PICTURING EUROPE DURING THE EARLY COLD WAR YEARS

THE ROMANIAN POLITICAL CARTOONS OF THE COMMUNIST OFFICIAL PRESS, 1948-1953

Mara Marginean

Romanian Academy, George Baritiu Institute of History, Cluj Napoca, Romania

ABSTRACT - *This paper investigates how Europe was imagined in the cartoons published by* The Spark *between 1948 and 1953. I depart from the assumption that by the time they were published, cartoons had become central to (re)imagining the continent by representing Western Europe as a complete alterity from Eastern Europe. During the early Cold War years, both sides of the iron curtain had invested impressive resources to represent themselves as the true defenders of peace, promoters of social well-being and generators of progress. However, within the Eastern Bloc in general, and in Romania in particular, views on modernisation were reformulated in terms of intensive industrialisation intended to convey the political priorities of the communist regime, in search for internal political and cultural legitimacy, into a meaningful message. Accordingly, 'othering' through visual discursive semantics implicitly stressed the changing values of identity, productivity and everyday life within the Romanian socialist system. This article argues that cartoons became central to the articulation of a discourse legitimizing the newly established Romanian communist leadership that employed Marxist-Leninist principles to question the Western European projects of economic recovery.*

A cartoon published by *The Spark* (*Scânteia*), the Romanian Communist Party official newspaper, on 1 January 1948, depicts a worker addressing a group of individuals: "Imperialists, whether you like it or not, you will need to return home!" (Fig. 1). The worker's silhouette is sketched hyperbolically, occupying the image entirely. His dimensions confirm that he is the central character. At his feet, in the lower-left corner, the 'imperialists' have been marked with labels like "United States of Europe", "Mein Kampf", and "Franco". As a result of their diminutive size, they appear intimidated by their opponent. In the upper-right corner the image of a factory completes the composition. This picture alone is evocative of a communication strategy frequently used by mass media in post-war Eastern Europe. Arranged di-

Fig. 1. Doru, "Worker to the Imperialists!" *Scânteia*, 1 January 1948, p. 1

agonally from the lower-left corner to the upper-right corner, the elements composing the image convey an idea of ascension. The worker's position, looking down on the imperialists, implies a fracture between a presumptive powerful East and a weakened Western Europe:[1] by blocking the Westerners' perspective on the future, it aimed to ascertain that the subsequent events in Eastern Europe would occur under the new political and economic rule. In other words, this image encapsulated the Eastern Bloc's reading of the ideologisation of economic capital, a rhetoric based on the Marxist Leninist principle which claimed that development of heavy industries would provide the basis for the state's modernisation. Within the Romanian context, nevertheless, the image carried an additional connotation. This was the first issue of *The Spark* published after the forced abdication of King Michael on 30 December 1947. As a result of the country's absorption into the Soviet Bloc, it became necessary to (re)imagine Europe's image. For centuries, Europe – as a cultural space – had traditionally been a model of modernisation for the Romanian people.

This paper investigates how Europe was imagined in the cartoons published by *The Spark* between 1948 and 1953. Placing cartoons ridiculing the West and realistic representations praising the East side by side, these depictions unveil an image of a divided Europe based on the premise of irreversible opposition. I depart from the assumption that by the time they were published, cartoons had become central to (re)imagining the continent by representing Western Europe as a complete alterity from Eastern Europe. During the early Cold War years, both sides of the iron curtain had invested impressive resources to represent themselves as the true defenders of peace, promoters of social well-being and generators of progress.[2] However, within the Eastern Bloc in general, and in Romania in particular, views on modernisation were reformulated in terms of intensive industrialisation, intended to convey the political priorities of the communist regime in search for internal political and cultural legitimacy into a meaningful message. Accordingly, 'othering' through visual discursive semantics implicitly stressed the

1. Gyorgy Peteri, "Introduction: The Oblique Coordinate Systems of Modern Identity," in *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, ed. Gyorgy Peteri (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 7.

