

IOSUD – UNIVERSITY „DUNĂREA DE JOS” FROM GALAȚI

Doctoral School of Social and Human Sciences



THESIS

RÂMNICU SĂRAT DURING THE COMMUNIST PERIOD. ECONOMIC EVOLUTION AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Candidate ,

TORCĂRESCU M. Ștefan

PhD supervisor,

ENACHE George - Eugen

Series U 3, Number 25

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KEYWORDS

The city of Râmnicu Sărat, administrative reform, economy, the interwar period, the communist regime, congress, collectivization of agriculture, industrialization, five-year plan, industrial center, urban agglomeration, propaganda, the image of the worker, factory, production, systematization, urban plans, standard housing, architecture, standard of living, Nicolae Ceaușescu's visits.

SUMMARY

The study of the communist regime is a vast and complex undertaking, which involves the analysis from a historical, political, economic, social and cultural perspective of the period in which the socialist ideology was put into practice. In the current Romanian society, the economic aspects of the communist regime are still the subject of intense disputes and debates, and the way people understand the context is marked by different opinions, despite the assumption, at the highest level of a "Final Report on the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania"¹, on the basis of which the communist regime in Romania was officially condemned as an illegitimate and criminal regime. The time that has passed since the destructuring of this totalitarian regime sometimes seems not to have been enough to completely remove the symptoms of residual communism, therefore the historiographic approach must continue to bring to light new data and case studies. The research sites are still rich in primary sources of history, including oral history sources, which make the historiographers of Romanian communism to be placed in a vital hermeneutic space for the education of the young generation, in a transition zone from the past to the future. This research approach becomes even more important in the context in which the Ministry of Education is preparing the assumption of a new study subject in the Education Framework Plan, which will be called the History of Communism.

In addition to general data collected from available national or local archival funds, research on communism must also include the individual experiences of those who lived under the communist regime, knowing and understanding how people ascribed meaning to life in the era. The impact of communism on smaller local communities, such as the one in Râmnicu Sărat, was major, and from a transgenerational perspective, it must be explained how this historical experience influenced certain contemporary mentalities and values. Neglecting the study of particular cases of economic development through communist industrialization policies may bring the risk of leaving possible anchors for the development of new authoritarian and extremist political-social currents in the future, based on the same ideological foundation. In the context where most of the industrial platforms created by the communists have collapsed, it is important to explain to the local communities what it meant to experience an unsustainable, artificial economic development, and what were the long-term costs for the population of such an intervention .

¹ The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, Final Report, 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20080408193207/http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/RAPORT_FINAL_CPADCR.pdf, accessed on 19.08.2023;”

Shortly after the revolutionary events of 1989, the interpretation of the economic experience of socialist development in our country meant a fierce struggle between the exponents of the old system, who continued to be part of the new political power playing other roles and wearing other masks, and the other side, the Romanians who wanted to live in an open society, based on truly democratic principles. Romania is developing today in a logic of the market economy, with a pluralistic political system, in which, however, democracy and freedom can still be weakened very easily, and globalization can be perceived as a danger to the general well-being and social cohesion .

The two components that we propose for analysis, industrialization and urbanization during the communist period, are subjects in full historiographical research. The researcher's mission is to understand and explain the mechanisms of forced economic development before 1989, started by suppressing civil and political rights, mechanisms that generated economic inefficiency and poverty. The historiographical researches on the topic of the communist economy until now have either focused on a generalizing approach, focusing on large industrial and urban centers in the country, or have focused on Romania's external economic relations. There are few studies that have highlighted the impact of industrialization on small communities, such as the one in Râmnicu Sărat, former city-residence for one of the largest counties in the interwar period, Slam Râmnic county. The intensive economic development of smaller local communities, where development has also generated extensive processes of systematization and urbanization, represents a generous research area not only for historians, but also for architects and urban planners, who focus their studies on understanding the connection between the Romanian urban landscape in communist society and ideology.

