

## *Romania: House of Cards*

**Steven L. Sampson**

Romania's status as Eastern Europe's "maverick" began in the early 1960s, when the Romanian Party Secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej attempted to resist Khrushchev's de-Stalinization efforts. Although part of the "home" faction of the minuscule Romanian Communist Party (membership in 1944 was 884!), Dej was just as Stalinist as those in the "Muscovite" group who had entered Romania on the heels of the Red Army. His strategy for consolidating power was to mobilize nationalism (both within the Party and in the population at large) by resisting Khrushchev's liberalizing influence on Romanian political life and his effort to integrate Romania's economy into Comecon.

Nicolae Ceausescu, Dej's lieutenant who succeeded him in 1965 and who has since ruled Romania with an iron hand, continued Dej's strategy. Ceausescu's popularity reached its height in 1968, when he condemned the Czech invasion and promised that Romanians would fight any encroachments on their territory. Since then, he has employed his nationalist trump card to mobilize internal support, to present himself to the West as a window to the USSR, and to gain bargaining points with the Soviets against the West.

Ceausescu's bitter pronouncements against *perestroika* and his total rejection of both economic reform and democratization resemble Dej's response to Khrushchev over 30 years ago. But things have changed in Romania. Ceausescu's trump card is used up. Romanians no longer believe in nationalism. In a country where even bread is rationed, where milk is available only by standing in line at 3 a.m., where children have not eaten meat for months, and where supermarkets sell only

canned tomatoes, nationalism is unable to fill their stomachs.

Romania's crisis differs from those of other East European states in that it is total: Poland may have economic problems, but politically and culturally it is at least chaotic if not "free." East Germany and Czechoslovakia may be repressive, but their streets are still lighted at night, their televisions are turned on, and gasoline is not rationed to 40 liters a month. Complaints by East Germans, Czechs or Poles about lack of information or spare parts for their personal computers pale in comparison to Romanians, who regularly bring back toilet paper, butter or salami when visiting the West. Romania has the lowest living standards in Eastern Europe and is politically the most repressive, culturally the most stagnant, and ideologically the most Stalinist.

Romania is being "Africanized," i.e., reduced to bare subsistence. People cultivate small plots or steal wooden benches to heat their apartments. It is a society fragmented by ethnic conflicts spawned by the regime in the form of overt Romanian chauvinism or even anti-Semitism. It is a country whose leader can be compared to the archetypical African socialist, who responds to criticism by maintaining: "This is our kind of socialism." He is on good terms with Kim Il Sung and Khadafi, and his best friends were Bokassa and the Shah (as well as Richard Nixon!). Romania is a country ruled by a nepotistic "sycophantocracy" of the King and his Queen (she ranks number two in the Party and three in the government, and is officially known as "Comrade Academician Doctor Engineer Elena Ceausescu").

By manipulating Romanian nationalism, Ceausescu gave Romanians a safety valve: workers and intellectuals could curse Russian machinations or cry out against Hungarian plots to take back Transylvania. This is no longer true. Ceausescu's policies of paying off Romania's debt by reducing living standards have brought the country to its biological minimum. The rationing of food, fuel, heat (to about 57° F in apartments), gasoline, electricity (one 10 watt bulb per apartment), paper, matches, and even television (down to 2 hours daily), has brought Romanians together. Recent protests in the Transylvanian towns of Brasov, Sibiu, Timisoara, Turda und Cluj saw Romanians marching together with their Hungarian and German brethren demanding "bread for our children, heat for our homes."

In August 1977, striking coal miners demanded an audience with Ceausescu so that, like the good czar, he could resolve their problems. Ten years later, in November 1987, the workers of Brasov carried signs demanding "Down with Ceausescu and with the Scoundrels." Not

only the Leader but his sycophants had to go. Workers no longer want to talk with their "czar"; they want him out. And to prove it, they burned down Party headquarters and liberated its secret stocks of scarce luxury goods such as meat and coffee.

