Forging Europe Under Communist Eyes
The European Community, the COMECON, and Socialist Romania

Due to its sheer reality, the historical fait accompli of the EU’s existence, there are very few critical perspectives on the process of European integration that can count at the same time as alternatives to it. In other words, quite few of the critical approaches to the European Union can claim to be addressed from a similarly real—or realizable—historical process of continental integration. Most of EU’s critiques, whether they are expressed in a more populist, trashy way,1 or in a more sober one, be it right2 or left leaning,3 can be easily dismissed or ignored by the EU’s establishment as mere intellectual exercises, addressed from a moral or theoretical high ground deprived of realism. In this strict sense, there is probably only one critique that is—or rather was—at the same time the expression of an alternative project of European integration, and

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that is the perspective of the East-European socialist bloc and of its own attempt at supranational or sub-continental integration—the COMECON. This perspective has not only the merit of being articulated from a rival, critical, and similarly real project of European integration, but also of being strictly contemporary to the first, decisive phases of Western integration, thus capable of throwing a precious light, nowadays lost, on the origins and early dynamics of what eventually became the European Union.

Notwithstanding all these merits, the reconstruction of the COMECON’s perspective on the process of West-European integration is beyond the scope of this article. What I intend to do here, instead, is merely to probe into this horizon by focusing on the peculiar role and perspective of one of the most unique actors caught in this historical process of continental rival integration and disintegration—namely, the perspective of socialist Romania on both the COMECON and the West European nascent EEC. Due to its unique trajectory, having started as a faithful Soviet pupil and then developed into a staunch internal oppositionist of the socialist bloc, communist Romania’s perspective can highlight—through its contrasts and shifting alliances—the content, scope and aims of the socialist critique of European integration, thus providing a fertile entry point into this whole topic.

It is no wonder that, due to its unique trajectory and hence privileged perspective, communist Romania’s foreign policy, especially towards the socialist bloc and the rival capitalist camp, has been the object of a certain scholarly interest, both in its time and more recently. However, none of these approaches matches the range and volume of the archival research produced recently by Elena Dragomir, in a series of articles and books. In what follows, I will first discuss Dragomir’s archival reconstruction of this topic, focusing on her two recent monographs—Opoziția din interior: România și politicile CAER față de CEE (The internal opposition: Romania and the CEE policies towards the EEC), 2019; O relație asimetrică: România și Piața Comună (An asymmetrical relation: Romania and the Common Market), 2022. The second part of the article will be devoted to some critical considerations on the allegedly pragmatic, adaptive, and non-ideological nature of Romania’s foreign policy stance during this period, as established by Dragomir, but also by previous scholarship on this topic. The article will conclude by briefly bringing back into focus the “ideological” aspect of this foreign policy relationship and strategy, which is rather neglected in these recent reconstructions of this topic.
Romania and the COMECON

Dragomir’s extended survey of communist Romania’s dealings with its socialist surroundings and the West-European project of continental integration focuses primarily on the archival material of the various meetings, committees, negotiations, and political decisions that took place between these three actors—communist Romania, the COMECON partners, and the EEC member states and establishment. In reconstructing communist Romania’s perspective and relations with these actors, Dragomir neatly separates between two aspects of this complex process: on the one hand, the ideological critiques that communist Romania expressed, in its media and through its leaders, with regards to the nascent capitalist integration of EEC; on the other hand, the pragmatic approaches and relations that Romania tried to establish with the Common Market and its member states. There is no doubt as to the hierarchy of these two aspects. The latter one, the pragmatic, real relations between the Socialist Republic of Romania (SRR), the EEC (and the COMECON) is clearly the most important one for Dragomir, covering, in her latest two monographs, more than 1,000 pages (including the two volumes that gather all the relevant archival documents); while the ideological critiques of the EEC, which are discussed in a few dozen pages, are seen as secondary. In Dragomir own words:

Even though Romania’s view remained in general critical with regard to the Common Market and the project of Western integration, its pragmatism—derived from following its own interests—pushed Romania in a different direction than the Soviet one. This indicates, again, that in the (economic) foreign policy of postwar Romania, ideology mattered less than it was initially thought, the role of ideology being overtaken by the commercial-economic interests.¹⁰

