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(In)formal distribution channels in Romania during the 1980s: Entrepreneurial foreign students within the Second Economy*

Abstract: This article explores the role of entrepreneurial foreign students in the entangled informal networks of the second economy in Romania during the 1980s by questioning an underexplored part of the distribution chain, namely the provision of commodities missing or in short supply which further fueled the black market. Using a network analysis that traced improbable connections, we identified an unexpected channel in the form of international trade fairs, seen here as potential occasions where informal links are most likely to be first realized. The case study figured the second economy as a transnational place where various actors competed in the generation of hard currency.

Keywords: Transnational networks, communism, cross-border flows, shortage economy, second economy

Introduction

Native from Congo, Victor Yila arrived in Romania for studies in 1983. His story¹ is similar, in many respects, to those of other foreign students who studied in socialist Romania, mainly in terms of everyday experiences in a time when the economic crisis and the dictatorial regime were progressing to their

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1 Victor Yila, "Mie îmi place România, nu plec!", *Între patrii. Mărturii despre identitate și exil*, ed. Mirela Florian, Ioana Popescu, (Iași: Polirom, 2006), 97–110.

peak.² Aliens in a foreign country, these students were navigating through a different social order and culture to make ends meet, within various matters: refraining to befriend Romanian students due to a strict legislation concerning the contact of locals with foreign citizens,³ a somewhat easier supply from the hard currency shops,⁴ some occasional transactions of in-demand products on the black market,⁵ or the apparently sympathetic approach by some Romanian fellow students, who later proved to be zealous informants for the local *Securitate*.⁶ The common thread of all the above is the development of relationships and connections embedded in different degrees of informality, a research topic which was discussed mainly in regard to the economic sector, and to the emergence of a second economy around commodities and services missing or in short supply. The case study approached in this article brings a new insight into the exploration of the second economy and the role of the

2 In 1982, the Romanian party leadership decided to pay in advance the whole foreign debt that resulted in radical cuts in imports and the export of virtually all types of commodities. Massive shortages in the supply of consumer goods and the decrease of living standards called for comparisons with war-time consumption practices.

3 A 1958 law was first concerned with this offense, but apparently it was unevenly enforced, see Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and truths: ethnography in the archive of Romania's secret police*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014), 252. Several years later, another law regulated formal and professional relationships with foreign citizens: see the "Law no. 23 of December 17/1971" concerning the defense of the state secret in the Socialist Republic of Romania. This law was reinforced by mid-1980s with the "Decree no. 408/1985 concerning some measures related to the defense of state secret and the way of establishing relations with foreigners" which was never published, therefore the monitoring of all contacts with foreigners was generalized; Romanians were required to sign a commitment to respect the law (the unpublished decree) and to report the content of interactions with foreigners by whatever means they happened: meetings, (in)formal discussions, phone conversations etc., see ACNSAS, *Documentary Fund*, Folder D0013376, vol 12.

4 The hard currency shops (called "Dollar shops") were supplying imported merchandise of better quality for foreign customers: tourists, students, or business travelers. In charge with this activity was the "Comturist" agency, which had shops in hotels, airports, border points, etc. and sold goods through 123 units: 14 in Bucharest, 75 on the Black Sea coast, and 34 in other cities located on the main tourist routes. Other shops in hotels belonged to the county tourism councils. Complaining about the chronic food shortages he encountered during the first weeks of his stay, Victor Yila was fortunate enough to be given a pass from his embassy, that allowed him to shop from the diplomatic stores in Bucharest. The latter were accessible only for the Romanian high leadership and for members of foreign embassies and missions, and one could find a wide assortment of goods, from groceries to household and media staples, cf. Yila, *Op. cit.*, 98.

5 Mainly blue jeans and cigarettes.

6 Romania's Secret Police, similar in mission and scope to the other specialized bodies in the Eastern bloc: KGB, Stasi, StB, etc.

foreign students in the entangled informal networks that unfolded throughout the countries of the Eastern communist bloc during the last decade of the Cold war and the emerging globalization of the 1980s.

Given its concealed nature, accounts on the second economy in the Eastern bloc moved progressively from anecdotal and ethnographic essays that associated informality and the second economy with questions of (il)legality, to contributions based on more refined analytical tools that addressed the interplay of formal and informal activities within the second economy, “the least ‘socialist’ sector of the economy”.⁷ As the literature review will shortly reveal, recent interdisciplinary endeavours brought to the fore not only more nuanced narratives that captured the complexity of socialist life, but added several interrogations on processes that are less visible when one questions longer time frames. Building on the latter, this article moves the discussion to a network analysis approach and aims to uncover new perspectives in the way informality can be questioned during the late socialist years in Romania. Here comes into play the study of the role played by entrepreneurial foreign students in the second economy, examined as part of a “pluri-functional and polycentric system of interconnected actors.”⁸

*Informality and the second economy
in Socialist Romania during the 1980s*

Recent years have brought a global turn in the historiography of Eastern Europe that combine comparative and transnational approaches of the region, mostly regarding the communist period. Several works thus consider the 1980s as a time when globalization was not a singular process, but rather refers to a multiplicity of competing policy and political projects, as well as processes of globalization from below.⁹

7 József Böröcz, *Informality and the Second Economy in East-Central Europe*, (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 1992), 2–3.

8 François Constantin, “L’informel internationalisé ou la subversion de la territorialité,” *Cultures & Conflits* 21–22/1996, 1–25.

