

A THREAT FROM BELOW ? SOME REFLECTIONS ON WORKERS' PROTEST IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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In communist Romania, workers' protest did not lead to the birth of a Solidarity-like movement. It is not easy to explain the relative quiescence of the Romanian working class under communist rule. The classic explanation relates to the weak traditions of the Romanian working class movement. Another explanation focuses on the fact that, until the early 1980s, the Romanian working class, as a whole, benefited from the policy of urbanization and industrialization carried out by the communist regime. However, it is this author's opinion that a more comprehensive analysis is necessary in order to explain the behaviour of the Romanian working class under communist rule.

To paraphrase Roman Laba,¹ there is no social history of Romanian workers, no sociology of the working class. Therefore, the present paper is intended to initiate a necessary debate on the problem of workers' unrest in communist Romania; it discusses some of the main characteristics of the workers' protest in communist Romania and addresses a crucial question: "What prevented the appearance of a Solidarity-type movement in Ceauşescu's Romania?"

This study discusses strikes as the major forms of working class protest. In fact, the most important workers' protest in communist Romania was the strike carried out by the Jiu Valley miners, in August 1977. At the same time, the alternative forms of workers protest (boycotts, machinery sabotage, waste of raw materials, "go-slow" production, etc.) need a more detailed research. Such protests are very difficult to analyze

¹ Laba complains that "there is no social history of Polish workers, no sociology of the working class." See Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland's Working-Class Democratization*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 7.

because of the general characteristics of the working process in a communist society. Actually, the entire working process was based on the "go-slow" idea. A well-known joke of the 1980s summarized the situation as follows:

"Why do Romanian workers not go on strike?"

"Because they work so slowly, that nobody would observe the fact. They are on general strike for forty years, so there is no need to pour into the streets."²

Under the communist regime, Romanians' attitude toward work was illustrated by many sayings. Two such sayings of the 1970s were collected by Katherine Verdery:³

"They pretend they are paying us, and we pretend we are working."

" We will complete the Five-Year Plan in four years and a half at any cost, even if it takes us a decade."

The relative quiescence of the Romanian working class, even during the period of structural crisis of the 1980s can be also explained by the existence of the category of peasant-workers, the commuting villagers. Such a category was favoured by the strategy of the "extended family household" which permitted people, especially during the period of structural crisis and food shortages of 1981-1989, to obtain the necessary foodstuffs for survival. The peasant-worker is the perfect example of an individual's strategy to survive under an "orthodox" communist regime: a job in industry in the nearby town, and food supplies from the little farm he owned in his village.

Turning back to strikes as the main forms of working class protest it is important to emphasize that, in communist Romania, the most important workers' protests occurred in "genuine" workers' environments (Jiu Valley, 1977 and Braşov, 1987), where the interregional long distance migration hampered commuting and favoured the emergence of a relatively numerous category of workers relying only on the salary they received in

² Mihai Botez. *Românii despre ei înşişi* (Romanians about themselves) (Bucharest: Litera, 1992). 57 (hereafter cited as *Romanians about themselves*). See also Mihai Botez. *Lumea a doua* (The second world) (Bucharest: Du Style, 1997). 204.

³ Katherine Verdery. *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic and Ethnic Change*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). 29.

industry. The "genuine" workers were, therefore, much more vulnerable to the structural crisis of the Romanian society in the late 1970s and 1980s. The term "genuine" has to be understood in the sense of a category of workers extremely dependent on the salary received in the socialist sector and not in the sense of "worker-father origins." At the same time, the dominant attitude towards the regime of both workers and peasant-workers was that of "hostile passivity, strongly reminiscent of peasant attitudes to inimical environments."⁴

The present study is organized in two parts. The first part focuses on the characteristics of workers' protest in communist Poland and discusses two important theoretical models that explain the birth of Polish Solidarity. The aim of this part is to provide the necessary elements to compare the characteristics of the Polish workers' revolts, carried out under the communist rule, with the Romanian case. Moreover, the uniqueness of Solidarity, the first free trade union under a communist regime, is also addressed.

The second part of this study addresses the crucial features of workers' protest in communist Romania. This part also examines the main aspects of the latent conflict between workers and technical intelligentsia, and the failure to create an alliance between the cultural intelligentsia and the workers. Such a failure determined the "specificity" of the Romanian case, in comparison with the successful case of Solidarity's cross-class alliance. In communist Romania neither the technical elites nor the critical intellectuals could provide intellectual support for the workers' public protest, as had occurred in Poland after the 1976 strikes in Radom and Ursus. The general characteristics of the Romanian technical elite's schooling induced a much more conformist mentality, that could explain, in some respects, the lack of dissidence in this category of the Romanian intelligentsia.⁵

⁴ Michael Shafir, *Romania. Politics, Economics and Society: Political Stagnation and Simulated Change*, (London: Frances Pinter Publishers, 1985), 141.

⁵ Radu Filipescu is one of the very few engineers who became radical dissidents. See Herma Köpernik Kennel, *Jogging cu Securitatea. Rezistența tinărului Radu Filipescu* (Jogging with the Securitate: The resistance of the young man Radu Filipescu) (Bucharest: Universal Dalsi, 1998).

The analysis is based on the confirmed workers protests in communist Romania.⁶ The mapping of workers' protests in communist Romania takes also into consideration the inter-war traditions of working class protest. The traditions of the working class protest, the trends of long distance internal migration, and the dynamics of the process of urbanization and industrialization, as well as demographic data have been considered in order to explain the reasons why major workers protests in communist Romania occurred only in two areas (counties): Hunedoara and Braşov.

This study was deeply influenced by the direct experience of the author, who worked for three years (1987-1989) as an engineer in an electric bulb factory.⁷ Working, commuting, speaking and sometimes quarrelling with the workers provided an in-depth knowledge of the mentality of both Romanian "genuine" workers and peasant-workers. This experience facilitated an "exercise of the distance," in the sense of avoiding the "hegemony" of the statistical data, and contributed to a more comprehensive analysis of the behaviour of the Romanian working class under the communist rule.⁸

I

SOLIDARITY: FROM STRIKE TO "SELF-LIMITING REVOLUTION"

On August 18, 1980, the representatives of Gdansk strikers submitted to the Prime Minister of the Polish People's Republic a list of 21 demands. The first demand put forward by the strikers was "to accept free unions, independent from the party and from employers, according to the

⁶ See Table 1. Unfortunately, the total number of workers' revolts, strikes etc. is incomplete. For the moment, a more detailed summary of workers protests in communist Romania cannot be made due to the difficult access to archives.

