

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Romania: Twenty Years after History Changed its Course

“Romania is not free of problems, but over the past twenty years we’ve managed to reinvent ourselves and to restore our democracy,” said Ambassador Simona Mirela Miculescu, Permanent Representative of Romania to the United Nations—the first female Ambassador in Romanian diplomatic history. Miculescu is not the typical ambassador, she told her audience at the Harriman Institute that she will always think of herself as an academic—before her career in diplomacy, Miculescu had been a Communications professor. “I must confess that I will always remain faithful to that environment.”

Miculescu discussed Romania’s transition after the fall of Ceausescu’s regime in 1989. “Some of you might remember that darkness reigned over Romania until 1989—people suffered from lack of food, heat, electricity, freedom of speech, repression, a pervasive cult of personality.” Nicolae Ceausescu, the totalitarian leader who ruled Romania from 1974 to 1989, amassed an enormous amount of foreign debt, which the West granted him as a result of his separatism from the Soviet Union. Ceausescu decided to repay the debt by putting the country in complete international isolation, rationing food and restricting heat and electricity. “This decision exacted enormous costs from our society.”

The infrastructure projects from that period—the Danube/Black Sea Channel, the Bucharest metro system, and the Palace of the Parliament—were built exclusively with Romanian materials, resources and technology. “This was the good part, and I am proud of it—in the early nineties there was a tendency to destroy infrastructure and because these projects had this history, they were not destroyed—I really think that destroying them would have been a pity.”

Although he eradicated Romania’s external debt, Ceausescu left the country in “an extremely precarious economic situation—the industry sector was slow and dysfunctional, purchasing power was low—and even if it hadn’t been, there was nothing to buy.” Miculescu lamented that international isolation had not only impoverished the population, but also added a “psychological”

dimension to Romania’s suffering. While countries like the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland “had liberated their minds” through attempted revolutions and political movements, Romania had been subjected to the strict wrath of a totalitarian leader, and its population, which “woke up in 1990,” had a difficult time adjusting its mentality. “Mindsets are the hardest part of a transition—they change very slowly.”

Miculescu feels grateful to have been a part of the transition. “I love to think, that even though I may be as small as an ant, I am a tiny part of these endeavors.” She described that “Romania in the 1990s was in a deeper crisis than any other country in East Central Europe.” Euro-Atlantic integration became the country’s priority. “We were a most enthusiastic people, who badly wanted to be a part of the EU. We always felt that we were a part of Western civilization, we are Latin, and we went for it with our hearts.” In 1993, Romania joined the Council of Europe. “This was the first major step—accession to an institution that had criticized Romania so much in the past.”

In 2007, after vigorous institutional and financial reforms, Romania entered the European Union. An audience member asked Miculescu about the transformation of Romania as an EU state. Analysts report that after the disappearance of EU conditionality, Romania has regressed—once Romania achieved its membership goals, incentives diminished, and corruption ran rampant, institutions weakened because the young elite who ran them migrated to other EU countries. Miculescu denied these allegations—“I really think that we can call Romania a success story. We have not stepped back. As far as corruption is concerned, we have multiplied our efforts, created new institutions and a national agency for the integrity of officials.”

Miculescu admits that many talented youth have left for other countries, “in particular to Spain and Italy.” But, she contends that this actually benefits Romania—while foreign investment has drastically increased over the past twenty years, “the biggest foreign investors in Romania are the Romanians.” Miculescu places

high hopes in the youth abroad. “We have brilliant young Romanians who shine all over the world—we have to stay in touch with them because they can be fantastic partners in the continuous rebuilding of our country.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner