

# Weaving the Narrative Strings of the Communist Regimes – Building Society with Bricks of Stories

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**Abstract:** The long duration of the Communist regime cannot be explained without closely looking at the manners of creating shared meanings and agreement on explanations on the shared historical context. Narratives of legitimation, some easier to depict than others, were almost as important as the use of force in imposing the specific values of the regime. In other words, soft power was the buttress of hard power. But the nuances are numerous, once we put this otherwise obvious remark under closer scrutiny. The case studies presented in this issue of the yearbook underline the practice of combining soft power with hard power: that is, legitimating narrative discourses transmitting sets of values and beliefs, backed up by policies of various forms of violence.

**Keywords:** communist regimes, narratives of legitimation, heroes, villains

It was not only the hard power and physical violence that kept the Communist regimes in control for so many decades. Their legitimating narratives also had a very important contribution. Varying from less harmful ones, such as distorting important dates in the public calendar in order to impose their own agendas, to ones with an implicit violent effect, such as pursuing and condemning the members of “inimical” organizations, the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe went to great lengths to establish their domination.

The main question would be: how was this possible? What makes a narrative (in any regime) so powerful and so convincing?

In order to answer this question we must take a look at what narrative is about and how it functions.

One of the most important aspects of narrative is that it has a specific structure<sup>1</sup>. Its structure is composed of: the characters or actors that manifest certain behaviours; a certain environment where the action takes place; the action *per se*, or the conflict which is what sets the relationship between the actors and the impact on the scene and permits the identification of the potential danger; and the possible resolution or the solution to the difficult situation. In this sense, all of the Communist regimes had a master narrative, based on a simple schemata: the regimes had their heroes and villains, the conflict between them, based on visions and values, developed in the historical context of the said regimes, and the resolution consisted in eliminating the enemy, thus eliminating the danger they could have posed. The ideological interpretation of the statuses of “friend” or “enemy”, and “hero” or “villain” implied a profound uncertainty regarding their use. Some of the case studies in this yearbook show how former “friends”, “heroes” of the regime, “devotees” or true believers easily became “villains” if the political context required a change of narrative. This fluidity of the narratives in itself might be considered a violent aspect of the regime, in the broader sense of the definition of violence<sup>2</sup>, which includes, besides the “violence that works on the body”, the “violence that works on the soul; where the latter would include lies, brainwashing, indoctrination of various kinds, threats etc. that serve to decrease mental potentials”<sup>3</sup>.

However fluid in content, the narratives of the Communist regimes had to keep to their structure in order to reach full functionality. This is why it is important to acknowledge that they had an inner logical sequence of events which also imposed a temporal structure. This is the feature that makes us perceive the events and the manner in which we remember them. Using more or less exact timeframes and specific landmarks, we are able to understand the development of a situation and to narrate it again, with more or less accuracy.

Walter R. Fisher, the researcher who gathered and systematized into a theory the long debates on narratives and their role in the human interaction, thus giving us the “narrative theory”, stresses the idea that narratives consist of symbolic actions (composed of words or deeds) with a certain sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them<sup>4</sup>.

This situation of using symbolic actions in order to interact leads us directly to the need of establishing the meaning of the symbolic actions, which in ideal democratic societies happens through a process of negotiation.

But in the Communist regime, this implied a certain way of setting the public agenda and of introducing a new vocabulary, new values and new filters for differentiating between friends and enemies, between what is right and what is wrong. The regimes were applying what Saleeby defines as a “politics of

<sup>1</sup> Roselle 2014: 75-76.

<sup>2</sup> Galtung 1969: 169.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>4</sup> Fisher 1987: 58.

storytelling”, of “narrative construction” and “mythmaking”, involving a careful selection of inspiring leaders, visions and symbols which are empowering for people<sup>5</sup>.

All political regimes need such politics of storytelling in order to build their legitimation through language, since, as Jerome Bruner states, narrative is also a manner of using language<sup>6</sup>. Van Leeuwen draws on Habermas’ taxonomy of legitimate authority, as he wants to erect a critique on the proliferation of the discourses of legitimation: authorization (“legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested”); moral evaluation (“legitimation by [oblique] references to value systems”); rationalization (“legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity”); mythopoesis (“legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions”)<sup>7</sup>.

The politics of narratives refers mostly to the last type of legitimation: mythopoesis. This category includes, among others, two important types of stories: moral tales (expressing “reward for engaging in the correct social practices”) and cautionary tales (“tales that convey what happens when a person does not conform to the norms of the social practices and their protagonists engage in deviant activities that lead to unhappy endings”)<sup>8</sup>.

Through their functions of carrying information relevant to decision making, mediating reality and constructing political space<sup>9</sup>, narratives are an important tool for politics, as we have seen. They are even more so in a dictatorial regime, in which acceptable behaviour and social practices need to be assimilated massively by the population<sup>10</sup>.

