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RED GRIVIȚA: THE BUILDING OF A SOCIALIST NEIGHBORHOOD IN BUCHAREST (1944-1958)

Abstract

This article investigates the postwar change of Grivița neighborhood in Bucharest, Romania, between 1944 and 1958, from a neighborhood traditionally inhabited by workers of the Romanian Railway Company to a space governed by the new socialist ideology. This modification consisted in the reconstruction of the dwellings destroyed during the war, the building of new apartment buildings in socialist style (and the search for the adequate form that the socialist architectural ideology should take), but also in changing the names of the streets and of the institutions, a massive propaganda on radio and written press, an investment in sports activities, a new approach to women's urban needs and a different way in distributing the new dwellings. The socialist authorities considered Grivița as probably the most suitable district in Bucharest to start the reform with due to the large number of communist supporters among the workers of the Railway Company. As early as September 1944, the new authorities started the reshaping of the district and, by 1958, when a new approach towards the city planning was adopted, Grivița represented the district towards which the attention of the authorities and opposition had turned. My study sheds light on the motivations of the reformers and the ideological print of socialist ideology in this large-scale process of urban building, as well as on the administrative resources involved and the reaction of the tenants in the neighborhood to these transformations.

Keywords: housing, postwar reconstruction, socialist urban planning, daily life, propaganda, street naming, socialist neighborhood, sports

Introduction

Griviței Avenue runs from the city center and heads north-west towards the city of Târgoviște. It was named as such to celebrate the conquest of *Grivița* redoubt in the War of Independence in 1878. The Avenue had

been chosen to locate on its left side the main train station of the city, *Gara de nord* [the Northern Train Station], which was built in 1872.¹ From the train station, Griviței Avenue runs parallel with the railway tracks up to Grant Bridge. On its right side, the dwellings are spread on the streets that join Griviței with today's Ion Mihalache Boulevard. In 1928, across the Grant Bridge, on the left side, a beautiful neo-Romanian apartment building for the workers of the Railway Company was built to house more than 100 families. From this building onwards, all the left side of Grivița Avenue belonged to Grivița Railroad Workshops, built at the turn of the 20th century. The Workshops represented the symbolic center of this neighborhood. It was the place where, in 1933, a communist strike against the salary cuts shook the foundations of the liberal state and launched Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej as the leader of the communists in Romania. The police intervened in force against the strikers and, due to the death toll, later on the communists referred to Grivița Workshops as *Grivița Roșie* [Red Grivița]. On the right side of Grivița Avenue, across Grant Bridge, the old cemetery *Sfânta Vineri* was the burial ground of the first communists, who preferred the red star on their tombs, not the Christian cross. On some lanes of the cemetery there are the tombs of these first communists who were buried starting with the late 1970s.

The cemetery ends at Caraiman street, where the Municipal Company for Low-Cost Housing bought land for the building of a small neighborhood with low-cost standardized dwellings: *Sfânta Vineri*. The project, located on nowadays Caraiman and Trotușului streets was achieved between 1925 and 1936. Although designed as a small neighborhood meant for the vulnerable classes, the houses were bought by middle class tenants. The next land plot was a huge insalubrious pit, known as *Cuțarida Pit*, a ground where mudlarks and beggars found refuge during the night and where good sand was available for producing bricks. The place was depicted by the Romanian writer Eugen Barbu in his novel *Groapa* [The Pit]. Onwards, passing by *Cuțarida Pit*, in 1912, the Railway Company started to develop a housing estate, called *Steaua* [The Star].² This small district counted more than 600 dwellings and 2,500 tenants and was designed with primary schools, a high school, the St. George's Church, a maternity and a kindergarten. Traditionally, the streets in this housing estate were named A, B, C, D, as elsewhere in the small districts (*lotissements*) designed by the Municipal Company for Low-Cost Houses. It is in one of these houses, that, during the strike of 1933, the communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej sought refuge at the house of an old man

called Moș Disagă. Or, at least, these are the memories of one of the oldest tenants of the neighborhood, who recalls the story as told by his father.³ Moreover, during the strike, the wounded were firstly taken care of in Saint George's Church. After the War, in 1953, the Party leadership installed a memorial marble plate on the fence where the workers were shot by the authorities. The name of housing estate, *Steaua* [The Star] had no reference to the communist symbol. It was named as such due to the proximity of the *Steaua* Refinery located on the next plot. It was among the buildings bombed and completely destroyed by the Allies in 1944. Further to the north, by the point where Griviței Avenue reached Constanța Bridge (a railway bridge connecting Bucharest to the Black Sea port of Constanța), the district belonged to the families of the Railway Company workers. During the bombardments of April-August 1944, many of these dwellings, industrial sites and public institutions were destroyed, as the Allies intended to annihilate the transportation of resources from *Gara de nord* [the Northern Train Station]. These bombardments compelled many citizens of Bucharest to flee out of the city.

After the coup d'état of the 23rd of August 1944 and the change of the political regime, the families of the Railway workers returned home.

Furthermore, the leftist workers of the Romanian Railway Company began to occupy important positions in the management of the Company. From these positions they implemented a series of social reforms for the employees of the Railway, aiming to improve the living and housing conditions. With the former Railway worker Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej holding the position of Ministry of Communications (to which the Railway was subordinated) and being a central figure in the leadership of the Communist Party, the program of erecting houses for the workers began to take shape in the first months of 1945. Grivița, the cradle of the railway workers and communists sympathizers, was the place where the reconstruction of Romania's capital city had been decided to start.

