

History

The Polarized Progress of Romania and Bulgaria

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 14 min read

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Many may not realize it right now, but Romania and Bulgaria are of major strategic political importance in today's world, and will be more so in the near future as current world issues sit. Now that the US has embarked on a strategic relationship with both nations, is it important for leaders to maintain knowledge of the political, social, and national history both nations struggled through, and to which have greatly shaped their respective issues today. Understanding each nations respective history – shared through common experience within a common struggle – is essential for a more globalized understanding of their relationship, but also to the efforts of strong ties and diplomacy.

This is an historical analysis of the modern history of both Romania and Bulgaria. Two old East Bloc states who each sit so close, yet so far from modernization. The way each has chosen to seek out progress after the Soviet collapse and subsequent failed statehood, is a testament to their different cultures to be sure. Yet despite differences in culture, they each still carry old chains from the past.

There exists a sharp double-edged sword that was created at the fall out of the Soviet collapse. From 1989 through 1992, Europe, and indeed the world, would see a shift in powers at nearly all levels as the Cold War ended and a new era began. Casting aside the shackles of the past, new nations found their independence restored, but at the cost of many great struggles. Some stuck out on a new path of development and recreation of national identity, others simply found it difficult to let go of the past. When gauging the results of the new era, we find proof of this sword's existence among the very nations forced into its forge during the four-year-long transition. There exists a certain level of polarization among states looking towards the future of the West while stuck reflecting on the East. To highlight this, we have to look no further than a pair of Balkan states so intermingled, yet so far apart in the idea of progress. Romania and Bulgaria exist today as bordering nations so stuck on progress that simply crossing the border can send a person back in time to the Soviet era. Two nations so stuck as they have been polarized by the East/West pull of progress versus reflection.

Bulgaria had it easy when it came to the Soviet assimilation. It did not fight its inclusion into the Soviet system, and upon the system's emerging collapse, did not see the motivation for rebellion as most of its neighbors displayed. Instead, Bulgaria was dependent on the system, thankful for it, and even could be said to have prospered from it to an extent. Essentially, the not-so-technologically advanced nation was better equipped in farming than any other industry, a market it saw continuous growth in even with its assimilation into the USSR. As a result, its economy was stable, even if its political affairs were not. Nevertheless, this was not to last. Ultimately, for Bulgaria, it was not necessarily the collapse of the USSR that thrust reform into action; it was political actions from its own government that interfered with Bulgaria's economic well-being that holds that claim.

In 1984, the already corrupt Todor Zhivkov, general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, embarked on a campaign to create a prominent "Bulgarian" identity for the state. He did this by banning its Turkish citizens from their ethnic identities. Anything that did not conform to the idea of what Bulgaria was or should be, was outlawed. For the Turks, this was everything from their very names, to their Muslim religion and customs. When they refused to conform, he banned them as a culture from living in Bulgaria all together. His government began operations to gather and expel Turks in mass from the nation, and opened up their now empty homes and left-behind possessions for sale to the remaining Bulgarian populations. However, what he failed to realize, was that a significant portion of the Bulgarian skilled work force was now gone, and Bulgaria's economic well-being was now at jeopardy.

The exile of the Turks had destabilized Bulgaria's economy, causing its production to slow, and over time, take a nosedive. As a result of lower production and exportation, the nation's income trickled and the people themselves felt the sting of Zhivkov's decisions. The controversy had begun to grow and spread across the nation, and by 1989, Bulgaria's foreign minister, Petar Mladenov, felt enough was enough, and led a peaceful coup in the Politburo. Zhivkov, now in his late 70's, resigned on November 9th of that year, the same day the Berlin Wall started coming down. Yet the struggle for reform had only just begun.

The nation of Bulgaria was communist through and through, and hard-lined communists became the roadblocks to progress that the nation so badly needed. Zhivkov was arrested and put on trial, while Mladenov took power and reversed Zhivkov's policies. By December of that same year, Turks were once again welcomed back into the nation – along with their cultural identities – but now all those who took advantage of their exile were fearful that their newfound possessions would soon be stripped away from them. It is understandable, of course, as these were simple people who, by all accounts of the Soviet system, were not used to having or maintaining much to begin with. What little they gained from the expulsion of the Turks initially, they had grown to covet.

