



New Perspectives on Contemporary Romania: From Dictatorial Pasts to a European Future

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Over thirty years ago, the Iron Curtain disappeared from mental maps while people from the former communist countries of Europe could travel freely across this barrier which separated countries and nations. Romania and Romanians lagged behind the others in the rush to “return to Europe.” Since the formal criteria of joining the European Union proved a test hard to pass, Romania became an EU member state in 2007, three years after the first wave of enlargement, while Romanians could travel freely in Europe since 2002, a serious delay as compared to others in Central Europe. Many imagined then an exodus of job-seeking Romanians towards the West, which would destabilize the labor market. Indeed, by 2008, Romanians had established large diaspora communities in many European countries, in particular in the Latin south. The Romanian diaspora in Spain represented the largest community living outside Romania and played a key role in domestic politics by turning upside down election results – particularly in 2009. In Romania, they are known as “căpşunari,” which means strawberry pickers, a pejorative name which refers to their low social status in the host countries and back home. On 10 August 2018, however, the “strawberry pickers” showed that they evolved into a transnational diaspora increasingly involved in the process of democratic consolidation at home by organizing a massive pro-democracy protest in Bucharest. Furthermore, in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Romanian agricultural workers became, to the surprise of many, a much sought-after workforce in several European countries. While these transnational economic networks continue to supply unqualified and cheap labor in areas of need, Romanians abroad are living aside the host communities and seldom together, as it happens with most of the migrants in the world. This special issue offers a glimpse into the recent past, the turbulent present and uncertain future of Romania and aims at explaining who are the Romanians, these people who do celebrate Christmas with the rest of Europe, but not Easter, who are so close yet still far away.

The selection of papers for this special issue presents the topical variety and methodological diversity achieved lately by studies on post-World War I Romanian history, politics and society. Geographic dispersion is also important, because it illustrates a gradual internationalization of Romanian studies, with a special emphasis on comparative and transnational approaches in a broader European context. Purposively, the studies selected are authored by scholars from the three historic regions

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of Romania, that is, Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania, as well as by foreign scholars specializing in Romanian topics from Western and Central Europe. It is also true that a selection of only six studies is not able to cover the entire spectrum of innovative works on Romanian history, politics and society covering the period from the immediate aftermath of World War I to the present. The present selection is meant to shed more light on the innovative scholarship which emerged recently on a traditionally underresearched European region.

The studies selected are briefly introduced below following the order of the historical periods they concentrate upon. Mihai Stelian Rusu (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu) adopts a fresh perspective on the Iron Guard, the extreme right movement in interwar Romania, by examining gender roles within the movement with an emphasis on models of fascist femininity endorsed by the short lived Romanian National Legionary State (September 1940 – January 1941). Francesco Zavatti (Södertörn University, Stockholm) proposes a new approach to the official production of history by examining the monographs and journals published from the 1960s to the 1980s by the Institute for Historical and Socio-Political Studies (*Institutul de Studii Istorice și Social-Politice de pe Lîngă C.C. al P.C.R.*) – the Romanian Communist Party’s official history institute. Błażej Brzostek (University of Warsaw) puts forward a complex analysis, from a comparative perspective, of the category of “normality” in relation to everyday life in communist Poland and Romania, two “fraternal” regimes whose norms and rules have been often described as being essentially “abnormal.” Cristina Petrescu (University of Bucharest) sets forth a highly original research on Ceaușescu’s Romania regarding the way transfers of cultural meanings and practices across the Iron Curtain nurtured a new sense of being European, which was experienced by individuals who tried to live as if in a free country while actually living under a dictatorship. Simona Mitroiu (“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iași) focuses on a topic of major interest, that is, memories of the young generation of late communism and argues that a complex narrative of the past emerged from these, involving a transition to youth years and specific knowledge of the life conditions and bothersome problems of life in late communism.

Dragoș Petrescu (University of Bucharest) addresses, from an innovative methodological perspective, the legacy of the 1989 regime change and argues that the exceptional nature of the 1989 events in Romania, that is, violent and controversial, has led in a convoluted way to the birth of a political (sub)culture of contestation, which favored democratic consolidation and hampered so far authoritarian backsliding on the Central European model.

Instead of concluding remarks, this special issue reproduces the Doctor Honoris Causa reception speech by Daniel Chirot (University of Seattle, USA), delivered at the University of Bucharest in October 2019 and entitled “Why 20th Century Romanian Sociology and History are Relevant Today.” As a prominent international scholar on social, political and economic change, Chirot is among the figures best placed to assess not only the challenges posed by choosing Romania as subject of research, but also the valuable lessons learned from many years of such research.