Ceausescu is isolated within his own country. By putting his own brothers in charge of the army and security police, he has undermined these organizations' professional *élan*. By putting his wife and son in important Party posts, he has demoralized any remaining Party activists. By restricting real privileges to his own family, he has caused anger among the elite. Army captains have been seen standing in food lines: a rare sight in any East European country even in the darkest days of food rationing.

The extraordinary letter to Ceausescu signed by six former Party officials, including the former Party secretaries, shows the depth of resentment, even among the Party's Stalinist core. It accuses Ceausescu, among other things, of *misusing* the security organs. Instead of "defending socialist order against exploiting classes, the *securitate* is being utilized against workers who demand their rights and against old Party members who exert their right to complain." This gesture toward the secret police will strike a chord in the elite: Ceausescu is now making life rough for everybody.

Those Romanians who must live a life without privileges are responding to their misery by protesting any way they can. Graffiti has appeared on walls, leaflets on trolleys, and protests in various factories. By East European standards, however, the protests are few, scattered and easily repressed. There is no opposition, only various opponents. Romanians have been voting with their feet: 30,000 of them, mostly of Hungarian origin, are now in Hungary, seeking political asylum. Romanians have even fled East, into the Ukraine, and have not been returned by the Soviets.

Ceausescu has all but lost his "maverick" status in the West, which now recognizes him for the outlaw that he is: Romania is a cold dank cellar in Gorbachev's common European house. Western diplomats do not need Ceausescu to mediate now that they have Gorbachev and more pliable intermediaries, such as the Hungarians. Romanian goods and labor are either of poor quality, uncompetitive or unneeded. Denmark and Portugal have simply closed their embassies in Bucharest.

Romania is also becoming isolated by the rest of Eastern Europe. Dozens of protests have taken place in Hungary against the treatment of Hungarians in Transylvania and against Ceausescu's program to

abolish thousands of villages in the name of economic rationality. Yugoslavs and Bulgarians have protested Romania's pollution of the Danube. In the UN, Hungary has voted with the West to examine human rights violations in Romania, and the remaining East European allies abstained — an unprecedented act. Diplomatically, Ceausescu's contacts and visits abroad are largely limited to Third World countries which may have minerals the Romanians need, or with certain Middle Eastern clients (Iran) who can exchange oil for Romanian small arms or agricultural products.

In their peculiar conspiratorial fashion, some Romanians think Gorbachev keeps Ceausescu going as a negative example for the rest of Eastern Europe. This is wishful thinking. Gorbachev would like to rid himself of Ceausescu, but he cannot. He must bristle at Ceausescu's frequent pronouncements of *perestroika* as a step toward anarchy, with Ceausescu's resolute promise that Romanians will never return socialist property to capitalists, that the development of the productive forces is primary, and that the leading role of the Party must be assured. Ceausescu's resistance to *perestroika* is total: in an extraordinary speech on his own birthday, he admitted having carefully examined Romania's economic and political system . . . and to have found it perfect!

Romanian-Soviet relations have grown increasingly tense, partly as Ceausescu and Honecker have united against *perestroika*, and partly because the Romanian people now look to the USSR for inspiration where they previously saw only an enemy. The Soviet embassy in Bucharest is roped off much like the US embassy was. Some occasionally throw manifestos over the wall, while others, in a historical reversal, wish for a Soviet invasion to liberate Romania from Ceausescu. For the first time, Romanian intellectuals are looking towards the East for inspiration. Censorship in the Romanian media about events in the USSR has led Romanians to listen both to Radio Moscow and Radio Free Europe.

