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“Historiography has been a minefield”
A conversation with Vladimir Tismaneanu

Romanian cultural policy is a landscape that changes constantly according to political decisions. The fortune or misfortune of scholarly research on sensitive topics such as the history of national communism is primarily due to the possible outcomes that politicians foresee — and the consequences affect the whole cultural field, including cultural projects, institutions and the lives of those who work in them. There is a clear tension between the freedom of scholarly research and the allocation of resources by political power. This tension became evident in Romania during the past decade, and was often highlighted by mainstream media, which contributed to making contemporary history, and the history of Romanian communism in particular, a hotly debated topic in the national public discourse.

Until May 2012, Vladimir Tismaneanu, professor of comparative politics at the University of Maryland, chaired the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER), a public agency of the Government of Romania coordinated by the prime minister’s office. It was the newly elected Romanian prime minister Victor Ponta (center-left coalition) who relieved him of that position.

The Romanian government’s diktat brought about Tismaneanu’s resignation from the Scientific Council, a decision immediately followed by other members. Vehement letters of protest were sent by members of other cultural institutions in Romania and abroad. One letter denounced the Ponta government’s attempts to discredit the Institute’s work and to “ politicize the activity of IICCMER”. Another letter, signed by seven IICCMER researchers, denounced the overt death threats addressed to them by an unnamed department head at IICCMER, and pointed to the defamation campaign and gross mystification carried out to discredit the IICCMER’s activities from 2010 to 2012, during Tismaneanu’s leadership of the Institute.

Vladimir Tismaneanu was appointed chair of the Scientific Council of IICCMER by the Romanian prime minister Emil Boc (center-right coalition) in 2010. Tismaneanu was chosen to lead the Institute because of his solid reputation and his leading role in coordinating the Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania in 2006. That commission’s Final Report was published in 2007 by Humanitas Publishing House; the electronic version was posted on the Romanian Presidency’s official site on December 18, 2006. The activities of the Commission were condoned by the Romanian president at the time, Traian Băsescu. Its members included well-known domestic and international experts on several aspects of Romanian history, and it was intended to offer a new and revised historic view of Romanian communism.

While from a scholarly point of view this commission’s resources and visibility represented a great opportunity, from the political point of view, the desired effect, and the actual result, was a partial discrediting of political adversaries — most of all Ion Iliescu. The Commission revealed the links that leftist and extreme rightist politicians had with the communist nomenklatura, enhancing the image of President Băsescu in public opinion as a man who endorses transparency and is unafraid of examining the past, being “new” in politics — a characteristic that his adversaries could not claim.

Reflecting on the recent conflict over IICCMER and on Tismaneanu’s trajectory in Romanian cultural life, two things come to mind. The first is that Gramsci’s statement, “History is always contemporary, that is, political”, is still true, and is also true of historical writing. Historiography, once it spreads outside the less visible circles of academia, tends to become political argument, and historians — or political scientists, in this case — become political allies to some, and political enemies to others. Second, the conflict regarding IICCMER confirms that the dependency of historical scholarship on political power is very much present in contemporary Europe. And that dependency is one of the constants of European historiography during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the process of establishing history as a profession, the allocation of resources has played a pivotal role. Political power has been able to offer both resources and prestige to those historians and institutions that were willing to create narratives that suited the project of political power. This made the fortunes of some schools of thought and some topics of research, while causing misfortune for others.

Even if political interference with historical research is an everyday matter in contemporary democratic Europe, the battle for national history is probably fought in no other European country with as much passion, determination, and vehemence as in Romania.

Certainly the speed with which research positions change according to the political winds is impressive. This feature of the relationship between politics and scholarship has several consequences for intellectual debate: the high rate of verbal violence and the acerbity of mutual accusations among intellectuals and politicians in Romania are surely unrivalled in Europe.
Hate is what we direct against those who symbolize what we detest – in ourselves and in others.

