

Illusion, Disillusion... and Hope Thirty Years Since the Fall of Communism in Romania, 1989–2019

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IN DECEMBER 2019, Romanians commemorated thirty years since the fall of communism.¹ With the ouster and execution of the perverse Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, a new page in Romanian history was turned and an era of seemingly interminable transitions began, one that may or may not be continuing today. Indeed, while many fervently hope that Romania has emerged or will soon emerge into a more peaceful “normality,” others wonder if the new normal isn’t perpetual transition. Three years of transition can be exhilarating. Three decades, on the other hand, is proving at bit much, since if there is any quality that can be said to mark modern times it is lack of patience.

The purpose of this essay is to share some reflections on the Romanian 1989 based in part on having been present in Romania on a research grant from August 1989 to July 1990 and in part on having been engaged in Romanian studies since 1967.² I should point out at the outset that direct experience of the Romanian 1989 taught

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me two things: the first is that often eye witnesses know less about what is going on than those who can observe calmly from afar, and the second is that the eye witnesses benefit from a good deal of unwarranted credibility merely from having been there. However, this essay is not concerned with the problems of historical memory.³

Why did the Romanian 1989 happen? This seems a good deal clearer than the “how it happened” question alluded to above. For starters, it has to be recognized that the tradition of dissent in communist Romania was among the most feeble in all of the communist bloc. The title of Cristina Petrescu’s book captures this well: *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote*.⁴ Following a brief era of armed resistance in the mountains by paramilitary groups (part of the Haiduk tradition),⁵ resistance in Romania was rather quixotic and generally ineffective.⁶ Again, I’m not going to go into explaining why this is so, but merely to note the fact.

The lack of an indigenous tradition of speaking truth to power in Romania, which has deep roots in the Romanian past and in Romanian Orthodox traditions, was directly abetted by Romania’s geopolitical situation: buried behind the Iron Curtain with the USSR literally on its doorstep. One result of this was what Adrian Marino has labeled “the myth of the irreversible situation,” the idea that the Cold War status quo/East-West standoff would last indefinitely.⁷ This was a profoundly demoralizing idea, and it fit perfectly with traditional Romanian fatalism derived from the *Miorița* myth which calls for realistic resignation, much like a reed bending in the face of a storm.⁸ The fact that Romania was ever more isolated from the West in the 1980s contributed to this sense of fatalism.

But before one is too critical of Romanian fatalism, we need to recognize that most Westerners accepted the same irreversibility thesis. Almost no Kremlinologists foresaw the collapse of communism (R. V. Burks, Alexander Shtromas, and Seweryn Bialer were honorable exceptions). How many specialists even talked about the potential difficulties of a transition from communist to free societies? Virtually none. Scholars and policymakers were caught unawares in 1989. And if academics, who speculate on the most unlikely things at the drop of a hat, seem to think that discussing decommunization is not worth raising, it is any wonder that the man in the street would agree that change was nearly impossible.

Our experiences in the fall of 1989 confirmed this. I recall a conversation I had at Nicolae Iorga Institute of History in Bucharest with my colleague the late Paul Cernovodeanu one day in November. It was abnormally cold and the temperatures in the reading room of the library was only slightly above freezing. (In fact, I had to wear gloves while working and every couple of hours would go out to my car to warm up.) Mr. Cernovodeanu sidled cautiously up to my desk bundled up in a bulky sweater and a heavy overcoat and whispered about the current situation “It’s as bad here as Africa.” He paused, shrugged his shoulders, and then interjected “No, it’s worse. In Africa at least it’s warm.”⁹

It was our perception that the Romanian population was psychologically immobilized by its situation. And, though all around them changes were happening, there was no indication that any transformation would even be attempted in Romania, quite the contrary. A Securitate agent boasted to an imprisoned dissident that things would not change in Romania in a thousand years... and most Romanians would have agreed. The 14th Party Congress of 20–24 November 1989 passed all of Ceaușescu’s proposals unanimously while electing him, his wife Elena, his brother Ilie, and his son Nicu to various posts (thus further promoting the idea of “Building Socialism in One Family,” a parody of Stalin’s “Building Socialism in One Country”).

