

# Under the Sign of Malnutrition

## Economic and Propaganda Policies in Romania at the End of the 1980s.

### Case Study: Bihor County

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**T**HE HISTORY of the communist period in Romania must be written in the spirit of truth, otherwise the conclusions can be considerably distorted.<sup>1</sup> Historical researches on the period are numerous, but critically assumed analyses, not bearing the imprint of the times, are nevertheless difficult to achieve. The present study proposes an interesting discussion about the economic policies of the communist regime in its last years and their consequences on a part of Transylvania, a very special territory of the Romanian space,<sup>2</sup> even in times of hardship.<sup>3</sup>

The last decade of the communist regime in Romania was a very complicated one due to the economic crisis that led to drastic reductions in the supply of the population with products necessary for daily living. This caused severe problems in an everyday life marked by the absence of food on the market, leading to serious health problems due to malnutrition. This situation developed gradually, but, by the end of the 1980s, things turned for

the worse. Even if this aspect was known by the supervisory structures, mainly the Securitate, measures to improve the situation were taken only after the fall of the communist regime.

Amid continuous rumors about the “decadent” West which “exploited” Romania through its international financial institutions, primarily the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the population’s expectations were very high at the beginning of 1989 when, on 31 March 1989, at the meeting of the Political Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, it was announced that Romania had managed to pay off its external debt.

When Nicolae Ceaușescu made the announcement at this meeting, he took by surprise even the members of the Central Committee who were not aware of the current stage in the payment of the country’s foreign debt.<sup>4</sup> The head of state emphasized the special effort made to pay off this external debt. Thus, he said, “in 1980, we had 11–12 billion dollars. At the beginning of the year we had 1,150 million dollars.”<sup>5</sup> The information was not intended for the general public and it was meant to have a confidential character. The moment had to be very well prepared from a propagandistic point of view in order to become another catalyzing and mobilizing element for an exhausted population that would then rally around its leader. In this context, Nicolae Ceaușescu told those present that “we shall discuss this issue at the plenary and at the Great National Assembly, and then we shall make it public, we shall not give it to the press now.”<sup>6</sup> The triumphant way in which he presented the situation made everyone think that Romania would embark upon a completely different path from an economic point of view.

The news would be announced a few days later, on 12 April 1989, at the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. The next day, *Scînteia* (The Sparkle) newspaper informed the population about this great achievement<sup>7</sup> and numerous festivities were held all over the country to mark this great event. At the session of the Great National Assembly that was convened a few days later, on 17–18 April 1989, Nicolae Ceaușescu was acclaimed by all the deputies in their quality of representatives of the people.

Thus, the premise for raising the standard of living was created, since, according to Nicolae Ceaușescu, the payment of the external debt finally marked the beginning of “Romania’s complete economic and political independence”<sup>8</sup> and, according to the same leader, “for the first time in its long history, Romania has no external debt, no longer pays tribute to anyone, and is truly independent—both economically and politically.”<sup>9</sup>

Nicolae Ceaușescu informed the public opinion about the figures of the external payments. Thus, he said,

*at the end of March, we paid off the country's external debt, which in 1980 rose to over 11 billion dollars. Completely. From 1975 till March 1989 we paid about 21 billion dollars, of which the interest represents over 7 billion dollars. This does not include the debt we had in rubles, which we paid off a long time ago. At present, our country has to collect over 2.5 billion dollars from the credits extended to different states. Paying the external debt has undoubtedly required great sacrifices. We had to act in such a way as to ensure both the general development of the country and the gradual payment of the entire debt during this period and to take the necessary measures for the continuous strengthening of order and discipline, the careful planning and management of all sectors of activity.<sup>10</sup>*