9 Jonathan Davis, *The Global 1980s: People, Power and Profit*, (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2019); James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobias Rupprecht, Ljubica Spaskovska, 1989. *A Global History of Eastern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, ed. James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, Steffi Marung, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); *Piratages audiovisuels. Les voies souterraines de la mondialisation culturelle*, ed. Tristan Mattelart, (Louvain-la-Neuve: De Boeck Supérieur, 2011); *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe*, ed. Cristofer Scarboro, Diana Mincyte, Zsuzsu Gille, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

On the other had, a rich scholarship from the Cold war years¹⁰ focused on the complementarity of informality and the black market, which were framed mainly as a “deviation”, or “an institutionalized pathology.”¹¹ This approach was lately tempered and explored by researchers familiar with inside aspects of the system, doubled by sound anthropological and sociological analysis.¹² From cross country comparisons to case studies that view informal transactions of the second economy beyond some widely held, yet oversimplified image of an illegal activity, current studies observed continuities and ruptures throughout long-term social processes, and questioned both the theological view of 1989 as ground zero for the advent of consumerist cultures, and the metanarratives of the Cold War that were still unfolding during the 1990.¹³

The study of the 1980s decade in Socialist Romania poses the challenge of exploring what lies beyond the accounts of the country as an isolated site of national Stalinism. In a previous paper on the bureaucratic gaps that emerged from outdated or incomplete regulations of trade operations, I questioned several significant factors that influenced economic, social, and cultural developments throughout 1980s.¹⁴ Amongst these figured (1) the foreign debt

10 The bibliography elaborated by Grossman covers over 150 publications dedicated to the second economy in the URSS and Eastern Europe, while other studies approach the subject exploring causes, forms, and consequences for long term economic developments, see Gregory Grossman, Vladimir Treml, *The Second Economy in the USSR and Eastern Europe: A Bibliography*, Berkeley-Duke Occasional Papers on the Second Economy in the USSR, (Durham: Duke University, 1985); Steven Sampson, “The Second Economy of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 493/1987, 120–136; Horst Brezinski, Paul Petersen, “The Second Economy in Romania,” *The Second Economy in Marxist States*, ed. Maria Łoś, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

11 Małgorzata Irek, *Travelling with the Argonauts: Informal Networks Seen without a Vertical Lens*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 140.

12 See Alexey Yurchak who explored “the internal paradoxes of life under socialism”, Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), and Alena Ledeneva inviting to chart the underexplored field of the “blat” as a series of practices which enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable, but also subverted it, Alena Ledeneva, *Russia’s economy of favours: Blat, networking and informal exchange*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

13 Besides Yurchak and Ledeneva, see Anne E. Gorsuch, Diane P. Koenker, *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), Susan Reid, „Cold War binaries and the culture of consumption in the late Soviet home”, *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 1/2016, 17-43, Martin H. Folly, „Review: Cold War Dichotomies”, *Journal of American Studies* 3/2000, 503-508.

14 Alexandra Bardan, „Bureaucratic Gaps in the 1980s: Diasporas, Transnational Solidarity Networks, and the Second Economy”, *New Europe College Yearbook 2021–2022* (forthcoming).

crisis that generated new strategies through which Romanian companies obtained hard currency, (2) the austerity measures that impacted everyday life with consumption practices recalling war-time scarcity and shortages, (3) a series of double standards which allowed certain categories of the population to legally have access to hard currency either by working or by having relatives abroad¹⁵ and (4) the (mainly) western technological and telecommunications developments that added supplementary connections between diasporic communities and kin groups in Romania. All these factors fueled and facilitated in various ways the expansion of transnational (in)formal solidarity networks that compensated for the regular shortages of consumer goods. Moreover, other scholars proposed interdisciplinary perspectives that brought to the fore bottom-up approaches and social processes which enlighten, albeit through incidental accounts, the dynamics of informal trade networks.¹⁶

Considering the image of Socialist Romania as one of the most isolated countries in the communist bloc, one should regard at least two aspects: it pertains mainly to the restrictions on international mobility, on contacts with citizens from other countries and to a heavily controlled media system, while it is also worth noting that the commercial liaisons with foreigners were sought after, albeit despised for the fear of undesired external ideological influences.¹⁷ In this vein, the (in)formal transnational trade tends to be overlooked, although several accounts place Romania as a dynamic place for the exchange of hard currency, informal trading with the locals was reported to be a much

15 Regulations concerning the possession and the handling of hard currency date back to the “Law no. 284 of August 14/ 1947 for the transfer to the National Bank of Romania of gold, effective currencies and other foreign means of payment.” However, during the early 1970s three new decrees allowed certain people to acquire with foreign currency durable goods (produced in the country or imported), to have personal accounts in foreign currency if they worked in other countries and to build, buy or repair houses and holiday lodging.

16 *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, ed. Paula Bren, Mary Neuberger, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

17 Tourism is illustrative for the ambivalent approach of communist authorities. Even during the period of controlled détente and liberalization of the 1960s, the logic of the Cold War prevailed by implicitly framing foreign tourists as potential spies, while the population had to be protected from the negative influence of foreign-mediated capitalist values, mediated through lifestyles, practices of consumption, fashion, and ideas that were different from the socialist model. However, commercial tourism was an important source of hard currency, that was necessary to finance other sectors of the economy and was also a means of reducing the foreign debt.

better experience that in other countries from southeastern Europe¹⁸ and, due to chronic shortages, in Romania it was the buyers who looked for the sellers.¹⁹ Another important factor should be thus considered, by following the trail of hard currency: accesible for foreign students, but not for the large majority of the population, it also figures as an important resource for paying in advance the foreign debt. The latter is currently associated with the harsh austerity measures in Romania and with the common paradigm of “economy of shortage” throughout the countries of the Eastern European communist bloc. I argue that “following the money” leads to a series of case studies uncovering several anomalies that cut across the East-West divide, such as the trading of luxury and premium goods, and a “hard currency discrimination” that reinforced in the long term some double standards embedded in the socialist consumer culture, long before 1989.

