The history textbooks controversy in Romania

Five years on

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With the EU accession process, pressure was placed on Romania and other post-communist countries to phase out an ethnic-nationalist teaching of history in favour of one that emphasized cultural diversity. The new history textbooks, which came out in 1999, earned fierce criticism from establishment historians, who saw in them a radical internationalism. In their opinion, historians after the era of Marxist-Leninism had been rediscovering Romania's roots and national traditions; they argued that any "interpretation" of this version, which had gone unchallenged since 1989, created "imprecision". Five years later, the author considers why it was not possible to discuss the issue with professional objectivity.

Introduction

After 1989, most eastern European countries sought to reform their political systems in order to overcome the effects of the communist regime and to integrate themselves into the European Union. Besides the structural and institutional transformations required by such an endeavour, many commentators observed the need for a more profound shift in thinking and acting: the oft-cited “mentality change” after half a century of indoctrination and moral corruption. This issue has been particularly recurrent in Romania, where, after the violent overthrow of the Ceausescu regime, social expectations were extremely high in relation to a very weak economy and low social cohesion. Many politicians’ response to this heritage was to call for solidarity, consensus, and mass mobilization. Ironically, this rhetoric used the same clichés and stereotypes as the public discourse before 1989.

A peculiar feature of the Romanian communist regime may explain the incongruity between its violent end and its rhetorical continuity. In the 1960s, the Romanian Communist Party gradually distanced itself from the Soviet Union, until in 1968 Ceausescu vehemently criticized the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. From that
moment on, he became the Western public’s favourite communist leader, because he was perceived as a maverick within the Soviet bloc. Encouraged by his popularity, Ceausescu developed his own ideology, which was a mélange of vulgar Marxism and fierce nationalism, an ideology that for strategic reasons was largely tolerated by his Western interlocutors. From the 1970s, references to Marx and Engels were progressively expelled from the public discourse and replaced with extensive quotations from Ceausescu’s work, which was based on a teleological history of the Romanian nation-state from early history to the present day. The doctrine of the ancientness, continuity, independence, and unity became the official dogma, and was disseminated throughout the Romanian communist nation-state. Though officially named “scientific socialism”, a better name for it might have been “scientific nationalism”.

Unlike the other countries from the Soviet bloc, there was no significant dissidence in Romania. One of the reasons for its absence was the role played by nationalism in legitimizing communist power in the country. In other countries, nationalism played the opposite role, as a weapon against the foreign Soviet yoke. Though there are notable examples in which communist power made use of national symbols and nationalist rhetoric, there remained enough room for an opposition to compete for these instruments of mass mobilization and social solidarity. This competition was impossible in Romania because the party-state itself played the role of dissident, and exhausted the nationalist rhetoric. In the late 1980s, it was difficult to articulate in Romania a coherent ideology that opposed the communist regime, since nationalism had been deprived of its revolutionary dimension and had become a reactionary instrument in the hands of party apparatchiks. This situation continued after 1989, when the tacit coalition between Left and extreme Right controlled the public sphere for over a decade.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that a fierce debate over the history textbook reform took place in Romania in 1999. History textbooks generally inflame political passions because they are the main instrument for developing the political orientation of successive generations. When nationalist rhetoric was relentlessly used for political legitimization, when the entire public discourse was flooded with historical references, and when historians were regarded as the ultimate defenders of national consciousness, history had a privileged position in the mind of the general population. It is true that before 1989, history was falsified, manipulated, and misused, but these faults commonly concern only Marxist aspects of the historical interpretation, and not the nationalist understanding of history. Only after 1989 did historians escape the ideological constraints of Marxist dialectic materialism, and feel free to write the “true history” of the Romanians. Like in the 1980s, nobody seriously questioned this national history, which remained as “scientific” and “truthful”. But when the nation finally seemed to be re-discovering its lost identity, the process of EU enlargement began threatening the “national idea” from a completely unexpected direction. In order to fulfil the standards of the European Union, Romania had to reform not only their political and administrative institutions, but also their history. Politely but firmly, the Council of the European Union recommended that the candidate countries abandon the kind of ethnic mobilization sought by former nationalist histories, and give a voice to minorities, local communities, regional interests, or gender issues. This was a new European history based on critical thinking and multiple interpretations.

