

Contesting the Leader on Daily Basis: Everyday Resistance and Nicolae Ceaușescu's Cult of Personality

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Abstract: *My paper analyzes how a part of the Romanian people contested on daily basis their leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, and also the overwhelming presence of his cult of personality in their life especially during the 1980s. To this end, I will employ James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance in order to map the array of means used by the people in order to express their protest towards the public homage paid to the Romanian communist leader.*

My examination of the documents created by the Securitate (the former Romanian political police) and also by the Romanian department of Radio Free Europe, of the memoir literature published after the demise of the communist regime helped me to identify the following forms of everyday resistance towards Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality: political discussions, individual or collective actions directed against the images of the Romanian communist leader, writing and spreading "documents containing hostile message" (unsigned letters, leaflets with messages against Nicolae Ceausescu) and political jokes.

They will be analyzed from two main perspectives that will show and explain in what their resistance core lies in. The first one underlines that these forms of everyday resistance reversed the meanings of the homage assumptions made by the Romanian propaganda about Ceausescu's leadership in order to identify what and particularly why certain aspects of his rule became the focus of the daily popular protest. The other perspective evaluates the role played by everyday resistance in the gradual undermining of Nicolae Ceausescu's domestic legitimacy that along other evolutions led to the popular revolt against his rule in December 1989.

Key words: *Everyday resistance, Nicolae Ceausescu, Communism, Cult of Personality, political.*

Introduction

From the perspective of Western observers, the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime represented a surprising and unexpected evolution. In the context of the events that took place in other countries of the former Soviet bloc during the year of 1989, the removal of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his leading team in December 1989 was not a surprise in

itself. What was striking in the Romanian case was the population's virulent contestation of the regime and its leader, and how they chose to act against them. This was because, despite the material deprivations population had to cope with during the 1980s, most of them seemed to have chosen the path of compromise and subordination to Ceaușescu's regime. Thus, with the exception of a few news about instances of Romanian intellectuals protesting against the policies and measures initiated by the communist government in Bucharest, the information which reached the West about Romania in the 1980s emphasized the apathy and the lack of any reaction from the population to the internal political and economic situation. Moreover, the Romanians' participation in large demonstrations organized with the purpose of bringing a public homage to Nicolae Ceaușescu completed the picture of society's acceptance and subordination to his leadership.

Using the documents of the former Securitate as a starting point, this article aims to challenge the unanimously accepted opinion of the complete subordination of the population to the Romanian communist regime. To this end, I intend to look at how some of the Romanians positioned themselves in relation to Ceaușescu's cult of personality. Using James C. Scott's perspective of *everyday resistance* to analyze the forms of public opposition to the public homage paid to the Romanian communist leader, I argue that individual and collective actions directed against his cult of personality, absent from official recollections of the past, did actually take place. Analyzing the *everyday resistance* of the population to Ceaușescu's cult of personality will highlight the gradual erosion of his political legitimacy, eventually throwing new light on the reasons which ignited the population's opposition to the Romanian communist regime in December 1989.

Defining Resistance and Everyday Resistance

Generally speaking, *resistance* implies an oppositional attitude translated in the refusal of accepting or subduing to something or someone. Analysed from the standpoint of people's relation with their authoritarian and oppressive regimes, the concept of *resistance* has been approached from different perspectives.

Violent or armed resistance deployed against a foreign power has been analysed in very diverse contexts from the oppositional actions aiming the Nazi occupation in Europe during the Second World War to

the civil war in China, military conflicts in Korea, Vietnam or Afghanistan. In all these cases, organized groups used bombings, kidnappings, assassination attempts or sabotages against a foreign regime, an occupation force or for preventing the rise to power of a certain political party.¹

On the other hand, *non-violent* or *civil resistance* employs organized and sometimes illegal forms of action against a political regime or party, a specific policy or decision-making. Consequently, civil resistance used protests, petitions, strikes, boycotts etc. to express opposition against colonialism, foreign powers of occupation, military *coup d'etats*, dictatorial regimes, racial, religious, gender discriminations or for defending human rights.² Civil resistance has also targeted democratic regimes in relation with preserving the constitutional order, regional autonomy, protecting the rights of national minorities or environment or protesting against a state's involvement in a military conflict.³

This analytical perspective, focusing only on organized forms of resistance, leads to a one-sided reading and understanding of the relation between the state and its population. In this respect, the power relations are accepted by default and contested only in open and direct

¹ See, for example, Bob Moore, *Resistance in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Roger D. Peterson, *Resistance and Rebellion. Lessons from Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Raymond Aubrac, Lucie Aubrac, *The French Resistance, 1940-1944*, (Hazan, 1997); Terry Crowdy, *French Resistance Fighter: France's Secret Army*, (Osprey Publishing, 2007); Marcia Kurapovna, *Shadows on the Mountain: The Allies, the Resistance, and the Rivalries that Doomed WWII Yugoslavia*, (Wiley, 2010); Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich, Bavaria 1933-45*, (Oxford University Press, 2002); Peter Hoffman, *The History of the German Resistance: 1933-1945*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Yves Chevrier, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*, (Gloucestershire: Arris Books, 2004); Rebecca E. Karl, *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth Century World. A Concise History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Peter Calvoceossi, *Politica mondială după 1945*, (Bucharest: Editura Allfa, 2000); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, (Bucharest: Editura ALL, 2007).

² See Adam Roberts, Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics. The Experience of Nonviolent Action from Gandhi to the Present*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Adam Roberts, 'Civil Resistance to Military Coups' in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 12, nr. 1 (1975), pp. 19-36; Roger Bruns, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Green Press, 2006).

