H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vladimir Pasti. *The Challenges of Transition: Romania in Transition.* Boulder and New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xxix + 344 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-370-2.

Reviewed by F. Peter Wagner (UniversitÃƒÂ¤t Mannheim, Germany)
Published on HABSBURG (May, 1998)

Romania: Transition, Transformation, Development

Romania has gained a reputation as a special case in the literature on east central Europe's process of transition and transformation. The reason lies in the following three conditions or events. First, the Ceausescu regime: considered to be one of the harshest and most nationalistic of the communist dictatorships, especially during the period of the 1970s to 1980s when other communist regimes were already experimenting with reforms or were under significant internal pressure to do so; second, the "annus mirabilis" of 1989: unlike the other revolutions in east central Europe, Romania's was a violent one and ended with the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu; third, the transition: despite the bloody revolution, the communist elite was apparently quickly able to reorganize itself, in a general political association (the National Salvation Front), later into a political party (the Party of Social Democracy of Romania). This allowed it to maintain control of the government through two free elections in 1990 and 1992.

Seemingly quite in line with those three special conditions, Romania's postcommunist development has been a tale of halting reforms, corruption, nationalism, ethnic tensions, and poverty. For Romanian (oppositional) reformers and for outside observers, Romania has thus presented a special case, if not a "special path"; a country under the shadow of an "unfinished revolution," if not laboring under the legacy of "sultanism."[1]

Despite this special case status, Romania is still one of the least studied and least known countries of the area formerly known as Eastern Europe. For this reason, Vladimir Pasti's book on the transition in Romania, covering the period 1989 to 1995, would appear to be a welcome contribution to the otherwise burgeoning transition/transformation literature. Pasti certainly has given us a provocative treatment.[2] The main problem of the book concerns the lack of any documentation and the absence of scholarly conventions; there are no citations, no quotations, no data, no notes, no references, no bibliography. There is hardly even an index: a few names, unexplained, and no subjects.

Thus, the book is more like a very long interpretative essay than a scholarly monograph. This, should not be surprising. The Romanian original, published in 1995, was conceived as an intellectual and political intervention in the ongoing process of Romania's transition. The formal failings of the English translation does, however, present a problem. Whereas the Romanian original could count on a pre-existing familiarity that readers brought to the events and actors covered, leaving Pasti free to pursue his interpretation, the English translation is presented a scholarly treatment that stands and falls solely on Pasti's voice. I will return to this problem shortly. Let me first turn to Pasti's treatment of Romania in transition.

Pasti begins by distinguishing between two aspects, indeed moments, of the transition: the exterior-oriented and the interior-oriented. With the term "exterior-oriented transition," Pasti refers to the process of Romania's integration into the international and European "structures, mechanisms, and flows." Of major importance for this process in Pasti's view is the fact that a model, the international and the European community, exists. Although "far from complete," Pasti deems this process a success. The major changes have been wrought and Romania has become an accepted member of the international and–I here presume Pasti as claiming by implication–European community.

It is the "interior-oriented transition" that presents the major problem for Romania in Pasti's view. In the first place, there is no model for Romania's interior-oriented transition: Romanians are left to their own resources, creativity, and willingness to change. Pasti's verdict on the "interior-oriented transition" is devastating: it has been a failure. What he sees is a society where the socialist structures and mechanisms of the early 1980s have been allowed to multiply, and where even earlier

structures and mechanisms have been reinvigorated. At the same time, the country is in the grip of both an economic and a social crisis: the infrastructure for development is sorely lacking or in shambles, energy is in short supply, production a mess, quality goods still a dream, and yet there is a power elite and a money elite that profits and a new poverty that the rest experiences. While most Romanians are dissatisfied with the developments after 1989, there is an absence of leadership: an absence of management in the economy and an absence of governance in the polity. The reason for the failure of the transition in Romania, according to Pasti, lies in the "spontaneity" of the transition itself. It is a lack of political leadership, but also of individual initiative, that accounts for Romania's predicaments. Thus, the fundamental changes that are needed cannot simply be described: they have do be made: "[w]hat is needed is action" (pp. xxvi, xxvii-xxviii, 33-58).

