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The border-crossing phenomenon between 1975 and 1989
in the Socialist Republic of Romania
– a form of contestation of Nicolae Ceaușescu`s regime

PhD. THESIS
SUMMARY

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The present study constitutes an effort to recover the memory of a social phenomenon that marked the final fifteen years of the Ceaușescu dictatorship. Through its upward dynamics, forms of manifestation, categories of population involved, and the coercive mechanisms activated in response, the phenomenon of illegal border crossings represents an indicator of the increasing repressive character of the regime, gradually acquiring contestatory connotations. Although the initial objectives of the research aimed at an exhaustive analysis of illegal emigration from the Socialist Republic of Romania (SRR) through the fraudulent crossing of the state border during the period 1975–1989, the complexity of the investigated phenomenon, the vast volume of archival sources identified (whose processing would require a collective research effort), and the restrictions regarding access to certain documentary fonds imposed limitations upon the present undertaking.

Consequently, our efforts were directed toward constructing a general overview of the border-crossing phenomenon during the Ceaușescu dictatorship and toward identifying its defining elements, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for future, more detailed investigations of specific aspects. Therefore, the present work should be regarded as an intermediate result of an ongoing research project — a work in progress, to use an archaeological analogy — possessing the potential for further development on multiple levels, such as a deeper examination of the repressive mechanisms employed by the Securitate or an analysis of the judicial practices applied to the protagonists of the phenomenon.

The phenomenon of illegal departures from the SRR through the fraudulent crossing of the border was not unique to the Ceaușescu dictatorship or to Romanian communism. Rather, it formed part of the broader category of forced migratory processes carried out through illicit means, which constituted a defining characteristic of Eastern European communist regimes. Illegal migration from the Soviet bloc toward the West emerged naturally under conditions in which the freedom of movement — inherent to human nature — was severely restricted by communist dictatorships. The decision of an individual to live outside the communist system could not be tolerated, such an act being perceived as a form of protest and as an external signal of dissatisfaction with socialist society. The migratory endeavors of citizens from socialist bloc countries belong to the category of forced migration, given both their definitive nature (since return or oscillation between the country of origin and the host country was generally impossible) and their political causality, namely the flight from persecution, abuses of human rights, and degrading living conditions. The only forms of legal emigration tolerated by communist regimes were those based on ethnic criteria, permitted within certain limits for political reasons (such as ethnic homogenization policies or foreign policy interests) and economic considerations (including the acquisition of financial or technological advantages from Western states). Within this broader context, unfavorable to legal emigration and the right to free

movement, significant differences emerged over the fifty years of communism among Eastern bloc countries regarding passport policies for both permanent and temporary departures (for tourism or professional purposes). These differences were determined by the varying levels of repression characterizing individual regimes at different moments, becoming especially visible during the final decade of communism, depending on each government's or leader's response to the reform initiatives promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev. Yugoslavia — which was not a member of the Warsaw Pact — must be excluded from this comparison, as the phenomenon of illegal emigration there was insignificant. The Titoist regime adopted a permissive policy regarding external mobility, Yugoslav citizens having enjoyed the right to travel abroad, including for employment purposes, since the 1960s.

From a comparative perspective focusing exclusively on Warsaw Pact countries, Poland generated the largest number of refugees, with migratory flows reaching approximately 250,000 persons during the peak years of the political crisis created by the “Solidarity” trade union movement. The massive illegal emigration of Polish citizens was possible precisely because of a more relaxed passport policy, including travel to neighboring Western states. Most Poles were not forced to risk their lives by crossing borders illegally; instead, they applied for refugee status after legally reaching the West on tourist visas. The other major crises of the Soviet system — namely the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring — likewise created favorable circumstances for the escape of segments of the communist bloc population. The opening of Hungary's borders between October 1956 and April 1957 enabled approximately 200,000 individuals to seek refuge in the West, while the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops generated a migratory flow of approximately 160,000 persons. More than 90% of Czechoslovak refugees eventually returned home after the stabilization of the political situation. Following these crises, however, both Hungarians and Czechoslovaks displayed limited interest in emigration to the West and in applying for refugee status, despite benefiting — similarly to Poles — from comparatively permissive passport regimes for temporary travel. Consequently, illegal migration among Hungarians reached its peak in 1988, with approximately 19,000 asylum seekers, while the number of Czechoslovak citizens clandestinely present in the West during the 1980s fluctuated between 11,000 and 12,000 annually. By comparison, statistics concerning Romanian refugee flows during the peak period of illegal emigration indicate the following data: in 1988, approximately 13,000 individuals applied for asylum in Hungary, 45% of whom had entered legally; this figure increased to 17,000 in 1989, of whom 20% had entered legally. At the same time, approximately 3,500 Romanian fugitives were registered on Yugoslav territory during 1988. Prior to 1988, however — before the opening of the “Hungarian route” of emigration, which caused an almost fourfold increase in border incidents — the annual number of Romanian

