

Lucian Boia: “The founding myth of modern Romania is a lie.”

“What can we do with Romania?” Perhaps historian Lucian Boia is the most appropriate person to explain why we have arrived at this point where we must pose this question. The man, who breaks myths and whose books about Romania are setting sales records, explains to us why we are last in every continental evaluation.



Lucian Boia has had enough of the imbecility widespread in our country (Photo: Adevarul)

[...] Why another sort of Romania? The answer has been sought for two decades and people seem to sink deeper and deeper into the quicksand of reasons with each asking. Boia’s small smile seems to suggest that he is one who has begun to understand. After having demolished many of the myths of national history, in his latest book Boia manages to put it all in plain words, outlining a history of backwardness.

It is the history of the Romanian region that began with the first state forms and ended with last summer’s hysterical outbursts, when the Romanian political class managed to dig a hole deep enough to contain the entire population of the country. [...]

Do you feel that the conflict within Romanian society is contrived?

Lucian Boia: I believe that it is a sense of skepticism sprung from the political games being played. All of us, no matter how critical we are towards the Romanian situation, must accommodate it and thus we also are a part of it. But this is not a psychological aptitude because Romanians integrate well in other countries, into a western type of philosophy.

The series we have published and documented began from the apparent ill-assembled and constructed items in our modern history from which, in the end, Romania was constructed. Do you think this is a correct hypothesis?

LB: In my recently published book (published in November and shown at the Gaudeamus Fair, titled “Why another sort of Romania?”-auth.), I try to explain what is happening in Romania, from the psychodrama of this

past summer and starting from the fact that the Romanians were again able to surprise Europe. I believe that Romanian society is the one that is able to stray furthest from societal norms. There are many of them and often contradictory. Romania is different not only from the West but also from the Central European countries. If we had to mention a few of the more peculiar historical developments, the one most notable to me is the great lag with which Romanian society began its journey. Think about it, the two principalities only emerged in the 14th century. Bulgaria was already a significant power in the region for centuries. Hungary was a strong kingdom. Poland also. The Prague University was founded half-a-millennium before the Romanian. Thus, we started with an incredible handicap.

Is there an explanation for it?

LB: We are a rim country. In antiquity, compared to the Greek world, we were on the periphery, while, for the Roman Empire, the Danube was the boundary. The Romans only crossed this border on Emperor Trajan's order. Xenopol said that the Romanian people are the result of an error committed by Trajan, who, instead of peacefully staying along the Danube, crossed to the area north of it, which the Romans were unable to hang on to for more than a century and a half. Subsequently, the Roman area fell outside the Byzantine Empire, but also of the West, too. In the modern era, we are in an interesting position where three empires – Habsburg, Turkish and Russian – tried to assert a claim to the edge or centre of the region. Muntenia and Moldova were able to retain their autonomy, but in a peripheral situation.

Would you say that the population of this region, essentially the ancestors of today's Romanians, made the peripheral situation their own?

LB: Yes, they made it their own but I don't know how consciously. This leads to a paradox result. On the one hand, to isolation, to difficult perception of certain external influences; on the other hand, to a large degree of openness. This paradox is typical of Romanian history, leading to the acceptance and adoption of certain models, called "contentless structure" by Titu Maiorescu. That is to say, you adopt the form but reject the content, or reinterpret it to such a great degree that not much remains. This is what Caragiale illustrated in his dramas and it is so timely that we can speak of it as a transient state of affairs in Romanian society.

These western paradigms were adopted relatively late, around the middle of the 19th century. Should we not dig deeper for the causes?

LB: Yes, of course. Just look, for example, at the tremendous political instability. There is no other European country, which, at the beginning of the modern era, had dozens of leaders. The continuous change of leadership shows a lack of certain well defined norms. The system of power was inherited-elected, combining the carrot and the donkey, which, in the end, led nowhere. This instability resulted in continual conflicts and external intervention. Eventually, the Turkish Empire made use of it and introduced Phanariot Era, when rulers were appointed or relieved by external preference. During that period, we had dozens of princely appointments. Thus, there are several reasons: the great time delay in the emergence of the Romanian principalities, the instability, the peripheral or border region situation, plus a large economic question. If you look at the economic indicators, the Romanian principalities, and later Romania from the Middle Ages, have to this day been consistently last in Europe. We started late and it has remained, in the economy area. In the social sphere, we had a society of boyars and peasants, with small and dirty villages in which many foreigners lived. Capitalists make a late appearance, and are mostly non-Romanians.

