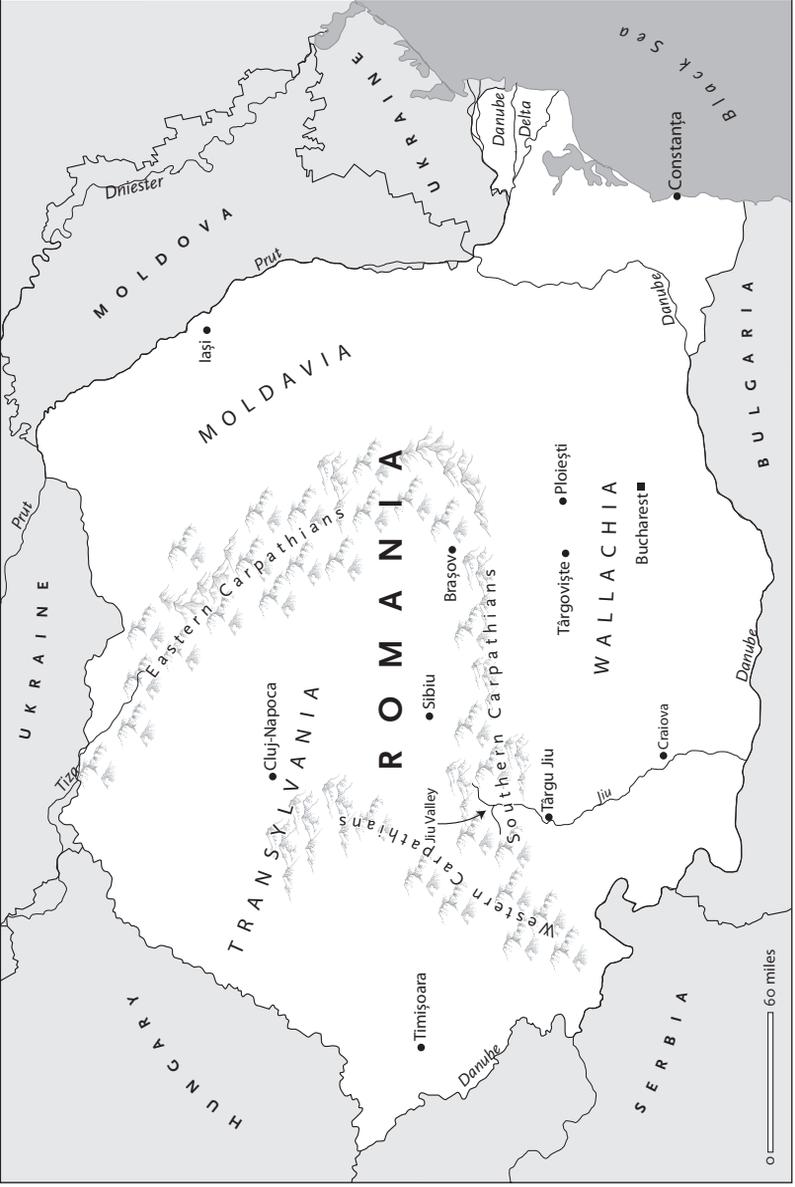


## ROMANIA REDIVIVUS

ONCE THE BADLANDS of neoliberal Europe, Romania has become its bustling frontier. A post-communist mafia state that was cast to the bottom of the European heap by opinion-makers sixteen years ago is now billed as the success story of EU expansion.<sup>1</sup> Its growth rate at nearly 6 per cent is the highest on the continent, albeit boosted by fiscal largesse.<sup>2</sup> In Bucharest more politicians have been put in jail for corruption over the past decade than have been convicted in the rest of Eastern Europe put together. Romania causes Brussels and Berlin almost none of the headaches inflicted by the Visegrád Group—Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia—which in 1993 declined to accept Romania as a peer and collectively entered the European Union three years before it. Romanians consistently rank among the most Europhile people in the Union.<sup>3</sup> An anti-EU party has never appeared on a Romanian ballot, much less in the parliament. Scattered political appeals to unsavoury interwar traditions—Legionnairism, Greater Romanianism—attract fewer voters than do far-right movements across most of Western Europe. The two million Magyars of Transylvania, one of Europe’s largest minorities, have become a model for inter-ethnic relations after a time when the park benches of Cluj were gilded in the Romanian *tricolore* to remind everyone where they were. Indeed, perhaps the aptest symbol of Romania’s place in Europe today is the man who sits in the Presidential Palace of Cotroceni in Bucharest. Klaus Iohannis—a former physics teacher at a high school in Sibiu, once Hermannstadt—is an ethnic German heading a state that, a generation ago, was shipping hundreds of thousands of its ‘Saxons’ ‘back’ to Bonn at 4,000–10,000 Deutschmarks a head.

Yet this year has seen the largest public protests in Romania since Christmas 1989. A citizenry which for decades offered minimal resistance to Ceaușescu now marches *en masse*, in cities across the country,



against the successors to his machinery of rule. The immediate spur was not corruption per se, but parliamentary attempts to void judicial crackdown on it. A February 2017 bill proposing to decriminalize bribes amounting to £38,865 or less—the exact figure involved in an ongoing investigation of Liviu Dragnea, president of the Partidul Social Democrat (PSD), the largest party in Romania and linear heir to the Communist Party—drove, in a few hours, thousands of Romanians onto the streets. In Bucharest they marched to Parliament, hoisting up effigies of PSD politicians in striped jumpsuits and proclaiming: ‘You rats!’, ‘May the National Anticorruption Directorate take you next!’, ‘Down with this regime of thieves!’ Three million Romanians have left their country in the last decade, the greatest internal flow within the EU.<sup>4</sup> The protesters, some of whom continue to gather on Sunday evenings in the major cities, are the young who stayed behind, part of a swelling middle class that no longer believes it must leave Romania in order to have a European future. Most work in a private sector that emerged largely unscathed from the economic crisis, whereas one in five public-sector jobs cut in Europe in 2010 were slashed from Romania.<sup>5</sup> They vacation abroad, speak several languages and have often spent time at a Western university. Multi-ethnic harmony, prospering economy, vibrant civil society: what more could Brussels ask? Romania is so well regarded that Juncker has chosen it for the historic first post-Brexit summit of the EU, to be held in Sibiu on 30 May 2019—the day after Britain’s formal departure—for a grand upward look at the future of a united Europe.

### *Beneath the surface*

It would be an overstatement to speak of a Potemkin republic. But behind the fair appearances, many—perhaps most—realities are darker. Of all

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt, ‘Romania: Bottom of the Heap’, *New York Review of Books*, 1 November 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Mehreen Khan, ‘Romania’s economy expands at 5.9% annual rate’, *Financial Times*, 16 August 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union: How the Weak Vanquished the Strong*, Manchester 2009, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Vargas-Silva, *EU Migrants in Other EU Countries: An Analysis of Bilateral Migrant Stocks*, Oxford 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria Stoiciu, *Austerity and Structural Reforms in Romania: Severe Measures, Questionable Economic Results and Negative Social Consequences*, Berlin 2012, p. 3.

East European countries, Romania is endowed with the greatest variety of natural resources. The Carpathian Mountains which wall off the northwestern province of Transylvania from Wallachia, in the south, and Moldavia, in the east, boast some of the last primeval forests of Europe. The Danube Delta offers a fabled reservation of endangered bird and fish species. The Ploiești oilfields contain the oldest commercial well on earth—Bucharest’s streets were the first to be illuminated by kerosene—and still hold unknown reserves, closer to ground level than in any other country ringing the Black Sea. The fertility of the soil is legendary. But little of the country’s potential wealth has found its way into the hands of its people. Arguably the last real peasantry to be found within the EU works what was once the breadbasket of the Ottoman Empire: two in five Romanians live in the countryside; one in three survive off agriculture; many have never left their villages and only a minority have access to mechanized farming equipment.<sup>6</sup>

The value of their land, however, has not been lost on Brussels, which has overseen the funnelling of Romanian wealth westward for a generation. Prior to its EU accession in 2007, entire sectors of the economy were picked off by multinationals. The Romanian banking system was taken over by Société Générale, Raiffeisen and the Erste Group. Its energy sector fell to Österreichische Mineralölverwaltung of Vienna and České Energetické Závody of Prague. Its steel manufacturing went to Mittal, its timber production to the Schweighofer Group, its national automobile, the Dacia, to Renault. Much of what isn’t yet owned by Western concerns has been laid bare for their disposal. In 1999, the Canadian mining company Gabriel Resources won dubious rights to excavate Roșia Montană, the largest open-pit gold mine in Europe. Its exploitation requires the stripping away of its status as a UNESCO heritage site, the demolition of four surrounding mountain peaks and a handful of nearby villages, and the carving out of a pit half the size of Gibraltar for holding cyanide-laced run-off; the Romanian state is being sued by Gabriel Resources for \$4.4 billion in profit losses for forestalling this process.<sup>7</sup> By 2010 the largest private owner of trees in Romania was Harvard University, which six years earlier had started buying up enormous swathes of forest that had themselves been seized by mafia

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<sup>6</sup> Data from the 2016 World Bank Annual Report.

<sup>7</sup> Neil Buckley, ‘Romania hit by \$4.4bn damages claim over stalled gold mine project’, FT, 29 June 2017.

intermediaries on bogus claims of pre-communist ownership; sold off to Ikea, tens of thousands of acres were sawn down, probably never to be recovered.<sup>8</sup> In 2012, residents of some fifty villages in the Banat, the fertile corner of western Romania that brushes up against Serbia and Hungary, woke up to find that their ancestral plots of land had been seized through another legal subterfuge by Rabobank of Utrecht.<sup>9</sup> There are dozens of such cases. Few have been compensated.

