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RUMANIA AND HER ALLIES: AUGUST 21 AND AFTER

Summary: This paper deals with the Rumanian reaction to the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the consequent campaign launched against Bucharest by the countries that participated in the intervention.

The coordinated aspect of this campaign, as well as differences in the Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Polish responses to the attitude of the Rumanian leadership, are examined. In addition, the nature of Bucharest's reaction -- i.e., the visible shifts that have taken place since August 21 -- is reviewed.

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Throughout the seven-month period that produced political euphoria in Czechoslovakia and increasing distrust among her more conservative Warsaw Pact allies, the Rumanian Communist Party constituted the most consistent and solid source of support (among the Pact countries) for the new leadership in Prague. The Rumanians, conspicuously absent from the series of meetings in which various combinations of the five either talked among themselves or attempted to mitigate the thrust of an invigorated and confident Czechoslovak leadership, continued to reiterate their well-known position on the principles regulating relations among Communist countries and expressed complete confidence in the ability of the Prague reformers to develop their own institutions and guide the nations of Czechoslovakia on a realistic "road to Communism." Acting in accordance with "national" conditions and interests, the Czechoslovak Communists would make their own contribution to "the strengthening and perfection of the Communist movement," a thesis that is fundamental to the "international" position of the RCP.

The Rumanian Reaction

Given Bucharest's understandable uneasiness over the manner in which "socialist achievements" are to be "defended" and her support

for the Czechoslovak leadership (most recently evidenced in Ceausescu's visit to Prague to renew the bilateral friendship treaty), it was to be expected that Mr. Ceausescu would not approve of the Warsaw Pact action in Czechoslovakia. Just one week prior to the invasion, the Rumanian Party leader had said that "there can be no justification for the use of armed forces for intervention in the internal affairs of any of the Warsaw Treaty member countries." (1) At a press conference in Prague on August 16, Ceausescu again referred to the applicability of the Warsaw Pact's provisions, noting that "the treaty is created to prevent an attack from the side of an imperialist country against some member country."

Still and all, the vehemence of the Rumanian reaction was probably not to be expected. In harsher terms than had ever before been used in the recurrent polemics between Rumania and her "fraternal allies," Ceausescu unequivocally condemned the invasion and expressed "complete solidarity" with the Czechoslovak people and CPCS. In the course of a single brief address to a mass rally in Bucharest on August 21 (2), he described the Warsaw Pact action as "a great error," "a serious danger to peace in Europe and to the fate of socialism in the world," "inconceivable and unjustified," and "a shameful moment in the history of the revolutionary movement."

In speaking to a special session of the Grand National Assembly on the following day, Ceausescu characterized the military intervention in Czechoslovakia as

a flagrant transgression of the national independence and sovereignty of the Czechoslovak Republic, interference by force in the affairs of the Czechoslovak people, an act in complete contradiction of the fundamental norms of relations that must reign among socialist countries and among Communist Parties and of the generally recognized principles of international law.

Referring to the Warsaw Pact pretext for the invasion, he asserted that "relations among Parties and states are carried on exclusively between their lawful leaders, and not between groups or persons who do not represent anybody."

Notwithstanding Ceausescu's sympathetic attitude toward the Czechoslovak leadership, it is evident that considerations of Rumania's own delicate position vis-a-vis her Warsaw Pact allies played a major role in the initial reaction to the intervention, reflected not only in Ceausescu's condemnation of the action but in the defensive (and defiant) tone of his remarks. Thus, in his August 21 speech, he stated:

(1) Scanteia, 15 August 1968.

(2) Radio Bucharest, 21 August 1968.

We have decided to begin from today to form armed patriotic detachments of workers, peasants, and intellectuals as defenders of the independence of our country. We want our people to have its own armed units, in order to defend our revolutionary gains, and to ensure peaceful labor and the independence and the security of our socialist homeland.