⁷ Romlux Tîrgovişte Electric Bulb Factory.

⁸ In this respect, the analysis of Jacques Revel was extremely inspiring. See Jacques Revel "Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social" in Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Histories: French Constructions of the Past* (New York: The New Press 1995), 492-502.

87th Convention of the International Organization of Labour, ratified by the Polish People's Republic."⁹

On August 31, 1980, the government accepted the 21 demands. Solidarity, the first independent trade union established under a communist regime, was born. The military coup of December 1981 and the coming to power of General Wojciech Jaruzelski defeated Solidarity but could not liquidate it.¹⁰ The so-called "Solidarity's decade" (1980-1989), a decade of unrelenting pressures "from below," that culminated with two waves of strikes in 1988, ended with the round table talks of February-April 1989 and the elections of June 1989. On December 29, 1989, the country ceased to be a "peoples' democracy" and was renamed "The Republic of Poland."¹¹

This part focuses on the period between 1956 and 1980, searching for the "roots of Solidarity," the only successful movement from below under communist rule. According to Michael Kennedy, the way in which the Soviet-type regime was established in Poland provided the main theme of protest, namely "the identification of communism with foreign occupation and repression."¹² However, the "way to Gdansk," and the birth of Solidarity cannot be explained only in terms of regime's lack of legitimacy. Moreover, the discussion about the birth of Solidarity as "one of the most important social movements in world history"¹³ has to answer not only the question why Solidarity appeared in Poland, but also why it appeared in the specific environment of the Baltic Coast shipyards. The present analysis begins by addressing the first question, namely why Solidarity appeared in communist Poland.

⁹ See the complete list of demands in Jadwiga Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 43-45.

¹⁰ R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1994), 374-76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 391-92.

¹² Michael D. Kennedy, *Professionals, Power and Solidarity in Poland: A Critical Sociology of Soviet-Type Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Solidarity as Outcome

Ole Norgaard and Steven L. Sampson propose a theoretical model that explains Solidarity as an "outcome" of social and cultural factors, emphasizing Poland's specificity among the countries of "real socialism."¹⁴ It is this author's opinion that Norgaard and Sampson have offered one of the best theoretical models that explain why Solidarity appeared in communist Poland, and only there. The two authors state that the birth of Solidarity can be explained by three kinds of factors: (1) structural factors (characteristic to Soviet-type societies), (2) nation-specific factors (especially cultural, having to do with "national features"), and (3) conjunctural factors.¹⁵

The two authors identify as major *structural* factors the following: (1.1) the economic crisis generated by the economic policies of the Gomulka and Gierek regimes, and (1.2) the need for democratization. They examine six *nation-specific* factors: (2.1) a poor perception of the regime's competence; (2.2) low regime legitimacy; (2.3) weak regime unity, (2.4) high societal homogeneity; (2.5) the availability (within the Church) of alternative centres of power; and (2.6) a prior experience of struggle. Finally, they consider three *conjunctural* factors: (3.1) the world economic crisis and its influence on East-Central Europe; (3.2) climate generated agricultural problems; (3.3) the "coming of age" of the post-war baby boom. The above mentioned factors are briefly discussed below, starting with the structural factors.

The *structural factors* discussed by Norgaard and Sampson are the *economic crisis* and the "need for democratization." The *economic crisis*, and especially the increases of food prices determined the protests of 1970, 1976 and 1980. Furthermore, the first major workers' protest in communist Poland, the 1956 Poznan workers' revolt, was caused in many respects by economic problems. The other structural factor, namely "*the need for democratization*" is very subjective and difficult to evaluate. It may be argued that this factor was brought about by Solidarity's birth. In this respect, David Mason correctly observed that:

¹⁴ Kennedy, 60-62. See also Shafir, 129-30.

¹⁵ Cited in Kennedy, 60-61.

Participatory democracy was not a widely held value by ordinary Poles in 1980. It was much more highly cherished by intellectuals. With the closer collaboration of intellectuals and workers after 1976, and an alternate form of political socialization occurring through the unofficial press in the latter 1970s, some of the ideas of democracy began to take hold among the workers. Even so, some of these political ideas were slow to germinate even in 1980. Only after August did the workers really begin to educate themselves in democracy, while at the same time trying to create an organization that would institutionalize it.¹⁶

Moreover, ordinary people, Mason suggests, were more concerned with the growing inequality in the Polish society of the 1970s. In his analysis, Mason notes that, in the late 1970s, egalitarianism "rose quickly in the hierarchy of values of citizens."¹⁷ Jadwiga Staniskis also speaks about the "lack of democratic culture" among the 1980-protesting workers in Szczecin.¹⁸

The discussion continues with the examination of the six *nation-specific factors* proposed by Norgaard and Sampson. As shown below, a brief analysis indicates that all six were present in late 1970s Poland.

First, the *poor perception of regime's competence* was deepened by the failure of Gierek's plans for the sustained modernization of country's industry. Second, *regime's low legitimacy* was determined by the perception of the post-war regime as alien and anti-national. As David Paul and Maurice Simon argue, the emergence of Solidarity was favoured by the intense Polish nationalism and focused nationalistic hatred for the Russians.¹⁹ Mason's analysis of public opinion surveys of 1981 indicates that the Poles openly expressed "the belief that the Soviet Union was the main threat to Poland's sovereignty."²⁰ Third, the *weak unity of the regime* was proved by the management of the crises of 1956, 1970 and 1980, when the cleavage that existed at the level of the ruling elite resulted in the change of that time party leader. Fourth, it may be argued that the *high societal homogeneity* was achieved, at least at the mass level, during the

¹⁶ David S. Mason, *Public Opinion and Political Change in Poland, 1980-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). 72.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸ Cited by Mason, 92.