After this general indictment of the Romanian transition, Pasti proceeds to present and analyze Romania's development. The presentation and analysis is divided into six chapters: the revolution of 1989; "the failure of the political revolution;" "the original parties–the opposition;" "the original parties–the rulers;" "industrial technocracy's way to power;" and "the industrial technocracy's fratricidal war." With the exception of the chapter on the 1989 revolution, each one presents an element of why Romania's transition failed.

The political revolution, in Pasti's terminology corresponding to what one would label the institutionalization of democracy, failed because it reproduced the old administrative structures and was unable to generate the kind of political leadership necessary to seize the possibilities the revolution of 1989 had opened up. The development of political parties did not aid the democratization of Romanian society and did not produce the necessary leadership for the transition. Instead, the political parties that developed were nothing more than entourages for politically ambitious personalities. Furthermore, political ambition only stood for partaking in the spoils of political office; no project or program was developed to counter the spontaneous nature of the process. Although Pasti elaborates this analysis of the political parties in the chapter on the opposition, the rulers, the National Salvation Front and later its offspring, the Party of Social Democracy of Romania and the Democratic Party, did not break the mold of spoils, personal bickering, and lack of vision and leadership.

If there is a winner of Romania's failed transition, it is the enterprise or industrial technocracy. For Pasti, the industrial technocracy not only had the distinct advantage of being there and remaining in position throughout, it also did not need to organize in order to make its interests count. And its interests are decidedly non-reformist: the reproduction of the old system is its fundamental interest and goal. Thus, the consequence of industrial technocracy's rather accidental victory is "the policies of underdevelopment" that have come to characterize the Romanian transition (p. 339).

There are some provocative and problematic assessments here–exactly what one would expect of someone who has in fact taken part in some of the events he describes (see note 2). Pasti's insistence on the lack of vision and program that characterized all political parties, and the spoils of political office as the ultimate and only goal of most political actors is provocative. Also problematic is Pasti's bias in this assessment. The entire opposition is characterized in this way. "The rulers," however, are treated in a far more detailed and nuanced manner. Indeed, in all of Pasti's assessments, there is a troubling general message. It was merely the wrong leadership–indeed: the wrong technocracy–that won. If only President Iliescu and Petre Roman had not been forced by their respective entourages to divide the National Salvation Front; if they had only listened to the expert advice offered by the "A Future for Romania Group"–then Romania would not only have had a different future, but a better future to boot. I may be permitted to wonder about this better future when reading: "political parties are a product of democracy and not its cause. Once the political decision is communicated to the population, the political parties show up in order to mediate among the groups of population that have differing options and the administration that has to execute the decisions" (p. 177).

It is interesting to note in this context that Pasti reserves the only truly positive assessment for the revolution of 1989 itself. For Pasti, it would be wrong to think of December 1989 as a plot or coup d'etat: instead, it was "a real revolution" (pp. 61-63). This is clearly once again an assessment made *against* the opposition, who criticized the government's use of the term "revolution" and introduced the term "events" as a reminder that although there had been a popular uprising, it was quickly incorporated into something like a coup d'etat. That the December 1989 events should be seen against the backdrop of communist elite discontent with the Ceausescu regime, a discontent taking rebellious shape because of the disastrous policies of the 1980s, has also been the general assessment advanced by some western scholars, most recently by Anneli Ute Gabanyi.[3]

This alternative view–taken here in most general terms, forgetting for a moment the question of the origin and sequence of the actual events–dissolves Pasti's notion of a "failed transition" *after* the revolution. Instead, the political leadership that "emerged" and the industrial technocracy that had "remained" become the two sides of Romania's transition coin. This does not mean that there were not reformists within "the rulers" who genuinely wanted better reforms (like Pasti), nor that "the opposition" is totally free of the charges leveled against it by Pasti. With these qualifications, I generally support the alternative view, which also has the distinct advantage of integrating Pasti's own account of the communist power system and elite dissatisfaction with his later account of a "spontaneous" transition which through a mysterious "vacuum" of leadership led to the conservation of old power structures and the creation of anti-reformist reforms.

