

Debates on the systematization plan in Ceaușescu's Romania and influence on the Hungarian minority.

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Abstract

The Romanian systematization plan, outlined in at the National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party in July 1972 and officially implemented in 1974 with the Law nr. 58/1974, was a project that applied the idea of integrating spatial and economic planning in order to develop an organic state-system where every aspect of the social and economic life of the country would be integrate and interconnected under the guide on the central government. The systematization of the rural settlements can be seen as part of a broader and more general plan of development and modernization that, under the leadership of the Romanian Communist Party, aimed to bring the country towards the construction of the perfect socialist society. In 1988, after a speech by the Party Secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu, the plan was declared to be on the top of Romanian political agenda, scheduling the concentration of the population in 558 agro-industrial towns and the destruction of circa 8.000 of the 13.000 villages by the year 2000. This announcement raised a great number of domestic and international protests, due to the social, economic and cultural implications of the plan. In this thesis, I will focus on the issues of the Hungarian minority in Romania and of the relations between the two bordering countries in relation with the plan of rural resettlement. As Hungary was the most fervent detractor of the systematization plan, depicting it as a weapon to annihilate the Magyar minority in Romania, I will analyse the Hungarian role in the debate and the international campaign against the systematization as a mean to better understand the relations between different countries in the Eastern Bloc and consequently the changing of East-West relations in the eve of 1989.

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Introduction.

From the late 1960s Romania has been characterized by a regime defined as "National-Stalinist" that combined the cult of personality and the overwhelming power of the intelligence service with a peculiar form of nationalism. According to the well-known definition given by Vladimir Tismaneanu in his book *Stalinism for all Seasons*¹,

national Stalinism systematically opposed liberalization. Reactionary and self-enclosed, it valued autarky and exclusiveness. It adhered to a militaristic vision of both domestic and international settings. National Stalinism clung to a number of presumably universal laws of socialist revolution and treated any "deviation" from these prescriptions as a betrayal of class principles. It frequently tempted political elites in countries where the pre-Stalinist radical left had been weak or totally non-existent and/or where the regime's legitimacy had been derived from an external source: Romania, Albania, North Korea, Czechoslovakia after 1968, and the German Democratic Republic.

Even though the distinction between National Stalinism and what Tismaneanu himself defines as National Communism, that is to say "a critical reaction to Soviet imperialism and rigid ideological orthodoxy [...] innovative, flexible, and tolerant of political relaxation [encouraging] intellectual creativity and theoretical imagination, [favoring] revisionist (both moderate or radical) alternatives to the enshrined Stalinist model"², might be brought into question for being somehow too sharp, it is undeniable that the Ceaușescu's regime had some specific characteristics that to some extent make the Romanian regime a particular experience within the Eastern Bloc.

Concerning the foreign policy, Romania started to state its independence from the Soviet Union already in the late 1950s, shortly after the XX Congress of the CPSU and the beginning of the Destalinization. The 1960s have been a decade of relative (and actually mostly apparent) liberalization, and the process of emancipation from the Soviet influence

1 Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for all seasons: a political history of Romanian Communism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 33

2 Ibid, p. 33

made a crucial step forward with the so called Declaration of Independence expressed by the Romanian Working Party in April 1964. It stated the national sovereignty of one country in building its own socialist society, according to its peculiar conditions and opposing the supranational structure of the Comecon, economic and political independence and the necessity of non-interference in other parties' domestic affairs, with a main accent on the territorial integrity: “starting with the later period of the Comintern’s existence it became clear that the problems of working class movements from one country or another could not be solved by one International center”³. Romanian unorthodox position became extremely evident in 1968 when Ceaușescu refused to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in support of the Warsaw Pact troops. In this way, Ceaușescu gained the favor of many Western countries – with economic benefits as well - for his somehow rebellious position towards the Soviet Union.

On the domestic ideological framework, the national ideology and the process of nation-building, somehow continuing from the interwar period, aimed to unify and homogenize the population, that is to say to “Romanize” every aspect of the political, social and cultural life, starting from the ruling elite. The aim was to legitimize the leadership as well as to differentiate the Romanian cultural identity from the other Eastern countries, highlighting its indigenous values. This type of “folk nationalism”, defining the national identity by the myth of common and antique origins and a unitary language and culture rather than the belonging to a common citizenship, considered every element which was not sharing the same unity of language and culture extraneous and undermining of the national unity. The regime, in particular towards the last decade, was strongly characterized by an increasingly nationalistic ideology, a powerful and obsessive cult of the leadership, a form

³*Statement on the stand of the Romanian Workers' Party concerning the Problems of the World Communist and Working-Class Movement* (Declarația cu privire la poziția Partidului Muncitoresc Român în problemele mișcării comuniste și muncitorești internaționale), Bucharest: Rumanian News Agency, 1964

of economic autarky and an increasingly insufficiency of basic goods during the 1980s. Another element needed to be taken into account to clearly understand the peculiarities of Communist Romania is the role and the influence of the Romanian Communist Party and the communist ideological tradition in general. Founded in 1921, the RCP was a minority party, mainly composed by members of ethnic minorities, numerically very small and politically and ideologically truly marginal before 1945. In 1933, it had only 1.165 members, of which almost the 75% were non-Romanians, mostly Hungarians, Germans or Jews⁴. This can be explained by looking at the socio-ethnic division of the national groups in the interwar period, a legacy of the Hungarian Kingdom, where the intellectual urban elites were for the most part Magyar, German and (Magyarized) Jewish, while Romanians were mainly a rural people. For this reason, some traditions that might be regarded as leftist were mainly related to peasant ideology and values which were considered to be the basis of the most authentic Romanian culture, to a “pre-capitalist rural air [...] with roots in 'peasant democracy’”⁵. They were thus more connected with a certain traditionalism and localism, than to the urban and supranational “mythology of a post-capitalist future forged by the working class”⁶, i. e. Communism.

The process of homogenization – Romenization - of the society started with the Romanization of the Communist Party itself, when the “foreign” elements were removed, due to their belonging to ethnic minorities, as well as their connections with the Soviet Union. Vasile Luca, born László Lukács, Minister of the Finance, and the Minister of the Foreign Affairs Ana Pauker, ethnic Hungarian and Jew respectively, and both exiled to Moscow during the underground period of the Party, were removed from their positions in 1952. Many of the new members of the Party elite were Romanians coming from a rural

4 Stefano Bottoni, *Transilvania rossa: il comunismo romeno e la questione nazionale, 1944-1965*, Roma: Carocci, 2007, p. 32

5 Lucian Boia, *History and myth in Romanian consciousness*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2001, p. 70

6Ibid, p. 70

environment, more related to traditional and indigenous values, in contrast with the internationalism and the urban culture of the non-Romanians⁷.

The economic policy was characterized by a stringent and forced process of collectivization and industrialization, following the Soviet model. The collectivization, of which “the systematization program is a logical [further] step”⁸, in Romania was a long process compared to other countries of the Eastern Bloc, started in 1949 and declared completed in 1962⁹. In the aftermath of the World War II, 80% of the Romanian population was living in the countryside¹⁰. The ideological framework was provided by the Marxist-Leninist concept of a large scale agricultural production owned by the state. Moreover, collectivization was used as a mean to enforce Party’s control on the rural areas, where it still did not have a solid base of consensus, implementing state’s structures at the local level and bringing “class struggle” in the countryside.¹¹ In Romania, this meant also enforcing control over multi-ethnic regions and regions considered politically instable, such as regions on the Romanian – Yugoslav or the Romanian – Bulgarian borders¹². The collectivization was also used to weaken members of the traditional liberal parties, such as the National Peasant Party and the National Liberal Party, which had strong popularity in the rural area¹³. The process was by no mean plain and peaceful: resistance from peasants brought to the use of violence and coercion by the state apparatus and, only in the period from 1950 to 1953,

⁷ Boia, p. 217

⁸ Per Ronnas, *Turning the Romanian Peasant into a New Socialist Man: An Assessment of Rural Development Policy in Romania*, Soviet Studies, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), Taylor & Francis, Ltd., p. 550

⁹ Constantin Iordachi, Arnd Bauerkämper (edit.), *The collectivization of agriculture in communist Eastern Europe: comparison and entanglements*, Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2014, p. 251. For more complete works on collectivization in Romania see Iordachi Constantin, Dorin Dobricu (edit.), *Transforming peasants, property and power: the collectivization of agriculture in Romania, 1949 – 1962*, Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2009; Kligman Gail, Verdery Katherine, *Peasants Under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949–1962*, Princeton University Press, 2011;

¹⁰ Iordachi, p. 251

¹¹ Ibid, p. 256

¹² Ibid, p. 263

¹³ Ibid, p. 277

89.401 peasants were sentenced to prison and other 80.077 were punished for various infractions¹⁴.

During the early 1960s, however, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's leadership sought to emancipate from the role of agrarian country imposed to Romania by the USSR within the COMECON, and to undertake a massive campaign of industrialization, with a main focus on the heavy industries. Those corresponded with Dej's ideal of socialist development of the country, from rural backwardness to urban industrialization. Moreover, Romanian elite's aim was also to reach economic independence from the USSR by building a fully development industrial system¹⁵. The process of industrialization, achieved at the large expense of agricultural investments, brought to impressive social changes: while in 1948 almost 80% of the population was living in rural areas, by 1981 the percentage of urban population was 50%.¹⁶

Given this general description of the peculiar path undertaken by Communist Romania, the main aim of my thesis is to analyse the so-called systematization plan implemented during the last two decades of the Ceaușescu's regime and its connections with the ethnic minorities' issues, with a main focus on the Hungarian community. The plan of systematization and rationalization of the territory has followed the Collectivization plan, launched at the plenary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party in March 1949 and carried on during the 1950s and 1960s, which had a strong impact on the social pyramid of the country and its relation with ethnicity, especially in multicultural regions such as Transylvania¹⁷.

¹⁴ Iordachi, p. 275

¹⁵ Michael Shafir, *Romania: politics, economics, and society: political stagnation and simulated change*, London: Pinter Publishers, c1985, p. 48

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 47

¹⁷ On the process of Collectivization in Romania see also Stefano Bottoni, *Transilvania rossa. Il comunismo romeno e la questione nazionale*, Roma: Carrocci Editore, 2007.

The Systematization plan was presented for the first time at the National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party in July 1972 and officially implemented in 1974 with the Law nr. 58/1974 *Privind sistematizarea teritoriului și localităților urbane și rurale* (Concerning the Regional Planning and Systematization of Urban and Rural Localities), issued in the *Buletinul Oficial*, Nr. 135, November 1, 1974.¹⁸

Its main aim was the “construction of a socialist society developed on many sides, contributing to the continuous growth of the material and spiritual welfare of the working people and to the organization on a scientific base and in a rational and harmonious way of the living and working environment of our homeland’s citizens” through the “judicious organization of the entire country's territory (districts, communes, urban and rural localities)”¹⁹. This would result in the constitution of an organic state-system, where every aspect of the socio-economic life of the country would be integrate and interconnected, under the guide on the central government. The systematization of the rural settlements can thus be seen as part of a broader and more general plan of development and modernization that, under the leadership of the Romanian Communist Party, would bring the country towards the construction of the perfect socialist society.

