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The exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television and its implications

1. Socialist television studies: revisiting the single narrative approach

Over the past thirty years, media and television studies have come a long way: from becoming a discipline of study, forming their own methods and methodologies up to encompassing various other disciplines and spanning across all continents. Nevertheless, the vast majority of existing work on television studies remained, for a long period, restricted to American and Western European academic centers and traditions, and developed mostly in reference to *capitalist / democratic television* – television systems fueled by and entrenched in capitalist / democratic¹ economies. However, during recent years, the study of European televisions has rediscovered *socialist television*, and we have witnessed a rapid rise in scholarly interest in a new field of research: socialist television studies. Sabina Mihelj, one of its pioneers, points to the topicality of socialist television stud-

¹ The extent to which these two terms overlap – *capitalist* (mostly negative connotation) and *democratic* (positive connotation) – outreaches the scope of this study. Though, we should take into account two seminal elements in the history of European television: firstly, the rejection, in Europe, at least until the 1970s, of many capitalist features of American (commercial) television; secondly, the recent discovery (precisely within Socialist television research) of a much more porous split between Western and Eastern television networks.

ies: “Until well into the second half of the twentieth century, the vast majority of producers and audiences around the world had experienced the medium of television in the context of non-democratic or, at best, semi-democratic political regimes. Socialist television studies are particularly well equipped to address the specificities of television cultures in non-democratic political contexts” (Mihelj 2014: 7).

Today, socialist television studies are in full swing. Recent years have seen the publication of a research monograph and several articles on socialist television in general (Imre 2016, Mihelj 2014), of several monographs on national socialist television, out of which some in English (Bren 2010, Roth-Ey 2011, Gumbert 2014, Evans 2016), others in different European languages (Ivanova 2005, 2006, Matei 2013), and of several edited collections of studies on television and broadcasting in authoritarian Europe, all in English (Bönker / Obertreis / Grampp 2016, Badenoch / Fickers / Henrich-Franke 2013, Goddard 2013). Today, there are many papers available on this topic, most of which have been published in *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture*, but also elsewhere.² On the whole, this recent body of literature presents two main new insights as compared to previous studies in the field of the history of Western television: on the one hand, it shows that European television during the Cold War was less heterogeneous than one may imagine when considering the political, economic and ideological split created by the Iron Curtain; on the other hand, it turns to and capitalizes on archives, mostly video, which have been inaccessible to the public.

In a very short period, the bi-polar model of commercial (Western) television / public service (Eastern, socialist) television, which dominated at the very beginning in this field and was deeply entrenched in the persistence of Cold War thinking, with its sharp East / West divide, has been overcome and nuanced. In what can be seen as a manifesto for the field, Mihelj identifies two other key issues of the new discipline, apart from overcoming Cold War binaries: 1) distinct but interrelated political, cultural and economic rationales of socialist television (mixing its ambivalent status with the impact on audiences); and 2) overcoming “the prevalence of methodological nationalism in the field by embedding the story of socialist television in the narrative of multiple modernities and multiple visions of progress” (Mihelj 2014: 7).

The interactions between Western and socialist mass culture are highlighted mainly with respect to the most popular TV programs: fiction and entertain-

² The most recent special issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* is devoted to a connected topic: *Memory, Post-Socialism and the Media*, see Mihelj 2017.

ment. As Sabina Mihelj states, scholar research in the socialist television field “challenges the perception of the socialist period as a ‘deviation’ from the supposedly normal course of historical development, and instead highlights continuities between post-1945 cultural histories and long-term historical trends, including the rise of modernity, popular sovereignty, and mass culture” (Mihelj 2011: 510).

A few years later, in *TV Socialism*, the first monograph which tries to show how socialism and television function(ed) as a window into each other, Anikó Imre (2016) points to three elements of the “defamiliarization” effect of historians’ contact with socialist television: 1) the ambivalent political and cultural status of television; 2) socialist audiences; and 3) transnational history. Given the “lower cultural status” of this new media, television escapes censorship, while, in need of an audience, television management (often embodied by superior party levels) has to produce and broadcast entertainment, making television a leisure medium. Imre emphasizes the importance of audience studies and contends that a ‘bottom-up momentum’ in cultural policies encompassed the entire history of socialist television. In addition, she claims that the history of socialist television is a transnational history, as it has to comply with international and transnational flows documented by UNESCO (see Nordenstreng / Varis 1974).

Nevertheless, the new picture which this recent research reveals does not uniformly cover all former socialist countries. If socialist television studies try to level post-war Europe, they expose other hidden breaches, such as the one between one group of Central European ex-socialist countries (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, GDR) and the South-Eastern ones: Albania,³ Bulgaria,⁴ and also, to some extent, Romania and Yugoslavia.⁵ However, assessing inequalities within the frame of socialist television scholarly research does not invalidate its achievements, but helps us realize that socialist television is not such a homogeneous field of study as it seems at first sight. Naturally, as television in former socialist European countries has just come under scholar scrutiny, time is required to legitimize it and including socialist television into a single narrative is the best way to attain its legitimacy.

Indeed, socialist television history is part of the ‘new Cold war history’ – “a history informed by multi-archival research and written from a multilateral perspective, free from the distorting lens of the bilateral relationship between the two superpowers” (Crump 2011: xv). Research on socialist television makes

³ Any information about this country, whose national television was inaugurated as late as 1968, is conspicuously lacking from social television studies.

⁴ The first article in English on Bulgarian socialist television was published last year, see Marinos 2016.

⁵ In this latter case we talk about a federal republic, with several state television channels.

one seminal assumption: that television in Eastern Europe was not mere political propaganda, in complete contrast with that of Western, democratic European television. Rather, we have to encompass the whole of European television when approaching socialist television, as there are many common stakes.⁶

Television has to be looked at from the point of view of cultural, political and economic dynamics on a national, international and global level, but at the same time as a constellation of systems, with cores and peripheries (Wallerstein 2004, Matei 2017). Thus, if socialist television's history is a periphery of its kind of the larger European television system, it is also true that socialist television has its own peripheries. What we should do, as researchers, is pay equal attention to all the parts and dynamics of such a system and engage in contacts with those areas which are less known.

The tremendous effort undertaken by the scholars involved in socialist television studies has opened a vast field of investigation. The mixture of historical, sociological and communication approaches has already succeeded in changing the common view on the effects of the Iron Curtain. As television was defined as a flow (Williams 1972), and the "Thaw-Era" coincided with the beginning of European television, there is no wonder that East and West do not seem today as divided as they were presented in the 1980s (see Tismăneanu 1988).

