

## Politics, Economics and the Institution of Pop Culture in Romania after the Fall of Communism

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**Abstract:** Before 1989, the year when the communist regime was overthrown, Romania's cultural landscape had been dominated by written culture and, in terms of music, only classical music had been seen as a truly cultural manifestation. Although the population was somewhat familiar with Western pop music, it was only after the fall of communism and the advent of capitalist modes of existence that pop music and culture, by means of audio and visual media, came into its own and gained legitimacy. Actually, the settlement of popular culture as such in Romania went hand in hand with the development of mass media, capitalist relations and a market economy. As life's circumstances changed so did the ways in which people imagined the world or expressed their viewpoint on reality. In this context, previous cultural figures lost their political power while others went onstage and had the floor. This article traces some of developments that have become landmark events in the transition from an exclusive high culture to an inclusive popular one.

**Keywords:** *American pop culture, postcommunism, rock music.*

### 1. A Reterritorialized Space

The evolution of pop culture within the Romanian post-communism owes much to the way in which the capitalist relations were established during the transition to a market society. This happened through a deterritorialization and, subsequently, a reterritorialization of the communist society, although the new Romanian capitalism did not start from scratch, but it settled into a country that still recalled a few aspects of its historical experience before the end of the Second World War and that had kept in touch with more liberal modes of existence via pop culture during communism. Thus, since the former local interpretation framework had to be changed, only the previous contacts with the Western capitalist system made the new ideological paradigm bearable for most of the population. Nevertheless, the establishment of a capitalist popular culture on a large scale required a total political change, which would generate a semiotic transformation. One of the first main problems to overcome in order to carry out this necessary political and semiotic permutation was the resolution of the property regime.

Communism meant state ownership of almost all goods and properties, which was imposed in Romania in the 1940s and 1950s. After the communist regime had been overthrown, a true semiotic revolution (or counter-revolution) began to happen by giving back the individual property rights. Many houses

given to former communist leaders were returned to the interwar bourgeoisie, or their heirs, the land was given back to the peasants, and the communist flats were bought by their tenants, becoming their own private property. In this process, collectivism gave way to raw individualism sometimes. Factories and other communist economic enterprises went bankrupt because the previous system of international connections and exchanges had started falling apart, together with the communism regimes of Eastern Europe, and, as a consequence, they were put up for sale for nothing and bought by all kinds of speculative agents. The corner “supermarket” replaced the communist food store (*alimentara*) and new merchandise was displayed on shelves. Private businesses began to appear, most of them dealing in selling imported produce and less in manufacturing goods. These dramatic upheavals happened in a historically short time and impacted whole generations of people from a psychological and economic point of view. However, these changes could not have happened without the political and cultural propaganda promoted by the new leadership. In fact, the persuasion process proved relatively easy in the light of a pro-American and pro-Western mythology, dating back to the end of the Second World War. Ianos Matias Kovacs explains this East European (Romanian included) propensity towards America by “anti-communist nostalgia”. He also adds other variables to it, such as “neophyte exaggeration of liberalism, partly for pragmatic reasons, such as geopolitics” (Kovacs 2007: 33). Kovacs even speaks of Eastern Europe as a “small America”, a fact that continues to entail consequences as far as Western European politics is concerned in this region. Anyhow, the grand hope of the postwar generations, summarized by the wishful formula “The Americans are coming!”, has finally turned into reality after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The Americans have arrived and, apart from military bases, multinational companies, fast-food restaurants, they have brought about democratic ideas, Reality TV, movies, music, a consumerist way of life, in short, they have brought over their popular culture.

The deterritorialization of the previous culture at the onset of the communist period, in the 1950s, seemed harder to achieve than at the beginning of postcommunism. Albeit both processes of ideological deterritorialization proved to be gradual and never complete, the cultural field was re-signified much more easily and quickly in the postcommunist era. Any sign that somehow reminded of communism was rapidly eliminated, ignored, changed, or used as an index. The country’s name and its official emblems were changed and so were the street and locality names. Colorful business signboards and street advertisement replaced drab communist slogans. Electric power inundated households, restaurants, streets and the big city night life was already similar to that in many Western cities, offering all sorts of liquor, food, concerts, and other kinds of popular entertainment.

