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# History Teaching in Romania

*Speranta Dumitru Nalin*

Relationships to time through memory or projection form a particular axis along which the post-communist space reshapes, constructs and understands its identity. Caught between a public rejection of the communist past and a need for roots in the recent past, if only for narrative reasons, and cornered by the near future in the name of transition, the postcommunist societies face a dilemma in their search for identity. The weight of this dilemma can be directly measured by the level of consensus around the passing of certain 'reparation' laws, such as the restitution of nationalised property or 'lustration', however it can also be seen in other public debates. This sheds light on the difficulties that a society may experience in adopting a collectively-accepted narrative, which then forms the basis on which it constructs its identity.

The present study focuses on the case analysis provided by educational policy reform. Educational reform implies not only freezing the past in a formula, but endeavouring to define citizenship for at least one generation. Our subject will be the reform of secondary school curricula and, more specifically, the debate in Romania surrounding the publication of alternative history textbooks for the final year. This discussion was quickly transformed into a political debate, culminating in a censure motion in the Romanian parliament. Our aim here is to shed light on the issues in the debate around identity: the decision-makers in a reform of this kind, the way in which they fit together and the conceptions of history and its teaching that were revealed at this time.

## **Politics, education and history**

The series of reforms implemented in the ex-communist countries in the 1990s included among its priorities the reform of the national education systems. Highly centralised in terms of both administration and the content of courses, the education system became a prime target for reform. First to be affected was the teaching of social sciences; this flowed naturally from a unanimous public consensus. However the secondary goals and reform mechanisms adopted by these societies varied from one to the next. The different models vary in cost and pace, sometimes reflecting irreconcilably different positions and paralysing or slowing the rate of change. The thorniest problem proved to be history, as the case of Romania shows, as conservatism sometimes became synonymous with the definition of identity. However public and political debate around the teaching of history is not peculiar to Romania, nor to the post-communist countries; it is the handling of that debate that is specific.

## **Curricula and the management of change**

Curricula reform in non-university teaching in the Central and Eastern European countries involved a range of public organisations and decision-makers, the most important being the Ministry of Education. Restructuring had to satisfy three imperatives: the elimination of the ideological content of certain subjects, the lightening of some overloaded syllabuses and the creation of a space for teacher creativity. These aims, of which the third should be considered separately, were met by means of various administrative solutions ranging from the ultra-liberal, Czech model<sup>1</sup> to more centralised versions. To assess the degree of centralism in decision-making, we need to consider the whole chain of production to distribution of a textbook. This in itself has not been a straightforward process in every country. First, standards for the new syllabus must be devised,<sup>2</sup> then the textbooks must be written, they must then be printed by the publishers and, lastly, they must be distributed to the educational institutions. The degree to which the Ministry supervises all or only a part of this chain, and the division and delegation of powers at each stage of the process, indicate the degree to which a model can be seen as centralising or liberal. Thus a highly formalised management of the production of the 'national knowledge', with fixed – albeit delegated – responsibilities for each authority (as is the case in Romania), could be regarded as centralising.

The management of syllabus innovation reflects the diversity of solutions adopted. The Czech Republic gives schools a margin for innovation of 10% for curricula and 30% in each subject, with the remainder being the responsibility of the ministry, while in Poland 'authored syllabuses' are rare and require permission from the ministry. Despite the varying degrees of freedom accorded to schools, in 1996 the OECD evaluators judged that teaching in the Czech Republic had not really changed. Only 10% of schools had produced significant changes and the report's writers noted that it was generally accepted that the government should play a part in syllabus innovation.<sup>3</sup> The concerns still being voiced in 1993 with regard to all centralised standards made the National Syllabus Council cautious; this body was supposed to base its work on the findings and advice of the Institute for Research into Education and on input from the professional organisations, parents and pupils.

The diversity of the range of contributors to the national knowledge can be increased, or indeed reduced, at every stage, from the setting of standards to the choices made by teachers. While in Romania, for example, when the invitation to tender goes out, five publishers are usually identified as successful bidders for a single textbook (written by each of their teams), in Poland, after a textbook had been officially approved, the ministry appointed only one publisher for its production.<sup>4</sup> We should remember that innovation in terms of alternative textbooks did not always mean that a new textbook was written. Lithuania first reprinted a history textbook from 1930, the Czech Republic brought out books dating from 1918 and 1938. Furthermore, the recent history of syllabus innovation has not always been one of progress. Roughly speaking, this could be partly due to the pluralist but still unstable context of political decision-making and governmental changes. After the liberal-socialist coalition in Hungary introduced a basic syllabus in 1996, the change of government in 1998 brought in a new framework, restricting the interpretation of the former. As a result, political history has once more eliminated the history of societies and lifestyles.

