DOSIER

Cuadernos de **Historia Contemporánea**
ISSN: 0214-400X

EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/chco.71891

Everyday Existence under the Communist Regime: "Normality" and Its Collapse in the 1980s

Błażej Brzostek[1]

Recibido: 15 de junio de 2020 / Aceptado: 11 de julio 2020

Abstract. This study focuses on two "fraternal" countries, Romania and Poland, and addresses the category of "normality" in relation to everyday life under communist rule and therefore under a political regime whose rules are sometimes described as essentially "abnormal". It has been argued that everyday life best reveals the nature of totalitarianism, because totalitarianism attacked and deformed all spheres of life, imposing dependence on, and fear of, soulless rules to consolidate power. "Normality" can be equated with predictability and a sense of security in everyday life, and its opposite would be a situation of uncertainty and danger: on an individual level – illness or unemployment, on a collective level – war, a great economic crisis, an epidemic. But "normality" is perhaps above all a colloquial category of judgment and criticism; it often becomes a postulated or idealized image of proper life. "Normality" also implies the existence of a certain norm and at this level becomes an element of social distinction; what is "abnormal" for given groups, can be a tame life picture for others. This study concentrates on concepts such as" norm," "normality" and "normalization" and the various meanings and understandings related to their use under communist rule by addressing the cases of Poland and Romania.
Keywords: communism; normality; normalization; everyday life; shortages.

[es] La existencia diaria bajo el régimen comunista: "normalidad" y su colapso en los años ochenta

Resumen. Este estudio se centra en dos países "hermanos", Rumania y Polonia, y aborda la categoría de "normalidad" en relación con la vida cotidiana bajo el gobierno de la comuna y, por lo tanto, bajo un régimen político cuyas reglas a veces se describen como esencialmente "anormales". Se ha argumentado que la vida cotidiana revela mejor la naturaleza del totalitarismo, porque el totalitarismo atacó y deformó todas las esferas de la vida, imponiendo la dependencia y el miedo a las reglas sin alma para consolidar el poder. La "normalidad" se puede equiparar con la previsibilidad y la sensación de seguridad en la vida cotidiana, y su contrario sería una situación de incertidumbre y peligro: a nivel individual – enfermedad o desempleo, a nivel colectivo – guerra, una gran crisis económica, una epidemia. Pero la "normalidad" es quizás ante todo una categoría coloquial de juicio y crítica; a menudo se convierte en una imagen postulada o idealizada de la vida adecuada. La "normalidad" también implica la existencia de una determinada norma y en este nivel se convierte en un elemento de distinción social; lo que es "anormal" para determinados grupos, puede ser un cuadro de vida dócil para otros. Este estudio se concentra en conceptos como "norma", "normalidad" y "normalización" y los diversos significados y entendimientos relacionados con su uso bajo el gobierno comunista, abordando los casos de Polonia y Rumania…
Palabras clave: comunismo; normalidad; normalización; vida cotidiana; escasez.

Sumario. 1. Introduction. About "normality" and "norm". 2. Between "solidarity of friends" and "anxious anticipation". 3. "It looks like a total collapse". 4. "Our queues". 5. Instead of conclusion: "They have!".

[1] Institute of History, University of Warsaw
E-mail: b.brzostek@uw.edu.pl

Cómo citar: Brzostek, B. (2020). Everyday existence under the communist regime: “normality” and its collapse in the 1980s. *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea*, Vol. 42: 59-78.

“Someday it will be normal” – promised on the cover the Polish opinion-making “General Weekly” in March 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic changed the rules of everyday life[2]. As a result of shopping rush, hygiene products, pasta and cereal disappeared (briefly) from stores. A generation of thirty-year-olds in Romania or Poland for the first time in their lives experienced the lack of toilet paper, while elders had the opportunity to live nostalgic moments. National borders were closed. The role of state institutions that impose the control regime has increased. In some countries, citizens were forbidden to leave their homes, while in others all bars and cafes were closed. Car traffic decreased and nightlife ceased. All this meant the suspension of the existing rules of existence, and thus the exclusion of “normality”, which became a memory of recent life and an expression of waiting for the restoration of known principles. And above all to regain “freedom.”

These types of phenomena are repeated in social life. Natural disasters, epidemics, wars or sudden political changes impose on the inhabitants of regions or countries an “abnormal” way of living, threatening their lives or just suspending the adopted rhythms and ways of organizing the day. This type of events often creates so-called generational experience, such as student riots in France or Poland in 1968, or it produces deep traumas, such as the earthquake in Romania in the spring of 1977. This can be also accelerator of fundamental changes in collective life.

A kind of such a turning point was to impose on the Central and Eastern European countries a new, modeled on the Soviet power system in the late 1940s, the era of far-reaching, sometimes dramatic changes in everyday life, whose fragile “normality” was being rebuilt after the destruction of World War II. Coupling the effects of the war, completely destroying in some countries the material and social landscape, and the violent political moves of the new regimes have created a very deep turning point in the history of part of Europe, which was on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. The political evolution of given countries ran differently over the next decades, but there were many similarities as a derivative of the political and economic system and the social evolution of these countries, officially called “fraternal”.

1. Introduction. About “normality” and “norm”

Daniela Koleva considers the problem of “normality” and “norm” in relation to communist countries, placing it in a broad historical context. It points to the evolution of the concept of “norm” in the nineteenth century appropriate for the language of medicine, which distinguished “norm” from “pathology”, creating the basis for the normalization of various areas of life, from the human body or the amount of calories daily consumed to the normalization of work or device parameters. The “norm” has become a universal indicator of the proper functioning of the human, social or economic organism. Normalization thus inevitably became an instrument of political

---

[2] “Tygodnik Powszechny” (Cracow), 22 March 2020.

power, which determined what "norm" is[3]. Numerous scientific institutions were established defining "norms" in various fields, while the modern notion of "normality" as a set of pre-defined principles instilled by the educational system was rooted in social consciousness. In a special way, the "norm" was assimilated by totalitarian systems, which made it a tool of strict control, as well as mobilization (famous labor norms and socialist competition of work) and political repression (when opposition attitudes were defined as pathological). Correspondence to norm, or "normality", became an image of political subordination, the best example of which being the so-called normalization in Czechoslovakia after crushing the Prague Spring. At the same time, however, it seems that the colloquially understood "normality" referred primarily to the quality of life, but also to the desired and unattainable state of affairs.

In this text I would like to focus on two "fraternal" countries, Romania and Poland. I am interested in the category of "normality" in relation to everyday life in a regime whose rules are sometimes described (not only in journalism but also historiography!) as essentially "abnormal". In 1972, Polish writer and publicist Leopold Tyrmand announced in exile the pamphlet "The Civilization of Communism", in which he argued that everyday life best reveals the nature of totalitarianism. "People who do not live in communism do not understand why people say there: 'soup in communism', 'communist billiards', 'writer in communism', 'communist tomatoes'"[4]. In his vision, totalitarianism attacked and deformed all spheres of life, imposing dependence and fear on soulless rules to consolidate power. In versions generally more sublime than Tyrmand's pamphlet, this view of "communism" was characteristic of classical sovietology. It focused on the mechanisms of power, the regime's pressure on the social masses, and the possible resistance of these masses to brutal changes such as collectivization of agriculture. The image of everyday life imposed by such a perspective is an image of deformation or destruction of existing ("traditional") structures by the new system as well as an image of resistance and adaptation of society to a new situation.[5] The revaluation brought by the so-called revisionist school in sovietology, consisted in showing the complex relationship between the apparatus of power and citizens, and above all the influence of the latter on the formation of the system and its evolution.[6] There would be no room here for any "communist tomatoes" as abnormal tomatoes, but for simply "tomatoes" born in such and no other social and economic circumstances.