Explicitly referring to a possible threat to Rumania, Ceausescu added:

It has been said that there was danger of counterrevolution in Czechoslovakia. Perhaps tomorrow they will say that our meeting has mirrored counterrevolutionary tendencies. If so, we answer to all that the Rumanian people will not permit anyone to violate the territory of our fatherland.

The Rumanian leader concluded his speech by urging the population to "be ready to defend our socialist homeland at any moment."

In addition to Ceausescu's two speeches, the Rumanian position was officially proclaimed in a joint communiqué issued on behalf of the Party Central Committee, the State Council, and the government on August 21, and in a more elaborate declaration adopted by the Grand National Assembly on August 22. The latter document expressed "disapproval" of the interference in the internal affairs of the Czechoslovak people and demanded the "immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops."

Rumanian information media devoted extensive attention to the worldwide condemnation of the Warsaw Pact action; coverage of the denunciations issued by Western Europe's largest and most important Communist Parties was exceeded only by that given to the strong response of the Yugoslav leadership. As for the popular reaction within Rumania, innumerable statements condemning the "aggression," supporting the attitude of the Rumanian leadership, and testifying to the population's readiness to defend Rumanian "socialist achievements" were carried by Radio Bucharest. In the capital, the annual Liberation Day parade on August 23 was turned into a demonstration of solidarity with Czechoslovakia, and lent popular support to the spate of speeches, statements, and declarations. Rumanian coverage of the situation within Czechoslovakia concentrated on the activities of the legal Czechoslovak institutions that were still functioning and generally contradicted the reports of the information media of the five Warsaw Pact countries.

On August 23, Ceausescu and Premier Maurer personally met with Czechoslovak Deputy Premier Ota Sik and Minister of Economic Planning Vlasak. The discussions with the Czechoslovak officials who had flown from Belgrade to Bucharest were described as "warm and comradely." On the next day, Ceausescu and President Tito met in

Vrsac and "exchanged views concerning bilateral relations and current international problems of interest to both countries." On the morning of August 25, the Rumanian leader received Soviet Ambassador Basov, at the latter's request. This meeting followed by one day the initiation of a press campaign against the positions of the Rumanian and Yugoslav leaderships.

The Warsaw Pact Response

The initial attack on the Rumanian position appeared on August 24 in two Hungarian newspapers. Magyar Hirlap expressed regret that the intervention had been condemned by leaders or politicians of "other socialist countries," specifically criticizing Ceausescu's attitude toward the Warsaw Pact action and accusing the Rumanian leader of appealing to "nationalist passions." In rhetorical form, the editorial questioned the attitude of the RCP, referring to the "Soviet sacrifices" involved in "the liberation of Rumania just 24 years ago." Another Hungarian daily, Esti Hirlap, again reminded Rumania of its debt to the USSR, and characterized Ceausescu's speech to the Grand National Assembly as "grotesque."

The first Soviet broadside against the Rumanian leadership appeared in Izvestia on August 24. "It is strange," commented V. Kudriavtsev, "to hear exactly the same formulations [characterizing the Warsaw Pact action as 'intervention'] from the lips of Rumanian or Yugoslav leaders." The article accuses Ceausescu of attempting to justify a position that "objectively helps the Czechoslovak counter-revolution in its desire to tear Czechoslovakia way from the socialist community." A later TASS dispatch on August 24 asserted:

It is noteworthy that the imperialist choir has been joined by the leaders of Yugoslavia and Rumania, who are actively helping the Czechoslovak anti-socialist forces. It is in Belgrade and Bucharest that political adventurers from Prague who found themselves outside of Czechoslovakia during these days are weaving their intrigues.

The TASS communiqué appeared in Pravda on the next morning.(3) In addition, Radios Budapest, Warsaw, and Sofia carried the Soviet dispatch; in the two latter instances, this was the first negative reference to the Rumanian position. Following its broadcast of the dispatch, Radio Warsaw's initial commentary on Bucharest's stance noted:

The reaction of the political leadership of Yugoslavia and Rumania is surprising and worrisome, as those countries will be able to preserve all elements of their socialist structure only if they are not left alone to face the infiltration of capitalist bourgeois ideology, and if they are always able to find support in the strong and unified bloc of socialist states.

