

CAFÉ EUROPE

Finishing the Romanian revolution

Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and the fight against corruption

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Alina Mungiu-Pippidi. Photo: Courtesy of Alina Mungiu-Pippidi

“If there had been no offer for Romania to join the EU, we would look like another Belarus now,” says Alina Mungiu Pippidi about her country’s path to become a genuine democracy. No one in Romania combines scholarship and civic activism like the founder and president of Romania’s largest think tank, the Romanian Academic Society (SAR). Alina’s anti-corruption initiatives have made a major contribution to increased transparency and accountability in Romania. Her academic record, meanwhile, has given her free rein to teach at universities the world over: from Bucharest to Stanford, Harvard, the European University Institute,

and Oxford. Today she teaches Democratisation Studies at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin.

December 1989 was a major turning point not only for Romania, but also for Alina. She had just obtained a degree in psychology from the Medical Faculty in Iași, barely 15 kilometres from the border of what then was still the Soviet Union (and would in 1992 become the Republic of Moldova). When the revolution began, Alina was working at the emergency unit of the Iași university clinic. On 25 December 1989, the night of the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena, Alina lost a patient. The events changed her professional life forever:

“It was quite surreal to work in the emergency room back then as we did not have any medicine, or doctors for that matter. I did not really have the right to be in the night shift with my level of training at the time but due to the lack of staff, there I was.

On the night of Ceausescu’s execution I had a patient who was in a very bad condition, with several chronic illnesses. He needed oxygen but my nurse told me that the only oxygen tube we had was coming to an end. Once we found the only other oxygen tube in the whole hospital, we learned that it had a mechanical problem and it did not work. We fumbled with it a little but we were not successful in making it work, so we called the clinic’s mechanic who was supposedly on hospital grounds and could fix this. We called him from 9 p.m. until 3 a.m., when my patient eventually died, not being able to find him. When I saw him later he told me that he was waiting for the TV transmission of Ceausescu’s execution, which was announced at 8 p.m. but was not broadcast until 6 or 7 hours later. People had to see it, though, as they did not believe he was dead.

I was very upset and at that point I really did not care whether Ceausescu was dead or not. I called the mechanic a murderer, took my typewriter and walked out forever, never to return to that place. I became a journalist.”

Alina had contributed pieces to the “Opinia studenteasca” newspaper as a student in the late 1980s. After leaving her job at the hospital she became more active at the paper. She was to become its editor in chief.

“We were the only newspaper in Romania’s second largest town and everybody was reading us. And for the first time we had to start thinking about things like our newspaper’s circulation. Since we had to

buy paper to publish the newspaper we started selling it, not just giving it away as we used to. We had a huge circulation.

It was somewhat difficult to publish in Romania, though, as all the typewriters were registered by the police – it was not like in Poland...”

The idea of the European Union was a distant one in post-revolutionary Romania, Alina explains.

“I think that the first time I started to be aware of Europe was during the debates over the Maastricht Treaty [signed in 1992]. By then we had free TV so we started getting this European Channel – a very boring channel, but you have to understand that after years and years of seeing only Ceausescu and his wife on TV I watched this channel in French with great pleasure. It covered the debates over the Maastricht treaty remarkably well. At that time I did not think that there was even the remotest possibility that Romania would join the EU. I was nonetheless very interested in these debates: it was clear that something historical was going on.”

Romania’s first years of transition were unique in that the communists did not disappear from government as soon as the revolution was over, as was the case in central Europe. Until 1996 the country was ruled by former apparatchiks. Alina’s main concern was to help her country become a genuine democracy.

“Our goal in 1990 and the years which followed was to achieve the first democratic government in Romania’s history, so my concern was how to help in the first democratic elections, how to help these opposition parties which were very weak back then. What was achieved in Central Europe nearly instantly, to have free and fair elections and to have the anticommunists win them, was achieved in Romania only as late as 1996. For five to six years we tried to accomplish our revolution, to reach the same stage that the others had already reached.

Meanwhile, the [EU] accession debates started in Western Europe. Originally, we looked at them only in a very instrumental way. We were only using them in order to attack the former communists in power, saying, ‘Look how far the central Europeans have moved and look at how we are left behind.’ This proved to be a very powerful rhetorical device.”

