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Varieties of Dissent Inside and Outside Communist Romania

Visegrad Scholarship at Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives
Report: January 21 - March 23 2017

Thanks to the Visegrad Fellowship, I was able to spend two months at the Vera & Donald Blinken Open Society Archives in Budapest. My initial aim was to ground the theoretical aspects of my PhD dissertation, and provide strong proof that one can safely talk about Romanian dissent and opposition to the country's communist regime. Far from only a few scattered voices, the Romanian population as exemplified through multiple categories, party members, intellectuals, workers, students revolted and protested the regime in different ways. Moreover, their voices were heard both inside and outside the Iron Curtain.

Aside from an "invented community" brought together by radio waves, there was an actual, physical location where the young generation, those born after the end of the Second World War met, talked openly, and asserted their identities freely, and in total contrast to the communist party's prescriptions. Here, some even dare to defy the rules and openly express their opposition to the regime. My PhD thesis analyzes the small communities located on the Romanian shores of the Black Sea, 2 Mai and Vama Veche, where resistance and collaboration were embodied locally. Categories of otherwise mutually exclusive types of behaviour overlapped, while social and gender norms dispersed as even famous members of the Romanian Communist Party departed from party prescriptions. The study of Vama Veche and 2 Mai as

sites of behaviour tolerated but not fully controlled by the socialist regime suggests that there individuals interacted with each other and the state authorities in ways different from their interactions in other spaces or localities. To paraphrase historian L.P. Hartley's well known remark that "the past is a foreign country," one could say that dissent was another locality for these vacationers.

The RFE archives of the Romanian Section hosted at OSA, I believed, could provide evidence about the alternative communities of 2 Mai and Vama Veche. They did not, at least not directly, yet mine is a success story because aside from deepening my understanding about dissent and its varieties inside the Romanian context, it pointed me towards new directions.

Resistance to the Communist regime is a controversial aspect in Romanian historiography. The master narrative imbued by political rationale states that Romanian society did little to resist communism. There were very few dissident voices, the story goes, and their activity was mostly driven by personal reasons such as the desire to leave the country. Furthermore, an alliance between the workers and intellectuals never happened. This almost deterministic view of history, shaped mostly by its famous political actors, gives little agency to ordinary people. History from the bottom up, everyday life, spontaneous acts of resistance, and the complexities of socialist identity have not yet come to the forefront of historical study in Romania. The Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives proved extremely useful in excavating little known accounts of resistance alongside their forgotten heroes. The abundance of the archival materials pointed to a more colourful reality and opened new research directions. In the process, the discourse on Romanian dissent will surely be challenged thus leading to a more complex understanding of the region's particularities.

The Open Society Archives allowed me to better articulate the concepts of opposition, its different categories in space and time, as well as their application to the Romanian context. While my focus was Romania, I also looked for how Romanian dissent voices related to the continuum of opposition to the communist regimes in other East European countries. I paid close attention to reports on dissent and samizdat from neighboring countries as well as the circulation and dissemination of anti-propaganda materials. The regional aspect of yet transnational ties was best exemplified by the situation of the ethnic Hungarian population in Romania. Their discontented voices were heard in Hungary, Romania, and through RFE broadcasts, in other Western and Eastern European countries, as well as in the United States. The RFE also mediated the connection between Romanian dissenters and other organizations, such as Solidarity, and diaspora communities from France and US.

One of the topics that struck me through the broad areas of information and detailed analysis was the Revolt in Brasov from November 15, 1987. An extremely important topic in Romania's communist history, the Brasov Revolt was even considered the prelude of the Romanian Revolution of 1989. Yet, Romanian historians have only recently begun to turn their attention to this subject. News about the revolts in Brasov that took place on November 15, 1987 circulated in Romania through RFE, who had received the information from different sources, amongst which the most reliable one was Tanjug, which at the time was the Yugoslavian state news agency. In these reports, it was told that up to 10,000 people, workers, women, and children had taken to Brasov's streets and stormed the headquarters of the regional party organization, burning the portraits of Ceausescu and his wife; this news subsequently spread to the entire Central European region. The Western German press declared that now "even the

Romanian polenta” had finally exploded. Days later, speaking on behalf of the Polish people and the Solidarity movement, Jacek Kuron sent a letter in support of the Romanian workers.