- (3) On the basis of available information, this appears to be the only attack on the Rumanian leadership that has appeared in the Soviet Party daily.

The first Bulgarian attack on the Rumanian leadership also came on August 25. Radio Sofia broadcast a speech by Party First Secretary and Premier Todor Zhivkov, in which he asserted that "we cannot disregard the behavior of and improper role played by the Yugoslav, Rumanian, and Chinese leaders during this decisive hour for the fate of socialism in Czechoslovakia." (4) In neither the Polish nor the Bulgarian attack was Ceausescu mentioned by name.

On the other hand, Hungarian information media continued to berate the Rumanian leader. Radio Budapest expressed "surprise" that "assistance to Czechoslovakia" had been "misinterpreted by some on the socialist side," and noted that Ceausescu's speech to the GNA had "caused serious indignation among the people of the fraternal socialist countries." Nepszava, on August 25, also accused Ceausescu of "stirring up nationalist sentiments" and of "holding up a distorting mirror" to the Czechoslovak situation. Asserting that "in [Ceausescu's] view, it was not the long months of extremist agitation that have disturbed life, peaceful work, and government activity in Czechoslovakia, but the dawn of August 21 that has done so," the trade union daily refers to the "strange supposition" that "the people who are building the same type of social order and belong to the same military alliance as Rumania should really feel themselves threatened by socialist democracy and by humanism."

Radio Moscow, in a Rumanian-language broadcast of August 25, stated that the leaders of Yugoslavia and Rumania had joined "the imperialist circles, who were stirring up political hysteria in their countries and at the UN."

Except for a brief commentary by Radio Sofia, (5) there followed a temporary lull in the East European press and radio campaign against Rumania. This coincided with a marked shift in the Rumanian attitude, characterized by Radio Bucharest's relative silence on events even remotely connected with the situation in Czechoslovakia.

In both cases (the Rumanian shift will be discussed subsequently), these pauses lasted approximately two days, from August 25 to the morning of August 27. Circumstances and time factors would suggest that the two were not related, i.e., that Bucharest's silence did not influence the brief cessation of attacks in the media of Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary. On the other hand, the sharpest Soviet commentary on the Rumanian position was carried during this period.

(4) Owing to Zhivkov's presence in Moscow at the time (his absence from Bulgaria was attributed by Bulgarian information media to "indisposition"), the speech was delivered for him by Politburo member Stanko Todorov. The full text appeared in Rabotnichesko Delo on 26 August 1968.

(5) A short item compared the attitudes of Yugoslavia, Rumania, and China, asserting that "the positions of right- and left-wing opportunism merge" in a "common anti-Communist chorus." Radio Sofia, 26 August 1968.

On the evening of August 26, Moscow television broadcast the strongest and most comprehensive Soviet attack on the Rumanian position. Commentator Victor Shragin stated that "the official policies of Yugoslavia and Rumania are now comparable with those of NATO and similar powers" and have "bear no relation to Marxist-Leninist internationalism." (6) In "linking themselves to the imperialist chorus," the leaders of Yugoslavia and Rumania "took the path of direct aid to the anti-socialist Czechoslovak forces."

Shragin notes, however, that there were precedents for the current behavior of the two countries. The catalogue of Rumania's mistakes included attempts to "undermine" the Budapest conference, her attitude toward the Arab-Israeli War and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and the normalization of relations with Bonn. Both countries were accused of following a line in the present crisis identical to that of Peking.

On August 27, the Hungarian and Bulgarian attacks on the Rumanian position were resumed. An editorial in Nepszabadsag expressed displeasure with "the attitude of the Rumanian leaders," once again criticizing Ceausescu for his presentation of "Czechoslovakia's peaceful work being disturbed by foreign troops" and his failure to consider "the tensions of the last months that have jeopardized the Czechoslovak socialist order." One of Radio Sofia's morning commentaries noted that the population in the district of Ruse (bordering on Rumania) had been "disappointed" in the attitude of the Rumanian leadership.