In the first chapter, I will present the main ideological guidelines that have shaped the concept of systematization. In particular, I will focus on three specific stages. The first one is the speech Nicolae Ceaușescu delivered during the National Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in 1967, where he presented the necessity of administrative-territorial reorganization to achieve a higher centralization and to better meet the challenges of the development of the socio-economic socialist system. I will later analyze the report of

¹⁸ Ronnas, footnote 5, p. 557

¹⁹ Law 58/1974 *privind sistematizarea teritoriului și localităților urbane și rurale* in http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Legea_nr.59_din_1974_privind_sistematizarea_teritoriului_%C8%99i_localit%C4%83%C8%9Bilor_urbane_%C8%99i_rurale [Accessed 30.05.2014]

the X National Congress of the RCP, held in July 1972, when directives for the systematization of cities, municipalities and villages were formally adopted and described in detail. Finally, I will focus on the law 58/1974, the last stage of the process. In the end of the chapter, I will try to point out some possible consequences of the plan not only on the material and economic living conditions, but on the social structure of the settlements involved.

Moreover, I will explore the pick of the campaign during the 1980s, meaning the last phase of the systematization plan, which coincided with the last phase of Ceaușescu's rule. In this period, Romania's experienced an increasingly worsening of the living conditions, due to the unorthodox position of the country within the COMECON on one hand, and to Ceaușescu's decision of paying back Romania's foreign debt on the other. This brought the country to a severe economic crisis, with high inflation, food and electricity shortage, rising of goods' prices and generally very harsh living conditions for the population. However, the plan was still on the top of RCP's politic agenda, as emerged from a speech delivered by Ceaușescu in March 1988 in from of the Conference for the Presidents of the Local Councils²⁰. The declared intention of continuing the systematization plan by increasing the number of new agro-industrial towns and to destruct circa 8000 of the 13000 villages brought the plan into the international limelight.²¹

In the second chapter I will address the core of my dissertation, bringing the minorities' issues into the picture. Particularly after the speech I mentioned above, but already from the mid-1980s, the plan of razing villages acquired an international resonance and ceased to be regarded as a Romanian domestic affair. I will thus analyze how the plan was presented in Romanian and international media and how crucial was the minority

²⁰ *Scînteia*, 3 March 1988 in Per Ronnas, "Turning the Romanian Peasant into a New Socialist Man: An Assessment of Rural Development Policy in Romania" in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 543-559, p. 543

²¹ Ronnas, p. 1

question by pointing out what are the international actors who took part in the campaign against the systematization plan and to what extent the issue of minorities' right was crucial to delegitimize the Romanian ruling elite. I will also try to characterize the relations between Eastern and Western blocks, as well as Eastern – Eastern countries that have shaped the discourse. My main aim is to understand the role played by the foreign and domestic press, by international organizations for human rights and by representatives of ethnic minorities – particularly Hungarians and Germans – in depicting the plan as a deliberate attack to the cultural identity and social structure of the minorities in order to massively assimilate and “Romanize” them by destroying their heritage.

For the ideological framework and the historical contextualization of my discourse, I refer directly to reports from the Congresses of the RCP where the guidelines and principles for the development of the plan are stated, alongside a more comprehensive idea of the organic socio-economic progress of the socialist society under the centralized guide of the Party. Regarding the international echo on the plan and the debate that originated, I will look at the domestic and international media, at reports of international organizations and of Radio Free Europe during the period from late 1970s to 1989, with a main focus on the two-year period between 1988 and 1989, when campaigns against systematization reached their peak. I will try to understand the international climate in which the debate developed, the set of international relations both between countries of the Eastern Bloc and between East and West and the role the issue of minorities' rights played in shaping the debate itself. Finally, I will try to point how the campaigns against the Romanian systematization and resettlement plan have contributed in the international isolation of the country and, eventually, in the breakdown of the Communist rule in 1989.

Chapter 1. The systematization plan: ideological framework and stages of development.

In his study on the *National integration through socialist planning*, published in 1984²², Steven Sampson gives a very precise description of the concept of systematization in Communist Romania. According to his definition, systematization is

firstly an *ideal* of how spatial planning should be integrated with economic planning and socialist development [...]. Second, systematization is a *program* for developing [...] each settlement in the country. [...] Third, systematization involves an *organizational structure* in which national objectives, regional imbalances and local potentialities are to be harmonized into a centrally administered state policy, codified by law²³

All those features are extremely evident in the first stages of conception of the plan.

The volume collecting speeches and articles by Nicolae Ceaușescu, entitled *Romania pe drumul Desavarsirii Constructiei Socialiste* (Romania on the way towards the accomplishment of the Socialist Construction)²⁴, includes a discourse the *Conducător* delivered at the National Congress of the Romanian Communist Party on the 6th December 1967. In the section dedicated to the *Imbunatatirea organizarii adimistrativ-teritoriale si sistematizarea localitatilor rurale* (Improvement of the administrative-territorial organization and of the systematization of the rural localities)²⁵, are stated the first guidelines and principles for the socio-economic and administrative reorganization of the national territory in order to achieve the “construction of a socialist society multilaterally developed and the general progress of the country” by creating the “conditions to the well-balanced distribution of forces of production”²⁶.

²² Steven Sampson, *National integration through socialist planning : an anthropological study of a Romanian new town*, Boulder, Colo.: East European Monographs, 1984

²³ Ibid p. 75

²⁴ Nicolae Ceaușescu, *Romania pe drumul Desavarsirii Constructiei Socialiste. Rapoarte, Cuvintari, Articole. Septembrie 1966 – Decembrie 1967*, Bucuresti: Editura Politica, 1968

²⁵ Ibid, p. 581

²⁶ Ibid, p. 476

In this chapter, I will refer to the Ceaușescu's speech as the starting point for the further development of a complex plan of territorial systematization with a main focus on rural areas, whose principles were stated and extended during the X National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party in 1972 and finally resulted into a law adopted in 1974.

The term “systematization” (*sistematizarea*) refers to a set of measures aiming to implement a harmonious, integrated and consistent socio-economic organization where every single unit would have its specific role and place within the productive and economic structure, in relation to the network of services and facilities, as well as in contributing to the development of the socialist society. The model of the resettlement plan was inspired to Ceaușescu by the Soviet experience. Nikita Khrushchev, already in the early 1950s, had imagined a rural settlement plan that, by increasing the living standard of villages, would have put an end to mass immigration from the countryside to the towns.²⁷ According to Ceaușescu's view, every aspect of the life of the country was seen as part of a general single plan that would embrace not only the material but also the human resources. As will be specifically pointed out during the X National Congress of Romanian Communist Party, the utmost goal was to reverse the anarchic development of single small localities, and to integrate each of them into the centralized model of modernization and development.

Thus the concept of territorial systematization in the Romanian context is applicable to different but interconnected fields. It refers to a set of physical activities in connection with the organization of dwellings' construction, population density, infrastructures and services, agriculture, husbandry and protection of the natural environment. However, far from being just a series of practical measures aiming to increase the productivity, systematization was an “ideal of how spatial planning was to be integrated with economic planning and

²⁷ Deletant, p. 297

socialist development”²⁸. The aim was thus to rationalize the allocation of resources, facilitate investments and integrate every single unit of production into the centrally administrated state policy, guarantying an equal, homogeneous and harmonious development of the country. The preferred model of development and modernity was the city.

As stated during the National Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in 1967, by that time 60% of the Romanian population was living in the countryside²⁹, in small, scattered and low-populated villages: the modernization of those settlements was regarded as one of the main tools for the construction of a fully developed socialist society. In order to better achieve this aim, the 1967 National Congress point out the necessity of initially change the administrative organization of the territory, approving a new law on the administrative units. According to Ceaușescu, the law on the territorial administration adopted in 1950³⁰ following the Soviet system of regions (*regiunea*), was unfitting the needed standards and criteria of development. The law 5/1950 provided the division of the country in 28 regions, in turn divided into 177 districts (*raion*): the existence of two intermediate administrative “steps” between the central government and the basic administrative units – *oraș* (city) and *comun* (municipality) – was regarded as a delaying factor for the application of the directives coming from Bucharest, and thus as a counter-productive aspect for the development of cities and villages and the country itself. The developing process had to be consciously guided and directed from the center, while the administrative division granted far too much autonomy to the different regions.

²⁸ Mircea Enache, *Land use planning and development in Romania*, U.S. Agency for International Development, 1993, p. 93

²⁹ Ceausescu, *Romania pe drumul Desavarsirii Constructiei Socialiste*, p. 583

³⁰ Legea nr. 5/1950 *pentru raionarea administrativ-economică a teritoriului Republicii Populare Române* (for the administrative-economic zoning of the territory of the Popular Republic of Romania) in [http://www.lege-online.ro/lr-LEGE-5%20-1950-\(116926\).html](http://www.lege-online.ro/lr-LEGE-5%20-1950-(116926).html) [Accessed 02.06.2014]

There was thus an urgent necessity to integrate the galaxy of scattered and low-populated rural settlements into the economic life of the country. In order not to disperse economic and human resources, and to develop municipalities into powerful administrative units, was necessary to establish an optimal dimension and density of settlements, and consequently unite smaller villages into a common municipality, in order to fulfill the requirements. Each municipality was entitled to host all the socio-economic institutions and facilities to serve the villages under its administration: schools, libraries, cinemas but also grocery shops, bakeries and so on. At the same time, it was necessary to start a mapping of the rural localities in order to establish their function and socio-economic profile, the rational position of the unity of production within the production system, the delimitation of the perimeter of the village (*vetrei satului*) within which developing the construction of dwellings and general services, a common center with commercial utilities, cultural institutions, and the position of the settlement in connection with the road network and the water and electricity supply system³¹. Identify the localities with prospective of development, in a coordinate effort for a harmonious growth of the country, for the modernization of the rural environment according to city standards, was regarded as “one of the conditions for the construction of the communist society”³².

The solution offered for simplifying the communication between the center and the periphery and thus improve the state centralization was to substitute the *regiunea* and the *raion* with a middle-way administrative unit, the *județ*, as the only connecting entity between the central government and the cities and municipalities. The system of *județe* was actually used since the creation of the modern Romanian state in 1859, and until the communist takeover in 1947: thus, the dismantling of the Soviet-like system of *regiunea* to go back to a traditional one can be also regarded as a measure undertaken within the

³¹ Ceaușescu, *Romania pe drumul Desăvârșirii Construcției Socialiste*, pp. 583-4

³² Ibid, p. 584

framework of a progressive emancipatory path from the influence of Moscow started by Ceaușescu at that time.

The territorial division in *județe* was supposed to be performed according to the “socio-economic conditions and the national [i.e. ethnic] component of the population, the traditional cultural connections, the prospective of development of the different localities”³³. Some attention was given to minority groups (*nationalitate conlocuitoare*, literally cohabitant nationalities). As stated by Ceaușescu, “the state and party organs will give attention to perform what it is guaranteed by the constitution, the full equality of rights and the fraternal development of the workers of Romanian, Hungarian, German, Serbian and other nationalities, for the blooming of our socialist country”³⁴.

The next year, on the 16th February 1968, the law “On the administrative organization of the territory of the Socialist Republic of Romania”³⁵ was enacted. The law 2/1968 represented the first step towards a broader reorganization of the national territory, following the guidelines emerged at the National Congress in 1967, with the creation of smaller administrative units, the *județe*, a higher centralization of the power and a definition of the status of the city (*oraș*) as a “more developed center on the economic, socio-cultural and urban point of view”³⁶ and the municipality (*comuna*) as the “administrative-territorial unit which includes the rural population united according to common interests and traditions, and constituted by one or more villages depending on economic, socio-cultural, geographic or demographic conditions” that would “ensure the economic, socio-cultural and farming development of the rural localities”³⁷. The main idea was to ensure the harmonious growth and development of the entire population, with main attention on the rural

³³ Ceaușescu, *Romania pe drumul Desavarsirii Constructiei Socialiste*, p. 586

³⁴ Ibid, p. 587

³⁵ Boletinel Oficial al Republicii Socialiste Romania, nr. 54-55 din 27 Iulie 1981, Lege nr. 2/1968, *Privind organizarea administrativă a teritoriului Republicii Socialiste România* in http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Legea_nr._2/1968,_republicat%C4%83_%C3%AE_n_1981 [accessed 02.06.2014]

³⁶ Law 2/1968, Art. 4

³⁷ Law 2/1968, Art. 5

environment which had benefited to a lesser extent of the measures undertaken by the previous administrations. Since the minorities' issue will be taken into great account later in this dissertation, in reference to the administrative division provided by the law 2/1968, I will incidentally refer here to the Magyar Autonomous Region (*Regiunea Autonomă Maghiară*), created in 1952³⁸, after a reform of the regions' system, as an autonomous region where the majority of the population was ethnic Hungarian³⁹ and whose administrative center (*Centrul administrativ*) was the city of Târgu Mureș. The dismantling of the Magyar Autonomous Region according to the law 2/1968 represented, de facto, the end of the administrative-territorial autonomy for the Hungarian minority.

