

In Trial, Romania Warily Revisits a Brutal Past



Cristian Movila for The New York Times

Ramnicu Sarat prison, which is 95 miles northeast of Bucharest, was reserved for political offenders. [More Photos](#)

By ANDREW HIGGINS

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BUCHAREST, Romania — Remembered as a brutal sadist by inmates who managed to survive the prisons he once ran, Alexandru Visinescu bubbles with violent fury. “Get away from my door, or do you want me to get a stick and beat you?” the 88-year-old former prison commander screamed recently when a reporter called at his fourth floor apartment in the center of this capital city.

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Like other onetime servants of the old Communist government, Mr. Visinescu — now a frail retiree with a hunched back — does not like being disturbed. Until recently, he was not. He was left alone with a generous pension and a comfortable apartment, surrounded by black-and-white photographs of his fit, youthful self in uniform. He passed his time with leisurely strolls in a nearby park.

His peace ended in early September, when prosecutors in Bucharest announced that Mr. Visinescu [would be put on trial](#) over his role in Communist-era abuses, the first case of its kind since [Romania](#) toppled and executed the dictator [Nicolae Ceausescu](#) in December 1989.

The case has opened a flood of news media coverage here and raised hopes, however tentative, among victims and their advocates that Romania may finally be following most of its neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe in shaking off a national amnesia about its brutal past and re-examining a culture of impunity that has fed rampant

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Cristian Movila for The New York Times
Valentin Cristea, 83, a former political prisoner from the Ceausescu dictatorship. [More Photos »](#)

corruption and constrained the country's progress despite its entry into the European Union in 2007.

In the eyes of many here, the downfall and execution of Mr. Ceausescu merely removed the leader of the old Communist Bloc's most intrusive dictatorship, leaving the system beneath largely intact. That continuity between the Communist and post-Communist elites helps explain why resistance to a serious reckoning with past crimes has been particularly strong in Romania, where there is still

widespread nostalgia for the Communist era.

"We are coming from very deep and dirty waters," said Laura Stefan of the Expert Forum, a Bucharest group that campaigns to strengthen the rule of law. "Corruption has a big link to the fact that we haven't talked about our past," she said. She welcomed the prosecution of Mr. Visinescu as an encouraging sign, noting that "to even think that these people are guilty and should pay is very new."

A former work camp commander, [Ion Ficior](#), is also under investigation and may face charges.

Still, Ms. Stefan doubts that the authorities are "really serious" about putting Mr. Visinescu and others in jail. "I am not optimistic at all," she said.

Fueling those doubts is the fact that Mr. Visinescu has been charged with genocide, which usually applies only to efforts to liquidate, in part or entirely, a religious or ethnic group, not to political repression. And the crimes he is said to have committed stretch back more than half a century, predating the Ceausescu dictatorship, which lasted from 1965 to 1989 and remains a far more politically delicate period because so many members of Romania's Communist establishment under Ceausescu maintained positions of power even after the fall of the old regime.

The difficulty of making a genocide charge stand up in a Romanian court — and then against any legal challenge at the [European Court of Human Rights](#) in Strasbourg, France — has raised concerns among those who have long pushed for justice that the case could prove to be yet another false start in the country's fitful efforts to come to terms with its past.

"They have charged him with genocide just so they can close this file without a result," said Dan Voinea, a Romanian criminology professor who served as the prosecutor in the hasty Dec. 25, 1989, show trial of Mr. Ceausescu and his wife, Elena.

Romania's political and economic elites, Mr. Voinea said, are still dominated by former Communists, their relatives and allies "who want to make sure that the crimes of Communism are never unveiled and never prosecuted in a serious way."

Indeed, critics of the government say the prosecution of Mr. Visinescu was undertaken only because the prosecutor received a detailed file from the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, a semi-government body in Bucharest that researches cold cases.

Romania under Mr. Ceausescu was the most authoritarian, Stalinist government in Eastern Europe, a paranoid nightmare in which one in 30 people worked as informers for the ruthless security agency, the Securitate. Mr. Ceausescu's repression of dissent was so complete that Romanians were forbidden to own typewriters without a police permit.

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George Calin contributed reporting.

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