Chapter 2
Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Communist Romania

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Abstract The present chapter focuses on the first ethnic conflict in post-communist East-Europe, which took place in the Transylvanian region of Romania. Violence between Romanian and Hungarian ethnics sparked shortly after the general enthusiasm generated by the removal of Ceauşescu’s dictatorship, whereas ethnic reconciliation progressed while the Romanian economy was severely deteriorating. What factors have made possible the March 1990 ethnic conflict? And how can we explain the positive evolution of the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic relationships afterward? The chapter maintains that the interaction between demographic (i.e., a relatively large youth cohort) and economic factors (i.e., severe and prolonged economic hardships) led to Ceauşescu’s overthrow. This event, together with the national ideologies that conditioned Romanians and Hungarians to fear and hate each other created a volatile psychological atmosphere that was tragically manipulated by local elites and lead to the outbreak of conflict. On the other hand, the difficult socio-economic conditions of the transition period created the grounds for essential social identity changes from mainly autarchic to strongly pro-Western. The development of a pro-European orientation during the transition period had positive effects on Romanian-Hungarian interethnic relations through several social psychological processes and raised a significant barrier against intolerance and extremism.

Keywords Romania • Ethnic violence • Social identity • Nationalism • Communism
The first ethnic clashes in post-communist South East Europe took place in the Transylvanian region of Romania, in which most of the country’s 1.4 million large Hungarian minority is concentrated. Shortly after December 1989, when Romanians and Hungarians joined their forces to overthrow Ceaușescu’s regime, tensions between the two ethnic groups began to escalate. Three months later, they erupted most violently and visibly in the town of Târgu Mureș, where bloody street confrontations resulted in several dead and hundreds injured. Although the post-communist economic and political situation in Romania turned for worse, the conflict did not spread and the two ethnic groups moved toward reconciliation.

Two key questions arise: Why did the conflict happen immediately after the general enthusiasm generated by the fall of the communist dictator? Why did the conflict remain limited in spite of deteriorating socio-economic conditions? What processes made the conflict and the subsequent reconciliation possible? Peace psychology approaches such questions by focusing on both macro and micro level processes, and by taking into account the interaction of several social, cultural, and historical factors (Christie, 2006). The present chapter embraces the inherent complexity of this field of inquiry and uses models from several social disciplines to study the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict. The chapter will first focus on the larger picture of intergroup violence in post-communist Romania and analyze if and how a series of macro level factors can account for the general wave of social violence that engulfed Romania in the first 2 years after the fall of Ceaușescu. In the second part, the chapter will zoom in on psychological changes in terms of fundamental ideology and national identity changes to help us better understand the waxing and waning of ethnic violence in post-communist Romania.

**Zoom Out: The Demographic-Economic Account**

In order to properly understand the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict we have to place it into the larger picture of the situation in post-communist Romania. Two observations are crucial in this respect.

First, after Ceaușescu’s fall, Romania was shaken not by one but by many violent episodes of collective violence. The most important was in December 1989. Of the 1,104 victims of the Romanian revolution, only 14% died during the riots that led to the overthrow of the dictator. The vast majority died after the political power was seized by the National Salvation Front (Siani-Davies, 2007). In the next years there were also six “minerias” or violent incursions of miners in Bucharest. The new political structure used miners as a shock force to repress political opposition and to disperse anti-communist protesters. The number of victims is highly disputed. According to the official count the number is smaller than ten while according to some newspapers and NGOs the number is higher than 100 (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010). Moreover, the post-communist period was also marred by many collective aggressions against the marginalized Gypsy/Roma minority that resulted in a dozen dead and hundreds of houses burned or destroyed (Haller, 2009).
Second, these conflicts followed the same dynamics: violence was most intense in the first 2 years after regime change and then it gradually dissipated (with a notable exception in 1999). For example, four out of the six mineraiads happened between 1990 and 1991. Similarly, of the 17 significant mob attacks against Roma recorded during the transition period, 13 happened between 1990 and 1991 and the rest until 1995. The first 2 years also accounted for 88% of the almost 300 houses burned or destroyed during these attacks (Haller, 2009).

