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Resisting through Culture in Communist Romania: Taking the Public's Perspective



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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore in what ways culture was an instrument of resistance against the communist regime in Romania.

Geographically, my research will focus on Romania - the political and geographical entity, such as it was defined by the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty. The chronological limits of my research will be the years 1948 (the year communism set a strong foot in Romania, in the immediate aftermath of the forced abdication of King Michael I of Romania) and, respectively, 1989 (the year when communism officially collapsed in Romania, following the topping down of Ceausescu regime). This 41-year period, during which the country was under totalitarian rule, represented a time of dramatic developments in the political and social life of the country, which had a direct (and equally dramatic) impact on its cultural life, as well.

The official cultural policies of this period imposed a rigid framework of cultural dogmas, the only rationale of which was to "transform the political values into cultural values"¹ - to use the very words of a cultural party activist of the time. The complete instrumentalisation of culture in imposing and consolidating the totalitarian rule was their fundamental goal. In other words, culture was thus regarded and utilised as an efficient instrument working *for* the political power.

But this was only the tip of the iceberg. As I will hopefully manage to show in this paper, underneath the surface, culture was also an instrument likely to work *against* the political power. By looking at the political and cultural context of Romanian communism, one can

¹ in Gabanyi Ute, A., *Literature and Politics in Romania after 1945* (in Romanian) (Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane, 2001), p. 217

notice the existence of a series of cultural mechanisms (or strategies) that manifested as a way to counteract the inexorable pressure exerted by the political power on both individual and society.

How exactly these cultural mechanisms manifested as an instrument of resistance against the totalitarian regime which ruled Romania for 41 years will be the focus of this paper.

In exploring the subject, I will structure this paper on two main chapters. The first chapter will set up the background and framework for my analysis. In a first section, it will provide a brief outline of the current debates in Romania around the theme of cultural resistance. A second section will then explain the approach this paper will take in engaging with the subject. It will draw from observations made about the current approaches, as discussed in the first section, to thus set up the premises for my analysis.

Following the framework outlined in the first chapter, the second chapter will explore five key mechanisms/strategies through which culture can be said to have played a role in resisting the communist system in Romania.

Methodology

The research question has been addressed following the review of available literature, of a series of articles in cultural or regular mass-media, of on-line resources of topical debates, as well as of a series of video and audio resources (containing interviews, public interventions of various authors and a documentary film). In spite of the fact that the concept of 'cultural resistance' is at the centre of Romanian cultural debates (as I will show in the first chapter), the literature dedicated to it, as well as the discussions around it, prioritise the analysis of the

relationship between the artist/intellectual and the political power - with a special emphasis on the ethics around it. While my exploration of the issue has been undertaken from a different angle (that of the public - consumer of culture, as I will explain below), the existing literature theorising on this topic has provided me only with tangential support. As such, the evidence used for the purposes of this paper has consisted mainly of individual testimony from people ('consumers' of culture) who experienced Romanian communism, as well as on various case studies, all taken from the research sources referenced above - drawing on which I will then extrapolate.

In terms of the validity of my research, having in mind the rather unquantifiable nature of the phenomenon of cultural resistance - as well as the fact that the particular perspective from which I have chosen to explore it is under-researched - I believe that the analysis and conclusions of this paper are best viewed as pointers for further detailed validation.

I. Cultural resistance - setting the framework of the analysis

'Cultural resistance' as it is currently approached in the Romanian public discourse: 'transgression' or 'shying away'?

In Romania, the concept of 'cultural resistance' gained visibility in early '90s, shortly after the communist regime officially came to an end². Basically, it has been built around the idea that one of the (few) ways in which the totalitarian communist regime had been opposed in Romania was through culture. According to this narrative, creating works of art that did not

² According to literary critic Adrian Marino, the first public debate on this issue took place in 1991; it consisted of a round table entitled "Rezistentă culturală (literară și artistică) în România" ("Cultural (literary and artistic) resistance in Romania") and it was carried out in the context of the 16th Congress of the Romanian-American Academy (27 June-2 July 1991) - see Marino, A., *Politics and Culture. For a New Romanian Culture* (in Romanian) (Polirom, Iasi, 1996), p. 30 (author's translation)

comply with the ideological requirements of the time, refusing to play a part in the propaganda masquerade, playing a risky hide and seek game with the State's censorship or merely sticking to a certain aesthetic or intellectual ideal - to use but a few illustrative examples - are seen as subtle ways to sabotage the system, and therefore to take an oblique political stance; in other words, a masked way to oppose the regime.

In the preface to a post-communist era edition of *The Paltinis Diary* (a cult book of the 1980s Romania), the author, philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, emblematically endorses this idea:

In this closed universe [totalitarian society], where it is the spirit that is mostly at threat, culture becomes a way of transgression and, by this very fact, it becomes political in nature. [Culture] thus becomes not only an alternative scenario, but a hardly perceptible resistance against complete isolation, fragmentation, discontinuity and massification. [...] When all the means of participation to the destiny of a community are abolished, culture remains a participation in the shadow and a preparation for regeneration. Because of this, it is subversive to the highest degree.³

This rather radical standpoint is not free from (often strong) criticism, though. A no less radical, alternative perspective denies any undermining influence that culture might have had on the power structures in communist Romania. Rather, this attempt to attach a political significance to culture is regarded as an artificial way to justify an alleged passivity, a lack of a stronger, more decisive civic stance against the regime, as well as a lack of solidarity (at the level of the Romanian society, as a whole, but in particular at the level of its intellectual class) - especially when compared to other communist countries, like Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary. As such, to claim that culture was an instrument (an efficient one, too) against the totalitarian system is regarded as a way to euphemize what in reality was a cowardly, and very often opportunistic, submissiveness. From this perspective, 'resisting through culture'

³ Liiceanu, G., *Paltinis Diary* (in Romanian) (Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991), p. 6-7 (author's translation)

would be no more than an 'easy harmless pretext not to confront the regime in a direct and risky manner'⁴.

The clash between these two extreme points of view was paradigmatically reflected by a memorable public dialogue between the above mentioned Gabriel Liiceanu and the Romanian-born, German author Herta Müller - within the context of the latter's visit to Bucharest in autumn 2010. On the occasion, the 'resistance through culture' thesis, advocated by G. Liiceanu (according to whom, basically, "each 'clean' book born during that time was a way to say no to the world we lived in")⁵, was sternly rejected by the Nobel Prize awarded writer, who placed herself at the completely opposite end of the debate:

*What you would like me to praise seems too insignificant to me; there's nothing I could say about it. It was just a way to preserve one's honesty at a mere individual level, something one did for oneself only, in order to stay morally clean, but it was not something against dictatorship[...]. If there had been more people to disturb this dictatorship, the latter couldn't have possibly become each day more sinister.[...]Books were also a means to shy away. A private honest gesture to write 'clean' books was not a gesture against the system.*⁶

So - was it 'transgression' or 'shying away'? Was it subversive opposition or euphemized submission? As noticed by literary critic Sanda Cordos, the concept of 'cultural resistance' 'has vacillated, in the public speech of these latest years, between a disparaging (towards the limits of dishonoring) meaning and a positive, legitimizing (sometimes ennobling) one'⁷. As an element likely to have a considerable weight in the hindsight assessment of the relationship between artist/intellectual and totalitarian power, it is only natural for the 'cultural resistance' theme to still stir passions in one sense or the other. Raising questions about the moral responsibility of the artist/intellectual in the face of an oppressive political

⁴ <http://stirile.rol.ro/print/marino-bantuie-noptile-dusmanilor-sai--574651.html> (author's translation); (accessed August 2013)

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-ebqrCukUo> (accessed August 2013); author's translation

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Cordos, S. *In the New World* (in Romanian) (Dacia, 2003), p.10 (author's translation)

force, about the nature and limits of compromise, cannot be an easy undertaking in a country that, for more than 40 years, had to find its way in an intricate labyrinth of challenges - among which, not the least difficult, were the moral ones. The ethical perspective has thus increased the stakes of the cultural debate on the issue of 'cultural resistance', which has contributed to radicalizing views. With rather few exceptions (notably former dissident poet Ana Blandiana⁸ who recognises the inherent ambiguities of such polarised debate) most positions concerning this subject seem to fundamentally embrace one side or the other of the argument.

Thus, rather than repeat the debate in Romania on the issue of 'cultural resistance' as summarised above, this paper will try to take a different approach in order to contribute fresh insight.

Setting up the premises of my analysis: broadening the perspectives

Building on the experience of the Romanian debates, summarized above, this paper will approach the issue of 'cultural resistance' in communist Romania using two main premises for its analysis; the rationale for each will be explained below. These premises are as follows:

- 1) The focus of analysis will be on the public-consumer of culture, and not on the artist/intellectual-producer of culture;
- 2) I will use an inclusive, wider meaning of the concept of 'resistance'.

I will now look at each of these premises in turns.

⁸ For Ana Blandiana, 'cultural resistance' represented a phenomenon which was 'half way between explicit political resistance and nothingness'. As such, according to her, although its existence was real and cannot be ignored, 'what was done at a cultural level does not compensate and does not stand as an excuse for what was not done at a political level' - <http://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/13073/Comunicat-de-presa/Ana-Blandiana-la-Cultura-bate-criză-in-89-as-fi-votat-legea-lustratiei.html> (accessed August 2013) (author's translation)

1) A review of the available literature reveals that the 'cultural resistance' theme has been treated mostly as a relationship articulated exclusively between the artist/intellectual and the totalitarian system. As such, as briefly outlined in the paragraphs above, the accent has been mainly put on the attitude of the former towards the latter. The exploration of the concept thus developed more as 'a both collective and personal conscience exam'⁹ of the man of culture *vis-à-vis* the political power. Despite its merits in contributing to the debate, such a perspective - preoccupied as it is, for the most part, with the issue of the 'betrayal of intellectuals' (to use Julien Benda's famous formula from the book of the same name) - has the downside to only partially tackle the 'cultural resistance' subject.

I believe that the binomial relation *culture-power* cannot be completely understood unless transformed into a trinomial equation - the third variable of which should be the *public*, the consumer of cultural 'products'. In this vein, also with Marx's statement in mind, that 'a product becomes a real product only by being consumed'¹⁰, approaching the issue from the public's perspective reveals its necessity.

The public represents the primordial target of both forces - cultural and political. If there is to be a confrontation between the two, it seems that the public is the battlefield and, at the same time, the stake and the 'turnsole paper' of this confrontation.

The public's cultural preferences (openly or secretly expressed); the strategies it uses in following these preferences, by deviating from the official ideology's narrow street (rigorously 'patrolled' by the 'thought police'); the way it falls into (or manages to avoid) the

⁹ Marino (1996), p. 21

¹⁰ in Hanne. M., *The Power of the Story. Fiction and Political Change* (Berghahn Books, Providence and Oxford, 1996), p. 26

propaganda traps - all these are reflective of the ways in which culture can stand against political power (be it in a successful manner or not). Not paying enough attention to these aspects means overlooking an important perspective, one which can throw a potentially informative light on the issue and which has hitherto been underutilised.

Having in mind the above, my investigation of the 'cultural resistance' phenomenon in communist Romania will focus on the public, as the recipient of the cultural product - and less on the artist/intellectual, the producer of culture. The *public* will include, of course, artists/intellectuals - but my analysis will engage with their quality of cultural 'consumers', and not that of cultural 'producers'. Looking at the way art/culture reverberated down into the public within (and in spite of) the context of the 41 years of totalitarianism, will be thus a key red thread of my analysis.

2) Having specified the particular research angle from which the subject of this paper will be tackled, a brief exploration of the main term of reference - the concept of 'cultural resistance' - will also be useful at this preliminary stage of analysis. Given the highly passionate debates over the issue, it is natural that the debate over what 'cultural resistance' actually means has been surrounded by some controversy in Romanian public discourse. Identifying some firm ground on which to build my argumentation is thus required.

In order to achieve this, in this section I will initially briefly reveal some of the perspectives from which the notion of 'cultural resistance' has been mainly discussed. Against this background, I will then explain how the meaning of 'cultural resistance' will be used for the purposes of the paper.

The controversy around the historical assessment of the nature of 'cultural resistance' during Romania's communist period (as explained in the previous section) is interlinked with disagreement over the meaning of the word 'resistance' itself. Thus, notwithstanding more sophisticated arguments that come against each other into the debate, the clashing views stem also from a dissimilar semantic interpretation of the word.

There are two nuances that the term can entail, which, in the context of the argument, can lead to contrasting interpretations of the phenomenon, as such, and also of its scope. As poet Ana Blandiana noticed, on the one hand, 'resistance' can mean 'opposition', 'fighting back'; on the other, it can simply mean 'survival', 'endurance'¹¹. The former thus implies an active, offensive stance; the latter, a passive, defensive attitude.

In contrast with the supporters of the 'resistance through culture' narrative, who rely on both 'degrees' of meaning in the construction of their argumentation, its critics use only the first, more strict, meaning as a reference point. From this latter perspective, the 'resistance' nature of a cultural gesture tends to be judged as being directly proportional with the level of assertiveness behind it. The less assertive, the less 'resisting' the regime. So, according to this narrative, unless 'active', unless overtly 'against', a cultural expression cannot be qualified as 'resistant' - but, at most and more properly defined, as mere '*surviving* through culture'. This latter formula was suggested by writer Ruxandra Cesereanu, on the occasion of a 2003 debate on the 'cultural resistance' theme, carried out at *Phantasma* Centre for Imagination Studies, of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca¹².

¹¹ <http://www.romanioliberal.ro/opinii/interviuri/ana-blandiana-imaginea-mea-literara-a-fost-intunecata-de-zoaiete-vietii-publice-218397.html> (accessed August 2013) (author's translation)

¹² Verbatim of this debate can be found at: <http://phantasma.ro/wp/?p=3394> (accessed August 2013)

The necessity of acknowledging such nuances was justified during the same event by Corin Braga, as follows:

There is the risk for the term 'resistance' to become a heroism-bestowing term, by transferring a hyperbolic value to a phenomenon [...] which cannot be attributed this dimension.[...]The risk is that, by declaring myself as 'resistant through culture', when in fact I was just a survivor, I am actually hiding and ennobling a little cowardice which I feel guilty of¹³.

Once again, the ethical considerations behind the question of the 'betrayal of intellectuals' come into play, even in the field of semantics... This 'purist'¹⁴ approach (as Sanda Cordos labels it), restricting the phenomenon to open acts of opposition, is nevertheless challenged by those who find that a more 'indulgent' and inclusive interpretation of the word 'resistance' would be perhaps more appropriate when assessing the phenomenon - having in mind the particularities of the political-historical context and the high degree of suppression exercised by the communist regime. In this respect, Ovidiu Mircean notices:

I find this distinction between survival and resistance superfluous. As long as the system had programmatically decided to destroy individuality, any form of survival of the individuality would entail, at the end of the day, a resistance against the regime. The question is at what point we should effectively detach a gesture expressly manifested at a social level - resistance - from a private, individual act of survival.¹⁵

Mircean's rhetorical question might be relevant, especially when considered through the prism of social ethics and when the moral responsibility of the intellectual is discussed. Risking one's life, freedom, physical or psychical integrity on behalf of a community, by manifestly and critically going against the grain of a totalitarian rule, cannot be axiologically equivalent to silently shielding oneself from the relentless attacks of an ideology, in a purely personal attempt to remain loyal to a set of values - denied, in essence, by that ideology. In

¹³ *ibid.* (author's translation)

¹⁴ *ibid.* (author's translation)

¹⁵ *ibid.* (author's translation)

other words, private non-compliance has value, but it cannot be equated with the raw courage of those who openly confront. From this perspective, it should be only fair to acknowledge this distinction - even if one accepts the idea that the defence of that particular set of (opposing) values is, ultimately, the goal that motivates both types of attitudes.

