

Romania: A Missed Opportunity for Minorities

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Partner organisation: PLURAL Association, established in 2012, www.asociatia-plural.ro

“During the transition, the most vulnerable societal groups that were exposed to change were the ones invisible during the communist era. Ethnic, gender and sexual minorities were the social categories that had, in theory, the greatest windows of opportunity. But in practice, they suffered the greatest losses during this period of time. While any kind of change in a political, institutional or economic system is a long process, building a plural, inclusive society takes even longer and has to be based on education. The experience of a totalitarian regime and a history of state racism and a patriarchy cannot be easily wiped out.”

Irina Ilisei, PhD, President of PLURAL Association

Introduction

The focus of the PLURAL Association in the framework of the Transition Dialogue Network was to analyse the impact of the transition towards democracy on social categories that were less

visible and that were most vulnerable in the Romanian society during communism - women, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI community, and low or working class citizens. We aimed to understand how this period affected these social groups, and what their social and political gains and losses were during transition.

Our analysis is based on a thorough literature review and seven video interviews with activists, academics and intellectuals engaged in the Romanian civic society. The interviews will be made available on the project website³⁸.

Milestones and Frameworks in Understanding Transition

The transition period in Romania is rooted in the failure of the communist regime in the country. December 1989 can be seen as a starting point for the reconstruction of Romanian society: *“The 1989 Revolution represents the main event in Romania in the last half century. It radically transformed the lives of millions of Romanians, modified the position of the country in the world and it triggered a whole process of change”*³⁹. While the origin of the transition in Romania is rather clear – the fall of the communist regime - the destination of this transition is a subject of debate. Transition is multifaceted. It includes political pluralism, a functional market economy, rule of law and the political representation of minorities.

One interviewee pointed out the need to reflect on how we frame the concept of transition, signalling that a permanent comparison with Western countries entails some risks. *“Who defines the transition? One version of transition was just the shift from that heart-rending communist, totalitarian, dictatorial regime in Eastern European countries to the glowing, democratic and liberal capitalism of the Western countries. This is the ‘official’ definition, how we transitioned from one to the other. However, people stumbled a lot in understanding what we actually had to do. Did we have to change all social structures or was it enough to change the political regime?”*

³⁸ Transition Dialogue – Mapping a Generation, <http://www.transition-dialogue.com/>

³⁹ V. Pasti, *România în tranziție. Căderea în viitor*, (Editura Nemira, 1995), p. 37

Did we have to change as people to become more democratic?” She was even more sceptical about the use of the term transition and its implications. “There are administrative structures in which nothing really changed. If we take a look at the socio-political formulas, how much did they change? And, if changes are indeed necessary, who should change them and in which direction?” (interview excerpt, Ioana Vrăbiescu, researcher of Roma and Migration Studies).

Other respondents are less doubtful about defining transition as the period that followed the fall of communism and of when Romania took the aspirational road of becoming a state, governed by democracy, rule of law, pluralism and freedom of speech. *“I believe that the transition started from the moment the dictator’s helicopter left the roof of the Romanian Communist Party from Bucharest, from the days of the revolution when, we all wished for and had aspirations to be accepted by the international community, to become an occidental state like we used to see in movies and magazines when they would escape censorship”* (interview excerpt, Iulian Stoian, activist for Roma and LGBTQI Rights). Indeed, most of the respondents identified the milestones of the transition period in Romania in direct relation to events that occurred in the international arena, and with Romanian adhesion to international structures, such as the Council of Europe, the Common Market, NATO and the European Union.

The 90s are generally perceived as the period of resettlement of institutions, the economy and society. The values and institutions of the previous political system were wiped out and there were no longer authority structures.

“ *“A lot of people robbed the state and bankrupted state enterprises for personal gain. [...] Ordinary citizens would also get ripped of en masse, especially in the early 1990s when people did not have an economic education.*

[...] Industries of all kinds were bankrupted and their assets were stolen. I mean, it was happening at all levels of society, from the highest to the lowest” (interview excerpt, Adrian Schiop, writer and anthropologist). From this perspective, the transition slowed down at the beginning of the 2000s, when society became more settled, and it ended when Romania entered the European Union - a moment that indicated Romania’s societal and institutional stability.

At an individual level, for many, the 90s signified deep poverty: “I associate transition with poverty, the poverty that I, my family, and especially the people around us would live in. I cannot make parallels to what happened before 1990 because I was not even born at the time, but what was more difficult was the fact that you felt poor, but you would see the wealth on the other side, around you, on the television screens, in friends’ houses and houses of rich people, and that’s how I think the feeling of frustration would somehow get born. Before 1989, everyone was doing badly, we were all equal somehow, but from the moment of the transition and the beginning of capitalism, the inequalities have grown and become more visible” (interview excerpt, Andreea Petruț, researcher of public policy).

