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Elena Ceaușescu's Personality Cult and Romanian Television

Abstract: Elena Ceaușescu, spouse of the Romanian communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, generated in the 1980s a gigantic homage industry, as she was the object of a personality cult as strong as that of her husband's. This paper briefly outlines the origin and elements of Nicolae Ceaușescu's personality cult, to focus then on Elena Ceaușescu's cult: how at first it was merged with the cult of her husband, her being a mere companion of the head of state, and then grew to the point of paralleling that of Nicolae Ceaușescu during the last years of communist rule in Romania. The second part focuses on the evolution of Romanian state television and its crucial role in the diffusion of her personality cult, showing how this state institution became completely subordinated to the presidential couple in the 1980s, and pointing to a paradox of the period: the shorter Romanian television's daily broadcasting time, the larger the amount of programming on Ceaușescu. Finally, the paper shows how January was infused with anniversary dates meant to consolidate the personality cult of the presidential couple and to reinvent communist traditions.

Keywords: personality cult, Elena Ceaușescu, Nicolae Ceaușescu, Romania, communism, television, media studies

Even though we usually associate dictators, tyranny and personality cult with men, it has not prevented some women from understanding the mechanisms of power just as well. As a rule neglected by historians, the women who stood at the side or in the shadow of dictators often had real political power themselves. Considered as authentic tragic heroines by a few authors, resembling "those of Racine in their pride or of Flaubert in their silliness" (Ducret 2013: 10), they were generally demonized by their people and their memory was most of the time kept only orally. Antipathy towards these women was, and is, often much greater than towards their male partners-in-crime, which may be a reason for the relative lack of scholarly interest. Elena Ceaușescu, wife of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, was one of the few spouses of communist leaders to have a high political profile of her own, being deeply involved in party administration. All through the 1980s, until their execution in December 1989, she was the second most influential Romanian, after Ceaușescu himself, and was the object of a personality cult as intense as that of her husband. In her craving for power, in her cynicism and cruelty, she was similar to Nexhmije Hoxha, spouse of the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha, or Margot Honecker, wife of the GDR head of state, Erich Honecker. She shared most in common with Jiang

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Qing, wife of Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party and Paramount leader of China, who impressed and inspired her deeply during the 1971 visit of the Ceaușescu to the People's Republic of China.

And yet, Elena Ceaușescu distinguished herself from the other wives of communist leaders. Tons of published *Omagiu* (homage) in her honour, thousands of radio and TV broadcast hours praising the “Mother of the Nation”, lies about her age and education, the charade about her scientific accomplishments (from a doctoral degree in chemistry to the title of academician) trying to conceal her abysmal ignorance and infinite vanity, a whole gigantic homage industry built around Elena Ceaușescu set her apart in the pantheon of communist first ladies. Perhaps in no other totalitarian system with a cult of the leading lady did adulatory practices reach such proportions as in Romania. Practically, the two presidential spouses enjoyed two parallel worship structures, which intersected at certain points.

The demonization of Elena Ceaușescu after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 was reflected in staggeringly high disapproval ratings. Public opinion polls conducted more than twenty years after the fall of communism showed that 87 % of Romanians saw her negatively, whereas only 45 % felt the same about Nicolae Ceaușescu.¹ Today, almost thirty years after her death, with her fading in collective memory, she still seems to be a taboo topic for researchers, which translates into a silence “based on moral and pseudo-cognitive reasons” (Olteanu 2004). While books about Nicolae Ceaușescu, his dictatorship and personality cult are still being written, Elena is hardly ever mentioned.

Nicolae Ceaușescu's personality cult

From today's perspective, the personality cult of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu belongs into one of the most fascinating and horrifying chapters of Romanian history, and it has attracted considerable scholarly attention.² In the post-Stalin era, in this part of Europe, Ceaușescu's systematic and theatrical cult can only be compared to that of Enver Hoxha's in communist Albania; on the global contemporary scene, it has similar features to that of the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, who greatly inspired the Romanian dictator.

Nicolae Ceaușescu was probably the most celebrated Romanian of all times, if we consider the masses of people involved in manifestations dedicated

¹ According to a poll conducted by INSCOP Research in November 2013 (<http://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/INSCOP-noiembrie-ISTORIE.pdf> [retrieved 1st August 2017]).

² See e.g. Fischer 1989; Burakowski 2011; Cioroianu 2004, 2010; Durandin 1990. For a critical analysis of the books on the personality cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu signed by foreign or Romanian authors, see Marin 2016, 22–25.

to him, the hundreds of congratulatory telegrams from ambassadors and heads of state, the parties organized and the gifts received, but also the huge space allotted to him in the mass-media (Avram 2014). In the beginning it was the printed press but later, after the introduction of television, this medium also came under the control of the Romanian dictator and helped expand the eulogy industry to absurd proportions.

