

GEORGE CRISTIAN MAIOR

Incertitudine: Gândire strategică și relații internaționale în secolul XXI (Uncertainty: Strategic thinking and international relations in the 20th century)

Bucharest: RAO, 2009

THE BOOK recently published by George Cristian Maior, devoted to international relations in the contemporary world, belongs to the field of political science and of current international relations. Therefore, it may seem strange that it is being reviewed by a historian, and especially by one specializing in the Middle Ages. However, the contradiction is only illusory, as old concepts have become obsolete and there is constant talk about the end of history, about post-history, about present history and even about the history of the future!

The book is an essay (actually a well-integrated set of several essays) on power and, implicitly, on politics. However, its outlook is, naturally, a deeply historical one that also values history as a form of human knowledge and experience. This is indicated by the meaningful fragment quoted from Paul Valéry: “Do not think it pointless to ponder upon the past and things long gone. It mainly shows us the frequent failure of the predictions that are far too accurate and, conversely, the great advantages represented by a general and constant preparation which, without pretending to create or defy the events—which are invariably surprising or have surprising consequences—allows man to quickly act upon the unpredictable; I fear that history allows for no predictions but, associated with the independence of the spirit, it can help us see better”. Of course, in the 21st century we can pay only limited tribute to the Roman

adage whereby history is the “teacher of life.” Too many people erroneously believed that their knowledge of history can grant them mastery over the present and clairvoyance for the future. Historical knowledge does not make one clairvoyant, but it helps us “see better,” which is something quite special indeed. This is the lesson that George Cristian Maior understood quite well on the basis of his life experience, of his legal and political studies, and also from his investigation of the past.

Thus, the author was able not to compile recipes, but rather to formulate informed opinions on the world we live in. When speaking about power, he could not overlook the state, which has been until recently the main repository of power and has even had the maximum potential for violence. However, the state has seen a number of radical changes and has restructured itself on the basis of new criteria, being different from what it was in the 17th–19th and even in the 20th century. And the author gives some compelling examples: the fracture of the international balance, the asymmetry created after 1989–1991, the use of the word *empire* in contexts once deemed inappropriate (“Soviet empire,” “empire of evil,” etc.), the world after the Cold War, composed also of “failed states” and especially of “non-states.” As indicated by George Cristian Maior, the latter—long ignored or neglected—have come to challenge the states, to concentrate tremendous power, at a time when the quantum of power is higher than ever. In other words, we are warned that many stakeholders currently hold power, but not enough to fully dominate the world. Still, when very small groups of people can attack a state (with 9/11 a case in point) and upset the balance of the whole world, when supra-national networks of all kinds have emerged to the fore, when terrorism is part

of daily life, when people cannot plan or predict the future, when economic crises can alter the world order and when all nations have interests of their own and fight to defend and promote them, the general impression is one of *uncertainty*. In other words, as pertinently argued by the author, governments can no longer manage balance (as it no longer exists!), being forced instead to manage uncertainty, the unpredictable and the unexpected. Not alone, but together with the civil society, with other bodies, organizations, NGOs, capable of becoming involved and of providing relevant expertise. Thus, in order to avoid planetary destruction, one resorts more and more to consensual policies, to preventive diplomacy and, especially, to diplomat-soldiers, trained not only to fight but also in the ways of the past, in sociology and political science, in other words, people with solid general knowledge.

This realistic but by no means flattering or comforting image of our world is constantly illustrated and explained by George Cristian Maior with examples coming from ages past, as what is the past for us was the living present for the people of that time. Thus, we see that, in a way, there is never anything new, up to a certain point: sometimes the common people love the enemy more than they love their liberators (Alexander the Great was cherished by the Athenians he had conquered, just like, after World War II, the Germans were more popular in Paris than the Americans); violent conflicts have certain common denominators, from the Peloponnesian War described by Thucydides through the Blitzkrieg of Genghis Khan to the great conflagrations of the 20th century; certain tribes (a hint at the tribal organization of certain Islamic structures, which produced the Taliban or Osama Bin Laden) have been in conflict with the states since olden times,