The American political scientist Charles King, in a critical review of the Final Report of 2006, claimed, “Few professors have biographical entries on Wikipedia. Fewer still have theirs blocked from further anonymous editing after becoming boards for hate speech.” Tismaneanu’s Wikipedia entry was vandalized several times by anonymous individuals, and hate speech directed towards his person (in previous regime are evident. Fewer still have theirs blocked from further anonymous editing after becoming "to delegitimize them ethically and intellectually". During the same conference, Gabriel Liiceanu offered a striking image of this campaign, telling a joke about politicians who warn historians: “We won’t meddle in history – but don’t you meddle in politics!” According to some Romanian politicians, historians are too much

About Vladimir Tismaneanu

Vladimir Tismaneanu is a professor of comparative politics at the University of Maryland, where he is also the director of the Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies. Between 1998 and 2004, Tismaneanu served as editor of East European Politics and Societies.

Born in Romania, Vladimir Tismaneanu grew up in a communist family. Both his parents fought in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. In the 1950s, his father was a party ideologue, his mother, a physician, taught at the Medical School in Bucharest.

In 2008, Tismaneanu denounced the “campaign against intellectuals” undertaken by influential voices in national mainstream media. Tismaneanu made his appeal to public opinion together with Gabriel Liiceanu, the founder and director of Humanitas Publishing House, who has had a leading role in shaping Romanian cultural discourse since the 1990s, and with Horia-Roman Patapievici, then the head of the Romanian Cultural Institute (he resigned last summer in protest against the Ponta government’s decision to downsize the Institute). On that occasion, Tismaneanu lambasted the “pathological intensity” with which the media disseminated “a toxic language” against intellectuals. Tismaneanu pointedly asked the conference audience, “How can you, expert in one domain, establish a dialogue with one who’s saying that you are an idiot and that you don’t know anything about these matters?” This “toxic language” was particularly intense in reference to Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu, the philosopher and former minister of culture and of foreign affairs. Here, according to Tismaneanu, “the most pernicious insinuation” was used “to delegitimize them ethically and intellectually”. During the same conference, Gabriel Liiceanu offered a striking image of this campaign, telling a joke about politicians who warn historians: “We won’t meddle in history – but don’t you meddle in politics!”

According to some Romanian politicians, historians are too much

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interested in politics, but actually, most historians are simply doing their research as they should, and are not to blame if the names of contemporary politicians appear in the Communist Party archives as Party activists or supporters. Those who study the past become political enemies to those who would prefer to consider the past over and done with.

President Băsescu appointed you head of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. What does it mean to work for a Presidential Commission?

“The topic and the Report have proved not only highly relevant, but also highly divisive. In more than one respect, Romania is a polarized country. Many people talk about the need for reconciliation, but how can reconciliation take place if nobody atones?”

“The offensive against the Report has been very much the result of the opposition mounted by post-communist nostalgics, including former apparatchiks, former Securitate operators, and ultra-nationalists, united in a common front against a genuine reckoning of the past in Romania. President Traian Băsescu was suspended in the spring of 2007 and, for a whole month, until a national referendum brought him back to the president’s office, the Final Report was deleted from the presidency site.

“To me, working for such a commission meant promoting values I deeply cherish: truth, dignity, tolerance, and compassion for the victims. I believe in the unity of thought and action. Our philosophy, the Commission’s moral viewpoint, was not vindictive: the issue was to capture the truth, not to indict people. We embraced an antitotalitarian ethos, both antifascist and anticommunist.

“I want to emphasize that while there are opponents of the Report, there are also numerous supporters. The most important newspapers in Romania, significant civil society associations, including the Group for Social Dialogue, and thousands and thousands of citizens expressed solidarity with the Commission.”

Are there historians who still approve of the political views of those political parties that more or less overtly oppose not only the activity of IICCMER, but also other institutions for the study of history, such as the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives?

“Romanian political parties in general have no special interest in historical matters. To most of them, quite erroneously, the past is another country. Obviously, the parties least interested in addressing the traumatic past, are those directly linked to the communist era, first and foremost the Social Democrats, whose honorary chair-man is the former communist ideologue and two-time post-communist president Ion Iliescu. It was not pressure from political parties that convinced Traian Băsescu to appoint the Presidential Commission in April 2006, but rather the mobilization of civil society. IICCMER, as it functions now, is actually the result of a merger in the fall of 2009 between two institutes: one dealing with the communist crimes and one dealing with the Romanian exile. I became chair of the Scientific Council in March 2010. In May 2012, Prime Minister Victor Ponta ‘released’ me from this non-remunerated duty and fired the executive president, professor Ioan Stanomir. This was the first decision in a series made by the Social-Liberal Union coalition government that came to power in April 2012, culminating in the failed coup attempt in July 2012. I should mention the dismissal of the young historian Dorin Dobrincu as the director of the National Archives and the forced resignation of the leadership of the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), headed by the philosopher Horia-Roman Patapievici. Neither I nor my colleagues have endorsed a particular political party. Our only concern was the quality of scholarship, the expansion of publications, and the development of the institute as a major research center.”

