



Postcard Transfer across the Iron Curtain: Tourism and Transnational Exchanges in Socialist Romania during the 1960s to 1980s

Adelina Stefan

HCM 5 (1): 169–195

DOI: 10.18352/hcm.527

Abstract

The article examines the transfer of postcards across the Iron Curtain against the backdrop of international tourism in socialist Romania. In the 1960s, socialist Romania began to develop international tourism, especially with the capitalist West, because it wanted to acquire hard currencies and to improve its external image. Although the success of international tourism was short-lived, it sparked a movement of people, ideas and images across the Iron Curtain. As photos were more difficult to be carried out across the border – the law in socialist Romania required that films be developed in the country – postcards provided a means to personalize vacations in Romania, especially in the 1980s when restrictions became tighter. When sent from the capitalist West to Romania, postcards embodied the very image of the ‘West’, which the majority of socialist Romania’s citizens could not easily visit.

Keywords: Iron Curtain, postcards, Romania, socialism, tourism

Introduction

In 1969, a Romanian tourist to the United States sent a postcard to her relatives in socialist Romania wishing them ‘warm regards from the beautiful, but distant place’ she was visiting. Although the message was mundane and did not offer much information beyond the

regular greetings, the image depicted on the postcard conveyed much more than the written words. The postcard shows Lincoln Memorial, a highly touristic place in Washington, D.C. A familiar landmark to the American public, the monument was a rather exotic sight for the Romanian viewers, not only because of the physical distance, but also because Romania was a country behind the Iron Curtain, and travel to capitalist countries was not an easy undertaking. This is why the presence of the Romanian tourist in the United States was in itself surprising. But it was the diplomatic opening of socialist Romania towards the capitalist West, especially France, West Germany and the United States in the mid- to late 1960s, as well as the socialist government's interest in developing international tourism, that made this experience possible for the Romanian citizen.¹ The interest in developing international tourism was part of a larger trend that characterized other socialist countries as well. Studies by Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker on the Soviet Union and Karin Taylor, Hannes Grandits or Patrick Hyder Patterson on Yugoslavia have shown how in the 1960s the meaning of tourism changed from an activity meant to restore workers' physical capacities to a more internationalist experience.² The Romanian case fits into this model, for in the 1960s, the communist government abandoned its ideological view on tourism as fostering a socialist identity for the working class and adopted a more pragmatic stance that stressed the economic dimension of tourism. Yet studies on international tourism and its role in creating transnational connections across the Iron Curtain remain rare.³ With some notable exceptions, most literature on tourism still takes a national approach.⁴ But as Eric Zuelow explains in his introduction to *Touring Beyond the Nation*, 'Tourism was bigger than a series of discrete national stories; it was hardly entirely the domain of specific state actors, but often the result of a larger current of developments'.⁵ How does this statement apply to the case of an East European country like socialist Romania in the Cold War context?

In the 1960s, the Romanian government chose to develop international tourism in order to acquire hard currencies and to improve the communist regime's image among the citizens of capitalist countries.⁶ Socialist Romania, similar to some more well-known tourist destinations in southern Europe, such as Spain or Portugal, aimed to attract tourists from the wealthier regions of north-western Europe with access to hard currencies. Hence, when referring to 'West' or 'capitalist bloc',

Romanian tourist officials had this particular group in mind. Along with the increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting Romania, Romanian tourists started to take vacations abroad as well. Most of the Romanian tourists could only visit the neighbouring socialist countries, but a small group of individuals, mostly those with ties to the communist *nomenklatura*, or those who had access to hard currencies in order to pay for their trip, managed also to travel to Western countries.⁷