We were also impressed by the siege mentality of both Romanians and foreigners in Romania in 1989. This included diplomatic personnel, who in our previous two Romanian sojourns (1971–1973; 1982–1983) had been insulated from the misery of the locals since they had access to unrationed food, clothing, electronic goodies, heat, well-lit apartments, gasoline, and medical care that most Romanian citizens did not. I say most because there were some Romanians who had entrée to such things: the members of the upper nomenklatura. Most Romanians were aware of and resentful about “communists in a Mercedes,” but had no idea that they could do anything about it. The lack of dependable electricity (which was frequently turned off during the day), heat (ditto), darkened apartments (even when electricity was available, the maximum permissible wattage per light bulb was low), and increasing time spent standing in line to get the necessities of life were all demoralizing. And of these factors, cold seems to me to have been the most debilitating. That something was even more wrong in and with Romania than it had been in 1971–1973 and 1982–1983 was also obvious from the virtual disappearance of political humor. We had gotten used to such humor—however restrained it was. Now, sadly, humor was almost nonexistent in Romania.

The political excesses of the later Ceaușescu years are well known: a megalomaniacal and egregious personality cult;¹⁰ demolition of much of the center of Bucharest (including numerous churches) to build grandiose new governmental buildings;¹¹ the use of a vicious “systematization” scheme to raze hundreds of villages and move their populations to “agro-industrial centers” where they could be more easily supervised and controlled; increased pro-natalism including taxes on families with too few children and mandatory gynecological exams at factories and other work places;¹² lack of basic medicines and medical care; escalating demands by service providers for bribes; and draconian schemes to pay off the huge foreign debt necessitated by its Stalinist developmental program.¹³

And yet, all was not well for the regime. Perhaps the greatest factor was Gorbachev’s desire to pull the USSR out of a fatal tailspin by restructuring the

system (*perestroika*) and promoting more openness (*glasnost*). Gorbachev's experimentation in the USSR, however, cut the ground out from under neo-Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe such as that of Romania. Though Gorbachev had no intention of undermining the Soviet system, the fact was that the Soviet system could not be "restructured" or reformed without destroying the Leninist model. It was a gamble, but one that in the end could not possibly have paid off. (On the other hand, it is doubtful that Gorbachev had any viable alternatives. Certainly the plotters of August 1991 could not have saved the day for Soviet Leninism.)

As for the events of late December 1989, when the crowds gathered in Timișoara, Iași, and Bucharest and began to actually protest against the regime, what Miodrag Milin wrote shortly afterward remains valid: "People were no longer 'normal'; for all practical purposes the instinct of self-preservation . . . which had nourished and maintained the dictatorship for more than forty years had disappeared. The spell was broken..."¹⁴

Those who had a deep and sympathetic attachment to the Romanian people and their culture were exhilarated: miraculously and at last our long suffering friends and acquaintances were free. They could now write, speak, and associate as they saw fit. Those interested in religion could follow their inclinations without fear of reprisal or repression. Given freedom, liberty, and new incentives, their talents and entrepreneurial abilities could now be channeled into positive entrepreneurial channels instead of being expended on black or grey markets.