The field, the sources, and the method

As mentioned previously, foreign students in Socialist Romania will be approached as part of a “pluri-functional and polycentric system of interconnected actors,” a theoretical model developed by François Constantin during the 1990s and inspired by his work on the political economies of African countries. Constantin moved away from the initial framing of informality as a problematic activity containing small units of action that functioned on the margins of the law, and called for a broader context, where references span from multinational corporations to transnational family ties. This new model invites one to see transnational networks outside geographies, in a constant flow, where there is no leader, and which are fuelled by win-win transactional interactions. Małgorzata Irek, a Polish anthropologist with more than 30 years of fieldwork in Eastern Europe, emphasized the horizontal nature of informality, where the “ethnography is not confined to a ‘site’ or a number of specified ‘sites’, but instead it flows freely with the actors,”²⁰ escaping the logic of geographical and social scales. The two models encourage a more flexible and non-linear approach of an informal trade network, although at first sight

18 Irek, *Op. cit.*, 189–193, Valentin Hossu-Longin, „Dura lex, sed lex,” *România Pitorească* 5/1985, 110; “Foreign students flock to Romania”, 5. 10. 1986, Item FF185, HU OSA 300-60-1-169-9, Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

19 Florentina Ţone, “Noi toți ne suspectam unii pe ceilalți”, *Bișnițari, descercăreți, supraviețuitori*, ed. Zoltan Rostas, Antonio Momoc, (București: Curtea Veche, 2013), 66–90.

20 Irek, *Op. cit.*, 167.

the foreign students, at least the entrepreneurial actors of this community, may solely describe peripheral players whose engagement within the region and the global is marginal at best.

The story of Victor Yila,²¹ who was aided by his ambassador to obtain, via the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a special commercial pass sheds some light into the case where his entry in the community of buyers from the diplomatic shops in Bucharest was formalized without great difficulties. Victor Yila lived and attended courses in Pitesti, but got supplies from Bucharest once every two weeks, where he traveled by car. Although his story does not fit into the pattern of the entrepreneurial students, his example highlights a key idea where informal trade networks can be scrutinized, namely the idea of improbable connections. This notion becomes the red thread that will guide the triangulation of information based on the content analysis of several archival sources and artefacts, from personal photographs to advertisements and commercial catalogs, through a case study method.²² I also conducted 2 interviews with actors whose experiences touched the topic of informal trade networks and the foreign students community, and added 4 previous interviews with respondents which informed on student life during the 1980s. For the critical reading of the *Securitate* archival funds, still subject of much controversy,²³ Kathrine Verdery provides a series of valuable insights. A closer look into the circulation of the *Securitate* documents²⁴ allows to retrace trajectories, connections and networks not only of people, but also for cases²⁵ and economic entities,²⁶ raising the challenge to deal rather with the excess of information, not with the lack of it. Numerous files had multiple authors as well as several layers of information on a given topic, from typed documents and handwritten notes to reports that combined both forms of written communication in a “site at which knowledge about ‘reality’ was concentrated through collecting

21 Yila, *Op. cit.*, 98.

22 Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 5th edition, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014).

23 Lavinia Stan, “Inside the Securitate Archives”, The Cold War International History Project, *Wilson Center*, published 4 March 2005 on <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/inside-the-securitate-archives>, retrieved 15 September 2022.

24 Verdery, *Op. cit.*, 67–71.

25 Called “case files”, they gathered information on target groups or specific topics which were considered important from an intelligence perspective, cf. Lavinia Stan, *Op. cit.*

26 The latter were known as “objective files” and focused on the activity of various Romanian companies, due to their line of work and commercial liaisons with foreign commercial actors.

endless amounts of information”,²⁷ corroborating facts, demanding more intel, calling for the attention of other departments etc.

Foreign students in Socialist Romania

A 1989 dispatch from the local news agency Agerpres estimated that more than 20.000 foreigners have graduated from Romania’s universities in the previous ten years.²⁸ Correlated with other sources, these figures inform on the evolution of the internationalization of higher education not only in Romania, but in a broader perspective. A first reference²⁹ outlines the foreign students’ enrollment in the country, and points to a steady evolution in numbers, from 4.971 freshmen in 1975 to a peak of 16.962 new students in 1981, followed by a constant decline until the end of the decade. Additional statistics allow to correlate this decrease not only to the economic crisis and the deterioration of living standards in Romania, but also to a “levelling off in the flows of foreign students to the countries of Europe,”³⁰ given that international mobility had already reached its peak by the early 1980s and the focus of foreigners shifted towards postgraduate, doctoral studies and research. At the same time, one can also note a slight decrease starting with 1980 in the number of Romanian students enrolled each year.

Related to the shares of foreign students in the total number of enrolled students, available data for 1980–1983 point to Romania as leader among the countries of the communist bloc, with an average of 8.6% foreign students,³¹ followed by Bulgaria with 4.9%, Hungary with 2.6% and Czechoslovakia with 1.97%. Input from the RFE/RL research reports give a quite accurate picture regarding the sociodemographic profile of the students’ community, stemming from the strong ties developed by socialist Romania to the non-aligned coun-

27 Katherine Verdery, „Ethnography in the Securitate Archive”, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae* 1–2/2014, 12.

28 Romanian Monitoring, Agerpres, 3 May 1989, Item ZCZC, HU OSA 300-60-1-169-9, Records of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Research Institute; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

29 The long-term trends are based on data from the National Institute for Statistics and UNESCO, in Valentin Maier, “Foreign students enrolled in the Medicine and Pharmacy Higher Education in Romania”, *Clujul Medical* 2/2016, 307–312.

30 The European Centre for Higher Education, “Foreign Students in the countries of the Europe region: basic statistical data”, *Higher Education in Europe* 11/1986, 68–79.

