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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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ROMANIA

Cristina Merrill is a John O. Crane Memorial Fellow of the Institute studying post-Ceausescu and post-communist Romania.

Romania's Orange "Resolution"— an End to Transition?

By Cristina Merrill

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BUCHAREST, Romania—On a crisp sunny morning a week ago I rushed to the local newsstand to get my weekly fix of *Academia Catavencu*. The political-satire publication, which has sustained me through moments of despair over the state of my native country, sells out quickly. *AC* addicts are a competitive lot. The seller and I began exchanging pleasantries. A fan of conspiracy theories, she has convinced herself that I'm being spied on. In fact, she thinks *she* is as well. At this time, she started whispering about a man (crisp white shirt, driving a Jeep) who apparently kept looking for me during the holiday break. Owning a 4x4 is no small thing in Romania, so I was flattered to think that either a rich secret admirer or a clean-cut Romanian secret-service agent could waste precious plum-brandy boozing time at Christmas to chase after me. We were interrupted by police whistles and sirens announcing an official convoy. The seller, Madame Ecaterina, grabbed me excitedly and said, "Let's go watch the President go by. It's the President, Traian Basescu." A dozen black Mercedes cars whizzed by without a chance for us to spot Mr. Basescu. Still, we'd witnessed important people on their way to Parliament.

The big intersection nearby is more complicated, and far more dangerous, than an English-garden maze (hedges might reduce the chaos, actually). I've heard people curse that police officers, so hard to find when they're actually needed, suddenly show up to control traffic and disturb the orbital mess of trams, buses, cars and taxis that routinely disregard traffic signs and ramble on, accident-free, thanks to God's grace or a Feng-Shui-blessed road design. Madame, on the contrary, seemed delighted by this particular interruption — this weather-beaten woman who holds her fort from 5a.m. to 4p.m. more stone-faced than not, doesn't delight easily. As we returned to the news kiosk, she engaged in cheerful talk with another client, who remarked that "things will finally start happening in this country. The rats are already fleeing their holes."

What a difference in spirits an election can make! Few people outside this country of 22 million probably know, or care, that Romania has had her own Orange Revolution. Orange *resolution* is more like it (Velvet seems appropriate as well, but that label is *so* last-year, anyway). First-round voting irregularities did not result in street protests, the way it happened in Ukraine, but in mobilizing a previously numbed civic society and press to achieve, in less than two weeks, unpredictable results similar to the neighbor's north of the border, only more peacefully. Proud Romanians are quick to point out that their country is no Ukraine: they'd already had an anti-communist revolution 15 years before, and a bloody one at that. In December 1989, former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, and his wife Elena were executed without due process. While thirsty for change, people here like to think that they've evolved into a relatively stable transition that rules out violence. As badly off as they are financially, their minimum wage is still double that of Ukrainians. And the resigned gloom that prevailed as recently as December 11th, the day before the presidential runoff, when former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase seemed the race's favorite, has been replaced by optimism

that ranged from timid to outright bombastic. Some newspapers declared that the country's bright future began the day Mr. Basescu was elected. One newspaper predicted the day of election to be "the last day of Communism."

Romania's new president, like Viktor Yushchenko, is considered a hero — despite his populist manners. Compared to Mr. Nastase, a university professor and doctor in international law who by his own admission is a "refined intellectual," Mr. Basescu shoots



Traian Basescu, the new president and face of Romania's Orange Revolution

from the hip, a tendency that seemed at first to hurt his chances to win over a population who wanted to appear sophisticated to Western eyes. But the twice-elected Mayor of Bucharest, who a few years back demanded that all dogs in the capital city be rounded up and put down in case they couldn't be adopted (only to be stopped by the protest instigated by that Goddess of animal rights, Brigitte Bardot), prevailed. This blue-eyed, short and balding former ship captain — Romania's "Poseidon," as *Academia Catavencu* half-jokingly called him — has managed to charm both men and especially women. The campaign color of his center-right party, the Justice and Truth Alliance, is also orange, on a blue background. His advisers say that the color choice was inspired in April not by Ukrainians but as a result of last year's orange trend in fashion and, more important to this *foţbal*-loving nation, by the look of the Dutch national soccer team.

Like Ukraine's Yushchenko, Mr. Basescu, 53, also holds a pro-western and anti-monopolistic stance. He considers Romania's corrupt officialdom (i.e., the "rats") a threat to national security and has vowed to make fighting endemic corruption a top priority — along with combating poverty. "As long as the state humiliates millions of citizens through poverty, the Romanian nation will not have cohesion," the new president said in his first speech after election. "Reestablishing the cohesion of the Romanian nation is my objective." In the heady days following his win, Mr. Basescu translated his campaign slogan, "You shall live well!" to mean, in the long term, the end of Romania's overly long transition from Communism and a return to normality. This latter goal will be especially difficult to achieve, given that the last known "normal" period here was sometime before WWII. The most abundant gifts offered in shops here are books and photos celebrating Interbellum Bucharest, a time between the wars when the capital city was known as Little Paris of the East.