Anticommunists won the 1996 elections and inherited a dysfunctional economy. The first post-Ceausescu governments had accumulated large fiscal deficits through continued subsidies to white elephant

state enterprises. Wage and pension payments fell into arrears. The anticommunists – under the leadership of President Emil Constantinescu – did not manage to address these deficits quickly enough. The initial reforms led to a serious recession. According to Alina, it was precisely the sorry state of the economy that brought the communists back to power in 2000.

By that time, however, Romania was already on the road towards EU membership.

“The EU decided at the Helsinki Summit [in 1999] to invite also Romania and Bulgaria to start accession negotiations. Both our countries were obviously far from ready, so [European leaders] probably thought that this was just a theoretical invitation to help reformers in the two countries, since the reformers were really on the brink.

The invitation turned out to be fantastic for the former communists. Once they returned to power, they actually tried to deliver on it. They were not stupid; there was a consensus among the political elite that it was worth going down this road. And what they did was fantastic. The Prime Minister at the time just hired an economist who had been working on Romania in the European Commission as a private advisor; he did everything in economic terms that the Europeans wanted.”

Back in 1996 Alina had founded the [Romanian Academic Society](#) (SAR), a think tank focusing on transparency and the fight against corruption. SAR grew to become the country’s biggest think tank, initiating a string of successful campaigns that changed the policy debates in Romania.

“The problem was that while this government [led by Adrian Nastase, 2000-2004] was doing fairly well economically, they had simply too much power and they started becoming more corrupt. And as we were working on different issues, we realized that regardless of the issue we were working on we ended up with corruption as the main obstacle.

This is when I created the Coalition for a Clean Parliament, which contributed to the ruling party’s defeat. They lost nearly 100 seats. Afterwards, I realised that you could not do this just once ... You have to keep doing it for a while. Of course, we could not fight all corruption in the country – but we did show the EU that we meant business.”

The EU was there to facilitate the process.

“Europeanisation is like a framework, it always works when you have domestic reformers to take advantage of it. These reformers can come from outside the system, as we did. Smart ambassadors from the EU countries know that in order for Europeanisation to work they need to identify and provide political support to people who want to change things, who will really achieve substantial Europeanisation, whose goal is to transform their countries. This is far more important than any kind of assistance programme. Give a signal to the right people – otherwise you will end up with a very bureaucratic accession process (with people learning how to report better to Brussels) but very limited Europeanisation.

Conditionality wears out. What really persists is emulation: what people do because they really want to be like Europe. And we really wanted to be like Europe, but we were in a minority. There were other people who wanted to be in Europe for their material advantage. This clash still exists.”

Romania and Bulgaria finally joined the EU in 2007. However, critical voices within the EU deplored the accession of these two countries, referring to stories of EU money embezzlements and other corruption cases. In an interview with “Internationale Politik” Alina refuted the view that Romania would have made more and quicker progress if its accession were postponed.

“It was due to this fixed date that we managed to push an official agency that vets the assets of politicians, top magistrates, and ministers. Before the EU got involved I was doing it piecemeal with civil society money with an alliance of NGOs and investigative journalists, at great risk to ourselves. We received threats, we were sued, etc. This is just one example. We fought after accession to have this agency started and even now Brussels is helping to increase capacity.

It’s true that after accession there was backsliding, but this happened in Central Europe, too. Politicians tried to fire anticorruption prosecutors and to change the legislation we adopted during accession. But they didn’t succeed. The accession has not stopped the dynamic of a society that wants to cleanse itself for its own sake, not because Brussels tells it to do so. It takes decades of democracy to build an impartial judiciary – nobody has invented shortcuts.”

Alina maintains that the EU’s transformative powers are still at work, even after Romania’s accession.

“The EU has less means of putting direct pressure on a member state, but there are other means that can be used. Now cases can go to the European Court of Justice. Now there is no more preferential distribution of money to firms, because this is illegal in the EU and there is now enough civil society to inform the European Commission of such cases. Once we tell the EC, they are really powerful. The only thing that they cannot do is to kick us out of the EU, but I think they went quite far in the case of Romania and Bulgaria to show some muscle. What is amazing is that the population approves of these steps. The population is an ally of the EU. The people really want to see these practices change.” ■