Both tourists from Western Europe taking vacations in Romania and Romanians travelling to the capitalist West used holiday postcards to document their experiences. Because of the political and ideological separations imposed by the early Cold War era, these travels initially worked as a form of ‘discovery’ for both groups. Hence, the practice of sending postcards became a common routine in order to communicate ‘something’ about both Western/capitalist and Romanian tourists’ experiences in the ‘other bloc’. Because postcards carried open messages, they were less susceptible to censorship than letters sent from or to capitalist countries. Furthermore, what mattered in the case of postcards was not as much the text as the image. In the case of socialist Romania, because of the travel limitations to the ‘West’ – often harsher than in other socialist countries – the visual representations on the postcards sent from capitalist countries shaped the image of places that remained physically inaccessible to most Romanian citizens. At the same time, postcards highlighted certain important figures and places for both Romania and the ‘capitalist bloc’.⁸ In the 1960s, the transfer of postcards took place between Romanian citizens and the citizens of north-western Europe, but towards the 1970s and 1980s it also included citizens from southern Europe, such as Italy, Spain and Greece, as they began visiting Romania. By exchanging postcards, Romanian tourists, foreign tourists and those Romanians who stayed at home became part of an intricate network that went beyond the Cold War divide. Yet against the backdrop of the Cold War, as postcards depicted officially sanctioned spaces, they also became ideological representations of the other bloc. Despite showing officially sanctioned spaces and working as a form of soft diplomacy in the Cold War, postcards also carried personal, subjective meanings between the sender and the receiver.

This study examines the transfer of postcards across the Iron Curtain between the 1960s and the 1980s, sent either by Romanians who visited capitalist countries or foreign tourists who befriended Romanian

citizens while on vacation to Romania. It asks questions about the type of visual representations postcards conveyed, as well as how postcards and visual representations worked as a form of soft diplomacy in attracting tourists from capitalist countries to socialist Romania. To what extent did the practice of exchanging postcards help to transfer images between socialist Romania and some of the Western countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain? Also, how did this transfer of images work at the subjective level for those Romanian tourists who could not easily travel to capitalist countries? The postcards will be examined according to their historical context, the depicted images, and the text. The first part of this article examines how socialist Romania became a tourist destination for Western/capitalist tourists and promoted itself abroad through visual materials, including postcards. The second part looks at how, in the 1980s, the Securitate, the communist secret police, attempted more or less successfully to control the Western tourists' free movement within Romania and the type of visual materials that tourists could take across the border. The last part examines the postcards that Western tourists or Romanians travelling abroad sent to their friends in Romania and the meanings ascribed to the received cards.

This study relies on an array of primary sources. Besides postcards, which I have found in my interviewees' private archives or have collected personally, I am also using sources from archives and oral history interviews. The archival documents are part of the Council of Ministers Collection and the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee Collections located at the National Archives of Romania. Furthermore, I have relied on the archive of the former Securitate, the secret police in socialist Romania. In addition, I conducted three oral history interviews: one with a former cameraman, and another two with persons who exchanged postcards across the Iron Curtain. The two female interviewees gathered an impressive amount of holiday postcards because either they had friends or relatives who travelled frequently, or they had befriended foreign tourists because of their work. I treat my interviewees as experts as they can provide information that I cannot retrieve otherwise. Also, I see the interviews as a form of 'dialogic discourse' in Alessandro Portelli's term, or as oral historian Luisa Passerini puts it, as a form of 'intersubjectivity'.⁹

The article contributes to both the literature about holiday postcards and the literature about international tourism in socialist Romania. To

date, no study has examined the circulation and meanings of holiday postcards in a communist dictatorship.¹⁰ Furthermore, current studies on visual culture under socialism have focused either on the subversive message of underground arts or on the officially sanctioned socialist realism.¹¹ By examining holiday postcards in socialist Romania and their transfer across the Iron Curtain, I hope to shed light on the complexities of visual culture under socialism, something not only divided between underground and official cultures, and on holiday postcards' role in creating ties between socialist Romania and the 'West' against the backdrop of international tourism.

How Did Socialist Romania Become a Tourist Destination for Western Tourists?

In the early 1960s, socialist Romania became interested in welcoming foreign tourists, especially those tourists coming from capitalist countries. A 1965 report by the National Office for Tourism-Carpathians (Oficiul National pentru Turism-Carpati, hereafter ONT-Carpathians) expected that 80 per cent of the revenues from international tourism would come from Western tourists and only 20 per cent from tourists from the neighbouring socialist countries.¹²