This could happen due to the following properties of narratives (according to Jerome Bruner<sup>11</sup>): sequentiality; indifference to extra-linguistic reality; mimesis; forging links between the exceptional and the ordinary; drama; viable instruments for social negotiation.

In order to increase their power and influence, the regimes used all these tools to build communities of culture<sup>12</sup>, in which the consensus on the views on the people, beliefs and values was forcibly imposed, the meaning was not put out for alternate interpretations and the procedures for constructing different

<sup>5</sup> Salleby 1994: 353-354.

<sup>6</sup> Bruner 1990: 59.

<sup>7</sup> Van Leeuwen 2007: 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Feldman, Skoldberg and Brown 2004: 1.

<sup>10</sup> By assimilation I mean apprehension of these practices in order to be “correctly” used in the public space.

<sup>11</sup> Bruner 1990: 43-55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 95.

aspects of reality where set from “above” to “below”. Psychologist and folk psychology theorist Jerome Bruner considers that a viable culture is composed of a set of connecting stories, even if they don’t represent a consensus<sup>13</sup>, but the communities of culture the communist regimes aimed for were supposed to be completely, although “forcibly” consensual, no matter how paradoxical this may sound. Bruner also stresses on the conditions of breakdowns: first, when a deep disagreement about what constitutes the ordinary and the canonical in everyday life, and what the divergent and the exceptional interferes in this community of culture; second, in conditions of rhetorical overspecialization of the narrative: the stories become so obviously ideologically or self-serving motivated that distrust replaces interpretation and are anyhow considered “fabrications”. Bruner stresses on the fact that we can find in the narrative our sense of the normative but also our sense of breach and exception<sup>14</sup>.

What is specific to an authoritarian or totalitarian system is that even though “fabrications” can be easily identified, they cannot be that easily sanctioned. In a cultural system backed by hard power, where meaning is not negotiated and the main referential system for symbolic communication is imposed from “above”, the referential system is doubled by a “code” and almost everything in language becomes subtext and hidden meaning. This was the case especially for 1980s Romania, when the narratives of terror and fear (the story that the regime put the people under almost constant surveillance and censorship was very active) were met with unspoken agreement between the consumers of culture and most of the producers of culture to share the “code” of irony. While the official set of meanings was standard and impossible to change, the negotiation of meaning in subtext could lead to infinite interpretations, finding allusive content to the regime even where there was none, potentially leading to an exponential spread of dissatisfaction and discontent in the public, more so than initially intended. This “double meaning” had a sort of corrosive impact on the official meanings, and also facilitated an implicit meaning of “normalcy”. Of course there was a second referential system which established “normalcy” and that came from listening to Radio Free Europe, or watching Bulgarian or Yugoslav shows. Therefore, narratives of legitimation functioned until they had harsh realities to compete with and alternate stories of better lives to be compared with, which is when the “fabrications” where so outright that they couldn’t be ignored any longer and the “community of culture” suffered a breakdown, in Romania’s case.

In the articles from the 2014 issue of *History of Communism in Europe*, things are even more nuanced. We will discover grand narratives of the regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, contradictory narratives, narratives adjusted to social practices, hard-power practices or soft-power narratives, all of their strings contributing to the creation of a web of control, transparent or very concrete,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 97.

that dominated this part of Europe since the end of the 40s to the end of the 80s.

In order to better grasp the idea of narratives, the yearbook is divided in three sections: the first section presents some of the protagonists of the regime and their roles inside the grand narration of communism; the second section is dedicated to narratives and their expression in arts – that is literature and film; and the third section consists in study cases that present different pieces of puzzles of the totalitarian communist narratives and different strategies to force them onto the population or to lure the masses into accepting the regime. One might say that there was a little bit of negotiation going on there, but it was more of a situation in which a less authoritarian government accepted to include in their cultural practices some of the old day's beliefs.

All of the case studies are well documented, most of them based on first-hand archival sources, some of them released and analysed for the first time.

The opening article, Ștefan Bosomitu's "Becoming in the Age of Proletariat". The Identity Dilemmas of a Communist Intellectual Reflected throughout Autobiographical Texts. Case study: Tudor Bugnariu", focuses on "narratives of the self". More exactly, in the process of negotiation of the construction of the self in relation with the political system<sup>15</sup>, our protagonist, a known intellectual, re-writes his autobiography several times, including or excluding certain details according to the reasons and the context in which he is asked to provide an autobiography for his Party files.

