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**Romania and the system crisis in  
Yugoslavia  
(1980-1989)**

**(Summary)**

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Iasi  
2013

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**Key words:** Romania, Yugoslavia, bilateral relations, Communist regime, system crisis.

A historical endeavour aimed at recomposing the evolution of Romanian-Yugoslav relations during the ninth decade of the twentieth century can only be a very difficult undertaking, given the fact that the dynamics of these relations are inextricably linked to the profound changes that marked the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the period and which preceded the dissolution of this state structure in the early '90. Thus, inevitably, the political, economic and social crisis that engulfed Yugoslavia after the death, on the 4th of May 1980, of Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito affected not only the existence of the Yugoslav federation in itself, but also its relations with the outside world, implicitly with Romania. If we consider the fact that the relations between the two neighbours evolved in the context of the special processes that occurred in the international environment during this time, at the end of which Europe and the world as a whole were virtually redefined and to which, *volens nolens*, Romania and Yugoslavia and, equally, Romanian-Yugoslav relations had to be related, then an investigative initiative aiming to shed light in a credible, balanced manner and to facilitate a scientific understanding of how the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia evolved during the 1980-1989 interval appears as a challenge all the more difficult to assume, but which, equally, is, in our opinion, very exciting.

The present thesis, entitled *Romania and the system crisis in Yugoslavia (1980-1989)*, falls within the research dedicated to diplomatic history and international relations and has tried to meet this challenge. Also, our endeavour has aimed at covering an important gap existing in the field of investigating the history of Romanian-Yugoslav relations during the postwar era. Thus, our desire to approach a work that tackles the evolution of the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia during the ninth decade has been reinforced by the fact that both the international and national historiography ascertain the absence of a study on the issue in question. For objective reasons – lack of access to archival sources covering the period – this fragment of the history of Romanian-Yugoslav relations has remained, so far, „in the shadows”, the little available information (press, a few general references in some studies, papers and memoirs) related to the topic being unable to reflect accurately and in depth the resorts, dynamics and issues that have defined the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia during this important segment of postwar history. Equally, although international historiography has paid much attention to the developments in 1980s Yugoslavia, reflected in hundreds of books

and studies, a Romanian historiographical reflection on this subject is lacking, the local production of works on the history of Yugoslavia and the Balkans presenting, ordinarily, in a compendious manner the processes that took place in the Yugoslav federation during this period and, more important, touching at most tangentially the issue of how they were perceived by Bucharest.

Aiming to fill this historiographic void, this paper has set itself to recompose the evolution of Romanian-Yugoslav relations between 1980-1989, an evolution seen within the context of the crisis that marked the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during this period.

As regards analyzing the dynamics of the internal phenomena of post-Titoist Yugoslavia, our aim has not been to offer an exhaustive approach to the problem, but rather to look at the developments in 1980s Yugoslavia from a new perspective, that of the Romanian archival sources. In this respect, we have pursued two objectives. First, we have sought to identify elements of novelty that could shed light on various controversial issues or that could complete a puzzle which, for that matter, still has many gaps. Second, although our intention has been to radiograph, with the greatest degree of objectivity possible, the dynamics of the „systemic crisis” in Yugoslavia, our endeavour’s appeal to autochthonous archival sources has aimed, at the same time, at capturing the way events, explored through the ideological filter of the Ceausescu regime, were perceived by the Romanian leadership.

The array of changes occurring in Yugoslav society and politics during this period has served as a framework for our main inquiry, which has sought to retrace the path followed by Romanian-Yugoslav relations between 1980-1989. In achieving this objective, one of our paper’s main lines of approach has regarded discussing what both in domestic historiography and in the general public opinion in Romania, as well as that in Yugoslavia has been forwarded, over time, as the „Romanian-Yugoslav friendship”. If through the works that have concentrated on studying Romanian-Yugoslav relations during prior periods (both interwar and postwar) to the subject of our research, various authors have succeeded, argumentatively, in imposing such a „label”, in this study we have tried to determine the extent to which, during the interval in question, such a statement has retained its validity. To this end, we have sought to identify and to analyze the elements of continuity and discontinuity in Romanian-Yugoslav relations – by reference to the previous period, i.e. Romanian-Yugoslav relations under Tito and Ceausescu – , the impact the changes in Yugoslavia, but also those in Romania generated upon the political and diplomatic relations between Romania and Yugoslavia, the issues that emerged during the

period between the two countries, their motivations and, last but not least, the manner in which they were handled by the two capitals.