Yet originally Romania was not a trailblazer of international tourism, not even among socialist countries. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Romania was mainly interested in social tourism that developed programmes for workers' respite. The existing tourist infrastructure, mostly inherited from the interwar period, was managed by the General Workers Confederation, the Communist Party's controlled trade unions. Only in 1955 did the government decide to create the ONT-Carpathians, an institution responsible for both domestic and international tourism. This was a travel agency subordinate to the Ministry for Interior Trade. Yet in the eyes of the communist high officials, both the Romanian government and the ONT-Carpathians leadership, international tourism was only restricted to the neighbouring socialist countries or, in some cases, to socialist groups.¹³ For their part, the countries of Western Europe and the United States were also reluctant to allow travel to socialist countries in Eastern Europe or the USSR in the early 1950s.¹⁴

But as early as the late 1950s, socialist countries (Romania included) started to meet every two years and discuss ways of improving international tourism.¹⁵ At first the discussions focused mostly on international tourism within the socialist bloc, but from the 1960s onward socialist countries became increasingly interested in developing international tourism that welcomed tourists from capitalist countries as well. The 1961 meeting of tourist organizations from the socialist countries took place in Moscow. This was already the fourth meeting of socialist tourist organizations and encompassed participants not only from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but also from Mongolia, North Korea and North Vietnam. A major absentee was Yugoslavia. While the first point on the meeting's agenda asked for a tightening of tourist relations among socialist countries in order to enhance workers' health and promote friendship between socialist nations, the second point mentioned the 'importance of developing international tourism between socialist and capitalist countries as a means of popularizing the accomplishments of socialist regimes and of counteracting the unfriendly imperialist propaganda towards socialist countries'.¹⁶

The third point on the agenda stated that tourist relationships between socialist and capitalist countries should start from the idea that socialist states could be cheaper and more attractive tourist destinations. The meeting also emphasized that socialist countries should find ways to promote themselves on the capitalist countries' tourist market.¹⁷ Despite the official document's wooden language, reflecting a certain diplomatic protocol specific to the 'Eastern bloc', the meeting of tourist delegates from socialist countries spelled out their intention to have a pragmatic approach in relation to capitalist countries and use international tourism to meet a specific agenda. During this meeting, Romania reached tourist agreements for 1962 with Intourist (USSR), ORBIS (Poland),¹⁸ CEDOK (Czechoslovakia), IBUSZ and EXPRES (Hungary). While delegates from Czechoslovakia and Hungary pushed for a development of tourism with capitalist countries, Romania's representatives presented a report that tackled the issue of 'health tourism' and the prospects for its development within the socialist bloc.¹⁹

But following the 1961 meeting in Moscow, the Romanian government became more aware of the possibility of welcoming Western tourists. In fact, immediately after the meeting, the Council of Ministers asked ONT-Carpathians for a report about the prospects of developing

international tourism in Romania. More than anything else, this report reflected the Romanian government's lack of experience with this sector. After having acknowledged the increase in the number of Western tourists who vacationed in socialist Romania, from 7800 in 1957 to 40,000 in 1961, the report examined how other socialist countries welcomed Western tourists.²⁰ Most examples were drawn from Bulgaria, Romania's southern neighbour. While in Bulgaria, tourists received guided tours, which helped familiarize them with the history of the country and of the resort, in Romania, tourists visited selected collective farms, which usually ended with a 'comrades' dinner party'.²¹ Despite this dull itinerary, change was in the air. Although in 1962, the ONT-Carpathians and the government did not have a clear plan for developing tourism with Western countries, the quality of visual advertising materials that promoted Romania as a tourist destination began to improve. As a result, one of the films produced during this campaign, *Les Carpathes de l'Est*, won the first prize in the Tourist Film Festival in Paris in 1962.²² Just one year later, in 1963, another report, put together by the Propaganda and Foreign Relations Section within the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers Party, emphasized this progress:

If during the previous years the tourist propaganda and the advertising of our country abroad focused only on general information, in 1962, these advertising materials became more detailed. Both printed materials and the commercials advertised specific tourist destinations, including information about the travel conditions, prices and where one can book a vacation to RPR [Romanian Popular Republic]. Some of the materials were printed in collaboration with the partner travel agencies from abroad, while others were made at the request of some foreign firms to be disseminated in their respective markets.²³

