“COMPULSORY PRISON FOR ALL”: AN IRONICALLY-PROPOSED RITE OF PASSAGE IN A POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRY

RADU SILAGHI-DUMITRESCU*

ABSTRACT

A recent expansion of anticorruption campaigns in Romania finds such media coverage, that parts of the society appear to be oversaturated. Together with doubts raised on the legitimacy of several of the higher-profile cases put forth by the prosecutors, this has led to an ironic public proposal that prison terms be compulsory for all citizens as a means of public education – in an arguably kafkian parallel to the concept of compulsory military service.

Keywords: compulsory prison, anticorruption, Romania, compulsory military service, television, rite of passage.

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have seen many governments pledging political and social reforms towards more efficient democracy, with anticorruption explicitly mentioned as inherent part of such reforms. Italy’s “mani pulite” anticorruption campaign is known for its effects, that included indictment of ~half of the members of the Italian Parliament, the demise of many political parties, and the advent of new political leaders.(della Porta & Vannucci, 2012; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mani_pulite#In_modern_culture) Romania is such a case where a vocal anticorruption discourse/rhetoric has marked three rounds of legislative, local and parliamentary elections between 2004 and 2014, as well as two presidential impeachment referendums.(Corbu & Moshe, 2013; Gherghina, 2014; King & Marian, 2014; Preda, 2013) The latest of these, in 2012, saw 90% of the popular votes go against the incumbent president on accounts of charges of corruption as well as of, paradoxically, allegations of abusive enforcement of anticorruption legislation;(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_presidential_impeachment_referendum) such critiques have surfaced pervasively in official documents of the Judiciary system after the respective presidential mandate was completed.(http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3049024/Former-Romanian-presidential-candidate-Udrea-charged-corruption-minister.html;
IMPRISONMENT AS A PERVERSIVE TOPIC IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

A central role in supporting anticorruption as a major societal theme in Romania has been played by mass-media. The popular impact may be illustrated by the fact that an internet search for “Directia Nationala Anticoruptie” (Romanian name of the national prosecutor’s office dealing with anticorruption investigations) reveals ~300 000 hits (Google, April 2015). This should be weighed against the fact that there are at most 30 million people worldwide able to read Romanian. This 300 000 value is nevertheless an ample underestimate, since the media will usually refer to this office by its acronym DNA, or simply by “[the] prosecutors”. A more instructive search for the expression “arestat de procurori” (“arrested by the prosecutors”) reveals 1.05 million results. For comparison, one may list the 468 000 entries retrieved for “Florin Piersic” (arguably the most popular film and theatre actor in Romania(Romania, 2016)), the 7.2 million results retrieved for “Mihai Eminescu” (Romania’s national poet, celebrated as such by countless means, from literature textbooks to boulevard names, cultural institution names, and even an official national yearly celebration of his birthday as “national Romanian culture day”(Wikipedia entry, 2016)), 304 000 for “ministerul educatiei si cercetarii” (the government ministry for education and research), 983 000 for “Voltaj” (one of the most popular Romanian-language rock-pop bands(Granger, 2015)). The Romanian DNA thus appears to be as much talked about, or even more, than some of the country’s best popular culture icons.

If one simply considers the 300 000 search hits for “Directia Nationala Anticoruptie” vs the 30 million people speaking the respective language, the hits:people ratio is 1:100; if one considers the more inclusive 1.05 million results for “arestat de procurori” the ratio is 1:30.

One may then similarly attempt to analyze some more general English-language search results for popular public institutions or personae. For instance, the ratio of search-hits to worldwide native English-speaking people would be 1:24 for the search term “Dr. Dre” – although his popular status may be argued to transcend the group of English-speaking people and reach people speaking any language – hence with a ratio of 1:135. Likewise, if one takes the ratio of internet hits to the total world population for a range of other global personalities, values of 1:57 (for “Beyonce”), 1:32 (for “Barack Obama”), 1:37 (for “Justin Bieber”), or 1:167 (for “Sherlock Holmes”) may be seen. These numbers are similar to than those illustrating the pervasiveness of the Romanian anticorruption prosecutors on the Romanian-speaking internet.