Many lessons can be learned from the different experiences of curricular innovation management. In contexts where state authority remains an object of anxiety, two possible scenarios seem to offer a solution: either innovation is decentralised as far as possible to schools and teachers, or it continues to be monopolised at the national level, but is implemented step by step, keeping all those involved on board. The observation that a 'free market' in syllabuses does not necessarily lead to innovation was most clearly illustrated in Russia, where, at the time of the policies of *glasnost*, historians and teachers were unable to rewrite history; in 1988 this even led to the cancellation of history exams.<sup>5</sup> The alternative scenario is not without its problems either since, where history is concerned, issues around identity and the distrust of all state-imposed knowledge render innovation hesitant and public debate laborious. Between the different factions among historians,<sup>6</sup> the public bodies and other authorities at the national level<sup>7</sup> and political groups that set themselves up as repositories for the nation's truth, it is hard to find bases for consensus.

### The politics of history: a universal question

The political debate around history teaching is far from new, or peculiar to the post-communist countries. Leaving aside the case of post-war Germany,<sup>8</sup> any change of regime can provide an opportunity for such debate. The need to meet official communist requirements turned history into a versatile discipline: the project of writing a history of social class and modes of production in Russia was quickly replaced<sup>9</sup> by classic tales of the heroes and anecdotes arousing patriotic feelings. Similarly, in Romania, Ceausescu's arrival in power in 1965 cleared history of great men, replacing them with the working people who were the true builders of history. Ten years later we find the figure of the head of state and party among the national heroes in the reinstated gallery.

The teaching of history may also be questioned in stable, democratic contexts, such as that of France in the 1970s and 80s, or the USA in the 1990s. It focuses the attention of both left and right (in France the 'Holy Alliance for National History' brought together Régis Debré and Jean-Pierre Chevènement). In the United States it managed to be above the law, however sacred, when the Senate voted out a bill requiring history, and notably social history including that of minorities, to be a core subject for all, even though education is to be controlled at state level.

The principle of the political control of the emotional link to the past is no longer cause for suspicion today. However the compulsory teaching of national history and an awareness of the potential for conflict date from the same period. While, in France, the former was introduced in 1880, a two-volume report on nationalism in history textbooks was produced in 1923–1925, commissioned by two Christian organisations<sup>10</sup> in collaboration with the Society of Nations. This gave rise to a series of bilateral conferences on the reciprocal revision of school textbooks.<sup>11</sup> Bilateral discussions were relaunched in 1951 under the aegis of UNESCO and were common practice. Discussions of this kind, some rather fraught, began in 1969 between the Soviet Union and Poland, in order to change each people's unfavourable image of the other as fostered by the history textbooks. In 1986 the Soviets allowed the Lithuanians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians to participate in

similar kinds of analysis. We should note that these debates took place between states, rather than within one society.

### What kind of past for our children?

Education closely follows the development of the pluralist post-communist societies. Some countries, including Romania, have adopted the concept of alternative textbooks. This practice, which dates from 1994–1995<sup>12</sup> in Romania, already presupposes a complicated decision-making process.<sup>13</sup>

In 1999 Ministry approval of a history book for the final year of secondary school gave rise to furious criticism: one of the five textbooks was regarded as anti-Romanian, or at least inadequate. Very soon public debate turned into a censure motion in parliament.<sup>14</sup> This extremely lively debate soon shed its initial tone, reflected in the more or less metaphorical demand by one Senator<sup>15</sup> that the textbook be publicly burnt. Largely sponsored and supported by the nationalist parties,<sup>16</sup> the motion had supporters among deputies from a range of parties although, when it came to the vote, party discipline reasserted itself.

The motion's authors initially interpreted the ministry's view as a manifestation of the desire to meet European<sup>17</sup> or American<sup>18</sup> requirements. They made particular mention of the following lines from a document produced by the American foundation:

What kind of history is being taught? A mobilising history, with models of heroism and patriotism, designed to awaken national loyalties, or an European history? Presenting the history of Romania in the context of the history of the Central and East European countries is a means of regional, spiritual integration and a gesture to minorities.