My Cousin, the Prime Minister and Presidential Candidate

The last two months, especially the 13 days between the two rounds of voting that eventually led to Mr. Basescu's win, were an exciting time for Romania — a pe-

riod full of tumult among people still uncertain of their future and yet somewhat aware that change lay within their grasp. The best and the worst of their mixed Latin, Tracian Slavonic and Byzantine roots, scarred by the wounds of history, came to the surface in the confrontation provoked by an emotional election — passion and conservatism, courage and resignation, honesty and denial. Abundant talk, typically Romanian and yet new to me after 22 years of having been away, was a necessary cleansing process for this nation that still needed to understand her past in order to forge ahead. I relished the depths of conversation and the promise of change. I found myself being drawn into enthusiastic rhetoric that brought me closer to my country of origin and at the same time led me to make pronouncements of a personally conflicting nature. Part of the difficulty of the last few months lay in the fact that a first cousin, former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, was running for president — in fact, he was the one favored to beat Mr. Basescu.

I admired and still have high regard for my cousin, the son of my father's oldest sister. Even before the start of the campaign he was the most famous, though not always the most well-liked, man in Romania. But he is of my own blood, so I tried to keep my personal affection for him separate from his image as a politician. I told very few people he was my uncle, both out of fear that those who despised him would try to use me against him or the opposite, of being used by those who wanted to get close to him. It was especially difficult mixing with people in the media, especially those I respected but who at the same time were publishing negative stories about my kinsman.



Adrian Nastase, the former Prime minister who lost in presidential elections, is also my cousin.

In the race to beat censors and bureaucrats who make getting and publishing accurate information difficult, Romanian media tend to run wild with stories involving personal scandals. Writers sometimes publish damaging material without fact-checking. At one point, front-page articles in a big daily were screaming that my aunt, the Prime Minister's mother, had allegedly bought her apartment for less than market value and through my cousin's mafia connections. The first time I went to visit her, in October, I kept my face covered on the drive to the apartment. My absurd reaction was provoked by a feeling of not wanting to be there as both a niece and a writer. In the following days I learned that my aunt had been harassed, with at least one attempt on her life. I feared for her — and indeed for me. Later, when I went to meet with my other cousin, Mr. Nastase's sister, I wore dark sunglasses to avoid being photographed. This, you may understand, is one newsletter I wish my family couldn't read — and not just for obvi-

ous reasons. There is one other family member, an uncle who lives in the United States, has persistently denigrated my cousin through smut I know to be untrue and which has helped fuel some of the ugliest parts of the campaign against my cousin.

I didn't want to have to choose emotionally between my cousin and someone else during elections. I would have loved to have a cousin with whose politics I agreed. But like the country of our birth, we can't choose our families. What we can choose to do is treat families with respect while staying true to ourselves. During the time I have spent here on my ICWA fellowship, I grew disenchanted with Mr. Nastase's governing party, The Social Democrats, (known as PSD here) and feared that his election would mean five more years (the new length of the presidential term) of the same leadership that clamped down on press freedom instead of corruption, and took care mostly of its personal interests. Critics say that it's no coincidence that many of the PSD members have gotten rich in politics.

Mr. Nastase, 54, unfortunately never got out from under the shadow of his main supporter, outgoing president Ion Iliescu, a top PSD official and former top Communist who served three presidential terms, or 11 of the last 15 years. Judging by published accounts in the few investigative papers that managed to escape censorship, Mr. Iliescu surrounded himself with former communists — today's "neocommunists" — who never shed their anti-democratic skins despite claims of reform. A Romanian popular expression says that the wolf can change his look but not his habits (similar to the English "old dogs and new tricks"). Thankfully, with this election a majority of Romanian Red Riding Hoods woke up and donned orange caps instead. Ironically, the same PSD politicians who were bragging that they would help get Romania into the EU and NATO soon after Ceausescu's fall were opposed to joining the North American alliance or privatizing state enterprises — two natural steps on the road to democracy and a market economy.

It wouldn't do my family any good to single out my cousin or chastise his party any further. Suffice it to say that I thought his rival ought to be given a chance for the sake of change. I welcome the opportunity to finally meet with Mr. Nastase, whom I have not seen since arriving in Romania, as cousins only, without the fear of compromising his position — or my independence as an ICWA correspondent.

The Quiet Before the Storm

Save for an announcement early on that Teodor Stolojan, then Mr. Nastase's main opponent and leader of the Justice and Truth Alliance (or DA), was withdrawing from the race for stress-induced health reasons, the electoral campaign, which officially started at the end of October, crept on uneventfully up to the day of the first-round voting. With a clean record that's hard to find

among Romania's compromised politicians, Mr. Stolojan, a former primer minister himself, had been the great hope of the opposition. After shedding some more-or-less impromptu tears (critics say the driven former ship captain plans even his emotional outbursts) Mr. Basescu stepped in to take Mr. Stolojan's place.

The two main parties started dispatching their candidates (sometimes with spouses, American style) and spreading their slogans throughout the country. Mr. Nastase's "My Politics Consists of Getting Things Done" reminded the population of some of his achievements over the last four years: helping build over 400 new school gyms (critics claim many weren't finished or were done badly, and that many contracts were given out as favors by political bosses who also profited from them); starting a program of feeding public-school kids milk and bread; making available apartments to young couples. Mr. Nastase consistently reminded voters that during his premiership Romania was invited to join NATO — and is likely to become a member of the European Union in 2007, along with neighboring Bulgaria. Final EU accession papers are due to be signed in April of this year.

