



**The legacies of difficult pasts in Post-communist
Romania:
Spatialities of traumatic memory, (dis)connected politics of memory
and anti-Semitic social attitudes**

Sonia CATRINA

Research objectives

First, it seeks to contribute to existing research on the politics of memory in Eastern Europe, by considering the Romanian case and proposing a comparative analysis of a double-sided process of institutionalizing difficult pasts in post-communist period.

Second, the paper pays particular attention to the Holocaust and communist legacies, specifically by focusing on perceptions regarding the foundation in Bucharest of two National Museums, one of the Jewish History and the Holocaust, the other of Communism, and thereby makes a contribution to recent literature that examines the spatialities of traumatic memory reflecting a multidirectional exchange and critical encounter.

Hypotheses

We argue that the processes of publicly acknowledging Romanians' difficult pasts as a moral responsibility towards producing common identity references, and reinforcing the setting up of official memory through representation allow for a conflicting relationship among agents across time.

The underlying argument is that state-sanctioned historical narratives are challenged by social actions aimed at instilling a strong sense of nationalist feelings in the Romanian contemporary society which destabilize the process of building shared representations of the national suffering and losses inflicted by Nazism and communism.

Main axes of the paper

I. Nation-state, legitimacy and myths

I.1. Interplay of the national ethos with anti-Semitism: from the eighteenth century to 1945

I.2. Ethno-nationalist ideology and national historical amnesia: from 1945 to 1989

II. The legacy of the past and historical truth in Post-communist Romania

II.1. Coming to terms with Communist past and memory-work

II.2. The Emergence of the World War II past and politics of memory

III. Historical consciousness, historical sense-making patterns through heritage-making and distorted understandings of the past

III.1. Personal biases and misapprehensions of the role of the National Museum of Jewish History and of the Holocaust

III.2. Public and academic perceptions of the role of the National Museum of Communism

(Preliminary) Concluding remarks

WWII, Nation-state and Historical Truths

Official efforts to work through Romania's dark past

- **2003, October 22:** the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania is established on the initiative of President Ion Iliescu
- **2004, November 11:** the “Elie Wiesel” Report is handed to the President
- **August 2005:** the “Elie Wiesel” National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania is set up
- **Researchers revealed that Romania downplayed its role in the Final Solution and presented ways of collaborationism inside the Romanian society aimed at destroying the Jewish populations.**
- **2009, October 8,** inauguration of a “National Memorial to the Victims of the Holocaust from Romania” (project started in 2005)
- **From the moment the Final Report of the “Elie Wiesel” Commission is presented to President Ion Iliescu, except for some political statements, for more than 10 years there is no record of any concrete institutional proceeding for the construction of a museum dedicated to the history of Jews and of the Holocaust.**

- **In October 2014, “by initiative of and with the support of the Presidential Administration and the Romanian Government, a Consultative Committee was established with the purpose to produce a concept for a museum dedicated to the history, culture and traditions of the Jewish communities in Romania and of the Holocaust, as well as proposing solutions for realising it.”**
- **Law no. 217/2015 - “anti-legionnaire law” or “memory-law”**
- **In March 2016, President Klaus Iohannis makes two visits at the “Yad Vashem” Memorial of Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust (on the 8th of March) and at the Memorial Museum of the Holocaust in Washington D.C. (on the 31st of March). At the end of these visits, during the press conferences, President Iohannis reaffirmed the necessity to materialise, through the Romanian Government, a National Museum of History of the Jews and the Holocaust in Romania**
- **2016: Romania has taken on the chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance**

- **The 29th of September 2016 – Approval by Decision no. 285 of the General Council of Bucharest Municipality to give administrative rights over the building situated on 18-20 Lipscani Street, sector3, to the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania Elie Wiesel for creating a museum for the history of Jews in Romania. **The capital's City Hall was sued on the counts (27th of January 2017). After 2 years, the trial was lost by the City Hall and the Decision project became null (civil sentence no. 8140/06.12.2018).****
- **The 16th of May 2018 – Governmental Decision no. 334/2018 regarding the allocation of 3 million RON for starting the Contest for solutions regarding the design of the National Museum of History of the Jews and Holocaust in Romania.**
- **The 21st of September 2018 – The National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania Elie Wiesel announces the organising of the contest for solutions for designing the permanent exhibition and the additional spaces of the National Museum of History of the Jews and Holocaust in Romania.**
- **2019: February, March, April: The General Council of the Bucharest City Hall rejects the Decision for conceding a building for the Holocaust Museum**