Following the enumeration of these impressive figures for Romania, which brought new arguments to explain Romania's extremely complicated economic situation, and being aware of the population's difficult situation, Nicolae Ceaușescu plunged into complex explanations, from the geopolitical realities to the concrete realities of Romania, to justify the domestic situation. Thus, he said, "as it is known, from 1980 until now, the world economic situation has been very complex and serious. The situation of developing countries, whose external debt today rises to over 1,300 billion dollars, has got worse."<sup>11</sup> Romania belonged to this category of developing countries, aspiring to the title of country with a medium level of development, but the great achievement was that, by "paying off its external debt,"<sup>12</sup> Romania managed to free itself, in the opinion of the authorities, from any foreign oppression and was capable of focusing on the welfare of its own people. In this respect, it was stated that

*in taking the decision to pay the entire external debt in this decade, we proceeded from the fact that only by paying it off would we be able to ensure full economic and political independence, to unswervingly implement the party's Program of building the multilaterally developed socialist society and to provide the necessary conditions for Romania's steady advance towards communism! At the same time, we have decided to act in such a way as to ensure the country's economic and social development as well as the continuous improvement of the people's material and spiritual status. In the years 1981–1989 over 2,000 billion lei were allocated for development. At the non-commercial exchange rate of the dollar this means over 200 billion dollars. This year's industrial production is more than 50% higher than in 1980. The agricultural production will be almost 1.5 times higher. The volume of goods sold to the population, at current prices, is 40% higher. The total remuneration fund has increased in this period by almost 60% and the average remuneration by almost 50%. As it is known, in the years 1981–1989, wages and pensions have doubled. This year, until 1 August, the second increase in remuneration and pensions shall*

*be completed. At the same time, child allowance has increased by about 70% and social spending per capita by over 44%. Generally, during this period, extensive works of industrial, agricultural and national interest have been carried out and over 1 million apartments have been built. In these years, the Danube–Black Sea Canal and the Poarta Albă–Midia Năvodari Canal, with a total length of about 100 km, have been commissioned, the metro in Bucharest has been finalized, and this year it will reach a length of 60 km, the flow of the Dâmbovița River has been regulated and the great works of modernization and systematization of the capital city, including the new administrative center, have been carried out. In general, all counties, towns and communes of our socialist country have seen a strong development...*<sup>13</sup>

All these arguments should have been enough to mobilize a population that was experiencing rather poor living conditions, so that the regime could still benefit from its support. But this was not possible and the communist authorities were aware of it. Nothing had improved in terms of living standards and food supply remained as poor as ever. This was contrary to what had been said at the Plenary of the CC of the RCP and at the meeting of the Great National Assembly, on 17–18 April 1989, proving that everything was only propaganda.

This also explains why the population continued to be watched by the repressive structures who, together with the ruling political structures, were aware of the problems regarding the food supply system, firstly but not only, and the other categories of goods necessary for everyday life, an everyday life that was more and more troubled towards the end of the communist regime.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, a note of the Oradea Securitate, dated 26 May 1989,<sup>15</sup> a month after the triumphalist speech in the Plenary of the CC of the RCP and in the Great National Assembly, pointed out serious deficiencies in supplying the population with agri-food products. It covered the whole range of staples. What may surprise today is the phrase used in the document—“the population’s consumption rights”—but it is a well-known fact that food was rationed in Romania, each inhabitant receiving a certain amount of food distributed monthly. The note of the Securitate made direct reference to certain “shortcomings in the supply of agri-food products,”<sup>16</sup> being in fact a synthesis of the population’s economic problems.