Meanwhile, beneath the surface of democratization, the authoritarian tenor of Ceaușescu's rule persists in Romania's powerful security forces. The Securitate, the most ruthless police force in the Warsaw Pact, has been rebranded and is now run by a generation of operatives whose average age is 35, trained at special intelligence universities. They are, in many cases, the children of the 16,000 Securitate members who provided the backbone of the Romanian state after 1989, having emerged as the undisputed winners of the 'revolution' of that year. At least nine of these new services exist. The predominant one, the Serviciul Român de Informații (SRI), monitors Romanians internally; with some 12,000 operatives, it has double the manpower of any equivalent agency in Europe and, with military-grade espionage equipment, conducts upwards of 40,000 wiretaps a year.<sup>10</sup> The older generation of Securitate agents managed the privatization schemes of the 1990s; they are now shielded by the younger cohort from legal oversight. This interlocking of economic influence—four out of the five richest Romanians have a Securitate background—and legal inviolability—Romania's judiciary is too dependent on the SRI to prosecute it—allows the deep state to operate with impunity. The security services have vast stakes in telecommunications and big-data collection. They oversee their own NGOs, run their own TV channels and have their people on the editorial boards of the major Romanian newspapers and across the government ministries. The permeation of the state by these networks comes to light only occasionally. In October 2015, a nightclub fire in Bucharest killed sixty-four, more than half the deaths due to infections contracted later at a local hospital. Why? The hospital's disinfectants, concocted by a company called Hexi Pharma to which the government had granted a monopoly,

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<sup>8</sup> Raluca Besliu, 'Reclaiming the Forest: A Romanian Story', *Open Democracy*, 19 August 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Luke Dale-Harris and Sorin Semeniuc, 'Dutch bank faces questions on Romania land grab', *EU Observer*, 6 November 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Interview, Iulian Fota, Bucharest, 4 July 2017.

were diluted with water, rendering them useless. This first scandal was soon overtaken by a second: Hexi Pharma, a front company, was run by the secret services.<sup>11</sup>

### *The agrarian question*

There is, undeniably, a *longue durée* behind all this. The only nationals east of the Adriatic to speak a Romance language, the only speakers of a Romance language to disavow the primacy of the Pope, the Romanians are also alone in recent political descent from Byzantium. For the Ottomans outsourced rule of their Danubian provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia to a handful of deposed Greek families, who in large part controlled the country as late as the 1930s, some six decades after Romania's recognition as a nation-state by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin. In the rest of the Balkans, Turkish conquest had all but destroyed the local landowning class, leaving a mass of tax-paying smallholders in the countryside once Ottoman rule receded; uniquely in Romania, a boyar aristocracy that had lorded it over the serfs for three hundred years remained intact. There, the national struggle was not a question of evicting the Sultanate, but of how this mass of Romanian-speakers might gain control over the territory it inhabited, a stretch of land reaching over five hundred miles from the Tisza to the Dniester, where it formed an overwhelming majority. From this viewpoint, urban minorities were seen as the main obstacles. The Greeks were the least populous of them. More numerous and obstructive were Jews, Germans and Hungarians. 'We want a national state, not a cosmopolitan state, not a Danubian America', declared Mihai Eminescu, Romania's national poet, in 1880.<sup>12</sup> Ethnic homogeneity, however, meant sacrificing the progress that could only come from these minorities. The dilemma was sharpened in 1920 by the Treaty of Trianon which awarded Romania, as a belated ally of the Entente, chunks of territory from neighbouring lands, more than doubling the size of the country; the paradoxical effect was to surround ethnic Romanians with much larger and more prosperous minority populations, who now made up 27 per cent, compared to 8 per cent in 1914.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Vlad Toma, 'Scenarii in cazul Condrea-Hexi Pharma: Intre servicii secrete si "dirijarea" masinii in copac', *Revista* 22, 27 May 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Mihai Eminescu, *Publicistică*, Chişinău 1990, p. 291.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, Seattle 1974, pp. 283–5.

Romanian Marxists saw the culprits for the plight of the country elsewhere. For their outstanding representative, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea—born in 1855 to a Russian-Jewish family in southern Ukraine, fleeing to Iași in 1877 to escape the Tsarist political police—Romania's problem was not the overbearing economic power of its minorities. It lay in the *neoiobăgia*, 'neo-serfdom', which a Romanian elite had imposed on the Romanian masses. In 1864 Alexander Ioan Cuza, the Domnitor, 'ruler', of Romania and a veteran of its 1848 revolution, had in theory enacted a sweeping agrarian reform, releasing peasants from manorial servitude and granting them a third of the soil. Two years later he was ousted in a coup that put a minor branch of the Hohenzollerns on the throne, with Great Power backing. In practice the class of landholding boyars, though lavishly compensated for Cuza's reform, circumvented its effects, converting peasant debts into labour obligations, and superimposing on a primitive feudal agriculture a parasitic capitalist system, to create what Dobrogeanu-Gherea called a 'dual regime'. Legally, the Romanian peasant had stopped being a serf; economically, little had changed. Aspirationally Westernized, in the manner of the Tsarist nobility, Romania's Francophone elites now amassed increasing power, while claiming that Romania was becoming more and more like a European state. For the nationalist intellectuals grouped around Titu Maiorescu, Eminescu and others in the Junimea ['youth'] literary association, plugging Western solutions into the country's historical problems was only allowing them to fester. Romania's constitution was copied from Belgium's; its legal system was the Code Napoléon. But what had any of this done for a country which still resembled nothing so much as the Russia of the 1850s? For Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Romania could break out of its cycles of feudalism only through swift industrialization. For conservative adversaries like Maiorescu the solution was more straightforwardly populist and atmospheric: raising the Romanian peasant to the rank of national hero.

In a country with a radical chasm between town and country, the realities of peasant life were more explosive. Redistribution of *latifundia* to micro-plots had not alleviated rural misery, leaving too many peasants on too little land, producing correspondingly little output. In the spring of 1907 some 25,000 peasants, mostly led by former soldiers, rose in armed revolt against the boyars. From Bucharest 140,000 troops were dispatched by King Carol I to crush what was to prove one of the deadliest peasant rebellions in modern Europe. The threat of rural

insurrection was the main impetus behind subsequent reforms. Strategic concessions—new rounds of land redistribution in 1917; mass enfranchisement in 1919—were attempts to forestall future uprisings, on the part of a Romanian elite that would observe the October Revolution from just across the Prut River, and which feared the effects of fielding an army composed of its own under-class. Between the wars, Romania's pseudo-democracy was 'a thin foil of civilization' superimposed 'on an untidily assorted ethnic conglomerate, from which it could be peeled off all too readily', wrote Gregor von Rezzori.<sup>14</sup> Standing guard over the new order was the Siguranța, the secret police founded by Carol I to infiltrate potential peasant revolts and enforce order in the countryside, a seedling of what would eventually become Ceaușescu's Securitate.

Power in early twentieth-century Romania oscillated between a pair of political machines that offered equally empty solutions to the agrarian problem. First came the Liberal Party, comprised of the so-called Regatenis, the banking and industrial elites from the Regat, the old Romanian kingdom, who claimed the legacy of 1848 and took as their ruling model the centralized French system. Ranged against it was the Peasant Party, founded after the First World War by elites from Transylvania who stood for the multinational governing model of the old Habsburg crown-lands. Hovering ceremonially over the state was the Hohenzollern kingship installed in 1866 after the overthrow of Cuza. As elsewhere in the Balkans, the German royal family, an artificial injection in a country suffering no dearth of aristocratic aspirants, caused more problems than it solved, by inserting a Teutophile pilaster into an essentially Francophile edifice. In 1930 the heir to the throne, the jingoistic 36-year-old Carol II, barred from succession by military and sexual disgrace, staged a coup that was abetted by the Peasant Party, supposedly to uphold the constitution after a decade of heavy-handed Liberal rule. The hallmarks of his reign became escalating corruption and authoritarianism, disdain for parliamentary institutions and introduction of anti-semitic laws.

### *The Guard and the General*

Such were the conditions that incubated the most formidable far-right movement in Eastern Europe. Conceived at Văcărești Monastery outside

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<sup>14</sup> Gregor von Rezzori, *The Snows of Yesteryear* [1989], New York 2009, p. 65.

Bucharest, the Legion of the Archangel Michael was founded in 1927 by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a law student from the Bukovina, and initially modelled on Action Française; it swiftly developed into a paramilitary formation, the Iron Guard. Never very large in actual numbers, the Legionary movement proved lethally effective in its penetration of Romanian society, rising above the ruck of the dozens of competing organizations of the radical right in the interwar years to produce a uniquely Romanian brand of fascism, set apart from the German and Italian versions by a fusion of two elements distinctive to it. First, despite cultish flashes—Guardsmen allegedly consecrated gatherings by swigging cups of one another’s blood—the Legionary worldview was avowedly Orthodox Christian. The heartland of the Guard was the swathe of Danubian plains stretching from Oltenia up into Bessarabia, the dominant bastions of Romanian Orthodoxy—Greek in rite but autocephalous since the late nineteenth century—in a country whose newly acquired western fringes tended towards Eastern Catholicism, Calvinism or Lutheranism.<sup>15</sup>

Second was the outsize presence of Romania’s intelligentsia in the ranks of the Legion. Though still one of the most backward agrarian societies in Europe, Romania was also the only country in the continent to produce more university graduates per capita than Weimar Germany, not to speak of its Belle Époque avant-garde.<sup>16</sup> The burgeoning middle-class intelligentsia comprised not just the Criterion Circle of young café writers like Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica and Eugen Ionescu, but many another luminary to come, from Eugen Weber to Emil Cioran, as well as a crop of novelists and diarists whose works have only recently found their way into translation: Max Blecher, Mihail Sebastian, Panait Istrati, Emil Dorian. A striking number of these intellectuals supported the Iron Guard, a phenomenon Ionescu would later dub the ‘rhinocerotization’ of this cohort. ‘The significance of the revolution advanced by Corneliu Codreanu is so profoundly mystical’, Eliade declared, ‘that its success would designate the victory of the Christian spirit in Europe.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Constantin Iordachi, ‘Charisma, religion, and ideology: Romania’s interwar Legion of the Archangel Michael’, in John Lampe and Mark Mazower, eds, *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, Budapest 2004, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, p. 385.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Joseph Frank, *Responses to Modernity: Essays in the Politics of Culture*, New York 2012, p. 143.