- **The 7th of July 2019 – Federation of the Jewish Communities in Romania, about the Museum of the Holocaust: “This project should neither be politicised, nor demonetised!”**
- **The 8th of July 2019 – The Romanian Academy, in a press statement: “A National Museum for the History of Jews and Holocaust is ‘a fully justified cultural and historical act’, but conceding a piece of land from the Antipa Park ‘is completely inadequate and damaging’.”**
- **The 11th of September 2019 – PL-x nr. 356/2019 – Bill regarding the foundation of the National Museum of History of the Jews and Holocaust in Romania adopted by the Chamber of Deputies and sent for promulgation on the 19th of September 2019.**

Despite public manifestations of blocking a National Museum for the History of the Jewish People and Holocaust in Romani (protests, pickets, court actions), the Law concerning its foundation was promulgated by President Klaus Iohannis during a public ceremony on Tuesday, at 17.00 in the Unification Hall at the Cotroceni Palace.

<https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/album-foto/ceremonia-publica-de-promulgare-a-legii-privind-infiintarea-muzeului-national-de-istorie-a-evreilor-si-al-holocaustului-din-romania>



Although at the level of the institutional memory, of the legislation and state institutions one can notice significant changes regarding the Holocaust issue, the foundation of a National museum of Jewish history is still an unsolved issue.

Representations of the Communist Past and public expressions of collective memory

- **1993, Sighet, the first memorial to the victims of communism was to be born, called the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance.**
- **1999: the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (the authority that administrates the archives of the former communist secret services in Romania and develops educational programs and exhibitions with the aim of preserving the memories of victims of the communist regime).**
- **2005, December, the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (a governmental body which analyzes, investigates and supports public awareness on the history of communism in Romania through research, educational, publishing and museum projects; as a result of the National Institute for the Memory of Romanian Exile, 2004, & the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, 2005).**
- **2006, April, Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (on the initiative of President Traian Băsescu, headed by Vladimir Tismăneanu); December 2006 : Tismăneanu” Report is read by President Băsescu in Parliament**

The museum of communism remains still at the stage of a legislative project even after 30 years from the Revolution. Between 2012 and 2017, there were 6 bills regarding the founding of such a museum:

1) 2012 February the 20th – Bill (1) – PL-x no. 250/2012 – Bill regarding the foundation of the “Museum of Communism” (rejected)

2) 2013 November the 4th – Bill (2) – PL-x no. 687/2013 – Bill for returning to state administration of the “Casa Radio” building on Calea Plevnei, Bucharest, with the purpose of building a conglomerate of museums and conference halls, including the “Communist Dictatorship Museum” (rejected)

3) 2014 April the 28th – Bill (3) – PL-x no. 515/2014 – Bill for the foundation of the “Museum for the History of Totalitarianism” – (rejected)

4) 2015 March the 4th – Bill (4) – Pl-x no. 582/2015 – Bill for the foundation of the “Museum of the Communist Horrors in Romania”. **Subsequently, it became Law no 157/25th of July 2019.**

5) 2016 February the 2nd – Bill (5) – Pl-x no. 117/2016 – Bill concerning the foundation of the “Museum of the Communist Dictatorship” in the “Casa Radio” building, at 174-176 Știrbey Vodă Street in Bucharest. From the 31st of October 2017 the law is on the Chamber of Deputies roll, recommended to be rejected.

6) 2017 June the 12th – Bill (6) – Pl-x no. 410/2017 – Bill for the foundation of the “National Museum for the Victims of Communism” – As of May the 29th 2019, the bill is on the Chamber of Deputies roll, recommended for rejection.

(Preliminary) Concluding remarks on entangled memories and biased perceptions on Romania's recent difficult pasts

- **Lack of official statement regarding the past which gives an official stamp of legitimacy to particular versions of memory in post-communist Romania**
- **Symmetry between the Nazi crimes and the communist crimes impacts on the process of “coming to terms with the traumatic pasts” (Tismăneanu, Iacob, 2015) in the Romanian democratic society**
- **Minimization of the wartime crimes against Jews undermines the discourse about historical and moral responsibilities**

- **“Martirolology competition” (Michael Shafir, 2003, 2007) between Nazism and communism divides Romania in terms of memory, showing the extent to which the forging of public memory is embedded in ideological debates.**
- **Lack of nation-state’s determination to institutionalize the memory of Romania’s recent past leaves room for nationalistic feelings articulated through language (in various statements and declarations) and practices expressing disapproval, contestation or objection to official decisions (protests, court actions), as expressions of social responsibility towards the institutionalization of public memory.**



Failure of nation-state to properly re-enact its twentieth-century past, through the production of consensual narratives of its dark pasts.

Thank you!

Sonia CATRINA

soniacatrina@gmail.com