

# Socialist Romania in Africa: ideology, geopolitics, and economy<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*The present article aims to offer a synoptic picture of socialist Romania's relations with African Third World countries during the Ceaușescu regime. Within these relations, economic and geopolitical motivations coexisted along with ideological ones, thus making the topic one of the most interesting and relevant key for understanding Romanian Socialist Republic (RSR)'s complex and cunning international strategy. However, I intend to prove that mere pragmatism is not enough to comprehend the drive behind Ceaușescu's diplomatic efforts in post-colonial Africa; ideological factors need also to be taken into account as well.*

**Key words:** pragmatism, Maoism, consciencism, blackness, 'group of 77', national-communism, neo-colonialism

## **Introduction**

Presenting itself, since 1972, as a 'socialist developing country,' the Romanian Socialist Republic (RSR) followed with this ingenious strategy a number of specific reasons, one of them consisting in diversifying its global commercial options, another to become a well-known and respected voice on the international stage, mostly in the emerging field of nonalignment and, last but not least, to obtain a symbolic and ideological prestige most useful for future international endeavors. As a 'socialist developing country,' RSR was paying a lot of attention to the 'new international order', a revolutionary concept consisting in the attenuation of global social, economic and geopolitical inequalities, in boosting the importance of small and middle states on the international scene and in permanently paving the way for the Leninist 'new' to the disadvantage of the bourgeois 'old'.

The main hypothesis of the paper resides in understanding RSR's interest in post-colonial Africa as a means to gradually be perceived, along with Yugoslavia, as a middle sized China within the matrix of tiermondism. Second, along with this symbolic prestige specific interests like gaining access to the Western industrial market or obtaining cheap natural resources, mostly oil, several minerals or wood are wrapped up.

As far as the structure of the paper is concerned, the article starts with a detailed introduction which presents the appearance and controversies surrounding nonalignment both as ideology and geopolitical practice, followed by a

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methodological and a literature review section. Next, the Soviet and socialist East-European involvement in Africa is analyzed in order to put the Romanian case into context. A short analysis of African post-colonial national ideologies with reference to Romanian national-communism follows, doubled by a critical assessment of RSR's acceptance into the so-called 'group of 77'. Finally, the conclusions of this whole scientific demarche are presented. Basically, RSR and the Third World African countries engaged in 'multilateral' relations during the 1970s, relations entailed by very practical reasons, but boosted considerably due to ideological affinities between both parties. In the following decade, substantial changes within the international political economy brought the Romanian-Third World idyll to an abrupt, but predictable halt.

The states of the Third World – whose number simply exploded after 1950, once the decolonization process started, especially in Africa – represented for the RSR a new opportunity to manifest its independence in the sphere of international relations with reference to the Soviet Union. Therefore, once the events that allowed the dissident ally's distancing from Moscow gradually became obsolete – the Sino-Soviet split or the tensions between East and West substantially reduced in the first half of the 1970s, once the Helsinki accords were signed – the so-called nonaligned movement of the young African, South-American and Asian states became the new international playground for the RSR (Barnett 1992, 41).

The nonaligned movement named, within the United Nations (UN), the 'group of 77,' after the initial number of the founding states (quickly exceeded in a few years), was anticipated in 1955 through the Bandung conference, although it officially appeared at the beginning of the next decade. With this occasion, several international principles that would constitute the political backbone of the future nonaligned movement were adopted: the respect for human rights as they are defined in the UN charter, equal consideration for all races, nations and states, the recognition of the right of every state to individually or collectively defend itself, according to the UN principles, renouncing the use of aggressions and threats in the relations between states, the solving of international conflicts and disputes solely through peaceful means, the encouragement of international cooperation based on mutual interests and on the respect of international rules (Sprințeroiu 1985, 29-30). One of the founders of the movement, Ghana's president (and a personal friend of Nicolae Ceaușescu), Kwame Nkrumah, eloquently expressed the aim of the nonaligned states: "We were born through protest and revolt against the international status-quo, due to the dividing of the world in two antagonistic blocs. We must permanently refuse to align ourselves with one or the other" (quoted in Sprințeroiu 1985, 20-21).

Sprințeroiu refuses to refer to the nonaligned movement as an alliance of the Third World countries, considering it rather as a 'moral force' capable of putting into perspective the interests of all developing states without creating a political, ideological and military bloc. Furthermore, the nonaligned movement could not be equated with a mechanical equilibrium through which its member states would have tried to obtain benefits from both the West and the Soviet Union, because the whole essence of the movement consisted in the refusal of 'bloc policy' and of 'all forms

of dependence', of coercing states in the field of international relations. The nonaligned movement wanted to democratize the relations between states and to create a global environment different from that of the Cold War, based on growing inequalities and recurrent crises – a new international order, one that appealed to the RSR more from pragmatic than from ideological reasons (see Sprințeroiu 1985, 44-45, 64-65). Nonalignment was not only a (geo)political option, but also an ideological one, therefore neither capitalism nor communism, in its European form, at least, could be directly extrapolated within the thinking and the practice of the young states, most of them African, which managed to win their independence despite the opposition of their former European oppressors. "Some would like the liberation movements to orient themselves towards class-struggle, like in Europe. Some would want them to become realist: a Don Quijote which throws himself over white skin windmills." (Neto quoted in Dragoș 1982, 54). Federalization by tribal criteria was also rejected: the African nations in the making wanted only to inspire themselves from the political solutions of the North (capitalism, communism), not to copy them, reserving themselves the right to formulate their own political answers to the problems they encountered: "Our European friends need to make way in their thinking and conceptions to the necessary flexibility in order to understand that our countries, being in a development stage, must discover their own political formulas in the context of their situations and civilizations, which are very much different from that of the European or American countries." (Ahidjo quoted in Dragoș: 1982, 91-92).

