

# Popular Lived Culture in Communist Romania (1945–1989) as Retraced in Life Histories: How People Appropriated or Resisted Products, Practices, Trends, and Elements of Lifestyle

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## ABSTRACT

Due to its character of totalitarian regime and through the major changes imposed in the society, the communist regime in Romania between 1945 and 1989 represents a distinct period in the history of the country. A series of inflicted macrosocial processes, such as the strictly centralized economy, collectivization and nationalization, as well as some phenomena such as the control of citizens' lives, the impossibility of free expression, censorship of the press and culture, the lack of consumer goods, restrictions on utilities, and so on, negatively marked the fate of many Romanians during this period. However, many people remember this period with nostalgia.

The present paper deals with the popular culture in Romania during the communist period (1945–1989), as seen, considered, and remembered by people who lived in that era, or at least in a period of it. The research was based on the method of life histories and focussed on the viewings of the subjects regarding the practices, rituals, artefacts, and products of popular culture in the communist time. Both folk culture and mass culture are discussed and analysed, as well as the elements of lifestyle, as described by the subjects. Moreover, the influences on the popular culture in that period are outlined, such as those of some large-scale phenomena like industrialisation and urbanisation, Western trends, Soviet propaganda, or the different impositions of the Romanian authorities, according to the various stages the communist regime has been going through in this period. The gathered data show that, while many memories of people are sorrowful and bitter, other recalls and considerations regarding the cultural practices of that time, and especially the human relations built by the means of these practices, are full of nostalgia. These aspects concerning popular culture in a particular historical period and nostalgia related to it are discussed in detail in the paper.

## KEYWORDS

Popular culture; lived culture; mass culture; life histories; communist nostalgia; communist Romania.

## INTRODUCTION

In the history of Romania, the communist period (1945–1989) was a distinct one. The political regime was characterized by the sole governing of the communist party, and inflicted important changes in society, at the economic and social level. The

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society faced imposed macro-social processes such as collectivization and nationalization, or largely forced, such as industrialization and urbanization. The radical transformations in society also involved cultural changes, marked by prohibitions, changes and impositions. Severe cultural control and restrictions, including on the media, together with the cultural imposition of socialist ideology were the mainstays of communist propaganda<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, however, a certain cultural continuity of the interwar period was maintained, as no totalitarian regime could totally destroy a certain cultural evolution in its unfolding course. Under these conditions, the popular culture in communist Romania had its own specificity, being influenced, on the one hand, by the mentioned restrictions and control, and on the other hand by the cultural continuity maintained especially in certain practices and activities of people, as well as by the cultural transformations inherent to the evolution of the society.

This paper addresses the popular lived culture in Romania during the communist era as remembered and described by the people living at that time. The research was based on the method of social biographies, in the form of life histories, aiming to obtain a subjective perspective of a noticeable historical period as far as popular lived culture is concerned. The viewings of the research subjects regarding the practices, rituals, artefacts, and products of popular culture in the communist time were analysed and their subjective viewpoints on the interactions between individual-group-society, rendered as temporal processes a-la-long, unfolded during some decades, were considered.

## CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Both 'culture' and 'popular' are terms that are able to determine controversial debates in sociological and cultural analyses. As regards the term 'culture', from a sociological point of view, following M. Weber, this is, fundamentally, a sociological construct, given that culture is founded on 'value', being defined as the finite segment of reality on which people can confer significance and meaning<sup>3</sup>. According to R. Williams (1981), culture has, contemporary, four appropriations: a developed state of mind and knowledge, the process of developing it, the means of this process, and the way(s) of life constructed through this process<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, culture can be understood both in a narrow and a wider sense. The first comprises artistic activities that allow interpreting, representing, and disseminating new values<sup>5</sup>, making use of

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2 C. VASILE, *Propaganda and Culture in Romania at the Beginning of the Communist Regime*, in: V. TISMANEANU (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2009, pp. 367–385.

3 M. WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (translated by T. Parsons), Dover Publications, New York 1958.

4 R. WILLIAMS, *Culture*, Fontana Paperbacks, Glasgow 1981.

5 X. GREFFE, *Introduction: L'économie de la culture est-elle particulière?*, in: *Revue d'économie politique*, Vol. 120, No. 1, 2010, pp. 1–34.



intellectual work for the creation of new meaning through artistic actions<sup>6</sup>. In this narrow definition, culture is mainly associated with productive activities, mostly (although not exclusively) carried out by specialized professionals<sup>7</sup>. Even understood in this tight way, culture still includes a wide spectrum of forms and media<sup>8</sup>. The second meaning, a broader one, incorporating also the ‘way of life’, implies that culture includes all the values, norms and benchmarks, references and behaviours, which define the state of social relationships, “shared goals, cooperative behaviour and reciprocity among individuals and communities within a given society”<sup>9</sup>. This vision is followed in the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity too, as, according to it, in culture should be regarded, in addition to art and literature, also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, in a broader sense, culture includes both a system of knowledge and a lifestyle, formed and shared by a community, prompting a sense of identity transmitted from generation to generation through symbolic communication and imitation processes reinforced by local institutions<sup>11</sup>. This larger meaning of the term ‘culture’ is also taken into consideration in cultural studies, provided that specific to them is the tendency to increasingly consider more areas of human activity as ‘culture’. This trend is part of a wider current that tends towards radical reflexivity in practically all areas of human activity, this being a characteristic of the modern era<sup>12</sup>. In cultural studies, the word ‘culture’ refers to the sociologically and anthropologically motivated preoccupations for the practices and products created by human beings. They are considered as expressing and including, at the same time, a certain degree of subjectivity. The sense of culture is seen as a social construct, and cultural studies tend to analyse how it is structured, articulated, and put into circulation in various environments<sup>13</sup>.

The term ‘popular’, on the other hand, has also diverse meanings and the controversies arise when it comes to decide which meaning to use at a certain moment<sup>14</sup>.

6 M. AZEVEDO, *The evaluation of the social impacts of culture: culture, arts and development*, Economics and Finance. Université Panthéon-Sorbonne — Paris I, English, NNT: 2016PA01E041, 2016.

7 OECD, *Culture and Local Development. Background document*, <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/lead/venice-2018-conference-culture/documents/Culture-and-Local-Development-Venice.pdf>, 2018, p. 12.

8 Ibidem.

9 OECD, *Culture and Local Development*, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/culture-and-local-development\\_9789264009912-en#page1](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/culture-and-local-development_9789264009912-en#page1), 2005, p. 27.

10 UNESCO, *UNESCO Culture for Development Indicator Suite*, [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Conv2005\\_CDindicators\\_Analytical\\_en.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Conv2005_CDindicators_Analytical_en.pdf), 2011, p. 4.

11 AZEVEDO, p. 3.

12 H. LAWSON, *Reflexivity: The Post-modern Predicament*, Hutchinson, London 1985; A. GIDDENS, *Modernity and Self Identity*, Polity Press, Oxford 1991.

13 P. DAHLGREN, *Introduction*, in: P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds.), *Journalism and Popular Culture*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 1–23, p. 6.

14 C. SPARKS, *Popular Journalism: Theories and Practice*, in: P. DAHLGREN — C. SPARKS (eds.), *Journalism and Popular Culture*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 24–44, p. 24.



Firstly, the notion of ‘popular’, in the sense of ‘of the people’, has a political meaning, given especially in the left political tradition, according to which ‘the people’ was designated as opposed to big capital and big business, that were seen as the enemies of the ‘common man’. This meaning was intensely exploited by communist ideologies and parties after 1933<sup>15</sup>. With few exceptions, the ‘Popular Front’, as the central element of the thinking and practice of communist parties around the world, has provided the fundamental intellectual framework for these parties and their successors to this day. Thus, the name of the Stalinist states established in Eastern Europe after 1947 was that of ‘popular democracies’ or ‘People’s Democracies’, while the current name of communist China and North Korea is still “People’s Republic of China” and “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” respectively. Secondly, the word ‘popular’ has an ideological meaning, a sense used mainly to distinguish the ‘mass of people’ (not ‘people’ in general) from the class of people with a noble title, and also from the wealthy or the educated people. However, in this paper I consider the meaning of the ‘popular’ introduced by the British cultural studies, that emerged in the ‘60s and followed a neo-Marxist tradition that criticizes and contrasts elite notions of culture, including ‘high culture’, with popular, everyday forms practiced by minorities. The superiority of all forms of elite culture including high culture is challenged and compared with useful, valuable forms of popular culture, and hermeneutic attention is shifted from the study of elite cultural artefacts to the study of ‘lived culture’ of minority groups<sup>16</sup>.