Our research took into account the three perspectives of analysis existing in Romanian society regarding the communist development model, outlined after the Revolution of December 1989². The first direction of analysis accuses the "heavy legacy" left by the former regime. The representatives of this current were even the exponents of the post-December power, the criticism being directed mainly towards the negative role played by Nicolae Ceaușescu personally, with an emphasis on the mistakes of the 80s, and less on those of the communist system, as a whole. Illustrative for this category of opinion is the message sent immediately after the assumption of power by Ion Iliescu, on the 7th of January 1990, in which he stated that "the legacy left by the Ceaușescu regime, the chaotic, irrational development of the economy, the waste of large amounts of the national wealth in costly and ineffective investments, the serious mismatches between different branches of the industry and of the economy as a whole, constitute sources of great difficulties and objective premises for long-term instability"³.

A second category of exegesis that I have taken into account is represented by the group of Ion Iliescu's opponents, who they directly accuse of neo-communism and of trying to continue the socialist policy camouflaged in the clothes of democracy. The post-December power is accused of bad management of the economic situation. Most often, the representatives of this

² Bogdan Murgescu, *Romania and Europe. The accumulation of economic gaps (1500-2010)*, Polirom Publishing House, 2010, p. 325;

³ Ion Iliescu, message January 7, 1990, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D3sZm4PdgA>, minute 5':50", accessed 20. 08. 2023;

category appeal to the history of political repressions from the early years of the communist regime in Romania, when fear and control were established, phenomena that had a negative impact on work and education.

The third area of analysis of the economic and social evolution from the socialist period is represented by the Romanians who admit that there were dysfunctionalities in the communist economy, but consider that the balance is a positive one, especially in relation to the economic decline that followed in postcommunism. If in the first two categories of analysis there is a somewhat small number of Romanians, especially intellectuals, politicians, representatives of civil society and people active in public life, in the third current of opinion quite a lot of fellow citizens are found. There are those from the generation of workers on the industrial platforms developed by the regime, people who in the new democratic regime faced the transition process from a centralized economy to a capitalist market economy, Romanians who sometimes had a harder time adapting to the new post-December realities, and that is why they are the nostalgics of the socialist era.

The exposure strategy and the interpretation of the general and particular data that we had in mind was balanced and responded to the need to highlight real and relevant aspects for national and local history, with due care not to overshadow the research by our local patriotism. I have experienced the situation where simple details became very strong arguments at a given moment. There have been situations in the written sources where we have obtained more important information from the notes made with a pen on the edge of a document, by the one who read and interpreted the document in order to apply it, than the official content of the document. Of course, this aspect is somewhat common in historical archive research. As for the press of the time, it abounds with data from official sources, which served propaganda and which I tried to analyze comparatively, critically, and to the extent that I had no element of comparison, I assumed them individually, taking into account the fact that they are provided in the manipulative spirit specific to the regime. Regarding the use of specific oral history tools, the big challenge for the researcher was at the interpretive level. The fluidity of memory, the individual representation of society and the way the topic of discussion is perceived in the local community, were just a few factors that had an influence on the data provided by the subjects.

As time passes and the intergenerational conflicts in society fade, the interest in studying the economic realities of the communist period will increasingly remain the task of specialists, and the fundamental conclusions based on scientific criteria will be assumed at the social level. On the one hand, the analysis of the economy of the communist regime must not remain at a social perspective with only the criterion of personal prosperity as an indicator, but must aim systemic aspects and social and economic sustainability, with corresponding public policies. In this sense, collecting as much data as possible and analyzing as many particular cases as possible is an effort that must be continued in contemporary historiography. On the other hand, a general evaluation of Romania's economic development during the communist regime must not lose sight of the relation of Romanian realities to the European realities of the period. In 1989, the level of

economic development of our country in the European context was one of the lowest in Europe, placing us not only after developed capitalist countries, but also after most socialist states⁴.

The communist period marked the entire Romanian society in many ways, with different impact depending on the place, period and circumstances, practicing the suppression of individual freedoms, using censorship, but also propaganda. From the point of view of state control over the economy, after the collectivization of agriculture and the nationalization of private and industrial property, the communist regime imposed centralized control over the economy, envisioning strict economic planning, with redistribution of resources to priority sectors and state control over prices and production, according to the Soviet model. The development of such a mechanism led to changes in the urban social structure. The propaganda motivation of the political regime was the desire to eliminate social inequities, to create an egalitarian society by redistributing property and resources, but this led to the creation of new forms of inequity, to shortages in the provision of goods and services for the population. Also, a phenomenon of forced intensive urbanization was generated, at the expense of rural areas. There have been massive movements of population to cities and significant transformations in people's way of life.