It is easy to see that the concepts proposed here are fluid and intuitive. The issue of "everyday life", although understandable to everyone, is a research challenge. The Polish historian Maria Bogucka tried to define it on the basis of extensive literature on the subject, concluding that determining the boundaries of the concept is basically impossible, and the typical scope of its understanding by researchers includes the "naturalness" of surrounding reality from the point of view of people living in it, predictability rhythms of the day, good knowledge of the rules of the game by the

---

3 Daniela, Koleva (Ed.): *Negotiating Normality. Everyday Lives in Socialist Institutions*, New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers, 2012, VII-XV.

4 Tyrmand, Leopold: *Cywilizacja komunizmu* [The Civilisation of Communism], Łomianki, LTW, 2006, p, 8.

5 See among new studies: Prisac, Lidia and Grădinaru, Natalia: "Dimensiuni ale cotidianului sovietic în RSSM" [Dimensions of Soviet Everyday Life in Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic], in: Liliana Carobca (Ed.): *Panorama comunismului în Moldova sovietică* [The Panorama of Communism in Soviet Moldavia], Iaşi, Polirom, 2019, pp. 703-723.

6 See Werth, Nicolas: *Le terreur et le désarroi. Staline et son système*, Paris: Perrin, 2007.

actors of a social performance[7]. So these would be components of intuitively understood "normality". In the works of sociologists, social psychologists or historians, there are several levels on which to analyze everyday phenomena. In one of them (1), "everyday life" approaches Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and analyzes of social networks. "Everyday life" would be a sphere of social experience in the environment, whose feature would be a certain stability, duration – the ideal research area would be a small territorial community here with established rules of existence and to a limited extent subject to external influences. Another plane on which the problems of "everyday life" are considered is (2) the material sphere of existence. It is the most natural way to learn about the earliest epochs that have not left written sources. Recreating daily farming practices and activities becomes in archeology (as in ethnography) a way to learn more complex social relationships. In historical studies of later societies, the material sphere (civilization) becomes a research area for economic and social structures, which Fernand Braudel described on a large scale, but always referring to facts from everyday existence, such as food, clothing or the shape of house. Everyday life appeared here as part of a great spectacle of civilization, embracing entire continents over many centuries. Gradually, however, research moved to social experiences on a smaller scale, and finally towards microhistory. On a different, rather sociological research level (3), "everyday life" is the sum of activities and events typical of given groups or individuals during the day, so the basic reference here is time. This kind of image of everyday life was revealed in studies of the so-called social time. A particularly large research project of this type was carried out in many European countries and in the USA in the mid-1960s under the direction of Alexander Szalai[8]. These were surveys that showed in a synthetic way the order of activities of residents, as well as, among others, inequalities in the distribution of time between men and women. Poland was included in these studies (surveys were carried out in Toruń). It is worth pointing out that at that time Polish sociologists conducted numerous similar studies. It would appear from the works of Salai's team and related projects that the modernization of everyday life appeared to be one of the main problems, including in particular the nature of professional work, transport, as well as mass-media (mainly television) in creating everyday behavior. However, these studies did not suggest that there were any major differences in the time budget between communist and capitalist countries. This was undoubtedly the result of the adopted methodology (surveys), which did not detect problems related to home supplies or political life. These aspects of reality focused on sovietologists and historians interested in social phenomena in the USSR and "fraternal" countries. This is where the plane important from the point of view of this text appeared, i.e. the search for (4) the specificity of existence in countries subject to communist rule.

In classical sovietology, interest in political phenomena and power elites was definitely dominant. Celebration (power spectacle) rather than everyday life and the center rather than the periphery had significance in such analyzes. But the "revisionist" trend was turning away from similar approaches5. Rather, it was interested in bottom-up adaptation strategies that allowed it to tame reality and pursue its own

---

7 Bogucka, Maria: *Życie codzienne – spory wokół profilu badań i definicji* [The Everyday Life – Disputes around the Research Profile and Definitions], "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej" (1996, 3), pp. 247-253.

8 Szalai, Alexander (Ed.): *The Use of Time. Daily Activities of Urban and Suburban Populations in Twelve Countries*, The Hague, Mouton & Co, 1972.

interests, whether in accordance with or in breach of applicable rules. The great workplace with its rhythms, state management and crew, trying to protect their own interests, as Sandrine Kott and Małgorzata Mazurek turned out to be the perfect area for such analyzes[9].

Still, it seems that political and social change is more interesting to scholars of communism than longue durée. In the sphere of everyday life, they are usually interested in the difficulties and limitations that touched citizens. Describing the housing situation, they are focussed in particular on repressive changes (expropriation, limitation of living space etc.) in the initial phase of the system and unsatisfied housing hunger in its declining phase. They deal with market shortages and queuing phenomena, focusing on particularly difficult periods. It also happens that they apply the concept of "abnormality" to the described phenomena without reflection. One researcher, writing about the developing practices of home-made chocolate or cheese making in Romania in 1980, absent from sales, claims that this was a reality "inconceivable for someone living in a normal society"[10]. This should be read as a reference to some imagined "western" norm.

"Normality" can be equated with predictability and a sense of security in everyday life, and its opposite would be a situation of uncertainty and danger: on an individual level, illness or unemployment, on a collective level, war, a great economic crisis, an epidemic. But "normality" is perhaps above all a colloquial category of judgment and criticism; it often becomes a postulated or idealized image of proper life. "Normality" also implies the existence of a certain norm and at this level becomes an element of social distinction; what is "abnormal" for given groups, can be a tame life picture for others. This is one of the difficulties in selecting and analyzing sources related to the communist dictatorship. The Polish pianist and music critic Roman Jasiński (born in 1900) described the year 1956 as "the beginning of a more normal life. This normality was manifested especially in terms of more frequent contacts with the West"[11]. Since then, Jasiński traveled to France and Italy every year. In turn, these trips allowed him to assess the state of affairs in Poland, very critical with regard to material living conditions. "Indeed, it may be better not to lean the head through the gates westwards; the more heartburn and hangover thereafter", he noted after returning from Italy in the fall of 1958[12]. At the same time, the mathematician Hugo Steinhaus (born in 1887) compiled in his diary statements of everyday shortcomings and inconveniences in Wrocław. He concluded that perhaps none of these phenomena in themselves is "strange", but their sum creates a very peculiar situation[13].

Of course, reaching for the message of elite (or repressed) groups causes the inevitable curvature of the perspective. These messages seem to be the most expressive, they illustrate the mechanisms of exercising power and repression appropriate for

---

9 Kott, Sandrine: *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société est-allemande*, Paris, Belin, 2001; Mazurek, Małgorzata: *Socjalistyczny zakład pracy. Porównanie fabrycznej codzienności w PRL i NRD u progu lat sześćdziesiątych* [Socialist Workplace. A Comparison of Factory Everyday Life in the PRL and GDR at the Beginning of the Sixties], Warszawa, Trio, 2005.