The same report noted that in 1962 alone, 124 advertising materials were published, with a total circulation of 5.1 million copies. Additionally, 5.2 million postcards were made available to promote Romania abroad, while a television network from West Germany commissioned two promotional movies about Romania.²⁴ The focus was mostly on promoting Romania as a beach holiday destination. A 1962 postcard depicting Mamaia, a Black Sea resort, reflected this policy.²⁵ The image shows modern hotels lining the beach, with tourists casually lying in the sun or

strolling along the coast. A comparison with similar materials produced in capitalist countries shows striking similarities in terms of design and intended audiences.²⁶ For instance, a 1960 Austrian postcard depicts Johann Strauss II, a popular nineteenth-century Austrian composer, and the various places in which he lived in Austria. Against the backdrop of mass tourism, Strauss became a commodity and also part of the Austrian tourism promotion. This was similar to what the communist government in Romania was doing in Mamaia. In the case of Mamaia, it was not a cultural personality, but instead specific constructions (new hotels and restaurants) and the beach which the communist government had chosen to commodify in order to attract foreign tourists to Romania.

The postcard depicting Mamaia was meant to convey to Western tourists the Romanian communist regime's aspiration to look modern. According to a 1959 Council of Minister's note about the 'quality of tourist materials', advertising was supposed to meet the expectations of foreign visitors and to compete with similar material from 'the countries with a developed tourist industry'.²⁷ Compared to those, the Romanian postcards and advertising (propaganda) materials were seen as lower quality, since they failed to show the 'new hotels and restaurants' on the Black Sea Coast.²⁸ The 1962 postcard depicting Mamaia was a response



Figure 1: Postcard showing hotels Aurora, Meridian, Doina, Flora, and Victoria in Mamaia, Romania (personal archive).

to these critics. According to this postcard, modern hotels were the landmark of the tourist landscape on the Romanian Black Sea coast.²⁹

But the official concern was not just how to convey modernity and internationalism, but also how to illustrate ‘Romanian authenticity’ in these images. Foreign tourists, for their part, also sought to discover some features that would be specifically ‘Romanian’. As a result, the ESPLA bureau, the office within ONT-Carpathians in charge of putting together materials that would advertise Romanian tourism (postcards, photo albums, tourist flyers), chose images that served this purpose. A 1965 postcard of a Romanian seaside mingles depictions of modern hotels with swimming pools and night views of the city with folk dances on the beach by people dressed in traditional peasant clothes. Although the image is almost surrealistic, it does catch the eye through the association of unexpected elements. At the same time, it commodified folk dance practices and delivered to the Western tourists the kind of image that they might have expected to encounter in an Eastern European country, that is, people in peasant dress.

By 1965, the growing advertising campaign delivered some results, as the reactions of some Western tourists and the increase in the number of foreign tourists show. But many times the expectations set up by



Figure 2: Postcard in German promoting Mamaia, 1965 (personal archive).

the postcards and other promotional material did not match reality. A 1965 letter by an Austrian tourist pointed out both the accomplishments and the shortcomings of the emerging Romanian tourist industry. The Austrian tourist had decided to visit Mamaia particularly because of ‘the strong advertising’.³⁰ Although the trip was not fully unpleasant, the tourist, who had previously visited ‘all summer resorts in Southern Europe’, felt obliged to explain why Mamaia, the largest resort on the Romanian Black Sea Coast, was not yet an international destination for tourists.

Because I want to consider your country, despite the twenty-year rupture, as part of European civilization, I take the time to evaluate your tourism from the point of view of the tourist. I want to show what could be done to bring the resort to our standards, and [for] Mamaia to become a truly international tourist destination...

- Flight attendants should speak some German.
- When tourists arrive in the hotel, at least someone from the management should welcome them. Human beings become completely impersonal when they are led like a crowd into the hotel... One never forgets she/he is just a number, an object.
- There are no entertainment options in Mamaia. Build some restaurants with Romanian food, wine and music!
- It’s not good to make announcements in restaurants only in Romanian, like they do for example at ‘Miorita’ [a restaurant with Romanian cuisine and folk music], where 90% of the clients are Germans.³¹