Thus, there were major problems with the milk supply. Here things were serious even in the opinion of this institution, which pointed out that “only 38% of the raw material planned for the county is being collected,”<sup>17</sup> delivering to the population “only 58,000 liters of milk on working days, as well as fresh produce set by the County Supply Programme.”<sup>18</sup> More serious deficiencies were reported by the Securitate in the area of complementary products such

as “beverages based on whey and buttermilk, artificial honey bars, cream cheese with additives, malted milk powder.”<sup>19</sup> The author of the document underlined that “these complementary products are not at the level of the established quotas, mentioning the lack of sugar and other raw materials that make up these products.”<sup>20</sup> The document also recorded the lack of certain products such as “cottage cheese, bark-wrapped cheese, sour cream, caciocavallo, cream cheese, cow cheese in quantities to meet the requirements, and the supplied milk does not always cover the needs.”<sup>21</sup> One cause for alarm was the supply of nurseries and kindergartens through the “Alimentara” food shop chain, which “is done according to the quantity of milk received and not according to the number of existing children,”<sup>22</sup> indicating that pre-school children from kindergartens in Oradea and in Bihor County did not receive sufficient specific food, a situation considered inappropriate even by the Securitate.

Shortcomings were also reported in the supply of meat products. The document read that “the range of products is limited and quantitatively unevenly distributed, dominant being the products with high profitability such as: Mistrreț pork salami, Igniș sausages, smoked bacon, bones,”<sup>23</sup> and indicated that the raw material consisted of “meat with low nutritional value.”<sup>24</sup> The shortcomings were major and were clearly recorded in the documentation prepared by the Securitate and forwarded to the hierarchical structures in Bucharest. The document stated that “the shortage of soy flour, sodium polyphosphate and oil, some spices such as thyme, caraway, maize, and the increased amounts of fat introduced affect the quality of these products. Also, due to the lack of suitable membranes, the commercial aspect leaves a lot to be desired (sheep and horse bladders and membranes are being used). There have been situations when the missing ingredients used in pre-packaged food have been replaced by bones.”<sup>25</sup>

Cooking oil was not sufficient either. Consequently, “due to low oil reserves, the Bucharest Cooking Oil Plant has delivered quotas that are below the quantities contracted by the beneficiaries. Some of these cannot be met by the Oradea Cooking Oil Company. By 24 May of the current year, of the 208 tons meant for ICRA Bihor only 125 tons were delivered, of which 2.4 tons to Beiuș, 12.1 tons to Salonta, 1.3 tons to Aleșd, and nothing to Marghita and Vașcău.”<sup>26</sup> With access to national data on this issue, the author of the document pointed out that Bihor County, despite being a border county, was allocated a quantity of cooking oil far below its needs and far below the quantities allocated to other counties. Alba, Arad, Cluj, Hunedoara, Sălaj, and Maramureș were listed among the best supplied counties and it is not clear why Bihor was the most disadvantaged of all the counties in the western part of Romania.

Major deficiencies were also reported in terms of sugar supplies, mentioning that “the Zahăr Oradea will finish the sugar stock for the market in May, and

there will be only 7,000 tons left in the state reserve.”<sup>27</sup> Risks from this perspective were even greater since “this unit delivers sugar to beneficiaries in 5 counties, with needed monthly supplies of 3,000 tons.”<sup>28</sup> The egg supply also faced an extremely severe situation. It was reported that “the quantities of eggs put up for sale by ICS Alimentara and the ICSIF food shops represent about 30% of the population’s needs.”<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, the document prepared by the Securitate and submitted to its higher authority indicated major general shortcomings regarding the inconsistencies in the public food system and in the “consumers’ co-operative system.” The worst inconsistencies were caused by the shortcomings in the “distribution of goods from the Commercial Department of Bihor County, in the sense that the established quotas were received after 15 May of the current year, a situation that has led to disruptions in supply...”<sup>30</sup> Thus, there were delays in the “distribution of oil and the allotted quotas have been diminished. Although yeast quotas are being received, they are small compared to the current needs. The provisions of the contract with ITA Bihor regarding the necessary means of transport are not complied with, causing supply delays. The food shop chain no longer has vegetable, fruit or mixed canned foods, and village food shops are sent products that are not in demand due to their high price (e.g. Golf Cigarettes).”<sup>31</sup>

Given the fact that important industrial centers in the county, such as the mining or the iron and steel towns, were given special attention in order to prevent possible riots, the documents of the Securitate recorded that in the first part of 1989 they were no longer supplied rhythmically, but only sporadically and “within 70–75%”<sup>32</sup> of their needs.

