



ORIGINAL PAPER

The West European Communist Parties and the Emergence of their Political Identity. Case study: The Belgian Communist Party

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Abstract

Although they were situated in a democratic, politically pluralistic environment, the position of the West European communist parties was similar to that of the parties in the Soviet block, as they were subordinated to Kremlin and connected both ideologically and doctrinally to the Soviet model of constructing socialism. Starting with the 60s, in the West European communism, the political identity of these parties is changing. The détente between the East and West in the early 70s would create a favourable context for the affirmation of the West European communist parties on their own political scene. From that moment on, collaboration with the socialists and the social-democrats would be necessary. Moreover, the West European communist parties also needed a change of their Soviet-inspired political discourse. The implementation of communism had to be reinterpreted. Communism had to be adapted to the concrete historical and political realities in their own states. Therefore, on the international communist movement's level, the consolidation of the political identity had to be marked by the emancipation from the Soviet tutorship. The need for unity of the Left political forces in Western Europe, the disagreement with both power poles of the Cold War, together with the approach of the Euro-communism thesis, they were all aspects of the centrifugal tendencies towards Moscow's policy and of the affirming of their own political identity. The identity struggles of the West European communism did not bypass the Belgian Communist Party (BCP). In the case study of this article, the author analyses and interprets the transcripts of the meetings between the Romanian Communist Party and the Belgian Communist Party. Using as research method the document analysis, the study reveals the West European communist parties' efforts to affirm their identities.

Keywords: *political identity, West European communist parties, Euro-communism, unity of the Left, Belgian Communist Party*

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Introduction

The contacts between the Belgian and the Romanian communists certainly took place in the context of the international meetings or on different occasions of participating at one or the other of the two parties conferences, while the official Romanian-Belgian party policy talks did not begin earlier than 1966, being very intense up to the end of the 70's. We must stress the fact that during these years, the international communist movement was facing many issues. On the other hand one could see this as N. Ceausescu planning to use these relations as a strategy to achieve maximum political benefits in his relationship with Moscow (Copilaş, 2011: 3). From the point of view of the efficiency of those meetings, we should recall the position on which the Belgian communists used to carry out the dialogues. Especially within the early meetings with the Romanian communists, the BCP was laying stress on the open attitude they had regarding "the meetings with comrade parties", no matter on which side of the Iron Curtain they might be (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 78/1967: 4). Also, in order for those talks to be fruitful, they supported the idea of counselling by another communist party. On an international level, that period of the cold war was characterized by the USA involvement in the Vietnam War and the eastern conflict, by the Sino-Soviet issue, by the issues specific to Western communist parties in their attempts to build their own identity, to reconsider their position to Moscow or by the idea of creating left wing fronts to make it possible for them to achieve government power (Anton, 2007: 155). An analysis and an interpretation of some frequent topics during the Romanian-Belgian meetings, such as the European security in the context of international security and cooperation, the struggle against imperialist forces, the building of socialism by the unification of the left wing forces or topics connected to the eurocommunist thesis, can highlight for us, to a certain extent, the position of Romanian or Belgian communists in the matters of the international communist movement. On the other hand, these topics of discussion between the two communist parties can show the emancipation tendencies of the Western parties in relation with the power centers of the Cold War, as well as the attempts to gain independence from Moscow, within the communist movement (Bracke, 2002: 8).

The attempt to identify these topics in the talks between the Romanian and the Belgian communists required first of all a study of the Romanian national archives-the central committee of the Romanian Communist Party files-the foreign relations section. We must state that the literature in this field approached only the relations between the RCP and the Belgian left wing groups only slightly, therefore, the direct study of the transcripts was the main source of analysis. Concerning the special studies used here I think that the study *Nicolae Ceaușescu and the international communist movement (1967-1976)*, by Cezar Stanciu, should be mentioned as being very useful for the proper understanding of the international background of the communist movement, of the RCP's activities in its relation to Western communist parties and last but not least of the themes debated during their talks. The studies of some authors such as Maud Bracke or Emanuel Copilaş also brought their contribution to the analysis of certain concepts (e.g. eurocommunism), typical for the communist movement, which I also came across when studying the dialogues between RCP and BCP. Also, I was offered useful information on the situation of the internal political stage of BCP by the Belgian political sciences magazine *Courier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*.