And yet, as Dragomir argues, ideology, and specifically the ideological critiques of Western capitalism and of the Common Market, were not quite mere décor, but did fulfil a double instrumental role: that of anti-capitalist, socialist rhetoric for the public at home and at large; but also, more efficiently or pragmatically, that of counterargument to any socialist attempt at a similar regional Eastern integration. In other words, the main role of the various denunciations, in the Romanian press, especially from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, of the EEC as a capitalist, imperialist and monopolist project was that of resisting and opposing any similar supranational project or temptation among the socialist bloc—in short, the critique of the EEC was meant as a preemptive critique of the COMECON.¹¹
This certainly is plausible, at least in the sense that Romania’s pragmatic relation with Western Europe and the Common Market was primarily determined by Romania’s non-position in—and opposition to—the Eastern socialist system and its possible integration; the cause of Romania’s insistent courtship of the former was her irreducible distrust of the latter. But also in the sense that, as Dragomir shows, the very project of socialist integration under the umbrella of the COMECON came—or was revived, under Khrushchev—as a reaction to the first signs of European integration in the mid-50s. These Western attempts, materialized in the Treaty of Rome, the European Coal and Steel Community, the ultimately failed European Defense Community, and the Euratom, were perceived by the socialist states as both a menace to their future economic trade with the West, and as a model to be replicated in the interior of the socialist bloc. This perspective on the nascent EEC was logically translated in the socialist states’ behavior, i.e., their concerted attempts at increased integration of the COMECON, which, as Dragomir rightly shows, was never merely a Soviet pet project or instrument of dominating its satellites. In this collective push towards socialist regional integration, the socialist states actively and indeed pragmatically tried both to resist and replicate, at a similar level, the menace and model of supranational Western European integration. Romania instead had a different opinion from the get-go, arguing, on the one hand, that Western integration cannot function as a model for socialist integration, being suited only to monopoly capitalist formations; and, on the other hand, that its menace was not so serious for the socialist states, which could still count on developing bilateral relations with the Western states, notwithstanding the integrationist push in the West. How legitimate was this optimism, this faith in the perdurance and development of bilateral relations with the member states of the EEC will be seen later. For now, it should be remembered that, as stated before, for communist Romania, and in contrast to the stance of the other members of the socialist bloc, the nascent EEC was clearly not seen as a menace or as the main menace—since for Bucharest the main menace was the projected socialist integration in the East, and the only chance of resisting this was through developing commercial ties with the Western states and the Common Market.

Romania’s repeated, staunch opposition to any attempt at socialist integration of the Eastern bloc is amply documented by Dragomir’s first two-volumes monograph—Opunția din interior: România și politicile caer față de EEC (1957–1989). This is quite a spectacular, yet monotonous reading. What is disconcerting is Romania’s consistency in opposing, for more than 30 years, any initiative that might have made even the smallest step towards regional integration, using the same arguments and the same tactics, even though the external, continental context had changed dramatically in the meantime. This certainly throws
a dubious light on Romania’s allegedly “adaptative” strategy—which is, pace Dragomir, the second most important characteristic of Romania’s foreign policy in this period, after its already praised “pragmatism.” How was this strategic behavior adaptative, if it remained exactly the same in a completely changed situation? Its strategy of hoping to circumvent the socialist integration by means of developing bilateral ties with the Western states might have made some sense until the 1970s, when the Western integration was still only an uncertain project, and individual states in the West could still chose their own foreign economic policies, thus allowing small socialist states to exploit the differences and divergent interests existing between them; but this bilateralist strategy certainly did not make much sense afterwards, when the EEC managed to impose its common economic framework, forbidding its member states from developing bilateral agreements on their own, and thus forcing the external parties—among them Romania and the other socialist states—to negotiate with the Western bloc as such, from a much weaker position and in a considerably more imbalanced relationship—a highly predictable development amply documented by Dragomir’s second two-volumes monograph, aptly called O relație asimetrică: România și Piața Comună (1957–1989). But more on this—on the appropriateness of notions such as “pragmatic” and “adaptative” as defining traits of communist Romania’s foreign strategy—in the third section of this article.

The first expressions of dissent by communist Romania towards the project of integration of the socialist bloc were articulated as soon as Khrushchev made his first attempts to revive and consolidate the empty shell of the COMECON as left by Stalin. This was the famous moment of Romania’s oppositionist stance in the 1962 discussions, celebrated in virtually all the scholarship on communist Romania’s foreign policy as the first signs of its anti-Soviet opposition and turn towards a national-sovereign stance. Faced with the menace of the ECSC, the socialist bloc, argued Khrushchev, should increase the economic integration at the level of the COMECON, by coordinating the various national economic plans, increasing the specialization of the member states and devising, eventually, a single economic plan for the whole bloc. Since other socialist states were already comparatively more industrialized than Romania, this effort towards specialization, intended to preclude the wasteful redoubling of existing industries and lines of production among the members of the COMECON, would have meant allocating for Romania the role of foodstuffs and raw materials provider in the socialist bloc. As is well known, Romania heroically rejected this proposal, with Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s leadership thus opening the path towards the national sovereigntist stance pursued later by Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Over the ensuing decades, Romania consistently persisted in this “pragmatic” approach, resisting any proposals for socialist integration on any occasion: by
rejecting the “Prague Program” in 1962; by basically emptying out the “Minimal Program” proposed in 1964 and then sabotaging its implementation. But also, more awkwardly, after 1968 and the coming into force of the EEC’s common agricultural policy, which implemented tariffs and negatively affected 90% of the socialist states’ exports towards the EEC; in 1971, by rejecting the “Complex Program,” at a time when the Common Commercial Policy of the EEC came into force, gradually ending all bilateral relations and forcing the socialist states to deal directly with the protectionist behemoth of the enlarged EEC; and then, from the 1970s onwards, as the issue of the recognition of the EEC by the socialist bloc and its member states repeatedly came on the agenda, by making sure that the mutual recognition between the EEC and the COMECON was deferred sine die, or at least that it would come only after the establishment of official relations between the individual socialist states and the EEC—a position extremely convenient to the EEC, which did not have any interest in recognizing the COMECON as an equal partner and preferred, instead, to approach each socialist state separately, from a much stronger position.

