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THE EVOLUTION OF THE PERSONALITY CULT IN ROMANIA: A VISUAL CASE STUDY

Abstract. A cult of personality arises when an individual uses mass media, propaganda, or other methods, to create an idealized and heroic public image. Cults of personality are usually associated with dictatorships. Personality cults were first described in relation to totalitarian regimes that sought to radically alter or transform society according to radical ideas. Often, a single leader became associated with this revolutionary transformation, and came to be treated as a benevolent “guide” for the nation without whom the transformation to a better future couldn’t occur. This has been generally the justification for personality cults that arose in totalitarian societies of the 20th century. So this article is centered around the personality cult of Nicolae Ceausescu, and proposes a case study that aims to present the evolution of this personality cult. As a result of the research undertaken, the personality cult of Nicolae Ceausescu may be divided into three stages, described and analyzed in the article.

Keywords: mass media, propaganda, communist dictatorship.

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In most cases, research observations are based on individual human nature or behavior of the theory of common sense or other scientific theories already developed. Whatever its source, the process involves finding and pursuing research ideas, testing their significance and interpretation of results (Baker, 73).

A major role in the research is held by the methods. Research methods are those that suggest which way is the best to test the theoretical hypothesis, providing a system of rules by which theory is empirically tested and developed (Vlăsceanu, 1982). Methods are sets of intellectual operation in which a scientific discipline tries to discover the truth, which is essential, real, beyond appearances, circumstances (Baker, 82). Each method has an operational nature, because it provides a set of rules, steps, techniques and tools, and organize research work to achieve the research purpose.

During the research approach, I turned to a combination of quantitative methods, trying to understand social reality as objective, measurable, and then

completing my study using qualitative methods, which helped me to see reality from a holistic perspective, the reality as a social construct.

So my research is meant to be a case study based on documentation, case analysis, archival data analysis, interviews and last but not least compositional analysis of images.

The researcher Robert K. Yin defines the case study of research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and where multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 23).

The case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object that can extend the experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research, hence the present research procedure propose a study case on the evolution of personality cult in Romania.

A key strength of the case study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process. Data gathered is normally largely qualitative, but it may also be quantitative. Tools to collect data can include surveys, interviews, documentation review, observation, and even the collection of physical artifacts.

Case studies are complex because they generally involve multiple sources of data, may include multiple cases within a study, and produce large amounts of data for analysis. Researchers from many

disciplines use the case study method to build upon theory, to produce new theory, to dispute or challenge theory, to explain a situation, to provide a basis to apply solutions to situations, to explore, or to describe an object or phenomenon. The advantages of the case study method are its applicability to real-life, contemporary, human situations and its public accessibility through written reports. Case study results relate directly to the common readers everyday experience and facilitate an understanding of complex real-life situations (Yin, 38).

Some essential books formed the basis of my research, books that proved to be extremely usefull in achieving the purpose of this research approach, namely, finding relevant answers to research questions raised initially.

These include: Earl R. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*. N.p.: Cengage Learning, 2010. This thorough revision of Babbie's standard-setting book presents a succinct, straightforward introduction to the field of research methods as practiced by social scientists. Babbie, long respected in the field and renowned for his engaging and friendly writing style, gives me the tools I need for understanding social research methods.

Therese L. Baker, *Doing Social Research*. N.p.: McGraw Hill, 1999, is another book which offers a hands-on, step-by-step approach to social research that combines authoritative content, effective pedagogy, and an engaging writing style. To that end, the author includes real, classic and contemporary research studies, as well

as interviews with the authors of these studies, to personalize the experience of doing social research. In this text, Baker encourages a sense of commitment to doing social research.

Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research*. N.p.: Sage Publications, 2009. Robert Yin's comprehensive presentation covers all aspects of the case study method from problem definition, design, and data collection, to data analysis and composition and reporting. Yin also traces the uses and importance of case studies to a wide range of disciplines, from sociology, psychology and history to management, planning, social work, and education. We can find in this book additional examples of case study research, discussions of developments in related methods, including randomized field trials and computer-assisted coding techniques, added coverage of the strengths of multiple-case studies, case study screening, and the case study as a part of larger multi-method studies, five major analytic techniques, including the use of logic models to guide analysis.