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The issue of the European security

Like the other Soviet group countries, for the RCP, the building of European security required, as a starting point, a recognition of the historical realities emerged after the second world war, as well as a recognition of the two German states - The Federal German Republic and The Democratic German Republic. In a dialogue with Marc Drumaux, member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the BCP, Alexandru Draghici¹ made a brief summary of the measures agreed upon by the RCP in the matter of the European security, more precisely: the dismantling of all military bases on other states' territory, the withdrawal of American troops from Europe as well as that of all troops in the national perimeters or the simultaneous dismantling of the NATO military group as well as that of the Warsaw Treaty (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 78/1967: 30).

The European security issue was the topic of the Romanian-Belgian talks as early as the first meeting between the two parties, in 1966 (Miloiu, 2004: 86). During that meeting, Marc Drumaux² showed interest in the way RCP would react to the matter of European security. As said before, prior to that meeting, the Conference of the Warsaw Treaty socialist states had taken place in Bucharest, where two important documents had been agreed upon: one concerning European security, and the other regarding the Vietnam War. Drumaux interlocutor, Mihai Dalea³ made a detailed presentation of RCP's position towards those documents and, implicitly, towards the issue of European security. For the Romanian communists, the signing of those documents by all the states attending the Bucharest conference was a real success, as it stood for an example of...". Mobilisation of all the progressive and peace-loving forces in Europe,(...) a document meant to support all the forces in favour of the dissolution of the NATO pact, therefore a document meant against the German militarism, against retribution" (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 101/1966: 5). In the 60's, the problem of European security formed the topic of many debates within the left wing area in Belgium, also. In the light of European security treaty, the Belgian social-democrats believed that, as long as the Soviet Union would sign the treaty, certain guarantees from the U.S. Had to be obtained. This point of view was also shared by the Belgian communists, because the USSR was not only a European power, but an Asian one as well. On the other hand, the American presence in Europe was seen by the BCP as a real threat to the European security, as it could „encourage the militarist vengeful forces in Europe" (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 101/1966: 16). Within the same meeting with M. Dalea, M. Drumaux saw as the only solution the withdrawal of both American and Soviet troops from Europe, while, in the meantime, the provisions of the upcoming treaty on European security were to specifically include the guarantee that the great powers would never threaten the European security.

Therefore, the matter of European security was quite complex and involved in its equation not only the American domination, but the Soviet presence in Europe as well (Constantiniu, 2010: 32). M. Drumaux's point of view on the NATO and Soviet military presence on the European continent was shared by the Romanian communist leaders as well, as I am going to explain in the next chapter.

The NATO issue in the Romanian-Belgian meetings

Ever since the first post-war decade, Belgium's foreign policy was focused on the cooperation between the United States and Europe. One of the authors of this political view was the Belgian politician, Paul Hanri Spaak, also known as the founding member of the European Community. P. H. Spaak's figure is also linked with the dawn of The Northern Atlantic Treaty, Belgium being one of the twelve signing states in April 1949. P. H. Spaak was openly supporting a common defense system for Europe and USA, being actually a middleman between the two, a supporter of the American involvement on the European continent (Stanciu, 2015: 66).

Considering the Belgium governments' pro-American position designed by Spaak, we can understand the BCP's tension as a communist party in the matter of European security, of the communist fight against American imperialist domination. Moreover, the relocation of the NATO headquarters from Paris to Brussels in 1966 sharpened the Belgian communists' focus on the NATO presence in Europe (Retegan, 2002: 9).