³ Adam Roberts, „Introduction” în Adam Roberts, Timothy Garton Ash (eds), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, pp. 2-3; Erica Chenoweth, Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, (Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 6-13; Michael J. Nojeim, *Gandhi and King. The Power of Nonviolent Resistance*, (Praeger Publishers, 2004).

acts of protest. However, the low number of such events prompted discussions and analyses about the religious, cultural and political reasons that could have explained why people did not react to the domination imposed by the political power.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a series of anthropological studies on the colonial and post-colonial rural societies brought about the existence of forms of everyday resistance of the population towards the political and economical authority. Consequently, from James C. Scott's point of view, *the everyday resistance* represents the main means of opposition against power and domination that characterize the behaviour and the cultural practices of subordinated groups.⁴

The concept of *everyday resistance* and Michel Foucault's perspective on power as an everyday and socialized phenomenon has fundamentally redefined the understanding of resistance and its ways of expression. Consequently, the power/domination becomes the focal point of numerous and diverse contestations and indirect negotiations within the realm of social relations. These complicated webs of power and resistance workings are always interwoven with and mutually constitutive of one another.⁵

The revisionist school has approached the subject of *everyday resistance* in its drive of questioning the use of the totalitarian model for studying the interwar Soviet regime. One of its representatives, Lynne Viola, sets two main types of resistance. According to her, the *active resistance* is the most clear-cut type of resistance and it may include demonstrations and protest meetings, riots, rebellions, assaults, assassinations, protest letters, etc. 'An endemic and deeply rooted behaviour of subaltern classes', the *passive resistance* comprises the forms

⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Douglas Haynes, Gyan Prakash, 'Introduction: The Entanglements of Power and Resistance' in Douglas Haynes, Gyan Prakash (ed.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asian Society and History*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 1-2.

⁵ Steve Pile, 'Introduction' in Steve Pile, Michael Keith (eds.), *Geographies of Resistance*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-30; Joanne P. Sharp, Paul Routledge, Chris Philo, Ronan Paddison, 'Entanglements of Power. Geographies of Domination/Resistance' in Joanne P. Sharp, Paul Routledge, Chris Philo, Ronan Paddison, *Entanglements of Power. Geographies of Domination/Resistance*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

of everyday resistance initially identified by James C. Scott, such as foot dragging, negligence, theft, feigned ignorance, dissimulation, false compliance. Also, Lynne Viola considers that it is more appropriate to speak of *resistances* or *acts of resistance* instead of resistance alone. That is because acts of resistance are influenced by and mirror the complexities of the societies in which they have emerged. Consequently, they reflect the existing social and political divisions and thus identify the conflicting forces present within the respective society. Moreover, Lynne Viola mentions that religious, national, gender or class determinants and also the proximity and threat of power forces shape the contours of resistance and its language.⁶

In her study about everyday life in the Soviet Union in 1930s, Sheila Fitzpatrick describes the behaviour and survival strategies employed by people to cope with the existing social and political conditions. She identifies the forms of *passive resistance* (such as rumours, gossip, jokes, political discussions, etc.) used by the subordinated groups to express their dissatisfaction with the harsh economic situation.⁷

Also, in the introduction to the English edition of the book *Sedition. Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev*, Sheila Fitzpatrick uses the term of *sedition* (the English translation for the Russian word *kramola*) to identify the various forms of everyday resistance in the post-war Soviet Union. Although she borrows the expression of *everyday resistance* from James C. Scott, she acknowledges that his theoretical model needs further amendments in order to fully reflect the nature of the Soviet daily resistance. Within the context of the post-war Soviet Union, the anti-Soviet speech and actions were not meant to remain hidden from the power holders or to be directed only at other subalterns as it was in the case of James C. Scott's *hidden transcripts*. On the contrary, given the nature of the subaltern conservation (anonymous letters denouncing the regime's misdeeds, the distribution of leaflets, the dropping of abusive notes to the authorities in the ballot boxes at election time, defacement or mockery of portraits and statues of leaders etc.), it was obvious that its initiators wanted the

⁶ Lynne Viola, 'Introduction' and 'Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate' in Lynne Viola (ed.), *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 1-14 și pp. 18-20.

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

power holders to listen to their anti-Soviet speech. Hence, Sheila Fitzpatrick asserts that *kramola* represented the only political acts through which Soviet citizens could express or take a stand about political affairs as the Soviet democracy allowed only a simulated participation to the political decision-making. Also, the author makes an important semantic distinction between the different acts of resistance according to the social position of those involved in them. Consequently, *dissidence* was the domain of intellectuals while *popular sedition* was an activity appealing more to lower urban classes.⁸

By the same token, Kerry Kathleen Riley analyzes the non-violent yet subversive means by which citizens express at first indirectly and later on directly their opposition to the East German Communist regime, tracing the progressive evolution of what she identifies as *everyday subversion*. Then, she examines the long-term contribution of private forms of resistance (the sharing of political jokes) and of the 'quasi-public' ones (church-sponsored events, small group discussions or work, peace prayers, etc.) to the peaceful demise of the communist rule in East Germany in 1989. Moreover, in regard to the essentially interactional nature of the forms of *everyday subversion*, Riley claims that they function as *rhetorical antidotes* by which people counteracted the ills of living in a communist regime.⁹

Everyday Resistance and Nicolae Ceaușescu's Cult of Personality

In line with the previously mentioned works, my paper will analyze the Romanians' *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality. Although retaining the basic meaning of James C Scott's *everyday resistance*, I will draw my own definition of the *everyday resistance* in the the particular case of Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality and based on Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner's definition of resistance.¹⁰

⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Sediton in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union' in Vladimir A. Kozlov, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Sergei V. Mironenko, *Sedition. Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 1-24.