Genuine reform in Romania will not come from protests by religious groups, ethnic minorities, or worker riots. Neither will it come from the small number of intellectuals protesting the regime on humanist grounds, such as the Cluj philosopher Doinea Cornea, who has been under house arrest for months. What is needed is some kind of reform movement or faction within the Party. In this sense, the extraordinary letter signed by six former high Party officials — none of whom have clean hands — is extremely important. It condemns the Ceausescu regime for violations of human rights, the irrational destruction of villages and poor planning, agricultural disarray, and for isolating Romania from

the rest of Europe (of trying to “remove it to Africa”). Ceausescu is indicted not for his Stalinism, but for abandoning Marxist principles and misusing his security police. The signers of the letter — themselves part (or formerly) of the Romanian *nomenklatura* — do not condemn Ceausescu for his nepotism, nor do they call for him to step down. The anger of these *apparatchiki* is directed not at Romanian communism *per se*, but at Ceausescu. Marxism is not declared bankrupt. Rather, Ceausescu is declared a traitor to Marxism.

Ceausescu quickly responded to the letter by isolating those signers who were still in the country, arresting some of their family members for treason, and by firing the ministers of finance and agriculture for incompetence. However, the question remains: If everyone is against Ceausescu, what keeps him in power? The brutality of the secret police is an insufficient explanation, since its own brutality reflects its inefficiency. A secret police apparatus requires citizens’ collaboration in order to function. It is not so much the secret police but the informer who runs rampant in Romania. Why for so long? And how much longer? The protest by former high Party officials is an important first step in creating a Party faction against Ceausescu. It is important that this faction is seeking the tacit support of the security police (by not blaming them *per se*) and international support as well (two of the signers were important in shaping Romania’s “independent” foreign policy).

Yet the question remains: if everyone is against Ceausescu, if nothing works, why does the regime not fall? Perhaps Ceausescu’s rule is like that of the Shah or Marcos or Papa Doc: it is a house of cards which can fall with the slightest push. The push can be a combination of internal protest, a reformist faction in the Party, and external pressure from the East. A house of cards can stand for some time, but when it falls, it collapses all at once. At the moment, Romania resembles most of Central Europe as it appeared in the 1950s: worker protests are more expressions of rage than the reconstitution of civil society. Intellectuals are mostly cowed into submission. Emigration rather than reform is on the agenda. And the reformers are former die-hard Marxists who see the regime as a betrayal of Marxism. In the context of East European social movements, Romania remains “backward.”

Having never had a reform faction in the Party, the current “reformers” are somewhat of an anomaly: they certainly have dirty hands. The best one can hope for is a successor who, in order to achieve some legitimacy, will do what most Romanians want: put some meat and eggs back in the stores, turn the lights back on, turn up the gas so

Romanians will not freeze in their own bedrooms, give them enough gasoline so they can again drive their own cars, provide them with a few Western films on TV, cease the chauvinism and stop the personality cult. In short, bring life in Romania back to something approaching East European normalcy.

Such demands, modest as they seem, would constitute a revolution of expectations in Romania. Only then may we see some move toward *perestroika* Romanian style. But in a country whose only experience of popular expression has been anti-Russian, anti-Hungarian, and anti-Semitic outbursts, where patronage, connections and *bakshish* have much longer histories than civil society, and where the national motto was "the head that bows low does not get cut off by the sabre," one can only wonder what kind of political culture this will bring, and how a new leadership will manipulate it.

How do we explain the absence of any move toward *perestroika* in Romania? It is seductive to focus solely on the personality of Ceausescu himself as the only limiting factor. This is not unreasonable. Ceausescu is an old-line, die-hard Marxist, who on several occasions has expressed genuine "worry" about "developments in certain socialist countries." He is simply unable to abandon the ideology with which he matured politically. He sincerely believes in the leading role of the Party, the priority of central planning, the importance of "socialist property" and the innate superiority of socialism over capitalism. He has repeatedly hailed the "excellence" of Party cadres and the perfect congruence of the Romanian development model to the country's "specific historical needs." Since plans are always touted as "excellent," Ceausescu can easily explain Romania's economic "shortcomings" as due to lackadaisical execution by underlings who lack sufficient revolutionary vigilance. Thus rotations and firings substitute for any talk of reform or restructuring.