**S**O, A few weeks after having announced Romania’s economic independence and after having paid off its external debt, the Romanians’ daily problems were far from being solved.

Things did not change for the better even in the months that followed. The population’s discontent reported by the repressive structures was still present, proving that all the discussions from the spring of 1989 about the payment of the external debt and the bright future awaiting the Romanians were nothing but propaganda.

The citizens continued to be dissatisfied with their economic situation even at the time of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (20–24 November 1989) where the great achievements in the economic field and the increase in the population’s living standard were once again presented. Thus, around the time of the Congress, on 10 November 1989, a number of complaints on “the contractual obligations in kind”<sup>33</sup> came from the sheep breeders from Cherechiu and Diosig<sup>34</sup> in Bihor County. They complained about being

forced to fulfill the same obligations even if in March 1989 it had been triumphantly announced that things would change as a result of Romania's economic independence. These sheep breeders were among the few social categories that had some economic independence in communist Romania and the regime was more cautious in their regard. One can notice this from the Securitate's reports stating that some of the shepherds who were under surveillance possessed considerable fortunes. One of them, Vonica Maniu from Cherechui, 60 years old, owned 1,300 sheep, three houses in the Alba, Sibiu and Bihor counties and an ARO Diesel car.<sup>35</sup>

Since tensions in the country continued to grow rather than subside, despite the authorities' hopes after having gained the country's economic independence, the law enforcement institutions were commanded to keep a close watch on the population's state of mind, all the more so since the proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress had to run smoothly. And this in a period when things in the communist bloc were out of control due to the liberalization of these regimes.<sup>36</sup>

That is why, in the days preceding the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the RCP, the Securitate received the mission of reassessing the state of mind of the population in Bihor County. The conclusions once again led to the same economic problems related to the supply of consumer goods. Issued on the second day of the congress, on 21 November 1989, the report restated the Romanians' real problems and the enormous gap between the standard of living and the propaganda, between what was said at the congress<sup>37</sup> and the everyday economic reality.

As reported by the Securitate, the reality was, in fact, discouraging for the inhabitants. These reports did not hesitate to record the true state of mind of the population. Thus, one of the notes on the situation in the town of Marghita, Bihor County, at the very time of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the RCP, indicated that "there is an inadequate mood caused by the huge delays in the delivery of gas cylinders, deficiencies in the distribution of houses, the non-payment of medical leaves and shortcomings in the food supply."<sup>38</sup> The document, extremely edifying and realistic, showed the realities at the end of 1989 in a Romania that was marked by a profound crisis. The way Marghita was depicted in this report is undoubtedly valid for the whole of Romania, excepting of course the members of the nomenklatura. We find out that "no gas cylinders have been received since 31 October 1989, no coupon has been issued for gas cylinders in November, 412 gas cylinders are yet to be delivered since October, in November none of the 1,300 allocated gas cylinders has yet been delivered."<sup>39</sup>

But the worst situation concerned the basic food supplies for daily living. The report presented the problems only for the months of October and November 1989, but for the entire year the situation was even more serious, with huge differences between the quantities that were allocated for consumption and the

quantities that were actually delivered. Thus, the report stated, “in terms of supplying the population with the main meat and milk products the situation for the months of October and November is as follows.”<sup>40</sup>

Products	1989	October	November	
Meat	allocated	18 tons	40 tons	
	delivered	4.7 tons	4.1 tons	
Meat products	allocated	39 tons	40 tons	
	delivered	10.7 tons	5.9 tons	
Canned meat	allocated	13 tons	13 tons	
	delivered	0 tons	0 tons	
Processed food	allocated	7 tons	7 tons	
	delivered	10.3 tons	2.3 tons	
Fish	allocated	1 tons	4 tons	
	delivered	4.5 tons	2.3 tons	
Canned fish	allocated	3 tons	3 tons	
	delivered	1.5 tons	0.7 tons	
Dairy products				
	cheese	allocated	10 tons	9 tons
		delivered	0.35 tons	0.2 tons
margerine	allocated	3 tons	3 tons	
	delivered	4.9 tons	2.3 tons	
butter	allocated	0 tons	2 tons	
	delivered	0.2 tons	0 tons <sup>41</sup>	

