

# CHANGES OF ROMANIAN PLACE NAMES DURING THE COMMUNIST ERA

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Seventy years ago Professor Ion Conea, a famous Romanian geographer and toponymist, suggested that, when not modified by officials, place-names are like 'some condensed description of the country' (Conea 1928). In Romania there are, broadly speaking, three types of place-names: first, traditional place-names which are unchanged; second, traditional place-names which have been slightly changed so that they conform with the modern Romanian language; and third, new place-names which have been imposed by the authorities. In Romania, as in other regions of Europe, there are many settlement names (oikonymes) which fall into this third category and these form the focus of the paper. There are two periods of Romanian modern history during which place names have been changed on a wide scale. The first was in the decades following independence in 1878 and continuing up to the Second World War. The second, when the replacement of traditional place names was most widespread, was during the communist period (1948-1989).

**Key words:** place-names, settlement names, pre-communist period, post communist period

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## Changes of Place Names in the Pre-communist Period

The first period of intervention by the governing authorities in the traditional toponymic framework was designed to accompany the modernization of Romanian society and sanction the rural colonization process (in areas such as Bărăgan and Dobrogea) consecutively with agricultural reforms (in 1864 and 1921). Many place - names were changed to reflect key personalities in post-independence Romania. These included members of royal family, such as Carol I, Ferdinand, Carol II, Queen Mary, Mihai I and Prince Nicolae; prominent politicians involved in the making of the modern Romania, such as I.C.Brătianu, C.A.Rosetti, L.Catargiu; and key figures in Romanian history, such as Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great), Mircea cel Bătrân, Mihai Viteazu (Michael the Brave), and Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler). Other place names reflected personalities of Romanian culture and

science (for example, Vasile Alecsandri, Mihail Kogălniceanu and Aurel Vlaicu), or the names of places where the Romanian army had achieved key victories during the War of Independence in 1877-1878 (for example, Plevna, Grivița, Smârdan, Rahova).

In addition, place names which had previously been administrated by foreign powers before 1918 were also changed. This included settlement names in areas formerly under the control of Hungary (Transylvania, Banat, Maramureș, Crișana), Austria (Bucovina) or Russia (Basarabia). Such place names were replaced by the traditional Romanian names for these settlements which had been in use unofficially before 1918. However, many German place names in the rural areas (such as Lenaheim, Gottlob, Lindenfeld) have remained in use until the present day.

In Dobrogea, a province which was part of the Turkish Empire before 1878, many Turkish place-

names were preserved for almost half a century (until the 1920s) in spite of a significant decline in the Islamic population of this region, most of whom chose to emigrate voluntarily to the remaining Turkish territory in Europe. In the 1920s most Turkish place-names in Dobrogea were changed to Romanian ones, since Romanians were now the dominant ethnic group making up over two-thirds of the region's population.

### **Changes of the Place Names in the Communist Period**

The changing of place-names began immediately after the Communist Party had taken power (1947-1948). As part of the complex mechanism which aimed to change totally Romanian society according to communist principles, local administration (including official place names) was used as a propaganda tool. Some new place-names were imposed by the central authorities, although the responsibility for changing place-names belonged to local authorities. The new names reflected key historical figures, such as leaders of feudal riots and the leaders of revolutions in 1821 and 1848, and important local communists and socialists. Examples of such place-names are Gheorghe Doja (a Szekler leader of the Transylvanian peasants' revolt of 1514); Tudor Vladimirescu (the leader of a national revolt in Wallachia in 1821); Horia, Cloșca and Crișan (leaders of the Transylvanian peasants' revolt of 1784); Nicolae Bălcescu (a left-wing leader of the revolution of 1848). All these place-names have remained in use until the present day. Other places were renamed after key figures from the illegal period of the Romanian Communist Party (1924-1944). These included Elena Pavel, Vasile Roaită, Ada Marinescu and Filimon Sârbu. Other

places were named after other important socialists, such as Leonte Filipescu, I.C.Frimu and Ștefan Gheorghiu. A further category of new place-names reflected key dates associated with the communist take over of power such as 23 August (1944), 6 March (1945), 30 December (1947) and 11 June (1948). Other names simply reflected communist ideals, such as Progresul (progress), Libertatea (freedom) and Victoria (victory).

In the 1950s the names of important international communist leaders, such as Stalin, E. Thelmann, K. Gottwald, G. Dimitrov and Mao Ze Dong, were also used as place names. These were mostly used for microtoponymes (that is, the names of urban districts, streets or industrial units) rather than settlement names. Even the names of Russian military chiefs (such as A. Suvorov and R. Malinovsky) were used as place-names, giving a clear indication of the strong influence of the Soviet Union on events in Romania during that period.

A specific feature of the 1950s was foundation of new villages in the Bărăgan region (in the thinly settled eastern part of the Romanian plain). This area was populated largely by families which until 1956 were exiled from the settlements located near to the border with Yugoslavia (Banat and south-western Oltenia) and with political prisoners until 1964. These new settlements were placed near to already existing villages and used existing names but with the determinative "noi" (new) added (such as Roseții Noi, Feteștii Noi and Mărculeștii Noi). One of the newly built villages – Lătești – was given the shape of the communist symbol (hammer and sickle). It was inhabited by some important Romanian cultural figures such as A. Marino and

P.Goma (who was expelled to France in 1977). In addition, two villages were given the names of birds which were protected by law (Pelicani and Dropia), perhaps reflecting the sense of humor of the communist authorities! Most of these villages were destroyed after 1964 and their inhabitants allowed to return home after many years of internal exile. Similarly, their place-names also vanished and are only preserved on topographic maps from that time.