Nonaligned radicalism provoked even from the beginning the hostility of the United States, Great Britain and France, but also of the European Community as a whole, the last one managing, through economic pressures, to subordinate the raw materials and the markets of the former colonies (Sprințeroiu 1985, 54-58; Quenum 1969, 18-19; Țurlea 1970, 19-20). Although the North-South polarization was, during the Cold War, and still remains, an undeniable reality, the three above quoted authors exaggerate: the young independent states could not have possibly survived in the absence of strong economic relations with the developed West, the most important global consumer of raw materials. And because these states, from reasons specific to colonialism, were obstructed to develop their own industries, they were effectively obligated by the structure of the global economy to play the role of raw material suppliers. However, on the long term, the reduction of global asymmetries could not be satisfactorily put into practice against rich states, but only with them as partners.

### **Methodological aspects**

Beside the handy ideological explanations, it is certainly intriguing how a socialist country with problems relating to late and accelerated industrialization decided to place such an emphasis on its 'unshaken friendship' with poor, unstable and mostly political unpredictable Third World countries, many of them lacking even a basic infrastructure. Therefore, the proposed research questions are the following: isn't RSR's drive towards the Third World motivated, at least partially, by Ceaușescu's

ambition to achieve an important symbolic capital in international relations? Were the material aspects of this relation really rewarding, in the light of the institutional and administrative turmoil existing in the newly independent African countries? Last but not least, what role could we ascribe to ideological tenets in understanding the complex and often contradictory role RSR aspired to play in the development of post-colonial Africa?

The main objectives of the paper are strongly intertwined with the research questions presented above. Namely, to show that RSR's interests in the Third World were both pragmatic and symbolic, on one hand, and that between Romanian national-communism and some post-colonial branches of African nationalism a powerful and compelling ideological common ground existed, on the other hand.

Regarding the research steps, they are outlined as follows. First, I discuss concepts like nonalignment and the 'new world order' and their relevance for RSR and the Third World countries regarding their postures on the international scene. Second, I advance a concise theoretical presentation of concepts like 'blackness' and 'consciencism', focusing on how Romanian national-communism strived to construe ideological ties in their direction, insisting especially on the last one. Third, before the conclusions section, I once again bring into discussion the 'new world order' and how it applied to RSR's struggling endeavor to be accepted as a full member of the 'group of 77'.

Ideological and comparative analyses are the main methodological tools used to outline the hypotheses, the conclusions and the overall scientific argumentation put to work in this article. Contiguously, critical discourse analysis or radical constructivism are also important for shedding light on how RSR and some African Third World countries articulated their identities with reference to present political and geopolitical stakes.

Some of the most important findings of the paper consist in pinpointing the congruency between Romanian industrial development plans and Third World's objective of post-colonial reconstruction. Basically, Romania was, for its entire modern procommunist history, an agrarian periphery acting as a supplier of cheap cereals, natural resources and workforce for the West European capital. In this regard, RSR perceived in the national liberation struggle of the young African nations its own hypertrophied past of struggles, heroes, betrays and malicious foreign powers. Consequently, historical empathy gave way to ideological synergy, as both parts tried to obtain more maneuvering space with reference to their specific hegemonic powers: The Third World in relation with Western Europe and the United States, and RSR in relation with the USSR, in the first place but, as the economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s unfolded, in relation with Western powers as well. The RSR – Third World alliance was far more than a simple, occasional collaboration between states sharing exclusively common external objectives. It was, even if lacking any chance of success, an attempt of starting a counter-hegemonic movement in world politics, one in which the 'chauvinism of great power', as it was called in RSR, would be contested and rejected to the end, even if the great power was the

United States, the Soviet Union or, to a lesser extent, the European Economic Community.

### Literature review

Surprisingly, the scientific literature on the Romanian-Third World relations is considerably small even before the end of the Cold War. Afterwards, it is almost absent, with the notable exception of Thomas Barnett's book, the first and, until now, only one dedicated entirely to RSR's connections with the global South, a first class political analysis of the subject. Of course, there is no shortage of national-communist propaganda, some of it intelligently and interestingly written. Reaching well beyond propaganda is Ioan Roșu-Hamzescu's book *Formarea cadrelor naționale în țările în curs de dezvoltare*, which offers an interesting insight in RSR's major contribution to the technical education of future engineers or doctors from different African countries. Furthermore, although adopting the official national-communist rhetoric, Ilie Șerbănescu's articles are incisive, pertinent and they definitely point out the shortcomings of the international political economy during the 1980s, by far a creation of the highly developed Western world. Another relevant work is that of Voiculescu Marin and Voiculescu Elena, *Renașterea Africană* (1979), which discusses in length the ideological affinities between Third World national ideologies and Romanian national-communism. A useful working instrument is Dragoș Gheorghe's chrestomathy *Gândirea politică africană. Antologie* (1982). Outside Romania, important scientific articles on the topic were written by Robert King and Collin Lawson, both insisting on the political and diplomatic aspects of the gradual rapprochement between communist Romania and African, South-American or Middle-Eastern countries amidst decades of mutual ignorance, distrust, or even hostility. Radio Free Europe's reports are excellent contemporary journalistic syntheses of the different turns and evolutions this political relationship undertook with the passing of the years.

