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Representations of Communism among Romanian Teenagers: A Research Note

Andrei Gheorghiță[1] *

[1] *Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Centre for Social Research, 2A Lucian Blaga, 550169 Sibiu, Romania.*

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ABSTRACT

A long time after the 1989 regime change, teenagers' representations of the communist past are entirely a matter of political socialization. In the absence of any direct experience with the former regime, their perspective on Communism is expected to develop exclusively in relation to school, family, mass media or other agents of socialization. This research note explores the Romanian teenagers' representations of the communist past based on survey data collected on a sample of 5,861 students enrolled in 86 schools across the entire country in 2010. A form of 'second-hand' nostalgia for Communism is identified among many of the teenagers investigated, regarded as an outcome of socialization in relation to family and school. Positive representations of the communist past appear to be facilitated by a lower socio-economic status, lower education, and the absence of travelling abroad experiences.

Introduction

Any study on representations of the communist past should place its focus at the crossroads between the 'intellectual' (scientific) meaning of this past and its 'lived' (common-sense) meaning (Tileagă 2012). In other words, there are

* Contact address: andrei.gheorghita@ulbsibiu.ro (A. Gheorghiță)

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two coordinates that structure social memory, placing themselves in a relation of both tension and mutual influence. On the one side, the 'intellectual' perspective on Communism in Romania tried to provide a value-loaded framework of understanding it as a totalitarian regime. The most systematic effort was probably the "Tismăneanu Report" (Tismăneanu *et al.* 2007) that stated the condemnation of Communism as a "moral, intellectual, political, and social duty". Thus, it was an effort to give an account of the societal transformation facing the country and to set a moral agenda for the present (Tileagă 2012; see also Ciobanu 2009, Rusu 2015). On the other side, representations of the past are shaped by the 'lived' meaning of Communism, based on subjective experiences or perceptions that vary from one individual to another. Sometimes these experiences or perceptions of the communist past are positive and lay the foundation for what is commonly referred to as 'nostalgia for Communism', a romanticized mix of images of "a safe society, calm times, prosperity, and solidarity among people" (Velikonja 2009, 538).

This article explores this tension between the 'intellectual' and the 'lived' meaning of the communist past for a particularly challenging category of the population: teenagers of 8th to 12th grade in the context of year 2010, almost 21 years after the fall of Communism. The particularity of this category is the absence of any direct life experience with the communist regime, as they were born after 1989. These teenagers' representations of the communist past rely solely on a multidimensional process of political socialization. On the one side, they are supposed to have been exposed to the official 'intellectual' perspective on Communism in school, as part of a deliberate effort of political socialization in classes of history, civic education or philosophy. This combines an effort of transmitting objective (neutral) information and fostering pro-democratic anti-communist (value-loaded) attitudes. On the other side, their 'lived' perspective on the communist past is entirely indirect, originating in spontaneous socialization via interactions with relatives, teachers, and peer groups or media exposure. This dimension is likely to be complemented with the indirect contributions of various forms of cultural

consumption (books, movies, theatre plays, music, computer games, etc.) that address in one way or another the topic of Communism.

In order to explore youth's representations of the communist past in Romania, this research note employs survey data collected on a sample of 5,861 students enrolled in 86 schools across the entire country in 2010. They were interviewed in school as part of the "Students and Civic Education" research project, funded by the Soros Foundation Romania within the framework of the Romanian Election Studies (RES) programme[1]. The paper begins with an overview on how students view the communist past compared to contemporary times, first in a general perspective, then on several policy dimensions (law enforcement, standard of living, education, and health system). Results are set in relation with variations in family socio-economic status, education, and experiences of travelling abroad. The next section explores how such representations of Communism arise through political socialization at the crossroads of family and school influences. In the final section, the main findings and conclusions are discussed.

