



## Rebuilding Social Capital in Post-Communist Romania

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For the past 10 years, Dana and Brandi Bates have lived in Romania's Jiu Valley working with youth, helping to rebuild social values that make for lasting peace.

Romanian communism ended with the execution of the dictator Ceaucescu on Christmas Day, 1989. Many say it was the best Christmas present they ever received. Now, 20 years later, are we in a position to assess the legacy of communism?

To highlight why taking account of communism is so important, noted scholar Janos Kornai points out that in 1977 about 32 percent of the world's population lived under the classical socialist system, whereas in the spring of 1991 the figure was 0.006 percent. What Kornai calls the "classical" system was a regime type that tended toward absolute control. Party leaders in the bureaucracy above gave commands to those below about virtually every aspect of life.

The hope underlying Marxist-inspired communism—and this was its terrific appeal—was that this controlled economy could better meet the basic material needs of the working class. We now know it was largely a disaster on many fronts. By focusing excessively on

the material conditions of existence, they destroyed even those.

But what of its current legacy? What are the "development" challenges in these contexts of post-socialist transition? I would like to argue that, among other things, communism undermined two core human values: agency and solidarity. Agency is freedom and the sense that one can make a difference in and shape one's world. It is the Enlightenment value par excellence and is linked to a notion of individual dignity. But communism, ironically, also destroyed solidarity—the ties that bind, the sense of mutual responsibility. Common ownership meant common neglect, and this applied to responsibility no less than property.

One consequence of communism today is that the associational life of youth is extremely low; some argue as low as 3 percent of youth in Romania have any type of club, whether that be Sunday school, Scouts, band or soccer. Furthermore, communism created a certain character type: that of the bowed head and executing

orders, no questions asked. These character traits are ill-suited for democracy. Corruption remains rampant. As a recent NPR report said, “There is corruption, and then there is Romania.”

Under communism one strategy for coping was telling jokes. These jokes were illegal, but they persisted all across the communist system. Because of the dysfunction of the economy and constant shortages and standing in lines, jokes such as these were rampant:

What happened when the desert became communist? Nothing for a while, and then there was a sand shortage!

The truth is that when we wanted to offer a LaVida-type program to the youth of Romania, we had no idea how relevant experiential education (adventure education and service learning) would be for the post-communist trauma. We did not want to offer jokes, but we did want to offer fun, and fun with a purpose. Recreation for re-creation.

Orthodox Church—a well-known fact. Yet it is not hopeless; the youth represent a positive wave of change, and there are profound strands of Orthodox thinking that can be leveraged to help rebuild these societies. For instance, John Chrysostom develops a theology of the common good:

The most perfect rule of Christianity, its exact definition, its highest summit, is this: to seek what is for the benefit of all.

This is virtually identical to the Apostle Paul’s “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” We are made in the image not of a lone deity but of a Trinitarian God—a God Who is love, and love requires relationship. This notion of the human as both person and communion corresponds with values of agency and solidarity that are recognized by our community development practitioners.

We stay in Romania, in a sometimes challenging context, because we have seen firsthand how experiential education contains the

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In 1999, with the help of a Gordon team of students, we built Romania’s first challenge course. We have been taking almost 600 youth through the week of their lives since 2000. Viata (“The Life” in Romanian) is empirically proven to develop trust (social capital), agency (empowerment) and other values. Tears in the kids’ and leaders’ eyes at the end of the week are the real proof.

We quickly realized that there were no follow-up programs; a summer camp by itself was inadequate, powerful as the experience might be. Yet many heavily funded organizations tried to rebuild “civil society” and volunteering via models imported from the West. By and large these failed because they presupposed that people were interested in volunteering but simply lacked meaningful opportunities.

The problem was much deeper. Volunteering was coerced under communism—what they called “communist Saturdays.” We had to dig deeper still and *attract* youth, and thus we set our faces toward developing a replicable model. We combined three factors: 1) the fun of adventure education with 2) what we call moral narrative (including Bible stories), and then 3) the community service projects. So fun, learning and service. This was the ticket. We are now the largest youth service organization or movement in the country. We opened our 170<sup>th</sup> youth club in March and have even gone international with a dozen clubs in Honduras. Our aim is to be the equivalent of the Scouts for the so-called developing world.

We live and work in an Eastern Orthodox context. Most Orthodox countries are new to democracy. Communism compromised the

key to human flourishing. But Gordon College and the Gordon area and community are dear to our hearts—it is our alma mater, it is where our home church resides, it is where many of our dearest friends and supporters of our work in Romania dwell, and it is where the initial inspiration for our work in Romania is located, the La Vida program.

In keeping with our ongoing connection with Gordon, God has graced us with the amazing opportunity to pioneer a semester abroad program through the College. As we go to print with this issue of STILLPOINT, we are delighted to share the news of the recent approval of a Gordon in Romania program. There is perhaps no context that can better bring learning alive and demonstrate empirically how ideas matter than post-Communist Romania. We would treasure your prayers for this new endeavor.



Dana was a philosophy major at Gordon and earned an M.Div. at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 2005. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Oxford Centre for Missions Study and serves as executive director of New Horizons Foundation, which he and Brandi cofounded. Brandi was an English literature major and serves as NHF’s administrative director and director of the summer Viata Program. The Bateses have a daughter, Briana, and a son, Gabriel Matei.

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