At the same time, given the fact that this traditional Romanian-Yugoslav „friendship” was founded not only on cultural and civilizational similarities or the often unhappy historic „destiny” of the two countries, always having to face the pressures and hegemonic tendencies of the great powers, but also on common foreign policy objectives and a strong international cooperation aimed at defending their territorial integrity, the postwar *status quo* and their political independence, in this study we have set forth an analysis that would determine the manner and extent to which the developments in the international system shaped, during the period, the dialogue between the two countries.

Finally, although not an objective in itself, a number of issues involved, either directly linked to Romanian-Yugoslav relations – particularly the problem of the Ceausescu regime’s policies towards national minorities –, or referring to the impact generated by certain developments in the international medium upon Romania, have facilitated an insight into the internal dynamics of the Romanian society of the 1980s, marked by an accelerated economic degradation, the increased repressive policies of the regime and a pronounced isolation in international affairs.

In light of the given objectives and the bibliographic support upon which these lean, the compositional structure of this work has been divided into two parts, that follow both a chronological and a thematic principle. From a temporal point of view, each of the two parts covers an equal interval (five years) of the time segment analyzed, while on a thematic level, each of the two parts defines a distinct period in the evolution of Romanian-Yugoslav relations.

Thus, the first part of the thesis, entitled „*After Tito, Tito*”. *Romanian-Yugoslav relations between 1980-1984*, is structured, according to a thematic criterion, in four chapters and is devoted to analyzing the Romanian-Yugoslav relations during the first half of the 1980s.

The Romanian-Yugoslav relations that developed during this period constituted, essentially, a natural extension of the friendly relations cultivated in the course of the previous decade by Tito and Ceausescu, continuing to evolve, largely, in accordance with the decisions and arrangements established during the 20 official and „friendly” meetings between the two leaders.

The reasons for this development are manifold. First, the international context of this period acted not only as an element meant to preserve the positive course of the Romanian-Yugoslav relations, but also as a catalyst for the dialogue between the two countries. The

amplification of East-West tensions due to the intensification of the arms race, the issues in international relations arising from the multiplication of cases of foreign military intervention – the case of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Vietnamese armed invasion of Kampuchea or the Chinese invasion of Vietnam – and, also, as a consequence of the Polish crisis created a favorable context for tightening Romanian-Yugoslav relations, in light of the similar or identical concerns and interests that these problems generated for the two states. In particular, the Soviet Union's return to its original political purposes, i.e. maintaining control over the communist bloc and achieving strategic superiority over the United States, highlighted the interdependent nature of the political and security interests of the two Balkan states and the need for a Romanian-Yugoslav „common front”.

Also, certain developments that occurred in the sphere of Yugoslavia's bilateral relations, particularly the worsening of its relations with Albania and the escalating polemic with Bulgaria regarding the Macedonian issue, impeded Belgrade to seek the preservation and enhancement of good relations with other neighbours, implicitly with Romania. At the same time, the disputes regarding the Albanian and Macedonian minorities carried on with the two countries led Yugoslavia to avoid raising this issue – with reference to the situation of the Serbian and Croatian minorities in Romania – vis-a-vis Bucharest as well. In this context, the national minorities problem, which catalyzed the degradation of the relations between Belgrade and Bucharest starting with the second half of the decade, remained, hitherto, a topic addressed with great care by the Yugoslav government.

The internal developments in Yugoslavia constituted another favorable element for maintaining a positive, „friendly” rate in the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia during this period. The new Yugoslav leadership's determination to preserve the course set by president Tito meant not only the perpetuation of the vision ingrained by the Yugoslav leader with regard to the country's internal order – escribed, essentially, to the principle of self-management, the federal administrative system and the concept of collective leadership –, but also the maintenance of the principal foreign policy lines outlined by him. Within this „legacy”, the strategic relationship with Romania was, without doubt, a significant component, which the new Yugoslav leadership continued to cultivate. Relevant proof in this regard was fact that, during this period, Romania was the country with which Yugoslavia had the most high-level contacts.