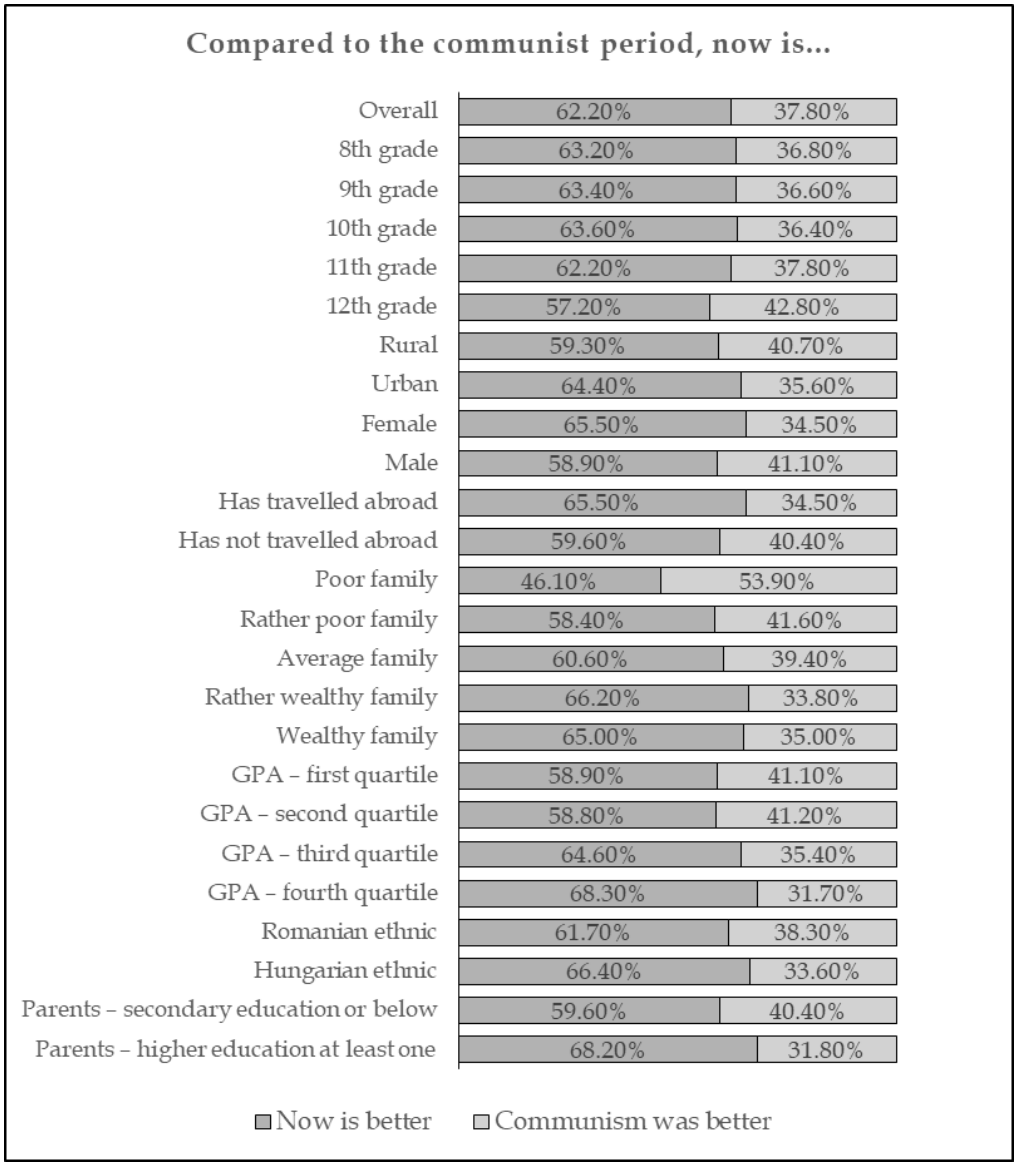
Teenagers' representations of Communism – an overview

Despite lacking a direct experience with the communist regime, more than a third (38%) of the teenagers investigated have depicted the communist period as better than the contemporary times (Figure 1). The share of answers displaying favourable representations of Communism increased with the year of studies, reaching 43% among 12th grade students. This result is quite unexpected, since most of the curricula related to the communist period was scheduled at the end of high school studies (classes of Romanian contemporary history) and was supposed to develop anti-communist attitudes. On the other side, one could consider such result as a consequence of a diffuse feeling of discontent towards the contemporary society that substantiates in the process of growing up: teenagers' contact with and

[1] For more details on the research design of the "Students and Civic Education" project, please refer to Bădescu *et al*. 2010, 87-103.

understanding of various problems the family is confronted with grow over time, hence they are more likely to consider their own social and professional pathways.

