The Prague Spring as Seen from Romania

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I (VT) was born on 4 July 1951 into a revolutionary family. Both my parents fought in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. My father, Leonte Tismaneanu (né Tisminetsky), lost his right arm in the battle on the River Ebro when he was 24. My mother, Hermina Tismaneanu (née Marcusohn), a medical school student, was a nurse in the International Hospital. They were Stalinist internationalists, and intensely and honestly believed in Soviet anti-fascism. After the defeat of the Spanish Republic, they went, via France, as political refugees to the USSR. My two sisters were born there—Victoria in Kuybyshev (now Samara) in November 1941, and Rodica in Moscow in April 1944. My family returned to Romania in February 1948. My mother, who in the meantime had graduated from Moscow Medical School No. 2, taught paediatrics at the Institute of Medicine in Bucharest. My father became a communist ideologue. While in Spain, my mother worked with numerous doctors and nurses, including the Czech communist physician František Kriegel (1908–1979) and the German nurse Erika Glaser, later Wallach (1922–1993). My mother's sister, Cristina Luca (née Bianca Marcusohn in 1916), was a member of the French resistance and headed the intelligence unit of the FTP–MOI (Francs-Tireurs et Partisans–main-d'œuvre immigrée) where she became friends with Artur London (1915–1986) [see Tismaneanu and Stan 2016].

It is their life story and biographical intersections that triggered these thoughts and many other fragments of personal recollections. I (VT) would say from the very beginning that even if my father was expelled from the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) because of his critical comments about the Romanian Stalinist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, he remained, until his very end, in February 1981, a true believer and a Marxist. My mother's story, on the other hand, was different: her infatuation with communism ended in 1952–1953, during the anti-Semitic campaigns in the USSR and in the Soviet Bloc. She had studied under the guidance of some of the accused doctors and could not accept the lunatic charges ('attempts to poison Soviet leaders.')

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Such was the family context in which I (VT) grew up and shaped myself as a young student/future intellectual. I learned a lot from my parents and their friends about the history of communism, but I also filtered through my own head and feelings some of the Cold War's major intellectual and political battles. Discussions at home were quite frank, although I disagreed with my father on the overall interpretation of Leninism. But the books that influenced me the most, during my Romanian adolescence and student years, were Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Their ideas, as much as others, played a decisive role in my formation. Initially, I was attracted, like so many of my generation, to neo-Marxist or humanist Marxist theories, including the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory. Later, I realised that revisionist Marxism was just another theoretical dead end, an illusion with no real chance of changing the existing despotic systems. Books such as those mentioned above and many others were circulating clandestinely in Romania. I read *The Gulag Archipelago* in French translation. I read Nikolai Berdyaev's book on the origins of Russian communism in French, I read Orwell's *1984* in English.

The Prague Spring of 1968 played an important role in my family's and the Romanian communist regime's dynamics alike. The analysis that I apply today to the two totalitarianisms of the 20th century is inspired by professional and moral reasons. If there were a kind of predestination or a curse to deny the different views between generations, humanity would be forever damned to repeat Cain's gesture against his brother, Abel. As Victor Hugo once had it: 'Un éternel Caïn tue à jamais Abel.'

In the late 1950s, my father was not a member of the local Muscovite faction, but the RWP's representative to a newly established (September 1958) journal (in Russian and most languages *Problems of Peace and Socialism* (PPS), in English *World Marxist Review,* in French *La Nouvelle revue internationale*) based in Prague. So my father lived there for a while, between April and September 1958, rarely travelling back home to Romania. But then, in September, when the first issue of the journal came out, to which he contributed as a roundtable participant, the head of the Central Committee's international department (Ghizela Vass) told him, without further explanations, that his trips to Prague were over. In the aftermath, he was expelled from the Party following a sinister investigation. I (VT) remember vividly because I was seven years old and had just entered first grade, and many of the local nomenclature's children were my fellow pupils. I remember the huge amount of stress we were all living with.