There was a good deal of excitement in attending various rallies and assisting in the demolition of the statues of Petru Groza and Lenin.¹⁵ There was a good deal of fun in what we called "contemporary archaeology," going around and scavenging ephemera discarded in trash dumps behind the Central Committee building and acquiring "souvenirs" at the *talcioc*.¹⁶

As for the population generally, there was a collective sigh of relief that manifested itself across the spectrum of our acquaintances. As one of our dear elderly Romanian landladies told us in response to a question about potential economic hardships: "We are prepared to eat yoghurt and onions if we can keep our freedom." My son, David, looking back on 1989, said

*Psychologically and spiritually, you could tell a difference in the way people felt. The oppression of the regime had to some degree been lifted. Economically and materially, people were just as bad off as they had been, though the borders opened up. It was clearly emotional for Romanians whom we knew who had lived before the communist takeover, especially Romanians who had been young adults or children during World War II and had pre-communist memories. They'd talk about how they'd been waiting for this and didn't imagine they would get to see the fall of communist Romania in their lifetime.*¹⁷

This pretty well sums up how we all felt in January 1990. Ceaușescu was dead, people were free to come and go across the borders freely for the first time in more than half a century, and the promise of deciding their own futures seemed well in hand.

These illusions were relatively short-lived. Even a bad historian realizes that the past usually is prologue, though this is a little more difficult for those directly caught up in events. We were, of course, dismayed (and horrified and disgusted and appalled) at the seizure of power by Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front (FSN) in January of 1990, by the manipulation of national hatreds for political purposes, at the theft of resources by insiders,¹⁸ the continued deep state activities of the former and present security agencies,¹⁹ the shocking behavior of many intellectuals from whom we had hoped better, the violence of the *Mineriade* (my two children were deeply impressed by a couple of beatings of obviously innocent passers-by that they witnessed, as miners became the shock troops of FSN regime), and the electoral shenanigans of 1990.

One didn't know whether to laugh or cry when, after one particularly alarming police action, Prime Minister Petre Roman explained that the violence was a product of the "fact" that Romania had fewer per capita police forces than any country in Europe. He offered no statistical evidence to back up this preposterous claim, and even General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, sitting beside Roman, couldn't keep a straight face at that point.

On the other hand, there were continuities with the past that we sort of took for granted, such as the use of petty bribes or *bașis*.²⁰ I always carried a pack of Kent cigarettes with me even though I didn't smoke; one never knew when a pack of Kents would be needed to resolve a problem. No one expected this "custom" to disappear instantly.²¹ Nor did we expect that the practice of *pile*, that is, the working of connections to maneuver through life, would just disappear, but we had anticipated that once people could deal freely economically there would be a lot less need to have to pull strings to get things done. This seems not to have been the case. Unfortunately, *pile* was and is still the way to get things done in Romania. Romania's National Anticorruption Directorate is a huge step forward.²²

In retrospect, it is difficult to establish exactly when the grim realities of history, place, and human nature dawned on us. One telling moment came as we watched the trial of Nicu Ceaușescu and were astonished to see young women throwing flowers and otherwise reacting passionately toward a young man who had acquired a well-deserved reputation as a drunkard and rapist. My wife shouted at the television set: "They are responding as abused women in a dysfunctional family would respond." This became the start for our subsequent work on what we came to call the Dysfunctional Society Syndrome as we tried to get a handle on what was going down in post-communist Romania.²³

Another telling moment came with the resignation and unresignation of Patriarch Teoctist (1986–2007). He had covered himself with glory by supporting the armed repression of the demonstrators in Timișoara and sending Ceaușescu a telegram praising his “brilliant activity” and leadership during a new Golden Age “properly and righteously” named after the genius of the Carpathians.²⁴ He resigned in disgrace from the Patriarchate on 18 January, but on 3 April 1990, with unanimous approval of the Holy Synod, he returned as patriarch, saying that he had withdrawn “for health reasons” but that he had recovered. (He served until his death in 2007.) The Romanian Orthodox Church, instead of providing timely moral leadership, proved to be more a composite of Romanian society’s problems and deficits, seemingly mired in a sycophantic past, badly needing new blood, but not getting it, continuing to compromise with power.²⁵

Other institutions’ performances after December 1989 were equally disillusioning. The army, which stood high in popular opinion, was headed by the egregious General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu. His appointment in February 1990 abruptly derailed an incipient military reform movement and demonstrated clearly the new FSN government was taking.