Nevertheless, this paper will disregard this distinction. As such, it will take an 'inclusive' approach, encompassing both semantic levels of the reference term. The reasons are outlined below.

First - as I have showed above, my analysis will be focusing on the *public*, the recipient and consumer of the cultural 'product', and not on the *creator*. In a totalitarian system's cultural chain, the public, in relation to both the artist-producer and the political power-(supreme) gatekeeper, represents a passive 'principle': it is reactive rather than active. As such, the 'resistance through culture' that might manifest at the level of the public will likely be passive by its very nature. It is a response, rather than an articulated initiative. Yet, it is a response that can still have consequences within the overall implementation of the totalitarian project. Failing to look at these consequences because they are a result of a mere 'passive-defensive' stance would remove an important premise from any assessment of 'cultural resistance'.

Second - I do not intend to look at the Romanian 'cultural resistance' experience through the filter of social ethics - like it has been usually done. Instead, I would like to focus, *sine ira et studio* (to the extent possible...), on what concretely happened and on its relevance thereof - and not on what, retrospectively and ideally, should have happened. How did the *soft power* of culture actually interact with the *hard power* of the totalitarian regime and how did this interaction manifest at grass root level? Beyond value judgments, any cultural mechanisms

employed as a means to elude the control of a tyrannical political power - be it in an assertive or in a passive-defensive manner - have the potential to be relevant in this respect. Hence, the necessity for both active and passive dimensions of the concept 'resistance' to be taken into consideration.

Third - in my opinion, an assessment of the 'cultural resistance' phenomenon should focus on cultural facts and their significance within the totalitarian construction - and not on the political gestures of cultural actors. For example, an active protest of a dissident man of culture - unless manifested through a cultural expression - does not represent, in my view, a form of *cultural* resistance, but a form of *political* resistance. It is not the *subject* (being a cultural actor) that determines the nature of resistance, but the *means* (what one does in order to 'resist') used by the subject. As such, when the lack of assertiveness is invoked in disparaging the idea of a cultural resistance in Romania, what is in fact targeted, in my opinion, is not so much a cultural attitude, but, rather, a political stance. With this in mind, I find that the all-encompassing meaning of the concept 'resistance' would be more appropriate as a premise for this paper - considering the fact that culture's ways are more often than not subtle, rather than directly overt.

Last, but not least - I believe that the specific political context, with its pressure put on individual and society (as addressed in the next chapter) cannot and should not be overlooked. Tzvetan Todorov noted that

[t]he heroism of those who experienced Holocaust or Gulag consists in the fact that they managed to remain human beings. It is not pure (conceptual) heroism, like in the past.¹⁶

¹⁶ in Ceseranu, R., *Voyage towards the Centre of the Inferno. Gulag in Romanian Conscience* (in Romanian) (Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane, 1998), p. 178

If one is mindful also of the fact that 'these monstrosities of history [...] were being set up within history under the sign of eternity'¹⁷, completely obstructing the horizon of any hope of deliverance, Todorov's remark is even more thought-provoking.

From this perspective (and without ceasing to pay tribute to the 'pure' hero, who, in spite all odds, continued to exist), a passive-defensive attempt to preserve a certain set of human values - deeply at threat within a totalitarian system - is no less a potential instrument to stand against that system. This paper aims at exploring this potentiality, in all its forms, direct or subtle, active or passive, courageous or prudent.

To summarize, this first chapter set up the premises based on which I will carry out my analysis. I have thus explained the necessity to focus on the public, as a receiver and consumer of cultural products, rather than on the artist/intellectual, as a cultural producer. At the same time, I have shown the reasons why, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen an 'inclusive', larger semantic outline for the reference term, the concept of 'cultural resistance'.

Bearing in mind these premises, I will now look at the actual way in which culture might have played a role in resisting the pressure the communist power in Romania exerted over individual and society alike.

II. Strategies of resistance

Using the framework of analysis outlined above, in this chapter I will look at five concrete ways (hereinafter also referred to as strategies or mechanisms) in which culture manifested as a potential instrument of resistance against the totalitarian regime in Romania. The first four

¹⁷ <http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html> (author's translation); (accessed August 2013)

strategies (a-d) have 'high culture' at their core, while the fifth strategy (e) will analyse the impact of 'popular culture'.

The inventory of the cultural strategies put forward in this paper might not be exhaustive: further research might identify additional mechanisms in this respect. Nevertheless, I believe that this list is illustrative of the ways in which culture was used by the Romanian public as a tool of resistance against a hostile political force - and thus able to provide a valid platform for my analysis.

Before starting my exploration, for a better understanding, I will provide a very brief description of the political and historical context against the background of which these cultural strategies emerged.

It is to be noticed, first of all, that the communist era in Romania was not homogenous¹⁸. Instead, it was characterised by a succession of distinct stages, each of them showing specific particularities which reverberated also in the official cultural policies of the time - hence determining the manifestation of specific forms of cultural resistance.

There are several periodisation grids used by researchers of the Romanian communist phenomenon. According to their focus, these grids might slightly (although not essentially) differ¹⁹. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to a simplified grid version, which is sufficiently comprehensive, without being scrupulously detailed, and which encompasses two

¹⁸ <http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html>; (accessed August 2013)

¹⁹ For illustrative purposes, I will mention three studies that put forward various grids that are more or less similar, yet not identical: Ute Gabanyi, A. (2001); Negrici, E., *Literature and Propaganda in Communist Romania* (in English) (The Romanian Cultural Foundation Cultural House, 1999); The 2006 *Report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, (a.k.a *Tismaneanu Report*) available at http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf (accessed August 2013).

main stages: 1948-1965 (Stalinist period) and 1965-1989 (nationalistic communism and development of communist leader Ceausescu's cult of personality)²⁰.

The first period, *1948-1965*, represents the dark age of Romanian communism, its main characteristic being the extreme brutality with which the regime manifested at all levels possible²¹. As essay writer Horia-Roman Patapievici put it, this period 'was the era of the annihilation of classical Romania and of her human, social, political, institutional structures'²². The model used in this respect were the Stalinist purges in the 1930s; the aim was the quick taming of the population, by ways of sheer terror. Moscow, in fact, assumed all the prerogatives of an occupying force and became the supreme reference point in all imaginable domains, any attempt to challenge this being drastically repressed.

Culture was among the first and most affected casualties of this new political context. This should be related to the fact that - as suggested by the above-mentioned *Tismaneanu Report*,

*[i]n the (Leninist in nature) vision of the communist parties (acting under Moscow subordination), literature, as well as culture in general, belonged to the category of instruments efficient in conquering and consolidating power.*²³

As such, culture was put through a process of complete subordination by the political power, with a view to be used as an exclusive instrument of the latter. Thus, as described by Gabriel Liiceanu²⁴, from a cultural perspective, this period is characterised by three main themes: an

²⁰ <http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html>; (accessed August 2013). See also Patapievici, H.-R., *Politics* (in Romanian) (Humanitas, 1996), p. 103

²¹ see, for example, the above mentioned *Tismaneanu Report*, available at http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf

²² Patapievici, *Politics* (1996), p. 103

²³ *Tismaneanu Report.*, p. 489 (author's translation)

²⁴ <http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html> (author's translation); (accessed August 2013)

inescapable cult of ideology; a strict, vigilant and omnipresent censorship; and, ultimately, a harsh punitive system, ready to activate as soon as ideology/censorship/new order were (or seemed to be) challenged in the slightest way.

