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Recurring exceptionalism. Protochronism, cultural autarky, and national identity in (post)socialist Romania

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Abstract
This article locates the socialist cultural policy of protochronism within the broader narratives of national self-thematization that framed the emergence of semiperipheral Romania as a modern nation-state. I start from an overview of how traditional Romanian nationalism was resourcefully mobilized both during and before Nicolae Ceauşescu's rule, mutating into cultural autarky due to the increased centralization of local political economy during the final communist decades. Correlating Verdery's Bourdieusian approach and a constructivist understanding of nationalism, protochronism is depicted as a rampant cultural expression of the nation-building process unfolding in socialist Romania from the late 1950s onwards. I exemplify the most striking ideas of its practitioners, as presented in the cultural press and theoretical texts, before questioning its main renditions within postsocialist historiography. Finally, I trace the link between protochronism and the contemporary Romanian radical right, highlighting their embeddedness in the ever-pressing project of ethnonational identity (the inception of which precedes the interwar period, its most widely invoked attendant). I argue that construing protochronism within these historical parameters is conducive to discerning which of its historiographical inertias are retained by contemporary Romanian culture, and how they are mobilised to various—and most often illiberal—political ends.

Keywords Protochronism · Romanian nationalism · National communism · Memory politics · Historiography

During his 2024 campaign for the Romanian presidency, hard-right independent candidate Călin Georgescu made the provocative, albeit baseless, claim that proto-Romanian was "the mother of the Latin language, and not the other way around" (Fanatik 2024). Within the same interview, he expanded upon this assertion of cultural exceptionalism by arguing that "any European population which might seek to

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discover its identity and roots will inevitably come across the Romanian language." Running on an ultranationalist platform of anti-establishment mysticism, fascist nostalgia, and Russophone conspiracies, Georgescu would later win the first round of the November 2024 Romanian presidential elections with around 23% of the votes. His meteoric amassing of electoral support puzzled pollsters, the mainstream media, and the incumbent political class, who had severely underestimated the resonance of his messianic populism. Citing foreign support for his online campaign and breaches of electoral law, the Romanian Constitutional Court would then annul the elections on the eve of their second round (Rogozanu 2025; Ross et al. 2024). The epicenter of the campaign had been the social media platform TikTok, where videos of a combative Georgescu making deceptively polarizing claims—such as the one cited above—consistently went viral. His clickbait-worthy takes hybridize transnationally prevalent tropes of radical right contestation (Rydgren 2018), a fascination for Romanian interwar fascism, and a strongly localized lexicon of indigenist exaltation. It was the latter which prompted conservative public intellectual and former Ministry of Culture Theodor Paleologu to describe him as a "protochronist," arguing that "Protochronism is an ideology, well, invented, created in the 1970s during Ceauşescu's time. Of course, protochronism has older antecedents. It is the idea that the Romanian people are the ones who invented everything—we invented writing, we invented the first language, Romanian is the primordial language, the Geto-Dacian people are the primordial people" (Ruscior 2024).

A visible item on the Romanian cultural agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, protochronism was initially theorised within literary criticism as a historiographic strategy, prompting the return to national heritage as an unfairly ostracized, but undeniably valuable, section of world culture, and unacknowledged precursor of its hegemonic developments (Verdery 1991; Crowder 2012). Neither ideologically benign nor politically passive, this wave of indigenism gained significant proportions, permeating most strata of cultural production as a central instrument of nation-building across the final socialist decades. A staple of ultranationalist discourse circulated within indigenist groups, protochronism and its hybrids have maintained a marginal, but consistent, position within postsocialist Romanian culture. Nevertheless, its successful instrumentation within mainstream politics by the neo-legionary radical right is striking to most given that, as Paleologu's depiction suggests, protochronism is widely conceived as explicitly—and exclusively—correlated to the final Ceauşescu decades, his personality cult, and the self-aggrandizing national mythology it engendered.

The central aim of this paper is to review this widely held historiographical framing. Given the apt political mobilization of protochronist tropes by the contemporary Romanian radical right—of which Georgescu is not the sole, but the most illustrative, representative—I argue that the revisitation of protochronism is warranted threefold. Firstly, to gain further insight into the seemingly paradoxical enmeshment of Marxism-Leninism and indigenism which functioned at the heart of party-state politics in its final decades. Secondly, to shed light on which of its historiographical inertias were retained in postsocialist culture and, conversely, on how protochronism itself came to be depicted by postsocialist historiography as an exceptional, monolithic, and insular cultural movement. Thirdly, to discern some of the intellectual

genealogies on which the narrative entrepreneurs of the contemporary far-right rely (Bronk and Jacoby 2020). Transnationally recurrent tropes of anti-globalist contestation extract legitimacy from local histories of national exceptionalism, and protochronism persists precisely as a resourceful lexicon of Romanian exceptionalism.

To this end, I start from an overview of how traditional Romanian nationalism was resourcefully mobilized both during and before Nicolae Ceauşescu's rule, mutating into cultural autarky due to the increased centralization of Romanian political economy during the final communist decades. On these grounds, protochronism[1] is depicted as a rampant cultural expression of the nation-(re)building process unfolding in socialist Romania from the late 1950s onwards. I exemplify the most striking ideas of its practitioners before turning to its main renditions in post-socialist historiography. I showcase how, under the lens of programmatic anticommunism, protochronism is dissociated from the broader currents of Romanian nationalism and exclusively construed as a regime-backed device of cultural intervention. Finally, I approach several 'protochronist' claims made by the radical right today as embedded within a "continuum of ideas and practices that started long before the 1930s and have been endorsed by several political projects across the political spectrum" (Coţofană 2023, p. 258), of which protochronism is an illustrative, albeit less readily acknowledged, example.

Given its robust presence across the cultural production of late socialism, I refrain from attempting a comprehensive outline of its rise and fall—Katherine Verdery's 1991 *National Ideology under Socialism*, as well as Alexandra Tomiţa's 2007 monograph, *O istorie glorioasă. Dosarul protocronismului românesc* [A glorious history. The file of Romanian protochronism] and Lionel Roşca's 2013 *La umbra timpului în floare. Protocronismul: Prolegomene la monografia unei idei* [In the Shadow of Time in Flower. Protochronism: Prolegomena for the monography of an idea], are consistent examples of such an approach. Rather, I am interested in discerning how, to paraphrase Verdery (1991, p. 123), the language of national exceptionalism persists as the natural dialect of Romanian political life.