Pasti uses a provocative first sentence to open his book: "[a]ny analysis of post-communist transition generally, and of Romania's transition particularly, is bound to start with the understanding of western politics" (p. xiii). Yet Pasti himself falls short of this task. The West (the center)–an interesting conceptual turning of the tables to be sure–remains silent. The model apparently still exists. There is no acknowledgment, let alone discussion, of the doubts and problems that occupy the so called highly industrialized countries of the former West. Thus, Pasti misses the intricate crossing of the external and the internal as constitutive of the double character of the transition: the double *internal* burden of a simultaneous political and economic transformation, *and* the problematic of integrating into an international, European (read: "western") system whose very parameters are undergoing profound changes themselves.[4] At the same time, Pasti can be criticized for assessing Romania's external standing in far too optimistic terms, even though he recognizes that the policy that has come to govern the international system in general, and the European integration process in particular, is a form of Neo-Realpolitik.

Pasti's seeming failure to make good on his own first sentence leads me back to the lack of documentation and the absence of scholarly conventions as the main problem of the book. More is at stake than a simple formality. The non-expert reader is not only bound to be baffled by some of the assessments presented. In the absence of even any intellectual references, she or he will inevitably miss the larger context of Pasti's treatise. He clearly situates himself at the beginning (and throughout the text) within a general debate on Romania's development that has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century. Within the confines of this review, I cannot adequately address this general debate.[5]

A few remarks have to suffice in order to bring to light the importance of this debate for the understanding of Pasti's book. The general debate on Romania's development has traditionally pitted "easterners" against "westerners," that is, autochthonists against integrationists. In the original debate from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the latter placed their hopes on the wholesale importation of "western" institutions, from a constitutional framework to industry, in an effort to modernize Romanian society. Meanwhile, the former savagely criticized the reality that they considered to be the fruit of this importation and placed their own hopes in development rooted in what they believed to be the original, native resources of Romanian society, the peasantry and the village community. In the present context of post-communist development, the confrontation between autochthonists and integrationists has quickly gained in relevance again. "Europe" and "civilization" are the key terms by which and through which neo-integrationists have come to plead their case for political and economic reform; while Romanian post-communist nationalism has gladly picked up the language of anti-Western sentiment and Romanian self-sufficient greatness: traditional autochthonism via the legacy of the nationalist discourse of the Ceausescu regime.[6]

This book was and remains a clear and powerful intervention in this debate. Although Pasti does not advocate that Romania should close itself to Europe or the international system, he criticizes the belief that the importation of western "forms, regulations, patterns" in itself generates development in and for Romanian society. Romania, in Pasti's view, needs to develop internally, and for that to happen, Romanians need to give up their cherished myth of externally generated (and as such benevolent!) development and their equally cherished myth of their own importance in and for Europe and the world. Turning inward, then, becomes the prerequisite for what according to Pasti is lacking the most: action. Regardless of the particular assessments made by Pasti in his treatise, it is his intervention in the contemporary development debate in Romania that makes the book important. Yet as I have pointed out above, the general message that comes with this intervention, a message of decision and action led, if not made by an expert leadership, cannot help but worry all those for whom democracy is more than a mechanism to integrate the people or to placate the masses.

In conclusion, let me place Pasti's intervention in our contemporary context. More than two years have passed since the publication of the original Romanian edition. The Romanian national elections of November 1996 resulted in a complete victory of the major opposition forces: a majority in both houses of Parliament, a new government, and a new President. Yet the coalition government of Prime Minister Victor Ciorbea proved to be unstable, and an all-out intensive Reform effort did not take place. After three months of ongoing governmental crisis, Ciorbea resigned on March 30 of this year. Radu Vasile is now the new Prime Minister and a new government was sworn in on April 17. It is fair to say that Romania's present problems were not caused by Ciorbea as Prime Minister and thus will not disappear with a new Prime Minister and a new government.