As it was effectively put in an article on the dictator's career trajectory, *Ceaușescu's life started at 50* (ibid.). More exactly, his personality cult started rising from that date on. His birthday, 26th January, was forcefully and suddenly brought to public attention in 1968, when he turned 50, a month after he became President of the State Council of the Socialist Republic of Romania. On 26th January 1968, *Scântea*, the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) newspaper, featured the headline "Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu turned 50", with the piece signed by the RCP Central Committee, the State Council and the Council of Ministers

Expectedly, Nicolae Ceaușescu's birthday was celebrated with greater pomp at round figures. After 1968, the first major celebration was in 1973, when he turned 55, after the 1971 visit to China and North Korea. From 1973 until the end of his life, he would go on working visits to different regions of the country or factories in Bucharest on the eve of his birthday, and homage texts and congratulations would start arriving and being published a few days before and would cease a few days after 26th January. After 1973, Romanian intellectuals and writers also engaged in the homage charade with their letters and odes to "the first man of the country", and later also to his wife. Tons of publications under the title *Omagiu* will forever remain "evidence of unimaginable human degradation, partly imposed, partly voluntary", as "moral mud was the vital substance of the Golden Age" (Tismăneanu 2015).

In the late 1960s, when Ceaușescu's personality cult started off, it also played a role in putting up resistance to Moscow. Its main source was the Stalinist tradition, as Ceaușescu gradually replaced Stalin in the political imagery of the RCP, but it also had roots in the Romanian national tradition, since Ceaușescu sought to emulate King Carol II of Romania. Finally, after his 1971 visit to China and North Korea, Ceaușescu, deeply impressed by the *dynastic communism* of the Asian countries, also adopted the Asian model (Cioroianu 2010 (1)). Despite its diverse sources of inspiration, Ceaușescu's cult had distinctive features, directly connected to the very nature of original Romanian communism³: Byzantine imperial glorification rituals were fused with Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy claims. The scenery was grotesque and delusional but, as ironic as it may seem, it was

³ Tismăneanu (2012, 466) defines Ceaușescu's socialism as "totalitarianism Romanian-style, a combination of Stalinism, Third World-ism, and Byzantinism", which "could never fully overcome its pariah genealogy".

this ubiquitous and sultry personality cult that enshrined Ceaușescu for eternity in the history of Marxist beliefs (Tismăneanu 2015).

Ceaușescu was depicted simultaneously as “the main doctrinaire, the visionary genius, and the ‘architect of national destiny’” (Tismăneanu 2012, 468). Words, colours and images built a Nicolae Ceaușescu with several mythic facets: he was the revolutionary, the theoretician of a new world order, the champion of peace, the architect of a new Romania, the hero of independence, the guarantor of national unity, the most beloved son – or father – of the nation etc. (Cioroianu 2010 (2)).

But this grotesque cult of personality in no way contributed to the credibility of the Romanian leader. On the contrary, it may be described as a textbook example of political ineffectiveness: if Ceaușescu was a popular and credible leader in Romania at the end of the 1960s, after his brave move in 1968 (condemning the Warsaw pact and the military intervention in Czechoslovakia), the next twenty years only reinforced the impression that the man whom Romanians had genuinely trusted was transforming into a mere caricature. Not surprisingly, at the climax of his personality cult in the late 1980s Nicolae Ceaușescu was much less popular in Romania than before he had become the object of this blind idolatry (Cioroianu 2010 (1)). Instead of bringing him closer to the people, this “ephemeral, shaky and questionable” construction (Tismăneanu 2015) of a Messianic leader fenced Ceaușescu off the Romanian people and in the gloomy 1980s made him one of the most hated figures, probably second in notoriety only to his wife, Elena Ceaușescu.

In December 1989, only a month after he was unanimously re-elected as head of the RCP, he and his wife were turned over to a firing squad and executed. The architects of the cult of Nicolae Ceaușescu had in fact worked against him and against an initially very promising situation. In the end, Ceaușescu was intoxicated by power, more and more convinced of the reality of their artificial and absurd construction and unable to divorce himself from it.

Elena Ceaușescu's rise to power and glorification

In the beginning Elena Ceaușescu was just the wife of the Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party. Her presence at his side was meant to strengthen the belief of the people that the head of the party, apart from being a patriot, was also a family man. As the wife of a communist leader, Elena Ceaușescu seemed to the Western eye more down-to-earth and relaxed than her counterparts, a possible sign of normalization: “When Ceaușescu announced his policy of international opening, the public appearance of Elena Ceaușescu, clumsy and uncultured as she was, was felt like a sign of normalization; in comparison with the symbolic bachelorhood of the Stalinist era, the new masters' matrimony seemed auspicious. Between Khrushchev's stumpy wife and elegant

Raisa Gorbachev, Ceaușescu's wife seemed to mark a new political style, more relaxed and attentive to individual values" (Petre 1995, 265).

Moreover, she made a break with tradition: she was selling the idea that she succeeded owing to her professional competence, creating the illusion of a ruling elite being recruited based on merit. The political and economic emancipation of women formed part of the mythic history of socialist women fabricated during the Ceaușescu regime, and Romania's transformation could not happen without a New Woman, whom Elena was now embodying. Consequently, the propaganda campaigns promoting the inclusion of women in the labour force and politics after 1973 were motivated, according to some authors, by two main factors: the demand for additional labour force and the need to legitimize the scientific career of Elena Ceaușescu (Kligman 1998, 129).