31 The percentage is similar to Austria and Belgium at that time, cf. The European Centre for Higher Education, *Op. cit.*

tries of the Third World, to the Middle East and Arab countries of the region,³² as well as foreign students with Romanian background.³³ A 1982 report estimated that 16.000 students came from Africa, Asia and Latin America, 4.000 from West Germany, 1.000 from Israel, more than 3.000 from Greece and a smaller number from the US, Canada, United Kingdom, and Japan. At the beginning of the 1970s, 40% of the students opted for polytechnical studies, 40% for a medical curriculum, and around 20% for courses in agriculture, economics, architecture and arts, but starting with 1975 there was a steady increase in the number of foreign students in medicine and pharmacy.³⁴ Although Romania's policy for integrating the foreigners in the university life included courses in Romanian language and regular academic disciplines, some shared facilities and extracurricular activities, the foreign students were surreptitiously separated in campuses. This isolation came from the restrictions refraining locals to be in contact with students from other countries, but also from the double standards embedded in the foreigner's status, meaning better living conditions, international mobility,³⁵ access to hard currency shops and other facilities.³⁶

A cross reference of archival sources from that period depicts a complex and contradictory image of the topic. In the official discourse,³⁷ the foreign students appear as part of a larger, ambitious project of the Romanian state, in the aim to open its prestigious higher education to the world, in particular to non-aligned countries. A hidden discourse stemming from the *Securitate*³⁸ carries an explicit anti-western stance, since the foreign students were mediators of bourgeois cosmopolitanism, providers of alien cultures and habits to a stra-

32 Linked to mutual projects and Romanian workforces exported to Syria and Iraq. A significant detail is that Romania was sending only 680 students to study abroad in 1985.

33 "Situation Report: Romania, 14 June 1973", 14 June 1973, HU OSA 300-8-47-192-24, „Situation Report: Romania, 8 December 1982”, 8 December 1982. HU OSA 300-8-47-206-21, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Publications Department: Situation Reports; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

34 Maier, *Op. cit.*

35 Foreigners were granted several exit visas.

36 Besides material privileges, foreign students benefited of low fees, of scholarships, a somewhat easier access to attend prestigious degrees (such as the medical schools), some undergraduate studies were exempt of an entrance examination (a high school diploma and certificate of aptitudes sufficed). They were also excused from self-administrative tasks and from political ideological courses/ meetings.

37 Media and official party documents.

38 Andra-Octavia Drăghiciu, "Between 'totalitarianism' and 'terrorism'. An introductory study about the 'Arab' students in the Romanian Socialist Republic (1974–1989)", *Caietele CNSAS* 1–2/2013, 326.

tegic category of Romanian citizens, students that were preparing to become a reliable workforce in the national socialist project. One should also note the irony of the reports, since the foreigners were allegedly channeling corrupted practices, mediated by mundane products that had a high symbolical value at the time, as the bad influence was conveyed not only in problematic habits, but also in the lavish consumerism of jeans, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages.³⁹ The critical discourse, based on RFE/RL documents, reported the foreign students' topic mainly as an "education industry" providing a cashflow which was estimated at 5% of the hard currency needed to pay the external debt.⁴⁰ The downside of the process was the cosmopolitanism flowing from the campuses and the dynamic black-market activities in which entrepreneurial fellows were involved.

Foreign students had access to Western products that most locals were deprived of, because they could purchase scarce goods from the "Shop" stores, while they were also mediators of a Western pop culture. A respondent remembered that her cousin, an American citizen who studied in Bucharest, received regularly video cassettes, magazines, and records: "I remember how we heard that Bob Marley died. We received a phone call from my aunt, she wanted to tell us, because he was one of our favorite musicians."⁴¹ Testimonies convey narratives about campuses as a place where there was heavy traffic with "jeans, coffee, calculators, Kent, Gambrinus beer, tapes, Walkmans, you name it, even class notes, projects, pens for group leaders,"⁴² where in student dorms there were handmade advertisements that promoted a lively exchange of "up-to-date music, movies and magazines,"⁴³ in short, a privileged place where the offer was meeting the demand, not only for the student community, but also

39 The troublemakers were broadly seen as the Arab students, a very large category, regardless of the country that they were coming from. They were politically active, dynamic informal traders, buying constantly from the dollar shops, and held some problematic relationships with local Romanian women. Due to a few incidents, they were under constant surveillance suspecting channels for terrorism, cf. Drăghiciu, *Op. cit.*

40 "Situation Report: Romania, 8 December 1982", *Op. cit.*

41 Interview with Cristina Boboc, 12 June 2019.

42 Răzvan Băltărețu, "Fotografii cu studenții români din comunism, care-ți arată că facultatea nu s-a schimbat deloc", interview with Andrei Bîrsan, *Vice*, 28 September 2016, retrieved on 15 September 2022 from <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/vvex7j/studenti-din-comunism>, 76, Yila, *Op. cit.*, 98, Ovidiu Ohanesian, "Migranți în comunism", 15. 11. 2014, *AntiMafia*, retrieved on 15 September 2022 from <https://ohanesian.wordpress.com/2014/11/15/migranti-in-comunism-ep-1/>.

43 Interview with Bogdan Hrib, 26 June 2019.

for local entrepreneurs and customers, alike.⁴⁴ While much of the offer and demand topic was partially covered to date, there is little information about how the traders operated to provision the needed merchandise. The case study developed next aims to bring new insights into this question.

Entangled (in)formal networks of supply

I explored the case study from several perspectives, by interrogating the most current sources of provision used by the foreign students either for their own needs, or to be invested in further informal transactions with local fellows and lay people in search of scarce products.