The synchronous evolution of social violence in post-communist Romania implies that, behind their particularities, these conflicts probably could have been shaped by the same forces. If so, of what kind of processes do we talk about? The most relevant conflict risks revealed by recent research do not apply to this case. For example, according to an accurate model of civil or ethnic violence onset, the most important predictor is, by far, the regime type, followed by infant mortality rates, bad neighborhood, and state led discrimination (Goldstone et al., 2010). However, 2 years before the onset of civil and ethnic violence Romania was a full autocracy (i.e., the least risky regime type), had an infant mortality rate that placed it at the safe 36th percentile, and had no neighbors with ongoing conflicts (troubles in Yugoslavia and Transnistria had begun afterwards). The only risk factor that cannot be entirely ruled out, that of state led discrimination, was not significantly associated with adverse regime changes in the analyses of Goldstone and his colleagues.

While such facts give more weight to the assertion that Romania is one of the most idiosyncratic former communist countries (Linz & Stepan, 1996), a closer examination of Romanian society indicates, nevertheless, two potential sources of the onset of intergroup violence and one potential cause of violence waning. These factors are: (1) a relatively large youth cohort (an anti-abortion decree from 1966 increased Romania’s birth rates twofold in just 1 year), (2) a severe economic crisis (the economic deprivations endured by the Romanian citizens during the last decade of the communist regime), and (3) massive migration (millions of Romanians left their countries after Ceaușescu’s fall in search of a better living abroad).

**Demography**

Social scientists have often suggested that youth bulges (i.e., very large proportions of youths relative to the adult population) increase the likelihood of violent social conflicts (Goldstone, 2001). While most researchers have explained this relationship by focusing on macro-level variables like economic and political structures and processes (Urdal, 2006), some have underlined the importance of socially or evolutionary shaped psychological processes that are activated by large youth cohorts (Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004; Mesquida & Wiener, 1996). For example, according to dominant economic approaches youth bulges could increase the likelihood of violent conflicts by lowering recruitment costs for rebellions (Collier, 2000). On the other hand, from a behavioral ecology perspective youth bulges lead to social violence because young men become more likely to form aggressive coalitions to gain access to reproductive resources (Mesquida & Wiener, 1999).
On October 1st 1966, desperate to increase Romania’s population at all cost, Nicolae Ceauşescu signed a decree that banned abortion and contraceptives and punished with higher taxes those who did not have any children. As a result of this decree, natality increased rapidly. Actually, it doubled in just 1 year (Pop-Eleches, 2006). Is it possible that by signing that infamous decree Ceauşescu generated a demographic tsunami that would lead, two and a half decades later, to violent social conflicts?

While the decree clearly had a significant demographical effect, it only worked on the short run and, eventually, could not stop the ageing of an increasingly urbanized Romanian population. If we do the math for the year 1990 we can see that Romania’s youth cohorts do not reach the critical thresholds advanced by various authors. If we operationalize the youth bulge as the proportion of 15–29 young males relative to the total population of 30+ male adults, we get a value of only 45% which is below the danger threshold of 60% advanced by Mesquida and Wiener (1996). When defining the youth bulge as the proportion of 15–24 years olds relative to the total population and use the 20% threshold (Huntington, 1996), we get 17.14%. Finally, if we compute the youth bulge as the proportion of 15–29 years olds to the total adult population and use the 40% threshold, we get a value of 29.79% which actually places Romania at the border between the low and medium demographic stress categories (Cincotta, Engelman, & Anastasion, 2003). To conclude, if interpreted strictly from the point of view of a threshold value, the youth bulge approach cannot account for the collective violence that swept Romania two decades ago. There were simply not enough “children of the decree”.

According to Mesquida and Wiener (1996), when a society experiences significant episodes of collective violence in spite of a small or medium proportion of young men, it most probably means that the general statistics hide an important youth bulge among one or more of its subgroups. Nevertheless, in Romania the only ethnic group that stands out from this point of view is the Roma minority, where, for example, the proportion of youth is twice as large as that of the Romanian or Hungarian ethnic groups (Rădulescu, 2001). Although members of the Roma minority were involved in major episodes of collective violence, including the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict, they were, by far, marginal actors. Most often, Roma were victims of collective attacks. It seems extremely unrealistic to attribute large scale events to the youth bulge of this small, marginalized, and highly discriminated ethnic group.

