

CRCE Briefing Paper

**An Interview with
Oana-Valentina Suciu**

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About the author

Oana-Valentina Suciu holds a university degree in political sociology and an MPhil and a PhD in political science. Educated in Bucharest, Oxford, New York and Budapest she was also the recipient of several research and academic development grants from OSI, AFP, USIS, and British Council/Chevening. Since her undergraduate years she worked as a civic activist and senior researcher for various NGOs and think-tanks, especially for the Romanian Academic Society and the Institute for Public Policies. She also collaborated with the World Bank Institute in Washington D.C. and with the Centre for Research into Post-communist Economies in London. Currently she is an assistant professor with the University of Bucharest, the Political Science Department, where she teaches political sociology, voting behaviour and the political history of ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Between 2007 and 2013 she was the head of the Domestic Programmes Department of the Romanian Cultural Institute. Her research interest lies in the ethnic minorities issues, political representation and transition in Central and Eastern Europe, and public space. She is also the author of numerous articles and book chapters on the above mentioned topics.

***Delo* interview with Oana-Valentina Suciu, 21 February 2014**

***Delo*:** A quarter of a century ago the protests ended the rule and the life of a long-time communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and that of his wife Elena. How do Romanians answer the question whether the fight for freedom paid off?

Oana Suciu: It is somehow difficult to generalise about the whole population, especially since there has not been much research on this topic, despite widely felt opinion that communism was a repressive and criminal system. In fact this was the conclusion of a scientific report compiled between 2005 and 2006 by a team of researchers under the patronage of the Romanian Presidency, when Traian Basescu was in office. The report concentrated more on communist repression and its effect on society, and less on the population's perceptions. It was, however, the first (so far) and only public and political condemnation of the communist system as a criminal one.

There are few quantitative researches that allow one to form an image about how the population experienced and internalised the communist experience. Even if the topic per se is approached only in a few public opinion polls, the type of questions repeatedly asked in most surveys in Romania, allows us to answer to some extent the question whether the fight for freedom paid off.

There were a several national public opinion polls conducted in 2011 by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile. They point towards a rather positive perception of communism, which has unfortunately increased from 2007, when a similar survey was conducted. To be more precise, 41% of Romanians considered that communism was a good idea but poorly applied. However, this should be read less as communist nostalgia, and more from the perspective of a comparison between the current economic situation and the difficulties it has generated. I would stress that this is more of an economic issue, rather than a political and human rights one, since the main reasons given by the respondents were the availability of jobs, living standards, home ownership opportunities. So the tendency to idealise the totalitarian social order was based on a strict control of labour and professional choices. It is also the type of patriarchal political culture that places the "equals" sign between the person of Ceausescu and the political regime, which might explain the 25% of Romanians who perceived him as a positive influence on Romania.

The trend is not different though from the rest of Eastern Europeans, who comparatively evaluate the current state of affairs through economic lenses and consequently declare that the communist period was a better one. Only 11% of Romanians referred to the infringement of human rights and around 6% to the arrests on political grounds, whereas almost half equated the negative impact of the regime with scarcity of food and services.

The trend is confirmed by more recent public opinion polls in November and December 2014, that show around half the population considers itself much less happy when compared with life before 1989. One third evaluates the state of economy as much worse than the communist one and has concerns mainly about economic status, families' future, the health system, pensions, salaries, education and, even more, unemployment (more than 40%). These opinions are not surprising, however, since Romania has been heavily hit by the world economic crisis. Since 2009 it has experienced huge salary cuts in public services (25%) and the highest VAT in the European Union (24%), which all explains the negative self-evaluation of the situation.

To make a long story short, the latest public opinion poll of 12-13th January 2015 shows that although half the population considers that their living standards are worse than before 1989, they do not regret the fall of communism.

Delo: With membership of the EU the motivation for the confrontation of a chronic corruption decreased. Has the fight against corruption brought any results?

Oana Suci: I do not agree with the statement that the motivation to confront or condemn corruption has decreased after the EU membership, in spite of the fact that Romania has the lowest absorption rate of EU funding among the ten new member states; a loss which might be attributed mainly to mismanagement and corruption.

A report from November 2014 of the Centre for European Policies (CRPE – an independent think-tank), based on a qualitative research and interviews with experts from public institutions, civil society organisation and media, shows that DNA (The National Anti-corruption Direction or Agency) functions within an appropriate legislative framework, resulting in good collaboration between prosecutors, judicial policemen and experts, that might even be translated into good practice policies by the European Commission, a rare phenomenon at EU level. This is in spite of the rather low budget and reduced personnel of the institution, whose teams last year managed successfully to lead and close tens of anti-corruption investigations - a sign of institutional consolidation.