The afternoon edition of Izvestia carried another Soviet attack on Bucharest's position. The newspaper asserted that Ceausescu's meeting with Sik and Vlasak was an attempt "to increase the activity of the counterrevolutionary forces in Czechoslovakia." In an obvious reference to Ceausescu's earlier statement that "relations among Parties and states are carried on exclusively between their lawful leaderships," the article stated that the two Czechoslovak officials had "no official mandate" and noted that the Bucharest meeting had taken place on the first day of the "legal" discussions in Moscow.

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- (6) A Radio Moscow commentary on the same evening, which was reprinted in Sovetskaya Rossiya on August 27, asserted that Marxism-Leninism demands "the conducting of a decisive struggle with any [who] ... even little by little retreat from the principles of proletarian internationalism," thus lending an ominous tone to Shragin's accusation.

Izvestia also criticized the Rumanian leadership for its failure to deny West German Foreign Minister Brandt's assertion "to the effect that Rumania might become a victim of armed action." Details of the Izvestia article were immediately carried by Radio Moscow (at 1930 hours on August 27) in a Rumanian-language broadcast. Since the publication (August 27) of the Moscow communiqué on the Soviet-Czechoslovak talks, there have been no critical references in Soviet, Bulgaria, or Hungarian media to the position of the Rumanian leadership.

The Polish Pattern

In the initial stages of the press and radio campaign against Rumania, the Polish reaction was considerably more cautious and certainly less extensive than that of its Warsaw Pact allies. With the exception of a few brief references on Radio Warsaw, the Rumanian position was not commented on by Polish media or in official statements. In addition, Radio Warsaw (August 27) specifically referred to the "deep change" in Bucharest's attitude, quoting Ceausescu as saying that "the most important problem is the deepening of friendship and unity of all socialist countries." (7)

The facade of apparent reticence was broken on August 29 by an article in Trybuna Ludu entitled "Nationalism Led Astray." The article is all the more remarkable in the light of the earlier mildness of the Polish response toward Bucharest's attitude and the fact that press polemics against Rumania had ceased two days previously. Trybuna Ludu characterized the initial reaction of the Rumanian leadership to the Warsaw Pact action as "abnormal and impermissible" and the Grand National Assembly declaration as "pathetic." The Party daily also noted that the leaders had "softened their tone," mentioning "earlier arrogant appeals for national mobilization" and that "now, this hysterical campaign is interpreted as a demonstration of confidence in the policy of the Party and government." Asserting that Rumanian "encouragement was given to the alleged revival of socialism in Czechoslovakia," the article claims that this "approval of democratization was not hindered by the methods used in Rumanian domestic policy, which fully contradict Czechoslovak practices."

Trybuna Ludu then reiterated a familiar theme:

The leaders of the Rumanian Communist Party formulate the question of sovereignty without associating it with class war, and place narrow-minded national interests in opposition to the international interests of socialism.

Adopting the Shragin approach, the Party daily asserted that "the narrowness of this policy has for a long time been directed against the unity of the socialist states." Rumania's establishment of diplomatic relations with West Germany and her "separatist policy toward the Israeli aggressor" are presented as "cracks" in this unity.

(7) This to date is the only explicit East European reference to a shift in the Rumanian position.

The recent Rumanian protest note (July 30) to the Polish Foreign Ministry is also included in this category. The article concluded that "this crack has been further widened by the Rumanian leaders' position on the crisis in the CSSR," a position which is "incompatible with the needs [unity and solidarity of the socialist community] dictated by the situation."

As is obvious from the scope of the article, the motivation for the attack extends beyond the confines of the current differences of opinion on the situation in Czechoslovakia. As was true in early 1967 (following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bonn and Bucharest) and prior to the Rumanian protest of July 30 of this year, Poland has again confirmed its position (along with the GDR) as the chief advocate of the demand that the foreign policies of all Communist states must be limited by the interests of the most orthodox Communist leaderships.

