

## BETWEEN CONTESTATION AND CONFORMISM. THE ROMANIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS IN THE EARLY SIXTIES

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The beginning of the sixties marked a new stage in the Romanian-Soviet relation. The distancing of communist Romania from the USSR was made on the backdrop of a change in the attitude of the Soviets, both within the Bloc and in the international relations<sup>1</sup>. As an expression of the *new course*, peaceful coexistence included relaxation in the relations with the West, with Moscow showing less interest in the international unity of the communist world<sup>2</sup>. However, within the Bloc, unity still understood in the spirit of Stalinist constraint was ensured by the creation of the Warsaw Treaty, the resuscitation of Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) and the granting of a certain degree of autonomy in the internal affairs, which had as the result the breakdowns in Poland and Hungary. Despite the new principles of equality among the communist states, both Comecon and the Warsaw Treaty acted as the political, economic and military levers which ensured the fragile cohesion between the Soviet Union and her allies, any other alliance outside the Bloc being forbidden.

The reactions of the satellites to the *new course* pointed out to the failure of the standardization of the Stalinist system and the necessity for the communist regimes to demonstrate their legitimacy. The attempts to break the rigid frameworks of the system were aimed either at creating a viable, legitimate and popular system, or at abandoning the communist project altogether. The national line was becoming one of the major threats to the unity on the Bloc. At the beginning of the sixties, the leadership in Kremlin was faced with the dilemma of a balance between the cohesion of the system and the viability of the regimes. However, cohesion was the result of coercion, the Polish revolt and the Hungarian

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<sup>1</sup> J.F. Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule* Duke University Press, 1988, believes that the Soviets imposed their authority in East Europe in three stages: 1945–1948, when the illusion of a democratic society was still being preserved; 1948–1956, the forcible imposition of the Stalinist system, which brought about institutional changes, the collectivization of agriculture and massive industrialization; de-Stalinization and relaxation in the Khrushchev variant, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Dulles, Secretary of State during the Eisenhower Administration, skeptical about the openness of the Soviets, warned that the strategy of the leaders in Kremlin could induce some dangerous complicity at the level of international relations. The death of Stalin had brought forth some negotiators with a human face, which went against his profound anti-Communist attitude. This made him assert that Stalin's death had been counter-productive. Stalin had died too soon, before Dulles could expose the real goals of the Soviet external policy. J.F. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. xi-xii; Thomas Parrish, *Enciclopedia războiului rece*, București, 2000, pp. 97-99.

revolution being relevant examples in this respect. Viability could only be reached through economic and institutional reforms and a change in the relations with the Soviet Union. However, these three terms were never met in any of the communist countries. The Polish attempts of 1956 and 1981, then the Czech attempt of 1968 remained simple experiments. For which the reason, the diversity of the communist space was a direct consequence of the attempts by the leaderships of the satellite countries to assert their own identity in relation to the Soviet Union.

When did Romania's distancing from Moscow begin and what were the reasons for this process? No doubt, the withdrawal of the Soviet troops removed the psychological barrier and allowed the Romanian leadership to enjoy more freedom. A first reaction was the rejection of the projects of economic coordination within Comecon. Gheorghiu-Dej noted in February 1960, after the meeting in Moscow that, "they were all taken aback when we declared that we did not agree with specialization"<sup>3</sup>.

The rejection of economic coordination can be interpreted from the perspective of three factors: 1. An economic factor: compliance with the Soviet directives would have involved a massive restructuring of the economic policy, liable to create additional chaos (Gheorghiu-Dej only agreed to reduce the surfaces planted with plum trees); 2. A second factor with far deeper implications was the need for the Romanian communists to earn legitimacy. In the case of the Romanian Worker's Party (RWP), a national leadership had the double advantage of bringing forth a Romanization of the elite and appeasing the anti-Soviet feelings of the population<sup>4</sup>. A last factor influencing the decisions of the leadership in Bucharest was the Soviet-Chinese dispute. The fiasco of the "missile crisis" and the relative success of Albania in her relations with China determined the Romanian leadership to reject in 1962 a new project of economic coordination. The "missile crisis" offered the leaders of the RWP new grounds for contestation. They disapproved, even if not officially, the action taken by Moscow. Corneliu Mănescu, Romania's representative to the UNO, declared a year later, in October 1963, to the Secretary of State Dean Rusk that, "in case of an open conflict with the USSR, similar with

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<sup>3</sup> "Records of the Meeting of the Political Bureau of 8 February 1960. Agenda: Report of the Delegation of the CC of RWP attending the Meeting of the Representatives of the Communist and Workers' Parties of the Socialist Countries of Europe on the Exchange of Experience in the Development of Agriculture and the Meeting of the Consultative Political Committee of the States Belonging to the Warsaw Treaty. Gheorghiu-Dej noted Khrushchev's suggestion that an evolution by leaps should be avoided on the economic level: "One could see from his words that he was pleased at the way things were progressing here, not in a spectacular or clamorous way, but still advancing steadily." Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale, CC of PCR Fund, Chancellery, 9/1960 file, ff. 7, 5-21.

