



# Nicolae Ceaușescu and the origins of Eurocommunism



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## ABSTRACT

After the Sino-Soviet dispute had considerably weakened Moscow's supremacy in world communism, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was keen on restoring control and unity. But he soon discovered that his meaning of unity did not exactly coincide with what others had in mind. West European communists were striving to accommodate social principles to domestic conditions so, as to be able to accede to government. They advocated for each party's right to make their own decisions independently and also for an enlargement of world communism beyond its initial sectarianism. Their cause was vulnerable though as internationalism was still an important part of their political identity, apart from the fact that Moscow did subsidize most of them. In the second half of the 1960s though, a new voice joined those asking for reform in world communism: Nicolae Ceaușescu, a leader of the Romanian Communist Party. Interested to promote his country's autonomy in the Soviet bloc, Ceaușescu had no reason to support Moscow's efforts to regain control. Instead, Ceaușescu developed close relations with West European Communist parties and assumed some of their ideological tenets, trying to fend off Soviet domination. This way, although he never was a Eurocommunist, Ceaușescu did play an important part in the ideological debates that were later to produce Eurocommunism, defending West European arguments in front of Moscow.

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## Introduction

Most definitions of Eurocommunism emphasize it to be an alternative to the Soviet model of constructing socialism. It is based on pluralism and the diversity of forms communism may take in different societies according to their specific social and political conditions and experiences. Eurocommunism is commitment to parliamentarianism and human rights, as opposed to the Soviet model (Badie et al., 2011, 318–319; Anderson and Herr, 2007, 539–540). Its roots are to be found among the West European communist parties which tried to differentiate themselves from the Soviet Union and identify an alternative model of socialism suitable to their domestic political needs. But the enunciation of such an ideological alternative was the product of new international conditions which permitted Western communists to debate the future of communism in the West with relatively little restriction as compared to the previous decades. Apart from the East–West dialogue, significant transformations occurred within the world communist movement and respectively in the relations between Moscow and other communist parties. This article explores the Romanian Communist Party (PCR)'s involvement and participation in these transformations, as well as its relations with the West European communist parties in this context.

The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 and Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalinist practices, including the inter-party relations, fostered the emergence of alternative visions and theories regarding the relations between Moscow and the other communist parties. This trend gained prominence especially during the 1960s, as Moscow confronted the several challenges: the Sino-Soviet rift, Khrushchev's failures in foreign policy, promotion of peaceful

coexistence and so on. As Maud Bracke<sup>1</sup> argued, the 1960s were a prelude to Eurocommunism, since most of the theoretical interpretations that nurtured Eurocommunism find their roots during this decade (Bracke, 2002, 8).

After Nikita Khrushchev's demise from power in 1964, the new Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, tried to consolidate Moscow's influence and prestige in the world communist movement and to regain its lost control over other communist parties (Ouimet, 2003, 17). In this context, the debates regarding inter-party relations in the world communist movement reached maturity, as more and more parties were unwilling to surrender the freedom of maneuver obtained in the previous years. A return to the hierarchic organization of the world communism – specific to Stalin's times – was not desirable any longer either for the West European communists, or the PCR.

Nicolae Ceaușescu, a General Secretary of the PCR, played a major role in the international debates concerning relations among the world communist parties and defended the reformation of these relations on the principles of each party's autonomy and right to choose its own model of Socialist construction. His position brought the PCR close to the theses advocated by the West European communists and was the fundament for the strong relations later cultivated by the PCR with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and other communists in the West. There were numerous situations in which the PCR defended the same ideas as the West European communists, confronting Moscow, hence differentiating itself from the other parties in the Warsaw Pact countries. It needs to be emphasized that though what brought the PCR together with the West European communists were *similarities of form not of substance*.

Nicolae Ceaușescu defended the same reformist ideas as the Western communists in what concerned the international and internationalist component of communism. Moscow's potential recognition of each party's right to develop its own model of socialist construction served Ceaușescu's national-Stalinist policies at home and did not involve the pluralistic orientation of Eurocommunism. Still, the PCR's relation with the Western communists in support of a common platform aimed at reforming the meaning of internationalism is a less-investigated topic which deserves more attention. Political scientist Vladimir Tismăneanu noticed the similarities between Palmiro Togliatti's theory of poly-centrism and the PCR's arguments for claiming autonomy in the communist bloc (Tismăneanu, 2003, 178), but the idea was not given much attention in literature. A recent study concerning Nicolae Ceaușescu and Eurocommunism, published in Romania, focused on the 1970s, describing the PCR's negative yet reserved reaction towards the enunciation of Eurocommunism in the 1970s (Copilaș, 2011, 34–38).

This study aims to add value to researches and assessments regarding Nicolae Ceaușescu's policies by investigating his involvement in the theoretical and political debates which questioned Moscow's leadership of the communist movement during the late 1960s. As the problem is extremely vast, I have chosen two particular issues specific to the debates concerning the reform of internationalism and inter-party relations. These issues originated among West European communists and the PCR had offered full support to them. They include: *allargamento*, or enlargement of the world communist movement; and active détente. My study investigates how the PCR positioned itself in regard to these two issues and the support them in spite of Moscow's opposition. This illustrates how the PCR took active part in facilitating the international and inter-party conditions and fostering later the emergence of Eurocommunism. Although its significance in a wider perspective was probably limited, the PCR's support for the theses of the Western communists – from inside the communist bloc – did play a role in preventing the Soviet Union from isolating the West European communists, as it did with Yugoslavia, China and other “disobedient” parties.

This article is divided in three major parts. The first explores how party autonomy in relation to Moscow became a leading principle in the foreign policy of both the PCI and the PCR. The second part explores the PCR's position in regard to the Italian thesis of *allargamento* and the Romanian-Soviet divergences on this issue. The third part analyzes the similarities between the concept of active détente enunciated by the PCI, on one hand, and Romania's foreign policy during Nicolae Ceaușescu, on the other hand. The last section concludes this study.

## 1. Poly-centrism and party autonomy

It is widely recognized today that the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which took place in 1956, had a dramatic influence on Moscow's relations with the other Communist parties. Most regimes in Eastern Europe were confronted with a crisis of legitimacy and so was the case for the West European parties, as well. The first theoretical reaction to Nikita Khrushchev's theses was publicized by the leader of Italian Communist Party (PCI), Palmiro Togliatti who advocated in favor of reforming the relations inside world communism. Each party, Togliatti, claimed, must have autonomy, meaning that decisions regarding political objectives and strategies had to be made by each party itself, far from outside interferences. The reference was obviously directed at Moscow. Furthermore, Togliatti and his party rejected, in the name of party autonomy, the idea of a leading center in world communism (Glasser, 2007, 85).

It was an explicit criticism of the relations between Moscow and the other parties and the ways they were sustained. Togliatti also brought up a new vision concerning these relations, the so-called “poly-centrism”. In his approach, inter-party relations had to be organized on regional bases, taken into consideration political and historical experiences. This meant rejection of the Soviet model of socialism as the only one validated by history and therefore compulsory for each party

<sup>1</sup> Maud Bracke is a senior lecturer at the University of Glasgow and has published numerous studies about the West European communist parties and their relations with Moscow during the 1960s and 1970s.

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