

Laughing about Nicolae Ceausescu. Humour and Everyday Resistance in Communist Romania

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Abstract

The paper aims at challenging the unanimous accepted opinion about the people's complete subordination to the Romanian communist regime during 1980s by considering joke telling as a means of their *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality. After the introductory remarks regarding the definition of *everyday resistance*, I will document the interest the former Securitate had in monitoring the spread of the political jokes made at the expense of Ceausescu.

The thematic analysis of the political jokes the jokes indicates Ceausescu's leadership activity as the main source of the „multilateral” failure of building the Romanian socialism and also of the deprivation and restrictions of all kinds which population had to face during their daily existence. Although it did not pose a direct challenge to the stability of the communist regime, the proliferation of political jokes about Nicolae Ceausescu and implicitly of the critical analysis they contained in brought its own contribution to the gradual weakening of his authority and legitimacy that together with other developments in home politics ignited the population's opposition to the Romanian communist regime in December 1989.

Introduction

One of the most striking characteristics of the Romanian communist regime during the last decade of its existence was the development of its leader's cult of personality. The laudatory contributions devoted to Nicolae Ceausescu overflowed the entire Romanian mass media. The huge mass rallies organized on the National Day or May Day and also a significant part of the artistic productions of that time (such as paintings, songs, movies, shows) were transformed into a mass homage paid to him. They all conveyed the same laudatory message regarding the Romanian communist leader and its successful leadership activity. Despite the material deprivations they had to cope with during the 1980s, the people's numerous participation in staging all these laudatory events seemed to underline their compromise and unconditional acceptance of the Romanian communist regime.

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By analysing the use of political jokes as a means of *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality, the paper aims to challenge the unanimous accepted opinion of the complete subordination of the population to the communist regime. Therefore, I argue that the critical analysis contained by these political jokes indicates that their creators or those who have been involved in sharing them with close people had their own opinions regarding the performance of Ceausescu's leadership, other than those transmitted through the official channels. They did not pose a direct and immediate threat to the stability of the Romanian regime, as an open resistance would do. However, they underlined the gap between the positive results of Ceausescu's leadership, as they were popularized by the party propaganda and the real negative consequences of his bad decisions in home politics. Thus, the jokes gradually weakened his authority and legitimacy in front of the people.

After the introductory remarks regarding the definition of *everyday resistance* and the rationales behind considering humour as a means of *everyday resistance*, the paper will highlight the concern of the communist secret police, the Securitate, to monitor the spread of the political jokes (in Romanian, *bancuri*), the role that they played in people's lives during the last decade of the Romanian communist regime and how they undermined Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality.

Methodology, sources

I consider underground humour as being a means of people's *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality. Coined by James C. Scott, the term of *everyday resistance* refers to a form of struggle against power and domination, at different times from those of a direct opposition to them and which characterize the behaviour and cultural practices of subordinate groups¹. Consequently, I state that the cult of personality of the Romanian leader represents a form of domination that triggers and also encapsulates the protest of the simple man. In this context, domination receives a broader definition and it refers to the omnipresence of the cult of personality in the individuals' everyday life as well as to the means used by Romanian officials to achieve this goal.

Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner set four characteristics, which in their view are essential for defining resistance: action, opposition, visibility and intention². In this case, resistance implies a daily *active behaviour* (verbal, cognitive) of the simple man that articulates his protest or opposition towards Ceausescu's cult of personality. The *opposition* element is concealed and expressed through an ordinary action of the Romanian citizens' life, such as telling political jokes.

The visibility of the *everyday resistance* raises several issues worthy of exploration. From James C. Scott's point of view, the *everyday resistance* was meant to remain hidden from the eyes and ears of the power holders. In this way, those engaging in this type of

¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

² Jocelyn A. Hollander, Rachel L. Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum*, 19, 4 (December, 2004), 538-544.

opposition would have protected themselves against the likely hostile reaction on the part of government officials affected by their criticism³. As I will show below, the Securitate, the Romanian secret police, knew about and took preventive and warning measures against those identified as engaging in creating and sharing political jokes in more or less informal contexts. Also, the fact that my identification of political jokes as means of *everyday resistance* matched with the Securitate's interpretation of them as being "hostile, hateful" acts direct against the Romanian regime might raise doubts about the veracity of interpreting humour as resistance of any kind.