Mr. Basescu set his focus on Romania's big problems of corruption and poverty, and promised to make his country livable again by ruthlessly punishing those "mafiosos" who stole from the public. The scandals he mentioned were numerous, often involving members or supporters of Mr. Nastase's government — everything from shady privatization contracts, pardons of debts incurred by dubious businessmen, to supposedly unfavorable agreements Mr. Nastase's government had made with Western partners, sometimes without the benefit of competitive bidding.

The two candidates had once been neighbors but otherwise seemed a world apart in everything from background to personal style. My sense is that they *both* represent Romania. Mr. Nastase stands for everything Romanians want to be (and aren't always) to impress the world, while Mr. Basescu is an image of who they are. Tall, elegant and, many say, handsome, Mr. Nastase emphasized whenever possible his sophistication and accomplishments — a doctor in law, graduate of two universities, fluent in several languages. (In fact, he was a model of academic success for me; my parents encouraged me to follow in his footsteps and be the second "Adi" in the family). His personal website, set up for the election gave the impression of a picture-perfect life, complete with family photos of his wife and two sons and a record of personal successes.

Mr. Basescu, on the other hand, was a natural in the part of the tough underdog, the urban battler who swears he will get things done. His ad campaign, in which he looks seriously yet knowingly at the viewer, with his finger pointing (and the words "You shall live well!") plays well into his role as a no-frills and pragmatic leader. Born in the port town of Constanta, the former ancient Greek

colony of Tomis where poet Ovid went into exile, Mr. Basescu spent some 20 years working his way up to captain in the Romanian navy. Following Communism he served as Minister of Transportation and over the last four years as Bucharest Mayor. He was elected in June to a second term. Like Mr. Nastase, Mr. Basescu had also been a member of the Communist Party, although, as he insisted, he never served as propagandist or informer for the old regime. There is a question mark over his knowledge or involvement in the selling of 16 Romanian navy ships (private individuals, and not the state, benefited from the \$400 million paid for the "privatization" of ships) during his work in the Transportation Ministry, which I hope will be cleared during his mandate. Already, an investigation into the affair has been opened since election.

Unfortunately for Mr. Nastase, the press here showed a less appealing side of him: they published stories showing that as a rising star in the old regime, he wrote articles praising it. Even more embarrassing were Communist-era articles written by Mr. Nastase's protector, outgoing president Iliescu (also nicknamed "Ion Ceausescu," a combination of his first name and the late dictator's last). For example, in an article he wrote while he was a student in Moscow in 1951 under the title "The Joy of Studying in the Soviet Union," Mr. Iliescu described the disgust he and other Communist students felt against "American cannibals who commit indescribable acts of cruelty against heroic Korean peoples."

Despite Mr. Nastase's wishes to remain above the mud-slinging political dialogue, he was dragged into the fray by journalists eager to feed Romanians' hearty appetite for juicy coverage. I forget exactly where and how it all began, but instead of discussing serious issues, the two candidates took to threatening and calling each other names like a couple of street fighters. Because of his penchant for hunting and his larger stature, Mr. Nastase became "*ursulet*," or teddy bear, while Mr. Basescu was nicknamed "*iepuras*," or little rabbit, thanks to his long ears and more lowly status as member of the opposition. The names spawned numerous jokes, caricatures and columns — just as in the old Communist days, when underground satire became a nation's therapy.

The Face of A Romanian President

Mr. Nastase's supporters fed the public an image of a respectable, sophisticated and cosmopolitan man who looked comfortable and suitable in White House hallways or in Brussels — a man with "a presidential face" who would provide continuity as the nation became a member of the EU. It seemed to work. At first Romanians, who as a nation lack self-confidence, covet status. It's not just the difficult transition from Communism or four decades of an authoritarian regime that shredded the self-esteem of an otherwise ancient and proud people with rich traditions and folklore. My native countrymen haven't believed in themselves in quite a while. "What do you expect from people who spent six hundred years

alone under the Turks?" said Dan Puric, a well-known producer and actor at the National Theater I recently interviewed. It was habitual during much of the Ottoman occupation for noblemen to kiss the sultan's slippers. One of Mr. Puric's shows currently running in Bucharest, called "Made in Romania," uses dance, mime and songs but few words. He said he wanted to tell the world through body language that Romania stands for something — and in the process he hoped to help Romanians trust in themselves again.