With its combination of peasant *bona fides*, Orthodox zeal and gang violence, the Iron Guard was well positioned for a multi-layered campaign against Romania's bureaucratic-boyar class. Arranged into thirteen 'nests' and a trio of 'death squads' by Codreanu, the Guardsmen spent the 1930s recruiting inside the university clubs and the Church, where two thousand Orthodox priests—some 20 per cent of the Romanian clergy—preached its message.<sup>18</sup> 'Legionnaires are the men of faith—of a great spiritual school—and one can trust them better than men held together by a mere programme', Codreanu explained in the *Nest Leader's Manual*, published in 1933, seven months before he ordered the murder of Prime Minister Ion Duca and six years before the Iron Guard would assassinate another prime minister, Armand Călinescu.<sup>19</sup> The state Carol II claimed to control was thoroughly infiltrated by an Iron Guard groundswell, manifest everywhere from village squares to city shopping streets, once the Jews had been evicted from their trades and restaurants, turning Romania into what Mihail Sebastian called one 'huge anti-semitic factory'.<sup>20</sup> The Guard also enjoyed a clutch of corporate allies, including railway magnate Nicolae Malaxa, the richest man in the country, along with a strident following among civil servants, street hooligans and peasants.

For the better part of a decade, the Iron Guard offered something convenient for both pillars of the political system. The King tolerated its swelling ranks as an ideological counterweight to a new political class oriented towards republican France. The Liberals and National Peasants, in turn, saw it as a paramilitary counterweight on the street to an army in the barracks that was loyal to Carol. The Guard profited from this dual opportunism. By 1938 its hold was becoming so strong that Carol moved to protect his own position, effectively dismantling the Romanian political system, disbanding all the traditional parties and installing a royal dictatorship. Codreanu was jailed on trumped-up charges and murdered in prison. But within a year, discredited by Hitler's award of much of Transylvania to Hungary, the King was ousted, and Codreanu's successor, Horia Sima, installed as Vice-Premier in a National Legionary government headed by the former Defence Minister, Ion Antonescu, a

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<sup>18</sup> Francisco Veiga, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier 1919–1941—Mistica ultranationalismului*, Bucharest 1995, p. 231.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism*, Princeton 1964, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> Mihail Sebastian, *Journal 1933–1944: The Fascist Years*, Chicago 2000, p. 391.

rabidly anti-semitic general who had testified for Codreanu at his trial. A wave of pogroms followed—the massacre of some 15,000 Jews in Iași would bewilder even the SS by its savagery. Amid chaotic looting and killing of Jews in Bucharest, tensions between the Guard and the General, each competing for the favour of Hitler, came to a head. When he got a green light from the Führer, who wanted a stable ally, Antonescu rounded on the Legionnaires, crushing the Guard with regular troops over three days in January 1941. He then joined the Nazi attack on Russia, committing twenty-seven Romanian divisions to Stalingrad, more than all of Germany's other allies put together, and killing a quarter of a million Jews in Soviet territory. By the summer of 1944, with the Red Army at the gates of Iași, a coup engineered by Carol's son Michael and his Allied backers swept Antonescu out of power and ultimately off to the firing squad. In the most dramatic *volte-face* of the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of Romanian soldiers beating a retreat from the Volga kept on marching west, now a wing of the Soviet thrust into the heart of the Third Reich.

### *Communism: from periphery and prison*

The most enduring legacy of the Guard was its dismantling of the Romanian state architecture that had insulated the traditional elites from the masses, leaving a vacuum for the Soviet occupation that had been licensed by the deal between Churchill and Stalin, assigning 90 per cent control of Romania to the USSR in exchange for 90 per cent British control of Greece. Communism had been outlawed in Romania since 1924. Unlike its counterparts in Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia or Poland, moreover, the local Communist Party (PCR) was from its earliest days a small, peripheral movement dominated by the educated minorities whom most Romanians blamed for their backwardness. Its founding figures included Elek Köblös, Béla Breiner, Marcel Pauker, István Fóris—non-ethnic Romanians from the borderlands that had been subsumed in 1920. Communism's slender basis here owed much to the agrarian problem: in a country in which some 90 per cent of Romanian-speakers lived off the land—Trotsky called Romania an expanse of 'dark peasant masses'—there was no open arena for organized politics.<sup>21</sup> 'Lacking the objective factors—concentration of capital, sufficient development of industry, a large proletarian mass—and not having the subjective

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<sup>21</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Nashe Slovo*, 1913.

factors—education and a class-conscious proletariat—Romania suffers all the contradictions of a capitalist regime without having the necessary factors for social transformation’, Ilie Moscovici, a leader of the Social Democrats, had explained in 1919.<sup>22</sup>

With the arrival of the Red Army, all this changed. Beginning in early 1945, before the surrender of Germany, a puppet interim regime under Petru Groza, a wealthy landowner from Transylvania, paved the way for Communist takeover, awarding key state ministries to the Party, which simultaneously secured the allegiance of one army division after another—troops that had fought alongside the Red Army and were now rewarded by Moscow with the restitution of Transylvania to Bucharest, in exchange for having turned on Hitler five months earlier than Budapest. Sham elections in November 1946 gave the Communists 84 per cent of the vote. Within months, with Soviet help, the PCR leadership had dissolved the Liberal and Peasant parties, executed or imprisoned most of the interwar and pro-Axis political elites and—after forcing King Michael to abdicate at gunpoint, the last royal behind the Iron Curtain to lose his throne—founded a People’s Republic.

The PCR cemented its power from the top down, having nothing to match the Legionnaires’ popular support. Amounting to no more than a thousand members in 1945, a mere eighty of them in Bucharest, the Party had been confined to the dungeons of Wallachia under the Liberal governments of the late 1930s. The most hardened Communists had been concentrated in a prison camp at Târgu Jiu.<sup>23</sup> It was there that the first general secretary of the post-war PCR, Gheorge Gheorghiu-Dej, a militant railway worker, met an apprentice cobbler called Nicolae Ceaușescu, and both formed ties with Soviet agents imprisoned alongside them.<sup>24</sup> This nucleus of the Party, the so-called ‘prison movement’, supplied it with a small cadre of ethnic Romanian strongmen of peasant stock. Defiantly anti-intellectual, overwhelmingly from the villages, they had emerged, not unlike some in the lower ranges of the Iron Guard, from the interstices of the social dislocation of the interwar period. Once released from prison, they were the pledge that the

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<sup>22</sup> Ilie Moscovici, *Luptă de clasă și transformarea socială*, Bucharest 1930, p. 302.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Roberts, *Roumania: Political Problems of an Agrarian State*, New Haven 1951, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley 2005, p. 123.

PCR was not just a foreign force. That was needed, because so much of the Party's leadership otherwise came from ethnic minorities, often returning from exile in the Soviet Union. The first finance minister of Communist Romania, Vasile Luca, was a Szekler from Transylvania—indeed Szekler Sabbatarians, who had converted to Judaism in the nineteenth century, were perhaps the most fanatical foot soldiers of the new PCR. The first foreign minister, Ana Pauker, was the daughter of a Moldavian rabbi. The first architect of collectivization, a man who ordered the slaughter of a million horses, was Alexandru Moghioroş, an ethnic Hungarian. Aware of the problem, Stalin made sure the Party's Secretary-General was Gheorghiu-Dej. By January 1947, this tiny group of pre-war militants found itself at the head of a party recruited post-haste of several hundred thousand members, eager to join the new power. There was, predictably, substantial personnel transfer from the lower ranks of the Guard.

On coming to power, the PCR confronted a two-fold problem of legitimacy, domestic and international. At home, its cadres included a conspicuous number of Jews in a country that had just sent more than a quarter of a million of them to their death; Stalin himself pointed this out.<sup>25</sup> Then there was the obvious fact that, like their sister parties in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria—though unlike those in Yugoslavia or Albania—they had been put into power by a foreign army, but from a much weaker pre-war base, in which Moscow had never had much reason for confidence. The first difficulty was resolved when Stalin's anger at the defection of Tito fused with a senile anti-semitic paranoia to unleash a series of show trials of East European leaders—Rajk in Hungary, Kostov in Bulgaria, Slansky in Czechoslovakia—suspect of disloyalty to Moscow; this allowed Gheorghiu-Dej to dispose of Jewish as well as other rivals in the Romanian leadership. The Party sought to overcome the second problem with a drive to match or even outdo its Soviet installers in ideological purity. Boyar estates were confiscated and their mansions converted into schools, hospitals and institutions for ideological hygiene; urban businesses were expropriated and mass campaigns for literacy launched. Repression was intense. A pair of Soviet agents from Tiraspol, Pintilie Bondarenko and Alexandru Nikolsk, were put in charge of sculpting the Securitate out of the Siguranţa, which had propped up the regimes of Carol and Antonescu. Over half

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<sup>25</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule*, London 1999, p. 116.

a million ended in labour camps or assigned residence. Some 35,000 political prisoners were consigned to the gulags of construction work on the Danube–Black Sea Canal, many dying slow deaths in the so-called ‘graveyard of the Romanian bourgeoisie’.

