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The Role of Trauma in Romania's Ontological Security

Abstract: This paper analyses Romania's foreign policy during the first post-communist years, by employing a theoretical viewpoint based on ontological security and trauma. It uncovers the elite efforts to secure the post-totalitarian state's identity and international course. Romania's search for ontological security featured the articulation of narratives of victimhood, which were linked with its proclaimed western European identity. The Romanian identity narrative has long struggled between "the West" and "the East", trying to cope with traumatic historical events. These discursive themes and ontological insecurities were crystallized in the controversy surrounding the Romanian-Soviet "Friendship Treaty" (1991). Key Romanian officials displayed different typical responses to cultural trauma and debated the state's path to ontological security, which was reflected in the foreign policy positions.

Keywords: *identity; trauma; post-communism; Romania; foreign policy; ontological security*

Introduction

The impact of trauma and memory in international politics has been discussed by a rich body of literatures. A few noteworthy mentions are more firmly located in the field of International Relations – IR (Edkins, 2003; Bell, 2006; Resende & Budryte, 2014; Auchter, 2014), while others specifically deal with foreign policy analysis (Wittes, 2005; Langenbacher & Shain, 2010; Saunders, 2011; Becker, 2014). The politics of memory and trauma and transitional justice have been widely researched in the case of post-communist Romania (Stan & Turcescu, 2017; Mitroiu, 2016; Stan & Vancea, 2015; Stan, 2013) and in the European context more broadly (Mitroiu, 2015; Stan, 2009).

In contrast to existing accounts, this article proposes to treat trauma and identity as narratives that have played a key role in Romania's post-totalitarian foreign policy, with a concrete look at the Soviet "Friendship Treaty" in 1991. The years 1990-1991 merit further study, as Romania was the only post-communist state that signed a security treaty with the USSR. The analysis contributes to the literature on Romanian foreign policy and draws

insights from the growing scholarship on ontological security. The arguments open with a theoretical viewpoint based on the ontological security interpretation of trauma, which has been applied to two empirical sections about Romania's identity and foreign policy.

Theoretical Viewpoint

To begin with, IR and foreign policy research have been traditionally concerned with the physical security of states in the international system. Ontological security is a recent endeavor to broaden this view and represents "the seeking of a consistent self through time and space and the desire to have that self-recognized and affirmed by others" (Innes and Steele, 2014, p. 15). States attempt to secure their selves through "the discursive articulation of a(n) (auto)biographical identity narrative", which "provides meaning for their past and current actions" (Innes and Steele, 2014, p. 17). Ontological security is as vital to states as physical security (Zarakol, 2010, p. 3). That is why state insecurity derives not only from potential physical threats, but also from "the prospective transformations and developments that call into question a state or a group's identity" (Innes and Steele, 2014, p. 16).

Ontological insecurity resonates with cultural trauma, which "occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). But memories of that event cannot be "passed down from generation to generation" (Bell, 2003, p. 73) to those who have not experienced the trauma. Instead, what is transferred is a narrative that "simplifies, dramatizes and selectively [tells] the story" of a group's "past and its place in the world" (Bell, 2003, p. 75). Or, using ontological security terms, trauma manifests in "narratives of victimhood" (Becker, 2014, p. 68) and "upsets a certain understanding of the collective biographical narrative" (Innes and Steele, 2014, p. 20).

Furthermore, ontological security relies on structuration theory, which considers structures and agents as mutually constitutive (Giddens, 1984). Structures do not causally determine agents' conduct, only providing the frames of meaning within which autonomous agents decide and act. Actors can strategically manipulate narratives (including those related to identity and trauma) for their political ends, a fact which renders the use of narratives critical to understanding foreign policy (Subotic, 2016, p. 611). Initially, the concept of ontological security referred to human beings and was extended to states because of its relevance to global politics (Mitzen, 2006, p. 351). While acknowledging the ongoing debates about the state as person in IR theory (Oprisko & Kaliher, 2014), this article is more interested in key Romanian officials as levels of analysis, since state agents "have the moral burden of making policy choices and the capacity to implement those decisions" (Steele, 2008, p. 18).

