

## ROMANIA AND THE INVASION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA BY THE WARSAW PACT

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During the night of 20/21 August 1968, troops belonging to five member countries of the Warsaw Treaty invaded, by air and on ground, Czechoslovakia, where a profound process of transformation was under way, known as Prague Spring<sup>1</sup>. The expeditionary corps totaled approximately 300,000 military, was backed up by 7,500 tanks and armored carriers and 1,500 carriers, fighter planes and helicopters. In just a couple of hours, through ingenious and carefully planned operations, the troops of the Warsaw Pact got hold of the most important political and strategic objectives in Czechoslovakia, as well as of the main towns. From the military point of view, the amplest operation unfurled in Europe after World War Two was a complete success, an operation made all the more easy by the fact that the army and the population had been ordered not to put up resistance. I believe in a similar result had the order had been disobeyed. The Czech armed forces counted 225.000 military, relatively well equipped, but dislocated all over the territory of the country, and with the mission to cover the borders with West Germany and Austria. Moreover, the leadership in Prague had taken no measures to increase the military potential of the country for fear that the allies might regard it as a provocation.

At the time when the Prague Spring was being brought to an abrupt end, Romania had long been considered a “dissident country” within the Warsaw Pact in particular, and within the entire communist world in general. The dissidence in relation to the leader of the Alliance, the Soviet Union, had begun in the early ‘60s with, as a landmark, the Declaration of April 1964.

Subsequently, through Nicolae Ceaușescu, the new leader who succeeded Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej after the death of the latter in March 1965, Romania

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<sup>1</sup> For the reform process in Czechoslovakia, see among other: Cristian Duplan, Vicent Giret, *La vie en rouge, I. Les pionniers Varsovie, Prague, Budapest, Bucarest. 1944-1968*, Paris, 1994; Vasile Mitrokhin, Christopher Andrew, *Arhiva Mitrokhin. KGB în Europa și în vest*, f.a.; Cristopher Andrew, Oleg Gordievski, *KGB. Istoria secretă a operațiunilor sale externe de la Lenin la Gorbaciov*, București, 1994; Alexandru Oșca, Vasile Popa, *România – o fereastră în Cortina de Fier*, Focșani, 1997; Jean François Soulet, *Istoria comparată a statelor comuniste. Din 1945 până în zilele noastre*, Iași, 1998; *The Prague Spring 1968. A National Securite Archive*. Documents Reader compiled and edited by Jaromir Novratie, chief editor, Antonin Benik, Vaclav Kurat, Marie Milchalkovo, Jitka Vandrová, Budapest, 1998. Petre Otu, Gheorghe Vartic, Mihai Macuc (coordinators) *On Both sides of the Iron Curtain*, Bucharest, 2000; Adrian Pop, *Tentația traziției. O istorie a prăbușirii comunismului în Europa de est*, București, 2002.

adopted a dissident stand within the Pact by opposing the reform projects aiming to tighten the control of the Soviet Union over the Alliance.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Nicolae Ceaușescu followed closely the evolution of the reform process in Czechoslovakia in the hope to find in Alexandr Dubček, the leader of the reformists, a partner in promoting his own anti-hegemonic policy.

As indicated by the Czech historians, Dubček showed some reluctance in collaborating with Romania, not wanting to get himself associated with its dissident policy, a fact that would have only deepened the discontent of Moscow and her allies. It is only during the last weeks preceding the invasion that Dubček and his collaborators altered their position and considered collaborating with Romania.<sup>3</sup>

Irrespective of Prague's apprehension of collaborating with Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu showed considerable interest in the developments in Czechoslovakia and the reactions inside and outside the Warsaw Pact. Thus, in late April 1968, he requested from General Ion Ioniță, Minister of the Armed Forces, and General Ion Gheorghe, Head of the General Headquarters of the Army, more sustained intelligence operations of the specialized military bodies in relation to developments in Czechoslovakia.