Cases of many national and local public figures have been brought to justice recently, from politicians to rigged football clubs managers. Most have been sentenced to prison and the confiscation of property. The experts appreciate the results obtained by the Chief Prosecutor, Laura Codruta Kovesi, who has been recently portrayed as a justice fighter by the *New York Times*, and whose presence is evaluated as a guarantee in the sustainability of the DNA. It's a plus for the state and for the honest politicians.

Delo: How do Romanians comment on the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which dismissed the appeal of former Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, who was sentenced to two years in prison for corruption?

Oana Suci: The rejection of Nastase's appeal is perceived by various opinion-makers in Romania as a success of justice. With the exception of his lawyer, family and a few party-members (The Social Democrat Party – PSD), the opinions expressed in interviews and through the social media is that this is a success of the justice system and of the anti-corruption fight. Moreover, it is proof of the independence of the judiciaries and, according to MEP Monica Macovei (former independent presidential candidate) “a lesson for all the corrupt politicians, politicians who steal (...) who should be afraid that if they do that, they end up in prison”.

Delo: Although the Romanian Agency for Anti-corruption sends the politicians to court, the voters in a majority of cases are returning them to office.

Oana Suci: Again, I do not quite agree with the above statement. At public level, recent surveys aforementioned, and other research indicate that 66% of the population is worried about corruption issues, and that a year ago the National Direction for Anticorruption (DNA) has begun to be trusted by the public. Also I would not speak about “authority” per se, but rather of notoriety provided by oftentimes complicated media and political interests.

The fact that, according to Kovesi's statements, until October 2014 4,500 files were registered, 834 individuals were sent to court, 1007 perpetrators have been condemned (which is a 90% success rate) and goods of over 150 million euros have been confiscated. This is a strong example of the anti-corruption fight in full sight of the voters, not only of EU institutions. Moreover, 63% of the denunciations of corruption emanated not from public institutions, but from regular citizens and

private bodies. You address a complaint to a trusted institution and the number of successfully solved cases is proof of that. It is a slow process, but it works and the last year has shown an increase of the involvement of civil society, not only through both non-governmental organisations and independent think-tanks (who have been fighting this battle for over 15 years), but also through the involvement of private citizens, who take to the streets or denounce corruption at the local and community level, and whose numbers are steadily increasing.

Delo: Did the ruling coalition accept the decision of Romania's members of Parliament, who rejected the controversial law on amnesty for corrupt politicians, or is it looking for another route, to save them from imprisonment?

Oana Suci: Yes, it did accept it, since it had no other choice in the light of the recent presidential elections in Romania. The bill has been comfortably rejected. The public, as well as the politicians, are now more aware of such enterprises. Besides which alternative a potential route of amnesty law will probably be quickly sanctioned at both of the levels mentioned above.

Delo: What kind of problems does Romania face in the field of health care and pension protection?

Oana Suci: These are two completely different questions. Pensions are protected and guaranteed by the state, and one can also contribute if desired to a private pension fund. The problem lies in a decreased demographic trend, which is experienced by the whole Western society, of a lower birth rate and an increasingly aged population. This will probably lead, in the future, to a generational gap that will be economically translated into hardship in covering the pensions for the retired.

As for the health system, health insurance is mandatory in Romania – depending on the amount one pays, he or she can benefit from various medical services. Private insurance can be obtained as well. The problem lies in the fact that the state budget offers a much too small percentage to the health system per se. Doctors and nurses in the public system are underpaid, the infrastructure is feeble, and not all the medication theoretically covered by the insurance is provided.

Last but not least, one needs economic development in order to be able to protect, otherwise the only thing to be shared or protected is poverty.

Delo: The Prime Minister Victor Ponta has, after two years of allegations that his doctoral thesis was plagiarised, renounced the doctoral title. Is this kind of scandal in Romania an exception or a rule?

Oana Suci: These are not just allegations, they are facts. The PM's thesis was 40% plagiarised, as the specialists' committee of the University of Bucharest first demonstrated in the summer of 2012 and also in a recent report of the University's Ethics Committee. Besides, a doctoral title is something that can be withdrawn but definitely not renounced. It is not as if you sign a divorce paper or return a shopping item that you are not satisfied with. What should be done, in this case, is for the Ministry of Education to revoke the order which granted the title to Ponta – unfortunately this has not happened as yet – they are members of the same political party, with a strict submission to hierarchy.