Adam Burakovski, *Dictatura lui Nicolae Ceaușescu, 1965-1989: Geniul Carpaților*. Iași: Polirom, 2011, is a book that aims to present a series of events that took place throughout the communist period. The author focuses on the history of communist fall, critically and objectively analyzing all events, sequences that have a key contribution in the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu political regime. It is a useful book because it follows the sequence of events in holistic manner, while portraying the leader,

which will give birth to a boundless cult of personality.

Ute Anneli Gabanyi, *The Ceaușescu Cult: propaganda and power policy in communist Romania*. Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation Pub. House, 2000. The book addresses the issue of Ceaușescu's cult, the gradual increase of its power, especially followed by successive birthday celebrations of the dictator. Also it is a blueprint for a totalitarian regime and the Romanian society in the decades VIII and IX. The author captures the efforts that Nicolae Ceaușescu was doing to create the image of not only the party leader, but the entire nation leader, considering that it was not only a spokesman for the restricted class, but the embodiment of the will of the nation. Last but not least is highlighted propaganda through which was created a real myth around Ceaușescu.

Dennis Deletant, *Romania under communist rule*, Center for Romanian Studies in cooperation with the Civic Academy Foundation, 1999. This book is the first synthesis of the history of communism in Romania, from the founding of the Romanian Communist Party in 1921 to the revolution that led to the downfall of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989.

These are just a few representative books which formed the basis of my research, plus the data archive, newspaper articles, Internet sources, databases and documentary film.

Therefore, it is important to begin with a definition of this notion of "the cult of

personality". Anneli Ute Gabanyi refers to the cult of personality as to a conscious exaggeration of some real or fictional qualities of the political leaders. The construction of this cult implies the following stages and conditions: the existence and the recognition of some real or fictional merits, then the exaggeration of these to the extrem of idolatrization and from here to the providential character and role for the communities destiny (Gabanyi, 41).

Usually, the cult of personality appears within the totalitarian regimes, either on the right side or the left side, acquiring a special development within the legitimating crisis of the totalitarists regimes' conditions.

In the communist Romania, the personality cult is a direct consequence of the totalitarian structures which promotes the leader to a privileged position of commend as a result to the exceptional prerogatives of the function, which leads to the maxi-mum centralization of the control powers in the hands of a single person. In searching for a little legitimization for the justification of the populist practices with the propaganda techniques which have the role of emphasize the thoughts and the willing among the leader, ideology supported and its peoples (Burakovski, 46).

In Romania, the personality cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu was constituted progressively as the system was betraying its incapacity of fulfilling that "unity of thought and will" of the peoples around the party. Ceaușescu took over these visible premises from the last two years

of Dej's leadership, 1962-1964, when Dej used frequently the populist techniques, of direct contact with the peoples, combined with the providential leader status (Gabanyi, 48).

Therefore, N. Ceaușescu succeeded to maintain a peerless cult of personality within the European borders (Roguski, 79). There existed three important moments which permitted N. Ceaușescu full monopol over the political power and implicitly the triggering of exacerbation of the personality cult (Gabanyi, 56).

In 1967, he was declared president of the State Council, which was a deflection to the Romanian Communist Party status, which was therefore modified for Ceaușescu, which stipulated the division of functions between party and state (Du Bois, 73).

The political purposes of the personality cult became even more evident during the 1960 birthday celebrations. It is clear from the host of commemorative articles and poems that Ceaușescu is being built up as a charismatic leader embodying all human virtues and fulfilling the historical national aspirations of the Romanian people. He is presented as a symbolic figure, a guarantee of the continuity of a policy that allegedly safeguards national dignity and independence. Together with patriotism, the personality cult in Romania is used to achieve what is officialy called "the moral political unity of the people" (Gabanyi, 58) by employing both a logical and a sentimental approach.