By 1979, when her personality cult entered a new, absolutist, phase, Elena Ceaușescu had accumulated a solid symbolic capital, being presented as a person who harmoniously combined the qualities of a wife, a mother, a revolutionary, a scientist and a politician (Olteanu 2004). By 1979, she turned from a mere background presence into an important social figure. However, before her legend could be created, the gaping void in her legitimacy had to be filled, at least at a discursive level. Her husband had already been a legitimate leader when he became head of the party; her cult, by contrast, depended both on external and on internal factors: firstly, her scientist image floated on the quicksand of falsehood, duplicity and ignorance; secondly, she had to come second to the leader. Since every personality cult is in fact a mythology, the Ceaușescu couple fitted perfectly into a coherent and hierarchical mythological system: "Nicolae Ceaușescu was the supreme almighty god, and his wife was a demigod" (ibid.).

In spite of the fact that her formal education was basic – she did not have a college degree, and her ignorance was appalling⁴ – Elena was presented as a scientist, and she was awarded a PhD in chemistry. In the early 1960s she was secretary of the party committee of the Bucharest-based Central Institute for Chemical Researches and, when her husband assumed leadership of the party in March 1965, she became head of the Institute. The same year she was elected a member of the newly-established National Council of Scientific Research and a year later, in 1966, she was awarded the Order of Scientific Merit First Class. In 1974 she became member of the Romanian Academy's Section for Chemical Sciences. During the period when her husband ruled Romania, Elena received many honorary awards for scientific achievement in the field of polymer chemistry. Every international visit of Nicolae Ceaușescu brought an international scientific title for her. Thus, official propaganda tried to sway the nation into believing that Elena Ceaușescu was a pioneer of Romanian chemistry (more in

⁴ As it came out after the fall of the communist regime, all her scientific papers had been penned by others.

Olteanu 2004), and the label “scientist of world renown” (Rom. *savant de renume mondial*) was automatically attached to her name.

Even though she frequently accompanied her husband on his official visits abroad, it was not until 1971 and their visit to the People’s Republic of China that she began to engineer her own political rise. For Elena, this journey, during which she had the chance to see how Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao Zedong’s wife, exerted control over many of China’s political institutions, including the media and propaganda, was a real *political epiphany* which accelerated her political rise (Ducret 2013, 158). In 1972 Elena Ceaușescu became a full member of the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee and a year later, in 1973, she was elected to the party’s Executive. In 1975, she was elected to the Grand National Assembly, the country’s national legislature, and in 1980 she was made First Deputy Prime Minister, a title invented just for her, which she bore until she was executed in 1989.

Having successfully implemented the lessons she learned from Jiang Qing in 1971 and fascinated by her political jargon, Elena apparently decided to follow in the steps of another woman of power in order to polish her image, Isabel Peron. Hence she took a trip to Buenos Aires in 1973, where she was struck by the life path of this former dancer who became vice-president alongside her husband in the September 1973 election (ibid. 161). She adopted from Peron the image of a compassionate mother to become the “Mother of the Nation” herself. Thus, perhaps as a result of these encounters, or because the propaganda architects became aware of the artificiality of two previously promoted aspects of her image (politician and scientist), they introduced a unifying, human component: a woman, a mother, even a daughter of the nation (as Nicolae Ceaușescu was “the most beloved son of the nation”), adding to all these the attribute of exceptionalism. From the 1980s, Elena Ceaușescu becomes omnipresent at public events; in widely-distributed official photographs she is usually dressed in white and surrounded by children and doves. Television cameras covering the couple’s official visits to villages or factories record an immutable ritual: children welcoming them with bread and salt, Elena thanking them and caressing them lovingly. More and more, she becomes holy Elena, mother of the Romanian fatherland and of all Romanian children (ibid. 163).

Marry Ellen Fischer, a US expert on Romania and keen observer of Ceaușescu’s leadership, pointed out that Elena, unlike her husband, lacked credibility in the country: “Despite the praise heaped upon her by the Romanian press, Elena Ceaușescu is not a popular personality in most of the country. She does not project the practical competence and concern of an Eleanor Roosevelt or the mystical charm and beauty of Eva Peron. Although Nicolae Ceaușescu’s image has become extremely ostentatious and lacking in credibility, it remains more palatable than hers; at least, Romanians say, he *earned* his high office, rising to the pinnacle of power through hard work and political skill. She, on the other

hand, is regarded as the undeserving beneficiary of his generosity. She does have the revolutionary credentials as a textile worker and communist activist in the 1930s, but those activities are not as documented as her extravagant use of furs and designer fashions in the 1970s and 1980s" (Fischer 1989, 172).