On every occasion, at each reunion of the COMECON, Romanian leaders argued that the COMECON should keep its initial statute, that of a merely “consultative” forum, and that the economic plans of each member state constituted an indispensable part of their national sovereignty that could not be infringed by any step towards supra-national integration. The tactical toolkit included: repeatedly invoking the original, Stalinist charter of the COMECON, in which it was designed as a merely consultative organ, deprived of any power; resorting to the principle of the “interested party,” whereby only those states that were interested in the policies proposed should take part in the agreement; and then later, when this principle threatened to leave out Romania from the possible regroupings of the other socialist states, by claiming its interest, but also its disagreement with the specifics of the proposed plans—a tactic which again had the effect of blocking any proposals, thus functioning as a sort of perverse veto.

The very success of these tactics in blocking any integrationist initiative at the level of the COMECON are an indicator of the significant influence that Romania enjoyed in this institution and prove that, if it wanted to, it probably could have used its leverage also for constructive aims, by ensuring, for example, that the projected integration was achieved on fair terms for the countries involved. Instead, Romania used its influence in the socialist bloc only in a negative, disruptive, and vetoing way, while trying to apply positive, constructive pressure in its relationship with the capitalist EEC, repeatedly asking for better trade terms and for a less protectionist stance from the Common Market in its regard—all, unsurprisingly, fruitless efforts.
Romania and the Common Market

The history of these failed efforts is the topic of Dragomir’s most recent monograph—O relație asimetrică (2022). Just like the previous one, this also makes for a spectacular yet somehow monotonous reading: it documents three decades of failed attempts, and of more and more negative outcomes, of Romania trying to persuade the EEC establishment to grant it freer access to its markets and less protectionist taxes, licenses, and portfolios, a decades-long effort during which the limited, occasional gains did not alter the clearly downwardly, ruinous, more and more “asymmetrical” relation.

All through the decades,

 Romania’s exports were heavily affected by EEC discrimination. Trade relations were not free, based on price and quality competitiveness, but imposed and carefully controlled by the Community, so that its producers were always at an advantage.20

In the late 1960s—that is, in the most beneficial period, as bilateralism was still the rule—the Romanian imports from the EEC countries were overwhelmingly dominated by technological products (51% industrial technology and means of transportation, 41% chemicals and manufactured products), while its exports towards the EEC countries consisted in large part (85%) of foodstuffs and raw materials. Practically, in its dealings with the West, Romania was already trapped in exactly the same situation it wanted to avoid in the Comecon, and this was even before the increased integration and enlargement of the EEC and the consolidation of its protectionism, which only made things worse. As Dragomir notes, in spite of all the efforts of the Romanian leaders and negotiators to improve the tariffs, quotas, and general parameters of its trade with the EEC, “these efforts were ‘annihilated’ by the prohibitive and discriminatory measures imposed by the Common Market.”21

“This situation was unfavorable to the economic interests of Romania,” leading to a widening deficit in its balance of trade.22 The situation would only get worse with the coming into force of the EEC common agricultural policy and common economic policy, which gradually ended all bilateral relations among states, and imposed limiting tariffs and licenses on the bulk of Romania’s trade with the EEC. All through the decades, we witness the bizarre spectacle of a communist state, cap in hand, asking the capitalist world for free trade, while the developed “free world” erects all sorts of protectionist barriers in its path—from frequent anti-dumping infringements, through drastically curtailing the import licenses, to high tariffs, negotiable proposals etc.
Another tactic employed by Romania in trying to soften the protectionism of the EEC was by joining GATT—one of the first socialist countries to do so. Yet nothing came out of this either: as Dragomir drily summarizes,

*despite the initial hopes, Romania failed to benefit from non-discriminatory treatment by the EEC or developed countries in general—precisely because GATT allowed derogations from the principle of non-discrimination.*

Another tactic employed was, from 1968 onwards, that of asking to be recognized, in international trade, as a developing country by the West, hoping that by gaining this status it would enjoy the same system of general preferences that the developing countries enjoyed in their dealings with the EEC and, in general, with the developed capitalist states. This aspect allows us to make a few remarks on a recent trend in communist historiography—the “socialism goes global” approach, focusing on the relations between the Eastern socialist states and the non-aligned movement, or Third World more generally. Much is made, in this approach, of the global, internationalist impetus of the Eastern socialist countries, and of their anti-colonial solidarity with the Global South. However, from Dragomir’s reconstruction, the case of Romania, in this whole field, appears in a quite different, unique light: in its case, “socialism went global” only because it refused to go regional. Or, rather, it was its undermining of any chance of building a regional socialist system—in a word, its anti-socialist foreign policy—, coupled with its failure to court any favors from the capitalist bloc, that forced communist Romania to “go global.” Moreover, this turn towards the Global South did not have much to do with a presumed anti-colonial solidarity, being instead grounded in more “pragmatic” concerns. Romania’s request to be recognized as a “developing country” was actually, in its concrete effects, quite un-solidary towards the developing countries themselves: as Dragomir shows, most of the other East-European socialist states were seen, and accepted to be seen, as developed countries, hence they were generally donors of preferential treatments and tariffs to their Third World partners, not receivers. By asking to be recognized as a developing country, Romania was instead hoping to achieve not only better terms of trade with the EEC and Western capital, but also with the Global South, by receiving, and not giving, preferential treatment in their mutual trade. It goes without saying that this strategy of begging thy neighbor, although it produced some occasional results by establishing in the late 1970s and 1980s bilateral deals with various states from the Third World, did not persuade the EEC to alleviate its protectionist stance towards Romania.