Starting from these demarcations, in this paper I understand the concept of ‘popular culture’ not in the sense of “what remains” outside of “elite culture” (what was considered ‘high culture’), but in the sense of what is produced or created by and for people, including products, artefacts and practices, indigenous forms of culture as legitimate expressions of people. From this point of view, popular culture includes also ‘folk culture’. The continuity between popular culture and folk culture is emphasized in British cultural studies. Although an important part of what was called ‘folk culture’ disappeared along with the disintegration of organic communities (whose way of life had actually generated the folk culture), some forms of it survived in a transformed way. Even though industrialization and urbanization have led to the process of professionalization and chasing away of the artist from the life and experiences of the public, truly ‘popular’ artists build the artistic act of people’s lives, experiences and attitudes, and express something of value to them<sup>17</sup>.

This theoretical perspective is specific to the culturalist approach, more precisely to the theoretical view introduced by the so-called ‘break’ from the end of ‘50s in cultural studies. That break was marked by the emergence of the studies of writers such as R. Hoggart (1957), R. Williams (1958), S. Hall and P. Whannel (1964), E. P. Thompson (1968)<sup>18</sup> who challenged the liberal or idealist tradition, in which values and ideas

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15 Ibidem, p. 27.

16 S. J. BARAN — D. K. DAVIS, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, Wadsworth, Belmont 2000, p. 224.

17 S. HALL — P. WHANNELL, *The Popular Arts*, Hutchinson Educational, London 1964, p. 52.

18 R. HOGGART, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1957; R. WILLIAMS, *Culture and Society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1958; S. HALL —

were considered essentially autonomous and free-floating, separate from the economic and political life of society, as well as the earlier, reductionist Marxist theories that saw culture as ultimately determined by the economic base of society. The new theorists regarded culture as having a complex interrelationship with other aspects of political, social, and economic life<sup>19</sup>, and as being actively produced. From this point of view, culture is not simply a passive receiver, influenced by economic structures, but it can be, in its turn, influential.

Another point of interest in the debate about popular culture today is whether or not ‘mass culture’ is part of popular culture. As nowadays mass media is omnipresent, one cannot make that radical disjunction between popular culture and mass culture, where the former one used to be considered ‘low culture’ or even ‘trash culture’<sup>20</sup>. In this regard, ‘low culture’, which would be largely equivalent to ‘mass culture’, is seen in opposition to what is called ‘high culture’, or ‘quality culture’, achieved especially by and/or for elites (including ‘elite artists’). Longing for commercial success has led, of course, to the standardization and the fall of the cultural product, designed to suit as good as possible the ‘masses’ — ‘for the masses’ and ‘about the masses’<sup>21</sup>. But at present, is anyone able to make a clear distinction between ‘declassed culture’ and that type of culture that expresses something valuable in the eyes of human beings? That is why in this paper I take into consideration mass culture, at least some forms of it, as being part of popular culture, next to folk culture. As J. Fiske (1989) pointed out<sup>22</sup>, the term of ‘popular culture’ refers to a process — the interpretative appropriation of capitalist mass culture products by the people. The term ‘people’ designates, in his opinion, in a revised version of the Marxist class analysis, “most people”, that are not part of what he calls ‘power-bloc’. Popular sensibility, he emphasizes, has the power to transform the artefacts of mass-marketed culture into spaces of resistance to the power bloc and to the dominant cultural, political, and social order. The moment of resistance and the popularity of popular culture does not reside in the nature of the texts of cultural life, but precisely in the moment of consumption. Through the productivity of the ways of interpretation, people generate the oppositional content of the popular and undermine the logic of ‘consumer goods’ of commercial culture, selecting from the multitude of products of cultural industries and from the multitude of possible ways of interpreting these products, exactly those who address directly to the sense of the popular and who can be used to give a popular meaning to the social experience<sup>23</sup>. J. Storey analysed also in detail the press, magazines, and television in his overviews of popular culture<sup>24</sup>.

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P. WHANNEL, *Op. cit.*; E. P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Classes*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1968.

19 B. CASEY — N. CASEY — B. CALVERT — L. FRENCH — J. LEWIS, *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, London, New York 2002, p. 57.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

21 SPARKS, p. 29.

22 J. FISKE, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Routledge, New York 1989.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 24.

24 J. STOREY, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA 1996; J. STOREY, *Inventing Popular Culture*, Blackwell, Malden, MA 2003.



Other relevant questions regarding popular culture are to what extent popular culture is imposed on people in general (by media corporations or state agencies) or derives from people's own experiences, tastes, habits, and to what extent popular culture is just an expression of a powerless and subordinate class position or an autonomous and potentially liberating source of alternative ways of seeing and doing that may be opposed to the dominant or official culture<sup>25</sup>. What matters as a popular culture depends, thus, to some extent on whether one is interested in what meanings are produced by and for the 'people' and whether these meanings are taken as evidence of "what the public wants" or "what the public gets"<sup>26</sup>. It should be emphasized, however, as a conclusion<sup>27</sup>, that the focus in the study of popular culture has extended from the original spotlight on obvious cultural artefacts such as texts, to the inclusion of practices, lifestyle and in general of what is called 'lived culture' under the umbrella of the term 'popular culture'.

## ROMANIA IN COMMUNIST ERA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

### THE PHASES OF COMMUNISM IN ROMANIA

The communist regime in Romania compassed a series of distinct stages, which differed one from another in radical ways. Although Romania was still a monarchy between 1945 and 1947, the communist forces took over the power in this interval, especially after March 6, 1945, when Dr. Petru Groza, the leader of the Ploughmen's Front (an ally of the communists) became prime minister. Although, in order to gain the recognition of the Western Allies, the government formula was broadened by admitting some ministers from among the members of the 'historical parties', the communists had control over the key ministries. After the elections on November 9, 1946, the official results credited the Communists with 80 % of the votes, while the opposition parties claimed serious electoral fraud. After the election victory, the communists focused on the elimination of the center parties from political life, as well as on the imprisonment, exile, trial, and execution of non-communist politicians. Therefore, during this period the communist regime seized power through fraud and violence, and with the massive help of the Soviets in Moscow<sup>28</sup>. This interval culminated with the forcing of the last king of Romania, Michael I, to abdicate, on December 30, 1947 and the proclamation, the very same day, of the Romanian People's Republic. This unconstitutional political act was not the expression of a popular, freely expressed will, but the result of a dictation of a political group, namely that of the communists, who

<sup>25</sup> T. O'SULLIVAN — J. HARTLEY — D. SAUNDERS — M. MONTGOMERY — J. FISKE, *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, New York 1997, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> V. TISMANEANU, *Diabolical Pedagogy and the (Il)logic of Stalinism in Eastern Europe*, in: V. TISMANEANU (ed.), *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, Central European University Press, Budapest, New York, 2009, pp. 25–50.



sought to bring the country to a state of obedience to the Soviet Union and its transformation into a totalitarian state.

Starting with the beginning of 1948, a period characterized by one of the most ruthless and dramatic regimes in the Romanian history followed. At the political level, the communists ensured the exclusive seizure of central and local power, a series of successive waves of arrests of any kind of opponents followed, and the infiltration of security service informants at all levels and in all social strata began. The implementation of the Stalinist model was started, in economy — by the processes of nationalization and collectivization<sup>29</sup>, politics — by setting up the power monopoly of the unique party (called between 1948 and 1965 the Romanian Workers' Party), and approaching 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', and culture — by constructing a 'Romanian homo sovieticus', the 'new human type' produced by the communist system<sup>30</sup>.

The period 1959–1974 was named also the 'enlightened absolutism' and can be characterized as a 'relaxation' stage of the Romanian socialism. This period started from the last years of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej leadership and continued in the first years of Nicolae Ceaușescu in his capacity as general secretary of the only party. Ceaușescu's rise to power took place in 1965. After his predecessor, Gheorghiu-Dej, died on March 19, 1965, on March 22, 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu, at that time leader in charge of key sectors of power — the army, security, justice, and the 'militia' — was elected party's first secretary. In 1965, both the official name of the country was changed, from the Romanian People's Republic to the Socialist Republic of Romania, and the name of the single party, from the Romanian Workers' Party to the Romanian Communist Party. In the first years after coming to power, Ceaușescu continued the policy of leaving the tutelage of Moscow started by Gheorghiu-Dej before his death. Externally, Ceaușescu initiated an openness to the West, intensifying trade, political, cultural, and scientific exchanges between communist Romania and Western states. One of the most famous political moments of those years was the condemnation by Nicolae Ceaușescu of the military intervention, which began on the night of August 20–21, 1968, of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia, an intervention that ended the Prague Spring. On August 21, Ceaușescu delivered a speech from the balcony of the Romanian Communist Party's Central Committee building, in front of a large gathering of people, describing the invasion of communist armies as "a great mistake, a grave danger to peace in Europe"<sup>31</sup>. The speech with strong anti-Soviet accents generated a great popularity for Ceaușescu internally and externally<sup>32</sup>. The period between 1965 and 1974 was marked, in domestic politics, by measures of political, economic, and cultural relaxation, by moving away from Soviet Union and reorient-

29 C. ROMAN, *Colectivizare [Collectivization]*, in: S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului [The dictionary of communism]*, Polirom, Iași 2008, pp. 691–692.