“The issue was to capture the truth, not to indict people.”

Do you think that optimism regarding Europe and the Western world has ceased among intellectuals and public opinion because of the economic crisis? Is it possible that allogenic factors, namely the neo-liberal politics of the center-right and the world crisis, favor “Stalinism for all seasons”, reinforcing the endogenous factors of corruption and patronage?

“The austerity measures adopted in 2010 were inevitable, yet the Social Democrats and the Liberals, supported by Dan Voiculescu’s Intact media trust and its TV stations, especially Antena 3, presented them as a ferocious exploitation of the Romanian people by soulless Western neoliberal institutions and their Romanian agents.

There was a lot of genuine discontent in Romania that led to the riots of January 2012. Non-violent protest is legitimate in any democratic society. The problem is when populist demagogues exploit and manipulate such popular discontent. In the summer of 2012, when the EU and the US State Department, through the US Embassy in Bucharest, put pressure on the Ponta government to stop its assault on the rule of law, Crin Antonescu, the National Liberal Party leader and interim president during Traian Băsescu’s second suspension, engaged in and escalate a virulent anti-American and anti-EU rhetoric. Even some of Antonescu’s colleagues voiced disapproval of his irresponsible political fireworks.”

A recent study conducted by Florian Banu shows the majority of researchers who examine the Securitate Archive materials are concerned with studying the conditions for intellectuals under the Communist regime.

Why is intellectual history so strong in Romania?

“The communist regime was an ideocratic system; ideology was the regime’s underpinning. The dictatorship was based on the supremacy of its own interpretation of Marxism, codified in Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speeches. The regime used different methods to control, coerce, and co-opt the intelligentsia. Walking in Stalin’s and Mao’s footsteps, Ceaușescu fancied himself a great theorist. Some intellectuals dared to defy him, but the overwhelming majority chose collaboration or silence. This led to a need to compensate for past complicity. Since 1989, democratic intellectuals have played a decisive role in formulating goals and programs for a nascent civil society. I think this fascination with the intellectuals’ files in the secret police archives is not specific to Romania. Think of the great Hungarian writer Peter Esterhazy’s discovery of his own father’s activities as an informer. Add to this the psychological effects of spectacular revelations about long-admired figures who turned out to have been less admirable than previously thought. At the same time, one must emphasize that many intellectuals, such as N. Steinhardt and I. D. Șirbu, turned down opportunities to become accomplices of the regime and remained targets of permanent surveillance.”

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Romanian cultural debate revolved around the definition of the Romanian nation and of Romania as a Western or an autochthonous country, and the communist period was no different in this respect. Do you think that the battle over historical interpretation in contemporary Romania can be still regarded in the light of Romania’s geopolitical position and the search for a new definition of Romanian national identity?

“Romania is now member of NATO and the EU. As the political scientist Ken Jowitt once said, membership in the EU is the best thing that has happened to Romania, and to Eastern Europe in general, in 500 years. Post-communist Romania has been a battlefield between liberal and illiberal visions of identity, traditions, belonging, loyalties etc. The late National Peasant leader, Corneliu Coposu, supported a civic-liberal interpretation of national identity, opposed to any form of exclusive tribalism. The same can be said about other political figures such as Traian Băsescu, Emil Boc, Valeriu Stoica, and Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu (himself a historian). There are, of course, at the other end of the intellectual spectrum, voices that promote xenophobia and exclusiveness, such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor and his Greater Romania Party. There are many blank spots that need to be studied, especially in Romania’s recent history. Self-serving narratives of perpetual victimization need to be demysti-fied. I think that the rise of a new generation of social scientists – I include historians in this category – has already resulted in a different perspective on the na-
When a totalitarian regime collapses there are no protective shells. Everything is exposed and wounds are split open.