

DIPLOMACY AND PROPAGANDA. THE ATTITUDE OF THE ROMANIAN AUTHORITIES TOWARDS THE SCREENING OF THE NADIA FILM AT THE CANNES FESTIVAL

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Abstract In the Socialist Republic of Romania, propaganda was a means of legitimizing and supporting the national-communist regime, inclusively abroad. Foreign policy represented the continuation and, to some extent, the very mirror of the internal policy of Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania. Starting from the use of some previously unpublished diplomatic documents, this article aims to highlight the manner in which the abusive interference of politics affected, not at all superficially, even Romanian sports. Moreover, the attitude of the Romanian authorities regarding the analyzed episode clearly highlights the concern and despair of the regime, whose internal popularity gradually and irreversibly eroded in the 1980s.

Keywords *Nadia* film, Cannes Film Festival, communist regime, diplomacy, ideology, propaganda.

Through the multiple levers at its disposal, the communist regime in socialist Romania proceeded to massive interference in all departments and fields of activity, affecting even the daily and private lives of its citizens. The economy, culture, art, education, religion were strictly controlled. The entire society became, in fact, the target of a huge social engineering project. Rigorous social control contributed to the longevity of the communist regime.

The evil and abusive interference of the political factor did not avoid sports either. The memorable performances of Romanian athletes, obtained at major European and world competitions, were intended not only to increase the country's prestige abroad, as it was natural, but also to legitimize Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, putting it in a favorable and positive light, under the circumstances of the popularity crisis of the 1980s. The communist regime and the leader tended to identify with the country. Against the background of restrictive and increased austerity measures and as a result of the drastic decrease in the population's living

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standards in the early 1980s, the Romanian authorities avidly pursued, through excellence in sports, the validation of the regime and the diversion of public opinion's attention from the obvious serious problems. The 1980s were also characterised by the gradual but certain (and rapid, after 1985) isolation of socialist Romania internationally.¹

However, for Romanians, watching sports competitions and the joys experienced, thanks to the successes of their compatriots, represented one of the few possibilities of escaping from the gray everyday life and spending free time. The 1980s saw the most prestigious successes of Romanian sports. At the Los Angeles Olympics, the Romanian delegation came second in the general medal rankings,² despite the boycott of the competition by the other European countries under communist regimes, with the exception of Yugoslavia. Moreover, the Steaua, Dinamo and Universitatea Craiova teams achieved memorable performances in European inter-club football competitions. If Universitatea Craiova was the first team from Romania to reach the semi-finals of a European cup, in 1983, Steaua Bucharest triumphed in the European Champions Cup, in 1986. Sports diplomacy served the Romanian communist authorities, helping them to embellish the image of the regime.

The communist regime in Bucharest transformed diplomacy and sports into efficient and valuable weapons of propaganda. In fact, extrapolating the thesis of Martin Wight (an exponent of the English school of international relations, yet aligned with realism in terms of approach), who argued that diplomacy in the Soviet Union had degenerated into propaganda,³ we believe it is no stretch to say that the "Nicolae Ceaușescu era" was no exception to this rule. Diplomacy tended to be mistaken for propaganda, constituting an instrument of legitimization of the regime. In fact, for any totalitarian political regime, propaganda is essential.

This article highlights several previously unpublished documents from the Archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They refer to the reaction of the Bucharest authorities to the screening of the *Nadia* film at the Cannes Film Festival. Given the notoriety of the most valuable Romanian gymnast of all time and the rather marginal situation of sports-focused research in Romanian historiography, the topic seemed exciting.

Along with propaganda, ideology played an essential role in the communist period. A turning point was the Theses of July 6, 1971, which amounted to a mini-cultural revolution, using Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China as a model. The Theses reaffirmed the leading and

¹ Regarding the reasons for the erosion of the international image of the Ceaușescu regime, see Hadrian Gorun, Lucreția Ileana Brănescu, "The Paradox of Nicolae Ceausescu's Foreign Policy and Several Reasons for the Deterioration of the International Image of His Regime," *European Scientific Journal*, XIV, no. 29 (2018): 75-83.

² Socialist Romania's decision was adopted by virtue of the policy of increased autonomy and quasi-non-alignment with the Soviet Union.