In what follows we show how and why socialist Romania was similar but, at the same time, different from the rest of the Eastern Bloc countries and in what way this influenced the development of Romanian television (TVR – *Televiziunea română*). This will add to a better understanding of the unique character of Romanian television within the frame of European socialist television, but will also facilitate a comparative approach with other countries of the European periphery whose television is less well-known.

2. Why was socialist Romania different?

The last few years saw a heated debate within Romania's intellectual circles on the public phenomenon of *exceptionalism* of today's Romania. It was fueled by the 2013 publication of the essay *Why is Romania different?*, signed by the well-known Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2013). While Boia has been labeled and praised as the myth buster of Romanian historiography, this essay apparently does the exact opposite: it sanctions (from an allegedly academic position) the (negative) myth of the country's inborn exceptionalism. What Boia does is

⁶ See Bourdon 2011 on the political influence upon television 2011, Fickers 2010 on the "techo-politics of colour", Imre 2016 on the importance of cultural policies before WWII etc.

induce the idea that Romania is a unique case in the world or at least in Europe. Elements of this exceptionalism, according to Boia, are: the fact that the Romanian people are the only Latin people who formed and developed in the Slavic part of the European continent (“a Latin island in a Slavic ocean”), Romanian is a Roman language with the most diverse and mixed borrowed vocabulary, the Romanian principalities showed up incredibly late on the map of Europe, when the neighboring countries already had a history behind them; there is almost no information about Romanians before the 13th century; the Romanian Middle Ages started when they were already finished in the rest of Europe; this historical delay caused the Romanian society to fall behind the rest of Europe and remain for very long in a rural traditional frame; Romanians are the only Christian Orthodox people who have followed the Slavic culture for a very long time, were then infused with Greek culture, just to make a sharp cut with the East, in the 19th century, and take over, at the elite level, Western cultural and political models etc. According to Boia, apart from these slow and multiple historical accumulations, Romania’s exceptionalism is due to the mindset of Romanians, defined by their proverbial passivity and negativism, lack of positive attitude, apathy and political opportunism.

While the essay has certain stylistic qualities and is far from lacking in a scientific approach, it aroused fierce debates and heated discussion, being accused of superficiality in its approach, cynicism, lack of empathy with the object of study, vulgar simplification, extreme bias, banality, methodological deficiency, epistemological questionability, by the authors of the volume *Why is Romania like this? The avatars of Romanian exceptionalism* (Mihăilescu 2017). Denouncing the temptations of exceptionalism, Romanian anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu shows (from a similar academic posture) that Romania’s exceptionalism does not have, in fact, anything exceptional, in the sense that it has never been an exception in the European ideological field, something never heard of, but an “ideological mixture, tailored up of Western ideas so that it fits the local client” (*idem*: 50).

Mihăilescu makes salient in his book the thin distinction to be noticed within exceptionalism: “Exceptionalisms are never true – and we have to put them in their right place when they have exceeding pretensions; at the same time, they can often be correct, when they are political strategies [...]” (Mihăilescu 2017: 51). However, it seems that most of the authors included in this collection of studies agree, more or less, to the fact that Romanian *communism* presented several features that distinguish it from other socialist regimes in Europe.

For almost half a century, Romania was a communist country, not different from the other communist countries in Europe or in the world, as commu-

nism everywhere starts from the same founding texts and adheres to several basic principles. However, inasmuch as communism permitted a degree of divergence within its limits, Romanian communism had a series of unexpected evolutions and divergences. Thus, the country with the smallest number of communists became the state with the biggest communist party; the mostly rural Romania took on a path of extreme and rapid urbanization (however, Romania has not overcome its demographic situation, being the least urbanized European country by the end of the communist regime); a rather ethnically diverse state after WWI, it was “Romanianized” to such an extent as to number almost 90% Romanians at the fall of the communist regime; the anti-nationalist communism from the beginning ended up by being ultra-nationalist; a society hardly touched by the communist ideology became so profoundly communist that it had the hardest time in breaking up with communism of all the other countries of the Eastern Bloc; Romania invented the dynastic dictatorship, similar only to that in North Korea; the ideological commitment of Nicolae Ceaușescu, unique among other East European leaders, was to continue the pace of industrial modernization at the cost of the Stalinist promise of meeting the basic needs of all; Romania’s position was singular in Eastern Europe as regards the Warsaw pact; the country with the seemingly weakest communist opposition overturned the regime with the bloodiest revolution in Europe etc. (Ban 2012, Boia 2016).

In what follows, we will briefly review several factors which added to the uniqueness of Romanian communism and, consequently, decisively influenced the evolution of Romanian television under the communist regime, as we will see further.

2.1. Urbanization

At the beginning of the 1960s, Romania was still a mostly rural country, the least urbanized society of all socialist national societies. But with the advance of communism, the pace of industrialization and urbanization rapidly increased. The appearance of towns changed greatly, when their most important element became the block of flats, multiplied by the thousand. Collectivization transformed a certain part of Romanian peasantry into an agricultural proletariat, while industrialization absorbed a significant mass of this rural population. On the one hand, the poorly built, crowded, identical buildings were supposed to host the large numbers of peasants transformed overnight into factory workers, town dwellers cut-off from the village but not truly integrated into urban life. On the other hand, the urbanization drive was in most cases superficial: a few blocks of flats and utilities available only in the center of a former village sufficed

to change its administrative status into a town. We have to emphasize, however, an important point concerning the socio-cultural status of those newcomers (former peasants transformed into factory workers) within the context of television reception: during the 1960s, most of them remained commuters between their village homes and the peri-urban factories they were working in (see Crowther 1988). In the 1980s, Ceaușescu was also planning to complete his urbanization plan by dissolving villages completely and transforming them into urbanized settlements, which never happened in the end.