Chronologically, the research is anchored in the trying time of recovery after the Second World War and continues until the collapse of the communist regime. Obviously, for a better understanding of things, I made a synthetic presentation of the economic and urban realities of Râmnicu Sărat before 1944. The direct research of documentary sources and specialized literature revealed the fact that the year 1967 marks a turning point in the history of the city of Râmnicu Sărat. If until then we were witnessing activities to modernize and improve the economic and urban situation based on the interwar realities, Nicolae Ceaușescu's visit to Râmnicu Sărat in 1967 meant making the decision for the city to become a larger industrial center, by establishing three factories with unique activity profile, the Factory of Brake Linings and Sealing, the Cast Iron Parts Foundry for Machinery - Tools and the Company of Assembling Parts for the electrotechnical industry. These were in addition to three other existing production units from the interwar period. It was the trigger moment for the rapid development of other economic branches that were supposed to support the social life of the workers on the Râmnicu Sărat industrial platform, from the 70s-80s of the last century.

The interest in studying the economic and urban evolution of the Râmnicu Sărat municipality during the communist period is given by the fact that in the works published so far on the history of the town or the area there are no details regarding this period. Although there are some historiographical concerns at the local level, they are written more in a literary style, by non-specialists, repeating the same data. Sometimes, through a writerly artifice, it seems that details and analyzes related to the communist period of local history are avoided. Other times, local authors limit themselves to printing a few archival documents, without critical analysis and placing them in historical context. In this context, it seems that in the current stage of political, economic, administrative, social and cultural development of the Râmnicu Sărat community, the effect of communist policies is still present.

⁴ Bogdan Murgescu, Romania and Europe. The accumulation of economic gaps (1500-2010), Polirom Publishing House, 2010, p. 328;

We believe that our research approach is necessary to understand that the image of the city today is the result of a process of historical evolution. Our research demonstrates that during the communist period the impact of industrial development was so great that the city almost rectified itself economically, urbanistically and demographically. Unfortunately, in Râmnicu Sărat, the vision of communist development did not represent a sustainable investment, and in the medium and long term it created moments of economic and social crisis, which affected the life of every worker, after the Revolution. From the multitude of existing economic units on the industrial platform, there are currently only two enterprises, with a very limited activity compared to the projected potential. Built with the enthusiasm that characterized that time, the Brake and Sealing Gasket Company is today called S.C. Fermit S.A. Râmnicu Sărat and barely managed to withstand the transition period. After massive personnel and capital restructuring, the company found the solution to adapt to the competitive market benefiting from new investments and re-technology by accessing projects with European funds, and currently the company is accepted in the Community Register of Trademarks. Apart from this industrial unit, in Râmnicu Sărat it still carries out production activities today, with almost 60 employees, S.C. Elars S.A. Râmnicu Sărat, the heiress of the Enterprise of Assembling Parts for the Electrotechnical Industry. The most relevant aspect of the company's current activity is the management of heritage, land, buildings and old equipment, with an estimated value of approximately 4 million euros. Symbolically, the total number of 170 existing employees in the year 2023 on the old industrial platform in Râmnicu Sărat, compared to the number of 18,800 existing workers on the same platform in 1989, represents the bankrupt communist vision of economic development in the medium and long term.