The denial of the political jokes' oppositional stance towards the communist regime and its leaders based on the argument that the Securitate and its documents had in fact created this everyday resistance is groundless. It does not take into consideration both the local conditions and also the subversive long term impact that political jokes had on weakening the authority of Ceausescu's regime.

Obviously, the resistance as a social and political phenomenon owes its existence to the communist regime. Its institutions (in the present case, the Securitate) classified certain events, acts, practices or categories of actions as hostile to its interests⁴. The very fact that the regime and the Securitate interpreted some ordinary actions such as political jokes as posing a threat to its stability was in fact an indirect acknowledgement of their real or possible oppositional potential. Moreover, it was not only the Securitate who recognized jokes as "hostile, hateful" acts against Ceausescu's regime. It held the same meaning for those who, in one way or another, came into contact with them. Recruited from the population by the Romanian secret police, the informants witnessed and offered details about the persons who told jokes and this implied a direct recognition of their seditious potential. Also the precautionary measures took by the jokes' tellers and listeners represent an indisputable acknowledgement of the political humour's illegal, subversive character.

My understanding of jokes as a means of *everyday resistance* goes beyond the recognition of their oppositional nature by both parts involved (people and the Securitate) to also include an assessment of their role in undermining the legitimacy of Ceausescu's regime.

In her analysis of the everyday subversion in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Kerry Kathleen Riley identifies two main ways in which political jokes expressed people's opposition towards the communist regime on a daily basis. Underground humour was a concentrated rhetorical attack against political conditions, institutions or leaders that pointed out convincingly at the failures of the regime's performance inside and outside the GDR. Thus, political jokes provided the much needed political analysis that succeeded in cutting through the half-truths or lies of the party propaganda and helped people "live within the truth", to quote Vaclav Havel. By channelling the political criticism, joke telling provided a form of genuine participation in the political life that

³ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, XI-XII, 2-26.

⁴ Lynne Viola, "Popular resistance in the Stalinist 1930s. Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate," Lynne Viola (ed.), *Contending with Stalinism. Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 17-43.

people were denied by the communist regime through the destruction of the civil society and faked participatory socialist democracy⁵.

Riley's considerations about the seditious character of the East-German underground humour can be useful in underlining the political jokes' contribution to people's *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality. Thus, the jokes provided an easily comprehensible critical analysis of Ceausescu's leadership that pointed out at the real consequences of his bad decisions concerning the internal policy. In this way, political jokes have contributed to weakening the authority and legitimacy of the home policies of the Romanian communist regime and of its leader by default.

The last element of Hollander and Einwohner's definition of resistance is *intention*. As I will show below, political jokes resumed the arguments of the official propaganda regarding Nicolae Ceausescu's political activity and ascribed them a new meaning that was contrary to the one provided through official channels. This involved an intellectual effort on the part of those who chose to express in such a manner their disagreement to Ceausescu's cult of personality, and an implicit recognition of the "hostile, hateful" character of their actions.

In order to document the contribution of political jokes to people's *everyday resistance* to Ceausescu's cult, I used the following main types of documents: the documents of the former Securitate, namely monthly reports on the mood of the population prepared by its county departments, a set of 960 political jokes collected and also several testimonies about the role that joke telling had in people's everyday life during the communist period.