30 R. C. IRIMIE, *Homo sovieticus: the European journey of the New Man*, in: Polis — Revistă de științe politice, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2014, <http://revistapolis.ro/homo-sovieticus-calatoria-europeana-a-omului-nou-homo-sovieticus-the-european-journey-of-the-new-man/>.

31 V. SEBESTYEN, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire*, Pantheon Books, New York 2009.

32 Ibidem.



ing towards national values. A series of treaties and agreements made by Ceaușescu with Western countries and organizations brought some prosperity internally to the population, which benefited at the same time from a relative openness and a ‘thaw’ in the cultural, artistic, and scientific fields.

However, in June 1971, Nicolae Ceaușescu and other party and state officials paid a ‘working visit’ to four Asian countries: the People’s Republic of China (June 1–9), the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (June 9–15), the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (June 15–19) and the Mongolian People’s Republic (June 21–24). It seems that Ceaușescu was deeply impressed by the reception he received, marked by public demonstrations and grandiose spectacles, as well as by the way the Chinese and North Korean leaders ruled their countries. On his return to Romania, on July 6, 1971, Ceaușescu gave a speech in front of the Executive Political Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, which marked the beginning of a new period of political ‘frost’ and the return to ‘socialist realism’<sup>33</sup>. This discourse is also known in Romanian historiography as the “Theses of July”. These ‘theses’ marked a turning point in Ceaușescu’s politics.

In 1974, Ceaușescu created the position of president of the country and was proclaimed, on April 29, 1974, the first president of the Socialist Republic of Romania. The period 1974–1989 meant the return to a tough dictatorial regime, but a different and totally new one: a presidential regime, centered on Ceaușescu’s personality cult. The totalitarian regime of Ceaușescu introduced in Romania a new form of socialism: the dynastic socialism<sup>34</sup>, characterized by: pushing the personality cult until paroxysm; imposing the dictator’s family members in front of the country; reinforcing the Stalinist methods of people control, as the infamous ‘Securitate’ — ‘Security’ developed new methods for terrorizing people<sup>35</sup>; rewriting history under the direct control of the party leadership, from a national-communist perspective<sup>36</sup>; economic disaster — strict centralization, planned economy, damaging industrialization<sup>37</sup>; frequently interrupted domestic electricity in the name of being ‘economic’; no central heating in apartments<sup>38</sup>; the impossibility of travelling outside the country; lacks in most of the consumer goods and commodities; and even by the starvation of the population in the last years of the dictatorship.

Ceaușescu’s dictatorial regime, as well as the communist regime in Romania, ended as a result of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, which consisted of a series of protests, street fights and demonstrations started in Timișoara and con-

33 V. TISMĂNEANU, *Stalinism pentru eternitate [Stalinism for eternity]*, Polirom, Iași 2005.

34 V. GEORGESCU, *Istoria românilor. De la origini până în zilele noastre [The history of the Romanians. From origins to the present day]*, Humanitas, Bucharest 1995, p. 287.

35 A. MURARU, *Securitatea [Security]*, in: S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului [The dictionary of communism]*, Polirom, Iași 2008, pp. 702–704.

36 M. BERINDEI — D. DOBRINCU — A. GOȘU (eds.), *Istoria comunismului din România. Volumul III: Documente — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975) [The history of communism in Romania. Volume III: Documents — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)]*, Polirom, Iași 2017.

37 D. DRĂGHIA, *Ceaușescu, Nicolae*, in: S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului [The dictionary of communism]*, Polirom, Iași 2008, pp. 689–690.

38 I. PÂRVULESCU (ed.), *Și eu am trăit în comunism [I too lived in communism]*, Humanitas, Bucharest 2015.



tinued in Bucharest and many other localities in the country, between December 16 and 25, 1989<sup>39</sup>. The Romanian Revolution of 1989, which led to the fall of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and the end of the communism in Romania, culminated in the trial and execution of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife, Elena, on December 25, 1989.

## MASS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

The authorities of the Romanian communist regime, in all the phases it went through, but especially in the Stalinist phase and in the phase of Ceaușescu's personal dictatorship, took all possible measures to control the communication, both mass communication and interpersonal one. The press was unscrupulously controlled, censored, and limited, as media was considered the main instrument of propaganda for the communist party<sup>40</sup>.

The media landscape in communist Romania consisted of the public national radio station, the public national television station, and a wider range of written publications — several national and local newspapers, generalist and specialized magazines in various fields, etc. The Romanian national public radio station, which started broadcasting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1928, continued its activity in 1945 under a series of new rules, whose main characteristic was politicization. The Romanian Broadcasting Society was brought under state control on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 1948 and starting from 1950 the number of broadcastings diminished. The local studios of the Public National Radio were closed because of orders given by Ceaușescu, in 1985.

The Romanian National Television, the first Romanian institution of this genre, was inaugurated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1956. Between 1956 and 1972 there was only one channel of the Romanian Television, while the second channel was set up in 1972. The television had plenty of success in Romania, as people were very interested to subscribe. In 1965 the unique TV channel could be received on 40% of the country's territory, and the number of subscribers reached 500.000, while in 1970 the reception reached 83% of the country's territory, and the number of subscribers grew to 1.5 million<sup>41</sup>. The broadcasting reached more than 100 hours per week up to 1982, but after that date they started to drastically diminish. Thus, that year, under the pretext of 'saving energy', the broadcast was suspended between 6PM and 8PM, Monday to Friday. The peak was the cancelation, in January 1985, of the second TV channel, which was named 'Program 2' at that time, and the restriction imposed on the first TV channel (named 'Program 1'), which started broadcasting only for two hours every day (Monday to Friday, between 8PM and 10PM). All these were conse-

39 R. CRISTEA, *Revoluția 1989 [The 1989 Revolution]*, Editura România pur și simplu, Bucharest 2006; M. STAN, *Momentul 1989 — România [The Moment 1989 — Romania]*, in: S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului [The dictionary of communism]*, Polirom, Iași 2008, pp. 710–711; G. CARTIANU, *Sfârșitul Ceaușeștilor: Să mori împușcat ca un animal sălbatic [The end of the Ceaușescus: To die shot like a wild animal]*, Adevărul Holding, Bucharest 2010.

40 VASILE, *Op. cit.*

41 TVR.ro, *Istoric — Alb-negru și color [History — Black and white, and color]*, [http://www.tvr.ro/istoric-alb-negru-si-color\\_2223.html#view](http://www.tvr.ro/istoric-alb-negru-si-color_2223.html#view), 2012.



quences of Ceaușescu's orders. Later, starting with November 1988, another extra hour was added, but the program was entirely dedicated to the cult of Ceaușescu's personality.

As far as the print press is concerned, the newspaper *Scînteia* ('The Spark') consolidated, during the communist era, its status as the central newspaper of the Communist Party, a position it had acquired since its interwar appearance, on August 15, 1931. *Scînteia* newspaper had the status of 'the central press organ of the party' until its disappearance, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1989. Along with *Scînteia*, other daily and weekly newspapers were also available, whose main feature was their strong politicization and ideologization. In addition to the magazines specially set up exactly for the transmission of communist propaganda (such as *Tînărul leninist* — 'The Young Leninist', *Era socialistă* — 'The Socialist Era' or *Munca de partid* — 'Working for the Party'), there were other magazines with various profiles, such as popularization of science, cinema, sport, magazines for women, etc.). Although they all had photos and articles dedicated to the communist leaders (i.e., after 1965, Ceaușescu and his wife) on the front pages, inside they contained also articles according to their profile.