Finally, the uncertainty created by the internal problems Yugoslavia faced during the post-Titoist period, especially the resurgence of nationalist manifestations, determined the

Yugoslav government to carefully manage its relations with Bucharest, whose political support weighed heavily in the light of the open hostility displayed by other socialist countries neighbouring Yugoslavia. The 1981 events in Kosovo were an eloquent illustration of this Yugoslav concern, Bucharest's backing of the federal policy pursued in this province receiving special appreciation and publicity from the Yugoslav press and leadership.

Given all the considerations above, during this period, the relations between Belgrade and Bucharest remained, at least on the surface, within the *status quo* established during the previous decade by Tito and Ceausescu, both countries going to great lengths, despite a series of issues already affecting the Romanian-Yugoslav dialogue, to nurture the thesis of the „Romanian-Yugoslav friendship”.

The second part of the paper, entitled „*The spoiled friendship*”. *Romanian-Yugoslav relations between 1985-1989*, is divided, as in the case of the former, in four chapters and is devoted to analyzing the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia during the last five years of the ninth decade.

During the second half of the 1980s, as the problems between the two countries already arisen after Tito's death surfaced, Romanian-Yugoslav relations experienced a progressive degradation. Although it never reached the level of deterioration of the dialogue between Romania and Hungary, for example, the relationship between Romania and Yugoslavia gradually distanced itself from the traditional image of the Romanian-Yugoslav „friendship”, an image intensively promoted by the two countries since the mid-'60 and which during the first half of the ninth decade still retained a great deal of relevance.

The decline that marked the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia during this period was the result of the interaction between multiple factors. In this respect, international developments undoubtedly played an important role. The accession of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the CPSU in March 1985 marked a turning point in international life, which with regard to the Soviet Union's relations with other European socialist countries meant, above all else, the abolition of the Brezhnev doctrine and the relaxation of Soviet control over the Eastern European satellites. In this context, the Soviet threat felt by Yugoslavia, which, for almost 40 years, had largely modeled Yugoslav foreign policy, was diminished and along with it Romania's strategic importance to Yugoslavia. This course was enhanced by the internal dynamics of the Yugoslav federation, where, in the latter half of the decade, the Titoist „legacy” went through an accelerated process of deligitimization, being contested in every form of its



expression, including foreign policy, within which the perception of Romania as an „ally” had been set by Tito as a basic orientation.

Against this background, the bilateral problems between the two countries worsened, increasingly acquiring the character of open disputes between Bucharest and Belgrade. During this period, three major issues affected the Romanian-Yugoslav dialogue: the operation of the Iron Gates I hidroenergetic system, the situation of the Yugoslav national minorities in Romania and the problem of the Romanian refugees who chose to illegally cross the border between Romania and Yugoslavia. These were not new problems, but they were brought to the surface by the Yugoslav party, primarily due to the Bucharest regime’s attitude, who refused any acceptable compromise in addressing these issues, and secondly as a consequence of the decreasing strategic importance of Romania to Yugoslav security interests, which eliminated many of the reservations previously demonstrated by the Yugoslav government in expressing – at least publicly – its grievances. No less important were the internal pressures exerted by the Yugoslav public opinion and republican political structures upon the federal leadership towards a reassessment of the country’s relations with Romania, starting off from the lack of availability shown by the Bucharest regime in regulating the bilateral issues between the two states.

Given the multiplication and intensification of bilateral tensions and disputes during this period, the Romanian Revolution of 1989 found the Romanian-Yugoslav relations at their most critical point. The reaction of the Yugoslav political leadership and public opinion to these events exhibited to the fullest extent the frustrations that had accumulated in Belgrade during the last decade vis-a-vis the Ceausescu regime. In this respect, the condemning of the repression, the wave of sympathy shown towards the demonstrators and the support given to the new Romanian political leadership that succeeded the dictator were revealing elements.

At the same time, the new socio-political realities of post-revolutionary Romania, which, after 1989, saw Romania engaged in a process of transition towards an existential model based on democracy and market economy, as well as the new foreign policy objectives assumed by the leadership that succeeded the Ceausescu regime – built around the idea of connecting Romania to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, promoting regional cooperation and, not least, the normalization of bilateral relations with neighbouring countries – created a favorable environment for reopening the prospects of development within the relations between Romania and Yugoslavia and the return to a „friendly” Romanian-Yugoslav relationship.