On the Prague journal and the RWP's role in it there are still many things to be said. In his memoirs, former Romanian communist politician and chief of the Romanian party's international affairs department in the late 1960s, Paul Niculescu-Mizil (1923–2008) talks about the battles between the exponents of the 'polycentric' direction (to employ Palmiro Togliatti's formula) and those of Soviet hegemonism (very often small Latin-American parties, but also Hungarian,

Greek, Bulgarian, and Middle Eastern communists). In many respects, the Prague experience had played an essentially formative role in the making of a 'party intelligentsia' (what I once called the party intellectuals, following the Gramscian notion of 'organic intellectuals') within the ideological apparatus of the CPSU [Tismaneanu 1991].

A book owed to Mikhail Gorbachev's former foreign policy advisor, Anatoly C. Chernyaev, which came out from Penn University Press [Chernyaev 2000] acknowledges such formative experience and influence. Members of the *PPS*'s editorial board included not just Chernyaev, but also Ivan Frolov (secretary of the ideology during the heyday of glasnost), Georgy Shakhnazarov (also, one of Gorbachev's close advisors and president of the Soviet Association of Political Sciences between 1975 and 1991), or Fedor Burlatsky (journalist and early advocate of perestroika). As a matter of fact, this connection between Gorbachev and the group of ideologues tied to the Prague journal has been stressed by British political scientist and Gorbachev's biographer Archie Brown [see Brown 1997].

What we, the authors of this essay, want to emphasise here is the significance of this anti-Stalinist trend which started in Prague in 1958, and that in the late 1960s, there was already a wind of intellectual awakening blowing through the Soviet team's curtains, mostly linked and the result of the liberalising and revisionist ideas connected with the Prague Spring (and Eurocommunism in general). Years later, former Czechoslovak ambassador in Washington, DC, and speechmaker of Charter 77, Rita Klímová (herself born in Romania in 1931; she passed away in Prague in 1993), would tell me (VT) about Mikhail Gorbachev's role in catalysing and enabling the revolutionary transformations of 1989: 'He was not a sufficient condition, but he was definitely a necessary one.' Rita had been married to Zdeněk Mlynář (1930–1997), one of the top ideologues of the Prague Spring and Gorbachev's former roommate during his law studies in Moscow.

It is important to mention that the *Problems of Peace and Socialism* journal had been a home for many other stars of the world communist movement. Its first editor-in-chief was Aleksei Rumiantsev, member of the CPSU's Central Committee (CC), CC department head, and, in the 1980s, head of the Soviet Political Science Association. More should be said about Jean Kanapa (1921–1978), the first French representative on the editorial board, then head of the foreign department of the FCP, including during the Czechoslovak experiment of socialism with a human face. It is true that, during the 1950s, Kanapa, a brilliant graduate of the famous École normale supérieure had been an adamant Stalinist. On the other hand, documents pertaining to the history of FCP—CPSU relations prove that in 1968, Kanapa, in his capacity as head of the French party's CC for foreign affairs, was ardently in favour of the Dubček line [Kanapa 1984].

When the Prague Spring occurred I (VT) was enthused, like many of my generation, attracted by the very idea of 'socialism with a human face', by the idea that totalitarianism is not eternal and that freedom can be achieved in a regime like the one we had in Romania. French and Italian communist newspapers were circulating in Bucharest and other Romanian cities and many of us

were listening to Radio Free Europe's intense coverage of political and cultural dynamics in Czechoslovakia. Officially, Nicolae Ceaușescu supported the Prague Spring and, during his visit to Czechoslovakia in early August he emphatically proclaimed his pro-Dubček stance. But then, in August 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia took place, followed by the restoration of the paralysing order of Soviet-style ideological despotism, the 'normalisation' imposed from and by the Kremlin, repression against those who had been supporters of Alexander Dubček's democratising project, the new thaw, Jan Palach's self-immolation in Prague in January 1969, Ceaușescu's handling of the so-called national scare (in fact an unreal one) of Soviet intervention in order to boost his own obscene cult of personality, the gradual fascisation of Romanian communism, and so on. After all this, it became impossible for me to embrace the communist illusion any longer. With 1968 and what followed came my own apostasy. In fact, as Adam Michnik often emphasised, the crushing of the Prague Spring symbolised the end of revisionist illusions about reform from the top down. This was also spelled out in conversations I (VT) had over the years with major figures of the Prague Spring such as Jiří Dienstbier, Antonín J. Liehm, and Ivan Sviták.

