

## The Iron Gate Hydropower Plant – a strategic tool in shaping new identities

In order to understand the path to economic development that Romania embarked on when launching its mass industrialization project, we need to look at the building of the Iron Gate Hydropower Plant as a model in the context of modernization and urbanization by examining how local communities and workers coming from all over the country were affected by the discourses of the regime and what attitudes they exposed. I read the archival material at OSA through the lense of those affected by the rising water levels in an attempt to see how the discourses affected them and what choices were they able to make regarding resettlement. I find the islanders of Ada Kaleh, a Turkish enclave of particular interest for two reasons. First because they belonged to a minority group, and even though the majority of the islanders opted for resettling in Turkey, a small group decided to resettle in nearby cities; and second, because at the moment of choosing to resettle in an urban surrounding, the discourse promoting the new, urban citizen implied an ethnically homogenous collective.

When examining the option of moving to the city by the smaller groups of the Ada Kaleh island, we need to see what are the theoretical approaches that focus on Soviet subjectivities, identifying ideology as central in Soviet life. Given that in my view only a framework of dynamic interaction can provide an understanding of the reactions given to how the regime envisioned the transformation of society and the creation of a new identities, I found Sheila Fitzpatrick's category of identity (social position) and identification to be useful, together with the notion of the *usable self*. The usable self is understood as a series of survival strategies (agency) that the subjects elaborated for themselves in response to the exigencies of state power (Chatterjee and Petrone, 2013). I identified the choice of moving instead of Turkey to nearby cities as a manifestation of agency. The wish for resettling in an urban environment was strong enough, seen also as an opportunity of upward mobility. Party leaders were speaking in front of huge crowds gathering from the area making clear that progress was possible only through modernization and industrialization efforts.

The Iron Gate Hydropower Plant (from now on IG HPP) functioned as spectacle: the many party member appearances were received and applauded by the masses according to a well established coreography. Their narrative was geared to fit the need of the regime: it focused not only on the advances made on the worksite, but also on creating the new, modern, urban subject. The speeches intended to have a mobilizing effect for reorganizing society and providing new identity models (Kim and Shoenhals, 2013). The discourses offered a framing according to which mass industrialization launched Romania on the path to modernization and economic development, which involved transforming a mostly rural society into an urban one, and promoting a new identity that would be suitable with the new social environment. The new man was seen as dedicated body and soul to fulfilling the goals of the party and an accomplice in creating a new collective along nationalist lines. (Griffin, 2013).

Thus, not only the construction itself was seen as a tool in transforming society, but also its builders: the erection of the construction and the building of a new man were seen as mutually constitutive and the speeches held at the worksite were geared to achieving this double goal. In order to understand how this goal was intended to be reached, and cohesion established, we need to look at the discourses and the discursive strategies employed.

When we read the speeches of the two leaders of the bilateral project, Josip Broz Tito and Nicolae Ceausescu (who became head of the party following the death of Gheorghe- Gheorghiu Dej one year after the construction was launched), we see that Ceausescu saw in this project the guarantee of industrial development. Tito made sure to include in his speeches directed at a local audience that Romania was clearly in a bigger need to explore the Danube's resources. Yugoslavia was contributing to Romania achieving its goal of modernization, as the federal republic already had several power plants and several of its big rivers could be exploited, versus Romania, with the only bigger river being the Danube. (But Romania also explored its other rivers in order to build powerplants). Meanwhile the Romanian side made sure to

stress that the bigger losses were suffered by the Yugoslavs, and they would have to resettle a higher number of inhabitants. It is not clear what his intention was, whether it intended to downplay the losses suffered by Romanian citizens by claiming that the people living on the other side of the river were even more severely affected. But when Tito referred to the number of people affected by rising water levels, he made sure to present Romania as the country which had to resettle a higher number of people. It seems that despite the fact that at joint meetings the two neighbouring countries highlighted their connectedness due to historical reasons, and stressed the importance of their alliance grounded in shared values with in mind the goal of strengthening solidarity, when their speeches were targeting local audiences both made sure to create an atmosphere of competition, probably seen as having motivational power and creating solidarity among the workers.

The joint project was a source of pride that both leaders highlighted, though the truth couldn't have been further from it: the two sides were built using different technology and equipment. The Yugoslav side was using British and German technology, while the Romanian side was using Soviet technology and equipment. Both sides had locks for upstream and downstream that they could operate separately and during construction phase synchronicity was the only key element of the works. Nonetheless, the Romanian press was constantly publishing news according to which a given workphase had been finished ahead of time, creating an atmosphere of victory with the Romanian side being clearly the winner.