Figure 1: ***Teenagers' representations of Communism compared to contemporary times***



Favourable representations of Communism are more likely to occur in the presence of several facilitating factors: *lower socio-economic status*, *lower education*, and *the absence of travelling abroad experiences*. First, positive representations of Communism appeared to be more widespread across environments likely to be subject to socio-economic frustration: it reaches 54% among teenagers coming from poor families, and 41% among those living in a rural community. Second, educational capital appeared to filter the representations of Communism: teenagers with school performance below average are more likely to idealise the communist past (41%), the same goes for those coming from families with an average or below average capital of education (40%). Third, teenagers lacking an experience of travelling abroad were more likely (41%) to depict Communism as a better period than the present. There is also a *gender dimension* related to how teenagers perceive the communist period: boys are largely more favourable to that period (41%) compared to girls (34%). The origins of such difference may be partially placed on variations in school performance between boys and girls[2], but it looks unlikely this is the sole explanation.

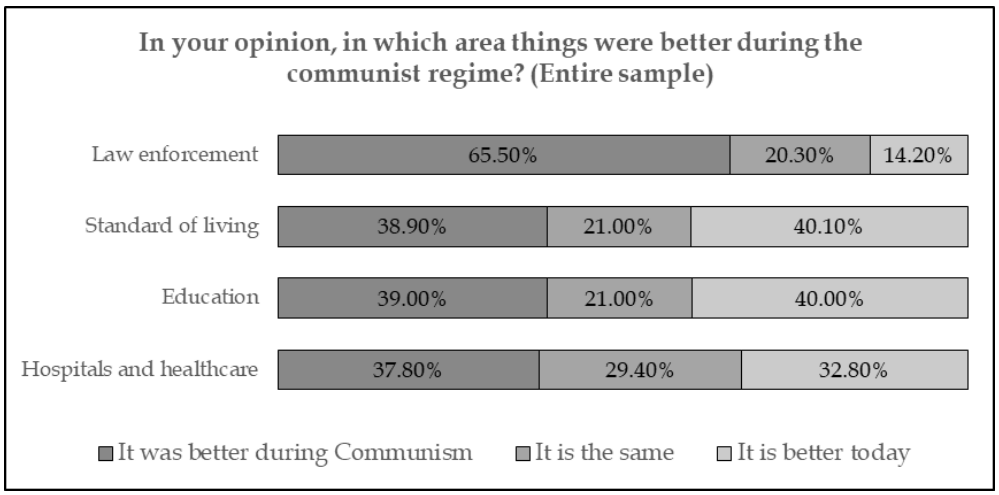
A section of the RES questionnaire asked the teenagers to compare the current period with the communist period on several policy dimensions, namely *law enforcement*, *standard of living*, *education*, and *health system* (Figure 2). Unexpectedly, teenagers regard the field of *law enforcement* as a critical failure of the current society compared to the communist one. Almost two thirds of the respondents (65.5%) consider the post-communist regime less effective in ensuring respect for the law. This observation should be corroborated with their rather low level of trust in the institutions expected to ensure compliance to the laws, namely the judicial system (39% trust it very much or pretty much) and the police (52%).

A second dimension where Communism is perceived as better than the current society is the *health system*: 38% of the teenagers included in the study placed the communist health system on a better position than the post-

[2] On the average, girls perform 0.7 points better on a scale from 1 to 10 compared to boys in our sample.

communist one, 29% put the sign of equality between them, and 33% preferred the current health system. Comparative evaluations in terms of *standard of living* and *educational system* are more balanced, and marginally more favourable to the post-communist period compared to the communist one (roughly 40% vs. 39% in both cases).

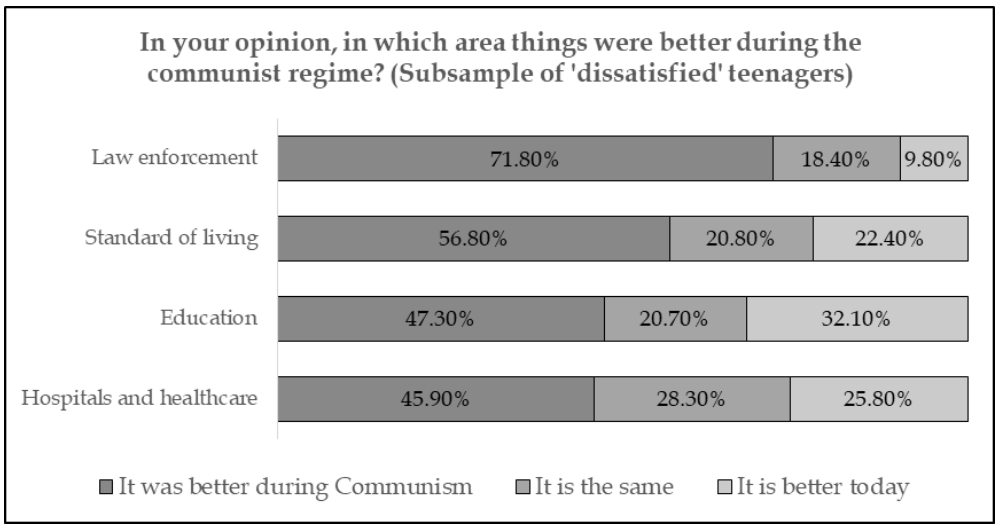
Figure 2: *Teenagers' evaluations of Communism and Post-communism on four policy dimensions (entire sample)*