Nevertheless, youth bulges may not need to reach a specific threshold in order to elevate the risk of social violence. On the contrary, their effects could be continuous and moderated by other variables (Urdal, 2006). For example, the violence risks associated with large youth bulges can be reduced by education (Barakat & Urdal, 2009) or kept under control by harsh totalitarian regimes (Mesquida & Wiener, 1996). On the other hand, the effects of medium youth bulges could be potentiated by aggravating variables. One such variable present in Romania could have been the economy.
**Economy**

Periods of economic hardships are usually associated with collective violence. In one of the earliest tests of the frustration-aggression hypothesis, Hovland and Sears (1940) used a dataset covering almost 50 years to analyze the relationship between the status of the economy and intergroup violence in 14 U.S. southern states. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis the frustration generated by blocked goals can lead to aggressive behaviors. During economic recession more people are likely to experience economic frustrations, and the aggression generated by these frustrations could be directed against convenient scapegoats. Consistent with these assumptions, they found that when the economy went down (e.g., lower cotton prices) the lynching of African-Americans went up (see also Hepworth & West, 1988). Similarly, based on the analysis of the relationship between weather, economic growth, and witchcraft trials in 11 regions of Europe during 1520–1770, Oster (2004) found that witch persecution was highest during the coldest years. Bad weather led to repeated crop failures and food shortages and people’s aggression was channeled by the prevalent cultural beliefs toward those who, allegedly, had both the power and the motivation to change weather in a deadly manner (see also Behringer, 1995, 1999, for an historical account).

During the last decade of the communist regime, Romanians had to endure severe economic hardships. Although the national economy grew constantly during the first years of communist regime, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s a series of unfavorable international evolutions (e.g., the Iranian crisis), natural catastrophes (e.g., the devastating earthquake from 1977), and especially bad economic strategies and decisions (e.g., the politics of economic self-sufficiency) reversed this trend and shattered to pieces the dictator’s dreams of “multilateral development”.

The life quality of the average Romanian citizen was most decisively affected by Ceaușescu’s determination to repay the entire external debt in a short period of time based on a strategy of export maximization and import minimization. His regime pursued this economic goal at the cost of rationing most of the basic commodities and of enforcing other severe austerity measures. In the last years of the dictatorship the personal monthly ration of many Romanian citizens came to consist of quantities like five eggs, one kilo of flour, one kilo of sugar, and some margarine. They also had to cope with drastically restricted access to electricity, heat and gasoline (Deletant, 2003; Longworth, 1997). If we link these dire conditions to the existing literature on the relationship between economic deprivations and social violence it seems easy to understand why the first ethnic conflict in post-communist East Europe happened in one of its poorest countries. Nevertheless, if economic hardships alone or in combination with the medium youth bulge can explain some of the social violence that engulfed Romania in the first 2 years of post-communism then how is it that violence calmed down while the economic crisis deepen?
Migration

The main macro-level factor responsible for the unexpected pacification could be migration. After the fall of the communist regime the borders opened and, in the following years, many Romanians were able to leave the country in search for a better living elsewhere. According to the International Organization for Migration, Romanian emigrants represent 10–15% of Romania’s adult population. The typical emigrant is male, aged between 15 and 44, from urban areas, with a medium level of education (IOM, 2008). Similarly, according to Sandu (2006) one third of the Romanian families have at least one member who has emigrated for work. This translates to a total number of 2–3 millions of Romanians who left the country in three main waves: 1990–1995 (with an average migration rate of 2.8‰), 1996–2001 (with an average migration rate of 5.1‰), and from 2002 onwards, when the Schengen visa was lifted (the average migration rate between 2002 and 2006 was 19.76‰).

An account based on the interaction between economy and demography seems able to elucidate the onset of violence in Romania and the gradual pacification of this country in the ’90s. The scenario would be the following: the decree signed by the dictator in 1966 determines the formation of a relatively large youth cohort that in combination with severe and prolonged economic hardships activates social violence. Most of the violence is concentrated in a short period of time because after the fall of Ceauşescu the borders opened and millions of young and middle aged Romanian citizens left the country in search of a better living elsewhere, thus easing the pressure at home.

The Demographic-Economic Account and Romanian-Hungarian Ethnic Conflict

While this all encompassing scenario seems quite plausible, can it adequately explain the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict? According to Green, Glaser, and Rich (1998) because the aggressive impulses caused by frustrations have a rapid rate of decay, it is highly unlikely to document significant relationships between economic crises and collective violence unless political leaders or organizations systematically blame minorities for economic misfortunes, thus reactivating frustrations and directing attributions for responsibility against specific targets.

Whereas in Romania we cannot talk about any kind of beliefs that attribute economic misfortunes to Hungarians or any other minority, Schöpflin (1988, 1993) has argued that Hungarians were used as scapegoats by Ceauşescu’s regime. The problem seems mainly semantic, however, because he does not claim that Hungarians were held liable for Romania’s economic misfortunes, but rather that Hungarians were used to divert attention from such problems. Actually, it would be more appropriate to maintain that Ceauşescu used Hungarians as scarecrows, presenting them
as a serious danger to the territorial integrity of the country when this danger was, in fact, not significant (Boia, 2001).

Ceaușescu needed as many diversions as possible because the political system he built encouraged citizens to view the state and its ruler as the main factors controlling their economic well-being. Even today, public opinion surveys show that most Romanians perceive the state as the main factor that shapes their personal economic well-being and that their economic discontents are translated into weaker political support (Cernat, 2010a). Under these circumstances, the only plausible direct victim of Romanians’ economic frustrations seems the dictator himself.

There is another reason why the economic crisis does not seem well suited to explain the wave of social violence that engulfed Romania in the first 2 years after the fall of the communist dictatorship. Although those years were socio-politically agitated, economically they represented the eye of a hurricane, that is, a short period of apparent plenitude that was preceded by the mad economic policies of Ceaușescu and followed by the very painful effects of poorly planned reforms. Objectively speaking, the national economy was breaking apart, but subjectively life seemed better because the new political structures took measures to provide Romanians with adequate consumer goods and save appearances, at least for a short while (Demekas & Khan, 1991).

Thus, while the economic-demographic account adequately explains the onset of social violence in Romania (i.e., the anti-Ceaușescu riots), it seems less useful when trying to understand the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict and the other conflicts that engulfed the country after the overthrow of the dictator. However, while this approach cannot explain why the post-communist conflicts involved specific social groups, the very events that led to Ceaușescu’s fall created a highly volatile atmosphere (de Rivera, 1992) that could help us understand why the likelihood of social conflicts was elevated immediately after December 1989.

Two psychological effects seem most relevant in this respect. First, after decades of helplessness, the overthrow of Ceaușescu by mass demonstrations represented for Romanians an unexpected but strong expression of power. They rose up against an apparently inexpugnable tyrant and succeeded in bringing him down. From a psychological point of view, power is associated with action, those who possess power or are primed with power, increase their goal pursuit (Guinote, 2007) and action orientation (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). In such situations not only is the distance between thoughts and actions considerably reduced but people are more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) and to treat social targets instrumentally (Gruenfeld, Inesi, Magee, & Galinsky, 2008).

Indeed, the beginning of the transition period was the scene of all sorts of public demonstrations, when crowds were pouring in the streets even for problems that are normally solved through other methods. To illustrate using my own personal history, during that period I was in high school in Târgu Mureș and I remember vividly that we did not do much in school for a couple of months after the overthrow of Ceaușescu. On the contrary, we spent most of our time demonstrating for various causes, ranging from changing the head of school to expressing solidarity with the Romanian students from the Bolyai high school. It took very little to get people into
the streets and there was an obvious pleasure associated with this newfound exercise of collective power.

Second, it seems plausible to assume that the removal of Ceaușescu’s dictatorship not only activated the concept of power, but also intensified the perception that things previously considered as unlikely were actually possible and quite probable. The literature suggests that people are more susceptible to persuasion during stressful periods (Baron, 2000). If the unshakable regime of Ceaușescu went down, then why wouldn’t be possible for Hungarians to take over Transylvania, for foreigners to buy the country and so on? That is, it is likely that the temperature of the main fears cultivated by the communist regime rose considerably immediately after its fall.

These observations can help us understand why the psychological aftermath of December 1989 was explosive. However, in order to understand why there was violence between Romanians and Hungarians we need to identify the rifts that dominated the social psyche during that time. More specifically, we need to zoom in and focus on the beliefs and theories cultivated by the national communist ideology.

**Zoom in: History, Ideology, and Identity**

Psychologists interested in ethno-political conflicts have acknowledged that the nature and history of intergroup relations fundamentally shapes ethnic and national stereotype content (Bar-Tal, 1997). The relationships between Romanians and Hungarians are characterized by a long history of conflict that can be traced back as far as the early Middle Ages and has at its center Transylvania, a territory long disputed between the two groups and essential for their national identities.