Key ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, though their ministers were often reformers, continued to be staffed by carryover personnel who systematically sabotaged their less-experienced superiors. A telling anecdote was shared with me by the American cultural attaché, Aggie Kuperman.

Good news and bad news. The good news is that the guy in the Ministry of Education that was putting roadblocks in the work of American exchange grantees is gone. And the guy in the Foreign Ministry that was a pain in the neck for Americans is also gone. The bad news is that the MinEd guy moved over to the Foreign Ministry and the Foreign Ministry guy moved over to the Ministry of Education, where both have resumed their obstructionist activities.

The Romanian Academy was no better. A noisy show was made of expelling Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu (along with Manea Mănescu and Suzana Gâdea) from their academy memberships and electing a few new members. However, it continued to be dominated by people who had made significant compromises under the communist regime, and, in general, proved to be a bulwark of obstructionism and docile servant of those in power.

The whole process of transitional justice constantly poked in the eye those who had naively believed a new page had permanently been turned.²⁶ This included unsatisfactory trials of selected bad guys from the old regime, impeding lustration of major collaborators of the communist governments and security forces, blocking of access to the Securitate and other secret files (though, curiously enough, files were readily leaked when they incriminated opponents of the

FSN regime), to cumbrous and downright unfair property rights restitution. And this is just a sample. One couldn't go more than three or four minutes in most newspapers without coming across half a dozen outrageous items that would make one's head explode.

Another puzzle was the almost visceral loyalty that people had for the Iliescu–Roman regime. This was illustrated for us by a particularly frustrating discussion with the elderly mother of a close acquaintance. This was a woman who had relatives that were victims of communism, who herself as a devoutly religious person had personally suffered, and was, therefore, someone who would have been thought likely to oppose the atheist Marxists Iliescu and Roman. My wife and I were completely at a loss to understand this incomprehensible response. Later, someone suggested that what was going on here was a kind of parallel to baby animals (such as ducks) who imprint on the first thing they see after they are born. Romanians, born out of totalitarianism, and faced immediately by the smiling faces of Iliescu and Roman everywhere in the media simply imprinted on them. Perhaps this explains it; maybe not, but the entire scenario was and is a puzzle... and an eye-opener.

Does all of this lead, 30 years later, to optimism or pessimism? In post-communist Europe, the optimist/pessimist discussion has been a popular pastime: is the glass half empty or half full? Or is the glass just too big? The London *Economist* recently addressed this matter in an edifying fashion.²⁷ As Europe prepared “to mark 30 years since the fall of communism,” given the advent to power of Orbán in Hungary, Putin in Russia, and Kaczyński in Poland, we must be prepared to hear “doleful references to Europe’s new east-west cleavage and sardonic asides about the predicted ‘end of history.’”

Yet, in the opinion of *The Economist*, “History is back . . . events of this summer prove many of the western European clichés about eastern Europe wrong. States scarred by communism are not incapable of producing strong civil-society movements.” The peoples of Eastern Europe “do not have some innately ‘Asiatic’ preference for authoritarian leadership.” Nor for that matter, when we look at what is happening in the rest of the world, are we forced to conclude that they have some kind of unique or unusual predisposition toward a nationalistic populism.

In the end, what we learn from history is that “Nothing lasts forever. History never ended.” After retailing a list of hopeful developments across the area—from the election of a liberal reformer as president of Slovakia to the election of moderate presidents in Latvia and Lithuania to the ouster of the oligarchs in Moldova—*The Economist* points out one other significant step forward: the increasing number of women who are significant in East European politics in their own right. After a few years of politically active women not named Elena Ceaușescu, additional barriers will go down for the better.

It remains to Westerners to support reformers and those who have risked their lives and livelihoods for freedom and civil society for nearly 30 years now.