As for the benefits of joining and petitioning the IMF, again before most of its socialist brotherly neighbors, see below the issue of debt.
Switching, as Romania tried to do from the 1970s, to a more “proactive,” not only reactive, stance towards the EEC, by starting various initiatives, did not improve its situation either. Nor was the Community willing to contemplate the idea of granting Romania credits at low interest rates—thus pushing it towards the IMF and private financial institutions.27 Moscow warned Romania, already in 1970, that it would have great difficulties in repaying the credits contracted on the Western markets.28 Yet, already from 1974, Romania had to contract credits from the IMF and the IBRD to finance its imports from the West, which it could not balance through its exports.29 As for its pragmatic relation with the EEC, “Romania did not succeed in obtaining a sectoral agreement on financial credits, just as it hadn’t been able to obtain such a sectoral agreement for transports, fishing and agriculture”30—the technology and industry imports being already severely regulated. From the ’80s onwards, with Romania’s brutal austerity by means of which it tried to repay in advance the foreign debt, thus curtailing severely the imports from the EEC, the Common Market became even more punishing in its retaliation and uncompromising in its stance towards Romania. And this, in spite of all the persuasive effort made by the Romanian side, which rightly—but vainly—explained that

_the surplus recorded in Romania’s trade balance with EEC countries was exceeded by the cumulative value of the imports from the EEC and the payments made to EEC countries on account of its foreign debt._31

_By the end of 1988, Romania (was) the only East-European country not to have established official relations with the EEC . . . Romania was willing to grant official recognition to the Common Market, in exchange for a global trade agreement on the terms proposed by Bucharest. But the tactic did not bear fruit. On the contrary, it proved to be counterproductive._32

So what, then, was the pragmatic result of all these pragmatic efforts?

**Pragmatism?**

_A s Dragomir herself candidly puts it, “in practice, Romania’s pragmatism did not produce the desired outcome, because of the stratagems employed by the Common Market.”33 Was it then only a pragmatism in theory, if in practice it proved to be such a failure? But how come, if the theory—the official, repeatedly stated ideology—was itself a warning against the naivety and dangers of such a “pragmatic” approach?
The very succession of the titles of Dragomir’s recent monographs—from the “internal opposition” in the COMECON to the “asymmetrical relation” with the EEC—should cast doubt over the “pragmatism” of Romania’s strategy towards its European partners East and West: precisely because of that “internal opposition,” of sabotaging every chance of a functional socialist regional system, Romania was trapped, for what concerned its most pressing economic needs, in an “asymmetrical,” exploitative relation with the EEC, left on its own at the mercy of Western capital, ending up in less than two decades totally thrashed by the international markets, in virtual economic default, avoided only by the harsh austerity and sacrifices imposed on its own population. Why was all this pragmatic?

The only sense in which this behavior could be called pragmatic is if we limit the subject and horizon of discussion to the perceived interests of the ruling elite, if we assess this pragmatism strictly as a logic of power: since the Romanian rulers knew it was the Soviets that put them in power, they were well aware that this implied both a lack of real legitimacy at home, and a constant danger of an expeditive deposition—or even reshuffle—at the hands of those same Soviets that had put them there. Hence, the most pragmatic thing to do, in order to ensure their survival at the top, was to try to carve up a space of autonomy from the Soviets, thus increasing their legitimacy back home, and opening a space of maneuver outside the borders. But in this sense, any ruler who holds desperately to his throne, no matter the costs, is pragmatic. And in the case of communist Romania, as we saw, the costs were quite exorbitant. What we must inquire, instead, in order to validate this pragmatism, is whether it was capable of ensuring the material conditions of its own survival, whether its actions actually supported the avowed pragmatic aims. And from this perspective, communist Romania’s foreign policy was not pragmatic at all. On the contrary, it was quite misfortunate, and its disastrous results should not have come as a surprise, as they were perfectly predictable on the basis of Romania’s own ideological declinations, i.e., its repeated rhetorical expressions of socialist solidarity and its no less frequent critiques of Western state monopoly capitalism.

Moreover, if we limit the meaning of Romania’s pragmatism merely to its resistance and defiance of Moscow, because this served the immediate interests—the very survival—of the ruling elite, then the whole breakthrough of a “new interpretative paradigm” which is repeatedly announced by Dragomir in her monographs evaporates into a mere terminological relabeling. As Dragomir explains, the burden and focus of explanation in the traditional scholarship on communist Romania’s foreign policy is its relation with Moscow, which is usually portrayed either as defiance, autonomy, relative autonomy, complicated balance etc.—but which, in any case, is seen to have overruled all other
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concerns. But if the only meaning of “pragmatism” in the new interpretative paradigm is the same old autonomy from Moscow—because it was the only concrete gain, in an otherwise generally disastrous train of multiple consequences—then the innovation is merely terminological. Not coincidentally, despite its claims to a new interpretative paradigm grounded in the idea of “pragmatism,” Dragomir’s reconstruction shares its positive appreciation of communist Romania’s foreign policy with the supposedly more traditional takes on it. It is a common feature of almost all scholarly research on communist Romania, even those most anticommunist—and Dragomir’s fortunately does not fall in this category—to praise its foreign policy, most of all because it was anti-Soviet, because it was grounded on the desire to create a relative autonomy from Moscow. Dragomir simply gives the label of pragmatism to this anti-Soviet strategy already established by the traditional historiography—but its “pragmatic” virtues were already well documented in that old “interpretative paradigm.”35 Unfortunately, any other possible meaning of this allegedly “pragmatic” grand strategy, besides its anti-Soviet tones, lacks any content or foundation.