⁹ Kerry Kathleen Riley, *Everyday Subversion. From Joking to Revolting in the German Democratic Republic*, (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Jocelyn A. Hollander, Rachel L. Einwohner, 'Conceptualizing Resistance', in *Sociological Forum* 19 (2004), no. 4, pp. 533-554.

In James C. Scott's scheme, Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality represents a form of domination that triggers and becomes the target of the common people's daily protest. In this case, domination receives a broader definition and it refers to the omnipresence of Ceaușescu's cult of personality in the Romanians' everyday life. This pervasive presence was mainly achieved through the total takeover of the mass media by the laudatory works dedicated to the Romanian communist leader. Moreover, the forced participation of the population to an increasing number of public events (such as parades, festivities) counted as another means for ensuring the presence of Ceaușescu's cult of personality in people's lives.

Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner set four characteristics, which in their view, are essential for defining *resistance*: action, opposition, visibility and intention.¹¹ Here, resistance implies a daily active behaviour (verbal, cognitive or physical) of the people that articulates their protest or opposition towards Ceaușescu's cult of personality. Their opposition element is concealed and expressed through more or less ordinary actions. In this regard, I have identified several forms of everyday resistance against Ceaușescu's public adulation. They include discussions and comments on political themes, individual or collective actions against images depicting the Romanian communist leader, editing and distributing of 'writings with hateful content' and political jokes. Their analysis will serve two purposes: it justifies their labelling as everyday forms of resistance to the cult of personality and also show how their content validates such a categorization.

The visibility of the *everyday resistance* raises several critical issues worthy of exploration. According to James C. Scott, all forms of resistance create what he calls *hidden transcripts*, i.e. acts, behaviours and attitudes the subordinated groups use to express their criticism of power or its holders. But this criticism was meant to remain hidden from the official representatives as it involved an interpretation of formal rules, whose significance and existence was known only to the subordinates. This helped them to avoid a direct hostile reaction from those affected by the hidden criticism.¹² Some forms of everyday resistance (such as the creation and distribution of leaflets, the vandalizing of Ceaușescu's portraits) underline the intention of their initiators to force the Romanian authorities listen to their protest. Also, as I will show below, the

¹¹ Jocelyn A. Hollander, Rachel L. Einwohner, 'Conceptualizing Resistance', pp. 538-544.

¹² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. XI-XII, 2-26.

Securitate knew about and took measures against those involved in everyday resistance.

In this context, a new issue is raised that does not exclusively concern the visibility of the everyday resistance. It also considers the identity of those involved in labelling certain actions as hostile to Ceaușescu's cult of personality, namely the former Romanian secret police, the Securitate, or persons who participated in such actions. The fact that my identification of the main acts of everyday resistance is based on information provided by the Securitate's documents may raise doubts about the veracity of such labelling. In this respect, one might invoke the argument that the Securitate had arbitrarily created this everyday resistance or that it had vested interests in identifying opponents of the regime and its leader.

As Lynne Viola mentions, popular resistance depends on the state for its existence. That is because its institutions (in my case the Securitate) classified certain events, acts, practices or categories of actions as hostile to its own interests. In addition, the resistance grows within and against the political, social and cultural parameters set out by the state.¹³ Even though the everyday or popular resistance owns its existence to the state, assessing its oppositional character is a more complex issue. It goes beyond the 'ideological imprimatur'¹⁴ and its categorization of popular moods according to 'the Marxist laws of social order' to consider the general context in which resistance occurs and also its source or target. Accordingly, if the specific manifestations of the everyday resistance matched the regime's fears of instability in connection with the above mentioned issues, this dictated whether a particular action was ignored or classified as an opposition.¹⁵ As I will show below, the Securitate's documents specifically recorded the 'hostile' content of people's everyday resistance in relation with two particular developments that would contribute to the final demise of the Romanian communist regime in December: the failure of the economic policy and the mass blaming on Nicolae Ceaușescu for the generalized shortage of food and consumer goods the population had to deal with during the 1980s.

Besides the Securitate, the everyday resistance had the same meaning for those who, in a way or another, came into contact with the

¹³ Lynne Viola, 'Popular resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate', pp. 17-43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 25, 32-33.

secret police. Depending on the case, they were either the Securitate's informers who gave details about the persons and their everyday acts of resistance or those who took precautions before performing any 'hostile' actions directed against the Romanian regime and its leader.

The last element that must be taken into consideration when defining the everyday resistance is the intention behind these acts of resistance. As I will show below, the forms of everyday of resistance resumed the arguments provided by the party propaganda about Ceaușescu's political activity and ascribed them a new meaning that was contrary to the one provided through official channels. This involved an intellectual effort from those who chose to express in such a manner their disagreement to Ceaușescu's cult of personality, and implicitly a recognition of the 'hostile, hateful' character of their actions.

Just as Sheila Fitzpatrick¹⁶ and James C. Scott¹⁷ I consider the everyday forms of resistance as the only genuine political acts through which citizens could express their opinion in matters of home and foreign policy. In my case, the subject on which they pronounced themselves was the results of the leadership of Nicolae Ceaușescu, as the Romanian socialist democracy offered no opportunity of expressing different views from the official ones.

The forms of everyday resistance against Ceaușescu's cult of personality are also a manifestation of what Kerry Kathleen Riley identified as *everyday subversion*.¹⁸ They helped to the gradual delegitimization of his regime and they could also explain its unanimous public contestation in December 1989. In this sense, they stressed the discrepancy between what official propaganda declared about the exceptional achievements of Ceaușescu's leadership and the grim reality of his activity.

Why Nicolae Ceaușescu's Cult of Personality?

Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality represents a very good subject for my analysis of everyday resistance not only because of its centrality to the Romanian regime, but also because it links Ceaușescu to certain

¹⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Sedition in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union', pp. 1-24, 9.

¹⁷ For James C. Scott, the forms of everyday resistance represent the main form of political participation of the subordinated ones or what he calls *infrapolitics*. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, pp. XIII, 200-201.

¹⁸ Kerry Kathleen Riley, *Everyday Subversion*.

unfavourable political developments that favoured the emergence of oppositional actions against him.

The cult of personality became the main feature of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime especially during the last decade of its existence. Marry Ellen Fischer relates this development to a change in the economic policy that prioritized for the first time directly the surviving of the heavy industry at the expense of the population's consumption and welfare. In this context, the cult of personality aimed at creating the image of an 'idol' for the Romanian leader 'an image that could mobilize the popular support that the goals of the regime and the personality of Ceaușescu could not produce'.¹⁹

Given the party control over the entire Romanian mass media, the laudatory comments about Nicolae Ceaușescu's activity and political biography were the only pieces of information that reached Romanians through the official channels. Thus, they informed the Romanians about Ceaușescu's leadership and also legitimized the gap between what people read, saw and heard about this subject and the realities of their everyday life in communist Romania. Moreover, any references people made about Nicolae Ceaușescu resumed or contested the official laudatory pronouncements about him that overflowed the entire Romanian mass media.

The development of the cult of personality also identified Nicolae Ceaușescu as the only decision-maker on matters concerning both the internal and external policy of the country. Thus, for most Romanians, he became the only responsible for the bad economic decisions that not only ruined the national economy but also worsened the living standards at unprecedented level.

The examination of everyday resistance will identify and analyze the main types of oppositional actions employed by the Romanians against the overwhelming presence in their life of Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality. These are the discussions or comments on political issues, individual or collective actions directed against the images of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the editing and the distribution of 'hostile' writings and last but not least, the political jokes. In each case, I will highlight the reasons for considering them as means of everyday resistance and

¹⁹ Marry Ellen Fischer, 'Idol or Leader? The Origins and Future of the Ceausescu Cult', in Daniel N. Nelson (ed.), *Romania in the 1980s*, (Boulder: 1981), pp. 117-141, 118-119, 126- 127.

exemplify their content in different contexts using the examples provided by the Securitate documents and other sources (such as Radio Free Europe's documentary papers or interviews).

As I will show below, people engaged in various forms of everyday resistance to Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality mainly due to hardships and generalized poverty that resulted from the radical change in the Romanian economic policy. Ceaușescu's decision to pay the country's external debt by prohibiting any imports and exporting any type of sellable goods, especially food, and his willingness to support the functioning of the 'energophagic' industry at all costs affected the Romanians' quality of life throughout the 1980s. Thus, people not only faced a shortage of basic foods, but also a severe rationalization of domestic consumption of electricity and heat which was felt more acutely during winter. Moreover, the intensification of Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality in the 1980s and the Romanian mass media insistence on presenting his leadership as a 'Golden Age' of prosperity and economic advancement linked up him and his work to the economic collapse of the Romanian communist regime and thus encouraged people's everyday resistance against him and his cult of personality.

Everyday forms of resistance against Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality

Discussions and comments on political issues

Discussions and comments on political issues came to the attention of the Securitate due to their 'hostile' or 'hateful' content against the Romanian communist regime and its leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu. My analysis is based on the weekly or monthly activity reports submitted by local offices of the Securitate that recorded the unusual events taking place within a county. They did not actually provide details on the content of the expressions that the Securitate considered being 'hostile' or 'hateful', and references to Nicolae Ceaușescu were disguised under general designations such as 'the superior leadership of the party and the state' or 'high political figures of the party and the state'.²⁰

²⁰ CNSAS (The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives), Documentary Fund, file 12639 vol. 3, folio 7; file 394, folio 41.

Consequently, the Securitate's documents identified people who 'expressed scurrilous and slanderous' remarks, who professed 'slander and serious injury', 'made biased statements' and 'depreciative' assertions, who 'offensively' addressed 'to high political figures of the party and the state' or to 'our party's and state's leadership'. In this respect, I would like to mention the case of a young man from the city of Blaj, Alba County, who 'amid complaints of a personal nature' 'addressed scurrilous and slanderous remarks towards the high political figures of the party and the state'.²¹

Although they did not elaborate on the content of 'hateful' or defamatory speech directed at Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Securitate's documents pointed out that the shortcomings in domestic supply in the 1980s prompted such a reaction on a part of the Romanian population. Moreover, given his undisputable position as both the leader of the party and state, many people directly blamed Ceaușescu for the shortages they had to deal with in their everyday life. As an example, a professor of chemistry from Bacău, who 'under the influence of reactionary radio broadcasts made denigrating comments about the socio-economic realities in Romania, against a person who had an important function in the line of the state whom he blamed for the country's economic situation'.²²

Exasperated by the prospect of extended food and consumer good shortages, some people believed that the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu from his position of Secretary General at the XIVth Congress of the RCP in November 1989 would be the only solution to solve the internal economic crisis. Thus, a citizen thought that 'some persons in the party's and state's leadership even if they were re-elected should retire and not bother the world',²³ while a chemical engineer from Baia de Arieș, a party member, stated that public supply might improve 'if the workers would openly express their dissatisfaction through street actions. He also said that he would have participated in such actions even if he would have lost his life, knowing that he left a better life to those who remained after him'.²⁴

²¹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 330 vol. 1, folio 37 v.

²² CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 8833 vol. 23, folio 315 v.

²³ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 8833 vol. 24, folio 191 f.

²⁴ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 394, folio 180 v.