*To assume eastern Europe is all Orbans, Erdogans, and Putins is to do the region a grave injustice. This summer has proved that eastern Europe is in fact teeming with democrats and liberals willing to put their own interests on the line for their cause. If the EU stands for anything, if it truly values the promise of 1989, it will stand by them.*²⁸

There are a lot of reasons for maintaining an un-naïve hope for the future of Romania. But we all need to continue to support liberty and free societies, to stand with and encourage those who contribute to building less dysfunctional systems, and to perpetuate the honest memory of those who heroically gave their lives and good fortune that others might have a better life.

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Notes

1. I prefer to refer to 1989 as the fall or collapse of communism in Romania rather than a revolution because three decades later it is still unclear whether this event was a revolution, a coup, or a combination of both. In other words, the “backstory” of 1989 remains murky. Readers of this essay will also be perhaps disappointed that more is not said about this event, but that is because I have little to add to what others have said. I recommend Dragoș Petrescu’s *Explaining the Romanian Revolution of 1989: Culture, Structure, and Contingency* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2010) and Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
2. For other recollections and commentary on 1989, see Paul E. Michelson, “Reflecții asupra Revoluției române după o sută de zile,” *Occident 16–22 Timișoara–București* 1, 1 (1990): 5–6; id., “Revoluțiile din 1848 și 1989 în România: Note spre un studiu comparativ,” *Ethos* 1, 2 (1990): 3–10; id., “Reflections on the Romanian Revolution of 1989,” *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire* 29, 1 (1990): 3–6.
3. But see how this relates to post-communism: Paul E. Michelson, “Collected Memories, Collective Amnesia, and Post-Communism,” *Interstitio* 1, 2 (2007): 137–158.
4. Cristina Petrescu, *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote: Resistance and Dissent in Communist Romania* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2013).
5. See Dorin Dobrinu, “Rezistența armată anticomunistă din munții României,” in *Școala memoriei 2006: Prelegeri și discuții de la a IX-a ediție a Școlii de Vână de la Sighet (10–17 iulie 2006)*, ed. Romulus Rusan (Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civică, 2007), 240–272, for a summary of his extensive work on this subject.
6. This may well have led to a kind of inferiority complex on the part of Romanians when compared to Wałęsa in Poland or Havel in Czechoslovakia as well as a lack of credibility with the Romanian masses after 1989.

7. See Adrian Marino in dialogue with Sorin Antohi, *Al treilea discurs: Cultură, ideologie și politică în România* (Iași: Polirom, 2001), 105 ff.; Adrian Marino, *Politică și cultură: Pentru o nouă cultură română* (Iași: Polirom, 1996).
8. On *Miorița*, see Lucian Blaga, *Spațiul mioritic*, Part II of his *Trilogia culturii* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1944); and Ernest H. Latham, Jr., ed., *Miorița: An Icon of Romanian Culture*, with an introduction by Ernest H. Latham, Jr., an essay by Alexandru Husar, and photographs by Laurence Salzmann (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 1999).
9. His cautious approach was merited as my Securitate files show: my activities at the Institute were heavily monitored, at one point with a little map of the reading room, showing where I usually sat and who I might have occasion to speak with. The fact that the reading room was at icebox temperatures meant that hardly anyone else was ever there. In the end, the Securitate decided to monitor me less since I was evidently expending my efforts on my 19th century research... and keeping warm. Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Bucharest, Arhiva Fond Informativ: Michelson, Paul-Edwin, file 248548, copy in possession of the author.
10. Anneli Ute Gabanyi's *The Ceaușescu Cult: Propaganda and Power Policy in Communist Romania* (Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 2000), is a collection of her analyses for Radio Free Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.
11. Dinu C. Giurescu, *The Razing of Romania's Past: International Preservation Report* (Washington, DC: US Committee International Council on Monuments and Sites, 1989).
12. See Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
13. For an interesting contrast, see how Romanian Radio/TV saw things in 1989 described in Eugen Denize, "Evenimentele anului 1989 reflectate de Radiodifuziunea Română," *Analele Sighet 10: Anii 1973–1989: Cronica unui sfârșit de sistem* (Bucharest: Academia Civică, 2003), 716–739.
14. Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara 15–21 decembrie '89* (Timișoara: n.p., 1990), 9.
15. For some of my meanderings at this time, see Apostol Stan, *Revoluția română văzută din stradă, decembrie 1989–iunie 1990* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007).
16. Some of these materials were displayed in 1990 at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California. A second and third exposition of these Romania 1989 memorabilia were held in December 2009 at the Gorgas Library at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and in 2019–2020 at the Heard Library of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
17. "UA Professor Remembers Watching Romanian Revolution Unfold First-Hand," University of Alabama News, 1 December 2009, www.ua.edu/news/2009/12/ua-professor-remembers-watching-romanian-revolution-unfold-first-hand/ (accessed 21 Oct. 2019).
18. Post-1989, the new "nomenclatura" got to stay in the new apartments and other perks. For insights into post-1989 corruption, see Tom Gallagher, *Modern Romania: The End of Communism, the Failure of Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) that names names and takes no prisoners.

