

## FACING THE PAST. A HISTORIAN TALE

*Neagu Djuvara\**

### **Abstract**

*Neagu Djuvara is a professional diplomate, a historian of South-Eastern Europe and an opinion leader. He left Romania shortly before the advent of Communism, and returned after 1989 as a senior scholar, who spent most of his career years in the West. His intervention in this symposium is rooted in his own experience. Djuvara claims that political factors and residual Communist attitudes can obstruct the natural development of history as a critical and objective science.*

**Key words:** ideology, mentalities, communist legacy, objectivity, competence

---

\* Neagu Djuvara is an Associate Professor at University of Bucharest, member of honor at AD Xenopol and Nicolae Iorga History Institutes

Those who do not know me should know that I left Romania on 23 august 1944 and returned immediately after the 1989 events. So I am a man that rediscovers Romania after 45 years - you will find in some of my writings the terrifying impressions I had to face back then.

Let's talk about historians. The fact is that some radio stations as "Free Europe" and "The Voice of America" created me such an outstanding fame that, when I returned to Romania, although I felt strange, it was a nice feeling to see that I was so appreciated and known by the people and national universities academics. They invited me to chair some important conferences and so I realized the problems that the history was facing in Romania. My first impression was that along with the official history I was discovering in some manuals, also existed both an older well-trained generation (60 years or older) and younger people comparing to my age - a middle-aged generation that were willing to write a different history. Academics as Stefan Gorovei from Iasi, whose passion kept him even during the communism in touch with the new currents in history, wrote about the medieval history since they couldn't write about contemporary history (generally unpublished materials because of the constrainings of a regime that required that the strict national-communist ideology to be respected). So, my impression about Romanian historians was pretty good.

Next year Professor Zoe Petre asked me to teach at the University of Bucharest, a place where I found out quality colleagues and academics like Andrei Pippidi and Bogdan Murgescu. The problem appeared at the second level of University, administrative level, which refused to pay me in order to convince me to leave the University. Whatsoever, I did not want to earn money but to do a good job and I refused to leave; there are colleagues that tried to return and bring some good practices but they had to face the opacity of those that were controlling the political power and remained outside. It is important to say that the main reason Romania is behind Hungary, Poland and other neighbor countries is the deliberative will to stop the return of the Romanians above. Criminal slogans like "We do not sell our country" only meant a delay in the foreign investments flow - Romania has today 20 times less foreign investments than Hungary. We felt these realities also in the history field. After 5 or 6 years we felt an obvious liberalization in the context of the publishing of new history manuals. The

counter-reaction to this current is defintory for the mentality change generated by 45 years of totalitarianism. Many party officials "still connected to the former ideology" and voices from public opinion voiced against the liberalization and in favor of old cliches. This was a confirmation for me - a Romanian that lived abroad - that the patterns of Romanian's resistance against Communism and other foreign ideology were just products of my mind. I believe that the communist ideology had a huge influence on Romanian people, an influence that may be erased only after the present two generations; first generation is insufficient for spooning out a general structure, a cultural scheme, a teaching system and some other hidden things. The Romanian youth, whom otherwise I admire a lot, display such a lack of culture regarding Ancient Romania that they cannot simply understand certain things.

Publishing alternative manuals was a good initiative but the violent reactions from the press and politicians are symptomatic for a surviving ideology. The case of one of these manuals is more than relevant for our case: the authors were accused of not giving enough importance to national heroes Vlad Tepes and Mihai Viteazul - but the manual goals were not those of laying down a bunch of events but to comment different historical perspectives. The scandal that blowed out showed deep misunderstandings and a widespread conservatism.

One can see how hard it is to write history in a neutral way. Here is where we stand today. We have to write an objective national history, to integrate our history - a history that lacked the proper objectivity since before the fifty years of communism, from times that we have thought that a nationalist message will stimulate the national pride. We are the beneficiaries of 100 years of pathetic national-communism discourse. There is much to do in order to write a free history, meaning that one has to feel free at last from political commendments. There are two difficult things to do: one was mentioned above and the other is the integration of Romanian history into South-Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and whole Europe history context. This is the issue I consider the most important. What worries me more is to see how politics is made today: insidious, malicious, conservating old structures, changing some executives from prestigious national institutes with people that do not belong there; publishing history guides using forty years old materials (Romanian History Treaty" edited

by Romanian Academy). It is also alarming that you cannot find in these guides names that really matter for Romanian history (Papacostea, Andreescu, Pippidi, Gorovei). The fact is that some official institutions are continuing an absurd war with the team of historians which was opposing national communism before 1989, a war that has a negative impact on the future of Romanian historiography.