# Dictators, dogs, and survival in a post-totalitarian city

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[145] The inhabitants of Bucharest blame former communist leader Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife Elena for certain issues that have troubled the Romanian capital since the pair's drastic and megalomaniac urban interventions of the 1980s. The couple's most concrete legacy is *Casa Poporului* (the People's House), now renamed Palace of the Parliament, one of the largest and most grotesque buildings in the world. It is impossible to overlook or tear down, as some Bucureşteni would wish, because of its immense size. The couple demolished around a quarter of the historical core of the city, in order to build it, together with the Avenue of the Victory of Socialism, the three-and-a-half-kilometre-long boulevard that leads up to it, lined by luxury apartment blocks for the elite. It was part of a plan to modernise the city's centre after the 1977 earthquake, which provided Ceauşescu with a pretext to create a tabula rasa and build a monumental Civic Centre that would help to undergird his growing personality cult. Ceauşescu was impressed and inspired by the North Korean example of Kim Il Sung, whom he much admired after he had visited the country in 1971. For most of the 1980s, the five-kilometre-long strip of land stretching from the Uranus Hill in the west to Piaţa Alba Iulia in the east of Bucharest was a heavily secured building site and no-go zone for the city's inhabitants, who got used to navigating their ways around it while traversing the city. In spite of its grandeur, it still is an area which people tend to avoid.

[146] Hundreds of Romanian architects were involved in the design process of this building, which begs the question to what extent this project was only "authored" by the dictator himself and whether many others should not be seen as complicit in his monstrous "achievement."[1] In any case, while the dictator and his wife, with the help of an army of architects and engineers, were building the palace and avenue, 40,000 people who had been driven out of their homes, often at very short notice, were housed in newly designed socialist apartment blocks in neighbourhoods at the outskirts of the city. The story goes that this is the cause of the huge stray dog population of Bucharest, of one of the most protracted and unsolvable problems of the city. People were forced to put their dogs, which were usually kept in courtyards to guard the typical one-story family homes in Bucharest, on the streets because there was no space and no use for them in the new socialist apartment blocks.

Numbers are hard to establish but at some point after the 1989 revolution the number of stray dogs surpassed 200,000, on a human population of around two million. Now the

number is down again, but sources suggest that it may still be around one hundred thousand, in spite of the campaigns of mass extermination at the beginning of the 2000s.[2] The stray dogs have become a standard feature in streets, parks, and public squares in the Romanian capital. They form part and parcel of the social fabric, since they are often taken care of by individuals in a neighbourhood. As they are territorially based and linked to a particular neighbourhood, they are also called *câini comunitari* or community dogs. One [147] gets to know them, and they get to know you, when living in a neighbourhood: humans and stray dogs share the same space and develop a relationship based on everyday proximity.

However, the canine co-inhabitants of the city can also become aggressive, crossing the boundary between community dog and predator. In January 2006, a Japanese businessman died after a dog attacked him close to Victoria square where the Romanian government headquarters is located, causing an outburst of moral panic in Romanian public opinion. Bicyclists know too that dogs can become dodgy. The peril for bicyclists is not necessarily other road users as one may expect in the unruly traffic of Bucharest but stray dogs. They bark and run after passing bicyclists. They attack much more ferociously when it gets dark, one of the most fascinating aspects of the urban night in Bucharest and an interesting inversion of the usual (daytime) patterns. Although dogs are normally diurnal animals, stray dogs come alive especially during the evening and the night. Whereas during the day they are often cautious about people and other dogs, taking a nap in a park or street gutter, when it gets dark they bark and start fights with other dogs, while looking for food in packs of half of dozen or so. [148] It is then that they feel unhindered and unthreatened by people. The night is when the day turns black and this is the moment they feel they can strike back.

In *The ecology of stray dogs: A study of free-ranging urban animals* (1973), the ethologist Alan Beck suggests that stray dogs "provide insight into the effects of urbanization on man. Once their ecology is understood, urban dogs may serve as indicators of stress, pollution, and environmental deterioration, and as models for behavioral adaptations to urban life."[3] There are indeed apparent parallels between the human and canine inhabitants of Bucharest, as has been explored in the work of documentary filmmaker Alexandru Solomon. Referring to the situation in Bucharest at the end of the 1990s, Solomon's film *A dog's life* (1998) tells how "man and dog are two species intimately mingled into one another like the damned souls of Dante's inferno. Here, the human-eyed dog daily confronts the dog-eyed human. Our city has a population of over 200,000 dogs. There are rich and poor dogs, dogs of the street and dogs that go to the hairdresser. This film documents the life of this parallel society, which is a mirror of the human society in Bucharest."[4] Recently, artist Călin Dan explored the parallel and similar destinies of humans and dogs in the Romanian context in his play *Ca(r)ne: This is our city* (2007) and film *Wings for Dogs* (2009), where he exposes in a potent manner the legacies of Ceauşescu's palace, the waste of ordinary lives, and injustices it has produced and still engenders.[5]

The erasure of the historical parts of the city has entered a new stage with the demolition of *Hala Matache*, one of the oldest Bucharest market halls, which stands in the way of a new thoroughfare and boulevard which is developing into the new business district of Bucharest; it connects Victoria Square (the government headquarters) with Ceauşescu's palace (the seat of parliament). The process has been accompanied by evictions of Roma and other urban poor from the dilapidated houses that were left to decay over the last two decades. Most of them are homeless again, building improvised shacks on wastelands in other parts of Bucharest or at the city's periphery. In another random part of Bucharest, people have been reported to have poisoned the stray dogs that were living in front of their apartment blocks. The dogs have disappeared.

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[1] Maria Raluca Popa. "Understanding the urban past: the transformation of Bucharest in the late socialist period". In: Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert (eds.), *Testimonies of the city: identity, community and change in a contemporary urban world*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 159-186.

[2] Adriana Mica. "Moral panic, risk or hazard society – the relevance of a theoretical model and framings of *maidan* dogs in Chişinău and Bucharest". In: *Polish Sociological Review*, 1(169)/2010, 41-56, here 48.

[3] Alan M. Beck. *The ecology of stray dogs: A study of free-ranging urban animals*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press e-books, 1973: viii.

[4] www.alexandrusolomon.ro/a-dog%E2%80%99s-life-1998/ [accessed 10.04.2011]

[5] Călin Dan. *Emotional Architecture 3*. Bucharest: MNAC, 2011.