The above combination of insights on ontological security and trauma sheds a distinctive light regarding the Romanian-Soviet "Friendship Treaty". It enables us to see beyond the traditional explanation of Romania searching for physical security in an uncertain

international environment. Foreign policy analysis needs to examine the interplay between the domestic and international arenas, which in post-communist Romania's case uncovers the struggle to secure the state's identity and future course. Throughout the search for their state's ontological security, Romanian foreign policy decision-makers articulated narratives of victimhood and displayed different attitudes that reflect three of the four responses to trauma - fight, flight, freeze and fawn (Becker, 2014, p. 63). Here of interest are the following responses: fight – insecurity controlled through a “more aggressive foreign policy”; freeze – “the withdrawal/engagement continuum” in international interactions and fawn – “pacifistic policy” intended “to subsume one's identity” or align with others (Becker, 2014, p. 63).

Romania between ‘the West’ and ‘the East’

After nearly five decades of communist rule, Romanian society fought for and earned its freedom with great sacrifice in the revolution of December 1989. The subsequent period of 1990-1991 showed that Romanian elites associated their state with a European identity. The provisional Foreign Affairs Minister Sergiu Celac (1990, p. 3) aptly summarised this point as early as January 1990: “Romania is a European country. That is something given by our history and spirituality”. The subsequent Foreign Affairs Minister Adrian Năstase, following Romania's first post-communist elections in May 1990, reinforced that – “[t]o my view, things are clear. Romania is a European state” (Năstase, 2006, p. 96). The “return to Europe” was a common foreign policy theme for the central and eastern European states after the collapse of communism. Even so, the Romanian case stands out because state leaders articulated certain narratives of victimhood, which were part of Romania's identity as a European state. The communist dictatorship was seen as either a “parenthesis in the country's historical destiny” (as cited in Iliescu, 1994, p. 184) or as a temporary submission to the East within a larger story of Romania's battle to align with the West: “[t]he generation of 1848 and that of the [1918] Unification linked the Romanians to western civilization, extricating them from oriental rule. The current generation of the Romanian nation will re-implement that goal” (as cited in Meleşcanu, 2002, p. 23).

In the early 1990s, the post-communist imaginary at elite level suggested that Romania had fallen victim to the East/the Orient throughout the state's historical trajectory. These narratives of victimhood can be traced back to the main landmarks of Romanian identity – geography, history and culture. Geographically, Romania has acted as a “turning point” between the West and the East and as an inevitable “defense line against all invasions” (Baicoianu, 2006), leading to the “besieged fortress complex” of Romanian mentality (Boia, 2001, p. 155). History has granted Romania a double descent (Dacian and Roman), later constructed to “claim superiority over the closest neighbors and to legitimate Romania's place as a rightful member of the European choir of nations” (Baicoianu, 2008, p. 10). Culturally, Romania has feared exclusion from an “idealized West” and has struggled “to achieve at least a fragile balance between specificity and a longing for integration” (Baicoianu, 2006).

The post-totalitarian era brought forth issues about Romania's ontological insecurity and anxiety for the state to not be stigmatized as being "eastern". In early 1991, Romanian officials started articulating Romania as "central" European, to detach the newly democratic state from negative eastern connotations (Salajan, 2016). It was not a surprising development, considering the western origins of the international system, where a series of designations and self-evaluations have "functioned as stigmas for states": not belonging to "the West", not being "modern", "developed or industrialized or secular or civilized or Christian or democratic enough" (Zarakol, 2011, p. 4). For societies that have never been ontologically insecure, it is very difficult to understand "how all-consuming the stigma of comparative backwardness may become" and "how scary it is to live continuously on the brink of being swallowed by [...] 'Easternness'" (Zarakol, 2011, p. 6).

Yet, whom does "the East" actually represent in the Romanian imaginary and why is it so frightening? The aftermath of World War I facilitated the unification of Great Romania in 1918. The historical provinces of Basarabia, Bucovina and Transilvania joined the Romanian Kingdom, made up of Valahia and Moldova that had already united in 1859. Since the interwar period, Russia had been constructed as the "barbarous East" in the Romanian imaginary, mostly because Romanians feared that communism would be imposed in central-eastern Europe, which fuelled their already strong anti-Russian stance and reinforced their identification with the West (Verdery, 1991, p. 44). Romanian interwar elites had "an almost irrational fear of the Soviet Union", which represented "Romania's hereditary enemy, always present, always a threat to her existence" (Hitchins, 2014, p. 223).