Unlike the printed press, radio and TV, which were undergoing heavy control, other types of media, understood in the broad sense of the concept, have been less controlled and censored. A wide range of books was printed and, although the censorship system was very well developed, it can be said that the content of the books was not exactly one hundred percent controlled, so that certain forms of resistance, especially in literature books, could emerge. Also broadcasting movies, including foreign, Western films, at the cinema was widespread, and remained possible until 1989. In terms of music, people borrowed and copied from each other recordings, audio tapes and so on, and the same happened with video tapes with movies, especially in the late 80's. Rock and roll and rock music enjoyed great success also in communist Romania, bands and singers such as Elvis Presly, Beatles, Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones etc. being known and popular in Romania in the 60s and 70s, and the same happened later with pop and disco music, very popular being bands such as Abba, Boney M., Modern Talking, Depeche Mode or singers such as Michael Jackson, Madonna etc. The music of these bands and singers became popular not so much by broadcasting on the radio, television or through concerts, but especially by transmitting from person to person the tapes and bands with music, by listening to it in private spaces, at private parties, as well as listening and dancing to it in discos.

The control and censorship became exacerbate in the last years of Ceaușescu's regime ('80s), when some drastic restrictions were imposed as regards the media content, especially as far as the television was concerned. For example, the American and Western European serials were eliminated from the — anyway limited — TV program due to the 'decadent capitalist values' which they showed, considered as harmful for the Romanian socialist society. This was for instance the case of the TV serial 'Dallas', which had a huge success in Romania in the 70s, but was forbidden by Ceaușescu in 1982. Despite of all the restrictions, especially in the 'relaxation period', but also until the communism breaking down in 1989 (in spite of Ceaușescu's control), various products and practices of Western popular culture entered and were adopted and appropriated by the population, being perceived, especially by youngsters, as elements of modernity or 'to be up to date'.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND PURPOSE

The communist period in the history of Romania was the subject of numerous researches, carried out not only from the perspective of history, historiography, political science, dealing with the investigation and systematization of a historical period<sup>42</sup>, but also from the perspective of iconography, sociology and social psychology, analysing everyday life in communist Romania<sup>43</sup>. This paper presents a research that aimed to examine the subjective perspectives of people who lived part of their life in communism, by narratively reconstructing their lives and experiences lived in that era, as they are recalled and appreciated retrospectively. The study was based on the method of *social biography*<sup>44</sup>, which explores “the connections between the dense specificity of individual lives and the larger contexts in which they are embedded (...) casting new light on the standard world historical narratives”<sup>45</sup>. This method usually involves the technique of *life history interviewing*, that is, a form of individual interview directed to documenting the subject’s life, or an aspect of it that has developed over the life course<sup>46</sup>. In this regard, ‘multiple social biographies’ or ‘life histories’ were collected, understanding the term in its classic sense, as subjects’ narrations

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- 42 See: M. BERINDEI — D. DOBRINCU — A. GOȘU (eds.), *Istoria comunismului din Romania. Documente — Perioada Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1945–1965)* [*The history of communism in Romania. Documents — Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej Period (1945–1965)*], Comisia prezidențială pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din România [Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania], Humanistas, Bucharest 2009; M. BERINDEI — D. DOBRINCU — A. GOȘU (eds.), *Istoria comunismului din România. Volumul II: Documente — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–1971)* [*The history of communism in Romania. Volume II: Documents — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1965–1971)*], Polirom, Iași 2012; M. BERINDEI — D. DOBRINCU — A. GOȘU (eds.), *Istoria comunismului din România. Volumul III: Documente — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)* [*The history of communism in Romania. Volume III: Documents — Nicolae Ceaușescu (1972–1975)*], Polirom, Iași 2017; S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului* [*The dictionary of communism*], Polirom, Iași 2008.
- 43 See: PÂRVULESCU, *Op. cit.*; V. O. CIOACĂ, *Viața cotidiană în România comunistă* [*Everyday life in communist Romania*], Beladi & Sitech, Craiova 2019; A. SIMA, *Vârstele omului nou: Viața cotidiană în ultimul deceniu al regimului comunist din România* [*The ages of the new man: Everyday life in the last decade of the communist regime in Romania*], IRRD '89, Bucharest 2020; I. MOLDOVEANU, *Viața de zi cu zi în România comunistă* [*Everyday life in communist Romania*], <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/789wmy/viața-de-zi-cu-zi-in-romania-comunista> & <https://comunismulinromania.weebly.com/povesti-din-vremea-comunista.html>, 2014; M. DOHI, *Vă mai amintiți? Cum trăiau românii în communism* [*Do you remember? How Romanians lived in communism*], [https://www.click.ro/news/national/va-mai-aminti-ti-cum-traiau-romanii-comunism#disqus\\_thread](https://www.click.ro/news/national/va-mai-aminti-ti-cum-traiau-romanii-comunism#disqus_thread), 2018.
- 44 S. CHELCEA, *Biografie socială* [*Social biography*], in: C. ZAMFIR — L. VLĂSCĒANU (eds.), *Dicționar de sociologie* [*Dictionary of sociology*], Editura Babel, Bucharest 1993, pp. 68–71.
- 45 E. BURKE III, *Social Biographies as World History*, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.ucsc.edu/dist/f/704/files/2019/05/Writing-Social.Biographies.pdf>
- 46 N. G. FIELDING, *Life History Interviewing*, in: V. JUPP (ed.), *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore 2006, pp. 159–161; R. ATKINSON, *The Life Story Interview*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi 1998.



about themselves, about their own lives<sup>47</sup>, that is, the respondents narratively reconstructed their lives and experiences during the communist period, exactly how they remembered them, following a biographic guide established by the researcher.

The research aimed to gather and analyse life histories of people who lived in the communist period, and, with them, the viewings of the subjects regarding the practices, rituals, artefacts, and products of popular culture at that time. This method allowed the investigation of some aspects such as: how the personal life trajectory interwove with the social micro-environment, but also with the dimensions of the macro-environment (like socio-political changes); how the cultural practices and artefacts were lived or made and what significations people gave to them; how were some socio-political phenomena — like forced collectivization, industrialization, urbanization, and so on — understood ‘by the interior’<sup>48</sup>. Besides all these, the biographical method has the advantage to offer a global perspective upon some socio-historical phenomena, because through it the interactions between individual-group-society are rendered as temporal processes a-la-long, unfolded during some decades<sup>49</sup>.

By the findings obtained through this method I expected to collect ‘subjective’ data about the ‘lived culture’, and also about the evolution, appropriation, resistance or rejection of the popular culture products, which in the end could lead us to outline the situation of popular culture in Romania in the communist epoch. Therefore, both folk culture and mass culture were discussed and analysed, as well as the elements of lifestyle, as described by the subjects. Moreover, the influences on the popular culture in that period were considered, such as those of some large-scale phenomena like industrialisation and urbanisation, but also the impact of Western trends, Soviet propaganda, or the leverage of different impositions of the Romanian communist authorities, according to the various stages the communist regime has been going through in this period.

The autobiographies of 62 persons who have lived a part or a large part of their life in the communist era were analysed. Because some of these persons were very old (over 80 and even over 90 years old), the life histories provided inside looks on all the distinct communist stages in Romania, including the ‘Stalinist’ one. In terms of the residential environment in which they were born, 39 subjects of the research were born in the rural area and 23 in the urban one. As concerns gender, 31 subjects were male and 31 female.

The autobiographies were made following a structure given by a biographic guide, whose main issues were: a) date of birth and place of birth, childhood and adolescence; b) school period; c) their own family and work; d) mass media consume (me-

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<sup>47</sup> K. PLUMMER, *The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research*, in: P. ATKINSON — A. COFFEY — S. DELAMONT — J. LOFLAND — L. LOFLAND (eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography*, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore 2001, pp. 395–406; D. BERTAUX — M. KOHLI, *The Life Story Approach: A Continental View*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 10, 1984, pp. 215–237.

<sup>48</sup> P. ILUȚ, *Abordarea calitativă a sociumanului [The qualitative approach of the socio-human field]*, Polirom, Iași 1997, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> CHELCEA, *Op. cit.*; G. FERRÉOL — P. CAUCHE — J.-M. DUPREZ — N. GADREY — M. SIMON, *Dictionnaire de sociologie*, 4<sup>e</sup> édition revue et augmentée, Armand Colin, Paris 2011.

dia understood in a large sense); e) elements of popular culture (including folk culture) — both artefacts/ commodities and ‘lived culture’ (cultural practices, lifestyle). The research focused both on those cultural products and practices imposed by the authorities, and on those generated by people (including the ones considered ways of resisting, such as the jokes against the regime); both on the local cultural products and the foreign ones, taken in different ways and adapted, and so forth. Due to confidentiality related reasons and the private character of revealing the identity of the research subjects, in this article they are referred, in the quotes that follow, as RS1 (from the research subject number 1), RS2, RS3, and so on, until RS62. The subjects of the research were ordinal connoted like this, from the oldest (RS1) to the youngest (RS62).



## RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSIONS

### ‘LIVED CULTURE’: POPULAR CULTURE PRACTICES AND RITUALIZED ACTIVITIES DURING THE COMMUNIST PERIOD IN ROMANIA

Getting together, listening to music and dancing was one of the popular culture practices that resisted from the time of the monarchy, before the Second World War, and continued during the communist period. The popular traditional dances and parties with live played popular music (usually by traditional folk music bands), remained widespread and were mentioned by the research subjects as ‘round dances’ — mainly those held in open spaces, in the middle of the village (in Romanian ‘hore’) and ‘balls’ — usually those held indoors in different locations. Such parties provided not only entertainment, but they had also social roles, most of all the opportunity to spend time with other people, and to meet new people, including potential life partners.

*RS36 (male, b.1947, R)<sup>50</sup>: “When I was young, I used to go to the round dances organized every Sunday in the clearing of the village, where not only young people used to join, but also older ones”.*

*RS26 (female, b.1940, U): “I had many friends and I used to go with them to the balls which were being organized by the U.T.M. (the youth organization of the Romanian Communist Party between 1954–1965 — a.n.<sup>51</sup>) every Saturday. We used to put on long floating dresses and curled our hair, that was the fashion back then”.*

<sup>50</sup> During analysing the research results, relevant quotes from the life histories of the subjects are presented. The quotations are preceded by the anonymous denomination of the respective research subject and are written in a different form from the rest of the text. In brackets are given the gender of the respondent, the year of birth (for example, b.1932, i.e., born in 1932) and the area (rural/urban) where he/she grew up (indicated as R for rural and U for urban). For instance, RS36 (male, b.1947, R) is a man, born in 1947, who grew up in a rural area.

<sup>51</sup> Abbreviation a.n. means, here and further, the author’s note.



RS15 (female, b.1936, U): “I met my husband at one of the dances that were taking place at that time on Sunday evening at Depot. It was a big hall where all the parties and dances were made”.

The specificity of these popular parties changed with the time: although Romanian popular music was still heard, and popular dances continued to be danced, especially in the '60s-'70s, they began to become the places where Western music at the time was also played, such as rock and roll, then rock, pop and disco. At the same time, the related dances (twist, disco) and other types of dances (waltz, tango, blues, cha-cha-cha etc.) started to become popular, differing radically from the prior 'national folk dances'.

RS32 (male, b.1946, U): “During the holidays we used to get together, several boys and girls, and we were organizing «dances» in one of our apartments, where we were listening and dancing to «pop music», recorded on magnetic-tapes: blues, twists, Charleston, tango and so forth”.

RS49 (male, b.1951, U): “We were listening to rock music, disco and dancing to their beats”.

Besides these popular parties, where either traditional or 'new' genres of music were listened and danced to, a range of other *leisure activities* have emerged as a result of the technological and media development. One of these leisure activities was going to the cinema. Although existent before, the cinema became a mass phenomenon in urban areas only in '40s-'50s. In the rural areas a substitute for cinema were the movies broadcasted sometimes in the weekends in the 'cultural homes' of the villages, that is, in some buildings constructed since the monarchic era, which were the main places for 'promoting culture' in rural areas. In cultural homes all social events of the village took place (weddings' and baptisms' parties, school connected celebrations, popular contests between communes, etc.), as well as the cultural ones, such as small traditional popular music 'concerts' or 'shows', amateur theater, and film broadcasting. Moreover, another way to broadcast movies in rural areas was the so-called 'movie caravan' or 'cinema caravan', which meant that the movie was brought by a team having a 'movie car', that went through the village for a while in the afternoon (especially in a day of the weekend), promoting the movie which was to be broadcasted in the evening, with a person announcing on a megaphone the title of the movie and why it was worth to be seen.

What is interesting resulted from the present analysis is the fact that going to see a movie was a ritualized, social practice, no matter if it was about a film in cinema, 'caravan' or 'cultural home'. As D. McQuail (1997) stated<sup>52</sup>, the activity of going out to a movie is first of all a social activity, the gratification being beyond the 'communicated message', not in the film itself, but in the opportunity to come together with other people (friends, couples, groups etc.). For instance, many of the movies seen by

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<sup>52</sup> D. McQUAIL, *Audience Analysis*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi 1997.



the research subjects in the first stage of the Romanian communism were proletarian Russian movies. The content of these movies was usually against the beliefs of the viewers, but they still enjoyed the time because they were together with the persons they wanted. In the 'relaxation period', people started to enjoy also the movies. According to our subjects, they liked Indian movies, Romanian historical movies and later French and American movies.

*RS28 (male, b.1940, R): "I remember going to the movies with pleasure. We watched what was broadcasted, we didn't have much choice. Some movies, in the '50s, were really crap, but we didn't care. We were happy to be with each other, that was really the fun".*

*RS57 (female, b.1955, R): "Romanian historical films, I remember them, I watched them with pleasure, even with national pride. Oh ... and Indian movies, such as «Procession of Memories» (original title: Yaadon Ki Baaraat — a.n.) or «One flower two gardeners» (original title: Ek Phool Do Mali — a.n.). How I cried when I watched them! Now they seem maybe so childish, but at the time we thought they were very good films".*

Another opportunity to be together with other people and also a ritualized activity was watching TV, after the television appeared in Romania in 1956. In the beginning few people had a TV set, because they were not available in stores. In order to purchase a TV set, one had to put oneself on a waiting list and wait several years to get one. Besides, the price of a TV set was pretty high for the people in that time. In villages, for example, only some families had a TV set, and usually every evening in the houses of these families, other villagers came to watch TV. So that watching TV was a community activity, a ritualized one, and an opportunity for people to gather in the same place under the same roof.

*RS54 (female, b.1953, R): "My family had the first TV set in the village, in 1967. In the evening, after work, everybody came to watch TV programs. The TV was put on the veranda, the largest room of the house, and my mother set little wood benches in front of it in order to be enough place for everybody, practically transforming our house in a cinema".*

Such popular culture practices, like listening to music bands and soloists and admiring them, as well as watching movies, both in cinema and on television, have also influenced the popular culture products and artefacts, such as clothing, accessories, and hairstyle.

#### POPULAR CULTURE ARTEFACTS AND COMMODITIES: APPROPRIATION OF LIFESTYLE ELEMENTS AND PATHWAYS OF INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNIST ERA

According to the life histories of our research subjects, it seems that the first Western influences on people's lifestyle in the communist era, especially during the 'relaxation period', were the French ones. France, French society and fashion have always been a model for Romania since the nineteenth century, but mainly for a small part



of the population, which constituted then the upper class, 'the elite'. In the '50s and '60s the French influence manifested itself, along with industrialization and urbanization, on a larger, mass scale, first on the urban population and then, through it, on the rural population.

RS10 (female, b.1935, R): *"When I first saw a fashion magazine in my life, I thought there could be no greater miracle. I know it was French, but unfortunately, I don't remember the name. Neither do I know when that happened exactly, I think it was at the end of the 1950s".*

RS26 (female, b.1940, U): *"Pleated skirts were fashionable, inspired by the French models. I also liked tight dresses, tailored after the French pattern — what fine cuts and lines, such elegance...!"*

RS25 (female, b. 1939, R): *"I used to have my hair cut in a style called «French cut»".*

Two French stars who were a source of inspiration for the Romanians appeared several times in the biographies, namely the singer Mireille Mathieu and the actor Alain Delon.

RS44 (female, b.1949, U): *"I had my hair cut short, more boyish as a child, and in high school I had shoulder-length hair and round haircut in the style of Mireille Mathieu, the French singer".*

RS60 (male, b.1962, U): *"I had long hair, combed back and with mane, my favourite star, Alain Delon, inspired me at the time".*

Alain Delon inspired, in fact, the style of the population not only in terms of haircut, but also regarding clothing. His name was even given to a very popular piece of clothing in Romania during the communist period, inspired by a coat worn by the actor in movies: Alain Delon became the equivalent of the 'sheepskin jacket', a winter coat made of sheepskin.

Adopting Western dress and haircuts trends was a practice that began during the 'relaxation period' in the end of '50s and beginning of the '60s. The late '60s and early '70s were marked by the embracement of hippie and rock style by young people, both in haircuts (long hair, tresses, locks, both for girls and boys) and in clothing (tight and flared trousers, wide shirts, etc.). In the 70's, some Western pop bands, such as Abba and Boney M. became also very popular in Romania, and their members were taken as models by many young people.