citizens who succeeded in reaching the West following the illegal crossing of the border did not exceed 1,500 persons. As for the “privileged” individuals who managed to travel abroad legally and subsequently refused to return to Romania, their numbers fluctuated between 3,000 and 5,000 persons annually throughout the 1980s.

The Romanian model of illegal emigration was distinguished by its manifestation in the most dangerous possible form, namely the fraudulent crossing of the border along all its segments — terrestrial, fluvial, and maritime — by means of extremely hazardous methods. In the Romanian case, the option of illegal emigration through refusal to return after a legal departure abroad was accessible only to restricted segments of the population. Nicolae Ceaușescu’s vision regarding emigration and the passport regime for temporary travel (whether for tourism or professional purposes) was considerably more rigid than that of other communist leaders. From the very first years following his accession to power — during the so-called period of liberalization — the Romanian dictator consistently maintained that emigration tendencies had to be suppressed through all means available to state authority, both repressive and propagandistic. Ceaușescu feared more than other communist leaders the possibility of receiving a “vote with one’s feet” from the population should he liberalize the passport regime. Moreover, Romanians’ freedom of movement within the Soviet bloc itself was far more restricted than in other communist countries, since any departure from Romania created the possibility for ordinary citizens to draw unfavorable comparisons with the so-called “achievements of the Golden Age.”

This rigidity was increasingly felt throughout society as the interest of Romanians in permanent or temporary emigration intensified. The phenomenon was fueled by the increasingly frequent interaction between certain social categories and citizens of Western states, as well as by access to Western material goods and cultural products, which profoundly influenced perceptions of the West. The dictator’s position regarding emigration and free movement reflected his refusal to internalize the humanitarian principles established by the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), including those concerning freedom of movement in the interest of developing human contacts and the right to emigrate for family reunification or marriage to a foreign citizen. After 1975, disregard for human rights principles became a major vulnerability for Nicolae Ceaușescu, exposing him both to external criticism — from governments, non governmental organizations, and Western public opinion — and to internal criticism originating from dissident circles. The intensification of external pressures during the final years of the regime, when Western protests were accompanied by criticism from Hungary, exacerbated the dictator’s conspiratorial paranoia. Nicolae Ceaușescu interpreted international demands regarding the observance of the right

to emigration as manifestations of foreign propaganda and attempts to interfere in the “internal affairs” of the Romanian state.

It must be emphasized that permanent emigration from the SRR was never formally prohibited. Nevertheless, the procedures required for approval were cumbersome and time-consuming, while the decisions issued by passport commissions were frequently abusive and arbitrary, refusals rarely being explicitly justified. The general principles governing this process — themselves reflections of Ceaușescu’s vision regarding emigration — operated to the disadvantage of applicants. These practices, which violated fundamental human rights and were often humiliating and frustrating, were intended to discourage the population from requesting permanent departure from the country. Applicants also risked becoming the targets of abusive measures imposed by the authorities, such as exclusion from party structures, demotion, the non-recognition of professional qualifications, or even dismissal from certain positions on grounds of insufficient loyalty to the regime. For certain population groups, namely the German and Jewish minorities, migration opportunities were influenced by external factors, particularly the involvement of the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel, as well as by the financial and foreign policy interests of the Romanian state. However, this major exception did not represent a retreat from the anti-emigration policies of the regime, since restrictive approval criteria continued to be applied, ensuring that emigration remained an unattainable aspiration even for many members of these comparatively privileged categories. Members of county-level passport commissions and of the central commission granted approvals according to the socio-economic interests of the state, favoring elderly persons and those lacking professional qualifications. Unsurprisingly, the opacity of these procedures encouraged the development of corruption. The aspiration to emigrate to the West among members of the German minority exerted a powerful influence upon the broader population of interethnic communities, generating a veritable “emigration psychosis” in these regions, which further fueled the phenomenon of illegal departures through fraudulent border crossings.