2. National Archives of Romania, Bucharest, fond CC al PCR – secția Propagandă și Agitație, d. 15/1953, ff. 5-11. See also Jessica Gienow-Hecht, "Culture and the Cold War in Europe," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. I, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 398-399.

changing values of identity, productivity and everyday life within the Romanian socialist system.[3] This article argues that cartoons became central to the articulation of a discourse legitimizing the newly established Romanian communist leadership that employed Marxist-Leninist principles to question the Western European projects of economic recovery. This argument is constructed as follows: first I will briefly discuss the cartoons' visual function within the media discourse in order to stress how such images served the process of constructing political power. The main part of the article provides the reader with several examples of Europe's image. I will conclude by discussing to what extent such graphic images were effective in forging a socialist identity in Romania.

FORGING AUDIENCES THROUGH GRAPHIC DESIGN

The cartoons published in the Romanian press pictured a highly politicized public space. They served as a tool for agitation in a troubled period and were conceived to be read immediately. The political instrumentalisation of images was carried out through mass media dissemination and served both as a reflection of, and the principal driving force behind the emerging socialist society. While the transmission of a message through various visual constructs was an expression of modernity, the symbolic connotations of these constructs, as well as the context in which they were created, are equally important. Within the Romanian political system of the late 1940s and the early 1950s these images seem to be part of a concerted strategy of monologue practices, which became the basis for constructing political legitimacy. Michel Foucault's approach of hegemonic discourses is particularly important here. In the context of Chinese propaganda posters, Evans and Donald discuss Foucault's approach of hegemonic discourses as follows: "these are the layers or trajectories of meaning that are common throughout the visual imagination of a society or group and that operate on the level of assumption. A hegemonic discourse may be naturalized to the point of being synonymous with common sense; it is natural because it is there."[4] Such a

3. Charles S. Maier, "The World Economy and the Cold War in the Middle of the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. I, 44-45.

4. Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, "Introducing Posters of China's Cultural Revolution," in *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China - Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, eds. Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 17.

discursive mechanism was conducted by 'inventing a tradition', which means that:

> a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past [...]. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.[5]

The actual practice was nevertheless complicated by the fact that the images had a double connotation. On the one hand they were part of a broader mechanism of image management within the period of high Stalinism (1946-1953), when Eastern European society was represented as a paradise. The visual constructs from this period had to integrate the working class within the historical tradition of Marxist Leninism by replacing any references to identity as an outcome of nationhood, ethnicity, language or religion. On the other hand – as they were meant to reformulate the country's previous relations with the West so that they would fit into the newly formulated in-

5. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-5.

Fig. 2. „Every percent above the plan is a strike against the imperialists" (1950), *Isskustvo*, 5-1950, p. 1.

ternational socialist rhetoric – these images were charged with an additional meaning within the Romanian context.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT

The cartoon published by *The Spark* on 1 January 1948 synthesized a particular strategy of image production in terms of composition, symbolism and ideological engagement with the Cold War rhetoric. Within the Eastern European visual framework, Western Europe was pictured as a distorted representation of those values that played a central part in an ideological articulation of socialist identity: collectiveness as opposed to individuality, pacifism as opposed to imperialism, and work as opposed to consumerism. Broadly speaking, the so-called unity of international socialism would differ from what in Eastern Europe was regarded as the physical disintegration of Western Europe. The working class' collective leadership would overcome the anti-national actions of the Western bourgeois politicians. Finally, the social modernisation through the development of heavy industries and a politically self-conscious population would make Eastern Europe immune to the decadent capitalist consumerism that was invading the everyday life of the masses in the West.

