

# **“TEFELISTI” VERSUS “TROGLODITI”. 175 YEARS OF SOCIAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN PROGRESSIVE AND RETROGRADE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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**Abstract:** *Progress oriented or retrograde tendencies have manifested themselves inside Romanian society since the Revolution of 1848. One hundred year later the communist regime imposed by the Soviet occupation falsely assumed a path towards emancipation and prosperity for Romanian people. The second decade of 21-st century was marked by social conflicts steadily growing in intensity. Fueled by the public messages of political leaders, mass protests covered multiple social issues: forestry and mining workers versus environmental defenders, straight tradition sticklers versus pride enthusiasts, religious devotees versus secular radicals, etc. These clashes continued also during the beginning of 2020's, having an apex in pro versus against vaccination movements.*

**Keywords:** *westernization, protest movements, old versus new, social media.*

## **1. Introduction**

Social progress is rarely welcomed with open arms. The intrinsic natural fear of encountering a different and potentially life-changing situation encompass a gross potential of denial of any benefits that might imply leaving the “old ways”. Human history is filled with examples of harsh or even brutal struggles marking the advent of social change – which is often associated with a cultural shift, the identity of a group being obliterated or reshuffled.

For more than two thousand years, people inhabiting the land around the Carpathian Arch were subject to various social and cultural transformations under the influences of large and powerful empires which bordered its territories and like in the case of many European countries, the nationalist movements of 19-th century provided some legislative and administrative clarity. All these innovative trends were marked by the core ideological conflict of old versus new which for most of Romanian citizens means a cultural struggle of East versus West.

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## **2. Romania's 'long journey' into westernization**

Ever since the 19th century the Occident has been a model for modern social development – promoted as such by rich young bourgeois intellectuals who had the opportunity to study abroad. On opposite side was the dominant traditional aristocracy linked by religion and in some case ethnicity to wealthy Greek Orthodox families living in Constantinople (Phanar neighborhood). Therefore, Romania's modernization was first and foremost a westernization of political life - traditional (indigenous and Phanariot aristocrats) ruling elites were to be replaced (Brasoveanu, 2019) by "bonjurist" (from French "bonjour" / "good day") bourgeois intellectual youth.

Various political events marked this journey. Romania's emulation of 1948 European wide revolutionary movements brought upon new ideas and leaders able to restructure a society which seemed stuck into medieval customs. Although ruled by a king of German origin, who had a major contribution during the War for Independence from Ottoman Empire, Romanian administration and social life embraced the French model (Dutu, 1981). Universities of Iasi and Bucharest were established and several institutions had their new headquarters building inspired by Parisian architecture. Emancipation movement in Romania took shape in National Liberal Party, established in 1875, which promoted an accelerated socioeconomic path towards progress, laicity and Occidental customs as opposed to "small steps tactic" of the Conservative Party.

The implementation of new transportation (railway) and telecommunication technologies (telegraph, telephone and radio) marked the definitive commitment of Romanian society toward progress and the 'Western way of life'.

For exactly one hundred years the social and political issues that animated Romanian society on its path towards capitalist development were characterized by balancing the Western influences with an indigenous civilizational project. Social and cultural progress was unquestionable (Dobra, 2020). Romanian elites in literature, philosophy and arts were welcomed and praised on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

## **3. 1948-1990 – East is the new West – progress enforced by 'proletarian dictatorship'**

Unfortunately, the end of WW2 brought a major social shift with Soviet Union's forceful grab of East European countries under its political and military control. With almost a non-existent indigenous socialist movement, Romania was placed under the strict control of an improvised obedient and unscrupulous clique (Montias, 1967) charged with bringing, by any means necessary, every social category into submission to the new oppressive regime. Claiming to be the epitome of modernization, the communist social project was in fact, in most cases, an unnatural reversal of educated political elites (Shafir, 1985) with grotesque violent apparatchiks. For about half a century, the countries in Eastern Europe were subject to an enforced mass industrialization (Gilberg, 1975) regardless of local specificities or profitability logic. Peasants were converted into factory workers and villages were urbanized almost overnight. The only genuinely flourishing domain was political propaganda praising the 'incredible' benefits of Easternization (Sovietization) and the communist way of life.

