

Romania: Twenty years after the overthrow of Ceausescu

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On December 25, 1989, Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena were summarily executed after a brief show trial. The execution brought about the collapse of one of the last Eastern European Stalinist regimes formed after World War II.

The end of the Ceausescu regime in 1989 was preceded by the collapse of governments in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). But while the events in these countries are often falsely portrayed as genuine popular revolutions, such a presentation is not possible in Romania. Even the most ardent advocates of radical change at that time have to admit that the downfall of Stalinism also included elements of a coup.

In Romania, the character of the transformation that occurred in Eastern Europe 20 years ago was much more transparent than elsewhere. The Stalinist elite exploited the protests by the population to secure its power and privileges on a new, capitalist basis. Ceausescu was removed from his own ruling apparatus, whose members to this day still control the power and wealth of Romania, while the people live in misery.

When Ceausescu assumed leadership of the Communist Party of Romania (PCR) in 1965, he was regarded as a “reformer” and a preferred partner of the West. He stressed the country’s independence and distanced himself from Moscow. In August 1969, US President Richard Nixon visited the country, and the following year, Ceausescu traveled to the United States. He also enjoyed a certain popularity within Romania, thanks to the effects of industrialisation, leading to rising living standards.

As the situation deteriorated in subsequent decades, Ceausescu developed a bizarre personality cult, along the lines of the Maoists in China, and based his rule increasingly on the notorious secret police, the Securitate. The economic decline in the late 1980s finally heralded the end of his regime.

The ruling PCR squeezed the population mercilessly to repay the country’s outstanding loans to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, amounting to around \$11 billion. Food was scarce, even bread was only available with a ration coupon. Wages were cut or were no longer paid at all. The health and education system collapsed. The lack of investments in industry and agriculture meant productivity fell

by more than 30 percent in these areas over a period of 10 years.

The regime suppressed protests by workers against this policy with brutal severity. The Securitate had far-reaching powers. Hundreds were arrested, kidnapped, tortured and killed.

On December 16, 1989, when the authorities wanted to relocate the dissident pastor Laszlo Tokes from Timisoara, it led to protests that escalated rapidly, leading to clashes with the police. The following day, on Ceausescu’s orders, the police, army and intelligence service shot at the crowd. Several hundred demonstrators were killed.

Now the protests spread to several cities, including the capital Bucharest. Many observers of those events believe that sections of the apparatus, including the Securitate, deliberately encouraged the protests.

On December 21, Ceausescu addressed a mass gathering in Bucharest. The initially friendly mood soon changed and turned against him. The following day, he and his wife fled in the face of a further mass demonstration, traveling by helicopter to the north to Targoviste, where they were arrested by the army.

Meanwhile, Ceausescu’s close confidantes in the party, army and intelligence services had formed a new leadership. To this end, the “revolutionaries,” as they dubbed themselves, had called into being the National Salvation Front (NSF). As the popular protests continued, and there was fighting between sections of the secret service and the army loyal to Ceausescu, they decided to liquidate the figureheads of the old regime.

Ceausescu and his wife were brought before a hastily convened military tribunal, where they were sentenced to death and shot in front of the cameras. The images were broadcast around the world.

Ceausescu was succeeded by Ion Iliescu, who had belonged to his innermost circle until the 1980s. In a climate of enormous political confusion, Iliescu and the NSF won the 1990 parliamentary elections, and two years later, the presidential election. Many leading politicians from Ceausescu’s circle also occupied ministerial posts in the new government. Under the leadership of Ceausescu’s pupil Iliescu, the NSF occupied all the important positions of state.

They set out to dismantle public enterprises, relying on the opposition of the population to the old power structures. More

than 600 people arrested by the army between December 22 and 28, 1989, on suspicion of terrorist attacks were released early in 1990. Many senior officers in the army, the Securitate and the militia who had ordered the shootings at demonstrators remained at large, or were even promoted.