<sup>4</sup> J.F. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 267; Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Soviet Bloc. Unity and Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 444.

the one in Cuba, Romania will remain neutral“<sup>5</sup>. The Foreign Minister assured the American official that the Romanian Government, as a member of the Warsaw Treaty, had not been consulted about the decision to place missiles in Cuba and, as a result, could not be considered as taking part in the dispute. Corneliu Mănescu mentioned the existence of a letter by the leadership in Bucharest, addressed to the same Dean Rusk, along which, “no matter what happens, we shall bear no blame, for we have had no contribution to this, and were never informed about the existence of these missiles. There is no nuclear armament on Romanian territory“<sup>6</sup>. A year later, on May 6 1964, Gheorghiu-Dej was terming as “disputable” the Soviets’ initiative to place nuclear armament in Cuba, questioning the practice of Moscow of involving members of the Warsaw Pact in potential conflicts with disastrous consequences, without asking for their consent<sup>7</sup>.

What was the motivation of the Romanian official’s intervention? A possible explanation would be that the Romanian Government had no wish to be associated with acts that might have tarnished its image on the international background. At the beginning of 1957, the leadership of the RWP launched a sustained program aiming to promote international relations, especially with the Western states. Peaceful coexistence was thus becoming a cover for the diplomatic approaches of the Government in Bucharest. On the other hand, at the beginning of the sixties, the American Administration changed its strategy in relation to the countries in the communist Bloc. The Americans aimed to lessen the Soviet control over the Bloc by encouraging economic exchange. Success hinged upon the degree of dependency/independence in relation to the Soviet Union. According to the report by the Romanian Legation in Washington of May 1962, the USA intended to encourage Czechoslovakia and Romania in their initiatives to achieve independence. However, the “missile crisis” could seriously affect these initiatives. The interest of the USA could be explained by the opposition Romania was showing within Comecon, a stand “copiously debated” in the international press<sup>8</sup>. Two elements were to be considered in developing economic relations with countries in the communist Bloc: the dominant position of Moscow in the region and the improbability of the communist regimes being overthrown. Khrushchev’s policy had resulted in diversity of form and institutions. However, the liberalization of the regime by renouncing terror and coercion was one of the issues still to be

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff, *When and Why Romania Distanced Itself from the Warsaw Pact*, in “Buletin“ of CWIHP, no. 5 (1995), p. 11; Vladislav Zubok, Constatine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War. From Stalin to Khrushchev*, London, 1996, p. 269.

<sup>6</sup> *Convorbiri neterminate. Corneliu Mănescu în dialog cu Lavinia Betea*, Iași, Polirom, 2001, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> “Records of the Meeting on the Presentation of the Documents of the Plenary Meeting of the CC of the RWP of April 1964 to the Cadres of the Central Committee“, 6 May 1964, ANIC, CC of RCP Fund, file 20/1964, f. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Ghiță Ionescu, *Comunismul în România*, București, 1994, p. 375.

settled in the process of de-Stalinization. Quite obviously, Romania and Albania had no wish to give up the Stalinist methods. Nonetheless, the USA was not considering a change of the political regime, but the intensification of economic relations. The encouragement of economic exchange was thus becoming one of the global coordinates of the American policy, and a context in which the limits imposed by the cold war could be overcome<sup>9</sup>. The interests of the American administration converged with the wish of the government in Bucharest, seeking to settle economic agreements at a time when pressure was being exerted by the Soviets. I believe that the opposition within Comecon and Mănescu's approach can be interpreted in the light of the program developed by the leadership in Bucharest. To accept coordination at Bloc level would have been to rule out the possibility of economic exchanges with the Western states, and to allow the Soviets to recover the position they used to hold in Romania in the first years after the war.

The management of the "missile crisis" also called for a reassessment of the situation created after the Chinese-Soviet break<sup>10</sup>. Even if in the first years of the conflict, more exactly in 1961–1962, Bucharest remained loyal to Moscow, in the following years the RWP changed its attitude, which gave way to some "disagreement" in the relations with the Soviet power. The position newly assumed by the leadership in Bucharest was made public in the article written by I. Gh. Maurer, *Temelia de neclintit a unității mișcării comuniste internaționale* (*The Firm Fundamentals of the Unity of the International Communist Movement*), published in "Lupta de clasă," in October 1963. The RWP was adopting an original point of view on the divergences within the communist movement. According to the Prime Minister, "neither public polemics [...], nor the attacks and accusations which can only damage the brotherly relations and the unity of the communist movement are a way to solve disagreements"<sup>11</sup>. Without giving any names, Maurer was requesting that public polemics should be put an end to. The Romanian Embassy in Moscow made a synthesis of reactions to the press article. The interviewed either made no comments, or rated Maurer's article as "interesting". In the absence of any official reaction, according to the synthesis made by the Embassy, the "Issues of Peace and Socialism" journal had sold well, "as it included an interesting article on the divergences with the Chinese"<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> J. L. Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War. Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations*, New York, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> For further details, see François Fejtö, *Chine-URSS. La fin d'un hégémonie. Les origines du grand schisme communiste (1950–1957)*, I, Paris, 1964; *Le développement du grand schisme communiste*, II; *Histoire des démocraties populaires. Après Staline, 1953–1971*, Paris, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> I. Gh. Maurer *Temelia de neclintit a unității mișcării comuniste internaționale*, in "Lupta de clasă", fifth series, year XLIII, October 1963, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe, Issue 220/1965, First Direction. The political Relations of the USSR with Other States, A–I, vol.I/1965, ff. 178–180.