¹⁹ Cited by Kennedy, 58.

²⁰ Mason, 29.

1950s, when Poland's experienced an economic leap forward (1951-1957). Fifth, the existence of an independent (Roman Catholic) Church in Poland provided *an alternative centre of power*. Furthermore, the election of Karol Wojtyla, the archbishop of Kracow as Pope John Paul II on October 16, 1978, had a massive contribution on the Polish revival. The Pope's visit to Poland, in June 1979, had an immense effect on "dissolving" the authority of the party.²¹ Sixth, the *prior experience of struggle* against the regime was shaped by the inter-war working class traditions (proved by the Poznan workers) and the entire history of workers' protests under communist rule (1956, 1970, 1976). Moreover, the three major elements that led to the birth of Solidarity as a free trade union were previously experienced during the 1970 coastal strikes: (1) the appeal to the round-the-clock, non-violent, sit-down strikes as forms of protest, (2) the formation of the so-called "Interfactory Strike Committees," in order to unite the workplaces in a common protest against the state; and (3) the very basic demand for free trade unions and the creation of national structure to co-ordinate them.²² Furthermore, the successful cross-class alliance established between professionals (technical intelligentsia) and the workers, and benefiting from the support of the cultural intelligentsia (especially through the Workers' Defence Committee--KOR) contributed in a major way to the birth of Solidarity.²³ In 1968, Polish students and critical intellectuals were left alone, while in 1970 workers were left alone to protest against the Gomulka regime. As Kennedy states, "the combination of economic crisis and the lesson of the likely failure of isolated protests is what brought the strata together."²⁴

²¹ Crampton, 365.

²² Laba, 101-105.

²³ The Committee for the Defense of Workers (Komitet Obrony Robotnikow--KOR) was founded by 14 Polish intellectuals in September 1976, in order to assist the victims of the repression of the June 1976 workers' revolts. Basically KOR's activity was structured on two levels: (1) to provide medical and financial aid to the victims and their families, and (2) to provide information about the victims of repression through open letters and manifestos. A list of KOR members during the period September 1976-October 1977, includes intellectuals such as: Jacek Kuron, Edward Lipinski, Jan Jozef Lipski, Adam Michnik. See Michael H. Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland: Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics, 1976-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 76-99.

²⁴ Kennedy, 62.

Finally, Norgaard and Sampson argue that, on the eve of Solidarity, communist Poland (like communist Romania) was particularly sensible to conjunctural factors.²⁵ In the case of Poland, however, the model proposed by Norgaard and Sampson does not explain why Solidarity appeared in Baltic Coast workers' environments. In this respect, Roman Laba's analysis provides a convincing argument.

Workplaces of the Baltic Coast: Nesting Solidarities?

The specificity of Baltic Coast workers' environments in terms of its protest potential was addressed by Roman Laba, who analyzes what factors determined the "coast's unique climate of self-assertion."²⁶ According to Laba, no systematic research on coastal workers' environments has been carried out in order to determine the factors that favoured the appearance of Solidarity in the region. Some attempts to explain the specificity of coastal workers took into consideration the following elements: (1) the long distance internal migration patterns, focusing on the presence of immigrants from Poland's eastern borderlands, "with their wounded national pride and their keen sense of Soviet domination;" (2) the greater openness to the world of coastal workers (favouring comparisons with Poland's workers life), induced by the existence of the seaports and due to the activities linked to the sea (trading, shipping, fishing, shipbuilding etc.); and (3) the special features of the region, as a post-war acquired territory in which numerous rural migrants have settled seeking a job at the shipyards (like Lech Walesa, Solidarity's leader).²⁷

In order to evaluate the special potential for protest of the Baltic Coast workers, Laba discusses *two opposing theories* related to the emergence of workers' protest in communist Poland, focusing on the process of sustained urbanization and industrialization. The *first theory* emphasizes that the workers of rural origin are likely to become active (in the political sense) only after the first generation born in villages is succeeded by city born generations of workers, who had time to develop the specific traditions that characterize the modern proletariat. As Laba

²⁵ Ibid., 60.

²⁶ Laba, 115.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

puts it, such a theory suggests "that workers who have recently arrived in the cities will compare their new situation to the even harsher conditions they left behind and remain politically quiescent."²⁸ The *second theory* states exactly the opposite, in the sense that the history of Polish workers' protest against the communist rule provides examples of radical protest among the newcomers, namely rural born workers, with no worker-father origins. In 1980, Laba argues, in Silesia, it was the miners with rural origins from the new mining area of Jastrzebie who protested and not the "old established miners with working-class traditions going back over generations."²⁹

However, in order to provide a coherent explanation of the appearance of Solidarity on the Polish Baltic Coast, Laba identifies the major characteristics of the workforce in the region as follows: (1) the coastal working class was the product of migration from eastern and central rural Poland; (2) in 1980, the workforce at the Baltic Coast shipyards was composed of young male workers, with short work stages, mostly unmarried and facing difficult housing problems; (3) the absence of peasant-workers among the workers at the shipyards--as Laba states, the coastal workers "had peasant roots in eastern and central Poland . . . too far away from their home villages to preserve a working connection with the land,"³⁰ and (4) the specific characteristics of shipyards as workplaces. These were (4.1) the shipyards were the dominant industrial centres of the region; (4.2) the job was extremely difficult, dangerous (comparable with the work in mining) and not rewarding, especially for young workers; and (4.3) the export-oriented activity of the shipyards, mostly toward Soviet Union. As a consequence, Laba states, the "shipyard's workers firmly believed that ships were produced for the Soviet Union under contracts that were exploitative."³¹ By the same argument, Alain Touraine *et al.* states that "the shipyard workers of Gdansk and Gdynia, several times

²⁸ Ibid., 116.

²⁹ Laba, 116.

³⁰ While at the country level almost 20 per cent of the industrial workforce worked simultaneously a farm. Laba, 119.