When Iliescu privatised the first state enterprises and pushed through drastic austerity measures, he encountered violent resistance. There were repeated strikes and demonstrations against unemployment and low wages. An inflation rate of more than 300 percent deprived the Romanian population of a means of providing for itself. In 1993, the government cut the subsidies for goods and services and thereby provoked a major strike movement. In 1994, 2 million workers took part in a general strike.

Popular anger and disappointment with the outcome of the changes were exploited by right-wing bourgeois parties. In 1996, an opposition alliance of Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and National Liberals took over the government under the leadership of Emil Constantinescu. The Western media celebrated this as the “real change,” as Constantinescu had set a goal of accelerating the privatisation of state enterprises and enforcing all the IMF’s demands for harsh attacks on social conditions.

At the same time, ultra-right figures such as Vadim Tudor, Ceausescu’s former court poet, won political influence. The Greater Romania Party he helped launch recruited mainly from among former Securitate thugs.

Many of the old Stalinist colleagues could now be found in the successor to the Securitate, the SRI, or had careers as successful entrepreneurs; the capitalist market economy offering them ideal opportunities for advancement. The old boys’ network functioned like clockwork, as former Securitate people could be found in all the state institutions, political parties and media.

One example of this process is Radu Tinu. From 1985 to 1989, he was deputy chief of the Securitate in the Timis district, where among other things he organised the persecution of this year’s Nobel Prize winner, Herta Müller, who was still living in Romania. Following the fall of Ceausescu and a brief detention, he became a manager for the Vienna Insurance Group.

These right-wing figures have constantly sought to stoke up ethnic and racial tensions. In March 1990, neo-fascist elements, along with former Securitate officers, fuelled such tensions in Tirgu Mures. The city’s inhabitants are Romanian and Hungarian in equal number. There were violent clashes between the two camps. Romania stood on the brink of an ethnic civil war.

It is no surprise that extreme nationalism was widespread among the successor organisations to the Romanian Stalinist party. The PCR, founded in 1921 under the influence of the Russian Revolution, came under the sway of Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy in the late 1920s. During World War II, the

PCR formed an alliance with right-wing bourgeois forces, such as the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the National Peasant Party (PNT), against the fascist dictator Ion Antonescu.

After the overthrow of Antonescu, an independent government under Petru Groza was formed in March 1945, which was tolerated by the PCR. In 1946, the PCR and Groza’s national-conservative “Plowmen’s Front” campaigned together in the elections. Under the umbrella of Moscow, the PCR took on state power under party leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. The latter was a genuine Stalinist. Political opponents were imprisoned and tortured mercilessly.

Ceausescu began his ascent in the shadow of Gheorghiu-Dej. After the death of Stalin in 1953, and increasingly after Ceausescu came to power in 1965, Romanian politics took on a nationalist and anti-Semitic colouring. To divide the population, minorities were deliberately discriminated against. Holocaust denial was openly propagated by pro-government newspapers.

Since the fall of Ceausescu in Romania, right-wing and post-Stalinist “Socialist” governments and heads of state have alternated in office. But policy has remained basically the same. To meet the criteria for accession to the European Union, rigorous austerity measures have been carried out. The last state-owned enterprises were privatised.

Today, the celebrations being held under the banner of “20 years of freedom” take place within the context of a prolonged economic crisis. None of the promises of prosperity and democracy have been fulfilled. All politicians agree with imposing the burden of the crisis and massive social attacks upon the general population.

At the same time, the country’s elections are far from democratic, as shown by the recent presidential elections. A fierce battle for power, influence and financial resources is raging inside the political elite.

The official ceremonies and speeches on the anniversary stand in stark contrast to the mood of the population. Strikes and demonstrations have increased sharply in recent months. People are no longer willing to accept the precarious conditions of life.

According to recent polls, one in three respondents now believes the events of 1989 were a mistake. Sixty percent of Romanians think politicians are more corrupt today than under Nicolae Ceausescu, and about the same number (56 percent) think the “communist” regime showed more respect for ordinary people than the current political system.



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