Scarcity and the nation. The case of Romanian socialism

It is telling that, when writing her Bourdieusian analysis of protochronism in the early 1990s, Katherine Verdery selects the terminology of (anti-)protochronism (out of a plethora of options employed in the cultural press[2]) not only due its wide circula-

[1] Following a distinction made by Roşca (2013), I primarily approach protochronism as employed within comparative literature and debated within the cultural sphere, thus refraining from directly engaging its developments within Romanian social sciences, specifically Ilie Bădescu's work. For a reading of Bădescu's reliance on—and departure from—Wallerstein, see Popa (2023).

[2] As noted by Verdery, the self-identification terminology of both protochronists and their adversaries was diverse: "Opponents of protochronism referred to themselves variously as 'democrats,' 'modernists,' 'upholders of the critical spirit,' and so forth, and to the others as 'protochronists,' 'nationalists,' 'traditionalists,' the 'Barbu Group' (after one of the most powerful and visible members), the 'neoproletcultists' (the designation Radio Free Europe often used), and the 'nationalist Stalinists' (i.e., heirs to 'dogmatism') (see Shafir 1983). [...] That both sides called themselves true patriots and accused the other side of dogmatism and proletcultism is a sure sign that those labels were doing more than simply describing" (Verdery 1991, p. 171).

tion, but also for its perceived neutrality and descriptive efficiency (Verdery 1991, 172). As Paleologu's recent diatribe suggests, however, the postsocialist trajectory of protochronism has rendered the term anything but neutral—rather, it remains a "*nomina odiosa* of the Golden Age" (Roşca 2013, p. 176).[3] Its direct association with Ceauşescu's 1970s cultural politics is itself worthy of further critical attention. Although common, such a framing elides the broader self-thematization patterns of national communism,[4] which do find an official cultural expression in protochronism but precede and outlive it.

Having achieved its unification as late as 1918, Romania underwent a turbulent interwar period, marked by the political mobilization of ethnonational homogeneity to violent ends, culminating in the Romanian Holocaust (Livezeanu 1995; Clark 2012). Implemented within a weakly institutionalized society consisting of a vast peasantry and a small industrial working class, with recent experiences of authoritarian rule informing the corruption and clientelism of its political elites, the Romanian communist regime has been widely described as "patrimonial."[5] Its coming to power in 1947 implied the exclusion of the national issue from both cultural[6] and political discourse. Discernible for around two decades, this "communist anti-nationalism" (Rusu 2015, p. 256) was motivated by the incompatibility of traditional Romanian nationalism with the internationalist imperatives of Marxism-Leninism, as well as the reliance of local communists on Moscow-sourced political legitimacy. Most readily linked to the Ceauşescu era, the return of the nation to party priorities is initiated by his predecessor, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. As the historical literature widely acknowledges (Petrescu 2009; Deletant 2019), it was this leader of the Romanian Workers' Party (RWP) who engendered, as early as the late 1950s, the rediscovery of autochthonous culture and the ethnonational imagination *as* political resources. This shift away from orthodox Marxism-Leninism is most often associated with changing domestic dynamics following Stalin's death, Khruschev's 1956 condemnation of his regime, and the Hungarian Revolution of the same year (Deletant 2019, p. 216). Since the local communist elite had gained their legitimacy through loyalty to (and endorsement of) Moscow, the shifting conjuncture set Romania on its course to de-satellization. This process was, as Deletant points out, both active and reactive. Essentially, it can be

[3]For a discussion of terminological issues surrounding protochronism and interwar traditionalism, see Crowder 2012, pp. 199–200.

[4]I refer to national communism as: "the strategy aimed at placing the Romanian party-state within the historical tradition of the Romanian medieval principalities. [...] mobilizing widespread societal support through an outright adherence of the communist elite to the fundamental historical myths of the Romanian modern nation: stressing its ancient roots, continuity, unity, and independence" (Petrescu 2009, p. 523).

[5]As defined in Herbert Kitschelt et al.: "It [patrimonial communism] relies on vertical chains of personal dependence between leaders in the state and party apparatus and their entourage, buttressed by extensive patronage and clientelist networks [...] The level of rational-bureaucratic institutionalization in state and party remains low because the ruling clique penetrates the apparatus through nepotistic appointments. [...] Patrimonial communism was likely to emerge in historical settings where a traditional authoritarian regime, assisted by compliant religious leaders, ruled over societies of poor peasants (whether they were freemen or serfs), weak cities, a thin layer of ethnic pariah immigrant entrepreneurs and merchants, a small and geographically concentrated industrial working class, and a corrupt coterie of administrators dependent on the personal whims of the ruler" (1999, p. 23).

[6]This is reflected, for example, by the lists of Romanian writers that were banned as early as 1945. See Comisia Prezidenţială (2006), pp. 488–489.

read as a reaction to the Sino-Soviet disputes (Deletant 2019, pp. 226–229; Rusu 2015, p. 257) and to Khrushchev's intentions to give the Comecon a supranational planning role (which would have blocked Romania's path of rapid industrialization, ensuring its position as supplier of raw materials and its vulnerability to Soviet exploitation) (Kemp 1999, pp. 149–151). But the project of Romanian autonomy is also actively incentivized by the domestic increase in party popularity—it is by framing itself as patriotic that Dej's RWP faction fortified its legitimacy and removed internal competitors.[7] Thus, destalinization engenders a new political strategy focused on industrialisation and economic development, the appeal of which is enhanced by the Party's mobilization of Romanian nationalism: an essential step in creating common ground for the ruling elite and the population in their shared strive towards party monolithism and emancipation from the Soviet hegemon (Petrescu 2009).

