

“Eleven years after the overthrow of communism, Romania is still searching for solutions to its deeper ills. It is a society in dire need of modernization, burdened with a backward political culture and a ruined economy. The challenge to the political class is how to overcome the patterns set by its predecessors, who introduced formal changes while failing to serve their constituent public.”

Deadlocked Romania

MARIAN CHIRIAC

Since the bloody revolution in December 1989 that brought an end to communist rule, Romania has been a study in ambiguity. Although successive postcommunist governments have restated their commitment to integrating Romania with European institutions, introducing formal changes (such as democratic elections), and implementing a market economy, Romania has yet to achieve these goals. Signs of recovery have begun to appear in the last year, but the high expectations for democracy and prosperity that had been in evidence a decade ago have been deflated by frustrations and painful disappointments.

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

The reign of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu—one of the most hard-line regimes in the former Soviet bloc—ended in late December 1989 when crowds stormed the Communist Party headquarters in Bucharest. Ceausescu and his powerful wife, Elena, tried to flee but were soon caught. A summary trial found the couple guilty of genocide and other crimes against Romanians. They were executed on Christmas Day by a hastily assembled firing squad, and their bodies were hidden to prevent supporters from using their gravesite as a rallying point. State radio broadcast that the “anti-Christ is dead,” the Romanian Communist Party was outlawed and its assets confiscated, and tens of thousands danced in the streets, celebrating the birth of what they hoped would be a new Romania.

But gunmen whose identities remain unknown—most likely Securitate (secret police) loyal to Ceausescu—opened fire on the demonstrators. The army

then stepped in, leading to fighting that briefly turned some cities into war zones (more than 1,100 people were killed and thousands were wounded in the violence). Although hundreds of people were detained as “terrorists” in the days that followed, no one was ever formally charged. Indeed, not a single terrorist was ever found. The incident remains one of the mysteries of the Romanian revolution.

The country’s new rulers—among them Ion Iliescu, a former communist apparatchik and onetime close associate of Ceausescu—marked the onset of a new era by launching some modest welfare measures, such as importing foodstuffs and providing uninterrupted heating to apartments. Iliescu assumed the role of national savior and “reform-minded patriarch.” The National Salvation Front (FSN) government, established after Ceausescu’s downfall, promised only to be a transitional body but instead transformed itself into a party that won a landslide victory in the May 1990 general elections, mainly by using its revolutionary legitimacy and exploiting the public’s fear of a “radical change.” This initial advantage sufficed to guarantee Iliescu and the FSN victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections and helped maintain them in power until the autumn of 1996.

Unlike other postcommunist movements in Eastern and Central Europe, the FSN had not worked for democracy before the revolution and boasted a membership mainly of former nomenklatura. Romania’s early postcommunist days thus were marked by the FSN’s heavy-handed tactics to gain national support, including intimidation of political opponents. The party was also charged with using the nationalistic language of xenophobia and antiminority sentiment in the search for popular support. Confrontations between ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians in the city of Tirgu

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Mures in March 1990, which left many injured, and President Iliescu's use of miners to suppress opposition in June of that year called into question Romania's adherence to democratic values. By the end of 1990, the West perceived the FSN as a neo-communist organization.

The FSN also failed to adequately address economic concerns. Romania was a special case among the former Soviet satellites. Mainly because of Ceausescu's megalomania—he had been intent on transforming the country from a grain exporter to an industrial titan—anyone would have found it difficult to reengineer the economy to make it globally competitive. But Romania's economy has consistently shrunk as the country's successive postcommunist governments have delayed privatization of unprofitable state enterprises, have failed to reform the financial or banking sectors, and have been unable to attract significant foreign investment and create a stable legal framework.

By 1996 most Romanians put their hopes in the election of a center-right coalition government led by the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR). But that government presided over a catastrophic economic collapse as inflation soared above 40 percent and the economy shrank 16 percent between 1996 and 2000. The coalition partners responded to these problems by bickering endlessly.

On December 10, 2000, Romanian voters returned to office the same president and the same ruling party that had begun the country's still-unfinished revolution. Leftist Ion Iliescu won a landslide victory in the presidential elections while his Social Democratic Party—the renamed National Salvation Front—received a majority of the seats in parliament. In his victory speech Iliescu made almost exactly the same promises he had made in the first days of the revolution: to continue with economic reforms, to tackle widespread poverty, and to root out corruption. He also vowed to create a “climate of solidarity and work” in this impoverished country and has insisted that “positive elements” from the past should be preserved. But analysts in Romania and abroad have expressed skepticism that Iliescu or his Social Democratic Party (PDSR) government will move reform forward.