The communists promised a district built having in view high quality construction materials, amenities, sports fields, parks, industry, schools and all the necessary comfort, a place where the memory of the dead communists was supposed to be cherished, and a space where women should benefit from the same rights as men. These objectives were strongly in tune with the Soviet practice. As Christine Varga Harris argues, "on the

whole, the well-built separate apartment, appointed with contemporary furniture and folk art and located in a neighborhood with ample consumer amenities and cultural facilities, embodied the more abstract overarching objective of the Khrushchev years – Communism.”⁴ This article analyzes the way in which the Romanian authorities implemented the reforms and which were their achievements by 1958.

Methodology

Understanding this transformation requires a complex methodology and a variety of sources. The archives of the Railway Company are not available publicly and cannot be accessed. Consequently, the Railway’s perspective is to be reconstructed from complementary archives, the most important of which are the Archives of the Municipality of Bucharest and the National Archives of Romania. The blueprints of some of the apartment buildings designed and constructed after 1944 are to be found in these archives. Furthermore, the archives of the *Union of the Romanian Architects* (institution founded in 1952) are available to the public and offer important information about the biography some architects who designed these new projects. But all these sources represent the perspective of the authorities. For balancing the perspective of this research, I took into consideration the archives of *Radio Free Europe*, located at the *Open Society Archives*, in Budapest, consisting mainly of reports sent to Radio Free Europe by various informants. They depict an opposite image of Romania and Bucharest, in general, and Grivița District, in particular. In my research, in order to understand better the process of housing distribution, I had in mind that the Romanian archives do not comprise the petitions sent by the citizens who desired to move in one of the new dwellings.

Moreover, the communist press, the most important ideological promoter, published regular articles regarding Grivița. *Scânteia* [The Spark / Firestarter] and *Lupta C.F.R.* [The fight of the Railway Company]⁵, two mainstream journals, covered events from Grivița as early as September 1944. It is important, at this step, to underline what Christine Varga-Harris asserted in her studies, the need of the citizens to learn and use “Bolshevik language”: “drawing from the vocabulary of official discourse and creating a ‘field of play’ through which they could identify themselves as members of ‘official society’”.⁶ The use of “Bolshevik language” in these two journals puts under question the credibility of the interviews with the tenants of the districts.

Thirdly, one of the most important sources of my research are the interviews which I conducted on the streets of the district with various tenants, especially from *Steaua lotissement*. Many of the interviewees brought files and photographs from their own archives to attest their memories. This perspective identifies the characteristics of daily life in these new districts, a perspective which the archives are silent about. Most of the written texts and blueprints in the city archives refer to the projects and technicalities (costs, construction materials, etc.) and offer less information about the ways in which the inhabitants approached and used the space. But oral history puts in the light these aspects of communist era housing projects in Bucharest. It also supplements not only the archives, but also the press releases of the time.

The particularities of Grivița district were not yet a subject of a complete academic study. However, the topic of housing and urban planning in the fifties was investigated by a series of scholars in the last years. Ana Maria Zahariade⁷ and Alexandru Panaitescu⁸ analyzed the Romanian architecture during the communist era, while Irina Tulbure⁹ and Miruna Stroe¹⁰ carefully investigated the connection between architecture and the politics in the fifties. Historians such as Mihai Marian Olteanu¹¹ documented the institutional and administrative aspects of the process of decision making between 1948 and 1952. Moreover, Emanuela Grama¹² investigated the policies of the fifties, while Mihaela Șerban¹³ analyzed the topic from the legal perspective. Although with a focus on the nationalization process from the city of Timișoara, Șerban's book offers one of the most convincing and careful explanations of the legal system that governed all these reforms. While Grama deconstructed the image of the *Old City* and the discourse regarding its place in Bucharest and revealed important files from the Archives about the practice of architecture, power and decision making in the fifties.

All these studies briefly approach the topic of reconstructing Grivița Neighborhood. However, my focus rests on the ideological roots not of the architecture, but of the housing issue itself. Varga Harris's study dedicated to housing during Khrushchev years brings a revealing methodology and theory of understanding not only the Soviet state, but also the housing ideology of the satellite states and the way the beneficiaries and tenants of the district regarded all the reforms. Varga Harris argues that "through practices related to homemaking (like decorating and furnishing) and shared activities "around the house" (like painting corridor or planting flowerbeds), individuals navigated between prescribed norms and lived

experience, and between national aims and personal aspiration for domestic and neighborhood life."¹⁴ One of the directions of the present study sheds light precisely on these practices.

I have limited my research chronologically from 1944 until 1958, as in 1958 a new series of urban policies changed the directions and Grivița was already finalized by that year. Secondly, the lack of archives leaves a series of questions unanswered: how did the authorities react to the presumably larger number of requests for housing than the number of built apartments? Which were the administrative criteria to be taken into consideration when distributing these dwellings? Who were the reformers who proposed the names of the new streets and how did people react to this re-naming? All these questions are to be answered only when the archives will open.