10 Liiceanu, Aurora: "Le quotidien communiste", in: Adrian Neculau (Ed.), *La vie quotidienne en Roumanie sous le communisme*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 65.

11 Jasiński, Roman: *Nowe życie. Wspomnienia 1945-1976* [A New Life. Memories 1945-1976], Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2019, p. 186.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 253.

13 Steinhaus, Hugo: *Wspomnienia i zapiski* [Memories and Notes], Wrocław, Atut, 2002, p. 490 (18 XII 1959).

the system, as well as its social engineering, which consists in the degradation of former privileged groups and the promotion of "children of workers and peasants". This mass social advancement, largely based on migration to cities and the use of industrialization, was a flagship element of propaganda, but also an important social fact whose study is not easy. First of all, it should be pointed out that the promoted groups rarely used the category of "normality", adopted by groups that had been stabilized in the past. Rather, the category of "persistence" (and "survival"), characteristic of peasant communities and poor urban strata, was appropriate for them, while post-war social changes instilled convictions about the possibility of "promotion". These opportunities were associated with the migrations already mentioned, but also with the development of education at various levels.

These changes were not specific to the communist world. Everyday life landscape in agro-industrial countries regardless of their political system has undergone significant changes under the influence of modernization, i.e. the spread of full-time employment, standardized working time, urban lifestyle marked by remoteness of residence and work place, use of collective transport, and the use of large commercial networks. But in Poland or Romania these phenomena were subject to central control by the political apparatus that liquidated (or strongly limitated) private sectors of the economy. The "norm" was to become collectivized agriculture and a rapidly growing city, whose population, in a growing percentage employed in industry, was influenced by mass culture and secularization. But the Polish sociologist Jan Węgleński asks whether it was not "urbanization without modernization", of course also referring to a certain "western" norm[14]. It points to the hasty nature of the process, which resulted from political decisions on rapid industrialization and from the state monopoly in the field of housing. In these conditions, after the rapid dismantling of the former economic fabric and social hierarchy, a new urbanized society emerged. The semi-modernization was also due to the phenomenon called by János Kornai the economy of shortage. Elementary supply shortages in the 1950s prompted the urban population to develop adaptation strategies, i.e. securing everyday needs by maintaining strong relations with the village, functioning on the black market, in the "gray zone", which – despite the general modernization assumptions – strengthened a number of pre-modern phenomena, including the capital importance of personal relations. It was, in particular in the case of Poland, a kind of continuation of social particularities well known from the times of war and occupation[15].

With the passing of decades of communist rule, the category of "normality" necessarily changed, which in the eyes of the generation born around 1945 and coming into independent life in the early 1960s, had to develop completely differently than in the eyes of their parents. This generation and younger did not know from their own experience other realities of life than those offered to them by the state of "people's democracy." At the same time, however, intergenerational dialogue, clearly suppressed in the era of the great fear of the 1950s (the "obsessive decade," as Stalinism was called in Romania), but then undoubtedly more vivid, as well as contacts with the western countries opening up especially in the 1960s, gave to the

---

[14] Węgleński, Jan: *Urbanizacja bez modernizacji?* [Urbanisation without Modernisation?], Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1992.

[15] See Kochanowski, Jerzy, *Through the Back Door. The Black Market in Poland 1944-1989*, Peter Lang, 2017.

"normality" very relative character. With the growing difficulties in economic life and demoralization in the ideological sphere (which became evident in both countries in the 1970s), the phantasmatic image of the West as a land of "normality" grew. It became widespread especially in the last decade of regimes whose failure became socially obvious.

"Normality" and "norm" can be associated here with the "average", i.e. statistical data, which before 1989 were (especially in Romania) the object of the strictest control, and during the political transformation became the determinant of the position of both countries on the map of Europe. Statistical data were devastating in this respect. In 1989, national income in Poland ($ 1760) and Romania ($ 1567) was five times lower than the European average (8298) and ten times lower than in Italy. Passenger cars per thousand inhabitants were 119 in Poland and 50 in Romania, with the European average of 197[16]. These data reflected social experience of perceptions of "normality." As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes write: "In 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe people did not dream of an ideal world that never existed. They wanted a 'normal life' in a 'normal country'. When Poles […] spoke of 'normality', they clearly did not mean any previous, pre-communist period of Polish history, to which their country could happily return to when the Soviet occupation was over. By 'normality' they meant the West"[17]. This view can be partially agreed, pointing out that the figure of "normality" in the Polish (and undoubtedly broader, Central European) mentality was clearly associated with the image of the past. It was the "abnormal" political system that tried to detach from it the nations subordinated to the USSR. Their social and political evolution would be, if not for the foreign yoke, "normal." It often revealed here that "communism" is by its very nature a denial of normality, which manifests itself at various levels, ranging from mysterious political life to the peculiar phenomena of everyday life.

2. Between "solidarity of friends" and "anxious anticipation"

"I don't know what awaits me in Bucharest, but I'm going back to my normal life," wrote Alice Voinescu in January 1954[18]. Scholar, first Romanian woman with a doctorate in philosophy (1913), theater historian, former lecturer at the music and theater school, she became arrested and spent 19 months in prison and a dozen or so in so-called forced settlement in the Moldavian village of Costeşti. Released from prison, driving in autumn 1952 to her settlement, she stopped in the town of Târgu-Frumos, noting its striking dirt and ugliness. In a dingy restaurant, she ate hard-boiled eggs and bone-in soup on the water, feeling happiness from this form of self-determination[19]. The later return to Bucharest was to be a return to "normal life". But before she was arrested, Voinsecu did not describe her life in terms of "normality." From 1948, deprived of work at the music academy, living in difficult conditions, sur-

[16] Murgescu, Bogdan: *România şi Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)*, Bucureşti, Polirom, 2010, pp. 329-330.

[17] Krastew, Iwan and Holmes, Stephen: "Naśladowanie i bunt. Co się dzieje z Europą Wschodnią?" [Imitation and Rebellion. What is Happening with Eastern Europe?], *Znak*, 2020, Vol. 3, pp. 35.

[18] Voinescu, Alice: *Jurnal*, [Diary], ed. Maria Ana Murnu, vol. II., Bucureşti, Polirom, 2013, p. 309 (19 I 1954; underline by the author).

[19] *Ibidem*, 319.

rounded by distrust, she noted various everyday emotions. Among these emotions were those that made up the sense of losing the world, as Pierre Bourdieu will call it, when everything seemed "unreal" to her. She was afraid of "total poverty", hoping mainly for "solidarity of friends", exposed to "all deficiencies and, above all, insecurity." She crowed about "anxious anticipation." The state of tension gave way to apathy (which Voinescu called "atony"), a type of paralysis associated with a decreasing ability to respond to the phenomena surrounding it: "It's like falling asleep slowly, forgetting, dying"[20]. It was a kind of adaptive mechanism resulting from increasingly difficult living conditions. In February 1951 she wrote: "I could not believe that it is possible to live in a similar apathy. Everything is narrowing – from living space to intellectual horizons"[21]. The result was a gradual focus on the present tense: "I have to get used to living only in the present. To enjoy summer days, flowers, trees and quiet hours. " Remaining in the present was also forced by numerous efforts around maintenance and supply.