This lack of pragmatism, this utter ingenuity, is already striking in the first major decision undertaken by communist Romania in the international field, its famous opposition to Khrushchev’s plans for integrating the economies of COMECON members.

First of all, in those fateful debates of 1962, the issue on the table was not the choice between industry and agriculture, a distinction which tends to quickly overlap with the bigger and heavily charged one between modernity and Middle Ages. It was, instead, a question of choosing between heavy industry, focusing on capital goods or, in Marxist terms, on the Department I (of means of production), and the alternative of developing a modern, rational, efficient agriculture and light industry, by focusing the production on the Marxian Department II (of means of consumption). With the benefit of hindsight, given our ongoing ecological and food crisis, as well as the general trend towards deindustrialization on the European continent, which dramatically affected Romania’s comparatively inefficient and wasteful heavy industry even more than it did the other countries, the choice should have been clearly in favor of the proposed plan for socialist integration. Not to mention the fact that, accepting the plans for socialist regional integration and Romania’s allocated role in it would have meant, in time, creating an optimal basis for a truly ecological industry and agriculture, devoted to society’s most immediate needs and preponderantly using local resources.

But even without the benefit of hindsight, the dangers facing Romania’s oppositionist stance should have been quite clear—and they revealed themselves as such in no time at all. By opposing Khrushchev’s plans for the COMECON, com-
communist Romania’s “pragmatic” and “adaptative” approach meant it refused being trapped in a presumably unequal exchange with its socialist allies, in which it would have been forced to sell raw materials and agricultural products while importing industrial technology and finished products from its neighbors. Yet this exchange mustn’t have been such an unequal and unfair one as feared by the Romanians: judging from the experience of the other socialist states, it was not at all at dominated by the Soviets, but was instead based on quite advantageous terms and subsidized treatment for their socialist “satellites.” Not to mention Romania’s effective influence in the ranks of the COMECON, which its own successful internal opposition testifies—a level of influence which was absolutely missing in its relation with the EEC. Instead, by rejecting the socialist integration and its allocated position in it, Romania had to conduct exactly the same kind of business and trade with the Western states, and from the 1970’s with the EEC, exporting mainly raw materials and foodstuffs, and importing industrial products and technological know-how, but on considerably much worse terms and in a much more unequal relation than the one offered in the projected socialist integration. The idea that this unequal exchange with the rival capitalist bloc could have helped Romania in becoming an industrialized country, thus reducing its gap towards the developed world—that is, towards that same developed capitalist West that aptly exploited its asymmetrical relation with Romania—was clearly devoid of any realism, and should have been seen as such if only the Romanian leaders had given some thought to their own repeated “ideological critiques” of capitalism and of the imperialist bloc. Instead, by using this anti-capitalist and socialist discourse as a mere façade, and throwing themselves in the arms of Western capitalism simply in order to counter the perceived Soviet threat, Romania ended up, as was quite predictable, with a costly heavy industry that was not only much less efficient than the heavy industry in the developed West, but also in comparison to its immediate rivals, the other socialist states, and which, moreover, especially in its penchant for the chemical branch, once Romania’s oil and gas reserves started dwindling, ended up with an industrial infrastructure lacking its basic raw materials—which again had to be imported, on disadvantageous terms, and in exchange for agricultural and textile products, from abroad. A lose-lose situation, predictable from the get-go, which nonetheless still passes for pragmatic and adaptative.

The impossibility of achieving the stated goal—functional industrialization, massive economic upgrade—through the unequal exchange with the capitalist West should have been quite plain not only for a hardened Marxist, but even for any decent economic strategist: one cannot pass from a preponderantly agricultural, non-industrial economy to a highly technologized industry with the prof-
its derived from trading agricultural, non-industrial products in exchange for highly technologized products, because this unequal exchange, especially when your partner is a rival, capitalist bloc, which has absolutely no interest in granting you any preferential treatment, by definition does not produce any surplus or profit to be reinvested. And this is where the issue of debt—foreign debt—comes in: precisely in order to re-balance the structural imbalance of its trade with the EEC and the West, Romania had to borrow and incur more and more debt—which, less than a decade later, would push it towards practical default, avoided only by imposing savage austerity. Again, all this spiral of debt-austerity-breakdown, which sealed the fate of Romanian communism, was a direct consequence of that same “pragmatic” foreign policy and economic strategy, of Romania’s sabotaging the chance of regional socialism and throwing itself in the arms and at the will of the capitalist camp. So, what was “pragmatic” about it?