Moreover, it was decided that measures would be taken so as to strengthen the military capacity of the army. Therefore, the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of 25-27 April 1968 decided that a military industry of the country should be created, to better meet the demands of the army in terms of equipment. Three scientific research institutes were therefore created in 1968: the Research and Technological Engineering Institute of the Army, the Research Institute for Artillery and Tanks, and the Aero Spatial Institute. A considerable number of armament factories and works were subsequently created, all contributing to the manufacturing of a great variety of armament, ammunition, military equipment, etc.<sup>4</sup>

During 20-30 June 1968, an application was held on the Czech territory, under the code name of "Sumava" (the application had been initially scheduled to take place during 5-20 April), without Romania being invited to take part. However, two Romanian observers attended the event, a deputy of the Head of the

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<sup>2</sup> Among the works addressing the "dissidence" of Romania within the Soviet Bloc, one should note: Stelian Tănase, *Elite și societate. Guvernarea Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej 1948-1965*, București; Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu și Securitatea. Constrângere și disidență în România anilor 1965-1989*, București, 1995; Alexandru Oșca, Vasile Popa, *România. O fereastră deschisă în Cortina de Fier*, Focșani, 1997; Mihai Retegan, *1968. Din primăvară până în toamnă*, București, 1998; Constantin Olteanu, *România – o voce distinctă în Tratatul de la Varșovia. Memorii 1980-1985*. București, 1999; Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, third edition, București, 2003; Dennis Deletant, Mihail E. Ionescu *România and Warsaw Pact 1955-1989*. București, 2004; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism pentru eternitate. O istorie politică a comunismului românesc*, Iași, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Jiri Hoppe, *România și primăvara de la Praga*, in *România și Primăvara de la Praga*, București, 2005, pp. 93-95.

<sup>4</sup> Ion Gheorghe, Corneliu Soare, *Doctrina militară românească 1968-1989*, București, 1999.

General Headquarters of the Army and the commander of the radio communication troops.<sup>5</sup> By consenting to the application taking place on the territory of Czechoslovakia, the Czech leaders intended to demonstrate the country's solidarity with the other members of the Warsaw Treaty. One should note that the operation was planned, organized and conducted exclusively by the Soviets, the partners of lower importance being informed selectively. President Ludvik Svoboda was also invited to attend the meeting in which the decision was to be made known, but the invitation to attend was only sent out one hour and a half before the meeting in question, which showed considerable lack of courtesy for the hosts of the application. The summing up of the results was made at a much later time and, quite significantly, some of the equipment of the participating units was left on the territory of Czechoslovakia after the application.

In July 1968, the General Headquarters of the Army held an alarm exercise at the division having its headquarters in Timișoara. The performance of the unit was barely rated satisfactory, which was indicative of serious flaws in the fighting capacity of the army. Until the invasion, namely until 20 August 1968, Romania took no any particular military measures, and acted with extreme caution so as not to raise the concern of the Soviet Union. Quite significant for the previous lack of military measures is the fact that at the moment of the invasion (20/21 August 1968), the Head of the General Headquarters of the Romanian Army, General Colonel Ion Gheorghe, was on holiday at the seaside. He was subsequently flown to Bucharest in a special plane. This can also be interpreted as a lack of information, seeing that the operation undertaken by their allied countries belonging to the Warsaw Pact took the Romanian authorities by surprise.

As known, owing to the stand adopted within the alliance, Romania was not invited to participate in the military preparations for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which had begun long before, according to the notes of General A. M. Maiorov, in April 1968. On the other hand, according to Anatoli F. Dobrînim, the Soviet Ambassador to Washington, the possibility of a military intervention was already being discussed on 21 March 1968, in the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although settling upon measures to repress "Prague Spring", the leadership in Kremlin did not take the political decision of armed intervention. In the hope that the issues could still be solved by other means, the Soviet Union postponed taking a final decision until early August.<sup>6</sup> The idea of military intervention was