The discourse on industrial development was employed in order to show how able the country is in managing itself efficiently when it can make decisions autonomously. The shift from economic and political dependence to economic and political autonomy informed the speeches held at the worksite in many occasions. The power plant was referred to in a way that would stress its grandiosity: the financial investment was enormous, workers were gathering there from all over the country, and the energy output was enough to cover 80% of Romania's energy needs. The technology used was the latest, making the investment one of the biggest in the world. The pride taken for being part of such an endeavour was highlighted in the leader's speeches. Improving navigation conditions, a necessity that was already on the agenda of the Danube Commission (the river managing authority) since the 19th century has also been solved. Building a dam as part of the energy supplying project and solving an issue that caused severe financial losses for all riparian countries due to navigation difficulties became a huge source of pride. All the more, as such an improvement was provided by a country which was seen as lagging behind in terms of industrial development and by providing solution, Romania saw itself shift from a position of lagging behind to that of an achiever, a foregoer, a pioneer. For everyone who participated in the works- according to the message of the speeches- it had brought a feeling of victory and an all encompassing sense of pride.

The speeches published in *Scanteia* show that prosperity was seen as conditioned by overcoming present difficulties. This future oriented approach was such a successful strategy that it had become efficient for several decades and only the severe poverty of the '80s would shake it (Tismaneanu, 2009). All current difficulties and challenges were seen as obstacles that needed to be overcome. Evoking the heroism of past generations and using it as model in the current modernization struggle made the efforts of the workers equal the hardship of the forefathers. The documents of the archive provide us with information regarding the difficult living conditions: workers' families lacked stoves and they addressed letters to party leaders in order to be able to receive one, arguing with having health issues. The lack of safety gear and the poor condition of the machines and equipment made life hard at the site, not to mention working in shifts, including during nighttime, without any extra payment for the effort. These were the challenges that had to be overcome, this is what the leaders had in mind when evoking the heroic past and used as model in today's struggle. But today's workers were also portrayed as the hero that will become a model for future generations, for his ability to overcome hardship.

In order to stress the continuity with past struggles, the speeches employed a language of war: the river became the force which was unforgiving and unpredictable. Large passages depicted the

water as a mythological creature with a gigantic force, which could only be tamed and overcome by the gigantic effort of today's fighters. The workers' struggle of building the powerplant was depicted as heroic, and their goal as worthy of all sacrifices. And indeed, according to archival materials, when work accidents occurred, including deaths (due to lack of proper gear and work safety measures), they were presented as sacrifices that are required in order to reach progress. This positivistic view was key in the transformation envisaged for society and the creation of the new man. (Kim and Shoenhals, 2013).

In line with focusing on results that the future holds, the regime made sure to hide all mistakes that might have shown the other side of the struggle. This is why work accidents were kept silent. When the rising waters entered one of the chambers of the power plant building, the Romanian press didn't mention it. It was the Yugoslav press which made reference to an event causing disruption in the works on the Romanian side. The Romanian press mentioned it only several days later, as the works that had already been restarted.

Stressing continuity with the past was another key strategy for creating cohesion. When one of Ceausescu's speeches identified a forerunner of the builders of the IG HPP in a 19th century person living in Orsova (at that time at the other side of the border), he presented him as the initiator of the very important work of today's builders. This anonymous person made daily measurements of the water level and the volume of the Danube, allowing site specialists to understand the river behaviour. The markings were seen as the starting point of the current endeavour, creating continuity with the past and historicizing the effort.

The discursive reframing of identity was carried out strategically: in order to reshape rural identities into new, urban ones, the goals of modernization (progress, prosperity) was framed as conditioned by the values considered intrinsic to the nation (overcoming difficulty and hardship), and historicized in order to create legitimacy and continuity with the past. The future-oriented framing was seen as key in strengthening cohesion and in forging a new, urban identity.

As part of a further research it would be interesting to examine whether the joint project was a tool in reaching the goals of economic independence and political autonomy. What kind of relation can we establish between a shift towards non-alignment and sovereignty needs and the building of the project? If we taken the first date when the plan of the building of the power plant emerged, June, 1956 and '68, the year when the dam was already finished and the project was heading towards its final construction years, we see a change in policy that Romania adopted. Following the '56 Hungarian revolution when Dej became complicit in arresting its leading figures, the talks stalled, as the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia held a position of non-interference in internal matters. But by 1968, three years after Ceausescu became the party leader, he denied invading Czechoslovakia, on the same principle, claiming the need of sovereignty and non-interference in internal matters. Romania maintained its position later on as well, and took a position of neutrality in the Sino-Soviet conflict, and offered to become the mediator, a role it has practiced already during the tension between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia prior to the Iron Gate talks. Romania was also the first communist country which criticized Israel for the 1967 war and gained the respect of Western powers.

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