The people's comments also emphasized the gap between the reality marked by shortages of supply of the internal market and narratives about the abundance and prosperity that overflowed the official media and the party leader's speeches. They underlined that the political education could not compensate or alleviate the difficulties caused by the low level of welfare. Thus, Ceaușescu's speech at the Congress of the Socialist Culture and Education at the end of the 1970s had been received and interpreted in the context of scarce food supply. A citizen of Iași stated that '... the words spoken by the head of state were only partly true, the words are somewhat nice, but only the words get to us, because in practice we get nothing. There it says that heaven will descend on earth, but in reality one cannot find a piece of meat. One wastes his spare time only by looking for some food, so the education that they want to offer us does not correspond to our needs, as they ask each one of us to be conscious, but he does not take into account that consciousness passes through the stomach'.²⁵ Much more bluntly, another citizen made some injurious comments about Nicolae Ceaușescu 'saying that he is not capable to run a country, that he was a shoemaker...that he issues all sorts of laws that are not good and are not being applied, that he indebted the country...and that there is nothing to be found on the market'.²⁶ The comment referred to the previous profession of the Romanian communist leader – a shoemaker. Because such a profession was not considered as proper for a leader of a workers' party, this detail was omitted from his official biographies but it could not be erased from the Romanians' memory as I will also show below.

The overflow of laudatory comments on the media about Nicolae Ceaușescu sparked negative comments, too. In the context of the celebrations dedicated to the last Congress of the RCP, a teacher from Sălaj County stated the following: 'There was too much propaganda made for re-electing the former leadership at the XIVth Congress. On the radio and the television they should broadcast something else because people got sick and it makes them comment negatively the social order in our country. The workers and other working people need to relax and not only see the face of the president painted in warm colours'.²⁷

²⁵ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13314 vol. 19, folios 221 f, 223.

²⁶ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, File 13787 vol. 13, folio 101 f-v.

²⁷ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, File 8833 vol. 24, folio 219 f.

The fact that such discussions were the only real political exercise of the Romanian citizens and that they involved a series of personal risks is confirmed by the following testimony: 'In those days, if someone did politics, it was only done silently, so you wouldn't have had the courage to say what you thought, because you did not know to whom you said it. So if you did not know well the individual you were talking to, you would have not had the courage to speak (...) Because you did not know if he would turn you in or who would listen to you. Or, if you were talking to someone on the street, you looked to the left and to the right, you looked forwards and backwards'.²⁸

The understanding of discussions and comments on political issues as means of people's everyday resistance considers not only the Securitate's interpretation in this regard but also their meanings. The examples mentioned in the documents show that at least some Romanians had and expressed a different point of view that contradicted the laudatory arguments provided by the party propaganda about Ceaușescu's leadership.

Individual and collective actions against images depicting Nicolae Ceaușescu

The Securitate's documents mentioned individual and collective actions directed against pictures and portraits of the Romanian leader. Similar to the case of the discussions or comments about political topics, the destruction or mishandling of Ceaușescu's images testified some profound dissatisfaction against his leadership. The main reason behind the popular discontentment was again related to Ceaușescu's bad economic decisions and their negative effects on the Romanians' living standard. Moreover, his pictures became the target of people's frustrations not only due to their omnipresence in the public spaces (especially official buildings) but also because of their massive use in promoting his cult of personality.

One way of mishandling the Romanian leader's official images was to scribble them. The Securitate noticed that on the cover of the *Cinema* magazine in January 1989, two young men wrote on the faces of the Romanian presidential couple 'ox and cow' as an expression of their

²⁸ LXXX. *Mărturii orale. Anii' 80 și bucureștenii*, (Bucharest: 2003), p. 170-Mariana Chiriță.

personal discontent towards the political and economic situation in Romania.²⁹

Also Radio Free Europe introduced to their Romanian listeners other two cases of improper treatment of Ceaușescu's image. One of its correspondents reported a photograph of Nicolae Ceaușescu on the shame panels of the militia from Sibiu and Brașov accompanied by the following evocative statement: 'He stole our bread'.³⁰ Another case reported not only by the Radio Free Europe but also by the international press was the one of Ion Bugan. In 1983 he received a ten-year sentence for driving in the centre of Bucharest on a car with the portrait of the Romanian communist leader with the title: 'We do not want you, executioner!'.³¹

Setting fire to the Romanian communist leader's images also expressed the population's feelings of hatred towards him. For example, the Alba county's office of the Securitate discovered a painting of Nicolae Ceaușescu partially destroyed by fire among other propaganda means stored in a school yard at the end of a demonstration organized on the occasion of 23rd August 1989 in Alba Iulia.³² Two peasants from the Mălăești village, Prahova County were arrested and jailed for allegedly burning several volumes of Ceaușescu's speeches (invariably having his portrait on the cover or after the cover page) which were displayed in the centre of Ploiesti, Prahova county.³³

Moreover, mistreatment of Ceaușescu's portraits also happened in the more intimate space of the household. Because in the 1980s the newspapers invariably reproduced on the front page a photographic

²⁹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 533, folio 32.

³⁰ Radio Free Europe, Romanian Broadcasting Department, Vlad Georgescu, Radio Free Europe Listeners' Mail no. 27, 8 August 1982, OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-6-3 Box 13, Letters and Appeals from Romania 1982-1983.

³¹ Vladimir Socor, 'Known Prisoners of Conscience in Romania: An Annotated Checklist', Radio Free Europe Research, RAD Background Report (Romania), 7 august 1987, OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-60-3 Box 18, Opposition, 1988-1989; Herma Kennel, *Radu Filipescu: jogging cu Securitatea*, (Iași: Polirom, 2009), p. 115.

³² CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 394, folio 85.