The sovereigntist rationale behind Romanian de-satellization is formally rendered in the April 1964 declaration[8] issued by the RWP (Kemp 1999). Notably, it formulates an incisive rejection of Comecon intervention in domestic economic planning[9] and invokes anticolonial struggles to illustrate the centrality of national liberation to the "world revolutionary process" (PCR 1964, p. 42). Published in the same year, *Istoria gîndirii sociale şi filozofice în Romînia* [The History of Social and Philosophical Thought in Romania], a collective volume coordinated by academician Constantin Ionescu Gulian, offers interesting insight into the historiographical valences of this anti-Soviet stance. The first attempt at a comprehensive materialist reading of autochthonous philosophical and social thought, the volume dedicates several subchapters to folk culture, the only genuine repository of a national culture which had its development constricted by the 'dictatorship of the church,' the ruling classes, and their choice of Old Church Slavonic as official language: "The adoption of a language the people did not understand and the monopoly on culture deepened the drift between the ruling class and the masses, which were thus kept in the dark for centuries. The expression of thought in a foreign language (which was also dead, like Slavonic was at the time) halted the development of creative thought and hindered the spread of culture" (Gulian et al. 1964, p. 17). This narrative of cultural imperialism and the portrayal of the Romanian people as doubly victimised—by class conflict and the disadvantageous machinations of regional history—echoes Gheorghiu-Dej's foreign policy. The authors refrain from an exaltation of ethnic homogeneity or of Romanian exceptionalism, acknowledging ethnic diversity in the region (and within the country's modern borders) as the starting point for intraperipheral solidarity. The ideological rationale of the volume is spelled out in its preface, which cites a Gheorghiu-Dej address highlighting the duty of primary school teachers to "cultivate national pride

[7] It was only during the Central Committee Plenum of November-December 1961 that an official, and politically effective version of party history was produced, which described the struggle between Gheorghiu-Dej's patriotic faction and a Soviet-centered one. See Petrescu (2009), p. 529.

[8] Declaraţie cu privire la poziţia Partidului Muncitoresc Romîn în problemele mişcării comuniste şi muncitoreşti internaţionale adoptată de Plenara lărgită a C.C. al P.M.R. din aprilie 1964, Editura Politică, Bucharest, 1964.

[9] The central argument is that: the relationships among communist countries should be governed by the principles of "national independence and sovereignty, equal rights, mutual advantage, comradely mutual aid, non-intervention in internal affairs, respect for territorial integrity, and the principles of socialist internationalism" (PCR 1964, p. 37).

for the revolutionary, progressive traditions of our people" (Gulian et al. 1964, p. 7). Although reluctantly referencing the nation in official speeches (Petrescu 2009, p. 528), Gheorghiu-Dej plays a direct role in its return among the priorities of the local political elite, enabling the extensive nation-building[10] process carried out by his successor. In this early indigenization of Marxism-Leninism, party identity is linked to the resources of national history, without any attempts to enact their complete overlap.

Less than a decade later, Nicolae Ceauşescu would go on to equate the two, engaging national history as a central resource of party and personal mythology. Following his 1968 "balcony speech"[11] (which marks a definitive break with Moscow following the suppression of the Prague Spring) and the July 1971[12] theses, the RCP's cultural strategy became wide-ranging in its push for autarky (Petrescu 2009), "anti-Westernism, anti-intellectualism and, generally, anti-professionalism" (Martin 2002–2003, vol. IV: p. 11). Often regarded as engendering a cultural revolution of Maoist inspiration, the July theses mark the end of the Western-facing late 1960s and the enforcement of Zhdanov-style cultural policies (Roşca 2013, p. 180; Cordoş 2003):

> It has become not that becoming of a custom, comrades, to look exclusively to what is made elsewhere, abroad [...]. This shows that there is a certain conception which conceives as better all that is foreign, a certain [...] servitude to what is foreign, and most specifically, to what is produced in the West, irrespective of whether it's good or bad. [...] Eminescu made fun of such mentalities in his poems. We must do this even more today. [...] We are [...] against servitude towards all that is foreign, against humiliating our own language, our own nation. [...] This entails neither nationalism, nor national narrowness, nor national isolation; this is the certain way of constructing socialism. [...] In Romania, we can only accept art and literature which stand the ground of the working class, which serve the people, socialism, our nation. (Ceauşescu 1971)

National poet Mihai Eminescu[13] is not the only member of the Romanian cultural pantheon mentioned by Ceauşescu. Beyond exemplifying "the extremely popular Romanian intellectual past-time of actualizing the political/metaphysical message of

[10] In his constructivist reading of the phenomenon, to which the present article subscribes, Petrescu identifies three components of this nation-building process, which, albeit initiated in the late 1950s, reaches its most obvious excesses as late as the 1980s: "(1) socio-economic, focusing on modernization conducted from above; (2) political, concentrating on elite manipulation; and (3) cultural, insisting on cultural reproduction." (Petrescu 2009, p. 524). It is the latter which is of primary interest here—not only does protochronism emerge as integrated in this wider cultural effort, but it is also relevantly anticipated across the 1960s.

[11] Delivered on August 21, 1968, Ceauşescu's balcony address condemned the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and criticized the Soviet Union for violating the national sovereignty of another state. See Deletant (2019), pp. 257–260.

[12] A speech delivered by Ceauşescu to the executive committee of the Romanian Communist Party in July 1971, following the leader's state visits to the People's Republic of China and North Korea. It marked a turn away from the 1960s Western-facing liberalization of Romanian culture and the reinforcement of Party-centric prerogatives in cultural production. See Deletant (2019), p. 348.

[13] On Eminescu's status in Romanian culture, see Terian (2018), Rusu (2024).

Eminescu" (Iordachi and Trencsényi 2003, p. 440), this invocation is symptomatic of how legitimacy is gained by establishing the regime's continuity with the canonical figures of national history. Less than an attempt at a synthesis of Marxism-Leninism and national ideology, this explicit turn to autochthonous mythology echoes the Russo-centric turn of Soviet mass culture during Stalin's rule, which implied forms of heroic consecration and historical revisionism that obviously contradicted the official materialist understanding of history (Platt and Brandenberger 2006). The process of creating a centralized Soviet identity in the first half of the century nevertheless differed greatly from the later efforts of Romanian communists to legitimate national autonomy via mystifying the nation-state during the end of the crisis-ridden 1970s and the early 1980s.