Regarding the RCP, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) could, in their view, constitute a form of limitation for the influence of the great powers (USA and USSR). That way, believed the Romanian communist leaders, the transition from the bipolar world, typical to the Cold War, to a multipolar one, could be ensured. Also, from an economical perspective, for the RCP, the CSCE process had to represent an alternative of the economic integration through which all economic barriers imposed by the European Economic Community (CE) would be removed (Stanciu, 2014b: 276). However, the Romanian communist leader did not see the common market as an impossible obstacle, even though he found several flaws in it (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 197/1974: 12). For Ceausescu, on the other hand, the dismantling of military blocks was seen as mandatory for the goal of the European states' unity, as well as for that of national sovereignty (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 197/1974:13).

The meeting in February 1967 between the Romanian ministry of foreign affairs, Corneliu Mănescu, and his Belgian peer, Pierre Harmel, shows us the Belgian government's position of that time, regarding European security and, implicitly the NATO issue. Regarding the treaty of nuclear non-proliferation negotiated at that time by the Soviets and the Americans, the Romanian and Belgian foreign affairs ministers agreed that the nuclear states should offer guarantees regarding the a refraining from the use of the atomic bomb. There were, on the other hand, divergent views between the two ministers concerning the presence in Europe of the two military blocks. The Romanian side, represented by Corneliu Mănescu, supported the simultaneous dismantling of both the NATO alliance and the Warsaw Treaty, since maintaining these military entities in Europe was perceived by the RCP as a form of domination of strong states over small ones. On the other hand, the Belgian foreign affairs minister supported the idea that the two military entities were not but a guarantee of European security (Stanciu, 2015:70). Therefore, with the Socialist Republic of Romania, the foreign affairs minister's view agreed perfectly with the one of the party, this being a perfectly understandable aspect in a political system with a unique party, with no absolutely no opposition. The BCP's situation was completely different, their views totally opposing the government policy most times, such as the case was in matters regarding the European security.

It is easy to see that the issue of gaining independence from the military entities' supervision was present not only in the Soviet communists' speech, but also in the one

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delivered by the Western communist parties. With the Belgian communists, Belgium's possible detachment from the NATO alliance, was an old issue, as we have already pointed out, even since the year NAO was founded, in 1949. This topic became more heated in the 60's during the talks on European security, because the Belgian government's relations with the NATO alliance were very solid (Dreyfus, 2000: 129). Actually, as Drumaux stated, the Belgian state had become a real NATO policy representative in Western Europe (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 78/1967: 7). Concerning its allegiance to NATO, for the Belgian communists it only stood for a form of domination by the American imperialist policy. Actually, Jan Debrouwere, a BCP delegation member in Bucharest, in 1971, is quite open in this regard: "as you may well imagine, Belgium's allegiance to NATO had negative consequences in the matter of national sovereignty. It is, in fact, a form of submission to the American imperialist policy..." (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier no. 80/1971: 55). For the BCP, the NATO issue was much more complex than the extent to which it was analyzed in the Belgian political context. The Belgian communists' struggles were also linked to the Belgian socialist parties; relations with NATO. In a discussion with M. Mănescu in 1967, M. Drumaux expressed his discontent of the socialists' policy, which, in his opinion, supported the foreign policy of the "bourgeois" parties, in power in Belgium, concerning NATO (ANIC, fund CC al PCR, secția Relații Externe, dosier nr. 78/1967:11). Drumaux believed that this political attitude of the socialists would lead to a scission of the labouring class, and, implicitly, of their political views. Under these circumstances, in the BCP's view, the unification of a left wing front had become an immediate objective.

The unity of left wing forces in Belgium

As the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was getting started, the tendency to bring together a strong left wing pole in Europe emerged. The reason for such tendency was founded on the decrease of the right wing parties' influence on the political stage in Western Europe, on the CSCE's leaning towards the left wing side as well as on the easier fashion in which communists had access to a governmental left wing coalition (Stanciu, 2015:73). All these goals of the communists required their collaboration with the socialists or social-democrats. These struggles of the Western communist parties were not indifferent to the RCP, who, for these reasons among others, would keep closer contacts to their parties. Both Western communists and socialists were aware that a potential collaboration or alliance between them would lead to an elective advantage, and, implicitly, to an easier access to government power. The victory by the communist and social democrat coalition in the elections in Finland in 1966 proved that such alliances were a certain political success.