I made a study based on the 1930 census in which trades and occupations make an appearance, according to their ethnic distribution. In the industry/craft group, the majority is non-Romanian; 47% Romanian and 53% non-Romanian. In trade, the ratio of Romanians is under 40%, with Jews being dominant.

Did this present an opportunity?

LB: Of course it was. Otherwise, we would not have had a middle class. Chance brought about that our middle class was not Romanian. As a result, the cities were cosmopolitan between the two wars, especially Transylvania.

Can the non-Romanian character of the local middle class be the answer for today's insipid Romanian capitalism, for the lack of initiative, as well?

LB: I do not believe so. In the meantime, communism intervened. In turn, territories populated by non-Romanians were lost, such as Northern Bukovina, Bessarabia and Cadrilater[ul]. Then, the Jews and Germans

went away. True, Romania became more Romanian than it was between the wars. However, the middle class, Romanian or not, was leaner and remains so today.

And then?

LB: There exists in Romania a social fault line; the socio-cultural distance between the lowest and highest levels is incredibly large. In circumstances such as these, you cannot have a significant sized middle class.

Advances did happen, especially in the second half of the 19th century. Romania has significant intellectual capital in the '30s.

LB: That is a fact. The westernization process was begun in the 19th century and quickly became evident how Romanians changed from one generation to the next. In the 19th century, Romanians dressed in the Turkish manner and used the Cyrillic alphabet. In a few decades, they dressed according to a Parisian style, used a transitional alphabet, which was a mix of Latin and Cyrillic letters, and put aside Greek as the language of literacy and chose French. This process meant a large amount of copying but, if we speak strictly about intellectuals, we have an unarguably, unassailably educated stratum. If you look at the university establishment of the day, you will see significant names. Today, we do not stand as well in the area of university establishments, a mix of value and worthlessness.

Are you an adherent of the idea that the period between the wars was Romania's luckiest era?

LB: No, I am not an adherent of this idea. The inter-war period seen as the golden age of Romania is a post-1989 ideological construct, when Romanians had to find an earlier founding myth. I believe that Romania did not function all that well in the inter-war period, with one exception, its intellectuals. From a social perspective, there were tremendous fault lines. Romania had Europe's highest birth rate, the highest mortality rate and the highest child mortality rate. All three are indicators of backwardness. And this was the country with the highest illiteracy rate, even when compared to such nearby countries as Bulgaria. According to the 1930 census, the literacy rate was 57%, and 83% of those only finished grade school. Essentially, only every tenth Romanian got past grade school.

In this context, can we speak of the Communist regime of the '50s as a modernizing regime?

LB: The communist plan was a modernizing influence everywhere. That it cloned was another thing but that was the goal it set for itself. Marx thought that the communist revolution will happen where society reached the highest stage of capitalism. On the contrary, communism started in exactly those countries where it should not have, in countries that had barely started on the long road of development. In the West, the social fracture was not all that great because a greater proportion of the population was literate and had access to culture. We continue to compare ourselves to Bulgaria but, between the wars, Bulgaria's upper stratum was a little below Romania, its lower stratum was in better shape. Our social fracture was huge and that led to another paradox: in 1944, Romania had the smallest Communist Party in the region, whereas it had reserves of what communism meant. I refer to the poor, illiterate peasants, who were easily drawn toward communism because they saw in it justification for social advancement. Plus, there was the gratification of seeing themselves rise while others fell.

How was the statistically average Romanian of 1948 aware of the regime change, from monarchy to republic?