Significantly, a brochure titled *Publications forbidden by 1 May 1948* counts 500 pages; four years later, it included an ever increasing list of 8779 titles²⁵.

Beside, not only books, but also (or especially) people are hunted down²⁶: this is a time when, notoriously, hundreds of intellectuals (together with thousands of representatives of other classes of the Romanian society) were sentenced *en masse* to long years of hard prison - following absurd or invented incriminations.

On the other hand, the 1965-1989 period, although tough and restrictive, is considered to have been relatively less brutal than the previous one. Once firmly installed, the communist power felt comfortable enough to slightly ease up. This process had started shortly after Stalin's death, in 1953, only to be stopped in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution (when a new wave of terror was preventively lashed out). Eventually, the slow detachment from Moscow's complete control, carried out in mid 1960s²⁷ (when, also, the political prisoners were released), determined a relative relaxation of the communist regime in Bucharest.

This also reflected in the official cultural policy - with censorship, although not concretely abolished, becoming to some degree more tolerant or, at least, more easily surpassed²⁸.

²⁵ *Tismaneanu Report*, p. 489

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 490

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 22

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 501

Nevertheless, in a short time, by the early 1970s, the 'cult of ideology' (above mentioned as specific to the first stage) was replaced by a 'cult of personality', the centre of which was president Nicolae Ceausescu.

As noticed by Gabriel Liiceanu²⁹, in the 'Ceausescu period', the 'punishment' for not complying with the regime's dogmas was more 'subtle' and more varied: physical extermination, as well as imprisonment, were still used as a method - but only in specific cases. The regime mainly based its control on preventive intimidation, through the psychological and physical harassments undertaken by its secret police, the *Securitate*, with consequences such as losing position, losing right of signature (in the case of writers) or even forced expatriation³⁰.

Against this background, it is evident that 'resistance through culture' could not manifest as a homogenous process either over the course of the 41 years of Romanian communism - but in specific manners and to various degrees, in accordance with the particularities of the 'stages' described above. As such, the five strategies of cultural resistance, analysed below, are not all characteristic of both phases of Romanian communism. Thus, the first discussed strategy (a) is particular to the first, more brutal stage; strategies (b) and (d) are examined mainly with the second phase as a historical-political background - although they could also be found to manifest in the first stage, albeit with less intensity; strategies (c) and (e) are, however, entirely specific to the second period of Romanian communism - having in mind the

²⁹ <http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html> (author's translation); (accessed August 2013)

³⁰ *ibid.*

strictness of the first communist stage, which would have made their manifestation impossible.

I will now start my exploration of each of the five cultural resistance strategies, on the trail of my research question.

a) Culture vs. political prison

In this section the focus will be on a very particular (and unusual) segment of the Romanian public-consumer of culture: political prisoners. I will try to examine in what way culture was an instrument of resistance for this category of people - whom, I would say, represent one of the sad symbols of the historical period under consideration.

The extreme experience of political prisoners was fully brought to light subsequent to the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, when an increasing number of memoirs/ *littérature de témoignage* started being published³¹. Unimaginable realities were suddenly revealed so that, as noticed by Ruxandra Cesereanu, since 1990 the Romanian reader 'has swiftly switched from a *literature of the hypocrisy* to a *literature of the infernal truth*'³².

This *littérature de témoignage*, nevertheless, revealed something beyond the 'infernal truth': the human capacity to endure, to preserve humanity against all odds, to transcend the most atrocious circumstances. It is perhaps significant to mention that one of the most remarkable examples of these works - a real cult-book of the Romanian contemporary literature - bears the paradoxical title *The Diary of Happiness* (the author is Nicolae Steinhardt).

³¹ According to *Tismaneanu Report* (p. 308), between 1990 and 2006 (the year the *Report* was published), about 150 memoirs on detention were published.

³² Cesereanu (1998), p. 71

What would the source of this metaphorical 'happiness' be in a Romanian communist political prison - a place conceived as a centre of physical and moral extermination? Apart from faith, which - as so much of this *témoignage* literature bears witness - transfigured many of the lives of those who underwent this particular type of detention, one of the ways to survive such circumstances (or, in other words, to *resist* them) was through cultural means.

In prison, as Sanda Cordos put it, 'literature [by extension culture] had an existential function'³³. It provided moral support and spiritual sustenance in the most concrete sense, as Lutheran vicar Richard Wurmbrand confesses:

*I would often recite for hours in a row, although sick and dizzy with starvation: a story could keep a man alive as good as a loaf of bread could.*³⁴

The role of such 'improvised Scheherazade-s'³⁵ stories (which often consisted in re-telling some of the great books of universal literature³⁶) was primarily to distract attention from the immediate squalor. Operating like a buffer between mind and the aggressive reality, they were also a tool of mental hygiene, providing some minimal level of psychological comfort.

Nicolae Steinhardt comments on these improvised 'reading circles', and the literary debates they triggered, carried out far from the vigilant eyes and ears of the guardians:

*You can clearly see that, for an hour or two, they [the inmates] completely forget where they actually are. Abstraction and documentation spread their enchanted net and carry off people within joy, [within] delusion.*³⁷

³³ <http://phantasma.ro/wp/?p=3394> (author's translation)(accessed September 2013)

³⁴ in Cesereanu (1998), pp 160-161 (author's translation)

³⁵ Cesereanu (1998), p. 94 (author's translation)

³⁶ Steinhardt, N., *The Diary of Happiness* (in Romanian)(Dacia, 1991), p. 83

³⁷ Steinhardt (1991), p. 85 (author's translation)

The same goes with other artistic expressions - such as, for example, as witnessed by artist Lena Constante, the silent 'piano' performance of one woman detainee who mentally played an imaginary instrument - with all the inmates following her like in a real concert³⁸.

These cultural 'getaways' provided a beneficial and most needed form of escapism, likely to reinforce the spirit in its attempts to *resist* the crushing that the penitentiary system was programmatically aiming at. As such, culture operated like a cathartic filter through which reality was passed through in order to be endured.

Sometimes, in more extreme situations, it was even more than that: metaphorically, it could be seen as a balancing stick that ensured the safe crossing of the fine line between sanity and insanity, between life and death. It is the case, for example, of Corneliu Coposu (personal secretary to the leader of one of the pre-communist political parties), who, for almost eight years was kept in perfect seclusion, including the prohibition of any speech. According to his subsequent re-telling, one of the measures he took in order to prevent madness during his isolation was his regular internal reciting of poetry - practiced as a mental exercise, as a daily routine of mind training³⁹. Similarly, Lena Constante, horribly tortured and completely isolated in her cell for 3000 days, fearing insanity, started 'writing' theatre plays in her mind and even making drawings and sculptures in her imagination, as a way to maintain control over her own psyche⁴⁰.

Culture, such as it manifested in Romanian political prisons, should however not only be seen as an individual solution of endurance in the face of hostile force. In fact, as I will argue

³⁸ in Cesereanu (1998), p. 156

³⁹ *ibid.* p. 173

⁴⁰ <http://phantasma.ro/wp/?p=3394> (author's translation)(accessed September 2013)

below, the 'imprisoned' culture was a tool set against the goals of the communist regime (albeit in an indirect, long term and non programmatic way).