Mental phenomena of this kind have been described by many witnesses of the era, in particular those whose lives have been degraded by the regime's political and economic oppression. A similar register of phenomena can be found in these descriptions: the impression of a confiscation of the future, appearing as an unknown area marked by fear; narrowing of the life framework due to economic difficulties (lack of a permanent job or very low salaries) and shortages (queues, searching for goods); the everyday free time limitation. Polish sociologist and witness of the era Hanna Świda-Ziemba called Stalinism "a thief of human time", describing the regime of permanent meetings, social work and training, which, combined with food and communication difficulties, caused constant fatigue[22]. These phenomena were described in the context of own experience or observation of public space, when behavioral changes (increase of rudeness and brutality) or collective mood were noted.

All this, however, became in the narrative of Voinescu the "normal life" to which she returned after the most dramatic episode of her experiences in the Stalinist era. From the point of view of prison and exile, all the burdens of existence took on a tolerable character. This type of adaptation, it seems, was based on the mechanism of collective psychology.

But Voinescu put the concept of a normal life in quotation marks. So she distanced herself from it, suggesting that she had met a different level of "abnormalities" – prison and exile. Also the Bucharest writer Pericle Martinescu, who kept his journal at the same time, used the concept of normality in quotation marks when he described the calming down of the mood after the shock of a drastic monetary reform, which in 1952 deprived citizens of some savings, and was associated with a few days of trade paralysis and inability to supply food[23]. These types of actions produced collective traumas that caused rumors to return in the next decades about another "exchange of money" and panic, manifesting as siege of grocery stores and stockpiling. This

---

[20] *Ibidem*, 93-114 (30 XII 1947-7 V 1948)

[21] *Ibidem*, 213 (6 II 1951).

[22] Świda-Ziemba, Hanna: *Człowiek wewnętrznie zniewolony. Problemy psychosocjologiczne minionej formacji* [The Internally Enslaved Man. Psychosociological Problems of the Past Formation], Warszawa, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1998, pp. 134-136.

[23] Martinescu, Pericle: *7 ani cât 70. Pagini de jurnal (1948-1954)* [7 Years like 70. The Pages from a Diary], București, Editura Vitruviu, 1997, pp. 237 (12 II 1952).

phenomenon, it seems, was particularly intensified in Poland, where exceptional war trauma persisted, causing this sort of social behavior. Rumors of “money exchange” also circulated in Romania, even during a period of relative material prosperity. For example, in 1974, the security service reported that TV workers were spreading such rumors[24].

The significant difference between Poland and Romania during the Stalinism period was precisely the burden of war damage, which was incomparably heavier in Poland. They gave the whole era an aura of great reconstruction, which greatly facilitated the survival of Stalinism. This probably contributed, among other historical and political reasons, to the less drastic nature of the “obsessive decade” in Poland. The general policy assumptions were similar – liquidation of the private sector, collectivization of agriculture, strenuous industrialization – but in Poland they were not carried out so consistently and with such victims. On the other hand, the recovery program had an integrating power and largely weakened the destructive impetus of the power apparatus, and gave citizens hope for the future. Suffice it to mention the contrast between the very small housing construction in Romania and the great project of the Workers’ Housing Estate (ZOR) implemented in Poland (1950-1955).

Notwithstanding these differences, Stalinism left in the social life of both countries the memory of elementary uncertainty in everyday life. Expropriations, sudden changes in regulations, repressive controls, monetary reforms draining the pockets of citizens, sudden food shortages – caused permanent anxiety. The threat of political repression, the activity of the secret police and arrest were particularly intense. Martinescu noted in the spring of 1951: “Every evening I lie down with the feeling that the next day I will not wake up in my room”[25].

This kind of feeling of elemental life instability weakened in Poland in the mid-1950s, and in Romania in the first half of the 1960s. Destalinization in these countries had a different character, marked in Poland by mass social pressure, and in Romania by the political strategy of the power elite, undoubtedly much more coherent one. Regardless of this, the system was characterized by a significant decrease in repressiveness and an increase in the standard of living. In Poland, whose regime was for a couple of years after 1956 the most politically and culturally liberal in the Eastern Bloc, this phenomenon was called “little stabilisation” (referring to the title of Tadeusz Różewicz’s play from 1962). This also meant a certain fragility of the obtained “normality”, including persistent fears of the outbreak of war. Similar symptoms can be seen in Romania. Its regime was very conservative in internal politics, but to some extent it opened up economically (importing western technologies and goods, developing tourism, recognizing a certain individual initiative in the economy), and above all, it continued its great industrial and construction expansion. In the 1960s, the medium-sized cities were remarkably rebuilt, and a housing estate, consisting of blocks of flats, became the basic form of housing. In both countries they were years of fairly common faith in the progress and benefits of “modernity”, which was associated, among others automotive appetites, aroused by the introduction of passenger cars into production.

---

[24] Consiliul Naţional pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securităţii [The National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives] (CNSAS), D 1/14, p. 264: Nota raport, 20 II 1974.

[25] Martinescu, *7 ani*, 233 (28 III 1951).

Romania was ahead of Poland by a few years, under the power of "early Ceauşescu", with a policy of certain opening to the West, acquiring its technology and loans, what caused, by the end of the 1960s, the substantial external debt. These years, however, brought an increase in consumer potential for society and were remembered as relatively prosperous. Differently in Poland, which under the rule of "late Gomułka" defended itself against this kind of opening, among others due to fears of dependence on capitalist markets. However, the policy of autarky, conducted in a country experiencing the effects of the demographic boom, led to a clear limitation of consumption possibilities. This produced a social rebellion in December 1970, which caused the collapse of Gomułka's rule. His successor, Edward Gierek, applied the "Romanian" variant of economic policy, broadly opening Poland since 1971 for Western loans and technologies. Gierek's policy was also noticeably liberal in terms of culture and social contacts with the West. Meanwhile, 1971 brought the opposite tendency in Romania: Ceauşescu tightened cultural policy and imposed restrictions on individual contacts with the West, and within a few years also limited economic cooperation with capitalist countries, undoubtedly under the impression of growing debt. Both economies, Polish and Romanian, were severely affected by the global fuel crisis of the 1970s, which limited the room for maneuver of the leaders. Both power elites also collided with serious social unrest, Polish in the summer of 1976, when street riots followed an attempt to increase prices, and Romanian one year later, when the miners from the Jiu Basin strike. The reaction in both cases was repression, but the general trends turned out to be different. In Romania, the power elite was strongly consolidated and dependent on a leader who imposed a very harsh political course, not allowing any loosening. Meanwhile in Poland a serious political opposition was organized and the dictatorship was at an impasse. As writer Marian Brandys noted in the autumn of 1977: "The situation is peculiar and extremely complicated. The complete fall of the authority of the state, the opposition becoming more and more free, the economic crisis deepening day by day, the police silent but ready to jump"[26]. However, no decisive "jump" occurred, as the regime clearly feared social rebellions, which it had already experienced several times. In 1980, the situation of Poland was marked by an advanced ideological and economic decomposition. This was also the diagnosis expressed by the head of the Romanian party, who was undoubtedly of a bad opinion about Polish colleagues. The great social conflict that broke out in Poland in the summer of 1980, causing concern in other countries of the bloc. Ceauşescu's reaction was to introduce draconian economic savings and to reinforce the exports to pay off debt.