LB: The majority did not have a political culture. Only those belonging to the intellectual elite sensed the turning point but the majority of Romanians were not part of the elite. Strange how Romania, which in 1944 had the least communist influence, how it turns into the country where communism spread the fastest. In the end, we embraced the communist regime more strongly than others did. Many were of the opinion that, overall, communism brought them more good things than bad. Communism gave them security; they did not have to worry about tomorrow or about unemployment. People were afraid of this freedom following 1989. It was not the lack of freedom that was disturbing, that only disturbs those who cling to freedom and know what to do with it. Most people were disturbed by the drop in living standards from the '80s. Communism collapsed primarily due to concerns connected with food distribution, not for ideological reasons. Many thought back nostalgically to the communism of the '60s and '70s, when Romanians all lived at more or less on the same – acceptable – level, when social differentiation was not troublesome, when people were not frustrated by the wealth of others.

Does the inter-war period have any responsibility in this?

LB: Of course it has. In fact, history is at fault. Romania always had, and still has, a historic delay. It is easy to say, you should have done more, but what more could be done? In 1920, there was an attempt at agrarian reform

and land was given to the peasants but there were too many peasants and too little land. Spiru Haret developed an educational system. There was advancement but it was slow. We are still behind as much as we were between the wars and the age of Stefan the Great (Ștefan cel Mare).

This sounds ominous, don't you think? "We can try anything but nothing works for us."

LB: Of course, if you are at the end of the list, you have a chance to stay there because the others are not going to stop and wait for you. But there are circumstances which contradict this reasoning. There are countries, South Korea for instance, which were not doing terribly well but are now at the head of industrial nations. Leaps are possible but not easy. This is like a race.

Strong political will is necessary to be able to move these things.

LB: Yes. Also another thing: a strong business environment. Look, for example, at the inter-war period, when a bad agricultural business cycle began. Before World War I, when large estates existed, a good agricultural business environment existed and the country was a grain exporter, which made the boyars rich. When it was the turn of the peasants, business was bad and the poor bore the brunt.

Are Romanians different because there were very few favorable business cycles?

LB: Romania was greatly distorted by communism but Romanian communism was the way it was because it descended heavily on inter-war Romania. However, when you look at how easily Romanians allowed Ceausescu to do absolutely anything, I do not think it correct to say that we tolerated the dictator because then we come to a fatalistic interpretation. Romania was the country where resistance to communism was the least, although there were people who resisted. Samizdat did not exist in Romania. Romanian intellectuals formed a certain kind of compromise with authority, getting in turn a certain amount of freedom up to a point that could not be crossed. There was not one book that was published underground or opposition on the scale of a Prague Spring. Romanians do not possess a culture of resistance, which also goes back to the Middle Ages. In fact, they have a culture of submission, from the peasants very much subjected to the boyars to the rulers as obedient servants of the Turkish Porte. So, you submit yourself but you try to be clever and perhaps take advantage of the one you submit to. This has no relation to business; these things you do for yourself.

Look at how we arrived at dynastic communism. Romanians accepted that the husband ruling the country shared power with his wife and son. No such thing existed in Europe. Nobody can tell me this was inevitable. Romanians accepted that, which is shameful and we should accept that. These all led to functional chaos and we did not come out of communism all that well.

What errors were made in 1989?

LB: First of all, what bothers me is the lie, the founding myth of modern Romania. We still do not know what happened during the revolution. The immediate abolition of the Communist Party also bothers me. Hence, nobody was a Communist if the Communist Party no longer existed. However, our entire elite arose from communism. All our points of reference are pre-communist and the men leading us are the heirs of a system they repudiate. This is not even to mention that in the early '90s they still bragged with basic democracy. We emerged from communism completely directionless and the connection to a pre-communist Romania was completely artificial. They resurrected the historical political parties but that was also contrived.

Under the circumstances, would a plan to de-communize have been possible?

LB: I don't think so, there was total chaos. Apart from that, there is a large dose of legitimacy in Romanian political life. But if we take the parties, we can see that the ideologies are very murky. In the end, the party calling itself social democratic, having rid itself of the communist attire, is, fundamentally, the continuation of the old Communist Party, which in the 'Great Lie' already did not call itself the Communist Party but which gave post-Communist Romania its first oligarchs. If you look at our political classes, exceptions aside, getting rich was their primary activity. And under these circumstances, they put ideologies aside. The Democratic Party, the current PDL, started out as a socialist party, was a member of the Socialist International and now calls itself a party of the right. They changed from one day to the next because, after the collapse of the PNȚCD, the right wing was vacant. The reappearance of the historical parties was also artificial. Coposu pumped up the PNȚCD, and then we can see how it deflated. The PNL had a somewhat better defined ideology, but that has been shelved when it merged with the questionable party around Dan Voiculescu and Antena3.

