

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Catherine Durandin, Zoe Petre. *Romania since 1989*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 248 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-661-1.

Reviewed by Edward Maxfield (University of Sussex)

Published on HABSURG (November, 2010)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan



Not So Exceptional: An Insider's View of Romania's Transition from Communism to Democracy

No one was closer to the presidency of Emil Constantinescu than his chief political adviser, Zoe Petre. The Constantinescu regime (1996-2000) promised much that was new but ultimately disappointed and so it is with this book. The English language version of *Romania since 1989* is published by Columbia University Press. Its first and most disorienting problem is the lack of a road map to the text. The core of the book is a single chapter of eighty pages, written by Petre. It is preceded by three scene-setting chapters and followed by a series of concluding commentaries (and a single annexure that describes the principal political parties of post-Communist Romania).

It is a rather eccentric format, though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. What it fails to do is give the reader any clear indication of what the book has to offer. And this follows through into the content of the book itself, which is part memoir, part polemic, and part political science tract. There is no preface to set out the authors' aims, no introduction to describe the structure of the book, no biography of the authors, and no index or bibliography. It is also quite poorly translated, but that is a minor distraction. All of this is a great shame because a memoir from someone so involved in the dramatic changes that took place in Romania's first post-Communist decade would have been tremendously valuable to students of the region's political transitions, especially since Petre could have applied the analytical skills of her academic training to the subject.

Petre's substantive chapter is the book's strongest

part. She surveys the political, social, and economic changes that took place in Romania between 1990 and 2008. All of the major events that will be familiar to students of post-Communist Romania are here: the violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in Bucharest's University Square and the consolidation of power by a kleptocratic class of former party bureaucrats; the brief flaring of interethnic violence in Targu Mures and the simmering undercurrent of racial politics, which fails, still, to dissipate; and faltering privatization, restitution, and de-Communization, which have given rise to a post-post-Communist politics dominated by elites who are firmly rooted in the old regime.

Yet it is maddening for its lack of detail. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) action in Yugoslavia, for example, was a turning point in Romania's domestic politics and its international position. The government's support for NATO was arguably the defining achievement of the Constantinescu presidency, leading as it did to a strengthening of Romania's case for membership in NATO and the European Union. Constantinescu's courageous decision to align so firmly with the West was a marked departure from Romania's previous approach to foreign policy and it carried with it enormous domestic political risks. In Constantinescu's own autobiography, *Time of Tearing Down, Time of Building* (2002) (which is also rather idiosyncratic in structure), the events are naturally covered in some detail. Petre, though, deals with it in a little over three pages. An insider's view of the events surrounding the decision to give active support to

the NATO bombing campaign would have been fascinating and new, and of interest to a much broader audience than students of Romania's politics. Similarly the events surrounding the dismissal of Constantinescu's first two prime ministers are barely mentioned. This is despite the first dismissal leading to political turmoil that arguably destroyed the president's own political movement and the second triggering a major constitutional crisis.

The chapter does not, effectively, compensate for these omissions with a rigorous analysis of the events it examines either. How did the party apparatchiks who formed the new governing class immediately after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu succeed in reinventing themselves as democratic socialists (forming one of the region's most enduringly successful political parties in the process)? Why did Constantinescu and his allies come to dominate the moderate opposition to the Left? More broadly, what were the factors that drove Romania's stuttering economic transition (and what about its future)?

Where the book does offer something of value is in the occasional insight that points to questions of real interest. For example, the book points out that the Social Democratic Party, now a member of the European-Left mainstream, appears to have more in common with the American fundamentalist Right when judged on its attitudes to issues like homosexuality and women's rights. Most of all, though, the value of the book—and not just Petre's core chapter—lies in what it reveals about the mindset of those who oppose the “continuing Communism” in Romania. Students of the historiography of the transition will find a book that sits firmly in the dominant

school of analysis, led by historian Vladimir Tismaneanu, willingly supported by many others.[1] It perceives Romania's path from Communism as exceptional, as driven by almost supernatural forces that diminish the role (and responsibility) of the individual to almost nothing. It is an approach in which Western analysts willingly collude (as does Catherine Durandin in her contribution to this work and, for example, Tom Gallagher in his comprehensive study of post-Communist Romanian politics, *Theft of a Nation* [2005]). It is a story of a present that is dominated by the past: despite the title of this work, half of its three hundred pages are taken up with telling the story of Romania before the fall of Communism. This belief in the dominant power of dark forces is given solid form in the shape of the Securitate, Ceausescu's internal security force. Future students might plot Romania's progress (or otherwise) into the realms of Western rationalism as opposed to blaming the country's problems on the stretching tentacles of Securitate power.

A new generation of political scientists is beginning to appear in Romania. They owe a debt to Petre for the battles she and others fought for freedom of thought and expression. Sadly, they are unlikely to turn to this volume in numbers to find new insights into Romania's first two post-Communist decades.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Romanian Exceptionalism?” in *Democratisation in Eastern Europe*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 403-451.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

Citation: Edward Maxfield. Review of Durandin, Catherine; Petre, Zoe, *Romania since 1989*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31056>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.