The sharp political and economic crisis in Poland in 1980 and the sudden supply crisis that fell on Romanian citizens in the same time took place after a decade of very high statistical economic growth and huge investments, consuming ¼ in Poland, and in Romania even 1/3 of national income. Under these conditions, social aspirations increased significantly and a new level of "normality" developed. At the same time, advancing social groups experienced consumption neuroses typical of modern society, undoubtedly reinforced by the specificity of the economy of shortage. Tensions between the amount of the household budget and growing aspirations, especially in the field of home furnishings and motorization, have been shown by

---

[26] Brandys, Marian: *Dziennik 1978* [Diary 1978], Warszawa, Iskry, 1997, 9-10 (8 XI 1977).

extensive sociological research conducted in the 1970s by the Polish Academy of Sciences[27].

In the late 1970s, events also took place that further knocked people out of "normality." Regardless of the growing energy crisis, natural disasters and random events took place. On March 4, 1977, a great earthquake hit Romania. Vigorous rescue operations, followed by quick reconstruction decisions gave the Ceausescu regime a new dynamic – the project of a major reconstruction of the capital was outlined, and the propaganda image of the dictator gained a new glow. In fact, 1977 can be regarded as a turning point in Romanian history, including in everyday life. In Bucharest, it was a change of landscape, which was only to follow the rhythm of subsequent decisions of the authorities about the demolition and construction of a new downtown. As journalist Alexandru Baciu noted in the spring of 1977, the obvious landscape was gone. "Everyday landscape has become gloomy. 'Before' streets were dimly lit because of cost savings. Now more bulbs are burning, but lots of damaged blocks are looking through the empty and black window openings, as if terrified". Interestingly, referring to the aforementioned play by the Polish playwright, he described the situation after the earthquake as "little stabilization" in which people try to forget about the misfortune. At the same time, he noticed an increase in collective anxiety, which marked the social ambience before, an atmosphere of uncertainty like in the war years, an ineffective search for confidence, life from day to day, improvisation, and the search for "normality"[28].

Similar notes remained from the "winter of the century" 1978/1979, which in turn disorganized life in Poland and revealed the weakness of its energy and transport system. Railway routes were paralyzed, while heating in the flats disappeared. Memories from the 1939-1945 occupation were also awakened, constituting a constantly renewing traumatic image[29]. At the same time, the dependence of the local regime on the Soviet Union, much more pronounced than in the case of Romania, which manifested its independence policy, prompted the writer Kazimierz Brandys to observe as follows: "This winter has revealed something – not only the weakness of the economy and administration, something much more important: unclear state of affairs, which blurs social recognition. […] we learn that snow has fallen. Then we ask ourselves: is this our snow? Do we have a duty to shovel it away? There is doubt as to whether this snow is not theirs, imposed as a part of friendship by Russia, so should they not make it their own"[30]. It seems that this observation corresponds to the diagnosis made at that time by sociologist Stefan Nowak. In the text 'System of values of the Polish society' (1979) he noted the existence of a 'social vacuum', i.e. a dead space between family-friendly circles and the imagined national community[31].

---

[27] Beskid, Lidia and Sufin, Zbigniew (Ed.): *Warunki życia i potrzeby społeczeństwa polskiego w połowie lat siedemdziesiątych* [Living conditions and needs of Polish society in the mid-seventies], Vol. I-II, Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, Instytut Podstawowych Problemów Marksizmu-Leninizmu KC PZPR, 1981.

[28] Baciu, Alexandru: *Din amintirile unui secretar de redacţie. Pagini de jurnal 1943-1978* [From the Memories of an Editorial Secretary. Pages from a Diary 1943-1978], Bucureşti, Cartea Românească, 1997, pp. 209-214 (7 III-10 IV 1977).

[29] Szczepański, Jan Józef: *Dziennik* [Diary], vol. IV: 1973-1980, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2015, pp. 509 (2 II 1979).

[30] Brandys, Kazimierz: *Miesiące* 1978-1981 [The Months 1978-1981], Warszawa, Iskry, 1997, pp. 69.

[31] Nowak, Stefan: "System wartości społeczeństwa polskiego" [The Value System of Polish Society], in Stefan Nowak, *O Polsce i Polakach. Prace rozproszone 1958-1989* [About Poland and Poles. Scattered Works], elaborated by Antoni Sułek, Warszawa, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2009, pp. 135-156.

This space could be filled by public institutions and associations, but the system – what Nowak could not publicly state – restrained its creation or confiscated it. It can be concluded that the election of Karol Wojtyła as pope in the autumn of 1978, and then his arrival in Poland aroused great enthusiasm, giving hope to fill the "social vacuum" in the symbolic dimension. The rise of the mass "Solidarity" movement was its institutional fulfillment in the summer of 1980.

3. "It looks like a total collapse"

The sentence above was written by novelist Jan Józef Szczepański at the beginning of 1979 under the impression of "the winter of the century"[32]. In the same year, for the first time after the war, a decrease in national income in Poland was statistically recorded (-2.3%), and the publication of this data testified to a recession, which in reality was probably much deeper. However, the "total collapse" in the economy took place in the following years. Although sugar cards have been in force since 1976, in 1981 most of the basic goods were already covered by rationing. Imports decreased dramatically, especially from the "dollar zone", which meant a partial paralysis of the economy in those sectors in which it was dependent on imports from the West, developed in the previous decade. Similar phenomena occurred in Romania, but in completely different political circumstances.

To a large extent because of fear of the Polish scenario, which Ceauşescu identified with the loss of political independence, perceiving the "Solidarity" movement as a creditors' Trojan horse, the Romanian leader tightened economic policy. This meant a reduction of imports and strenuous repayment of foreign debt[33]. In the autumn of 1980, when in Poland amidst political and economic convulsions store shelves were empty, so there was also a sudden collapse of supply in Romania. Doina Jela (born 1951) as a teacher in a small town in eastern Romania described it as a complete shock. She made notes on November 18, 1980: "A hunger awaits us, which is hard to believe. […] I can't believe my eyes. Within a month, everything disappeared, not because it ran out, but as if it was withdrawn. Food above all, but not only. There is no soap, no detergents, toothpaste, medicines, toilet paper etc. etc., there is absolutely nothing among the necessities, the minimum necessary to feel human. […] Faces surprised, I didn't see people laughing in the street, empty grids, empty windows and huge queues in front of it, but quiet and calm, which I don't understand. […] I think that nothing like this has happened in the last 30 years"[34].

The peculiarity of the Romanian situation was that the regime upheld the vision of "normality" in terms of "norms" defined by political leadership. In other words, the situation in the country was to appear as "normal" because it met the criteria imposed from above as rational and scientific. The most vivid example of this approach was the food propaganda campaign, prompting citizens to reduce their appetites and change their eating habits. In this way, attempts were made to reduce the importance of drastic deficiencies in various types of food, in particular meat, and to justify

---

32 Szczepański, *Dziennik*, 506 (1 I 1979).

33 Betea, Lavinia and Florian-Răzvan Mihai, Ilarion Ţiu, *Viaţa lui Ceauşescu* [Ceauşescu's Life], vol. III, Târgovişte, Cetatea de Scaun, 2015, pp. 133-159.