Nevertheless, instead of describing a series of historical events and linking them to interethnic attitudes, I will focus on national ideological shifts. There are two main reasons for adopting this approach. First, objective events often do not correlate with subjective attitudes. For example, at the end of World War II, elements of the retreating Hungarian army in northern Transylvania committed a series of atrocities against the Romanian population. The official dead count is estimated at around 900 victims. These events are strongly active in the social memory of Romanians and have been used to justify negative attitudes toward Hungarians (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1999). Comparatively, the Allied forces bombardment of Romania or the forced instauration of the communist regime by the Soviets killed many more Romanians. However, both historical episodes are generally absent from the collective memory of Romanians, who endorse positive attitudes toward US and Britain and are nostalgic about communism. Second – and this can explain the previous point – history is often rewritten to serve the interests of socio-political elites. Next, I will shortly describe two major versions of Romanian identity and history, and how the national communist ideology laid down the psychological bases of the Romanian-Hungarian conflict.
Changing Foundational Myths and National Enemies

The construction of Romanian national identity relied heavily on historical myths (Kolarz, 2003[1946]). The myths were changed to serve pro-Western or autochthonist views, depending on the political ideologies and interests of those who controlled the country (Boia, 2001; Verdery, 1991).

When modern Romania was born at the end of the nineteenth century, its elites had a powerful pro-Western orientation and they defined national identity in terms of historical beliefs that were congruent with this ideological direction. The much emphasized origins myth that Romans and only Romans were the ancestors of Romanian people served to highlight the similarity between Romania and Western nations, to justify pro-Western political decisions and protect help from Western powers in the struggle for independence (Boia, 2001; Verdery, 1991). This myth also implied specific attitudes toward neighboring countries. For example, the central belief that Romanians are “a Latin island in a Slavic sea” (that is, a bastion of civilization in the midst of barbarity) was associated with political decisions characterized by feelings of superiority and hostility toward neighboring Slavic countries (Kolarz, 2003[1946]).

On the other hand, in order to compensate for severe economic failures and to legitimate the communist rule, Ceauşescu’s regime used a nationalist ideology that took the form of protochronism, that is, the belief that Romania had been a source rather than a recipient of foreign cultural values (Niessen, 2002; Verdery, 1991). This ideology brought to the forefront myths that could stress Romania’s distinctiveness, originality, and preeminence. Romanian identity was no longer linked to the West. On the contrary, Romans were rather depicted as imperialistic aggressors and were eclipsed by the Dacians as ancestors of the Romanian people. In spite of the scarce historical data, the kingdom of Dacia was depicted in glorious terms and placed at the center of the world, an image that closely corresponded to the role Ceauşescu envisioned for communist Romania (Boia, 2001).

Most importantly, Hungarians were now depicted as the main national enemy, constantly and efficiently conspiring to take over Transylvania. Such accusations represented an active attempt to divert Romanians’ attention from the serious internal problems faced by their country (Boia, 2001). Consistent with this view, the most intense political tensions between Romania and Hungary developed in the eighties, when Romania’s economic crisis reached its peak. During this period there were important social events (e.g., diplomatic expulsions) and both sides published many “historical” books that focused on outgroup atrocities against the ingroup.

Traditionally, these kinds of events have been politicized by the Romanian-Hungarian dispute over the legitimate “owner” of Transylvania, a territory that during the last century alone belonged to each side several times. The conflict led to the development of opposite theories, each serving the interests of the side that has elaborated or embraced it and being central for its national identity. In order to justify the idea that Hungarians were the first inhabitants of Transylvania and this territory rightfully belongs to them, Hungarian historians have adhered to a migrationist
theory, according to which Romanians arrived in Transylvania after the Hungarians settled in and started to build a Western like civilization. On the other hand, Romanian historians have stressed the idea of continuity, according to which Romanians have inhabited Transylvania long before the arrival of Hungarians, who conquered the land by military force, subduing and oppressing Romanians for centuries. Each theory justifies why the disputed territory belongs to the positively portrayed ingroup, promotes negative outgroup stereotypes, and emphasizes ingroup victimization.

The politic conflict of the eighties made these theories highly salient for the general public and they became widespread among both groups. Many Hungarians think that Romanians came in Transylvania as shepherds and they found here a civilization built by Hungarians. Later, the Romanians spread like “rabbits”, took over the control and are now discriminating and trying to assimilate the rightful “landlords”. At the same time, consistent with the view supported by Ceaușescu’s ideology, many Romanians believe that Hungarians conquered Transylvania centuries ago and oppressed their peaceful ancestors, and now, after Transylvania has been reunited with the rest of Romania, are conspiring to bring it back to Hungary (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1999).