The Securitate and Joke Telling

The analysis of the Securitate's papers highlighted the concern of this institution for monitoring and recording the dissemination of jokes at the expense of the Romanian leader. Thus, the Alba County's Inspectorate of the Securitate identified a group of people who told „slandorous jokes with defamatory content against some leading figures from the leadership of our state”⁶. Also, the Securitate's documents mentioned that some people not only disseminated the jokes but also contributed to their creation. In this respect, I mention the case of a foreman from IMGB⁷, who was outlined in the Securitate's papers as having a very friendly nature who „easily enters in a discussion and creates all sorts of jokes of bad taste addressing inclusively the high leaders of the party with insults and serious injurious comments”⁸. Because the analyzed documents were reports of the Securitate's county departments, they did not elaborate further on the “slandorous” content of the political jokes and they used various expressions such as “leading figures from the leadership of our state” or “high leaders of the party” to hide that the Romanian communist leader was in fact the target of these humorous

⁵ Kerry Kathleen Riley, *Everyday Subversion. From Joking to Revolting in the German Democratic Republic* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 11, 58-67, 85.

⁶ ACNSAS, fund Documentary, file 336, folio 150 f.

⁷ IMGB was an important factory of heavy machinery located in the Romanian capital, Bucharest.

⁸ ACNSAS, fond Documentary, file 13807, vol. 17, folio 82.

compositions. Moreover, the reading of the Securitate's papers indicates that jokes were usually shared directly during a conversation between two or more people. Despite this, the Securitate's monitoring over private correspondence managed to find examples of letters containing political jokes. For example, a woman wrote to an acquaintance that all members of her family were fine "as much as it is possible nowadays, heat is scarce, no one knows what follows next and even if they get well through the winter, they'll shoot them because they were in the opposition (joke)"⁹. The commentary between the brackets probably belonged to the person who had written the report and it was meant to draw the reader's attention to that composition in case it would have remained unnoticed during a further reading.

Joke Telling in People's Everyday Life in Communist Romania

In Romania, political jokes have become, especially during the 1980s, a „national sport” in which participated representatives from all socio-professional categories (intellectuals, workers, peasants, students, soldiers, policemen, the Securitate officers). Political jokes also became a part of people's everyday life as they were told during visits or meetings with close friends, at the workplaces, during travels by public transport or when queuing for purchasing food and consumer goods¹⁰. The following testimony confirmed that queues were a place where the common people's orality flourished: “In queues the orality flourished: political jokes, rumours, biographical histories, gossips, economical and food information”¹¹.

The subversive potential of jokes, yet their omnipresence in the everyday life of the simple man was stated in the following testimony: „The only forms of rebellion were the jokes. The jokes were incredible (...) there were countless jokes. That was the ultimate form [of revolt, n.a.]”¹².

The creators of the political jokes were inspired by the real events and facts, which had a strong impact upon the life of the Romanian citizens (such as the Romanian Communist Party's congresses, the growing prices of food and gasoline) or from the everyday reality which people had to face (difficulties in supplying the population, work in agriculture and industry, people's interaction with representative figures of the communist regime, such as the policeman, party activist or the Securitate officer or the program of the Romanian Radio Television). The jokes also contained criticism of Marxism-Leninism and of the theory of the multi-developed socialism or emphasized the people's lack of „revolutionary” enthusiasm in carrying out the tasks of „great responsibility” that they were assigned within the plan. Also, the political jokes ridiculed the Romanian presidential couple or their closed collaborators¹³.

⁹ ACNSAS, fond Documentary, file 530, vol. 2, folio 6.

¹⁰ Călin-Bogdan Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice* (București: Editura Metrol-Paideia, 1991), 8, 11, 165.

¹¹ Șerban Anghelescu, ethnologist, 56 years, *LXXX. Mărturii orale* (2003), 100-101.

¹² Felicia Colda, librarian, interview with the author, October 25, 2012.

¹³ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*; C. Banc, Alan Dundes, *You Call this Living? A Collection of East European Political Jokes* (Athens: The University of Georgiana Press, 1990).