19. See Marius Oprea, *Moștenitorii Securității*, 2nd edition, rev. and enl. (Iași: Polirom, 2018).
20. For a discussion of previous Romanian legacies, see Paul E. Michelson, “Perceptions on Imperial Legacies in the Balkans: The Romanian Lands,” *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes/Journal of South-East European Studies* 36, 1–4 (1998): 65–77.
21. See Jill Massino, “‘But this is the world we live in’: Corruption, everyday managing and civic mobilization in post-socialist Romania,” *Eurozine* (4 October 2019), www.eurozine.com/but-this-is-the-world-we-live-in/ (accessed 21 Oct. 2019).
22. See Andrew Macdowell, “The DNA of Romania’s anti-corruption success,” *Politico* (15 April 2016), www.politico.eu/article/the-dna-of-romania-anti-corruption-success-eu-transparency-international/ (accessed 21 Oct. 2019).
23. See Paul E. Michelson and Jean T. Michelson, “Post-Communist Romania: A Dysfunctional Society in Transition,” in *Mentalități și instituții: Carențe de mentalitate și înapoiere instituțională în România modernă*, ed. Adrian-Paul Iliescu (Bucharest: Ars Docendi, 2002), 61–97; Paul E. Michelson, “Despre viitorul trecutului recent al României,” *Politică externă comunistă și exil anticomunist*, ed. Armand Goșu (*Anuarul Institutului Român de Istorie Recentă*, vol. 2, 2003) (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 13–39; id., “Overcoming Communism’s Dysfunctional Legacy: The Romanian Case,” *Journal of Global Initiatives* 6, 2 (2011): 109–125. For a discussion, see Sorin Antohi, *Civitas imaginalis: Istorie și utopie în cultura română*, 2nd rev. edition with a Postscript from 1999 (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 147, 264–265, 313.
24. Quoted in Michael Bordeaux, “Patriarch Teoctist,” *The Guardian*, 6 August 2007, www.theguardian.com/news/2007/aug/07/guardianobituaries.religion (accessed 24 Oct. 2019).
25. See Paul E. Michelson, “Orthodoxy and the Future of Post-communist Romania,” *Xenopoliana* 7, 3–4 (1999): 59–67.
26. This has been pursued by Lavinia Stan in a number of studies and excellently summarized in her *Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
27. Charlemagne, “The eastern summer,” *The Economist*, 20 August 2019, p. 44.
28. Ibid.

Abstract

Illusion, Disillusion... and Hope:

Thirty Years Since the Fall of Communism in Romania, 1989–2019

The article reflects on the Romanian 1989 based on having been present in Romania from August 1989 to July 1990. It presents reasons for viewing Romanian development since 1989 with optimism and with pessimism, how this era gave birth to both illusions and disillusionment, as well as reasons for hope.

Keywords

Romanian 1989, optimism, pessimism, dysfunctional society syndrome, end of history