The same antagonistic view is noticeable within the cartoons' visual repertoire. Socialist realism, the official Soviet aesthetic at that time, featured symmetrical compositions, classicist-inspired elements and heroic representations as sources of ideological legitimacy. Accordingly, the traditional aesthetic categories - 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'grotesque', 'comic' - had to be replaced with deeply ideological concepts – 'reflection' on the party, 'revolutionary character', 'positive heroes' as the main characters of the visual narrative, 'realism' as opposed to 'abstraction' and 'vernacular features'.[6] Cartoons, along with the rest of artistic production, mirrored a socio-economic reality within which the working class identity surpassed any other forms of self-identification (Fig. 2). From the Soviet point of view, Europe was a "capitalist

6. Bernice Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 293-294.

Fig. 3. "Long live peace between people," *Scânteia*, 12 December 1952, p. 1
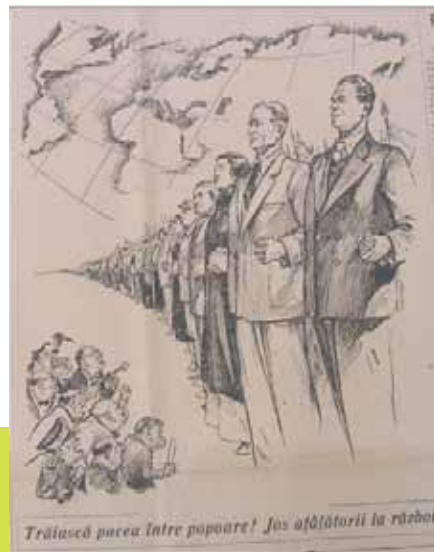
Fig. 4. "Two balances of economic development," *Scânteia,* 3 January 1953 p. 1

7. Erik van Ree, "Heroes and Merchants. Joseph Stalin and the Nations of Europe," in *Imagining Europe. Europe and European Civilisation as Seen from its Margins and by the Rest of the World, in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Michael Wintle (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2008), 53.

8. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Socialist Realism's Self-Reference? Cartoons on Art, c. 1950," in *Style and Socialism*: *Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, eds. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 155-157.

culture that needed to be criticized" because "capitalism denied people the possibility of becoming heroes," whereas culture in Eastern Europe was understood as an outcome of economic development.[7] Accordingly, the representative of the East fighting against the aggressive West was not a member of the political elite, but a worker – an anonymous figure emblematic of the first years of socialist construction with whom every citizen had to identify. In contrast to the heroism of the socialist worker, the depiction of Western Europe consisted of asymmetrical compositions, derogatory and ironic images, which sought to accentuate the viewer's negative emotions by inducing repulsion or amusement.[8] The cartoons' vicious message, for example, became unambiguous after observing the marginal elements: small, minimalist figures, with distorted physiognomies. A telling example is the image of the Soviet-inspired rhetoric regarding the 'struggle for peace':

> The relationship between peace forces and their enemies is shown clearly through the artistic mechanisms of exaggeration of size and symbolism. The worker's strong, accusing hand exceeds the proportion of the arsonist, stunted and caught in ac-

tion, many times. The poster's author sought to visually empha-
size the powerful forces of nations eager for peace. However, the
poster also points out that the enemy is still dangerous. He must
be exposed, charged and tried.[9]

The West was depicted through a limited representational repertoire: bones,
skulls and other death related symbols, guns, as well as elements related to
national currencies and monetary policies.[10] There were three leading cat-
egories of representation – their meanings often overlapping – of Western
Europe: first as an instrument of US aggression against the rest of the world;
second as a demonstration of the inability to make political decisions; and
finally as an illustration of economic failure (Fig. 3 and 4). However, if one
would have to synthesize the Romanian cartoonists' view on Western Eu-
rope in a single image, it would undoubtedly be the US dollar. Immediately
after the launch of the Marshall Plan in 1948, the Soviets formulated their
anti-capitalist agenda, according to themselves to prevent the United States
from achieving global hegemony. As the main point of confrontation be-
tween the former war allies was the question of how to tie economic devel-
opment effectively to the post-war social reconstruction process – that is the
modernisation of societies – the politicians' main concern was to indentify
the best way to convey economically strategic interests into social policies.
Given that the Soviets were vehemently opposed to Eastern Europe benefit-
ing from US aid, it was necessary to come up with a convincing justification
as to why a financial offer that could have been the key towards rapid eco-
nomic recovery was declined unequivocally.