In post-communist Romania, relevant articles that touch upon socialist Romania's involvement in Africa are those of Mihai Dinu Gheorghiu et al., „Les étudiants africains en Roumanie (1970-1990). De l'internationalisme militant à la commercialisation des études” (2014) and of Bogdan Iacob, ‘A Babel in Bucharest. Third World students in Romania, 1960s-1980s’ (2022). Then there is my own contribution from 2011, ‘Aspects of a “brilliant assertion into the consciousness of the world”. The Third World in Socialist Romania's foreign policy’ (2011). Important coverages of different African social, cultural and political realities are to be found in the books of journalist Nicolae Melinescu, who travelled frequently on the ‘black continent’ before 1989 (2018, 2019, 2009). Melinescu teamed up with the historian Constantin Hlihor and delivered the most recent contribution on the topic, *Romanians in Africa. From the first explorers to Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2025). Furthermore, historian Bogdan-Iulian Ranteș has published in 2017 a book entitled *Romania's relations with states from Equatorial and Western Africa, 1960-1974*, while the above mentioned Constantin Hlihor also published *With the hands of others: Romania and the proxy wars in Africa (1970-1985)* (2025).

I would emphasize that the present contribution is relevant because it insists on the importance of the ideological dimension in understanding the rest of the components that sum up RSR's one of a kind partnership with Third World countries, especially African ones. In communist Romania, ideology was not simply a disposable layer which the regime could conveniently put on and take off whenever the international situation called for it. On the contrary, national-communism was firmly embedded in the internal and international practice of the political elite. Only Thomas Barnett's and Voiculescu Marin and Voiculescu Elena's books take this factor into account, but the last one is full with propagandistic clichés, while the first one, although excellent from many point of view, does not satisfactorily discuss concepts like 'consciencism' or 'blackness' and does not use at all critical discourse analysis or radical constructivism as methodologies. Although the present study makes use of these methodologies only tangentially, overall it does not adopt the positivist stance that Barnett's book does, preferring interpretative over causal explanations.

### **Context: Soviet and Socialist East-European relations with Africa**

Soviet involvement in Africa dates back to the 1920s, when a so-called 'Negro International' was formed. It lacked notable political influence: the African space was extremely diverse and also understudied by the Soviets. This was not the case of former colonial powers. After the disappearance of the Third International in 1943, when Stalin tried to appease his newfound Western allies against Hitler, the British and the French communist parties were put in charge of spreading Soviet propaganda in Africa. But this new strategy proved to be a failure as well, since Moscow's postwar 'two camp' policy arbitrarily distinguished between socialist and imperialist countries and considered the emerging African countries to be firmly on the side of their former colonial masters. Insisting that the former colonies were nationalistic and not independent enough, and disregarding their pleas for international neutrality, Stalin encouraged local communist parties, weak and politically irrelevant, to stage coups against the new postcolonial leaders and movements. This strategy was also inefficient (Klinghoffer in Kanet 1975, 52; see also Hlihor 2025, 208-210).

In evaluating the success of Soviet strategy in the developing nations in the last years of Stalin's rule, one would have to say that the Soviet Union wasted an excellent opportunity to find allies and friends throughout Asia and Africa. Most of the areas of these two continents either had just acquired independence or were witnessing a rise in nationalist demands for freedom. The leaders and people saw in Western Europe, and to a lesser degree in the United States, their primary enemies. However, instead of attempting to court the friendship of these nations, the Soviets antagonized them by condemning their leaders and supporting rebellions against their governments. Not until the middle-fifties did a significant shift in this policy take place (Kanet in Kanet 1975, 26).

After Stalin's death, during the second half of the 1950s, the Soviet Union abandoned its previous strategies towards Africa and started to differentiate between 'progressive' and 'reactionary' African countries. The criteria for making this typology operational were, however, very loose, especially in the first cases, were some countries could be proclaimed pro-Soviet only on the basis of a certain centralization of their economies, even without the implication of local communists. Still, during the late 1960s the Soviets managed to improve relations with several African countries, like Syria and Egypt, for example, especially in military affairs. This happened mainly because the United States presence in Northern Africa was voluntarily diminishing in that period, not necessarily due to the successes of Soviet diplomacy (Kanet in Kanet, Bahry 1975, 13). It was only during the next decade that the Soviet Union consolidated its strategic presence on the African continent, thus proving its superpower status (Kanet in Kolodziej, Kanet 1989, 48-9). However, the evolution of Soviet policy over time has depended heavily on developments in the Third World and on the objectives and behavior of individual developing countries. Although the Soviets have created the general outlines of an approach to the developing world, their actual policy initiatives have depended primarily on events over which they exercised little or no control (...). In other words, the policy of the Soviet Union has been largely reactive and has responded to some of the opportunities provided it. Over time the successes, failures, and actual evolution of Soviet policy have been influenced by the goals, interests, and concerns of Third World partner or client states (Kanet in Kolodziej, Kanet 1989, 52-53).