The personality cult, togheter with the patriotism, is viewed as a device for achieving an emotional response from the

people, for rallying them around the party and its program, and for strengthening Ceaușescu's position within the party. Furthermore, the personality cult serves to enhance Ceaușescu's prestige, as an innovative Marxist-Leninist ideologist, as a political leader, throughout the world.

Although the gap between the real and the projected image of Nicolae Ceaușescu is, at times, almost unbridgeable, most analysts agree on his real achievements in at least two fields: power policy and propaganda. No matter how great the inconsistencies of his policies aimed at consolidating and perpetuating his personal power, he has always managed to justify what he does through propaganda.

Around 1965 we can see the first pictures with Ceaușescu, the leader, moment that can not be overlooked. This time coincides with the taking office of Secretary General of the Romanian Party. One of the first actions of Ceaușescu, once in power, was renaming of the Romanian Workers Party in the Romanian Communist Party. At the same time, he says that Romania has become a socialist country and decide that the current name of the country has to be changed.

So, in the following I will concentrate on a compositional analysis of this image, image that is representative for the period which marks the beginning of a cult of personality, which over the years will not have margins.

From a practical perspective, any fixed frame static image can be analyzed grammatically, establishing clear, natural and effective message.

An image with a high coefficient of stylistic unity or vision, sends a clear message, without contradiction, which could have blocking effects on human personality.

Therefore, we must recognize that the first impression is one that arouses our interest and makes us to investigate the causes for which we draw that picture, to decipher the message.

Thus, to analyze an image, the first impression is a very good starting point. Emotions and feelings stemming from the "first impression" are the least



influenced by education and by our field of professional interest. Therefore it is useful to identify and clarify these emotions and feelings, if we want to continue our analysis of the photo.

The forefront of this image contains a representation of the newly elected general secretary of the Communist Party, it establishes a direct contact with

the viewer, giving an impression of a slight superiority, the top, is master of the situation, innovation brings a new beginning, progress and welfare default.

Nicolae Ceaușescu has kept sober, elegant, worthy of a true leader, an embodiment of intelligence, the great hero, a providential leader.

In the background can be seen the Socialist Republic of Romania's flag, a sign that the leader and the state are merge and become impossible to understand life of one without the other.

There are used warm colors, red that transmits enthusiasm, blue representing confidence, relaxation, creativity and protection. These colors make it look like a warm person, which leave the ear to the voice of the people and gives them a real support.

The purpose of this picture is essentially that of attracting popularity, required during the seizure of power, the desire to strengthen the position of the great hero of the people.

This picture is the representation of an early stage of socialism, which depicts the humble leader, coming from the humble working class. Its purpose seems to be to free the people from the burden of Soviet rule, assigning the role of savior, in order to sensitize the people. Consequently, it seems that this picture is the first step in building the personality cult.

The year of 1968 is considered the crucial moment for the instauration of the personality cult. The public speech from Bucharest, where Ceaușescu condemned the invasion of Cehoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact's troops, without

announcing Romania, member of the Pact only after it was already generated, gave an international prestige to the country (Gabanyi, 68).

The "true Ceaușescu" emerged more clearly after 1968. Ceaușescu has consistently pursued a foreign policy based on national interest rather than bloc loyalty, without, of course, being able to escape the country's geopolitical situation or its alliance status. While emphasizing that Romania's choice of communism is irreversible, Ceaușescu has tried to create some room for maneuvering by proclaiming Romania a "developing socialist country" (Verdery, 49).

Later on, in 1974, he marked his election as a president, taking over functions such as general secretary of the RCP and president of the State Council and of the National Defense Council. Hence, Ceaușescu was holding all the commendable levers. Through the 'small steps' politics it arrived at the situation where Ceaușescu was irreplaceable (Deletant, 82). The unleashing of what we today call the personality cult of N. Ceaușescu, striking reality of the time, started beginning with 1974, after one year of election of Elena Ceaușescu as member of the Political Executive Committee of the party. The wife of the dictator became the so-called number 2 cabinet, which meant she became the second person in the leading of the country, who was taking over fundamental fields such as: education and culture (Pacea, 111).