³¹ Ibid., 119-25.

attacked the unequal trade balance with the Soviet Union and its catastrophic effects on the life of Polish industry."³²

In conclusion, Laba's study on the specific conditions of the coastal workplaces provides a new approach to Solidarity's birth. The specificity of Baltic Coast workers' environments induced a special sense of cohesion and solidarity among workers and that must be acknowledged in order to determine "the roots of Solidarity." At the same time, the model proposed by Norgaard and Sampson, who underline the structural, nation-specific and conjunctural factors must be completed with an analysis of individuals' perceptions and actions, as Laba and Mason suggest.

Moreover, Laba's study argues for a reconsideration of the thesis which states that Solidarity "emerged from the educative efforts of the opposition intellectuals beginning with 1976," in the sense of considering the movement a "complex synthesis of socialism, nationalism, and religion."³³ It may be argued that the Polish critical intelligentsia created an "aura" around coastal workers' protest and conveyed such an image outside Poland, thereby focusing the attention of both national and international public opinion on Solidarity. Mason argues that "after August [1980] did the workers really begin to educate themselves in democracy," as a result of their close relations with critical intellectuals.

It is important to emphasize Solidarity's special character of "self-limiting revolution," as defined by Jadwiga Staniszkis.³⁴ As Touraine *et al.* argue, Solidarity had set itself three limits to its action: (1) the leading role of the party in the state was explicitly guaranteed by the Gdansk agreement; (2) Poland remained within the socialist camp; and (3) trade-union demands were to be moderated because of the economic crisis.³⁵

Another important aspect, emphasized by Kennedy, was that the skilled workers from large enterprises, eventually joined by the professionals (engineers) formed the structure of Solidarity's "hard core".³⁶ Moreover, a crucial element was the construction of a cross-class

³² Alain Touraine, François Dubet, Michel Wieviorka and Jan Strzelecki, *Solidarity. The Analysis of a Social Movement: Poland 1980-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 52.

³³ Laba, 181.

³⁴ Staniszkis, 7-8.

³⁵ Touraine *et al.*, 179.

³⁶ Kennedy, 286-89.

alliance, between workers and engineers, on the one hand, and between the cultural/critical intelligentsia and the workers on the other.

Finally, with regard to the organization of strikes, Kennedy identifies the three major elements of the "mechanism" which determined the birth of Solidarity: (1) the appeal to round-the-clock, non-violent, sit-down strikes as forms of protest; (2) the formation of the so-called "Interfactory Strike Committees," in order to unite the workplaces in a common protest against the regime; and, (3) the very basic demand for free trade unions and the creation of a national structure to co-ordinate them. As he states, "it was the 'innovations' of occupation strikes, solidarity strikes, inter-enterprise strike committees, independent trade unions and national solidarity that enabled the movement Solidarity to be born and cause a major, if temporary, transformation of Soviet type society."³⁷

Based on the theoretical models discussed above, which focus on the Polish case, the present study addresses below, in a comparative perspective, the issue of workers' protest in communist Romania.

II

WORKERS' PROTEST IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

In order to provide the framework of the present analysis, the available information concerning workers' public protests (strikes, revolts and demonstrations) in communist Romania has been compiled to create Table 1. Romanian and foreign sources, as well as the materials collected by the Radio Free Europe Research Institute, have been utilized to complete the information. It must be emphasized that the information provided by Table 1 is by no means complete and further research is imperious necessary in order to provide more information concerning other strikes and/or revolts.

As a general characteristic, workers' protests in communist Romania were spontaneous, induced by low wages, wage cuts, non-payment of the supplementary work, stiff working conditions and high penalties for slow work or absenteeism. At the same time, high prices,

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

cutting of the food supply facilities and the decline in the standard of life were the causes of many spontaneous strikes. Demands for wage increase the extension of the vacation period or for improving the safety conditions were also causes of spontaneous strikes, but the majority of the strikes were defensive.

The classic model of workers' protest in Soviet-type regimes was proposed by George Schöpflin:

The usual course of events was for workers in a particular workshop to nurse their grievances until one day they would down tools and demand remedies, which tended to include more money. The management in consultation with the local party secretary would offer them money in partial settlement and that would be the end of the matter. However, if that was not done for some reason, then tempers were readily frayed and demands could quickly become political.³⁸

Concerning the Romanian case, Vladimir Socor suggests a similar pattern:

Although prompted by problems in the system itself, the workers' demands nonetheless focused on issues in the factory and could be resolved (however temporarily or deceptively) by the authorities on that level. The authorities seemed very reluctant to send in security forces, instead opting quickly for piecemeal concessions followed by selective reprisals against only a small number of presumed ringleaders.³⁹

The analysis of the 35 workers' strikes and revolts described in Table 1 reveals that in only one case was the protest directed against the communist regime: the Braşov revolt of 1987 (but even in this case the revolt was provoked by the non-payment of wages and, later, the protest turned to a revolt against the communist regime). Based on the data provided in Table 1, the study addresses now the specific aspects of workers' protest in communist Romania.

³⁸ George Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 167.

³⁹ Vladimir Socor, "Transylvanian Hungarian Underground Press on Social Problems and Strikes: Romanian Situation Report/2-6 March 1987" (Romanian Fond, Unit No. 300/60/1/837, OSA/RFE Archives), 19 (hereafter cited as RFE/ Situation Report/2).

Why Did a Solidarity-Like Mass Movement Not Appear in Romania?

The analysis of workers' unrest in communist Romania is even more difficult due to the inevitable comparison between the protests carried out by the Romanian workers and the case of Poland, where "one of the most important social movements in world history," the Solidarity movement, was born. Therefore, the author is compelled to answer the unavoidable question: "Why did a Solidarity-like mass movement not appear in Romania?"

In order to provide a coherent answer, the comparative analysis will take into consideration the two approaches proposed for the Polish Solidarity case, discussed above, but in an inverted order. Therefore, the analysis addresses the following two issues: (1) the *specificity of the workplaces* where the major workers' protests in communist Romania took place, namely the Hunedoara and Braşov regions, where the 1977 Jiu Valley strike and, respectively, the 1987 Braşov revolt took place, and (2) the *factors that hampered the appearance of a Solidarity-like movement* in Romania as outcome, discussed in accordance with the model proposed by Norgaard and Sampson.