The ministry was thought to have created an artificial opposition between these new educational objectives and those of Romanian law on education, which recommends both 'scientific' knowledge and 'love of the country and its historical past'<sup>19</sup> The textbook's authors were said to have imposed these new objectives in four different ways:

a) forced demystification and assertion of the importance of the imagination. Thus, the formation of the Romanian people was presented as a 'narrative'; Menumorut, Glad and Gelu 'did not really exist'; the elites of the early modern period 'believed' that a society could develop only within the framework of its own nation. The Romantic intellectuals 'invented' the modern Romanian nation, in other words they wrote its history;

b) the distortion of historical realities by presenting them as insignificant or through well-calculated omission. The first millenium, which was crucial for the Romanian language and people [...] was dealt with in a few words. Information about the arrival of the Hungarians in the country was removed [...] Several *voievodes* which formed a wall against the Ottoman expansion were ignored. In relation to the events of 1848 and 1849 in Transylvania, the authors do not refer to the crucially important fact of the decision of the Hungarian Diet [...] granting national and political rights to the Romanians [...] Kossuth's anti-Romanian action [...] [The authors] avoid stating that the Romanian borders were confirmed by peace treaties.

c) certain historical figures are ignored, minimalised or disparaged. Decebal had 'sensual lips', Trajan had a 'a fringe', Cuza had two children from his relationship with Maria Obrenovici, later adopted in 1865 [...]

d) events are politicised. The authors diminish the importance of the Révolution of December 1989, using expressions such as 'demonstrations of protest' 'popular revolt' [ . . . ]. Political slogans such as 'neo-communist' are used.

In defence of the manual the deputies stressed the emphasis on mentalities rather than political history, the importance given to everyday life, the desire to produce a textbook that would be attractive to young people, avoiding overloading them with themes they had already learned in previous years, the innovation of the approach to the history of the imagination, a new reading of the past, the desire to cultivate truth and a respect for the essential aspects of history.

The response of Minister A. Marga avoided any reference to historical content, defending the five textbooks as a whole and reassuringly asserting that they expressed 'energy and ideas that are entirely Romanian'. In his eyes only historians had the right to write textbooks or to participate in a meaningful debate. To mix the work of the historians with politics would be a form of censure both counter-productive in educational terms and politically unjust. The special capacities of the historians were invoked in two ways: the parliamentarians' approach was institutionalist, in the strictest sense of the term (the Academy of Sciences, *Academia*), while that of the minister was individualist; the historians were divided, however it was up to them to find the bases for consensus.

### Deciding the laws of history

The incompatibility of positions was due to a confusion of two different levels: discourses from the philosophy of history were used in a debate that was intended to be political and the parliamentarians' vision of history left little room for compromise. To put it simply, here history was seen as linear, progressive and necessary, with laws that were reflected and described in historical knowledge. The concept of historical truth was primordial, with perspectivism seen as the manifestation of an incomplete, unfinished approach. Human will was seen as blurred and local, effective only in the short term. Such a vision could not easily coexist with so-called 'oblique' discourse ('the Romantics *believed* that the nation encourages development'), which threatened the ontological status of the entity being described (the nation).

This philosophy of history does not derive from communism; the perennialism of modern nationalism was already developed before being reinforced by communist historiography. The post-communist reform of historiography faced two main problems: the omission of certain events and the single, generally-imposed perspective of so-called 'historical materialism'. I would risk the hypothesis that the larger the 'blank spots', the more impossible any radicalism of innovation becomes in the philosophy of history. What we are seeing in the ex-communist countries, in Poland,<sup>20</sup> Romania<sup>21</sup> and Russia is a *social* demand for truth. These societies are not made up of epistemologists or scientists; speaking the truth signifies quite simply, as a Polish historian confirms, filling in the 'blank spots'. The consequences of omissions and of the weight of ideology are the collapse of social trust and a loss of credibility among historians qualified under the old regime.<sup>22</sup> The lack of consensus among historians is experienced in the society as a manifestation of conflicting interests. In this way the framework of a single history persists in the collective

mind – a mind torn between two hostile forms of conservatism: one looking back to precommunist Romania for all its reference points, while the other takes refuge in the recent, and still familiar, socialist past.<sup>23</sup>

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Translated from the French by Trista Selous