Jolted by Khrushchev’s Secret Speech of 1956, Gheorghiu-Dej had to moderate his regime. A thaw set in from the early sixties, the camps were closed and most prisoners released. This was a system-shift throughout the Soviet bloc, more or less mandatory once de-Stalinization took effect in the USSR itself. In Romania, however, it was accompanied by a more unusual and significant change. Gheorghiu-Dej had not appreciated the unceremonious dumping of Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, which left him potentially open to the same fate. In reaction, he started to steer the country away from Russia, to gain greater national legitimacy at home. The Soviet leadership had always wanted Romania to remain an agricultural economy, which could import what it needed from its industrialized neighbours in an interdependent Warsaw Pact system; under Khrushchev, it sought to formalize this division of labour through Comecon. In 1963 the PCR formally rejected this pressure, charting instead its own path of industrialization by turning to the West for non-Soviet sources of energy, technology and cash.<sup>26</sup> Widening rifts within the international communist movement made this easier. The Romanian Party conference in 1960 had been the scene of the first open clash between the CPSU and the CCP—Khrushchev and Peng Zhen engaged in a public slanging match—and the Sino-Soviet split, public by 1962, created greater leeway for independence. At the UN, the Romanian delegate dissociated his country from the stationing of Soviet missiles in Cuba. All of this occurred between the departure of the last Soviet divisions from Romanian soil in 1958 and the accession of Ceaușescu seven years later.

### *The cobbler’s apprentice*

The leader who succeeded Gheorghiu-Dej as Secretary-General in 1965 came from a small village in Oltenia. Born in 1918 into a family of nine children, suffering from a stutter, Ceaușescu’s formal education came

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<sup>26</sup> Cornel Ban, ‘Sovereign Debt, Austerity and Regime Change: The Case of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania’, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2012, pp. 749–50.

to an end at the age of eleven. A Party member at fourteen, and soon undertaking tasks for it in the underground, his only school of learning was prison. At twenty-five he was sharing a cell with Gheorghiu-Dej, and on release became head of the Party's youth league. Rising through its ranks, he was responsible for the drive to increase its membership among youth, which between 1960 and 1962 rose by half to buttress support for resistance to Comecon. By 1965 two-fifths of its members were under forty. Once installed in power, Ceaușescu pursued the goal of all-out industrialization, powered by inputs from the West, with much greater boldness and success than his predecessor. From 1950 to 1963 the Party brought an average of 43,000 Romanians out of their villages every year and put them to work in factories; in the next decade-and-a-half, it urbanized more than double that number per year.<sup>27</sup> With technology transfers from the West, modern plants for auto, aircraft, chemicals and steel were built in advance of the rest of the Soviet bloc. In all, between 1950 and 1989 the proportion of the population employed in agriculture fell from three-quarters to just over a quarter. By the end of this period, manufacturing accounted for over half of GDP. Per capita income had increased from its extremely low starting point seven times over. The fact that Ceaușescu delivered far greater material benefits to the population, with less loss of life, than any of the previous dictatorial regimes in Bucharest—from King Ferdinand to Carol II to Antonescu—would be obscured by his later excesses. By the turn of the seventies he enjoyed real popularity.<sup>28</sup>

Such support was based on the political as well as the economic course of the regime. In early 1968, Ceaușescu denounced crimes of repression committed by Gheorghiu-Dej and rehabilitated his most prominent victims within the Party. In August he condemned the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, unleashing a wave of patriotic enthusiasm in the country, 50 per cent of university graduates taking out party membership within a year. Cultural liberalization saw translation of forbidden literature, including heterodox Marxist texts, allowing glimpses of an intellectual world hitherto unknown in Romania, which had never possessed much of an intelligentsia of the left, as opposed to the right.

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<sup>27</sup> Costin Murgescu et al., 'Influences of the Processes of Industrialization on Social Mobility—on Romanian Data', *Romanian Journal of Sociology*, 1966, pp. 4–5, 138.

<sup>28</sup> Florin Abraham, *Romania since the Second World War: A Political, Social and Economic History*, London 2017, p. 35.

Political relaxation never went far, and within a few years there was nothing left of it. But popular support did not vanish so quickly. For the paradox was that, while internally Romania remained the most unreconstructed Communist state in the Warsaw Pact, externally it was the most Western-oriented.

This was not just a one-sided wooing of a wealthier capitalism. Ceaușescu's diplomatic opening to the West made Romania, for the first time in its history, a significant player on the international stage. Bucharest became the Cold War's principal diplomatic clearing-house, acting variously as liaison between Washington and Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow, New Delhi and Islamabad. It brokered discussions on Israel, where it simultaneously ran the lone embassy of Eastern Europe in Tel Aviv, and the wider Middle East, where it supported Palestinian statehood and the autocratic regimes in Libya and Egypt. Romania's status as a rogue member of the Soviet bloc defying Moscow, and the profits to be made from lucrative commercial relations with it, earned Ceaușescu a warm Western reception. Trade relations with Madrid and an exchange of embassies with Bonn set the ball rolling in 1967. In May 1968, at the height of the student revolt in Paris, De Gaulle became the first Western ruler to pay a state visit to Romania. In 1969 it was Nixon who arrived in Bucharest, lifting Ceaușescu to the zenith of his domestic popularity, and three years later receiving him with open arms in Washington, when Romania joined the IMF. In all, Ceaușescu would make four official visits to the US in his Boeing 707. 'We believe in enhancing human rights. We believe that we should enhance, as independent nations, the freedom of our own people', President Carter explained in a joint 1978 address from the White House. 'And Romania has been instrumental in pursuing the goals of the Helsinki conference.'<sup>29</sup> The welcome in Rome, where he met the Pope, in London where he was knighted by the Queen, in Paris where he was decorated with the Legion of Honour and in Copenhagen where he was awarded the Order of the Elephant, was equally unstinting. Revelling in the trips all such relations brought him, by the end Ceaușescu had made over two hundred official visits abroad.

Being fêted on this scale soon went to his head. For such success, adulation at home was the only proper reward. One particular trip seems

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<sup>29</sup> Jimmy Earl Carter, 'Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter', Washington, DC 1978, p. 735.

to have shown him how that was best expressed. In 1971, he toured China, Mongolia, North Vietnam and North Korea. What he saw in Pyongyang enchanted him—vast spectacles of mass gymnastics in obeisance to Kim Il-sung, a personality cult to dwarf any other, in a country that was at that stage more industrialized than China. In the view of his Russian interpreter Sergiu Celac: ‘Up to 1971, by Marxist standards, he was able to generate new ideas within the limits of the system. After his visit to China and North Korea in 1971, something of crucial importance must have happened in his mind. What he saw in North Korea was an image of real socialism—that is, total regimentation.’<sup>30</sup> Within a month of returning to Bucharest, Ceaușescu had DPRK treatises on *Juche*—‘self-reliance’, Kim Il-sung’s trademark doctrine—translated into Romanian. To the Party’s Executive Committee he delivered his ‘July Theses’, a 17-point programme calling for a fully fledged integration of party and state that would ‘grow the material and spiritual wellbeing of the masses, ensure the conditions for the plenary affirmation of personality, and build the new man, profoundly devoted to socialism and communism.’<sup>31</sup> Economically, Kim’s autarky was the opposite of Romania’s pursuit of foreign investment and technology. But psychologically, Kim had shown how a leader should be treated. The slide into megalomania was set in motion.

### *Family and party*

So, even as the prosperity of the seventies continued, a maverick nationalist state hardened into a tin-pot family dictatorship. At the top, the First Couple comfortably inhabited their own burlesque absurdities. Gussied up for bear-hunting trips in the outfits of the Magyar barons they had dispatched to labour camps, Ceaușescu and his inner circle acted out a parody of a kitsch elite. After assuming power, the Conducător—as he would term himself, like Carol and Antonescu before him—never wore the same clothes twice, and paraded through villages with an imperial sceptre. His wife, Elena, professed to be the greatest scientific mind of her generation. Anglo-American institutions—Central London Polytechnic, the Royal Institute of Chemistry, the Illinois Academy of

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<sup>30</sup> John Sweeney, *The Life and Evil Times of Nicolae Ceaușescu*, London 1991, p. 98.

<sup>31</sup> Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Proposals of measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity, of Marxist-Leninist education of party members, of all working people*, Speech to Party Executive Committee, 6 July 1971.

Science—lent their support by awarding her doctoral chairs. Answering to Father and Mother was a Godfather network: a trio of Ceaușescu served on the Central Committee; some thirty other relatives, from both branches of the family, were posted elsewhere across the state to serve as alarm bells for potential trouble inside the Party. Ceaușescu's brother, Nicolae Andruță, handled the training of the Securitate; another brother, Ilie, was Deputy Defence Minister.<sup>32</sup> What had been an oligarchy, as it was in every other East European state, became a dynasty, comparable—as one careful scholar has put it—to a neo-patrimonial regime like those of the Pahlavis or the Somozas.<sup>33</sup>

A scrupulous student of the cults that Carol and Antonescu had built around themselves, Ceaușescu proved more inventive in staving off potential threats to his rule. A critical step was the de-professionalization of Romanian society. The Army, already subordinated to the Securitate, was sapped of its defence funding and became little more than a building corps. The Party *nomenklatura* was constantly rotated through cities, ministries and posts, subjected to, at best, individual removals, at worst, organizational anarchy. Efficient bureaucrats were demoted. Military officials found themselves reassigned to positions in urban planning. Cadres were recalled from the countryside and put in charge of university departments. This bewildering displacement prevented any organized echelon of younger officials from overthrowing the older apparatchiks. It also solved the persistent Romanian problem of over-centralization of state authority in Bucharest by atomizing power into multiple centres—the Army; the Securitate; the Patriotic Guards; the First Family—that were too consumed by internal rivalries to mount an effective challenge to Ceaușescu himself. Even the Securitate never achieved anything like the position of the NKVD or KGB in Russia. With some 10,000 officers, it was actually the smallest secret service per capita in the Eastern Bloc, though it may have been equipped with proportionally the highest number of informants—by one reckoning two-and-a-half times more than the Stasi. Its six divisions watched everything, from circulation of propaganda to military promotions to protection of Ceaușescu's person. In later years, its economic agency,

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Eyal, 'Why Romania could not avoid bloodshed', in Gwyn Prins, ed., *Spring in Winter: The 1989 Revolutions*, Manchester 1990, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, Ithaca, NY 2005, pp. 16–17.

the Direcția de Informații Externe (DIE) recruited seven out of ten of the personnel working in Romanian trade legations throughout the world as collaborators, and engaged in every manner of shady operations to drum up money for the regime.<sup>34</sup> Its military wing commanded some 24,000 troops.