The need for rural development and modernization of the rural area within the framework of a centrally planned economic system was reaffirmed during the X National Congress of the Communist Party in July 1972, when the *Directivele Conferinței Naționale a Partidului Comunist Român cu privire la sistematizarea teritoriului, a orașelor și satelor, la dezvoltarea lor economico-socială* (Directives of the National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party on the systematization of the territory, cities and villages and their socio-economic development)⁴⁰ were officially adopted. Since, as I already pointed out, the majority of the population was still living in small and backward villages, the reorganization of the rural environment was regarded as crucial for the general progress of the country. The economic reasons beyond the decision of reforming the territorial organization of the countryside were going in two different directions: the first reason was the rational allocation of the economic resources to implement services and infrastructures (roads network, water and electricity supply system etc.); the second one was the increment of the productivity of agriculture and husbandry within the general national productive

38 *Constitutie a Republicii Populare Romane*, September 24th 1952, art. 19, 20, 21 in http://legislatie.resurse-pentru-democratie.org/const_1952.php [accessed 31.05.2014]

39 According to the 1956 census, 77.3% of the population of the region was ethnic Hungarian, 20.1% Romanian, 1.5% Rom, 0.4% German, 0.4% Jew. In Bottoni, p. 68

40 Ceaușescu, *Romania pe drumul*, p. 476

system. In the report from the National Congress⁴¹, the section dedicated to the “Directives” describes the current situation, pointing out the absolute need for an organic and comprehensive plan of systematization. Firstly it is briefly emphasized the increment of the industrial production during the last completed five-year plan (1966 – 1970), with a special attention on those underdeveloped *județe (județe le slab dezvoltate)*⁴² which, due to the Party’s policy of a “well-balanced distribution of the productive forces through the entire territory of the country [...] experienced a strong growth of the industrial production”⁴³. The idea of homogenization starts to emerge, for the report goes from talking about the equal distribution of resources for a uniform development of every administrative unity, to the equal distribution of inhabitants in settlements. The matter of low population density in urban centers is thus brought into the picture in connection with the villages’ issue. The urban environment and the city living conditions were indeed seen as the point to reach for the complete development of modern living standards as well the natural *milieu* for the advancement of the socialist society. On the contrary, the uncontrolled growth of villages with a really low population density (13,000 villages of which about 40% had less than 500 inhabitants)⁴⁴, was making the implementation of infrastructures and facilities and the development of education and health system very expensive: for this reason, according to the Directives of the X National Conference, “raising the degree of organization and civilization of the villages is possible only concentrating localities and buildings”⁴⁵. At the same time, due to the uncontrolled growth of villages a “significant part of the arable land” has been detracted from the agricultural production. The emphasis on the lacking of fertile

⁴¹ *Conferința Națională a Partidului Comunist Român, 19-21 iulie 1972*, București: Editura Politică, 1972

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 477

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 477

⁴⁴ *Dispoziția Conferinței Naționale a Partidului Comunist Român cu privire la sistematizarea teritoriului, a orașelor și satelor, la dezvoltarea lor economico-socială*, in <http://lege5.ro/> [Accessed 30.05.2014]

⁴⁵ *Conferința Națională a Partidului Comunist Român*, p. 479

land, as I already mentioned, was one of the main points to reaffirm the unavoidability of the plan.

Thus, stating the need of the harmonious growth of every *județ*, both in economic and social terms, of the increment of the agricultural production by allocating more land to cultivation and husbandry, and to protect the natural patrimony by preventing uncontrolled construction, the National Congress of the Romanian Communist Party adopted the directives for an articulated law on systematization.

The directives adopted during the National Congress of the RCP resulted into the Law 59/1974 *Privind sistematizarea teritoriului și localităților urbane și rurale* (On the systematization of the territory and of the urban and rural settlements), published in the Official Gazette nr. 135 on the 1st November 1974. The main aim of the law was the "systematization of the country and localities [...] on the basis of the Romanian Communist Party's policy of building a multilaterally developed socialist society, in order to contribute to the steady growth of the material and spiritual welfare of all the working people"⁴⁶. The law made provision for the determination of appropriate guidelines for construction density, population density, recreation areas, road infrastructure and utility building, and preservation and improvement of the natural environment. Each locality was required to establish a "building area" (*perimetrul construibil*) as small as possible, outside of which construction was prohibited, in order to optimize the use of agricultural land. The project provided guidelines for city planning, apartment building, roads and public transports, residential areas.

A centralized planning administration led by the Committee for the Problems of People's Councils (*Comitetul pentru problemele Consiliilor Populare*) was established. A Central Commission of Party and State for Regional, Urban and Rural Planning supervised

⁴⁶ Law 59/1974 *Privind sistematizarea teritoriului și localităților urbane și rurale*

the Committee. Each of the 40 county or district people's councils (*Consilii Populare Județene*) and the municipality of Bucharest had their own planning institutes, which elaborated the details of the plan according to local characteristics. At each level, citizens were supposed to participate through the Local Systematization Commission (*Comisiile Locale de Sistematizare*).

Each settlement would be the focus of a detailed study (*Studiu de sistematizare*) to establish its prospective development, according to its industrial, energetic, agricultural, touristic resources, as well as its infrastructural connection: each of those analysis would result into a local plan of systematization (*Schița de sistematizare*) that outlined the possibilities for the further spatial and socio-economic development of the settlement.

As I already pointed out, the city being the preferred model of progress, the purpose of the plan was to regularly level the differences between urban and rural areas, to achieve a complete modernization of the countryside. Towns would no longer have an individual role and development, but were selected on the basis of some criteria such as natural features, infrastructure, population growth, exploitability of agricultural land. Within a hierarchical system established on those criteria, the investments in infrastructures and facilities were to be concentrated on the selected centres, increasing the population density to minimize the occupied land by the construction of standardized housing units (the *blocuri*). The settlements that were judged unsuitable for the future development were doomed to naturally die. The matter of population resettlement, which will have a great resonance during the 1980s, was still in this phase regarded on voluntary bases: people were free to choose whether to move to towns or cities to new dwellings, or to remain in villages where no further investments would be done.

The law 59/1974 can thus be seen as a general project of organization and optimization of the productive sector as well as of modernization of the rural settlement of

the country, according to general guidelines and as part of an overall centralized plan of development. Although the need of improving living standards in the countryside by providing services and infrastructures is not a matter of discussion, it is clear that this kind of plan would have had a strong impact not only on the material conditions.

As Per Ronnas pointed out in his study on systematization⁴⁷, moving peasants from one-family houses with a private garden to new-built apartments in blocks of flats would have marginalize their capacity of being self-sufficient in food production, prioritizing the socialist agricultural system and making the population entirely dependent on the state. Moreover, the resettlement and concentration of the population in localities with a higher population density would completely change the historical and traditional set of relationships, connections and social structure stratified during the centuries. The new social structure would have been shaped by a centralized culture production, cutting the links with traditional institutions (such as the church, for instance), while levelling all social and cultural difference and creating a homogenous society according to the socialist model. The plan was thus extremely suitable for creating the “new socialist man, [...] modelled after the urban working class and [representing] very much the antithesis of the traditional Romanian peasant, who stands for rugged individualism, conservatism and backwardness”⁴⁸. Once again, the urban environment is represented as the highest point of civilization, the place to create a perfect developed socialist society. Such a scenario was thus a serious threat for the survival of both the architectural and the socio-cultural heritage of small rural villages, and it does not come as a surprise that, in the “extreme” phase of the plan during the 1980s, the ethnic minorities felt particularly vulnerable. Finally, a high concentration of population would have also eased the task of the secret police and of the informers of controlling the Romanian population. Despite the fact that political control over the population and social

⁴⁷ Ronnas, p. 551

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 550

engineering were not the explicit purpose of the plan, all the implications I pointed out need to be taken into consideration.

While slowing down for a while at the end of the 1970s, the plan returned on top of the political agenda of the Romanian Communist Party during the 1980s, when the initial idea of a “natural death” for those settlements that did not meet the requirements of the general plan of development was replaced by a project of a forced village razing.

Chapter 2. The plan in the international spotlight: human and minorities' rights, press campaigns, international organizations

As stated by Ceaușescu on a public speech on March 3rd 1988 before the National Conference for the Presidents of Local Councils, the Systematization plan was again on the top of the Romanian political agenda, and by 1990 the number of rural villages was expected to be reduced from 13.000 to 5/6.000, with the construction of 558 main agro-industrial centres⁴⁹. The plan for rural systematization and resettlement, as I have tried to point out in the first chapter, was an ambitious project due both to ideological and economic reasons. Surely the plan carried many socio-cultural implications, but in its first design it was not lacking some reasonability: the need to modernize the countryside and to bring facilities and services to the peasant population it is not under discussion. Moreover, it is needed to point out that, due to the massive industrialization carried on in the first decades of communist rule, both with the purpose of emancipating Romania from the role of agricultural country within the COMECON and of creating a new urban proletariat⁵⁰, the rural environment had experienced a lack of investments and resources⁵¹.

Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s the plan was put temporarily aside: however, in the mid-1980s investments in the agricultural sector increased considerably⁵², a policy often referred to as “revolutionary” in the Romanian press⁵³. As I already pictured in the previous chapter, this was primarily due to economic reasons: Ceaușescu's will to pay-off the foreign debt accumulated in the late 1970s, mainly towards Western countries⁵⁴,

⁴⁹ RFE, *Romania situation report*, 16.09.1988; also in Ronnas, 543; Turnok D., “Urban development in a socialist city: București” in *Geography*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (November 1974), pp. 344-348, p. 256; Dinu Giurescu, *The razing of Romania's past: international preservation report*. Washington D. C.: U.S. Committee, International Council on Monuments and Sites, c.1989, p. 2

⁵⁰ Shafir, p. 47

⁵¹ Turnok, p. 254; Shafir, p. 46

⁵² Turnok., p. 254

⁵³ “Noua revolutie agraria – baza a inforirii agriculturii si satului romanesc” in *Romania Libera*, 17.02.1988; Popovici Ion, “Angajare Revolutionaria”, in *Romania Libera*, 12.03.1987;

⁵⁴ Shafir, p. 110; Daniel Nelson (edit.), *Romania in the 1980s*, Boulder, Colo : Westview Press, c1981, p. 220; Turnok, 254

followed by a period of austerity, brought the necessity for increasing the food production, both for domestic needs and exportations. Hence the systematization plan was again on the top of the political agenda, and new importance was given to the development of the *satul romanesc* (Romanian village), to increase the agricultural production as well as to modernize the rural settlements according to urban standards.

This second phase of the plan, however, unlike the first design of the project in the early 1970s, and unlike the actual destructions of historical monuments that occurred in Bucharest as a consequence of the urban systematization of the capital and in the aftermath of the 1977 earthquake⁵⁵, had a strong international echo, prompting an international debate and media campaigns against the so-called Ceaușescu's *bulldozer-politik*⁵⁶.