2.2. Cultural traditions and historical liabilities

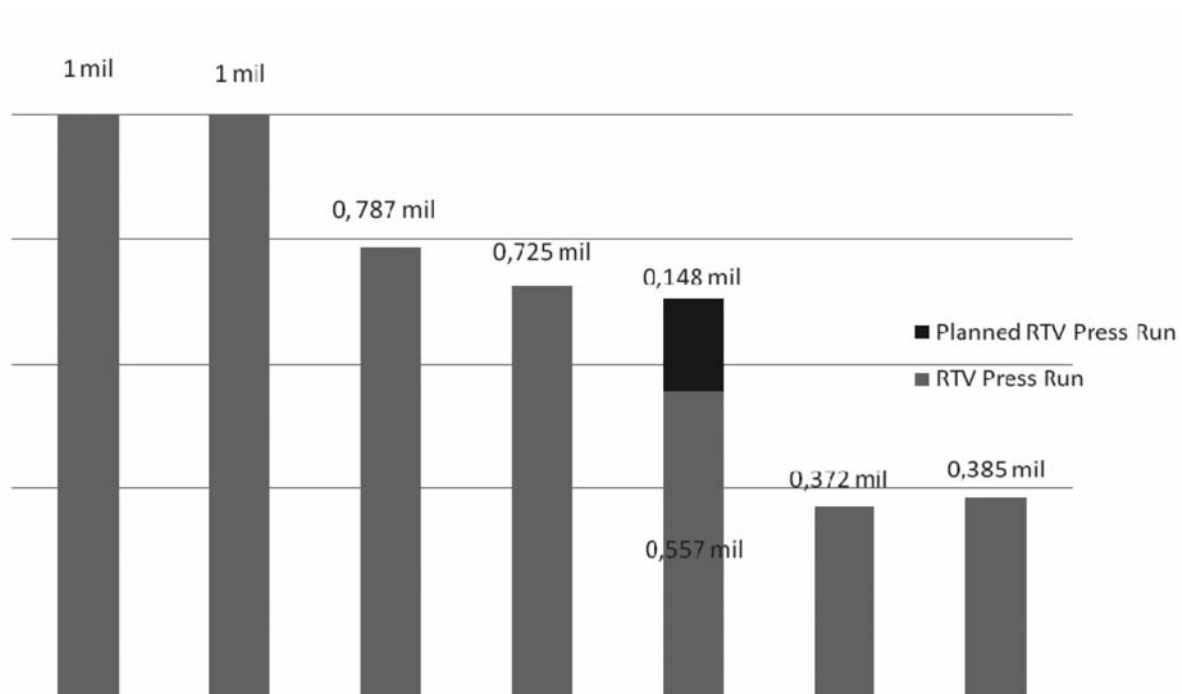
A strong French and German elite cultural tradition mitigated by a post-WWII anti-Nazi propaganda propelled an already two-century-long French cultural influence (Drace-Francis 2016: 47), as soon as the first signs of the “Thaw-Era” appeared, in 1963-1964. A French television news magazine feature asserts that in the Popular Republic of Romania, once Russian language lessons ceased to be compulsory in schools, French became the foreign language chosen by two thirds of Romanian pupils, from 1963 onward (*Cinq colonnes a la une*, 1964). This reflected not only on literature (see Baghiu 2016), education and language borrowings, but also on the burgeoning showbiz (see the pop music international festival *Cerbul de Aur* (The Golden Stag), 1968-1971, see Matei 2013).

On the other hand, although Romania moved to the Soviet side in 1944, it was nevertheless considered an overpowered nation and had to pay war debts to the Soviet Union. France, another European “exception”, especially during the De Gaulle regime, shared with Ceaușescu’s Romania, during the first half of his regime, some similar features: rigid presidential rule, nationalistic policy as a counterpart to American / Soviet imperialism (associated with collaborative projects with the opposite superpower), powerful state engagement to emancipate individuals through high culture elements and exceptional cultural claim in context. We can say that France was immersed into an “Anglo-Saxon” larger context, while Romania, into a larger “Slavic” one (Matei 2014). In both cases, television was not mainly an entertainment media (which is true for any other socialist country), but mostly as an educational / cultural / propagandistic tool.⁷

Even if much of Romanian television programs was devoted to entertainment (48.2% compared to 36% in Yugoslavia, in 1970, see Ivanova 2007: 123)

⁷ One “exceptionalist” terminological and cultural feature of Romanian television programs within the socialist television network is implicitly offered in Anikó Imre’s book: while in Hungary, Poland and East Germany entertainment programs were labeled as *cabaret* (a French mass culture item of the 19th century imported and used in Germany), in Romania they have always been known as *variétés* (Rom. *varietăți*), the same as in French (Imre 2016).

at the beginning of the 1970s, the new ideological drive of the 1970s and the cut of daily broadcasting in the 1980s drastically reduced this percentage.⁸ On the other hand, as innovation and format import were banned from the mid-1970s, TVR's programs became duller and duller. This is partially shown by audience surveys and, even more, by the disappearance of these surveys during the 1980s, as well as by the drastic fall in television magazine sales during the 1980s: from 1.05 million copies sold during the 1970s, TVR sold 0.78 million in 1983 and less than 0.4 million in 1986 (see Graphic 1). Similarly, the number of TV subscriptions fell in 1983 for the first time, to be followed by a steady decline until the end of the communist regime.



Graphic 1. TVR broadcasting magazine circulation (millions) [1980-1987]. Source: SRR Archives.⁹

2.3. Ethnic identities

Ethnic issues were obvious at the beginning of communist rule in Romania. The “non-Romanians” had the largest share in the communist party and even in its leadership, partly due to the ethnically mixed composition of Romania,

⁸ For the ratio of propaganda and entertainment during a 1971 Sunday program on TVR, see Matei 2013: 110.

⁹ SRR Archives (*Arhivele Societății Române de Radiodifuziune* – Archives of the Romanian Society of Radio Broadcasting).

partly to the fact that “non-Romanians” were fitter than Romanians to put into practice the communist “internationalist”, anti-national project.

Of all the other socialist countries, except for Yugoslavia, which was a federal republic, Romania was the most ethnically heterogeneous state. The center of the country was dominated by a non-Romanian population, the “autonomous Hungarian region”, which would only disappear in 1968, when the regime began its social policies of ethnic homogenization. These included mass emigration of ethnic groups, first the Jews, then the Germans and Hungarians. The “Romanianization” of Romania was also the result of heavy industrialization and urbanization, which displaced a large part of the rural population, which was mostly Romanian, and resettled them in the multi-ethnic towns and cities. Thus, if in 1930 ethnic Romanians made up 71.9% of the country’s population, at the end of the communist period their share reached 89.5% (Boia 2016: 88).