As far as the written culture was concerned, in the first postcommunist years, the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin were thrown out and classic liberal writings by the likes of J. S. Mill, Benjamin Constant, Friedrich A. Hayek and so on, replaced them, at least in universities. The cases of some Romanian classical writers, such as Mihail Sadoveanu, Tudor Arghezi, Camil Petrescu, who

allegedly had colluded with the communist power, captured the public attention and were under scrutiny. Some important writers, such as Eugen Barbu, who had supported the communist regime, were dismissed by the new intellectual elite, while others became obsolete or were replaced by interwar authors. Indeed, the initial strategy of promoting interwar writers - Cioran, Noica, Eliade, Mihail Sebastian, Eugen Ionescu – adopted by publishing houses like Humanitas proved to be a success. At the same time, a whole new type of commercial literature, made up of pop magazines (*Pop Rock & Show*, *Play Back*, *Bravo* – the Romanian edition), pulp fiction, and self-development books, began to spring up, gain ground and capture the attention of the dwindling readership. All went hand in hand with the growth of visual media and the Internet, which would soon turn into the main sources of information, knowledge and entertainment.

## **2. The Decline of High and Written Culture and the Rise of the Commercial and Visual Media**

One of the main consequences of the fall of communism and the advent of capitalist modes of expression was the delegitimization of the high and written culture. This opened fresh opportunities in the area of the new cultural industries. The cultural field during communism clearly favoured the written culture and native authors. The wave of pop culture that was engulfing the country after 1989 made many authors lose their influence and even their importance, the nation's definition being reconfigured in accordance with the ethnic – civic binomial, to the detriment of the ethnic (Ștefănescu 2017). Part of the cultural reconfiguration that took place after 1989 centered around right-wing intellectuals, members of the Group for Social Dialogue (Grupul pentru Dialog Social): Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Horia Roman Patapievici, etc. They supported the Western cosmopolitanism and directly influenced the civic movement in Romania but – in reality – they could not have a decisive say in the entire process of cultural legitimization. On the contrary, their right-wing elitism was at odds with the new tenets of intrusive popular culture and although they tried to impose a new dominant high culture, they did not succeed. Despite their efforts, most writers lost their privileged status of the communist era and book sales slumped dramatically in the first postcommunist decade (after an initial rise). The average run of a book consisted of 1000 copies at the end of the 1990s and 630 in the year 2003 (Marius Lazăr *Eu citesc*). The game was to be won by eclectic, globalized cultural productions, in sync with the consumer capitalism and the worldwide star system. Thus, the overthrow of communism marked the quick passage from the prevalence of classical, written culture to the domination of visual and consumer culture, despite the advent of a relatively high number of cultural magazines in the first years after the political regime change. Many writers abandoned their literary projects and became journalists, taking part in public debates and joining the mass media industry.

In the beginning of the 1990s, after a new law for the audiovisual industry had been enacted, television started thriving and reached maturity in about 10 years' time. The first private TV station – SOTI – was established in 1991 with the help of the International Media Fund, whose headquarters were in Washington.

By 1994, when it ceased to exist, SOTI managed to bring some changes to Romania's fledgling mass media industry. As an alternative to the public television TVR, it tried to have a different agenda and diversify the topics approached by its journalists. Like Antena 1 and ProTV later, it changed the news format and struggled to make it more attractive to the general audience. Consequently, the influence of the state-run TV network, TVR, began to erode to the advantage of the new commercial TV channels, which became prominent by taking over and adapting American and West European formats and productions. For example, the show *Chestiunea zilei – Today's Issue* (a.t.), broadcast by ProTV and Tele7 ABC at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, copied Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show* from NBC. The Romanian version of the show enjoyed a large audience and popularity, being included in one of the prominent Romanian movies produced at the time, *Filantropica* (2002). Also, *Marius Tucă Show*, a popular program that was in competition with *Chestiunea zilei* and was broadcast by Antena 1, actually replicated *Larry King Live*, a well-known American TV show hosted by CNN. At the same time, one of the strategic moves made by ProTV was the inclusion of *manele* in its entertainment programs. *Manele* stood for a music genre, played mainly by Roma ethnics, with basic, often violent and vulgar words, which mixed Balkan, Turkish, local folk and popular music and which had simple, repetitive rhythms. Since *manele* were regarded as vulgar, their introduction to television was a controversial moment, coming against the supposedly educational role of television, a role inoculated into the public mindset during the communist period. In spite of this, ProTV took its chances and the result was an increase in its rating and a symbolic step towards the victory of the commercial mass media.