The study of the Romanian national archives shows us that N. Ceaușescu played an active role in the Western world left wing political area. More precisely, he would show interest in the unification of the left wing forces in Western European states. Ceausescu saw these unification actions by the left wing forces as a successful way in which socialism was being built in the Western countries. On the other hand, such alliances required that the traditional relations between communists and socialists be reconsidered. We must add that this cooperation between European communists and socialists depended on certain USSR perceptions on the international politics, such as the American domination in Western Europe.

Moscow did not condone such forms of allegiance, because the social-democrat European parties were seen as being very close to capitalism as well as very tolerant to the American influence in Europe (Niculescu, 1997:89). The differences in opinion between the social-democrats/socialists and the communists were caused by a different view on how the ideology was to be applied. Both supported the ideology of the social classes' clash in the process of achieving socialism, but their views on the way this had to be carried out led to different opinions. However, the background of the relations between communists and socialists had also seen moments of actual cooperation, were we to recall the so-called "people's fronts" during the 30's, which stood for the expression of political alliances that were set on opposing the increasingly strong extreme right wing in Europe at that time.

In the years following World War II, European socialists and social-democrats were exposed by Moscow as being "traitors" of the working class' interests (Jdanov, 1947: 248). On the other hand, in the 40's, communist parties in Western Europe (such as the French Communist Party or the Italian Communist Party) were excluded from the government coalitions they had been part of. Finally, in order to better understand the communists' position to the socialists and social-democrats, we have to recall the meetings held by the communist and labour parties in Moscow in 1957 and 1960, where the social-democrat movement was seen as a tool in the hands of imperialism, thus betraying, obviously, the interests of the working class.

The problem of the allegiance between the communists and social-democrats also emerged with the Belgian parties, but a unification of the left wing forces was quite difficult to achieve. First of all, the Belgian socialists were divided into several parties. During the meeting in Bucharest, M. Drumaux explained to Corneliu Mănescu the situation of the Belgian Socialism, how divided the socialists, social-democrats, the Walloon socialists, the Flemish socialists, Christian social-democrats, etc were.

The BCP's presence on the Belgian scene had been quite discrete even since the 50's. Actually, since the reformation of the Political Bureau in 1954, the party's leaders are much more radical and much less tolerant to another allegiance with the socialists. The BCP's influence over the electors faded constantly, which led to a search for new alliances with left wing forces, during the 60's. Union strikes occur in Belgium, in the early 60's. In this context, Belgian communists were antagonizing the anti-union measures taken by the government coalition, formed by social-Christians and socialists.

Therefore, between 1961 and 1965, the BCP was quite invigorated on the internal political stage (Gotovitch, 1997:34). More precisely, the BCP strengthens its elective position through a growing popularity among unionists. Between 1968 and 1981, frictions occur among the Belgian communists, which would block a possible political assertion of the BCP-either internally or internationally-even though that was a favorable period for the Western communist parties. However, the 70's are characterized by a relative stability of the BCP on the political scene, gaining an elective constant result of more than 5% in the Walloon region. From the point of view of mass popularity, the BCP's political situation during the 60's and the 70's may indicate the reason for which they would look for alliances with other Belgian left wing forces.

During most of the meetings with the Belgian socialists and communists, the RCP showed a constant interest in their vision of unity. In one or the other of these parties' struggles regarding possible elective assessments as outcome of such alliances. Just as well, the BCP was interested in Ceaușescu's policy of supporting the collaboration between socialists and communists. The BCP manifested great interest in the Belgian

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socialists. This interest of the BCP is very well highlighted during the discussions occurring in Bucharest, in September 1971, when R. Dussart, (a prominent member of the BCP), in a dialogue with Paul Niculescu Mizil, presents the situation of the Belgian left wing. In Dussart's opinion, the Belgian socialist party, despite being a very powerful party on the Belgian political scene, was not capable to cross the limits traced by reformist policies.

