

# The Impact of the Totalitarian System

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*Each age is a sphinx which collapses into the abyss  
once its mystery has been revealed.*

*Heinrich Heine*

## **Abstract**

*To understand the specificity of Romanian literature after 1948 and its evolution and to assume Paul Goma with lucidity and self-critical spirit, it is important to establish a tight presentation of this period which has several stages. And this is all the more necessary, as the Romanian literature, subjugated to ideological and political objectives of the Communist Party, was deprived of the freedom needed for the development of any art, becoming an area of confinement of non comprehensive language (the “meaningless formal games” did not have any sense) and hosting “export truths”.*

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In order to assume Paul Goma with lucidity and self-critical spirit, we need to know, besides the writer's biography, the history of the environment which forms him, Goma's identity and his writing, being generated by the political, moral and ideological context. Therefore, we consider that a review of this period as a whole may reveal the causes of this writer's apparition who, handing the expressive instruments he has and motivated by the realities in which he lived, strengthened his stature by differentiation from others, embodying the very difference.

To understand the specificity of Romanian literature after 1948 and its evolution, it is important to establish a tight presentation of this period which has several stages. And this is all the more necessary, as the Romanian literature, subjugated to ideological and political objectives of the Communist Party, was deprived of the freedom needed for the development of any art, becoming an area

of confinement of non comprehensive language (the “meaningless formal games” did not have any sense) and hosting “exports truths”. In such a way, the Romanian writer has become “no more than a poor relative of the rest of the world literature: he is in a sort of quarantine of false problems, false realities. He mimes the confrontation of ideas and is bound to a strange hide-and-seek game with the contemporaneousness, to which he looks through the keyhole: the door never opens totally”<sup>1</sup>. Passing over the first decade which is characterized only by one type of propaganda literature, during the following decades the regime had control not only on editorial production but also on writers’ consciences, which it has seduced and manipulated. In addition to the writers of good faith, some were lured by “the smile diplomacy of the party cultural minds”<sup>2</sup>, considering that any collaboration with the System will facilitate the selection of their work. Even if at the time they believed that this tactic will bear fruit, the propulsion of false values had negative effects, many writers returning to the darkness of inferiority. Therefore, by removing any paths that would put people in a position to judge the truth, the System wanted the creation of “the new man”: “Jealousy turns into hatred, impotence becomes virtue in totalitarian regimes, and the virtue of the incapable ones was the ticket to the function of censors, of manipulators whose duty was to guillotine the free thinking”<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the political factor is one that has dominated the national interest and that we must account for, in order to understand the fate of Romanian literature after the World War II. However, this will not be possible if we do not compare the socio-political, literary and cultural ambience from Romania with that from other satellite states that have hosted the Communist regime since 1948. To accomplish this project we will follow this line: a presentation of socio-political context of Europe after the war, recording the differences that occur between the two halves of the continent, discussing the effects of the System from the host countries and the writers who have not agreed to deal with the totalitarian regime.

If to speak about the consequences of the Second World War we have to say, just from the beginning, that for most Europeans it meant not only a heroic battle, but a gradual degradation of life in which people have been betrayed and humiliated, driven to crimes and baseness, having to take their lives from nothing and walk silently over the dark tombs of the past. The years 1945-1947 have been

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<sup>1</sup> Monica Lovinescu, *Seismografe. Unde scurte II*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1993, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism*, second edition, Fundația Pro Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Bogdan Ficeac, *Cenzura Comunistă și formarea „omului nou”*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 111.

decisive for the fate of Europe: The continent was divided into two: the central and eastern parts (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania) came under Soviet domination, and the western part became “the free world”. To secure the monopoly of power and maintain the “leading role”, Stalin reproduced the Soviet power in the satellite states, eliminating or absorbing other parties. The stated aim of the Communists in 1945 and 1946 was to “finish” the unfinished bourgeois revolution in 1848, by redistributing property, ensuring equality and democratic rights in that part of Europe, where these values were always dispersed. Of course, at the first sight, they seemed to be tangible and seductive goals, but the things evolution has proved the contrary. And this mainly because the communist parties have turned to strategies of disguised pressure, to repression and terror. The political opponents were defamed, arrested, judged as fascists or collaborators, imprisoned and even executed (1946-1947).

The socialists were a real obstacle in the development of the totalitarian system. “Unable to defeat them, the Communists decided to join them or, more precisely, to make the Socialists join *them*. Thus, in 1948, communist-socialist «unions» spread across the Soviet bloc: Romania in February 1948, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in June, Bulgaria in August and Poland in December”<sup>4</sup>. Although this account of the imposition of the Soviet power in Eastern Europe was common throughout all countries of the region, there were significant local differences. This is the case of Romania and Bulgaria, where the Soviet intervention was stronger. This is explained first by the fact that both countries were at war against the Soviet Union, but also because they had a geographical position that inevitably led to Soviet domination.