This process of homogenization was paralleled by a strong nationalistic stance in public culture, of which television was meant to be the vehicle. Hungarian and German programs started being broadcast in 1969 (seemingly as a personal initiative of Nicolae Ceaușescu, see Matei 2013: 148) and were cut off in 1985, as an effect of the drastic cuts in TV broadcasting.¹⁰

2.4. Geopolitical status

Romania had the (bad) luck to only be surrounded by socialist countries. The only possible territorial menace came from the Soviets, but no ideological danger could come from beyond its frontiers. However, when the seclusion imposed by Ceaușescu’s regime became extreme after the 1980s, Romania’s neighbors, especially Yugoslavia, became a “window to the West”, in that their more liberal regimes were “balancing between the sought-after communist control and a flirt with capitalism” (Vučetić 2012). Romania’s exceptionalism was to be proved once more: this communist country, initially unwilling to embark on the communist path, surrounded by other communist states, would be the last one to overthrow the regime. While the surrounding states were slowly softening their authoritarian regimes, Romania was becoming ever more secluded in its communist ideology. As TVR became one of the main channels of communist propaganda, losing all other functions by the 1980s, Romanians were viewing the television broadcasts of the neighboring countries, which could easily be watched in the border areas and further .

¹⁰ Teodor Brateș, former director of TVR’s news department, believes that one of the reasons for these broadcast cuts was precisely the fact that Ceaușescu wanted to have a justification for eliminating the Hungarian and German programs (Alexandru Matei, personal interview with Teodor Brateș, 2016).

2.5. Personal dictatorship

Nicolae Ceaușescu distinguished himself from other communist heads of states from the Eastern Bloc in a number of noteworthy ways. From today's perspective, his personality cult is one of the most fascinating and horrifying chapters of Romanian history, which has attracted the interest of many researchers (Durandin 1990, Cioroianu 2004, Burakowski 2011, Marin 2016) and can only be compared to that of Enver Hoxha in Albania (Tismăneanu 2012). If Ceaușescu was a popular and credible leader at the end of the 1960s, after his brave move from 1968 (condemning the Warsaw pact and the military intervention in Czechoslovakia), the next 20 years only turned the man whom Romanians genuinely trusted into a mere caricature. Absolute ideological commitment would have been impossible without a personal dictatorship in which all important decisions were taken, after 1974, by only one man, the president. Not surprisingly, at the climax of his personality cult, at the end of the 1980s, Nicolae Ceaușescu was much less popular in Romania than before he became the object of this blind idolatry (Cioroianu 2004, 2010).

At the end of the 1970s, when **Ceaușescu's personality cult started off**, it also played the role of resistance towards Moscow: he was to replace Stalin in the political imagery of the Romanian Communist Party. However, his cult also had roots in Romanian history, in the person of Carol the Second during the inter-war period. Finally, after his 1971 visit to China and North Korea, Ceaușescu also adopted the Asian model, being deeply impressed by the dynastic communism of the Asian countries (*idem*, Ban 2012).

The progressive accumulation of power in the hands of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, already on its way in 1974, after the former became the first Romanian president and his wife was appointed a member of the Central Committee, explains much of the peculiar turn taken by TVR by the mid-1970s, which in the 1980s intensifies down to near catastrophe.

3. Exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television

Romanian television's history cannot be assessed without taking into account these five crucial elements which made the Romanian socialist regime unique in the Eastern Bloc. TVR was launched on 31 December 1956 (and was combined at that point with the radio). If the period from the mid-1960s until the end of the 1970s was the "Golden Age" of TVR, with diversifying genres, television reporting, investigative journalism in full swing and a second channel added in 1968, by the end of the 1970s, TVR had entered its dictatorial phase, which

lasted throughout the 1980s, when programs became politicized and were only made to please the dictator Ceaușescu. The diversity of genres was reduced to political programming and broadcast content became scarce. The second channel was shut down in 1985, as were the local stations of Romanian television.

At its beginning, the development of Romanian television was undermined only by the first aspect: few technical competencies to be exploited. Shortly after that, TVR flourished under the authority of several leading Jewish personalities.¹¹ In 1965, when Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, the former Communist leader, died and Ceaușescu came to power, television coverage was 40% of Romanian territory and membership was still low: 500,000 or 3% of the Romanian population, with a high imbalance between urban and rural regions and between the country's provinces. In the years to follow, with the advancement and consolidation of Ceaușescu's rule, TVR would undergo profound changes, which would grant it a specific profile amongst the televisions in Europe.

Important research, done mainly by Dana Mustata, attempts to integrate Romanian television into the bigger picture of European socialist television (2012 a,b). There has been little interest though in documenting the effects of what has been recently labeled (and criticized) as Romanian "exceptionalism" upon Romanian socialist television industry and culture. In a chapter of Mihăilescu's volume on the exceptionalism of Romania, entitled *At the border of empires, at the crossroads of worlds. A Romanian geopolitical exceptionalism*, Valentin Naumescu brings to attention the revival of former traditional cultural borders within post-Iron Curtain Europe: Central Europe tried to recover its traditions and, in 1991, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia founded the Višegrad group. Naumescu suggests that "this sub-regional project" aimed at attracting rapid Western economic investments, but was also pointing at an "implicit separation from Bulgaria and Romania (poorer countries, with bad images in the West, whose transition start was delayed)" (2017: 77).

As concerns the relative scarcity of research on socialist Romanian and Bulgarian television, Namuescu's argument may stand. On the other hand, it does not explain how national Romanian exceptionalism could have affected television. As figures will show, at the beginning of the 1960s, Romanian television was relatively more developed than its Bulgarian counterpart. But, as time passed, the situation reversed: by the 1970s, the Romanian television network was poorer than that in Bulgaria; its material basis in Bucharest grew more dysfunctional and its technical involution made it lag behind all other European

¹¹ Personal interview of Alexandru Matei with Sanda Țăranu, former TVR presenter, 2012.

television networks as far as the beginning of color television broadcasting is concerned.

In other words, if at the beginning of European socialist television history the Romanian official channel could easily be embedded into this larger picture (the year of the first public broadcasting, television genres, new headquarters built in the 1960s), it gradually slipped out of it as Ceaușescu's regime became more authoritarian. This exception is to be seen mainly, but not exclusively, as the result of Ceaușescu's personal repeated interventions in state media policies, as his belief was that television was totally inefficient as a mobilization means to an austere economical and moral day-to-day social regime. On the other hand, the cultural gap between a backward rural society and a small urban elite, specific to interwar Romania (see Butoi 2017), prevented a larger diffusion of television culture until the late 1980s, when this culture no longer relied on what the national channel was allowed to offer to its public (see Sorescu-Marinković 2012). While differences between rural and urban cultures have always existed in the European periphery, in Romania they were bigger than elsewhere. And while nationalisms were active in each of the former socialist countries, trying to prevent television inter- and trans-national flows, the Romanian national-communist regime took all these to the extreme.

