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## FINAL REPORT

### WISEGRAD SCHOLARSHIP AT THE VERA & DONALD BLINKEN OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES

My archival work at OSA focused on a wide array of topics and themes relating to my dissertation project titled “Giving in the Cold War: Economic Life, Humanitarianism, and Mobility in Europe, 1960-1990.” In the following report I will first discuss my findings at OSA from a topical perspective and then engage in a brief discussion of giving from a phenomenological point of view.

#### LIST OF SOURCES STUDIED AT OSA

##### HU OSA 300-60-1 — ROMANIAN UNIT — SUBJECT FILES

Boxes # 2, 14, 48, 53, 165, 168, 207, 209, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 427, 430, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 550, 552, 553, 554, 570, 571, 627, 628, 629, 630, 655, 764

##### HU OSA 300-60-3 — ROMANIAN UNIT — RECORDS RELATING TO ROMANIAN OPPOSITION AND PROTEST MOVEMENT

Boxes # 1, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

HU OSA 300-3-1 — GERMAN AFFAIRS EAST GERMAN SUBJECT FILES

Boxes # 17, 22

HU OSA 300-7-5 — US OFFICE — SUBJECT FILES RELATING TO EASTERN  
EUROPE

Box # 8

HU OSA 300-40-2 — HUNGARIAN UNIT — SUBJECT FILES IN ENGLISH

Box # 105

My research focus at OSA lay on examining newspaper clippings, internal analyses, broadcast reports as well as personal letters and appeals. I made extensive use of the keyword search functionality in the online archive looking for such terms as “borders,” “customs,” “gifts,” “natural disasters,” or “packages,” among others. In the above-listed document collections six broad rubrics provided crucial insights on the following areas of interest:

- 1) **Informal Economy:** In this category I delved on material on Eastern European and Romanian “black markets,” legislation policing the import of contraband and smuggling activities, corruption in Romania with a particular focus on individual profiteering of state employees at state borders and at customs. Informal economies, often described as second economies or black markets in socialism, have been subject to a burgeoning body of work. My attention in this emerging literature lies on the transnational aspect of informal economic exchanges including the cross-border flows and transmission belts of materials and goods within socialism. My work claims that the transnational aspect is crucial to understanding external and domestic economic practices as converging informal domains, rather than as disconnected spheres.
- 2) **Tourism:** In this rubric I studied the rise and expansion of the European tourism industry from the 1960s to the 1980s. I searched for material describing the emerging bilateral tourist agreements, travel routes and destinations, and organized programs that increasingly offered

ordinary people opportunities on both sides of the Iron Curtain and within the socialist bloc to embark on hitherto unavailable travel and leisure activities. I learned that the Romanian state gradually ramped up its efforts at developing its tourism industry both in competition with neighboring socialist states and as a national effort aimed at generating economic growth since the 1960s. Cross-referencing these policies with those of Hungary and East Germany (cf. Hungarian and East German Units at OSA), the Romanian state's policies clearly emerged as reaction to a bottom-up demand for cross-border contact and mobility. Most importantly, this research section has been helpful to bolster my claim that such official pathways allowed millions of European tourists to travel to Romania in both licit and illicit capacity. Notably, various interviews conducted with individuals who traveled to Romania confirm the existence of a widespread culture of "backpack tourism" in the 1970s and 1980s that crucially drew on the physical and mental infrastructures developed around tourism. Bringing such oral history interviews into conversation with the material collection at OSA allowed me to unpack the ways in which ordinary people re-appropriated tourism as a form of mobility for their own purpose of assisting and helping family, friends, neighbors and complete strangers in Romania. Additional archival material on valuta, travel and visit regulations in Romania confirm that foreign travelers and tourists were subject to extensive state policing in Romania. Thus, despite frequently undercutting official doctrines of socialist leisure and carving out spaces of autonomy, "backpack tourism" never completely escaped the sphere of Cold War ideology and the constraints of state control. This, in turn, enabled "backpack tourists" to develop a particular set of rituals and scripts allowing them to navigating the gaze of the socialist state.

- 3) **Borders:** A focal space where "backpack tourists" created and deployed such performative and ritualized forms of behavior were state borders. I delved into various files on customs regulations, border incidents, legislation on small border traffic, and reports of individuals describing their experience traversing the various socialist state borders. The document collection at OSA offered detailed insights into the official frameworks established by the socialist state of East Germany, Hungary, and Romania that became a domain of complex (and complicated) negotiations between visitors and customs officers. State borders, as my

work argues, were crucial points of state control managing the flows of import and human mobility. Oral history interviews provided additional insights into the ways in which the Romanian state (and its pendants across the socialist bloc) rather than appearing as an all-knowing, all-controlling entity, was itself an actor in the economy of giving. Its ability to marshal existing expertise that rendered the practice of giving readable and manageable to local state officials was limited. I will revisit this aspect in my discussion on the liminality of giving.