My father fully embraced Nikita Khrushchev's theses, including the ones that referred to Stalin's 'cult of personality', but he never broke with the grand revolutionary illusion of Marxism. He had been expelled from the RWP in 1960 for 'factionalism' and for having discussed so-called 'unprincipled issues' in private. In the words of former Romanian communist prime minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer (1902–2000), he had swum against the tide. We had numerous contradictory talks, my father and I, up until 1970, and then we both decided it would be wiser to avoid issues that might lead to an open conflict. It became obvious among my colleagues, many of them from the same social strata, that the system was irredeemably lost, that nothing good would come of it. The last hope for internal rejuvenation had been the Prague Spring.

Our (VT & MS) point of view on the meanings and overtones of the year 1968 in Romania is in tune with the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, which I (VT) chaired in 2006 [Tismaneanu and Stan 2018]. A number of conceptual issues were tied to the efforts of Marxist revisionists to liberalise the communist systems and to bring back the individual as the focal point of the philosophical reflection inspired by Karl Marx. A liberal wind had swept in in 1968, a feeling that everything was possible, that the social imaginary can finally be set free. With hindsight, sure, it was all just a big illusion. But back then neo-Marxist revisionism contributed tremendously to the final dissolution of the frozen universe of both totalitarian and post-totalitarian bureaucracies.

Our (VT & MS) first thesis on 1968 is that there was a time when many people saw Ceaușescu as an open-minded Marxist, a nationalist communist or even a supporter of socialism with a human face. I (VT) was there, in Bucharest, and had a peculiar family background, coupled with a huge thirst to grasp what was going on. Ceaușescu himself had flirted with this image and many Romanian

intellectuals and technocrats believed in his demagogy, while foreign observers deemed him to be an East-European David confronting the big and scary Soviet Goliath. This was the narrative in 1968. I remember how during an Anex Paris conference in 1987, *Le Monde* journalist Amber Bouzouglu came up with the best formula to describe reactions to Ceaușescu in the Western media (*Le Monde*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*): 'Cher monsieur, nous nous sommes tous faits eus' / 'Dear Sir, you tricked us all!'.

Our second thesis is that Ceaușescu cynically used the crushing of the Prague Spring (the military invasion after 21 August 1968) as an excuse to strengthen his own personality cult. Ceaușescu invented a self-aggrandising mythology in which he occupied the hero's place, the very symbol of this strong bond between the Party and the people. In 1968, 'RCP–Ceaușescu–Romania' became the official slogan. So our thesis is that the origins and the first expressions of this personality cult are not to be found in 1971, as was presumed for many years, but between 1967 and 1968. Gheorghiu-Dej did not benefit from a similar spectacular cult and for sure did not use his image as a propagandistic instrument, but Ceaușescu was something else.

Our third thesis is that Ceaușescu was a deep-rooted, unswerving Bolshevik. Neither he nor his camarilla ever wanted to liberalise or democratise the political system in Romania. The narrative put forth by nostalgics like Paul Niculescu-Mizil (quoted above), but also by former foreign minister Ștefan Andrei (1931–2014) et al., is that during 1966, 1967, and 1968 a reformist phenomenon took hold inside the Party, and from the top down. Even Ion Iliescu has tried to advocate this thesis on various occasions, including in a dialogue with VT [Iliescu and Tismaneanu 2004]. The authors of this essay totally reject this thesis. Even in its less repressive phase, the system was structurally opposed to any idea of Rechtsstaat (rule of law) and market economy. *And this is precisely where the significant difference between the Prague Spring and the pseudo-reformist masquerade in Bucharest lies.*

Marxist revisionism was an intellectual and political trend based on a revolt against the bureaucratic Leviathan of Stalinism. The pivotal elements of Marxist revisionism were anti-authoritarianism, resistance to bureaucratic centralism, rejection of statist all-embracing domination, and repudiation of dogmatic controls over the life of the mind. Revisionism's logic would eventually transcend the initial strategy, and therefore, it would become the opposite of Bolshevism [Tigrid 1977].