In time, African Soviet allies turned into a financial burden. But, for geopolitical reasons, Moscow maintained relations with its African 'clients', some of them politically unsustainable (Kanet in Kolodziej, Kanet 1989, 56-57). No matter how hard it strived to cement its influence in Africa, the Soviet Union was simply economically unattractive for postcolonial states, which aimed to expand their presence on the Western market (Singleton in Kolodziej, Kanet 1989, 333, 347-348). This reflected in the Soviet political strategy towards Africa: if, during the 1970s, the Soviets believed in transforming friendly African regimes into communist states, in the next decade they settled for encouraging anti-Western nationalism and joining whatever local political forces available (Singleton in Kolodziej, Kanet 1989, 353). The limits of Soviet power in Africa consisted mainly in Moscow's incapacity to prove itself as a reliable economic alternative to the West, on one hand; on the other hand, regional political instability also played a major role as well in this regard. But Soviet successes in the Third World should not be overlooked: the nonaligned movement increasingly supported Soviet interests, within and outside the UN (Kanet in Kanet 1987, 17-18; Kanet in Kanet 1987, 108; see also Lavigne in Lavigne 1988, 119). Furthermore, the Soviets achieved a major success in educating some of the African political and economic elites: the Lumumba University founded in Moscow in 1960 opened its doors to thousands of Third World students, especially Africans (Klingfofer in Kanet 1975, 68; RSR was hosting as well thousands of Third World students in its universities; during the 1980s, when shortages become more frequent, tensions between the population and some of these students increased, and even

regrettable racist incidents occurred – see Iacob 2022). In the same time, African countries were perceiving the socialist world much the same as the industrialized North, voicing similar pretensions towards the Soviet Union or other eastern socialist countries we will refer to below as they did with reference to the United States and Western Europe (Machowski, Schultz in Kanet 1987, 136).

As for the East European involvement into Africa, three states stood out: the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the RSR and Czechoslovakia. While the GDR was the most active of this trio (Després in Kanet 1987, 158), Romania was not far behind, as we are about to see. According to their possibilities, level of development, and African strategies, East European socialist states like Czechoslovakia, the GDR and Poland exported mostly industrialized products in African countries, while Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, agricultural ones (Després in Kanet 1987, 148). Needless to say, these East European socialist states had more modest and pragmatic ambitions than the Soviet Union in Africa (see Hlihor 2025, 173-176). As I will insist further, although they started under high auspices during the 1960s and reached their peak during the 1970s, East-European relations with African states regressed in the next decade, mostly due to international circumstances beyond the control of protagonists.

### **From ‘blackness’ to ‘consciencism’: the emergence of African post-colonial nationalism and its ideological ties with Romanian national-communism**

Two of the most important ideologies of nonalignment, ‘blackness’ and ‘consciencism’ both emerged inside a violent and complex political space. The African decolonization process was abrupt and chaotic, concentrating itself on industrialization in the absence of infrastructure, technological know-how and education. Foreseeable, the result consisted in numerous economic and political crises, assassinations, and coup d’états (McWilliams, Piotrovski 1988, 232-245). As an expression of this situation, political identities in the making were themselves contradictory, incompatible and many times simply incoherent. The main question of emerging nationalism was an unsurpassable one: were they products of European political culture or, although influenced by it, their roots were firmly grounded in pre-colonial African mythology? This puzzling dilemma was resolved by stating that the configuration of specific African political identities begun long ago before the European invasion which abruptly and irreversibly put an end to them. Although the new national revolutions were confined to a foreign territorial pattern, imposed by the former occupants, they were considered to be essentially original attempts to continue the lost legacy of pre-European African greatness (Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 20-26, 37-38; Senghor 1986, 41-42).

African theorists distinguished between two main alternatives in the process of national edification. One was the tribe and the extended family as premises for the new nations. As we will see, this alternative will constitute the one of the main theoretical drives for ‘blackness’. Acting as intermediary between local and national identities, these two pre-national identities also guaranteed an original theoretical model which excluded the unwanted intrusion of Western political concepts

(Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 51-54). The other condemned tribalism as a means of the former colonial powers to ideologically maintain Africa subordinated and easily exploitable. Tribalism obstructed the creation of powerful and homogenous African nations, an evolution that would have hindered the West's ambition within the Third World. Furthermore, tribalism was an alienated expression of the class struggle that nevertheless existed in Africa, despite apparent aspects that would have deemed it impossible. Intellectuals and politicians like Sékou Touré, Tom Mboya or Kwame Nkrumah argued, in Marxist-Leninist terms, that class struggle was a permanence of history and, in a specific form, it existed in Africa too, where a huge rural class lived along a small but rapidly growing proletarian class and an urban or rural bourgeoisie created to respond to the administrative needs of the former European colonists (Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 40, 47-48, 54-60). Both types of African nationalism, we could label them cultural nationalism and pro-communist nationalism, acted as 'ideologies of late industrialization' and were keen on obtaining the progress of this whole continent wronged by history either through the development of autochthonous cultural elements, either through a class struggle entailing the efforts of the rural class and of the proletariat against a bourgeoisie behaving as a transmission belt for colonial interests, a class struggle that would underline the newly found political independence with a more substantial economic one (Matossian in Hutchinson, Smith 1994, 218-225; Cabral in Alcoff, Mendieta 2003, 55-61).