In the context of chronic food shortages, foreign students would emulate local practices, since their tactics for obtaining food and fuel were largely the same of average Romanians, i.e., dealing with connections in the state commercial system and restaurants.⁴⁵ Foreigners had however the means to buy necessities from the hard currency shops and duty-free outlets. Diplomats and embassy members had access to two specialized shops in Bucharest, and since obtaining a pass was however possible, these sources were available to other categories of foreigners living in the country. An informed account from dr. David Haddaler⁴⁶ pointed towards other means of supply: on regular basis via telephone order-shops for groceries,⁴⁷ from a local shop at the embassy, and twice a year by ordering from the “Peter Justesen” company,⁴⁸ a worldwide duty-free

44 Țone, *Op. cit.* See also the documentary *Adevaruri despre trecut: Student străin în R. S. R.*, published 17 January 2021 on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyu4bCAcpgY>, retrieved 15 September 2022.

45 “Foreign students flock to Romania,” *Op. cit.* The local informal networks for food developed within the Romanian society were mainly based on family ties with rural households, see Steven Sampson, “Rich Families and Poor Collectives. The Second Economy in Romania”, *Bidrag til Östatsforskning* 1/1982.

46 Interview with dr. David Hadaller, 3 April 2022. Dr. Hadaller was a Fulbright Lecturer in Iasi during 1987–88, and currently documents this experience on the Facebook page: *My Fulbright Year in Romania*, www.facebook.com/DrHadaller. He was provided with an ID card allowing him to buy food and other items available at the food stores of the diplomatic corps in Bucharest. The permits were nominal, they were valid only accompanied by the holder’s identity document and were non-transferable. Dr. Hadaller also emphasized the harsh contrast between Romania and other countries from the communist bloc in terms of living standards and access to basic products.

47 Prices were in local currency, and access to order-shops were part of Fulbright accommodation package. Locals could also order groceries, yet according to testimonies the phone lines were always busy, making it difficult to place orders.

48 As reported by dr. Hadaller for his experience, US Fulbright fellows arriving in Romania were given a “Peter Justesen” catalogue and advised to place a first order right away. Dr.

retailer for embassies, consulates, and other international organizations.⁴⁹ The living experience gained throughout a year spent in Romania proved that ordering from the “Peter Justesen” catalogue was expensive, even for a foreigner, because the “Dollar shops” provided a wide assortment of merchandise at more competitive prices.

Insights from various accounts mark the hard currency shops, run by “Comturist” and local tourism bodies, as the privileged source of merchandise for foreign students engaged in informal trading. Seen as a “driving force behind Bucharest’s lively black market,”⁵⁰ the entrepreneurial fellows used hard currency to buy scarce goods, then resell the products to Romanians at inflated prices in the local currency. The sums were then changed back to dollars from tourists and businessmen, “at up to four or five times the official exchange rate.”⁵¹ Besides imported cigarettes (mainly Kent),⁵² coffee, beverages, soap, shampoo, and cosmetics were resold on the black market at higher prices. Frequent trips to Western countries were used to acquire gold and “suitcases full of blue jeans.”⁵³ The hard currency shops were also the source for household appliances and home electronics which were resold for tenfold their normal price.

However, it appears that even the hard currency shops were not exempt of shortages of various items. In late 1985, the Decree nr. 366 issued by the State Council regulated the activity of selling Romanian goods in convertible currency. Mircea Hranovschi, who worked as an economist at Comturist at that time, recalled some effects of the decree, since it stipulated that the “Dollar shops” should sell mainly goods manufactured in Romania, while the number of items approved for imports was cut down to five: coffee, cocoa, citrus, pea-

Hadaller compared the two lists he had made at that time, the first one without an informed context of buying, containing many misguided items, while the second order included scarce products and even household items (laundry detergent, a broom), besides snacks and beverages for socializing occasions. Both orders from the “Peter Justesen” catalogue were paid with personal money.

49 A 1985 advertisement published by the “Peter Justesen” company in the *Foreign Service Journal* (second interior cover) focused on the 1000 pages catalogue, a “cornucopia of the things you need for daily living, entertaining and recreation. It is also a splendid source of gift ideas.”

50 One of my informants mentioned an example where a foreign student received parcels from the family with goods to be resold.

51 “Foreign students flock to Romania”, *Op. cit.*

52 Kent was used as a currency to buy a wide range of goods and services, Garry Lee, “In Romania, Kent as Currency,” *The Washington Post*, 29. 8. 1987.

53 “Situation Report: Romania, 8 December 1982”, *Op. cit.*

nuts and color photographic films, while home electronics were excluded.⁵⁴ A letter to Radio Free Europe reported that a series of rumors circulated about an alleged closure of the “Dollar shops”, and of the mandatory exchange of the hard currency legally held by Romanians in bank accounts at a very low rate, 14 Lei for 1 \$, instead of 60 Lei, the black market rate. Apparently, the rumors prompted huge queues at shops, with a buying spree that cleared even a stock of hard-to-sell foreign goods.⁵⁵

Albeit there were noticeable cutbacks in provisioning the hard currency stores during the second half of the 1980s, a dynamic evolution of informal (and/or illicit) trade can be traced starting from 1984 in the classified ads published by the national daily *Romania Liberă*, where the number of sales ads for media equipment grew steadily every year.⁵⁶ The informal import networks were fueled by employees of local international transport companies, by performance athletes and teams, by Romanian citizens who worked abroad, and last, but not least, by foreign students. Another source of provision can be identified when linking the latter with a series of international trade fairs organized in Bucharest. This last example calls for improbable connections within informal networks, documented through the surveillance of the Securitate on economic topics.⁵⁷ Three trade fairs were organized by the “Peter Justesen” com-

54 Although imports were reduced by the decree nr. 366/1985, there were still means to provision the hard currency stores with foreign merchandise: the first one comes from a 1977 set of norms regarding “the regulation of accepting and using gifts received from foreign partners in the country or abroad”. The norms stipulated that objects should be used either to equip the enterprise with what was missing, or they were to be capitalized, with priority in foreign currency through “Comturist”, see ACNSAS, *Documentary Fund*, Folder D0016580, vol 1. The second source came from confiscations made by the Economic Militia who was tracing smugglers and speculators, interview with Mircea Hranovschi, 6 October 2022.