Revolution ended Romania's isolation from the international community but not the country's quest for democratic values and integration into the new Europe and Euro-Atlantic organizations. More than a decade later, Romania's continued social and economic problems, along with popular disappointment with the successive governments' efforts,

have led many Romanians to long for the security and certainties of the communist era.

A DECADE OF FAILED REFORMS

The December 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections have created anxiety well beyond Romania's borders. The vote had been billed as a choice between moving forward toward integration with the European Union or backward into isolation and xenophobia. Focus was placed on the presidential elections, since the head of state is seen as the key player in the Romanian arena.

In defiance of his past, Iliescu was perceived as the lesser evil in this presidential election. His opponent, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, shocked observers by securing a place in the second round of voting on the back of a campaign characterized by anticorruption rhetoric and the manipulation of anti-Gypsy and anti-Hungarian sentiments. Tudor, leader of the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), was a sycophant of Nicolae Ceausescu. He has often been compared to Russia's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (head of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party) or France's Jean-Marie Le Pen (head of the right-wing National Front). Tudor promised to rid Romania of criminals and minorities by force and threatened to carry out “mass executions” of corrupt officials.

Iliescu used his charisma and energy to persuade Romanians that he could turn around their ailing economy. His campaign was aided by the majority of Romanians, who still seem to believe that communism was a good idea. Recent surveys indicate that some two-thirds of Romanians say they were better off under communism, when an all-embracing welfare system protected people from outright poverty and social exclusion.

Iliescu ran a populist campaign in the first round of the presidential elections in an attempt to rally left-wing voters. After he won the first round, he tempered his message, pledging to continue the economic and social reforms needed to secure EU membership. Always the favorite of the rural poor and pensioners, Iliescu attracted support from unexpected quarters for the runoff against Tudor. Alarmed at the prospect of a far-right president, leading center-right politicians, civil rights groups, and media organizations—all of whom had denounced Iliescu for his communist past and previous presidential record—rallied round the former president, calling on their supporters to back him. In the end, Iliescu won handily, taking just under 67 percent of the vote to Tudor's 33 percent. Turnout, however, was low—only 57.5 percent,

down 20 percent from the 1996 elections. Voter disillusionment with politics, and the two candidates on offer, were the major factors.

Political analysts are still trying to understand Tudor's meteoric rise from 3 percent of the vote in 1996 to 33 percent in 2000. His PRM also won a fifth of the seats in the Romanian parliament. According to some studies, Tudor was the choice of mainly male voters frustrated by their social situation. Generally poor, they believe in conspiracy theories that attribute the country's problems on minorities or the West. At the same time, Tudor and the PRM profited from a last-minute resurgence of nationalist sentiment among the electorate; 70 percent of Romanians believe that some minorities continue to represent a threat to the state. But Tudor's popularity also reflects the failure of successive governments to effectively deal with Romania's deep-rooted economic problems.

Most observers have interpreted the Romanian general elections as the success of political stagnation and extremism. Rather than expressing support for the former communists or for the extreme-right PRM and

its leader, however, people have rejected the Western-style democracy project of the former government. And, at first sight, for good reason.

Most Romanians shared the euphoria and optimism that accompanied the election of the country's first genuinely reform-minded government in November 1996. More than 80,000 people gathered in Bucharest's central University Square, waving flags, shouting "We won, we won," and celebrating what they called their "second revolution." (This also marked the first time in Romania's modern history that a leader departed through a peaceful transfer of power and not because he was strangled, overthrown in a coup, or shot.)

A coalition of the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR), the Democratic Party (PD), and the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania won the elections on a prodemocratic platform. The CDR's candidate, Emil Constantinescu, a geologist and lawyer by training, became Romania's new president after he defeated his archrival, Ion Iliescu.

Chief among the coalition's promises was a call to restructure the economy to increase individual income from a per capita GDP of \$1,562 and accelerate accession to the European Union. Four years later the high hopes for economic growth and acceptance into the mainstream of Europe had been

dashed (for example, 1999 per capita GDP had declined to \$1,515). Worse, the center-right coalition that brought Constantinescu to office failed to offer a viable alternative to the national-authoritarian rhetoric of the not-so-reformed former Communist Party of Social Democracy (PDSR). Held together mainly by its opposition to Iliescu's clique, the coalition started to fall apart as soon as it entered government.