³³ Vladimir Socor, 'Known Prisoners of Conscience in Romania: An Annotated Checklist', Radio Free Europe Research, RAD Background Report (Romania), 7 august 1987, OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-60-3 Box 18, Opposition, 1988-1989; Radio Free Europe, Romanian Broadcasting Department, Vlad Georgescu, Radio Free Europe Editorial no. 190, 30 August 1986, OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-60-1 Box 431 Police and Security 1973-1987.

material of Nicolae Ceaușescu, they became the target of people's feelings of hatred and frustration towards him. The following testimony is an revelatory example of such a behaviour: 'She did very well the other day, my aunt Graziela, when she came into the yard to take the newspaper from the mailman, she smiled, went into house, locked the door, pulled the blinds, made the newspaper small pieces, trampled it and then she took an Extraveral'.³⁴

Creating and distributing 'writings with hateful content'

Another form of everyday resistance to Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality identified in the documents of the former Securitate is the category of 'writings with hateful content'. It included three main types of documents: letters, scraps of paper or leaflets and inscriptions. As in the other cases of everyday resistance, the dominant theme in relation to Ceaușescu is focused on uttering invectives, especially in the context of the severe lack of basic products for consumption. Furthermore, the analysis of the Securitate's documents and private indicated that people considered Ceaușescu's political decisions as the main cause of the general and unprecedented deterioration of their living standards.

The largest number of such 'hostile writings' were the *letters*. This is because their writing and sending decreased, at least in theory, the risk that their authors were to be identified or be surprised in the act by the state authorities.

The Securitate's documents mentioned the case of a retired man from Dâmbovița County. He was identified because he drafted and sent in 1982 'two anonymous letters with content that insults and slanders the policy of the state and personalities from the leadership of the party'.³⁵ Another case was that of a worker from Gorj County who mailed to the Romanian National Radiotelevision an anonymous letter 'in which he denigrated the home and foreign policy of our state, using defamatory expressions when referring to the higher leaders of the party and state'.³⁶

³⁴ LXXX. *Mărturii orale. Anii' 80 și bucureștenii*, pp. 169-170-Speranța Rădulescu, ethnomusicologist. Extraveral is a Romanian drug used to calm nervousness and anxiety.

³⁵ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13765 vol. 16, folio 93 v.

³⁶ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13807 vol. 17, folio 200.

Fragments extracted from the private correspondence of individuals complete the picture of the scarcity in the ordinary people's everyday life. They mainly stressed the discrepancy between the images of abundance and prosperity of the 'Golden Age', as the leadership period of Nicolae Ceaușescu was characterized by the Romanian propaganda, and the reality of the everyday life of the simple man marked by a permanent crisis of food and other goods. Here, a woman from Sebeș, Alba County, wrote to an acquaintance in 1989 about how the electricity interruption affected her mood, therefore justifying the use of invectives against the leader of the RCP: 'From 16:30 he cuts off the electricity until 19:00, permanently, excluding Sundays. We sit for hours in the dark because they are no candles in stores or oil lamps ... Should you only listen how we cursed and bless you know who'.³⁷ A citizen of Zlatna, in the same County of Alba, in turn, described in a letter 'in an ironic tone-wag' the daily hardships which he had to face: 'I must confess with deep patriotism that I write to you at candlelight. We are being visited on a daily basis by the Power Outage, and with every breath I breathe out poetic steams. For some time those in charge of electricity have been upset with us and they create an hibernation ambiance ... Anyway, the Golden Age imposes its mark...'.³⁸

A second category of 'writings with hateful content' was the one of the so-called *scraps* or leaflets. These were disseminated by the authors in various ways. In this case as well, the documents issued by the Securitate did not provide details on the content of the text found on the scraps of paper, resuming only to assessing it as 'biased' and 'denigrative'.

On the occasion of the election of deputies in the Olt County, a retired man came to the attention of the Securitate for placing in the ballot box one scrap 'with hostile content with insults and slanders against the state's leadership'.³⁹ Again, a student from the 9th grade of an evening school in Bacău managed to distribute in the mailboxes of some citizens a number of 33 scraps 'having a threatening and injurious content, aimed at people who held important functions in the line of state...'. Consequently, she was investigated for her conduct by the Securitate.⁴⁰

³⁷ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 394, folio 146 f.

³⁸ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13765 vol. 16, folio 145 v.

³⁹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13765 vol. 16, folio 122.

⁴⁰ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13807 vol. 17, folio 172 f-v.

The only case that I have identified in which the content of the scraps was reproduced entirely in the documents of the Securitate's investigative bodies was reported in late November 1989, in Alba Iulia. On an electric pole on a main street of the town, at a height of 1.80 m, someone glued a 17 x 12 cm poster made of a paper sheet from a notebook with squares. It contained 6 rows of writing, catalogued by those involved in the investigation of the events as having an 'inappropriate content'. The text on the scrap was reproduced in capitals and consisted of a series of slogans against the Romanian communist leader and his regime:

'Down with Ceaușescu! Down with the regime!
 We want justice not Congresses
 We want freedom! Down *the bosses*
 That's enough! No more re-election!
 We want food!
 Down with the thieves!'⁴¹

This succession of slogans expressed the author's protest against the re-election of Nicolae Ceaușescu at the last party forum in November 1989. By mentioning the lack of freedom, social justice and, last but not least, food, the anonymous protester demanded the removal of the Romanian communist leader as well as of other smaller party 'leaders'. Labelling them as 'thieves' was the reaction to the material benefits they enjoyed constantly while most people had to endure strict rationalization of food consumption, electricity and heat.