Economy and politics were always depicted together. The cartoons implied
that the accelerated decline of industries and currencies formed an obsta-
cle for a successful reconstruction of Western Europe. Moreover, the im-
ages suggested that Western European countries were unable to handle
the challenge of reconstruction successfully on their own terms. In addi-
tion, to further enhance the economic and ideological gulf between the two

9. P. Poszau Glauber, "Caricatura în
luptă pentru pace," *România liberă*
(12 June 1955): 2. My translation.

10. George Oprescu, *Artele plastice
în România după 23 august 1944*
(București: Editura Academiei RPR,
1959), 122. Alexander Shkliaruk, *Our
Victory. Posters of the Great Patriotic
War 1941-1945* (Moscow: Kontakt-
kultura, 2010). Thomas C. Wolfe,
*Governing Soviet Journalism: The
Press and the Socialist Person after
Stalin* (Bloomington & Indianapolis:
Indiana University Press, 2005), 2.

worlds, Western Europe was presented as a victim of American imperial-ism. Focusing on France and the United Kingdom, the traditional allies of the United States, and shortly afterwards also on the Benelux countries, cartoons stressed the close ties between economic dynamics and political decision-making. As a result, the Western half of the continent was on the verge of physical extinction. Europe was falling apart piece by piece as the national leaders ceased any rights of particular interest to their own coun-tries in favour of the US. Furthermore, the same Western-European leaders were falling into nothingness while inflation reached higher rates. In 1949, immediately after the communist parties' representatives were removed from Western governments – as was the case in for example France and Italy – and the Vatican announced its anathema to socialists, the cartoons published by *The Spark* implied that the mirage of the dollar provided the most plausible explanation for the Westerners' alleged renunciation of self-interest in favour of the Americans (Fig. 5 and 6).

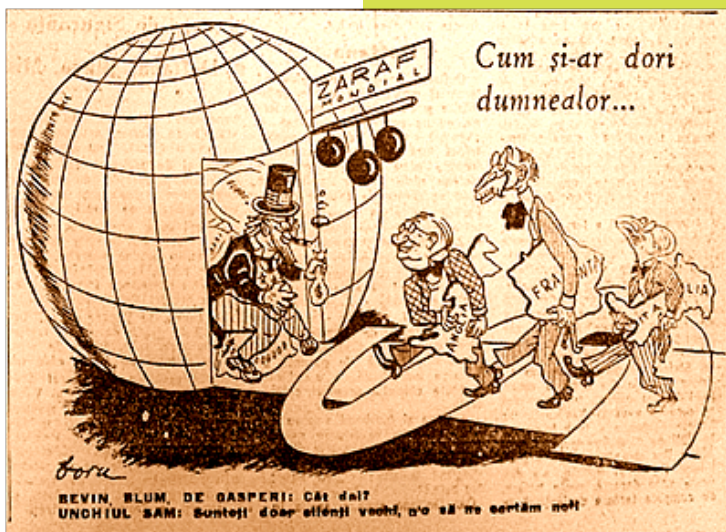Fig. 5. Doru, "As they would like…" *Scânteia,* 10 April 1948, p. 4

Fig. 6. *Pravda,* 9 August 1949, p. 4

Similar to the Soviet newspapers printed during those years, the Romanian political press abounded in references to how Eastern Europe fought against fascism. Understanding the political construction of Western European societies as an outcome of actions of the Marshall Plan entangled with fascist practices, resulted in portraying the enemy as an aggressive presence close to the Eastern Bloc. Accordingly, the anti-imperialist cartoons in *The Spark* illustrate the militancy of the West and endorse the Romanian authorities' effort to protect the controversial domestic economic process of heavy industry development, which was increasingly coming under attack in the West. On that note the explosion of anti-Western graphics published by *Pravda* and reprinted by *The Spark* immediately after the launch of the Marshall Plan, could be explained as well (Fig. 7, 8 and 9).