3.1. Urbanization and television

Rapid, but superficial urbanization, the 1968 administrative reform which completely modified the structure of the country (from 16 regions to 40 counties) and the need for popular support led to what now seems to be the beginning of Romanian mass culture. International tourism, a cinema industry, glossy magazines, international music and film festivals, more porous frontiers – all these laid the foundation of a proto-consumer society in Romania between 1963 and 1968. 1968 is the year when TVR made some major achievements: new functional headquarters (built between 1967-1970, but planned in 1964), more broadcasting hours, the launching of a second channel available only in the Bucharest area, an international pop music festival in Brașov, international film co-productions, televised foreign language classes (Russian, but also French, English, German, Italian). Still, the membership was one of the lowest in Europe, and the lowest among the other socialist states (except for Albania): 9.35/100 compared to the second lowest figure, Bulgaria, where the ratio was 15.88/100 (Matei 2013: 221). The evolution of these figures shows how Bulgaria's and Romania's television networks changed last place in Europe between 1965 and 1968: Romania had 26 memberships per 1,000 people in 1965, while Bulgaria had 22, whereas in 1968 the order is already reversed: 56/1,000 in Romania and 70/1,000 in Bulgaria (see

Ivanova 2007: 122). During an interview with one inhabitant of a village in the heart of Romania (Gorj department), a former technician remembered that his first TV set was bought in 1969, not that he didn't have enough money to buy one earlier, but because the village hadn't been connected to the national electricity network¹².

A still fragile urbanization, combined with the rural origin of most of the new party apparatus, whose members were controlling television, starting with Ceaușescu himself, prevented most cultural programs from becoming popular. According to the data from *Oficiul de Studii și Sondaje* (The Office for Studies and Polls),¹³ in 1972, for example, the permanent audience of TVR above 15 years of age was 5 million (33% of the entire population above 15 years of age). The rural population, which represented 59.5% of the entire population of Romania, made up 34.3% of TVR audiences, while the urban population (40.5% of the total) made up 65.7% of TVR audiences.

The 1970s witnessed the rise of a new huge social class: young commuter peasants, who were employed in the newly built factories. They would work there in the morning, to go back home in the afternoon and continue working in their households. By the 1980s, most of them were already living in the outskirts of cities or in small towns, after access to the main cities was restricted.¹⁴ However, most of them had to wait until the 1990s to watch television, very expensive in the 1970s and very dull in the 1980s. What they would have wanted – modern music, blockbusters, quizzes and reality programs etc. – only became available after 1995. Except for popular movies (even three per week in those years), Western series, traditional folk music, blunt Romanian comedies (e.g. *Nea Marin* – Uncle Marin) and children's programs, television culture was rather high culture for them.

3.2. Cultural traditions, historical liabilities and television

The period 1968-1975 represented the golden years of TVR, as we have already mentioned. A former press official – in Paris after 1960, Tudor Vornicu – designed the entire entertainment program after 1965. Valeriu Lazarov, the first outstanding Romanian television entertainment producer, left the country before 1970, first for Italy, then for Spain. Vornicu might have been a *Securitate* (Romanian state security) agent (see Matei, 2012) and his political power probably made him the major representative of a leisure television, a position

¹² Alexandru Matei, personal interview conducted in August 2017

¹³ SRR Archives.

¹⁴ According to Decree no. 68/ 17 March 1976, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, no. 24/20 March 1976, 14 Romanian cities, labeled big cities, banned any resettling in their territory.

which he kept until his death in 1988. His TV productions during the grey 1980s, mainly light news magazines and entertainment weekend broadcasts, gave birth to TV stars and were the most interesting, with growing audiences. During these years one can notice a simili-synchronization of national mass culture with major western trends (mostly European): the appearance of pop, but also some rock and jazz music, of youth movements (hippy) etc. But TVR was stubbornly aiming at diffusing high culture: theatre, concerts, camera music and opera, literature and fine arts, theoretical debates – generally very dull, but informative.

According to a survey from 1973,¹⁵ audiences asked for: 37% more daily movies (Romanian, American, Indian and French), 27% more popular music, 12% more entertainment (and more series, especially more realistic Romanian series), 7% more news magazines. As far as the preferences of the audiences were concerned, the top four were: 1) movies and series, 2) *Teleenciclopedia* (a Discovery style show), 3) *Varietăți* (Varieties), and 4) *Reflector* (Spotlight, news magazine about social and economic flaws), while the last places in the top of preferences were shared by: 1) *Viața satului* (Village Life): 17% in 1973 (see Matei 2013: 315), 2) Tele-school and foreign language classes (Russian and German), 3) news magazines on politics and ideological debates.

Another survey from 1972 presents the Romanian population educational and audience structure. Thus, 90.5% of the entire population had elementary education and it made up for 63% of the audience; 7.2% possessed a high school diploma and made up 27% of the audience; while 2.3% had a university diploma and made up 10% of the audience (SRR Archives).

On the basis of the various data made available by the surveys, we can say that television in socialist Romania was more high/medium culture than popular media¹⁶, with peasants and workers being the social categories possessing the fewest television sets, while housekeepers, retirees, clerks and intellectuals possessed the largest number of television sets.

Even though part of the television content was accused of being vulgar or obscene in formal or informal meetings, comments or TV chronicles,¹⁷ the entertainment TV programs of the 1970s are considered nowadays a standard of

¹⁵ *Barometrul audienței în luna ianuarie* (Audience barometer in January), SRR Archives.

¹⁶ The structure of the broadcast supports this assessment: symphonic concerts, opera and operette, theater were rather frequent, while popular urban music was not so popular in the 1960s, when more than 60% of Romanians lived in the countryside (Udrea 2014).

¹⁷ The genre of TV chronicle appeared in 1963, and its most well-known author is a Jewish Francophile journalist still alive, who directed the magazine *Cinema* from its inception in 1963, up to 1989: Ecaterina Oproiu.

good taste. Though moral and aesthetic values change over time, we should add that television entertainment was even then more conservative: very little jazz or rock music, only one quiz, very scarce political satire. Part of broadcast satire was directed at stifling avant-garde art and promoting a healthy way of living. TVR had only one popular quiz, *Cine știe continuă* (Who knows goes on), which only transferred from radio to television in 1973 and was cancelled shortly after, when Ceaușescu forbade television formats involving material prizes.