The *first major issue* is related to the specificity of the workplaces where the major workers' protests in communist Romania took place. It is this author's opinion that the similarities between the two areas in terms of working-class traditions, industrialization and urbanization patterns, of long distance intercounty migration trends, and of distribution of developmental resources existed between the Hunedoara and Braşov counties, which explains convincingly enough why the major workers' protests during the Ceauşescu period occurred only there.

In terms of industrialization and urbanization patterns, as well as in terms of working-class traditions, the similarity between Hunedoara and Braşov counties is striking. Both areas had strong working-class traditions from the interwar period, being among the very few "pockets of industrialization" of Greater Romania. The high percentage of population active in the secondary sector represents an essential precondition for the emergence of protests "from below." In this respect, the comparison between the two areas under scrutiny with regard to the employment in the

secondary sector in 1977 (when the Jiu Valley strike occurred) is extremely telling.

In the case of Hunedoara county (which includes the Jiu Valley region), in the major mining centres, the employment in the secondary sector was significantly high. In 1977, in the mining centres of the Jiu Valley, the population active in the second sector represented 77.7 per cent of total active population in Lupeni, 74.3 per cent in Petrila, 66.5 in Uricani, and 78.6 per cent in Vulcan. In the case of the town of Hunedoara, 71.4 per cent of the total active population was employed in the secondary sector. At the same time, in 1977, in Hunedoara county workers represented 63.2 per cent of the total active population.⁴⁰

In 1977, the Braşov county was one of the most industrialized counties of Romania. The population active in the secondary sector represented 67.2 per cent in Braşov, 71.3 per cent in Codlea, 71.8 per cent in Făgăraş, 77.7 per cent in Rîşnov, 77.9 per cent in Săcele, 73.7 per cent in Victoria and 85.6 per cent in Zărneşti. As Per Ronnas argues, "Braşov was the most urbanized county and had limited potentials for further reductions of the agricultural population."⁴¹ In the Braşov county workers represented 70.5 of the total active population.

However, the analysis of workers' potential of protest has also to take into consideration not only the total number of workers employed in the secondary sector, but also the percentage of commuting villagers and the percentage of long distance intercounty migrants. As already mentioned, is important to discuss the emergence the category of "genuine" workers, whose "broken ties with the countryside" obliged them to rely almost entirely on the salary obtained from the socialist sector. Therefore, the case of the long distance intercounty migration will be discussed based on the data provided by the 1977 census. Unfortunately, between 1977 and 1992 no other census was taken in order to complete

⁴⁰ The analysis of the industrial structure of Romanian towns is based on the seminal work of Per Ronnas. See Per Ronnas, *Urbanization in Romania: A Geography of Social and Economic Change since Independence* (Stockholm: The Economic Research Institute, Stockholm School of Economics, 1984), 359-73.

⁴¹ Ronnas, 147.

the information with data concerning the period between 1977 and 1989, but it is reasonable to consider that the general trend was maintained.⁴²

In order to define the concept of long distance intercounty migration, the present research considers a maximum commuting time of two hours per trip, which means a total of four hours per day. The main characteristics of the Romanian means of transport (railway and bus) have been analyzed in order to evaluate the maximum commuting time. Moreover, the information provided by different scholars has been compared with author's own experience of commuting.⁴³

Therefore, in order to determine the percentage of the population unable to commute, in both cases of Hunedoara and Braşov counties, the population born in the neighbouring counties has been subtracted from the total number of migrants into the respective county. In the case of Hunedoara county, the figures related to the migrants from Alba, Arad, Caraş-Severin, Gorj, Timiş and Vâlcea counties have been subtracted from the total number of intercounty migrants. This resulted in a total number of 131,388 long distance intercounty migrants, representing 25.5 of county's total population. In the case of Braşov county, the total number of migrants from Argeş, Buzău, Covasna, Dîmboviţa, Harghita, Mureş, Prahova and Sibiu has been subtracted from the total number of migrants into the respective country. This resulted in a total number of 146,696 long distance intercounty migrants, representing 25.2 per cent of the county's total population. At the same time, this author's calculations reveal that another two counties, Timiş and Constanţa, received a relatively high number of long distance intercounty migrants (23.5 per cent of the total population and 21.8 per cent, respectively). Moreover, in both cases, the working-class was well represented in absolute numbers as well as in the percentage of the total population. In the case of Timiş county, workers

⁴² In the case of Braşov, the pattern of long distance intercounty migration was illustrated in the 1980s by the numerous jokes with Moldavians who migrated to Transylvania. A joke stated that the city of Braşov was to become Iaşov, considering the large number of migrants from the Moldavian city of Iaşi. The analysis of the internal migration figures is based on the Romanian 1977 census. See Direcţia Centrală de Statistică, *Republica Socialistă România. Recensămîntul populaţiei şi al locuinţelor din 5 ianuarie 1977*, vol. I, *Populaţie – Structura demografică* (Bucureşti: n.p., 1980), 696-743.

⁴³ Verdery, in her study on the village of Binţinţi (Hunedoara county) states that the average commuting time for the commuting villagers was of two hours. Verdery, 58.

represented 59.1 per cent of total county's population, whereas in the case of Constanţa county, 64.0 per cent of total population were workers.

