic movements) gathered momentum. The democratic opposition learned from its defeat in 1990 and 1992, and started to address the social grievances of the many disenfranchised groups. Social malaise and exasperation with the extraordinary level of corruption among the government, a mafia-style company, helped Constantinescu and Roman expand their electoral support.

Romania's Second Revolution

By the end of 1995, Romania-watchers were convinced the Iliescu and his party of Social Democracy would not be able to win the next local and parliamentary elections. Indeed, in June 1996, the opposition made tremendous inroads during the local elections. Significantly, Victor Ciorbea, a 42-year old lawyer and former union leader, became the mayor of Bucharest running on an anti-corruption platform and defeating Iliescu's favorite, former tennis champion Ilie Nastase. As

the major tests were coming closer, i.e. parliamentary and presidential elections, the two main oppositional formations (the Convention supporting Constantinescu for president and the Democratic Party supporting Roman) indicated their willingness to cooperate in the effort to unseat the Iliescu regime. Both Roman and Constantinescu stirred responsive chords among the electorate by lambasting the omnivorous kleptocracy, the dismal state of the economy, the plummeting living standards, and the absence of political transparency. On November 3, the anti-Iliescu parties (among them the Hungarian Democratic Union, which received almost 7 per cent of the vote.) won the parliamentary majority. The loss of parliamentary control prompted a desperate Iliescu to turn "negative" in his campaign fight. His shrill attacks on Roman, including insulting remarks regarding his former prime minister's Jewish heritage, backfired.

The president's lonely fate appeared starkly clear at the moment his most trusted associate, the chief of Romania's secret police, Virgil Magureanu, declared that in the parliamentary elections he had voted "for change." Immediately after their parliamentary victory, the Democratic Convention and the Democratic Party signed a "governance pact," sealing their electoral alliance in the struggle against Iliescu's re-election. Thus, the base for Iliescu's defeat was the historical compromise between the traditional, anti-communist opposition Democratic Convention and the Social Democratic Union (grouping Roman's party and a small Social Democratic Party). Unlike Iliescu, who ran a campaign based on slanders and intimidation, the opposition focused on the need to build a new Romania. Iliescu's rhetoric was apocalyptic, suggesting that a coalition government with the ethnic Hungarian party would turn Romania into another Yugoslavia. This was of course preposterous and even the rabidly Hungarophobic nationalist parties refused to endorse Iliescu's candidacy. The eternal presidential smile disappeared from Iliescu's face. Instead, Romanians rediscovered the somber face of the communist bureaucrat accustomed to using the language of class struggle and other worn-out Leninist cliches.

On November 17, a majority, that is 54.4 per cent, of the Romanian voters elected Constantinescu as their country's new president. The ex-communists' grip on power had come to an end, and euphoria ran supreme. Like in December 1989, Romanians felt exhilarated by the chance of moving fast into a Western-style democracy. Obsessed with its external image, the Iliescu government refused to admit that the country's isolation was first and foremost the consequence of its continuous domestic blunders, particularly the failure to engage in serious market reforms. With Iliescu's departure from the helm, Romanians hope they can be seen once again as a normal country with a normal reform-oriented leadership. In the words of political analyst Dorel Sandor: "Now is the time to allow institutions to work. We don't need a new father."³

Quo Vadis, Romania?

The alliance between Roman and Constantinescu is based on mutual concessions, and therefore it is not exactly an easy one. The two leaders, and their parties, have different visions of the country's past, present, and future. Emil Constantinescu is a member of the National Peasant Christian and Democratic Party. He owes much of his career to the support received from the revered leader of this party, Corneliu Coposu (who died in 1995). A political prisoner under the communist regime for 17 years Coposu never made a secret of his monarchist convictions. The party's official line, codified by Coposu and the group of old leaders, calls for constitutional continuity, i.e., it rejects the legitimacy of the communist-imposed abdication of King Michael in December 1947. Although during the campaign Constantinescu toned down, indeed completely purged references to a referendum on the constitutional foundations of the state, it is hard to believe that this topic will simply vanish without a trace. From exile in Switzerland, King Michael congratulated the new president admitting that this is not the time for questioning the constitutional order. At the same time, the problem of legitimacy remains open as long as the Romanian republic does not procedurally confront the illegal coup d'etat that forced the king to abdicate and proclaimed the "Romanian People's Republic." What kind of continuity will Emil Constantinescu want to represent in the long run? The kind of continuity--whether it is the constitution of 1991 or pre-World War II-- that remains following his presidency will define Constantinescu's place in Romanian history as either a pragmatist or a monarchist. For the short run, he is most certainly a pragmatist, and since in politics everything is short run, he can recall his monarchist leanings should he need them.