Despite the critical Austrian tourist, in the mid- to late 1960s, Romania was promoted in Western advertising materials as the hidden treasure of ‘the East’. In 1968, *Auto Touring*, a Belgian magazine, not only informed its readers about specific tours and prices to Romania, but also published a well-informed article about the country. The article, titled ‘Invitation en Roumanie,’ presented the Romanians as the ‘Romans of the East’ and reminded its Belgian readers that French culture was very influential in this country before the Second World War. Furthermore, the article informed its readers that one can easily start a conversation in French while strolling around Bucharest.³²

Along with a strong promotion of socialist Romania as a tourist destination came the relaxation of travel requirements. If individual travel

across the Iron Curtain still required a visa, which could in most cases be obtained at the border, travelling in organized groups was easy in the 1960s. A 1964 article in *The New York Times* informed its readers that Romania would offer Western tourists a better currency exchange and would relax travel restrictions, while in 1967, Romania was the first socialist country to abolish visa requirement for Western tourists who travelled in groups.³³ The composition of tourist groups travelling to Romania reflected this change. While in 1965, Czechoslovak and Polish tourists predominated, in 1970, tourists from West Germany prevailed on the Black Sea Coast.³⁴ This change in the composition of foreign tourist groups visiting the Romanian seaside reflected the efforts of the socialist government to attract more tourists from the Western countries and its relatively successful use of visual materials.

Romania's special status in the Western imagination persisted until the early 1980s. In 1980, a Norwegian travel agency decided to sell common tourist packages for Romania and Yugoslavia. The Norwegian travel agency advertised both countries as beach destinations, as most Scandinavian tourists sought to spend their vacations in such places. The title page of the tourist flyer [Figure 3] shows a group of tourists in bathing suits casually enjoying the sea. This image hardly suggested that these places were located in two countries behind the Iron Curtain. To further convince its readers, the tourist flyer featured the new hotels,



Figure 3: Tourist flyers promoting Romania abroad in 1980. (Source: ANIC, CC of PCR Economic Collection, file no. 205/1980, f. 73).

Amfiteatru (Amphitheater) and Belvedere in Neptun-Olimp, a brand-new resort on the Romanian Black Sea Coast. Both hotels appear lavishly modern and looked like they provided all the comforts Western tourists would require.

Despite the promotion of Romania in ‘the West’ as modern and part of European civilization, as well as its association with the more liberal Yugoslavia, the regime’s choice to remain restrictive in its domestic policies fostered a negative image among Western tourists.³⁵ In the 1980s, more news about human rights violations, persistent shortages and surveillance was reported in the West. This negative campaign affected the flow of tourists from capitalist countries to Romania. Whereas poor service and the lack of entertainment facilities as compared to the Mediterranean or Yugoslavia had been an issue since the late 1970s, this new wrecked image of Romania was the last nail in the coffin. At the beginning of the 1980s, the number of foreign tourists reached a peak of 7 million per year.³⁶ Soon after, however, numbers started to plummet, and towards the mid-1980s, the number of foreign tourists was around 4 million. The percentage of foreign tourists varied from 30 per cent in the late 1960s to 15 to 20 per cent in the 1980s. While in 1974, 666,635 Western tourists visited Romania, in 1979, their numbers had only increased to 743,279.³⁷

Surveillance and Limitations of Interactions between Romanians and Western Tourists

As a response to the declining image of Romania in the Western press, in the 1980s, the communist regime began to impose some restrictions on Western tourists’ free circulation within Romania. Also, tourists walking around with a camera became suspects in the eyes of the regime, while those who took photos of less pleasant Romanian realities could face travel interdictions.³⁸ Although the Securitate attempted to control interactions between Romanians and tourists from capitalist countries since the 1960s, surveillance methods only began to be put in practice in the 1980s. The main concern of the Romanian communist regime in this case was the type of information and image that Western tourists would get about Romania via these informal conversations. But the Securitate’s attempt was met with limited success because of its lack of means.