Therefore, in order to explain the singularity of major workers protests in Hunedoara and Braşov counties, the analysis has to take into consideration the economic policy of the Ceauşescu regime with regard to the mentioned four counties, Hunedoara, Braşov, Timiş and Constanţa. According to Daniel Nelson, during the period 1970-1983, some major changes occurred in the regime's economic policy in the sense that the investments in the fixed assets of socialist enterprises create the differentiation between the counties.⁴⁴ The "big winners" were Constanţa, Gorj, Tulcea and Vâlcea counties. According to Nelson's classification, in terms of investments, the "big losers" were the industrialized counties of Hunedoara and Prahova. Moreover, it can be observed that there were no Transylvanian counties among the "big winners." Mureş county was a "big loser," whereas Cluj county was a "moderate loser." Braşov county was placed among the "small losers." At the same time, Timiş county experienced almost no change in terms of investments. As Nelson correctly observed:

Economically, . . . Romanian counties have not been able to escape from, or avoid, the Ceauşescu's regime disruptive effects. Counties with wealth were not able to ensure that their gains would keep pace with national development, and the poor judeţe [counties] were no more likely to benefit from "dezvoltare multilaterală [multilaterally development]." Additions to counties' economic infrastructure appear to have been driven, then, by the *least rational* of motives--*ethnic biases and familial ties to certain regions*.⁴⁵

With regard to Hunedoara and Braşov counties, the lack of investments in industry created major sources of workers' discontent. Such was the case in Jiu Valley, where workers demanded the establishment of light industry factories (to provide jobs for their spouses and daughters) and criticized the bad working conditions (the lack of protective equipment, the free meal before entering the shift etc.). In the case of the Şteagul Roşu Braşov truck plant, enterprise's obsolete products induced the lose of export

⁴⁴ Daniel N. Nelson, *Romanian Politics in the Ceauşescu Era* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 164.

⁴⁵ Nelson, 166.

markets, the non-fulfilment of the export plan and wage cuts, which created the premises for the 1987 workers' revolt.⁴⁶ In the cases of Timiș and Constanța counties, the possibility of smuggling consumer goods from the former Yugoslavia and Hungary (in the case of Timiș county) or through the commercial seaport (in the case of Constanța) acted as a "safety valve" and hampered to some extent the emergence of social protests in both regions. However, a detailed analysis of smuggling consumer goods in both Timiș and Constanța counties has to be carried out in order to reveal the extent to which the possibility of buying scarce consumer goods on the black-market hindered the emergence of social protests in workers' environments.

In conclusion, it may be argued that a striking similarity, in terms of industrialization and urbanization levels, of long distance intercounty migration trends, and of distribution of developmental resources existed between the two mentioned counties, which can explain why the major workers' protests during the Ceaușescu period occurred only in Hunedoara and Brașov counties.

The *second major issue* is related to the factors that hampered the appearance of a Solidarity-like movement in Romania. As discussed above, Norgaard and Sampson have imagined a theoretical model, which explains Solidarity as an "outcome" of social and cultural factors, emphasizing Poland's specificity among the countries of "real socialism."⁴⁷

The first structural factor to be discussed is the *economic crisis*. It is important to underline that in Romania, in spite of the fact that the economic crisis resulted, beginning with 1981-82, in a decline in the

⁴⁶ See Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (London: Hurst & Company, 1995), 252.

⁴⁷ They explain the birth of Solidarity through three kinds of factors: (1) structural factors (characteristic to Soviet-type societies); (2) nation-specific factors (especially cultural, having to do with "national features"); and (3) conjunctural factors. The *structural* factors the following: (1.1) the economic crisis generated by the economic policies of the Gomulka and Gierek regimes; and (1.2) the need for democratization. The *nation-specific* factors are: (2.1) a poor perception of the regime's competence; (2.2) low regime legitimacy; (2.3) weak regime unity; (2.4) high societal homogeneity; (2.5) the availability (within the Church) of alternative centres of power; and (2.6) a prior experience of struggle. The *conjunctural* factors are: (3.1) the world economic crisis and its influence on East-Central Europe; (3.2) climate generated agricultural problems; (3.3) the "coming of age" of the post-war baby boom. See pp. 5-6 above.

standard of living to "unmatched since the famine of the post-war period,"⁴⁸ the first major workers' protest determined by the economic crisis occurred only in 1987, in Braşov. It may be argued that in both cases the economic crisis produced workers' revolts, but in the case of Romania the first major protest determined by the economic crisis occurred only in 1987, 31 years after the 1956 Polish workers' revolt in Poznań. Furthermore, the similarity between the two protests is striking with respect to the "mechanism" of revolt: workers went on strike, marched into the town where they were joined by city dwellers in their protest, and attacked the Party Headquarters building. As mentioned in the case of Poland, it is this author's opinion that the second structural factor, namely the "*need for democratization*" has little relevance in both Polish and Romanian cases.⁴⁹

In addition, the major differences between the characteristics of workers' protests in the two countries reside, especially, in the nation-specific and conjunctural factors. The analysis continues with the discussion of the six *nation-specific factors*.

First, the *poor perception of regime's competence* was not extended to the person of Nicolae Ceauşescu until the 1987 Braşov workers' revolt. As mentioned above, the Jiu Valley strikers had a poor perception of the party officials but they still believed that Ceauşescu was "on their side" and therefore asked to negotiate directly with him. The Braşov strikers, on the other hand, protested against the personal rule of Ceauşescu by shouting "Down with Ceauşescu!" which had not been the case in 1977, in the Jiu Valley.

The second factor, related to *regime's legitimacy*, needs a more detailed analysis. The "independent way" of Romanian communism, which started with the withdrawal of the Russian troops in 1958, and continued with the Statement of April 1964 and the refusal to participate to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, have created the Romanian version of national-communism without destalinization. Actually, the national, "independent way" of the Romanian communism was, beside industrialization, the principal source of legitimacy for the regime, and was perceived as such by the overwhelming majority of the population until the

⁴⁸ Shafir. 117.

⁴⁹ See p. 6 above.

early 1980s. With respect to this issue, Mihai Botez quotes a Romanian high rank party official who, in a discussion with a foreign diplomat exclaimed: "Independence is our legitimacy!"⁵⁰ In the Romanian case, to paraphrase Paul and Simon, the intense Romanian nationalism coupled with nationalistic hatred for the Russians acted in the favour of the regime, that benefited from Romanian russophobia, which, as Hugh Seton-Watson put it, "is second only to that of Poles."⁵¹

The third nation-specific factor has to do with *regime's unity*. Until the Braşov workers revolt, the Romanian communist regime avoided any major cleavages at the level of the ruling elite. It was only after the Braşov workers' revolt of November 15, 1987 that members of the communist elite, such as Silviu Brucan, protested against the personal rule of Ceauşescu. On November 29, 1987, Brucan, who was a deputy editor of the party daily newspaper *Scînteia* between 1944 and 1956, and former Romanian ambassador to the United States (1956-59) and to the United Nations (1959-62), declared that "a period of crisis has opened up in relations between the Romanian Communist Party and the workers."⁵²