To understand better, one must consider what were the widely stated primordial ambitions of the newly-installed power. As essay writer Andrei Plesu simply put it,

[the regime] wanted the forging of a 'new man': with other criteria and options than those of the traditional man. In order to achieve this project, the key-notion is 're-education': other models, another memory, other mores and manners.⁴¹

The Romanian political prison - conceived as the paragon 're-education' institution of the 'new order' - was, paradoxically, one of the few 'places' of Romanian society where this 're-education' failed. Here, the old, 'classical' set of moral and intellectual values managed to be preserved, against all odds. In this respect, culture played a major role. Bringing together the most prestigious elites of the time (from any imaginable field of activity) transformed these prisons in something more than the monstrosities that they were: they became real 'breeding grounds' for culture.

The *littérature de témoignage* abounds in reports about the academic atmosphere that often seemed to simply defy physical and moral abuse practiced in a ritualistic manner in these penal institutions. As such, in the vision of one of the former inmates, prison could be regarded as an 'initiativ realm, equal to Delos, Oxford or Harvard'⁴². In this vein, an emblematic prison scene (taking place, obviously, beyond the awareness of the guarding authorities) is described by Nicolae Steinhardt in his *Diary of Happiness*:

[...]several cultural circles are being organised: Sanskrit lessons, taught by Dr. Al-G., art history (Remus Niculescu), Spanish (Theodor Enescu), general biology (Dr. C. Raileanu), cultural history (Al. Pal.), agricultural techniques (Iacov Noica),

⁴¹ Plesu, A., *On Joy in East and West and Other Essays* (in Romanian)(Humanitas, 2006, 2007), p. 46 (author's translation)

⁴² Sirbu, I.D., *Crossing the Curtain. Correspondence with Ion Negoitescu, Virgil Nemoianu, Mariana Sora* (in Romanian) (Editura de Vest, 1994), p. 443 (author's translation)

*philosophy of law (Dinu Ranetti); I myself 'open' an English language course. [...]There are also subjects of a more mundane nature: a certain Mr. Radu Ant. [...]informs us in detail about the technique of cooking food in the traditional peasant clay oven.*⁴³

As such, not only was the dire reality transgressed through this intense engagement with culture, but, more importantly, the memory of the 'old world' (one of the things that the new regime was fiercely fighting to annihilate) was kept alive.

The political prison was not able to create the 'new man'. In a paradoxical and ironic way, it became a platform for reinforcing the model of the 'old' one. Later on, after their release, the former political prisoners became, as Andrei Plesu remarked, 'conveyors of a tradition of intellectual *normality*'⁴⁴. As such, in the newly created society, they were preservers of an apparently long forgotten set of values that could potentially be paid forward.

In the next section, using the example of a former political prisoner, philosopher Constantin Noica, I will examine how this set of intellectual values, saved under such extreme circumstances, was actually transmitted to the younger generation - also as a form of cultural resistance.

b) Culture - past time and ivory tower

On the occasion of a gathering with his readers, essay writer and philosopher Andrei Plesu recounted a short anecdote. He humorously told how, during a meeting in the 1990s with a Russian peer, he proudly informed the latter about the highly impressive number of volumes (40,000) of an edition of the philosopher Martin Heidegger's work, that had been printed and sold in Romania during the last years of its communist past. The fishing-for-compliments

⁴³ Steinhardt (1991), p. 83 (author's translation)

⁴⁴ in Cesereanu (1998), p. 177 (author's translation)

information, pointing at the unusual and laudable interest for such an abstruse philosopher, was given a flabbergasting reply: 'How many did you say you had? 40,000? Well, we had 500,000,000...'⁴⁵

Beyond the humorous aspect of this scene, there is, nevertheless, the reality of an astonishing interest for books, and for culture in general, which was specific to this type of totalitarian society. Liviu Ornea talks about a 'fury of reading'⁴⁶, which was manifest at all levels of society, with reading developing as a 'mass phenomenon'⁴⁷.

This interest can be explained from two different perspectives. A first explanation might be provided by Sanda Cordos's observation that

*literature stood for newspapers and stood for a lot of other things. [...] many books were successful not just because they were great works of art, but because they were answering an interest that, in a normal society, was solved by mass-media. As such, in a fictional work you would read news in brief, you would read miscellanea, you would read everything you could not read in a newspaper.*⁴⁸

From this perspective, literature - culture, by extrapolation - can be seen as providing an outlet for a repressed natural need for amusement - which was denied in a deeply politicised environment, completely dominated by the *perpetuum mobile* of the propaganda machine. Culture provided a way out, towards a shielded space of relative 'normality'.

Can this 'way out' be qualified as also a way to 'resist' the regime, though? No matter how dim its influence might have been, culture - analysed from this perspective - can be seen as

⁴⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYViU_XaRSA (accessed September 2013)

⁴⁶ Ornea, L., 'Bifurcations. My Generation', *Observatorul Cultural*, 28 June 2013, http://www.observatorcultural.ro/BIFURCATII.-My-generation*articleID_28829-articles_details.html (accessed September 2013)

⁴⁷ Cordos, S. <http://phantasma.ro/wp/?p=3394> (accessed September 2013)

⁴⁸ *ibid.* (author's translation) (accessed September 2013)

playing a role in preventing the total conditioning of the individual, as choreographed by the regime; as such, it did represent a form of resistance.

In its classical book on totalitarianism, *The Captive Mind*, Czeslaw Milosz makes the observation that "[m]an tends to regard the world he lives in as natural"⁴⁹. Thus, no matter how absurd the rules one has to live by every day, they eventually end up being assimilated as normal, as 'natural' - should no alternative reference points (even if virtual) be available in order to challenge these given rules. From this angle, culture - and its mass consumption - was not only a form of mass escapism, a mere entertainment used to compensate other (denied) forms of amusement. It also provided some alternative reference points and thus played a role in re-defining 'normality'. This way, as Cordos put it, it 'kept active in society some community values of a general nature, other than those promoted by the official ideology'⁵⁰. In other words, it provided a way to 'resist' that ideology, by generating 'anti-bodies' against it - even though not knowingly or coherently assumed as such.

If the first perspective, to explain the remarkable interest for culture in communist Romania, derives from a more common need for entertainment, there exists also a second dimension of a higher spiritual nature, namely that culture was one of the few ways that could put meaning into a life otherwise placed by history under the sign of absurdity. Culture thus represented: a searching tool for a deeper meaning; an alternative existence in a universe parallel to the historical reality, where inner freedom could compensate the lack of outer freedom; and the possibility of a fulfilled destiny - if not socially, then perhaps more importantly, metaphysically.

⁴⁹ Czeslaw, M., *The Captive Mind* (Penguin Books, 2001), p. 25

⁵⁰ <http://phantasma.ro/wp/?p=3394> (accessed September 2013)

This 'philosophy' of culture started to develop as a coherent phenomenon around several outstanding figures of Romanian intellectuals, many of them representatives of the old antebellum intelligentsia, who played the role of 'underground' cultural 'gurus' for a whole generation of young people looking for a different set of values than the ones proclaimed by the official ideology. Among these, maybe the most influential was the already mentioned philosopher Constantin (Dinu) Noica, himself a former political prisoner, to whom I will shortly refer below.

For Noica, history was unimportant, it was accidental and inexorable at the same time, and as such, should have been disregarded and simply not opposed politically⁵¹. It was like a hurricane that one needed to take shelter from - the only viable shelter being culture. Noica's deep conviction was that 'Romania [had] but one chance, through culture, because the historical destiny [had been] denied to her'⁵². He dedicated his whole life to this one chance and, as such, among his cultural projects, he assumed the role of 'cultural trainer'⁵³, initially selecting young talented Philosophy students and privately 'training' them. Later on, this transformed into a cultural phenomenon, inspiring both intellectuals and general public alike.

