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A Comparative Insight into Nicolae Ceauşescu’s Strategies of Power Consolidation

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Resumo:
A sucessão do poder nos regimes comunistas afigurou-se um processo periclitante visto que não existia nenhum mecanismo constitucional disponível, sendo a tarefa que se revelou ser mais complexa a do controlo da polícia política. Os partidos comunistas confiavam fortemente na repressão política para manter o poder, mas o controlo que detinham sobre a polícia secreta era por vezes precário. Pouco tempo depois da sua subida ao poder, em 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu da Romênia sentia que o aparelho dos assuntos internos fugia ao seu controlo, ao mesmo tempo que acreditava que só detendo um controlo total poderia verdadeiramente consolidar o seu poder. Com o intuito de alcançar o controlo que pretendia, Ceauşescu manipulou com êxito um discurso reformista que o tornou bastante popular entre os romenos, por detrás do qual travou uma dura batalha para controlar a polícia política. Sob esta máscara reformista, Ceauşescu levou a cabo reorganizações institucionais e reforças políticas com vista a eliminar qualquer movimento de resistência ao seu governo, tanto no seio do partido como nos assuntos internos. Este facto demonstra que, no seu entender, o controlo pessoal sobre a polícia política constituía um dos mais importantes instrumentos de consolidação do poder.

Abstract:
Power succession under Communist regimes was a perilous affair since there was no constitutional mechanism available and the most complicated task was control over the political police. Communist parties relied heavily on political repression to maintain power, but their control over the secret police was sometimes unstable. Soon after his power accession in 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu of Romania perceived the internal affairs apparatus to be escaping his control, while realizing that only full control over it could really consolidate his power. In order to achieve the control he envisaged, Ceauşescu successfully manipulated a reformist discourse which made him very popular among Romanians, behind which he carried a fierce battle to control the political police. Institutional reorganizations and political rehabilitations were employed by Ceauşescu under the reformist disguise in order to eliminate any resistance to his rule, both in the party and the internal affairs. This proves that personal control over the political police was in his vision one of the most important instruments of power consolidation.

Keywords:
Romania; Communism; political police; reform; rehabilitation; power consolidation.
Political repression was certainly a common feature of all Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, since their very establishment and until their collapse in 1989. The issue had often been discussed with much emotion by public and media, given its sensitive nature and the fact that many of its victims survived the changes of 1989. This was more so valid in a country such as Romania, where political repression had reached one of its peaks during the late 1980s, when most East European societies were experiencing the relaxation of perestroika. Although Communist regimes were usually associated with repression, the relations between the political police and the party leadership under Communism had sometimes been vacillating.

This statement is valid including for Romania, usually known for the abruptness of its political police. During the late 1980s, Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu largely employed the services of the Romanian political police, the Securitate, in order to control a society that was being subjected to great shortages due to economic failures. But Ceaușescu’s relation with the Securitate had not always been so cordial. When he gained power in March 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu had little control over the Internal Affairs apparatus, which was in the hands of his opponent, Alexandru Drăghici.

The basic aim of this study is to reassess the complicated relation between Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Securitate and also the role played by the political police in Ceaușescu’s struggle to consolidate his power. In doing so, the analysis shall follow the conclusions enunciated in two major studies dedicated to Ceaușescu’s relation with the Securitate, signed by Mary Ellen Fischer and Dennis Deletant1. This article shall engage topics such as Ceaușescu’s control over the Internal Affairs apparatus as an instrument of power consolidation in a three-leveled analysis, institutional, rhetorical and political, relying on party documents, declassified in recent years. The study shall also draw comparative conclusions, based on the emerging literature on party-police relations in other countries of the Communist bloc.

It is widely known that, when Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej unexpectedly died in March 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu was not one of the favorites in the struggle for succession – or, at least, he had not been, shortly before the event. There was an “old guard” around Gheorghiu-Dej, from whose members the successor was expected to be elected. According to memoirs of those directly involved in the events surrounding his death, Gheorghiu-Dej expressed pref-

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