Therefore, in the BCP's opinion, the BSP was not following the guidelines of a transforming policy through which an actual socialist perspective, in the communist ideological sense, could be envisioned. Moreover, Belgian communists were worried by the election defeat in the parliament polls by the social-democrats, and, implicitly, of the loss of key-positions in the political life, losses which the BCP could not compensate. In other words, Belgian communists saw these losses of "forces" as a defeat of the left wing, including them. But the attitude and relation of the BSP to communists was also communicated to N. Ceaușescu in April 1972 by the president of the Belgian socialists, Edmond Leburton who stated that "If personal relations between us are good, then political relations are inexistent"(ANIC, fund CC al PCR - secția Relații Externe, dossier no. 26/1972: 29).

The Belgian communists were aware of the good relations between the BSP and the Romanian communists. Aware of that fact and worried for the fate of socialism in Belgium, R. Dussart asked the RCP, in 1971, to mediate a collaboration or possible alliance with the socialists, because, as he said: "We are in favor of regrouping the popular forces in Belgium, with no exclusivity whatsoever...yet, we notice that there are big difficulties in creating this regrouping. This is the reason why we believe that regrouping the progressive forces is only possible by following a short and medium-term political program, which allows the entire working class to appreciate the situation and enables them to understand that they must organize themselves for having not only social but also political conquests..." (ANIC, fund CC al PCR - secția Relații Externe, dossier no. 80/1971: 8).

The importance of the relations that the BSP wished to develop with the BCP, as well as the importance of the role played by the RCP in such allegiances is highlighted by R. Dussart: "You are the only governing party to maintain serious relations with the Social – Democrat Party. This is why we draw attention on these contacts which you have with them and on the explanations which we want to offer to each other" (ANIC, fund CC al PCR - secția Relații Externe, dossier no. 80/1971:7). [...] "you may play a certain part so that, along with the actions of the Belgium Communist Party, one may reach political mutations inside the socialist party" (ANIC, fund CC al PCR - secția Relații Externe, dossier no. 80/1971: 7).

During the same meeting, Dussart stresses the importance of the role the RCP could play in its relations with the SBP, suggesting the Romanian communists to have a new attitude towards the BSP, even a strategy in their meetings with them: "...the relations of the Romanian comrades with the Belgian Socialist Party should however follow a new axis [...] I think that the Romanian comrades may now express some exigencies in their relation with the Socialist Party as well. It is about understanding what the Belgian socialists intend to do in the context of the Belgian nation, in order to bring new content to the politics in Belgium, content which may orient the Socialist party, along with all the progressive forces, towards stages leading to socialism, I would even say that one day our Romanian comrades may see the distances dividing the social-democrats from the communist party, or, the convergences between them and that one day it may become

possible for the Romanian Communist Party and the Belgian Social Democrat Party to reach a political agreement...” (ANIC, fund CC al PCR - secția Relații Externe, dossier no. 80/1971: 11). It is easy to understand that the Romanian side assured R. Dussart of their support in the BCP's efforts to achieve a unification of the left wing forces in Belgium. Such dialogues between the leaders of the left-wing parties in Belgium and the Romanian communists were frequent. In terms of the socialism status in Belgium, they played rather an informative role concerning the left-wing situation in the Belgian state rather than a concrete role. The influence of the RCP upon these parties was minimal; it was hard to believe that an intervention by Ceaușescu in one political party or another would have led to forming such coalition (Stanciu, 2014b: 256).