As far back as the 11th party congress in late 1974, Ceaușescu was already being

called a statesman of a stature comparable to such major historic figures as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Lincoln.

RCP Secretary-General and President of the Romanian Socialist Republic, Nicolae Ceaușescu, celebrated his 60th birthday on January 26, 1978, the same day marked his 45th anniversary of “uninterrupted revolutionary activity”. The festivities were presented as a large-scale popular celebration by workers, peasants, and intellectuals, state, party, and public organizations, all of whom expressed the admiration for Ceaușescu and his works in “poetic form”, as well as their devoted support for the policy of the party and its leader (Sweeney, 123).

Two evident strains emerged in all these commemorative events: the homage paid to a communist militant who has actively worked for communism since his early days as an organizer of the Union of Communist Youth and the rendered to the political and economic ideologist, author of 14 volumes of speeches.

Ceaușescu was called “the most genuine popular leader to emerge in the entire history of the Romanian people”, while in a broadcast devoted to the secretary-general, Radio Bucharest empathically declared: “We, the people of our times, are proud of being the contemporaries of the most remarkable statesman of our modern history” (Gabanyi, 67).

The picture above is representative to this phase, where Ceaușescu has the nations’ support. He also shares his “succeses” with a person with similar “extraordinary” qualities impersonated



by his wife. This image presents us the Ceaușescus in a festive atmosphere, celebrating the birthday of the great leader, representing a great event to the whole nation. This national event is a great opportunity to give tribute to the “nations’ beloved son”. This representation of the Ceaușescus, shows Nicolaes’ great ambitions not just on a politic platform, but as a family man also, his wife being next to him at every important event, being the arch of socialist human values.

They enjoy popularity, having all the flowers from the people, whom are so grateful to the couple. Thought they have no eye-contact with the camera, their satisfaction and proud is obvious from the photo.

Therefore this image marks another phaze of his cult of personality, a phase which emphasizes Elena’s constructive role, and gratitude.

The honoring of Ceaușescu the politician culminated in the ceremony at which he was awarded the Victory of Socialism order for “exceptional merit in revolutionary activity devoted to the social

and national liberation of the Romanian people", and received for the second time "the supreme award" of being named Hero of the Socialist Republic of Romania (Deletant, 95).

The veneration of Ceaușescu sometimes assumes near-religious proportions: "The Demigod of Romania", references to him are often written in capital letters, he is often presented as a sort of Christ-like incarnation of the people, a "body from the people's body, a soul from the people's soul" (Verdery, 49).

The superlatives are particularly frequently used. For example: "first worker of the country", "first soldier of the party and the country", "the greatest politician in Romania's history", "the worker of all workers, the peasant of all peasants, as we all know", and "one of the greatest peasants of humanity". Antithetical phrases are very frequently used to describe Ceaușescu's "multilateral personality" made up of normally irreconcilable antinomies. Thus, he is both "pater patriae" and the "son of the fatherland", "the peace-loving soldier". A favorite theme is Ceaușescu "eternal youth". Like the traditional heroes of Romanian fairy tales, Ceaușescu "seems to be invested by our country's nature with the mysterious gift of youth without old age" (Gabanyi, 79).

Ceaușescu's heated desire to see himself glorified grew up simultaneously and directly proportional with the extension of his power, arriving at paroxysm in the 80s. It is remarkable the fact that this personality cult of N. Ceaușescu was

facilitated by the activity from inside of the party, and it was characterized by the application of some dictatorial methods which were defying the basic norms of the democracy and the ones respecting the affirmation of human personality (Sweeney, 134). A vast assemblage of power in the hands of N. Ceaușescu opened a way to arbitrariness, subjectivism and excesses of a personal nature. He was described fairly as a "modern tiran" within an Austrian TV documentary that was broadcasted in Vienna in January 1986 and which revealed among other things, the ridiculous glorification of Ceaușescu and his wife, as well as the acute economic crisis, food crisis and energetic crisis that Romania was going through and the inhuman measures of austerity imposed by the dictator leader from Bucharest.