I still recall what a boy told me two years ago, my first time back in my old country in two decades. I asked him how he thought the nation fared after communism. He shrugged and said that he couldn't tell for sure but that he thought too many ideas borrowed from abroad. "Romanians copy well," he said, but don't always use what they learn to benefit themselves. In the late 19th century, when Paris was the rage, Romania's Romance-language speakers became devoted Francophiles. Now, as possibly the most pro-U.S. country in Europe, Romania is absorbing all things American at a frantic pace. "Talk show," "workshop," or "e-mail" are words *de rigueur* — not to mention "super" and "OK," which Romanians use with manic frequency (sometimes combining them into "*super-OK*"), having dropped the more authentic and Roman-influenced slang term "*misto*" (pronounced MEESH-toe), meaning "cool." Romanians are sponges for foreign languages, which they speak with less accent than people of other nationalities. Having a Latin-based language as base helps, but in the end I believe that Romanians just try harder to belong to the Western world. During the campaign, the media often quoted reaction from abroad to events here, an important measuring stick of performance. And Mr. Basescu declared one of his presidential priorities to be the development of the Washington-London-Bucharest axis. Jokers immediately jumped on the statement, adding that corruption in Romania would make the addition of Berlusconi to the Bush-Blair-Basescu grouping more suitable.

"It's pure snobbery to keep talking about the need for a presidential face," said a prominent guest on a talk show, when the host wondered why Romanians are so eager to enter the EU and the Western World in a "servile" manner. The explanation isn't that simple, especially since people here put great Latin emphasis on looking good. The word "*fatos*," (pronounced FAHT-sosse) comes from the word for face and means trying to put on a good appearance — but it doesn't have the slightly negative connotation it would in the West, where it could be translated as "superficial." On one political show, when the reporter traveled to the countryside to gauge people's reaction to the two main candidates, on a couple of occasions respondents said they preferred Mr. Nastase because he is "*gras si frumos*," or "plump and handsome." City folks are no better. A friend of my family called to complain about Mr. Basescu's physique. "I like people who look good," she said. "Basescu looks like he's been dug out of a pile of trash." They may not have self-confidence, but Romanians compensate with a biting sense of

humor. *Academia Catavencu*, of course, had a field day with Mr. Basescu's few remaining hair strands, and dedicated columns to advising him on how to coif it. Writers joked that Mr. Basescu ought to shave his head to avoid giving a weak-leader impression every time the wind blew his scarce locks in all directions.

Mr. Basescu either didn't like playing the appearance game — or couldn't help himself — while campaigning. At times disheveled, he accused, shouted, shot from the hip, and name-called — even going slightly overboard by threatening to scrutinize and recall all major contracts made by Mr. Nastase's governments. "We want to complete the revolution we began in 1989 by toppling Ceausescu," he said.

Following the first round of elections, when numerous voting irregularities were revealed, Mr. Basescu called for a repeat of elections and the arrest of the head of the electoral bureau. *Quel horreur!* Mr. Nastase warned Mr. Basescu that he was embarrassing Romania in front of the world and harming his country's chances to get into the respectable world of the EU. Mr. Nastase, for his part, was probably saying the right thing for his electorate. A deeply religious and traditional people, Romanians seek and encourage "propriety" and "credibility," even though their Latin tendency pulls them into more exhibitionist directions. My English friend Mark Percival, managing director of the NGO Romania Think Tank, feels that Romanian and British humor is actually similar — it's all about living with the tension of expectation and reality, an ebbing tidal flow of repression and outburst. When I asked a taxi driver the night before the final election round who he was going to vote for, he paused. A supporter of Mr. Basescu's political party, he said that he

liked the candidate but that he seemed "*dezechilibrat*," or unbalanced. Incidentally, that's what many people say about talented and outspoken theater director Puric as well.

First Round: Resignation

First time around, Romanians seemed resigned to cast the ballot for Mr. Nastase and his party. The November race was a presidential and parliamentary one, and it was assumed that his alliance of Social Democrats and Humanists (the PUR) would also gain a majority in the bicameral congress. People I spoke to even said that it made sense to reelect corrupt people, since they would be less hungry to steal (having already accumulated personal fortunes) than new arrivals to power. The experience of the last 15 years has taught Romanians to assume that politicians are motivated by greed. As one character in a recent Romanian movie says in reference to a candidate for mayor in a small village, "His youth gives him plenty of strength to steal."

Voices of dissent fought to counter this sense of resignation. As I recently wrote, most of the Bucharest press seemed strangled by the ruling party, which used all kinds of means to keep critical articles out of the public view. Up to the last days of the campaign only a handful of publications, including investigative daily *Evenimentul Zilei* and satirical *Academia Catavencu*, regularly dared take the PSD to task. One subject they focused on was the allegedly illegal campaigning undertaken by outgoing president Ion Iliescu on behalf of the PSD. The constitution prohibits a president from displaying any party affiliation during an election. Nevertheless, Mr. Iliescu accompanied Mr. Nastase on the campaign trail and gave arrogant answers when confronted by journalists who

brought up the need for him to stay neutral. "I'm not Switzerland," Mr. Iliescu answered.

For town meetings Mr. Iliescu held with impoverished, elderly Romanians, organizers distributed money, food and gifts, which is considered electoral bribing by law, and also forbidden. On a train going out of town at about that time I was reading an account of such a meeting in *Evenimentul Zilei*, when a passenger asked to borrow my copy of the paper. He read it with visible disgust and said, "Iliescu ought to go to prison. What a mockery, giving candy to old people." But he added, "Nothing will happen, of course. Nastase will still be



elected. We can't do anything about it."

