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LETTER FROM BUCHAREST

by

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Abstract

This is a personal view of conditions inside Romania on the eve of its accession to the EU. It contains vivid descriptions of events in the Romanian parliament and highlights the difficulties facing Romanians and their state in respect of 'coming to terms with the past.' The article identifies elements of the Romanian system, such as education, which are crying out for reform as the country makes its 'return to Europe'.

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On one of the unseasonably mild weekends before Christmas, I strolled around some of the less car-infested parts of downtown Bucharest with a Bulgarian acquaintance Stefan. We noted the enthusiasm with which preparations for Christmas were being followed, a much bigger event than in Bulgaria, he concluded. The Romanians were also more overt in their public expression of faith than their southern neighbours. When a taxi driver used his left hand to continue talking on the mobile phone and the right to bless himself while passing a church, he found this disconcerting; indeed he came to the conclusion that this extravagant display of ritual was more superstition than a deep religious belief, a kind of insurance policy to guarantee God's protection in a life full of uncertainty.

Stefan ultimately found the Romanians a passive people despite their enthusiasms. To his practised eye (five years in the country), they invested their energies in essentially non-productive and ephemeral pursuits, above all talking. Coming from a taciturn race, the readiness of the Romanians to talk readily to strangers even about their own private affairs was something he would never get used to. He enjoyed the variety of television channels that the mania for self-expression had given rise to. But he still finds

himself among a nation of spectators who once they start something often find it hard to bring it to fruition. Even the ruthlessness and planning required to mastermind the bloody crimes for which Bulgaria has become famous, seems beyond the attainment of Romanians. He is pleased to be in a safe if rather disorderly society where it is possible to raise a child without worrying if the infant will be kidnapped as happens in his own country with some frequency.

I had challenged some of Stefan's views about the Romanian world and argued that perhaps the Bulgarian one was not so different. But they came flooding back into my head while sitting in the visitors gallery of the Romanian Senate on the afternoon of 18 December. VIPs such as Lech Walesa, Ex-King Michael, and Patriarch Teoctist sat in the front row as President Traian Basescu read out the findings of a report he had commissioned on the nature of Romanian communism. A commission of experts headed by Professor Vladimir Tismaneanu had concluded that Communism was an illegal regime imposed by external armed force in the mid-1940s, one which stayed in power through blanket oppression that left many hundreds of thousands of victims. It also concluded that the structures and mentality of Romanian communism persisted long after 1989, thereby distorting the transition to political and economic pluralism.

But most of the time, the President's words were virtually inaudible thanks to the guerrilla tactics of Corneliu Vadim Tudor, brazen colleagues like Daniela Buruiana and hundreds of young supporters of his Greater Romania party. After booing the former King, Vadim paraded a banner depicting Basescu as a mafia felon within a few metres of his podium. I could not understand why Basescu lacked the presence of mind to leave and to request that everyone else who valued the occasion follow suit. One of the plethora

of security forces meant to keep order could then have cleared the hall of demonstrators, including Vadim who remarkably has been a Vice-President of the Senate for many years.

Parliamentarians representing parties supposedly committed to defending democratic norms sat glued to their seats. Vastly outnumbering Vadim and the other protesters, they could easily have pushed them out of the chamber in minutes. A phalanx of cabinet ministers were turned into frightened and dumb children in the face of a voodoo high priest uttering a torrent of invective and knowing full well it was unlikely that either the young Bogdan Olteanu, the Chamber of Deputies President or Nicolae Vacaroiu, the former apparatchik who has been President of the senate for a decade, would call him to order. I wondered what effect these scenes would have on foreign investors considering if Romania was a robust enough democracy to guarantee their investments or indeed people considering settling in the country and unsure about their personal security.