- 4) **Packages:** Another domain of state control that served as an official pathway for the delivery of goods across borders were (gift) packages and parcels. Similarly to my reconstructive efforts in regard to state borders, I examined a wide range of archival materials at OSA detailing the complex and changing array of customs laws and postal agreements regulating package donations from the 1960s to the 1980s. As an analogue to tourism, the history of postal regimes spanning West and East Europe during the Cold War offer crucial insights into the intricate regulatory frameworks established by socialist states and the ways in which these domains overlapped with and shaped the ability of ordinary people to send and received gifts and aid packages from abroad.
- 5) **Economic Development:** Newspaper clippings and internal RFE reports offered insights into the rise of Romania's foreign loans granted by Western states and the evolution of its debt levels in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, the documents were helpful to chart the contours of Romania's shortage economy and its discontents as well as the detrimental constraints on basic supply and consumption implemented by the severe austerity program of 1981. The material studied sustains various important claims such as the following three: a) *shortage* was not a pre-determined systemic feature of the socialist economy in Romania (and elsewhere in the socialist bloc), but rather (re-)emerged after the oil crises and the rise of Western debt in the mid to late-1970s. Increases in the general standard of living and the rise of a moderate consumer culture starting a decade earlier attest to the relatively robust economic gains under socialism bringing prosperity to large parts of the Romanian population after the postwar years. Crucially, then, my analysis will point out (in conversation with a newer literature in the field) that socialism as an economic system was

not monolithic. Rather, the economy of socialism was the sum of a series of distinct periods and changing economic doctrines marked by considerable geographical discontinuities. For Romania I would distinguish between an early industrial socialism ranging from the postwar years to the mid to late 1960s marked by large-scale industrialization projects; this early stage was followed by a “supply-side socialism” between the late 1960s to the mid to late 1970s marked by increases in consumption and a burgeoning, modest consumer culture; finally this intermediary stage gave way to “austerity socialism” between 1981 and 1989 that reintroduced war-time rationing. The ultimate failure of socialism in Romania, in effect, was the result of a convergence of internal and external factors (stifling debt levels coupled with detrimental austerity policies). This point is crucial to rebuff teleological interpretations of socialism’s inherent birth flaws that determined its economic collapse in 1989 (see Janos Kornai for an older interpretation on this topic). The material at OSA was particularly helpful to map out how the rise and evolution of giving related to and indeed corresponded with shifts in consumption and basic supply patterns in socialist Romania. b) The material collection at OSA was helpful to discern that Romania’s austerity program was devised to radically curb the country’s basic supply and consumption levels for the purpose of paying off foreign loans. Rationalization measures prescribed by the Romania state through austerity programs labeled as the new “rational diet” or “rational life” were to mobilize the population to support national austerity as a way of empowering Romania to regain independence from the “imperialist forces of Western loans.” While indeed the Romanian state was able to pay off the country’s debt by 1990, the social costs of these policies were dramatic. I studied an avalanche of letters and appeals submitted to RFE in the 1980s that contemplated the severe material deprivation in the country and increasingly focused their critique on Ceausescu himself. This material offered crucial insights into the “general mood” of the Romanian population and allowed me to think in new ways about the labor revolt of Brasov in 1987 and the Romanian Revolution of 1989. Notably, I increasingly came to see these two incidents, of which ultimately only 1989 gained international exposure, as a form of “austerity revolts” caused by the severe shortage economy. Rather than to look for dissident networks and opposition movements as crucial agents of political change in Romania, the

downfall of the Ceausescu regime appears increasingly as the result of the population's discontent with the dramatic material deprivation. This bottom-up refusal of austerity economics in Romania did not require the rallying cries of intellectual elites or an organized opposition movement, which may indeed provide a new interpretation of 1989.

- 6) **Natural Disasters:** Finally, a hitherto neglected aspect in the period of socialism have been natural disasters and their economic effects for socialist economies. The source collection at OSA offered material for new hypothesis about the economic and financial deficits created by a series of natural disasters in Romania in 1970, 1975, and 1977, which I hope to develop further in a future chapter of my dissertation. To return to the role of natural disasters within the economy of giving, while these three calamities spurred an international humanitarian campaign for Romania by professional organizations, they also provided the pretext for the emergence of private initiatives from East Germany, Hungary, and West Germany. Natural disasters may indeed be conceptualized as acute and visible moments of giving that performed the function of humanitarian aid and established a grammar of assistance for Romania as early as 1970.