according to the testimony of Ammianus Marcellinus (a Roman historian from the fourth century and a continuator of Tacitus) and of Ibn Khaldoun (Arab historian and writer). With George Cristian Maior, dates, facts, historical characters and historians, far from playing a circumstantial role, are actual protagonists helping him “see” and manage uncertainty. Thus, in the modern world he identifies “three tectonic shifts,” namely, the rise of the West (after the 15th century), the rise of America (after the 19th century) and the “rise of the rest” (today). Also, in order to highlight the magnitude of the resulting imbalance, the author shows that the unipolar world that lasted between the fall of the USSR and the year 2001 had been unprecedented since the time of the Roman Empire. Equally interesting and suggestive are the considerations regarding the balance of power in Europe from the 5th century BC and until recently, a balance consecrated by various documents, from the Peace of Westphalia that came after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), to the principles of Woodrow Wilson concerning the community of power and a world that had become safe for democracy, and from the Congress of Vienna (1815) to the Peace of Paris (1946–1947). Naturally, the focus is on this first decade of the 21st century, with its shocking antecedents, from the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe to the collapse of the USSR, and from the Irak war to the first signs of terrorism, but also with its actual challenges, some of which are extremely difficult to decipher in detail. We are talking about the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the similar attacks in Madrid and London, the defiance showed by Iran, the relations between the US and Putin and Medvedev’s Russia, the difficult and halting structuring of the United Europe (the Europe of 27, still in the process of expansion), alrea-

dy called “empire” by some, the governing of the former Yugoslavia and of the Western Balkans in general, the famine present in certain areas, pollution, pandemics, the lack of natural resources (and their use by some for blackmail), the unprecedented economic crisis, etc. All of these are analyzed, pertinently and in detail, by an author trained originally in the Cluj academic environment and then in the US and in other Western countries, being afterwards fortunate enough to put this knowledge to good use as a diplomat, politician, and head of some important state institutions.

George Cristian Maior also quotes from the works of philosophers (from Hobbes, Kant and Hegel to Bertrand Russel or Francis Fukuyama) and men of letters (from Rudyard Kipling to Harriet Beecher Stowe and from Mark Twain to Jorge Luis Borges), and comments on the significant (sometimes from a political rather than aesthetic point of view) poetry of Czeslaw Milosz and... Saddam Hussein. Of course, there is no literary value whatsoever in the work of the latter, where it is vaguely supplanted by a political message and by the echo of frustrations otherwise shared by other dictators with delusions of talent, from the Emperor Nero (died in 68 A.D.) to the present day.

George Cristian Maior’s book on uncertainty is a certainty from several points of view. First of all, it is an outstanding specialist analysis of a contemporary world marred by so many sharp contradictions. It is a lucid and honest analysis aimed at a large audience, interested in the fate of their country and their planet. Secondly, the book is a warning and a memento for us all, but especially for the decision-makers concerned with the fate of Romania. The author tells us that all countries have interests to protect in a contemporary global world, in which the system of com-

municating vessels works better than ever. We are discreetly told that the illusion of a pure and innocent power has forever disappeared, filed by history alongside the ideals of chivalry. Thirdly, the essay on uncertainty is also a fine intellectual exercise, drawing on both history and the experience of the contemporary world. This is a book that can help anyone anywhere, as it is a political panorama (dealing with power) of today’s world, but the minute and realistic analysis of this world is meant to determine the place and the role of Romania and the part to be played by our country in the extraordinarily complex network of current international relations. Of course, all future designs are unrealistic, as the pace of change is staggering and surprising, but the discreet invitation of the author nevertheless leads to some strategies that Romania must, in its turn, devise.

George Cristian Maior invites us to ponder upon our world—the only one that we know directly, and yet understand only in part—with an exquisite elegance of the spirit, with a calm lucidity doubled by an intelligent communication and by the certainty of the well-informed specialist. His elegance, lucidity, and certainty stimulate us to show vigilance, involvement and participation, in order to prevent the slumber of reason from creating additional and untamable monsters. Furthermore, he urges us to make sure that Romania—a member of NATO and of the EU, that is, of the select clubs that run the world—would operate as an active subject and not as a mere object in the web of international relations. George Cristian Maior offers us readers a lesson in scholarship and life, with honesty, generosity and especially with dignity, presenting us with an invitation to live the present as informed participants.

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