There are two main reasons why we should expect such significant effects of the national communist ideology on Romanians’ beliefs and attitudes. First, the annihilation of the small urban anti-Bolshevik Romanian elite after the installation of the communist regime in Romania, coupled with the powerful migration of the largely illiterate rural population toward urban areas (the proportion of Romanians living in rural areas fell from over 80% in the 1940s to under 50% in the 1980s) created the grounds for easy ideological indoctrination. Second, under communist rule Romania had state controlled television, state controlled radio, state controlled newspapers, and state controlled textbooks. Even interpersonal communication was controlled to a large extent by the state, because people were constantly afraid that their conversations would be reported to the Securitate and that they would suffer negative repercussions if they expressed something undesirable for the regime.

Reciprocal Fear, Manipulation, and Mobilization

If we take into account the highly volatile atmosphere created by the fall of the dictatorship and the national ideologies that conditioned Romanians and Hungarians to fear and hate each other it is easy to understand why violent conflict between the two ethnic groups was imminent (Kelman, 1999).

The significance of ambiguous social events could have been easily colored and inflated by the strong reciprocal negative stereotypes built into the two conflicting ethnic identities and thereby escalated hostility. This is exactly what happened. For example, during the anti-communist demonstrations from December 1989, in some towns the crowds behaved with extreme violence against the regime’s officials, killing them and horribly mutilating their bodies. Nevertheless, whereas the events that
involved Romanians against Romanians were ignored (e.g., the killing of two policemen in Cugir), the events in which Hungarian demonstrators lynched Romanian policemen were interpreted not as actions directed against exponents of the repressive regime but rather as actions directed against Romanians (e.g., the killings from Târgu Secuiesc).

Nevertheless, whereas intuitively the interaction between the psychological aftermath of December 1989 and the strong negative interethnic attitudes seems sufficient to explain the onset of violence, in fact, the situation was complicated by an idiosyncratic feature of Romanian Hungarian interethnic relationships. Specifically, although most of the Hungarian minority is located in Transylvania, in the urban areas of Transylvania Romanians and Hungarians have good opportunities for contact. In contrasts, in the rural areas the population is ethnically homogeneous and opportunities for contact are lacking. As a consequence of the extensive and good quality interethnic contact, the Romanians with the most positive attitudes toward Hungarians can be found in the Transylvanian towns. On the other hand, Romanians from rural Transylvania have more negative perceptions of Hungarians (Cernat, 2010b). Given these circumstances, it follows that the escalation of conflict in the ethnically mixed town of Târgu Mureș from a small dispute over the ethnic composition of the Bolyai high school to deadly street fights needed more than an explosive psychological atmosphere and strong interethnic prejudice. Since the two groups were not segregated residentially or in other way, the escalation also needed significant mobilization.

After the fall of Ceaușescu, Romanian and Hungarian local elites struggled for the control of Târgu Mureș, a town that is almost evenly divided demographically between the two ethnic groups. Initially, the two sides were involved in an apparently harmless conflict: Hungarians negotiated with the central authorities to transform the ethnically mix Bolyai high school into a Hungarian lyceum. Locally, Romanians opposed this plan that involved the transfer of many Romanian students to other educational institutions. The demonstrations were largely peaceful at first (when involved local pupils and students) but turned deadly when inhabitants of neighboring rural villages were brought into the town to “save” the situation.

One essential tool used by local elites to attract the masses on their side was the appeal to historical symbols and events. Relevant in this respect is that a content analysis of the two local Romanian and Hungarian language newspapers published prior to and during the March 1990 ethnic conflict revealed a high frequency of articles on national history. Both newspapers provided a biased presentation of the historical information by focusing on outgroup oppressions in the past (Bodó, Cosmeanu, Máteffy, & Mărginean, 1995). A subsequent experiment showed that even a highly sanitized version of the information published in those days was enough to activate dangerous ethnic stereotypes (Cernat, 2001).