Disagreements within the ruling coalition resulted in the dismissal of two prime ministers: Victor Ciorbea at the end of 1998 and Radu Vasile a year later. The departures not only showed a lack of confidence among the individual coalition members but also instability within the government itself, and this in turn created a negative response from the electorate. The legislature was dogged by an inefficient bureaucracy and lacked an organized and efficient consultation process, while the CDR coalition's legislative

activity was slowed by internal disagreements and a failure to make political compromises. Only a handful of important laws were passed: on education,

property restitution, and opening communist-era police files. Although Constantinescu made a point of attacking corruption, Romanians remained deeply cynical about this issue, privately lashing out at government officials for enriching themselves through corrupt deals.

The political deadlock severely damaged Romania's already shrinking economy, which contracted 6.9 percent in 1997, 5.4 percent in 1998, and 3.2 percent a year later. These three years of economic decline dragged living standards lower, with purchasing power halved from its 1990 level.

Constantinescu's government hurt itself politically by trying to push forward market-oriented reforms (its own version of Russia's and Poland's "shock therapy"), including the privatization of state industries, but failing to firmly counter opposition from groups such as the coal miners. Between January 18 and 22, 1999, thousands of disgruntled miners from Jiu Valley staged marches on Bucharest to protest job losses stemming from mine closures that were part of the government's privatization program. Armed with stones and clubs, they clashed violently with ill-equipped riot police near Bucharest during a final protest march; more than 100 policemen and dozens of miners were hospitalized. The miners, backed by popular support, demanded the dismissal of the gov-

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ernment; their street protests and strike came to an end only after a compromise was reached with the authorities in which pay raises were to be negotiated and the mine privatization plan implemented more gradually. The January miners' uprising was the fifth in nine years (their previous "visit" to Bucharest in September 1991 left nine dead and scores wounded and caused extensive property damage). Confrontation and political turmoil continued in 2000, with a series of protests by students, workers, and, in one notable case, investors who were angry about the collapse of a trust fund.

Obviously, the postrevolutionary governments have failed to radically reform Romania's economy or society. Rising unemployment and inflation and relatively low wages have encouraged the growth of the black market. Education, health care, and social security have largely been neglected. The general situation in the country was aptly captured in a November 2000 European Commission report on Romania's EU membership bid: "Romania cannot be regarded as a functioning market economy and is not able to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the European Union in the medium term." The report bluntly put Romania at the bottom of the list of countries that had a chance of being considered for EU entry. It criticized Romania's fragile macroeconomic environment, uncertain legal and institutional framework, and uneven commitments to reforms as among the main obstacles to proper economic and social development. The report also highlighted Romania's slow progress in reforming its large farming sector and improving living conditions for tens of thousands of abandoned children in state orphanages (at least 1,000 children are abandoned annually, many of them by poverty-stricken teenage mothers).

FLIRTING WITH NATIONALISM

One of the greatest hindrances to democracy in Romania is nationalism. Any survey of modern Romanian history reveals a pattern of corrupt manipulative leadership along with nationalist movements whose primary features are xenophobia (mainly directed at Hungarians and Russians) and especially virulent anti-Semitism. Although Romanian nationalism in the 1990s did not achieve the intensity of some of its neighbors (mainly Serbia), the country's long history of divisions, especially between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians, burdens its transition to a democratic society.

Shortly after the December 1989 revolution, the treatment of country's 1.6 million ethnic

Hungarians became not only a central issue in Bucharest–Budapest bilateral relations but also a broader foreign policy concern. The country's new leaders soon abandoned the policy of forced ethnic assimilation put in place by Nicolae Ceausescu, but failed to improve interethnic relations. The events of March 1990 in the Transylvanian city of Tirgu Mures—where ethnic Hungarians and Romanians clashed over the use of the Hungarian language on a shop sign—galvanized extremism in both communities (relations have since calmed in this city, which is shared almost equally by the two main ethnic groups).

Transylvania is an ethnically mixed region that was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its Romanian and Hungarian population is often suspicious of and anxious about the political intentions of leaders from each other's community. However, the hate or permanent distrust that can affect everyday life is not usually in evidence. Long and complicated disputes instead have been seen at the political level. In the first days of 1990, the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR), the main group representing Romania's ethnic Hungarian minority, began a campaign to secure Hungarian rights, including a demand for personal, local, and territorial autonomy. Although Iliescu usually refrained from making crude nationalist statements, his Social Democratic Party showed its own latent nationalism by building alliances with parties well known for their nationalism and nostalgia for Ceausescu's brand of national communism. A political agreement was even signed in January 1995 by Iliescu's PDSR and the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), the anti-Hungarian Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR), and the leftist Socialist Workers Party (PSM) that placed Romania in the unenviable position of being the sole Eastern European government dependent on such extremist movements. The ascendance of extremist parties that were soon busy inserting supporters in some ministries and sensitive local positions did not help interethnic relations, but at least did not create disturbances between the Romanian majority and ethnic Hungarians.