The particular popularity of the anticorruption office in Romania (hereafter referred to by its acronym, DNA) has transcended regular news discussions in multiple ways; for instance, a search for jokes related to DNA (using the search term “gluma DNA” in Romanian) retrieves 300 000 hits by itself. Being “nicked” by the prosecutors, and especially by the “DNA” is arguably a very common expression nowadays in Romania, invoked at least as a possibility in almost any argument, from very serious ones to mere jokes. The popular reach of these issues may also be illustrated by the fact that the 2009 presidential campaign in Romania saw a locally-unprecedented move by the
incumbent (and then running) president, where an all-star team of Roma singers of a local genre, of extreme popularity within the lower strata of the society, were recruited to launch a single dedicated to his campaign. The video was run on national music channels not as paid political advertisement, but as independent artistic work; its verses, however, were uncompromising: “Come, [candidate’s name] get the power/ Rid the country of scum/ And of perverts and of mobsters/ Teach them all respect”. Ironically, one of the singers on this team was later prosecuted for cigarette smuggling. (ZIARE.COM, 2009)

The role played by Romanian mass-media in any campaign, including the anticorruption ones, may need to be considered in light of recent charges supported by an increasing number of current and former officials, that most media outlets are controlled by a mixture of dirty money and secret service people – who would hence implicitly control any long-running interest of the press in any topic, including anticorruption. (http://www.balkanalysis.com/romania/2011/04/20/the-romanian-secret-services-politics-and-the-media-a-structural-overview/; http://www.gandul.info/politica/dupa-seful-sri-elena-udrea-o-ataca-si-pe-sefa-dnacoldea-conduce-romania-cu-secretele-tuturor-kovesi-cu-catusele-13804720) Beyond the press itself, former ruling party members have recently revealed paying dirty money (i.e., of uncertain source and with no official record kept) to an “army of online trolls” aimed not only at supporting key party officials and policies, but also at attacking opposition in the very broad sense – including private press institutions. (http://www.agerpres.ro/justitie/2015/03/20/dna-postacii-de-pe-internet-o-costau-pe-elena-udrea-10-000-euro-lunar-17-18-55; http://www.antena3.ro/romania/cristian-calugaru-la-q-a-postacii-elenei-udrea-platiti-din-bani-negri-287748.html) The latter move went as far as publicly demanding inconvenient journalists and TV stations to be taken off the air, simply “because they are toxic” as opposed to other more legally-relevant arguments. As recently as late 2014, electoral gatherings have seen such journalists labeled by crowds as “rot of the nation”. (http://www.reportervirtual.ro/2014/11/badea-gadea-si-ai-lui-putregaiul-neamului-antena-3-niste-derbedei.html)

In this context, highly-ranked current or former officials, including former presidents, prime-ministers, heads of the Judiciary system, and private investors have recently been a focus of law-enforcement authorities of various sorts, at times with temporary arrests and at times with jail sentences. (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3046665/Crusading-women-blaze-justice-trail-post-Soviet-Romania.html) All this is typically happening with live media coverage, and spiced with reports of classified data allegedly leaked from the judiciary offices to extents that often surpass what one would expect to be the norm in a free society. (Basham, 2015) A few cases may be illustrative, and follows. Romania’s finance minister Darius Valcov was recently forced to resign amidst charges of corruption. This story was, however, spiced (and amply covered by media in this respect) by reports from the prosecutors that he had amassed a huge secret collection of art paintings by some of the world’s most renowned artists (Renoir, Rembrandt, etc), and that these were “hidden in the walls of an apartment” and “under his bed”; many of these data were later contradicted. (; “Senate’s Standing Bureau to consider 2nd request for senator Valcov’ detention,” 2015) “Gold” was also reportedly found in his safe. For the same minister, a search warrant was allegedly issued (and very much
Compulsory Prison for All": An Ironically-Proposed Rite of Passage in a Post-Communist Country

publicly covered as such in the press) for a burial ground in a public cemetery, where putative bribes would have been hidden; this story was following up on a less spectacular one, according to which bribes had been negotiated and exchanged on the premises of that cemetery. ("Senate’s Standing Bureau to consider 2nd request for senator Valcov’ detention," 2015) Former minister, Parliament member, presidential candidate and controversial close aid of former president of the republic, Elena Udrea, formed the subject of a wide public debate when during her corruption-related impeachment hearings in the Parliament (live on TV, as most such actions would be), she “touched her nose” in a manifestly cryptic manner – and went on to later confirm that the gesture was indeed a secret message for “a close person”. () A member of the Romanian equivalent of the Supreme Court was arrested on account of attempting to grow ostriches for commercial purposes; later, goats were invoked for the same account – though none of the animals were found. Two ladies’ dresses were also invoked by the prosecutors, as a bribe given by his godson.