Theoretical Perspective

The reformers' aspiration to build communism started almost metaphorically from the construction of the house and the neighborhood, while the negotiation of the relationship between individualism and the ideals of communism revolutionized the new urban housing. Christine Varga Harris argued that "mutual preoccupation with housing comprised a terrain upon which state and population endeavored to construct a viable socialist society. Although the separate apartment was at the center of this venture, discourse about house and home also infused larger discussions about Communism".¹⁵ Moreover, Harris proposes in her study a conceptualization of the home

in a way that rigorously incorporates the spaces bordering it, examining the place of the neighborhood within housing policy and the domestic landscape, as well as ideals for harmony between interior and exterior spaces in terms of design, function, and potential for social intercourse. As a whole, it elucidates the broader parameters of "house and home" as it corresponded with three official mandates: forging the Soviet person, invigorating socialist society, and attaining Communism.¹⁶

The influence of the Soviet ideology and practice in the housing strategy was crucial to understand the transformation in the Romanian urban policies. One of them was the usage of the social space as a place where the citizens actioned together. In the Soviet example,

in social spaces contiguous to the home, citizens were encouraged to partake in neighborhood initiatives, whether spontaneously created or driven by Party activists. These included tidying the stairwells of communal apartments, planting shrubs in the courtyards of new *mikroiaiony*, organizing leisure activities and ensuring public order.¹⁷

Many of these initiatives are confirmed by the tenants of the new dwellings from Grivița. These endeavors are related to what Harris referred to as “proletarian propriety”:¹⁸

[...] As one group of Party activists declared, “a building is not simply an edifice where they rent apartments. A block or street – this is not simply a row of neighboring buildings. This is a small part of our Soviet society.”¹⁹

It is important to mention also another historian that Varga brings into discussion, Deborah Ann Field, who explored

the interplay between reform and daily life within a broad range of relationships - from personal ones associated with sex, marriage, and childrearing, to social ones like those stemming from habitual interaction among neighbors in communal apartments.²⁰

Equally important, the concept of “communist morality” brought forward by Field and explained also by Harris as

an official precept that synthesized individual and collective interests and fused personal actions with their potential social implications – afforded citizens an opportunity to pursue their own interests²¹

offers the key of understanding the interviews from the press. Lastly, regarding the “strict dichotomy between the private and the public in Soviet society during the 1950s and 1960s”,²² both Varga Harris and Field reject this perspective in favor of granting more agency to the citizens. This approach is complementary to the focus on women’s perspective and the importance of consumer goods: “household consumer goods and prescriptions for homemaking were laden with ideology”²³ and

Soviet public culture drew a relationship between housing and domestic consumption, on the one hand, and shaping a distinct mentality and way

of life, on the other. Overall, even though the separate apartment of the 1950s and 1960s was in ways akin to Western variants – cozy, efficient, and grounded in the nuclear family - it was not supposed to imitate the capitalist home.²⁴

Harris mentions that “productivity in the workplace as contingent upon the structure and quality of home life” and that it brought “long term national goals like modernization, emancipation of women.”²⁵ Regarding this perspective, “continuing mission to liberate women from the burdens of housework, the separate apartment was pronounced a key component of a new type of living.”²⁶

In conclusion, *novostroika* (“new construction”) embodied not just the construction of buildings, but also the construction of the society. As Varga Harris defines it

novostroika, together with renovated buildings and refurbished neighborhoods, represented a society based on egalitarianism, social justice, and compassion by evoking a tangible contrast between life before the Revolution, with its many hardships, and after, when all want was finally being eradicated thanks to bountiful state provision. In this way, government and Party rhetoric presented mass housing as an articulation of the system as it was supposed to operate.²⁷

Administration

The promise for housing reform can be rooted in the journals *Lupta C.F.R.* in 1944 and *Scântea* in 1945, as the authorities launched a hasty campaign to start the construction of dwellings in Bucharest. A series of apartment buildings constructed starting 1945 can be considered the first communist housing project in Bucharest. In March 1948, the authorities inaugurated a housing project in Grozăvești neighborhood, meant for the workers of the Heating Station; in 1948, the journal *Realitatea Ilustrată*²⁸ published an article about the new housing project in Tei neighborhood, with dwellings for the employees of *Societatea de Transport București* [The Transportation Company of Bucharest]; in 1946 the authorities also started the Ferentari Housing Estate, consisting of 20 apartment buildings, which were inaugurated one by one up to the mid-1950s. On Dimitrov Boulevard, they also built apartments for the workers of Vasile Roaită Factory, while in 1949, the authorities inaugurated the two apartment

buildings on Maior Coravu Boulevard, with 100 apartments. Besides those in Ferentari, all of them were small in scale. While Ferentari incapsulated the same socialist values, it is Grivița neighborhood that was chosen for the imprint of socialist values due to the prewar crowding of supporters of the Party.

In 1944, Grivița neighborhood was part of the *Nr. 4th Green District* and the General Mayor of Bucharest was Victor Dembrowschi. After the fall of Monarchy and the instauration of the Republic (on January 1st, 1948), the authorities started the administrative and political transformation of the city. In August 1948, the National Assembly named Nicolae Pârvulescu as the Mayor of Bucharest. The next mayors were: Nicolae Voiculescu (February 1949 – December 1950), Gheorghe Roman (December 1950 – December 1951), Anton Tatu Jianu (January 1952 – June 1952), Jean Ilie (July 1952 – March 1953).²⁹ Later on, in 1950, the four districts of Bucharest (nr. 1 - Yellow, nr. 2 - Black, nr. 3 - Blue and nr. 4 - Green) were dissolved and replaced with 8 *raions*, following the Soviet model. Grivița neighborhood was part of the Raion number 8 and it was named as *Grivița Roșie* [Red Grivița]. It had a separate Mayor, subordinated to the General Mayor.