Towards mid-80s, Ceaușescu's cult of personality develops and promotes unprecedented forms, obviously outstripping the expressions relatively benign of the early 70's. In 1985, it was the 20th anniversary of his election as general secretary of the RCP, event that triggered an avalanche of odes and anthems, works of fine arts, etc, which were meant to increase the incommensurable need of glorification of the supreme leader.

In the first half of July, a rather odd celebration-the 17th anniversary of the 9th RCP Congress in 1965 which had inaugurated the "Ceaușescu era", was the focal point of a concerted propaganda campaign in the Romanian media (Gabanyi, 91). On this occasion, the personality cult that grew up spon-

taneously around the party and state leader reached a new high point. With the country experiencing a social and economic crisis, this pro-Ceaușescu pro-paganda attempts to prove that the policies devised in 1965 were correct, that their results are praise-worthy, and the man who initiated them deserves the gratitude of the country.

At first glance, the official praise bestowed upon Ceaușescu on the occasion of his 68th birthday seemed to proceed along established lines. On closer inspection, however, a slight change of angle could be discerned: the adulation dwelt less on present triumphs and spoke more of the achievements that “the living legend” and “his golden era” would leave to posterity, perhaps reflecting a growing awareness of Ceaușescu’s poor state of health. Another novelty at the birthday celebration was the unusually critical note that Ceaușescu sounded in his address. Along with his recent speech

at a meeting of the CC Political Executive Committee, the tone suggested a widening estrangement between Ceaușescu and the party (Verdery, 66).

This image is representative for the third phase of his cult of personality, which reaches its peak in the mid 80’s.

The picture emphasizes an important day of the Romanian history, the 65th anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party. As a first impact, we can see the color “grey”, a neutral color which highlights the mediocrity, and monotony, “the sound which polutes the society”.

As the main character of the poster, Ceaușescu situates itself as a superior to the people, full of pride and self-satisfaction. Beneath are the people, filled with joy, having to participate at such a significant historical event. Their smiling faces, shows the satisfaction towards the regime and the leader.

Nicolae Ceaușescu is emphasized as a working-class hero, as the beloved son of the nation, who watches over the wealth of everybody. Here, he has eye-contact with the spectator, and he has the smile of a warrior for peace, justice and socialism.

In this phase, he is not looking for the support of the people, he situates himself above them, and he has a consolidated position as a leader and mentor of them, with the absolute control of power.

This representation of his is much closer to the real Ceaușescu, who once become a leader has all the prerogatives of a ruler. He “undresses” the image of a modest and humble leader, and subordinate the nation’s interests to his owns. Hence this



image becomes a clear representation to the durity of communism.

On his left and right are positioned the emblem of the Romanian Communist Party, with soviet inspiration, with the sickle and hammer as its main elements, simbolizing the indisociable link between the peasantry and the proletariat, and the emblem of the Romanian Socialist Republic, which aims to cultivate the patriotism among the people.

Ceaușescu watches his people with detachment and satisfaction, inviting them to share his joy of celebrating this 65th anniversary of the Communist Party.

If we divide the image on two axes, vertical and horizontal, we see that the poster is located in the left side, on the top, in the imaginary sphere. The sphere of the reality is emphasized by the monotony of the "grey Bucharest". A Bucharest with a gloomy atmosphere with the intrinsec pessimism of communism.

The massive blocks, painted in the grey color of communism can be associated with the feeling of the inhabitants of this city. The oppressive grey is everywhere from the buildings to the souls. It con-taminates every sphere of human activity. Dacia 1310, wich is situated in the part emphasizing the reality, remains in the peolpe's consciounes as a symbol of communism, due to the fact that it was the most popular, and well-known brand, and also a "mirror of the social industry". Therefore this part of the poster represents an authentic image of Bucharest at that time.

Concluding, I can say that this image emphasizes the last phase of the cult of

personality of Ceaușescu, a campaign poster with the savior of the nation, attributing himself the role of a revered leader of a working-class, which celebrates his name. In this national euphoria, all the credits are taken by the one and only ruler: Ceaușescu.