In September 1996, following intense Western pressure on both sides to find a compromise, Romania and Hungary finally signed a treaty aimed at resolving the status of ethnic Hungarians and aiding both countries in gaining admission to the European Union and NATO. The UDMR played an important role in this process: the Hungarian government routinely consulted with the UDMR leadership, and the party

held discussions with institutions such as the Council of Europe and the EU.

In November 1996, when the center-right coalition that won general election included the UDMR, it seemed that Romania finally had made a resolute turn and was set to move forward on the road to European integration. The new government's program included provisions for accommodating the demands of the Hungarian community. It issued two laws to eliminate legal restrictions regarding mother-tongue education and the use of minority languages in local administration and in bilingual signs in mixed communities. Less than a year later, however—following NATO's July 1997 decision to postpone Romania's admission into the alliance—the UDMR's coalition partners began to take steps to water down the measures.

Despite the favorable developments after 1996, the nationalist attitudes of most Romanian media and certain politicians have since generated strong disappointment among ethnic Hungarians. Further, according to an opinion poll published at the end of 1999, more than 58 percent of Romanians believe that the UDMR is plotting against national stability and unity.

AN IDENTITY CRISIS?

Nothing has more threatened perceptions of Romanian national identity than the country's drive for membership in NATO and the EU. In December 1999, when Romania received an invitation to join EU accession talks, public opinion in the country was radically divided. Most people, in accordance with the official line, said that the West had been gracious enough to invite everyone—prepared or not—to participate in the enlargement process. The other reaction, expressing nationalist and populist attitudes, declared the decision further proof of the West's rejection of Romania, following NATO's rejection, the indefinite postponement of EU entry, and the low rate of foreign investment. Clearly Romanians, while hoping for acceptance from a West they do not understand—and which in many ways does not understand them—suffer from an identity conflict that threatens to undermine any further chances at EU integration.

The collapse of communism created a desire among most Romanians to pursue the "Western ideal." The West was associated with prosperity, wealth, freedom: everything that had formerly been concealed, prevented, or restricted in Romania. The question of NATO and EU accession brought these vague terms into the broader public discourse. Sur-

prisingly, despite years of Ceausescu's propaganda—designed to manipulate Romanians into hating the outside, especially the West, and to incite nationalism—popular enthusiasm for EU and NATO membership was high: surveys conducted in 1995 showed overwhelming Romanian popular support for entry into the EU and NATO. But the years of economic hardship and the unpopular conditions for entry set by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the EU itself have raised the fear that Romania is heading in the wrong direction. This attitude helps explain the results of the 2000 general elections, which saw the return of "reformed" communists and the rise of ultranationalists. Romania's post-1989 governments, nevertheless, have continued to see European integration as a strategic fundamental objective for Romanian society.

But government leaders have also seen gaining membership in Western institutions as an institutionally driven process. Integration has been associated with membership in the EU, the Council of Europe, or NATO without a full appreciation of the need to make substantial domestic social reforms. European integration is seen in symbolic terms, while most Romanians, including politicians, remain confused by what it actually means. No public awareness campaign has ever been undertaken, even though only about 5 percent of Romanians now consider joining the West a pressing need.

Eleven years after the overthrow of communism, Romania is still searching for solutions to its deeper ills. It is a society in dire need of modernization, burdened with a backward political culture and a ruined economy. The challenge to the political class is how to overcome the patterns set by its predecessors, who introduced formal changes while failing to serve their constituent public.

But Romania also needs the help of Western governments, international financial institutions, and investors to become part of the modern world. Although the West has stressed the need for liberalism and market reform in Romania, its support has been more rhetorical than real. The West must decide if a stable and prosperous Romania is better than a Romania entrenched in poverty and exuding an anti-Western attitude. If it believes the former outcome is more desirable, it must help Romania become more democratic, to undertake economic reform, and learn to tolerate ethnic diversity and allow the expression of opposition voices. The other course is to allow Romania to become a quasi-democratic country with little prospect of entering the European community of nations. ■