If Nicolae Ceaușescu's life "started at 50", Elena Ceaușescu's public (and, we could add, mythical) life started at 60. It should be said, however, that she had the year on her birth certificate changed from 1916 to 1919, so as not to be older than her husband who was born in 1918 (Avram 2014). On the occasion of her first nationwide birthday celebration, on 7th January 1979, when she actually turned 63, the press stated that Comrade Elena was celebrating 60 years of life and 40 years of revolutionary activity (Olteanu 2004). After this date, her age was not to be mentioned any more. Her real age and appearance, as much as his, were to be concealed by using anniversary paintings or carefully retouched photographs in the printed press, or by shooting her from a distance and favourable angles, so her face could not be clearly discernible. Every image of hers was meticulously scrutinized before being approved for consumption by the wide audience.⁵

The 1980s were inaugurated by the advent of co-management of the Ceaușescu couple. By 1979, Elena Ceaușescu's cult had become merged with her husband's, and she was not referred to as his wife, but as a "*genius*" scientist in her own right. Lucian Boia finds the origins of Elena's cult in her and Nicolae's poor background. Linking their personalities together, their backgrounds exacerbated their frustrations and transformed them into megalomania, "which they fed and stimulated in each other" (Boia 2001, 127–128). Everything from the pharaonic style of buildings to the construction of cities which were supposed to completely replace "backward" villages had been symptoms of the presidential couple's complexes and their belief that history was somehow obligated to reward their efforts. Boia's paradigm regarding the presidential couple can be summarized as follows: megalomaniac leaders driven by their background-

⁵ Dana Mustata quotes the former news desk deputy chief editor at Romanian television, Teodor Brateș, who recalls the Ceaușescu couple watching the broadcast of a meeting between Bulgarian President Zhivkov and Ceaușescu: "After they saw the televised images on their home screen, a scandal blew up as they found themselves looking old, wrinkled and gesticulating inappropriately. Those involved in filming the event were threatened with the most severe sanctions. However, a screening of the filmed materials held at the public broadcaster showed the opposite: the dictatorial couple had been filmed from a distance, from favourable angles and were by no means misrepresented. Upon closer investigation, it eventually turned out that the images watched by the dictatorial family on their home screen belonged to Bulgarian television, and their confusion had been exacerbated by the fact that towards the end of their regime the two were interested only in images, wanting to look good and to be admired by the masses, and therefore muted the sound on their television sets" (Mustata 2013a: 117).

related pathology and sustained by the Romanian historical and cultural legacy of passivity (Grec 2016, 53).

Romanian television as a propaganda medium

Mass-media were instrumental in making the Ceaușescu into idols. There were several vehicles for the propagation of their personality cult, such as homage volumes, gramophone records, films, TV and radio programmes, events around 23th August and homage events in the country and abroad (Marin 2016), but it was the printed press and television which had a decisive role. By the 1980s, both the printed media and television propagated their personality cult more than anything else. Paradoxically, this led to their detachment from the social reality in the country as well as from the growing civil hostility towards them (Mustata 2013a: 111).

The Romanian state television (TVR) was launched on 31st December 1956 (and at that point was combined with radio). The period from the mid-1960s until the end of the 1970s was the golden age of Romanian television: investments in equipment and personnel were made, genres greatly diversified, television reporting and investigative journalism developed, a second channel was added. However, at the end of the 1970s TVR entered its dictatorial phase, which lasted throughout the 1980s. Programmes became politicized and were made to please the dictator Ceaușescu; the diversity of genres was reduced to political programming alone and broadcast content became scarce. The second channel, added in 1968, was shut down in 1985, as were the TVR local stations. Being aware of the enormous potential of television, power holders cut down broadcast hours to a minimum, which in the second half of the 1980s amounted to two hours a day. In that way the censorship and propaganda departments were able to take full control over television content (more in Mustata 2013a; Matei 2013).

The exceptionalism of Romanian television among the other socialist televisions in Europe transformed it, in the second half of the 1980s, into the most absurd mass-media institution on the continent. It broadcast 20–30 hours a week (less than in 1965), most of which was black and white (a unique case in all of Europe) and devoted to the activity of the presidential couple. Even if the rise of Ceaușescu's personality cult, which peaked in the 1980s, was probably the main trigger for this dictatorial phase of Romanian television, the economic crisis the country was experiencing at the time should not be underrated either (Mustata 2013a, 107). However, with its outdated equipment, enormous delay in introducing colour broadcasting, and dull programming, TVR faced stagnation or even regression long before the Romanian economic crisis broke out.

The last decade of totalitarian power in Romania was characterized by television and other media being under the personal control of Nicolae and

Elena Ceaușescu themselves. Towards the end of the 1980s, television had only one role: to trumpet the Ceaușescus' invincibility and support their idolization. In line with this, broadcasts made systematic use of visual codes and clichés that underlined their personality cult. Be it the coverage of one of Ceaușescu's work visits, the celebration of a national event or the inauguration of a new factory, a common denominator for most broadcasts was the presence of masses of people made up of tiny, undifferentiated human figures paying homage to the heroes, waving scarves in the colours of the Romanian flag and singing patriotic songs (Mustata 2013a, 115). Through the use of such visual representation, the two Ceaușescus were identified as beloved leaders, cherished by all and distinguished for their personal and social merits.