The diversity also characterized the forms that political jokes took in communist Romania. The first refers to the Q & A model. To a rather trivial question (sometimes addressed to Radio Yerevan) that has in its components elements that make a reference to the official propaganda speech is being given an unexpected answer, which represents the pun. The second type of political joke focuses on Bulă's character, naïve, dumb or sometimes clever. He personifies the simple man who manages to creatively surpass all restrictions and limitations associated with the daily life in communism and yet who manages to maintain the good humor. The third pattern that political jokes are made after makes reference to hypothetical situations, which compress the hidden desires of the citizens. The most popular are related to the hypothetical death of Nicolae Ceausescu or to his emigration. Fourthly, the jokes usually took 2-5 lyrics from the "new folklore" and mocked a number of topics of general interest, such as food shortages, the lack of preparation of the members of local or central leadership, or the repressive presence of the Securitate. In the fifth place, the discussions between two people who met for the first time or on the contrary, were on friendly terms, or in a relation of subordination constitutes the pretext to mock the situations that the citizen had to face, such as the shortage of food or of consumer goods, or Ceausescu's omnipresence in his life through mass-media¹⁴.

Political Jokes and Nicolae Ceausescu

The analysis of the political jokes about Nicolae Ceausescu associated his person and leadership activity with the „multilateral” failure of the Romanian communism. This was mainly due to the development of his cult of personality that underlined Ceausescu's providential role in drafting and implementing the plans for Romania's subsequent advancement towards a communist future. Also, the paternalistic posture created by the Romanian propaganda as part of the public worship of Nicolae Ceausescu identified his work as the only source of material welfare of the population¹⁵. The raise of the number of jokes about the leader of PCR towards the end of the 1980s is significant. The period coincided not only with the unprecedented intensification of the personality cult, but also with the depth of internal economic crisis.

Besides linking up his activity with the economic collapse of the Romanian communist regime, the political jokes about Ceausescu also contributed to the delegitimization of his leadership from a different perspective. Thus, he was identified with „Uncle Nicu”, „the boss”, „Nicolae” or „Ceausescu”, „Comrade” (in Romanian, „Tovarășu”) without using any other epithet to betray his position of leadership in the Romanian party and state.

A recurring theme of political jokes about Nicolae Ceausescu was related to the identification, directly or indirectly, of his internal activities as the only cause of deprivation and restrictions of all kinds which the Romanian citizens had to endure during their daily existence. During the 1980s people would not only face a shortage of basic

¹⁴ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 185-187.

¹⁵ Manuela Marin, *Originea și evoluția cultului personalității lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (Alba Iulia: Editura ALTIP, 2008), 283-394.

foods, but also a severe rationalization of the domestic consumption of electricity and heat which was felt more acutely in the winter. This was due to Ceausescu's decision to pay at all costs the country's foreign debt by exporting any type of sellable goods, especially food and also to maintain in function the Romanian mammoth and 'energofagic' industry. Under these conditions, using black humor, the political jokes described best the situation that the population was facing in the 1980s.

A political joke from the fall of 1985 stated that „Ceausescu had turned Romania into a country of believers because “we fast seven days a week; we light the candles every evening and go on Sundays to the service”¹⁶. This joke identifies the negative consequences of Nicolae Ceausescu's decisions in the economic field, namely the lack of food and electricity and the extending of the weekly working program for certain key parts of the Romanian economy. What increases the humorous effect is the pun based on a contradiction of meaning. Therefore, the first part refers to the transformation of Romania into a nation of believers, which is paradoxical given the atheistic orientation of the communist regime. The following subordinated statements bring additional explanations concerning the ways in which faith manifested and which in the context of the 1980s Romania, came to summarize the main problems that people had to face. Thus, the allusion to the permanent fast refers to the lack of basic food products (meat, milk, eggs) and lighting the candles as part of the Christian ritual, is indicated as an important illumination source for houses in the conditions of the rationalization of domestic consumption of electricity. However, this joke plays with the word *service*, which in Romanian has a double meaning, *job*, or *religious service*. Thus, the Sunday service turns from the religious service that most believers attended on Sunday, to the working place where the individual had to be permanently committed to accomplishing the tasks that were assigned to him in the national effort to build the Romanian socialism.