If we are to have a flashback, it is understood that the hopes for a democratic Eastern Europe after 1945 were minimal. In Central and Eastern Europe the indigenous liberal or democratic traditions were insufficient to deal with old dominant social layers, authoritarian and venal, which would later provide the communist states with people educated by the same principles. “Hence the USSR was not going to leave this part of Europe (the Soviet army forces remained in Hungary until the mid ‘50s, and again after 1956 and in Romania until 1958), and as events were to confirm, the future of Eastern Europe remained closely linked to the fate of East giant neighbour”<sup>5</sup> (except Czechoslovakia, which was after 1945 the Soviet Union’s main ally in the region). That being so, at the end of September

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Judt, *Epoca postbelică. O istorie a Europei de după 1945*, trans. Georgiana Perlea, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2008, p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

1947, Stalin called communist parties from Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, France, Italy and the USSR for a meeting in Poland for the establishment of Cominform (Information Bureau of Communist and Workers Parties), designed to coordinate the international communist activity and improve the communication between Moscow and the satellite parties. In fact, the real objective was the wish to restore the Soviet domination in the international movement.

Once coming to power, the Communists quickly passed to economic uniformisation, the Soviet irrational measures being faithfully reproduced in the entire communist block. On September 30, 1948, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej from the Romanian Communist Party announced that “we want to achieve a socialist accumulation at the expense of the rural capitalist elements” - in a country where the “capitalist elements” of the rural economy gleamed in absentia<sup>6</sup>. From this point of view, the economic history of the East after the Second World War has some commonalities with Western European recovery from the same years, especially that the West has given priority to economic growth and productivity at the expense of services and commodities. As time passed, politics and administration have become synonymous with repression and corruption, traditional abuses being dressed in rhetoric of equality and social progress: “the Sovietized Eastern Europe has steadily rolled away from the western half of the continent. While Western Europe was preparing to enter an era of dramatic transformation and unprecedented prosperity, Eastern Europe was slipping into the abyss: a bleak period of inertia and resignation, rhythmmed by cycles of protest and obedience, which was to last almost for four decades”<sup>7</sup>. Except the Germans, the Western Europeans were generally indifferent to the loss of Eastern Europe, where history seemed to have stopped. But the line separating East from West was imprinted in European intellectual and cultural life between 1947 and 1953.

Of course, there is another explanation of the situation, especially due to the fact after the war many figures were removed from the political scene and instead of them there appeared young writers, artists, journalists and political activists for whom communism was not a conviction, but a faith - as noted later Alexander Wat. Pavel Kohout, who was to gain international fame in the following decades as a post-communist dissident and playwright, originally was known in his native Czechoslovakia as an ardent supporter of the new regime (when he was only 24 he wrote an “Ode to our Communist Party”). It is the same for Paul Goma who, in

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 187.

1968, after Ceaușescu's speech about non-interference policy, saying that Romania will not send troops to Czechoslovakia, becomes a member of the Communist Party. As *Czesław Miłosz* noted, explains Tony Judt, the communism operated on the principle that writers do not need *to think*, but only *to understand*, understanding that was a commitment, because at that time, young intellectuals did not want more. "We were the children of war", wrote *Zdeněk Mlynář* (who joined the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1946, when he was 15) "and, as we did not manage to fight against anyone, we carried on the spirit of war in the early postwar years, when we finally had the opportunity to fight for something"<sup>8</sup>. The innocent enthusiasm with which some young East Europeans have been thrown themselves into the arms of communism ("I feel the revolution!" exclaimed the writer Ludvík Vaculík when he joined the party) helps us understand the great disillusion that followed, the intellectuals being stunned to discover the reality of Stalinist power. After 1948 Eastern Europeans were faced with a double exclusion: first from their own history, because of the Soviet presence, and later from Western consciousness. Eastern European writings about the West in the early '50s have in common a note of grief and stupefaction: *Miłosz* called it "deceived love" in *The Captive Thought*. "In *Notes for a Definition of Culture* (1948), T. S. Eliot could say with sufficient confidence that our era is a decline, that cultural standards are lower than those of fifty years ago and that evidence of this decay is evident in all spheres of human activity"<sup>9</sup>. "Does Europe not realize, wrote the exiled Mircea Eliade in April 1952, that a part of its own body was amputated? Because... all these countries *are* in Europe, all these peoples are part of the European community"<sup>10</sup>. But things were not like that. Stalin succeeded to take the East out of the equation. In July 1955 there were ten years of coldness between East and West, Stalin's death (March 1953) generating wider protests and calls for change. Thus between 1953 and 1956, five million prisoners were released from the Gulag. But things did not stop here. Red Army's brutal intervention in Hungary (1956) and suppression of anti-Soviet movement show, once again, that reforms could not occur except under the auspices of the Party. At the same time, these events encouraged the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals dissidents like Paul Goma in Romania, Wolfgang Harich in the GDR etc.