As the video archives of Romanian television are still difficult to access, my findings are based on the analysis of the TVR Sunday to Saturday listings magazine, *Tele Radio*.⁶ As Elena Ceaușescu was born on 7th January, I shall focus on the week in January containing this day to determine at which point in time and to which extent the homage TV shows broadcast for her birthday influenced state television programming. I shall also examine the other January days infused with meaning in the new communist calendar, and the treatment they were given in the printed press.

A shift in orientation and intensified communist propaganda meant to support Ceaușescu's personality cult can be detected even by analysing the front page of the TV listings magazine. If between 1968 and 1975 it mainly featured photographs of famous entertainers, people of culture, TVR newscasters or just artistic images, in the second half of the 1970s the front cover was monopolized by photographs of industrial or agricultural workers. From 1983 on, text prevails: slogans and incentives to peace and work or previews of the ever more numerous TV programmes boosting the cult of personality of the two Ceaușescus. This is also the year when Nicolae Ceaușescu's portrait was first featured on the front cover on his birthday, 26th January.⁷ It should be noted that Elena Ceaușescu's portrait never appeared on the front cover, only inside the TV magazine.

The adulation lavished on Ceaușescu's was ubiquitous in TVR programmes, with the exception of its entertainment content which, however, was almost non-existent in the last years of communist rule. On Sundays, when the daily broadcasting time was the longest, the first programme, *Lumea copiilor* (Children's world), featured a "literary-musical-choreographic show" called *Suntem copiii Epocii de Aur* (We are the children of the Golden Age) or an editorial titled *Cutezători, pășim pe drumul de glorie* (We bravely march on the road of glo-

⁶ Initially a radio listings magazine, it was called *Programul de radio*, and then, with the advent of television, *Programul de radio și televiziune*. Between 1968 and 1982, its name was *Radio-TV*, and after this date it became *Tele Radio*.

⁷ Personal communication of Vasile Isache, <http://tvarheolog.wordpress.com>.

ry), which were mainly devoted to praising the leader. There followed two short shows of 15–20 minutes, *Sub tricolor la datorie* (On duty under the tricolour) and *Viața satului* (Village life), both containing moments devoted to the directives of comrade Ceaușescu, which did not leave too much time for the nominally announced topics. The afternoon show *Album duminical* (Sunday album) featured patriotic songs, poems or choreographies, ending the first part of the Sunday programmes. After a four-hour break, programmes resumed with the first news bulletin (*Teledin*), which invariably started with Nicolae Ceaușescu's activities: work visits, receptions of ambassadors, congratulatory telegrams, or record agricultural production per hectare etc. The prime-time show was *Cântarea României* (Singing of Romania), a cluster of cultural events organized by the Council for Socialist Culture and Education with the aim of promoting mainly folk art and artists, but also choral music. In the second half of the 1980s, the slogan of this show was *Omagiu țării și conducătorului iubit* (Homage to the country and its beloved leader): each administrative region of Romania prepared such a show once a year, as a present to the presidential couple.

Apart from Sundays, however, tribute shows to Ceaușescu were aired all the other days as well: Monday – *Ce-ți doresc eu ție, dulce Românie* (What I wish for you, sweet Romania), patriotic and revolutionary songs; Tuesday – *Țara îți făurește visul* (The country is fulfilling your dream), patriotic and revolutionary songs; Wednesday – *Trăim decenii de împliniri mărețe* (We live in decades of great accomplishments), a 30-minute “literary-musical-choreographic show”, and *Tu cântăm, iubită țară!* (We sing of you, beloved country), Romanian popular music; Thursday – presenting the winners of the national festival *Cântarea României*; Friday – *Copiii cântă patria și partidul* (Children singing of the homeland and the party); Saturday – *Țara sub tricolor, sub roșu steag* (The country under the tricolour flag, the red flag). The two hours of broadcasting per day in the second half of the 1980s would also squeeze in 15-minute documentaries (the average length of a TV show in this period) on the builders of the Golden Age, the beauty of the homeland, Romanian glorious history, the Nicolae Ceaușescu era – an era of great revolutionary accomplishments, Romanian education, research and production, Romania in the world etc.

Elena Ceaușescu's personality cult in the month of January

Expectedly, the personality cult would gain in intensity around the birthdays of the two Ceaușescus, the national holidays – 23rd of August (marking the 1944 overthrow of the pro-fascist government of Marshal Ion Antonescu) and 1st of May (Labour Day) – and the RCP congresses.⁸ As for Elena Ceaușescu, she also

⁸ The propagandistic delirium reached its culmination in November 1989, on the occasion of the 14th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party. For whole seven days, TVR broad-

confiscated 1st and 8th March, days honouring mothers and women. After 1983, almost the whole month of March was dedicated to the "Mother of the Nation", honoured through the *Omagiu* TV shows (music or poetry shows meant to glorify her qualities as a woman, mother and wife, but also as the foremost scientist of the country and a remarkable politician). The printed media were even more crammed with echoes of the birthday, as the available print space remained more or less the same,⁹ while the broadcast hours were drastically reduced. If March, traditionally women's month, was confiscated by Elena Ceaușescu, January was monopolized by both Ceaușescus. It is remarkable, however, how the communists seized this month, on TV and in the mass-media in general.