Personal perceptions of transition change based on a person’s age, social class, ethnicity, gender, and area of residency. However, a person’s career and their education level also have a great impact on how December 1989 is perceived by that person. This is probably also the aspect that has the greatest impact on distinguishing between the different generations. The pressure to readjust to a society, which was continuously transforming, was greater for those in the labour market or those who had just graduated. Their opinion of communism and transition depends on their ability to readjust and maintain their economic and social status. The peaceful transfer of power from those in power to the opposition is another relevant aspect of transition.

⁴⁰ D. Sandu, *Sociologia tranziției: valori și tipuri sociale în România*, (Staff, 1996), p. 28

“As opposed to Poland and other Eastern European states, what happened in 1989 [in Romania] was not really a regime change. I think that the power has been seized by the second tier of Communist Party members, who were nevertheless communists.

In Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, there was a real dissidence. In Romania, maybe also because the regime was much more brutal than in other Eastern-European states, this dissidence could not manifest itself. Starting from that simulation of a revolution where we still do not know what happened, it quickly became clear that the new rulers were not willing to renounce the leverages of power, to step back. And accordingly, the first peaceful power shift took place later, after six years. Some people say that it was then that the communist cycle in Romania ended – and I agree with them. 1996, I think, was the moment when Romania has become much more viable from the point of view of a democracy governed by rule of law. Because, until then it was not really the case” (interview excerpt, Adrian Szelmenczi, activist for human rights).

Effects of Transition on Minority Social Categories

Are minority groups represented in the political arena in Romania? This is considered a key indicator of a consolidated democracy. Therefore, it is worth examining if and how minority social groups take part in the decision-making process.

One of the main characteristics of the political regime in Romania before 1989 was that political or social pluralism was non-existent. There was only one way to rule Romania – namely through the communist party.

“Communism was a type of fundamentalism, in the sense that it had at its base the belief that there was only one truth, one morality”⁴⁰.

The fall of communism gave minority groups the chance to have their voice heard, opened up debates on the political rights of minority groups and allowed institutions that work for the protection of those rights to be created.

Despite this opportunity, however, the Roma minority continued to occupy a marginal position. *"We did not manage to build public institutions related to our identity. This is the greatest loss"* (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu). In parallel to that, women were a politically underrepresented social category during transition. *"The ideology of gender equality, promoted by communism, completely collapsed. After the fall of the communist regime, the political representation of women fell to 3.5% at a national level and 1.6% at a local level"* (interview excerpt, Mihaela Miroiu).

This shows that minority groups needed time to develop their negotiating skills. Members of underprivileged groups needed to learn how to exercise their free speech rights. Moreover, minority groups did not even recognise themselves as such. In addition, these groups also needed to learn that they could organise themselves and take a political stand. Referring to the gay community, Adrian Schiop points out that *"In the 1990s nobody would come out of the closet and it was a non-existent category"* (interview excerpt). The LGBTQI community took over a decade to take its first steps towards fighting for political rights.

In practice, *"the analysis of different reports, public policies and strategies made by the Romanian governments and public institutions during transition shows an acute incapacity to think about the diversity of disadvantaged groups and the multiple facets of their problems"*⁴¹. From an economic standpoint, groups most affected by the transition, including the elderly, unqualified workers, people with disabilities, and the Roma were also underprivileged during the communist regime. Women were over-represented in all these categories and were the most exposed to the continuous fall of living standards, the rise of social exclusion and unemployment⁴².

⁴¹ V. Pasti, *România în tranziție. Căderea în viitor*, (Editura Nemira, 1995), p. 20

⁴² V. Pasti, *Ultima inegalitate. Relațiile de gen în România*, (Polirom, 2003), p. 30



Roma women standing in front of the Tricodava factory in 1976
Source: Crina Morteau, Urban Roma Collection



Bucharest street performance for representation and recognition of women in the public sphere, 8 March 2016
Source: Tudorina Mihai, www.feminism-romania.ro

During transition, the state took measures that indirectly had a much stronger negative impact on women than on men. For example, most of the existing social infrastructure for childcare was closed after 1989.