55 Gabriel Andreescu, Mihnea Berindei, *Ultimul deceniu comunist. Scrisori către Radio Europe Liberă*, Vol. 2, (Iași: Polirom, 2015), 63–65.

56 Radios, televisions, tape recorders, pick-ups, radio cassette players, jukeboxes, discs, cassettes, tapes, and videocassettes. The analysis was based on the number of the classified ads published in the first week of October, tracked for a period of 20 years – 1970–1989, see Alexandra Bardan, “Fenomenul video în România anilor ‘80: între secretul lui Polichinelle și Operațiunea ‘Mica publicitate’”, *Iscoada*, published on October 7, 2021 at www.iscoada.com/text/fenomenul-video-in-romania-anilor-80-intre-secretul-lui-polichinelle-si-operatiunea-mica-publicitate.

57 The trail of information points to the *Securitate* department of the city of Bucharest, the 2nd Directorate of Economic Counterespionage, informers from the “Comturist” agency, the Customs Warehouse from Chitila, the management of the Ministry of Tourism, and the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and International Economic Cooperation, see ACNSAS, *Documentary Fund*, Folder D0008853, vol 23.

pany, highlighting a framework of exclusive formal transactions for the foreign embassies and missions in Romania, whose members were authorized to shop there, given their diplomatic status.⁵⁸

The first trade faire was organized in November 1985, in the hall of central landmark in Bucharest,⁵⁹ where the “Peter Justesen” company exhibited and sold a wide range of electronic equipment, beverages, cigarettes, coffee, cosmetic items worth US\$ 180,000. The success of the exhibition was certified by a noteworthy increase in the volume of orders the following months, which led the company to plan a future event for the next year. Customs documents from a Warehouse in Chitila⁶⁰ regarding the parcels arrived from the “Peter Justesen” company for the diplomatic missions in Romania showed an increase of almost 150% in the number of parcels during the nine months following the fair: from 14,254 pieces in the 3rd quarter of 1985 to 28,150 pieces in the 4th quarter, then to 44,851 in the first quarter of 1986. In terms of weight, the evolution was less spectacular, from 656,799 kg to 714,023 kg, and finally to a 926,123 kg volume of merchandise.

The 1986 fair was planned at the beginning of the year, as the company “Peter Justesen” got in contact with the local Company for Fairs, Exhibitions and Advertising for Foreign Trade (ITEPCE)⁶¹ to establish the period and the place of the exhibition. Although ITEPCE did not have the necessary approvals, it counted on receipts worth approximately \$10,000, therefore it agreed to organize an exhibition between 12–14 May, with the venue to be determined later. The context of this second event, as described in a *Securitate* typed note, is relevant for the cutbacks experienced by the local hard currency stores: “As a result of the reduction of the range of products made available to diplomatic missions accredited in the Socialist Republic of Romania, through the network of ‘Shop’ and ‘Comturist’ stores, the Danish order house ‘Peter Justesen’ is going to organize in the next period an exhibition for the presentation and sale of products intended exclusively for diplomatic missions and their mem-

58 The benefits were related to the duty-free shopping, meaning exemption from custom duties and VAT, and operationalized in highly competitive prices, usually cheaper than the local market price. At the same time, duty-free shopping required the buyer to hold an official diplomatic document or a foreign passport.

59 The auditorium belonging to the Palace of Socialist Romania (the name of the former Royal Palace at that time). The auditorium was used as a cinema, so it was an accessible place to visit.

60 Chitila is a town situated about 9 km to the northwest of Bucharest.

61 In Romanian - Intreprinderea de Tîrguri, Expoziții și Publicitate pentru Comerț Exterior (ITEPCE).

bers.”⁶² The offer was quite generous and various, with audio-video equipment, household appliances, leather goods, cosmetics, cigarettes, watches, etc. worth 1,533,679 Danish crowns,⁶³ and totaling 11,922 kg. The “Romtrans” Agency in Bucharest was hired for the transport, estimated at US \$10,000. The problem remained the venue, since “Comturist” did not agree with the exhibition on the grounds that the Danish company carried out an unfavorable competition and raised this claim to the ITEPCE. However, it appears that a director from the latter had already approved that the event should take place at the Intercontinental Hotel,⁶⁴ a place with a different commercial traffic, frequented by many foreign students.⁶⁵

The third edition of the “Peter Justensen” trade fair was organized again at the Intercontinental Hotel, the “Round Hall”, during 25–27 May 1987. The company presented a wide and varied range of merchandise consisting of audio-video equipment (radio-cassette players, VCRs, color televisions, music systems, audio, and video cassettes, etc.), household appliances (food processors, coffee grinders, mixers, etc.), food products (chocolate, sweets, canned goods, coffee, etc.), cosmetics (perfumes, creams, make-up products, men’s cosmetics, etc.), leather goods (bags, travel suitcase sets, cords, etc.), household items (sets of pans, sets of glasses, sets of knives, cutlery, etc.), interior decoration items (furniture fabrics, drapes, curtains, garden furniture) and electronic games for TV sets. The note reporting on this event added new elements of context,⁶⁶ since the “Peter Justensen” company has been said to organize, for about two years already, a traveling exhibition especially for members of diplomatic representations from socialist countries. The exhibited products were mainly stock goods that were presented under extremely attractive prices, which the company wanted to liquidate. Besides the 40–50% discounts below the normal catalog prices, the “Peter Justensen” company also offered a special discount of 15% on the overall value of all orders based on the items on display. Since the

62 ACNSAS, *Documentary Fund*, Folder D0008853, vol 23, f. 18.

63 An equivalent of about US\$ 190,400, calculation based on the “U.S. Dollar / Danish Krone Historical Reference Rates from Bank of England for 1986”, accessed on www.poundsterlinglive.com/bank-of-england-spot/historical-spot-exchange-rates/usd/USD-to-DKK-1986

64 As compared to the previous exhibition place, Hotel Intercontinental was not accessible for the average Romanian, not only in terms of prices, but mainly because it was a heavily surveilled place by the *Securitate*.