Although the documents of the Securitate mentioned the emergence of *inscriptions* with 'hateful content'⁴² due to the scarce information about their content one can't confirm that they refer to Nicolae Ceaușescu and his cult of personality. However, the secondary literature records the case of a group of three young men from the village of Băleni, Dâmbovița County (Florian Vlăsceanu, George Paul, Victor Totu). On the night of 22 August 1983, they have changed the text of the slogan, painted in white on the asphalt of one of the main arteries from Târgoviște, from *Long live Ceaușescu!* to *Down with Ceaușescu!*. For their deed, the three young men were sentenced to six, seven and eight years of imprisonment.⁴³

⁴¹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 530 vol. 2, folio 52-53 f-v.

⁴² CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13314, vol. 22, f. 46-49; file 13314, vol. 24, f. 57-58 f-v; file 17444, f. 188-190.

⁴³ Herma Kennel, *Radu Filipescu: jogging cu Securitatea*, p. 141; Vladimir Socor, 'Known Prisoners of Conscience in Romania: An Annotated Checklist', Radio Free

Political Jokes

The study of everyday life in the countries of the former Eastern bloc underlined the existence of numerous anti-regime jokes. Although most of the analyses acknowledge the role of jokes in informing a specific relation between the people and the political power, they differ in their understanding about the nature of this relation. Some authors denied the oppositional character of the jokes by pointing out that the communist regimes allowed their existence as a relief panacea for the frustrations or negative feelings of the population. In this case, the jokes showed how people accommodated to the regime and used them to deal with 'the paradoxes and discontinuities' characterizing their daily existence.⁴⁴

On the other hand, some scholars see political jokes as *rhetorical antidotes* (Kerry Kathleen Rilley), as form of *alternative popular culture* (Dana Niculescu-Grosso) or as a *thermometer* of the society (Christie Davies). Thus, they essentially interpret political jokes as an alternative way of expressing criticism towards the political power taking place between two moments of overt and active opposition to it. Although humour was not the most courageous anti-regime activity, it engaged people in a sort of moral protest against it. In the course of time, this daily and largely anonymous protest gradually alienated people from the political power and thus eased the transition to an open popular resistance movement.⁴⁵

My understanding of political jokes places them among the means of the Romanians' everyday resistance to Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of personality. In addition to numerous references in the Securitate's documents about individuals or groups of individuals who engaged themselves in disseminating jokes on political issues, there are also other arguments that emphasized their oppositional character. Thus, a thematic analysis points out that political jokes provided a critical approach to Nicolae Ceaușescu's leadership in an unsophisticated

Europe Research, RAD Background Report (Romania), 7 august 1987, OSA Archivum, HU OSA 300-60-3 Box 18, Opposition, 1988-1989.

⁴⁴ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 277-281.

⁴⁵ Kerry Kathleen Rilley, *Everyday Subversion*, pp. 22, 58, 65; Dana Niculescu-Grosso, *Bancurile politice în țările socialismului real. Studiu demologic*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1999, pp. 11-90. Christie Davies, „Humour and Protest: Jokes under Communism” în *IRSH* 52 (2007) DOI: 10.1017/S00208590070003252.

manner, accessible to a large audience in a way that side-stepped the official censorship. Moreover, the political jokes stressed the discrepancy between the results of Ceaușescu's work popularized by the party propaganda and hardships of his regime to which people were subject. Also, it shall be recalled that telling jokes implied the risk of being reported to the Securitate and being consequently punished.

In spite of this probable threat, in 1980s Romania political jokes have become a 'national sport' involving representatives from all the walks of life (intellectuals, workers, peasants, students, soldiers, policemen, Securitate officers) and of all ages. The subversive potential of the jokes, as well as their omnipresence in the everyday life of the simple citizens is stated in the following testimony: 'The only forms of rebellion were the jokes. The jokes were incredible (...) there were countless jokes. That was the ultimate form [of revolt, n.a.]'.⁴⁶

According to a former Securitate Colonel, the communist authorities 'were genuinely interested in jokes which touched upon issues such as the unavailability of basic products and the censorship of television programmes because this kind of jokes functioned as indicators for the spirit of the people'.⁴⁷ The archival documents also confirmed the concern of this institution for the dissemination of jokes in general and of those cracked at the expense of the Romanian leader in particular. Thus, a group of people have been reported in official documents of the Alba County's Inspectorate for Security for 'telling slanderous jokes with defamatory content against some leading figures from the leadership of our state',⁴⁸ while a young man from Vrancea County, brought to the attention of the Securitate because in his circle of friends, insisted to complete the insults against the 'leader of the country' with 'a joke with political nuance affecting the leading figure of the state'.⁴⁹ Also, some people were recorded not only because of their contribution to the dissemination of jokes, but also to their creation. In

⁴⁶ Interview with Felicia Colda, librarian, 46 years old, Alba Iulia, 25th October 2012. The personal archive of the author.

⁴⁷ Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle - The Film*, Alegria Productions, Bergman Pictures, MPI, RWA, 2006 apud. Dumitru-Alin Savu, 'Humour and Politics in Communist Romania, Graduate College Thesis', University of Bucharest, 2012, p. 40.