It is interesting to observe that in the 1960s almost all place-names connected to communist heroes and leaders disappeared. They were replaced by ancient, traditional place-names. One notable exception was Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (named after the first ruler of communist Romania) which was the name imposed by law in 1965 on the new town built in the 1950s near the village of Onești in the county of Bacău.

After 1964 the authorities began to use new place-names which were directly inspired by nature of physical environment (such as relief, hydrology and vegetation), although many such names had little connection with the settlement's environment. These included names such as Stejaru (oak), Izvoarele (springs), Crâng/Rediu (young forest) and Poiana (clearing).

In any analysis of the modification of place-names (whether traditional or more recent) those place-names which were removed from the toponymic frame of the country are as important as those which are added. The erasing of the place-names can be considered with respect to political, religious, social, economic, ethnic, ethical and aesthetic criteria.

The political agenda of communism required the elimination of all place-names belonging to people or institutions which did not fit the 'communist standard'. Thus, all names connected with the royal family, great politicians (even those who contributed to the establishment of the modern Romanian state) and with traditional institutions (such as the police) vanished. With the exception of micro-toponymes – such as the names of urban streets – these have not returned, even after December 1989.

Similarly, the communist authorities changed all place-names with religious connection following Lenin's slogan that 'religion is the opium of the people'. Place names were also changed when they did not accord with the social and economic agenda of communism. Those names which recalled the social problems of the past, such as Golani (beggars) or Salahori (hard manual labourers) were eradicated. Other names which suggested infertile land were also deemed to be inappropriate and were changed.

The communist authorities also largely eliminated place-names which alluded to, or maintained, ethnic tension or discrimination between Romanians and gypsies or other minorities. Thus, old place-names which alluded to gypsies (such as Lingurari, Ursari, Țigănia), Hungarians (such as Unguri) or Russians (such as Geaferca Rusă, Cotu Ruși) were changed in the 1950s and 1960s. Ethical considerations demanded the removal of place-names which were considered to affect the dignity of the inhabitants. Although this took place before 1948 it was systematically applied after 1964.

Finally, aesthetic criteria demand the elimination of place-names which were considered 'ugly'. These included names which were considered to invoke fear among the population such as Balaurul (the dragon), Oasele (bones) and Sângeroasa (bloody). Other names which referred to the animals considered 'unfit' by local authorities were removed on the grounds that were inappropriate names for a community. These included Valea Boului (bull's valley), Bivolul (buffalo), Valea Porcului (pig's valley).

The changing of place-names by the communist authorities varied spatially within Romania. It was most pronounced in the east (Moldavia) and south-east (Dobrogea and Bărăgan) part of the country. Since these regions were settled relatively late the names of the many rural settlements reflected the pre-communist regime, and the communist authorities were particularly concerned to change such names. Some villages in Dobrogea have changed their names many times over the past century. For example, the village of Nufăru, located near the Danube delta, was successively named Prislav (its original name), Principesa Elena (a member of the royal family) until 1948, and Ada Marinescu (a communist heroine) between 1948 and 1964.

There were two major consequences of the changes to place-names during the communist period. First, such changes marked a clear break between the past and the present. A place-name is proof of continuity, of inhabitancy, of a settlement. The communist project was to rebuild Romanian society and to mould it according to communist dogma. To do this involved trying to eliminate

connection with the past: one communist-era slogan was 'a new man into a new world'. Making changes to place-names was one of the most obvious ways of marking the presence of a new order. Second, the changes to place-names imposed by the communist authorities dramatically decreased the range of the toponymic frame in Romania. The great variety of former place-names which had reflected a wide range of natural conditions and interactions between communities and their local environment was lost. The 'official' toponymy of the communist era had an obvious arbitrary character, resulting either from the introduction of semantically abstract place-names (such as Libertatea or Progresul), or the restriction of compound place-names to determinative forms. Thus Poșta Berheciului (Berheci's post office) became simply Poșta, while Poiana Almașului (Almaș' clearing) became simply Poiana.

### **Changes of Place Names in the Post-communist Period**

Following the collapse of communism in December 1989 there have been further changes to Romanian place-names. The situation is as follows: all place-names which clearly reflected events or personalities from the communist regime were changed. Most reverted to their previous names. Thus Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (in Bacău county) became Onești, Dr. Petru Groza (in Bihor county) became Ștei, 23 August (in Tulcea county) became Zaclău (and later I.C. Brătianu); 30 Decembrie (in Ilfov county) became 1 Decembrie (after the new Romanian national day). Other former place-names were revived. These included Coronini (in Caraș-Severin county), formerly called Pescari (fishermen); Jurilovca (in Tulcea county) previously called Unirea (union); and Murighiol (in Tulcea

county) previously called Independența (independence). However, no settlements or districts have been renamed after members of the Romanian royal family, despite the greater recognition of the post-communist authorities of their significance for the modernization of Romania. Place-names which were changed according to ethical criteria have remained unchanged.

In the post-communist period place-names have become an significant political issue, particularly in

areas where there are large ethnic minorities. In those areas, particularly in Transylvania, where the local population is bilingual (or trilingual), place-names at the entrance to settlements are increasingly in more than one language (usually Romanian and Hungarian). Overall, the responsibility for place-names is assumed by local authorities in accordance with the greater decentralization of power since 1989.

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