However, a number of jokes that emphasized well known slogans stressed the responsibility of Nicolae Ceausescu for the lack of food and other consumer goods that people had to face on daily basis during the 1980s. Thus, a joke mentioned the emergence of a new slogan: “Ceausescu-RCP/Our meat, where is it?” The same theme provided the inspiration for lyrics of “the new folklore” that were posted on the door of a baker: “Nicolae be good boy/Gives us bread as before!”¹⁷.

That fact that the general opinion was that the economic policy of Ceausescu's regime was directed against the people is depicted by the content of the next joke, previously identified in a letter intercepted by the Securitate. “Who didn't die of cold last winter and of hunger last summer, is shot for being in the opposition”¹⁸.

The deterioration of people's living standards in the 1980s generated the proliferation of jokes that expressed the feelings of those who identified Ceausescu as the only guilty person for the dire economic situation. The hate was one of the feelings that the population had for its leader. Thus, a joke describes a working visit of Nicolae Ceausescu in a company where all workers are gathered to greet him. On his arrival they applaud,

¹⁶ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 97.

¹⁷ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 17, 110.

¹⁸ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 95.

throw flowers and shout „Hurrah.” From all of them, Bulă shuts up. Discretely taken aside and asked why he did not shout, Bulă confesses: I harbor the hatred in my heart, I do not make it public!”. The comic effect of this joke is given by the use of the double sense of the word “hate”. In the Romanian language, “ura” can be an exclamation meant to express approval, excitement, or the intense feeling of enmity towards anyone or anything. The main character of the jokes, Bulă who embodies the simple man, is used not only to express the true feelings of hatred of the population against Nicolae Ceausescu, but also to suggest the gap between people's real feelings and those displayed in the public space on the occasion of public events¹⁹.

The negative feelings of the population against Nicolae Ceausescu and identifying the person and his activity as being the source of all the problems which it had to face during its daily existence have led to jokes that treated the subject of the hypothetical death of the Romanian communist leader. The persistence of this theme in the political jokes collected in the 1980s reveals that in the public opinion's eyes, the idea of the physical disappearance of Nicolae Ceausescu meant the end of all troubles and material deprivation.

In this sense, a joke imagined a meeting between the Pope and a group of Romanian believers, who asked for the sanctification of Ceausescu.

“-Okay, but he does not qualify!

-Yes, he does, Holy Father! He was born in a manger, cows blow in his ear and twenty-two millions of Romanians pray for his ascension to heavens”²⁰.

The main message of the joke is that in their desperation to permanently escape from Nicolae Ceausescu and all the evil he generated, people are able to use anything, including extreme solutions, such as sanctification. Although the arguments advanced by the Romanian delegation in support of its proposal are correct by referring to the circumstances in which Jesus Christ was born, when applied to the Romanian Communist leader they acquire a different meaning. By inference, his birth in the manger recommends him as a cattle's representative, the cows' blowing in his ear refers less academically to his wife, Elena Ceausescu, who according to popular mythology would have influenced him in making his (wrong) political decisions. Invoking 22 million people is not accidental because according to official data, it was the total population of the country. In conclusion, the physical disappearance of Nicolae Ceausescu was the subject of the prayers of all Romanians.

Another explored theme in the political jokes about Nicolae Ceaușescu was his lack of education. The persistence of this theme can be considered as a side effect of the “polishing” of the Romanian communist leader's biography by the party propaganda. Accordingly, all materials published about his political activity before 1965, the year of his election as Secretary General of the RCP, omitted any stance of his initial profession (shoemaker), focusing instead on the alleged results of his involvement as a *young revolutionary* in the party's struggle against the old regime.

¹⁹ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 30.

²⁰ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 74.

In this context, the jokes either make reference to the former job of the RCP's leader, the one of shoemaker, or they build imaginary stories confirming his limited education. Thus, a political joke, which has seen different versions, has as its main characters Ceausescu or his wife. The RCP's leader looks upset for not finding a particular pair of shoes, while Elena Ceausescu during a visit boasts herself with a unique pair of shoes. The reason is that the shoes represented the MB thesis of the Romanian communist leader. Other political jokes which also emphasized the low level of education of Nicolae Ceausescu put him in the hypothetical situation of thinking whether he was the one who promulgated the law of gravity, of shopping for a swimsuit for honouring the invitation to the „Swan Lake” and last but not least, of demonstrating not only poor pronunciation of the Romanian language but also the massacre of its grammar²¹.