34 Jela, Doina: *Telejurnalul de noapte* [Night Television News], Bucureşti, Vremea, 2005, pp. 30-31 (18 XI 1980) (underline by the author)

changes in the recipes of dishes or food preparations[35]. Imposing a “norm” seems to be a proven strategy of a state whose political mechanism is extremely authoritarian. It seems that such a “norm” is not socially accepted, but there is no public space in which this lack of acceptance could be expressed. Various intimidation and conformational strategies are effective.

Gossip and rumors are becoming a substitute public sphere, while the social “norm” is established from the bottom up and ignores the “norm” imposed. An example would be again home cooking, which residents (especially women) try to protect against shortages by developing their resourcefulness.

Resource strategies were similar in both countries, but developed in very different social and political frameworks. In Poland, the largest social conflict in the history of the communist bloc continued, causing occurences unknown elsewhere, including enormous social emancipation, but also chaos in the economy, paralyzed by strikes, which the regime, moreover, showed as a symptom of deadly “anarchy”. This created a major discontinuity in the history of People’s Poland. In 1980 the Solidarity movement emerged and sixteen months of its legal operation followed, finished by the imposition of martial law in December 1981. All these events were associated with changes in political leadership, social atmosphere, and the extent of repression, and finally the principles of the functioning of the state in which the significance of the Party clearly weakened during the martial law, when executive authorities and the army came to the fore. These dramatic political events took place in conditions of economic collapse and disorganization of everyday life. The imposition of martial law was annonced as the only solution to restore discipline by blocking the legal operation of the Solidarity movement and the militarization of the economy. In 1982, Poland has declared insolvency and has ceased its debt repayment. At the same time, the economic and political underground was developing, which forced older residents to associate with the period of the Second World War, as well as sharp material restrictions, the appearance of food rationing, but also street police actions, when the youth shouted to the police “Gestapo” or “SS”. Whereas the writer and composer Stefan Kisielewski (born in 1911) “returning during martial law from Paris, when asked how he feels in the country, he reportedly answered: ‘great, like during the occupation’”[36]. In this time, government propaganda stressed the authorities’ efforts to restore “normality,” without referring to any “norm” imposed by the omnipotent state, but “normality” treated colloquially. The threat to it was to be the chaos caused by “Solidarity”.

In Romania, a similar, and (since 1984) much more serious disorganization was accompanied by the invariability of official life and the lack of hope for any influence of society on the authorities’ practices, which caused even existential fear. In Poland, there has been an officially recognized diagnosis of the situation since 1980: the “crisis”. The regime blamed Edward Gierek’s dismissed political leadership, and then the “anarchic” inclinations of the trade union movement. But the word “crisis” adequately defined social experience. Sociological research conducted in Poland showed its symptoms such as a decrease in educational aspirations (the growing

---

[35] Bădică, Simina: “Eating Well in Times of Scarcity: Reactions, Perceptions, and Negotiations of Shortages in 1980’s Romania”, in *Negotiating Normality*, 121-150.

[36] Sobolewski, Tadeusz: *Dziennik. Jeszcze jedno zdanie* [A Diary. One More Sentence], Warszawa, WAB, 2019, 21 (10 VII 1982).

belief that education does not provide material promotion) and cultural (understood as participation in high culture) and the development of informal types of agreement to acquire scarce goods and services[37]. Similar phenomena were accompanied in Romania by growing propaganda which portrayed the situation in the state as the "golden age" of its history. Therefore, social frustrations did not find an outlet that to some extent gave the Polish society a sense of the existence of an independent Church and the strong opposition, which had significant material and moral support from the West. The Romanian regime, which did not experience major social revolts, tried to keep society isolated, maintaining nationalist propaganda and at the same time forcing exterior acceptance of its policy. This was, of course, a very superficial acceptance, lined with growing frustration (which discharged significantly once, during the riots in Braşov, 1987), and every day discharged in the form of rumors and jokes, as well as in efforts to receive the signal of Bulgarian television, which has become a substitute for "normality".

This forced acceptance is visible in a peculiar source, which is the account of Romanian journalists from their stays abroad, the mandatory document for the security service. These narratives are characterized by a black image of the so-called fraternal countries where all the signs of a crisis are seen. In a report from Poland, prepared in the autumn of 1984, one of the journalists pointed to a huge housing crisis, stagnation in construction, inefficient attempts to build the metro in Warsaw, high prices, food rationing system and huge supply shortages, supplemented on the black market, where they appear privately imported goods, including from Romania. He also emphasized drug addiction spreading among young people and various symptoms of lack of social discipline. In a report from Hungary, submitted at the end of 1986, another journalist pointed to inflation, which caused serious anxiety in the country, and increasing material stratification[38]. Concepts like "crisis" or "shortage", reserved in official propaganda to describe the situation in capitalist countries, were apparently permissible in legitimate non-public discourse concerning "fraternal countries". Other categories were created by street language, non-legitimate, but public in the sense of prevalence.

4. "Our queues"

In the excellent dictionary "80s and the inhabitants of Bucharest", composed around 2000 by anthropologists from the Romanian Peasant Museum, and based on the personal memories of a large group of people from different social strata, we find the peculiar concepts from the colloquial language typical of the era[39]. The Polish reader will quickly divide it into (1) those that seem perfectly familiar to him and correspond to the experience of the 1980s in his country, (2) those whose similarity is revealed to a limited extent and finally (3) completely foreign in wording or content. The latter include the notion of *biserică* (church), which occupies limited space in Bucharest's memories, when it has a unique symbolic and existential meaning in Polish experi-

---

[37] Beskid, Lidia (Ed.): *Potrzeby i aspiracje społeczeństwa polskiego w połowie lat osiemdziesiątych* [The Needs and Aspirations of Polish Society in the Mid-eighties], Warszawa, Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 1989.

[38] CNSAS, D 1/9, k. 119-123: Informare [report of the journalist of the "România Liberă" newspaper about his stay in Hungary], 24 XI-1 XII 1986.

[39] *LXXX. Anii '80 şi bucureştenii* [LXXX.The 1980s and the inhabitants of Bucharest], Bucureşti, Paideia, 2003.

ence. Similarly, the concept of *disident*, which sounds foreign, because in Poland of the last decade of communism oppositionists were no longer called dissidents, but *podziemie*, the underground, whose social significance was enormous. The terms *frig* (cold) and calorifer do not have such emotional significance in Poland, because its citizens did not experience similar difficulties, and fear of cold can be located mainly in the years 1979-1981 (after the trauma of the "winter of the century" and in fear of the effects of the general disorganization). By introducing martial law, the authorities tried to convince the citizens that they acted in their interest, protecting the country against "anarchy", and thus also against the defeat of underheating, and ensuring good heating was undoubtedly politically significant. In Romania, draconian savings have also embraced this sphere of existence. Also, the term of *demolare* has no equivalent among the important worlds of the Polish everyday dictionary of the 1980s: no demolitions were made, and on the contrary, attempts were made to revive the ethos of the great reconstruction from war damage that was to legitimize the People's Republic. The term *antenă parabolică*, equally well known, was not associated in any way with Bulgarian television in Poland, moreover, Polish television, apart from the period of martial law (1981-1983) did not look anything like Romanian. The concept of *traseu* will also be foreign because some customs of the regime were different: residents of the Polish capital did not know the phenomenon of regular closing of the main streets due to the passage of the leader's cavalcade. After experiencing the demoralization of the power apparatus in the 1970s, Jaruzelski's regime cared for the modest decorum. On the other hand, the concepts of *muncă patriotică* (social work) and especially *practică agricolă*, although known from the social experience of the Polish People's Republic, are not relevant in relation to the 1980s, when such works were no longer significant. Among others, in 1980 the obligatory *praktyki robotnicze* (workers' practices) for students were abolished.