Factors in the Hungarian and Bulgarian Response

It would also appear that the Hungarian and Bulgarian responses to the Rumanian position were not determined solely by the nature of the immediate crisis. As has been noted, Hungarian press and radio carried the strongest attacks (with the exception of Soviet media) on the Rumanian leadership in the period from August 24 through 27, polemicizing directly with Ceausescu on every occasion. One might conclude that the virulence of this campaign may be attributable to elements of tension that have traditionally affected relations between these two countries.

On the other hand, the Bulgarian reaction is surprising for its relative moderation. While Zhivkov was the only East European leader to attack the position of the "Rumanian leaders," only brief references to Bucharest's attitude were made, and Ceausescu was never mentioned personally. A further indication of this moderation is provided by a comparison of the various delegations that attended the receptions given by the Rumanian embassies in the East European capitals on August 23 (Rumanian Liberation Day). In Moscow and Warsaw, extremely low-level government officials attended. In Budapest, Hungarian representation (Miklos Ajtai, candidate member of the Politburo and Vice-President of the Council of Ministers) was less important than in recent years. In Sofia, however, the Rumanian reception was attended by Politburo member Kubadinski, Foreign Minister Bashev, and other high-level government personalities.

While the Zhivkov leadership has given very few indications of placing the interests of Balkan cooperation above those of "proletarian internationalism," it appears in this case that the regime has sought to confine differences with Bucharest within well-defined limits in order to avert a serious deterioration in the bilateral relationship. Such a decision may have been partially motivated by the present embittered state of Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations.

Shifts in the Rumanian Position

Since the initial Radio Bucharest announcement that Warsaw Pact troops had "illegally penetrated" the territory of Czechoslovakia, Rumanian opposition to the intervention has not wavered. However, in reviewing the nature of Bucharest's reaction to the occupation, the outlines of three distinct periods emerge. From the morning of August 21 until August 25, Rumanian information media were saturated with innumerable denunciations of the Warsaw Pact action, total support for the Czechoslovak people and their leadership, and declarations supporting the position of the Party and government and expressing Rumania's ability to defend herself.

The only significant statement in the subsequent two-day period of relative silence (August 25-27) was contained in Scanteia of August 26 -- an editorial that presaged a shift in the Rumanian position. Although eulogizing the August 22 Grand National Assembly declaration and stating that "it is inadmissible to resort to military action against the sovereign will of legitimate Party and state bodies," the editorial's emphasis was on "friendship and alliance with the fraternal socialist countries" and "strengthening the unity of the international Communist movement." Scanteia asserted that "the press of some socialist countries present Rumania's stand in a distorted way;" however, the Party daily declined to reply to these "tendentious assessments and unfounded interpretations," claiming that:

In the present situation, our Party is firmly resolved to do everything that depends on it so as not to aggravate relations still more and not to endanger still further the interests of unity, so as to thwart the hopes of the reactionary imperialist circles for a deepening division in the ranks of the international Communist movement.

Following the conclusion of the Moscow talks and the publication of the communiqué, Rumanian information media resumed their coverage of the situation in Czechoslovakia, but in a markedly different way. With few exceptions, dispatches from Prague were primarily factual, reporting on various meetings and quoting Czechoslovak sources. Denunciations of the intervention were replaced by statements of support for the GNA declaration. References to the defense of Rumania ceased almost entirely. While continuing to express "disapproval" of the occupation and the hope that conditions would be created for the withdrawal of the Warsaw Pact troops, the Rumanian leadership and media adopted a moderate and diplomatic tone, in evident contrast to the earlier period.