Pasti's two year-old diagnosis of a political deadlock without any clear alternatives therefore still appears to hold. However, the context has changed in a very significant way. With the elections of November 1996 the fundamental division of post-1989 Romanian politics and political culture, and one of the anchor points of Pasti's treatise, the division between "the opposition" and "the rulers" collapsed. As Pasti's discussion of the political landscape shows, "the opposition" and "the rulers" were in fact idealized categories. Still, both categories did order Romanian political life and the perceptions thereof, as Pasti's discussion equally demonstrates. Furthermore, and quite contrary to Pasti's neat distinction of "external-oriented" and "internal-oriented" transition, Romania's integration into Europe and the international system has suffered two major blows in the meantime. Romania was rejected both as a candidate for NATO and as a candidate for EU enlargement.

What will be the consequences of these internal and external events for the further development of Romania, its political landscape, economy, and society? As I have already indicated, present developments are not very hopeful. Romania still remains one of the most troubled and least reformist of all the east-central European countries, too close for comfort in its economic development to neighboring Bulgaria, with only Albania, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina being worse off. Yet saying this should immediately raise an entire complex of questions about the myths and expectations that the year 1989 engendered, the realities of the transition/transformation we have experienced since then, and the Neo-Realpolitik that has begun to steer the process of European and international "integration." Raising this complex of questions will help us to reintegrate Romania into a more general vision of European postcommunist development. Granted, this is not much, but it is the least_ we can and should do. Pasti's interpretative essay can be seen as an invitation in this regard.

Notes:

[1]. See: Trond Gilberg, *Nationalism and Communism in Romania: The Rise and Fall of Ceausescu's Personal Dictatorship* (Boulder, CO and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1990); Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution: Rumaenien zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie* (Muenchen: Piper, 1990); Andrei Marga, *Philosophy in the Eastern Transition* (Cluj: Biblioteca Apostrof, 1993), 89-119; Richard Wagner, *Sonderweg Rumaenien: Bericht aus einem Entwicklungsland* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1991).

[2]. I personally do not like the kind of finger-pointing that judges the merits of a work by who its author happens to be. Suffice it to say that Vladimir Pasti was part of a "young turk" or "brat pack" group (whose founding nucleus had been at the Communist Party school, Academia Stefan Gheorghiu, in the 1980s) that attempted to influence the program of the National Salvation Front at its 1992 National Convention. Out of this group emerged the foundation "Un viitor pentru Romania" (A Future for Romania); the group officially declared its support for the Stolojan government. Pasti writes about all this, pp. 220-223, without mentioning his own involvement in the group, but with considerable sympathy for its efforts.

[3]. Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Systemwechsel in Rumaenien: Von der Revolution zur Transformation* (Muenchen: Oldenbourg, 1998). Unfortunately, the book did not reach me in time to make more than this general reference to it.

[4]. I have terrorized my students at the University of Cluj and baffled friends and colleagues there and elsewhere with this idea of viewing the transformation in east central Europe as part of a general problematic of development at the end of the twentieth century; F. Peter Wagner, "Beyond 'East' and 'West': On the Global Dimension of the Eastern European Process of Transformation," forthcoming in: *Protosoziologie. Special issue: On a Sociology of Borderlines. Studies in the Time of Globalization.*

[5]. Lucian Boia, *Istorie si mit in constiinta romaneasca* (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1997); Joseph L. Love, *Crafting the Third World: Theorizing Underdevelopment in Rumania and Brazil* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1996), 25-98.

[6]. See the essays by Katherine Verdery in *What was Socialism, and What Comes Next?-*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); reviewed for H-SAE by David A. Kideckel, http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?-path=30432850694715, and available on the HABSBURG gopher at gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/00/Pubs/lijpn/HABS/Books/reviews.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: F. Peter Wagner. Review of Pasti, Vladimir, *The Challenges of Transition: Romania in Transition.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1993

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.