As a local and global phenomenon, East European Marxist revisionism developed in the aftermath of Stalin's death and was different from the late 19th–early 20th century reformism associated with *The Preconditions of Socialism* by Eduard Bernstein, Friedrich Engels's former secretary, a person of immense reputation and legitimacy within the socialist movement. Our focus here is on the Marxist revisionism that came about in Eastern and Central Europe and found many congeners and partners in dialogue among the apostates from official Marxism in France and the United States, especially after the Hungarian

Revolution of 1956. Its main proponents were György Lukács (1885–1971) and his Budapest school, Karel Kosík (1926–2003), Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), and the Praxis group in Yugoslavia.

There is a neo-Marxist illusion at the basis of Marxist revisionism and it is partially inspired by Sartrean existentialism, Ernst Bloch, Henri Lefebvre, and Antonio Gramsci. The first element of this illusion was that the system could be reformed from the top down, that people could place their hopes in the coming of an enlightened leader (such as Imre Nagy, Dubček, or Gorbachev). A second element anticipated that an enlightened leadership would push for reforms, which would eventually lead to the liberalisation and then the democratisation of the system as a whole.

After 1956, it became clear that reclaiming young Marx's libertarian tradition would never work with but against the profitocratic oligarchy. This became pretty evident during those ten days of liberalisation initiated by Imre Nagy in 1956. Starting in 1960, Marxist revisionism turned anti-Bolshevik and ended ultimately as non-Marxism and anti-Marxism. The Prague Spring had been the 'swan song' of this revisionist illusion and the 'dialectics of the concrete' (Karel Kosík) vanished under the tracks of the Warsaw Pact armies. However, this Marxist revisionism did blow up and it corroded the original apologetic discourse. It instead inserted a counter-narrative, it rehabilitated themes such as subjectivity and negativity, and it brought back the 'person' as a legitimate subject. At the same time, it opened the gates to a post-Marxist vision, and, in some cases (such as Leszek Kołakowski), an anti-Marxist *Weltanschauung*.

After 1968, Adam Michnik came to the conclusion that the system cannot be reformed from the inside. He therefore argued that 'there was no such thing as socialism with a human face, but totalitarianism with broken teeth' [Michnik 1998]. In the aftermath of the Prague Spring, Polish revisionists asked themselves: 'What is to be done?' Some of them wanted to flee the bloc, some wanted to stay and oppose the system in Poland. Michnik's solution was called the new evolutionism or the civil society project. So, in many respects, the defeat of Marxist revisionism was just the prelude to the birth of the social movements that would climax in Solidarność. In Romania, on the other hand, the crushing of the Czechoslovak experiment became a legitimising tool for Ceaușescu's growing cult of personality and an argument for many intellectuals to endorse the RCP's 'patriotic' rhetoric. Even a former political prisoner, later the country's most prominent dissident, novelist Paul Goma, joined the RCP.

Following the tragedy of August 1968 in Czechoslovakia, the ideology of human rights became increasingly acknowledged as the fundamental basis for the new course adopted by the Czechoslovak opposition. Václav Havel was never a Marxist, his philosophical stances were influenced by Jan Patočka's school of thought, hence by phenomenology. Charter 77 brought together thinkers and activists of various orientations, existentialists, neo-Marxists, disenchanted socialists, and classic liberals. For many of the chartists, the key idea was to 'live in

truth' and not to add to the all-pervasive lie of the existing political arrangement [Riese 1979].