Drawing largely on the RFE archives at OSA, the above paragraph is part of the summary of an article that will be published in a special issue of *Centaurus, An International Journal of the History of Science and Its Cultural Aspects*. Part of the **International Broadcasting: Technology, Knowledge, and Imaginations Across Borders** issue, my article, “Auch Polenta explodiert”: Radio Free Europe and Romanian Political Opposition to Ceausescu’s Regime” will reflect on the events in Brasov in 1987 through the lenses of transnational ties, border crossings, and the imagined community of soundscapes, showing how radio transmissions supported growing Romanian opposition to communist rule. During the Cold War, Radio Free Europe had the largest audience of all international broadcasters in Romania. In the late 1980s, RFE’s audience was estimated at 63% of the population. For many Romanians, RFE offered one of the few alternative sources of information, keeping them updated not only about external events, but also about what was happening in their own country. Had it not been for the sounds and their echoes, since Romanians had, after all, broadcasted their revolution on TV, some might even say we would not have had a successful revolution at all.

OSA also put me in touch with young scholars that study different aspects of the Cold War from an Eastern European perspective. Some of us took our friendship a step further and established a research team dedicated to the study of radio broadcasts during the communist era through jamming, monitoring, knowledge production and dissemination, social practices and circulation of archival artefacts connected to radio listening practices. Having the ability to transcend fixed, geographical borders, the radio acted as means of production, transmission and

reception of information just like other printed materials, or recordings, whether samizdat or tamizdat did.

Lats but not least, it's worth mentioning that one thing that the alternative communities of 2 Mai and Vama Veche, tourists and locals alike, had in common was the listening to RFE. The archival research that I was able to conduct at OSA made me think in new and hopefully innovative ways about varieties of dissent, and how they shaped the social and cultural fabric of communist societies.



ITEM No 2416

12 July 1951
AA - 217

RUMANIA

PROPAGANDA
(Radio)

Loudspeakers have been installed by Rumanian authorities in the port of ORSOVA on the Danube, others were given free of charge to the population. The most powerful ones were installed along the river bank, so that they may be heard by the Rumanian speaking Serbian population on the Yugoslav side of the Danube.

Young soldiers of the Army Engineer Corps stationed in ORSOVA are reported to listen secretly to broadcasts from Western Europe and to the "Voice of America."

DATE OF OBSERVATION : current period

EVAL. COMMENT : Source: usually reliable;
Information: First paragraph confirmed by other sources. Last information is very probably true.

List of accessed materials:

Records of the Open Media Research Department

- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 1
- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 9
- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 10
- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 17
- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 19
- HU OSA 205-4-70 Romanian Subject Files, Box: 21
- HU OSA 205-4-71 Romanian Subject Card Files, Box : 3

Western Press Archives

- HU OSA 300-120-13 Subject Files Relating to Eastern Europe, Box 114
- HU OSA 300-120-13 Subject Files Relating to Eastern Europe, Box 115
- HU OSA 300-120-13 Subject Files Relating to Eastern Europe, Box 116

Analytic Research Department

- HU OSA 300-5-190 Records of Vlad Socor, Box: 28
- HU OSA 300-5-190 Records of Vlad Socor, Box: 38

Romanian Unit

- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box: 366
- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box : 367
- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box: 368
- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box: 369
- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box: 370
- HU OSA 300-60-1 Subject Files, Box: 371
- HU OSA 300-60-2 RFE Confidential Reports on Romania, Box: 1
- HU OSA 300-60-2 RFE Confidential Reports on Romania, Box: 2
- HU OSA 300-60-2 RFE Confidential Reports on Romania, Box: 3
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 1
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 2
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 4
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 5

- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 6
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 7
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 8
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 9
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 13
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 14
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 15
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 16
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 17
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 18
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 19
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 20
- HU OSA 300-60-3 Records Relating to Romanian Opposition and Protest Movement, Box: 21