Book Reviews


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The number of academic contributions related to certain topics regarding the history of the Romanian communist regime is very high. Some themes have especially received a lot of attention from scholars. The foreign policy of Romania during 1944-1989 is one of those. But, there is still room for relevant research, mainly because the conceptual and methodological frameworks used by historians and political scientists have evolved a lot. Emanuel Copilaș’s book, The Genesis of the romantic Leninism. A theoretical perspective on the international orientation of the Romanian communism 1948-1989, is trying to apply new concepts and methods of research in order to better explain the variations in the foreign policy of communist Romania.

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The author divided his research in two parts, an empirical and a theoretical one. The volume is structured in eight chapters, the first two chapters explaining the conceptual framework of the research and how it can be applied to the Romanian case. The next three chapters analyse the foreign policy of Romania during the ‘50s and the first half of the ‘60s, while the last three take into consideration the foreign policy during the period in which the Romanian Communist Party was led by Nicolae Ceaușescu.

What Copilaș is trying to do is to apply theories of International Relations to the topic of foreign policy of Romania during the communist regime. In order to achieve his goal, he explains his main conceptual influences. The number of authors cited in this book is impressive, three of them being essential. First of all, Copilaș is inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory of centre, periphery and semi-periphery and uses this conceptual framework to explain the international political landscape after the Second World War. Secondly, the author uses Kenneth Waltz’s three levels of understanding international relations. Emanuel Copilaș believes that all three of them can explain certain evolutions regarding Romania’s foreign policy, but uses more often the first two (he says that his research is somewhere in the middle between individual and systemic). Last, but not least, the most important theory used by Copilaș is socio-constructivism, especially the works of Nicolas Onuf. Apart from this author, when explaining the internal evolution of the regime, Copilaș uses the works of
Robert Tucker and Kenneth Jowitt, trying to see connections between the three stages described by Jowitt and the changes in foreign policy.

There are two main contributions that came out of Copilaș's approach. Explaining the theme using this vast interpretative apparatus, Copilaș not only challenges some assumptions, but opens several new points for debate. Of course, there are some empirical issues to his research (as I will explain later), but nevertheless it is very clear the necessity for more researches that use a dense conceptual and methodological approach.

The first major contribution of Copilaș is to understand the evolution of Romanian foreign policy as linked to the ideological foundations of the regime. Most researches in the field assume that ideology was only a layer of the regime, without any real relevance. Therefore, the foreign policy of Romania is understood only as a quest for independence from Moscow because the Romanian communist did not like to be controlled from abroad. Copilaș believes that the matter at hand is a lot more complicated. As he explains, the evolution of Romania from the most docile ally of the Soviet Union to the first socialist country visited by the president of the United States of America is related mostly to how the communist elite in Romania understood Leninism (the author uses this word, not Marxism or Stalinism) and its applications to the field of international relations.

The second major contribution of the book is the excellent contextualisation. Emanuel Copilaș knows very well the literature about the socialist block. Not only that he explains how the Romanian foreign policy is linked to other evolutions in all communist regimes (one of the best examples is the impact of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and his
regime), but the uses the ideological perspective not only at the level of Romania. His explanations about ideological changes of Leninism is quite complex. He uses it to conclude that all changes of foreign policy from Romania must be understood in the context of a general, systemic, ideological evolution of the Soviet bloc.

The book takes into consideration the entire history of the communist regime in Romania (1948-1989). The massive changes that happened during this time are very well presented. From a total subordination to the Soviet Union, to a more and more independent foreign policy, to nationalism and cult of personality, Copilaș manages to explain them all. The first part of the book discusses how Romania tried and succeeded in having a, more or less, independent foreign policy. Copilaș contradicts several well-known historians and political scientists and his arguments are very well-thought.

For 1965-1989, two main coordinates have been identified by Copilaș. These are the calculated dissent and the prestige diplomacy. The calculated dissent is:

The exploitation of the independent position of Bucharest in the socialist block in order to obtain image capital, funding and political help from the West, while using the same help in order to obtain economical concession from Moscow. Gradually, especially during the last decade of the communist regime, the calculated dissent has inverted his marks: as the human rights became more and more important in international relations, and the most communist states tend to tolerate them (...) Romania will keep the Leninist understanding of the human rights, indulging in a romantic style (...)\(^1\).