However, before the conflict, the social communication channels focused not only on historical oppressions but also attributed current negative intentions to the outgroup. For example, the local Romanian newspaper published articles that depicted Hungary as a threat to the territorial integrity of Romania. The slogans
chanted back then by the groups of demonstrators (e.g., “We die, we fight, we defend Transylvania!”) suggest that for those people, the conflict came to involve high stakes, namely an essential component of their national identity. From the point of view of the social identity theory of collective behavior (Drury & Reicher, 2000) during social events like the March 1990 demonstrations, people define themselves in terms of a common social identity, judging and acting based on its specific contents. The identities involved in this particular conflict were attributing very negative intentions to the other ethnic group and glorifying the historical characters that confronted it. Thus, once strongly prejudiced groups were brought into the town, violent confrontations were highly probable. The only thing that could have saved the situation – the determined intervention of authorities – happened only after the worst had been done.

Even though authorities eventually intervened to stop the fighting, few people were optimistic about the future evolution of ethnic relations in this region. Such attitudes were justified both by Romania’s unfortunate socio-economic trajectory and by the dramatic events that took place in other East-European countries. Nevertheless, the Romanian-Hungarian ethnic conflict was among the few that did not spread in this region of the world. On the contrary, shortly after the violent clashes from March 1990, the Romanian-Hungarian relations entered a definite positive path. What factors led to such a fortunate development?

Ethnic Reconciliation: The Post-Communist Identity Shift

While the post-communist migration phenomenon and the idiosyncratic interethnic contact opportunities can help us understand why the conflict did not spread, the picture would be incomplete without also taking into account the important ideological and identity shifts that marked the Romanian transition period.

Obviously, the beliefs and mentalities of the communist era did not vanish once the regime that promoted them collapsed. Actually, their influence can be identified even today (Cernat, 2010a; Krauss, 2002). Nevertheless, in the meantime, new orientations and ideas have emerged and they are shaping Romanian society. Most importantly, if at the beginning of the transition Romanians had strong isolationist and xenophobic attitudes, in a couple of years they came to be very proud of their European identity and among the strongest supporters of the European Union (Neculau, 2002).

What has prompted Romanians to rediscover their pro-Western orientation? And, more importantly, what effects has this development had on ethnic relationships in Romania? To answer the first question, I will focus on the serious economic, political and social difficulties experienced by Romanian society during the transition period. To respond to the second question, I will analyze several psychological processes through which the pro-Western orientation could have positively altered interethnic relations.
Socio-Economic Collapse and the Resurrection of the Pro-Western Orientation

Romania was the only communist country that took very seriously the Soviet idea of war industry, investing massively in huge industrial compounds that were not viable economically (Longworth, 1997). As a consequence of this and other strategic economic mistakes that I have already mentioned, Romania started the transition with a poor economic basis that offered few chances of rapid recovery. To make things worse, other negative external (e.g., the dissolution of traditional export markets) and internal (e.g., the slow pace of reforms) factors also took their toll. Consequently, it should not be surprising that Romania’s post-communist economic course was far more troublesome than other post-communist countries. These difficulties had severe repercussions on the quality of life of most Romanians, which has deteriorated almost continually. One of the most relevant statistics in this respect is that only in 2004 the Romanian GDP per capita reached the 1989 level, which itself was far from being adequate.

Social identity theory has been an essential tool for peace psychologists, helping them to understand various conflicts (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001). This also applies to the present case. According to social identity theory, people are motivated to preserve a positive self-esteem and one important source of positive self-regard is membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, a situation like that experienced by Romanians during the post-communist period is likely to threaten the positivity of their national identity. When ingroup status is low we defend ourselves by running away, performing cognitive evasive maneuvers, or fighting. That is, inadequate social identity can activate three major strategies: (1) individual mobility (i.e., distancing ourselves from the ingroup); (2) social creativity (i.e., redefining the situation by focusing on dimensions on which the ingroup is superior, on inferiors outgroups etc.), or (3) social competition (i.e., acting to change ingroup position) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Moreover, our responses are also affected by the status of the other groups to which we belong. Roccas (2003) demonstrated that low ingroup status leads to stronger identification with an alternative positive identity and more positive attitudes toward it. This social identity management response could explain why many Romanians have come to identify strongly with Europe and to endorse very positive attitudes toward this supranational category. Consistent with this hypothesis, Romanian students primed with negative features of the national economy reported greater identification with Europe and identification with this supranational category correlated positively with national identification (Cernat, 2003). Although no empirical studies have addressed this issue further, it seem reasonable to assume that other negative features of the national ingroup (e.g., political, cultural etc.) could also have led to stronger identification with Europe. To put it shortly, as the fruits of the autochthonist orientation grew more and more bitter, integration into a powerful and well governed supranational entity seemed brighter and brighter. This transformation was possible at a societal level in just a few years because the
pro-Western orientation was, historically speaking, an important force in the Romanian society and only had to be reactivated in the collective mythology rather than built from nothing.