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandru Oșca, Teofil Oroian, Gheorghe Nicolescu, Vasile Popa (editors), *Tentația libertății. Operația "Sumava" – un simplu pretext*, București, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> "Document", 2005, no. 1, p. 36. Interview with General (r) Ion Gheorghe Head of the General Headquarters of the Army (1968-1974).

first proposed by Piotr I. Șelest, the leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party, and supported by Iuri Andropov, at the time head of the KGB.<sup>7</sup>

The question arises whether Romania was caught off guard by the intervention of the five members of the Warsaw Treaty. The available information shows that Bucharest was informed about the intentions of Moscow and of its allies. In early August 1968, the intelligence service came in possession of data indicating that troops of the Warsaw Treaty would invade Czechoslovakia. The information was communicated to Nicolae Ceaușescu, and made quite an impression on him. Since he was to visit Czechoslovakia in only a few days, he asked for a one page report which he intended to present to Dubček.

One should note that Ion Stănescu, Head of the *Securitate* at the time, and General Ion Ioniță, Minister of the Armed Forces, advised Nicolae Ceaușescu to cancel his visit to Czechoslovakia. In their opinion, the visit could be rated as an additional demonstration of dissidence on the part of Bucharest, liable to irritate Moscow. Moreover, Ceaușescu was running great risk of being caught in the events, while in Czechoslovakia. The Romanian leader waived the suggestion, arguing that he intended to inform Dubček about the invasion. According to information still to be confirmed, Ceaușescu was disappointed in the attitude of the Czech leader, and declared that, "He does not know about it, nor does he wish to believe it."

Further data provided by the specialized Romanian bodies added to this information. In April 1968, Nicolae Ceaușescu authorized the Ministry of the Armed Forces to employ listening posts to monitor the allies, a thing until then forbidden. Thus, in early August 1968 an unprecedented intensification of the radio activity near the borders of Czechoslovakia was ascertained, pointing out to a massive buildup of troops. In July and August 1968 a considerable intensification of military activities could be noted in all the member countries of the Warsaw Treaty but Romania. Military exercises were held in the western parts of Ukraine, the anti-aircraft defense system in the central and eastern areas of the continent was activated, applications of the Soviet troops were held on the territory of Hungary, and the system of command, control and communications was updated (C.3). Everything showed that the preparations for the invasion, with the code name of "The Danube", had embarked on a final stage.<sup>8</sup> One may conclude that the Romanian authorities were not caught off guard by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Treaty, the available amount of information clearly pointing out to the imminence of the event.

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<sup>7</sup> *Primăvara de la Praga în viziunea generalului A. M. Maiorov*, in "Document", 2005, no.1, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> *The Prague Spring 1968*, p. 427; For Petr Șelest's activity, *Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968 (Part I): New evidence from the life of Petra Shelest*, edited by Mark Kramer, in "Cold War International Project, Bulletin", 10, pp. 234-250.

A most important issue still to be settled is whether the peril of a military intervention of the Warsaw Pact in Romania, carried out simultaneously with the invasion of Czechoslovakia, ever existed. Various answers have been given so far. However, I believe it hardly possible to give answer to this capital question in the near future, given the lack of primary sources, especially of information kept in the Soviet archives.

To sketch out a possible answer, I shall begin by making some reference to the geopolitical and geostrategic position of Romania. As a middle-sized country in terms of surface and population, ranking second to Poland within the Warsaw Treaty, apart from the Soviet Union, Romania was exclusively surrounded by socialist countries, being a second line state in military terms. As known, this was the major argument employed by the leaders in Bucharest to persuade Moscow to withdraw its troops from Romania.<sup>9</sup>

A possible attack by the opposing alliance, NATO, would have been launched first on Bulgaria and Hungary, and only subsequently on Romania. Within the Warsaw Treaty, the Romanian Army had the mission to block two strategic directions – the Greek-Turkish and the North-Italian ones. Indeed, the dislocation of the Romanian military forces was made according to this mission, most of the troops being positioned between the Southern Carpathians and the Danube, as well as in the southwest and west of the country.