Furthermore, within a five-year span the visual representations of modernisation as a form of social progress within non-socialist Europe were virtu-

Fig. 7. Doru, "Marshall Plan marching," *Scânteia,* 26 February 1948, p. 5
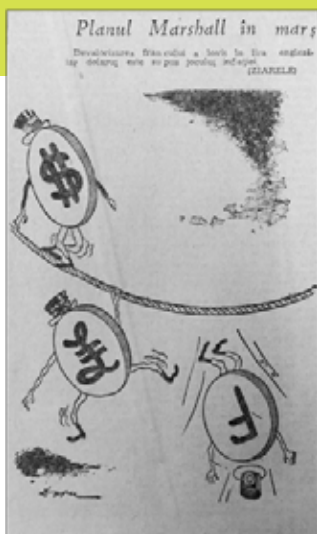
Fig. 8. "Currencies' devaluation in Marshalized countries," *Scânteia*, 20 September 1949,w p. 4

Fig. 9. E. Taru, "Two currencies," *Scânteia*, 5 February 1952, p. 3

ally non-existent. There were very few newspaper articles describing the everyday experience of the Western population. As a rule written material was illustrated by expressive collages claiming that the high level of unemployment, poor living conditions, and lack of food, housing and consumer goods, were part of daily life for the Western European population. Several cartoons published in the early 1950s, for example, compared the population's living standards on the two halves of the continent. Adopting the compositional model of an ascending diagonal arrangement from the lower-left corner to the upper-right corner, the author chose to divide the visual field through an ascending line of what was meant to be the dynamic of the socialist economy. In contrast, the corresponding line of the Western economy was much more levelled and represented by a chain, an obvious allusion to enslavement and lack of freedom (Fig. 4).

EUROPE (RE)IMAGINED?

Following Benedict Anderson, this article approaches the political cartoons as parts of a discursive mechanism that aimed to imagine a Romanian community based on Soviet values.[11] Nevertheless, the discourse changed over time. Immediately after the beginning of the Cold War, there seemed to be a greater concern amongst the newspaper's editors with the articulation of a narrative that pointed out the negative features of Western Europe. Later, as the political legitimacy of the newly imposed communist regime strengthened, the cartoons became more concerned with stressing the socialist values within Romanian society. Accordingly, such graphic products must be read within the context of a particular dialogue between politicians, as emitters of an ideological message through controlled mass media, and their receptors – the public who had access to such images and whose conduct had to comply with certain ideological expectations. Given that "social actors are more inclined to think, feel and act based on what they see,"[12] to what extent were the cartoons published in the Romanian political press efficient instruments in constructing a socialist identity?

11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

12. Robert Hariman, John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

The transfer of Soviet visual constructs to Romania occurred relatively fast. The close collaboration between the VOKS (Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) and ARLUS (The Romanian Association for Strengthening Relations with the Soviet Union) was coupled with a wide circulation of cartoon and poster albums designed by Boris Efimov, whose work was published frequently by *Pravda*, and was also put on display in several art exhibitions throughout the country. More visually oriented than *Pravda*, *The Spark* regularly published various sorts of images, including photos, posters and cartoons. Some of the cartoons were reprints from *Pravda* or the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil*, while the rest was designed by Eugen Taru, Chik Damian or Rick Auerbach – local artists previously connected to the interwar artistic avant-garde.[13]

The large number of cartoons printed by *The Spark* could be a consequence of the high degree of illiteracy of the Romanian population in the early years of communism. According to the available data, the great majority of workers employed by the newly developed centres of heavy industry were very poorly educated: they had received no more than four years of primary education. To overcome these obvious shortcomings, trained propagandists had to organize daily readings and discussions about the articles published by *The Spark*, so that industrial workers would familiarise themselves with the intended ideological meaning. Workers were expected to continue the discussion about the ideological matters at stake during lunchtime, and later at home with their families.

