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Cezar Stanciu. "A Lost Chance for Balkan Cooperation? The Romanian View on 'Regional Micro-Détente,' 1969-75." *Cold War History* (online), 18 November 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2018.1524878>.

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Research on Romania during Communism has received a real boost over the past few years. This is partly due to the opening of the Romanian national archives and partly because of the new questions raised in the vein of the 'new' Cold War history, which de-emphasises the bipolar superpower perspective and focuses on the role of more marginal actors, such as Romania.¹ Examples of such recent scholarship are Corina Mavrodin's work on Romania's de-satellitization in the global Cold War, Eliza Gheorghe's research on Romania's role in nuclear matters, and Elena Dragomir's article on Romania's stance towards superpower hegemonism.²

Cezar Stanciu's article, "A Lost Chance for Balkan Cooperation? The Romanian View on 'Regional Micro-Détente,' 1969-75," fits in this pattern of exciting new scholarship on Romania which goes beyond the conventional image of Romania as a mere maverick, aiming to defy the Soviet Union. Making extensive use of material from the Romanian national archives and placing the article in a very broad geographical context, Stanciu argues that Romanian proposals for Balkan cooperation in the early 1970s both served to "undermine Soviet control of the Balkans" and "to promote multilateral détente" (2). Approaching the period of détente from the perspective of the Balkans, Stanciu has a fascinating interpretative angle which allows for an analysis of NATO countries, such as Turkey and Greece, as well as Warsaw Pact countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria, and a non-aligned country, Yugoslavia. This inroad is a particularly strong point of the article, since

¹ See e.g. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 281-295.

² Cf. Corina Mavrodin, "A Maverick in the Making: Romania's de-Satellitization Process and the Global Cold War (1953-1963)," Phd. Diss. 2017; Eliza Gheorghe, "Atomic Maverick: Romania's Negotiations for Nuclear Technology, 1964-1970," *Cold War History* 13:3 (2013): 373-392, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.776542>; Elena Dragomir, "The Perceived Threat of Hegemonism in Romania during the Second Détente," *Cold War History* 12:1 (2012): 111-134, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2010.510837>.

it facilitates a new perspective on the *détente* period, which is otherwise mostly considered from either the perspective of the superpowers or a broader East-West perspective within the context of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

The article consists of three sections between the introduction and the conclusion. The first one, “A Labyrinth of Challenges and Risks,” deals mainly with the historical and geopolitical context of the tensions on the Balkan peninsula in the period 1964-69, and is exclusively based on secondary literature. The second section, on “The Content and Stake of Balkan Cooperation in Romanian Perspective” deals with the Romanian perspective on Balkan cooperation from 1969-1975 and thus forms the core of the article. This section is based on meticulous research in the Romanian National Archives as well as two references to the online repository of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The author’s claims in this section are therefore considerably more convincing, despite the fact that the fascinating treatment of the stake of individual Balkan countries lends itself to *multi*-archival research which, apart from the two references to CIA-documents, is lacking throughout the article.

The last section on Romania as a potential “Factor of Chinese Influence in the Balkans” is based on equally thorough archival research in the Romanian National Archives on the period 1965-1974. There is, however, a missed opportunity here, since the period 1961-1964 is particularly interesting in terms of the Chinese influence on the Romanian stance in the Warsaw Pact. The fact that Stanciu deals with “The Romanian View on ‘Regional Micro-Détente’” justifies an exclusively Romanian approach, but further research would certainly benefit from archival evidence from other countries, such as Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece. Multi-archival research could have served to clarify to what extent Balkan cooperation was a mere Romanian ploy to defy Cold War bipolarity or to address pressing concerns of the Balkan countries on both sides of Iron Curtain and beyond. The author does not refer to the archival material from this period, even though the archival evidence on the first half of the 1960s undermines some of his more general claims, as I outline below. Having said that, the archival research on the Romanian perspective in the period 1969-75 is a solid basis for Stanciu’s main argument.

Stanciu’s first section, in which he sketches the broad historical context of the situation in the Balkans in the second half of the 1960s, is thought-provoking in its scope, even though it is based on secondary literature. He shows how states at both sides of the Iron Curtain “were willing to challenge the superpower domination of the region” (3) through further Balkan cooperation, while at the same time being at loggerheads on issues such as the respective Greek and Turkish position on Cyprus. Although the Greeks were enthusiastic and the Turks lukewarm, the Bulgarians were sceptical about the Romanian plans for Balkan cooperation from the outset, deeming it unrealistic and viewing it as a ploy to undermine the Warsaw Pact. The Yugoslavs, meanwhile, supported the Romanian project, particularly in the aftermath of the Soviet-led intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which was condemned by the Romanians and the Yugoslavs alike.

