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Romania confronts communist past in trial of prison camp chief

Alexandru Visineşcu, 88, denies charges of crimes against humanity as commander of brutal prison camp

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The Guardian, Wednesday 24 September 2014 18.39 BST

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Alexandru Visineşcu, commander of the Râmnicu Sărat prison from 1956 to 1963, leaves court in Bucharest on Wednesday. Photograph: Vadim Ghirda/AP
The hearing only lasted an hour. The defendant was a frail old man in a hat. The atmosphere was subdued, the legal procedure perfunctory.

But in a packed courtroom in Bucharest, Romania finally took steps on Wednesday to come to terms with the brutality of its communist past. Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Ceauşescu regime, the country for the first time initiated a trial of an individual accused of crimes committed during the 42 years of communist rule.

Alexandru Visineşcu, 88, faces charges of crimes against humanity for his role as the commander of the notorious Râmnicu Sărat prison for political prisoners.

Sitting quietly in a three-piece suit in the second row of the courtroom, he did not look like a man who was making history.

Visineşcu, who was commander at Râmnicu Sărat prison between 1956 and 1963, is said to have overseen an "extermination regime" and is accused of torture and having an involvement in the deaths of 12 political prisoners. He denies the charges.

Nicoleta Eremia, the widow of a former political prisoner, asked the court for €100,000 (£78,000) in moral and financial damages related to her husband, a general imprisoned for writing a book critical of the communist leadership.

Her husband, who spent three years in Râmnicu Sărat prison and who died in 2004 aged 90, "left this world lacking peace" because of what had happened to him in prison, Eremia told the Guardian after court had adjourned for the day.

"My husband ended up weighing just 30 kilograms (4st 10lb) when he got out of prison. I have records showing how much hard detention he was made to do."

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Visineşcu, who declined to comment before the trial began, sat quietly throughout and was not called to take the stand. After clarifying the parties involved and examining documentation, the judge adjourned the case until 22 October.

The case lifts the lid on the vast secret police apparatus that kept tabs on Romanians for signs of dissidence throughout the communist era from 1947-1989.

For those incarcerated as a political prisoner, life was harsh; of the estimated 617,000 people locked up as opponents of the state, 120,000 are thought to have died behind bars.

Yet, aside from Ceauşescu, his wife Elena and a few aides, communist-era officials were not brought to justice and were allowed to either retire and live in peace or else enrich themselves through contacts built up during the old regime.

“The sentiment was that Nicolae Ceauşescu was gone, so was his wife (they were executed on Christmas Day 1989). They acted as scapegoats for officials and for the party as a whole,” said Adrian Cioroianu, dean of history at the University of Bucharest. “In the 1990s we as a nation had other priorities,” he added.

There is a sense now that Romania is ready to deal with some of the darker legacies of its past.

“It’s been 25 years, it’s time to see justice,” said Cosmin Budeancă, director general of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER), an organisation set up in 2006 by the Romanian government to try to address communist-era crimes.

After an earlier failure by the IICCMER to convince state prosecutors to move forward with an initial list of 210 former officials, in July 2013 the organisation submitted a revised list of 35 individuals. Of those, four have been charged, according to Budeancă, with Visineşcu the first to reach trial. Another, Ion Ficior, a one-time labour camp commander, is likely to be next. However, before that happens much depends on the outcome of the Visineşcu case.

“Visineşcu is very old, so it is unlikely he will actually be sentenced to prison time, but if convicted there would still be a moral justice, which is important for society, for the former prisoners and for their children and grandchildren,” said Budeancă.

In a sign that it was willing to address past crimes, in 2012 Romania removed the statute of limitations for crimes against humanity, allowing for the prosecution of those whose crimes went back more than 40 years.

“The communist regime in Romania was among the worst in eastern Europe,” says Laura Ştefan, an anti-corruption expert and a former director in the Romanian ministry of justice. “Changing the statute of limitation was the only way to deal with cases in a judicial manner, rather than just in the history books.”

Some have suggested that by going after the likes of Visineşcu, rather than the more senior officials who were making the bigger decisions, Romania is once again taking the easy option, but others disagree.

“This guy meant a lot to the people who went through that place. He wasn’t just a no-rank person who carried water; he was a decision-maker,” said Ştefan.

“There are a lot of testimonies against Visineşcu,” added Ana Blandiana, a poet, former dissident and the president of a foundation that runs a memorial museum in Sighet prison, another of the former communist-era prisons.

“These people live comfortably, they have state pensions and housing, which makes it not just a historical crime but one that still has an impact today,” she said.

“If the trial had happened in 1991-92 the impact on society would have been much bigger,” said Cioroianu, but he added that it was still a very important signal.

“In my faculty, the students must understand, they must see, that something happened in the 1950s or 60s and that it wasn’t forgotten – that justice was done, while those who were involved must understand

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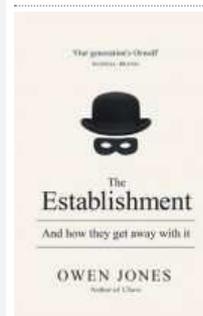
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that no one is above the law.”

Visineşcu has always maintained that he simply followed orders.

Passing through the crowds of journalists and television cameras on his way out of court, Visineşcu was inundated with questions. Asked how he felt about the people who were bringing these charges against him, he said: “They can do what they want,” and refused to answer further questions.

Brief timeline

30 December 1947: Romania changes from being a monarchy to a socialist republic

22 March 1965: Nicolae Ceauşescu is elected general secretary of the Communist party (the head of state)

28 March 1974: Ceauşescu becomes the first president of Romania

22 December 1989: Revolution topples the communist regime

25 December 1989: Trial and execution of Ceauşescu and his wife, Elena

January 2006: Romania sets up the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, later merged with the Institution for the Memory of the Romanian Exile to form the IICCMER

July 2013: The IICCMER sends a list of 35 individuals to state prosecutors

3 September 2013: Romanian prosecutors charge Alexandru Visineşcu, initially with genocide

19 September 2013: The IICCMER release the name of a second man, Ion Ficior, a former labour camp commander

24 September 2014: Visinescu's trial begins, the charge is crimes against humanity

• This article was amended on 24 September 2014 because a headline originally suggested Visineşcu served during the Ceauşescu era. In fact it was before Ceauşescu came to power.

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