The shift was clearly reflected in the performance of Ceausescu himself. In the course of five days (August 26-30), the Rumanian leader addressed nine different audiences, and, unlike his

speeches of August 21 and 22, Czechoslovakia was no longer his main theme. While reiterating the Rumanian position in milder form, Ceausescu devoted most of his attention to the "construction of socialism" in Rumania and the unity of the Rumanian people in support of the foreign and domestic policies of its leadership. This major theme also appeared in the speeches of numerous Party and government officials, who were dispersed throughout the country on "working visits." By the end of August the efforts of the Rumanian leadership appeared to be twofold -- to prove unquestioningly that "socialist achievements" in Rumania were secure, and to appeal for national unity in the face of the tense situation. Indicative of the former effort was Premier Maurer's statement on August 31 that "we are building socialism in such a way that it can never be said that we have deviated from it." As for the latter, it is apparent that the areas populated by the minority groups (especially the Hungarian one) were the targets of special attention in the leadership's "working visits."

In evaluating the Rumanian position, one can only speculate on the rationale for the initial posture of defiance and the subsequent cloak of moderation. Since his elevation to the leadership in 1965, Ceausescu has evidenced few signs of strain and a great ability for calculation in the near continual "war of nerves" with the Kremlin. However, if he had no prior information on Soviet intentions vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia (and there is no evidence to suggest that he did), the possibility cannot be excluded that the Rumanian leader assumed that the confluence of forces leading to the invasion of Czechoslovakia might also apply in the case of Rumania. On the other hand, with the passing of the immediate threat and the benefit of hindsight, one might hypothesize that Ceausescu's invocation of the invasion threat may have been a pre-emptive move designed to focus world attention on his country. As the Economist recently theorized, a swift and categorical condemnation of the intervention may have been regarded as the most feasible way in which to ward off a potential danger to Rumania.(8)

Any one or a combination of factors may have influenced the abrupt change on August 25. In reconstructing the sequence of events, there are three developments that may have played a key role in the decision. Assuming that on August 24 Ceausescu believed that a military invasion of Rumania remained a distinct possibility, he may have sounded out and been turned down by President Tito on the question of Yugoslav assistance to the Rumanians in the event of an attack on the latter. Secondly, Ceausescu's meeting on August 25 with Soviet Ambassador Basov raises several possibilities: limited Soviet reassurances on the course of the talks in Moscow; the charge that the Rumanian attitude was jeopardizing the chance for a settlement; or the threat of some form of direct sanctions against Rumania. A third element may have been the nature of the talks in Moscow, as is

(8) The Economist, 31 August 1968.

reflected in the fact that the Rumanian silence coincided with the last two days of the negotiations. In light of their extended duration and the inclusion of Dubcek, Cernik, and other leaders in the Czechoslovak delegation, the Rumanians may have decided to lapse into silence until such time as a settlement was reached, in order to avert the danger of overcommitment.

Another possible explanation for the shift in the Rumanian position is that, by August 25, the leadership concluded that the original plans of the five Warsaw Pact countries envisaged only the intervention in Czechoslovakia, and not in Rumania as well. In these circumstances, Bucharest may have decided to de-escalate the polemics and avoid provocations that might have led the five to consider a subsequent move against Rumania.

Regardless of the motivation for the adoption of a more moderate position, it has apparently influenced the cessation of attacks on Rumania by the five Warsaw Pact countries. Whereas Yugoslavia's unequivocal opposition to the occupation has continued to draw the wrath of Czechoslovakia's "helpers," there has been no attack on the Rumanian leadership since August 29.

There is no question but that Rumanian policy, both foreign and domestic, will be seriously affected as a result of the occupation of Czechoslovakia. The leadership's opposition to this traducing of national sovereignty in Central Europe has won it the admiration and sympathy of world opinion and increased respect and support from the Rumanian population. However, as the evening of August 20 clearly indicated, such factors are not paramount in Moscow's considerations of its own interest. Barring a substantive reversal of the policies that Bucharest has espoused for the past five years, it is apparent that the Rumanian position within the East European institutional framework will continue to be a solitary one in the immediate future.

Furthermore, the decision to invade Czechoslovakia reflects very explicitly on Moscow's current willingness to tolerate diversity. Having witnessed the use of armed force against Czechoslovakia, the Rumanian leadership can only wonder as to the threshold of possible Soviet action in the case of Rumania. This consideration will undoubtedly impose enormous strain and pressure on subsequent policy-making decisions in Bucharest.

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