Documentary sources play a crucial role in substantiating and supporting the arguments and conclusions in the present research. We used primary sources, consisting of official documents created during the studied period, correspondence, pictures, etc., as well as secondary sources, consisting of research by historians who analyze the economic and urban development at the general and local level, books, scientific articles and other types of academic publications. These sources were useful to gain a broader perspective on the topic and to assess how other researchers have approached the issue at a general level. I had access to the National Archives - Buzău County Service, but also to the archive of the Râmnicu Sărat City Hall, the archive located at the headquarters of some former enterprises or documents kept in private collections. During the interviews, I had access to primary sources of history, located in the personal collection of some former employees of the factories, or their families. At Buzău County Library and the "Corneliu Coposu" Municipal Library in Râmnicu Sărat, I had access to certain statistical studies and to the volumes of the Statistical Yearbook of the Socialist Republic of Romania published in the years included in the reference period. We had the opportunity to take interviews and oral testimonies from people directly involved in the decision-making act or in the production process, from simple workers in industrial units, to decision-makers, or representatives of the local administration of that period. I considered that precisely this personal and subjective dimension can bring originality to my study. Periodic publications, newspapers and magazines of the era were also of interest for the research, beyond the specific propagandistic elements, sometimes providing important details from the economic development activity, but also particularly valuable images for urban development. Online resources were also useful for research, sometimes providing access to primary and secondary sources, especially after the pandemic period, when many prominent institutions digitized their collections.

The thesis comprises six chapters. In the first chapter, I tried to present the economic context in which Romania as a country and, in particular, the county capital, Râmnicu Sărat, was in the interwar period.

In the second chapter I presented the concept of planned economy introduced since the 1950s. I also referred to the need to better understand some ideological aspects regarding the approach „man as the main force of production”, the worker - stakhanovite, whose purpose is not only to meet the production plan but to exceed it, but starting from the five-year plans thought out at the level of the entire country, I tried to define the role drawn for the city of Râmnicu Sărat within the national economy.

Focusing our research on industrialization as a strategy for development, urbanization and the social transformations involved in these broad processes of the communist regime, we considered the five-year plans that helped us highlight the party-state solutions for building the socialist "new world" , even in disadvantaged areas. As the researcher Alexandru D. Aioanei also points out, industrialization was a phenomenon that "was charged with a much wider meaning and did not represent only the encouragement of a specific economic sector. In its economic dimension, industrialization meant, first of all, the shift of emphasis from agricultural production to technological production. For the P.M.R. leaders, however, industrialization was, at the same time, a lever for building the new state and, implicitly, the new society."⁵.

In the third chapter, I present the most important existing industrial units on the Râmnicu Sărat industrial platform, which actually formed the backbone of the region's economy for several decades. Using the archives of the respective economic units and oral history interviews, I sought to highlight the importance and value of these enterprises within the Romanian economy.

In the fourth chapter, I analyzed the phenomenon of urban development generated by local economic activity, from what represented a general characteristic of systematization at the national level, to concrete local aspects, which still affect the daily life of residents of Râmnicu Sărat municipality. In the historical evolution of the urban tissue (Appendix 2), from the first commercial center developed around the Brâncoveanu foundation in the heart of the city until 2013, the year of the completion of the last General Urban Plan, the urban development leap from 1968-1989 remains unique in its scale and intensity in the history of Râmnicu Sarat.

Chapter five deals with oral history elements intended to highlight the current perspective of former workers on individual destiny and local history. The period covered is concerned in particular with the second part of the communist era, in which the interviewees were able to express themselves fully. I was very fortunate that the city's last mayor from before 1989, business executives, union leaders and engineers on the industrial platform are still alive and available to answer the questions I asked them.

The work is accompanied by an extensive bibliography in which archival sources, mostly unpublished, predominate. Also, the work contains a series of appendices that include documents, photos, but also summary sheets of the conducted interviews.

⁵ Alexandru D. Aioanei, *Moldova on the coordinates of the planned economy. Industrialization, urbanization, social engineers (1944-1965)*, Cetatea de Scaun, 2019, pp. 21-22;

In a city that the communists called, before they came to power, "the city where nothing happened", the effervescence of socialist development left as a legacy the large number of townspeople, former workers, and a lot of blocks of flats. An important part of today's residents come from those who migrated from the neighboring rural areas, which belonged to the former Slam-Râmnic county, in the times when the city was prophesied to become an industrial center. Although moving from the village to the city, from a house to an apartment, meant a radical change, the new townspeople adapted to the new reality much more easily than the old townspeople, especially those whose properties were confiscated, who lived throughout the communist period the drama of being considered citizens with "unhealthy origins". As a reminiscence of their agrarian vocation, one of the frequent habits of the people in Râmnicu Sărat with rural origins, who lived in the apartments on the ground floor of the block, was planting a small vegetable garden on the green space in the condominium, or, later, the construction of garages or small warehouses.