A significant difference in the social experience of the two countries, it seems, was the intensification of neo-stalinist practices in Romania, which were already marked in the 1970s, and in the next decade involved the efforts of the authorities to mobilize. Mass mobilization was an important element of Stalinist political and economic life, with which – as demonstrated by Vladimir Tismăneanu – Ceauşescu's regime never parted[40]. And the economic collapse of the 1980s only increased the pressure to mobilize employees. In Poland of the Jaruzelski era, one should rather talk about the "demobilization" efforts of the authorities, who were afraid of social movements, and it is difficult to indicate big attempts to engage citizens, which were visible in the 1970s. Meanwhile, Romanian citizens have experienced "stealing time" severely through all kinds of "social work" that was only formally voluntary (including, for example, sweeping streets in cities), and countless meetings and political training. As Jela wrote, those meetings "to which hundreds of people are being attended, where no one is listening (and how can you see it better than from behind the presidium, that no one is listening and everyone is doing something else on the bench?), of course, are absurd. […] We no longer despair because of lost time, just as we do not take into account the time lost for eating, brushing teeth and other physiological necessities for which nature is responsible, and not each individual or specific

---

[40] Tismăneanu, Vladimir: *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

person"[41]. Jela's notes about the collective "paralysis" resembled what Voinescu noted about "atony" However, thirty years have passed and the social perspective has undoubtedly changed, and has also created a new concept of "normality" related to the modernization promise the regime tried to fulfill.

Civilization changes and propaganda promises aroused in the societies of Central and Eastern Europe a significant modernization appetite, which was satisfied especially in the relatively calm 1970s. The notion of commonly understood urban "normality" gradually included, from the 1950s, the use of equipment such as water supply, sewage and central heating, the fitting of new housing estates. The use of public health services and other services administered by the state belonged to the "normality". It has become "normality" in large cities shopping in self-service stores. Detergents and various personal hygiene products, including toilet paper, have become widespread. In other words, a large part of society has become dependent on services distributed by the state and products of the state industry. At the time of economic collapse, all these areas were covered by an acute deficit. This was already noted in 1954 by writer Petre Pandrea during an exceptionally harsh winter in Bucharest, which he believed revealed the effects of imposed collectivism. People suffered, deprived of food and fuel, which was the result of a central distribution system. "Let a man eat no more at home, but in the canteen. […] Do not wash at home. Let him wash collectively. Let him not beat a hog for Christmas, but rather buy something la Alimentara". Pandrea argued that the enemy of such a system is a climate that can easily break transport and cooperation networks and bring defeat to the population[42]. Similar observations appeared during the severe winters in Poland in 1959, 1963 and especially in 1979. But these were special disasters, breaking out of "normality", while the overall collapse of the system turned out to be a chronic process with everyday consequences similar to a natural disaster. Waves of existential fear passed through both countries, in Poland in the autumn of 1981, when the heating seemed to cease and the closure of universities was considered, and in Romania from the winter of 1984/1985, when due to draconian restrictions in the apartments were cold[43]. Inhabitants of apartment blocks could not heat their flats otherwise than by electricity, the consumption of which was also subject to extreme restrictions. In this way, "modernity" promoted over the years turned against citizens. And the lack of hot water and cleaning products has ruined the importance of social pedagogy, which has been carried out for decades and aimed at promoting hygiene. Thus adopted as "normal" (or "desirable") life practices could not be implemented. In Romanian cities, the "normal" rhythm of the day was completely disturbed, because the low gas pressure requently forced cooking at night, and hunting for food purchases, in turn, getting up early or leaving work early. This was described in detail in his diary by architect Gheorghe Leahu, for whom – a representative of the social elite – the daily efforts around supplying the house were primarily humiliation and meant a complete deletion of "normality"[44].

---

41 Jela, *Telejurnalul*, 23 (21 IX 1980).

42 Pandrea, Petre: *Crugul mandarinului. Jurnal intim (1952-1958)* [Mandarin Cross. An Intime Diary (1952-1958)], Bucureşti, Editura Vremea, 2002, pp. 157-158 (1954).

43 Clit, Radu: "La peur au quotidien", in: Neculau, *La vie quotidienne*, p. 50.

44 Leahu, Gheorghe: *Arhitect în "Epoca de Aur"* [An Architect in the "Golden Age"], Bucureşti, Fundaţia Academia Civică, 2004.

In many places in his diary, Leahu expressed a characteristic reluctance to rustic customs, which – in his opinion – began to dominate in the culture of Bucharest in the 1980s. It was quite long-standing reluctance of the social elite towards the village, rooted in the nineteenth century, and it did not expire in the communist regime, which otherwise proclaimed the "alliance" of the city and the village. One of the features of moral changes in cities subjected to the communist type of modernization, sociologists called "ruralisation"[45]. This phenomenon deserves wider study. In any case, this type of modernization produced phenomena that Polish intellectual Aleksander Wat called "retrogradational", that is, seeming to reproduce pre-modern social order. In his view, communism was a system of "orientalizing", reproducing certain mental structures appropriate, in his opinion, for Asia[46]. These types of thought strings seemed to be quite characteristic for intellectual assessments of the "abnormalities" of life in the system. In addition, the collapse of 1980 followed some years of relative prosperity, not after the experience of war, which was the basic reference for the generation of Aleksander Wat, born in 1900. The most active core of society in the 1980s was the post-war generation, which entered the middle age at the time of economic and political collapse, worrying about both their own living and working conditions, as well as the future of their children. These threads are clearly visible in the Leahu journal or in Doina Jela's notes. She wrote in fall of 1980: "This dead present in which we all live. It no longer exists tomorrow. This is the perpetual today. This permanent present is hell. No past (memories), no future (hopes)"[47]. Lack of hope for improvement in fate, therefore, caused mass emigration from Poland, estimated at one million people. Emigration from Romania was subjected to much stricter control, which also had an impact on the social atmosphere in this country.

Thus, the characteristics of the 1980s in both countries were generally a feeling of limited life options and the fall of personal and civilization aspirations, liberated especially in the previous decade. This limitation of possibilities prompted the search for social networks that could meet basic life needs: personal connections, solidarity of friends, mentioned by Voinescu thirty years earlier, and above all family relations and relations between the city and the country, allowing the replenishment of food supply. All this belonged to a sphere that was definitively distant from modernity, would be a "retrogradative" phenomenon and as such was described by witnesses of the era.