Meanwhile, ProTV, followed by other TV stations, introduced a news report format, focused on sensational news (*Stirile de la ora 5 – The 5 O'Clock News* (a.t.)), as well as other entertainment programs, most of them based on American patterns, promoting marginal role models, who were in fact becoming more and more relevant and attractive for the post-communist world (for instance, the reality TV show on B1 channel, *Monica si Irinel*, involving a dodgy old businessman, Irinel Columbeanu, and a young fashion model, Monica, which enjoyed a very good rating).

Many successful TV shows and news reports that have been made since then in Romania imitate American and Western European formats, if they are not entirely produced in the West. These shows usually make use of local characters and setting, although their script is based on Western know-how. Madalina Nicolaescu says that "given the overwhelming presence of the USA on the TV screens and movies broadcast in Romania, the so-called 'global media culture' can actually be described as American culture" (Nicolaescu 2001: 138). Nicolaescu gives as an example the "glocalized" series *În familie – In the Family* (a.t.), but she also mentions other Romanian TV shows, such as *Cum sa devii milionar – How to Become a Millionaire* (a.t.), *Din dragoste – For Love* (a.t.) and *Big Brother*, replicating Western patterns (Nicolaescu 2001: 139-141). In 2001, a new TV station, which was to become Realitatea TV, was established. It was a news station that would adopt a broadcasting format similar to that of CNN. Both Realitatea TV and other news stations, such as Antena 3, were going

to become quite relevant for the public interested in politics. All these TV stations, whose apparent aim was the spread of information, began to churn out a continual talk-show, actually favouring one political party over another.

The commercialization process could be easily spotted in the political realm as well. Here, Romanian parties espoused American strategies and PR techniques and paid American advisers in the field of communication. Thus, according to Peter Gross, in the 1996 presidential elections, the Americanization of politics, which had already been happening in Western Europe for some time, moved to the East, together with many American aid programs for the states in this region. In Romania, the acting President, Ion Iliescu, hired a group of American political advisers, while American-style public surveys were a must for any candidates and political parties, as was the propagation of their results through mass media. In this context, the TV electoral ads of at least three of the main candidates running for the position of president in 1996 (Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu, and Petre Roman) had an obvious American tinge. In fact, this tinge or influence was present throughout their entire electoral campaigns, which were similar to what Kathleen Hall Jamieson described as American elections (Gross 1999: 150).

Indeed, the rise of private TV stations, which competed against the state-run television dependant on government funds, represented one of the decisive factors that drove the right-wing candidate, Emil Constantinescu, to win the presidency. The new private televisions framed the electoral campaign as a fight between former communist, undemocratic, tendencies and the democratic forces, as an ideological battle between the East and the West. From a political perspective, the result of those presidential elections was a proof of Romania's westward direction, an official endorsement of Romania's passage to the Western sphere of influence. From the point of view of mass media, it meant a "victory of the visual" over the written press and culture, which eventually came to mean the victory of the commercial culture and the imposition and prevalence of the private TV stations over the state-owned television, in accordance with the rating surveys.

### **3. Socialization through Music. Alternative Rock and Hip-Hop**

Starting with 1990s, the Romania cable television networks started to offer a wide range of appealing European and American channels. MTV, the famous American music channel established in the beginning of the 1980s and watched by Romanians on tape cassettes during the communist period, began to increasingly show alternative rock music, which became mainstream, particularly thanks to the American band Nirvana. Most videos that were broadcast belonged to alternative rock artists, such as Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, or Tori Amos, but other genres were also well-represented by Green Day, No Doubt, Pantera, etc. The MTV music and videos gave birth to the first Romanian generation that socialized by means of pop and rock music directly from the source.