As one can see, there were major deficiencies in supplying the population with essential products such as milk, meat and their derivatives. The situation was a general one for the entire Bihor County as well as for the entire country. This explains once more the events that followed in December 1989.

Another report drawn up by the Securitate on 25 November 1989, one day after the congress, recorded the population’s state of discontent during the forum of the Romanian communists. The document is “an example” of what it meant to transmit data from the territory without causing discomfort either to the addressees or to the addressers, once Nicolae Ceaușescu was re-elected. Thus, the document read that, in Bihor, the works of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress were followed in a “peaceful atmosphere, without the troubles and disturbances from the other socialist countries . . . , which shows that the general policy of our party and state is just, trusted by the entire people.”<sup>42</sup> Or, it is known that, in the autumn of 1989 during the Congress in Oradea and Bihor, there were disagreements as to what was happening in Romania.<sup>43</sup>

In spite of the fact that the Securitate’s note wanted to distort reality, one can notice the dissatisfactions mentioned here. The same dissatisfactions had



been recorded in another note just a few days before, the note that we have mentioned earlier. The report of 25 November 1989 underlined that most of the commentaries during the congress “address issues related to a better supply of the population with agri-food and consumer products. This is all the more so since the content of the report speaks on several occasions about raising the people’s standard of living.”<sup>44</sup> People therefore saw the major differences between propaganda and everyday reality. This aspect was presented in the report, which indicates that the Securitate called the attention to this fact as well as to the fact that the population was deeply dissatisfied, as all the people they monitored complained that “it is inadmissible that, after such a rich harvest, flour is rationed and not distributed monthly, that rice has been absent for a long time from the food shop chain, an absence more acutely felt now in the eve of the winter holidays, that the meat, meat products, dairy products, sweets and eggs are found in insufficient quantities in grocery shops and some imported products or spices are completely unavailable.”<sup>45</sup>

In its informative notes, the Securitate called the attention to the existence in Bihor County of a growing state of discontent caused by the economic problems that the vast majority of the population was facing, a population that, even during the “great forum of the communists,” was more concerned about “its daily problems caused by supply difficulties”<sup>46</sup> than about what was being discussed there.

These documents clearly presented the fact that people were expecting from the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress concrete measures to solve the existing problems based on the fact that the leaders of the Communist Party and of the Romanian state were coming up with statements about the continuous increase in living standards, the exact opposite of what was happening in reality. Thus, another note of the Securitate recorded that most people “expected from the congress concrete and immediate measures meant to improve the supply of food, medicines, consumer goods.”<sup>47</sup>

Virtually all social strata were dissatisfied, and this fact was highlighted by the information provided by the Securitate from Bihor County. The medical staff was also discontented, citing “the lack of first-aid drugs in hospitals, pharmacies and Centrofarm warehouses.”<sup>48</sup> The shortage of medicines was an everyday reality in Bihor as well as in the entire country, completed by another bleak reality, the lack of food. All of these contributed to serious deficiencies in the population’s health, caused by malnutrition and the lack of medication. Malnutrition occurs when the calorie intake is higher than the nutrient intake. It affects both adults and children and can cause permanent disabilities and higher risks of infection. Everyday realities in Romania in the 1980s created this possibility on a fairly wide scale and the queues outside the shops were “a reflection of underdevelopment and resignation amid nationwide misery.”<sup>49</sup> The culture of poverty

is a concept often used when talking about the Romanian society of the 1980s<sup>50</sup> and it refers to how individuals and households were facing food shortages.

