

Teaching the history of Romanian communism in high schools: problems and suggestions

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The communist period, as well as the tumult that followed it, are, even now after 16 years since the collapse of the communist regime, still not very known and understood. A survey developed in 2007 by the Public Opinion barometer of the Open society Foundation showed that Romanians consider communism as a “good idea”. The report concludes that: “the ones that consider themselves as part of the low class and that self-define themselves as losers of post-communist transition had nothing to win not even freedom but lost the safety of tomorrow. For them communism remained a good idea.”

Young people aged between 15 and 24 have very little knowledge about the communist period. The specialists in education stated that the teenagers’ ignorance is due to school curricula and to the deficiency of professional information. The lack of interest that teachers show towards this period and the indifference of the teenagers with regard to this subject show, without a shadow of doubt, the necessity of studying the communist regime, its consequences and its consequent events in high schools. Most of the high school students cannot state a clear and coherent vision about the criminal acts of the communist regime, regardless of whether it concerns the annihilation of the democratic state, the organized genocide, the forced sovietisation, political extermination of elites or repression in culture. Concerning the 1989 revolution and the events that followed it, the teens only have vague ideas about the course of the events, this minimum knowledge being due to family education and not to the education system. Most of the time, the information reduces to contemporary phenomena, events that cannot be chronologically categorized or vague perceptions about certain characters.

The conception of a textbook about the history of communism met the stringent necessity of debate, analysis and knowledge of the political, cultural and social aspects of the communist totalitarian regime. After 16 years since the collapse of dictatorial regime, the ideology, the institutions and the practice of communism are not sufficiently studied in Romania. Moreover, the effects of communism on transition, the continuity of structures, mentalities and communist methods are not known, nor researched or interpreted. In Romania, there aren’t specialized libraries on matters related to communism and post communism; there isn’t a national academic curriculum or a national educational programmes dedicated to this topic.

We should all agree that teaching Communism history is a very demanding and difficult task, a sensitive matter which makes the relationship student-teacher a little more delicate. From the point of view of acquiring knowledge, the history of Communism – as a topic of study for students – is feeding not only through the textbook or the teachers' approach but also from the family, society, community, and media. Therefore, the analysis of events is influenced by myths, stereotypes and legends that are known inside the community and various circles. The difficulty in approaching recent events also comes from the methods used by teachers in order to make a clearer and easier understanding of the current events: the appeal to present. The multiple interpretations given to current events – amplified by characters or social and political groups (living actors) – sometimes transform the historical controversies in sensitive matters which imply experiences. At a first glance, the questions that the teacher teaching the history of communism asks seem dull, without hidden meanings and answers (e.g. What happened in Romania in 1989? Was there a revolution? Who are the authors of the crimes done by former political police? Were the condemnations of the ones who illegally tried to leave the country just?).

Still, the post totalitarian society is strongly influenced by the "Old regime". Students use the experience they learn about in class to explain themselves the phenomena characteristic to the world they live in, concepts of collective memory, the change of the present view of some past events. Therefore, matters which seem simple gather complex meanings.

High school students are the closest to the employee status than any undergraduate level pupil. Therefore, they always check their hypothesis and reflections in the debates done during history classes and other classes. Their interest for the past, for the history of their society, of their community, manifested in our case, during classes concerning the history of communism, also means the attempt to answer some important questions like: which were the consequences of not respecting human rights or how does the citizen responsibility function in a totalitarian state? Thus, the history teacher makes the students to take a certain attitude with respect to the studied topics.

Maybe to a greater extend than in other studied fields, the students' sensitivity is an important factor during the class of history of communism; still, the teacher must avoid sources of information which could produce powerful emotional reactions (execution films, torture methods and treatment applied to convicts, shocking images). At the same time, the history teacher has the duty to use historical analysis, to place the events in international context (especially European), to use various types of historical sources, to assure a comfortable space for debates, to adopt the role play method. The history teacher has a very difficult task: to help students understand and sustain the different opinions of various actors to the events mirroring the historians' interpretations. The simplification in interpreting events must be avoided. At the same time, the history teacher should make clear an important

statement for recent history: students must be informed that historians and their interpretations are influenced by political decisions and by the social context.

Together with interpretation, the analysis of historical sources is a key element in teaching the history of Communism. These should be thoroughly analysed but carefully chosen as they could be difficult to understand by students. The chosen sources should have some compulsory characteristics: to be comparable with other sources; to highlight the knowledge and also the expectations of students; to raise questions and discussions; to have medium difficulty. Here are some important questions to be asked concerning different sources of information (objects, journals/letters, official documents, newspapers/magazines, photos) from or about communism: which was their goal? How were they preserved – was there a direct interest? Were they public or secret in the era?

Teaching the history of Communism in high school implies specific methods both for students and for teachers. The teacher needs to have very good communication abilities and to avoid emotional involvement in sustaining certain topics. Furthermore, he has to help students as much as possible in understanding the institutional framework in which democracy functions (through making a parallel with elements of totalitarian regimes), in conscious involvement in social life, in choosing democratic options. The teacher's role is to teach students useful procedures for day-to-day life: critical and evidence based approach, coherent justification, problem solving, decision making mechanism, evaluating situations from the point of view of the acquired principles.

There are also situations when teachers do not succeed in adapting their speech and the construction of a lesson from various reasons– sometimes out of unawareness other times due to lack of professionalism. Here are some examples: the teacher doesn't confront different points of view; or the teacher too often and without bringing arguments states his point of view; doesn't encourage group work; has a positive/negative attitude towards a figure from the communist regime; doesn't analyse the accuracy and truthfulness of a historic source. But, most of the times, the most frequent mistakes are simplifying the interpretation of events (due to lack of time) and especially the attempt to obtain from students more than they can possibly assimilate.

Many students and also teachers consider the handbook *History of communism in Romania* as a "collection of truth", an instrument for historic knowledge, an idea messenger for the young generation. A history handbook is, in very simple terms, a story; a story that needs to be accessible to students. It reflects, no matter how liberal in the teaching conception and adopted methodology we are, a certain political and cultural orientation of authors. The interpretation of an event, the selection of sources, the formulation of learning activities, all are the result of a choice. If our choice was adequate, time will tell.

Sources

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Questions from the audience and answers

1) Financing of the textbook “The History of communism in Romania”?

The Institute is a government agency, but the textbook project received additional financing from the Dutch, American and German embassies. The researchers also worked in cooperation with other organizations specializing in education.

2) Goal of the Textbook?

The goal of the textbook was to get students thinking critically about the history of communism in Romania. The book should show that there was a repressive regime, and emphasize the values of freedom and democracy.

3) Is the book compulsory for students?

Lessons on the history of communism are already compulsory in schools, though not entire courses.

The government supports the textbook, but teachers and school can choose whether to use it or not.

4) Next steps? Replication?

The Bulgarians have expressed an interest in the project, and Hungarians and Poles have complimented the work, but felt that it was too early to introduce in their countries.

5) Why not parallel a history of communism with a history of capitalism?

A textbook on communism is more appropriate for Romania, since it reflects the nation's particular history.

6) Experiences from teacher trainings?

Trainers have noticed interesting differences between respective regions of Romania, namely that teachers in some regions are more open to the idea of communism as progress, while others focus on the system of repression.

7) How has the book been received in schools?

So far the textbook has only been used with small groups. There have not been many complaints yet.

8) Dealing with emotions evoked?

Personal emotions and memories are more of an issue with older teachers, but teachers should use the textbook as a teaching tool rather than base lessons solely on their own experiences. Trainers also suggest the use of role playing and debate in the classroom to illuminate the perspectives of others.