

REVIEW

Sabrina P. RAMET, *East Central European Communism. Politics, Culture, and Society, 1943-1991*, Routledge Taylor&Francis, London, New York, 2023, 326 p.

Sabrina P. Ramet has written one of the most original histories of communism in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The approach did not intend to introduce new or archival sources into the scientific circuit, nor to refer to the implications regarding the system of international relations after the Second World War, nor to dwell on some particularities of the evolution of the regimes of these states.

The work brings into the scientific debate an evolution of communism perceived through a new methodology, from a completely different point of view than most that refers to the period 1944/45 – 1989/91. As Vladimir Tismăneanu notes at the beginning of the volume (*Foreword: An Invitation to Idealistic Realism*), Sabrina P. Ramet's analysis brings a revolutionary key to interpretation. „Professor Ramet’s methodology is sophisticated and rigorous. What we have here is a thrilling panorama of the emergence, dynamics, crises, and final breakdown of what used be called the Soviet Bloc. (...) Ramet’s book is a marvelous exercise in excavating the enduring values and ideals which inspired the men and the women of East Central Europe’s successive upheavals” (p. xvi- xvii).

Sabrina P. Ramet's methodology is based on no less than four fundamental elements, which are applied to all periods and states with communist regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe: (1) the evolution of fundamental institutions (state and party, including the emergence and the use of economic, social, repressive, cultural, foreign policy mechanisms); (2) cultural developments (with priority in mass media, music, literature, theater and cinema); (3) gender equality (gender studies), an aspect that has been approached mediocly in general histories of European communism and which in the present case has extremely understudied case study applications, such as Albania or Bulgaria; (4) religious structures and developments within these regimes, both in terms of collaboration with and opposition to them.

Also, remarkable is the answer the author gives, in the opening of the volume, to the decisive question: what was communism in Central and South-Eastern Europe? Sabrina P. Ramet's definition is novel and challenging: „*Organizational monopoly*, pointing to the fact that no independent organizations were allowed to exist, other than the Churches in East Germany, Poland, and Yugoslavia (partially independent in Hungary, throughly or largely penetrated in Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia); and *planned society*, with the planned economy as the centerpiece” (p.1).

The volume is structured in six chapters: (1) Communism's unintended consequences: An introduction; (2) The Soviet bloc, part one: 1944-1956; (3) The Soviet bloc, part two: 1956-1980; (4) The Soviet bloc, part three: 1980-1989; (5) Socialist Mavericks: Yugoslavia and Albania, 1943- 1991; (6) Epitaph.

Sabrina P. Ramet detects, according to her methodology, five distinct phases of the evolution of the communist regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe: (1) 1943/44 – 1948/49 – the establishment of the regimes as such; (2) 1948 – 1956 – Stalinism; (3) 1956 – 1971 – the emergence and development of some reformist currents but, in some states (Poland) also the strongly anti-Semitic ones; (4) 1971 – 1980 – the failure of reformist currents and the beginning of major structural problems, especially in the economy; (5) 1980 – 1989 – the decline of communist regimes (18-19 p.). The author also establishes that during this period no less than three categories of communist parties functioned, the major tie-breaking criterion being that of control and proximity to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the U.S.S.R.: (1) parties independent of Soviet control (Yugoslavia and Albania); (2) a party operating autonomously but needing to take Soviet interests and wishes into account (Romania) and (3) parties under direct Soviet control (German Democratic Republic, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria) (p.18).

Most of the internal developments in these communist regimes, especially in their early days, are rigorously copied from the institutional and decision-making structure of the U.S.S.R. This fact is also valid for East Germany, where from May 1945 until March 1948 the Soviets applied denazification, a process which also included all those who looked critically at the communist regime and encouraged independent opinions (p. 37). Stalinism, which was repudiated only at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, represented in the opinion of Sabrina P. Ramet "a project to construct an alternative modernity, a 'socialist modernity' " (p.46). In some situations, the author draws attention, the cult of Stalin's personality was excessive: in the field of music, for example, when the dictator turned 70 (1949), over 100 works were composed in Romania praising him. Among them: *Cantata Dedicated to Comrade Stalin* by Zeno Vancea, the *Cantata Dedicated to Comrade Stalin* by Mihail Andricu, the *Ode to Stalin's Law* by Hilda Jerea, and *Cantata Dedicated to Comrade Stalin* by Alfred Mendelsohn (p. 46). Also, in the case of Romania, Sabrina P. Ramet mentioned the historical threshold that, institutionally and legally, managed to bring the discussion about gender equality. Decree No. 2218 (issued on 13 July 1946) affirmed the legal equality of men and women. Law No. 560, passed the same year, declared that „women have the right to vote and may be elected in the Grand National Assembly under the same conditions as men”. This declaration of equality between women and men has reaffirmed in the Constitutions of 1948 and 1952 (p. 86.).