In your opinion, why does not Romanian society react in any way to these things?

LB: Because Romanians have a culture of silence, and explosions happen only every hundred years. There was an explosion in 1907, the next in 1989. It would be ideal if there would be no such explosions but a civil awareness through which things would continually reposition. When the salaries of public servants were reduced, the people should have reacted. But Romanians are apathetic, they do not react. In western countries, there were far lower reductions and we saw huge demonstrations. Nobody would dare to reduce salaries by 1% in France because there would be a new revolution.

Perhaps the reason is also that there is a significant disinterest towards those things which we, as a society, assign to the common sphere? For example, relating to public life.

LB: Yes, there is a complete lack of civil consciousness. Communism tried to create a collective society and it made the people extremely individualistic. You could see it in the political crisis of the summer, which splintered the people so much, even in intellectual circles, that you could hardly exchange a word with them.

How did you see marshalling of power in the plebiscite?

LB: it is clear that Bănescu arbitrarily interpreted the constitution and placed his key people in various posts but the others were no better. I believe in equal parts that it was a coup, as well as that Bănescu was a dictator. That is to say, this is a new Romanian comedy. The difference is that Bănescu systematically gathered together ever more power over the years, strictly sticking to the rules, while those who wanted to overthrow him wanted to achieve certain things in a matter of days. Their method of action was astounding, the time constraint matters a lot. When everything is working faultily, then it is natural that the game is dishonest on both sides. I, however, do not see grand plans in either camp. What I dislike is the cunning combined with self-abasement.

You allude to something?

LB: I am thinking of Ponta being asked to Brussels and presented with the 11 requirements. Do you think that if it was Poland, the president would have gone? This is a bad mark for Romania, which shows our inferiority complex. As opposed to us, Poland has a superiority complex, not always the healthiest, but still better than an inferiority complex. Or there was the episode when the British Foreign Minister commanded Ponta to the airport, and he went. This sort of thing is unbelievable that a foreign minister orders a prime minister.

Do you hold a combative politician such as Traian Bănescu in higher esteem?

LB: Bănescu has a stronger personality and does not yield as easily but he has other faults. His authoritarianism, his favoritism towards the people he has placed in various posts, and a fairly hick style, which is incompatible with the presidential position. For me, it was a disappointment how Crin Antonescu behaved in the month he was the temporary president. Also aggressive, also an authoritarian style.

What is your opinion of the episode of charges of plagiarism levelled against Victor Ponta?

LB: It was obvious that he plagiarized. We were just talking about that perhaps he plagiarized, perhaps he did not plagiarize, we create panels, and Ponta tells us that the methodology was different in 2002. Most certainly he plagiarized! In truth, perhaps I am wrong, I don't know of he plagiarized, perhaps he was also surprised if he was not the author of the dissertation. Many got their doctorates that way. Even the famous Mischie, who received one of our doctorates in history and he is an absolutely primitive man. He wrote his paper on Grigore Iunian, and the only connection was that he bought his burial crypt. His wish is to be buried in the Iunian family crypt.

Here again, we catch a small piece of Romanianism, in a negative context?

LB: The problem is that Romania's old elite disappeared and arose in its place this multitude, these people from a very low level, especially culturally. One individual, who has enough brains, can start at the bottom and rise. But an entire social category?! This completely disturbs society and it will take years until things settle down. Romania continues to be the country where the ratio of rural dwellers is the highest, with us it is 45%. In western countries, the proportion is perhaps 10%. These people did not really become urbanized, and the villages lost their traditions. This fueled the mahala, populated by such persons who were neither urban nor rural, with no urban culture or rural traditions.

What is your opinion of the presence of Romanian scholars in public life in the past ten years? Much was written about that the scholarly have become an adjunct of party interests.

LB: It was more or less the same earlier, too. In the '30s, if you looked at the body of teachers, half of its members joined the political parties.