This renewed reliance on nationalism *qua* legitimator of party hegemony is translated into interventions across the sites where national identity is 'invented' and negotiated, from literary history (Terian 2021, p. 28) and ideological education (Marin 2022, pp. 160–198) to the centralized organization of national cultural and sports events, exemplified by Cîntarea României [Song of Praise to Romania] (Anton et al. 2022, pp. 273–335) and Daciada, respectively. The ethos of 'national mysticism' (Cinpoeș 2010, p. 63) is particularly prevalent in domestic film production, specifically high budget historicals[14] of evident revisionist character. Inscribed within the genre of the Great National Epic, films such as the 1967 *Dacii* [The Dacians], the 1972 *Mihai Viteazul* [Michael the Brave] or the 1972 *Burebista* participate in the Hollywoodization of national history (Parvulescu and Turcuș 2021), while also ensuring Ceauşescu's symbolic insertion into a reconstructed historical pantheon (Deletant 1991; Cinpoeș 2010).This revisionist process also targets the official narrative of national ethnogenesis. The centrality of the autochthonous Dacians to the inception of the Romanian people is highlighted to the detriment of the colonising Romans (Petrescu 2009; Deletant 1991; Adam 2018, pp. 227–32). When formulated in the 1974 *Programul Partidului Comunist Român* [Programme of the Romanian Communist Party], this indigenist narrative—which is still salient in contemporary far-right exaltations of Dacian culture (Coţofană 2023, pp. 265–267)—is rendered as follows: "Of specific importance was the Thraco-Dacian statal organization, which reached its peak during the time of Burebista and Decebal's kingdom. [. . .] The conquest of Dacia and its transformation into a province of the Roman Empire—with all its negative aspects—led to the mingling of the two civilizations" (Comisia PCR 1975, p. 27). Parallels are thus drawn between the independent Dacian state and the aspirationally autonomous Romania, with Ceauşescu embodying 'Burebista's 1980s counterpart' (Deletant 1991, p. 72).

This primordialist (Smith 2003) construal of national history is, in Verdery's reading, part of the symbolic-ideological means of control of a regime which, under conditions of endemic scarcity, envisioned "an initial autarchy that would later reverse itself—a sort of primitive accumulation that would become self-sustaining, that can generate development *without* infusions of foreign materials and capital (be this cultural or economic)" (Verdery 1991, p. 179). Differently put, the local communist

[14] Examples include: *Tudor* (1963), *Dacii* (1967), *Columna* (1968), *Mihai Viteazul* (1972), *Ştefan cel Mare. Vaslui 1475* (1975), *Dimitrie Cantemir* (1975), *Vlad Ţepeş* (1978), *Burebista* (1980), *Mircea cel Mare* (1989).

elites tapped into the political capital of ethnonationalism and cultural protectionism to legitimise their safeguarding of Romanian sovereignty from either Western or Soviet hegemony. This engagement of the national issue (unavoidable given its centrality in the regional experience of political modernity) is overseen by the local intelligentsia, whose precarity within the shortage economy of the late socialist decades motivated a ready embrace of indigenist values beneficial to political leadership, since the intellectuals hoped "to gain greater control over the resources that would accrue to whoever most persuasively 'represented' Romanian culture" (Verdery 1991, p. 207). Thus, according to Verdery's argument, protochronism emerges as a symptom of an increasingly centralised local market which rewards national representativeness, and whose culturally peripheral and politically precarious position is mitigated through claims of national priority and exceptionalism. Before I overview the weakly theoretical grounds on which the protochronists advanced these claims, it is relevant to note that they were not the sole participants in—and beneficiaries of—this autarkic logic of cultural production. In different ways and to various degrees, their detractors also employed the national theme, and its inherently ethnicist premises, thus laying the groundwork for the programmatic nationalism of the 1990s and its rehabilitation of the interwar period (Şandru 2024, pp. 169–71).

Historical revisionism and national priority. The case of protochronism

The origins of protochronism are deceptively transparent: it began in a 1974 essay written by literary critic Edgar Papu and published in the cultural journal *Secolul XX* [The Twentieth Century], in which he advances the term as operative descriptor of Romania's cultural singularity. Conceived in direct opposition to Eugen Lovinescu's synchronism[15]—nothing but a "longing which feeds a retarded consciousness" (Papu 1977, p. 17)—the term is etymologically self-explanatory (the Greek 'proto-chronos,' first in time), hinting at the revisionist self-assuredness of this Romanian patent. Its central claim is the temporal priority and aesthetic superiority of Romanian culture within world culture, doubled by the push to discover examples of national precocity and rightfully acknowledge them. For example, Papu sees in Ion Creangă's folk tales (such as "Dănilă Prepeleac") the precursors of twentieth-century literature of the absurd. His most compelling analysis is that of Eminescu, who is simultaneously portrayed as a harbinger of European existentialism (in line with a reading by Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica[16]), and located within a network of semiperipheral Romanticism:

> The greatest Portuguese Romantic poet, named by Unamuno a Leopardi of Portugal, Antero de Quental, was born a mere eight years before our poet [...].

[15] Patented by interwar critic Eugen Lovinescu in his 1937 *Istoria civilizaţiei române moderne* [The History of Modern Romanian Civilisation], synchronism conceives of the modernization process of the minor and belated Romanian culture in terms of its 'synchronization' with the Western 'saeculum,' as enabled by cultural interdependence and, following Gabriel Tarde, imitation. See Dumitru (2016).

[16] On Noica's association with the protochronist movement and its elitist 'intellectual populism,' see Şandru (2024), pp. 164–66.