This last finding is unexpected, as it comes against the initial arguments placing an idealised picture of the communist period in relation with economic frustration and lower educational capital: in other words, it is exactly these two dimensions (*standard of living* and *educational system*) that are more frequently referred to as better in post-communism than in the communist period. To further understand these mechanisms, the next step in the analysis was to further focus on the subsample of 'dissatisfied' students that assessed the communist period as superior overall to the current times (43% of the entire sample). An initial finding is that 'dissatisfied' teenagers assess Communism as better on each of the four policy dimensions, which does not come as a surprise. However, this subsample has a different hierarchy of policy dimensions in assessing the superiority of Communism

over present times. On the first position, it is still the dimension of *law enforcement*, where 72% of the 'dissatisfied' students said things went better before the change of regime. On the second position, it is the *standard of living* that 57% of these students assessed as better in Communism. Around 47% of the 'dissatisfied' students regarded the *educational system* as being worse than it was twenty years before, and 46% of them had similar opinions related to the *health system*. The most significant difference between this subsample and the entire sample is in relation to assessing the capacity of the regime to secure a reasonable *standard of living*: 57% of the students in the 'dissatisfied' subsample regarded the post-communist period as less successful than the Communist one, compared to only 39% of the overall sample having chosen the same answer.

Figure 3: *Teenagers' evaluations of Communism and Post-communism on four policy dimensions (subsample of 'dissatisfied' teenagers)*



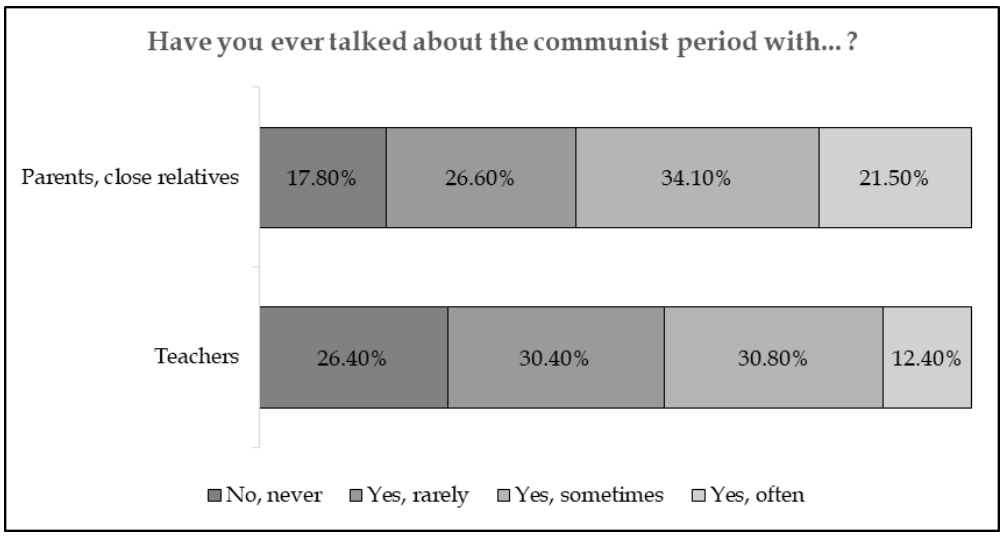
How are teenagers' representations about Communism emerging?

Teenagers' attitudes towards the Communist regime do not originate in any sort of direct experience, but are the result of a process of political

socialization. This section will focus on their emergence in contact with *agents of political socialization* expected to have a relevant impact on the formation of teenagers' representations about Communism: *family* and *school*.