In 1964, the opposition assumed surprising shapes: the public rejection of the Valev plan<sup>13</sup> and the Declaration of April 1964<sup>14</sup>. In both situations, the policy of Moscow was overtly contested. The declaration gave the premises for maintaining autonomy both within Comecon and the Warsaw Treaty. Moscow was prompt to react. According to the counter-admiral Domnin, the Soviet military specialist representing the Commandment of the United Forces of the Warsaw Treaty in Romania, “[...] the Romanians took a 180° turn in their relations to the USSR and some prominent representatives of the (*Romanian*, underlined by M.A.) State believe that the enemy no 1 of the PRR is the USSR. [...] In the present circumstances created by the PRR, the reactionary elements have become active, and there may be some interesting developments in the future”<sup>15</sup>. Khrushchev’s reaction was also very vehement. At a meeting with the Czech representatives, the Soviet leader declared that Romania’s attempts to break away from Comecon could be tolerated, but any attempt to break away from the Warsaw Treaty would be severely repressed.<sup>16</sup> The autonomous position of Romania within the Bloc and within the Warsaw Treaty became more apparent in 1964. By the promotion of an independent external policy and the strengthening of their internal positions, especially through economic development, the leadership in Bucharest intended to take a distance rather than break off completely from Moscow. Romania continued to be a member of the Warsaw Treaty and Comecon. The diplomatic efforts of the communist leadership in Bucharest made Romania known on the international level and aroused the interest of the Western countries<sup>17</sup>. François Fejtő thinks that the *new style* adopted by the Soviet leadership (more specifically by Brejnev and Kosâghin) in 1964-1966, characterized by prudence, encouraged the tendency of the states with a people’s democracy for emancipation and for a nation approach to communism. A diversification within the communist Bloc could be seen both on the economic and ideological levels<sup>18</sup>. The author believes that the deviation of the Romanians, in comparison with the Chinese and Yugoslav models, was minor<sup>19</sup>. The nationalism of the leadership in Bucharest did not include an approach to the fundamental issues of the communist system. Opposition was the result of the

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<sup>13</sup> The project, put forward in Moscow in February 1964, aimed the creation of an economic region which would have included the Moldavian SSR, the southern half of Romania and the northern part of Bulgaria.

<sup>14</sup> “Declarație cu privire la poziția Partidului Muncitoresc Român în problemele comuniste și muncitorești internaționale” (The Declaration on the Romanian Workers Party’s Position with regard to the problems of the communist and labour international movement), in “Scînteia”, 24 April 1964.

<sup>15</sup> *Retragerea trupelor sovietice. 1958*, coord. Ioan Scurtu, București, 1998, p. 393.

<sup>16</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, București, 1997, p. 500.

<sup>17</sup> Robert R. King *A History of the Romanian Communist Party*, Hoover Press Publication, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> François Fejtő, *Histoire des démocraties populaires*, pp.220-221.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, *L’héritage de Lenine. Introduction à la histoire du comunisme mondiale*, Paris, 1977, pp. 403–410.

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contradictory policy of the Soviet Union, both within the Bloc and at the level of international relations. Pressure was rejected in the name of peaceful coexistence and full equality among the states. The lack of a strong reaction, more exactly of a possible armed intervention, was due undoubtedly to the specific background. The Chinese-Soviet conflict in full development, the Berlin crisis, and the rocket crisis had undoubtedly tarnished the image of the Soviet Union. Direct intervention in Romania would have been counter-productive and could have only fueled the anti-Soviet trends. As long as Romania showed no intention of withdrawing from the two organisms of coordination, there was no reason for military intervention. On the other hand, the leadership in Bucharest sought to diminish the control exerted by the Soviets and their interference in the internal policy of Romania. As known, from the political point of view, the RWP remained within the rigid limits of the Stalinist model. Conformism was evidenced by the limitations of the program of the leadership in Bucharest. The development of international relations was undoubtedly the result of an ambitious economic program which aimed to attain a certain amount of independency in relation to the Soviet Union. From the political point of view, the RWP pursued two goals: the Romanization of the leadership and the preservation of an intact Stalinist structure.