The concentration of political power in the hands of Nicolae Ceausescu and the naming of his wife and some close associates in leadership positions was also a favourite subject of political jokes. Such a joke created as a Q&A stated that the acronym PCR (Romanian Communist Party in English) meant „Petrești, Ceaușești și Rudele lor”, (The Petrești, The Ceaușești and their Relatives), Petrescu being Elena Ceausescu's family name before marriage²².

Another favourite topic that appeared in the political jokes addressed Ceausescu's working visits, which took place all over the country. On such occasions, he visited the most important local economic sites and verified if the targets of the national plan were accomplished. Last but not least, he offered 'precious indications' concerning the proper conduct of the current activity in those economic units.

In this context, the political jokes satirized Ceausescu's pretention of omniscience, who produced, usually being totally ignorant of the subject, indications about how the activity of a visited unit should have been organized. Thus, applying his indications was a harmful choice and negatively influenced the work management of those organizations.

In this respect, a political joke recycled a well-known slogan in the communist period, which stated the importance of fulfilling the indications given by the communist leader to successfully implement the national development plan. Thus, in the joke, the last slogan was “to unswervingly follow the guidelines and disorientations of comrade Nicolae Ceausescu”²³. The subject of this joke is obviously the indications that the RCP's leader gave. His pretensions of omniscience and his involvement in all sectors of the national economy transformed the suggestions that he gave during the working visits in true 'confusions' for the current activities. At the same time, the consolidation of Ceausescu's personal power over the party and state imposed as unswerving the implementation of his indications.

A series of other jokes rest upon the topic of the organization of the leader's working visits by the local authorities. The next joke captures in a humorous note the nature of the preparations for such an event:

²¹ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 23, 65, 28, 17, 56-57, 84.

²² Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 46.

²³ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 106.

“Mr. Nicu announces his visit to a CAP (collective farm) and people prepare intensively so that they couldn’t be blamed for anything wrong. Once arrived, Ceausescu is being walked around the most important places. At one point he sees a beautiful cow and asks the attendant next to her:

- How much milk does this extraordinary cow give?
- I don’t know, bless you, because they brought her only yesterday”²⁴.

The joke describes the atmosphere of the preparation and evolution of one of Ceausescu’s working visits. Thus, everybody is mobilized to transform that unit into a model. Everything goes according to plan, the leader is being walked around all the important places, but he is uninspired to ask the attendant a question. The latter’s honest answer has the role of emphasizing the preoccupation of the local authorities to conceive for their unit an appearance of plenty to satisfy its high-ranking guest. This was done by loaning the most beautiful exemplars of animals, machinery, change parts etc. from other economic units to impress Nicolae Ceausescu.

The destruction of the old Bucharest to make way to the new socialist buildings that were to become emblematic for the greatness of “Ceausescu’s era” was another theme of the political jokes. Thus, they mentioned that Romania built the “the multi-demolished socialist society” or that the Bucharest would be renamed as ”Ceauşima” as a consequence of the RCP’s personal involvement in its systematization²⁵.

The following joke also focuses on Nicolae Ceausescu’s participation to the architectural reconfiguration of the Romanian capital:

“Question: what happens if a bee enters in the Boss’s car?

Answer: they will take down whole Bucharest as he shakes his hands to protect himself”²⁶.

Using as a pretext an imaginary situation, the bee’s incursion in the car that Ceausescu used in the city, the joke emphasizes the absurd dimension of his exercise of power which allowed him to tear down walls by a single shake of his hands.