65 “Foreign students flock to Romania”, *Op. cit.*

66 ACNSAS, *Documentary Fund*, Folder D0008853, vol 23, f. 12.

goods could only be ordered, not purchased on the spot, the delivery of orders was exempted of shipping fees, rendering the offer even more attractive.

Another striking difference for the 1987 fair was the total value of the orders, that amounted to about US\$ 4,3 million, an impressive result given the short time allotted to the fair, of only three days and a visitation program from 13.00h to 19.00h. Correlated to the estimated purchasing power of the diplomatic staff during the previous exhibitions, the discounts alone could not explain the high rate of the orders. A brief analysis suggested by the informant who reported on the matter counted several factors. One of them was related to the deficits in “Comturist”’s offer, and to the Decree nr. 366/1985 according to which, besides the cuts in imports, all sales were conditioned by a ratio of 50% imported goods, and 50% domestically produced goods, quotas that were enforced at the stores reserved for diplomatic and commercial representatives. In this respect, the goods presented in the “Peter Justensen” fair were either missing from the “Comturist” offer, or the same goods had substantially reduced prices and were not subject to limitations or quotas for any purchase. For example, a box of 50 cartons of Kent cigarettes cost US\$ 700 in the local open circuit offer of the hard currency shops in hotels, US\$ 550 in the closed-circuit duty-free stores and shops for diplomats, and only US\$ 290.40 in the “Peter Justensen” fair trade catalog. For the electronics, the gap between prices was even bigger: a Sharp GF 7300 radio cassette player cost US\$ 144 in the open circuit offer of the hard currency shops in hotels, US\$ 135 in the closed-circuit duty-free stores and shops for diplomats, and only US\$ 55 in the “Peter Justensen” price list, or for an Akai videocassette recorder VS 12, the prices descended from \$1117 to \$1047, and to \$578 as discounted by the “Peter Justensen” company.

Whether it was or not intended as a part of “Peter Justensen’s” commercial strategy,⁶⁷ a second reason for the push in its sales at the 1987 fair was backed by the fact that the purchases were made not only by members of diplomatic missions but also by foreign students from all university centers of the country, who were previously notified of the “Peter Justensen” event by their country’s embassies and were asked what they wanted to buy from the fair. The resulting quantities were then distributed among members of the embassy, since placing orders (and filling out forms) was reserved exclusively to holders of a diplomatic identification. Moreover, the report specified that the prod-

67 I got in touch with the “Peter Justensen” company via email to explore the possibility of accessing their archives from the 1980s, but my request was declined, due to lack of time and short of staff.

ucts and quantities requested by foreign students were intended not only for their own needs but also for resale in the local currency. The informant emphasized the foreign students' switch of suppliers, the "Peter Justesen" company instead of the local "Dollar shops", to mark the main cause, i.e., the Decree nr. 366/1985, and to project the negative outcome, a decrease in the future sales of all Romanian hard currency stores, be they for diplomatic representatives, or other outlets in Bucharest and in the university centers throughout the country. Since the "Dollar shops" were running out of their usual customers, the foreign students, the net losses were estimated to be at least 50% of the total sales figure achieved by "Comturist", about 2 million dollars.⁶⁸ The report also deplored the lack of coordination between the state's enterprises, pointing a finger towards the Intercontinental Hotel, because the amount collected by the hotel for organizing the "Peter Justesen" exhibition, estimated between US\$ 20,000 and 30,000, was extremely small compared to the losses of "Comturist"'s subsequent income.

Partial conclusions

This article questioned the role of the foreign students in the entangled informal networks of the second economy in Socialist Romania during the 1980s, and explored a novel perspective by asking how entrepreneurial traders operated to provision commodities and services missing or in short supply. With this approach, the analysis focused on an underexplored part of the chain of distribution and identified an unexpected channel in the form of international trade fairs. Available data and sources revealed that the role of the foreign students, who became informal buyers in the "Peter Justesen" exhibition of 1987, appears as an incidental occurrence. At the same time, it broadens the investigation of informal networks by pointing the need to consider how the instance of improbable connections will inform future analysis.

The next interrogations may thus be linked to the foreign trade fairs and shows organized throughout the years as potential occasions where informal commercial links are most likely to be first realized. The example of the "Peter Justesen" series of exhibition showed that changing a variable, i.e., the

68 The estimations may seem exaggerated, however data corroborated from other lines of activity from "Comturist" point towards revenues situated between US\$ 2 and 4 million, see Alexandra Bardan, "Bureaucratic Gaps in Romania during the 1980s: Diasporas, Transnational Solidarity Networks, and the Second Economy", *Op. cit.* On the other hand, the framing of the report focused on the negative outcomes of the Decree nr. 366/1985, that produced effects in the activity of foreign trade until the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

venue to the Intercontinental Hotel in 1986, brought the source of provisions in a commercial traffic heavily frequented by entrepreneurial students. At the same time, the content of the offer presented during the “Peter Justesen” fairs outlined the precise categories of merchandise in high demand on the Romanian (black) market, albeit the products were considered at that time premium and luxury goods. Their flow into the channels of the black market informs on one of the paradoxes of the socialist consumer culture, where periodical infusions of foreign commodities fueled an overvalued reading of Western culture⁶⁹ and contributed to a specific process of social stratification long before the 1989 revolution.

