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Policing Good Life: Ambiguous Practices of Social Well-Being during the 1950s in Romania

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My research project focuses on the transformation of Romanian domestic space during the 1950s. I look at how material goods generated tensions between political actors and professional specialists, as well as between regime and population. Central in my approach is to contextualize social policies within the frameworks of reconstruction / modernization of postwar Europe. I am concerned, therefore, to identify differences in social welfare approaches by comparing solutions suggested by propaganda rhetoric, policy makers and professional authority. In this way, my goal is to establish to what extent such programs implemented locally in Romania reflected ideological differences or similarities between East and West and, on another level, if they were fueled by utopian or pragmatic goals. This is particularly important because the 1950s are illustrative for a paradoxical situation. On one hand, the Romanian regime coupled a utopian rhetoric about the people's everyday abundance with steady control over the daily life by creating various ideological categories of needs (minimal, necessary, maximal, waste, luxury, labor, recreation, productivity etc). On the other hand, institutional practices, individual (re)actions or professional knowledge have appropriated, confiscated, adapted, transformed or re-symbolized the old ones, which repositioned the urban communities' social landmarks in terms of continuity or rupture from the previous order.

My research questions are:

- What meant "good life" in Romania during the 1950s?
- What kind of practices - formal and informal – forged new relationships among the state, material goods and the people?
- What does the issues of well-being tell us about the relationship between political authority and professional autonomy?

During my two month stay at OSA, I have worked on Romanian unit (administration, communication, economy, industry, housing, living standards, labor, trade, trade unions, social structure, population, corruption, political life and personalities), media research holdings (Information Service Department, Media and Opinion Research, Administrative files, fonds from the US office on Romania, weekly information letter, publication department), and on-line collections (Information items, Situation Reports, Background Reports).

These documents proved very useful

- to understand how everyday life was transformed under the fluid conditions of the early Cold War years;
- to assess to what extent individual experiences (in various contexts and locations) informed official approaches to well-being;
- to situate the problems of welfare within the frameworks of professionalization in the field of social and economic research;

- to trace how penal and civil legislation on material goods changed over time in response to societal actions;
- to grasp subsequent cultural changes, related to collective and individual values and popular opinion, as well as meanings of marginality, morale and deviationism;
- to trace how material goods reflected the social re-stratification of urban society and the emergence of a new elite.

My research focused on three main overlapping frameworks.

1. **Categories of social needs:** Documents in the description of the country and towns (boxes 622, 637, 642) unveiled how after a period of difficult living conditions, there was noticed a gradual improvement of the quality of life, particularly in the areas that were of major economic importance, like industrial centers. This suggests that some professional categories like skilled workers and technicians enjoyed better material status. In this respect, regulations of salaries, norms, recreation or housing (boxes 545 - 548) are illustrative not only for a paternalist approach to industrialization, but also for more profound changes occurred during the 1950s, which stress how research institutions developed sociological inspired methodologies that would record “objectively” workers’ needs of daily calories, living space, clothing or culture (boxes 96, 139).
2. **(In)Formal aspects of well-being:** Changing the official social hierarchies by reconfiguring the hierarchies of needs is further documented in the boxes on morale and general mood, trade unions, as well as industry and economy. For instance, the large number of micro-monographies of industrial sites (box 374) mention labor conflicts, issues about productivity and absenteeism, management tensions, political intrusions, technical modernization, but also emerging marginal and anti-social behavior. There is a consistent body of documents on underground circulation of goods, theft, illegal associations; the bigger the industrial center, the higher the incidence of underground commercial actions. While, such evidence is useful to recuperating the image of everyday life during the 1950s, they also stress successive changes in the national legislation. Furthermore, extensive lists of prices, incomes, availability of goods, ration cards, diversification and expansion of commercial networks, quality of supply, consumer cooperative’s relationship with the authorities and population (boxes 382, 405-423) reconstruct an alternative image of the Romanian cities, which often differed from the official meaning contained in the architectural design.
3. **Discourses on well-being:** As taste was media constructed, newspapers and radio not only disseminated information on new products, but, paradoxically, recuperated many modernist concepts about products’ functionality and utility, which led to a new aesthetic and ideological approach to socialist urban lifestyles and need. However, the particular nature of the archival materials available at OSA, as well as the context in which the documents were created raises questions about how such information was further used in the RFE broadcasts, or how did the population or the regime respond. In this respect, not only that the means of forging audiences was important – the subsequent practices of jamming, availability and accessibility of radio sets, alternative sources of information including rumors – but also the overall dynamic of radio sets production so that listening to short-wave frequencies became accessible to a wider public (box 55). For instance, the media research holdings contain some audience figures (particularly for the 1960s), some excerpts from people’s letters from the 1950s, and several records that illustrate how the

official discourse of the communist regime was reinterpreted through the lenses of information collected from RFE sources.

As a result of my stay at OSA, my approach changed in several ways. First, I extended the time framework to include the 1960s so that I could gain a better sense of the social changes over the years. Second, I became more interested in comparative methodologies, which would help me integrate the Romanian case within a broader East-European perspective. Third, I began to pay a closer look to media studies and the research of popular opinion.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to research at OSA. I would like to thank the staff for all their time, effort and professionalism to make my stay here as fruitful as possible. My special thanks to Ioana Macrea-Toma for her guidance in handling the archival material, Katalin Gadoros for administrative support, Robert Parnica, Örs Tari Lehel and Tibor Szigeti for assistance in the research room. I would also like to thank my colleagues - Karla Koutkova, Monika Metykova, Victoria Shmidt, Maria Stozek and Igor Korshunov – for the friendly talks in the research room and outside.

List of materials researched:

- 300-60-1: BOXES - 6, 7, 54, 55, 56, 61, 62, 91, 94 - 97, 131 – 133, 139, 157 – 161, 163, 164, 168, 374, 382 - 388, 393, 404 – 414, 416, 419 – 428, 510 – 514, 532, 533, 535, 536, 542, 543, 545, 546, 547, 549, 550, 551, 552, 554 – 556, 590 – 592, 654, 656, 622, 642.
- 205-4-71: BOXES - 1 – 8.
- 205-4-72: BOXES – 1 - 20.
- 300-2-7: BOXES - 5, 6, 9.
- 300-6-1: BOXES - 1 – 11.
- 300-7-3: BOXES - 1 – 12.
- 300-8-52: BOXES - 1 – 3.
- 300-8-15: BOX – 1.
- 300-8-13: BOXES - 1-5.