Yet to focus solely on the will of the Leader as the impetus which can foster or impede *perestroika* is to fall back into the kind of totalitarian-directed society model which so dominated our conception of Eastern Europe for two decades. Just as important as Ceausescu's own stubbornness and fear of *perestroika* is Romanian society's inability to force the ruling clan to change its mind or relinquish control. There has up to now been very little pressure from either masses or elites to force Ceausescu to undertake any fundamental reforms. Citizens' protests have been either spontaneous riots, in which workers reassert their implicit rights to social welfare goods — food, heat, wages — or simply "rejections" of economic penury and political repression. No alternative

program has been proposed outside of getting rid of the Ceausescu clan.

Within the elite, no reform faction has been able to create any meaningful profile to which society could gravitate. Technocrats and experts within the Romanian elite seem to be continually on the defensive against the "reds" installed by Ceausescu and his wife. Various ministers, both "experts" and "reds," are periodically rotated to new posts or fired as scapegoats when Ceausescu discovers that too many foreign loans have been taken, food production has not improved or coal production has failed to meet its target. This prevents them from building up any independent power base and from forging any strong coalitions within either the Party or the state apparatus. As a consequence, discontent focuses solely on the Leader rather than on a plan for economic or political reform. Instead of *perestroika* or *glasnost*, we find discontented intellectuals or party elites, such as the six activists who wrote the protest letter to Ceausescu.

The lack of internal forces which can force the leadership to undertake *perestroika* is complemented by the lack of external forces capable of pushing Ceausescu in this direction. The Soviets may criticize what is happening in Romania, but they are in no position to impose a solution. They cannot dictate a *perestroika* and are so preoccupied with the decay of their own empire that any intervention in Romania is out of the question. As they look at Eastern Europe, all the Soviets can do is criticize the situation in Romania, and try to set limits on liberalization in Poland and Hungary. Ceausescu, of course, has no intention of approaching any of *these* limits, so his position is relatively secure. One might cite pressure on Ceausescu toward *perestroika* coming from the West in the form of trade sanctions or political isolation by the Common Market, the World Bank, or individual Western trading partners like West Germany. Yet this pressure is increasingly irrelevant now that Romania has repaid its debts, has reduced its trade with the West, and is pursuing an autocratic "Albanian" economic model.

The most important task of a post-Ceausescu leadership, however, would be to provide a value orientation as a support for mobilization. The only possible solution here is to elevate private values to public values. The private values have included education, hard work and material rewards, professional competence, consumerism, travel, civil freedoms, stability for one's family and mobility for one's children. These are not Ceausescu's values, who emphasizes "reds" over "experts," political activism over professional competence, and sacrifice over consumerism. He tends to view such private values as "egoistic."

Yet these private values are the values of the professional class, and it is this professional class that Romania needs to get back on its feet.

A post-Ceausescu regime will also require sacrifice, but such cannot be extracted by the now discredited calls for "nationalism," "socialism" or "development." Only private values have the power to mobilize the population for further sacrifice. The new regime must transform the so-called "egoistic," private concerns into public values. By establishing a contract based on "renewal" and "getting down to work," by promising *private* rewards, the future leadership can lift Romania out of its current crisis. Such a contract may not produce an enthusiastic population, but it will mobilize them without resort to coercive methods, useless slogans, military orders, or updated appeals to anti-Sovietism. Only by putting *private values on the public agenda* can post-Ceausescu Romania establish a new social contract. By itself, this will not produce the dynamism and legitimacy which characterized Romania in the 1960s, but it may at least help the society to muddle through as it once did. If the post-Ceausescu regime is unwilling to pursue such a strategy, the already exhausted society can only be subjected to further atomization, increased anomie, and chaotic violent explosions.

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