> Similarly, the most relevant Brazilian Romantic poet, Antonio de Castro-Alves, was born only three years before the one who would write *Luceafărul*, while the most significant Bulgarian Romantic, Hristo Botev, a mere two. Therefore, Eminescu is not isolated or backward; rather, he excellently integrates in a universal Romantic movement. (Papu 1977, p. 89)

The argument advanced here—that Eminescu's status as a *late* Romantic is relative to the temporality of central literatures and thus unjustifiably ignores the alternative histories of marginal ones—has fully legitimate premises. This subsidiary appraisal of cultural imperialism (irrespective of its provenance) strings together the more critically valuable sections of protochronist thought. Its arguments anticipate disciplinary adjustments prompted by World Literature theorists (Tihanov et al. 2023), while also echoing Stalin-era efforts to establish Soviet temporal priority (Verdery 1991, p. 175) as well as the earlier, more obscure but similarly motivated, anticolonial thinking of Russian Eurasianists (Glebov 2014). Much like in their case, however, these critically fruitful reflections on cultural peripherality are not fully dissociated from self-aggrandizing projections of national exceptionalism and civilisational grandeur. Thus, Papu assembles a provisional network of peripheral Romanticism only to authoritatively conclude that, nevertheless, Eminescu "leaves all the Romantic poets behind through his titanism" (Papu 1977, p. 90). Such artificial constructions of cultural 'titanism' ultimately characterise the development of protochronism and ensure its survival—to the point that Ceauşescu himself announces, for example, "that well before Gorbachev, he had ideas about factory self-management and other reforms of perestroika" (Verdery 1991, p. 176).

Already by 1977, when Papu returns to it in *Din clasicii noştri. Contribuţii la ideea unui protocronism românesc* [From our classics. Contributions to the Idea of Romanian Protochronism], the concept had gained followers among fellow critics Dan Zamfirescu, Paul Anghel or Ioan Constantinescu.[17] In a concomitant play for disciplinary urgency and increased legitimacy, the preface of the volume links Papu's historiographical method to previous research in the history of art and science,[18] seemingly with the same purpose of celebrating yet unacknowledged Romanian contributions to universal knowledge. He concludes that "across all fields, Romanian anticipations have been very visible within the universal creation of values" (Papu

[17] I. Constantinescu advances the idea of "prophetic value" (valoare profetică), correlating it to the Romanian avantgarde, which Papu acknowledges as valuable but nevertheless discards in favour of his more resonant conceptual alternative, protochronism (see Papu 1977, p. 14). In his 1977 polemic review of Papu's volume, Nicolae Manolescu validates Constantinescu's approach in *Moştenirea modernilor* [The Legacy of the Moderns]—"Several years ago, I. Constantinescu dealt with a similar issue in *Moştenirea modernilor*, preferring the term 'avantgarde' instead of 'protochronism' and limiting himself to those cases in which the influence on ulterior work could be certainly proven. Maybe his term is not good, but his approach seems to me more commonsense that Edgar Papu's, whose anticipations become, due to the lack of any foreign pragmatic result, simple literary curiosities which, instead of comforting our national pride, depress us through their insignificance" (Manolescu 1977, p. 9).

[18] Papu references volumes such as Dinu Moroianu and I. M. Ştefan's *Focul viu—Pagini din istoria invenţiilor şi descoperirilor româneşti* [The lively fire—Pages from the History of Romanian Inventions and Discoveries] (Moroianu and Ştefan 1963), Constantin C. Girescu's *Contribuţii la istoria ştiinţei şi tehnicei româneşti în secolele XV—începutul secolului XIX* [Contributions to the history of Romanian science and technique from the fifteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century] (Girescu 1973), or Nina Stănlescu's *Carte de inimă pentru Brâncuşi* [A book from the heart for Brâncuşi] (Stănlescu 1976).

1977, p. 7). Literary history is emboldened to catch up and demonstrate the extent of its national representativeness, just as other sectors of Romanian intellectual history had done. It is thus not surprising that a similar argument is invoked by fellow critic Paul Anghel, who comes to Papu's defense in 1977, following an ambivalent review of *Din clasicii noştri* authored by Nicolae Manolescu (significantly titled "Tezism şi spontaneitate" [Rigidity and spontaneity]). Although acknowledging Papu's erudition and sophisticated approach, Manolescu accuses him of misconstruing Lovinescu's theory of synchronism and its employment of imitation. Anghel replies to this accusation of epistemological misconduct not only by invoking Papu's intellectual humility and meticulous scholarship, but also by referring to similar approaches in the history of mathematics and logic (employed by Solomon Marcu[19] and Anton Dumitriu[20]), which showcase that the national "organ of great culture and of great spirituality need not be imported" (Anghel 1977, p. 8). Anghel's polemic reply leads to roundtables organised by the cultural periodical *Luceafărul* in 1977, 1978 and 1985, and debates in the pages of literary magazines (Roşca 2014, p. 95)—in other words, to protochronism entering the domestic cultural agenda.

That the concept gained traction within literary criticism gestures to the Herderian nationalism of the minor Romanian culture (Casanova 2007), in which literary historiography had been central to the fashioning of the national self-image. It had mitigated the consistent obsessions of peripherality through its "constant preoccupation with a symbolic reterritorialization of Romanian culture from the outskirts of Europe to its core" (Goldiş 2018, p. 99). This logic is augmented by the limited options for political debate afforded by the regime, which relegated the national question to the sphere of cultural politics (Martin 2002–2003). Thus framed by the "anti-capitalist, isolationist and anti-intellectual direction" (Martin 2002–2003) of the RCP—as officially formulated within the July theses—protochronism can be read as a crude reiteration of the narratives which had underwritten Romania's emergence as semi-peripheral nation and had mediated its contacts with liberal modernity. When conceiving it as "an intensified resuscitation of interwar indigenist arguments about the national essence" (Verdery 1991, p. 168), Verdery acknowledges this impression of continuity, which might be extended to the meso-regional nineteenth century and some of its most striking features: elite-society desynchronization (Antohi and Trencsényi 2014, p. 24), a weak utopian tradition, and a French Revolution that never left "the realm of ideas and ideals."[21] Codified within the self-representation efforts of Eastern European intellectual history is the pressing question of national identity, usually conceived as a conflict between adoption and rejection of the western

[19] Romanian mathematician and linguist, who participates in the cultural debate surrounding protochronism and synchronism. See, for example, "Luceafărul," 1978.