The first question approached concerns the people teenagers talk to about Romania's communist past. Parents and other family members, as well as teachers, were considered potential sources of information. About 82% of the teenagers report *discussing with their parents or close relatives about Communism*. Of these, 21% report frequent discussions, 27% report this topic is rarely touched upon, while 34% mention sometimes discussing Communism. Discussions appear to be more frequent as teenagers get older. The share of teenagers reporting no discussion on this topic constantly decreases from the 8th (23%) to the 12th (11%) grade. The same decrease is registered for the share of teenagers mentioning sometimes discussing the topic.

Figure 4: *Frequency of discussions about Communism within family and in school*



Communism appears significantly less frequent in the *discussions of teenagers with their teachers*. More than 26% of the respondents declare they never approached this topic in school. This is quite surprising, as communism

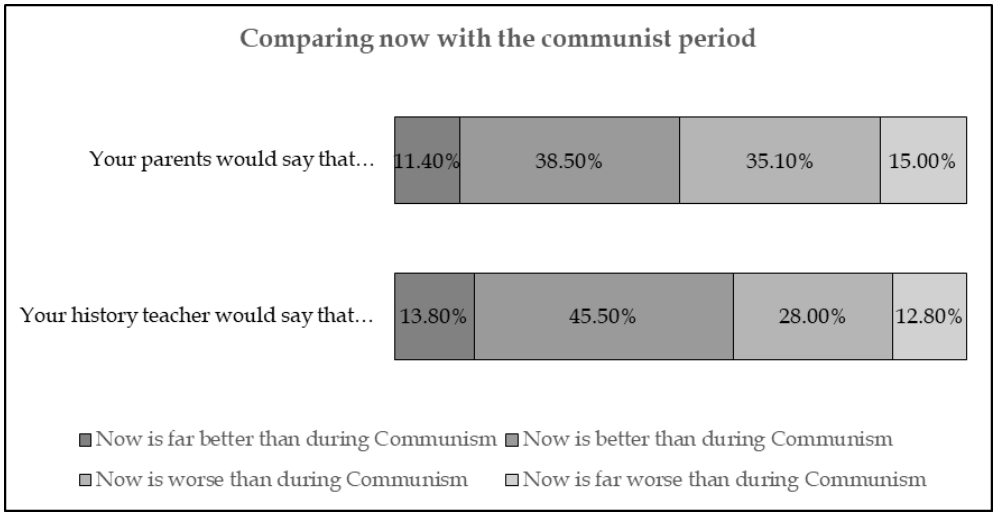
is specifically included in the curriculum and should be discussed in several disciplines. 12% of the teenagers declare they have frequently discussed the topic with their teachers, 31% say they have done this sometimes, while 30% say this has happened rarely. The same tendency to increase the frequency of discussions as the teenagers get older can be observed. The share of those saying they never discussed about communism with their teachers decreases from 33% in the 8th grade to 14% in the 12th grade. This suggests that, to a large extent, Romanian society is failing in its deliberate efforts to pass on knowledge and attitudes about the totalitarian past: 14% of the Romanian teenagers never discuss (or realise the discussion of) the totalitarian past during their time in the formal education system.

The second question approached concerns the arguments being transmitted by parents and teachers acting as agents of political socialization. This includes both explicit messages transmitted by parents and teachers in their dialogue with teenagers and implicit messages embedded into behavioural reactions. Obviously, primary data concerning the parents and teachers of the teenagers were not available. Thus, teenagers were asked how their parents and history teacher would comparatively assess the communist period and the contemporary period. This analytical strategy might be, at first glance, accused of being superficial, but it is far from being so. From a cognitive psychology perspective, our views of different social actors are diffuse and constantly updated based on information we receive. Thus, in a political socialization context, when studying effects, the way the receiver (the teenager) perceives the message is more important than the content of the message itself. The teenager will continually update his/her impression on how the parents / history teacher see the communist period. This impression will then be reflected (or not) into the teenager's attitudes. In this perspective, the questions requesting a teenager to provide the answer he/she believe the parents or teacher will give are an adequate indicator of his/her perceptions of the parents/teachers.

In terms of perceptions of the parents' attitudes, balance was found. About half (50.1%) of the teenagers believe their parents would say the

contemporary period is worse or much worse than the communist one, while the other half say the opposite. When it comes to the teenagers' perceptions of their history teacher, in 41% of the cases the teacher is seen as a nostalgic of the Communist regime (divided between 28% moderate nostalgia and 13% strong nostalgia). Even if, overall, history teachers are perceived as less nostalgic than the parents, this result is worrying given the anti-communist message expected to be embedded in the contents of education in a transitional Romania.