During this time three main important laws were adopted, which determined the transformation of the district: the nationalization of the private industry and companies (June 11th, 1948); Decree 92/1950 regarding the nationalization of the private property; and the decision 1302/1953 of the Executive Committee of the People's Council of the Capital according to which the private space in an apartment or house was limited to 8 sqm per person. This limit was "established as a housing norm on the entire territory of the city of Bucharest and the basic tariff for 1 sqm of living, regarding the brick or stone dwellings with water, sewerage and electric light installation, is set at 1.50 lei for the entire city of Bucharest".³⁰ Consequently, in Grivița, hundreds of dwellings were seized by the state and the authorities started the evacuation of the families from the houses considered to benefit of too much space or they moved in their houses hundreds of families who paid the rent at the state authorities.³¹

Reports of Radio Free Europe reveal the inequalities determined by the new regime:

whole families were evicted or forced to live in a single room: The building crisis gives rise to serious social problems. The increased population in the city, resulting from forced industrialization, has caused the housing

shortage to become even more acute. The 1952 housing law does not allow a family (husband and wife and one or two children up to 14 years of age) to occupy more than one room. The family is entitled to an additional room only when the children have passed their 14th birthday. All living space comes under rigorous distribution laws.³²

The Nationalization Decree 92/1950 and the massive waves of arrests resulted in arbitrary decisions about the houses and left the intimate life of the families in the hands of the authorities. The owners were forced to accept tenants, starting an uneasy relationship with the strangers who moved in. Under these regulations, how did the tenants carry their daily life?

The reconstruction and the new tenants

The project of reconstruction of the new dwellings on the ruins of the affected ones and the design of new dwellings was to be carried out simultaneously with the reconstruction of the necessary amenities from the *lotissement*: kindergarten, nursery, school. Based on the post-war momentum and the economic support of the state institutions, the Railway Company began the restoration of the Grivița neighborhood, but not before describing its landscape:

what was this boulevard and the neighborhood of the same name, we know. An agglomeration of hovels, unhealthy to the greatest extent, dirty, devoid of the most elemental comfort and permanently constituting an outbreak of infection, of epidemics. The small hovels in which the families of the workers were living were good hosts of syphilis, tuberculosis and promiscuity.³³

The bombardments of April 1944 only made the situation worse: “whoever stepped last summer through these places will never forget what they saw: there was only a huge pile of ruins, where one could hardly recognize the places where hundreds of families once lived”.³⁴ The discussions about the aesthetic characteristic of the dwellings which were to be built were of no concern for the tenants, more interested in the indoors improvements. According to the editors of the official newspaper *Lupta C.F.R.*

the emphasis was placed on the necessity of the bathroom in the apartment, the more so that those who will live in the houses are workers who, at the end of the day, come home dirty. The bath is not a luxury, but a necessity, to ensure conditions of primary importance for maintaining health. Each apartment will therefore have two large rooms, a spacious hall, bathroom, kitchen, a small entrance, cellar, a garden of flowers in front, a courtyard, electric light and sewage system.³⁵

The reformers prepared the first blueprints for the reconstruction based on a report issued by the Housing Commission of the Railway Company. In this report (handed over directly to Gheorghiu-Dej) it was mentioned that out of the total of more than 1,000 apartments inhabited by employees throughout Bucharest, half of them were damaged or destroyed. By the fall of 1945, the Railway Company planned to repair all the damaged houses, but only in the spring of 1946 could this plan be completed.

The conclusion of the editor seems similar to those shared, during the interwar period, by both the Railways directors and the workers' trade unions, from which I quote:

no matter how hard we try to ensure the worker a satisfactory economic conditions, no matter how high the standard of life, it will not be enough as long as it is not provided with a comfortable home that will provide him and his family with the physical and spiritual rest that is so necessary to be a good servant, a good citizen.³⁶

The discourse on housing continued therefore the three main characteristic of the intentions that governed the previous regime housing policy: family, repose, and health.

In the absence of clear indications at the end of the forties, the question related to the form that the socialist dwelling was going to take still sought its answer. Was the socialist dwelling meant to be individual or collective? Presenting both the advantages and disadvantages of each of these options the author of the article in *Lupta C.F.R.* stated that the optimal solution would be:

to build two- or three-floor apartment buildings, in which up to 10 families would live. These houses would be able to be as varied in style as possible. Secondly, each one must have a garden, large terraces and shops on the ground floor.³⁷

Consequently, the architectural solution had to merge both rural and urban characteristics, and the urban dimension had to consider the design of entire neighborhoods equipped properly: “in the plan on which this *neighborhood* of democracy will be built, spaces must be provided for public gardens and sports grounds, construction of cinemas, a workers’ theater and schools.”³⁸ Therefore, the new socialist dwelling combined the functional needs with the social-cultural ones as the multiplication of these dwellings would lead to the rise of a new type of socialist man. Despite the enthusiasm of the author, none of these projections was new. After all, the *Steaua* lotissement had all the appropriate facilities similarly to other lotissements, such as *Vatra Luminoasă* or *Raion* built in the early '30s; the only difference laid in the distribution: the previous social housing reform distributed the houses to the middle class, while the communists claimed they would distribute them to the working class. The majority of the new buildings meant to replace the damaged ones were designed as “villas”, with the difference that, compared to the already existing houses, most of them had 4 apartments in each building and a common staircase. Simplified from the neo-Romanian ornaments, the villas are rather characterized by an austerity appropriate to the context in which they were built. Judging by the arch at the entrance, they represent a prefiguration of the Soviet-inspired architecture in Romania. Some of them also have an interior courtyard and balconies. The Railway Company continued to build them and have them in property until 1955, or, according to other sources, until 1962. After that, they were taken over by ICRAL (Întreprinderea de Construcții, Reparații și Administrare Locativă [The Enterprise for Construction, Repair and Housing Administration]), an institution which dealt with all the administration of the buildings in Bucharest.³⁹ The second housing project was the one on Constantin Buzdugan street.