By far the most resounding success was by American series. Given the good economic relations with the US governments,¹⁸ TVR could buy American series much more cheaply than its neighbors from the Eastern Bloc.¹⁹ American series could be broadcast until the early 1980s: in the 1970s *Dallas* became the most widely watched television program in Romania, with more than 90% of the audience watching it.²⁰

3.3. Ethnic issues and television

Starting with 1969, the year of the 10th Communist Party Congress, TVR also broadcast in Hungarian and German, in an attempt to rally all ethnic communities within the nation (of course, the Roma were the big absentee from the picture). The idea of broadcasting in Hungarian and German was also meant to emphasize an internationalist communist commitment that Ceaușescu tried to minimize during his regime. However, these programmes were a highly propagandistic mixture of news magazine and high culture (theater, visual art, traditional or classical music). The Hungarian language program had 150 minutes, while the German one had 105 in 1972, at their acme. However, Hungarian and German programs were never broadcast in prime time. These programs were suspended in the 1980s as Romania was escalating nationalism and the Warsaw Pact was losing substance. Teodor Brates thinks that one of the reasons for the dramatic cuts in broadcasting begun by early 1985 was precisely the violent anti-Hungarian stance of Ceaușescu himself. Hungary was permitted by Gorbachev to host refugees from Transylvania²¹,

¹⁸ Romania was awarded the *Clause of most favored nation* in 1975, but the reason for the advantages in buying American movies was the close relationship between the two states.

¹⁹ Mihai Bujor Șion, General Manager of the Television Committee in the early 1970s, stated in 1972: “The license fees we pay for feature movies are very low within the international market, from 1/2 to 1/10 compared to other fees socialist televisions have to pay” (The meeting of the TVR National Council, September 1972, SRR Archives).

²⁰ The most watched cinema movie in the 1970s was an Indian one (Câmpeanu 1979).

²¹ Antenne 2 broadcast on 12 May 1988 a feature about Romanians from Transylvania (most of them of Hungarian ethnicity, but not all) going to Budapest. There is also an interview with Cornelius Rosca, the founder of the Free Romania organization whose task was to integrate Romanian immigrants in Hungary. INA Archives.

while most Germans had already left the country, some of them being “sold” by Ceaușescu.²²

3.4. Geopolitical status and television

At the beginning of the 1980s, when broadcasting of the Romanian television was cut down to three, then to only two hours daily, and communist propaganda was ubiquitous, altering all the programs, more and more people started watching the television programs of the neighboring countries. Thus, near the state borders, watching Bulgarian, Hungarian or Yugoslav television became a *modus vivendi*, a way of escaping the isolation and self-sufficiency imposed by Ceaușescu’s politics, of piercing the imaginary Iron Curtain separating communist Romania from the rest of Europe (Mustata 2013b, Sorescu-Marinković 2011, 2012). Yugoslav television was the most liberal and had the most diverse program. Furthermore, its strong signal covered the entire Banat region, higher areas of Transylvania, as well as part of Muntenia and Oltenia, where it overlapped with Bulgarian television. Ex-Yugoslavia was in-between the Eastern socialist world and the capitalist democratic one, a *semi-periphery* of its kind, in Wallerstein’s terms, or the territory of *Coca-Cola socialism* (Vučetić 2012), so that there is no wonder that its television programs enjoyed more freedom than those of its socialist siblings.

Watching the “bourgeois” television programs of neighboring countries was a frequent phenomenon in the border zones of the Eastern Bloc. Western television (and before television, radio) helped Eastern Europeans to compare their living standard with the much higher one in capitalist countries. This way, the foreign TV audience got used to the functioning of democracy and experienced a freedom unknown in communism. In the long run, the programs of Western television supported pro-democratic attitudes and undermined public support of communism (Kern / Hainmueller 2009: 379). The transnational flow of information which the radio, and later the television enabled played an important role towards the end of the communist period and encouraged the process of democratization. It is widely believed that the Western media greatly contributed to the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Nye 2008).

For example, the Germans in GDR regularly watched the programs of FRG television (Kern / Hainmueller 2009, Kern 2011, Grdešić 2014), while on the other side of the continent Finnish television was introducing Estonians to the colorful world of entertainment and consumerism, teaching them about Western values and

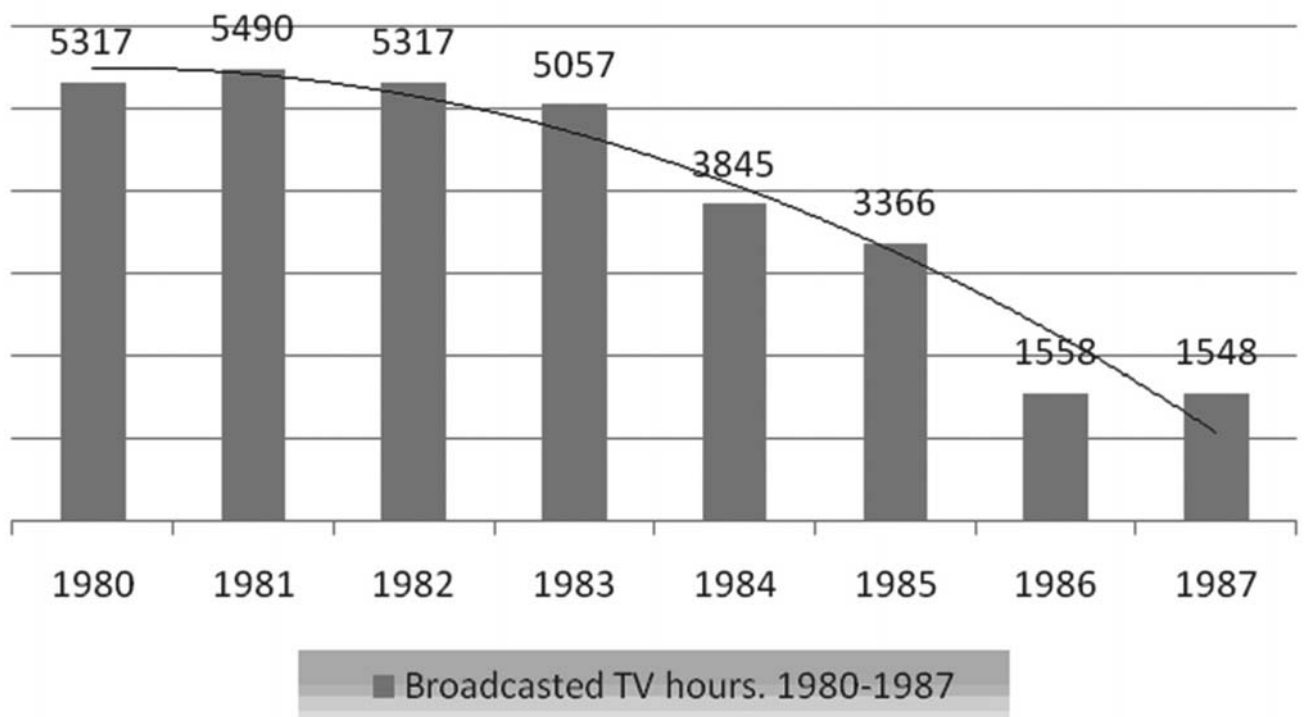
²² More in the documentary *Trading Germans* by Răzvan Georgescu, 2014.