It was clear that the communist ideology brought only terror and false promises, the countries of Eastern Europe being absorbed by stagnation,

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<sup>8</sup> Zdeněk Mlynář *apud* Tony Judt, *op.cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot *apud* Tony Judt, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade *apud* Tony Judt, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

corruption and cynicism that had to last for decades. If the '60s were characterized by a naive faith and a hope hardly to materialize, "the '70s were the saddest decade of the twentieth century, an era of cynicism, of lost illusions and modest hopes, having a culture focused on individual and not on the community"<sup>11</sup>. Only in 1975, two years after the opening of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, measures to improve East-West relations and, "the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, freedom of religion and opinion" were proposed. In August 1975, the Helsinki agreements were signed and approved unanimously. Thus, they opened the way to communicate with the other half of the continent. After the eighth decade, there appeared speeches and writings that invoked "human rights" and "personal freedoms".

A special case was Romania – the most "Eastern" country from all the Communist satellites of Moscow regime. It was under communist rule from December 30, 1947 until December 22, 1989 and has seen the longest persecution. In addition to the over one million prisoners (this number does not include people deported to the USSR) from prisons, labor camps and from the Danube-Black Sea Channel, tens of thousands of which have died, Romania was also characterized by the severity of prison conditions and by various "experimental" prisons, especially that from Pitesti, where for three years, from December 1949 until late 1952, prisoners were encouraged to "re-educate" each other through physical and mental torture.

Communism in Romania experienced two periods: the first period is the consolidation of Communist power, between 1948-1964, the second period corresponds to Ceaușescu's era - 1965-1989 – period which is divided into two: the internal relaxation period (1965-1974) and the neo-Stalinist or personal power period (1974-1989). As mentioned Ș. Papacostea, "there are, grosso modo, two important stages in the process of mystification of Romanian history: a Stalinist pure one, in the '50s, which simply subordinated the historical discourse to the goals of a foreign power, thus minimizing the national character and its values, and another neo-Stalinist one, in the early '60s, which exacerbated the national feeling as an instrument of a totalitarian variant"<sup>12</sup>. This transition in the last two decades of the regime can be explained by the abandon of the early instruments of social analysis proposed by "the classics of Marxism-Leninism": "The generation of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.439-440.

<sup>12</sup> Ș. Papacostea in Pavel Chihaia, *Fața cernită a libertății*, Jurnalul literar Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 13.

militant Marxists and internationalists with predominant proletarian origins and social experiences, which led the party during '40s and '50s, was massively replaced in 1964-1968 by new effective activists and supporters of rural origin who did not have Marxism and internationalism as spontaneous and intellectual required references"<sup>13</sup>. After contributing at the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, the Romanians have obtained the withdrawal of Soviet troops from their national territory in 1958 and adopted an increasingly independent path. Under Dej (1965) as well as under Ceaușescu, Romania refused to get involved in Moscow disputes. Ceaușescu became a “de Gaulle of Eastern Europe”, as *The Economist* wrote in August 1966.

“As for true de Gaulle, who visited Bucharest in 1968, he noted that although the Ceaușescu’s communism did not fit the West, it was probably perfect for Romania: *chez vous un tel régime est utile, car il fait marcher les gens et avancer les choses* (“Such a regime is quite useful for you, because it puts people in motion and makes things move”)<sup>14</sup>. Not being involved in internal debates, Bucharest intellectuals had no other choice but to content themselves with the “proxy” participation to a cosmopolitan French culture, with which the Romanians have always had a special affinity. Moreover, after the war, France remained the only state that could reflect on and define the cultural status of the entire continent, the rival cities being destroyed or absorbed by local problems. Since the early '20s, as European countries fell prey to all dictators, political refugees or those being in intellectual exile headed to France, Paris being the capital of Europe.

One of the basic weapons used by the communist regime in Romania for rising up the culture, but also the public space, was the censorship. As stated Bogdan Ficeac, “censorship played simultaneously two roles: a negative one, which was to prohibit, purify and castrate, and a positive one, to create, by ideological selection, a “literary front”, a “historical front”, a “scientific front” etc. Therefore, the major function of censorship was likely to create new elites according to an ideological canon established by the sovereign”<sup>15</sup>, elites that had to fully respect the dictatorial requirements – “the written word had to be submitted unconditionally to the canons imposed by propaganda and, especially, had to set the verb in a poor cliché, lacking the richness of the Romanian language, easy to assimilate mainly through obsessive repetition”<sup>16</sup>. In 1968, formulating his conception of literature and cultural policy, Ceaușescu imposed certain limits on

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Barbu, *Republica absentă*, Nemira Publishing House, 1999, Bucharest, p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Judt, *op.cit.*, p. 397.

<sup>15</sup> Bogdan Ficeac, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p.113.

the field, restricting the formal and thematic freedom: “literature should be – and this is an unshakable axiom – to serve society, to spread among masses a picture consistent to Marxist-Leninist ideology. In order to achieve these objectives, the literature must be intelligible, so that “formal meaningless” games have no sense; the “stylistic diversity” is valid only if it may contribute to understanding and to a stronger representation of the content. Criticism in art is also permitted, only if it is limited to ethical or mentality conflicts. Basically, the writers have been refused the right to disclose the economical, political and ideological sources of these conflicts”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the goal was to have total submission to political purpose and not to national interest. Those who disobeyed were forced to do so, the taken measures being very different: prison, forced work into camps, internment in psychiatric homes, home arrest, etc. All these measures were accompanied by ideological manipulation at all levels of life. Detainees were distributed in prisons according to their age and social class: political interbelic militants were imprisoned in Sighet, intellectuals were kept in Aiud, peasants in Gherla and students, who represented the new generation, in Pitesti. Prisoners were forbidden to communicate, the re-education process having four phases<sup>18</sup>: external unmasking; internal unmasking; moral unmasking, made public; and the last phase: the prisoner, after being re-educated, had to torture his best friends, who were to go through the same phases. Therefore, the aim was to make the young people lose their humanity and become torturers after their release. In these circumstances, it can be said with certitude that, “under Ceaușescu, the Communism degenerated from national-Leninism into a kind of neo-Stalinist satrapy where nepotism and Byzantine level inefficiency relied on a tentacular secret police”<sup>19</sup>. But it was not able to fully subdue the spirit of intellectuals, because, instead of a drawer vigorous literature, writers created an unusual prose worthy of interest.

Even though, “crucified between brutality and parody in recent years”, Romanian communism fell, the repercussions of this dictatorship continued to influence the works themselves and the writers, as well as the readers, the police, the bureaucracy, a big part of the party remaining the same. In other words, allying to the opinion of Bogdan Ficeac, “the communist state structures and the old elites must no longer be exchanged and replaced because it is presumed that they have suddenly disappeared. Communism does not turn into its opposite, democracy, but

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<sup>17</sup> Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Literatura și politica în România după 1945*, trans. Irina Cristescu, Fundația Culturală Română Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Virgil Ierunca, *Fenomenul Pitești*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991, pp. 32-33.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Judt, *op.cit.*, p. 570.



simply leaves the scene. Power vacuum theory allows power to survive and to take other forms”<sup>20</sup>. In these circumstances, the exiled writer, who knows the facets of this political game, linked to the moment when he had to confront destiny and escape, often even forced to escape from this aggressive area, seeks to recover, in writing, the real life, the unconditional one, which becomes the route of his writing.

It is the same for Paul Goma. Living at maximum limit-situations, observing the pains, the prose writer realizes the revealing and initiative meaning of these experiences that he immortalizes in writing. We could ask, although we are not the only ones, which would be, in this context, the source of the well-known writer? Could he not become a writer without biography (that of being arrested detained or deported, as Virgil Podoabă calls it)? Of course, opinions are divided and even if it is difficult to give justice to those who assume that they have the truth, or those who seek to discover it, having a more or less clear picture about it, we must recognize that “the sufferings he had to endure as a prisoner and deported are an existential propaedeutic for his writing”<sup>21</sup>, being, only later, put to its origin. But how and to what extent is a question that sparks further discussion and can find the answer only knowing the entire perimeter of the Goma-world. Therefore, we thought that a presentation of the socio-political context can facilitate, in addition to framing the writer in the space that determines him, to understand his conception of life and literature (materialized, with great erudition, in his work) and may help us to explain the need to develop a program to remember and not to keep silent the experienced or assumed tragedies:

“And I’ve decided not to ever forget them  
not to revenge, but not to forget them  
and especially, especially  
NOT TO KEEP SILENT”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bogdan Ficeac, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Virgil Podoabă, “Adamevele(III)”, *Vatra*, no. 5-8/1997, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Goma, *Gherla*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991, p. 221.

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