The urge to construct the new dwellings lead to the edification of 9 apartment buildings in Grivița, located between Lainici and Feroviarilor streets. The architect entrusted with the design was Cristina Neagu, one of the first women architects in Romania. From an architectural point of view, the use of stone for the cladding of the ground floor and the installation of the wooden doors at the entrance gives the composition a rather rustic dimension, while wrought iron balconies and discreet ornaments project an urban and modern image. The solution harmoniously intertwined the two discourses and gave the entire Grivița *Raion* a new shape. The apartments include a living room, a bedroom, a large kitchen, a bathroom,

hall and balconies. In addition, each tenant benefited from a cellar and a space in the courtyard garden, used either as a relaxing space or for various household activities. But the decision makers within the Railway Company did not continue to construct more of these buildings, and the design of a *Democracy District* at the dimensions and characteristics of the one imagined in the pages of *Lupta C.F.R.* did not happen. After the reconstruction of the dwellings in Steaua *lotissement* and the construction of new apartment buildings, the authorities sought to promote the image of these novel projects among the workers. Consequently, they inaugurated a new genre in their own press with an accent on workers and their families who moved in these new apartments: “the welcoming narratives”. Which was the communist imaginary of the family and to what extent did the efforts of the new administration turn to the new working classes, almost completely ignored by the old regime, or at least presented as such?

A press report published in *Lupta C.F.R.* in August 1950 mentioned the new tenants of the freshly reconstructed apartments on B street.⁴⁰ The press report promoted a discourse characterized by the antithesis between a traumatic past and a radiant present and future. Not by chance, the article in *Lupta C.F.R.* starts with women’s perspective on housing, as the editors of the newspaper present the story of Lucreția Pavelescu, mother of eight children, the wife of comrade Gheorghe Pavelescu, a welder at Grivița. Lucreția Pavelescu dramatically recalls her past, in stark contrast to the present:

we have known the misery in the past, all ten were living in one room, and today, due to the Party’s care, we live in an apartment consisting of three rooms, kitchen, bathroom, storehouse and cellar. When I moved to the place I am now living in, I really saw what improvements had been made for the working people and I have only words of gratitude for this great care of the Party.⁴¹

Are these the worker’s words or an interpretation of her words by the editors in order to match the ideological terms used in the official documents? Is this the “Bolshevik language” that Varga Harris theorized? Probably we will never know, but similar statements recorded and narrated by *Lupta C.F.R.* converge to the same message: the reconstruction of the houses affected by the war and the edification of the new apartment buildings had significantly contributed to raising the standard of the workers’ lives. Does this interview represent a reliable source for analyzing

the housing issue in the Grivița neighborhood or is it a mere propaganda meant to convince the audience about the direction of the reform?

On Honterus Street, closely parallel to Kiev Street, one of the oldest tenants of the neighborhood does not recall any Pavelescu living in the new apartments, nor her 8 children.

Also, the phone directory for the period of 1958-1965 does not have any mention of a Pavelescu family. Surely, one would not expect that one of the official magazines of the Railway would publish critical remarks regarding the authorities, but this type of reflection is confirmed by the interviews taken during the field research in the neighborhood. The interviewees, people who moved in the district starting with 1948 or their children confirm many of the aspects that Lucreția Pavelescu mentioned. But more suggestive for this analysis, they also reveal that most of them were Party members, workers enrolled in the Unions, actors from the Workers' Theatre "Giulești" and even one of them became the mayor of the Grivița Roșie Raion.⁴²

Streets: Names and reforms

The practice of renaming streets was not new and it was in the hands of the Committee for Nomenclature, subordinated to the Townhall.⁴³ As early as 1948, the letters which identified the streets were renamed in the memory of the communist history. In *Steaua* lotissement, streets were named Pavlov, Kiev, Comuna de la Paris [The Paris Commune], but also Feroviarilor [(street of) Railway Workers], Acceleratorului [(street of) the Accelerator], Tracțiunii [(street of) the Haulage], names connected to the Railway. The parallel Boulevard, which represents the eastern limit of the neighborhood, was named May 1st.

The daily life in the district meant not just living in the house, be it in the villa or the apartment building, but also in the small urban paths that governed the activities of the people. Grivița slowly transformed in the direction desired by the new authorities. From the privacy of the house to the working place, from the morning call of the Roaită's alarm, located in the courtyard of the Railways' Workshop,⁴⁴ until dusk, the daily life in the neighborhood was based on paths influenced by the various structures: political (street deputies, delegates and informants), economic (shops and newly opened factories) or sports (Grivița Roșie Stadium and Children's Park). The analysis of these factors reveals a more reliable image of the

daily life in the district than the one from the blueprints of the architects or the intentions from the discourses of the politicians.