³ Martin Wight, *Politica de putere*, transl. by Tudor Florin (Chișinău: Arc, 1998), 125-127.

determining role of the Romanian Communist Party in all departments of culture, education and art. Mangalia Theses,⁴ of August 1983, would complete the ideologisation of culture, art and cinema.

It may seem somewhat bizarre how a cinematographic event raised the alarm to the maximum, highly alerting the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest, the National Council for Physical Education and Sports, the Romanian Gymnastics Federation and the Romanian embassy in Paris. The categorical and unequivocal tone of the correspondence proved that the risk of an incipient diplomatic conflict was not to be neglected. The screening of the film *Nadia* in Cannes was to take place just three months before the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

Although the subject itself was not a political one, its political implications cannot be overlooked. We must note that the Romanian ambassador in Paris, Dumitru Aninoiu, did not communicate the issue of the inopportunity of presenting the film at the Cannes Film Festival to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ștefan Andrei. The rather intense exchange of telegrams, from May 1984, occurred mainly with the director of the Second Relations Directorate of the MFA, Romulus Neagu, but also with the deputy minister of foreign affairs, Constantin Oancea, and with Aurel Duma, Minister Secretary of State.

A telegram sent on May 8, 1984, by Constantin Oancea to Dumitru Aninoiu, reveals that the director of the feature film, the American Jim Mac Ginn, had approached the Romanian Gymnastics Federation about making the film since 1983. However, after the Romanian party analysed the script, censorship certainly leaving its mark, “it was found that it contained slander and distortions against gymnastics in our country and against the sportswoman Nadia Comăneci”⁵ and, therefore, the offer was refused.

Nevertheless, the film was broadcast in Yugoslavia, through *the Tribune Entertainment Company* and *the Jadran Film* association. There was no shortage of insults, an expression of the obvious irritation of the Romanian diplomat, because the former coordinating coaches of the women's gymnastics team, Bela and Marta Karoly, were placed, as the main protagonists, in a favorable light. They were labeled as *traitors*, because at the end of March-beginning of April 1981, on the occasion of a demonstration tournament organized in the USA, they did not return to Romania,⁶ requesting political asylum in the country across the Atlantic Ocean. Although, symbolically, Romanian sports, and indirectly the political regime suffered a blow at that time, Nicolae Ceaușescu was probably not too unhappy, considering his xenophobia, especially his aversion to ethnic Hungarians. However, the Romanian authorities expressed fears about the possible statements of the two coaches. The dictator of Socialist Romania was involved in sports, especially gymnastics, his interventions during the Moscow Olympic Games (1980) and the European Championships in Prague (1977) being illustrative. At the respective European

⁴ Dennis Deletant, *România sub regimul comunist* (Bucharest: Fundația Academia Civică, 2006), 186. The Mangalia Theses were presented by President Nicolae Ceaușescu in reaction to the film directed by Dan Pița, *Faleze de nisip*.

⁵ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania (AMAE, hereinafter), Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 1.

⁶ Stejărel Olaru wrote extensively about this relevant episode in his recent book *Nadia și Securitatea* (Bucharest: Epica Fiction &History, 2021), 304-326.

Championships, due to biased refereeing, which disfavored the Romanian team, this one was withdrawn from the competition at the express request of the head of state. Sports were a party and, implicitly, a state priority during Ceaușescu's regime.

In a Note signed by Haralambie Alexa, member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party and president of the National Council for Physical Education and Sports (CNEFS) for a very short period, we find similar information. The film script had been read since the previous year, 1983, by Septimiu Todea, secretary of the CNEFS, Petre Focșeneanu, head of the international relations service of the CNEFS, Nicolae Vieru, secretary of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation (FRG) and by the federal coach Maria Simionescu. Immediately, the president of the CNEFS at that time, Marin Dragnea, was informed "about the fact that the script contains numerous distortions of gymnastics in our country, of the life and activity of the sportswoman Nadia Comăneci." The FRG's disagreement with the making of the film was communicated to the producer.⁷ *The traitorous* invective against the Karolys came up again. In addition to presenting the activities of Nadia and her family "in numerous moments in the film, offensive and degrading", the film allegedly highlighted the differences between the coaches and the federation. Furthermore, it allegedly resorted to "substitution of persons and slander of some management personnel", as well as of the Romanian representatives in the International Gymnastics Federation.⁸