Gabriel Liiceanu, one of his disciples, recounts in the Preface to his *Paltinis Diary*, a book that describes his transformative meeting with Noica:

[c]ulture was not a simple school exercise there, it did not aim at 'becoming cultivated', but represented a formation and a transformation from the depth of your being, it was Bildung, paideia, birth of the self, of individuality, of autonomous thinking, pulling itself from the world of forced and planned imbecilisation.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Liiceanu (1991), p. 13-14

⁵² in Petreu, M., *From Junimea to Noica. Studies on Romanian Culture* (in Romanian)(Polirom, 2011), p. 499 (author's translation)

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 503 (author's translation)

⁵⁴ Liiceanu (1991), p. 13 (author's translation)

His arduously preached belief in the transformative and central role of culture (reminding somehow of the Arnoldian 'sweetness and light'), created a legend around Noica, especially after the publishing of *Paltinis Diary*, in 1983, a book that soon became legendary itself in Romanian literature:

Thousands of young people each year, from all over the country, would go to Paltinis⁵⁵ in order to find, with the help of the 'trainer of spirit' a life solution.⁵⁶

Noica's model, based on the idea that - as synthesised by G. Liiceanu - 'any inferno could become bearable if the paradise of culture was possible'⁵⁷ put forward a possible solution of resistance - if not *against*, at least *within* the totalitarian system, 'pointing beyond [the existing order] culturally in creative works, but not politically in action'⁵⁸. This solution consisted in consciously ignoring history, withdrawing into the 'ivory tower' of culture and having access to a higher meaning, in an attempt to save your spirit.

The most important outcome of this 'strategy' would consist in the fact that, this way, the spirit was prone to acquire immunity against the contingent realities of history and politics - surviving and finding fulfilment at a superior, transcendental level. Nevertheless, one can argue that, from this perspective, what is acquired on a metaphysical level, can be lost on a contingent level: while the spirit might flourish, active political opposition can lose stamina/momentum. As such, as suggested by Ruxandra Cesereanu, 'excessive spiritualisation' can become a way to accept the 'evil'⁵⁹, to allow it to flourish as well, along with the 'spirit'.

⁵⁵ the mountain resort where Noica retired

⁵⁶ Liiceanu (1991), p. 12 (author's translation)

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11 (author's translation)

⁵⁸ Goldfarb, J.C., *Reinventing Political Culture. The Power of Culture versus the Culture of Power* (Polity Press 2012), p. 59

⁵⁹ Cesereanu (1998), p. 113-114

One can thus argue that the 'ivory tower' solution of resistance is a double-edge sword, with the potential to destroy what it actually tries to protect. Its merits are related mainly to the fact that certain cultural values were preserved this way and passed on through the roughness of history, like an endangered treasure. As such, the normality re-defining 'alternative reference points', previously referenced, were kept in place within a society that faced the danger of becoming more and more autistic.

At the same time, there were other, more 'interactive' (though still subtle) ways to culturally take a stance against the system. In the next section I will explore one of them.

c) Development of a double language; complicity created between creator and public

A popular political joke, circulating during the last years of Romanian communism, would go: two pensioners are chatting in the park. One of them says: 'It looks like it's going to rain again.' The other one answers: 'Yeah! Bloody bastards!...!'

This short, dry-humoured, political anecdote - where, to any Romanian living at that time, the 'bastards' would be naturally identifiable as the regime's agents - is very illustrative of a particular form of cultural resistance that I would like to discuss in the present section: the double language of artistic creations and the complicity it generated between the artist and the public.

The double language, used as a way to convey otherwise unspeakable truths, represents one of the particularities of both social and cultural life of communist Romania - especially during the last stage of the regime. The masked 'message', the transmission of an officially inconvenient truth by 'wrapping' it up in an apparently 'innocent' expression represented one

of the ways in which artists would usually try to surpass censorship, in an attempt to preserve their artistic freedom. On its turn, the public was not only fully aware of this 'technique', but also - having in mind the level of exasperation and tension that the population was experiencing⁶⁰ - was constantly eager to 'decipher' this message, which was expected to be always 'there'. So much so that, as poet Ana Blandiana recalls it, 'they would notice anything, sometimes they would notice what was not even there'⁶¹ (hence the joke's absurd association of rain with people in power).

This abnormal sensitivity to the 'underground' meaning emerged as a counter-reaction to the paranoia of the official censorship, affecting all cultural and mass-media expressions - the restrictions of which could reach absurd, if not ludicrous levels. Illustrative in this respect is writer Norman Manea's account on how one of his books was refused publishing because (among other reasons), it contained words such as '*queues, rape, informer, meat, cold, tyranny, coffee, suicide, breasts, God, anti-Semitism, whore, darkness, homosexual* etc. etc.'⁶². The idiosyncrasies of the regime were multiple, unpredictable and very burdensome on the language. Thus, a parallel language, with words breaking through their normal 'aura' of meaning, started being developed, in an attempt to (creatively and, very often, humorously) find its way around forbidden 'areas'.

This 'creative attempt' was not only the appanage of the artist, but also, and to the same extent, the public's, who, in receiving the message, was as imaginative and astute. Thus, the

⁶⁰ Blandiana, A., *From Censorship as Form of Freedom, to Freedom as a Form of Censorship*, conference, 28 October 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ8OoTrBsk8>; (accessed September 2013)

⁶¹ *ibid.* (author's translation)

⁶² Manea, N., *On Clowns: The Dictator and The Artist* (in Romanian)(Polirom, 2005), p. 107 (author's translation)

creator and the public 'would meet half way', as Ana Blandiana put it⁶³ in order to give expression, in the public sphere, to truths that were otherwise inconceivable to be spoken up. As Manea explained it, '[t]ruth had been forced to take refuge in literature, surviving through ingenious codes, often in equivocal and obscure forms'⁶⁴.

This complicity between artist and public was prone to generate a sense of solidarity and even a sense of triumph over the political system that, in spite the sophisticated censorship machine, had been outsmarted. In this respect, actor Toni Greu subsequently admitted: '[t]o laugh about those who are censoring you is an almost indescribable feeling'⁶⁵.

These feelings of satisfaction and, more importantly, of solidarity were even more intense when this 'complicity' manifested 'live', through performing arts, like theatre. Writer Gabriela Adamesteanu makes this remark in recalling the details surrounding the 1985 very popular performance of the theatre adaptation of her (no less successful) book *The Wasted Morning* - a work hinting at the ill-fated role communism had had on Romanian society:

*The impact of literature is very distinct from the impact of theatre. What, inside your solitude, when you read a book, creates a small reverberation, in a theatre room it gets an enormous resonance. The simplest sentence becomes incendiary on the scene.*⁶⁶

No matter their degree of resonance, the hidden messages transmitted by the artist, with the precise aim to be de-codified by an audience fully expecting such messages, can thus be argued as a way to take a stance against the regime; a way to reject the continuous process of

⁶³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ8OoTrBsK8>;(accessed September 2013)

⁶⁴ Manea (2005), p. 51 (author's translation)

⁶⁵ http://adevarul.ro/cultura/istorie/limbajul-codat-umorul-epoca-aur-fentau-romanii-comunismul-prin-umor-cele-mai-savuroase-bancuri-cizmarul-savanta-1_5141f0c600f5182b850960a1/index.html (author's translation);(accessed September 2013)

⁶⁶ interview with Gabriela Adamesteanu, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5pWkQjS3xQ> (author's translation) (accessed September 2013)

indoctrination and to preserve awareness about a reality that the regime wanted dimmed by the fog of ideology. From this perspective, this 'underground' communication, carried out in defiance of (and, in a way, taking revenge over) an oppressive force, represents a form of 'sublimation of politics in cultural activity'.⁶⁷ Thus, what it was not possible to be said and done on the political scene, was transferred and expressed on the cultural scene.