Private life started within the intimacy of the home and relied on the property of the house. However, the property regime was uncertain after 1948, especially with the moving of the new tenants into the nationalized dwellings. The relation between families and the new urban rhythm and ideology dictated by the socialist authorities started from home, where the families made the first renovations. Some residents hung pictures with the communist leaders in the hall of the houses and the rooms began to be arranged with items bought from the shops on Calea Griviței, produced by the planned economy.

The Railway Company dealt with the yearly reparations. Among these tasks was also placing slab stones in the courtyards of the tenants, all of them imprinted with the initials of the Company.⁴⁵ These actions were taken at the initiative of a Street Committee.⁴⁶ In those years, on Pavlov street and in the entire Steaua lotissement, responsible was a certain Gheorghe Stanciu, a Party member.⁴⁷ The Committee, interfering with the lives of the people, would check if the sidewalk was clean, if there was any untrimmed grass. In addition, the Street Committee arranged for Dej's visits to Aurel Vlaicu high school, while the children would visit comrade Dej in his dwelling close by, in Domenii Neighborhood.

Propaganda: The role of radio and written press

In the private space of the house, the affiliation to the district and to the socialist ideology was beginning to crystallize not just with the help of the portraits or furniture, but with the help of a far more decisive media: radio. The socialist press considered that the previous regime had neither granted nor facilitated the working classes the acquisition of a radio machine, presenting the case of one of the dwellers of the district:

for many years I wanted to have a radio in the house, but it was a dream that could not be realized. Only the privileged benefited from the progress, because the workers were kept in the dark in order to be more easily exploited. But today [...], both my family and thousands of other working families have the opportunity to raise their cultural and political level through their radios.⁴⁸

This testimony, translated by the editors in *Bolshevik* was supposed to convince the readers of the paper about the necessity and the importance of this means of communication.

The testimony was taken one year after the inauguration of the first local radio station, on Pavlov Street, in *Steaua Lotissement*. The radio broadcasts were not only heard through the private radios at home, but also on radio distributors mandatorily installed by the authorities in the houses and on the streets of the neighborhood. The radio meant a first contact with the neighborhood and an important pillar for the construction of the new sense of socialist identity of the dwellers. The program of the radio in a random day in 1951 consisted of the news bulletin describing “the successes of the workers from the Grivița Workshops”; a musical program, performed by the popular orchestra of the *Laminorul* factories; the speech of Comrade Popescu Nicolae, from *Grivița Roșie* who spoke “about how he managed to become a leader in production, helped by the Soviet technical literature” and “a beautiful program of Romanian folk music”, performed by the same *Laminorul* factory orchestra. In conclusion, the residents of the Grivița Roșie district had a mediated first contact with the life of the district.

As both radio and written press represent for this case study important primary sources and, as both are mediators between the “actual historical event” and my current interpretation, I can only ask myself: to what extent is the press to be trusted? And what better way of balancing the interpretation than introducing in the narration another mediator, the opposite of a local communist radio, a primary source of information not just for present historians, but for the Romanians behind the Iron Curtain before 1989, namely Radio Free Europe.

The reports sent to Radio Free Europe by various “sources” or “informants”, as they were named by the Radio, presented a far more skeptical image about their communist counterparts:

Grivița Roșie is the only district in Bucharest with radio. The workers of the Railway Company consider this “attention” of the regime as an incubus.⁴⁹ In the beginning, there were very few who used them for fear that they might have microphones or other spyware hidden in them.⁵⁰

It is not difficult to understand why. The authorities were increasingly circumspect and were trying by any means to control the access to information. Only that the control of the state apparatus was not manifested

using this technique, but with the “funding” of a new “institution”: “street informer (mole)”, a very different type of informant that the one passing information to Radio Free Europe. As mentioned before, the street was not only an urban object, but also a way of political and administrative organization: each street had its own deputy who supervised the various activities and was aware of everything that happened on that street. Radio Free Europe’s report mention that “each street has its official ‘mole’”, that is, a trusted person of the Party who regularly reports to the *Securitate*.” Radio Free Europe’s perspective presented a neighborhood characterized by the relations of mistrust between neighbors, far from the imaginary of the authorities, characterized by a desired unification of the professional and political identities.

The public space started from the garden in front of the house and continued on the carefully maintained sidewalk and later on the street: “the residents are obliged to sweep each portion of the sidewalk and street in front of the house under the control of the street delegates, although they pay separate taxes to the commune for the sweepers, used by the Party in other ways”,⁵¹ claims one reports sent to Radio Free Europe. The main problem in Grivița was the lack of paved streets, an issue which the authorities claimed they had solved or, at least, to present it as such. Like in the statement of a worker, lodger of Volga Street in the district interviewed by the *Scântea* daily:

The street he lived on, Volga Street, was famous for its mud. In 1930 a flood had turned the street into a lake. [...] Today, Volga Street, like all the surrounding streets, has a different look. From narrow, dark streets, they turned into wide, paved streets, with sidewalks, with electric light and a good part of them were channeled.⁵²

One of the oldest tenants of the neighborhood, Ms. C⁵³ mentioned that her father (an old railway worker who supported Dej) had a subscription for the newspaper *Lupta C.F.R.*, but her father mentioned that he never read it due to its propaganda contents. The second woman interviewed, on Pavlov street 25, who moved to Grivița in the 1980s, recalls the radio in the house installed by the authorities and the various programs which she used to listen.⁵⁴

Sports

The life of the neighborhood had begun to be governed by even a much more important factor, sports, widely promoted by the new regime. Almost every issue of the magazine *Lupta C.F.R.* mentioned the results of the clubs, especially the football and rugby teams and all the lodgers attended the matches in weekends. This image was also carefully reproduced in *Scânteia*, which built it in contrast to the old regime, a cornerstone in understanding the new realities:

Who would recognize now, in the today's lively, clean district the dark slum and misery from the time of the capitalists? Here, not far from the courtyard of the Grivița Workshops stretched some years ago, the famous Cuțarida Pit, where the unemployed were looking for rest during the night? Today, a big stadium is being built on this place. An iron fence, beautifully painted in blue, surrounds the ground on which the construction of stadium had begun.⁵⁵

The importance of sport increased in the new regime, as a metaphor for communist vigor.