RS32 (male, b.1946, U): *"Around the years 1974-1977 I had long hair and even a beard".*

RS47 (male, b.1950, R): *"When I was young clothes were weird in comparison with today's fashion. One used to wear tight, flared trousers, loose-bodied shirts, and shoes with double soles. Back then it was fashionable for men to have long hair".*





RS38 (female, b.1948, U): “I was once inspired by the hairstyle of the American music star Connie Francis, who had been in 1970 to the Golden Stag Festival (in Romanian «Cerbul de Aur», the most popular Romanian song contest and awards, held annually in the town of Braşov, Romania — a.n.)”.

RS52 (female, b.1953, U): “My sources of inspiration for clothing and haircuts were the «Cinema» magazine and the movies... In the ‘70s-‘80s I was influenced by the style of the vocalists from Abba, I loved listening to their music. So, when I was a student in the first year at the University I had long blond hair, with a fringe, just like Agneta. I was wearing black and navy-blue velvet suits, pointed clogs and shoes with very thick soles (...) The haircuts went through various stages, from up to the shoulder length and curls while Boney M. were on the wave, to some sort of French style cut later on”.

By the end of the ‘70s, along with Western disco music, the disco style started to emerge also in Romania, influencing both the clothes and the haircuts, mostly those of women: very short (‘mini’) dresses and skirts, stilettos or sandals with very thick soles and tight jeans in the ‘70s — early ‘80s, respectively jeans or other types of pants with high waistline, colourful or metallic shine leggings, blouses and dresses adorned with glittery ornaments, XXXL size T-shirts with messages written on them and deep plunging necklines, ‘bat wing’ sleeve tops and so forth — in the ‘80s.

RS53 (male, b.1953, R): “The clothing was in accordance with the fashion of those years, that is, flared trousers, made of «terylene» material, jeans and striped pants”.

RS58 (female, b.1962, U): “During high school, I started to be more interested in clothes. I wanted, as other girls too, special, elegant outfits. I used «The Woman» magazine (in Romanian: «Femeia», a popular magazine for women at the time — a.n.), to see what is new on the market, I was watching movies to see the way people from abroad dress, and this is how we girls tried to keep up with fashion. During those times (1978–1979) flared trousers, short dresses and high-heeled shoes were very fashionable”.

As far as the haircut or hairstyle is concerned, the disco style had a huge influence, as a great number of women adopted the curly hairdos, teased, and sprayed with plenty of fixative. Some women went to the hairdresser to get this kind of hairdo, while others did it at home, giving themselves a hot or a cold ‘perm’. The disco style, which involved long, curly hair with as much volume as possible, was taken over and adapted over time in various forms. With adult women, the most common was the style of short, curly hair, most often ‘permanent’ (either with large curls or small curls, in the Afro style). ‘Curls’ could also be obtained by using curlers. According to the social biographies analysed, the disco style of haircut has been taken over both in urban and rural areas and has become very popular among women of all ages.

RS27 (female, b.1940, R): “I think the top of elegance was to have your hair done «perm». It was really crazy, you had to make an appointment at the hairdresser and even so, you stayed 2–3 extra hours”.



RS40 (female, b.1948, U): “I had long perm hair since that was the fashionable way to wear it back then”.

RS53 (male, b.1953, R): “Men used to wear long hair or cut it in the «French way», while by women fashionable were the curls, made using hair rollers”.

Even though such fashion trends and hairdos manage to influence people in Romania, there were few Western clothes and generally Western commodities on the Romanian market. Only those people who had the chance to travel to Western countries — and these were those who had high positions in the communist party, or some professionally specialized people who to the party appeared as being very safe to be allowed to travel abroad — could buy Western clothing items themselves. Another way of getting such clothes was from relatives who had immigrated to Western countries.

RS56 (male, b.1955, R): “There was no way to get Western clothes back then, especially for the people living in the rural areas”.

RS29 (female, b.1941, U): “The cuts of our clothes were very simple, if you wanted something special, you had to place an order (to a seamstress — a.n.). Another way of getting such items was getting into contact with people who went abroad because of their work. Those people always got back with things to sell. [...] I liked the most the fashion of the '60s-'70s, when cone-shaped skirts in knee length were so fashionable, combined with very high heels stilettos, overcoats tied with a very broad belt underlining the waistline, curled hair rolled towards the exterior. The star who had an influence on my way of dressing was Sophia Loren”.

Mostly, clothes were produced in Romania or imported from other socialist countries. In the '80s, however, during Ceaușescu's regime of restraints, not even Romanian clothing products were available, at least not too many, varied or having a good quality, because they were exported to a large extent within the framework of Ceaușescu's determined policy of paying all the country's external debts. The lack of clothing items in stores was supplemented, throughout the communist period, by the practice of making clothes by a tailor (either by single-handed tailors in villages, or in tailoring shops in cities).

RS32 (male, b.1946, U): “The way of dressing was modest in terms of material quality. After I started to have a salary, in 1966, I used to go to the tailor and he made the trousers and even a custom suit the way I wanted them, because the items I could find on the socialist market were all the same, as if they had used only one pattern, in some sort of contest, Stakhanovite — who makes more suits in the same amount of time. [...] I also had a friend who was a sailor, I bought jeans from him a couple of times”.

RS21 (male, b.1938, R): “The clothing of that period used to be common, poor, we were all looking the same, as if we all had some kind of uniform. Rarely was it possible to find good quality merchandise in the stores, they usually brought in what was not accepted for the export. The whole Romanian industry was working 90% for the export”.



As regards other Western products, besides clothes, despite the fact that some Western brands were known and theoretically present on the Romanian market, they were not actually to buy in the stores. This was the case of the soft-drink Pepsi-Cola, which could be bought at most in some expensive restaurants or in the so-called 'Shops' that sold all kinds of products only for foreign currency. However, such restaurants and shops existed only in very big cities.

Other Western brands the research subjects have recalled of having back then, or most accurate having heard about them, were the Kent cigarettes, the American original jeans, Chewing Gum or the 'Fa' soaps and deodorants. They were not to be found at the market or in stores, but people could possibly get them by paying a fairly large sum of money and consuming effort, after having appealed to an underground market. As several subjects recalled (see the quotation of RS34's saying below), some Western products were copied and taken as templates during the communist period even by the Romanian factories.

*RS34 (male, b.1947, U): "I did not have Western products back then. The jeans in Romania came from somewhere else, and they weren't bought in stores, but «acquired» who knows how. I knew about Pepsi Cola, but it was not to be found. They started producing something in Romania that wanted to be similar to Pepsi Cola, a beverage called «Cico» with quite a horrible taste".*

*RS13 (male, b.1936, R): "Only the Security and the Party organizations enjoyed Western beverages, whisky for instance".*

*RS41 (female, b.1948, R): "One could get Kent cigarettes from an underground network, we usually bought them to offer them as gifts. There were very few Western items on the market back then".*

*RS58 (female, b.1962, U): "Sometimes we had the opportunity to buy from different people goods from Western Europe or America, such as «American blue jeans», as we called them, striped pants, mohair blouses, soaps, shampoos, or chewing gum, which we were crazy about".*

*RS52 (female, b.1953, U): "Jeans, perfumes, soaps and even good quality toothpaste could be bought only from SHOP stores, where only foreigners could get in, because the transactions were made using foreign currency. But in Regie (student dorm complex in Bucharest — a.n.) there were some guys who were friends with foreigners, and they used to sell such items, jeans for instance".*

Besides the Western influence on the lifestyle in communist Romania, there was also a Soviet/Russian influence, at least in terms of clothing style. The research subjects remembered some clothing items that arrived in Romania from the USSR, like fur caps (the most spread ones) and fur coats (bought by the people who had more money than the average). Unlike Western trends that have been observed and copied by people as a result of media consumption, i.e., music, cinema, television, Russian fashion has spread rather directly through interaction between people. As the visits in USSR



and other socialist countries were possible under certain conditions, the people who went there brought various products with them, which they sold in Romania, thus making possible a Russian influence on the style of clothing.