It is extremely sad that a scientific title, for which most academics work for 5,8 or 10 years, often for ridiculous salaries and no support from the state (often the documentation was performed with the support of international and private bodies, in top Western universities), is considered by some politicians as a tool for political and economic gain. It is also funny to see how a doctoral title is considered a tool to assist in climbing the social ladder. The problem is deeper than a few academic scandals (since yes, some of them did burst recently in the media), but I would say they are the exception not the rule.

Delo: is there a new wind after the victory of Klaus Iohannis or is everything the same as it was?

Oana Suci: It depends what you mean by a “new wind”. If you mean it at the public perception, definitely yes –the population is much more optimistic – for instance, 58% consider that Romania is heading the right direction (compared with only 23% in September, last year, which is a huge difference in sociological terms). Moreover, a similar percentage considers that the President should initiate a country project and that Romania will play an important role at European and international level. Of course these are mainly perceptions and evaluations from less educated people in the rural areas, where the President is pictured more like a super-hero, or a higher-rank local mayor, who should take charge and solve day to day problems.

In reality, things are moving more slowly but they are moving – a first example is the rejection of the amnesty bill for politicians. We have to bear in mind that Romania is a semi-presidential republic, where both Parliament and Government have an important say in decision making. These institutions are far from favourable to the newly elected President for at present, since Klaus Iohannis is a former member of a now opposition party. Change needs instruments, mechanisms and functioning institutions that have to be enforced by all these bodies, not just by the President.

Delo: What does it mean for Romania that Iohannis is a member of the German and Protestant minority?

Oana Suci: Some analysts and journalists have been surprised by Iohannis’ election. Well, they should not have been. Although Romanians do not constitute the most informed of populations, and they rely on information shortcuts (i.e. they look for the information in the easiest places), this does not mean that they are un-informed. On the contrary – research from the latest decades shows that ethnicity is *the* strongest information shortcut, followed by religion. This can be translated through stronger support or rejection of a person, community, nation, based on information such as the ethnic group or denomination. In this case, the German minority (the Saxon one, to be more precise, which colonised the central part of Transylvania from the 13th century) is and always has been a highly respected one. Although a self-contained ethnic group, its successes in terms of commerce and culture are known at the societal level, leading to the perception of Germans as being serious, hard-working and respecting their promises (*Ein Mann, ein Wort*).

Klaus Iohannis is proof of this evaluation. We should bear in mind that he has been elected, with a majority of votes, as mayor of the city of Sibiu (Hermannstadt) three consecutive times, a place where the Germans are hardly 5% of the population. The fact that he managed to put the city on the European map, by successfully making it the 2007 European Capital of Culture, has been widely publicised throughout the country. Besides the glamorous aspects of this accomplishment, the economic development and the foreign investments in the county of Sibiu are a provable fact, through increased economic results and financial indicators in the last decade.

Last, but not least, his apparently dry electoral slogan “Romania of the well performed work” summarised the positive aspects of his management, was much appreciated by the voters, even by these who supported other candidates in the first round of the presidential elections in November 2014. So, rather than being a handicap, the German protestant has been supported by the Romanian orthodox majority, who used these information shortcuts to make decisions regarding their vote.

Delo: Did Romania, considering the fact that restrictions in the labour market do not apply to her anymore, finally reach the other members of the EU?

Oana Suci: Romanians did work officially in the EU even during the labour restrictions, in those countries, especially Spain and Italy. There are still no official figures, although the latest census from 2011 did cover this issue, but the phenomenon of work migration is a fact. It depends what you

understand in reaching the other members. If you mean economically, no not really, that would be impossible. But Romanians who live and work abroad do maintain a strong connection with the country. Proof of that is the flow of remittances. They send money home on a regular basis, especially to finance the building of houses in their towns and villages. This was also apparent on another level, the involvement of the Romanian diaspora in voting in recent elections, when hundreds of thousands of Romanian citizens literally invaded the diplomatic representations of our country in order to vote. This can be translated into an increased self-awareness of their rights, both economic and civic ones.

Moreover, the economic immigration figures did not increase significantly after labour restrictions were withdrawn, which shows that whoever really wanted to try working abroad was determined to this anyway and other legal circumstances.

Delo: Do the poor and the beggars or the educated personnel, who want to improve the knowledge and progress professionally, flee from Romania?