The same thing also applies to the notion of “national interest,” which Dragomir often uses as a synonym for Romania’s alleged pragmatism in international relations: all its actions were, allegedly, subsumed under the imperative of “national interest.” But the whole concept of “national interest” is, in itself, quite non-communist or at least quite inappropriate to describe the behavior of a communist state. The only national interest of a communist state is, by definition, to safeguard and consolidate its communism. And this, for a country like Romania, could only be achieved by integrating the country in a functional socialist international system. Hence, its “national interest” was inherently anti-nationalist. The idea of building communism in a single state, against the resistance, or at least independently from its regional neighbors might make some sense for a country like the Soviet Union in the 1930s, whose size and whose encirclement by hostile powers practically did not leave any other choice. But this strategy did not make any sense for a country the size of communist Romania, surrounded as it was only by socialist allies. In other words, in the dilemma international socialism vs. national economic autonomy by means of heavy industrialization, from a truly Marxist-Leninist perspective there is no question as to their priority. The internationalist imperative clearly comes before the imperative of heavy industrialization. The former pertains to strategy; the latter is merely a tactic. This hierarchical relation between the two imperatives is also expressed chronologically: the first five-year plans came into force in the Soviet Union in the 1930s only after the failure of international socialism, and as a forced reaction to it—encirclement, hence socialism in a single country and autonomy, hence focus on heavy industry and on producing the necessary means of production. But in conditions of international, brotherly socialism—and the postwar COMECON and socialist bloc provided these real, historical conditions—
there is no imperative of national autonomy and hence no necessary sacrifice for heavy industry. Specialization, division of labor, fair exchanges and socialist solidarity should be quite enough.\textsuperscript{38}

At the same time, this proves that Romania’s behavior was rather un-pragmatic even in the most common sense of the term—which Dragomir uses often—, that of sacrificing ideological concerns for concrete, immediate gains. As shown above, there were no concrete, immediate gains from Romania’s “pragmatic” behavior, but only predictable negative results, while the reason for sticking to this strategy in spite of its negative outcomes was rather ideological in itself, in the most basic sense of misguided, delusional strategy: it was a strict adherence to the Stalinist formula of privileging heavy industry at all costs, but in a context in which this tactic did not make any sense anymore—which rendered it precisely a delusional, ideological approach, and, as such, un-pragmatic.

This whole discussion is not about judging whether the perceptions of Romania’s communist rulers were accurate or not—and Dragomir rightly refrains from this.

\textit{The present research grants special attention to the actors’ perceptions and convictions, without trying to answer whether these were accurate or not, whether they corresponded to reality or not . . . Ignoring or refusing to take into account the perceptions and convictions (of an actor), especially when he “perceives” imminent and ominous threats to its interests and security, simply on the grounds that these perceptions do not correspond to “reality” as it is defined by the analyst, is a fundamental error.}\textsuperscript{39}

But this discussion is not about comparing the Romanian communists’ perceptions to reality. It is, instead, an attempt to compare their behavior with their declarations, their allegedly pragmatic approach to the EU and the COMECON, on the one hand, and their critique of this state monopoly capitalist formation and their socialist decantations, on the other hand, and to probe into the cognitive disjunction and logical gap that divides them. The problem in Dragomir’s treatment is that by taking these perceptions and convictions as \textit{real} (for the actors involved), and then characterizing the foreign policy built on them as pragmatic, realist and adaptive, she ends up validating them as also \textit{true}. What is problematic and unaddressed here is precisely the gap between the actors’ perceptions—their fundamental distrust of Moscow—and their avowed convictions—their repeated expressions of socialist solidarity and anti-capitalist critique. Now, for the Romanian elite, the former (the distrust towards Moscow) was obviously real, but one can doubt whether it was all that true: after all, as Dragomir repeatedly remarks, the COMECON was not a Soviet instrument for
dominating its satellites, but a genuine attempt at integration embraced by most of the socialist states. Furthermore, as recent scholarship has amply proved, doing business with Moscow and the other socialist states was clearly not as bad as doing business with Western capitalism and the EEC turned out to be. So, in brief, the Romanians’ perceptions (their apprehension of Moscow) might have been real (for them), but quite doubtful in actual fact, or at least in comparison to other more menacing potential business partners. As for the other term—the Romanian elite’s avowed socialist and anti-capitalist convictions, they appear not to have been real at all, not to have been really believed by the Romanian elite, although they were quite probably true: their repeated critiques of state monopoly capitalism and their repeated socialist declarations should have alerted them to the danger of sabotaging the project of socialist regional integration and of abandoning one’s economic fate to the mercy of international monopoly capital.

If this is true, then the whole aspect of the “ideological” critiques, by the Romanian communists, of Western capitalism in general and the EEC in particular, and the whole “state monopoly capitalism” theory on which they were grounded turn out to be considerably more important than Dragomir concedes—and more than the Romanian communists assumed them to be.

It is an odd thing that Dragomir does not give much importance to the concept of “state monopoly capitalism” (and, in general, to the ideological critiques of the EEC formulated by Romanian authors and rulers). Odd, because the very content and context of the numerous documents and meetings that she discusses are a strikingly immediate confirmation of the validity of that concept. Most of the negotiations, proposals, accords or treaties between the Socialist Republic of Romania and the EEC were done through “technical, unofficial contacts between senior officials of the two parties.” Since both the political and the security aspects were, as it were, out of discussion—the latter being firmly entrenched by the existence of the two military blocs, the former precluded by the lack of official recognition between the two actors—, all these negotiations and accords touched exclusively only the economic aspects, and thus strikingly show the state (and even more the supranational West European formation) in its most banal Marxian posture, as the representative and agent of the collective interests of its capitalists, or as the executive of its own state (or super-statal) monopoly capitalism. This is what all these tense and repetitive “political” negotiations are all about: who gets to sell and buy what and on what conditions, in the “national interests” of its concentrated, monopolist private capital in the West, or in the interests of the nationalized, state capitalism in the East.