In addition to this time perspective ("eternal present" or degradation), the spatial perspective, i.e. the distance from the source of the economic norm, which the imaginary world of capitalism has become, was very important. The economic decline in both countries strengthened the importance of alternative monetary and supply systems, i.e. the black market. This was reflected in the everyday dictionary, among key concepts, widely present in the mentioned collection "80s and the inhabitants of Bucharest", was *valută* (identical to the one used in Poland and in both countries mainly associated with the dollar as valuable money as opposed to local money without authority). In turn, the *Kent* slogan in relation to the realities of the Polish

---

[45] Brzostek, Błażej: "Ruralization of Bucharest and Warsaw in the First Postwar Decade", in Włodzimierz Borodziej, Stanislav Holubec, Joachim von Puttkamer (Eds.): *Mastery and Lost Illusions: Space and Time in the Modernization of Eastern and Central Europe*, Munich, de Gruyter, 2014, pp. 99–120.

[46] Wat, Aleksander: *My Century. The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

[47] Jela, *Telejurnalul*, 233-343 (14 XII 1980).

People's Republic should be replaced by the *Marlboro*, but otherwise the symbolic meaning of "western cigarettes" will be similar, although it seems that in Romania they were much more important as a kind of replacement currency. Similarly, a *shop*, i.e. a store with attractive (western or export) goods, sold for currency, finds an equivalent in the concept of *Pewex*.

Of course, the key concept in both dictionaries is *coadă*, *kolejka*, or queue, although some semantic differences may be considered. The social choice of the concept of "queue" instead of "tail" in Polish (*kolejka*) is significant, which would mean the primacy of the principle of justice "to everyone in order". However, other administratively imposed rules, such as priority for pregnant women, invalids or veterans, or bottom-up strategies of "queuing," pushing or self-help, conflicted with this rule. Queues have also become a social institution that plays a role in the circulation of information or socializing, integrating to some extent the communities of homes or housing estates. Equally important, however, was the disintegrating role, because queues were associated with everyday torments and various hidden privileges (starting with the privilege of the power apparatus using alternative supply networks).

The queue phenomenon reflected gender, age, affiliation and status. Various regulations imposed by trade organizers clashed with bottom-up social regulations. In Poland, their best example was "social queues", which consisted of creating order lists that required special ordering by the "queue committee". These committees are very suggestive substitutes for wider collective action in the absence of real representative institutions. The queue thus became a symbol of a certain order, but also chaos and uncertainty. This made the queue a symbol of social tensions, whether hidden (passive expectation) or explicit (quarrels in queues, sometimes ending with police interventions). The queue was also a symbol of dependence on the administration and supply management authorities that could "throw" (*a băga*, *rzucić*) the goods in one place or another. The actions of the authorities had to be foreseen, obtained secret information about them, and participated in the game they imposed. Success in this game (or "hunting") was the reason for great satisfaction and Leahu often noted the joy at home after successful purchases.

Part of the above phenomena was noted in Poland in 1980 by a team leaded by Jacek Kurczewski at the Warsaw University, which conducted sociological research on queues[48]. The researchers assumed that the queue is the quintessence of social life in a "crisis". It was an abnormally large queue even for the economy of shortage. Dan Lungu writes that the queue phenomenon only appeared in Romania during "certain periods of the production crisis", especially when political authorities were prone to appropriating the economic field[49]. However, it seems that (first) the economic field was permanently appropriated, and queues were not seasonal at all, but permanent. The alleged seasonality of queues is due to a perspective error resulting from social experience. Well, queues were recorded when their intensity became unbearable, and not during periods considered "normal". But sources from years considered to be auspicious ("normal") point to the deficits and queues that persist at the time. In the documents of the Romanian political police from 1971, we find numerous news about the shortage of meat and meat speculation, as well as shortages of fruit or

---

48 Kurczewski, Jacek (Ed.): *Umowa o kartki* [Agreement on Ration Cards], Warszawa, Trio, 2004.

49 Lungu, Dan: "Les avatars de la file d'attente dans le socialisme de type soviétique", in: Neculau (Ed.) *La vie quotidienne*, p. 91.

fish[50]. However, the intensity of these phenomena was important, contributing to the image of "normality" as a tame and predictable world, in which the preparation of dinner was not a challenge, or, on the contrary, constant existential uncertainty, characteristic of the 1980s. One can get the impression that the "queue" itself became over the decades of shortage a component of normality, and only its nature (length, frequency, atmosphere) determined fields or periods of "abnormality". Comparisons were also important in this respect, not so much with the difficult to access and mythical West, but rather more frequently visited "brother" countries. Deficiencies in this sphere had a different range or different optical image, while queues or lack thereof set the standard of "normality" obtainable in a similar economic system. The citizen of the Polish People's Republic imagined that in Hungary "there are no queues", while he was convinced that in the Soviet Union they were more spectacular than in his homeland. The romanian writer Alexandru Baciu was struck in Moscow (1978) by the meekness of those standing in queues, a discipline giving the impression of forced. He wrote that prefer the chaos of "our queues"[51].

5. Instead of conclusion: "They have!"

Social domestication of the queue phenomenon did not mean that moral indignation disappeared, related to violating the "everyone in order" principle, especially when power relations were involved. In Romania, authorities tried to hide queues on prestigious routes, especially the presidential route, forcing people to stand behind the houses. Hiding queues from the dictator was the reverse of hiding special supply networks from the eyes of citizens. In both cases it was about maintaining the appearance of "normality". This contributed to the conviction about the immoral nature of the system, as Dan Lungu notes[52]. This conviction was expressed by numerous anonymous citizens calling the authorities or sending letters, as documented by the political police. For example, in the autumn of 1984, numerous calls to the Central Committee concerned gas shortages. When an employee of the Committee argued that the situation was known to the authorities and action would be taken, one interlocutor shouted that "they have!"[53].

The conviction of a fundamental social division into "us" and "them" belongs to traditional colloquial thinking. It seems that it was an essential element of social consciousness in the so-called socialist countries. It contradicted egalitarian official principles and that is why it gained particular bearing capacity. "They" were, of course, a very liquid category. In the context of the considerations here, it seems important that the collapse of the system eroded hope for its egalitarian character and sharpened social divisions. The conviction of the ubiquity of the black market and its sphere of corruption in which local political elites were involved was not new in the 1980s. The novelty, however, was the scale of the phenomenon and a sense of general decay of norms. This shifted the concept of "normality" into the realm of myth. In 1989 it turned into a myth of "returning to normality." However, the 1990s marked

---

[50] CNSAS D 011737, vol. 24: Bulerine MAI 1971.
[51] Baciu, *Din amintirilile*, 253 (10 X 1978).
[52] Lungu, "Les avatars de la file d'attente", 100.
[53] CNSAS, D 1/9, p. 40: Raport, 17 XI 1984.

a fundamental conflict between the hope of the hard-to-reach "normality" of the capitalist type and nostalgia for the lost "normality" in socialism of 1970s. Among the difficulties of the so-called system transformation, "normality" has gained a new dimension, manifesting itself in political propaganda and especially during election campaigns in which the slogans of "return to normality" have become the most typical. The image of "they have!" did not disappear as those who were able to ensure "normality" above and beyond the control of the people.