Between 1965 and 1989, Ceausescu's regime proposed, or rather imposed "a distinctive road to socialism that involved, among other things, the establishment of a patrimonial dictatorship" (Bunce, 1999: 169) a Janus-like vision of society with one face towards the heroic (often embellished by a gross protochronism) past and with the other face towards the 'glorious future of the new (communist) man'. Thus, modernization was not only promoted as the emulation of a society's desire for a better future (Spigler, 1973) but also as the result of the will of a 'majestic' leader - worthy successor of a line of brave rulers. This nationalist specific view of communist doctrine encompassed an atrocious burden on economy and the quality of life of Romanian citizens – a forced autarchic project unadjusted to the country's resources which meant inefficient and unprofitable production covered by impoverishing taxation and penury of common goods. This unrealistic exhaustive economic approach, this lack of orientation towards a few clear domains was also the reason why technological advancement lagged behind.

#### **4. 'West by South-East' - Romania's path to modern democracy**

The dissolution of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 did not bring a swift and irrevocable transition towards liberal democracy and market economy. Formal communist leaders and some secret police high rank officers attempted to influence the new regimes into maintaining a close relationship, till 1991, with Soviet Union (Verdery, 1996), forming unofficial and sometimes criminal networks.

Political alternance and full-scale privatization occurred at a different pace among this group of countries: the proximity to Germany set a strong occidental example to countries like Poland and Hungary, while Bulgaria and Romania beneficiated from the oriental capitalist model of Turkey. This situation deeply influenced the common customs of both Balkan people. Being modern in the 90's meant wearing unknown brands of jeans and t-shirts of Turkish origins, listening to local music filled with oriental influences and savoring the delicious ubiquitous kebabs. Romania needed almost ten years (Deletant, 2001) to assume a calendar and advance a clear option towards the European Union and NATO integration. As a result, in 2002 EU countries granted a travel visa lift and the facility of establishing temporary work contracts. It was also a good opportunity for small entrepreneurs to bring merchandise from the West as the most common source till then had been Turkey and China.

The pursuit of modernization and socioeconomic development became steady and increasingly faster once the effects of circular migration to the prosperous West European multinational enterprises settled in (Pop-Eleches, 2010) and contributed to social and economic opening to new technologies. More and more Romanians had the opportunity to learn and embrace the new ways of market economy. At the same time, the social and political life in the country was shaken by fierce power struggles and ample mass protests, frequently the most obvious symptoms of the clash between reforms and set-backs. Generational replacement happened rather slowly; therefore, bureaucracy was often perceived as an obstacle to emancipation and entrepreneurial development.

## 5. 'Thirty-five years of democracy through political protests

As in the case of 1848, the Revolution of December 1989 laid the foundations of Romania's transition from an old oppressive regime to liberal democracy. However, this time, some of the former communist leaders were reluctant to give up power that easily (Gallagher, 2005). Therefore, after a mere five months, on 22 April 1990 an ongoing mass occupation of University Square started. For more than fifty days, an impromptu agora was organized, conferences, concerts and poetry recitals promoted the freedom of speech and the discontent with political leaders grabbing the power after some 'poorly' organized elections.

For the last decade of 20th, century Alianţa Civică (i.e. engl. "The Civic Alliance") was the main organization involved in almost all social protests. Composed mainly of student organizations and uncompromising trade unions, the Alliance spearheaded the modernization of social and political life (Watts, 2004), eventually resulting in the first political alternance with the elections in 1996.