As expected, RSR supported the last version of African nationalism, the pro-communist one. Ghana's president Kwame Nkrumah was a fierce adept of nationalization, a process that would restore African dignity and its rightful possession of vast and diverse natural resources. Nkrumah criticized other theorists of 'patriarchal socialism' or 'African socialism' like Julius Nyerere or Léopold Sédar Senghor for denying class struggle and for insisting too much on Africa's cultural uniqueness, thus isolating it from the global class struggle against imperialism. While many African traditions were definitely worth keeping, other ones like rampant feudalism doubled by inequitable possession of land was not something to make Africans proud, Nkrumah argued. Due to theorists like Senghor, African socialism had lost its post war militancy and political relevance and became a mere cultural ornament for the personal ambitions of several theorists, among which Senghor was the most prominent. His concept of 'blackness' represented exactly this unwanted and pernicious culturalization of African socialism, rendering it as a mild and innocent form of claiming 'a place in the sun', as the Chinese saying goes, for this continent ravaged by European capitalism in its most aggressive period. However, Africa cannot truly win its independence by appealing to the mercy of great powers; Africa needs to have its geopolitical and ideological rights recognized as an equal member of the global club of regions and continents (Marinescu 1986, 174-175; Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 103-105, 109; Tănăsie in Popișteanu 1989, 149; Nkrumah 1973, 440-445; Guibernau 1996, 124; Senghor 1986, 148).

As theorized by Nkrumah, 'consciencism', represented a form of synthetic African dialectical materialism, one that would encompass Western, Islamic and

Euro-Asiatic elements in order to offer Africa the political possibility to better grasp its position, advantages and perspectives on the world stage on the basis of a unique and non-recurring ontology. Consciencism was grounded in ‘communalism’, an idealistic form of African society existent in pre-colonial Africa that was to be adapted to present day realities and needs, not mechanically and uncritically revived (Tănăsie în Sprințeroiu *et al.* 1989, 148-150; van den Boogard 2017, 50-51).

Furthermore, in the new political environment made possible by consciencism, the liberal system of multiple parties and free elections would have been harmful for consolidating the independence of this ancestral continent due to the fact that it would have perpetuated Western foreign interferences in African internal affairs. Only the Leninist vanguard party was suitable for the historic mission of obtaining and strengthening Africa’s independence in the context of internal and international class struggle (Nkrumah 1970, 100-101; Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 68-79, 83).

Socialists like Senghor repelled the authoritarian one-party system in favor of multipartidism and representative democracy based on free elections (Voiculescu E., Voiculescu M. 1979, 1987; Senghor 1986, 148). This plural political system responded better to the needs of blackness, through which Senghor understood the overall cultural heritage of black people as manifested in their day to day existence. As ancient Greece offered the world reason, Africa offered the world blackness, a specific emotion deeply stratified within the historical and cultural layers of African becoming. Of course, Nkrumah fiercely rejected blackness as a cultural setback of African global political struggle, a totally useless, when not wholly dangerous, ‘metaphysics of knowledge’ (Nkrumah: 1973, 443-445; Marinescu: 1986, 185-187).

Romanian national-communism was especially fond of consciencism. Both shared the adamant conviction in the Leninist party as vehicle of historical and social progress. Both were culturally eclectic and politically one-sided. As consciencism insisted on recuperating the African past in order to fit the present and future political struggles, Romanian national-communism also integrated a discursively articulated heroic past in order to legitimize the existing political regime. Unlike conservative nationalism, which valued above all the past, or liberal nationalism, placing emphasis first of all on culturally and institutionally construed citizenship, national-communism was very pragmatic oriented and in the same time extremely exclusivist: it aimed to mold a new type of nationalism centered around the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) in order to militantly inspire the population to assume the regime’s developmental imperatives as its own. In the realm of international relations, Romanian national-communism did not benefit from the privileged discursive position it had within the Romanian borders; consequently, it was compelled to adopt more flexible discursive strategies and to play the role of a global moralizer, while privately lamenting it was not a superpower it deserved to be (Popescu 1993, 307). Regarding blackness, the ideological substance of the concept was condescendingly considered as a ‘petite-bourgeois’ simulacra of a revolutionary notion, too much inclined towards the liberal political philosophy in order to count as truly relevant from an ideological standpoint. However, like in the case of

Eurocommunism, while the political doctrines per se were treated with disbelief, their contextual political usefulness came handy on many occasions. Therefore, Senghor's works were translated in Romanian and he was esteemed as one of the most important and prolific theorist of African renewal.

### **Forging the 'new international order': an overview of RSR's acceptance into the group of 77**

As already mentioned in the introductory section of the paper, the nonaligned movement represented for the RSR not only an opportunity to maintain its dissident foreign policy, initiated in the 1960s, but also a means of legitimating the official discourse within the Romanian borders (Barnett 1992, 2). Mircea Malița, a Romanian diplomat with a prodigious career, remembers that RSR could have become a member of the group of 77 even from 1964, the year the group was constituted within the UN, but, in the context of its alienation with reference to the 'socialist camp', the Romanian leadership preferred to maintain its attention on European political problems and especially on USSR (Malița 2015, 349-350). Furthermore, RSR was not interested in building bridges with African countries until the early 1960s, and this omission came with a steep political and also professional cost: the country simply did not have enough specialists and diplomats familiarized with an ever changing African political, economic, social and cultural landscape (Ranteș 2017, 24).