Romanians therefore resorted to the most dangerous form of illegal emigration largely because the overwhelming majority of citizens were unable to obtain authorization for temporary travel abroad; for some individuals, even travel within socialist bloc countries remained extremely difficult to achieve. The border-crossing phenomenon persisted throughout the entire communist period, varying in intensity according to the degree of oppression or relaxation characterizing the regime at different moments. By analyzing the dynamics of border incidents, the motivations of fugitives, their belonging to various social categories, the methods of escape employed, and the countermeasures implemented by the repressive apparatus, we identified the following stages in the evolution of the phenomenon: the years of communist consolidation (1945–1948) and the period of

Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's dictatorship (1948–1965), during which flight from the country represented a means of salvation for members of the elites who had understood the irreversible nature of the political changes after 1945 and who risked becoming victims of Stalinist repression; the period of relative relaxation of the repressive regime and the so-called liberalization (1965–1971), which we regard as a transitional phase during which the phenomenon manifested itself at a relatively low intensity, with an annual average of approximately 500 border incidents during the 1960s and approximately 1,000 during the first half of the 1970s; the period of national communism (1975–1989), which constitutes the primary focus of our research and which was characterized by a constant increase in the number of fugitives.

The growing incidence of illegal border crossings beginning in the second half of the 1970s was a direct consequence of the contradictory policies adopted by Nicolae Ceaușescu. On the one hand, the regime partially permitted the emigration of ethnic Germans to the Federal Republic of Germany, thereby stimulating interest in permanent emigration, especially in the multiethnic regions of Banat and Transylvania. Nevertheless, precisely those segments of the population displaying the strongest desire to emigrate — particularly young families and professionally qualified individuals — encountered the greatest difficulties in obtaining the necessary approvals. At the same time, the relative liberalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s facilitated, to a certain extent, contact with the West, primarily through cultural openness. Communist youth gained access to material goods, pop-rock culture, and — most troubling for the regime — alternative ideas and values, which influenced behavioral patterns through the expansion of consumerism, the diversification of tastes, growing interest in foreign travel, and the emergence of nonconformist attitudes. The subsequent ideological rigidification was negatively received by segments of the younger population, especially in urban, intellectual, and multiethnic environments, which resisted the regime's efforts to disconnect society from Western socio-cultural influences by developing alternative strategies for acquiring Western products. The increasing control exercised by the Securitate, the restriction of freedoms, and the confiscation of leisure time contributed significantly to the decision of many individuals to abandon such a society, thereby increasing the appeal of emigration.

The principles established by Basket III of the CSCE, concerning the right to emigrate on the basis of family ties and the right to freedom of movement, had a significant impact upon the phenomenon of emigration in general and also influenced the dynamics of illegal border crossings. After 1975, there was a noticeable increase in cases in which close relatives of border-crossers who had successfully settled in democratic countries after obtaining refugee status applied for permission to emigrate permanently for the purpose of family reunification, invoking the Helsinki Accords. In situations where Romanian authorities pressured family members to withdraw their applications or

deliberately delayed the processing of their files, the regime risked provoking public protest actions by Romanian refugees abroad, the most common form being hunger strikes. Such actions attracted the attention of the media, human rights organizations, and foreign officials to Romania's violations of its international commitments. Within the same interpretive framework, the granting in 1975 of Most Favored Nation status to the SRR may also be analyzed, insofar as the Jackson–Vanik Amendment — which conditioned trade agreements upon respect for emigration rights — contributed to stimulating migratory phenomena, especially within evangelical communities, whose members found support among co-religionists in the United States.

A totalitarian society, even when apparently uniform, is marked by differences that may become highly significant under certain circumstances and may generate divergent collective reactions. Such differences are either internal, inherited from periods preceding the imposition of the totalitarian model, or generated by external factors that manifest themselves to varying degrees in different areas governed by totalitarian regimes. Moreover, differing approaches may result from the specific characteristics of communities and social environments in which individuals live and mutually influence one another. Consequently, although any citizen of the SRR — from an ordinary worker or high school student to a university professor or even the world's most decorated gymnast — could potentially become involved in an illegal border-crossing attempt, the socio-demographic analysis of the group of border-crossers revealed the existence of distinct typologies.