Sabrina P. Ramet established as terminology "Romanian exceptionalism" (p. 172) to define the evolution of the communist regime during the period of

Nicolae Ceaușescu. She also mentions that „the reason why the Soviets allowed Romanian deviations in foreign policy was that it did not present a threat to Soviet interests; to put it bluntly, Romania did not present an attractive alternative model (as Czechoslovakia did for a few months in 1968). On the contrary, controls in Romania were as severe as any in the bloc. (...) Ceaușescu's rule was also characterized by an extreme form of nepotism and cronyism” (p. 172).

Three major events are designated by the author as the beginning of the disintegration of the communist regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe: (1) 16 October 1978, the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II; (2) 4 May 1980, the death of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito; (3) August 1980, the outbreak of strikes at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk (200 p.). These can be found in a period designated by Sabrina P. Ramet as prerevolutionary, characterized by five fundamental characteristics: (1) financial failure; (2) the desertion of the regime by intellectuals; (3) the politicization of new strata and the growing confidence of sectors of the public to defy the authorities and a readiness to organize; (4) a corresponding loss of confidence on the part of the public elite; (5) and a political unraveling as the old structures proved unable to meet the new challenges (p. 200).

The leaders of the European communist regimes that had no direct connection with the U.S.S.R. and with Soviet institutions had the greatest longevity in leading their communist parties and states: Josip Broz Tito, leading the Yugoslav Communists, then the Yugoslav Communist Federation, from August 1937 to May 1980, and Enver Hoxha, leading the Albanian Communist Party, then of communist Albania, from March 1943 to April 1985. These states, although they experienced developments partially decoupled from the general ones, influenced by the U.S.S.R., were by no means outside the general framework of totalitarian communist regimes: control of society, repression, lack of fundamental freedoms, tensions between society and the party and state political factor. This different nature from that of most European communist states ultimately led to the establishment of an isolationism unprecedented in Europe of the regime of Albania, which Sabrina P. Ramet has chronologically established between 1968 and 1990.

Why did communism fall? It is a question to which, as in the case of the definition of communism, Sabrina P. Ramet found an explanation related to the legitimate (institutional) nature of the regimes in the states of Central and South-Eastern Europe. „The states of the Soviet bloc were not legitimate political formations. The political systems in the bloc were illegitimate for at least five reasons: they were not independent states but subordinates to the Soviet Union, with the national satraps having to clear any decisions of consequence either with the Soviet ambassador or the Kremlin directly; lack of pluralism; people's contempt for the controlled media; failure of the communists to deliver on their

promises of equality; the economic inefficiency of the system, as manifested in perennial shortages of some goods” (p. 224- 225).

The communist regimes in Central and South-Eastern Europe, even if ideologically identical, also had some differences. Most of these concerned the status and role of the Church and civil society in amending the decisions of leaders. There were other import models, not just the Soviet one. For example, Nicolae Ceaușescu and Enver Hoxha (in Albania), claims Ramet, adopted the ideas of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong, from the People`s Republic of China. „While a cult of the leader was typical across the region, it reached absurd, gargantuan proportions arguably only in Romania, in the era of Nicolae Ceaușescu, while it was totally abandoned in Hungary by Janos Kadar”, Sabrina P. Ramet concluded (p. 318).

At the same time, the author also identified some benefits of the functioning and evolution of the European communist regimes. Among these, the necessities of life such as basic foods, fuel, rent, and public transport were heavily subsidized; medical care was provided free of charge; gender equality (p. 319).

The history of European communist regimes, written by Sabrina P. Ramet, opens an interesting, new and challenging perspective on their anatomy, as well as their political, social, ideological, economic and cultural structures. The revolutionary new methodological structure of the interpretation of these regimes successful complements the great scientific achievements so far.

Florin Anghel*

* ”Ovidius” University of Constanța, Romania. fl_angel@yahoo.com