Despite their diplomatic and ideological closeness, RSR and the other East-European regimes were competing with Third World countries when it came to the access of their products to the Western markets. Unfortunately, RSR did not place too much of an emphasis on products destined to be exported on African markets, considering political relations would suffice; this strategy proved wrong, as Poland, the GDR or Czechoslovakia begun to win some of the economic contracts initially agreed with RSR (Hlihor 2025, 277). Far from being worried by this evolution of the relations between East-European regimes and the Third World countries, the Soviet Union derived some advantages from it. First of all, Moscow could easily retract the assistance offered to a Third World state in case of civil war or in case of a hostile Western reaction – without entirely eliminating the communist influence from the region. Next, the Soviet assistance was made more efficient by the fact that Czechoslovakia's military technology and GDR's communicational abilities were promptly put to its disposal. Furthermore, through the participation of the East-European regimes in helping Third World countries, the pressure upon the Soviet budget oriented to the same goal was lowered. Finally, East-European assistance attenuated the sensation that the Soviet Union involves itself with Third World countries just to military compete with the West (Barnett 1992, 14-17; see also Hlihor 2025, 66 and Lavigne in Lavigne 1988, 113).

RSR signed more treaties of friendship and cooperation with Third World countries than the Soviet Union did and also emphasized itself among the other East-European regimes in this regard, leading Thomas Barnett to affirm that the RSR – which named itself starting with 1972, in order to underline its solidarity with the

nonaligned movement, a ‘socialist developing country’ – aspired to become a bridge not only between East and West, but also between North and South. Also, RSR’s autonomous and even rebellious posture in international relations, especially when it came to the Soviet Union, was deeply appreciated by many African states and their leaders (Hlihor 2025, 16; see also Ranteş 2017, 30-31). Comparing himself with Tito or Mao, Ceauşescu “wanted to position himself with reference to Moscow as a natural leader of an increasingly radicalized and (possibly) socialist Third World. In this time, he planned to transform Romania into a ‘Japan of Europe,’ a middle sized state with great economic authority” (Barnett 1992, 47; see also Linden 1987, 58-59; King 1978, 879). But, at the end of the 1970s, in the context of an alarming increase in oil prices, of the oscillations of the international economy and of some uninspired investments, the relations between RSR and the Third World began to visibly diminish in terms of commercial volume, despite keeping the bombastic rhetoric against imperialism and neocolonialism. Ceauşescu bragged about having relations with all African countries, except openly racist regimes like South Africa and Rhodesia (Ranteş 2017 38); the Soviet Union was more selective in this regard, and, in 1975, for example, a year when Soviet and East European socialist countries’ involvement into Africa was at its highest (see Ranteş 2017, 41) - did not engage in diplomatic relations with ‘the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Malawi, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Gabon, and Niger’ (Klinghoffer in Kanet 1975, 66).

Maoism represented for the RSR the main ideological inspiration source in the process of its rapprochement with the Third World. Romanian national-communism also borrowed from Maoism numerous defining elements: militant art and literature, voluntarism, romanticism, the correctness and responsibility of activists, indispensable for a proper construction of socialism, hostility towards anarchic manifestations and towards erroneously understood liberty, in the absence of necessity to which liberty is connected within every phase of the advancement of history upon revolutionary coordinates, respectively the critique of bureaucracy and small-bourgeois commodity which alters the revolutionary spirit of the party (Tsetung 1971, 134-136, 275, 368-369, 437, 445; Ţze-Dun 1955, 347-348).

Ceauşescu also inspired himself from the propaganda and ideology of North Korea (Sung 1976, 588-593), also derived from Maoism. Maoism – which, as James Gregor points out, through its ‘reactive and developmental nationalism’ aiming to mobilize the ‘masses’ in the name of national rebirth, for too long obstructed by what Mao named the ‘foreign national yoke,’ and by dividing nations between ‘proletarian’ and ‘bourgeois’ and discursively creating a global conflict which will eventually end with the victory of the first – becomes intelligible with the help of fascist rather than Marxist theories (Gregor 2000, 207-208; Ţze-Dun 1957, 506-507). Regarding the Third World, the Chinese communists affirmed even from the end of the 1940s, an opinion that later made its way into the RSR (Voiculescu and Voiculescu 1979, 58-60; see also Marinescu quoted in Marinescu 1984, 141-143), that the effervescent nationalism manifested by the former European colonies, despite the

fact of being 'bourgeois' in its essence is, in the global revolutionary equation, a progressive one, and thus needs to be supported by all (Chao-Tsi 1949, 43-44).

Adopted as a UN program in 1974 at the initiative of the nonaligned movement (Senghor quoted in Dragoş 1982, 375), the new international order foresaw the attenuation and finally the elimination of the economic disparities existent between North and South through intensifying the efforts against colonialism, which obstructed the emergence of a much more fair international status-quo (Stanciu 1979, 65-70; Giorgios quoted in Dragoş 1982, 156-157). The new instruments of colonialism, more efficient than military intimidation and direct economic exploitation, were multinational companies. These were guilty for threatening the independence of the young developing states through neglecting and even intensifying the social problems which already existed there, through supporting the reactionary forces from these countries, blackmailing them to obtain new concessions in order not to move their business elsewhere and, in general, deepening the Third World's dependence on Western capital (Bogdan quoted in Florea, Duculescu and Opaschi 1982, 251-253; Moise quoted in Florea, Duculescu and Opaschi 1982, 269-277; Seftiuc quoted in Florea, Duculescu, Opaschi 1982, 354; Elian 1977, 125-139). However, the economic and demographic growth rates of the South were growing, and the prognoses for the year 2000 anticipated new quantitative jumps of developing states which, RSR argued, had to be encouraged through a qualitative change of the international environment on the whole. And that could only mean one thing: the implementation of the new international order.