While the Romanian official media described the plan as a glorious effort for achieving the harmonious growth and development of the country, the homogenization of the living standards and the creation of a classless society, the Western press as well as various international organizations for human rights started to raise strong objections against the Romanian plan for rural resettlement, carrying on a campaign which became increasingly stronger during the biennium 1988 - 1989. Criticisms addressed different issues related to the plan, such as the preservation of the artistic and architectural heritage, or the impact of the population resettlement on the traditional social fabric of small rural communities. However, as I will further analyze in this chapter, the international attention has focused mainly on the issues of national minorities' rights, especially concerning the 1.7 million of ethnic Hungarians⁵⁷ living in the country.

⁵⁵ For an accurate report of the urban destructions occurred in Bucharest see Dinu Gurescu, *The razing of Romania's past*, Washington, D.C. : U.S. Committee, International Council on Monuments and Sites, c1989

⁵⁶ David Turnock, "The Planning of Rural Settlement in Romania" in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 157, No. 3 (Nov., 1991), Published by: The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), pp. 251-264

⁵⁷ Shafir, p. 166

Alongside Western voices, however, for the first time criticism was expressed by other Eastern European countries as well. Beside the Hungarian government and diverse Hungarian intellectuals, associations and refugees, strong criticisms emerged from organizations such as Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, which in several occasions directs the attention on the situation of Romania. After calling for solidarity with the Romanian population in January 1988, for being denied of “elementary liberties to a degree unparalleled in any other Soviet bloc country”, as well as being subjected to a “government [...] also incapable of providing [...] with basic material and social security”⁵⁸, Charter 77 later in the same year addressed the topic of village razing. In its document no. 38 issued on 7 July 1988, the association appealed “for European and worldwide solidarity with the suffering Romanian populace and condemned Nicolae Ceaușescu’s plan to raze 7.000 of Romania’s 13.000 villages by the year 2000 and to resettle the villagers in so-called agro-industrial centers”⁵⁹, pointing out the project’s “dubious economic value” and remarking that “the enforced assimilation of ethnic minorities, especially of ethnic Hungarians, that it entailed was appalling”⁶⁰. Without explicitly referring to the systematization plan, during the 1980s the GDR and Yugoslavia expressed their concern for the situation of the German and the Serbian minorities respectively, as well as for the general situation suffered by the Romanian population⁶¹.

As I will try to point out, the debate on the rural systematization plan has to be analyzed in a broader context of changes in the relations between Romania and other Eastern countries, as well as the West. Moreover, after the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, held in 1975 in Helsinki, whose final Accords Romania was one of the signatory states, new international attention was given to human rights issues in

⁵⁸ RFE, *Czechoslovakia situation report*, 21.01.1988, p. 39

⁵⁹ RFE, *Czechoslovakia situation report*, 14.07.1988, p. 17

⁶⁰ Ibid, 17

⁶¹ See RFE, *Yugoslavia situation report*, 09.09.1988; RFE, *Yugoslavia situation report* 19.08.1986, RFE, *RAD Background Report/75(Eastern Europe)*, 09.05.1984

communist countries. After the Helsinki process, the Hungarian communist leadership gained new sympathy from Western countries, due to its collaborative attitude during the negotiation process, and took the opportunity to publicly speaking of the issue of Magyar minorities living in bordering countries, managing in focusing the attention of the West on this matter. On the other hand, the international growing concern for the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Romania led to a worsening of Ceaușescu leadership's reputation. This will have an important role in shaping the debate on systematization.⁶² Although the final Act remarked the inviolability of frontiers (Art. 1.III), the territorial integrity of States (Art. 1.IV) and the non-intervention in internal affairs (Art. 1.VI), it was clearly stated that “the participating States on whose territory national minorities exist will respect the right of persons belonging to such minorities to equality before the law, will afford them the full opportunity for the actual enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms and will, in this manner, protect their legitimate interests in this sphere” (Art. 1.VII) and that “the participating States, recognizing the contribution that national minorities or regional cultures can make to co-operation among them in various fields of culture [as well as education], intend, when such minorities or cultures exist within their territory, to facilitate this contribution, taking into account the legitimate interests of their members” (Art. 3)⁶³.

The notion of minorities' rights in general and of ethnic Hungarians' rights in particular needs to be taken into account to better understand the dimension of the debate. Individual rights of every citizen were fully guaranteed by the 1965 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Romania, regardless of “nationality, race, sex or religion”⁶⁴ (Art. 17). Moreover, according to Art. 22, in the Socialist Republic of Romania, the cohabiting

⁶² For the consequences of the Helsinki process on Hungary and Romania, see Katalin Miklössy, “The Helsinki Process from Small States' Perspective: Cold War Strategies of Hungary and Romania in Comparison” in Anders Blomqvist, Constantin Iordachi, Balázs Trencsényi (eds), *Hungary and Romania beyond national narratives : comparisons and entanglements*, New York, NJ : Peter Lang, 2013

⁶³ Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Final Act*, Helsinki, August 1975 available at <http://www.osce.org/mc/39501?download=true> [accessed 30.05.2014]

⁶⁴ Full text in [http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitu%C8%9Bia_Rom%C3%A2niei_\(1965\)](http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitu%C8%9Bia_Rom%C3%A2niei_(1965)) [accessed 30.05.2014]

nationalities are guaranteed the right to freely use their native language, as well as to benefit from books, newspapers, magazines, theater and all levels of education in their mother tongue. In the administrative-territorial units inhabited by people of other nationalities than the Romanian one, all the institutions would use the native language of the other nationalities, both in oral and written use”⁶⁵.

However, as I will later point out, this was true only on paper, especially from the late 1970s when, alongside the worsening of the economic conditions, often regarded by the Romanian government as one of the main reasons to disrespect the Constitution provisions about minorities⁶⁶, the public discourse acquired an increasingly nationalist tone. In addition, it is needed to make a distinction between individual equality before the law of all the Romanian citizens, and the collective perception of the minority’s status and identity. According to Michael Shafir, “it is such collective rights [...] that the Romanian regime has strived to obliterate”⁶⁷, referring to both the territorial⁶⁸ and the cultural autonomy of the ethnic minority as a community. Moreover, the perception of the “Hungarians issue” by the Romanian regime was strongly related with the territorial conflict over Transylvania.

Surely a way to manipulate the public opinion⁶⁹, “such insensitivity toward the minorities is [...] set against oversensitivity on the other side”⁷⁰. As I will later describe,

⁶⁵ Art. 22 “In Republica Socialista Romania, nationalitatilor conlocuitoare li se asigura folosirea libera a limbii materne, precum si carti, ziare, reviste, teatre, invatamintul de toate gradele, in limba proprie. In unitatile administrativ-teritoriale locuite si de populatie de alta nationalitate decit cea romana, toate organele si institutiile folosesc oral si scris si limba nationalitatii respective [...] (my translation from Romanian). [http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitu%C8%9Bia_Rom%C3%A2niei_\(1965\)](http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitu%C8%9Bia_Rom%C3%A2niei_(1965)) [accessed 30.05.2014]

⁶⁶ Shafir, 163.

⁶⁷ Shafir, 160.

⁶⁸ As I already mentioned in Chapter 1, the Hungarian Autonomous Region, created in 1952 as an autonomous territorial unit with a majority of ethnic Hungarians, was abolished in 1968 after a revision of the borders in 1960, in order to decrease the percentage of Magyars living in the region. Despite its name and the official purpose of creating a territorial unit with a special status, the region contained barely a quarter of the ethnic Hungarians of Romania (borders were drawing following the criteria of cohesion of the Magyar population, including the Székely Land, but leaving out cities with a strong “Hungarian character”, such as Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár), and its status was rather nominal than effective. See Shafir, p. 160. For a deeper analysis of the creation of the Hungarian Autonomous Region also Bottoni, *Transylvania Rossa*

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Michael Shafir, *Official and Popular Romanian Perceptions of the Conflict over Transylvania*, RFE Background Report /201, 03.10.1988

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 1

concern for the situation of Hungarian communities outside the national borders was increasingly present in the Hungarian discourse. This “mobilization of the Hungarian identity”⁷¹, in Romania and, to a greater extent, in Hungary and among the émigré community in the U.S, had surely played an important role in the debate over the systematization plan.

The historiographical discourse and the consequent intellectual production had a strong role in shaping the public opinion on the perception of the national question, both in Romania and Hungary. In a regime strongly characterized by an increasingly nationalistic ideology, a powerful and obsessive cult of the leadership and a form of economic autarky that led to an increasingly insufficiency of basic goods as was the Romanian one during the 1980s, it is evident how the intellectual production and the historical narrative was a powerful tool to legitimize the ruling elite and create consensus.

The Romanian “unorthodox” position within the Easter Bloc needed to be supported and legitimized by an ideological and cultural production that somehow accentuates the specificity of the Romanian identity in respect to the other communist countries: this is what Lucian Boia defines as the “syndrome of the 'Latin Island in a Slavic Sea'”⁷². During the 1970s, Romanian historiography experienced a gradual reclamation of the work of liberal historians of the interwar period, which have been rejected in the aftermath of the World War II. The Marxist historiography started to be replaced with a historical narrative based on the liberal *topoi* of the interwar period. The new narrative adopted the fundamental cornerstones of the interwar historical production: the *antiquity* and the *continuity* of the Romanian presence on the national land, and the *independence* and *unity* of the Romanian people within the framework of the modern nation-building⁷³. The Daco - Roman synthesis

⁷¹ Laszlo Kurti, “Transylvania, land beyond reason: toward an anthropological analysis of a contested terrain” in *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vo. 14 n. 1 (1989), pp. 21-52, p. 31

⁷²Boia, p. 72

⁷³Boia, chapters 3 and 4

became the main historiographical paradigm, emphasizing the continuity and the long duration presence of the Romanian people on the national territory as well as its specificity within the Eastern Bloc, and somehow establishing new links with the Western culture. The Hungarians relied on a similar “mythological” ethno-genesis, i.e. the theory of the “Turanian origin [...], a blurred concept and curious mixture of dubious facts and fiction, concocted to prove that the Hungarian tribes of the period of Conquest are descendants of the Scythian and Hunnish warrior tribes”⁷⁴.

In particular, the controversy over the “contested” region of Transylvania knew a new apex after the publication in 1986 of the three-volume *History of Transylvania* by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences⁷⁵. The volume represents the first attempt to describe the history of the region in 50 years and, despite the high price of the book, all the 40.000 copies were sold in a few months⁷⁶. The government of Bucharest, however, regarded the publication as a falsification of the Transylvanian history, partly because the “general findings of the book do not support[ed] the Romanian historical theory of the Daco-Roman continuity”⁷⁷. The volume was attacked by the Romanian press, and even in the foreign press: on April 7, 1987, an article entitled “A Conscious Forgery under the Aegis of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences” appeared on the London *Times*, signed by the three Romanian historians Ștefan Pascu, Mircea Mușat and Florin Constantiniu⁷⁸.