Figure 5: *Teenagers' perceptions of how their parents and teachers view the communist period*



It is hard to assess to what extent the attitudes of parents and teachers regarding the Communist regime are transferred to teenagers. Still one can explore the simultaneous statistical distribution of the teenagers' perception on whether their parents/teachers are nostalgic or not and their own evaluation of the Communist period. For an easier interpretation, answers

were subject to recoding in a dichotomous format[3] (Table 1). In almost 87% of the cases where their parents are perceived as favouring the post-communist democratic regime, teenagers assume the same view point. In 62% of the cases where parents are perceived as nostalgic their children assume a favourable view of the Communist regime. The same dynamic is present in relation to teachers (history teachers, in the exact question format): in 80% of the cases where teachers transmit a message perceived as favourable to contemporary society, their pupils assume a similar position. Teachers' favourable opinions of Communism are reproduced by their pupils in 63% of the cases. In relation to both parents and teachers as political socialization agents, the teenagers appear to reproduce more easily attitudes favourable to the contemporary regime (real, tangible) over attitudes favourable to the communist regime (relatively abstract from the teenagers' perspectives).

Table 1: *Teenagers' reproduction of the views of their parents and teachers of communism and the contemporary period (dichotomous format)*

		The teenagers' assessment	
		Now better	Communism better
Parents would say…	Now better	86.80%	13.20%
	Communism better	37.70%	62.30%
History teacher would say…	Now better	79.80%	20.20%
	Communism better	36.80%	63.20%

The influence of parents over how teenagers perceive the communist period appears to be stronger than the influence of teachers. The Gamma coefficient calculated for the relationship between teenagers' attitudes and parents' perceived attitudes is at a remarkable .707, higher than .553 calculated for the relationship between the teenagers' attitudes and the perceived attitudes of their history teachers.[4] Nevertheless, in both cases there is a strong positive association that confirms, at least partially, the political

[3] The comparison was reduced to two categories: 'the contemporary period is better' (by merging 'better' and 'much better') and 'the communist period is better' (by merging 'worse' and 'much worse' categorisations of the communist period).

[4] It must be noted that the question refers strictly to the history teacher. Thus, the analysis does not account for situations in which pupils are exposed to diverging signals by various teachers.

socialization hypothesis concerning teenagers' opinions of the communist past.

Discussion and conclusion

More than two decades after the fall of the communist regime in Romania, survey data collected in 2010 showed a large share of teenagers (from 8th to 12th grade) having developed a form of *'second-hand' nostalgia for Communism* (see also Gheorghiță 2017, Oushakine 2020), in the absence of any 'lived' experience with it. This paper approached this form of nostalgia as a product of political socialization in relation to *family* and *school*.

Data showed the communist past to be a subject of occasional conversation for a large majority of Romanian teenagers, either within family talks or within school classes. Many of them perceived their parents to have nostalgic attitudes towards the communist past and also their history teachers. To a large degree, the teenagers interviewed in the 'Students and Civic Education' study appeared to reproduce their parents' or teachers' attitudes on where post-communism stands compared to the communist regime.

Positive representations of Communism were more likely to be facilitated by a *lower socio-economic status*, *lower education*, and *the absence of travelling abroad experiences*. Still, this 'second-hand' nostalgia for Communism was largely widespread across all the categories of teenagers interviewed in our study. *Law enforcement* and *the health system* are the two policy dimensions on which most of the teenagers included in the study regarded Communism as having outperformed the democratic regime of their time.

Taking the interpretation of these conclusions further is a largely speculative task. However at least one aspect should be highlighted: the educational system appears to have failed to address the topic of Communism in its deep totalitarian roots (the 'intellectual' value-loaded perspective, as education for democracy or retrospective justice) and limited itself to a historical perspective. This failure intertwined with the hardships of post-

communist transition in immediate environment of teenagers that nurtured a genuine (first-hand) nostalgia for Communism among their families: "the more everything is shaken, the greater the yearning for a stable society and secure times" (Velikonja 2009, 546). In the absence of a proper balance between the two (the 'intellectual' perspective as condemnation of communism and the 'lived' perspective as family nostalgia), a new form of 'second-hand' nostalgia for Communism largely arose among an entire generation of teenagers, with consequences hard to anticipate.

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