Due to an efficient and assertive diplomacy, RSR signed numerous treaties with African states, in which it committed to financially and materially contribute to their independence (see Vais 2012, 433-451). As already mentioned, few of these treaties entailed concrete benefits, at least until the end of the 1970s when, due to the recession of the global economy and the increase of oil prices, Romania started to massively invest in sub-Saharan Africa in order to gain access to the cheap energy sources and markets from the region (Romanian industrial products being refused, due to their low quality, more and more on the western markets). Joint societies were created, in which the Romanian part contributed with technology, experts and capital, and the African part with the working force and raw materials. In this way, RSR could sell some products on the western markets, these being presented as made in Africa. But when, due to international economic conditions, the states of the Third World asked for more concessions from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) member states, the RSR opposed, arguing that the responsibility for economic development belongs to each nation individually (Barnett 1992, 67-68; Roşu-Hamzescu 1979, 119-120).

On the other hand, one cannot deny that RSR substantially contributed to the financial help of the Third World countries, especially before becoming a member of the 'group of 77' (1976), providing almost a third of the amount granted by all East-European regimes. For RSR's budget, the numbers were impressive: Argentina and Algeria – 100 million dollars (1972); Brasil - 180 million dollars (1975); Egypt – 230 million dollars (1972-1974); Iran – 135 million dollars (1968-1969); Syria –

170 million dollars (1971-1974); Guinea – 80 million dollars (1974) (SR/Romania: 22 December 1975, 1-8; „România și schimburile...”: 2 April 1975, 7). RCP even created a “solidarity and support fund of the national liberation movements, of the young independent states” and “of developing countries,” an initiative “received with warm approbation by the Romanian people” (Botoran and Unc 1977, 227). RSR’s support was not limited to the financial component, but expanded towards forming the ‘cadres’ specialized in different fields of industrial engineering that would have built afterwards socialism in their origin countries, thus ensuring their prosperity and independence (Roșu-Hamzescu 1979, 111-122; *Dezvoltarea colaborării și solidarității...* 1978, 21-22).

As a self-proclaimed socialist developing country, the RSR had greatly to suffer from the global recession that occurred at the end of the 1970s: the massive industrialization policies, way beyond the country’s real possibilities, now proved, along with the growing fuel prices RSR had to import sometimes from thousands of miles away, their lack of inspiration. The short term solution resided in borrowing money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, a fact which further deepened the country’s foreign debt because, during crises, the interest rates of money go up. Confronted with this disappointing solution, for which the West bears the major responsibility, Ceaușescu blamed the ‘neocolonialist interest rates’ which only limited the progress chances of developing countries and deepened the inequalities between the West and the Third (Cercescu in *Practici imperialiste...*: 1982, 133). For Third World countries, the situation was even worse. Practically, at the end of the 1950s, “a field car could be bought by a Latin-American with the equivalent of 124 coffee bags, and today (1977, m.n.) it necessitates the equivalent of 344 coffee bags. A rubber exporting country could purchase, in 1960, with 25 tons of products, 6 tractors, and today only 2 tractors” (Popescu quoted in Mitran and Lotreanu 1977, 47). In order to combat these worrying tendencies, RSR proposed the reconfiguring of interest rates as follows: 5% for developing countries and credits without interest rates or with a maximum interest rate of 2-3% for the less developed countries. On the whole, it was desirable that “the maximum level of the interest rate not to grow beyond 8%” (Șerbănescu in *Practici imperialiste...*: 1982, 108). Indeed, beside the propagandistic exacerbation, the situation was alarming. In 1970, for example, from the loans contracted by developing countries (14, 3 billion dollars), only 45% were effectively cashed by these, “the rest representing interest rates, commissions and due rates of previous loans, while in 1980, from the 96,5 billion dollars, only 30% entered into the possession of the debtors” (Stănescu in *Practici imperialiste...*: 1982, 139).

Not only RSR, but other East European socialist countries as well were compelled to increase their exports towards African states while simultaneously reducing imports from them: they all needed foreign currencies, especially dollars, to finance their development and also their deficits. If, during the 1970s, weapons and oil represented the most important sources of foreign currencies for socialist states in their trade with African countries, in the 1980s, oil gave way to weapons,

due to the acceleration of the oil international crisis in the second half of the previous decade (Graziani in Kanet 1987, 157-158; Després in Lavigne 1988, 62-63).

Due to the combined pressures of developing countries within the UN, the interest rates begun to diminish in the second half of the 1980s. But the prospects still remain worrying for debtors, because the number of credits with variable interest rates went up while the reimbursement terms of the credits went down.