The approach of the eurocommunism thesis in the RCP-BCP meetings

By eurocommunism we mean the political trend emerged within the Western communist world, trend that was still manifesting within the marxist-leninist ideological limits, while advocating an adaptation of the communist ideological background to the realities and requirements imposed by the singularities of the Western states. One of the basic eurocommunist ideas was a peaceful transition to socialism, through other means than the insurrectional ones, supported by the Bolsheviki (Stanciu, 2014b: 363). Another feature of eurocommunism was supporting the idea that socialism would be built in a political background in the sense of Western democracy, easing a diverse, parliament-based framework, where access to power was achieved through open elections (Radu, 2004: 95). Therefore, the building of communism within a pluralist, legit framework, typical to Western countries meant a step-by-step construction of socialism, spared of the labouring masses dictatorship. These reforming ideas were first initiated, as early as the 60's, by the main Western communist parties (ICP, SCP, FCP) (Pons, 2006: 24). These ideas were later integrated in the concept of eurommunism. The context of the times was marked by Moscow's failure to reunite, as a monolith, the international communist movement, at the international meeting in 1969. This led to a decrease in Moscow's pressure, especially that on the Western communist parties. This political trend didn't fail to influence the small Belgian communist party, which, along with the Western communist parties, tried to identify their own ways and methods of assertion (Stanciu, 2014b: 300).

The transcripts of the talks between the RCP and the BCP show us that the eurocommunist ideas were present in the communist political life in Belgium. It's interesting that, despite having no support whatsoever for these eurocommunist ideas, Ceaușescu was going to support them, as long as they would contribute to a strengthening of the autonomy of communist parties as well as to the weakening of the Soviet domination over world communism, which was certainly in the RCP's interest also.

Ceausescu's attitude to this trend is not that important for our study, but, the fact that the notion of eurocommunism was present within the Romanian-Belgian discussion agenda, can be a clue as to the Belgian communists' interest in finding new ways of political assertion and emancipation.

Conclusions

The issues related to international and European security, the theme of the left wing unification in the Western states or that of eurocommunism ere, mainly, debate subjects between the RCP and Western left wing political forces whose opinions weighed heavily within the communist movement in Western Europe, such as the ICP,

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the SCP, the FCP. As already stated, such topics of discussion show us that the “dissident” tendencies towards Moscow, manifested by the important communist parties in the West, were also shared by the smaller ones on the European political scene, such as the BCP. Like the other Western European communist parties, the BCP was focused on collaborating with the Belgian socialists. The BCP was aware that joining left wing alliances could lead to a political advantage. Especially considering the fact that their electoral ratings had reached a worrying level for a party that wanted to play an important role, not only internally but also internationally. Approaching these internal political realities, of political diversity, also required that the communists gave up the international type of solidarity imposed by Moscow. Through those actions, the Belgian communists were actually taking a step further to distance themselves from the USSR.

The BCP, on its effort to consolidate its identity, was going to sign up to the “reforming” ideas supported by the great political parties in Western Europe. That kind of ideas, such as building communism through other means than the insurrectional ones, accepting the diverse political background, as well as the other specific conditions already traditionally existing in the Western European states, were also going to be approached in the talks between the RCP and the BCP. This “communism of their own”, theoretically named *eurocommunism*, was going to be advocated by Ceaușescu during the talks with the Belgian communists. For the Romanian leader, these “dissident” theses were acceptable as long as the communist parties could promote through them their own interest and could assert their sovereignty from Moscow.

The conclusion to be drawn would be that the discussions between the RCP and the BCP were rather a kind of informative, consultative type of meetings. Each of those parties was actually interested in the other one’s activity, on both the internal and the international level of the communist movement. The mutual knowledge of these parties’ position in the current world issues, such as those regarding European safety or the eurocommunist theses, could become a motive for encouragement in the common effort to get past the cold war’s bi-polar situation, or to achieve emancipation from the Soviet control.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-1304.

Notes:

1. Romanian communist official, vice prime-minister between March 18 1961- July 27 1965 and December 9 1967- April 26 1968.
2. Member of the Belgian delegation and vicepresident of the BCP.
3. Romanian communist official, member of the Central Committee of the RCP between 1948-1984.

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Article Info

Received: May 21 2016

Accepted: June 17 2016