After decades of relatively good mutual relations between the two countries, due in particular to their belonging to the Warsaw Pact and as member states of the COMECON, an increasing concern by the Hungarian government and the Hungarian émigré community for the situation of the Hungarians in Romania can be observed already from the late 1970s,

⁷⁴ Kurti p. 22

⁷⁵ B. Kopeczi (ed.), *Erdely Története I-III [History of Transylvania]*, Budapest: Akadémiai, 1986. On the role of Transylvania in the Hungarian politics also RFE, *RAD Background report (Hungary)*, 29.11.1988

⁷⁶ RFE, *Hungarian situation report*, 03.04.1987, p. 21; Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 23

⁷⁷ RFE, *Hungarian situation report*, 03.04.1987, p. 22

⁷⁸ Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 23; Katherine Verdery, *National ideology under socialism: identity and cultural politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, Berkeley: University of California Press, c199, p. 220; RFE, *Hungarian situation report*, 03.04.1987, p. 21

alongside with the deterioration of the living conditions of the population in general and with the increasing of the nationalist and “romenocentric” tone of the public discourse in the country. It is clear that in an increasingly isolated country, whose economic policy was strongly focused on the payment of the foreign debt through drastic austerity measures led by a personalistic and “family-centric” regime, which had at its disposal a massive and pervasive secret police, not only Hungarians were suffering extremely poor material and moral living conditions. However, as I already pointed out, to violations of individual rights it is needed to add those of community rights. In the field of education, for instance, after the 1973 law⁷⁹ aiming to favor technical over humanities studies, in the perspective of the campaign for industrialization, an increasingly effort to discourage education in minorities’ languages can be observed. Compared to previous decades, Hungarian sections within the Romanian schools were drastically decreased. At the university level, only certain subjects were taught in Hungarian (especially Hungarian language and literature), to the detriment of technical and scientific ones. In this way, those who chose to study in their mother tongue were precluded any possibility of getting more qualified jobs, especially in the technical – industrial field. As for primary education, measures were taken which limited the creation of classes taught in the native language of minorities where the number of students was not reaching a minimum of fifteen per class. In this way, for students who received primary and secondary education in the Hungarian language it was much harder to be admitted to university than those who studied in Romanian. As a result, families were deterred from enrolling their children in Hungarian classes, as a way to ensure them further access to higher education, and thus to obtain better jobs, with the consequence that Hungarian sections experienced a diminishing in the number of pupils and many classes were reduced or eliminated. It was also common practice to send citizens of Hungarian ethnicity, holding

⁷⁹Law –Decree No. 273/1973 of the State Council, *Statute on Opening of Classes Taught in the Languages of the Nationalities and in Romanian*, in Monitorul Oficial, 13 May 1973

a degree or a high school diploma, to work in regions populated by a Romanian majority, in order to deprive the Hungarian community of its intelligentsia and at the same time to facilitate the assimilation - hence the "Romanization" – of those who were leaving their cultural *milieu* and breaking up their ties with the community of origin⁸⁰. The printing and circulation of books in Hungarian was subject to a strict regulation, and in general cultural exchange between Bucharest and Budapest was "below the level one would expect from two neighboring socialist countries"⁸¹.

In the early 1980s dissent, however considerably limited compared to other countries of the Eastern Bloc, very often assumed an "ethnic" character. The only known *samizdat* in Romania are *Ellepontok* (Counterpoints) and the *Erdélyi Magyar Híregyház* (Hungarian Press of Transylvania, HPT), founded in 1981 and 1983 respectively⁸², both issuing in Hungarian language and focusing mainly on the situation of the Magyar communities in Transylvania. *Ellepontok* was successfully disbanded by the Romanian authorities in 1983, while *Erdélyi Magyar Híregyház* was still issuing in 1989⁸³. HPT's reports, in particular, were reaching the West quite regularly and represented an important source of information on the Hungarians' situation and, to a lesser extent, on the general worsening of living conditions for the Romanian people⁸⁴. The information activity undertaken by the *samizdat* was surely remarkable and had a great role in making the West aware about the situation in an increasingly isolated country such as Romania during the 1980s. However, in my understanding, being Hungarian refugees or dissidents the main source of information has somehow shaped the debate on the systematization plan with a great minorities-focus. I shall return on this later.

⁸⁰ Shafir, *Romania*, 162-164

⁸¹ Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 35

⁸² Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 31; *Hungarian Press of Transylvania*, Release No. 1/1983 May 20, 1983, in <http://www.hhrf.org/> [accessed 01.06.2014]

⁸³ Reports from the *Erdélyi Magyar Híregyház* are available at <http://www.hhrf.org/>

⁸⁴ Vladimir Socor, *Dissent in Romania: The Diversity of Voices*, RFE Background report/94 (Romania), Munchen 5 June 1987

For the same reason, while the literature on the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Romania was quite flourishing outside the national borders from the late 1970s onwards, some reports had pretty alarming titles: for instance, an article signed by the Committee for Human Rights in Romania entitled “Will the United States Endorse Cultural Genocide in Rumania?” appeared on *The New York Times* on May 7, 1976⁸⁵, followed by a volume titled *Witnesses to cultural genocide: first-hand reports on Rumania's minority policies today*⁸⁶, published in 1979 edited by the American Transylvanian Federation (I should later return on both those organizations of Hungarian émigré in the United States); the concern for human rights in Romania had a close tie with the minorities’ rights issue also in the reports of important international organizations such as the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (the report *S.O.S. Transylvania* was published in 1988⁸⁷) and the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, (*Destroying ethnic identity: the Hungarians of Romania*, February 1989⁸⁸). As I already pointed out, in my observation both the alarmist tone of the reports and the strong focus on the minorities’ issues are due to some extent to the fact that the sources of information, being mainly Hungarian voices, while surely remarkable and trustable in reporting the events, might have had a slightly un-objective overview on the situation as a whole. Surely an ethnic minority, as any other kind of minority, is a rather vulnerable group within a country whose regime has a strong personalistic/paternalistic, centralized and, of course, nationalistic character. However, in my understanding the effort of creating a homogeneous (used by the official propaganda as a positive term) and difference-less society was a very comprehensive project not explicitly aiming to destroy

⁸⁵ The article is quoted in Kurti, *Transylvania*, n. 26 p. 45 and in p. 39 and in Árpád Szoczi *Timisoara: The Real Story Behind the Romanian Revolution*, iUniverse, Bloomington 2013. However, I would clarify that I could not find the article in the online archive of *The New York Times* [<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/nytarchive.html>]

⁸⁶ George Schoflin et al., *Witnesses to cultural genocide: first hand reports on Rumania's minority policies today*, American Transylvanian Federation; Committee for Human Rights in Rumania, New York: 1979

⁸⁷ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *S.O.S. Transylvania*, Vienna June 1988

⁸⁸ U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, *Destroying ethnic identity: the Hungarians of Romania*, New York, February 1989

the Hungarian identity but rather to silence any manifestation which did not fit the main model of the “new socialist urban man”, from political liberalism, to different forms of religion, from intellectual “unorthodoxy” to peasant culture. The “Hungarian question” (and, to a lesser extent, the German one) had surely more echo and resonance due first and foremost to the numerical dimension of the issue, being the Hungarians in Romania almost 2 million, and to the perception of the disadvantage as a collective condition embodied into the “natural” belonging to a different ethnic group, rather than the expression of isolated cases due to personal choices or beliefs. Moreover, I think that, unlike other minorities groups such as Roma, for instance, having the external support of a relatively reformist, however still communist, country as was Hungary in the 1980s, had played an important role in focusing the international attention on the violations of human rights in Romania, strongly linking this topic with the violation of minorities rights.

The official relationship between Hungary and Romania started to increasingly deteriorate from the late 1970s⁸⁹.

2.1 Campaigns against the systematization plan

The extent on which nationalism is engaged in the public discourse both in Hungary and Romania, as well as the character of the official relations existing between the two bordering countries during the 1980s can give us an overview on the atmosphere surrounding the development of the debate on the systematization plan. Worsening of the economic crisis and of the population’s living conditions in Romania, as well as a growing concern for violations of human and minorities’ rights with Hungary as one of the main actors both on the official level and with actions carried on by different organizations of the

⁸⁹ RSR 09.03.1978

civil society, created the fertile environment for putting the systematization plan in the international spotlight.

After the speech delivered by Ceaușescu on the 3rd March 1988 at the National Conference of Chairmen of People's Councils⁹⁰, described by Dennis Deletant as “a spectacular goal of his own”⁹¹ by the Romanian leadership for the vehemence of protests that caused, the systematization and resettlement plan for rural areas was brought again on the top of the political agenda. In his speech, the *Conducător* strongly reaffirmed the Party's will to hastening the plan by increasing the number of New Towns to 558 and to reduce by 1990 the number of rural villages from 13.000 to 5/6.000, in order to obtain more arable land.⁹²

Due to the strong interest for violations of human rights in Romania from the mid-1980s, with a main focus on the Hungarian minority living in the country, Ceaușescu's speech obtained immediately a strong echo on the international press, both in the Eastern Bloc and in Western countries. Indeed, as I will try to point out, on the international scene the plan for razing more than half of Romanian villages was very much connected with the issue of minorities' rights violation, and often depicted as a deliberate attempt to destroy the ethnic identity of Hungarians and other non-Romanian groups.

⁹⁰ *Scântea*, 4 March 1988, p.2, quoted in Dan Ionescu, *A Chronology of Western Protests against Romania's Rural Resettlement Plan*, RFE/RL Research Institute München 20.10.1988, p. 1; also in Per Ronnas, *Turning the Romanian peasant*, p. 1

⁹¹ Deletant, p. 313

⁹² RFE, *Romania situation report*, 16.09.1988; also in Ronnas, p. 543; Turnok, p. 256; Giurescu, p. 2

2.1.1 Romanian systematization plan in the Eastern media: Hungarian criticism, coverage in countries of the Warsaw Pact, domestic dissent

As an unprecedented event, the plan raised criticisms not only in Western countries, but within the Eastern Bloc as well. Surely Hungary was on the frontline: the increasingly tension between the two bordering countries, regarding mainly the treatment of the Magyar communities under Ceaușescu's rule, led to a strong campaign against the rural resettlement plan. Strong criticisms against Romanian policies on ethnic minorities and against the destruction of historical monuments in Bucharest had been already raised at the Budapest CSCE Cultural Forum held in the Hungarian capital from 15 October to 25 November 1985⁹³. At the meeting took part the 35 signatory countries of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act⁹⁴, Romania and Hungary included. However, according to Radio Free Europe reports, the Romanian press gave very few information about the Forum, and neither the Minister of Education or the Minister of Culture, nor any other personality related to the cultural field, were sent to Budapest as delegates⁹⁵. Strong remarks were made in relation to the destruction of historical monuments in Bucharest and in other cities, regarded as part of a “common European heritage”⁹⁶ and thus not merely seen as a Romanian domestic affair. The issue of minorities' rights and of the treatment of Hungarians under Ceaușescu's rule was as well brought to the participants' attention; the Romanian delegates, however, replied stating that in the country equal rights were guaranteed to all citizens irrespectively of ethnicity. Moreover, while the forum was still ongoing, in a broadcast addressing Romanian people living abroad, Radio Bucharest said that the nationalities' issue was an exclusive concern of the governmental authorities, and Ceaușescu himself at the CC plenum of the Romanian Communist Party on 13 November “criticized nationalism and revanchism

⁹³ In <http://www.osce.org/item/58534>

⁹⁴ Edith Markos, “Agenda Set for 1985 European Cultural Forum in Budapest” in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute (RFE/RL Research Institute), p. 1

⁹⁵ RFE *Romania Situation Report*, 10.01.1986 p. 7

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 8

wherever it appeared and threatened that Romania was prepared to take these issues before international forums”⁹⁷. It is clear how the Romanian statements were not only generally blaming the interest showed by another country in what they considered a domestic issue as a foreign interference, but they were relating Hungarian concern for minorities living abroad with the territorial dispute over Transylvania⁹⁸.