Vadim represents the views of a sizeable percentage of Romanians who see the communist era as one of personal fulfilment, especially in economic terms, despite human rights abuses. This perspective is also shared by a surprisingly large number of young people uncomfortable with economic competition and the retreat of the state who have come to believe that communism was a more just and efficient system than its capitalist successor. Several hundred of them were involved in the most shaming point in the day when, with Vadim at their head, they stormed the visitors gallery barricading civic personalities and veterans of communist jails and, it has been claimed, threatening to defenestrate at least one of them. Photos of Horia Patapievici, the well-known

intellectual who made this allegation, appealing to zombie-like parliamentarians below to do something, blanketed the front pages of the press the next day. Parliament's security staff had mysteriously vanished and the entire disturbing day made me wonder about the efficacy all of the programmes from the EU, the American Nation Endowment for Democracy, and national governments to transform parliament into a motor for democracy. What was the point when the highest institution in the land could still lay prostrate at the feet of a demagogue who appeared to be on leave from an asylum but was in fact a supremely calculating figure adept at manipulating the past.

Calls for Vadim's prosecution have been widespread but weary resignation is likely to replace them as so many times before. The squabbling parties in the centre-right coalition headed by Calin Tarceanu, leader of the Liberal party (PNL), cannot afford to antagonise him unduly since they may be reliant on his support either to secure votes to dissolve parliament and force early elections, or else support another minority government. Neither can Mircea Geoana, on whom uneasily sits the crown of the troubled Social Democratic Party (PSD), successor to the Communists. Still mired in corruption scandals emanating from its 2000-04 government, the PSD's support has slid from 37% in the 2004 election to 20% and it fears the defection of many of its remaining supporters to the populist camp. Thus having criticised Basescu in the spring for his hesitation in launching a commission to establish how firm is the evidence to condemn communism's record in Romania, Geoana's conclusion today is that the report opens up old wounds and is 'neither useful nor credible'. Of course he has still to keep looking over his shoulders at 76-year-old Ion Iliescu, arguably the chief architect of the post-communist system. He was one of those condemned in the report, shortly after being

unanimously elected honorary president of the PSD. Thrice elected President, Iliescu, who insists that ‘there were people of vision inside the Communist Party’, and predicted the stormy scenes of the 18th when appearing on various TV shows in which the motives both of Basescu and Tismaneanu, neither of whom had done particularly badly under communism, were hotly debated.

The sabotaging of the parliamentary occasion was possibly a coded warning to Basescu not to entertain any thoughts of expanding on the report. This would involve stripping communist and state officials implicated in repressive acts of most of their pensions; a large number who are still alive are named in the report. Architects of the anti-communism report hope that it will pave the way for investigations into how second-ranking former communists consolidated power in 1990 by promoting inter-ethnic conflict and mobilising coal-miners to intimidate their opponents. But Basescu is unlikely to sanction such a move since it would antagonise his allies in the intelligence services, one of his key power-bases.

I escaped from parliament as Vadim's *danse macabre* was in full swing in front of frozen legislators and parliamentary staff watching the spectacle on TV screens in the vast lobby. Hundreds of state cars were lined up outside to take parliamentarians back to their homes where, no doubt, they would settle down in front of the TV to savour the day's happenings, once more slipping back into passive mode.

As I trudged towards the bustle and chaos of the Piata Unirii, Bucharest's central spot, the squat floodlit citadel on the hill - inhabited by hundreds of paralysed souls - struck me as a perfect metaphor for a static and profoundly superficial state. Its ministers

and functionaries are obsessed with ensuring that laws and procedures are followed before any decision can be taken. Millions of citizens pay a big prize for the obsession with the rule-book and their disregard for delivering accessible government. But when they are confronted by a hoodlum and his delinquent troupe, suddenly there is no more precious rule-book to worry about.