⁴⁸ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 336, folio 150 f

⁴⁹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13314 vol. 20, folio 257.

this respect, I mention here the case of a IMGB⁵⁰ foreman, whom the Securitate's papers described as having a very friendly nature, and whom 'easily engages in conversation and creates all sorts of jokes of bad taste addressing inclusively the high leaders of the party with insults and serious injurious comments'.⁵¹

A recurring theme of political jokes about Nicolae Ceaușescu identifies his leadership as the main cause of all kinds of deprivations and restrictions the Romanian citizens had to deal with in the everyday life of Communist Romania. Thus, a joke from the fall of 1985 stated that 'Ceaușescu had turned Romania into a country of believers because *we fast seven days a week; we light the candles every evening and go on Sundays to the service*'.⁵² This humorous composition identifies the most relevant negative consequences of Nicolae Ceaușescu's decisions in the field of economics, namely the lack of food, electricity and extending the weekly working schedule in some key sectors of the Romanian economy. Nonsense owns the scene here as the first part of the joke refers to the transformation of Romania into a nation of believers which is paradoxical given the atheistic orientation of the communist regime. The following subordinated statements bring additional explanations concerning the ways in which faith manifested and which in the context of the 1980s Romania thus summarizing the main problems that people had to face. Then, the allusion to the permanent fast refers to the lack of basic food products (meat, milk, eggs) and lighting the candles as part of the Christian ritual, is indicated as an important source for illuminating the houses in the conditions of the rationalization of domestic electricity consumption. However, this joke stresses the double meaning of the word *service*, which in Romanian has a double meaning: both *job* and *religious service*. Thus, the Sunday service is turned into the work which the individual had to be permanently committed to while accomplishing the tasks that were assigned to him in the national effort to build the Romanian socialism.

Another theme exploited by the political jokes about Nicolae Ceaușescu was his lack of education. This was the side effect of the official 'polishing' of his biography by omitting all the references to his

⁵⁰ IMGB was an important factory of heavy machinery located in the Romanian capital, Bucharest.

⁵¹ CNSAS Archive, Documentary Fund, file 13807 vol. 17, folio 82.

⁵² Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *Din bancurile politice ale românilor. 10 ani de umor negru românesc*, (Bucharest: 1991), p. 97.

initial profession, that of a cobbler. In addition, Ceaușescu's willingness to collect different academic titles might also have favoured the emergence of jokes about his low level of education.

In this context, the jokes either make reference to the former job of the Romanian Communist Party's leader or they build imaginary stories confirming his limited education. Thus, a political joke, which has seen different versions, has Ceaușescu or his wife as its main characters: Ceaușescu looks upset for not finding a particular pair of shoes, while Elena Ceaușescu during a visit boasts herself with a unique pair of shoes. The reason is that the shoes represented the MB thesis of the Romanian communist leader.⁵³

Other political jokes which also emphasized the low level of education of Nicolae Ceaușescu put him in the hypothetical situation of thinking whether he was the one who promulgated the law of gravity, of shopping for a swimsuit for honouring the invitation to the 'Swan Lake' and last but not least, of demonstrating not only his poor pronunciation of the Romanian language but also the massacre of its grammar.⁵⁴

The omnipresence of laudatory events dedicated to Nicolae Ceaușescu in the Romanian media and through these in the lives of the common people is beautifully captured in the following joke which has Bulă⁵⁵ as its main character:

'Bulă stays with a tin can in front of him and cannot decide whether to open it. Annoyed, his father snaps at him:

-Come on, Bula! I'm hungry! Are you waiting any longer to admire that can?!

-I'm not admiring it! I'm afraid to open it!

-Right! You are afraid to open it?

-Well, I'm afraid ... Don't you see how it is now: you turn on the radio, you encounter Ceaușescu, turn on the TV, you encounter Ceaușescu, open the newspaper, you encounter Ceaușescu ... God knows what we might find in this can! What if we'd be in trouble ..? ... '⁵⁶

⁵³ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc*, pp. 23, 65.

⁵⁴ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc*, pp. 28, 17, 56-57, 84.

⁵⁵ Bulă was the main character of the Romanian political jokes during the communist period. Sometimes naïve and stupid, sometimes intelligent and sly, he ridiculed directly and in a nonconformist way the communist system and its leader.

⁵⁶ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc*, p. 73.

Collected shortly after the birthday celebrations of Nicolae Ceaușescu in January 1983, the joke emphasizes the population's degree of saturation concerning everything involving the presence of the Romanian Communist leader in their daily life. The comic effect is caused by the behaviour of the main character who, recalling his former 'encounters' with Ceaușescu on the radio, TV or newspaper, was afraid of the punitive consequences that a new meeting could result in the paradoxical context of the opening of an ordinary can.

Moreover, another series of jokes stressed in a humorous manner the transformation of the national television into an instrument for promoting the RCP leader's cult of personality during the 1980s. For example, a joke mentioned that the main news program, 'telejurnalul', was to receive the name of 'ceaușeschiada'⁵⁷ referring to the fact that it focused only on the exhaustive presentation of recent internal and external activities of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Conclusion

By analyzing the reactions of a part of the population against Ceaușescu's cult of personality, my article aimed at providing a more detailed picture of its relations with the Romanian communist regime, subordination being only one of them. Using James C. Scott's perspective of *everyday resistance*, I have identified the existence of some opposition actions against the Romanian leader's cult of personality, such as the discussions or the comments on political issues, individual or collective actions directed against the images of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the editing and the distribution of hostile writings and last but not least, the political jokes.

The analysis of the examples concerning the main forms of everyday resistance towards the Romanian communist leader's cult of personality pointed out the existence of critical opinions of a part of the population against the content of the laudatory materials prepared by the party propaganda. Thus, the overall picture of Nicolae Ceaușescu resulting from content analysis of everyday forms of resistance to his cult of personality is that of an unpopular leader, illiterate, who due to his modest intellectual education drove Romania and its population towards a generalized economic crisis and impoverishment. In addition, the generalization of the celebratory message focused on highlighting

⁵⁷ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc*, p. 51.

the so-called exceptional results of the leadership of Nicolae Ceaușescu, in total disregard for the reality or the ability of people to understand the situation they found themselves in, contributed to the gradual erosion of its political legitimacy and to the virulence of the public opposition that ended his regime in 1989.