On May 4, 1984, the film's producers sent the FRG an invitation for a three-person delegation, including Nadia Comăneci, to participate in the Cannes International Film Festival, which was to take place between May 11 and 18, 1984. The filmmakers would cover all the related expenses necessary for the Romanian delegation's travel. Three days later, Barbara de Romain, international consulting director of BRONCO, visited the FRG, coming from the Cannes Film Festival. She requested confirmation of Nadia's participation in the festival, also bringing a cassette containing the 97-minute feature film.⁹ The cassette was viewed by Marin Stanciu, general director of România Film, Marin Alexandru, technical director, Septimiu Todea, secretary of CNEFS, Petre Focșeneanu and Maria Login, secretary of the FRG. As a result, the Romanian authorities decided:

1. FRG should get involved with the organizers of the Cannes Film Festival, in order to reject the presentation of the film *Nadia*
2. *Tribune Entertainment Company* and *Jadran Film* had to be convinced to abandon the screening of the film at the Festival, as well as its marketing, "*insisting that the film be destroyed.*" Otherwise, the Romanian authorities reserved the right to sue the respective companies "*for the damages caused to the sportswoman Nadia Comăneci and the sports authorities in our country.*"

⁷AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 2.

⁸AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 2.

⁹AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 2.

3. *"To take action to counteract this defamatory manifestation with the French, American and Yugoslav authorities, with the International Olympic Committee, with UNESCO, as well as with other international and national forums."*

4. *"If, however, the film were shown on screen, the company should be sued by Nadia Comăneci, supported by the FRG."*

5. The Romanian Press, Radio and Television had to widely support this action, acting alongside foreign media.¹⁰

In the above-mentioned provisions, what is particularly striking is the insistence of the Romanian authorities to destroy the already made film, which denotes the anger probably caused by the fact that the film had already been released in the USA and Yugoslavia, despite the opposition to the script, expressed since the previous year. However, for the communist officials, freedom of expression had no real relevance.

The CNEFS decisions were repeated almost literally in Romulus Neagu's May 12 telegram to Dumitru Aninoiu, who was to "take firm measures to ensure that the film is not presented at Cannes, such an action being a hostile act towards Romania."¹¹ For Romanian diplomacy and communist authorities, any criticism was equivalent to an action against Romania. Moreover, the Secretary of State, Aurel Duma, wrote to Ambassador Dumitru Aninoiu, asking him to send detailed information regarding the situation of the presentation of the film about Nadia Comăneci.¹²

Further on, events rushed. From the correspondence between Romulus Neagu and Dumitru Aninoiu, we learn that letters were sent from Nadia Comăneci to the Organizing Committee of the Cannes Film Festival, from the FRG and Nadia Comăneci to the film's producers, as well as from Nadia to the IOC President, Juan Antonio Samaranch. Moreover, FRG sent a letter to UNESCO itself. The intention was, quite plainly, to even call Michel Rougagnou, the French ambassador to Bucharest, for an audience with the FRG leadership. The situation was particularly tense. Additionally, two delegates of Romania Film, Decebal Mitulescu and Mihai Duță, had already left for Cannes, to be contacted by the Romanian embassy in France, if it deemed it useful.¹³

In order to prevent the screening of the film *Nadia* at the Cannes International Festival, the Romanian embassy took unceasing steps at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the Directorate General of Culture, the Ministry of Culture – Foreign Relations Service, the National Center of Cinema, as well as the French organizers of the festival. It also appealed to the support of influential figures in French cinema, such as Raluca Nathan, Alain Duvarger and composers

¹⁰AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 3.

¹¹AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 4.

¹²AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 9.

¹³AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 5.