Here Vadim Volkov's approach to *kulturnost* in Stalin's Russia during the 1930s, based on Norbert Elias' understanding of 'civilizing processes', is particularly useful. According to Volkov the modernisation of Europe was entangled with processes of changing peoples' behaviour – "subtle changes in social organisation of everyday life, such as manners, public conduct, standards of hygiene, speech, food consumption, things of everyday use, dwelling space."[14] On an economic level, these civilizing processes meant that

13. Virgiliu Țârău, "Caricatură și politică externă în România anilor 1950-1951," in *România și relațiile internaționale în secolul XX*, eds. Liviu Țârău and Virgiliu Țârău (Cluj Napoca: Clusium, 2000), 215-226. Boris Efimov, *Pentru pace trainică* (București: Editura Cartea Rusă, 1951). Rik Auerbach, "Pentru o discuție asupra caricaturii românești," *Contemporanul* (8 October 1954): 4. Amelia Pavel, "Tradiție și stil în caricatură," *Contemporanul* (22 June 1956), 2. Gheorghe Mândrescu, "Grafica și propaganda în primii ani ai regimului comunist în România. Exemple din colecția Muzeului Național de Artă din Cluj-Napoca," *Tribuna* 48 (1-15 September 2004): 20-21.

14. Vadim Volkov, "The Concept of *Kul'turnost'*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process," in *Stalinism. New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 211.

they had to be reflected in the labour productivity of the industrial workers. Soviets believed that economic structures depended on political control, as opposed to the Western vision of sustained economic growth. The civilizing process provided a "relatively coherent framework which connected the rise of centralised states with the transformation of everyday behaviour," which "led to the emergence of a less violent and more complex type of society."[15] Accordingly, *kulturnost* meant (re)creating the future as a socialist society, which is exactly what the Soviets argued the economic vision of Western Europe did not do. Using newspapers as the main instrument of mass communication, the communist authorities aimed to convey the idea that the party was capable to fulfil the masses' needs. The social context in which the population read those images, however, was somewhat problematic. The intensified and forced process of industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture conducted in Romania during the first years of the Cold War produced massive migration from rural areas towards industrialised spaces. While official rhetoric claimed that industrialisation would greatly improve the workers' living conditions, it soon became apparent that the authorities' promises were unrealistic.

In this context the cartoons became central to a self-legitimizing practice targeting the domestic audience, which aimed to reconfigure the connections between economy, labour and culture. The socialist reading of Eastern Europe was fuelled by the idea that within the newly industrialised society,

15. Ibid., p. 210.

Mara Marginean is currently completing a PhD in History at the Romanian Academy, entitled "Towards a New Modern in Romanian Architecture: Spatial Narratives of Labour in the Industrial Region Hunedoara, 1945-1968." She holds a B.A. in History of Art from Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, and an M.A. in History from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. Her research interests include the visual culture of the Cold War, theories of modernisation and aesthetics in twentieth century Europe, and sociology of professions.

economics would establish a homogenous Soviet cultured community, consisting of politically conscious individuals. Moreover, Soviets claimed that they were the sole protectors of European culture. This culture had first been threatened by the fascists, whom the Soviets defeated, and was now besieged by American consumerism, which they promised to fight as well. In other words, these images claimed that since the post-war Western European economic system was built on the US vision – a vision regarded by the soviet propaganda as cultureless – there was no real reason why the European construct would last.[16]

16. Jessica Gienow-Hecht, "Culture and the Cold War in Europe," 401; see also "'How Good Are We?' Culture and the Cold War," in *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe 1945–1960,* eds. Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbendam (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 226