



## So Mr President... how about freeing the real hostages?

Matei Paun **23.09.2005**

In the eight years since I returned to Romania, our political class has not changed. Not one bit. It is as short sighted, confused and corrupt as it has ever been. Let me be absolutely clear: in spite of Nato membership and pending EU accession, politically speaking, nothing has changed, at least not for the better.

Of course, the economy has changed, but that is not due to our politicians. That brief first and only year (1997-1998) of courageous and authentic, home grown reforms is what unleashed the economic forces that have taken us to where we are now. In that short period, the currency was largely freed, prices were liberalised and privatisation kicked off. Think of a coiled spring which is suddenly let go - Romania is today such a spring, "catching up," as it were, on lost ground. Only economic neophytes or political propagandists would claim otherwise. This, unfortunately, is too often the case, when various politicians or their parties take credit for today's economic boom.

What did help were several international conflicts and events (Serbia, 9/11, and Iraq come to mind) and the rolling, unstoppable expansion of the EU. Sooner or later it was bound to engulf Romania and, in any case, as it happens, we'll probably be one of the last to join for some time to come.

It is amazing to me how some Romanian politicians still have the courage to express an opinion on whether we should join the EU. Incapable of governing properly, some now want to keep others from governing Romania. One can't but wonder why: do they need still more time to steal and plunder? To further consolidate their power base? It is true that Romania is far from ready and that economically it will get clobbered in the face of Western capital and productivity, but it is also unlikely that Romania will catch up on fifteen years of slow-moving reforms in the two, three or even four years of delay that some would probably like to see. It certainly will not happen with the present political class which has been at the helm during the past decade and a half.

Romania is still navigating without instruments or a rudder. There is no genuine, compelling vision. We don't know what we want.

We don't invest in anything. Instead we mimic democracy and pretend to be capitalists when in reality Romania's political class are largely committed central planners, whose reflexes are to control, constrain and, if possible, steal. While our so-called leaders manipulate us, lie to us and

hide the truth, they enrich themselves and their patrons.

The president, for example, is hailed as a Caesar for the release of three of our citizens supposedly held as hostages. A special unit is created in the presidential palace, the media is on full alert, the secret services become great liberators. But few realise that in fact, an entire country is held hostage. And not for 55 days, but for 55 years! Some 20 million people are being held hostage: hostage to poverty, hostage to corruption, hostage to hopelessness.

And the captors are not too dissimilar from those holding the three journalists.

Lets get one thing straight: we are the real hostages, and our captors are in fact the same political class for which we have continuously been voting for the last 15 years. Now our politicians are pretending to be European, to be Socialists, Christian Democrats, whatever they can get away with.

We are constantly subjected to one circus after another. One supposed scandal after another - never resulting in a prosecution or prison sentence for anyone that would really matter. We dig up the past only because we do not understand it, because it fascinates and mesmerises, not so as to come to terms with it, but so as to make peace and move on. No, because that would mean truth being told and guilt assigned. And that, of course, would put an end to their games. It would end the manipulation and set the hostage free - and that is the last thing "they" want.

You ask who "they" are? "They" are our politicians, our business tycoons, our media idols. "They" are also us. They are us because as long as we listen to them, as long as we allow them to occupy space in our brains, then we are a willing audience. We become their accomplices. Just as a circus cannot exist without an audience, so we are the audience that allows this charade to go on. We have become our own hostages. Hostage to ourselves.

We must allow uninominal voting (one man/one vote) so as to break the stranglehold of political parties who sell parliamentary seats for 200,000 euros apiece. We must decapitate the Bucharest power brokers so as to seriously decentralise Romania and allow regional initiatives to have a chance and compete with each other. We must dig up the recent past and have the courage to assign blame and responsibility to those who hijacked Romania's young democratic aspirations in the early 1990s. We must confront high level corruption and send people to jail. We must invest in our future, meaning in education, healthcare and infrastructure. We must no longer be hostages to our past or our present.

(previously published in the magazine Vivid)

\* Matei Paun is a founding member of the Romania Think Tank and a managing partner with the specialist investment bank BAC Romania. He may be contacted at [matei@bac-romania.com](mailto:matei@bac-romania.com)