The 'cipher' allowed for suppressed political standpoints to find an outlet and a platform for expression, exposing the regime for what it was. This would strengthen the line between 'them' (the people in power) and 'us' (the population, artists and public alike). The 'enemy' was thus clearly identified and its position in the social-political equation unmistakably specified. This cleavage, the separation between 'us, the people', and 'them, the representatives of the totalitarian project', might therefore be regarded as one of the small cracks in the system that contributed to the final collapse of the regime. Although, such a definite (and important) hypothesis would need further research.

If this section examined the twisted ways the truth about the regime was uttered as a form of cultural resistance, in the next section I will examine a strategy whereby, through culture, truth was spoken up.

d) Listening to Radio Free Europe

In Romania, Radio Free Europe (RFE) is regarded as one of the most prominent symbols of anti-communist resistance. Very widely and intensely listened to at all levels of society,

⁶⁷ Goldfarb (2012), p. 137

during the communist period Radio Free Europe represented the most trusted source of information that the Romanian society at large would rely on (and, often, even cling to).⁶⁸

RFE's broadcasts would programmatically focus on political issues, providing information and analysis on the latest domestic and international events. At the same time, it broadcasted a series of very popular cultural programmes, usually set against the background of the political and social context of communist Romania. As such, very sharp cultural analyses and debates around books, theatre plays, exhibitions etc. were used as a tool to disclose and critically engage with political and social realities of the country.

These cultural programmes were organically linked to the personality of Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, two literary critics and cultural journalists (husband and wife), whose voices had become an emblem of the radio station.

One of the central themes of the cultural programmes hosted by Ierunca and Lovinescu was the idea that ethical criteria were indispensable to the foundation of any aesthetical construction. As such, as Horia-Roman Patapievici put it, they were passionate believers in the idea that

[...]the writer, in the process of creation, does not have two inkwells: he is compelled to use the same ink when he is prostituting himself, as well as when he is trying to write a masterpiece. And the attempt to be aesthetically good is irreversibly compromised by not having been morally right.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *Cold Waves* (2007), documentary on the role played by RFE in communist Romania. Director: Alexandru Solomon

⁶⁹ Patapievici, Popovici, Stanomir, 'Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca - the End of Exile', *Revista 22*, 30 April 2008 (author's translation), <http://www.revista22.ro/monica-lovinescu-si-virgil-ierunca-sfarsitul-exilului-4521.html> (accessed September 2013)

Art as an antinomy and adversary of *lie* (such as it was understood by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his 1970 Nobel Prize Speech, for whom *lie* was also a 'principle of violence')⁷⁰ was one of the main beliefs that guided Ierunca and Lovinescu's cultural critique. Romanian artists who had accepted the 'pact with the devil' were harshly criticised and exposed in their programmes as being one of the sources of the profound moral and social crisis that the Romanian society was facing.

Whilst it is not the purpose of this paper to critically engage with the open debate on the 'morality-art' relationship, it seems evident that the two RFE hosts' insistence on the ethical 'canon' was a necessary (and salutary) principle to embrace, in the programmatic attempt to protect a set of moral values that had been severely distorted (and thus menaced) by the totalitarian regime and the ideology it preached. The immense popularity that their programmes enjoyed was, in a way, evidence of the fact that the public was kept aware of these values; as long as this happened, these values had a chance to be protected - and embraced. As one journalist wrote about Monica Lovinescu, she

*[...] was, unlike any of her peers in literary history, the critic who was listened and understood even in the remotest hamlet which could receive short waves. It was least important that the letter of her critique remained unfamiliar to the uneducated people who would listen to her, the important thing was that the general meaning of her word was never misunderstood by anyone*⁷¹.

With this in mind, one can argue that this illegal (but constant) communication between the cultural broadcasters and their audience was prone to provide a sense of orientation and a clearer understanding of the surrounding reality. It also helped maintain inside the society an awareness of an immutable ethical code. Even if this code was not all the time and in all circumstances respected, by its mere virtual presence in the social and individual conscience

⁷⁰ Behring, E., *Romanian Writers in Exile 1945-1989* (in Romanian), (Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane, 2001), p. 95

⁷¹ Patapievici, Popovici, Stanomir <http://www.revista22.ro/monica-lovinescu-si-virgil-ierunca-sfarsitul-exilului-4521.html> (accessed September 2013)

alike, it represented a form of resistance against the regime, representing as it did a contradictory set of values. The fact that, in late 1970s, an assassination attack was ordered by the communist authorities against Monica Lovinescu (who eventually survived) represents not only evidence that, indeed, these two value systems were incompatible, but it was also a confirmation that the reverberation of her (and Ierunca's) thinking in the public conscience was seen as potentially dangerous for the regime.

Besides this role in 'shaping conscience'⁷², the cultural programmes broadcasted by RFE had another function worth mentioning in the context of this analysis: they were a way to stay in tune with the latest international cultural expressions, and, at the same time, they enabled a form of cultural memory 'recovery'. One particular show, *Povestea vorbei* ('The Story of Word') - with the strap line *Pagini uitate, pagini cenzurate, pagini exilate* ('Pages forgotten, pages censored, pages exiled') - is illustrative in this respect. The programme provided the Romanian public with the possibility to have access to Romanian and foreign literature which had been forbidden by the regime. The latest literature published in the West (like Solzhenitsyn's work, for example), Romanian dissident writings (like Paul Goma's work), older, 'classicised' literature (e.g. Orwell), as well as a series of works of exiled Romanian writers, many of them representatives of the inter-bellum intelligentsia (Ionesco, Cioran, Eliade etc.) - all forbidden for one reason or another by the communist power - were read and commented during this show.

As such, on the one hand, an information gap was covered, with the taboos imposed by the regime being ignored and broken. Having access to forbidden literature thus represented not only an act of defiance against the political authority, but, more importantly, facilitated the

⁷² *ibid.*

acquiring of new thinking patterns - different from the ones the regime aimed at imposing. This had the potential to prevent assimilation of individual judgment by the ideological thinking; in other words, it provided a way to 'resist' the system and its indoctrination program.

On the other hand, the particular example of *Povestea vorbei* illustrates how certain cultural expressions, recalling of a past that the regime wanted obnubilated, were preserved and transmitted. Acknowledging the existence of a past, different in values and expression from the present, held the potential to germinate a vision of the future that was also possible to be detached from the current reality. As noticed by Ioan Stanomir, 'Monica Lovinescu [and Virgil Ierunca] spoke the language of a world that we knew had existed before and about which we knew would be reborn. Socialist Romania was not and could not be our fatherland [...].'⁷³

As such, the legitimacy and even the long term viability of the system were questioned, thus setting up premises for the system to be (at some point) eventually challenged.

It is to be noticed that not only high culture was used by RFE as a tool against the communist power in Romania. Popular culture was also aimed, in the radio station's strategy, at playing a significant role in weakening the grip that the communist regime had on the country.

I will examine this aspect of the radio's activity in the next section.

⁷³ *ibid.*

e) Popular culture

In the previous sections, the core of my examination were various forms of 'high culture'. However, expressions of what is commonly referred to as 'popular culture' also had an influence on the Romanian public's relationship with the communist regime.

In trying to explore the potential impact that popular culture had, I will put a special emphasis on the Western cultural 'imports' - such as popular music, commercial movies, books, magazines etc. These 'imports' are specific to the second period of Romanian communism, especially to the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the first stage of the regime is characterised by the *Tismaneanu Report* as being 'cut off from the Western culture and civilisation, [...] [with] a reorientation of the whole cultural life towards the Soviet Union'⁷⁴. In this context, up to mid 1960s, such imports were random and too few to be taken into consideration.