[20] Romanian logician, mathematician and philosopher.

[21] As noted by Antohi and Trencsenyi: "In the European context, the main point of departure is usually taken to be the conservative reaction to the French Revolution. Doubtlessly, in East Central and Southeast Europe one can hardly find a consistent counterrevolutionary conservative tradition comparable to de Maistre, de Bonald or Donoso Cortés (although there were individual cases that can be placed into this context, such as the "apology of Orthodoxy" by the Romanian Alexandru Sturdza). At the same time, it is possible to discover certain elements in the local Romantic and post-Romantic ideological traditions that were highly critical of the heedless import of Western institutional practices promoted by mainstream liberal nationalists" (2014, p. 24).

model (Iordachi and Trencsényi 2003, p. 416). The Romanian case is no exception, and protochronist attempts to explain the sociohistorical origins of national exceptionalism are illustrative in this regard. According to "Cultura română—sinteză europeană" [Romanian culture—European synthesis], a 1975 essay published by Dan Zamfirescu, the nation's singularity is tied to its emergence as a synthesis of the two Europes: the Latin one and the Slavic-Byzantine one (a stance which echoes Nicolae Iorga's imagining of Romania as a Latin island within a Slavic sea) (Zamfirescu 1975). Thus, as Papu explains,

> Peripheral identity is transmuted into a central, crossroads one. We would have remained, in culture, a peripheral region of both the East and the West, if the opposing elements of these two great regions would have maintained themselves here in a passive and hybrid state of *mingling*. We cannot negate the existence of such a regrettable aspect in our region [...]. Just as often, however, an action which created synthesis, and thus new things, was initiated here. (Papu 1977, p. 11)

It is artificial continuity with both the autochthonous ancient past and the Western-facing medieval one that engenders the type of legitimacy which can shift the symbolic geography of the nation, reframing its peripherality as a competitive advantage. The belated discovery of this "usable past" is linked to an ever-unfavourable historical climate, a recurring self-victimizing narrative which traverses national self-representation from the nineteenth century to contemporary Euroscepticism. In its protochronist iteration, it highlights how, despite overwhelming challenges which stunted its rightful development, "Romania [. . .] is an example of a small country, but of a great spirit, which conquered the 'impossible.' [. . .] Historical circumstances have led it [the Romanian people] to gain the vocation of maturity. Even though the thread of our creations was always cut, forcing us to play the role of beginners again and again [. . .]" (Papu 1977, p. 198). Such emphasis on the exceptional maturity of the nation speaks to the organicist understanding of culture which underscores protochronist thought. Beyond its rhetorical effectiveness, this organicist reading enables a framing of historical revisionism as a necessary process of empirical discovery enabled by the illuminating social machinery of the present. As noted within a 1975 essay of Zamfirescu's, published on the front page of *Luceafărul*:[22]

> Our national history must be rewritten, more precisely, rethought, dacapo al fine in a new way imposed by our new experience, which has sent its headlights into the farthest corners making us see it differently, just like the smoked up figures on the interior walls of Voroneţ, Suceviţa, or Moldoviţa [medieval Romanian monasteries] revealed themselves in an astonishing and unexpected extravaganza of colors, when the powerful modern machinery of cinema and television turned upon them. (Zamfirescu 1975)

Therefore, late socialist culture is tasked with exploring and unearthing the "unexpected extravaganza" of the national past, identifying its moments of temporal priority and historical grandeur. As Verdery demonstrates, the political and economic

[22]The official publication of the Romanian Union of Writers.

context of socialist Romania offered an unpredictably fertile soil for the cultural enactment of this ethos.

Dismissing it as an isolated historiographical experiment—orchestrated by a Ceauşescu who "skillfully combines, like an alchemist, [...] autochthonism and interwar traditionalism to create the most effective weapon of mass destruction against Lovinescu's synchronism" (Roşca 2013, p. 118)—obscures its protean nature and political instrumentality, both then and today. Moreover, it fails to properly account for the downfall of the protochronist group, which precedes the end of the regime. In 1986, one of the central anti-protochronist magazines, *România literară*, published a piece by party official Gogu Rădulescu which accused the movement of neolegionarism. Prevented from publishing his reply in Romania, Edgar Papu was forced to resort to a diaspora publishing house administered by the European Center for Tracian Studies in Rome (Tomiţă 2007, 208–13). The diasporic survival of protochronism—facilitated by the likes of former legionary Iosif Constantin Drăgan, editor of the *Noi, tracii* magazine (Adam 2018, p. 229)—is beyond the scope of my paper, but should be acknowledged as ensuring its revival within the mystical nationalism of the 1990s.

Anti-communism and the return of the nation. The case of postsocialist historiography

Negotiating the place of national tradition within global modernity remains central to the 'cultural self-reflection' of postsocialist Romania (Iordachi and Trencsényi 2003; Verdery 1996). The turbulent transition to democracy which followed the socially traumatic and ever-'unfinished revolution' of 1989 (Mark 2010) inscribes cultural politics into the complicated process of transitional justice. Following a brutal final decade of socialist rule, the embittering presence of former party elites in the institutions of the newly democratic state is among the main catalysts of a pressing anti-communist historiographical agenda. The emerging civil society—represented by former dissidents and conservative intellectuals—engages in transitional justice by formulating a narrative of 'communism-as-total-social-trauma' (Rusu 2017, p. 1258). By incorporating familiar tropes of national victimhood, it frames the regime as "an appalling dictatorship, brought to Romania by the Red Army and implemented with the help of the local communists—many of whom were of Hungarian or Jewish origin—to which the Romanians resisted heroically, but their resolute resistance was eventually crushed because the scale of repression was greater than anywhere else in Sovietized Europe" (Petrescu and Petrescu 2009, p. 82). This strand of domestic memory politics is complemented by the instrumental anti-communism of centre-right parties (particularly PD and PNL), which mobilise confrontationist strategies of handling the communist past to electoral ends (Rusu 2017). Distinctly shaped by these dynamics of remembrance, the historiographic coverage of protochronist thought also exhibits, much like protochronism itself, a resilient dialectic of national exceptionalism and national victimhood.