The Prague Spring went beyond the communist system in Eastern Europe and begot a trans-European dimension, more often than not associated with youth revolts across the globe in 1968. I (VT) vividly remember those passionate hours of listening to Radio Free Europe's analyses on student movements in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France. I also remember all the broadcasts that followed the invasion by the armies of the Warsaw Pact. And it is RFE where I first heard of Leszek Kołakowski and the Polish professors who defied Gomułka's regime and stood in solidarity with the rebelling students at the University of Warsaw in March 1968.

The Prague Spring had been anticipated by a series of events and developments of crucial significance: Khrushchev's sudden ouster in October 1964; the persecution of intellectual dissenters (the Sinyavsky–Daniel trial in 1966); the Sino-Soviet Split and the Vietnam War. In Romania, there was the Declaration of April 1964, known as the document that epitomised Gheorghiu-Dej's policy of autonomy from the Kremlin. The Ninth Congress (in July 1965) of the Romanian party did nothing but confirm this political ambivalence: on the one hand, openness and external autonomy (close to Titoism); on the other, Ceaușescu's and his faithful camarilla's increasingly tighter grip on power. The dialectics of de-Stalinisation and de-Sovietisation were thus in full swing in Romania in the mid-1960s, and the winning course only became evident after August 1968.

What was going on in Czechoslovakia during the same period? After an ambiguous de-Stalinisation process, there were all sorts of political, social, and cultural crises. The Czechoslovak Writers' Union Conference in the spring of 1967 marked the break-up between the intellectuals and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). Many other acts of defiance added to the general picture. The conflict between Czech and Slovak communists led to the collapse of unity at the top. In January 1968, Dubček became First Secretary and, in a matter of months, what had started as a small programme for the rationalisation of socialism turned out to be a radical strategy for institutional reform. The Polish and East-German leaders genuinely panicked and pressured Moscow to take pre-emptive action. All the archival materials suggest that the intervention was intended to bring an end to this experiment in democratic socialism. The invasion was therefore triggered by the old and ossified Leninist bureaucracies' fear that the Czechoslovak example would be contagious and would eventually lead to the collapse of the communist empire altogether.

In Romania, despite some friendly statements about the new leadership in Prague, Ceaușescu retained absolute power. The myth of the Communist Party's 'leading role' was regarded as sacrosanct dogma. Only a few excerpts from the 'Action Programme of the CPC' of 5 April 1968 were published in Romanian. The RCP tried as much as possible to avoid delivering news about the abolition of censorship and the emergence of independent political and cultural associations

in Czechoslovakia. When Ceaușescu decided to rehabilitate Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu (1900–1954), he did it not to condemn the old practices of the Securitate, but to consolidate his own dominant position within the party. The hope for change was insidiously manipulated by the ideological apparatus of the Romanian Communist Party.

I (VT) was almost seventeen years old when a group of intellectuals from Prague published 'The Two Thousand Words' manifesto, while the Communist Party in Bucharest chose to ignore the call for the deep and meaningful pluralisation of the system. A break with Leninism, the ideology behind the providential role of the single party, was never in the pipeline in Bucharest.

Ceaușescu's speech of 21 August 1968 championed defiance of Soviet imperialism only to enhance his international profile as a courageous maverick. In reality, condemning the invasion was for the Romanian leader a way of rejecting the monopolistic ambitions of the Kremlin. For Ceaușescu, any genuine reform amounted to 'right-wing deviation'. The failure of the Prague Spring became his favourite alibi whenever there was a need to justify the myth of the indestructible unity of the party, leader, and nation. Almost a year after the defeat of the Prague Spring, a world communist conference was held in Moscow. The Chinese, Albanian, North Korean, and Yugoslav communist parties boycotted it. The leaders of the Italian and Spanish parties, Enrico Berlinguer (1922–1984) and Santiago Carrillo (1915–2012), openly distanced themselves from the Soviet concept of 'limited sovereignty' and condemned, once again, the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

In a way, this moment signalled the birth of 'Eurocommunism'. Ceaușescu was quite cautious in his intervention. For him, the important lesson was not to engage in any attempt at a less stifling form of socialism, without remaining a mere vassal of the Kremlin.

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