The *institutional autobiography* became a *genre* in itself, in the sense that writing this document was mandatory for a person in order to be admitted into the Party, along with filling in an adhesion and a questionnaire. This kind of autobiography was meant to prove the clean background, the revolutionary feelings and the dedication to the Party cause. Therefore, the selection of the biographical information, the narration of the revolutionary self, was actually a performance of a social role<sup>16</sup>, a reinvention of the self which was proven fit and adjusted to the new social practices and capable of employing the required symbolic activities<sup>17</sup> in order to be part of the system. The writing of the "self" could be considered a sort of a test of "integration", in which the person could prove that they were capable of understanding and making use of the new meanings.

This was a soft policy for creating the basis of political support, from the grassroots. The role of the individual on the political stage was essential, in the sense that he/she was always on the position of proving himself/herself a worthy citizen.

Another provocation for the Communist regimes was to re-write the grand narratives of the nation, a complex and systematic re-narration of the nation<sup>18</sup>, a

<sup>15</sup> Fludernik 2007: 271.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 272.

<sup>17</sup> In the sense Jerome Bruner uses this concept, Bruner 1990: 12.

<sup>18</sup> Bhabha 1990.

revolutionary nation in which the revolutionary citizen could play his/her part. A good example in this sense would be the GDR's reinterpretation of the German Peasant War in 1525. This example was used by Walinski-Khiel in order to show how political myths were used by GDR for legitimation and support. The author explains that the peasants' rebellion was described as a first and great attempt to transform the society, and the narrative went on to show that even if the "peasants' aims of building a free, just and peaceful society" was defeated in the past, they were fulfilled by the "founding of the new state in 1949"<sup>19</sup>, thus transforming the rebellion in a founding myth for the socialist state.

What happened if the narratives did not match at some point and the individual refused to mingle his/her destiny with those of the party and the state? Renata Kirin's article, "Yugoslav Women Intellectuals: From a Party Cell to a Prison Cell", presents the outcomes of such cases. She analyses four biographies of committed intellectual women who were the victims of the Stalinist purges in Yugoslavia (1945-1953) from the perspective of gender feminism. Their statute of purged communist intellectuals is just as complicated in post-communism as it was in the communist regime: they are not kept in the collective memory as "survivors of communism" even if they are survivors of the communist repression, as they were not kept on the political stage and disappeared after the 50s. The "narration of the self" – the autobiographical discourse – is again a key element in reconstructing the puzzle of communist narratives. While the official discourse granted women economic and social equality, the political and social practices limited their access, as the latter were infused with patriarchal values. Moreover, the before mentioned purges affected many revolutionaries, "enemies of the people", and many women among them. This process also implied re-narrating the narratives of revolution, as those purged had been previous heroes who had to be transformed into "political criminals" on the grounds of being Stalin's supporters. In this case they were forced to destruct their autobiographies and eliminate themselves from the grand narratives of the communist nation. Among them, women in previous important positions were applied the same treatment and they were able to speak about their experiences only after the fall of Communism.

The next section in this issue consists in two analyses of arts as vectors for narratives. Barbara Loach's "Topographies of Identity and Memory: Berlin's "Ghosts" and *Book of Clouds* by Chloe Aridjis" depicts an identity crisis personified by the protagonist of the *Book of Clouds*, Tatiana, a Mexican-Jewish woman that lives in the nowadays city of Berlin and is struggling to adjust, against all her semantic memories and stories about the past. Her conflicted feelings reflect the city's own struggling to adjust to a (post)modern, 21<sup>st</sup> century condition which demands it to reconcile its conflicting narratives of the past. Few other cities bear such a symbolic charge as Berlin does, and the debate on its urban

<sup>19</sup> Walinski-Khiel 2004: 44-45.

space, its organization and its buildings still lingers on. The conflicting memories that these issues trigger become even more conflictual when faced with friendly messages and appearances for the tourists. Tatiana's struggle is actually the city's struggle to utter an integrated narrative about its totalitarian, divisive pasts, in a present that may be characterized by the freedom of telling any stories, but is also strained by its imperative of remembering.

Germany is also the focus of the next contributor. Sebastian Haller's analysis focuses on the narratives of legitimation in GDR and their mass dissemination through a very popular TV series. "Diesem Film liegen Tatsachen zugrunde ...". The Narrative of Antifascism and Its Appropriation in the East German Espionage Series *Das unsichtbare Visier* (1973-1979)" is an analysis on the discursive environment that fostered the narrative of antifascism in GDR and the narrative in itself. The author proposes the concept of this narrative as a "fluid superstructure" used in other political narratives and underlines its importance when transmitted by such popular medium as a TV series with high audience. "Antifascism" is a "floating signifier"<sup>20</sup>, a key element of the discourse of legitimation employed especially when the SED government was confronted with a loss of credibility, in the 70s. The author considers that it was an important tool to reinforce the idea of a "western enemy", in the context of the relaxation of relations between the two states, by exploiting the idea of a Nazi past of FRG and its imperialist and militarist tendencies.