A 1967 report by the Ministry of Interior, Inspections Service, Argeş County about ‘the informative work concerning tourists, specialists and traders from capitalist countries’ noted that the number of visitors from capitalist countries in Argeş County increased compared to the previous year. Against this backdrop, the task of Securitate agents became that of gathering information about every foreign visitor.³⁹ Yet the report acknowledged that the material that the Securitate had gathered about many tourists was irrelevant. Often, the Securitate’s agents learned about the presence of foreign tourists or specialists from Western countries only after they had left. ‘In regard to foreign tourists’ surveillance, we think the results are not satisfactory. Regarding the 128 tourists who spent more than 2–3 days in our region and lived with their relatives, friends or in the hotel in Pitesti, we only have information about where they stayed, for how long, when they arrived, when they left and in some cases what they thought about our country’.⁴⁰ Rank-and-file Securitate and militia agents, along with ‘unreliable’ collaborators, were deemed responsible for the lack of more substantial information. ‘In some towns, our agents made even more obvious mistakes. The officers learned about the presence of foreign tourists after they left and only by chance...For instance, D.D., former member of the National Peasants Party, from Curtea de Argeş, was visited by an Italian tourist in 1966, but we only found out about it from a postcard, which the Italian tourist sent to D.D.’.⁴¹ Hence, the information extracted from a postcard served multiple purposes. While for the Securitate, especially in a less touristic region like Argeş County, it could signal a connection between a Romanian and a foreign citizen, who most likely visited Romania as a tourist, for the receiver, it was a connection with the outside world, which the regime tried so desperately to cut off.

If in a region like Argeş it was easier for the Securitate to keep an eye on the interactions and correspondence between Romanian and foreign citizens, this was much more difficult to achieve on the Black Sea Coast, where Western tourists predominated. Despite this, in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the Securitate attempted to monitor Western tourists and their interactions with locals and tourist workers. In 1974, in Tulcea County, a region on the Black Sea Coast which included the Danube Delta, one of the most important tourist attractions, the Securitate opened a file about ‘foreign tourists and specialists’, whom they suspected of engaging in espionage.⁴² ‘From our data

it appears that some of the tourists and foreign specialists in our county are interested in gathering scientific, economic and military information, and they ask questions about the popular mood or national minorities...in order to accomplish this they build relationships with Romanian citizens'.⁴³ Despite opening the file in 1974, the Securitate agents in Tulcea did not put together a single report until 1982. According to the 1982 report, the secret police had ninety-six informers on the Romanian Black Sea Coast, including Tulcea County, and they placed twenty-two foreign tourists or specialists under surveillance because of connections with Romanian citizens. One tourist attracted the Securitate's agents' attention because he photographed a beggar (allegedly drunk) in the proximity of the central square in Tulcea, as well as some people who were poorly dressed.⁴⁴ Because of that he had the film removed from his camera when he left the country. In the mid-1980s, the Romanian communist regime became increasingly suspicious of foreign tourists, especially those who travelled outside organized tourism. A 1987 Securitate report emphasized that 'special attention should be given to those tourists who come on an individual basis or to visit their relatives...Foreign tourists of Romanian origins and individual tourists who rent cars without a driver should be put under surveillance'.⁴⁵

This increased surveillance made it difficult for Western tourists to Romania to take photos in the 1980s without being suspected of espionage or other wrongdoings. But if taking photos of 'improper' sights became a potential criminal activity, sending and receiving postcards to and from capitalist countries looked less suspicious to the communist regime, since the written message was visible. Moreover, the postcards issued by the National Office for Tourism-Carpathians showed officially sanctioned images. The photos were taken by approved photographers, and when necessary they were adjusted in order to show a neat and pleasant space.⁴⁶ A 1973 article published in the magazine *Mail and Telecommunications (Poșta și Telecomunicații)* stressed that the Romanian Postal Service should 'print postcards and stamps of different sizes depicting iconic images of historical places and tourist sites in Romania that would popularize Romanian sites'.⁴⁷ More specifically, these materials were supposed to show images of folk dress, natural landscapes and important cultural and historic Romanian personalities, as well as representative international events that would 'contribute to both meeting the plan figures and educating the masses'.⁴⁸ Hence,

postcards depicted acceptable images of Romanian socialism in order to ‘educate’ both Romanian and foreign viewers.