The issue of treatment of Magyar minorities living in bordering countries was again brought to the public opinion’s attention by the Hungarian Democratic Forum, a group of reformist intellectuals created in Budapest in September 1987. According to a provisional resolution adopted after a meeting held on the 6th of March 1988 – shortly after Ceaușescu’s speech about the systematization plan – “the situation of the Magyar minority in Romania had become one of the ‘causative elements’ of the current social, political and economic crisis in Hungary”⁹⁹ for the issue was treated as “nonexistent” and labeled as “nationalist”¹⁰⁰ in the previous decades. This new concern in Romanian ethnic Hungarians is due to the increasing number of information that reached Hungary and made the public opinion aware of the situation of the minorities, and pressured political institutions to reshape their domestic and foreign policies.¹⁰¹ The final resolution issued by the Forum made four proposals regarding the situation of minorities, asking the government to “include [in the Hungarian Constitution] the principle that the Hungarian state not only supports but assumes responsibility for all ethnic Hungarians, no matter where they live”; moreover, the document stated that “the widening of private and cultural relations with Magyars outside Hungary should become a key factor in shaping Hungarian foreign policy¹⁰²”, that “a government body, headed by the Prime Minister and assisted by a permanent consultative

⁹⁷ Crisula Stefanescu, RSR 10.01.1986, p. 27

⁹⁸ See also RFE, *Romania Situation Report*, 10.01.1986

⁹⁹ HSR 21.03.1988 p.21

¹⁰⁰ Ibid,

¹⁰¹ Ibid,

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 22

council, should be set up to take care of all affairs at the state level relating to the Magyar minorities”¹⁰³ and finally that in media “the approach to minority issues should be radically changed to help eliminate ignorance”.¹⁰⁴ Even though Romania was not explicitly mentioned, the reference to the situation of Hungarians of Transylvania seems to be quite unmistakable, as well as the appeal to reshape the foreign policy from non – interference to a clear and decisive approach in defending ethnic Hungarians’ rights in other countries. In the “Program of the Hungarian Democratic Forum”, published in *World Affairs* in 1989, it is stated: “let us promote the survival of national and ethnic minorities in Hungary and the neighboring countries, as well as that of the Hungarians all over the world, by granting full individual and collective rights and encouraging higher education in the home-country or their own communities through economic, scientific, and educational cooperation; [...] the HDF champions the protection of the freedoms and traditions of national, ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities. [...] We have been linked to our neighbors and to the small and medium-size nations of the region in general, through a more or less common history and fate for many centuries. In this part of the continent, state borders seldom coincided with national ones. Multi-lingual co-existence subsisted with national oppression and selfishness, as well as with the persecution of minorities. [...] Hungary is searching for her place between a Western Europe about to be unified and an Eastern Europe about to disintegrate”.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the list of Foreign policy objectives and international relations of HD included a point about “assisting in the efforts for securing equal rights for all nations, nationalities, and minorities in the region”.¹⁰⁶ The intention not only to champion the interests of Hungarian minorities in bordering states, but also to somehow turn to the West

¹⁰³ Ibid, 22

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 23

¹⁰⁵ “Program of the Hungarian Democratic Forum”, published in *World Affairs* Vol. 151, No. 4 (spring 1989), pp. 159-164

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 163

as a reformist country in a scenario of future democratization of the Eastern Bloc, is stated quite clearly.

Returning to the reaction to the systematization and rural resettlement plan, a report by Radio Free Europe collecting the Hungarian critics raised against the Romanian project summarizes the main voices in the national press and media¹⁰⁷. According to the report, which covers only the period from May to July 1988, the Romanian systematization plan was a topic constantly (almost daily) discussed in the Hungarian press as well as in official statements by Hungarian institutions. At the institutional level, however, the tone was still quite prudent in accusing Ceaușescu of deliberately attempt to destroy the identity of the Hungarian minority: on the 14 June the Associated Press news agency reported a quote by the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and Hungarian Prime Minister Károly Grósz statying that “in Romania it is not only Hungarian but also Romanian villages that are to be demolished, so i feel it would not be correct to construe the action merely as an attack against the minorities there”¹⁰⁸. However, the public opinion was strongly oriented in seeing the plan as specifically treatening the minorities’ life. Strong voices against the planned destruction of villages raised form the civil society, as well as from journalists and intellectuals. Among others, as reported by Radio Free Europe, writer Istvan Csurka pictured the project as “designed to destroy areas where the population still speaks Hungarian”¹⁰⁹, while the weekly of the Hungarian Communist Youth, *Magyar Ifjúság*, accused Bucharest of “trying to erase the Hungarian cultural heritage in Transylvania”¹¹⁰ and the daily *Magyar Hírlap* denounced the Romanian intention “to destroy hundreds of villages in counties with massive ethnic Hungarian population”¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁷ Dan Ionescu, *Chronology of Hungarian Protests at Romanian Rural Resettlement Plans*, RFE Reports [Country Series: Romania] 9 July 1988

¹⁰⁸Ibid, p.3

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 1

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 2

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 2

Moreover, the Hungarian Foreign Minister, although abstaining in making an official statement against the systematization, provided foreign journalists with english translations of Hungarian articles that criticize the plan, showing the intention to inform the Western press on the developments in the Romanian project and on the situation of the Magyar minority in the country¹¹². The growing attention and criticism on the Romanian resettlement plan led, on the 27 June 1988, to the organization of a demonstration called by different groups of the civil society, mainly affiliated with the Hungarian Democratic Forum. The rally, to which participated a number of people estimated from 30.000 to 100.000, was regarded as “the biggest independent demonstration since the 1956 Revolution and the largest ever in one East European communist country against the policies of another”.¹¹³ It is thus evident how the protests against the Romanian plan have led to an unprecedented mobilization of the Hungarian civil society, which shows as well the intention of the country to distance itself from the neo-stalinism kind of rule represented by the Romanian elite. The campaign against the plan resulted thus in a double success for Hungary: beside the genuine concern for the treatment of its minorities abroad, it contributed in depicting the country as reformist, and to isolate Romania even more. The Romanian elite, on the other hand, proved to be deaf to any form of foreign dissent and criticism, constantly stating that the plan, far from being a disastrous project aiming to destroy the historical, architectural, social and cultural heritage of both Romanians and minorities, was rather a magnificent and unavoidable step on the path of modernization and for completing the socialist development of the country. Which, I believe, was absolutely true in Ceaușescu’s view.

The Hungarian émigré community in the U.S. is worth of a specific mention. Two organizations had an important role in lobbying the U.S. government and public opinion on

¹¹² Ibid, p. 2. See also Henry Kamm, “Hungary Assails Rumania on Village Razings”, *The New York Times*, May 29, 1988

¹¹³ Ionescu, *Chronology*, p. 5

the situation of Hungarian minorities in Romania and, in fact, to create a “new Hungarian – Transylvanian identity affecting Hungarian – Romanian and [...] Romanian – U.S. relations”.¹¹⁴ I am referring to the American – Transylvanian Federation and the Hungarian Human Rights Committee, both created in the U.S. mainly by Hungarians escaping Transylvania after World War I: according to Laszlo Kurti, they “have been crucial forces in shaping the present state of affairs in the East as well as in the West”¹¹⁵. In his article, describing the early migratory flow from Hungary to the U.S. and Canada during the interwar period, the author highlights the royalist and nationalist character of the émigrés who settled in America after World War I. Unlike the previous generation of immigrants, mainly poor peasants and workers, the new “Hungarian diaspora” was formed by aristocrats member of the upper class, who were obviously very unhappy with the redrawing of Hungarian borders after the Trianon treaty. According to Kurti’s analysis, the émigré community was also showing support to Horthy’s regime and was really pleased when Hungary regained the northern part of Transylvania in 1940, after the Second Vienna award signed with Romania with the mediation of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. New Hungarian migrants both from Hungary and Romania joined the ranks of the émigré community in North America after the communist takeover, as well as after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956¹¹⁶. Founded in 1976, the Committee for Human Rights in Romania (CHRR) “since [then] has monitored the human rights conditions of 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians who live as minorities in Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Ukraine, who collectively comprise the largest national minority in Central Europe. [CHRR] is the only professional organization in the West devoted to the

¹¹⁴ Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 40

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 40

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 41

rights of these communities”.¹¹⁷ The Committee, whose name was changed in 1984 to Hungarian Human Rights Foundation in order to show the organization’s will to switch its focus from Romania to also other countries where Magyar minorities live, had launched several initiatives, such as demonstrations, found rising and publications. Its reports and publications, sometimes written jointly with the American – Transylvanian Federation, had a strong impact on the Western media, contributing in shaping the discourse over the treatment of Hungarian minorities in Romania and, after 1988, in picturing the ethnic connotation of the systematization plan.¹¹⁸ In his article about the “Hungarian Lobbying efforts for the human rights of minorities in Rumania: the CHRR/HHRF as a case study”¹¹⁹, the Hungarian scholar Andrew Ludanyi¹²⁰ clearly acknowledges the predominant role of the Hungarian Human Rights Forum, jointly with other small organizations of Hungarian immigrants in the United States, in bringing the issue of human and minorities’ rights in Romania to the U.S. Government. After refusing of breaking its diplomatic relation with Israel in 1967 during the Six-Day War¹²¹ or in marching on Prague in 1968, Romania gained the favor of Western countries for its unorthodox position towards the USSR. This led to a trade agreement with the United States, which in 1975 accorded Romania the status of Most Favored Nation (MFN).¹²² Nonetheless, growing concern for the violations of human rights under Ceaușescu’s rule led in 1987 to suspend the MFN treatment¹²³ and in

¹¹⁷ Hungarian Human Rights Foundation, *Aspirations and accomplishments*, in www.hhrf.org [accessed 03.06.2014]

¹¹⁸ See, for instance, George Schöpflin et al. *Witnesses to cultural genocide. First hand reports on Rumania’s Minority Policies today*, New York, N.Y. : American Transylvania Federation : Committee for Human Rights in Rumania, 1979

¹¹⁹ Ludanyi Andrew, “Hungarian Lobbying efforts for the human rights of minorities in Rumania: the CHRR/HHRF as a case study” in *Hungarian Studies* 6/1 (1990) Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest

¹²⁰ Andrew Ludanyi (Szikszó, 1940), is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Ohio Northern University and writes for the *Hungarian Review* (hungarianreview.com). He is also co-editor of *The Hungarian Minority’s Situation in Ceausescu’s Romania*, first published in Budapest in 1988 under the aegis of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Rudolf Joó (editor), Andrew Ludanyi (revising editor), *The Hungarian minority’s situation in Ceausescu’s Romania*; translated from Hungarian by Chris Tennant, Highland Lakes, N.J. : Atlantic Research and Publications, c1994

¹²¹ Shafir, *Romania*, p. 176

¹²² Ludanyi, *Hungarian lobbying efforts*, p. 80

¹²³ Ludanyi, *Hungarian lobbying efforts*, p. 77; Kurti, *Transylvania*, p. 42

August 1988 to a Senate resolution, sponsored by Senator Frank Lautenberg, to stop any trade privilege accorded to Romania, due to “human rights abuses, particularly [the] plan to raze agricultural villages in traditionally Hungarian areas”.¹²⁴ The worsening of trade relations with the United States, surely achieved by the lobbying activity of the HHRF and other organizations, contributed in increasing Romanian international isolation and economic crisis.