Though the resurrection of the pro-Western orientation has clearly served important social identity motives it is important to stress that it also involves a utilitarian dimension. Cernat (2003) also found that Romanian participants primed with economic gains from EU membership showed more positive attitudes toward EU. Thus, the accentuation of similarities between Europe and Romania is not only about feeling better about the national ingroup. It is also about legitimizing integration claims and achieving important socio-economic goals.

**Pro-Western Orientation and Interethnic Tolerance**

The pro-Western orientation had a positive impact on Romanian Hungarian interethnic relationships through several basic mechanisms. First, researchers interested in the improvement of intergroup relations have often emphasized the importance of superordinate identities. According to self-categorization theory, superordinate categories, which include both ingroup and outgroup members, can have positive effects on intergroup bias. This is because the perception and evaluation of individuals depends on their group membership, and people tend to be more favorable toward those who belong to self-categories (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). When people frame the situation in terms of “we” rather than “us” and “them” outgroup members are brought closer to the self and this leads to less bias (Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989) and more positive intergroup behaviors (Dovidio, Gaertner, Validzic, Matoka, & Johnson, 1997). The integration of Romania and Hungary in the same supranational entity could have had such effects.

Second, when peoples’ group membership is salient, their thinking, feeling, and behavior will follow the ingroup prototype (Hogg, 2001). Therefore, social identities can also affect bias to the extent that their psychological correlates constrain outgroup perception and evaluation. Since the European identity is generally associated with norms and values encouraging tolerance and understanding between ethnic groups (Klein, Licata, Azzi, & Durala, 2003), it follows that it would positively affect intergroup relations through this correlates. Consistent with this view, an empirical study found that Romanians’ strength of European identification is positively related to attitudes toward Hungarians and that this relationship is mediated by pro-social values (Cernat, 2006).

Third, we also have to take into account that outgroup views are shaped by major social events (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001). In Romania, the process of European integration explicitly required concrete political and legal steps toward the better treatment of various minorities. A series of significant events, like the inclusion of the
Hungarian minority in the Romanian government or the signing of an important Romanian-Hungarian treaty, could have had positive effects on intergroup relations through a mechanism of dissonance reduction (i.e., people’s motivation to minimize the psychological discomfort generated by conflicting thoughts). That is, even though many people were not enthusiastic about such measures, as long as they were not voicing revolt, the conflict between intolerance and conformation to the new norms could have led to a reduction of prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998).

Finally, the temporary migration of millions of Romanians in Western Europe in the last two decades could have also led to the importation of more tolerant values and norms. However, whereas existing analyses confirmed that migration does significantly affect a range of personal values and priorities they failed to reveal important effects on general ethnic tolerance (Sandu, 2006). On the contrary, Sandu’s research only detected such beneficial effects for attitudes toward Hungarians. This particular result could be explained by the fact that the other groups included into the analyses (i.e., Gypsies, Arabs, and Jews) were more likely to be perceived as non-European.

The description of these processes does not imply that all ethnic tensions have been solved. Negative beliefs are still present. After all, the pro-European orientation is just one of the forces that drive Romanian society. However, it seems safe to conclude that its presence raised a significant barrier against ethnic violence and has encouraged the diffusion of more tolerant attitudes, at least toward the Hungarian minority.

Conclusion

The present chapter analyzed the waxing and waning of Romanian-Hungarian interethnic violence in post-communist Romania by focusing on both macro and micro level processes, and by highlighting both the commonalities and idiosyncrasies of the conflict as compared to other major episodes of social violence in Romania.

On the one hand, it maintained that the interaction between demographic (i.e., a relatively large youth cohort) and economic factors (i.e., severe and prolonged economic hardships) led to Ceaușescu’s overthrow. This event, together with the national ideologies that conditioned Romanians and Hungarians to fear and hate each other created a volatile psychological atmosphere that was tragically manipulated by local elites. On the other hand, the chapter argued that the difficult socio-economic conditions of the transition period created the grounds for essential social identity changes from mainly autarchic to strongly pro-Western. The resurrection of the pro-Western orientation had positive effects on Romanian-Hungarian interethnic relations through several social psychological processes and raised a significant barrier against intolerance and extremism.
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