Postcards as Communication Avenues in Socialist Romania

As postcards conveyed the official image of socialist Romania, ordinary people had no obstacles when using them to communicate with private individuals across the Iron Curtain. Ileana N., a translator of French in Bucharest, used postcards to communicate with her friends in France, Belgium or Spain in the 1980s. ‘It was easier to send or receive postcards than it was with letters. There was no point to intercept them as anybody could see the message, and usually it was something like, “I am coming on X date, I will visit Y and Y places”, or just usual greetings. The more conventional the message, the fewer chances to call for the authorities’ attention’.⁴⁹ Although it displayed an officially approved image, sending a postcard involved a process of careful selection and often writing text that referred to the image shown on the postcard. Moreover, each postcard was personal and conveyed a specific message. Ileana N. remembers how in 1981 she sent a postcard to a Belgian friend that referred back to the interwar period, since it depicted the Techno-Import building, an Art Deco apartment building in the centre of Bucharest. Her message was clear: she wanted to show the diversity of urban landscapes in Bucharest and elsewhere in the country beyond the newly built communist blocs, as well as the cultural heritage of the interwar period.

This was an exception, however. In most cases, Ileana N. would receive postcards rather than send them. The received postcards, especially when they were sent from capitalist countries, held a subversive message. Ileana N. acknowledges that what was more important than the written message was the image shown on the postcard: ‘We would put the postcards on display in the bookshelf or somewhere in the kitchen’.⁵⁰ For her, postcards were a constant reminder of the outside world, even if she could take trips abroad (mostly to socialist countries) and she was in touch with Western citizens because of her job. But for those Romanian citizens who could not travel, which was the majority, postcards displaying images from the capitalist countries came to



Figure 4: Techno-import building, 1980s (built in 1935) (postcard, personal archive).

epitomize ‘the West’. Because of that, in socialist Romania, postcards became commodities and were valuable objects that symbolized one’s social status or personal networks. During our interview, Ileana N. showed me one of her favourite postcards, which showed a generic image of the Seine River in Paris. She was particularly fond of this image because of what the city of Paris epitomized for her and also because of her personal memories about the river walk.

Unlike the usual correspondence with capitalist countries, the process of receiving a postcard from abroad or sending one was relatively



Figure 5: Image showing the Seine River that Ileana N. received from a French friend (postcard, personal archive).

simple for both Romanian citizens and foreign tourists. The Romanian Postal Service acknowledged that in most cases sending postcards was a vacation-related activity. An article titled ‘The Management of Postal Service in Spa Resorts’ in *Mail and Telecommunications* mentions that mailboxes were placed in all hotels and inns as well as in the centre of most holiday resorts.⁵¹ Furthermore, in order to facilitate conversations with foreign tourists, the Romanian Postal Service’s employees in the larger resorts were supposed to speak a foreign language.⁵² Receiving a postcard at home also looked hassle-free, with postcards usually dropped in the receiver’s mailbox.

Liliana R., a former accountant in Cămpina, a town in the Prahova Valley, an important mountain tourist region in Romania, remembers that she used to regularly receive postcards from her friends and extended family travelling abroad.⁵³ While we were going over her collection of postcards during the interview I conducted with her, Liliana called my attention to the correspondence she had with her cousin, Aurel Iacobescu, a painter who could travel abroad more freely.⁵⁴ One of the postcards her cousin sent from Paris in 1972 described his itinerary in

Europe, while the image shown was the Church of Sacré-Coeur with its gardens in Montmartre, Paris. Liliana confessed that she liked the postcard because of the quality of its paper and the bright colours. Liliana, a painter herself in her free time, used these postcards as an inspiration for her paintings. But they were also a window into a world she could not physically reach, because she lacked both the financial means and the political connections that would have helped her obtain a visa.

Her cousin, Aurel, was in a different position, mostly because of his work. In the summer of 1972, Aurel, after having spent two months in Paris, planned to also visit Naples and Capri in Italy. Aurel Iacobescu's



Figure 6: Image showing Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Paris that Liliana R. received from her cousin Aurel Iacobescu (postcard, Liliana R.'s personal archive).

unusual mobility across the Iron Curtain could be explained by his special circumstances. As his paintings were sold abroad, Aurel Iacobescu became popular in the West. As a result, some German and French galleries requested permission from the state-controlled Romanian Union of Plastic Artists to exhibit Aurel Iacobescu's paintings and to host him as well.⁵⁵