The 1995 collective volume *Miturile comunismului românesc* [The Myths of Romanian Communism], edited by widely respected historian Lucian Boia, is an illustrative example of postsocialist historiography, particularly through its methodological preference for theories of historical narrativity and the study of mentalities and

political myths. In it, literary critic Eugen Negrici authors the chapter "Mitul patriei primejduite" [The Myth of the Endangered Homeland], which criticizes the literary production of chauvinistic national communism, humorously accusing it of bothersome predictability. Targeting the notorious self-victimizing stance of the protochronists, he explains the pervasive anxiety over national sovereignty in the following terms: "from the vague and persistent memory of the secular injustices of our eastern neighbour [. . .] was the myth of the endangered homeland reborn, reactivated, reinstated" (Negrici 1995, p. 51). Concluding his account, Negrici notes: "Some part of the naught of the act is thus recovered, but not its criminal meaning: a successful attack on the myth of the homeland, which prolongs its agony, and fractures, through resonance, all the other myths which ensure the stability of the national being: faith, honour, dignity" (Negrici 1995, p. 56). Therefore, Negrici dissociates the mutant, aesthetically degrading patriotic production of national communism from the tenets of traditional nationalism, which is thus irreversibly tainted by its role in the self-imagining of the regime.

It is within a similar framework that protochronism is approached within the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. Inscribed within a wider bid by PD and PNL to secure the support of the anti-communist liberal electorate (Ernu et al. 2008), the work of the Tismăneanu-led Commission illustrates the confrontationist memory politics which dominate Romanian politics to this day (Rusu 2017). In the Report—which "reads like a political demonology of Romanian communism" (Rusu 2017, p. 1269)—protochronism is conceived as a form of "manipulative pseudonationalism" (Comisia Prezidenţială 2006, p. 632) operating within an ideology which "speculated nationalist inclinations, exploited and cultivated anti-Hungarian and antisemitic stances, instrumented deeply rooted anti-Russian resentments and encouraged the absurd attempts to demonstrate Romanian superiority over the Western world" (Comisia Prezidenţială 2006, p. 114). "Risen out of the yeast of national pride" (Comisia Prezidenţială 2006, p. 505) the institutional support received by protochronism is interpreted as a propaganda strategy, aimed at sabotaging and weakening the aesthetic, and thus ideological, liberties that local literary production had progressively gained over the late 1960s and early 1970s (Comisia Prezidenţială 2006, p. 505). Its associated cultural protectionism is explained as an attempt to isolate Romania "through creating the feeling that we do not need anybody and anything beyond the walls of the besieged City since, anyway, we live in glory and grandeur" (Comisia Prezidenţială 2006, p. 505).

A similar lens is adopted in Alexandra Tomiţă's 2007 monograph, *O istorie "glorioasă." Dosarul protocronismului românesc* [A "glorious" history. The file of Romanian protochronism]: "We can serenely conclude that protochronism, even in its doctrinarian, mature phase, was never anything more than a false idea which, when thrown on a fertile political soil, sprouted quickly and developed chaotically. Its thistles and briers have strangled the royal path of Romanian culture" (Tomiţă 2007, p. 319). Tomiţă's volume assembles a comprehensive, if biased, account of protochronism, its development and iterations. Heavily reliant on Boia's work—which had, up to that point, treated protochronism exclusively as "an experience of the Stalinist Soviet Union" (Tomiţă 2007, p. 8)—it employs similar theoretical grounds when depicting protochronism as "an effort of national-communism to maximally valorise a clus-

ter of self-produced myths, to cheaply and efficiently compensate for endemic shortage and societal crisis" (Tomiţă 2007, p. 9). Notably, the volume includes an analysis of the post-socialist legacy of protochronism, tracing the fruitful post-1989 academic and cultural careers of its protagonists (of which Corneliu Vadim Tudor[23] remains the most relevant example). However, as Paul Cernat notes in a review, Tomiţă refrains from correlating protochronism "to an ampler phenomenon [. . .]: the radical critique of eurocentrism coming from the periphery" (Cernat 2007). Tomiţă's reluctance to acknowledge peripherality and anti-imperialism as decisive for the emergence and cultural relevance of protochronism is itself symptomatic of a wider strand of anti-communist, Western-facing intellectual production.

An attempt to locate protochronism within a wider historical narrative and elide its exceptionalism as communist-era cultural deviation surfaces in Lionel Roşca's early 2010s work. In his monograph, Roşca emphasises how, due to the ideological imperatives guiding both proponents and detractors, protochronism is unfairly perceived as a monolithic cultural moment, with robust institutional and theoretical backing. However, it is neither—"marked by a congenital epistemological fragility" (Roşca 2014, p. 98), it is a historically embedded expression of conflicting identity narratives endemic to Romanian nation-building. As Roşca points out, the erudite protochronism of old-fashioned intellectuals like Papu ended up being little more than a Trojan horse for indigenist arguments, mobilized by the strong ideology of ethnonationalism to more modest ends than the historiography (particularly the Western one) might suggest. Ultimately, the protochronists were "neither 'the fundament of Ceauşescu's nationalist tyranny' (The Report of the Presidential Commission), nor 'the new Pretorian guard' of the regime (A. Tomiţă)" (Roşca 2014, p. 100). In a recent discussion of far-right party Alianţa pentru Unirea Românilor [Alliance for the Union of Romanians] (AUR),[24] Alexandra Coţofană engages a similarly historicizing approach. Noting the transnational salience of protochronist practice,[25] the author detaches protochronism from its Ceauşescu-era origins. Stringing together Nicolae Densuşianu's 1913 *Dacia Preistorică* [Prehistorical Dacia], the activities of the interwar far-right, Ceauşescu's 1971 theses, and the Facebook nation-branding strategy of far-right leader George Simion, Coţofană showcases the position of protochronism within the enmeshment of anti-modernism, anti-imperialism, and self-aggrandizing indigenism which frames Romanian nation-building. This historicizing posture proves critically fertile precisely because protochronism "can be traced historically and can have effects on policy and ways of governing" (Coţofană 2023, p. 261). It is by acknowl-

[23] A vocal member of the protochronist collective of the *Săptămâna* literary magazine, Corneliu Vadim Tudor became a central figure of post-1989 Romanian politics after founding the far-right party Partidul România Mare [Greater Romania Party], coming in second in the 2000 presidential elections.