The analysis of age groups clearly demonstrates that the phenomenon of fraudulent border crossings was characteristic primarily of younger generations, the proportion of individuals under the age of thirty varying between 67% and 80% throughout the entire period under examination. This fact is not unusual, however, since within any process of forced migration involving considerable risks, the younger segment of the population is generally the most inclined toward action. The substantial proportion of citizens born and educated during the communist period constitutes compelling evidence of the failure of the political project aimed at creating the “new man,” given that the so-called “revolutionary youth” represented the social segment in which the regime invested most heavily in ideological education.

From the perspective of professional structure, workers constituted the predominant category among border-crossers, their proportion increasing from approximately 50% in 1975 to nearly 70% in 1988. They were followed, at a considerable distance, by the categories of unemployed persons and students. This characteristic distinguishes the migratory process of the late communist period from that of the immediate postwar years, when flight from the country had represented primarily an option for political, economic, and cultural elites threatened by Stalinist repression. During the final stage of

the dictatorship, flight from the country became an alternative to the communist regime precisely for the social category in whose name the Romanian Communist Party claimed to govern.

An analysis of the geographical distribution of border-crossers according to county of residence indicates that the phenomenon acquired a mass character only in certain regions of the country, particularly in Banat, in Transylvanian counties with significant Saxon communities, in Crișana, and — especially in 1988 and 1989 — in counties with predominantly Hungarian populations. With the exception of Bucharest and northern Moldavia, where neo-Protestant communities existed, the rest of the country displayed relatively limited interest in illegal emigration. Thus, the phenomenon manifested itself most intensely in border regions where the influence of the central political nucleus was weaker and where, despite border restrictions, social, ethnic, cultural, and mental continuities with neighboring spaces persisted. The connections between communities located on either side of the border continued to exist, albeit at a reduced level, aided in part by local cross-border traffic agreements. Although the regime sought to limit interactions between the inhabitants of Banat and Crișana and their Serbian and Hungarian neighbors, openness to external influences emerged naturally from the fact that these populations belonged to multiethnic communities that had historically developed within the unified framework of the former Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian provinces. Consequently, while communist borders functioned as instruments of isolation, older spatial continuities transcending political frontiers continued to manifest themselves in these regions, making the phenomenon of illegal border crossing appear almost natural, as an expression of a “reactionary culture.”

The ethnic structure of the studied group confirms the theory of border continuities. Thus, the majority of border-crossers operating along the Hungarian frontier during the final two years of the dictatorship were ethnic Hungarians, who represented nearly 50% of all protagonists, despite constituting only 7% of the total population of the SRR. During this period, the phenomenon acquired a pronounced ethnic dimension, becoming a reaction against the violation of minority rights amid the intensification of nationalist rhetoric and the ideological rigidification of the Ceaușescu regime. At the same time, the upward dynamic of the phenomenon was encouraged by the interest shown by the reformist government in Budapest toward the situation of Hungarians in Romania. Regarding the German minority, the proportion of border-crossers originating from this group consistently exceeded their demographic weight within the overall population of the SRR, fluctuating between 3% and 8%, despite Germans representing only approximately 1.5% of the population. Legal emigration, made possible through the secret agreements between the governments of the Federal Republic of Germany and the SRR, strongly influenced the dynamics of the border-crossing phenomenon among German minorities, as well as within the broader multiethnic communities of which Saxons and Swabians

formed a part. In these areas, contact with the West was more substantial, facilitated by West German citizens returning to Romania to visit relatives. The same type of direct connection with representatives of the Western — particularly Anglo-American — world also influenced the illegal emigration of members of evangelical denominations, who themselves were affected by the discriminatory policies of the regime.

Concerning the political dimension of the repression directed against persons who resorted to fraudulent border crossings, it is important to note that Law no. 221/2009 regarding politically motivated convictions recognizes as inherently political all convictions for border-related offenses pronounced prior to 1 January 1969, the date on which a new penal code entered into force. For convictions issued after this date, under the provisions of the 1968 Penal Code — which introduced a comparatively more lenient regulation for border offenses, punishable by sentences ranging from six months to three years imprisonment — the political nature of the conviction must be proven before a court of law. Only a small number of individuals convicted for border offenses during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship under Article 245 of the 1968 Penal Code undertook legal steps to obtain recognition as victims of politically motivated convictions, and in most cases final favorable rulings were not issued. Nevertheless, there were instances in which courts of first instance recognized the political character of such convictions. Although this subject belongs primarily to the field of legal studies, it is important to emphasize that the legislation concerning the condemnation of the communist regime offers a partial acknowledgment of the repressive character of the mechanisms employed by SRR authorities to combat illegal border crossings.