In this spirit of hopelessness the first presidential debate, on state-owned station TVR, took place. A disappointing two-hour display of political show biz, devoid of substance, it was a circus-like game show filled with dazzling lights, loud music and superficial hostesses who asked candidates scripted questions — and then failed to probe key issues. A ticking clock routinely cut off speakers before they finished their responses. A poor imitation of American televised debates (especially since nine presidential candidates participated), it failed primarily because Romanians are too emotional and verbose to be reduced to sound bites. As much as I don't like his politics, I had to agree with Corneliu Vadim Tudor, a nationalist candidate for the Greater Romania Party, who dismissed the show's arrangement as a "masquerade." Mr. Tudor, who four years ago came in second place in the first round of the presidential race despite name-calling against Jews and Gypsies, is a newspaper publisher who considers himself a man of letters — and as such provoked moments of hilarity when he advised candidates to avoid "cacophonies".

Romanians have embraced their democracy with abandon. In 1990, in the first election after the fall of the communist dictatorship, 150 political parties came into existence. In 1996, 16 presidential candidates debated in the first round. This year the number was nine, representing six political parties. The remaining candidates were independent. The media played favorites from the beginning, however, and chose to cover exclusively Mr. Nastase and Mr. Basescu, whose parties also commanded a majority of representation in Parliament. At least one other quality candidate, Gheorghe Ciuhandu, the popular mayor of the city of Timisoara and leader of the Romanian National Christian Peasant Party, was regarded as an alternative to Mr. Basescu. But this status worked against him, because voters who opposed Mr. Nastase opted to vote for Mr. Basescu in order to create as much leverage as possible against the powerful Prime Minister. Too weak an opposition would have given him a win on the first try. A second round takes place only when no candidate secures an absolute majority of votes. About 18 million people were eligible to vote in the November 2004 elections, with 314 parliamentary and 137 senate seats in play.

First—round voting irregularities, PSD mistakes and some media protests

The first-round voting on November 28 confirmed people's expectations and fears. Mr. Nastase came in first, placing ahead of Mr. Basescu by about eight percentage points. In parliamentary elections, the Social Democrats, allied with the Humanist Romanian Party, also won the most votes. The run-off between the top candidates, scheduled for December 12, looked like a dress rehearsal for Mr. Nastase's coronation.

The lonely voices of independent media then chimed

in with a volley of investigations. In the days leading to the elections, *Evenimentul Zilei* published transcripts of past official meetings of the governing party, in which PSD politicians discussed ways to control the press and manipulate the justice system and acknowledged corruption inside its ranks. As I reported in a recent newsletter, *Evenimentul's* editor, Dan Turturica, was risking his post by delving into issues of a sensitive nature. Just as it happened with *Romania Libera*, another independent newspaper where the German owners allegedly started intervening editorially under pressure from the PSD, the publisher of *Evenimentul*, the Swiss company Ringier, wanted less negative focus on the PSD — and more "positive investigations," an oxymoron that would send shivers down the spine of any self-respecting journalist.

Mr. Turturica had plenty to work with. The ruling party made lots of mistakes that proved fatal in the end. One of the worst was getting mixed up in the voting irregularities I wrote about in the last letter (multiple voting, busing, or bribing of voters). It seems both parties were guilty of distributing handouts that imitated the look of opponents' campaign literature but contained slanderous material. The Coalition for a Clean Parliament (CNAS) complained that the PSD faked its pamphlets *en masse*. Formed by key political NGOs, CNAS has monitored candidates to Parliament and published a list singling out those who "do not meet civil society's criteria for moral integrity." Criteria included collaboration with the former Communist regime, switching parties or using public money or property for personal purposes. The PSD and its allied party have the most such unsuitables, 95 in total, while Mr. Basescu's party had only nine. CNAS decided to leave presidential candidates off the list but nobody else, including outgoing President Iliescu was spared. For instance, one top PSD official was accused, among other things, of using public money to build a church in his native village and accumulating a fortune that couldn't be justified by his small salary as a public functionary. Bothered by the negative publicity, the PSD created its own version of the CNAS list, with false information. The copies I have seen, identical in look to the original, criticized Mr. Basescu, his running mate, Calin Popescu Tariceanu (now Romania's Prime Minister), and several other campaign staff and associates.

Both parties engaged in efforts to mobilize people to cast ballots, but the PSD, better financed and entrenched, seemed to reach deeper, especially in rural areas where a majority of mayors were members of the party and could influence, persuade and threaten a poor and less educated electorate. An exit poll showed that Mr. Nastase won a majority of the rural vote (just under 60 per cent) and of those without a high school education (61.5) and over 56 years of age (63.5).

Joined most of the time only by *Romania Libera* (out of some 14 Bucharest dailies), *Evenimentul Zilei* hung on to the scandals with a bulldog's tenacity. Other papers also ran critical stories but only selectively. Much of the

press was too compromised politically and financially to put up a united front — especially television stations, which have been in the hands of friends or sponsors of the ruling party or owe such debts to the state that criticizing the PSD was akin to signing dissolution sentences. The threat of the taxman hovered ominously and reduced them to silence.

