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Modern Romania

*The End of Communism, the Failure of
Democratic Reform, and the Theft of a Nation*

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the *boieri* determined to remove Cuza. They formed the Liberal Party, whose vision for the country did not include a socially emancipated population. Its goal was the narrowly political one of a unified and independent Romania with ethnic Romanians in charge.

In 1866 Cuza was removed in a coup and the curtain came down on perhaps the only genuinely radical political interlude in Romania's history as a state. The political vacuum was then quickly filled when Prince Charles, a member of the Catholic branch of the German Hohenzollern family, accepted an invitation to ascend the throne. Charles's forty-eight-year reign began after a plebiscite in April 1866 in which all but 197 out of the 686,193 votes cast were in his favour.¹³

A promising début: constitutional monarchy

The decision of the Liberals to look for a foreign prince was a typical move by élites in charge of fledgling Balkan states that were seeking legitimacy. Much faith was placed in monarchs whose origins were foreign because they were viewed as more disinterested in their approach to material wealth and power than local subordinates and capable of rising above factionalism. The 1866 Constitution was closely modelled on that of Belgium, a country widely felt to have made spectacular progress since its formation in 1830. Liberals expressed the hope that Romania could soon become 'the Belgium of the east'. But the 1866 document contained articles dealing with property, elections and local government, not found in the Belgian prototype, which reflected the illiberal views of the new order.¹⁴

Charles of Hohenzollern (Carol) enjoyed a successful reign as prince till 1881 and then as king, dying in 1914. Exercising the considerable powers granted to him by the constitution with increasing confidence, he regarded foreign and military affairs as his special domain. Carol led a combined Romanian and Russian force to victory at the battle of Plevna in 1878, thus ending the Ottoman presence immediately south of the Danube.¹⁵ Romania became an internationally recognised state in 1881, but relations with Russia were permanently soured when the latter retained control of the mainly Romanian-speaking territory of Bessarabia, which most Romanians saw as an integral part of the Russian homeland.

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A monarch who became a guarantor of continuity and was re-
 spected abroad brought much-needed stability to Romania. The
 military remained largely separate from politics, and thus no praeto-
 rian tradition developed as it did in Serbia after 1900 and in Bulgaria
 after 1918, Carol was also prepared to allow capable and even inde-
 pendent-minded figures to exercise power on his behalf. The domi-
 nant figure for much of the first half of his reign was Ion C. Brătianu.
 His Liberal Party took shape in 1875, its chief rival being the Conser-
 vative Party: the differences between them can be overstated but the
 two certainly had opposing views on agriculture and industrial de-
 velopment. The Conservatives believed Romania's vocation to be as
 an agricultural country, whereas the Liberals believed in a diversified
 economy in which industry would have a steadily increasing role.
 Many of them believed in the desirability of state intervention in
 economic affairs.¹⁶ Conservatives and Liberals had much the same
 foreign policy which centred around consolidating independence in
 a contested part of Europe 'where the vital interests of three empires
 converged'.¹⁷

The king alternated the two parties in office. When one was asked
 to form a new government, almost its first task was to organize elec-
 tions. The state machine was mobilised to ensure that a comfortable
 majority was secured. This facade democracy drew increasing resent-
 ment from among intellectuals. Vasile Alecsandri, seen during his life-
 time as the national poet of Romania, described the regime in 1886
 as 'a stupid comedy played by stupid actors before a naïve public'.¹⁸

Political differences were not usually pushed to the limit. Defi-
 nitely aiding stability was the fact that the population was remark-
 ably homogeneous from an ethnic and religious standpoint. In 1899,
 92.1% of the population of 5,956,690 were ethnic Romanians of
 the Orthodox faith.¹⁹ But there were compact Romanian popula-
 tions across the frontier in Bessarabia and, above all, in Transylvania,
 part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Romanians were the
 largest ethnic group in Transylvania, but not only were they denied
 autonomy by its Hungarian rulers but energetic and ultimately un-
 successful attempts were made to assimilate them. In the nation-
 building myths of both Romania and Hungary the province of
 Transylvania held a central place.

Oligarchy and the masses

The peasantry comprised over 80% of the population and of these 85% were illiterate in 1890. However, mass education was not a priority for either party, and income differentials between the peasantry and other sectors of society widened.²⁰ Despite the 1864 agrarian reform, no self-reliant class of peasant farmers had appeared. The *boieri* used their domination of the local administration to ensure that they kept the best land or cheated on the amounts surrendered.²¹ Constantin Dorogeanu-Gherea described the new agrarian order as 'neo-serfdom' under which technically free peasants were bound to their lords far more tightly than before.²²

In each of Romania's counties (*judets*) the state's local arm was a prefect who brooked no opposition. The state chiefly manifested its presence in the lives of the peasantry through the tax collector, who 'often treated the rural population not as a source of public revenue but of personal revenue'.²³ In 1901 there were 102,560 government employees, or roughly 2% of the whole population, but less than 1% of these received a salary sufficient to allow a middle-class standard of living.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, no strong sense of public service emerged among this poorly-paid sector. *Smecherie* (crafty dealing) and *bacsis* (bribery) were terms seen as defining the behaviour of certain categories of civil servants as well as their political masters.²⁵ In Weberian terms, Romania was evolving into a 'patrimonial' rather than a 'bureaucratic' state-nation. Far from having been uprooted, the Phanariot traditions in Romanian public life were merely being updated. No institutions effectively interposed themselves between the oligarchy and the masses or were willing to champion the downtrodden. The king was hardworking and ascetic, but showed no real understanding of the material plight of his people. The Romanian Orthodox Church did little to raise people from their low political expectations and submissive mentality. The 1866 constitution declared it the 'dominant religion', but the political élite determined that it would be subservient to the state.²⁶ The communists would not find such a church hard to subdue when they came to power after 1945.

During Carol I's reign socially conscious individuals, well-informed about the plight of the peasantry and the state's shortcomings, formulated plans for improvements, but no influential economic or

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