Like in the Polish case, the fourth factor, the *high societal homogeneity* was achieved, at the mass level, during the 1950s. The fifth factor, regarding to the *autonomous centers of power provided by the Church*, determined a crucial difference between Poland and Romania under communist rule. The Romanian Orthodox Church and its status under the communist regime hampered the development of an alternative discourse to that of the ruling power. In this respect, Shafir argues: "The contrast with the Catholic Church in Poland could not be greater. Traditional submission, increased by the threat of sanctions, makes the dominant church in Romania a tool in the hands of the authorities."⁵³

Finally, with regard to the sixth factor, in the case of communist Romania the *extremely weak prior experience of protest among the working class* hindered the development of successful protest actions. In the case of communist Poland, as shown above, Roman Laba identifies

⁵⁰ Botez, *Romanians about themselves*, 33.

⁵¹ Cited by Wayne S. Vucinich. See Wayne S. Vucinich, "Major Trends in Eastern Europe" in Stephen Fischer-Galati, ed., *Eastern Europe in the 1980s* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981), 9.

⁵² Deletant, 253.

⁵³ Shafir, 152.

three major elements that led to the birth of Solidarity as a free trade union: (1) the appeal to the round-the-clock, non-violent, sit-down strikes as forms of protest; (2) the formation of the so-called "Interfactory Strike Committees," in order to unite the workplaces in a common protest against the state; and (3) the very basic demand for free trade unions and the creation of national structure to co-ordinate them.

It is interesting that in the case of Romania, during the period 1977-1979, two actions from below, the 1977 Jiu Valley miners strike and the creation of SLOMR (The Free Trade Union of the Working People of Romania) in 1979, could have provided support for the development of a successful mass movement in Romania. But the economic crisis, which is the major cause of a protest from below was incipient at that time (bread-rationing was introduced only in 1981, and massive price increases for foodstuffs occurred in 1982).

Moreover, the Goma movement, actually the most important dissident movement of the 1970s Romania, was initiated in 1977 but there was no connection between the Jiu Valley strikers and Goma movement. With regard to the Romanian intellectual dissidence in the 1970s, Shafir quotes a Western specialist in East European affairs who told him in the early 1980s that "Romanian dissent lives in Paris and his name is Paul Goma."⁵⁴ The assertion is correct in many respects, considering that the Romanian cultural intelligentsia did not support the Goma movement. Therefore, in 1977 Romania the intellectuals could not or, more exactly, did not dare to articulate a noticeable dissident movement (as the lack of support for the Goma movement proves), to say nothing of a cross-class alliance in the sense of providing support for the miners' strike of August.

Norgaard and Sampson argue that, on the eve of Solidarity, communist Poland (like communist Romania) was particularly sensitive to *conjunctural factors*.⁵⁵ Indeed, the world economic crisis affected both countries. However, while in the case of Poland the "coming of age" of the post-war baby boom could have influenced the birth of Solidarity in 1980, in the case of Romania a somehow similar "baby boom" occurred only in the late 1960s, and was determined by Ceauşescu's policy of forced natality. It may be argued that in the case of Romania the "coming of age"

⁵⁴ Shafir, 168.

⁵⁵ Cited in Kennedy, 60.

of the late 1960s baby boom played a relatively important role in the 1989 Romanian revolution, but not in the creation of a successful working class movement. Moreover, it is this author's opinion that the election of a Polish Pope has to be considered an extremely important conjunctural factor that contributed heavily to the birth of Polish Solidarity.

In conclusion, until the 1987 Braşov workers revolt, the Romanian working class seemed to be more likely to seek various forms of "muddling through" rather than protesting against the communist regime. It may be argued that until 1977 the "new social contract," as defined by Antonin Liehm,⁵⁶ functioned extremely well in the Romanian case. Moreover, the communist regime skilfully utilized the association industrialization-nationalism, especially after the statement of April 1964. A large category of workers, the peasant-workers (the commuting villagers), estimated at 30-50 per cent of the total active workforce in industry, succeeded in overcoming the economic crisis that lowered Romanians' standard of living beginning in the late 1970s. Such a category was favoured by the strategy of the "extended family household" which permitted, especially during the period of structural crisis and food shortages of 1981-1989, people to obtain the necessary foodstuffs for survival. The class of "genuine" workers, whose broken ties with the countryside made them rely exclusively on the salary received in industry developed slowly in communist Romania. It may be argued that the category of genuine workers attained a certain degree of self-consciousness in the late 1970s and early 1980s, depending on the characteristics of the workplace (large or small enterprise, dangerous

⁵⁶ "The notion of a *new social contract* [emphasis mine] in East and East Central Europe suggests that the population of those areas had ceded to the authorities its rights to free speech and assembly, its right to organize, and various other basic democratic rights in exchange for certain implicit guarantees. These include assured employment that, even if providing only mediocre wages permits a standard of living above the poverty level. Little real effort, personal involvement, or individual initiative is required. The contract also implies the state's provision of important social services and a degree of social security. As long as the contract is honoured by both parties, it provides both with a set of real or perceived advantages. Social and political calm prevail, and there is no need for labor camps, revolts, terrorism, or more than a minimal number of political prisoners." See Antonin J. Liehm, "The New Social Contract and the Parallel Polity" in Jane Leftwich Curry, ed., *Dissent in Eastern Europe* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 174.

work, location of the enterprise and its relevance at national level). At the same time, the lack of traditions and previous experiences of struggle resulted in a rather passive resistance of such workers, with the notable exception of the Braşov revolt. The deep economic crisis created a special sense of cohesion not only among the workers, but also among the urban population in general. As shown in the case of the 1987 Braşov workers revolt, the potential for protest of the Romanian urban population was extremely high.