The Securitate's most important task was to ensure that the two most potentially dangerous forms of resistance to the regime, from labour—as in the uprising of truck and tractor workers in Brașov in 1987—and from intellectuals, had minimal opportunity to synchronize.<sup>35</sup> But Ceaușescu did not trust it, and when the crisis of the regime came in 1989, it proved a broken reed as instrument of repression. Gheorghiu-Dej had relied on terror for political control. For all the fearsome reputation of his regime, this was not Ceaușescu's method. Even outspoken opponents in the party, though swiftly removed from their positions, were never killed. During his reign, political prisoners numbered less than seven hundred. The distinctive feature of his system was enormous inflation of the PCR under him. The fusion of party and state came to resemble the substitution of the state by the party, which expanded beyond all proportion: by 1985 its membership was approaching some four million—one in four adults, one in three working Romanians, the largest political party per population in the world. By then it had little real purpose beyond *Pile, Cunoștințe, Relații*, as the acronym was often rendered—that is: connections, acquaintanceships, relatives—and servicing the Ceaușescu personality cult. But so long as the regime delivered economically, it could function as a giant, suffocating security blanket around the society it ruled.

### *Suicidal solvency*

Materially, all went well till the end of the seventies. Then came strange, self-inflicted disaster. Romania had acquired a more advanced manufacturing complex than any of its neighbours by borrowing from Western banks to import Western technology. Yet it had not been imprudent: in 1978, its external debt was still only 10 per cent of its export earnings; Poland and Hungary had both run up much larger debts, with less to

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<sup>34</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989*, London 1995, preface; p. 325.

<sup>35</sup> Personal Interview, Emil Constantinescu, Bucharest, 6 July 2017.

show for them. But in 1979 the regime started to borrow heavily to finance an expansion of oil refineries, petro-chemical complexes and steel plants, all requiring high levels of energy consumption—just as the second oil shock hit the West, the price of crude went through the roof and interest rates soared. In the five years from 1975 to 1980, Romanian demand for oil trebled. Between 1976 and 1981, foreign debt jumped from \$0.5 to \$10.4 billion. Fear of contagion from the Polish debt crisis of 1980, following Volcker's interest-rate shock, sapped Ceaușescu's access to private credit sources, causing outstanding interest payments alone to balloon from \$1 billion at the end of 1981 to \$3 billion just four months later.<sup>36</sup> By the summer of 1982, debt accounted for 80 per cent of the value of all exports.

At this point, instead of rolling the debt over and gradually paying it down, as the creditors expected, Ceaușescu made the crazy decision—to their astonishment and even irritation—to pay it off at breakneck speed, even before it fell due. To do so, he slashed imports and investment to the bone in a manic austerity programme, the most disastrous episode in the economic history of postwar Europe.<sup>37</sup> Virtually overnight, Romania reverted to a subsistence-level peasant economy. A mass horse-breeding programme replaced most mechanized transportation in the countryside. Tanks of methane gas latched to roofs powered Bucharest's public buses. Central heating was cut off in the depths of winter—'there's no shame in us wearing sweaters inside the house, especially at night', Ceaușescu told his Central Committee in 1986—hot water was available only once a week, street lighting was dimmed, bread was rationed.<sup>38</sup> The defiantly vast over-investment in industrialization went to naught as far as Romanians were concerned. A state that in 1980 could produce technologically comparable versions of French- and German-designed cars, trucks, jets, helicopters and turbine engines for export could, by 1984, scarcely manage to feed its own people.

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<sup>36</sup> James Boughton, *Silent Revolution: The International Monetary Fund, 1979–1989*, Washington, DC 2001, pp. 322–3. Fritz Bartel, 'Fugitive Leverage: Commercial Banks, Sovereign Debt, and Cold War Crisis in Poland, 1980–1982', *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, March 2017, pp. 72–107.

<sup>37</sup> This strategy was the opposite of that of Honecker in East Germany, who knew as early as the late 1970s that he would never be able to repay Western creditors: see Charles Maier, *Dissolution*, Princeton 1999, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> From Mioara Anton, 'Ceaușescu și Poporul!' *Scrisori către 'iubitul conducător' (1965–1989)*, Târgoviște 2016, p. 157.

The paradox of Ceaușescuism would not outlive the decade. By its end, Romania's value to the West as the Warsaw renegade had disappeared: popular movements in other states like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia promised to achieve liberation from Communism from within, while Romania appeared headed in the opposite direction, to an economic and human-rights abyss. Little attempt was made by the West to differentiate between starvation and suppression: its intelligence services could not even be sure whether Elena Ceaușescu, who shared all the self-delusions of her ailing husband but none of his administrative capabilities, was essentially running the country. But of one thing there was no doubt. As US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft later recalled:

We changed our priorities with how we looked at the Soviet Union—or at Eastern Europe. Before we had favoured those countries in Eastern Europe that were making the most trouble for the Soviet Union, the most restive, the most cantankerous, and so on, so that Ceaușescu's Romania was at the top of the list. And instead, what we focused our attention on were those who were trying to liberalize and change the system. So Romania went from the top of our favoured list to the bottom, and Poland came up to the top.<sup>39</sup>

Ceaușescu's fatal gamble was his assumption that Romanians would put up with the miseries he had inflicted on them forever. Surrounded by countries where, as they well knew, Communist regimes were being overthrown, within eight months of Romania becoming the only East European country to pay off all its debts, the regime collapsed in a matter of days. A rising in Timișoara over the state's eviction of a Hungarian pastor from his parish precipitated mass protests in solidarity elsewhere, forcing the Conducător to call a pro-regime rally in Bucharest that quickly descended into a turbulent uproar: 'Down with Ceaușescu!', 'Back to Europe!'. The Ceaușescus fled the city by helicopter, only to touch down in nearby Târgoviște with 'engine trouble'. Captured by army units, they were brought to the classroom of a military school and subjected to a 90-minute kangaroo court. Sentenced for genocide and crimes against humanity, the First Couple were tied up in front of a brick wall and a firing squad. 'Shame! Shame!' Elena cried, as her executioners laced rope

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<sup>39</sup> Gen. Brent Scowcroft, 'The End of the Cold War and What's Happened in the Ten Years Since', Transcript of Keynote Speech, Brookings Institute, Washington, DC, 2 December 1999.

around her wrists. 'I brought you up as a mother!' Nicolae reportedly sang the Internationale as he died.

### *National Salvation?*

The succession was announced on live TV from the same balcony on which Ceaușescu had delivered his last speech a day earlier. A National Salvation Front emerged out of nowhere, put together from the backbenches and lower rungs of the Party he had led. The Front—Romanian acronym FSN—was a heterogeneous group, about which most Romanians still know almost nothing certain. A complete roster of its 145 founding members, some of whom were added to its ranks without their prior consent, remains unpublished. 'We gathered together anyone we could', I was told by Petre Roman, the first prime minister of post-Communist Romania, the son of a Hungarian Jew who fought in the Spanish Civil War. 'You could tell who was trustworthy from those in the Party who hadn't raised their heads [to support the leader] in years.' Ceaușescu's rule had precluded the emergence of dignitaries of civil society, or knights-errant of human rights. Such dissenters as existed—Norman Manea in the United States, Paul Goma in France—were based abroad. Instead there was a second tier of apparatchiks who had fallen out with the leader or been blackballed by him, but whose disagreements remained within the field of Communist orthodoxy, rarely venturing outside it.

Heading the FSN, Ion Iliescu was relatively senior in their ranks. An old hand of the Central Committee, educated at the Moscow Polytechnical Institute in the same graduating class as Gorbachev, he had served as propaganda chief in Bucharest before falling out of favour in 1971, after expressing dismay at Ceaușescu's admiration for the cult in Pyongyang. Expelled to the backwaters, first as county official in Timiș, later in Iași, Iliescu was back in Bucharest by 1989, running a minor Party publishing house. How exactly he came to the fore in the Front remains unclear, like much else about the events of Christmas 1989. There were genuine anti-Ceaușescu protests on the streets of Bucharest that December. The FSN's trick was to present itself as the organic outcome and organizational culmination of that movement, as random shootings broke out in the capital and other cities. Defenders of the regime, of whom there were a few thousand on December 22nd, were first magnified, then 'destroyed', with the FSN feeding clips of an ongoing

'revolution' to a state TV channel after seizing the National Television Tower in Bucharest. Days earlier, the Ceaușescu regime had attempted to downplay its resort to violence in Timișoara, sealing off the hospital morgue and covertly sending bodies to Bucharest for cremation. The FSN sought to showcase the opposite: a violent struggle against the tyrant and his servants was being waged. On the airwaves, it warned of terrorists—GRU agents? CIA operatives? Palestinian gendarmes, loyal to their Securitate trainers?—roaming through Bucharest. In cities like Brașov and Cluj, the Securitate and the Army squared off in friendly-fire skirmishes, the result perhaps of long-simmering rivalries, perhaps of genuine confusion. Once securely installed, the Front announced that the struggle to defeat the regime and its hold-outs had taken 60,000 lives. The real number was just over a thousand, almost all killed *after* Ceaușescu had been overthrown.<sup>40</sup>

Proclaiming itself a temporary organization, the FSN was quick to function like a new state party. Elections held in May 1990 put Iliescu into the Presidency with 85 per cent of the vote and gave the Front a lesser but still substantial 66 per cent majority in Parliament. When students and oppositionists rioted in protest, the regime outsourced repression to 10,000 coal miners, brought into Bucharest on special trains from the Jiu Valley, 200 miles away, to pummel the demonstrators and ransack their homes. Tens of thousands of 'revolutionary certificates' were distributed to citizens handpicked by the Front as heroes of Ceaușescu's overthrow. Awarded an initial lump sum equalling some

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<sup>40</sup> Romanians tell a range of stories about what happened in December 1989. In Bucharest I met Marian Zulean, a lieutenant stationed with the Third Army's 374 Reconnaissance Company in the southern Romanian city of Craiova when Ceaușescu fled the capital. Zulean told me that three strange things happened in the days after the FSN had taken power. First, on the afternoon of the 23rd, his regiment's Soviet-manufactured 2K12 Kub system began randomly firing missiles into the sky; Zulean claims someone with knowledge of its mechanics deliberately triggered its sensors, perhaps by releasing a heated balloon into the air somewhere outside his base. Second, towards midnight on the 24th, more than a dozen Ladas bearing Yugoslav plates drove into Craiova. Refusing to stop at a military checkpoint, they were fired upon. Several people were killed; the wounded were dispatched to a nearby civilian hospital. Zulean claims none of the latter were ever seen again. Finally, from the 23rd onwards, different units of the Army and the Securitate were simultaneously ordered to storm the same buildings in order to hunt down 'terrorists'. These shootouts killed one of his conscripts in Craiova and may have left at least a thousand dead elsewhere in Romania.