Teodor and Vladimir Cosma.¹⁴ The French authorities showed some concern for the wishes of the Romanians. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture referred to the international nature of the festival and the jury, to its "autonomy", so that administrative interference was not appropriate. French officials suggested that it was necessary for the Romanian actions to clearly show that the film affected the image of the athlete, the sports movement in Romania and Romania itself, "an argument for substantiating a *defamation complaint*."¹⁵ Equally, from the Romanian party's argument, it had to be clear that "the audio-visual elements incriminated in the film are false, or obtained illicitly, without Nadia's consent, that they are not clippings from public documentaries, interviews, etc." Some French officials promised support, stating that they would take steps to block the presentation of the film. In fact, it was to be screened out of competition, in the commercial section.¹⁶ Next, the ambassador of Socialist Romania in Paris informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also the CNEFS, that the organizers of the Cannes festival were taking advantage of the fact that the film was being presented out of competition, not involving the jury, but only the producers and Casa Cori-film. The embassy pledged to continue its efforts with the responsible decision-makers so that the film would not be screened, strictly following the instructions received from Bucharest. Finally, Nadia Comăneci did not arrive at Cannes. The Romanian ambassador also referred to an article in the newspaper *Le Matin*, which reported a sudden change in attitude on the part of the Romanian authorities, linking it to the boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics by the Soviet Union.¹⁷ This thesis is obviously unsubstantiated, since Romanian-Soviet relations were not ideal, to put it mildly.

From the correspondence carried out in those days between Romanian diplomats, it emerges that, to a certain extent, the Romanian authorities, - although, in principle, they were against the presentation of the film, following, moreover, the directives previously formulated categorically by the CNEFS - somehow remained in expectation, even if the gesture was certainly a facade, motivated by tactical considerations, involving the observation of the evolution of events. Thus, although the Romanian embassy was notified, no official steps were recommended, at least initially.

On May 12, however, the diplomatic mission in Paris received explicit and direct instructions to take steps to thwart the screening of the film. The embassy reached out to the competent authorities, including UNESCO.¹⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French Ministry of Culture informed the Romanian embassy that the organizing committee assumed responsibility for the problems related to the Cannes Film Festival, and that certain presentations or restrictions regarding film productions could not be imposed on. The only prohibitions that the French state could adopt were regarding the presentation of pornographic films, those that incited war or promoted racial or religious hatred. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Socialist Romanian embassy that it had no competence and, moreover, did

¹⁴AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 6.

¹⁵AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 6-7.

¹⁶AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 7.

¹⁷AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p.7-8.

¹⁸AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 13.

not intend to intervene, implying that the American authorities had more influence to determine, possibly, the withdrawal of the film from the festival. It was suggested, as a last resort, that the producer could take legal action, although the delicate nature of such an approach was pointed out, which required “thoroughly argued charges regarding the denigration of the image of Nadia Comăneci and the sports movement in Romania, to demonstrate that it is a case of interference in private life.”¹⁹ The response of the French ruling circles clearly highlights the difference between a free, Western-type society, in which the state did not intervene in issues that strictly concerned citizens, and an aboulc society, fully controlled by the totalitarian communist state. The position of the UNESCO secretariat was similar. After taking note of the Romanian party’s protest, the festival’s organizing committee claimed that the responsibility fell entirely on the producers and the Cori-film company.²⁰

Even though they opposed any presentation of *Nadia* at the Cannes International Festival, the Romanian authorities nevertheless obtained an important solace. The film was not shown at the Festival itself, but at the cultural and commercial section, where it would not have enjoyed success, running in almost complete anonymity. Dumitru Aninoiu reported that the film was screened “2-3 times, in one of the halls rented by the film vendors,” in front of an audience of only 15-20 people.”²¹

To sum up briefly, the interference of the political factor during the communist regime in Romania affected not only culture, art, cinema, but also sports to a certain extent. The Romanian authorities insisted on banning the presentation of a film produced in the USA at a major festival of this kind, organized in France. We could even speak of a tendency to interfere in the internal affairs of another state, which would run against the principle of national sovereignty, so important for Nicolae Ceaușescu. It would have been interesting to observe the attitude of Romania and the Secretary General of the PCR, if the French or American authorities had interfered, urgently requesting the suspension of the presentation of a Romanian film at a festival in Romania.

The foreign policy of the communist regime was practically an extension of domestic politics, where state interference was omnipresent in all areas. The foreign policy of Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu represented the almost mirror image of domestic politics. In addition, the attitude of the Romanian authorities undoubtedly betrays the concern (which will degenerate into despair) of the regime, whose popularity was declining in the early 1980s. The internal degradation would soon be accompanied by the irreversible and increasingly fast erosion of its international image.

¹⁹AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 11.

²⁰AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 12

²¹AMAE, Issue 217/1984, France, file 639, p. 12, p. 8.