A RITE OF PASSAGE

Such disconcerting yet spectacular aspects, with high-profile citizens apparently summarily handcuffed and jailed, and in which the press indulge heartily, have arguably facilitated the chief anticorruption prosecutor, Mrs. Kovési, to soar to unprecedented approval rates of 60-70%, in a nation that just a few years ago, in 2012, had seen her (as a close collaborator of the then-impeached president) as a target of the 90% negative vote in an impeachment referendum against the president.(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_presidential_impeachment_referendum) The remarkable popularity of the press-assisted judicial actions appears to have created a state of mind, explicitly stated by a few,(TV, 2015) where everyone is presumed guilty unless otherwise proven, and where no one is safe from jail whenever a higher power so decides – regardless of guilt, protection or merit. The citizens are then to acknowledge that they are at the mercy of a higher authority for which law, democracy and ethics are always firm excuses for arbitrary and humiliating action against anyone needed. One staunch critic of such state of things has been TV presenter Mircea Badea, a young one-man-show presenter working for the CNN affiliate in Romania, Antena 3.(Wikipedia, 2015a) Mr. Badea’s popular reach has made him, among other things, the singular subject of a political add campaign during the 2009 presidential elections – where the incumbent (and soon-to-be-reelected) president would pose Mr. Badea as a direct enemy not only of the presidency, but generally as an enemy of the decent elements of the society.(Wikipedia, 2015b) To a good extent due to Badea’s performances, his TV station, Antena 3, while exclusively dedicated to news, is noted to at times have the highest national ratings of all TV station, and to generally fare among the top 4 TV stations nationally, far above competitors in the news niche.(Measurement, 2015) Mr. Badea was also instrumental in setting up the most-signed petition ever in Romania, now deposited at the Washington Newseum and incidentally relating political abuse - including abuse of the anticorruption campaigns.(National, 2015)

It is in this context that Mr. Badea has mockingly proposed compulsory jail as an educational measure for all citizens aged 18 and above, even before they may have broken any law. Details were proposed as well: one would “do” one month of jail at
age 18, and then one month again every four years (“just like an electoral cycle”), “just in case”. Moreover, each such month would be divided into two parts: two weeks spent in the summer and two weeks spent in the winter – “so that one can have a taste of both seasons”. Then, if one would eventually break the law and actually be convicted to jail, the sentence would have already been partly served, if not fully. A parallel with the compulsory military service is obviously drawn, as the mocking pro-jail arguments of Badea are mere reflections of arguments previously used when describing/supporting compulsory military service: that one is “educated” “in there”, “learns discipline” (at times meaning “learns to cope with humiliation”), “comes of age”, “must stay there long enough to experience both the cold season and the warm season”. (3, 2015)

The “compulsory jail” proposal may be seen as yet another view of the ancient concept of the rites of passage (e.g., (Silaghi-Dumitrescu, 2016) for Romanian variations), with the incumbent arbitrarily-dispersed force and humiliation, at the mercy of a “higher authority”. While the various degrees of associated abuse and humiliation undergone by citizens would be difficult to ignore, the apparent absurdity of the proposal qualifies it as an attempt of exorcism by laughter.

The extent to which a society may covet such “rites”, where its members are exposed to arbitrary damage, may be argued to be dependent on the degree to which each individual member is either perceived as a non-negligible quantity or as a potential individual partner for negotiation. Citizens in post-communist countries, with their recent decades of enforced absolute dictatorship, would be indeed expected to be familiar to such rites. In fact, while post-communist “anticorruption” and communist “anti-bourgeoisie” campaigns would be expected to be very different concepts, their essential manifestation as (at least apparently) arbitrarily-dispersed aggressive force, would mean that the respective societies may perceive current judiciary abuse as a familiar, and perhaps coveted, trait. Its benefits would be in allowing smoother transition towards the future, especially in countries where the formal demise of the communist dictatorship was, on paper, completed in a few days or weeks – much shorter than the scale at which collective mentalities and cultures may be expected to significantly evolve. In short, forced to live in a society threatening them with a sudden burst of too much choice and too much responsibility, a part of the citizens will always be tempted to find ways to revert to the good old tranquil days of lack of civic responsibility.(Silaghi-Dumitrescu, 2017) However, they will refrain from doing so in manners that may appear plainly retrograde (“communist”, “reactionary”, “anti-democratic”, “dictatorial”) – and will prefer versions labeled “modernization”, “civil society”, “reform”, “democracy”, “anticorruption”, or “anticommunism”. Badea’s “compulsory prison for all” proposal is thus underlying an imbalance between the will and the capability of the society, in terms of civic responsibilities.
“Compulsory Prison for All”: An Ironically-Proposed Rite of Passage in a Post-Communist Country

REFERENCES


Senate’s Standing Bureau to consider 2nd request for senator Valcov’ detention. (2015). Nine O’Clock.


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mani_pulite#In_modern_culture.
“Compulsory Prison for All”: An Ironically-Proposed Rite of Passage in a Post-Communist Country