€33,000, to this day they receive tax breaks, a free burial plot, free public transport and a monthly stipend of at least €600, or roughly half the average monthly salary. At the same time, a liberal-minded Constitution was introduced in 1991 and fresh elections held in 1992, after the Front had split into a wing led by Roman, urging a rapid free-market makeover of the economy, and another under Iliescu, inclined to proceed more cautiously. Iliescu won the Presidency for a second time with 62 per cent of the vote, his party down to 34 per cent in Parliament. Though it was short-lived as a single body, the FSN proved an effective bridge to what would be the new political system of the country, in its ability to be simultaneously two things. In its dismantling of the Communist Party and creation of a multi-party system, the Front marked enough of a departure from the old regime to be seen as change. But it was not a serious-enough change to threaten the interests of the system embodied in the Securitate, whose embers still glowed under the ashes of the First Couple.

### *A sui generis political system*

The only point to emerge with any clarity from Romania's 1989 was that the state with the last and most violent break from Communism ended up with the least to show for it. In that sense the 'revolution' had less in common with the overthrow of the old order in neighbouring states than with the coups littered across the country's twentieth century, leaving shadowy ruling structures lurking beneath ostensible changes to the state. The political system it spawned has now lasted longer than Ceauşescu's dominion itself, and in two respects is unlike any other in Eastern Europe. Everywhere else, the first governments to come to power after 1989 were the conservative or liberal foes of Communism, who set the parameters of post-communism. In most cases, the former ruling parties remained contenders for office, usually after recycling themselves into neoliberal outfits with social-democratic labels, and secured sporadic bouts in government—the last in Poland ending in 2004, in Hungary and Bulgaria in 2009—before withering away.<sup>41</sup> In Romania alone, former communists, by no means confined to one party, took charge of the political system at the outset and have retained a dominant presence to this day.

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<sup>41</sup> The exception is Czechia, where a Communist party still calls itself such, regularly getting around 15 per cent of the vote, but has never formed part of a government.

A second distinctive feature of the system is its constitutional machinery. Combinations of a directly elected president and a parliament are common across the region, but the powers of each vary widely. In Romania, the President has control of the security services, but cannot dictate government policy or dismiss a prime minister that Parliament has elected. The Parliament itself is composed of two chambers with equal powers, a perfect bi-cameralism whose only other example in Europe is Italy, though there it is under relentless attack. Moreover since 2003, under pressure from NGOs and EU ombudsmen wary of its people voting for parties and not personalities, Romania has desynchronized its parliamentary and presidential elections, a year after France synchronized its own polls (with notorious consequences for French democracy).<sup>42</sup> This has all but guaranteed an in-built polarity to the country's politics, where the pattern has become a presidency directly supported by the West wrangling with a post-communist parliamentary bloc still clinging to more redistributive economics.

The result at the level of governance is continual internal volatility, despite the striking homogeneity of the political class itself. Across the ideological spectrum, Romania's parties are congeries of all-purpose self-enrichment—public externalizations of the state, as opposed to any electable means for civil society to control it. The 'right'—comprising five parties of significance, most of them claiming descent from forebears of the 1930s, above all the former National Peasants and Liberals—has for some time controlled the Presidency. The 'left'—that is, principally the Social Democratic Party (PSD)—mixes communist nostalgia and nationalism, and has mostly controlled the Parliament. In every quarter, politicians can be found with backgrounds in the PCR, and parties are hostage to competing groups in the security services that it bequeathed to the new order.

The highlights of this system can be divided into the presidencies of Iliescu (1989–96, 2000–04) and his three successors, Constantinescu (1996–2000), Băsescu (2004–14) and Iohannis (2014–). Confronting a bleak international environment, in which he was generally regarded in the West as the black sheep in Eastern Europe's 'world turned right-side up', Iliescu showed little appetite for the privatizations that would have raised his standing abroad and, amid increasing economic difficulties,

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<sup>42</sup> Personal Interview, Alexandru Gussi, Bucharest, 16 June 2017.

had little margin for alternative reforms. The transition to a free-market economy suffered a devastating setback when a national Ponzi scheme sponsored by the municipal administration of Cluj spread across the country within a half decade of the revolution, sucking in a third of all circulating lei-notes and pillaging the bank accounts of some four million citizens—one in eight Romanians. Its loans paid off, Romania aroused none of the interest the IMF and World Bank lavished on Hungary and Poland.<sup>43</sup> First despised by the crumbling Soviet Union, now distrusted by the triumphant Anglosphere, Romania was geopolitical no man's land. 'We opened our eyes and there was nothing there', I was told by Celac, who became the first foreign minister of post-communist Romania.<sup>44</sup> The election in 1996 of Emil Constantinescu, a geologist who had watched from a university classroom when the miners attacked students, and whom Iliescu's enemies hailed as 'Romania's Havel', was greeted by some as the real revolution that should have happened in 1990. As Constantinescu himself remarked:

The state I took over was not post-communist. All the communist structures were still in effect. The difference was that one man, Ceaușescu, was gone, and he had been replaced by a leadership combining former Securitate, former *nomenklatura* and former Party activists. And these new men had privatized communism and set up a puppet democracy. But they had also learned to defend what they'd done through double-speak. 'We hate communism!' But they still believed in it.<sup>45</sup>

Elected with the support of a collation of different opportunist parties, in command of none of them, Constantinescu had a weak parliamentary base, relying on technocratic cabinets. At the IMF's behest shock therapy was imposed in 1997, shutting down state enterprises, cutting social services, resulting in such widespread hardship—a poverty rate of 44 per cent—and leaving him so isolated that he made no attempt to be re-elected in 2000. Rejected by the Romanian masses, his rule won accolades in the West for starting to restore property to pre-communist owners and swinging Romania behind NATO's attack on Yugoslavia in

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<sup>43</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Romania had lower levels of foreign direct investment than almost any other country in Eastern Europe: Steven Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, Abingdon 2000, p. 92.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview, Sergui Celac, Bucharest, 2 July 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Personal Interview, Emil Constantinescu, Bucharest, 6 July 2017.

1999, when in Blair's words it proved itself 'an exemplary ally and future partner of the West', providing unlimited air space for the bombing of Belgrade and other Serb cities.

Just 1 per cent of the Romanian public was in favour of the bombing, and in 2000 Iliescu had little difficulty returning to Cotroceni Palace for a third term with a wide margin over his opponent, the rabid chauvinist Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a former court sycophant of Ceaușescu and a vociferous Holocaust denier. This time, however, policy was driven by his prime minister, Adrian Năstase, twenty years younger and a purer breed of neo-communist politician, who lost no time privatizing steel to Mittal, and refashioning the PSD into a conduit for Romania's Euro-Atlantic integration. Populated with former apparatchiks, swarming with Securitate agents with long experience of spying on Western security services, his government backed the invasion of Iraq, hosted a clandestine prison near Constanța for CIA torture, and oversaw Romania's entry into NATO.<sup>46</sup> Accession in turn to the EU required a change in the Constitution, which had to be ratified in a referendum. Under the benevolent eye of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen, Năstase faked the vote in 2003 with no questions asked in Brussels. Floating on a sea of backhanders, bribes and embezzlements, economic growth was briefly robust. But when Năstase ran for the presidency in 2004, by then at odds with Iliescu, the stench of corruption was too strong and he narrowly lost.

*'You could do these things'*

The winner was Traian Băsescu, whose ten years in Cotroceni Palace have done more to shape contemporary Romania than the tenure of any other ruler. A coarse, swaggering figure, he began his career in Ceaușescu's merchant marine, rising to captaincy of a tanker, a post where illicit transactions—smuggling, bribe-taking—went without saying, and service to the Securitate came with the job. When a fire broke out on his ship in Rouen, threatening a huge conflagration on the Seine and requiring a massive French operation to bring it under control, he had no compunction in concealing—as he would later boast—evidence of its origin from the police. A member of the PCR, Băsescu entered politics as

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<sup>46</sup> Kate Connolly, 'Romanian ex-spy chief acknowledges CIA had "black prisons" in country', *Guardian*, 14 December 2014.

a stalwart of the FSN, becoming Transport Minister for Roman in 1991, before cornering the same post under Constantinescu, where he sold off the fleet in which he had once worked to Norwegian interests for a song. Elected Mayor of Bucharest in 2000, he was caught red-handed in illegal purchase of property in the city.

Now repositioning himself as a staunch anti-communist, Băsescu ran for president in 2004 as if he were a corresponding member of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Landmarks of his decade in power were the entry of Romania into the EU; legislation in theory restoring all nationalized houses, flats and real estate in their totality—*restitutio ad integrum*—to their pre-communist owners, a move so extreme no other East European country has attempted it, in practice converting them into unlimited booty for post-communist predators; stationing Romanian troops in Iraq to the last, after all other European contingents had pulled out; and the unbridled harshness of the austerity package he imposed after the financial crash of 2008. Often quarrelling with his prime ministers and lacking a stable majority in Parliament, Băsescu survived two referendums to depose him, the second of them—when 88 per cent of voters, disgusted with him, wanted him out—voided by placemen on the Constitutional Court.