## CONCEPTUALIZING GIVING

In addition to assembling a wide cluster of aspects and themes relating to my dissertation project, conducting research at OSA helped me to think about giving from a *phenomenological* level. Victor Turner's work on liminality was particularly helpful to theorize this evanescent everyday practice in the time of socialism.<sup>1</sup> In Victor Turner's classical discussion, "Liminality and Communitas," liminal individuals or entities are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."<sup>2</sup> Liminality, in this sense, invokes a condition of in-betweenness and structural ambiguity. The

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<sup>1</sup> See Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967), *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, second edition (London, 2008), 95.

non-structure or anti-structure that Turner refers to in “Betwixt and Between” through such concepts as the “realm of pure possibility” and structural invisibility offers glimpses into the unlimited possibilities from which social structures emerge. Extending Turner’s notion of liminality to social practices in socialism, I suggest, allows for a productive discussion of giving as a daily activity that slipped through and between the control of institutions and eluded traditional categories in socialism and the broader ideological context of the Cold War.

What makes Giving liminal? Here I wish to refer to two aspects:

1. Giving extended beyond national borders thereby blurring and indeed complicating the boundaries of classical sovereignty, Cold War ideology, and economic modes of exchange. Giving was part of an intricate and changing system of different jurisdictions, state domains, and institutional frameworks. It therefore never fully belonged to one single social structure or one socialist state. Packages and backpack tourists constantly moved in and out of different arenas of state sovereignty. The clearest example for the inherent liminality of giving offer the binary categories of tourism versus illicit trade. Betwixt and between these two dualist rubrics, giving was neither an illicit activity commonly attributed to the illegal trade of contraband across borders that socialist states attempted to police through legislation and border controls. Nor was giving a proper leisure activity; although backpack tourists often disguised their activities as tourist trips and incorporated visits to family members and friends or independent vacation plans into their travels. Instead, giving was bound to a liminality that was both predicated on the prescriptive economic and political frameworks of smuggling and tourism in socialist societies and simultaneously reworked these categories without ever being fully absorbed into either domain.

2. This type of structural liminality also extended into epistemological and ontological ambiguity. Over more than two decades no clear classification system, legislation, or political program emerged within the socialist bloc that allowed states to classify, name, control, and manage giving properly. Giving as a practice thus remained elusive to the life worlds of border and customs officers, postal clerks, and other state officials, inducing apparatchiks in the Romanian communist party. As a result, the socialist state never developed a clear agenda to regulate acts of giving. As a liminal practice, giving thus constantly oscillated between the illicit

and licit, either falling into the category of cross-border smuggling or into the rubric of tourism/kin visits. Ultimately, this dualist conceptual framework remained too circumscribed and inadequate for socialist states to render visibility to giving as a widespread social practice and to make it readable to its experts and institutions. For border and customs officers, this dearth of language was not without benefits. Increasingly during the 1980s, the the flow of packages and influx of backpack tourists became a tacitly accepted (or expected) source for access to unavailable consumer goods, valuta, or medicine in Romania. State officials generated considerable personal profits by bargaining with donors and recipients or through outright theft of goods from packages. Giving thus became ensnared in a landscape of local contingencies and individual decisions made along state borders and ad hoc in customs offices. The collusion of disparate motivations added to the inability of the Romanian state to effectively control and manage acts of giving, let alone to recognize them as an additive and collective effort of tens of thousands of ordinary people. Instead, in the language of the nomenclatura, giving remained a disconnected activity, minuscule in scale, insignificant to be deemed necessary of policing.

This epistemological non-structure or anti-structure, to refer back to Turner, extended into the ontological domain of donors and recipients too. Importing foodstuff and medicine or sending packages to Romania seldom translated into a palpable language of charity, humanitarian aid, or philanthropy among individuals who offered assistance and aid across borders. Indeed, the peculiar language of humanitarianism often deployed in crises zones around the world in the 1990s remained reserved for institutionalized forms of emergency or development aid deployed by large international organizations such as the Red Cross, Caritas, or Diakonie in the time of socialism. The requisite developmentalist and humanitarian language emerged after the international humanitarian order (re)gained access to Eastern Europe in the 1990s. In socialism giving thus remained a practice without a name.