encouraging them to dream of a better future (Lepp / Pantti 2012: 76). In Enver Hoxha's Albania, the television of the neighboring countries (Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia) were, in the 1980s, almost the only connection between the extremely isolated Albanian society and the rest of the continent. Even if watching foreign television was forbidden and punishable in Albania, it became a mass phenomenon in the border zones of this socialist country. After 1973, signal jammers were installed in the border regions of Albania, but in most cases their effect was minimal (Idrizi 2016). As far as the practice of watching foreign television in socialist Romania is concerned, what sets Romania apart is the amplitude and spread of the phenomenon, which led, among others, to extensive language acquisition (Sorescu-Marinković 2011).

Dana Mustaca notices that in 1982 Romania's public architecture completely changed, when TV antennae started popping up on the roofs of the buildings, when the broadcast of the World Cup from Spain was forbidden (Mustata 2013b: 156). Surprisingly, this practice was tacitly accepted in Ceaușescu's Romania, where the *Securitate* controlled everything: "The public space of the country remained clear of suppressive measures against reception of foreign television, as well as of any (functional) infrastructures obstructing foreign radio signal coming into the country" (*idem*: 157). A TVR document dated 4 July 1982, entitled *Information concerning the reception of foreign television programs in the territory of our country*, includes a map made by the *Securitate* that year. The map shows the "reception zones" in Romania where watching foreign TV was possible (*idem*: 162, Figure 2). A note has it that in the south of Romania 6-8 million people were watching Bulgarian TV, in the south-west, 3-4 million people were watching Yugoslav TV, while the Romanians in the North and East of the country were watching Soviet TV. According to that document, Yugoslavia had the highest number of transmitters sending a signal into Romania.

3.5. Personal dictatorship and television

Already from the beginning of the 1970s, the incipient cult and dictatorship of Ceaușescu, his conservative personality and preferences, Romania's autonomous policies within the Warsaw Pact and a stricter nationalistic stance in cultural policies prevented TVR from following the same development pace as before. Instead of quizzes, TVR launched an amateur cultural program called *Carmen Patriae*, whose name was shortly after changed into *Cântare Patriei* (Song [of praise] to the country) and then, in 1976, into *Cântarea României* (Song [of praise] to Romania). This was the initiative of Ceaușescu, who was increasingly discontent with the new television ethos.



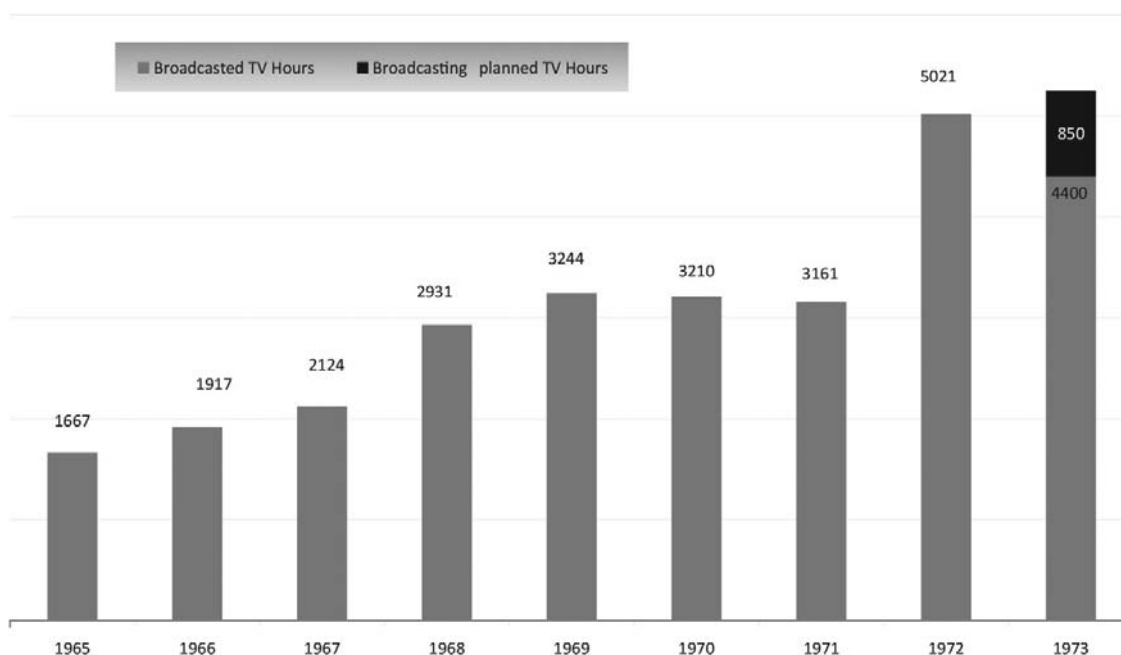
Graphic 2. Broadcasted TV hours per year (thousands) [1965-1973].

In the aftermath of Ceaușescu's visit to China in 1971, he initiated a cultural revolution in Romania. Until then, television had fallen under the direct control of the Radio and Television Committee of the Council of Ministers, a government organ which ensured that television broadcasting complied with the socialist ideology. In March 1971, however, the Radio and Television Committee became the National Council of Romanian Radio and Television, whose composition was to be decided by both the Council of Ministers and the party's Central Committee (Mustata 2013a: 111).

With the occasion of the 10th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, in 1969, Ceaușescu accused TVR's programs of lacking seriousness. A few years later, during a meeting with the TVR management in August 1976, he expressed blatant annoyance regarding the special television program for the Romanian National Day (August 23rd). He stated accusingly that during such a special day there should be no room for movies or series, which he considered no more than mere schedule filling since nothing better was produced: "Even if we had had five channels, they should have all focused on August 23rd! (...) You should show the most important events. This has to be the television's program! (...) Movies take too much time during evening slots. Watching movies is the least interesting

activity for the critical mind”.²³ Ceaușescu railed again against Romanian television and media in 1979, during the 12th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (Matei 2013: 265, 301). One could think that Ceaușescu criticized only the conspicuous inability of Romanian television producers to create relevant content, which was probably the case in the beginning, but not later. Ceaușescu was in fact discontented with the presumed incapacity of television to become the perfect medium for education and culture.²⁴

When Aniko Imre states that, by the end of the 1960s, television audiences were already using television as a leisure media (2016: XXX), she implies that everyone was aware of its status, party members included. What made the difference in the Romanian case was the almost exclusive command of the Ceaușescu couple in virtually all Romanian affairs. Television ceased to be of any value for them in the 1970s, when the number of broadcast hours started dropping (see



Graphic 3. Broadcasted TV hours per year [thousands] [1980-1987]

Source: SRR Archives

²³ File no. 40/1976, Executive Bureau of TVR National Council, Section Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, Romanian National Archives.