In 1996, Recommendation 1283 was issued by the EU Council. Also in that year, a
coalition of opposition parties succeeded in defeating the Social Democratic Party, which, for many commentators, consisted of and/or was supported by the former Communists’ activists. The new governing coalition began a series of reforms including the education reform under the leadership of Andrei Marga, the new minister of education appointed on May 1997. The ministry issued a series of programmatic documents (“The Reform of Education Now”, 1997, “A Look Into the Future of Romanian Education”, 1998, and “The White Book of Education Reform in Romania”, 1998 [1]), in which the main coordinates of the education reform were defined. However, to change a rigid system was not an easy task, and many administrative measures had to be taken, such as the reorganization of the inspectorates’ network of the Ministry of Education. Only in 1998, with the help of the World Bank, did the reform of the textbooks begin. A new “National Curriculum” was drafted, and a public tender for editing the new textbooks was launched. There was not much time left for elaborating the new textbooks, and the obligation to keep costs down, imposed by both the Romanian government and the World Bank Committee, did not help the conditions under which the textbooks were produced, at least in the case of history. They became available only after a delay, and the school year 1999-2000 began without them. Before their appearance, nobody had been expecting a controversy; but, on 6 October 1999, one started.

The controversy

Initially, a Social Democrat politician appealed to the minister of education regarding the newly authorized alternative textbooks. His main concern was the absence from the textbooks of “the great historical personalities of the Romanian people”. In his opinion, the textbooks portrayed:

a history without vaivodes, rulers and kings, without the Romanian people’s struggle for defence and independence [it is a history book] for children […] and for the Romanian people, a renunciation of national identity. [2]

The same day, an independent member of parliament vehemently criticized the new textbooks, particularly one in which the authors had “dared” include only few words about Michael the Brave, but had found room for a number of present-day Romanian mass-media personalities. His conclusion was that “these textbooks deserve to be publicly burned”.

That evening, a popular TV talk-show organized a discussion between two of the authors of the incriminated textbook and two journalists “representing” public opinion. The impertinence and ignorance of these journalists reminded many viewers of the public prosecutions of the 1950s. The journalists were outraged, for example, that leaders of the Romanian national movement from the nineteenth century were called “romantics”.

This was the beginning of the scandal. In the following weeks, daily newspapers, magazines, and reviews joined the vocal denunciation of the history textbook reform as envisioned and enacted by the ministry of education. The main line of criticism was that the government was servile towards EU institutions, and took their recommendations too literally. The common argument was that Romania should enter the EU with dignity, with their own identity, and proud of their tradition, in other words, with their own national
history. However, there was another line of argument, according to which it was not only the internationalist, homogenizing, bureaucratic circles of the EU that were dissolving Romanian identity, but some Hungarian circles as well. It is worth mentioning the opinion of Adrian Nastase, a vice president of the Romanian Social Democratic Party, who maintained that the textbook contained “anti-Romanian aggression” originating in Magyar revisionist historiography, whose only goal was “the autonomy of Transylvania and the dismemberment of the Romanian state”. Nastase was seeking to take advantage of the public sensitivity about the Romanian nation-state caused by the recent Kosovo crisis. He even went so far as to warn the Romanian public about a conspiracy against the Romanian state: “This real foundations of this ‘textbook’", he said, “are Magyar revisionism and radical internationalism.” [3] This was not a surprising statement from someone who affirmed that Romanian membership in Nato would be delayed because “the Transylvanian problem is set to detonate”. [4]

The political scandal reached its peak at the beginning of November when sixty-four MPs signed a motion against the government on this issue. According to this text, the ministry of education infringed the law of education, which states very clearly: “education […] contributes to the preservation of national identity” and “assures the cultivation of love for the country, for its historical past, and for Romanian traditions”. Eventually, the motion was defeated in parliament, but it had serious repercussions for the elections in 2000.

It is hard to summarize the multitude of criticisms raised against the new alternative textbooks and the national curricula. However, there is a common ground for most of these reactions. I refer to a vision of a unique history designed exclusively for the patriotic education of children. In this history, there are no alternatives and no contradictions. Moreover, if an argument contradicts the basic narrative, the argument is held to be an instrument of the country’s enemies, who are waiting in the wings to dismember the nation-state. A common opinion, expressed more or less radically, is that the historian should fight constantly against the monstrous coalition of revisionist chauvinists and radical internationalists. This fight, “the historians’ frontline” as it was called in the 1980s, obliged historical interpretation to avoid any breaks, doubts, or alternatives, which may have raised useless if not harmful questions. In other words, it was thought that history should be an explanation of the Romanian people and its fulfilment in the realization of the nation-state.