Another social category disproportionately affected by the transition was the Roma. Racism played a role when it comes to Roma losing their jobs and facing discrimination in accessing the labour market: *“At the very beginning of transition racism took violent forms [...]. Transition, in fact, has unveiled this passive-aggressive racism that I am talking about, that existed during communism as well. After the Revolution, all the rule of law institutions were unreliable. Without authority, these negative feelings added up and surfaced in the form of conflicts between Roma people and Romanians”* (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu).

'Room Service' Recognition of Minority Groups

The transition was also the moment when the first state institutions and civil society organisations striving for anti-discrimination and human rights were created. However, the values that were ingrained in the past, such as a rejection of differences, negative experiences in building social solidarity and a lack of experience creating bottom-up political changes, were still inherited in the period that followed 1989 and did not shift along with the change of regime. The recognition of the value of pluralism and political rights of minority groups was very slowly achieved, and as both the literature review and our respondents show, it was achieved due to pressure from international institutions. *“During these 26 –27 years, there was a process of adapting the national legislation to the various juridical systems Romania was aspiring to. For example, the vocation towards a democratic state and Romania’s ascension to the Council of Europe was a fact that produced a series of changes to our legislative framework. We abolished the death penalty, we abolished article 200 from the Penal Code, which would bring penal charges for homosexuality, and so on. Lots of such elements have been*

progressively adopted, but this came at the cost of not educating the population properly during the process” (interview excerpt, Iulian Stoian).

As a consequence, Romania registered an important progress concerning the recognition of minorities but this improvement remained mostly at the level of legislation and political frameworks. It did not translate itself into better practical measures, improvement in societal attitudes or public speech of politicians: *“Romania, subsequently, has signed the framework convention regarding the protection of the national minorities, and has ratified it too. There are not many people who know about it, especially journalists [...]. The Romanian states assumes the protection of the Hungarian language as a minority and regional language, also through some international documents that were signed – though their application is not systematic. We still have a lot of sentences which are at least bizarre from certain points of view, which are clearly against the Romanian Constitution. We still have situations in which repressive organs [state institutions], if I may call them so, take action on ethnic considerations” (interview excerpt, Adrian Szelmenczi, activist for human rights).*

Referring to the situation of gender equity and women’s rights in Romania after the fall of communism, Mihaela Miroiu developed the concept of ‘room service’ feminism, which she defines as “form without content” that has been welcomed to answer Western requests for integration⁴³. A similar path was followed not only concerning women’s rights but also concerning ethnic minorities, LGBTQI rights and any diversity policies. A discourse in favour of minority groups was brought in and was included into legislative frameworks, but only a few measures were used in practice. Neither budget distribution, nor educational policies were written in support of equality for minority groups. The transition towards valuing diversity, inclusion and political rights for minority groups is, therefore, incomplete.

⁴³ M. Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie. Teorii politice feministe* (Polirom, 2004)

“I do not see transition as finished, I believe that the transition is only beginning. The political and systemic transition has been done but not the mental one. Public debates on certain topics are not very prominent, and these are the things that the well-being of this nation depends on” (interview excerpt, Nicoleta Bițu).

Lessons for Civic Education

The past of a society is the space where the values, fears, and modus operandi are rooted. One projects the future based on their past. The transition from a totalitarian regime to a pluralist democratic society, with functional institutions and a capitalist market, is a process that has occupied almost three decades. Internalisation of the democratic political culture and the spirit of an open inclusive society are subject to longer processes of change that need to be supported by education.

Having deep, structured debates on transition in Romania would help us understand how the communist legacy makes its presence felt over 27 years after the end of the communist regime. It would open up the dialogue about how different social groups envision their own political agendas and how these positions can be negotiated and brought together in an inclusive society. Reflecting on the past, such as the socialist or transition periods, is not only relevant for the sake of it but also for understanding where the political attitudes stem from, how different social categories experienced these periods, why society is polarised, and how constructive dialogue and solidarity inside of the society can be constructed.

Civic education, with non-formal educational methods, offers a great methodology for bringing together people with different social backgrounds, family histories and even people of different generations. It offers spaces for reflection, debates and interaction, and for getting in touch with different life experiences and attitudes towards social life. One of the most relevant goals that civic

education can achieve is making the interplay between the individual level and the structural level in a society visible. In every political era, individual choices interact with the social context, institutions or media. Individuals shape the society that they live in. Moreover, political regimes are experienced and interpreted differently based on the various social group a person belongs to. It is the role of civic education to shed light on these relationships, to generate the sense of responsibility, and to empower action.

About the author

Irina Ilisei, PhD, is a researcher and trainer. She is founding member and President of PLURAL Association in Bucharest and is an external consultant for several other NGOs and institutions. Her main fields of works are Roma rights, inclusive education, gender and active citizenship.