However, the pattern of social protest revealed by the 1987 workers' revolt shows that a mass-movement similar to the Polish Solidarity was also hindered by the lack of organizational skills of the Romanian workers, and especially due to their lack of *solidarity* (except for the miners). Even if the Braşov revolt would have been a round-the-clock, non-violent sit-down strike (on the model of Jiu Valley miners strike of 1977) it unlikely that solidarity strikes in major enterprises throughout the country would have occurred. In fact, under communist rule *not one solidarity strike occurred* in Romania. In all the cases, the strikers were left alone by their fellows from other workplaces.

A THREAT FROM BELOW ?

**Table 1. *Workers' Protests in Communist Romania
(Strikes, Revolts, Demonstrations), 1950-1989***

No.	Date	Place	Location	Causes
0	1	2	3	4
1	August 1950	Botoşani	Textile factory	Workers went on strike because they were denied payment for the supplementary work
2	Summer 1951	Bucharest	"Belvedere" Tobacco factory	Workers protested against low wages and high prices.
3	15 June 1951	Galaţi	Galaţi Shipyards	Workers protested against low wages, high prices and stiff working norms.
4	July 1951	Reşiţa	Reşiţa Steel Mill	Workers did not receive their corn flour ration
5	30 July 1951	Ploieşti	"First of May" Factory of Oilfield Equipment	Penalties imposed on workers arriving late at their work.
6	December 1951	Brăila		Heavy penalties for slow work and absenteeism: the strike started with the protest of 18 workers who were deprived of their Christmas wages due to unintentional delays (their commuting train was late)
7	November-December 1951	Jiu Valley: Lupeni, Lonea, Petrosani	Mining Industry	The miners protested against cutting of the food supply facilities: sabotages were reported at Lupeni and Lonea and a demonstration took place in Petroşani
8	December 1951-January 1952	Braşov	"Dumitru Voina" Explosive Plant	Spontaneous strike provoked by the decline in the standard of life.

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0	1	2	3	4
9	December 1951-January 1952	Arad	"Victoria" Tool Factory	Spontaneous strike provoked by the decline in the standard of life.
10	December 1951-January 1952	Turnu Severin	Turnu Severin Shipyards	Spontaneous strike provoked by the decline in the standard of life.
11	1-3 February 1952	Bucharest	"Grivița Roșie" Railway Repair Shops	Currency reform: workers protested against the monetary reform announced by the Gheorghiu-Dej regime.
12	5 February 1952	Ploiești	Refineries and Oilfields	Demands of wage increase and increase of vacation period
13	February 1952	Bucharest	"23 August" Enterprise (former "Malaxa" Factory)	Currency reform: the workers protested against the monetary reform announced by the Gheorghiu-Dej regime.
14	February 1953	Bucharest	Tram Drivers	Decline in the life standard
15	24 June 1953	Bucharest	Metallurgical industry: "Grivița Roșie," "23 August," and "Vulcan" Plants	Decline in the life standard and high working norms
16	November 1953	Brăila	"Progresul" Shipyards	Workers protest occurred when party representatives called a meeting to explain the reorganization of the wage system in communist Romania
17	29 November 1953	Brăila	Cement Factory	Workers protest occurred when party representatives organized a meeting to explain the reorganization of the wage system in communist Romania.
18	July 1953	Băicoi (now Florești, 45 km from Ploiești)	Crude Oil Extraction	Workers protested against the 10-hour working day without wage increase

A THREAT FROM BELOW ?

0	1	2	3	4
19	Summer of 1957	Băia Mare	Chemical Complex Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej	Workers protested against non-payment of the supplementary work
20	July 1958	Brezoi	Mining Industry	Workers did not receive the food they were supposed to receive
21	August 1958	Jiu Valley: Lupeni	Mining Industry	Workers protested against poor safety measures and refused to work on Sundays
22	September 1972	Jiu Valley	Mining Industry	No details available
23	1-3 August 1977	Jiu Valley: Lupeni, Petroșani	Mining Industry	The legislation introduced in July 1977 that raised the retirement age from fifty to fifty-five and ended the disability pensions for miners
24	February 1981	Bucharest	Steel Mill Chemical Plant	Workers' unrest as a result of food crisis
25	February 1981	Ploiești	Petrochemical Complex	Workers' unrest as a result of food crisis
26	February 1981	Pitești	Petrochemical Complex	Workers' unrest as a result of food crisis
27	October 1981	Motru Region: Leurda, Lupăia, Horăști	Mining Industry	No other information available
28	September 1983	Maramureș	Mining Industry	Miners protested against wage cuts
29	November 1983	Brașov	"Steagul Roșu" Truck Factory	Around 1,000 workers protested against wage cuts
30	February 1985	Timișoara	Not specified	Discontent with the wage system

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0	1	2	3	4
31	August 1986	Arad	Railway workers	Workers protested against the non-payment of wages and food crisis
32	November 1986	Cluj	Heavy Equipment Plant Refrigeration Machinery Plant	Workers protested against wage cuts and the reduction of the bread ration
33	November 1986	Turda	Glass Factory	Workers protested against wage cuts.
34	16 February 1987	Iasi	Nicolina Rolling Stock Works	Around 1,000 employees protested against wage cuts; non-violent protest
35	15 November 1987	Braşov	"Steagul Roşu" Truck Factory	Non-payment of wages

Remarks: Author's compilation from a variety of sources.

Sources: OSA/RFE Archives, Romanian Fond, Unit No.300/60/1/837, different items: Liviu Antonesei, *Jurnal din anii ciumei: 1987-1989. Încercări de sociologie spontană* (Diary from the years of the plague: 1987-1989. Attempts at spontaneous sociology) (Iasi: Polirom, 1995), 13-14, 137; Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român* (A sincere history of the Romanian people) (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 1997), 518-21, 531; Dennis Deletant, *Ceauşescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (London: Hurst & Company, 1995), 243-47, 249-53; Vasile Gogea, *Fragmente salvate (1975-1989)* (Saved fragments 1975-1989) (Iasi: Polirom, 1996), 168-77; Marin Nedelca, *Istoria României în date* (Romania's history in data) (Bucharest: Niculescu, 1997), 270, 366; Stelian Tănase, *Ora oficială de iarnă* (The official winter time) (Iasi: Institutul European, 1995), 61-62.