This type of history was confirmed as early as 1974, when the introduction of the Communist Party programme outlined the “historical development of the Romanian people”. This kind of party-history, which traced the formation of the nation-state from the earliest times, when it was only “an unorganized state”, up to the present, is an ideology based on the assumption that state, society, people, national leaders, and ultimately the party, are in fact equivalent. To affirm that “the nation was invented” (as it was the case with a lesson from the incriminated textbook) is a heresy for those who hold this integrist vision of nation.

A short parenthesis: there is a common belief that the present-day idea of nation in Romania, as well as in eastern Europe, is inherited from the culture of the inter-war period. The belief is that after Stalinist repression, the political regimes of these countries had to gradually accept an ethnic definition of nation formed before the
communist takeover. Interestingly enough, there is a large consensus among Western and Eastern commentators regarding the continuation of nationalist ideology beyond the short interval during which it was repressed or “refrigerated”. Romanian historians proudly refer to outstanding personalities such as Nicolae Iorga, claiming that they belong to an honourable lineage. The problem with this interpretation is that the present-day notion of nation was never used before the late communist period. Before World War II, under the influence of German idealism and social radicalism, the national movement was a revolutionary movement seeking to reform a decadent society, to revise the fundamentals of modern civilization on the basis of national and traditional culture. The interwar nationalists never confused nation with society or people; on the contrary, the Romanian nation was perceived as a community opposed to Romanian society as collectivity. The present-day nationalists lost the revolutionary dimension of the national movement, because the national revolution (advocated by Nicolae Iorga) had already happened. However, if this is true, when could this revolution have happened if not during the communist regime? It was the communist ideologues who claimed that the communist regime solved the national problem, and, later, that the social revolution was in fact not only a social, but also a national revolution, which fulfilled the longstanding dream of the Romanian people. This idea of nation, which has nothing to do with the pre-communist nationalism, entered into the historical consciousness and was adopted by many Romanian historians only in recent decades.

Returning to the textbook controversy, it is clear that the presence of history specialists was minimal. Initially, eleven professors from the University of Cluj protested against the way in which politicians and journalists addressed the issue of textbook reform. Soon after, another thirty-eight professors from the University of Bucharest joined the protest. In the following weeks, a number of young historians objected publicly to the tone and violence of the debate. Their reactions were rather civil than professional; in other words, they reacted to the way in which the discussion was being conducted, and not to specific problems raised by the new textbooks. However, not all historians showed solidarity with the authors of the textbooks. Some academic institutions and university departments issued a number of negative reports, which eventually were used by the authors of the parliamentary motion. The faculty of history of the Romanian Academy declared that the history textbook edited by Sigma “does not correspond to the exigencies of a textbook designed to contribute to the national education” of the schoolchildren. The “specialists” of the faculty considered the textbook to be uneven, “some lessons being deficient in terms of information and conception”. The history department of the Western University of Timisoara accused the textbook of “taking national history away from the schoolchildren” and of “diminishing the feeling of national dignity”.

The official historians and the ethno-national vulgate

I will refer to opinions publicly expressed by historians from the institutional mainstream of history studies in Romania. The first is Dan Berindei, the president of the faculty of history of the Romanian Academy, the first to publish an article regarding the content of the incriminated textbook. [5] In his opinion, the textbook is superficial because the curriculum was designed in a superficial manner. The publication of such a textbook is marked by the broader context in which history and civil solidarity is marginalized in favour of individualism. A textbook “should transmit to the schoolchildren the fundamentals of national education” and not cause the feeling that “it is shameful to be
Romanian or that one is part of a second-class nation. [...] The textbook should be precise and not equivocal. Any imprecision is harmful.” He chooses a number of examples from the textbook that exemplify this kind of superficiality and imprecision. One is the lesson about the union of Romanian principalities in 1859, where Prince Cuza is described as being an obstacle to the permanent international recognition of the union. Another is the lesson about “the construction of national identity”, where it is mentioned that the Romanians found out only recently that they are Romanians. The last example is the lesson about medieval Romanian states, which are considered questionable, because there is only one source, a late chronicle that might be incorrect. In each case, Berindei is disgusted by the way these topics are approached. “Are our common origins and the unity of all Romanians inexact, or a creation of imagination?” he asks. “Are we unitary or not?... Where did we come from, ultimately?”

These few examples show that the kind of history envisioned by Dan Berindei is a history in which “imprecision” means in the last instance the avoidance of any interpretation, of any discussion that might harm the hegemony of the unique history of the nation. When education becomes indoctrination, any discussion about Prince Cuza and his role in the international recognition of the union of the Romanian Principalities, or about the modern nature of nation, or about the existence of the early medieval Romanian “states”, may harm the kind of trust expected from the students.