The public observance of Christmas, the most important religious holiday in Romania alongside Easter, was tacitly banned in the communist period when concepts such as religion or Jesus Christ were erased from the vocabulary. As atheism became state religion, the birth of Jesus was replaced by the New Year's Eve; the Christmas holidays – by the winter holidays; Christmas carols – by patriotic songs; *Moș Crăciun* (Father Christmas) – by his communist counterpart, *Moș Gerilă* (Grandfather Frost), who arrived not on 24th December, but on 1st January, which also became the new date for decorating not the Christmas tree, but the winter tree. However, in spite of official discourse, the tree was usually decorated ahead of time in almost every home, but kept away from the window, lest someone see it, and the family would reunite around the Christmas table, in accordance with tradition. Christmas was a silent holiday, still celebrated but behind closed doors. To compensate for this erasure of traditional holidays and for emptying this season of symbolic substance, the New Year's Eve was magnified and made into the most important day of the winter season. As it provided an opportunity to list the accomplishments of the Party and set new goals for the upcoming year, it was propagandistically exploited to the maximum. As far as television goes, though, the three days around the turn of the year offered a densely packed programme which included not only politi-

cast only internal news bulletins, homage shows, documentaries and coverage of the huge communist meeting, meant to celebrate the great socialist victories in Romania. No art film, no theatrical production, no entertainment, no cartoons were broadcast in their traditional Saturday or Sunday time slots, making Romania look more like a country in mourning than in a celebration mode (personal communication of Vasile Isache, <http://tvarheolog.wordpress.com>).

⁹ For example, the *Scântea* issue of 8th March 1984 was a festive one meant to celebrate the mothers and women of Romania, but there was only one object of the panegyrics: Elena Ceaușescu, the woman. She was celebrated on all the pages of the newspaper: her scientific contribution, her worldwide renown, her books published in the country and abroad, her qualities as an ideal woman, mother, daughter of the country (personal communication of Vasile Isache, <http://tvarheolog.wordpress.com>).

cal but also entertainment content. In the 1980s, these three days were the apex of RTV programming, practically the only days RTV was worth watching.

Admittedly, January was the month with the biggest potential for inventing communist traditions. Being the first month of the year was heavily significance-laden in itself. With Christmas having been pushed aside, after the grand celebration of the New Year's Eve, the communist year could begin, commitments for the following months could be made. As far as anniversary dates are concerned, January abounded in them. First, there still were echoes of the declaration of the People's Republic of Romania from the end of December,¹⁰ both in the printed press and on TV. Second, an important date that the communists appropriated and included in their new calendar was 15th January, the birthday of Mihai Eminescu, a Romantic poet often regarded as the greatest Romanian poet. Third, and most important, the birthdays of both Ceaușescu were in January, which fitted perfectly into this new system of measuring (new) time.

If in the beginning the communists were hesitant regarding Mihai Eminescu, by the middle of the 1960s the poet had become a perfect symbol for the communist ideals to cluster around. After truncating the poet's work and eliminating from it fragments that lacked anti-capitalist overtones, after erasing references to the poet's anti-Semitic views from the *History of Romanian literature* and republishing his sanitized poems together with numerous volumes of praising literary critics, Eminescu's position as the supreme representative of Romanian spirituality was secured. After 1965, the universal character of the poet was strongly emphasized; it is not a coincidence that this offensive took place at exactly the same time as the large-scale campaign of promoting Romania at a global level which Ceaușescu undertook (Boia 2015, 165).

Like all other commemorations of important people, mainly rulers, from Romanian history, Eminescu's also had only one aim: to glorify Nicolae Ceaușescu and secondly, but not less notably, his wife, through a primitive method of mythological transfer: "All heroes of the nation were called, by turn, to warrant for and to support the most famous of them all, the one who was fulfilling the entire Romanian history" (ibid. 168). One of the literary figures in service of the communist government, Geo Bogza, in an acclamation to Mihai Eminescu, posed a rhetorical question: "How about starting counting the year, our year, from January 15?"; probably a subversive suggestion, as the birthdays of the two Ceaușescu were also in January (ibid. 164).