Băsescu's most enduring legacy, however, came elsewhere. The institution ostensibly tasked with bringing justice to Romania's political scene is the Direcția Națională Anticorupție (DNA), founded in 2005 by EU directive. The DNA, however, does not see its work as merely a campaign against corruption. Its writ is indefinite, enforced with very little personnel turnover, an auto-colonization of Romanian society that has for a decade grown increasingly unaccountable, on the basis of two constitutional amendments put through by Băsescu. The first declared corruption a matter of national security, the second extended this classification to tax evasion. What prompted him? The heroic version would make of Băsescu the spoiler of Romania's post-communist system, a deserter from it determined finally to clean up the state. Once a sprig of the FSN, in office he turned on its PSD successor, resuscitating security sectors the PSD had once controlled and using them as a personal power base against the entire political system. At Cotroceni Palace he installed a national intelligence unit answerable only to the Presidency. 'I gathered all the security services together and put them under my authority',

Bănescu told me. ‘It was post-9/11. You could do these things. They were being done everywhere.’<sup>47</sup>

### *An organ for all seasons*

Whatever the truth, the effect of Bănescu’s tenure has been to equip the DNA with the legal status of a military operation, subject to zero civilian oversight, in a country already vulnerable to a proliferating deep state. The DNA speaks the vernacular of geopolitics. Its field is ‘tactical’. It vows to bring Romania ‘the rule of law’. Anticorruption is the *luptă*—the ‘battle’. Its methods are murky to the point that virtually any Romanian stands to be imprisoned by it. The DNA’s chief prosecutor is Laura Codruța Kövesi, a 37-year-old former professional basketball player who has collected no shortage of commendations from the Anglophone media (‘European of the Year’ in 2016, courtesy of *Reader’s Digest*) and Western embassies (‘Brave Woman Award’, courtesy of the United States; the Legion of Honour, courtesy of France; the Order of the Polar Star, courtesy of King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden), on top of two Certificates of Appreciation (2007, 2011) from the director of the US secret service—all of which overlooked her plagiarized 2012 doctoral dissertation. Kövesi imprisons, on average, three Romanians per week and has another five thousand awaiting trial at any given time.<sup>49</sup>

The power of the DNA rests on its ability to offer something to a range of constituencies. For the protesting middle classes, it is an unimpeachable vehicle of progress that does not require them to vote; it does their work for them. Six out of seven Romanians trust it more than they do their elected ministers.<sup>50</sup> For the European Union, the DNA is a reliable handmaiden of austerity.<sup>51</sup> It is restoring the police procedures of communism even as it dismantles the modicum of economic justice it managed to effect. Kövesi’s jurisdiction does not extend to multinational corruption. But she does oversee the targeting of public services in villages which disproportionately supported the PSD in a 2012 referendum.

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<sup>47</sup> Personal Interview, Traian Bănescu, Bucharest, 28 June 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Personal Interview, Armand Gosu, Bucharest, 27 June 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Bryne, ‘Romania in top-level graft crackdown as paper tiger bares teeth’, FT, 26 July 2015.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Barometrul INSCOP—Adevărul despre România’, March 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Personal Interview, Costi Rogozanu, Bucharest, 22 June 2017.

For the secret services, the DNA is a front behind which they can operate in comfort; it is convenient that NATO, which has demanded that Romania's spooks be reined in, supports the DNA.

The DNA's reach extends to the top. In 2014, by no means an atypical year, it locked up not just twenty-four mayors, five MPs, two ex-ministers, seven judges, thirteen prosecutors and some 900 lesser bureaucrats, but also former Prime Minister Năstase, who no sooner spotted the police at his mansion gates than he put a pistol to his head, only to misfire and take off an inessential part of his neck.<sup>52</sup> Its mission would be impossible without the surveillance powers of the SRI, which claims to be an anti-terrorist unit. There is good reason why Kövesi secures the convictions of 92 per cent of those she hauls into her courtrooms. The DNA's networks within the SRI grant its 120 full-time prosecutors a perpetually renewable reservoir of incriminating information on political elites, who reportedly now take the batteries out of their cell phones before meeting one another. She has met on numerous occasions with SRI chiefs—for example, on the night of Bănescu's re-election in 2009—with whom, unfazed, she denies any connection.

Bănescu's transfer of the bulk of Securitate files in 2007 to a National Council for their study has provided the DNA with unfettered access to shelves of secret-police archives stretching sixteen miles, which are only now being put to use in Romanian courtrooms as smear details in cases of corruption. Testimonies are elicited from witnesses who collude on the threat of being put in jail themselves.<sup>53</sup> The DNA circumvents the PSD's control of Romanian television by trumpeting its arrests to the young across social media, marching the accused to police cars in handcuffs for news crews of smartphones, detaining them for as many as three months in squalid pre-trial detention centres, leaking edited transcripts of their telephone conversations to the press and voiding any chance of a fair trial. It prosecutes Romanians who have so much as dined out with their corrupt countrymen. It throws its most ruthless prosecutors against political and media adversaries on the thinnest of charges—and then, to re-burnish its image for the public, often turns on those prosecutors. It nimbly projects itself abroad, putting on

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel Brett, 'Trouble at the top: corruption, anti-corruption, and the battle for political survival', South East Europe at London School of Economics blog, 24 June 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Gallagher, *Romania and the European Union*, pp. 215–16.

anti-corruption seminars for think-tanks throughout Western Europe and pointing to the street protests as public validation of its work.

The afterlife of the Securitate in post-communist Romania has been less surprising than its consolidation as the driving force of neoliberal overhaul. Not a single Securitate officer after 1989 was put on trial. Roughly half made their way into the private sector. The other half was subsumed into the new security services, themselves subordinated to the military. But the effect was to reverse the dispersal of power that had been the backbone of Ceaușescuism. Economically, legally, militarily, more than 10,000 Romanians now had unprecedentedly shared interest in mutual self-protection and self-advancement—and there was no Conducător now standing in their way. It remains the case to this day, more so in Romania than anywhere else in the space of post-communism, that the prepotence of the deep state compensates for the authority deficit of the state elsewhere. The currency of power is blackmail. Bureaucratic clusters mysteriously turn on one another. Others are caught in the act of corruption but are curiously immune from prosecution. No writer has better dramatized these continuities than the Romanian-German novelist Herta Müller, who claims to this day to be tailed on her Romanian book tours by a privatized derivative of the Securitate, and whose award of the Nobel Prize in 2009 has served a wider attempt by the West to make amends for having liked Ceaușescu for as long as it did.

### *The street and the village*

The post-communist system in Romania is now in generational crisis. An encrusted political elite clings on amid contending forces—the street protest movement, the European Union, the state. It is disproportionately made up of PCR members who cycled back into power after 1989 and are now being removed from the state, one prison sentence at a time. They controlled the secret services under Ceaușescu. Today they are pitted against their former institutional arm. Not all of them are in the PSD, but the PSD has been the target of the middle-class outrage for two reasons. First, it was voted into a majority of the Romanian Parliament, and exploits this to circumvent justice in brazenly crude ways. The February 2017 bill that sparked the protests proposed legalizing corruption; an earlier bill, which did pass, allowed imprisoned Romanians to reduce their sentences by self-publishing ‘works of scientific value’, yielding sudden bursts of pseudo-scholarship (‘Dental Implants versus

Cemented Prosthetics on Natural Teeth’, by Realini Lupşa, a pop star currently imprisoned on charges of tax evasion).

Second, the PSD, corrupt though it is, is the lone political defender of the much larger group of Romanians who are not protesting, and who never entered the middle class. The Russian sociologist Yuri Levada calls these people *homo prevaricatus*—the successors to *homo sovieticus* who, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, emerged as the losers of 1989. The protesting middle class casts them as an impediment to Romania’s turn to Europe. They are the *știrbi*, ‘toothless bumpkins’. They live in villages. They work the land. They are reckoned to be among the most religious people on the continent.<sup>54</sup> Their standard of living once matched that of Southern Europe. Now it more nearly resembles Central America. Nevertheless, they are pro-EU. The PSD has made this peasantry into its moral cause, which it claims to be defending against the marketization of Romania. It vows to uphold their pensions, stave off the end of public services and tax the corporations. It runs many of Romania’s TV stations, and controls three out of every four villages through a patchwork of *baroni locali* who oversee paternalistic dependencies throughout the countryside.<sup>55</sup> The PSD is the only party most peasants have ever seen campaign in their villages. Though only one in six Romanians vote for it, this is enough to give the PSD control of the parliament in a country with the lowest-voting demographic in Europe. In 1990, 86 per cent of Romanians went to the polls; in 2008 and again in 2017, a mere 39 per cent.<sup>56</sup> For the other Romanian parties, parliamentary ambitions will only be realized if they can either spur middle-class protesters to vote—difficult, as these parties are in every way as corrupt as the PSD—or splinter the PSD’s electoral bloc. ‘The faster we die, the better for them’, a pro-PSD pensioner from a village outside Brăila told me.<sup>57</sup>

### *Progress?*

Anti-corruption is symptomatic of a deeper problem. Neither side of the political spectrum ever bucks their shared Atlanticist bent. In late 2014

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<sup>54</sup> Catalin Ionete, ‘Majority, Minorities and Religious Pluralism in Romania’, in Greg Simons and David Westerlund, eds, *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries*, Farnham 2015, p. 180.

<sup>55</sup> John Henley and Kit Gillet, ‘Romania set to go to polls as anti-graft party eyes kingmaker’, *The Guardian*, 9 December 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Data from Election Guide and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

<sup>57</sup> Personal Interview, Valentina Sova, Brăila, 22 June 2017.