The geostrategic position of Czechoslovakia was completely different. This country had a common border with the Federal Republic of Germany, member of the North Atlantic Pact, and with Austria, a neutral country. A possible failure of socialism here would have had serious consequences on the entire sphere of hegemony of the Soviet Union in central and northwestern Europe. Neither was Romania in the position of Poland, a territory of transit for the Soviet troops in East Germany, which was seen as the stage for the final confrontation between the two blocs. One should conclude that from the geopolitical and geostrategic points of view Romania was not a region of prime interest to the Soviet Union.

Operational arguments would add to these geopolitical and geostrategic considerations. Although the Soviet Union had an impressive military potential, it was nonetheless difficult for the Soviet commandment to plan and carry out two strategic operations of such considerable extent – one against Czechoslovakia, and the other one against Romania. Given the dimensions and the physical-geographic characteristics of the Romania territory, the quantum of the forces involved would necessarily have been larger for Romania, and the planning and carrying out more difficult.

To these military difficulties also added the major general political consequences derived from the necessity to manage two relatively concomitant “crises” – one in Czechoslovakia and the other one in Romania. It was only natural

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<sup>9</sup> Central Historical National Archives, CC of RCP Fund.,Chancellery, file no. 129/1968, ff. 155-161.

that simultaneous military operations should generate a multitude of reactions on the international level and place Moscow in a rather embarrassing position. Nonetheless, until late August 1968, tension at the borders of Romania was at its highest, a considerable amount of information and testimonies leading to the idea of an imminent attack.

Some of these events, especially those taking place at the crossing points, were only meant to intimidate, but they could just as well indicate the imminence of some greater danger. I shall give a few examples from the archive documents and the specialized literature. Near Reni, drills of pontoon launching were being carried out by a specialized unit every night, for the laying of a pontoon bridge over the Prut. Similar drills were being carried out by the Bulgarians near Giurgiu. At Leușeni and in the surrounding areas, Soviet military groups on campaign were performing reconnaissance missions in anticipation of a large-scale operation. To the west, Hungarian troops were undertaking similar reconnaissance missions near Borș and Petea.

There was also a sustained wireless activity, indicating a massive buildup of troops. According to the data and interpretation of the General Headquarters, in the second part of the month of August 1968, 10-12 large Soviet units, 4-5 large Bulgarian units, and 2-3 large Hungarian units were concentrated or being concentrated at the border with Romania.

This information was also confirmed by the military attaché of Switzerland, accredited to Romania, who was stationed in Vienna. This military attaché also traveled to Bucharest, and, during an audience to the Head of the General Headquarters, he produced a map with the positioning of the troops dislocated around Romania. The information of the Swiss military diplomat was similar with the data already in possession of the specialized Romanian bodies.

As a conclusion, by corroboration, all the available data seems to lead to the hypothesis that the Soviets and their allies had no intention to attack Romania during or immediately after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. At the time, the greatest, even lethal danger to the socialism of Soviet inspiration came from Prague, and not from Romania. The Ceaușescu's policy did not question the fate of the communist society or the stability of the Warsaw pact. As a result, Romania was a target of second importance at that time, and a military operation for the elimination of Romanian "dissidence", in connection with the intervention in Czechoslovakia, but with considerably more difficulties in points of organization and, especially, of political consequences, was not required.

However, the leadership in Bucharest and Nicolae Ceaușescu himself, considered the threat of an aggression in all earnestness, the well known "balcony scene" being the only occasion when the Romanian people truly rallied around the Communist Party. The firm declaration of Nicolae Ceaușescu that he would oppose resistance to a possible attack was followed by ample military measures. The General Headquarters drew up an operation plan to block out the main operative-strategic directions. The document was submitted to Nicolae Ceaușescu, who

approved it and asked for full discretion. He also demanded that nothing should be undertaken without his approval.