The establishment of the laudatory events dedicated to Nicolae Ceausescu in the Romanian public space was also another subject of political jokes during the communist period. Thus, the omnipresence of Nicolae Ceausescu in the Romanian media and through this in the lives of the simple man is beautifully captured in the following joke which has once again Bulă as its main character:

”Bulă stays with a tin can in front of him and cannot decide whether to open it. Annoyed, his father snaps at him:

-Come on, Bulă! I’m hungry! Are you waiting any longer to admire that can?!

-I’m not admiring it! I’m afraid to open it!

-Right! You are afraid to open it?

-Well, I’m afraid ... Don’t you see what it is like now: you turn on the radio, you encounter Ceausescu, turn on the TV, you encounter Ceausescu, open the newspaper, you

²⁴ Ştefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 66.

²⁵ Ştefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 106, 108.

²⁶ Ştefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 110.

encounter Ceausescu ... God knows what we might find in this can! What if we'd be in trouble?"²⁷.

Collected shortly after the birthday celebrations of Nicolae Ceausescu in January 1983, the joke emphasizes the population's degree of saturation concerning everything involving the presence of the Romanian Communist leader in its daily life. The comic effect is caused by the behaviour of the main character, who invoking the invoking his former argument of the context of his former encounters with Ceausescu through the radio, TV or newspaper, was afraid of the punitive consequences that a new meeting could result in the context of the otherwise unlikely, opening of an ordinary can.

Another version of this joke that also satirized Ceausescu's omnipresence in the mass-media had as a main character an anonymous Romanian citizen. Tired after a day of work, he comes home, sits on the couch and turns on the radio and hears Ceausescu talking about his country's accomplishments. Bored, he turns off the radio and turns on the TV. He sees Ceausescu's portrait and hears him talking about the Golden Age (as his leadership period was characterized by the Romanian propaganda). Consequently, he turns it off too, when his wife wants to plug in the ironing machine. The character jumps on his wife, as in rugby, pins her down and yells: "don't plug it in as we'll hear Ceausescu again"²⁸.

Also, a series of jokes stressed in a humorous manner the transformation of the national television into an instrument for promoting the RCP leader's cult of personality during the 1980s. For example, a joke mentioned that the main news program, "telejurnalul", was to receive the name of „ceaușeschiada” referring to the fact that it focused only on the exhaustive presentation of recent internal and external activities of Nicolae Ceaușescu²⁹.

Conclusion

The paper aimed at challenging the unanimous accepted opinion about the people's complete subordination to the Romanian communist regime during 1980s by considering joke telling as a means of their *everyday resistance* to Nicolae Ceausescu's cult of personality. The thematic analysis of the political jokes about the RCP leader underlines that at least their creators or those actively engaged in sharing them with other people had a critical perspective on the results of Ceausescu's leadership and thus, a very different one from that given by the official propaganda. As a result, the political jokes resumed the arguments contained in by the laudatory contributions devoted to Nicolae Ceausescu and ascribed them a new meaning that was contrary to the one provided through official channels. Consequently, the jokes indicated Ceausescu's leadership activity as the main source of the "multilateral" failure of building the Romanian socialism and also of the deprivation and restrictions of all kinds which population had to endure during their daily existence. They also represented a valuable channel through which Romanians could express their genuine feelings of hatred and despair towards "the most beloved son of the

²⁷ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 73.

²⁸ Ioana Popescu, ethnologist, 53 years, *LXXX. Mărturii orale* (2003), 92.

²⁹ Ștefănescu, *10 ani de umor negru românesc: Jurnal de bancuri politice*, 51.

nation” as Nicolae Ceausescu was very often identified by the official propaganda. Also, the political jokes ridiculed the RCP leader’s efforts to hide his lack of formal education and in this context, his claim to be an omniscient leader capable of leading the entire country by on his own. Although it did not pose a direct challenge to the stability of the communist regime, the proliferation of the political jokes about Nicolae Ceausescu and implicitly of the critical analysis they contained in brought its own contribution to the gradual weakening of his authority and legitimacy that together with other developments in home politics ignited the population’s opposition to the Romanian communist regime in December 1989.