I will attempt in a different paper to reconstruct the meanings and strategic deployments of the theory of “state monopoly capitalism”—more exactly, the
various conceptual Soviet layers of this theory (Lenin’s, Stalin’s and Varga’s) and the dialectic relation between them, as well as communist Romania’s initial rather rigid, restricted understanding of it, and its further ideological shift or rearticulation of the theory from the 1970s onwards. For now, and to conclude, this re-opening of the ideological aspects of communist Romania’s “pragmatic” foreign policy should allow us a final methodological or conceptual argument, on the role and weight of such labels as “pragmatism,” “realism,” and “ideology” in historiographical reconstructions.

A possible objection to our argument here could point to this: by criticizing and deconstructing the “pragmatism” of Romania’s foreign policy aren’t we, perhaps, in danger of falling in the opposite trap, that of reconstructing this history in quite idealistic and moralistic terms as failed opportunities, dubious communist convictions and internationalist treason? Perhaps, this argument would continue, communist Romania’s foreign policy should be reconstructed not in these terms, as failed or grasped opportunities, as pragmatism or ingenuity, but in a more materialist and context-determined way, as simply Romania’s forced choice—only choice—in the given context. From this perspective, communist Romania’s choices and actions are, perhaps, quite understandable: because of the original birth scene of Romania’s communist regime, because of Moscow’s looming ascendance over it, because of the negative and exploitative nature of the first forms of economic “cooperation” with the Soviet Union—the Sovroms under Stalin—, and finally because of a “realist” awareness of the economic backwardness and West-dependency of the countries of the socialist bloc, Romania opted—like many developing countries—for a typical developmentalist strategy based on import substitution industrialization, which logically entailed imposing protectionist and independentist, autarchic relations with the immediate competitors in the socialist bloc, while trying to upgrade its economy with the help of Western technology and capital. From this perspective, the issue of foreign debt can also be realistically reassessed, as Romania borrowed “pragmatically” at the beginning of the 1970s when capital was cheap, and only found itself with unsustainable debts at the end of the decade because of the unpredictable evolution in foreign markets and US monetary policy. As for communist Romania’s “courtship” of the capitalist West, proper consideration should be given to the peculiarity of Western Europe and the EEC in this context: the reason why Romania was so insistent in its courtship had much to do with its conviction that Western Europe might become a real “third-way” alternative to US capitalism. This belief was, again, quite realistic or understandable in its context, given all the theatrics of de Gaulle’s sovereigntist opposition to NATO and the EEC in the 1960s and given the Ostpolitik and détente context of the 1970s. In this context, it was quite natural for Romanian
strategists to consider the West European countries as a power less hostile and protectionist than the US, and less threatening than the Soviet Union, and thus to base the economic development of the country on building economic ties with them. From this perspective, the coming into force of the EEC and of its protectionist foreign economic policies spelt the ironic end of this European illusion for the Romanian communists, the end of Western Europe as a possible sovereign power, distinct from both Moscow and Washington, allied or friendly to other independent, sovereign and non-aligned countries. Though it should be said that this development, while contradicting the hopes that the Romanian communists placed on Western Europe in the late ’60s and early ’70s, was very much in line with their predictions made in the late ’50s and early ’60s, on the impossibility of Western Europe attaining its autonomy from the US and its incapacity to really act as a major third power.

While all these components of the evolving context were certainly real, and perceived as such by the Romanian communists, what I try to argue here is simply that this context was, nonetheless, as all context is, also ideologically pre-constructed. And the first ideological prerequisite of this seemingly spontaneous, “realistic” apprehension of the existing context was conceiving of socialist Romania on the likeness of its ruling elite, as a country which is threatened first of all by its socialist neighborhood, and which can forge a future for itself only against the pull and the pressure of Eastern socialism. Which is a policy and an ideological conviction most probably realistic in its perceived, preconstructed context, yet quite anti-socialist in its premises, and un-pragmatic in its outcomes.