It is clear now that RSR's situation progressively deteriorated during the 1980s and the alliance with the nonaligned movement started to become a real burden. But the circumstances through which the rapprochement between RSR and the nonaligned movement occurred were very much different. Presenting itself as a 'developing socialist country,' RSR took into account not only a global political stake – the continuation of its dissident foreign policy – but also an economic stake at a regional scale. In 1971, the European Community announced lower tariffs to the imports from developing countries, namely Third World countries, a development that greatly interested the Romanian leadership. In order to legitimate its new position, RSR begun the adhering procedures to the 'group of 77' (Lawson 1983, 366; King 1978, 880-882, Căpățină, Miha-Beșteliu and Tănăsescu 1973, 38-39). Emphasizing the velocity and the efficiency with which it built socialism, RSR tried to become, as we have seen, a model for Third World countries, for economic reasons (obtaining facilities at the exports for Western markets), for political reasons (maintaining and consolidating its dissidence towards Moscow) and nevertheless for ideological and historical reasons (the affirmation of independence and of the national state as the main actor of the new international order and of the similarities between the present of Third World peoples and the past of the Romanian people, on its turn subjugated by oppressive empires) (see *Politica externă...*: 1972, 129-130; Vadim Tudor 1983, 237; Caraciuc 1974, 72-73; Lache quoted in Mitran and Lotreanu: 1977, 430). Later, both before and after RSR became a member of the 'group of 77,' numerous African leaders, motivated, among other things, by Ceaușescu's consistent financial help, referred to him, among others, as an 'example' from which they could learn a lot 'in elaborating their way (...) to socialism' (*Solidaritate militantă...*: 1977, 77, 25, 109; Bourguiba Jr. 1968, 9; Bourguiba 1968, 6-7; OkumbaD'Okwatsegue 1975, 8-9; Malecela 1974, 7-8; Voiculescu and Voiculescu 1979, 117-118).

RSR's integration into the 'group of 77' represented the most credible moment in its campaign to present itself as a 'socialist developing country' (Barnett 1992, 62), being the result of a long and laborious process entailed in 1964. But "the group was organized in regional sections, Asian, African and Latin-American, and Romania was not acceptable for none of these sections. Doubts regarding the acceptance of non-regional members, Romania's motives, the effect which its position as a CMEA member would have had upon the group's negotiation possibilities, led to its rejection" (Lawson 1983, 365). Encouraged by the fact that Yugoslavia was included in the group, in the Asian section, being also a member of the nonaligned movement, RSR perseverated, constantly supporting the group within the UN (Nicolae 2000, 171-172). In 1976, the Latin-American section of the group

announced its intention to include RSR in the case it had no pretention to take part in the ‘specific decisions of the countries from this area.’ But the Arab states manifested their opposition, due to the fact that RSR was not present to the voting, within the UN, of a resolution incriminating Zionism; wishing to maintain good relations with Israel, RSR was absent and the resolution was not adopted. Next, the African countries opposed, along with Yugoslavia. As independent and nonaligned the RSR pretended to be, its affiliation to CMEA and the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) undoubtedly transformed it into a promoter of the policies of the ‘socialist bloc’ (Nicolae 2000, 174; Gafton and the Romanian Section: 23 May 1979, 7-8). Finally, the efforts of Romanian diplomats paid and RSR was accepted into the ‘group of 77.’ The event was emphatically presented in the Romanian press and in the foreign affairs books and propaganda materials, RSR’s new found quality confirming “a principle convincingly supported by our party, by its general secretary namely that it does not exist and it cannot exist a reason for which a socialist country being in the same time a developing country not to act as a member of the ‘Group of 77’” (Ene, Bogdan in Ene 1985, 209). Or, in other words, “the essential resides not in the appurtenance or non-appurtenance to different political-military groups, but in the positions and way of action of states for the affirmation of the new international relations, in actively promoting the principles of peaceful coexistence, of the essential objectives, of the cause of peace, independence sovereignty, tempering and international collaboration” (Sprințeroiu in Popișteanu: 1989, 30; see also SR/Romania: 19 August 1976, 2 and Ciorănescu: 1976, 1-8).

### **Concluding remarks**

Although economic pragmatism was the main drive behind RSR’s decision to improve its relations with the Third World during the 1970s, ideological considerations played an important role in this process. Romanian national-communism aimed to influence national-liberation movements, to export in the area its own ‘revolutionary’ model, different from that of the Soviet Union. Its failure has a lot to do with the internal flaws of the model itself, but also with external factors such as the oil crises from 1973 and 1979. Overall, raw materials from the Third World represented an important supply alternative for a highly industrialized RSR in a more and more unstable economic world, while the Romanian know-how and industrial technology benefited the young independent states in the process of consolidating their independence. The relation was mutually satisfactorily until the 1980s advancement of international neoliberalism drove both parties to more precarious international economic approaches, shattering their dreams of authentic independence, on one hand, respectively RSR’s ambition to become a middle-sized power acting as a natural leader of a radicalized national-revolutionary global movement, on the other hand. Even so, many of the political and economic initiatives existing between RSR and its African partners never materialized (Ranteș 2017, 240).

This paper insisted on how material factors intertwined with ideological factors in making possible the complicated and sinuous rapprochement between RSR

and the African Third World countries, pinpointing that national-communist ideology was not a facile camouflage for an otherwise pragmatic and ruthless political elite, but was inscribed into its cognitive, epistemological and behavioral code. Future research should take into account to a greater extent empirical factors and, maybe, concentrate on more particular issues, such as RSR's relations with one or two Third World countries, or maybe the whole Third World, not only its African dimension. As a synoptic assessment of the subject, this study is improvable when it comes to empirical issues while it is also prone to generalizations.

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