From a network analysis perspective, the foreign students’ indirect involvement into the commercial transactions of the “Peter Justesen” exhibition of 1987 brings to the theoretical model of the “pluri-functional and polycentric system of interconnected actors”⁷⁰ a supplementary transnational dimension through the connection of the students to their embassies. Albeit they were marginal players in the trading transactions carried out during the exhibition, their presence activated temporary informal networks needed for filling the “Peter Justesen” order forms and further strengthened existing trading connections by the reselling of goods within their current local distribution channels. This process, singular at best, frames the communist second economy as a transnational place, where various actors competed in commercial transactions and in the generation of hard currency. Moreover, the students’ casual involvement in the “Peter Justesen” fair highlighted novel anomalies within Romania’s economic system. Under the socialist framework, the two companies, “Comturist” and the Intercontinental Hotel, would have collaborated, given their complementary business objects. However, the requirement to fulfill hard currency plans directed towards the payment in advance of Romania’s external debt turned the two companies into harsh competitors on the grounds of obtaining the much needed money.

69 As Liviu Chelcea noted, foreign consumer goods were largely seen as Western, whether they were coming from a western European country, or from other regions, such as Turkey or other places from the Middle East: “After 1989, due to the heavy trader tourism with Turkey and to the influx of Western consumer goods, as well as to the self-Occidentalizing discourse of the Romanian politics, Turkish objects became ‘Balkanic’ or ‘Arab’.”, see Liviu Chelcea, “The Culture of Shortage during State-Socialism: Consumption Practices in a Romanian Village in the 1980s”, *Cultural Studies* 1/2002, 16–43.

70 Constantin, *Op. cit.*

Summary

Beneficiaries of the dynamic policy of Socialist Romania that aimed to open to the world its prestigious higher education, foreign students enrolled in universities throughout the country were facing during the 1980s the prospects of shortages and missing commodities, similar to the large majority of the Romanian population. However, given their status as foreigners, they had access to Western products that most locals were deprived of, because they could purchase scarce goods from the hard currency stores. Entrepreneurial students further resold merchandise in high demand on the black market. The paper proposes a methodological framework inspired by network analysis, and centers the investigation on the actors of the informal networks of the second economy by asking how the entrepreneurial foreign students provisioned the commodities that were subsequently resold. The trade fairs organized by the “Peter Justensen” company, a Danish duty-free order house for diplomats, in 1985, 1986 and 1987 highlighted these type of events as potential occasions where informal commercial links are most likely to be first realized. In 1987, purchases were made not only by members of diplomatic missions but also by foreign students from all university centers, aided by the former to place orders that were reserved exclusively to holders of a diplomatic identification. The foreign students’ incidental involvement in the commercial transactions of the “Peter Justesen” exhibition of 1987 frames the second economy of a socialist country as a transnational place, revealing a more complex picture as compared to current narratives on the topic.

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Резиме

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(НЕ)ФОРМАЛНИ КАНАЛИ ДИСТРИБУЦИЈЕ У РУМУНИЈИ ТОКОМ 1980-ИХ: ПРЕДУЗИМЉИВИ СТРАНИ СТУДЕНТИ У ДРУГОЈ ЕКОНОМИЈИ

Апстракт: Овај чланак истражује улогу предузимљивих страних студената у заплетеним неформалним мрежама тзв. *друге економије* у Румунији током 1980-их, тако што преиспитује недовољно истражени део дистрибутивног ланца, снабдевање недостајућом или дефицитарном робом, што је додатно ојачало црно тржиште. Анализом мреже која је пратила невероватне везе, приликом усредсређивања на међународне сајмове као потенцијалне прилике у којима ће се неформалне везе вероватно најпре остварити идентификован је потпуно неочекиван канал. Студија случаја представља *другу економију* као транснационално место где се различити актери такмиче у стварању чврсте/конвертибилне валуте.

Кључне речи: транснационалне мреже, комунизам, прекогранични токови, економија несташице, друга економија

Као корисници динамичне политике социјалистичке Румуније, која је настојала да отвори свету своје престижно високо образовање, страни студенти уписани на универзитете широм земље су се током 1980-их година, баш као и већина румунског становништва, суочавали са изгледним несташицама и дефицитом робе. Међутим, с обзиром на статус странаца, они су имали приступ западним производима недоступним већини локалног становништва, јер су дефицитарну робу могли да купују у нарочитим продавницама које су је продавале искључиво за чврсту/конвертибилну валуту. Предузимљиви студенти су даље препродавали робу за којом је владала велика потражња на црном тржишту. У раду се предлаже методолошки оквир инспирисан анализом мреже, при чему се истраживање усредсређује на актере неформалних мрежа *друге економије*, преиспитујући методе помоћу којих су се инострани предузимљиви студенти снабдевали робом коју су потом препродавали. Трговачки сајмови које је организовала компанија „Петер Јустесен“, данско бесцаринско предузеће за снабдевање дипломата, потврдили су да је то-

ком периода 1985–1987. ова врста догађаја била потенцијална прилика за успоставу првих неформалних комерцијалних/трговинских веза. Током 1987. куповину су обављали не само чланови дипломатских мисија већ и страни студенти из свих универзитетских центара, који су, штавише, помагали да се испоручују наруџбине резервисане искључиво за носиоце дипломатских пасоша. Проблематично учешће страних студената у комерцијалним трансакцијама изложбе „Петер Јустесен“ из 1987. године уоквирује комунистичку *другу економију* као транснационално место, откривајући далеко сложенију слику од савремених наратива о овој теми.