Romania's growing European diaspora propelled Klaus Iohannis—a nonentity in national politics, but heralded as an efficient German by the mythologizing middle classes—to an improbable presidential victory over ex-prime minister Victor Ponta, who had succeeded Iliescu in the mid-2000s as the face of the PSD. Iohannis was the anti-Bănescu of the Romanian right: mild-mannered, clean-cut, above vulgar outbursts, he beat Ponta in a campaign in which the PSD resorted to desperate nationalist populism, demanding its rural electorate reject a Lutheran speaker of borderland German. But voters hoping that Iohannis would continue Bănescu's anti-corruption battles with none of Bănescu's scandals have inevitably been disappointed. For Iohannis is no less corrupt than many of his forbears. In the 1990s his family falsely claimed ownership of a host of pre-1946 properties; a single one of these, leased out to a branch of Raffeisen on Sibiu's main square, has earned Iohannis some €320,000 in illegal rent cheques since 2003.<sup>58</sup> (Kövesi, whom Iohannis nominated to a second term as DNA chief in 2016, has never commented on the case, though she has locked up many other politicians for much less.) Iohannis, who is not a talented politician, has surrounded himself with impeccable globalists and security specialists. His closest advisor, Leonard Orban, served as the EU's first commissioner for multilingualism. His economic adviser, Cosmin Marinescu, a neoliberal economist, was one of the architects of Romania's EU integration. His ambassador to Berlin, Emil Hurezeanu, once headed Radio Free Europe. His ambassador to Washington, George Maior, was previously chief of the SRI.

It's been argued that a deeper geopolitical struggle lies behind the anti-corruption fight. Iohannis and Kövesi are not the only conspicuously non-Romanian names manning the DNA front; there is also Eduard Hellvig, current head of the SRI, and George Maior, its former boss. As the Peasant Party from Transylvania attempted to bring order to the interwar Regat, or as the Hungarian minority of Timișoara, a city in the Banat closer to Vienna than to Bucharest, kick-started the toppling of Ceaușescu, so now would 'progress' in Romania seem to come from the technocratic west, again attempting to impose order on the chaotic Balkan east that is the fief of the PSD. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, the Hungarian radical born in Cluj in 1948 and expelled by the Ceaușescu regime in 1981, has likened the DNA to an anti-democratic Habsburg bureaucracy imposing its understanding of enlightenment on an Eastern European

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<sup>58</sup> Ionuț Stănescu, 'Iohannis încă face bani din casa care nu îi mai aparține', *Rise Project*, 2 February 2016.

peasantry too backward to understand what's best for itself. Voices like his are rare in the country, where criticism of the EU from the left is in short supply—confined in Bucharest to *CriticAtac*, an online platform of Marxist analysis, and in Cluj to the bilingual Babeş-Bolyai University, which possesses one of the premier sociology departments in Europe, and was almost single-handedly responsible for the re-foundation of Romania's left during the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>59</sup>

One of the great successes of the DNA has been its ability to use middle-class protests to control Europe's vision of Romania today. Those who join the street movements admire it out of a mixture of naivety and fear of what Romania has been. It is a generation whose memory of communism is that of the austerity decade into which they were born, and who were raised in the wild-turf capitalism of the 1990s. Not only has their prosperity come from the influx of multinationals, whose CEOs now take to the streets with them in protest; so have many of their progressive values.<sup>60</sup> Until the time comes for the corporations to head further east in search of cheaper labour, they will be a powerful stimulant of what Romanians call *ura de sine*—their unusually strong brew of national self-hatred. But it is unclear what will be left in Romania by then, between emigration—more Romanian doctors can be found in France than in their native land, all educated by Romanian taxpayers—and the final dousing of the embers of Ceauşescu's social state.

In Bucharest, the second-largest city in the Balkans, the deprivations of the last century are everywhere on display. A capital that in the 1930s aspired to be the Little Paris of the East has emerged from communism a metropolis of compulsive conformity, with more fast-food outlets per capita than almost anywhere else in Europe. As mayor, Băsescu oversaw the killing of some 50,000 stray dogs that had been responsible for one in four emergency-room visits in Romania. Now the old centre of the city pullulates with neon advertisements and stag parties of drunken British bachelors: a new Prague. Ceauşescu's People's House, the heaviest

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<sup>59</sup> Cornel Ban, 'Beyond Anticommunism: The Fragility of Class Analysis in Romania', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2015, pp. 646–8. *CriticAtac* is edited by Florin Poenaru, Ştefan Guga, Alex Cistelean, Vasile Ernu, Vladimir Bortun and Costi Rogozanu. See also, G. M. Tamăs, 'Words from Budapest', NLR 80, March–April 2013.

<sup>60</sup> 'Expat bank CEO joins protests in Bucharest: I care about my children's future', *Romania-Insider*, 6 February 2017.

building on Earth, has become a sepulchral museum, too vast for the state to illuminate at night, its foundations crumbling into fist-sized chunks of concrete available for cheap tourist pillage. The *blocuri comuniste* have been cleared away to make space for chain hotels that receive the new influx of international businessmen. In the suburbs, sprawled around the giant American embassy, ranks of new shopping malls have left the city's main boulevard, Calea Victoriei—where Mircea Eliade and Constantin Noica became writers and Gorbachev rode alongside Ceaușescu during his 1987 motorcade—a succession of shuttered storefronts. The careworn publicly owned cinemas once clustered around the Cișmigiu Gardens are all but gone: the ex-Securitate owners of the new multiplexes have reportedly outsourced the destruction of their competition to racketeering gangs. Only in the daunting old boyar mansions of neighbourhoods like Negustori and Armenească can you get a glimpse of the pre-communist past. Knots of Roma drift around, held in pitiless contempt by the other locals, hawking flowers and bathing in the Dâmbovița for sport.

The most intriguing trial being conducted in Bucharest today is one unconnected to corruption. It is putting Romania's revolution in the dock nearly three decades after the fact. Ion Iliescu, now 87, has been charged with crimes against humanity owing to his use of miners to bludgeon dissent in June 1990. He stands to be imprisoned for the rest of his life. The point of the trial is very much the trial itself. The next generation of the Romanian state is devouring the last, in a way reminiscent of Iliescu and the FSN's own use of Ceaușescu as a scapegoat for communism. In Hungary and Poland, the legacy of 1989 threatens to be undone by its 'heroes', Orbán and Kaczyński. Romania is different. Iliescu is not only a means through which the DNA can end three decades of entrenched PSD power. He is also the victim of a political system that is now not simply attacking the legacy of 1989, but seeking to rewrite its narrative as well. A revolution still lacking any credibly agreed interpretation risks being issued one in the courtroom.

The lack of any sober examination of the past in the national operetta of politics has, as if by compensation, received sustained treatment in one of Europe's liveliest cultural scenes. In provincial cities such as Brăila or Galați, the plays of Caragiale and Ionesco still attract discerning audiences at weekend performances in grand nineteenth-century theatres. Nation-wide quality bookstore chains—Carturesti,

Humanitas—showcase the work of novelists, from Adrian Schiop to Ruxandra-Mihaela Cesereanu to Vasile Ernu, who, though only sporadically translated out of Romanian, probe the bleakness of the recent past with the same savage black humour as Mircea Cărtărescu or Norman Manea, their better-known counterparts. If these novelists remain more popular within Romania than outside of it, the Romanian New Wave, the most dynamic cinema in Eastern Europe, is the opposite. The new generation of Romanian directors—Radu Muntea, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristi Puiu—now rake in major prizes from international film festivals every year, but it was Cannes that first registered the crop of talent coming out of Bucharest: *Un Certain Regard* went to *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu) in 2005, the *Caméra d'Or* to *12:08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu) a year later, the *Palme d'Or* to *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu) the year after that. The New Wave directors were all coming of age at the time of Ceaușescu's overthrow, the only 1989 revolution to be thoroughly captured on camera from the barricades. Their early work ably dismantled any insinuation that Romania would resemble a European state once it had become a European Union one. The country of films like *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* and *Stuff and Dough* (Cristi Puiu, 2001) is a terrifyingly bleak place, stillborn between the death pangs of communism on the one hand and the onset of predatory capitalism on the other, all of it captured in the measured detachment of dry, observational scene-work. Foreigners have proved the most avid followers of what amounts to yet another Romanian product for European consumption: countering the travel-brochure idealizations of depopulated natural backdrops with depictions of a national landscape of grisly hospitals, hollowed-out universities and decrepit apartment blocks. Within Romania the reception has been curiously subdued. Of those who do go to the cinema—a small number: Romania has but a hundred movie screens and ranks among the lowest in ticket sales in Europe—most flock to the new multiplexes showcasing American blockbusters.<sup>61</sup>

The fixation of the New Wave has more recently gravitated from the collapse of communism to what never went away: Romania's unrelenting internal bureaucracy, infiltrating every nook of society—an inescapable, almost climatic force which homes in on rich and poor alike with equalizing ruin. Its only antidote appears to be the very corruption

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<sup>61</sup> Corneliu Porumboiu with Daniel Fairfax, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 5 October 2015.

that perpetuates it—that, or leaving Romania altogether. In *Police, Adjective* (Porumboiu, 2009), a detective is tasked with the absurd mission of directing all the resources of the Vaslui police department towards the arrest of a trio of teenagers caught smoking pot in a park. In *Child's Pose* (Călin Peter Netzer, 2013), a rich Hungarian matriarch attempts to bribe her son's way out of a manslaughter conviction after he drives over a peasant boy from the villages, only to find herself confronting the defiant moral code of the countryside. 'You know in '91, your mother and I decided to move back', Romeo, a doctor from Cluj in Mungiu's 2016 *Graduation*, tells his daughter, Eliza. Eliza has been assaulted the day before her final exams; her chance for a scholarship at a UK university is now in jeopardy. Romeo must bribe her way out of Romania and grease the culture of corruption he despises. 'It was a bad decision. We thought things would change, we thought we'd move mountains', Romeo tells Eliza. 'We didn't move anything.'