During the years of communism, the people in Râmnicu Sărat contributed to the construction of a new city, which they enlivened accordingly, to which they still feel very attached today and which they felt belonged to them. Today, it is difficult to reactivate the spirit of local patriotism in the younger generations, many of the children and grandchildren of former workers choosing to live in other urban centers. Therefore, the present approach to the development of the city of Râmnicu Sărat, during the communist period, offers openings for future researches of local history. The problem of systematization, urbanization and industrialization, both at the national and local level, represented an extensive phenomenon, developed over more than 20 years, and requires detailed research in order to obtain a panoramic image designed to reveal the real impact, until present, of the socialist vision on the transformation of small towns into industrial centers.

More than three decades after the fall of the dictatorial regime represented by Nicolae Ceaușescu, the concern for the objective reception of the communist period in Romania remains a research priority. In the context in which pre-university education is discussing the imminent introduction of a new compulsory subject, called *The History of Communism*, the access of the young generation to documentary sources of national and local history must represent the essential step for the development of social and civic skills. Academic research is intended to contribute to the understanding of the long-term evolution of social and economic structures, to encourage open debate on the past and to provide sound scientific arguments for the correct understanding of the reality of any era, within the limits of existing documentary sources. In general, for the study of recent history there are enough risks of approach, these being caused by possible contradictory narratives or ideological interests, an aspect that is even more obvious when it comes to studying the history of Romanian communism. Even if time will settle the reception of the communist period, dispelling any doubt about the fact that the communist regime in Romania was illegitimate and criminal⁶, the historiographical effort must be continuously supported. The search for truth must always be in the researcher's mind.

⁶ Final report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, Bucharest, 2006, p. 403;

Romania's communist past must not divide today's society and polarize different social or political groups. The distortion of the recent historical past in order to gain public support is as reprehensible as the communist regime itself. If from an official point of view, the Romanian Parliament condemns the communist dictatorship, by approving the Report on the condemnation of the communist dictatorship in Romania, from a social point of view we still need to be engaged in the process of reconciliation with the past, to facilitate the understanding of the complexity of the socialist ideology, the phenomena and the events it generated in the short, medium and long term. A superficial look as well as the underestimation of the impact that communism had on the Romanian society can generate consequences for the understanding and prevention of such abuse in the future. Research and documentation imply the continuous work of every historian of Romanian communism, and the possibility of using tools specific to oral history brings the advantage of investigating particular cases. We felt it was important to investigate the reception of events that directly affected people, then and now. The effects of communist politics on the individual and the local community are best seen through personal stories and individual experiences. Analyzing the personal fate of former workers from Râmnicu Sărat and other community members gave us a more detailed and human perspective on the impact of communist policies.

The argument of economic development, of the stability and predictability of social life for every worker is one of the strongest and most frequently invoked arguments, in particular, which people from Râmnicu Sărat that are in the category of golden age nostalgics present as opposed to the unpredictability and dynamism of life in present democracy. This type of assessment is characteristic to medium and small cities, where industrialization meant the incorporation of an important human resource into urban social life. The inhabitants of the countryside, who had been deprived a generation ago of the economic means specific to agricultural work through collectivization, were called by the regime to a new life, a better life, acquiring a higher status, that of a factory worker, having a monthly salary and living in the block of flats. The migration from the village to the city meant an important leap from the point of view of the quality of life, leap which the Romanians probably could not have done too soon under the conditions of normal economic development.

We believe that the present paper comes to fill a gap in local history, analyzing the history of the communist regime in an old trade fair and old county seat, by highlighting the impact that social and economic transformations had on the city of Râmnicu Sărat. The topic addressed is a topical one because while some people can see the economic benefits and infrastructure investments, others can remember the difficulties and living conditions under the communist regime. In the complex process of assessing this period at the local level, our detailed research provides an informed and scientifically validated perspective.

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