A flare unites civil society

What seemed to change the tide, the day after elections, were revelations of irregularities in vote-counting at the Central Electoral Bureau

(BEC in Romanian). BEC officials, mostly political appointees of the PSD, gave vague explanations for why the number — about 160,000 votes — previously declared null, kept decreasing throughout the counting day (a mathematical impossibility), only later to show up as additional votes in favor of Mr. Nastase. Similarly, null votes were supposedly added to the PSD alliance. A warning flare went up through the spine of civil society, the media and Mr. Basescu, uniting them in protest. Saying that fraud had been committed, Mr. Basescu asked for new elections to be held and the arrest of the person at the helm of the electoral bureau that helped “the PSD hit.” Said Mr. Basescu, who asked the electorate not to take to the street: “It’s very serious what is happening with elections because Adrian Nastase and his clique were not satisfied to steal factories and plants, houses, money, now they want to steal from Romanians. I consider that the Alliance and myself are no longer in a fight to win elections, but for Romania.”

Ironically, the day after the accusation, December 1, happened to be Romania’s National Day, a holiday. The streets of Bucharest, usually bustling, were empty. On major arteries, especially around the massive Palace of the Parliament, blue PSD flags dominated, sometimes alongside strategically placed national flags — a sinister picture given what had been happening. But all was not quiet. *Evenimentul* was going wild filling the paper with articles in emergency-type font.

A nice surprise came from television, through



On Romania’s Day, national and PSD flags stood side by side.]. But all was not quiet. Evenimentul was going wild filling the paper with articles in emergency-type font.

Realitatea TV, a privately owned all-news-and-talk show station launched three years ago. Though by the end of elections on December 12, it too faced pressure from the ruling party (it fired a show host critical of the PSD and put a moratorium on political coverage just as cries against irregularities were multiplying), for the better part of the 13 days that followed it gave full news and analytical coverage to political issues. The channel did for the election what CNN did for Americans during the Gulf War.

Thrilled to see my own little revolution happen in my lifetime in Romania, I stayed glued to the nonstop reporting, the kind of “appointment TV” I had enjoyed years before with NBC’s primetime schedule of “Mad About You,” “Seinfeld” or “Friends.” Strange what little joys life throws our way sometimes. Friends in New York were downloading the latest hits on ipods while I couldn’t wait to get home from meetings to turn on Realitatea.

The best thing about this station, however, was not just the constant flow of news. It was the talk shows, moderated by excellent journalists (where had they been before the campaign?), whose guests had fascinating things to say. Many criticized the PSD, but overall I was enthralled to see people having deep and cogent conversations and helping put issues in perspective. Finally, I thought, Romanians were starting to understand their present — hopefully they’ll do the same with their history and walk more confidently into the future. Communists managed to subjugate Romanians through censor-

ship and disinformation. People were fed stale crumbs of truth, without being allowed access to the whole picture. Having remained so long in the dark, Romanians are still disoriented. I'm one of them, so I can say they are terrible map readers and givers of directions. It makes sense that they orbit, with little self-confidence, around the light of more civilized planets. The word "Western" translates as "Occident" in Romanian, or that part of the horizon where the sun last appears in the evening. They want to "wander from east to occident," as Shakespeare wrote in *Cymbeline*.

Intellectuals, writers, politicians, people whose names I had read in a few of the papers, all started coming out of the woodwork on Realitatea TV. The contrast with public television or even the rest of the stations, was striking. Mr. Basescu and Mr. Nastase kept dueling through press conferences but most stations were choosing to show mostly the Prime Minister or, worse, cutting off his opponent for lesser events. Thanks to Realitatea, I got to know faces from civil society. On one segment, host Robert Turcescu, whom I described as full-fledged media star in my last newsletter, had as guest Renate Weber, president of the Soros-founded Open Society Foundation. He asked her why civil society hadn't done more to protest problems in the election. "We didn't dare because we weren't been listened to by the media," she said. Mr. Turcescu, incidentally, had added *Cotidianul*, a newly reorganized daily where he serves as editor in chief, to the independent media. I jokingly say that *Academia Catavencu*, the trust that publishes the satire weekly by the same name, won the election for Basescu, but the company indeed played a big part in helping him look more attractive.

With its biting humor, *Academia* played a visible role in making Mr. Basescu appear like a winner — despite jokes it made at his expense and nicknaming him "little rabbit," "Popeye the sailor," or "Uncle Baldie." The owners of the media company also invested heavily in both *Cotidianul* and a new radio station, launched around the first round of elections. Radio Guerilla promises to infuse a rather homogenous Romanian market, stuck in replaying the same hits, with new music and a different take on news. I'm a big fan of the hour-long morning media review show at 9, which approaches events of the day or the special guests with a refreshing lack of inhibition. For the launch, the station recorded commercials with both presidential candidates but it mostly played an ad with Mr. Basescu, in which he parodied his own campaign slogan to advise the station's listeners, "You shall listen well!" Coming from the "boys at Catavencu," it's no wonder that the slant has been critical of the PSD. "When you vote today listen to your conscience and not what the PSD is telling you," said media show host Liviu Mihaiu, a founding editor of *Academia*, the Friday before the second round of voting.