Nevertheless, the day of the poet's birth (and death), as it was commemorated on TV, did not have anything special in comparison to those of the presidential couple. After the drastic reduction of TV broadcast hours in the

¹⁰ The People's Republic of Romania was declared on 30th December 1947, after the forced abdication of King Mihai I of Romania. The country bore that name until 1965, when it was changed to the Socialist Republic of Romania.

first half of the 1980s, there was not much time for anything anyway: generally, Mihai Eminescu's commemoration would last 30 minutes. But, from November 1988 every Monday evening TVR broadcast 15 minutes of patriotic poems and songs under the title *Ce-ți doresc eu ție, dulce Românie* (What I wish for you, sweet Romania), Eminescu's line which became emblematic of the communist credo. This is also the moment when TVR programmes are re-extended to 3 hours per day.

After the country became the Socialist Republic of Romania in 1965, which put an end to the January commemoration of the declaration of the People's Republic of Romania, the first month of the year was further inflated, symbolically and propagandistically, on the small screens and in the printed press by adding one more celebration, which was to remain in the communist calendar until 1989: 26th January, Nicolae Ceaușescu's birthday. But it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that this new calendar became complete, by adding one more date: 7th January, Elena's birthday.

A comparison between the TV listings for the same day but different years, 1977 and 1987, shows the extent of the impact of her personality cult on TV programming (fig. 1 and fig. 2). As we can see, in 1977 TVR had two television channels (TV1 and TV2) and two radio channels. The 7th of January was a weekday that year, Friday. TV1 started broadcasting at 10:00 with *Teleşcoală* (TV school), as school children had their winter holiday. At 11:00, *Matineu de vacanță* (Holiday matinee) featured a Romanian movie for children followed by a five-minute news magazine with which the first part of programmes ended, at 12:25. The afternoon part started at 16:00 with a half hour of TV school, followed by a half hour of the French language course and by a 105-minute-long German language programme. There followed the 10-minute lotto draw, a music show of 25 minutes, and *1001 de seri* (1001 evenings), a children show of 10 minutes broadcast every evening between 1970 and 1980, featuring the *Mihaela* cartoons by the famous Romanian cartoonist and director Nell Cobar. The evening news, *Teledjurnal*, scheduled for 19:30, lasted half an hour, and was followed by 10 minutes of economic news. The evening movie, a French-Italian co-production, was followed by *Revista literar-artistică tv* (A literary-artistic TV review), world news and local news. The evening programming closed at 23:00. On the same day between 17:00 and 23:00 TVR's second channel featured Romanian folk and classical music, comedy, travel documentary, music, cartoons, news magazine, opera, moments from the history of Romanian science and the portrait of a Romanian painter. Elena Ceaușescu was nowhere to be mentioned on TV on her birthday in 1977.

The following year, 1978, broadcasting hours were already reduced: although 7th January was a Saturday, broadcasting started at 12:00, and not at 10:00 as it had before, but there still were no shows connected to Elena's birthday celebration. In 1979 we can notice the first attempts to put together a TV

[illegible]

Fig. 1 Romanian TV listings
for Friday, 7 January 1977
(courtesy of [http://tvarheolog.
wordpress.com](http://tvarheolog.wordpress.com))

schedule which would accommodate tribute programmes praising Romania's first lady. Even if the titles of the programmes in the TV listings for that day do not refer explicitly to Elena Ceaușescu, who was celebrating 60 years of life and 40 years of revolutionary activity, at least some of the shows or parts of the shows broadcast on that day were directly connected with her: *Vârsta de aur a chimiei românești* (The golden age of Romanian chemistry) – 15 minutes; *Prestigiul chimiei românești* (The prestige of Romanian chemistry) – 30 minutes; *Glas de bucurie* (The voice of happiness), a “literary-musical-choreographic show” – 60 minutes. This was dictated by the printed press (*Scânteia*) which marked the first national, public celebration of Elena with an “ardent homage from the party and the people” printed in red ink. This is the year which marks a change in her status: she becomes a heroine; after that date, the number of epithets attached to her name only grows.

However, TVR still had to wait a few years for the *Omagiu* format to take its final shape, on air and on the pages of the listings magazine. In 1984, the two-part format of the *Omagiu* show was already established: 1) a documentary about Elena Ceaușescu; and 2) a “literary-musical-choreographic show”. It lasted 70 minutes and was aired in prime time: 19:20–20:30. In 1985, when 7th January was on Monday, the broadcasting time was already cut down to only two hours a day (from 20:00 to 22:00), with *Omagiu* lasting exactly 60 minutes. In 1987, when Elena Ceaușescu’s birthday was on Wednesday, *Omagiu* occupied 75 minutes of the two hours of the total broadcasting time (see fig. 2). In

Fig. 2 Romanian TV listings for Wednesday, 7 January 1987 (courtesy of <http://tvarheolog.wordpress.com>)

Fig. 2 is a scan of a Romanian television listings magazine for Wednesday, 7 January 1987. The page is titled 'TELEZIUNE' and 'Miercuri 7 Ianuarie 1987'. It features a large advertisement for a TV show titled 'OMAGIU' (Homage) at 20.00, which includes a painted portrait of the Ceaușescu couple. Below this is 'DIN INIMĂ CÎNTIRE' (From the Heart, Singing) at 20.40. The RADIO section lists various radio programs, including 'RADIOPROGRAMUL DIMINEȚII' (Morning Radio Program) at 6.00 and 'RADIOJURNAL' (Radio Journal) at 12.00. The page also includes a small section for 'ROMANȚE ȘI MELODI ÎNDRĂGITE' (Romances and Beloved Melodies) at 21.35.

