

S P E E C H

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

RULE OF LAW PROGRAM
SOUTH EAST EUROPE
THORSTEN GEISSLER

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Opening speech by Thorsten Geissler, director of KAS RLP SEE – Third National Conference “Romanian Communism” - Bucharest, March 14-15, 2013 –

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Rule of Law Program South East Europe of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, to the third edition of the yearly national conference on Romanian Communism, organized by the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives and the “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History of the Romanian Academy. It is an honour for us that we have been your partner in this endeavour from its very inception – and I am glad to see that, as the speakers before me have stated, there is the firm intention on the part of the organizers to continue what has become a fruitful tradition in the Romanian academic landscape in the future as well.

I must confess that I am particularly happy about the fact that the relationship between history and memory will be a central theme of this conference.

Why is remembering so important?

First and foremost, it is important to remember the terror unleashed by the Communist regimes in Romania and elsewhere, in order to make sure that such crimes are never committed again. That is why I sincerely hope that the results of this event will not remain confined to the realm of science, but that they will reach especially the young generation, as a strong and clear warning.

We also have a duty to remember in order to honor the memory of the countless victims who endured the horrors of places like Sighet, Pitesti or the Danube-Black Sea-Canal and who died in torment, far away from their loved ones and deprived of even the slightest element of their human dignity. Those who stood up against the Communist regimes are encouraging models who were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice as the price to be paid for the revolt of their consciousness against injustice.

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And as Christians or humanists, we have the duty to remember in order to constantly remind ourselves that man easily succumbs to the temptation of absolute power and of using the most inhumane of means to obtain it.

Memory is not only preserved through narratives. I am therefore thrilled to see that the conference programme includes analyses of current and future sites of remembrance. These *lieux de memoire* are essential points of crystallization for the formation of a collective identity across generations, by enriching the temporal dimension of history with a spatial component. The more people visit places like Sighet or Râmnicu Sarat – or Jilava in the future – the more we can be certain that they will internalize an utter rejection of any form of authoritarian or totalitarian rule. Because simply reading about the horrors of the past cannot be compared to the experience of feeling the air of terror and fear that is still looming at the sites of some of the most abhorrible crimes committed in this country.

I also have words of praise for those researchers who have chosen to dwell upon the fate of individual figures whose destiny was dealt a criminal blow by the Communist regime and its perpetrators. Because our duty to remember also implies a moral obligation to remove the veil of anonymity which still covers the graves of too many victims. It is important to show to the world that these peoples had names, photographs and – most of all – aspirations and ideals of their own, which they never had the chance of fulfilling.

I am also pleased to see that some participants chose to direct their attention towards the critical engagement with historical documents. By reading secondary sources as primary sources, we can often gain profound insights into the manipulation and mediation of knowledge. This method serves to uncover the deceptive methods of power employed by a power-thirsty Communist regime, for which any lie could be presented as a truth if it served its interests.

It is not by chance that we, a Rule of Law Program, decided to engage in a partnership with the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives and with the “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History. Because there can be almost no clearer antithesis than the stark contrast between the rule of law and Communism, which never truly adhered to the idea of a society ruled by law. We all know that the constitutions of Communist states contained apparently very generous provisions on human rights – yet we also know that there was a deep chasm between the constitutional text and the constitutional reality, in which the rule of law was subjugated by elites interested in self-preservation at any cost. The graves upon which Communist regimes around the world laid their foundations prove that any attempt to remove the law from the equation of a just society can lead only to crime and terror. The Communist past therefore tragically underlines the importance of rule of law as a

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guarantee for the respect of human dignity and fundamental rights.

This why any conference on Communism is more than just an academic event about the past. It is a celebration of the freedom of science, of the freedom of speech and of the freedom of conscience – and thus, an occasion to cherish the human dignity under the rule of law.

Thank you for your attention.