*RS8 (female, b.1933, R): "I recall the Russian rabbit fur caps, with «ears», for men, but I also remember the caps for the ladies, made of fox fur, silver ones or red ones. The most sought products were fur coats, especially the ones made of silver fox fur, but they were far from the reach of most people's pockets, because of their high price".*

Next to the fur coats and caps from USSR, other products that marked Romanian life-style back then, during the communist era, were the electronic and electro-technical commodities produced in USSR, various electric devices, watches, razor blades, perfumes and jewels made of gold. Some of them followed the exact same route of buying-selling them directly by people: they were bought in USSR or other socialist countries and sold to acquaintances in Romania. Another route was by citizens of other socialist countries who were visiting Romania, especially Russians, Polish and Czechoslovak, and their sale in Romania. For instance, this 'behind closed doors' route, very hidden and strictly forbidden by the communist authorities, was the only possible for buying gold made items, as commercializing gold was prohibited in Romanian socialist commerce, and the ones caught were punished severely, even thrown in jail. Moreover, this was also the opportunity, sometimes the only one, to buy some electrical and electronic products, such as coffee grinders, mixers, cassette recorders, tape recorders, cameras, etc. On the other hand, certain products, very few, could follow the official route of socialist commerce, being in a certain mass imported by the authorities, among them being TV sets, radios, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, watches, bicycles, motorcycles, and cars.

*RS29 (female, b.1941, U): "I had a Smena camera, a Majak magnetic tape player, a coffee grinder, the Zyl refrigerator and two Russian fur caps. I also bought Russian gold jewels for my daughters. Who could afford buying fur coats was free to do it, but I did not have that much money".*

*RS4 (male, b.1932, R): "The household appliances were brought from Russia or other communist countries".*

*RS33 (female, b.1947, R): "At first, I had a Russian VEF radio, then SELENA".*

*RS49 (male, b.1951, U): "I had an Elektronika cassette player (Russian one) and a magnetic band player Tesla B93 (from Czechoslovakia). I also had a Russian TV set RUBIN 102, a bicycle Ucraina, a SELENA radio. My father had a Russian motorcycle K (around 1956)".*

*RS58 (female, b.1962, U): "Many Russian merchandise was getting into our country, and among them there were the fox fur caps, with ears, the meat mincing machine... Watches were very popular, the wrist ones, the table watches or the pocket ones. The bicycles were appreciated, so were the Russian cars (Lada, Moscovici). They had good products, but not all of them suited our tastes".*

IMPOSED CULTURAL ITEMS IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA:  
RESISTANCE AND REJECTION OF CERTAIN POPULAR  
CULTURE PRODUCTS AND PRACTICES



Unlike clothing, accessories such as jewelry and watches, and electrical and electronic devices, which were popular and part of the lifestyle of the population during the communist period, Russian music and movies did not become popular. Despite the fact that in the early stage of Romanian communism elements of the Soviet culture were imposed in the society, as the authorities were trying to push the idea that it was a 'superior' culture and people had to learn from it, this did not lead to its spreading, instead it led to hostile feelings and the developing of forms of resistance. None of the subjects living during the Stalinist period recalled names of Soviet/Russian films, actors or singers, or ones from any of the socialist countries, the way they remembered about the French ones or, later on, of American or British ones. Russian music and films continued being broadcasted on the radio and TV stations also after the Stalinist period, but they did not become popular, and they did not manage to bring trends or models into the Romanian popular culture. Few subjects out of the 62 group, remembered something about music or Russian songs broadcasted during the communist period. Paradoxically, the ones who remembered were among the young research subjects.

*RS42 (male, b.1948, R): "I know they used to broadcast Russian music on the radio, especially during the Dej era, when Soviet troops were still in Romania".*

*RS55 (female, b.1954, R): "«Oci ciornîie» was often broadcasted on the radio".*

*RS60 (male, b.1962, U): "I recall the tunes Kazaciok and Kalinka".*

There existed also products and items of popular culture in the communist Romania that were set by the authorities by all possible means of propaganda, including through mass media. During the Stalinist period the leaders of the country tried not only to impose elements of Soviet culture (including high culture, such as Russian literature, but only certain editions, not all of them), but also to impose some ideological products, that they wanted to turn into popular culture, such as slogans, patriotic songs, militant songs, etc. Some slogans from that period managed to remain in the collective memory of people, though not because they used to believe in them at that time, but rather because they were repeated without cease, in an excessive and continuous manner, by the official propaganda sparked by the leading party. Two of the slogans were present in many biographies that have been analyzed: 'Stalin and the Russian people have brought us our freedom' (official slogan), respectively 'Ana Pauker<sup>53</sup> and Dej, scared the daylight out of the bourgeoisie' (slogan created by the

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53 Deputy prim-minister and external minister of Romania between 1947-1952, Ana Pauker is considered to have played a dark part in Romania's history, bringing numerous prejudices to the country. At the same time, she is thought to have played a very important part in imposing brutal measures of repression characteristic to the Socialist-Stalinist



people). Worth to mention is that both these slogans sound like very short poems in rhyme in the original Romanian language.

Other slogans and themed sayings that emerged during the first stage of Romanian communism were referring to the 'friendship between socialist peoples', one of the basic ideas of the Soviet ideology. Some of them were used to attack the 'exploiting' system of capitalism.

RS11 (female, b.1935, U): *"The slogans were anti-capitalism, they were worshipping «the big brother from the East», Soviet technology, they used to advise people to work (for instance, I remember the absurd saying «a five year's norm in four years' time»), or they criticized «lazy» people".*

RS22 (male, b. 1938, R): *"At that time the sayings related to «the friendship of peoples» was en vogue, it was referring to the «unshakable» friendship connecting socialist countries, as a guarantee for the prosperity of each people and of the entire «Soviet empire». I was raised and educated in a way that did not make me trust in «the power of the red empire» (that is what my father used to call it). Maybe that's why I never interfered with anything that had to do with politics. I was not a member of the party and that is why I did not get promoted in my professional activity".*

The coming to power of Ceaușescu and the change of optics in the Romanian politics, especially with regard to the USSR, led to imposing of new slogans, sayings and patriotic songs through the official propaganda. This time, obviously, the slogans and propagandistic songs did not focus on Stalin anymore, who had already fallen into disgrace, nor on the friendship between the socialist peoples, but on the Romanian Communist Party, having Nicolae Ceaușescu more and more in the centre, as his cult of personality and his dictatorial regime after 1974 progressively increased.

RS46 (female, b.1950, R): *"The most frequent slogan was «The Party, Ceaușescu, Romania!»». It was chanted at rallies, it was contained in patriotic songs. It was broadcast on radio, on TV. On the walls of the factories there was written «Long live the Romanian Communist Party!»». At meetings and demonstrations, we were forced to «shout» slogans like «Ceaușescu — PCR!» (PCR: commonly used abbreviation in Romanian for 'The Romanian Communist Party' — a.n.) or «Ceaușescu and the people!»». As if he cared about the people...".*

RS30 (female, b.1941, R): *"I remember some slogans: «Let's do everything!»; «No work without bread, no bread without work!»; «The Party, Ceaușescu, Romania!»». They were insistently broadcast on radio stations, TV, not to mention the newspapers, they were full of propaganda. But people's opinion about them was unanimous: disgust, plus jokes at their expense".*

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regime, right from their very beginnings. Since she ruled the country with an 'iron fist', she was given the nickname 'Stalin with a skirt'. See also: Ș. BOSOMITU, *Pauker, Ana*, in: S. COURTOIS (ed.), *Dicționarul comunismului [The dictionary of communism]*, Polirom, Iași 2008, pp. 687-689.

RS59 (male, b.1962, R): *“When I was a child, I used to go to the cultural home to watch movies, but before the movie started, there was a kind of preview, where communist slogans were put, about Ceaușescu and the Romanian Communist Party. [...] Patriotic songs, communist slogans were broadcast all the time, but people ignored them”.*

RS49 (male, b.1951, U): *“All the films at cinemas were broadcasted after a «news bulletin» filled with communist propaganda. Everybody was waiting for the news broadcast to end and see the American movie”.*

As with the Stalinist slogans and songs, the population did not believe in the slogans and songs about Ceaușescu either. As the research subjects remembered, although these rallying cries were permanently broadcast on radio and television, publicized through newspapers and magazines, printed on the first pages of textbooks, or presented even as previews of movies broadcast in cinemas (or through the movie caravan), for the people they were empty of content, nobody really paid attention or listened to them. Their excessive broadcasting had a boomerang effect: people began to ignore them, to hear them without listening to, they became ‘immune’ to them.

The Romanian communist regime, in all its stages, tried also to impose practices of popular culture such as comrades’ meetings, group activities that were meant to ‘benefit the society’, marching on, celebrations occasioned by various pretexts and so on. Just like it happened with the slogans, the practices imposed by the communist authorities, despite the fact that they were massively promoted, did not gain too much success or popularity. The meetings between ‘comrades’ never became popular, even though the people working for the Security tried to use them to control and indoctrinate people. Group activities ‘for the benefit of the society’ were, in fact, forced labour with no remuneration, in fields that did not have enough work force, such as agriculture. The celebrations organized under various pretexts were also perceived as activities carried out by the means of constrain and menaces, hence involving many efforts and wasted work.