Any interpretation that offers a different point of view than the official one adopted by the major academic institutions proves to be an “imprecision”. As a matter of fact, “an interpretation”, in the jargon of the discipline, is an explanation not yet fully adopted by official institutions. In learning the fundamental problems of the national history, students should not encounter any problematic topic, any “imprecision” as Berindei calls it. National history, then, is an integral and unified explanation that becomes an ideology, suspending the critical sense of the schoolchildren. The classic model of this history is the one offered by the party programme in 1974 as a state truth that should be acknowledged by all Romanians.

Ioan Scurtu, the chair of the faculty of modern history at the University of Bucharest, is the second author who addressed the problem of the new history textbook as a professional historian. [6] Besides raising the same arguments as Dan Berindei, Scurtu added new criticisms about the education reform in Romania. He started by saying that the authors of the textbook “represent the point of view of the government” – the coalition of parties that were in opposition until 1996. This is why he considers the textbook to have avoided the term “revolution”, favouring the “1989 events” or “revolt”. There are other examples, and not only from recent history, that reveal “the authors’ interest in disseminating uncertainty and confusion about the essential problems of Romanian history”. Interesting to note is the recurrence of the same kind of “ambiguity” identified by Berindei. Once again, the “story” of the formation of the Romanian folk or the “invention” of the nation (the actual title is “The ‘invention’ of the Modern Nation”), illustrates this “ambiguity”.

He identifies further a series of calculated omissions that falsifies national history. The decision of the Hungarian diet to unite Transylvania with Hungary, or “the real causes” of the 1784 peasant uprising, are examples of omissions that confuse students’ understanding of the “real course of events”. The next set of errors identified by Scurtu is
the way in which “the great personalities of national history are ridiculed” by being presented in relation to some insignificant event, and not to their great deeds, as in the case of Decebalus, Trajanus, or Cuza. All these correspond with a “willingly distorted history”, ruled by “political” rather than “scientific” criteria. His general understanding of how history should be written and taught is revealed by a comment according to which “the history textbook shall transmit to the student clear and precise information and not to limit itself to just interpreting historical events”. In other words, historical interpretation is inferior to clear and precise factuality. The consequences of avoiding interpretation are clear when Scurtu gives the example of the centralization of the Romanian state in the inter-war period. For him, state centralization was “an objective necessity” because of the inevitability of administrative unification, and this should be found in the textbook: “How else can one educate the student?” Precisely this kind of example highlights Scurtu’s hidden intentions. The idea of state centralization is debatable not only today, but was a public issue in the inter-war period too. Choosing this line argumentation is equivalent to choosing the political side of those parties that strove for it, which were, incidentally, mostly extreme rightwing. We can also ironically ask: “how else can one educate the student?” In Scurtu’s understanding of history teaching, the answer is simple: Romanian history should be based on the “four pillars” of our existence: the longevity, the continuity, the independence, and the unity of the Romanian people.

A last historian who should be mentioned briefly is Florin Constantiniu. He accused the education reform in Romania of being a “didactic Chernobyl” because “the narrative was replaced by the problematic”, and students “cannot understand problems if they don’t know the course of events that generated them”. [7] What do these commentaries on the new history textbooks have in common, and what kind of history do their authors imply? First, all are disappointed because the new textbooks and the new curriculum do not cover the “fundamental problems” of Romanian history as they were developed in the 1980s. For them, the old textbooks (published in 1994) were good, only a little too overloaded with data. (It is worth mentioning that Ioan Scurtu was referent for this textbook and co-author of an earlier one from 1983, entitled The fundamental problems of the history of Romania. The differences between the two are minimal.) The only conclusion that there can be is that there is no need to change the history textbooks, since the existing ones are reasonably good.