The elaborate ritual organized every year to pay homage to Ceaușescu on his birthday has by now lost any semblance of spontaneity. Praise for Ceaușescu proceeds along strictly prescribed patterns. The "Great leader" and "most beloved son of the fatherland" is for example, portrayed as a providential figure, a part of "Romanian mythology", the incarnation of all nation virtues, and the historic culmination of national aspiration and goals. His adulators present him as a man of superhuman, if not godlike, qualities: ephitets such as "the genius", "the titan" and even "the demigod" point to clearly hagiographic aspect of the Ceaușescu cult. His birthplace, Scornicești, has become the site of a nationwide pilgrimage that underlines the cult's quasi-religious undertones (Deletant, 134).

The attempts to inflate Ceaușescu's historical role while dismissing that of other leading figures in the history of the Romanian Communist Party, as well as using his personality cult to repress any possible competitors, have apparently led to a growing estrangement between Ceaușescu and the party apparatus.

There is clearly widespread dismay, among not only the public but also most party members, over Ceaușescu's personality cult, which is generally

associated with and often blamed for Romania's dire economic predicament. Moreover, the new Soviet leadership engaged in eliminating the vestiges of the Brezhnev cult at home has more or less discreetly signaled its disapproval of the Ceaușescu cult and the problems it

has caused. In the meantime, Ceaușescu is creating personality cults around his wife Elena and their son Nicu, perhaps in the hope that through their staying in power his own cult will survive the growing internal and external disapproval.

I also used, in the case study, quan-

Attitude towards people	During '50-'60	During '60-'70	During '80
Interview no. 1	Sensitizing people	Attracting popularity	Policies against the people
Interview no. 2	Sensitizing people	Sympathy wave	Policies against the people
Interview no. 3	Sensitizing people	Attracting popularity	Policies against the people
Interview no. 4	Sensitizing people	Attracting popularity	Policies against the people

	During '50-'60	During '60-'70	During '80
Interview no. 1	Construction of socialism	Consolidation of power	Repression
Interview no. 2	Attract supporters	Consolidation of power	Dictatorship
Interview no. 3	Wave of sympathy among the people	Accumulation of power	Terror
Interview no. 4	Attract supporters	Sensitizing people	Repression

titative research methods, including the structured interview. The results of the interview shows a segmentation of the personality cult as can be seen on these scales of analysis:

The interview was applied to a representative sample of four persons, so the respondents believe that the period of '50-'60 coincides with the period of socialist construction, during which is placed the cornerstone of the communist regime, characterized by a incipient phase of the personality cult.

The '60-'70 period brings with it, as can be seen in the above scales, the need to legitimize the regime and also the leader, a new stage in the evolution of the cult

of personality, mainly characterized by the desire to consolidate the power. Repression, dictatorship and terror, felt especially by the population, can be found during '80s.

By putting together all these results, I can conclude that in Romania's case, the personality cult had evolved since the '60s.

Being the party and state monopoly the means of coercion and mass media cultivated only the exceptional figure of the leader.

Therefore, the first stage followed a policy of distancing from Moscow, culminating with public condemnation of the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. In these conditions,

Ceaușescu played a prominent role, which had a noticeable effect reflected in a relative increase in living standards.

The last step coincides with the national-communist dictatorship and cultural revolution characterized by taking over all levers of state, a pronounced cult of personality and a state apparatus able to suppress all opposition. Economic policy of forced industrialization and urbanization proved to be bankrupt, in the '80s, Romania, was passing through a strong moral, social and economic

crisis, during which most people lived at subsistence level.

Ceaușescu refused any attempt to change and he wasn't willing to accept a reform. On the background of the failure of political regimes of the Eastern bloc, started a popular uprising in Timișoara, which was the spark that fueled the public desire for change, and after extensive street fighting, Nicolae Ceaușescu was removed from power. He was sentenced to death for genocide and for subversion of state power and national economy.

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