Mr. Basescu Wins

Mr. Nastase took a serious hit in the only televised debate between him and Mr. Basescu shortly before the

second-round of voting. For reasons that were never made clear, Mr. Nastase refused the one-on-one contest until the last moment. Broadcast on public station TVR at 10p.m., it was also picked up by Realitatea, which decided to have guests rate the candidates afterwards. (The host and editor of that Realitatea show, on which Mr. Basescu got rated higher than his opponents, was eventually fired as a result of PSD pressure, observers said.) Much more subdued and lacking in fluff than a previous presentation of crowds of candidates, the commercial-free two-hour debate — moderated by the head of the Romanian Press Club — was an intense experience and generally a *tour de force* for both candidates. Mr. Basescu, however, looked more direct, genuine and pragmatic.

Toward the end of the debate Mr. Basescu delivered a memorable knockout blow — and the jury is still out on whether his statements had been spontaneous or not — when he said that he and Mr. Nastase have a "big problem." Looking at Mr. Nastase the whole time, Mr. Basescu said: "I was speaking with colleagues at the beginning of the campaign. 'What a curse this is for Romanian people, to have to choose between two former communists [...]' Then I would look myself in the mirror and would say: 'Do you respect Romanian people?' I'd say 'I do.' Have you ever mocked them? I never thought I did [...]' The biggest drama is not that we both were members of the party. Maybe it's not the end of the world, the worst that can happen, to be a party member in a communist state. That's the way it was then. The drama is that we cannot afford to keep the same mentality after 15 years, since we no longer have communism in Romania. Yet you convince me every day that you cannot understand that these [state] institutions ought not to be meddled with."

Picked up by the media, those comments probably helped mobilize undecided voters to choose Mr. Basescu. In any other context, Romanians would have deemed this rawness and directness unsuitable for a presidential candidate. But the words probably brought the mirror to viewers' own faces and confronted them with their own vision of themselves and their nation's future. I wonder if they asked themselves, how much longer they'll pretend that putting on appearances will solve their problems and get them into the West? Whatever the impetus, with a boost from urban and young voters, Mr. Basescu won. He won resoundingly in the major cities and resoundingly in Bucharest, where a tenth of the population lives. It was a very close call overall, with 51.23 percent of votes for him and 48.77 percent for his opponent; a difference of fewer than 300,000 votes separated winner from loser. Mr. Nastase, now part of the opposition, still plays an important role in politics as head of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Parliament, and as one of two key players in the PSD.

Euphoria sets in

The mass celebration that erupted in the square in front of Parliament made it look like a revolution had

taken place. Respect for my cousin and my aunt kept me home, despite SMS text-message invitations from friends to join them in festivities. After a wonderful lunch she had prepared for me at her apartment with her own hands, my aunt Cristina, a blond, blue-eyed cover-girl beauty in her time, drew me aside and asked in a trembling voice whether I thought her son would become president. On daily errands I use a bag she gave me, along with many other gifts as a welcome to Romania. At night, I cover myself in a woolen blanket from her. I imagined that at the time Mr. Basescu was on stage celebrating his victory, she felt a mother's deep pain over her son's defeat.

Euphoria seemed to set in immediately after the election — and in some ways it hasn't left, a month later. Mr. Basescu was everywhere, from press conferences to talk shows. At New Year's he shared champagne with the crowds. A crazy energy seemed to possess everyone. So many things were happening at breakneck speed, both good and bad, that it was difficult to keep pace. As someone wrote, the end of the year was so dynamic that it was impossible to find time to take a bite of stuffed cabbage, a traditional holiday food, in between so many events of national importance. Indeed, around this time, a journalist from the national television station came out and accused the PSD of censorship. Soon he was joined by several other colleagues. That domino effect is still rippling through the media. Recently, journalists from the state-owned radio station have asked for the resignation of their chief, claiming "censorship with pen and scissors" throughout the PSD governance.

Inexplicably, however, Dan Turturica was fired from *Evenimentul Zilei* on the eve of Christmas, some say as an indirect act of vengeance on the part of the PSD for the wounds the editor-in-chief inflicted on the party and its candidate during elections. The move caused a protest walkout of 30 staffers, some of whom now work for Realitatea TV. It is rumored that Mr. Turturica and former



Traian Ungureanu, a former BBC journalist, mourns the "silencing" of journalists at *Evenimentul Zilei* newspaper.

Evenimentul colleagues have plans to regroup by launching some other media outlet later this year — but getting financing may be a problem. "*Evenimentul* has been silenced," wrote Traian Ungureanu, a contributor to the paper, a frequent critic of the PSD and a former chief of the Romanian-language section of the BBC who apparently was fired a year ago from the British broadcaster as result of pressure from the PSD. Mr. Ungureanu praised the journalists who dared to be the exception in the media and act on their professional instincts and out of disgust with the "appetite for allowing to be tossed around [the idea] that Romanian principles equate with equilibrium. [...] Prejudice, nostalgia, conniving and resignation are our *pieces de resistance* as people. *Evenimentul Zilei* refused to fall prey to the above."