The reconstruction of the dwellings affected by bombings, the construction of new ones, control of the street and public gardens and the inauguration of the park were the first concrete steps made by the authorities. Simultaneously, they started the reconstruction of public institutions in the district such as the nursery, maternity, high school, but also the *Olga Bancic* kindergarten, (re)inaugurated on Kiev Street. The purpose of renovating the kindergarten was expressed by the management of the Union and the directors: “[in order that] the children are no longer left home alone, or on the roads and their parents being concerned with them, this kindergarten has been set up, which is the first step towards caring for the next generations, a concern that until today was so neglected”. The program began in the morning and lasted until 16.00, the children received food, specialized medical care and were monitored continuously. After the arrangement of the kindergarten, the Steaua maternity was renovated and Steaua nursery was opened, in a “modest, clean and well-organized house, with cribs and a breastfeeding room”.⁵⁶ All these facilities represented an improvement in the quality of the services, especially for women. This concern for the ease of women's activities also culminated with the opening of the nearby textile factory.

Women perspective

The opening of a women's factory was, most probably, an attempt to offer work for the wives of the Railway workers and propaganda speculated the contrast between an age of unemployment and discrimination of women and the aspirations for equality promoted by the new regime:

right next to the blue fence of the new sports park, a beautiful new building rises, in which there is an uninterrupted noise of machines. It is the Grivița textile factory, one of the new businesses in the district. And always, on the door of the company, there is a poster: "we are looking for new workers".

As the editors of the article claim, "these simple words speak louder and clearer than anything about the reality of one of the fundamental rights our regime has given to the working people: the right to work, ensured through socialist industrialization."⁵⁷

This right to work has transformed the urban space as much as the opening of the shops did. The inauguration of the commercial venues on Griviței Avenue was again presented from women's perspective: "the housewives fill the shops every day", the editors of *Scânteia* claim, but they quickly balance this image with the masculine presence at the *Ferometal* store nearby. The economic life was changed by the nationalization of 1948 and by the involvement of the state in the production and distribution of consumer goods. The food crisis of this decade could not be masked despite the press articles who claimed the opposite. However, during the Spring of 1952, meeting with voters, "several speakers made proposals regarding ensuring a greater assortment of goods in stores. Comrade Ion Iliescu, turned at the "Grivița Roșie" Workshops, showed that especially now, the Municipality will have to seriously control how the *Aprozar*⁵⁸ units are supplied and how they serve the buyers"⁵⁹, a sign that even propaganda understood to publish these requirements in order not to lose credibility in the eyes of readers.

Finally, *Scânteia* covers the elections of November 1952 and presents an encouraging situation, reporting the growth in the economic, urban or cultural fields in Grivița: "Within the district there were established 62 food stores, 19 shops; houses for workers, two public baths, an ice factory; the *Vasile Roaită* hospital, the Caraiman children's hospital and a maternity; in the district an intense cultural life is ongoing; new schools and a boarding school for students, 3 popular libraries were set up, 9,000 radio speakers were installed",⁶⁰ and many others.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the new communist housing policies consisted of renaming of the streets and institutions, of an ambiguous architectural style and urban planning, the distribution of the houses to faithful members of Unions and Party, a control of the daily life on the streets, and a radio and written propaganda. The process of construction of new manufactures for women together with sports fields and cultural institutions was tributary to the ideological pursuit of equality and health offered by the regime, an important step forward in comparison with the old regime. Family seemed to play the same role as in the previous one. However, the dramatic conditions of the families who lived in misery until 1945 was resolved at the expense of what, arbitrary, the state defined as bourgeoisie. Many of the families who were suspected of lack of loyalty to the regime were evicted from their rightful houses or forced to live in the same conditions as the vulnerable classes before 1945, crowded in small rooms.