Notes

1. See, e.g., from a thousand titles, Craig and Elliott 2009.
4. See on this Marsh 1984; Romano 2014; Kansikas 2014; Broad and Kansikas 2020; and especially Godard 2014.
5. Communist Romania’s, and in general the socialist bloc’s relations with the other main geopolitical actor of the time, the Global South or the “non-aligned movement,” has recently began to be discussed more consistently—see e.g., Mark, Iacob, Rupprecht, and Spaskovska 2019; Mark and Betts 2022; Djagalov 2020. I will only touch very briefly this aspect here, seeing it strictly as an element and a consequence of Romania’s stance and great strategy towards the other two main geopolitical actors, the socialist bloc and the Western capitalist camp.
10. Dragomir 2022, 1: 121.
11. I leave here aside the whole discussion about the supranational nature of the EEC and the intergovernmental one of the COMECON. On the one hand, the Romanians were quite sensitive to this distinction—witness their repeated attempts, documented by Dragomir, to address the European Council (thus the intergovernmental body of EEC) only to be repeatedly sent to the Commission (its supranational body). But on the other hand, for what concerned the COMECON, the distinction did not matter at all for Romanian negotiators, since everything pertaining to the COMECON, any small step towards inter-governmental coordination was perceived as a supranationalist menace.
13. It might sound slightly awkward to praise one’s capacity to translate her/his convictions into her/his behavior—as this should be quite banal and obvious. Yet communist Romania’s own foreign policy towards the Eastern and Western bloc is precisely—as the rest of the article will show—a case of erratic behavior that confirms the accuracy of its avowed convictions in the exact same measure in which it ignores or outrightly defies them.
14. Kansikas (2014) sums up well the position of the smaller socialist states: “if they negotiated alone against the EEC they would be very weak and they knew it. If they had the backing of the Soviet Union, the CMEA (COMECON)—and thus its members—would be stronger. On the one hand, they had to accept that the Soviet Union would have more control; on the other, they could at the same time hope to affect Soviet policy choices.”
15. The integration of the EEC was still, throughout the ‘60s, a highly contested and uncertain project. It was only from the turn of the ‘70s, with de Gaulle’s removal as the last strong representative of the idea of “national sovereignty” in Western Europe and the ensuing enlargement and consolidation of the EEC, that it acquired the truly ineluctable, irreversible aura that its fait accompli presents to us today. It is also worth remembering that the mid–1960s EEC crisis of the ‘empty chair’ of France—the highpoint of de Gaulle’s opposition to the ‘supernational’ integrationist push by the EEC—was provoked by France’s refusal to cut down and abide by Community standards on its trade with the communist states, especially its grain exports to China (see Ludlow 2007 on this).
18. See Kansikas 2014 for a brilliant reconstruction of this process at the turn of the 1970s.
19. As the Romanian leaders acknowledged in an internal meeting: “on all the issues in which we could not introduce our point of view, we got away by using this formula: only the interested parties,” Dragomir 2019, 133.
22. Dragomir 2022, 1: 111.
23. Dragomir 2022, 1: 166.
24. “In Romania’s opinion, the developing countries did not have the capacity to truly influence the international milieu.” Despite this awareness, or rather because of it, Romania was hoping that the developed countries would “end voluntarily the system of commercial discriminations,” and that they had to be “persuaded to assume their collective responsibility that they had towards the developing countries”—which Romania tried, and obviously failed. The utmost naivety of this “anti-colonialist” approach, hoping to eradicate the world’s divisions through mere persuasion and voluntary renunciation by the imperialist camp, voids again of all content the notion of Romania’s “pragmatism.”

25. Dragomir 2022, 1: 156.
26. “Both in the West and in the East, it was argued or suggested that Romania was a developed socialist country, which should therefore be a donor and not a beneficiary of preferences. Bucharest responded with its own concept of generalized customs preferences. According to it, Romania was a socialist developing country entitled to preferential treatment on the same terms as the rest of the developing countries. As a developing country itself, Romania was not a donor of preferences to other developing countries” (Dragomir 2022, 1: 178).
27. In the tragic context of the 1977 earthquake, the European Community made a gesture of humane solidarity by granting Romania export licenses for a series of products worth 7.6 million dollars. Though, as the Romanians bitterly noted, this was exactly the same amount and the same products already agreed on in the previous negotiations (Dragomir 2022, 1: 279).

29. For a reconstruction of the history of communist Romania’s foreign debt from the perspective of international capital, see Grama 2019–2020.
32. Dragomir 2022, 1: 385.
33. Dragomir 2022, 1: 260.
35. See Mureșan 2008; Stanciu 2013, but also even the staunchly anticommunist Cioroianu 2013, chapter 10.
37. See Ban 2014, 41–82 for a reconstruction of the disastrous unfolding of this economic and foreign strategy.
38. Not to mention the fact that the focus on creating a self-sufficient national heavy industry is not at all—as Dragomir claims—a sine qua non of communist policy. This developmentalist, “import substitution industrialization” effort is (and was at that time) quite common to states that did not claim to be socialist; while important socialist states—see China under Deng, or Yugoslavia—opted instead for a strategy focused more on the production of means of consumption.
41. One should not make out too much of this “pragmatic” and peaceful approach of the EEC towards the socialist states. It was not at all a sign of its ability to transcend Cold War divisions but, on the contrary, as for instance Ludlow 2007 shows, an expression of its (temporary, now lost) ability to exploit the entrenched divisions of the postwar world and profit from the security arrangements of its position in the Western camp.
42. I thank Adrian Grama and Vali Stan for these critical comments.
43. In this respect, it should be stressed though that all through the 1960s and early 1970s the Romanian press abounded in stories about the dollar crisis and its instability as global currency—hence, the imprudence of contracting huge credits in such currency should have been quite visible. See, for instance, Tănăsescu 1962; Comisioneru 1965.
44. For such views on Western Europe as a possible alternative sovereign power to the US, see e.g., Brucan 1968; Câmpeanu 1968; Aldea 1973; Șerbănescu 1973.

References


**Abstract**

Forging Europe Under Communist Eyes: The European Community, the *COMECON*, and Socialist Romania

This article aims to critically discuss the foreign policy of communist Romania, especially towards Western Europe and the socialist bloc. It does this firstly by reviewing Elena Dragomir’s recent ample analyses of communist Romania’s foreign policy. Its second section consists in a critical problematization of the allegedly “pragmatic” and “adaptative” nature of communist Romania’s dealings with its Western and Eastern partners, as established both by Dragomir’s recent contributions, as well as the traditional scholarship. The paper ends with some more general methodological and conceptual reflections on the role, weight, and meaning of “pragmatism,” “realism,” “context” and “ideology” in historiographical reconstructions.

**Keywords**

communist Romania, foreign policy, *COMECON*, European Community, pragmatism, ideology, integration, state monopoly capitalism