Second, they compare the EU intervention in history teaching with the Stalinist ideological pressure of the 1950s. “In those years”, Scurtu recalls, “ideology prevailed, that is Marxist-Leninism, comrade Stalin, and dialectical and historical materialism. The historical fact, scientific in itself, was not important, but only the ideology.” Yet, as professor Gheorghe Platon explains, the totalitarian regime tried and failed during the last decades of communism to impose ideological ballast for its own political ambitions. Another much more detailed description is offered by Berindei:

In recent years, the harmful idea has been cultivated that national history has been entirely falsified, worthy of nothing but to be discarded. The reality is entirely different. There is no doubt that for half a century history was put under political pressure. Initially, an extreme Left internationalism was imposed upon it, and as a consequence, adulation for Russia and the Soviet Union. An effort was then made to settle Romanian historiography into a much more balanced form,
which passed into the final period of the former regime, the period incorrectly called "national communism". [8]

The articles and interviews of the well-established Romanian historians are particularly interesting because this kind of self-reflection is a rarity for them. Their comments on the history textbook reform indicate that they consider that Romanian historiography is in a similar situation to that of the early 1960s, when historians struggled to re-nationalize the discipline. It is an anachronism for which a good explanation can be found in a study by Bogdan Murgescu published the following year. [9] Murgescu identifies the crisis of the Romanian historiography with several components, among which I name just a few: the lack of critique and self-reflection within the discipline; the illustrative use of the historical sources; the lack of concepts and arguments; the lack of any interdisciplinary dialogue; an acute disciplinary parochialism; ethnocentrism; and a prevalence of political history.

What is evident from Murgescu’s study is that the history textbook reform was done before the reform of history as an academic discipline; this is why the reaction was so virulent and unilateral. Furthermore, the historical narrative of the 1980s was not seriously challenged, and the ethno-national vulgate was not contested by another understanding of history and Romanian society. The controversy occasioned by the 1999 history textbook reform in Romania was somehow to be expected insofar as textbooks have a major role in shaping the historical orientation of the present.

It is worth mentioning that a few years before, a similar controversy regarding National Standards took place in the United States. Although the circumstances are barely comparable, there are a number of interesting resemblances. Lynne Cheney, the most vocal critic, accused, in a series of articles in the Wall Street Journal, [10] the authors of the National Standards of sacrificing national history to political correctness. She mentioned that the American Revolution was mentioned only in relation to the relationship between man and woman, that it was said to have had the same effect as the Great Depression, and that the Constitution was not mentioned at all, although a number of great personalities such as Bell, Edison, or Einstein, were. Moreover, she notes that George Washington makes only a fleeting appearance and was not mentioned as the first president of United States.

All these questions and accusations sound familiar to the Romanian public. It seems that history textbooks can cause controversies not only in a former socialist country, but also in a Western democratic country. This happens largely because textbooks are highly relevant for the political culture of the next generations. They are political texts par excellence, but in a completely different way than those of the last fifty years of scientific materialism and Marxist-Leninism, when history was a part of the political ideology of the one party-system. In the former, history teaching offers students the opportunity to develop their narrative competence [11] and their judgment on arguments presented by commentators who use historical references. In the second case, history teaching yields to mere indoctrination.

Epilogue
Recently, in a seminar on teaching the Holocaust, one of the participants presented an ideal type of lesson about the Final Solution. During his presentation, he underlined the individual choice that the members of Einsatzgruppen had to make, and their responsibility for it. The entire lesson was centred on explaining, “how such horrors were possible”. The presentation reminded me of a fragment I read a long time ago about British historiography. After the Russian Revolution, there was an attempt to explain “how such horrors were possible”. In contrast, French historiography after 1789 tried to explain “how such miracles were possible”. I realized that there are two possible ways of approaching national narratives. To paraphrase this aphoristic fragment, I would say that Romanian historiography should take into account not only “how the miraculous history of the Romanian people was possible”, but also “how the horrors of the last century were possible”. Choice and responsibility are qualities traditionally attributed to maturity, and are more appropriate than pride and dignity for the foundations of an education. The last century gave us enough examples of leaders full of pride and dignity, but with no discernment or sense of responsibility.

**Footnotes**


3. Adrian Nastase, "Aceasta lucrare este antinationala, dezvoltand toate tezele istoriografiei maghiare" [This Work is Antinational, Developing all the Theses of Hungarian Historiography], *Cotidianul*, 18 October 1999.

4. Adrian Nastase, "Romania a fost si va fi amanata sa intre in NATO pentru ca se are in vedere detonarea "problemei Transilvane" [The Nato Integration of Romania Has Been and Will be Delayed Because There is Expected the Detonation of the "Transylvanian Question"], *Cotidianul*, 12 October 1999.


6. Ioan Scurtu interviewed by Monica Szlavik, "Oamenii politici ar trebui sa renunte la ideea de a se implica in scrierea istoriei" [Politicians should give up the idea of meddling in history writing], *Curierul National*, X 1999, 2620, 16-17 October, 3.


10. All these articles are available on the site of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, www.aei.org, accessed on 16 October 2004.


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