The new political establishment opened the access to Western music, which led to an effervescence of recovering old hits and artists. Thus, old bands like The Beatles, The Doors, The Rolling Stones were listened to alongside the

more fashionable alternative genres. Timpuri Noi [Modern Times], a rock band named after a Bucharest underground train station that was inaugurated during the “Golden Age” of communism, was considered as “cel mai bun produs muzical al nepoților lui Dracula” – “the best musical product of Dracula’s grandchildren” (a.t.) (Ernu 2009: 272). The band played before 1989 as an underground act and was among the first to be broadcast by the European music channels MCM and MTV Europe. Not before long, other native alternative rock bands also began to appear on stage, some of them, like the Moldavian – Romanian band Zdob și Zdub, imitating Red Hot Chili Peppers from California, with a difference: their music drew on local folk beats. The hard rock bands Compact, Iris, Holograf, who had enjoyed a widespread success in the communist regime because they were seen as a sort of rebels by their fans, continued to attract a large audience, after some rebranding. For instance, Holograf’s hit, “Money Talks”, was a transposition into the contemporary Romanian context of an AC/DC hit, bearing a similar title. On the other hand, singers like Loredana Groza and Ștefan Bănică Jr. replicated Madonna and Elvis Presley respectively. American folk songs, adapted and with Romanian lyrics – “Vânare de vânt” (a cover of Bob Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind”), “Dar nu-i nimic asta e” (also a cover of Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright”), and others – which had been successful with Cenaclul Flacăra under the communist rule, were played again by the same old artists, reunited as a new band, Pasărea Colibri. Meanwhile new music genres like hip hop were coming up on stage, appealing to more and more young people.

Hip hop is a kind of music that appeared in the neighborhood of Bronx in New York, in the early 1970s. It is defined by its messages that express revolt against the authorities because of the poor living conditions of the black population and it is characterized by a recital of words to a rather monotonous beat. It is closely knit to the African-Americans’ fight for civil rights and liberties and it has become a worldwide subculture, shared by blacks, whites, and other colors altogether. In 1989, according to well-known *Billboard* magazine, hip-hop and rap (its cousin) accounted for 6% of the American music market and ranked at the 4<sup>th</sup> place in the music industry, in terms of its market share (Watkins 2005: 33). The hip-hop trend appeared in Romania in the beginning of the 1990s. Radio Nova aired the first hip hop program and shortly the first important bands showed up. The Romanian bands were inspired from the American hip-hop and even imitated the rivalry pattern of the Americans:

Cum hip-hop-ul american era foarte bine împărțit între East Coast și West Coast, nu a durat mult până să se creeze o delimitare a trupelor noastre privind aceste curente și la noi, creându-se astfel două grupări: R.A.N.-S. (Răcnetul Agoniei Naționale – Sindicat), cu direcția Est (R.A.C.L.A., PARAZIȚII o scurtă perioadă, DELIKT, DA HOOD JUSTICE, KLANSMEN sau GETTO DACI), și CARTELUL (B.U.G. MAFIA, LA FAMILIA, GANGSTA CLIQUE, BROTHA IN BLACK, M&G sau DEMONII), cu accente dinspre Vest, între aceste două „găști” existând de-a lungul timpului numeroase conflicte, ce au dus ulterior și la o rivalitate a „cartierelor”. (ZonaTech 2019)

Thus, Romanian hip-hop was born in poor working-class neighborhoods of Bucharest (Pantelimon, Colentina), voicing the “artistic creativity” of the so-

called “neighborhood boys”. It entered in the neighborhood life at a time of economic downfall and dramatic social upheavals, in the 1990s. The words of the songs speak up about the transition to a materialistic society and the marginalization of the working-class people (for example, B.U.G. Mafia’s “Soarele răsare doar dacă-l plătești” – “The Sun Will Rise Only If You Pay for It” (a.t.), or about the social and political arrangements:

facem slalom printre cretini zi de zi/ într-o lume mică și murdară așa cum o știi/ proștii par concepuți pe cale artificială /că sunt mulți ai dreaeu și nu au nici o boală/ avem vile luxoase lângă blocuri jechoase/ mașini de top, oprite lângă căruțe la stop/ avem discoteci lângă biserici/ și gabori care fură/ primari cu 4 clase care nu știu limba română... (Paraziții 2007)