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The second concept, prestige diplomacy, is linked to the calculated dissent, representing the various moments in which Romania tried to become some sort of a mediator in international conflicts around the world.

Copilaş’s approach is indeed important and his contributions are very relevant. But still, there are some issues with his research. As said, he divided his thesis into two parts: a theoretical one and an empirical one. From my point of view, the first part is most certainly the best part of the book. He manages to use in very coherent manner many theoretical and conceptual approaches and his perspectives to certain topics are very interesting. I will not discuss his point of view regarding the relations between Marxism, Leninism and Stalinism. This is a very complex debate (with many excellent contributions from every camp) and I believe that is not the most relevant for the topic at hand. I will just point out that Copilaş believe there are important differences between Marxism and Leninism. Apart from this, his point of view (developed more in his most recent book) is that in the late `80 the Romanian communist regime evolved in some sort of combination between Leninism and fascism (he actually discusses the more general topic, the relation between Marxism and Fascism, stating that there are several points in which these two ideologies connect).

The empirical part of the research is based on several types of sources. First of all, Copilaş has an excellent knowledge of the literature about the history of the communism in Romania. He uses those past contributions in a manner in which he integrates them in his researches. Secondly, he uses archives (from Open Society Archives in Budapest, National Archives of Romania in Bucharest and the regional archives in Timișoara). The number of documents from the National Archives of
Romania in Bucharest is rather small (only three folders). Of course, he uses a lot of published documents. His conceptual and methodological approach is, as I said, very interesting and it would have been much more interesting if Copilaş would have based his research much more on central archives. The number of documents available is very high, many of them are not yet known to the public. I strongly believe that Copilaş’s points of view would have been much more well-founded if the empirical part of the book would have been more based on documents, not so much on secondary literature.

Apart from this, Copilaş seems to have a rather general understanding of the foreign policy of Romania. He is right to point out the link between internal and international evolutions (so I understand why he insists on the internal evolutions of the regime), but concerning international relations of Romania he focuses his book only on the very general trends (he accepts in several parts of the book that his approach is a synoptic one). Of course, a different way would have been very hard to do because the theme itself is a complex one. Maybe Copilaş would publish in the future several case-studies, more focused, using the same framework of analysis.

There are several parts of the book that are not about the main topic: Romanian foreign policy in an ideological interpretation. Copilaş gives a lot of attention for topics like: the 1956 crisis in Poland and Hungary, the Prague Spring in 1968, Gorbachev’s attempts to reform the system and many others. As we can see, many chapters are about what happened in other socialist countries. Even though these chapters are useful for (at least) two reasons: understanding the context in the soviet block and the impact of
the event on the Romanian regime, maybe Copilaș should have written a little bit less about them. Apart from this, he focuses quite a lot on the internal evolution of Romania. As I said, I believe he is right to do so, but still he maybe should have focused more on the foreign policy and rather explain only the link(s) that were connected with the national events. All those long chapters that are not actually about the main topic of the book make the reading a little bit difficult. First of all, scholars, keen readers on communism, most certainly know almost all the information he takes about. Secondly, the general public might find it not so easy to follow the book. Of course, the balance is very hard to find. Emanuel Copilaș likes to digress a lot, in order to better explain his points of view and his arguments.

The book ends with the idea that Marx would have liked the falling of the Romanian communist regime:

*In December 1989, the society has risen against the regime, in a revolutionary spurt that Marx, I tend to believe, would have welcomed*.²

One might not agree to this conclusion, but we must accept that Copilaș has the right to believe that Leninism was, in 1989, totally different from original Marxism.

Emanuel Copilaș managed to open even more the debate about the foreign policy of Romania during the communist regime. Even though the topic received a lot of scholarly attention, I strongly believe that Copilaș’s contribution, *The Genesis of the romantic Leninism. A theoretical perspective on the international orientation of the Romanian communism 1948-1989*, is very relevant to the matter. The book does not close the theme, but actually opens it to a more conceptual approach.

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² *Ibidem*, p. 574