A number of ad-hoc military structures were also created, so as to cover all the deficient operative-strategic directions, especially the two “gates” – of the Someș and of Focșani. The most important initiative was the creation of an army corps positioned in the south of Moldavia and the northeast of Muntenia. It was staffed with officers from the Military Academy, from the commandment of the Second Army, and had under its orders a number of units and subunits dislocated in the region. The army corps functioned until December 1968.

A commandment was also created for the defense of the capital, headed by General Stelian Țârcă, deputed of the Minister, to which forces in Bucharest and in the surrounding areas were subordinated. The commandment was to cover the directions Urziceni-Bucharest and Giurgiu-Bucharest.<sup>10</sup> On 11 September 1968, the 57<sup>th</sup> Division of Tanks was created in Bucharest. Several other similar measures followed in less than two weeks: the creation of the 67<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division in Brăila, of the 81<sup>st</sup> Mechanized Division in Dej, and of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of Mountain Corps in Curtea de Argeș. Thus, the number of large units rose by one third, and the number of the tank and mountain corps units doubled.

Several other measures were taken: setting out of a number of anti-tanks and anti-infantry mine fields, as well as of anti-tank trenches, which were further used as irrigation facilities; reconstruction of some footings in the former fortifications; destruction, according to the needs, of some railways or bridges, etc. It was thus decided that the Giurgiu-Ruse bridgehead lying on the Romanian territory should be blown up. However, Nicolae Ceaușescu made it clear that this would be only undertaken at his order.

An important measure with impact on the public opinion, but of little military consequence, was the creation, actually the reactivation of the patriotic guards, a measure announced by Nicolae Ceaușescu during his “balcony” speech. Immediately after the speech, a meeting was held at the General Headquarters of the Army, and solutions were adopted for application of this political decision. In less than 48 hours, 51 battalions were created, numbering 10,000 people, who took part in the military parade of 23 August 1968.

Nicolae Ceaușescu did not only mobilize the internal resources, but he also sought support from outside the country. In August 1968, Romania was encircled from the operative-strategic point of view, with the exception of the Yugoslav segment. Therefore, Nicolae Ceaușescu cast his eyes on the neighboring country. On 24 August he met with Iosip Broz Tito at Vârșeț.<sup>11</sup> The meeting was disappointing, since the Yugoslav leaders refused to collaborate with Romania on the military level, be it for defending of the Turnu-Severin-Timișoara corridor, the

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<sup>10</sup> “Document”, 2005, 1, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Transcripts of the Ceaușescu-Tito meeting of Vârșeț published by Ioan Scurtu in “Dosarele Istoriei”, 1998, no. 8, pp. 50-58.

only way to ensure an inflow of armament, ammunition, and military equipment, seeing the Black Sea was blocked by the Soviets. He nevertheless consented to shelter the Romanian military under the same conditions in which Romania had received the Polish military in the autumn of 1939, namely disarmed and confined to special camps.

According to a number of documents and memoirs, the Soviet authorities also raised the concern of some western capital, including Washington. Dean Rusk, the American Secretary of State, seems to have expressed to Ambassador Dobrînin the concern of the USA as to the possibility of an armed intervention against Romania. The Soviet diplomat assured him on 31 August 1968 that the USSR and its allies had no intention whatsoever to invade Romania.<sup>12</sup>

One may wonder what prompted Washington to speak up for Romania, but not for Czechoslovakia. The most plausible explanation suggested in historiography is that the international statute of the United States would have been seriously affected if the Americans had not reacted to a repetition of the Czech episode. Without any doubt the explanation is plausible, but I would like to advance the hypothesis that the attitude of the American authorities can also be related with two other important events. The Dean Rusk-Corneliu Mănescu meeting of October 1963, during which the Americans reached the conclusion that Romania would remain neutral in a possible conflict among the two superpowers and blocs, and Nicolae Ceaușescu's refusal to break relations with Israel in June 1967, after the Six Days War.

Further political support came from Communist China, with Cen I, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs, and Ciu-En-Lai, Head of the Government, declaring that assistance would be given to Romania.<sup>13</sup>

Romania's reaction to a possible invasion by the Soviets and their allies was prompt and followed by large-scale measures. However, one may wonder how efficient these measures would have been. In other words, what would have been the chances of the Romanian army and of the country in general?