Ludanyi’s article, however, provides a good example of the character of the debate on the situation of Hungarians in Romania in general, and on the rural resettlement plan in particular. From the first paragraph of his article, indeed, Ludanyi portrays systematization as a “grand plan for “progress” [which carries] a hidden agenda nurtured by Ceaușescu’s personal chauvinism and his need to scapegoat the minorities of Transylvania. Of the 7,000 villages slated for destruction, at least 2,000 are Hungarian and Saxon or Swabian German settlements. The real objective is to break up their compact settlements and force them to depend solely on the social and cultural institutions of the majority Rumanian population”.¹²⁵ Moreover, the author refers to it as “a new policy for the “final solution” to the minority nationality question in Transylvania”.¹²⁶ However, I think it might be worth noticing that his sources of data are mainly daily newspapers published in the United States.¹²⁷

However, Budapest was not alone within the Eastern Bloc in protesting against the Romanian project, nor Hungary was the only country concerned about its minorities living outside the national borders. According to a report compiled by Vladimir Socor for Radio

¹²⁴ S.RES.455 : A resolution condemning Romania for its human rights abuses, particularly its plan to raze agricultural villages in traditionally Hungarian areas. Sponsor: Sen Lautenberg, Frank R. [NJ] (introduced 8/5/1988) Cosponsors (25) Committees: Senate Foreign Relations Latest Major Action: 8/5/1988 Referred to Senate committee. Status: Read twice and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations.

¹²⁵ Ludanyi, *Hungarian lobbying efforts*, p. 77

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 77

¹²⁷ In particular, *The Washington Times*, April 6, 1988; *The Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 1988. p. 17; *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer*, Sept 2, 1988, p. 5-A., in Ludanyi, *Hungarian Lobbying Efforts*, footnote 1, p. 89

Free Europe¹²⁸, collecting statements and articles appeared in different newspapers in the Eastern Bloc, many communist countries have raised criticisms against the treatment of minorities in Romania. Despite the fact that not all the criticisms were specifically linked to the resettlement plan, but rather to the general treatment of the Hungarian minority, according to Socor, while governments did not take an official side in the dispute, “media coverage [...] in all East European countries except Bulgaria has given greater play to Hungarian official statements than to Romanian ones, contained factual references to Magyar and other minority grievances in Romania, and ignored Romania's claims that all is well with the country's minorities”.¹²⁹

The most critical articles appeared in newspapers of those countries inhabited by Hungarian communities as well, such as Czechoslovakia. Even though the country's minority policy had been previously criticized by Budapest, the dailies *Rude Pravo* of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and *Pravda* of the Slovak Communist Party expressed concern about the impact of the systematization plan on the ethnic minorities in Romania (alongside the Hungarian one, Bratislava concerned about the small Slovak community as well) and about the situation of refugees escaping Transylvania for Hungary. However, I will mention once again that the sources were mainly Hungarian articles and official statements.¹³⁰

In the German Democratic Republic, only the Budapest rally organized to protest against the rural resettlement plan was briefly mentioned on the Party daily, the *Neues Deutschland*. Nevertheless, in a regional party newspaper, the *Saechsische Zeitung* of Dresden was given attention to the plan as a threat to Hungarian and German villages in Transylvania. According to Socor, the article is “noteworthy because it seems to be the first

¹²⁸ Vladimir Socor, *East European Media Treatment of the Hungarian-Romanian Dispute*, RAD Background Report/161, RFE 19 August 1988

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 1

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 2

time in some 25 years that a party organ in the GDR has expressed interest in the situation of ethnic Germans in Romania”,¹³¹ showing how concern over the minorities’ situation was coming from countries who had previously always respected the non-interference agreements and that were surely not renowned for their reformist character and underscoring the inexorable process of Romanian isolation within the Eastern Bloc as well. While not expressly referring to the rural resettlement plan, Yugoslavian official media criticized Romania for its treatment of Hungarian, Serbian and other ethnic groups and for measures restricting Serbian cultural life and the use of Serbian language and blamed Romanian authorities for their refusal of discussing the minorities’ situation.¹³²

Some Polish media had also paid attention to the issue, placing the Hungarian-Romanian dispute on the minorities’ treatment in the broader context of the debate between reformist and anti – reformist countries. The weekly *Polytika* expressed a clear skepticism against the official Romanian historiography and against the systematization plan, while *Przegląd Tygodniowy* in an article by two Polish authors who have “apparently visited both Transylvania and Hungary”¹³³ reported on “the "deep despair" prevailing in Transylvania”¹³⁴.

Finally, according to Radio Budapest, the foreign affair weekly of the URRS *Ekho Planety* reported about the Romanian plan for rural resettlement. However, the report was based on Hungarian sources.¹³⁵

The only country in which media had not expressed a critical position against Romanian minorities’ policy and the rural resettlement plan was Bulgaria. According to Socor, the party daily *Rabotnichesko Delo* just reported official statements made in

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 3

¹³² Ibid, P. 3

¹³³ Ibid, p. 3

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Ionescu, *Chronology*

Romanian and Hungary without taking a side, probably due to its interest in maintaining a common front with Bucharest and because of its own issues with the Turkish minority.¹³⁶

After this short and surely not complete overview on the Eastern European media coverage on the minorities' situation in Romania and on the systematization plan, I think it is worth noticing that, beside Hungary, the main criticisms were coming from countries which had citizens of Hungarian ethnic origins (Czechoslovakia) – thus implicitly showing their position towards their own domestic minorities' policy – or from those whose ethnic communities were living in Romania (Yugoslavia, GDR), hence connecting the fate of the Hungarian minority with that of other minorities in Romania. Moreover, it seems safe to affirm that “reformist” countries such as Poland, preferred to side another reformist country, Hungary, than support an increasingly isolated, closed and national-Stalinist¹³⁷ country as was Romania in the 1980s. I would also like to notice that, as in the case of Western media, quite often the main sources were Hungarian articles and reports: I believe this strongly contributed in giving the debate over systematization a firm ethnic connotation and in picturing the plan as a deliberate attack to minorities' identity and heritage.

Dissent in Romania did not reach the same extent of other countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. However, first voices of dissent started to rise among Romanian intellectuals and even party members in the mid-1980s, and systematization was one of the main points of criticism. One of the most famous is Doina Cornea, a former professor of French language at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj, who from 1982 has started to write letters and texts denouncing the material and economic difficulties of Romanian population as well as the intellectual and spiritual crisis of the country, due to repression and state control over the cultural production., and who, due to her political

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 4

¹³⁷ See Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for all seasons*

activity, was dismissed from her job in 1983.¹³⁸ In one of her letters which has been smuggled outside the country, transmitted on Radio Free Europe on the 23 August 1988 and brought to the West in September, Cornea addressed Ceaușescu on the issue of systematization, asking to put an end on the project. She did not deny the need to improve rural living standards, but she strongly rejected the plan of destroying villages depicting it as a treat to peasant culture itself. She called for reforms of agriculture and market economy, stating that the most fruitful way to “help peasants [is to] improve their settlements within their traditional framework with modern equipment, as in the Western European countries, [to return] the land to them to revive family farming, [to give them] loans for the purchase of some modern tools [and to give them] permission to sell their products freely, inside the country or abroad, without any obligations other than paying legal taxes and duties”.¹³⁹ Cornea moreover strongly underscored to the cultural and spiritual centrality of the rural world for the traditional national culture, a view somehow “symmetrical” to the Hungarian mythology of Transylvanian peasantry as the “cradle of Hungarian civilization”: “by striking at the peasant house” – she wrote – “by replacing it with a poky flat in a tower-block, you strike not only at the soul of the people, but also at a patrimony which belongs to all mankind” and appealed to the “goodwill of Romanians in exile, but also of foreigners who are equally concerned about the preservation of our native values, to support this protest.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, according to Deletant¹⁴¹, this letter and the appeal to renounce to the rural resettlement plan gained Cornea a great support both abroad and in Romania, and many other intellectuals, writers and workers put their signature. For her letters of dissent, Doina Cornea was put under house arrest by the Securitate.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, p. 262 and following

¹³⁹ Doina Cornea, “A letter to Ceaușescu”, *The Spectator*, 16.09.1988

¹⁴⁰ Ibid,

¹⁴¹ Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, p. 267

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 268

The growing isolation of Romania and the worsening of international relations, due to the steady wave of critics from foreign countries and domestic appeals from dissidents led to the rise of critical voices from the ranks of the Romanian Communist Party itself. On the 10 March 1989, an open letter to Ceaușescu, known as “Letter of the Six”, was made public by the BBC.¹⁴³ The appeal was signed by six veteran members of the RCP: George Apostol, First Secretary of the Party from 1954 to 1955; Alexandru Bârlădeanu, Party’s economist; Constantin Pîrvulescu, founding member of the Party in 1921; Silviu Brucan; Corneliu Mănescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1961 to 1972; Grigore Ion Răceanu.¹⁴⁴ The letter, directly addressing President Ceaușescu, listed the facts that brought on the country the objection of the international community for violating the Helsinki Final Act, signed in 1975 by the *Conducător* himself. The first element on the list is “the whole plan for systematization of villages and the forced removal of peasants to three-storey apartment blocs [running] against article 36 of the constitution which protects the right to personal property of a household, with annexes and the terrain on which they are situated”.¹⁴⁵ The six subscribers of the letter asked Ceaușescu “to state categorically in unequivocal terms that you have renounced the plan of systematization of villages” in order “to stop the negative processes both domestic and international besetting our nation”.¹⁴⁶ According to Deletant, the letter was totally unprecedented because the protest was coming from members of the Party itself, it was a collective letter and, since the text had to be smuggled abroad, it showed that there was no room for debate within the ranks of the RCP.¹⁴⁷ Those forms of domestic dissent not only indicate the growing isolation of Ceaușescu and the discontent for his anti-reformist attitude and policies, but also show the strong impact on the planned rural

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 274

¹⁴⁴ Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, p. 274

¹⁴⁵ The English translation of the letter is available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Letter_of_the_Six [accessed 02.06.2014]

¹⁴⁶ Ibid,

¹⁴⁷ Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, p. 275

resettlement in creating the dissent. The systematization plan was seen as both a spiritual and cultural and an economic threat for the life of the country.

2.2.2 Western reactions and press campaigns against systematization

The strongest criticisms on the rural resettlement plan were coming from the press of Western countries. From the mid-1980s the main newspapers of the United States, UK, France, Germany, Italy and other countries were constantly reporting on the Romanian regime, living conditions and human rights violations. Interest and attention of Western media increased after Ceausescu's speech on the systematization plan delivered in March 1988 and the consequent Hungarian protests. Radio Free Europe once again provides a report on the *Chronology of Western protests against Romania's rural resettlement plan*¹⁴⁸, covering the period from 3 March to 30 September 1988. Protests, coming from politics, institutions international organizations, but also members of the civil society such as professors, artists, writers and intellectuals, were mainly focusing on two different aspects: the preservation of the historical and artistic heritage and the minorities' rights. The rural resettlement plan, often described as a violation of the Helsinki Final Act that Romania subscribed in 1975, was regarded as a major threat to Romanian historical patrimony as a "piece of European culture".¹⁴⁹ The President of West Germany's UNESCO Commission appealed to his Romanian counterpart to prevent the destruction of villages¹⁵⁰, while the Vienna-based Austrian-Hungarian Association condemned Romanian's rural resettlement plan as leading to "the destruction of irreplaceable values of universal culture"¹⁵¹ and the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Geoffrey Howe sent a formal letter to his

¹⁴⁸ Dan Ionescu, *Chronology*

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 7

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 8

Romanian counterpart, blaming the plan as a violation of basic human rights and a cause of “irreparable damage to Romania's architectural and cultural heritage”.¹⁵²

Great attention was given to the minorities’ situation. To give some examples, the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights published a report with the alarming title of *S.O.S. Transylvania*¹⁵³ which described the systematization plan as a “serious threat to that minority”¹⁵⁴; the Austrian Parliament voted unanimously for a resolution condemning Romanian resettlement plan and the treatment of minorities¹⁵⁵; during a meeting of the UN Subcommission on Human Rights, an observer for the International Federation for the Protection of the Rights of Ethnic, Religious, Linguistic, and Other Minorities, denounced Romanian attempt to "assimilate and eventually wipe out" the cultural identity of its ethnic Hungarians.¹⁵⁶

It is also very evident how the concern for the rural resettlement plan led Romania to a growing diplomatic isolation. For instance, protesting against the plan, a Dutch parliamentary delegation canceled its official visit to Bucharest scheduled for October 1988, while a deputy of the German Social Democratic Party called for isolating Romania “diplomatically”¹⁵⁷.