Furthermore, bad blood had already existed between the Bulgarian people and the Turks. The Turks had invaded Bulgaria hundreds of years prior, and since their advancement north was held at bay by Romanian forces, Bulgarians suffered throughout the centuries as a result. To say the Bulgarians were not fond of the idea that Turks would be returning would have been an understatement, and the communists knew this. Despite the fact that the USSR was in turmoil, the breakup did not exactly motivate the nation to follow suit. Communists used the resentment of the Turks to their advantage in a swift campaign to undermine the new

reintegration efforts, and this persisted in making change within the old Soviet bloc increasingly more difficult to produce. Even after the brief 1991 to 1995 reform period – when anti-Communists finally had the power to fight back, old communist officials were prosecuted, and more Democratic reforms were pushed into the spotlight – the purge of Communism was thwarted yet again due to economic depression.

Stagnation in the economic growth of the state itself gave rise to increasing rates of crime as the nation struggled to implement change. As a result, this gave the old communists another leg to stand on, and by 1995, they had once again been restored to power. Of course, as we all know, communism does not allow for economic growth, and the nation was soon on the brink of total collapse. Disaster loomed as the state protected its own power and assets, which only caused inflation to skyrocket. 1997 brought another try at capitalistic reform, but no matter how hard it tried to take root, the nation still suffered.

Today, the history of Bulgaria's struggle to change since the fall of the USSR is still very apparent. Walking through nearly any location within the country will prove that communism still readily exists within its borders. Strong, prominent Soviet figures and marks can be found nearly everywhere, and everything from the vast poorness of the people, to the types of conversations to avoid with locals, show how the nation has struggled since the collapse. Bulgaria – even after its recent acceptance into a loose NATO trial alliance (for the agreement of aid and military training) – is still a nation struggling to define itself as it plays a game of tug-of-war with its past communist attachments against its desire to progress.

If one wanted to find a greater example for such sharp contrasting struggles, they need only to look to Bulgaria's northern neighbor. Romania was practically the embodiment of all things Soviet, and was a magnification of Bulgaria's struggles in nearly every way. However, Romania did not prosper from economic exchanges within the Warsaw Pact as Bulgaria did, but in fact suffered greatly at the hands of a dictatorial regime that would make Stalin himself proud. Additionally, while Romania's arguably suffered from one of the worst Communist oppressions of the era, also in contrast to the Bulgarian conundrum, Romania made leaps and bounds towards reform after the fall of the USSR, then again at another round of collapse and turmoil. While we could say that Bulgaria stood as a testament to the slow and steady, Romania would then become a stark magnification of state struggles with polarization.

By the 1980's, Romanian dictator (proclaimed "President"), Nicolae Ceaușescu, had, since 1965, run Romania straight into the ground in nearly every way. The overwhelming majority of Romanian natural resources were exported, traditional culture was suppressed, entire populations were forced to conform under state threat, interaction with foreigners was outlawed, freedom of expression and speech were under tight subjugation, and anyone who expressed discontent were immediately repressed and/or arrested and detained. By the 1970's, any wealth the nation might have used for internal prosperity was gone, energy shortages were the norm, food was often scarce, and the black market took a firm root into the everyday life of citizens.

The people suffered. Many would die of starvation; the nation simply had no outside support and lacked the internal structure to support itself. Since abortion was illegal, growing problems existed in orphaned populations that exploded while thousands of mothers died horrible deaths from self-abortion attempts. Additionally, Romanian's hated the Russians, and despite the fact that Romania had joined the Warsaw Pact, it refused to include itself within the alliance. This both isolated the state and decreased any chance it might have stood at gaining any economic benefit. By the 1980's, Romanian life was so grim that it became the key source to a growing unrest the people themselves unconsciously understood, but had yet to realize. That, of course, finally reached a turning point at the treatment of a lone Pastor.