This demonstrates once again the demagoguery and the propaganda of the regime that built a parallel, imaginary world. Despite the deficiencies recorded by the secret police in this report, which was also submitted to their superiors, Nicolae Ceaușescu underlined the increase in living standards and food consumption. He said that “food consumption has risen from 1,800 calories per capita daily in 1950 to about 3,300 calories today, Romania belonging thus to the countries with a good consumption from the point of view of physiological needs.”<sup>51</sup> For six hours, the report presented on 20 November 1989, on the first day of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the RCP, listed the great achievements of the regime and described the happy world the population of Romania was living in.

**U**NDER THESE circumstances, what happened in December 1989 came almost naturally, by itself and in a context that seemed intentionally prepared even by the existing political, administrative and repressive structures. The situation was therefore likely to trigger major events and the explosion took place on a ground that had been specially prepared, in our opinion. Since the Securitate, the guard dog of the regime, and the decision-makers in Bucharest were aware of these things, one may wonder why no steps had been taken to prevent things from getting out of control, e.g. improving Romania’s economic situation given the fact that it had been announced more than half a year before that the country’s external debt had been paid off and that the country had gained its economic independence. Or maybe Nicolae Ceaușescu was not informed about the reality. Consequently, he could not take action. Taking this theory into consideration, who prevented him from being informed? If somebody was preventing him from finding out, was it deliberately or accidentally? What was the purpose? Is it possible that there were certain persons who wanted Nicolae Ceaușescu to step down in the context of the general changes in the Soviet bloc since he, misunderstanding the course of history, was refusing to resign as head of the party and head of state? These are all legitimate questions that so far have not received a professional answer based on credible documents and testimonies, although suggestions in this direction have already been made. As it is often the case, there may be a combination of all of the above. We hope that future research will shed light on these unknown facts, once access to the archives is granted. However, we also need to consider whether these archives have been or shall be properly kept.



**Notes**

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7. *Scinteia*, 13 April 1989, 1.
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11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. Adrian Neculau, ed., *Viața cotidiană în comunism* (Iași: Polirom, 2004), passim.
15. Archives of the National Council for the Investigation of Securitate Archives, Fond documentar, file no. 1193, vol. 2, fols. 16–18 (hereafter cited as ACNSAS).
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18. *Ibid.*
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20. *Ibid.*
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23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, fols. 16–17.
26. *Ibid.*, fol. 17.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, fols. 17–18.
29. *Ibid.*, fol. 18.
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31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. ACNSAS, Fond documentar, file 1193, vol. 3, fol. 225.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*

36. Adam Burakowski, Aleksander Gubrynowicz, and Paweł Ukielski, *1989: Toamna naștinilor*, foreword by Stejărel Olaru, trans. by Vasile Moga (Iași: Polirom, 2012), passim; Stelian Tănase, *Istoria căderii regimurilor comuniste: Miracolul revoluției* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2009), passim.
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38. ACNSAS, Fond documentar, file. no. 1193, vol. 3, fol. 85.
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40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., fol. 85v.
42. Ibid., fol. 247.
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50. Liviu Chelcea and Puiu Lățea, “Cultura penuriei: bunuri, strategii și practici de consum,” in Neculau, 152–174.
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## Abstract

Under the Sign of Malnutrition: Economic and Propaganda Policies in Romania at the End of the 1980s. Case Study: Bihor County

The last decade of the communist regime in Romania was a very complicated one due to the economic crisis that led to drastic reductions in the supply of the population with products necessary for daily living. This caused severe problems in an everyday life marked by the absence of food on the market, leading to serious health problems due to malnutrition. This situation developed gradually, but, by the end of the 1980s, things turned for the worse. Even if this aspect was known by the supervisory structures, mainly the Securitate, measures to improve the situation were taken only after the fall of the communist regime.

## Keywords

economic crisis, repression, propaganda policies, malnutrition, Securitate