After 1965, it was possible for these cultural products to emerge on the Romanian market - both officially (through the State TV, radio, other distribution channels endorsed by authorities), and unofficially (to the point of illegality). To illustrate this latter situation I will use the example of the individual imports of music or movies (usually carried out by pilots or sailors - among the few who were allowed to travel to the West) - 'which were then immediately copied and spread around with extraordinary speed'⁷⁵. As such, these products, from their very coming out on the market, were already bearing the aura of the 'forbidden fruit' - which, *a priori*, increased their power of attraction. At the same time, this practice, generating wide underground distribution networks, would strengthen a certain feeling of

⁷⁴ *Tismaneanu Report*, p. 491, http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf (accessed September 2013)

⁷⁵ Ofrim, A., 'A Brief History of Communism in Romania', *Dilema Veche*, 9 May 2013, <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/o-scurta-istorie-comunismului-romania>

solidarity among the public consumer of such products - standing together against the 'prohibiting force'.

Another unofficial (and, for that matter, illegal) channel of distribution was Radio Free Europe. Cornel Chiriac's show, 'Metronom', which he hosted until his assassination by the *Securitate* in 1975⁷⁶, represented not only a source of information about and access to the latest Western pop-rock music trends, but it was also seen as a 'form of protest against a small-minded life style'⁷⁷. This music, and its message, came in clear contrast with the rigidity of style and the Pharisaic, monomaniac message of the communist propaganda. This contrast was arguably prone to germinate a desire to break free from the constraints put on individual and social life alike, and thus generate a spirit of revolt. As such, it held the potential to have an indirect political impact on its listeners - usually represented by the young generation.

In fact, as recalled by Andrei Voiculescu, who hosted 'Metronom' after Chiriac's death in 1975, the RFE pop-rock show was regarded by the radio station's management as a way to attract a layer of audience who was later on expected to build up an interest for political programmes as well. As Voiculescu declared, 'the age of my audience was between 13-14 and 28 years. As they were growing old, they would follow other (political) programmes, as well'⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ *Cold Waves* (2007)

⁷⁷ Hurezeanu, E., 'Radio Free Europe: Ordered Assassinations', *Jurnalul National*, 2 February 2004, <http://jurnalul.ro/special-jurnalul/europa-libera-asasinate-la-comanda-73491.html> (accessed September 2013)

⁷⁸ *Cold Waves* (2007)

'Metronom' enjoyed huge success among young Romanians. Thousands of letters (most of them under pseudonym) were sent to RFE, requesting for a variety of music (unavailable inside the country) to be broadcasted. Again, a complicity was being developed beyond the control of the political authorities, as nicely illustrated by one anonymous letter which, in addition to the usual music request, held a message for the authorities, circled in red: 'Dear comrades from the censorship department, please let this postcard pass. We love music and music is not guilty of anything'⁷⁹.

Nevertheless, one can argue that, in its 'innocence', this music held power. It was the expression of a forbidden world, the freedom of which was enticing and unsettling. The sterilised world of the communist order was perceived as senseless and constraining against the flamboyant background of this music.

Even when these popular culture products were reaching the public through official channels, their subversive nature was not diminished. Thus, in spite of the huge efforts of the censorship apparatus to 'clean off' any message potentially aiming at the regime, Western music and movies were still perceived as symbols of a different (better by default) world - highly idealised by a society which did not have access to it and was only free to imagine. As such, when asked what was the attraction that Western movies had for cinemagoers during that time, historian Bogdan Murgescu answered:

Everything! From the actors' clothing, which we could not even admire in the shop windows, to the diversity of things and objects that we were missing. Not that we did not have them at all, because there was some period when one could still find things, but what we were missing was that something else, other than the political ideology which was relentlessly everywhere. Sometimes we would find that piece of history or,

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

*better said, reality, my parents were telling me about and which now was completely absent.*⁸⁰

Against this background, one can argue that popular culture in communist Romanian society played the role of a bridge - to a world (in space and in time) from which, otherwise, the country had been disconnected. As such, it also nourished the illusion (and the desire) of a better world, built up on freedom and plenty - in contrast with the dire reality of the communist order.

Conclusion

This paper represents a brief analysis of the ways in which culture manifested as a potential instrument of resistance against the totalitarian regime in communist Romania.

The topic has been heavily debated in Romania since the fall of communism, in 1989. However, as revealed by the available literature, much of the existing focus has been on assessing the virtue of artists/intellectuals and the effectiveness of their actions in relation to their resistance (or otherwise) against the regime.

In exploring the subject, this paper took a different path, choosing to focus on the recipient and consumer of the cultural product (the public), and not on the cultural producer (artist/intellectual). As such, by looking at how the public's attitude towards the political power was likely to be shaped by culture within the context of the totalitarian system, the intent was (apart from shedding a fresh light on the topic) to avoid becoming distracted by

⁸⁰ http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/filmele-difuzate-cinematoteca-perioada-comunista-erau-multe-care-ideologi (author's translation) (accessed September 2013)

ethical judgements on individual behaviour *vis-à-vis* political power and thus be able to understand better the role of culture itself as a conduit of resistance.

Building on the wider meaning of the concept of 'resistance' (semantically covering open acts of opposition, but also, equally important in the context of the analysis, passive forms of opposing the regime), the paper looked at five concrete ways (called strategies) in which, by cultural means, the Romanian public was likely to place itself in opposition to the totalitarian force - thus rejecting its project.

As the exploration of the five 'strategies' revealed, the 'rejection' of the totalitarian project by ways of culture (in other words, the cultural resistance) did not emerge, in most cases, as an obvious, coherent and coordinated process - but it was rather spontaneous and defensive in nature. It developed - slowly and subtly - mainly out of an individual need to shield from ideological intoxication, but also to preserve inside the society a certain set of moral and intellectual values, as well as a certain memory of (and connection to) the past. These were severely threatened by the communist power, the ultimate (and frequently stated) goal of which was the construction of a brave new world.

This defensive character, nevertheless, should not be seen as without consequences for the regime. In an indirect, long term way (and to a certain degree), culture did reveal its potential to weaken the totalitarian construction. The set of values it preserved not only prevented the total conditioning of the individuals (and thus, their assimilation by the system, as programmatically assumed by the latter). They were also a 'remind[er]' of what society could

be like⁸¹, and, as such, had the potential to germinate an aspiration for change. This aspiration - often finding its expression through cultural means, given the unavailability of mechanisms for political engagement - might be placed among the factors that eventually contributed to the weakening of the system, so that, when other conditions lined up, the system was ready to fall. As such, although culture did not destroy the system by itself, it can be argued to have contributed towards it.

Having said that, it should be worth noticing that the strategies of cultural resistance analysed in this paper manifested in particular circumstances, against the background of a brutal, but 'imperfect' form of totalitarianism⁸², through the 'cracks' of which they were able to develop. At the same time, a certain historical predisposition to get around the official authority, characteristic of the Romanian people as one of its essential tools of historical survival, also facilitated such ways to 'resist' the regime.

Considering all the above, the question that comes to mind is whether the cultural mechanisms of resistance that occurred in Romania could apply in similar ways in another circumstance. Would it be the case that in North Korea (to choose an apt example, not least as it notoriously served as a model for Ceausescu's regime) that cultural resistance would find less space, due to a more perfected application of the totalitarian project, in a more disciplined and authority-abiding society? Or would it be possible to identify similar themes,

⁸¹ Dorfman, A., interviewed by Melvin Bragg, episode *Writing and Political Oppression* in the series 'In Our Time', broadcast on BBC Radio 4, on 8 April 1999, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00545g8> (accessed September 2013)

⁸²<http://destinatii.liternet.ro/articol/162/Gabriel-Liiceanu/Scoala-de-Vara-Sighet-ed-VII-Strategii-de-supravietuire-culturala-in-comunism.html> (accessed September 2013);

albeit through the prism of mechanisms particular to Korean society? Such an intriguing hypothesis could provide the basis of further research.

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