The third section is opened by Radu Stancu's "The Political Use of Capital Punishment as a Legitimation Strategy of the Communist Regime in Romania, 1944-1958". Stancu's thesis is that capital punishment was used as a tool by the Romanian communist government in order to legitimate itself through a schemata of identifying and punishing the enemies. But the paradox was that the death punishment was legally applied only to less than three hundred people, while other thousands died, killed in different circumstances by the authorities. The capital punishment was still used in order to create the impression of legality, although it was used mainly to remove "fascists, saboteurs, traitors or members of the resistance", meaning all the political enemies of the newly installed regime.

Narratives of legitimation intermingle even more in Ukraine, even from the period between the wars, when the Stalinist politics and policies of encouraging the development of a nationalist spirit in the case of the Ukrainians, in detriment of the Russian ethnics, were inconsistently applied, leading to tensions. Giuseppe Perri's *Korenizacija: an Ambiguous and Temporary Strategy of Legitimization of Soviet Power in Ukraine (1923-1933) and Its Legacy*" makes a very well documented study case of this situation, arguing that the aim of this policy was actually to control the population.

<sup>20</sup> Mouffe and Laclau 1985.

Ioana Ursu's "Narrativity and Legitimation in the Discourse of the Communist Archives: Analysing the Files of the *Burning Bush Organization*" is trying to find the patterns of the Securitate's discourse about its enemies, as revealed in its files from the Council of the Study of the Securitate's Archives. Ursu managed to identify, by the method of discourse analysis, the link between the communist ideology and the repressive system it installed against its real, imagined or symbolic enemies. In this case, the narratives of legitimation are clearly outlined, as they simply fit in the pattern of identifying those who would pose a potential danger to the regime and its ideology and eliminate them.

Andrea Talabér's "Medieval Saints and Martyrs as Communist Villains and Heroes: National Days in Czechoslovakia and Hungary during Communism" shows, on the other hand, a willingness of the Communist regimes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, to re-negotiate their narratives and include the "hero" figures of the masses – St. Wenceslas and Jan Hus in Czechoslovakia and St. Stephen in Hungary – in the public life. As Talabér puts it, this only happened in the second half of the regimes, after a previous ban from the public discourse. This policy would be a concretization of a different political strategy: to negotiate the master narratives in order to include some of the popular social practices in order to re-gain legitimacy by turning to the people's preferences. By establishing the meaning through actual sharing and not imposing from above, these particular regimes might have prevented a cultural "breakdown".

Camelia Lelesan takes a closer look at the system of rituals in post-war Soviet Union, in "The Power of the Ritual – the System of Rites as a Form of Legitimacy in the Soviet Union -". Her statement is that after the war, the narratives of legitimation transmitting Marxist-Leninist values were enriched by elements of patriotic nationalism, especially by including the master-signifier of the Great Patriotic War in their system of beliefs. Again, by resorting to this aspect of soft power, the political leadership was pursuing the goal of strengthening their positions and gaining popular support. The rituals were a source of meaning and generators of social practices which people could relate to easily, due to their significant emotional component.

Nikola Baković's article "From Mother's Day to "Grandma" Frost. Popularisation of New Year Celebrations as an Ideological Tool. Example of Čačak Region (Serbia) 1945-1950" presents a very thorough study case, based on first hand archival resources, that comes in support of the idea that the rituals in a totalitarian regime are an important fulcrum for the legitimating narratives. Not only did the Communist regime in Yugoslavia impose new rituals for the New Year's Eve, but they also changed its meaning and the vocabulary for its celebration, thus making important transformations in the public calendar. The most important aspect was shifting the weight from the Christian Orthodox celebration of Christmas to the less important New Year's Eve (thus following the Soviet model). The reconfiguration of rituals triggers a reconfiguration of behaviours and the communist regime used the organizations of women as vectors for

producing this change, an important observation to make, since women themselves were new actors in full ascension and emancipation on the political and social stage, and therefore even more willing to support a regime that supports their rights (only at a discursive level, as we have seen in Renata Kirin's article). Moreover, the main targets or beneficiaries were children. This specific group of age is highly important because it holds the premises of a generation completely indulged in the approved communist social practices and political narratives.

Serge Moscovici, the social psychology theorist, states that any society is a machine that produces gods. Because, he says, if there are no gods, meaning strong passions and effective symbols, a society is not capable of mobilizing or leading its members towards the goals it proclaims. Apathy, he concludes, is the main form of deviation in society<sup>21</sup>.

The communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe managed, with more or less success, to produce new gods, new heroes, new villains, new stories, new rituals, new meanings, new vocabularies, new practices, that could transmit new visions and values. It was just that most of them were not new, but "stolen" and "transformed", most of the time not negotiated but imposed from above, and most of the time, triggering drama and pain onto those who did not want to be part of the new community of culture. Could it have been that the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 also represented a "breakdown" of communities of culture which could not sustain their own narratives anymore?

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