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## Notes

1. Which, according to the experts of the OECD, went 'beyond what is usual in OECD countries'; see *Review of National Policies for Education: The Czech Republic*, OECD, 1996, p. 127.
2. The establishment of the different bodies known as National Syllabus Council (in the Czech Republic and Romania) or Office for Educational Reform (in Poland), responsible for devising standards and/or syllabuses came later and was seen as a solution to the problems encountered in the course of making changes to the syllabuses themselves. Frequently it was the work of this type of body, either located within or simply supervised by the ministry, that gave rise to the most debate and indeed disagreement (as in the case of the Green Book in Poland in 1993).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
4. According to data provided by the Council of Europe, *Secondary Education in Poland*, CE, 1996.
5. The prestige of teachers dropped enormously; they were embarrassed and uncertain when facing pupils who brought in new 'historical facts' gleaned from the memories of their close relatives and friends; see

Véronique Garros, *Dans l'ex URSS: de la difficulté d'écrire l'histoire*, in *Annales ESC*, July/October 1992, n° 4–5, pp. 989–1002.

6. The main differences are not so much between schools as between the historians who qualified under the communist regime, whose credibility has diminished, and those of the 'second echelon'.
7. In Poland the catholic church put up resistance to the postmodernists in history; see Jerzy Topolsky, 'L'historiographie polonaise aux temps de transition', in H. Moniot and M. Servanski (eds), *L'Histoire et ses fonctions. Une pensée et ses pratiques*, Paris, L'Harmattan 2000, p. 85.
8. A powerful revisionist school was formed in response to the needs for reform in history education. Its mission was to purify German historiography of its authoritarian nationalist and fascist elements and to encourage research into Europe.
9. Pokrovski, having been criticised by Lunatcharski et Bukharine in the 1920s, was later condemned in 1934. Stalin and Jdanov were involved in this and, rereading the classic historians later rehabilitated him; see for example, Marc Ferro, *L'histoire sous surveillance: science et conscience de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard 1987.
10. *Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work and the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through Churches*.
11. A German initiative put forward in 1935 with France and Poland. Around forty recommendations were made by the Franco-German conferences. Discussions ended in 1938.
12. Until 1999, alternative textbooks were produced for five years of schooling, from the primary to the secondary level.
13. Three to five experts for each subject, collaborating with other working groups for subjects which are studied over several years, develop syllabuses which are then submitted to the National Syllabus Council (created in 1997). This council includes researchers from the Institute of Educational Sciences, high-ranking civil servants from the ministry and academics, who make their decision and communicate it to the unit for the coordination of reform, which then invites tenders from the publishing houses. In 1998 the Minister of Éducation appointed a commission to establish a framework for syllabuses. Once the textbooks have been published, the teachers make their own selection at a more local level.
14. The debate shifted from the press to the parliamentary commission on education. In the course of a few weeks the commission's opinion, originally released in the form of a statement, turned into a censure motion 'against the educational policies promoted by Romanian history textbooks'. On 8 and 15 November 1999, this motion was debated in the Chamber of Deputies and was later rejected by 132 votes to 66; however the ministry asked for improvements to those textbooks that had been criticised.
15. Sergiu Nicolaescu, a film-director by profession and maker of a number of historical films.
16. The PRM or Party of Greater Romania, and the PUNR or Party of the National Union of Romania.
17. Recommendation 1283/1996 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the study of history.
18. The Romanian branch of the 'Project for Ethnic Relations' Foundation.
19. Art. 4 (1b) of Law 84/1994.
20. In Poland 'the word truth has become one of the most frequently-used in political discourse'; see Jerzy Topolsky, *id.* p. 82.
21. Among the most common slogans in Romania over the last decade were, 'The Truth about the Revolution!', 'You lied to the people with the television'. Other demands for light to be shed concerned the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the communist regime, political prisoners and the circumstances of expropriation.
22. As an illustration of the urgency of the problem, two days after the Revolution of 1989, on 24 December, a call from the 'Committee of free historians of Romania' expressed 'a condemnation and a programme', criticising the fact that 'the true national values have been falsified, hidden and destroyed'; see, in French, Al Zubb, 'L'après-communisme roumain: illusions, blocages et désarrois de Cléo', in C. Durandin (ed.) *L'engagement des intellectuels à l'Est. Mémoires et analyses en Roumanie et en Hongrie*, L'Harmattan, Éditions de l'Institut Français de Bucarest 1994).
23. Recently a policy of reconciliation was implemented by the current President Iliescu. This involves the restitution of some of the property of the former Romanian king Mihai I, the signature, with Mihai and the Patriarch Teoctist Arapasu, of a call for reconciliation, and plans for amnesties in relation to the socio-political conflicts of the last decade.