[24] Founded in late 2019, AUR is an ultranationalist, Orthodox and culturally conservative party which entered the Romanian parliament in 2020. The first far-right party to succeed Corneliu Vadim Tudor's early 2000s PRM in mainstream Romanian politics, it has since gained substantial electoral support (securing around a fifth of the votes in the 2024 legislative elections) and established itself as the central pole of the Romanian sovereignist bloc. See Soare and Tufiş 2023; Crăciun and Ţăranu 2023.

[25] See Crowder (2012), p. 221 and Coţofană (2023), p. 261: "this ideological work is not unique to Romania. The protochronic nature of Albania suggests the nation is home to an older culture than the ancient Greeks (Aref, 2003), Estonia is argued to be the well-spring of all civilizations (Saks, 1966), former Georgian president Zviad Gamsahurdia was an avid promoter of Georgian protochronism (Nodia, 1996).".

edging its embeddedness in the nexus of pre-socialist Romanian nationalism that one can better estimate its post-socialist afterlife and trace its entry into the lexicon of contemporary extremist politics. This framing moderates the historiographical dualism which posits twenty-first century radical right politics as direct successors of the interwar far-right (Gheorghiu and Praisler 2022; Grapă and Mogoş 2023). Within the globally pervasive reckoning over the resurgence of right-wing populism—or is it (late/post-) fascism? (Toscano 2023; Steinmetz-Jenkins 2024)—this justified comparison partially obscures the cultural repertoires on which politicians like Georgescu or the AUR's George Simion rely in their narrative entrepreneurship (Bronk and Jacoby 2020). Although acknowledged in the literature (Bocancea 2024; Şandru 2024; Drăgulin 2024), this reliance of the strongly anti-communist far-right (Popescu and Vesalon 2023) on the inheritance of national communism is yet to be systematically approached.

I argue continuities are discernible in two ways. Firstly, within the inherited 'usable pasts' of the far-right, whose extractive employment of national history builds on the historiographical labor of national communism. Simion's entry in the political arena was announced via a promotional video shot in Sarmisegetusa, the presumed capital of Dacia, in which he is symbolically acknowledged by a Dacian as a herald of national dignity (Simion 2019; mentioned in Coţofană 2023). This move can be read against Ceauşescu's 1980 celebrations of the 2050th anniversary of the first Dacian state (Deletant 2019; Adam 2018). A similar ethos was obvious in AUR's 2024 campaigning ahead of the elections for the European Parliament, which was strongly reliant on the pantheon of medieval Romanian history (e.g., Ştefan the Great, Mihai the Brave, Mircea the Elder) assembled by communist historiography. Their portraits were used in electoral materials, actors impersonating them were brought on stage during political rallies, and fragments of the socialist epics were used in online campaigning (e.g., the official Europarlamentari AUR Facebook page). The degree to which communist nostalgia ensures the effectiveness of such campaigning remains unclear. Nevertheless, as substantial work in memory studies has showcased, the condemnatory stances of anti-communist intellectual production have done less to rhetorically disempower these cultural narratives of national communism than to ensure their polarising character (Petrović et al. 2023). It is precisely the widening gap between the 'winners' of transition, who embraced "the 'communism-as-collective-trauma narrative' developed by liberal democratic elites," and the 'losers', who find refuge in nostalgia towards the regime (Rusu 2017, p. 270) that is electorally exploited by the far-right in its referencing of socialist culture.

Secondly, astring ties together the political projects for the legitimation of which these 'usable pasts' are rallied in the first place—the phantasm of national sovereignty. The polycrisis-ridden 1970s and 2020s are linked by comparable calls to economic protectionism and cultural autarky. When nostalgically perceived as a precedent for economic sovereignty and fulfilled national exceptionalism, the Ceauşescu era itself becomes a 'usable past' for the contemporary far-right. The rhetoric of national exceptionalism it furnished—as culturally corroborated within protochronism—is politically resourceful for the likes of Georgescu precisely because the protectionist logic which engendered it is consonant with his baseline anti-globalism.

Conclusions

In their analysis of Romanian national characterology during the postsocialist decades, Iordachi and Trencsényi make a valuable point: "the polarity between Westernizers and autochthonists has never been fixed: its specific content and participants are permanently changing, depending on the social-political and ideological mutations in society" (Iordachi and Trencsényi 2003, p. 451). As this article has aimed to show, this structural dichotomy of Romania's political modernity is discernible across the socialist decades and beyond them, in the pendulation of cultural discourse between self-aggrandizing and self-victimizing. Few political contexts have been more illustrative of this dynamic than Georgescu's first round win, which has reconfigured domestic politics within the Manichean logic of pro- and anti-Europeanness. Streamlined by the tenets of Romanian exceptionalism, Georgescu's new-found centrality in domestic politics—as well as the consistent amassing of domestic support by far-right parties—prompts critical reflection on the intellectual sources of his mysticist populism. Alongside the interwar legionary movement, English distributism, and the tenets of sustainable development, protochronism is one such source.

Aiming to nuance the historical dualism which most often posits the contemporary far-right alongside their interwar predecessors, my analysis of protochronism offers historical context to some of its central claims before tracing its post-socialist reception within the hegemonically anti-communist cultural field. This reading acknowledges the protochronist episode as a historically coherent mutation of a national ideology which both precedes and outlives it, and enables further inquiry into how the cultural production of national communism is revived, reframed, and instrumentalized to various political ends. The diagrammatic account assembled here gestures to gaps in the historiography of protochronism—its institutionalisation within the social sciences, the story of its marginalisation and survival in the diaspora, and further hybridisation with the 1990s nation-building process(es) are yet to be comprehensively approached, as is its enmeshment with anti-communist nationalism, transnational conservatism, and post-truth politics which lies at the heart of today's radical right.

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