There are two major historical experiences of Romania that illustrate the ontological security view on trauma – the annexation of Basarabia and northern Bucovina by the USSR in 1940 and the Soviet imposition of communism finalized in 1947. On 26 June 1940, the USSR demanded that Romania renounce Basarabia and northern Bucovina within twenty-four hours. The move had been negotiated as part of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression policy, known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact signed in 1939 (Hitchins, 2014, pp 224-225). In August 1944, the Red Army entered Bucharest and the Romanian communists under Soviet guidance seized power by falsifying the election results in 1946 and by forcing King Mihai to abdicate in late 1947. A communist dictatorship was installed in Romania and Soviet military forces remained stationed here until 1958 to secure control over the state (Hitchins, 2014, pp. 243-253). Both major events constitute traumas that have disrupted Romania's ontological security or consistent recognized self through space and time. One entailed the irrevocable loss of part of Romania's population and territory; the other buried the state's European and western oriented identity under forty-five years of totalitarianism.

Once democracy was restored, trauma played an important role in Romania's ontological security and foreign policy positions. At first, the "freeze" response to trauma (Becker, 2014, p. 63) was reflected in Romanian leaders refusing to clearly name NATO and EU accession as the state's international course. President Ion Iliescu employed very vague language at

the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe in November 1990: “[t]he new Romania resulting from the Revolution of December 1989 has adopted a policy oriented towards re-establishing historical and traditional relations with the other countries of Europe and North America, as well as towards developing relations with states sharing the same Latin culture and civilization” (Iliescu, 1990, p. 3). Later in February 1991 at the Warsaw Pact meeting, Minister Năstase remained similarly vague about the state’s foreign policy: “(...) a priority direction for Romania after 1989 is to promote wide partnership relations with the North-Atlantic Alliance and the Western European Union, to associate with the European Economic Community and to participate in the other European structures” (Năstase, 1996, p. 81).

Romania’s partnership with NATO and the future EU or the state’s relations with European and North American countries did not necessarily entail its western integration. It seemed as if Romanian elites had withdrawn from making clear decisions and opted to engage international audiences through a non-committal language. More importantly, the above foreign policy statements prefigure that the state’s ontological security was high on the Romanian officials’ agenda during 1990-1991, featuring debates about Romania’s post-totalitarian identity and international affairs. The debates reached their highest point when the controversial Romanian-Soviet treaty surfaced in mid-1991.

Romania and the Soviet “Friendship Treaty”

Romania was the only post-communist state to sign a “Friendship Treaty” with the USSR. The document was negotiated by Minister Năstase in March 1991, then signed by President Iliescu during his official visit to Moscow in early April, but never ratified or officially adopted by Romania’s Parliament. What caused the main controversy surrounding the treaty? Three “security clauses” were very problematic, as they could have unpredictable consequences for Romania’s foreign policy decisions. First, Romania and the Soviet Union agreed not to participate in “any kind of alliances against each other” (Socor, 1991, pp. 26-27). Second, other parties would not be granted permission to use the signatories’ territory “for committing aggression against each other” (Abraham, 2006, p. 188). Third, if Romania or the USSR entered an armed conflict with a third state, neither the Romanian nor the Soviet side would “give any type of assistance to such a state” (Anghel, 2014).

The treaty and its security clauses came as a “shock” to Romanian society (Tudoroiu, 2008, p. 389). Looking at the terms, the most puzzling aspect was that Romania consented not to be involved in any organization or alliance that opposed the USSR’s interests. An alarming reading of the document stressed that Romania’s independent foreign policy decision-making had been compromised and that its potential NATO integration would be jeopardized (Cioculescu, 2009, p. 138). A number of scholars have agreed that implementing the Soviet “Friendship Treaty” could have resulted in the “Finlandization” of Romania or its transformation into an “Eastern European version of Belarus” (Roth, 2015, p. 121).

In the literature on Romanian foreign policy, the case study has been widely explored by approaches based on the pursuit of physical security. They argue that Romania showed the typical behavior of a “minor power” and had merely tried to “hedge” or balance between the regional hegemony – NATO and the USSR (Soare, 2008, p. 56). The balancing position was necessary as the international context had been “characterized by strategic ambivalence, with Romania thrown into Europe’s grey area of instability and conflict after the Cold War, and in response urgently searching for strong security guarantees” (Soare, 2013, p. 14). Yet accounts relying solely on physical security ignore several issues. They treat security concerns as exogenously given and are not interested in the state’s internal arena, where a substantial part of the foreign policy decision-making process occurs.

The Soviet “Friendship Treaty” is particularly relevant to Romania’s post-communist trajectory, because it underlines the process of domestic debate among political leaders on a very divisive topic – a security relationship with the USSR. Another intriguing element is that some decision-makers – notably Romania’s President – were not hedging, but making a firm choice to build a security arrangement with Moscow. Although Minister Năstase conducted the treaty negotiations in 1991, the directives and ultimate decision belonged to President Iliescu. The Romanian President argued that the document had been misinterpreted and it was only meant to create a different “positive” relationship with the USSR, based on “the principles of international law and the new post-Cold War realities” (Iliescu, 1996, pp. 251-252). He denied that the Soviet Union was effectively given the right to veto Romania’s NATO accession. The fact remains that President Iliescu endorsed the “Friendship Treaty”, being the only post-communist leader from central-eastern Europe to officialise a security relationship with the USSR.

After the treaty content was made public, the Romanian Prime Minister – Petre Roman – accused Minister Năstase of “duplicity and premeditated misinformation” about his negotiations with the Soviet side; Roman was allegedly trying to persuade Iliescu that the treaty should not be adopted, a request apparently refused by the President (Severin, 1995, p. 157). The memoirs of leading parliamentary figures have elucidated the context somewhat. Alexandru Bârlădeanu, at that time chairman of Romania’s Senate, confessed to having no prior knowledge about the President’s actions or the Soviet treaty; Bârlădeanu only discussed the resulting situation with Cornel Mănescu – head of the Parliament’s Foreign Policy Commission (Ivan, 1998, p. 164). Mănescu had received the signed treaty, which was supposed to undergo parliamentary ratification to become legally binding. He asked for Bârlădeanu’s support so that the Romanian-Soviet treaty would not be ratified in Parliament. The main reason was that, by adopting the treaty, Romania would officially “confirm the validity of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact” and thus admit “the loss of Basarabia and northern Bucovina” (Ivan, 1998, p. 165). Bârlădeanu assured Mănescu of his support “to the very end” and asked him to discuss things with President Iliescu, but the subject was not brought up again (Ivan, 1998, p. 165).

Therefore, what insights do ontological security and trauma highlight in the Romanian-Soviet treaty story? Collective actors become ontologically insecure when “critical situations rupture their routines thus bringing fundamental questions to the level of discursive consciousness” (Ejdus, 2017, p. 1). Removing a dictatorial regime and transitioning to democracy was a critical situation that enabled the emergence of long buried questions about Romania’s identity and appropriate foreign policy. Securing the post-totalitarian state’s identity was a vital task, since the traumas of communism had interfered with its (auto)biographical narrative. A security treaty with the USSR encapsulated the discursive controversy at elite level regarding Romania’s path to ontological security and responses to trauma.

By endorsing the treaty, President Iliescu and Minister Năstase moved from the “freeze” to the “fawn” response toward the USSR, fearing Romania’s historical enemy and hoping to secure state identity by aligning with the “aggressor”. This attitude was opposed by the Premier and key members of Parliament, who showed a “fight” response by not ratifying the treaty. Even Iliescu, the most influential political actor at the time, could not push the document through because it clashed with the narratives of victimhood in the Romanian elite imaginary. The treaty brought forth ontological insecurities about Romania being considered “eastern” and being now a willing victim of “the East”. In 1940 and 1947, it was impossible to fight against the USSR and the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Yet in 1991, democratic Romania could at least refuse to officially recognize the past loss of its territories, which began the disruption of the state’s (auto)biographical narrative.

Conclusions

This article has analysed Romania’s foreign policy during the first post-totalitarian years, by relying on the premise that states care about their ontological security as much as about their physical security. Sometimes though, a secure sense of self is more significant than physical survival or power and material gains. Signing the Soviet “Friendship Treaty” could be seen as Romania’s attempt to appease the closest hegemon. But not ratifying the treaty in Parliament could have jeopardized Romania’s relations with the USSR, including its physical security. That is why ontological security takes the analysis a step further by uncovering the Romanian elite debates concerning state identity in general and foreign policy in particular. Romania’s post-communist identity has been articulated as western European, while retaining narratives of victimhood vis-à-vis “the East” symbolized by the USSR. These narratives originate in two traumatic historical events that have disrupted Romania’s (auto)biographical narrative, both involving the Soviet Union. While some Romanian leaders supported a security treaty with the USSR after 1990, most were against it, which illustrated the “fawn” versus “fight” responses to trauma. Ultimately, the state’s post-totalitarian identity had to be secure, which required establishing a consistent (auto)biographical story within the wider structure of meanings. And that meant avoiding any association with “the East”.

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