

Romanian Communism Conference

17 – 18 March, Bucharest

Bucharest, Romania

March 17, 2011

Opening speech by

Thorsten Geissler

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It is both a great pleasure and an honour for me to welcome you to this conference on behalf of the Rule of Law Program South East Europe of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. As a Christian Democratic think tank, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation promotes democracy, freedom, the respect for human and civil rights and the respect for minorities world-wide. This is why we happily support this event: because coping with the past, coping with totalitarian rule is a core area of our program. In this context we believe that remembrance plays a particularly decisive role in the successful development of a political culture.

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That is why we appreciate the work of our partners, the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives and the Institute for History Nicolae Iorga. We have common objectives:

- We want to develop research and educational activities aiming at disseminating accurate historical information about the repressive actions of the Securitate and of the entire communist regime, and their consequences on Romanian society.

- We believe that it is important to disclose former agents and informal collaborators, as well as to expose the repressive actions of the former communist secret police in accordance with the rule-of-law principles, and thus enabling lustration.

- And we think that to ensure the free access of individuals to their personal files produced by the former Securitate during the period March 1945 to December 1989 is of high importance in order to raise awareness about the extent of communist repression and also to come to terms with the recent past.

The work of the Romanian authorities and institutions that are concerned with these topics goes along with similar activities in former Warsaw Pact countries – and the objectives there are the same. I myself come from a country that was once divided into two parts. The one in which I had the privilege of growing up was a Western democracy with free and democratic elections, respect for human and individual civil rights, free access to independent courts and independent media. But in the other part elections were a farce, people were denied fundamental freedoms and rights, the courts

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were mere instruments of the ruling Communist Party and the same was true for the media.

Like in your country in the last months of the year 1989 my countrymen in the Eastern part of Germany took their fate in their own hands and liberated themselves from a totalitarian regime to obtain the rights they had been denied for such a long time. There was a broad consensus that communism and socialism had failed and should be thrown to the "dump of history" forever.

But as the Chinese put it, "The memory paints with a golden paintbrush" and when I read about the results of certain opinion polls taken in the part of Germany that was once under communist rule I shiver. People seem to forget quickly and nostalgia and romanticism become a common phenomenon.

I have lived in this country only for three months, but it is my impression that this is not different in Romania. In December 2010 the Romanian Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile released the results of another opinion poll on communism and de-communization conducted on a representative sample. The results were stunning for me. According to the survey, 59 % of Romanians consider communism a good idea, 44 % think this good idea was wrongly applied, while 15 % think it was well applied. Only 29 % of respondents view communism as a bad idea. Have the abuses of communism already been forgotten by such a substantial part of the Romanian population?

Maybe the results would have been different if the following questions had been asked:

- Would you like to be denied the right to say what you really think politically?
- Would you like to have no permission to travel abroad?
- Would you like to have bread, oil and sugar on food tickets?
- Would you like to have only one state-owned TV station broadcasting two hours a day, offering strictly programs with Ceausescu?
- Would you like the Securitate opening your correspondence, listening to your phone conversations and bugging your apartment?
- Would you like to see food shops empty and well-stocked shops for the nomenclatura?
- Would you like to wait for seven years to have a phone line installed in your home?
- Would you like to be obliged to live in drab and grey state-owned apartments sometimes with electricity supply only for two hours a day?

But such was the reality in Romania which people seem to forget when they are asked general questions about their perception of communism. And as there has never been a country governed by communists in which people lived in freedom and prosperity, the idea that communism is a good concept but was only wrongly applied in Romania and the other Warsaw Pact countries is not based on facts but remains a dangerous illusion.

I wish to mention that I did not overlook the encouraging aspects of the mentioned opinion polls because positive views on communism are also related to age. And I find it encouraging that among those who never had any direct experience

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with the communist regime and I am talking about those younger than 20 only 21 % consider communism a good idea. The fact that a majority of young Romanians seem to appreciate the privilege of growing up in a free and democratic society makes me optimistic keeping in mind that the future of the country will be in their hands.

It was on the 10th December 2010, the International Day of Human Rights, I had just arrived in Romania, that I visited the prison of Jilava. A documentary was screened describing the degrading and inhuman circumstances under which thousands of opponents of the communist regime had to suffer, the cruelty and brutality they were exposed to, most of them for many years. But the most moving part of that day was when I had the opportunity to talk to some former inmates of that prison. I was shocked by what they told me. They had survived but the scars that had been inflicted on them by the communists will remain for the rest of their lives.

This is why I am glad to be here today, I know that you have many different personal and academic backgrounds, hold different political opinions, represent different institutions and come from many sectors of civil society. The interdisciplinary approach that we pursue not only during this conference is not a coincidence but a well-reflected decision that was made to ensure that no important aspect that relates to the matter we discuss is overlooked. But despite of these differences I know I am in the company of people who share my values and my sincere desire that democracy and respect for human and civil rights will always prevail in this country and that a totalitarian ideology or regime will never get another chance.

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In this sense I wish to thank all those who prepared this conference and contribute to its success and can assure you of the full support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the future.