The analysis of articles appeared on the international press gives some understanding of some of the features of the debate on the rural resettlement plan. An article published by *The Sunday Times*¹⁵⁸ referred to a “plan to raze 8000 villages, many inhabited by Romania’s 2 mln ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania”, stating that “peasants are already seeing the signs of the approaching holocaust of *sistematizarea*”. On *The Independent*, an article of 28 June 1988 stated that “to be a Romanian at this moment of history is a misfortune. To be a

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 10

¹⁵³ International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, *S.O.S. Transylvania*, Vienna: June 1988

¹⁵⁴ Dan Ionescu, *A chronology*, p. 4

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 4

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 8

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 8

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Glass

Romanian of Hungarian ethnic origin is a double catastrophe. [...] President Ceaușescu seems anxious to transform his country into a giant labor camp and to scatter the Hungarian and German minorities across the land”.¹⁵⁹ On the same newspaper, on the 2 August 1988, it is possible to read that “the Romanian regime declared intention of razing 20.000 villages to rehouse their largely non-Romanian inhabitants in block of flats”¹⁶⁰. *The New York Times*, in reporting the demonstration against the village razing organized in Budapest on the 27 June, accounted that “tens of thousands of Hungarians marched to the Rumanian Embassy on Monday to protest plans by President Nicolae Ceaușescu to destroy more than half of the villages in Rumania, many populated by ethnic Hungarians”¹⁶¹. The Italian daily *La Repubblica*, describing the area nearby Sibiu, in southern Transylvania, spoke of “villages which are progressively disappearing”¹⁶²; in another article, published some months later, talking about reformist and anti-reformist countries in Eastern Europe, the author wrote that “Ceaușescu refuses to discuss the project that plans the destruction of 8.000 villages inhabited by the Hungarian community in Transylvania”¹⁶³. Those are just some examples about statements that were likely to be found in international newspapers reporting on the systematization plan. It was not unusual to read overstatements on the number of villages doomed to be destructed, as reported by *The independent*; as well as on the number of villages effectively inhabited by Hungarian or German minorities. On the other hand, some of the articles were giving the impression that the plan was proceeding at full speed, while only some villages in the suburban area of Bucharest were effectively destroyed¹⁶⁴. Despite the fact that there are no evidences that the main aim of the plan was the destruction of minorities’ ethnic identities, I have observed a general tendency in connecting the social and

¹⁵⁹ “Ceaușescu for the doghouse” *The independent*, 28.06.1988

¹⁶⁰ John Porteous, “The coming winter of Transylvania”, *The independent*, 02.08.1988

¹⁶¹ Thomson Reuters, “Hungarians March to Protest Rumanian Plan”, *The New York Times*, June 29, 1988

¹⁶² Original text in Italian: “Si vedono i villaggi che stanno progressivamente scomparendo” in Giuseppe Smorto, “Sibiu, scampolo triste di socialismo Romeno” *La Repubblica*, 06.04.1989

¹⁶³ Gianni Corbi, “L’Europa dell’Est una e trina”, *La Repubblica*, 23.07.1989

¹⁶⁴ Turnok, p. 261

economic criticisms of the plan with the issue of minorities' rights. While the Hungarian concern was entirely understandable, it seems safe to say that many Western media have been influenced by Budapest's point of view in depicting the Romanian project. In my understanding, this is due to a more general international climate, with the two countries somehow at the opposite pole of the debate about reformism in the Eastern Bloc. Even among scholars I have observed some contradictory positions in expressing the extent of the influence of minorities' policies on the concept of systematization. For instance, Per Ronnas and David Turnock, authors of various studies on Romanian systematization¹⁶⁵, agree in considering the strong projection of the ethnic dimension on the debate over the plan a "grave mistake, since the programme was national in scope"¹⁶⁶. Ronnas goes further in affirming that "to argue that the programme is primarily directed at the ethnic minorities is a numerical absurdity" since, according to the 1977 census, "ethnic minorities make up 9.1% of the rural population in Romania"¹⁶⁷. Moreover, both scholars regard the Gypsy minority as the minority group which would be affected mostly by the plan, as they concentrate on the periphery of villages mostly inhabited by a Romanian or Hungarian majority, in precarious and small settlements with poor infrastructures, which were most likely to be destroyed.¹⁶⁸ Surely the Gypsies' situation was largely ignored in the international debate over systematization due to the fact that "no voices of protest and defence have been raised"¹⁶⁹.

However, other scholars have clearly spoken about systematization as a plan with a strong ethnic dimension. In her article concerning the treatment of ethnic minorities in Romania, eloquently entitled "The destruction of the Hungarian villages in Romania" and

¹⁶⁵ Here I am referring in particular to David Turnock, "The planning of Rural Settlement in Romania", in *The geographical Journal* vol. 157 no.3, November 1991 and Per Ronnas, "Turning the Romanian Peasant into a New Socialist Man: An Assessment of Rural Development Policy in Romania" in *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1989). For other titles see the Bibliography of this thesis.

¹⁶⁶ Turnok, p. 259

¹⁶⁷ Ronnas, p. 548

¹⁶⁸ Ronnas, p. 549; Turnok, p. 259

¹⁶⁹ Ronnas, p. 549

published in *Anthropology Today* in 1988¹⁷⁰, Venetia Newal pictured the plan as one of the “the weapons used to assist in the assimilation of national ethnic minorities”¹⁷¹. Dennis Deletant, in his complete volume about dissent in Romania¹⁷², wrote that “the Hungarian minority was also seriously affected by Ceaușescu’s campaign of village redevelopment or ‘systematization’” and that “the programme, not specifically aimed at Hungarian villages [...] was bound to have a disproportionate effect upon the Hungarian counties of Harghita and Covasna, which were targeted for ‘phasing out’”. Moreover, writing about Doina Cornea’s letters, Deletant points out how the Romanian dissent calls “for an end to the destruction of villages under the ‘systematization’ plan, which had driven ‘hundreds of thousands of peasants’ from their ancestral lands and homes”¹⁷³, thus depicting the plan as a project already in progress and which already had some “victims”.

In my opinion, this difference of point of view is due to the scarcity of precise information and documents on the plan, both in its planning and developing phase. Moreover, as I tried to point out in this chapter, it seems safe to affirm that the Hungarian voice had a strong influence in shaping the international debate and view over the plan.

I would finally point out how the data presented in the two studies by Ronnas and Turnock, which I consider to be reliable, evidence how, in its original shape the plan was scarcely likely to be realized. Both authors point out how the schedule was constantly postponed and reshaped according to lower targets; moreover, the large scale of the plan as stated in 1988 would imply the need of resettle half of the rural population, requiring the construction of some 10.000 dwellings. As stated by Ronnas, “at the present rate of construction it would take almost 200 years to construct the dwellings necessary to

¹⁷⁰ Venetia Newal, “The Destruction of the Hungarian Villages in Romania” in *Anthropology Today* 1988, Vol. 4, No. 5 (Oct., 1988), pp. 3-5

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 5

¹⁷² Deletant, p. 134; 267

¹⁷³ Deletant, p. 267

accommodate all those who, according to the programme, will be resettled in the course of the next twelve years [from 1988 to 2000]”.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Ronnas, p. 547; also Turnock, p. 256

Conclusions

The overview on Eastern, Western and domestic protests against Romanian systematization underscores how the ethnic dimension was predominant in shaping the debate over the rural resettlement plan. As I tried to point out, the majority of Western media were relying on Hungarian sources, due to the difficulties on gaining information from Bucharest. The Romanian leadership, indeed, seem to be quite deaf to the international appeals for ending the campaign. Moreover, due to the growing isolation of the country and the scarcity of information coming from other voices than the official media, it was hard to have reliable sources from Romania. In many cases I believe it is safe to say that Western media took the Hungarian side in picturing the Romanian situation and the impact of the plan on the Hungarian minority. Reading some of the Western press, furthermore, one can get the impression that the plan was actually progressing at a full speed, that the majority of villages doomed to destruction or already destructed were inhabited by ethnic Hungarians or members of other minorities and located in Transylvania, and that finally the main aim of the plan was indeed the annihilation of the minorities' identity, culture and historical patrimony. However, as I tried to point out, there are no evidences for affirming that Hungarians would be more affected by the plan than any other Romanian citizen. According to the reports and the studies on the plan of systematization and rural resettlement, the project was extremely ambitious and was supposed to be actuated on a very large scale. Hence in my understanding, and as also highlighted by some studies I have read, it is extremely unlikely that the plan was actually going to be concluded by 2000, according to its initial design, especially considering the severe economic crisis that affected Romania in the 1980s.

The “megalomaniac” project was surely a severe attempt to strongly and further modify the social and economic asset of the Romanian rural environment. The creation of homogeneous centers, the resettlement of the population according to centralized criteria and the allocation of resources in an equal way would have levelled and swept away all the social, cultural and economic local and regional specificities, those of the ethnic minorities included, deleting the history of an extremely diverse country. However, at the present state of the studies on systematization there are no evidences that one of the main aims of the plan, if not the main one, was to actually destroy the ethnic identity of minorities in Romania by eradicating, resettling and assimilating non-Romanian communities. However, unlike Romanians themselves, or the Gypsy community that I briefly mentioned, Hungarians and, to a lesser extent, Germans had strong countries championing for them outside the national borders. It is perfectly natural, I believe, that Budapest was concerning for the treatment of Magyars living in Romania: however, I think the Hungarian struggle to stop the plan, joined with the Romanian silence and refusal to comment on that until at least the end of 1988, might have led the international public opinion to embrace the Hungarian view. I might add to the general picture, the growing international and diplomatic isolation of Romania from the mid-1980s, due to its opposition to adopt reforms in the framework of Soviet *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*, to the general concern for violations of human rights and to the massive flow of Romanian refugees who fled the country from the second half of 1980s.

Concluding, I believe that the international protests against Ceaușescu’s *bulldoz-politik*, however quite exaggerated, alarmist, not always accurate and very minorities-focused, nevertheless contributed in creating a growing awareness on the situation in Romania, regarding the respect for both individual and collective rights, as well as the material conditions of the population.

The Hungarian protests and movements against the systematization, on the other hand, seem to be related to a new political climate raised in the country from the mid-1980s, and in particular after the change in the leadership in 1988. The progressive liberalization and the break of taboos about topics that have been silenced for decades (such as the situation of minorities living in bordering countries) seem to have generated a fertile climate for such a strong debate on systematization.

It is undebatable that the Hungarian communities of Romania were strongly suffering for the harsh economic, social and cultural conditions of the country, which I already described. It is also undebatable, I believe, that as a community they might have experienced forms of cultural and linguistic discrimination. However, there is no evidence that individuals have been discriminated due to their ethnic belonging, and only because of it. Ceaușescu's rule aimed to create a homologated society according to a very precise model, the "new man" shaped by an ideology which was permeating every aspect of social and political life. The "New Man" was a devoted socialist, a hard worker and a strong guardian of the revolutionary achievements. In this perspective, I believe, nobody was immune and the homologation to the predominant only one model was targeting every Romanian citizen. Systematization, thus, was not merely a planning process, but an "attempt at social engineering"¹⁷⁵.

Concluding, I believe it is safe to say that the growing isolation and the vehement campaign against the systematization plan have been one of the causes for Ceaușescu's weakening and, eventually, fall.

¹⁷⁵ Deletant, p. 318

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