Oana Suci: This is a rough generalisation. The immigration phenomenon cannot be reduced to these categories. Moreover, there are different migration trends, depending on the country of destination – there is one type of migration in Italy or Spain (that I mentioned before), based mainly on temporary labour contracts in agriculture and constructions, other types of migration in Germany and Austria, Britain, Ireland or France, and a totally different one in the United States or Canada. The official figures amount somewhere around 730,000 individuals, for a population of approximately 20 million, but probably they are higher. Not necessarily because it is illegal immigration (although that exists, absolutely, but is not the rule), but because there are temporary work contracts which are more difficult to introduce in statistics.

What counts more in the Romanian case is the source of migration – the location and the development degree of the region where these people leave from, for a longer or shorter period of time. Of course people from poorer areas, with a low development coefficient, present a higher degree of trying their luck somewhere else. As Professor Dumitru Sandu, from the University of Bucharest, shows in several studies, local communities are agents of modernisation not only by how wide their migration abroad experience is. The ways the shares of returnees and current emigrants from different waves (since the destinations have changed over the years) combine in the profile of communities, give their typology. By migration, localities could be of low or high migration experience or could have a specific profile by the shares of return, post-accession and post crisis migrants. In plain words, depending how poor and/or united one's community (including a professional one) is, the migrant chooses his/her destination and decides to stay for a longer or shorter period of time.

Delo: Are Romanians scapegoats, when it comes to immigration policy, because young people in the EU still have a little chance finding work?

Oana Suci: I wouldn't be that harsh and I am no specialist in EU labour issues. The economic crisis affected the whole system, of course, with the harshest felt effects in the poorer areas and countries. I can only talk from my own experience and from the one of my friends and former students – and that is that, often, you have to work twice as hard and twice as much in a Western framework (and when I say "twice" I am referring to the EU standards) in order to prove yourself. However, once you have done that, where you come from is of less importance.

On top of that, there will always be nationalist or extremist parties who will conduct campaigns against the immigrants whom they consider more vulnerable, or more dangerous, or both. In the UK, for instance, it is the case of Romanians and Bulgarians. Before them, it was the Poles – who, it is

true, were smart enough to transform the insult (remember, the British were appalled by the “Polish Plumber”) into a national PR campaign; an intelligent and humorous move!

Again, this is an issue in itself that can be documented historically, sociologically and anthropologically and we don’t have time for this here. What is important to mention though is that, and a look at the data of the Eurobarometer is enough, Romanians are not that different from the average European in terms of hopes, dreams, expectations, fears, knowledge about their citizen and European rights and obligations, Moreover, Romanians are the people with the highest support for the EU, who consider themselves as “Europeans”. Treating them as second class citizens would not be the most appropriate move in terms of labour rights and immigration policies.

Delo: Where is the reason that people protest in a sign of support for corrupt leaders, but they do not protest against the socialist government of Prime Minister Victor Ponta, if the opposition does not send them to the streets?

Oana Suci: I am afraid I have to contradict you again over this issue, or, rather add a nuance in it. People do not protest as a sign of support of a corrupt politician. That there are supporters of politicians who happen to be corrupt is another story. Romanians do sanction politicians and they do take to the streets without being sent there by politicians from any side.

The best example in this regard is the 2013 protest against the gold mining exploitation from Rosia Montana, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Bucuresti, Cluj-Napoca, Brasov, Timisoara (to name just a few), sanctioning politicians irrespective of their political party. I wrote then that the movement, without clear leaders, was starting to resemble more and more the Occupy Movements across the Atlantic or, closer across the Channel, a type of grassroots campaign which has been developing slowly but steadily ever since then. And this is just one example – many aspects of national and local politics are sanctioned like this, from environmental issues, to economics and urbanism issues. In my neighbourhood alone, I can count three community initiative groups that no one would have dreamed of, say, 3-4 years ago. One is organised by my next-door neighbour, a young architect who is interested in the urban issues of the area. We also have to remember the important role played by social networks in community involvement.

It might not sound much, but I think it is important for someone to know that they can first sanction their county or city mayor and councillor and then move to a higher level, and hold accountable higher rank politicians and civil servants. As I mentioned earlier, there is a much higher rate of private citizens amending corruption issues at the official level and this is not a bad sign at all.

Delo: In Romania, if an individual needs medical assistance or employment, is a tip from friendly local official worth more as all official state guarantees?

Oana Suci: If by a “tip” you mean some friendly advice, I think that this hardly a singular Romanian case. If you mean it as a connection, for better services or results, that is sometimes the case, but one cannot generalise on that.

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