The discrepancy in force between Romania and her potential aggressors was obvious. As already shown, Romania was encircled by her allies in the Warsaw Treaty, with only one free "corridor" leading to Yugoslavia. On the other hand, acting along the principles of political realism, Iosip Broz Tito had no intention to run the risk of a conflict with the USSR for the sake of Romania. Moreover, the Romanian Army was deficient in technical equipment and almost completely dependent on imports of armament and ammunition from the Soviet

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<sup>12</sup> *Apud* Florin Constantiniu, *op. cit.*, pp. 481-482.

<sup>13</sup> *România și primăvara de la Praga*, București, pp. 54-59 (Paper delivered by Dan Cătănuș).



Union. In addition, owing to the improper disposition of troops, several strategic directions were left vulnerable.

Other elements can also be reckoned with as potential factors of the Romanian resistance: the morale of the population, strongly determined to oppose the invaders; the surface of Romania, much more important than the surface of Czechoslovakia; the absence of Soviet troops on the territory of Romania; the liquidation of most of the Soviet intelligence agencies in Romania (1962-1963); the negative reaction of the international public opinion to a new demonstration of force by the Soviets, etc.

As to this reaction, one should say that despite the interventions of the Americans and the Chinese, Romania would have had to face the attack on her own. The Chinese leader Mao Tze-Dong gave a plastic definition of this reality at a later time, and without making reference to the situation in Romania in 1968: "The water lying far away cannot put out the fire burning nearby". Given the circumstances, I should say that the resistance put up by Romania may have lasted from several hours to several days. At the present stage of research, a military success seems to be ruled out.

The position of Romania in August 1968 is somewhat similar with her position in 1940, when the country was in a state of political and military isolation and under the impact of the ultimatum given by the Soviet Union. Faced with the possibility of a conflict with the Soviets, King Carol II and a large majority of Romanian politicians decided to give way. This was the beginning of the end of Greater Romania, followed by the Diktat of Vienna (30 August 1940) and the Treaty of Craiova (7 September 1940), imposed by Germany and Italy. While losing moral credibility, King Carol II also lost the throne.

In August 1968, faced with an invasion until now insufficiently documented, Nicolae Ceaușescu reacted with vehemence, and declared that the Romanians would defend their country. This firm stand earned him considerable prestige in the country and international recognition. It also turned into the main factor ensuring the survival of the neo-Stalinist regime in Romania for two more decades, with the cult for Nicolae Ceaușescu becoming ever more aberrant.

The crisis of August 1968 between Romania and her allies in the Warsaw Treaty is quite illustrative as to its management. Fully aware of his political and military isolation, despite the American and Chinese support, Nicolae Ceaușescu adopted a moderate stand and sought to reach a compromise. An escalation of the confrontation with his powerful eastern neighbor stood no chance of being successful and could bring about his eviction.

Faced with the political difficulties of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviets in their turn were willing to ease up tension in their relations with Romania. Therefore, they tried to reach a compromise. This would explain the

assurances given by Ambassador Dobrînin to the American authorities that the Soviet Union had no intention to attack Romania.

The American researcher Mark Kramer believes that both parties, Romania and the Soviet Union, showed moderation, which could serve as a model in the management of serious crises.<sup>14</sup> Paul Niculescu Mizil, who lived the events, rallies to this point of view. According to his testimony, “Romania was able to manage successfully an international crisis with a possible tragic outcome.”<sup>15</sup>

Given the above, I believe that the events of August 1968 are an important page in the contemporary history of Romania pointing out to the particularities and limits of the country’s position within the Eastern Bloc.

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Kramer, *The Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia. New Interpretations*, in “Cold War International History Project”, Bulletin 3, Issue 3, fall 1993, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Niculescu Mizil, *O istorie trăită*, vol. II, București, 2003, p. 143.