Stanciu’s overview is fascinating and raises many relevant points, such as the fact that the Romanians were already going it alone within the Warsaw Pact by establishing diplomatic relations with West Germany in 1967, while refusing to sever such relations with Israel in the wake of the Six Day War in the same year. Stanciu does, however, make rather bold claims which cannot be supported by secondary literature alone. In line with conventional wisdom, he argues that the Romanians were in a particularly vulnerable position after the Soviet-led intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, since they did not support it and were accordingly at risk from a potential Soviet intervention in Romania, too. Such fears in turn led to extra Yugoslav support for Romania—even in terms of “transportation of supplies for the Romanians in case of a Soviet attack,” and it

made the Romanian endeavour to withstand the Soviet superpower seem particularly heroic (5). Although Stanciu does mention Yugoslav President Josip Tito's recommendation "to seek reconciliation with Moscow," he does not in this article examine how matters evolved in this respect (5).

A closer look at archival material – even from Bucharest itself – shows that the Romanian leadership only feared a Soviet intervention immediately after the crackdown in Czechoslovakia, but actually explored this rhetorically in its campaign against Soviet domination.³ Balkan cooperation was therefore not necessary in order to counter the Soviet threat, although such plans did help Romania to assert its independence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union to the outside world, as did the public condemnation of the intervention in Czechoslovakia. Since Stanciu uses the historical context as an important foundation for his further argument, it is a missed opportunity that he has not looked at the easily accessible Romanian documents on this period, which would nuance his otherwise compelling narrative. Moreover, Stanciu also draws conclusions about the way in which "many countries in the region engaged energetically" in a regional micro-détente, which cannot be drawn solely on the basis of the secondary literature he discusses (5). Considering the commendably broad scope of the article, some multi-archival research could have served to substantiate his interesting claims still further.

At the same time, the article would have benefited from some further historiographical discussion. Stanciu's findings on the Romanian proposals for Balkan cooperation could have been still more forceful in the light of Corina Mavrodin's exciting research on the Romanian role in a Balkan nuclear free-zone in the late 1950s.⁴ Mavrodin's research is not mentioned in the article, and the Romanian role is mentioned only summarily and attributed to the Bulgarians instead. The same applies to Elena Dragomir's important insight on the way in which the Romanians defied superpower hegemony in general, rather than the Soviet Union in particular, which could have served as a useful context for Stanciu's claim about the Romanian aim for micro-détente.⁵ Although Stanciu mentions Dragomir's work later in the article, it could have deepened the level of analysis of the Romanian stance at an earlier stage (7). Stanciu also omits the fascinating research by Eliza Gheorghe on Romania's mediation in nuclear matters, which could serve to explain how the Romanian leadership explores the position between different blocs – in the case of the Balkan cooperation embodied by Greece and Turkey on the one hand, versus Romania and Bulgaria on the other and Yugoslavia as the non-aligned member.⁶ Although he widely draws on literature on the Balkans in general, a more conceptual framework on the Romanian stance – which is central to this article – could have been built, whereas the findings from the

³ Laurien Crump, *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered: International Relations in Eastern Europe, 1955-69* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 242.

⁴ Cf. Corina Mavrodin, "The Advantage of Being Small and Thinking Big: Romania's Tactical Approaches to Escaping Bloc Rigidities", in Laurien Crump and Susanna Erlandsson, eds., *Margins for Manoeuvre in Cold War Europe: The Influence of Smaller Powers* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁵ Dragomir, "The Perceived Threat of Hegemonism in Romania during the Second Détente."

⁶ Eliza Gheorghe, "Atomic Maverick: Romania's Negotiations for Nuclear Technology, 1964-1970," *Cold War History* 13:3 (2013): 373-392, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.776542>.

recent volume in *The Balkans in the Cold War* could have been mentioned more explicitly.⁷ None of the abovementioned literature detracts from the author's argumentation, but it could have served to anchor his case still more in the scholarly debate.