On the other hand, Petre Roman deems any such discussion inappropriate and dangerous. Having been directly involved in the King's expulsion from Romania in December 1990 (when the ex-monarch came for a brief Christmas trip), he has expressed uncompromising commitment to maintaining a republican form of government. In the same vein, it is to be expected that the Democratic Party and its leader (who is the new chairman of the Senate, the upper chamber of the country's parliament and constitutionally the second highest position in the state) likely will obstruct any attempts to examine the many mysteries surrounding the December 1989 events and the miners' first raid on Bucharest in June 1990 (which occurred during Roman's prime ministership under Iliescu).

If the tensions within the coalition deepen, the Democratic Party will leave the government and play the role of an independent oppositional force. Another factor which may lead to discord within the coalition, is the personalities of the party leaders themselves. For example, the Democratic Party's leader, Petre Roman, has presidential ambitions, and he received 21 per cent of the vote in the first round in the 1996 presidential race, which is an indication that a large segment of the electorate is ready to support him. In other words, the Democratic Convention and the Democratic

Party alliance--which also includes the Hungarian Democratic Union--began as a marriage of convenience and is likely to remain one as long as there is a harmony of interests and incentives. Indeed, there are plenty of incentives, the act of governing itself perhaps being the strongest one, for the two major formations to suppress their differences and keep the coalition stable for a relatively long period of time. Furthermore, the Democratic Party may be a moderating influence against a growing "revolutionary temptation" among the Democratic Convention and the calls for retroactive justice and radical de-communication.

Meanwhile the once ruling party is now in opposition, i.e. Iliescu's Party of Romanian Social Democracy, likely will adopt an obstructionist strategy which fans discontent with the costs of reforms; appeals to the losers of radical reforms; and mobilizes the unions against cuts in state subsidies for basic goods and services. As for Ion Iliescu himself, it is hard to see a key political role for him in a modernized and Westernized Romania. Like Gorbachev, who was in many respects his model, he will be confined to a status of irrelevance. Among his party's elite there are too many "young Turks" who are eagerly thinking about the next elections in four years and who regard Iliescu as a relic of the past.

Bedrock or Sand?

Nationalism, an affliction that Adam Michnik aptly called the terminal disease of communism, already has been played ad nauseam in Romania. While it is true that national sentiment is strong, there is little reason to believe that it will take aggressive, violent forms. Emil Constantinescu's stand on this issue is rather liberal, and many among his close associates are individuals who have been the targets of the extremist parties' attacks in the past. Romania's democratic engagement as 1996 closed was firm. The latent nature of this democracy, however, remains mysterious: is it a civic-oriented community, based on liberal individualism, or is it rooted in nostalgia for archaic bonds of solidarity and group-defined loyalties? Will Romania accept the major trends of globalization, or will it try to oppose them in the name of vaguely conceived values of "one nation under God"?

After seven years of missed opportunities, institutionalized cynicism, and disgraceful plundering of national resources by those who were supposed to administer them, Romanians voted for renewal. Therefore, this is the country's second chance in one decade to reengineer itself, and while it is by no means certain, it is reasonable to expect that those individuals and parties called to lead will make the best of it and, in fact, succeed. Romania's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures (e.g. NATO) and its prospects for democratic development depend first on the political imagination and moral verticality of its new leaders. Strong tendencies among the educated groups, especially the youth, suggest that Romania has passed a critical threshold. "Balkan-ghosts" stereotypes notwithstanding, no country is forever condemned to repeat its past. And, in the case of

Romania, there is something that may constitute a usable past: a collective memory of a fragile but real constitutionalism during the inter-war period; a tradition of anti-totalitarian resistance in the 1940s and 50s; and the recollection of the December 1989 revolution. This is the foundation on which a modern pluralist polity can be constructed provided that Romania's new ruling coalition, which long resembled grains of sand trapped in an ever-turning hour glass, has finally recognized that in politics continuous dialogue and compromise are the cement of democratic power.

NOTES

1. See Gail Kligmann and Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Romania Belatedly Savors Real Democracy," OpEd, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 4, 1996.
2. See Vladimir Tismaneanu, "Democracy, Romanian Style," *Dissent*, Summer 1995, pp. 318-320.
3. See Jane Perlez, "Romania's Anti-Communist Revolutionary," *New York Times*, November 19, 1996.