NOTES

- 1 Initially, the Railway was named *Târgoviște Train Station*, but the authorities changed its name to *Gara de nord* [the Northern Train Station]
- 2 Initially, The Railway Company signed a contract for the construction of the lotissement with the Municipal Company for Low-Cost Houses to build the dwellings, but soon decided to carry the investment by itself. The construction started in 1912 based on the plans designed by architect Ioan D. Trajanescu and were stopped due to the War. After 1919, the Railway Company funded its own Construction Department which continued the dwellings and other edifices designed by architects Constantin Pomponiu and Maria Cottescu, one of the first female architects from Romania.
- 3 Interview on nr. 7 Honterus Street, June 2020
- 4 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home. Soviet Apartment Life during Khrushchev Years*: Ithaca and London, Cornell University Pres, 2015, p. 7-8
- 5 C.F.R. stands for *Căile Ferate Române*, [The Romanian Railway Company]
- 6 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 16
- 7 Ana Maria Zahariade, *Arhitectura în proiectul comunist 1944 – 1989*, București: Simetria, 2011
- 8 Alexandru Panaitescu, *De la Casa Scânteii la Casa Poporului. Patru decenii de arhitectură în București 1945 – 1989*, București: Simetria, 2012
- 9 Irina Tulbure, *Arhitectura și urbanism în România anilor 1944 – 1960: constrângere și experiment*, București: Simetria, 2016
- 10 Miruna Stroe, *Locuirea între proiect și decizie politică* București: Simetria, 2015
- 11 Mihai Marian Olteanu, "Reconstrucția industrială a orașului București (1948-1952)" in *Studii și materiale de istorie contemporană* 13:5-22
- 12 Emanuela Grama, *Socialist Heritage: The Politics of Past and Place in Romania (New Anthropologies of Europe)* Indiana University Press, 2019
- 13 Mihaela Șerban, *Subverting Communism in Romania: Law and Private Property 1945-1965*, Lexington Book, 2019
- 14 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 12
- 15 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 9
- 16 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 10
- 17 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 11
- 18 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 11
- 19 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 11
- 20 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 11
- 21 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 11
- 22 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 10
- 23 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 15

- 24 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 15
- 25 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 7
- 26 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 7
- 27 Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House...*, p. 15
- 28 Ada Bârseanu, "Case noi pentru oameni noi", in *Realitatea Ilustrată*, nr. 42/1948
- 29 Mihai Marian Olteanu, "Istoria comunismului : politică, societate, economie. Reconstrucția socialistă a orașului București (1948-1952)" in *Studii și materiale de istorie contemporană*, Issue 1/2014, p.10
- 30 Deciziunea 1302 a Sfatului Popular al Capitalei, în *Buletinul Oficial al Comitetului Executiv al Sfatului Popular al Capitalei*, anul III/ iulie 1953
- 31 Decree 92/1950 for the nationalization of some dwellings, available online at <https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/g42tinbu/decretul-nr-92-1950-pentru-nationalizarea-unor-imobile>, accessed July 2020.
- 32 Report sent to Radio Free Europe Communication Railways (1954 – 1958), Radio Free Europe Archive
- 33 N.B., "Cartierul Democrației", *Lupta C.F.R.*, December 17th, 1944
- 34 Ioan Rădulescu, "Reconstrucția locuințelor muncitorești la C.F.R.", *Lupta C.F.R.*, 29 July 1945
- 35 Ioan Rădulescu, "Reconstrucția locuințelor muncitorești la C.F.R.", *Lupta C.F.R.*, 29 July 1945
- 36 Ioan Rădulescu, "Reconstrucția locuințelor muncitorești la C.F.R.", *Lupta C.F.R.*, 29 July 1945
- 37 N.B., "Cartierul Democrației", *Lupta C.F.R.*, December 17th, 1944
- 38 N.B., "Cartierul Democrației", *Lupta C.F.R.*, December 17th, 1944
- 39 I.C.R.A.L. is the acronym for Întreprinderea de Construcții, Reparații și Administrare Locativă [The Company for Construction, Reparations and Housing Administration]
- 40 Current Ion Incuțeț Street. It was renamed after 1989, in the memory of the nationalist politician Ion Incuțeț.
- 41 ***, "Locuințe noi...", *Lupta C.F.R.*, August 1950
- 42 Interview with F.D., born in the fifties in one of the apartments, June 2015
- 43 According to the same source, another important communist leader Ilie Pintilie lived on Kiev Street as well. He died in the earthquake from November 1940.
- 44 Roaită's alarm was a symbolic communist *lieux de memoir*, connected to the strikes from 1933.
- 45 Interview with the tenant of Nr. 7 Honterus Street
- 46 All the streets in Bucharest had to have a Street Committee, in close relations with the Municipality and the Party.
- 47 According to the memories of the tenant from nr. 7 Honterus Street, Stanciu's daughter became minister.

- 48 ***, "Locuințe noi pentru ceferiști – de vorbă cu familiile muncitorilor ceferiști
din cartierul C.F.R. Steaua", *Lupta C.F.R.*, August 1950
- 49 "Pacoste", in the original Romanian text
- 50 ***, *Bucharest's Red District Turns Black*", p. 3, Radio Free Europe
- 51 ***, *Bucharest's Red District Turns Black*" p. 2, Radio Free Europe
- 52 V. Albulescu, "Grivița, azi", *Scânteia*, 26 November 1952
- 53 Interview on nr. 7 Honterus Street, June 2020
- 54 Interview on Pavlov Street, nr. 25, June 2020
- 55 Mircea Manea, "Deputatul, gospodarul cartierului", in *Universul*, April 25th,
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- 56 ***, "În căminul de zi "Olga Bancic", *Lupta C.F.R.*, November 10th, 1945
- 57 Maria Silvestrov, "O fabrică în plină dezvoltare", *Scânteia*, August 21st, 1953
- 58 Aproz is the acronym for APROvizionare cu ZARzavat [Supplying with
vegetables]
- 59 ***, "Sub semnul unității între popor, partid și guvern. Întâlnirea tov. Gh.
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București", in *Munca*, April, 1956
- 60 ***, "Tovarășul Gh. Gheorghiu-Dej în mijlocul alegătorilor din circumscripția
electorală orășenească nr. 373 București (Grivița Roșie)", *Scânteia*,
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