By 1989, Ceaușescu's policies had become so harsh on the Romanian people that pure hate had slowly crept into the hearts of the people towards him. That December, Ceaușescu's regime was right in the middle of oppressing yet another citizen – a Pastor of a lone Protestant church in the town of Timisoara – that the people couldn't stand by any longer. Open public opposition to the government's treatment of the Pastor quickly sprang into action as hundreds of people formed a human blockade around the church, shouted anti-governmental slogans, and burned books. Security forces swarmed to the scene, and began opening fire, point-blank, at the crowd. Some officers were so torn at the idea of mass murdering unarmed civilians, that they suddenly grew a conscience, refused to fire on the crowd, and paid the price as their own peers quickly turned on them, shooting them dead one by one on sight.

News of the even spread like wildfire across the Romanian countryside, and the people were pissed. This was the event that began Romania's transition, and its fruition came shortly after during a December 21st governmental rally in the capital of Bucharest. Ceaușescu had organized a show of support for his regime, but the event turned to overthrow when students began shouting anti-government slogans. Within a matter of moments, the whole crowd joined in and the palace square was filled with the shouts of dissidents screaming "Down with Ceaușescu!" Ceaușescu fled with his wife by helicopter while telling his security police to literally crush the crowds. But it mattered not; his reign of terror was soon to come to a complete end as violent widespread revolution ignited across the nation. Both Ceaușescu and his wife were instantly captured, put on trial and publicly executed by a horde of volunteer shooters shortly after.

Like Bulgaria, the change in government did not bring true change to the nation's economic standpoint. Instead, like a magnified version of Bulgaria's affair with change, Romania suffered for a long time from communist resistance and those whose livelihood was tied directly to the old communist ways. Further still, many communist elite were fearful of the repercussions they might face if the people were to ever learn of their role in Ceaușescu's reign. This became the motivation for Ion Iliescu to take over the government and instill himself as the nation's newest dictator. He followed many of Ceaușescu's previous examples, quickly attacking minorities and siding with conservative right-wing parties. Yet even he could only provide part of the roadblock communists desired, as by the late 1990's, Romania was steadily on the road to Westernization.

By 2000, a completely Democratic government was elected to power, and the nation finally opened itself to full-on western progress. As a result, it benefited from a massive increase in economic status and growth rates throughout the entirety of the European continent. This, unfortunately only lasted until 2009, as the nation was not fully prepared for such fast paced growth, and in its struggle to keep up, suffered from another economic recession following the 2008 worldwide market crashes. What happened next would thrust the nation into yet another stage of unrest as the nation's political system was forcefully dissolved by the people. From 2009 to the end of 2012, Romania was without a real government. It suffered again at economic loss, became the largest IMF debtor in the world by 2010, and incurred the wrath of political overthrows by 2012. In fact, the only thing that has managed to keep the nation afloat to this day is the fact that it became both an EU and NATO member within the last decade.

Both Romania and Bulgaria today are slowly working on progress together with the help and aid of the European Union and NATO Allies. They are on the path to a creepingly slow recovery, but this is primarily due to their refusal to let go of a communist past. While Bulgaria is a solid example of slow and steady progress, Romania's stark contrast of past brutality sparked a near instant desire to seek out progress and change – to which it simply was unprepared to keep up with. In both states do we see their desire to look towards a more Western future while a refusal to let go of the past holds them back little by little. They are so polarized, even in their own cultures that it is difficult to say where the line of the past ends and the future actually begins. Bulgaria has had a difficult time finding its place in the new era, and Romania is still struggling with unrest and a failed political system. However, it is not as if there is no hope for the future. The collapse of the Soviet system left them both adrift in an ocean of possibilities; alone to figure out which to take hold of. As both nations continue to shrug off the chains of the past, their willingness to take hold of the life rafts of progress in the last decade alone is a testament to the improvement that could surely follow.

Questions to ponder:

1. What are YOUR thoughts on the modern history of these two nations?
2. How do you think your understanding of the history these nations shared could help you as a leader in the future?
3. From a Globalized Leadership perspective, do you think the knowledge gained from understanding the history Romania and Bulgaria lived through could be useful to a situation in which you are sent to live and work in a foreign nation and culture? How?

Post YOUR replies in the **comments section below** so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

References:

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About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.