We do not have a culture of intellectual criticality of the entire political spectrum?

LB: Instead, we very much have a culture dependent on power and striving to get into the good graces of power. This was seen in communism, too.

As an intellectual, how do you feel in a country divided into Bănescu intellectuals and Antonescu intellectuals?

LB: I think the expressions are too excessive. The intellectuals don't belong to either one or the other but it is hard to find one who is not for or against Bănescu. There are very few who see the problems on either side. In that, we have little experience. One example is when most intellectuals lined up behind King Carol II and the introduction of monarchical dictatorship. Then we see in 1940, when they all abandon him. This is one fault of the intellectuals. They bear a part in the general apathy.

According to you, was the 2006 condemnation of communism a good thing?

LB: I don't think it was a bad thing, I'd be overstating if I said otherwise, but I think it was a meaningless thing. If you ceremonially state in parliament that the regime is illegitimate and criminal, I would have certain reservations. Of course it was, and not only that. I would come out with a more in-depth and subtler assessment. And as the height of hypocrisy, it is done by the heirs of communism and voted on in parliament. You thought you could expect on having something come out of it but nothing happened. It seems to me that there was only a lot of dishonesty. The situation is the same with the lustration law, another amusing thing, which would have made sense immediately after 1989, when it would have made a clear break with communism. But now?

It doesn't even seem as if it was one of the moral or political dilemmas of post-revolution Romania.

LB: Of course not. If the majority voted for Iliescu in 1990, then is it not clear that they were against the 8th article of the Timișoara Proclamation?

Would a return to a monarchical system have been a viable solution?

LB: Yes, it would have been a solution but an illusionary one. We speak hypothetically as it could never happen because the Romanians did not want any such thing. Romanians were taught, that monarchy has outlived its age, that a republic is the solution. And the Romanian, without qualms, accepted that.

Could a monarchy be a solution still?

LB: I don't think so. When the thread is broken, it is difficult to return to it. A monarchy represents a certain link of continuity in a transitory period. In any case, King Michael is out of the question. What happened afterwards, what Radu Duda is trying, I find laughable. There was a fracture after Michael and I don't think we can place any reliance on the present family.

In other words, you expect a republic.

LB: I believe so, yes. For Romania, I don't think a parliamentary monarchy is useful because it presupposes a certain kind of discipline – not possible in light of the anarchy inside our parliament. The thing works very well in a true parliamentary culture, but that is not the case in Romania. What would probably fit us better would be a semi-presidential regime.

At this moment, do you see some sort of country project for Romania?

LB: I see no project of the sort for the country.

Categorically...

LB: The situation is that our plans depend on the European Union decisions. However, I see no EU plan whatsoever. There is a crisis, this is a bewildering period. Plus the fact that I don't think we have a monetary crisis, rather a civilization crisis, an identity crisis. The cards are being reshuffled, certain mutations are happening all over the world, a crossroads in the history of the world. All data are changing. This is similar – if you will – to the period of the collapse of the Roman Empire. A world disappears and another one emerges. History speeds up more and more and changes ever faster. We have no idea what will finally happen to the structure we call Europe.

Is Romania more in tune with this path of history?

LB: Of course. It is more aware, especially to facts within the EU.

Do you think this is a good thing?

LB: Yest, it is. The trouble is that, while we are better integrated into Europe than we were before communism, our elite is less and less so. That is why cause despair in the Europeans. The western world is a world built on certain rules, while the Romanian world only mimes these rules. We have rules so that we can break them or to act as if we obeyed them.

Did Orthodoxism contribute in any way to this situation?

LB: Perhaps to the extent that the Romanian Orthodox Church, based on long historical tradition, is fairly dependent on the state. The Orthodox Church is concerned with God and the relationship of man with God and has always yielded to politics. Churches assume a larger role in the West. This is visible, we can compare it with the stand of the Polish church against Communism. What would have happened if the communist regime in Poland had begun to raze churches? It is inconceivable. In any case, society as a whole counts. I don't believe that Orthodoxism caused that the Romanians are in this situation. In fact, I would say that the situation the Romanians find themselves in shapes the Orthodox Church into what it is. Meaning, the level of civilization counts.

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