Outgoing President Iliescu also provoked national fury by pardoning the leader of miners who right after the 1989 Revolution came to Bucharest to help quiet protest and in the process beat students and intellectuals. Surprised by people's reaction, Mr. Iliescu retracted the pardon the same day he and the newly elected president were supposed to travel to Brussels for an EU meeting. Mr. Basescu refused to board the same plane with Mr. Iliescu. In the weeks since, Mr. Basescu has made several key appointments that have been cheered by his followers and have put pressure on enforcement agencies that deal with justice and corruption. Critics say that he runs the danger of overstepping the boundaries set on the presidential office by the Constitution and weakening his prime minister's powers. And skeptics warn that his enthusiasm will wane once the immense task of solving this country's many problems overwhelm him — or worse, that he'll join the long line of compromised Romanian politicians.

The Courage of Desperation

So far, however, the beginning looks promising. Good things have happened already on Mr. Basescu's presidential watch. "Rats" have indeed started to flee their holes under the pressure of police investigations or fear of Mr. Basescu's wrath. This "savior who will wash the country of corruption," as one paper praised him, is receiving record numbers of petitions from ordinary citizens who see him as a savior from all things bad in Romania. Civil society and civic pride, which were in vogue right after the Revolution, have come back to life. Leaders of major NGOs have become media darlings practically overnight. Given the condition of political life in Romania, even those feisty journalists who followed their conscience in the public interest, could be called civic leaders. *Evenimentul's* Dan Turturica; Cristian Parvulescu, president of ProDemocratia Association; Alina Mungiu-Pippidi of Romanian Academic Society; finally, Monica Macovei, leader of the human-rights NGO APADOR Helsinki Committee, all became sought-after talking heads. Following his victory, Mr. Basescu did a fine job of recruiting many of them to his brain trust as counselors or ministers. Ms. Macovei, in fact, is the new Justice Minis-



Civic leaders often meet in this classic building of cultural and historic value.

ter, one of the most important roles in Romania today.

Enthusiasm was contagious. I started attending civic meetings that were popping up like mushrooms after rain. Many associations gave press conferences jointly or opened some of their working sessions to the public. As space (or being able to afford space) is of the essence, the one place where I found them convening regularly was the Old-World-style headquarters of The Group of Social Dialog (GDS), the first civic association founded in Romania after the fall of Ceausescu.

Inside a charming courtyard off Bucharest's most stylish avenue, Calea Victoriei, GDS' bourgeois building stands at the center of one of Bucharest's most enlightened spaces, an almost spiritual meeting place of politics and culture. Upstairs, the mansion houses upstairs *Revista 22*, the first intellectual publication founded after the Revolution. On the first level, to the left of the elegant salon-like room where meetings are held, is a library for

NGOs with Internet-equipped older Mac computers. I had, in fact, sought shelter at this Internet oasis before, when my computer was riddled with viruses and I needed to check email somewhere. As I tried to decipher French or German-language sociology manuals on the nearby shelves I was grateful that something as old-fashioned as this could still exist amid a world assailed by cell-phone and SMS beeps. The right wing of the building has been turned into Green Hours, a popular jazz-club and performing-arts space in Bucharest. To the right of the courtyard sit a good bookstore and adjacent music store, while across the way a beer garden welcomes revelers well into the early morning on summer nights.

For a while, until the government passed an ordinance to allow GDS to occupy the state-owned building, its future looked uncertain. It is said that centuries ago the place belonged to a princely Serbian family whose heiress was the mistress of Romanian ruler Alexander Ioan Cuza; it was on this site, the story goes, that Mr. Cuza was arrested and then forced to abdicate as a result of a plot. During Communism the mansion was used by the dictator's womanizing son, Nicu. The GDS locale is often booked solid with civic meetings, political and cultural lectures, and guest appearances by figures of renown in all areas. Romania's intellectuals, revolutionaries of sorts, at last have found the courage to pick up where they left off decades ago. I must admit that I had hoped for my fellow Romanians to act in a more extreme

manner, like their orange Ukrainian brethren and sisters, and take protest to the street. It seemed from here that in the U.S. the trendiest cocktail-time talk was memorizing Yushchenko and Russian Commonwealth of Independent States exotica (I imagine that precocious children back home are already practicing for speller bees by memorizing names like Kyrgyzstan or Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka). Now I understand, however, that violence or instability no longer suits buildings and people here.

After the first round of elections, I asked a well-known civic leader, Zoe Petre, why Romanians hadn't reacted more vehemently. "Ukraine is where we were in 1989. We've had our Revolution. Besides, Ukrainians have the courage of despair — we've lost it," she said in between slow puffs of cigarette smoke. Second-round voting, however, proved that Romanians had regained their élan. Now they'll need to work on their self-esteem in order to replace despair with normality. □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005-2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (May 2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Andrew J. Tabler (January 2005 - 2007) • **SYRIA/LEBANON**

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships at the *Cairo Times* and *Middle East Times* before moving on to Lebanon and Syria and work as a correspondent for the *Economist* Intelligence Unit and a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group. His two-year ICWA fellowship will base him in Damascus and Beirut, where he will report on Lebanese reconstruction and Syrian reform.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt spent two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt examined long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator:
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Publications Design & Management:
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