As for the subjects of the phenomenon themselves, they publicly claim the status of victims of communist repression. Indeed, the Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania includes border-crossers among the victims of “indirect social crimes,” alongside the victims of pronatalist policies. The overwhelming majority of individuals who recounted their experiences of clandestine border crossings — in interviews, documentary films, press articles, memoirs, and responses to online questionnaires — insist that the primary motivation behind their actions was the desire for freedom. Admittedly, this concept was understood differently by each individual: for some, it meant freedom of movement; for others, the unrestricted exercise of religious beliefs, escape from abuses committed by the authorities, professional self-development, the freedom to marry a foreign citizen, or liberation from a society structured upon corrupt interpersonal relations. Many former fugitives also emphasize that they chose permanent departure from the country through the most dangerous possible means despite enjoying materially better living conditions than many of their compatriots, thereby underscoring the fact that economic motivations were not the primary factor guiding their decisions. Even though the majority

of border-crossers did not intend their actions to constitute explicit political statements, the phenomenon as a whole — through its upward dynamics and through the risks assumed by means such as swimming across the Danube, jumping from ships, hiding in train carriages, boarding or leaping from moving trains, hijacking vessels and aircraft, or navigating the sea in improvised boats — amounted to a tacit form of opposition to the regime. Although most fugitives did not subsequently engage in protest activities or join the critical voices of exile communities, each successful “escape” was transformed into a declaration given to Western officials — whether representatives of the UNHCR or authorities from transit or asylum countries — exposing the abuses committed by the regime. On the other hand, the regime attempted to conceal the political significance of the phenomenon in order to preserve Nicolae Ceaușescu’s image as a “dissident” within the Eastern bloc and as a reliable interlocutor in relations with the West. To this end, acts of “evasion” were juridically downgraded to the category of ordinary criminal offenses, punishable by relatively mild sanctions.

Nevertheless, once the phenomenon intensified significantly beginning in the mid-1970s, the repressive apparatus was fully mobilized. The Securitate assumed a leading role in efforts to counter illegal border crossings, and the issue became one of the institution’s informational priorities. Simultaneously, hostile rhetoric regarding this category of individuals was revived. Echoing the slogans of the 1940s and 1950s, Ceaușescu-era propaganda once again depicted border-crossers as traitors to the nation. Retrospectively, one representative of the repressive institutions, retired General Gheorghe Văduva — who held leadership positions within the Border Troops Command during the 1980s — openly acknowledged the political implications of the phenomenon. In his volume *The History of the Border Guards*, he admitted that the exodus was caused by “a terrible lack of individual and institutional freedom. The citizen knew and felt that he was constantly surveilled, controlled at every step, threatened. [...] One of the forms of protest was leaving the country. Legally, this was impossible. Consequently, many of the bravest among those who could no longer endure the regime attempted to reach the West through the fraudulent crossing of the border.” Finally, the attitude adopted by democratic countries toward Romanian border-crossers further reflects the political dimension of the phenomenon. Romanian fugitives were generally not perceived by Western governments as economic migrants; in the vast majority of cases they were accepted as refugees or political asylum seekers. Although some border-crossers were repatriated by Yugoslav authorities because they failed to provide sufficient political justification for their escape, those who returned following unsuccessful attempts and invoked the physical and psychological abuses committed by border guards, Securitate officers, and militia authorities — as well as the impossibility of social reintegration — were recognized as victims of persecution and consequently granted refugee status.

In conclusion, we argue that illegal border crossings during the Ceaușescu dictatorship constituted a phenomenon through which segments of the younger population, originating from particular social environments or regions of the country, indirectly contested the regime, demonstrating both their resistance to ideological indoctrination and their capacity for mobilization in pursuit of personal objectives. We consider that bringing the border-crossing phenomenon into public attention possesses particular relevance in the current context, marked by a growing nostalgia for the communist regime, attitudes increasingly shared by significant segments of younger generations. In an era in which Romania forms an integral part of the European Union — a political project founded upon freedom of movement and the right to choose one's place of work and residence — it has become difficult for younger generations to imagine a system that drastically limited such rights and transformed the individual into a prisoner within a dictatorially governed space. Recourse to the memory of the social phenomenon of fraudulent border crossings, which marked the final decade of the Ceaușescu dictatorship, therefore constitutes a necessary endeavor for understanding that civil rights are not guaranteed per se and that the absence of social engagement in defending democratic principles and the rule of law may at any moment generate a fundamentally different reality, less favorable to individual development.