1988, the show lasted 70 minutes, and on 7th January 1989, Elena Ceaușescu's last birthday was celebrated with a 70-minute TV show, this time titled *Vibrant omagiu* (Vibrant homage). We can notice that the shorter the daily broadcasting time, the longer and more suffocating the homage shows devoted to Elena Ceaușescu.¹¹ In addition, more and more space in the TV magazine was allotted to the framed text which announced the show combined with a painted portrait of the Ceaușescu couple.

If at first no attention was paid to the way in which the names of Nicolae and Elena were printed, it later became a rule to print their names in capital letters and ensure that they were not split at the end of a line in order to avoid the risk of funny wordplays being made. From the first colour issue of the TV listings magazine in 1968 until the end of the 1970s, all colours were used, but from 1979, apart from black, only red and blue remained, probably to symbolize the Romanian flag (red, yellow and blue). The use of colours was only allowed for

¹¹ As Anikó Imre notices, unlike television in the United States which explicitly favoured the housewife receptive to advertising, socialist TV "targeted the man or masculine worker, who plops down on the sofa after a long day at the factory" (Imre 2016, 191). In the 1980s, however, Romanian television developed a strong propaganda agenda to promote the ideal socialist woman, modelled by Elena Ceaușescu: "Noi, femeile and *Universul femeilor* discussed agricultural work, the working woman, women leaders in different professions, the revolutionary woman and the many virtues of Elena" (ibid. 192). It must be said that these programmes are definitely older than the 1980s, but their agenda drastically changed these years.

the Monday, Wednesday and Friday pages. If Nicolae's or Elena's birthday were not on one of those days, the editors would squeeze two weekdays on the black and white pages, omitting several show titles, so that the greetings and the special birthday programme could be printed on a colour page.¹² If 23rd August or 1st May did not fall on a colour page day, then the whole magazine was printed in black and white.¹³ From the autumn of 1988, colour disappeared completely from the inside pages, and only remained on the magazine cover.

As TVR in the 1980s was reduced to a medium of broadcasting (for) Nicolae and later Elena Ceaușescu, with abundant representations of worship, shrunken broadcast hours, duller and duller programmes and no entertainment, the Romanian audience lost all interest in TVR and watching foreign televisions became a mass phenomenon (Mustata 2013b; Sorescu-Marinković 2010; 2012). The dictatorial couple became the directing figures behind TV programmes, the main actors on the small screen and, more than that, the target audience of TVR. As Radio Free Europe stated in 1985: "Romanian television has the rare privilege of being a private television, a state television representing the viewing taste of one family" (Mustata 2013a, 116).

After a decade of watching the seemingly forever young Ceaușescu couple on TV every evening, in December 1989 Romanians were taken aback to see how old the two looked on their last, unretouched, live appearance. The whole country watched dumbstruck Nicolae Ceaușescu's embarrassingly poor improvisation when he addressed the masses in Bucharest, a clear sign that the end of the "golden age" was drawing near. Symbolically, it was December, Christmas day, when they were executed.

Concluding remarks and implications

Elena Ceaușescu's personality cult developed alongside her husband's during the 1970s, taking an independent turn from the beginning of the 1980s. However, unlike him, she lacked legitimacy and credibility, and her cult was built on shaky ground. The propaganda apparatus tried to compensate for this by an aggressive glorification campaign. The Romanian television played a crucial role in the dissemination of her personality cult, after this institution became completely subjugated to the presidential couple and lost all of its functions, except as a propaganda medium. With its daily broadcasting time reduced to a minimum, the content of TV programmes was easy to control and the Ceaușescu couple

¹² In 1983, for example, the *Scântea* issue of 8th January echoes Elena Ceaușescu's celebration from the previous day by presenting two specialist volumes signed by her. In the following years, the headings and illustrations devoted to her on pages 1, 3 and 6 were in red ink.

¹³ Vasile Isache calls this situation "colour jealousy" (personal communication).

was an everyday presence on the small screens of all Romanians, completely monopolizing TV on anniversary dates.

On the other hand, the symbolic appropriation of the first month of the year by the communists may be seen as a model of inventive and efficient propaganda. Elena's birthday was preceded by the New Year's Eve and followed by two other important celebrations: the birthdays of Romania's national poet Mihai Eminescu and Nicolae Ceaușescu, which automatically included her among the most famous Romanians. After the Revolution of December 1989 which marked the fall of the Romanian communist regime, January as the month of invented communist tradition was disestablished and Elena, whose celebration was short-lived, was sent directly to the dustbin of history. Significantly, Mihai Eminescu's statue appeared on the cover of the first issue of the TV listings magazine printed after the fall of communism, and the head title read: "On the centenary of the death of the national poet, the Romanian people was born again".

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