In a direct ghetto style, characterized by offbeat language and rhythm, Paraziții – The Parasites (a.t.) draw the attention to the reversal of values, the gap between the rich and the poor, the general state of corruption in the society, and the lack of education of the authorities, while expressing their contempt for those who try to show off. Looking at the general picture, the Romanian postcommunism practically imported all kinds of American mass culture. The PRO Generation, the subcultures of rap, house, hip-hop, and rock are all part of the whole range of global exchanges. Youth cultures generally share music genres that turn into lifestyles. The same has happened in Romania, the cultural flows between the West and the East contributing to Romania’s integration into the Western patterns of civilization, as well as to the creation of a new Americanized identity of many Romanians. As hip-hop singer Puya demonstrates it, one of the identifications of the new generations of cosmopolitan, post-communist Romanians is with the American Dream, in the absence of a Romanian Dream, or a mythology of self-fulfillment that would be relevant for them:

I can be what I want to be  
Losing my identity  
‘Cause I got a lot of life in me  
Let me live my American dream<sup>1</sup> (Puya 2010)

This song has been a hit, repeatedly played on radio and MTV Romania, attracting a strong following on social networks, such as YouTube, as well. Sung in RomEnglish, with a chorus straight in English, the whole tune and lyrics represents a good example of cultural hybridization and American influence on youth culture in Romania.

After listing a series of internationally known exports or brands made in USA and embraced by people everywhere, such as hamburgers, hot dogs, Bill Gates, Windows, Microsoft, FBI and CIA, Puya actually provides a kind of linguistic critique of how Romanian vocabulary became imbued with English words. Thus, the native “muncă” is replaced by “job”, “mișto” becomes “cool”,

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<sup>1</sup> „Pot să devin tot ce-mi doresc să fiu/ Pierzându-mi identitatea/ Fiindcă sunt plin de viață/ Lasă-mă să-mi traiesc propriul Vis american.” (a.t.) (Puya 2010)

whereas “trend” substitutes for “modă”, and the conclusion is that “Vorbim engleză de când ne naștem” – “we have been speaking English since we were born” (a.t.). The text, very important in the economy of the hip hop genre, where music is reduced to a monotonous and simple beat meant to support the words, also embarks on a cultural critique. Consequently, it derisively states that, in Romania, which was culturally dominated by Turkey until not long ago, everybody wants to be a VIP in the American style and people pretend to live their lives like their “brothers” across the Ocean. However, the Romanian background is grey and the relative poor economic standing can be seen when the country borrows money from the IMF (International Monetary Fund). Finally, the song makes an ironic appreciation of America as the beacon of the world, stating that “Cercetătorii vin, clar, din America” – “Obviously, researchers hail from America.” (a.t.), in other words, everybody should definitely accept that all novelties, all scientific discoveries are made by Americans and then transmitted around the globe. To sum up, this piece of hip hop actually shows how American culture has been integrated into the Romanian mindset and begins to reproduce itself using indigenous material. At the same time, the song also pinpoints the novel mental accessories that furnish the preferences and identity of the new generations.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The positive reception of pop culture in Romania, after the fall of communism, was associated with the need of integration into the “Western world”. The alliance between popular culture and the fledgeling democratic state was officially anointed when, in 1992, the American superstar Michael Jackson held a concert in Bucharest. The performance was recorded and broadcast by HBO, one of the important TV production houses worldwide. Ion Iliescu, the first democratically elected president of Romania, had a face-to-face meeting with Michael Jackson, an occasion for him to consolidate his problematic legitimacy as a leader. The American singer was allowed to shoot a video with Romanian policemen (most of whom had been part of former communist militia forces), who were shown running after him. It represented a symbolic moment, indicating that pop culture started to be officially accepted as a cultural phenomenon and, undoubtedly, was going to be assimilated as a real cultural manifestation.

The meeting between the “King of Pop” and the Romanian President was an attempt of the latter to gain popularity among the proAmerican young generation by associating himself with a world famous pop star and recognizing the instrumental role of popular music in politics. The encounter replicated the early example of the American President Richard Nixon, who met the “King of Rock and Roll” in a bid to gain the support of the American youth, which was against the Vietnam War. This kind of events would become a fixture of some political leaders later on. Thus, even as pop culture was beginning to gain ground in larger segments of the rank-and-file public, its political power was gradually becoming evident too.



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