The bulk of the article is based on research in the Romanian national archives and focuses on the Romanian attempts at Balkan cooperation between 1969 and 1975. It is interesting to note that Ministry of Affairs first proposed such cooperation to the Romanian politburo in April 1969. Although Stanciu does not mention it, this occurred one month after the Warsaw Pact's Political Consultative Committee approved the proposal for a European security conference, which would later kick-start the CSCE, in Budapest. In this case, too, the Romanians had put a lot of emphasis on the normalisation of international relations beyond the blocs.⁸ Stanciu acknowledges that "Ceasescu gave the impression that the project was a serious endeavour," but also notes that it may "well have been just a rhetorical tactic of undermining hegemony and Soviet control while encouraging political autonomy in the region" (6). This is exactly how the Bulgarians viewed it and how the American CIA interpreted it, as Stanciu shows on the basis of online CIA reports (14). The tension between appearances and intention, which is so common in the case of Romania, is a fascinating aspect of the article, which could have been explored still further. It is in line with so many Romanian attempts, for instance in the case of mediating between the Kremlin and the Chinese leadership during the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, to use a seemingly constructive contribution to further its own room for manoeuvre.

Meanwhile, the contents of Balkan cooperation remain very vague throughout the article, presumably because the idea primarily served as a mere instrument to gain leverage over the Soviet Union. Although Stanciu mentions the fact that the proposals were initially "vaguely formulated," it remains unclear to what extent they were developed any further (6), apart from a reference to "a much more incisive vision of Balkan cooperation" in 1973, when Ceasescu advocated "multilateral consultations in reference to the potential withdrawal of foreign troops from the territories of Balkan countries and the liquidation of foreign military bases" (10). This would also have entailed the involvement of the Soviets and the Americans, because of the presence of their troops and bases on the Balkan peninsula, which in itself seems to reveal a Romanian stratagem to exercise leverage over the superpowers. Stanciu's argument that Ceasescu therefore "aimed to devise methods and forms to limit superpower hegemony under the rhetoric of such a project" seems extremely convincing (13). Stanciu shows that the Soviets regarded the Romanian proposals for "a Balkan bloc" as "ill-intentioned," but American President Richard Nixon included it in a common American-Romanian declaration in 1973, even though the topic was not included on the agenda (12).

Stanciu also convincingly argues that the proposals for Balkan cooperation increased Romania's status in the peninsula, particularly concerning the contacts of Romanian officials with their Turkish and Greek counterparts. Moreover, the support of Tito also deepened the Bulgarian-Yugoslav divide on the issue of Macedonia, which the Bulgarians apparently used to put the Yugoslavs under pressure. The way in which different Balkan leaders responded to Ceasescu's plans sheds light on important geopolitical issues, such as the status of Macedonia and Cyprus, that transcended the Cold War bipolarity. The same applies to the role

⁷ Svetozar Rajak, Konstantina E. Botsiou, Eirini Karamouzi and Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, eds., *The Balkans in the Cold War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁸ Laurien Crump, *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered: International Relations in Eastern Europe, 1955-69* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 273-276.

of the Chinese to which Stanciu devotes a separate section. In this section the author successfully analyses the interesting dynamics between Romania, China, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, which were rife with difficulties as part of the Sino-Soviet split. Stanciu argues that the Romanians “did not conspire with the Chinese against the Soviets” (14). He shows that the Chinese only expressed “support for the Romanian plans on Balkan cooperation” in 1972 (17). His claim that the Romanians “were never encouraged by the Chinese to assume the responsibility of any anti-Soviet action” is nevertheless a little too bold (18): archival records from Bucharest show that there was a lot of contact between the Romanians and the Chinese in the first half of the 1960s, in which the Chinese certainly inspired the Romanians to defy the Soviet Union within the context of the Warsaw Pact.⁹

In his conclusion Stanciu argues on the one hand that “the initiative had in itself the potential to deter hegemony” and on the other emphasises “the will to give détente a different meaning” (19). These are, however, different aims, and although the former emanates quite clearly from the article, the Romanian “formula of regional détente” appears more clearly from the interpretation of the author than from the archival material he refers to (18). Some of the views attributed to the Romanians in this respect could have merited further reference to primary sources so as to substantiate the author’s claims. Although the Romanian contribution to regional détente remains questionable, Stanciu convincingly shows that “the act of simply advocating cooperation across the Iron Curtain in the Balkans” was important in itself, since it could serve to undermine superpower hegemony (18). The article proves that an analysis of the Cold War benefits hugely from an approach that goes *beyond* the blocs, decentres the superpowers, and focuses on smaller players in the vein of New Cold War history. The way in which Stanciu explores much uncharted territory about Balkan geopolitics in the 1970s on both sides of the Iron Curtain and beyond is particularly thought-provoking. Although the topic lends itself to multi-archival research to transcend the Romanian focus, Stanciu’s article deals with an important issue, one that has been under researched to date, and that deserves still further consideration. This is accordingly an excellent incentive for further research on the Balkans in the Cold War, and an important contribution to ‘new’ Cold War history.

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⁹ Crump, *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered*, 77-86.