The next day I received an E Mail from a Romanian friend who, in his professional life has helped ensure that the society has advanced much faster than the sleepy and compromised state. It indicates the degree to which, on the eve of EU accession, post-communist mentalities still influence millions of Romanians:

'On Realitatea TV there was a show presenting the results of some opinion polls - The Greatest 2007 Romanians. The most voted politicians were Basescu, Becali¹ and Vadim (in this order). Unfortunately the lack of education from the population's part is more and more obvious. Romanians prove time and time again that they are smarter than the average, but deficiencies in civilisation and education is something which makes them backward thinking and primitive in key aspects of their behaviour. This is not something to be quickly fixed, but it is time to plead for a total reinvention of the Romanian education system, starting from scratch, from the moment the children are born. Otherwise Romanians will always fall victim to hungry populists.

The only hope is that the EU will tame the Romanian primitive forces in a decade or so. I am trying to be optimistic and believe that entering the EU will make us more responsible, and not more permissive and gregarious.'

Significantly, the EU strategy for Romania contained no provisions for improving the quality of education and modernising its antiquated structures. The examples of once poor countries, like Finland and Ireland, shows that prioritising educational reform can enable them to escape from underdevelopment and catch up with their rivals.

¹ Gigi Becali, a football mogul whose New Generation Party is tipped to do well in the next parliamentary elections.

The road-map for entry - the fabled *acquis communautaire* - was a formulaic exercise which involved passing 90,000 pages of EU legislation into domestic law and scaling back the economic role of the state. In this sense success is evident since the Romanian public sector is now considerably smaller than its British counterpart. But Brussels has been somewhat inconsistent in the way that it has approached Romania. The eagle-eyed insistence on economic liberalisation has not been matched by a similar insistence that reforms in the political and administrative realms are fully implemented rather than just paid lip-service to. Such inconsistency could prove very costly for Romania. Without a modern and efficient bureaucracy, it will be unable to access a large party of the 30 billion euro worth of structural funds it is due to receive in the next 6 years. Indeed, as top government officials have admitted, this poor country whose average income is only one-third of the current EU average, could end up a net contributor to EU funds.

Most of the key branches of the economy, from energy and telecommunications to banks and what remains of the heavy industrial sector, are now owned by EU multinationals. Some analysts argue that this explains why Romania was allowed to join the EU in 2007 with the political elite absorbed in its own power games and disinclined to make the time to work out a post-accession strategy to take full advantage of the assistance that Brussels is offering. The EU has been concerned to see the installation of a neutral and more professional justice system but the impetus appears to stem primarily from the need to protect foreign investment in the country. In a confrontation with the political élite over whether it would submit to having the origins of the wealth of individual dignitaries investigated by a judicial agency, the EU backed down in late 2006

when parties refused to pass the required legislation. The lack of a strong and united political nucleus for reform at this turning-point for Romania was painfully evident at the New Year's Eve celebrations for EU entry held in Bucharest. The Prime Minister had to steer foreign dignitaries to two rival events, one hosted by himself and the other by the President who regards the former as a pawn of big businessmen.

Beyond the freedom to go and work in most EU states which 2-3 million Romanians have taken advantage of, most Romanians have yet to see any tangible benefits from EU involvement in their affairs. Further massive hikes in heating and other basic commodity prices, and the impending closure of many small and medium-sized firms which fall foul of strict EU regulations, could cause further social hardship. The President aside, the low standing of mainstream forces means that the populist camp, already strong since 1989, is likely to do well in future elections. The first ones will be the European elections of May 2007. Five members of Vadim's party who sit as observers in the Parliament have been enough to ensure that the far-right becomes a grouping in Strasbourg with access to generous funding. Romanians are already enjoying respect in the countries where they have settled as hard-working and law-abiding citizens, bringing new life to Spanish and Italian communities with falling populations. It will be sad, but not surprising, if this authentic return to Europe is overshadowed by extremist manifestations at home which indicate that at least in its political arrangements, the country has still to escape from the post-communist shadowlands.

The author

Tom Gallagher holds the chair of Ethnic Peace and Conflict in the Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University. His most recent work on Romania, was *Theft of a nation: Romania Since Communism* (Hurst & Co, London 2005).