²⁴ Ștefan Andrei, Foreign Affairs Minister under Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime (1978-1985), mentions that, when asked why he had ordered a dramatic rescheduling of television programs, Ceaușescu answered: "It's true, we could add some hours daily, but you don't do education and culture with the help of television, only through reading, shows and exhibitions. In television, sports shows produce the highest audience figures" (Andrei / Betea 2011: 143).

Graphic 2). At first, the low status and popularity of television could be blamed on underinvestment. New headquarters were lacking, color television was still waiting, the extension of the second channel did not meet plans, the amount of programming did not evolve, entertainment stagnated.²⁵ By the beginning of the 1980s, TVR's parameters were roughly the same as ten years before. And, when major economic and political crisis started, Ceaușescu almost suspended it. From almost 5500 hours in 1981, programming dropped continuously, down to 1548 hours in 1987 (see Graphic 3).

4. Implications

The first major implication of the above-mentioned “exceptionalism” factors was the transformation of Romanian television in the 1980s, into the most absurd mass-media institution in Europe, as it broadcasted 20-30 hours a week (less than in 1965), most of which was black and white (a unique case across Europe)²⁶ and devoted itself to the activities of the presidential couple. Even if the rise of Ceaușescu's personality cult, which peaked in the 1980s, was probably the main trigger for this dictatorial phase of Romanian television, the economic crisis the country was experiencing at the time should not be understated, either (Mustata 2013a: 107). Economists have already showed how the Romanian economy shrank during the 1980s (Ban 2011, Murgescu 2010), but what strikes most during TVR's history under Ceaușescu's regime is its stagnation as early as the mid-1970s. Without new headquarters (which TVR's staff requested in vain, as the ones opened in 1968-1970 were meant for producing around 50 hours weekly),²⁷ without implementing color television, without having consistent quizzes (as Ceaușescu despised the idea of giving material prizes to the winners), TVR faced underdevelopment long before the Romanian economic crisis.

Between 1958 and 1989, TVR went through four stages of evolution (or, more precisely, *involution*): 1) the romantic phase (1958-1965), characterized by rarity, experiments and shows; 2) the expansion phase (1965-1973), marked by socialization, everyday life, mass culture; 3) the phase of compromise (1974-1982), where ideology and entertainment were in a fragile balance; and 4) the

²⁵ At the meeting of the TVR National Council from September 1972, Mihai Bujor Șion declared: “I have to say that the chances of getting more people are minimal. (...) We know all the figures from all the radio-television stations in Europe. The number of people is related to the broadcasting hours. You start from 20 people per hour and you can even reach 128. We have a figure of 20”, SRR Archives.

²⁶ Many people would place a (rainbow) colored glass screen in front of the TV set in order to get a glimpse of what it would be like to watch color TV.

²⁷ See Color Television File, in SRR Archives.

agony phase (1983-1989), marked by the ubiquity of Ceaușescu's personality cult, where we can only speak about TVR survival or, with maybe a more apt metaphor, hibernation. Hence, if we take into account the stagnation of the regime, begun in the mid-1970s, there are 15 years of hard times for a still new cultural industry. But from the view point of television audiences, satellite antennas, strong coverage of the neighboring television channels and VCRs diffusion changed television watching into a clandestine, but tacitly permitted practice (Mustata 2013b). This was also the moment when television culture lost its supposed political impact. Anti-communist messages came from radio stations like Free Europe or the Voice of America, not from television.

The second major implication of these factors that made Romanian socialist television unique in the Eastern part of Europe is the period of the early 1990s, after the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. Upon the fall of the communist regime, after almost 15 years of freezing, TVR found itself unable to move forward. Thus, it just resumed its cultural and social vision from the mid-1970s. The year 1990 was neither the end of the calamity, nor the beginning of another Golden Age. In the first five years after the Romanian Revolution, TVR accomplished what it could not do in the 1970s: entire color broadcast (even in 1989, programs were broadcast in "partial color", meaning that only newsreel focusing on Ceaușescu's public life were broadcast in color, together with studio live broadcasting), second channel revival and coverage of the whole country (the second channel was terminated in 1985), rapid extension of the schedule and the introduction of avant-garde pop music. Of course, sexual images could now be shown as well. A popular quiz appeared later, *RoBingo*, whose presenter is now one of the best known television stars in Romania. But all these Romanian novelties were already obsolete for European television. In an attempt to resume its 1970s projects, TVR fell back upon its tele-school broadcasts and foreign language classes, one of its innovations at the end of 1969, while old news magazines lived a second life: *Reflector*, *Transfocator*, *A Smile on 16 mm* (a sort of lighter version of candid camera), together with the varieties program and the Golden Stag festival. Practically, TVR was acting like a visitor from the past who had landed in the future and decided to ignore everything that had happened in the meantime.

This backwardness prepared the scene for commercial television, which officially arrived in Romania in December 1995 and literally swept away TVR's audiences. The authors of this study themselves remember watching PRO TV for days, the first of the Romanian commercial TV stations, as if television had been born anew.

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The exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television and its implications

During recent years, the study of European televisions has rediscovered *socialist television*, and we have witnessed a rapid rise in scholarly interest in a new field of research: socialist television studies. On the whole, this recent body of literature presents two main new insights as compared to previous studies in the field of the history of Western television: on the one hand, it shows that European television during the Cold War was less heterogeneous than one may imagine when considering the political, economic and ideological split created by the Iron Curtain; on the other hand, it turns to and capitalizes on archives, mostly video, which have been inaccessible to the public. The interactions between Western and socialist mass culture are highlighted mainly with respect to the most popular TV programs: fiction and entertainment.

The authors give us an extraordinary landscape of the Romanian socialist television. Unique in the Eastern part of Europe is the period of the early 1990s. Upon the fall of the communist regime, after almost 15 years of freezing, TVR found itself unable to move forward.

Słowa kluczowe: socjalistyczne studia nad telewizją, Rumunia, telewizje narodowe

Keywords: socialist television studies, Romania, national tv