RS40 (female, b.1948, U): *“The community activities were organized by the party (Romanian Communist Party — a.n.). More specifically, young people, and not only, were engaged in meetings, in compulsory political activities. We participated in national holidays and festivals whether we wanted to or not. We were forced to do these things and we could do nothing to avoid them”.*

RS31 (male, b.1946, R): *“The «community activities» until 1989 were horrible, any of them: going to the corn harvest, going to the parade, or «greeting on the route», all voluntary work. They all involved constraint, fatigue, unnecessary waste of time”.*

RS50 (female, b.1952, U): *“Important anniversaries took place on stadiums, and the pioneers (i.e., children, members of the Pioneer Organization, the communist pioneer movement in communist Romania, founded on April 30, 1949 — a.n.) used to rehearse all summer long for one event. Only those people who «knew someone» managed to get away with this activity”.*



## RECALLING CULTURAL PRACTICES AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS: BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND MEMORIES OF SORROW

It is however interesting to note that precisely the relations between the members of the community, the people living during those times, are some of the aspects research subjects recalled full of nostalgia, or even full of regret, as it can be noticed out of the following examples:

*RS40 (female, b.1948, U): “Back then people were closer to one another, they were getting along better. Because of the hardships they had to face, there was a lot of compassion and they helped each other”.*

*RS28 (male, b.1940, R): “The friendship relationships got consolidated not only during the time spent at school (a.n.: RS28 worked as a teacher), between peers, but also due to the meetings at the culture home of the village, where we used to coordinate spectacles involving dances, singing, chorus. [...] There was something about these relationships, because they were warm, and they brought people together, families got to meet each other. But nowadays one cannot find such things anymore, not even in the rural areas”.*

*RS51 (female, b.1952, R): “Although we had a lot of shortcomings, restrictions and deprivations, we were fine at that time. There was a kind of tacit understanding between people, and that is why the relations between them were closer, more authentic. Today, wherever you look around, you see competition, envy, broken relationships, everyone wants to appear better than others. In those days (during communism — a.n.), although we were poor, we seemed to have a common soul. Isn't this spiritual wealth more important than the financial one?”.*

Thus, according to the memories of some people, just the cultural practices of that time, including the activities imposed by the communists, such as the cultural shows, were bringing their contribution to getting people together. As can be seen in the quotes above, especially the human relations built by the means of these practices are regarded full of nostalgia. Several subjects of the research recall ‘the charm’ relationships between people had back then, despite the hardships they had to face. And yet, this recall is contradicted by the memories of other research subjects, who assert that the human relations were profoundly affected by the fear of talking to other people, except for the close members of their own families. The memories of such subjects were rather bitter and sorrowful, as can be seen in the quotes below.

*RS9 (male, b.1934, U): “Throughout the entire communist era, you couldn't really talk to anyone. There were Security agents everywhere waiting for you to be dumped. Sometimes the so-called informant was your neighbour or even one of your best friends. That is why the relations between people were very affected, in a negative way”.*

*RS61 (female, b.1963, U): “The relations between people were broken at the time. The only ones you could talk to about what you think were the family members. In fact, this fear of getting too close to others was transposed by the popular wisdom into a rhyming saying*



*in Romanian: «Who has a loose tongue is gonna work for five years in the salt mine» (in the Romanian original this saying is in rhyme — a.n.). [...] No, I by no means would want to live in such times anymore. Living in two different eras, I realized that freedom is cherished especially when you don't have it. And I prefer to have it”.*



Therefore, all these different memories and contradictory evaluations of the same experiences and of the same period, and the entire analysis of the biographies, show us how history is being lived in a subjective way by every person, and how the same reality is being lived, valorised, and interpreted in a different way by human beings. This confirms one of the basic premises of the constructivist perspective in sociology, stating that reality is socially built and reproduced by people, according to their own knowledge, interpretation, and experiences. Human beings give their own meaning to things and phenomena that make up the surrounding world.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present research points out that in communist Romania the popular culture was influenced by the three distinct phases that the communist regime went through between 1945 and 1989, but also by the large-scale phenomena that progressively transformed the society, namely industrialization and urbanization. The analysed biographies of people belonging to different generations reveal a gradual modification in the popular culture practices and products even in those practices and artefacts of deeply traditional folk culture. Such transformations were mostly the result of the modernization of society as a whole, as Romanian society followed the generalized trend of the industrialised world, despite the fact that, in the last years of his dictatorship, Ceaușescu and his totalitarian regime tried to keep the population of Romania as far as possible from Western influences.

And yet, the impact of Western popular culture trends, which began to make its presence felt especially in the last years of the 1950s, continued even after Ceaușescu established his personal dictatorship in the last half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. The so-called ‘enlightened absolutism’ or ‘relaxation period’ in the Romanian communist regime that began in 1959 was a loosening stage, which brought a distancing from the Soviet control, at the same time with a relative openness towards the Western world. However, getting to know Western popular culture trends did not occur via direct contact, since travel to the West was forbidden, but more via mass media, especially music, cinema and television. What has been seen in movies and series, in specialized magazines related to cinema and fashion, but also the Western singers, members of bands or artists, have managed to set the tone and trends of ways of getting dressed, shoe wear, haircuts, dance, social activities, preferences and so forth. They have shown the lifestyle and the general trends characterising modern industrialized societies, and the Romanians, especially the young people, could not be turned back once they had turned on this path. Things stayed like this even during the dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

As far as some products of popular culture is concerned, Western brands were used as models even by the socialist factories. For instance, in Romanian factories



some sorts of jeans were produced, that tried to follow the pattern of the American ones, or the soft drink 'Cico' was produced instead of Pepsi-Cola, which was known on the Romanian market, but almost impossible to find. Thus, there was an appropriation, specific for those times, by the Romanian population of the practices and products of Western popular culture.

Unlike Western music, movies and series, the Soviet music, films and series did not become popular, not even during the brutal Soviet ideology propagation in the 1950s, when they rather generated forms of resistance. One explanation is probably that the majority of them tried to spread communist propaganda and indoctrinate the population, which led to their rejection, given that for most Romanians Soviet communism was felt as something repressive and totally foreign. In fact, communism has often been called in Romania "the red plague"<sup>54</sup>. However, although Russian movies and music kept being broadcasted on the TV and radio in the '60s, '70s and '80s, they continued not have much success among the population. Soviet singers or the ones from other communist countries, as well as what has been seen in socialist movies, have not been copied or turned into idols. Probably the austerity of the reality presented in the socialist films also contributed to this, in contrast to the 'Western reality', perceived as prosperous, bright, and glamorous, thus deserving to be taken as a benchmark. Still, some Soviet products managed to turn into part of the Romanian lifestyle, though not via the media, but through direct interactions between people. Certain products turned into fashion items, such as fur caps, fur coats, watches, jewellery, cameras, while others had to replace products that were not to be found on the Romanian market and they were necessary in order to fulfil a series of necessities, such as electro technological items.

As regards the practices, products and artefacts of popular culture imposed by the Romanian communist regime, they did not become really 'popular', being mostly ignored or rejected by people: the slogans and sayings praising the communist regime and Ceaușescu were omnipresent, mass media and public gatherings were filled with them, they had to be chanted at rallies and meetings, but no one seemed to believe in them, they were just shouted and listened to, without hearing them properly. The same happened with patriotic songs, or with the 'ordered' artefacts, as well as with the enforced cultural practices. Consequently, they were abandoned as soon as the communist regime fell.

The research also revealed ritual practices of popular culture generated by the technological evolution of the society, such as going to the cinema or the gathering of groups of peoples in order to watch TV. These used to be activities whose gratifications were to be found mostly in their social side, and not in the actual content of mass media, as they were new forms of lived culture, developed as society evolved, independent of the phases communism was going through.

Moreover, the gathered data show that, while many memories of people are sorrowful and bitter, other recalls and considerations regarding the cultural practices of that time, and especially the human relations built by the means of these practices, are full of nostalgia. Indeed, some imposed practices, such as the celebrations and the contests involving the community and the pupils or students, made some of the re-

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54 CARTIANU, p. 32.

search subjects feel nostalgic: not the practices themselves, but the human relations built by the means of these practices, relations which, at present, according to those subjects, have lost their warmth and even their humaneness. On the other hand, exactly the same human relationships were not regretted or regarded with nostalgia by other research subjects, given their disturbed character due to the inability to communicate freely what you really thought, specific to the communist period. These different considerations regarding similar issues show us how the same reality is being lived, valorised, and assessed in different ways by different persons and how history is being lived and interpreted in a subjective manner by every human being.