Becoming a member of NATO (2004) and European Union (2007) marked the consolidation of Romania's democratic route (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2007), but also provided a platform for far-right retrograde nationalist agenda initiated by few communist veterans. Slow and steady gliding from heated rhetoric towards insidious populism, the ultra-nationalist movement managed to gather significant potential inside Romanian political spectrum, drawing upon social frustration of a still large enough part of population touched by poverty and lack of education which takes comfort into communist nostalgia.

The second decade of 21-st century was marked by social conflicts steadily growing in intensity. Fueled by the public messages of political leaders (Oehler-Şincai, 2023), mass protests covered multiple social issues: forestry and mining workers versus environmental defenders, straight tradition sticklers versus pride enthusiasts, free-lance (more or less legit) agents versus justice establishment supporters, religious versus secular radicals, etc. These clashes continued also during the beginning of 2020's, having an apex in pro versus. against vaccination movements which particularly manifested as virtual world versus real life confrontation.

The progressive "woke" movement was born from the protests against authorities' corruption and incompetence regarding environmental issues (like in the case of "Uniti Salvam Rosia Montana") or administrative negligence and abuse (like in the case of "Coruptia Ucide" and #REZIST). Its promoters are called "tefelişti" indicative derived from the TFL abbreviation (TFL – "tineri frumoşi şi liberi" can be translated as "young beautiful and free"). The members of the opposite group, the nationalist nostalgic one, are sometimes called "troglodiţi" (troglodytes) or "toothless" (derivative of old poor people who lack teeth) by their opponents mainly on social media. Romanian progressive movement is enforced by Uniunea Slavaţi România (i.e. English "Save Romania Union") Party prone rather to center-right liberal values as opposed to most political organizations in this category which are center or radical left oriented.

There were several occasions when Piaţa Victoriei (Victoria Square) – the landmark of Romanian Government Headquarters witnessed the clashes of progressive and retrograde movements represented by various parties and organizations which thrive on

nostalgic feelings about "the good days of Ceausescu's regime when Romania was strong and respected" (as a participant declared during an interview).

Under the influence of a world-wide resurgence of far-right populist movements induced by the volatility of economic growth and subsequently of the social welfare, Romania is confronted with a thinning legitimacy of mainstream political forces to which progressive movement seems to add-up rather than compensate. On the other hand, the retrograde nostalgic groups claim a new rapprochement with Russia and *étatist* values.

## 6. Conclusion

The second half of 19-th century marked the beginning of Romania's socioeconomic modernization process. Placed under the classic conservative-liberal rivalry, the emancipation of the only Eastern Christian people with Latin origins did not occur smoothly and at a fast pace. Modernization was pushed forward mainly by young intellectuals of rich bourgeois families. They were opposed by conservative old aristocratic landowners who saw the arrival of Western investment and worldly customs as just another colonization attempt in a more subtle manner. These opinions gradually changed with transportation and communication development and subsequent economic growth.

Unfortunately, Romania's path towards modernization was violently interrupted, half into 20th century, by the establishment of the communist regime under the Soviet army occupation. Assuming an empty-shell modernizing social project, the blood-soaked regimes in Eastern Europe managed to instill wide-spread social distrust and sheer reluctance to community actions or common interest objectives.

Once welcomed inside the European Union family, Romanian people felt comfortable to abandon its over fifty-year-old 'subsistence coping' mode for a development aspirational one. This struggle between tradition and progress seems never-ending while its fruitful ideological complex is feeding a thriving Romanian political class.

In present times, populism seems more and more a given of developed countries. Migratory flows coming from Africa and Asia and political instability contribute to the rise of extremely vocal political leaders, who thrive on individual and public resentment constantly fueled by the use of social media platforms.

Since 2008, my fieldworks are focused on protest movements and their transformation once virtual communities were involved. Out of all the ethnographic data I gathered, a common trait revealed almost as an axiom: even if social and political issues raised by the protest participants remained basically the same, a constantly growing pessimistic voice is expressed during interviews - political establishment is perceived as unassuming and impotent in front of world-wide social polarization tendencies.

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