Aurel Iacobescu's trips abroad to capitalist countries took place against the backdrop of travel liberalization for Romanian citizens at the end of the 1960s. In 1967, new regulations were introduced in regard to obtaining a passport.⁵⁶ Whereas according to the previous law, issued in 1957, the request for a passport and an exit visa had to be pre-approved by the Council of Ministers, the 1967 law mentioned the right of Romanian citizens to obtain a passport and travel 'in the conditions of the law'.⁵⁷ In addition, Romanian citizens living abroad did not need a Romanian visa in order to return to Romania. The reasons for which one could have one's request for a passport or exit visa denied were also made more transparent. Put simply, one could not take a vacation abroad to a capitalist country if one was on trial, had any outstanding debts to a 'socialist organization' and, more vaguely, was someone who 'could endanger Romania's image abroad and its relations with other countries'. The last stipulation referred to individuals convicted for various crimes, former members of interwar political parties, members of various religious sects, or individuals who had their properties nationalized and could appeal to international courts in order to regain their properties or gain adequate compensation.⁵⁸ Although these restrictions violated international law regarding freedom of movement and had a clear political target, the sheer existence of this law was a step forward. Taking vacations abroad became, at least in theory, a right for some of the citizens of socialist Romania. The number of Romanian tourists who travelled abroad reflected this situation. While in 1967, 43,676 Romanians took vacations to Western countries, in 1968, their numbers grew to 65,067.⁵⁹ Yet the number of Romanian tourists travelling to Western countries decreased slightly in the 1970s.⁶⁰ For instance, in 1975, only 39,573 Romanians visited Western countries between May and November, August being the most popular month.⁶¹ Significantly, the fact that Romanian citizens' summer destinations were West Germany, France, Israel, Great Britain, Greece, Austria and Spain suggests that going on vacation could have been the

main reason for undertaking these travels. In most cases, the Romanian citizens going abroad were high communist officials and their protégés, but people could also travel in order to see a family member. Romanian tourists to Western countries had to show an invitation from a foreign citizen, who also had to pay for their trip abroad in hard currency.

Aurel Iacobescu, Liliana's cousin, was one of thousands of individuals who benefitted from this opportunity to go on vacation to Western countries. Because Aurel worked as a painter, he had a more relaxed schedule. But a flexible schedule was not enough to make one a tourist; one also had to have an expendable income. Aurel's popularity abroad, as well as his political connections and the fact that a member of communist *nomenklatura* liked his work, helped him to afford these extended travels. Moreover, the Western art galleries that invited him paid for his trips. Between 1972 and 1981, he visited a Western country every year and sent at least one postcard to his relatives in Câmpina. From his postcards, one can recognize that his favourite destination was Paris. For New Year's Eve 1981, the postcard he sent showed a panoramic view of Paris while the greetings offered 'good health and many accomplished wishes'. Although the vista was generic, the postcard reflected Aurel's experience as a socialist tourist into a capitalist country and Liliana's possibility in following her cousin's trips.

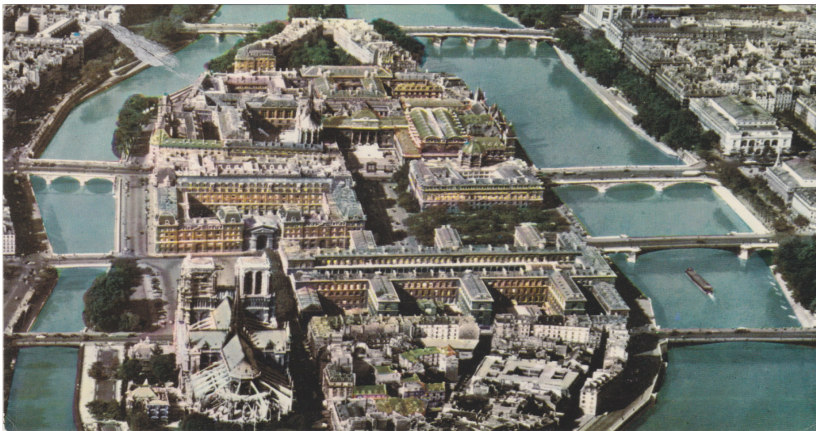


Figure 7: Image showing a panoramic view of Paris, 1980, postcard that Liliana R. received from her cousin Aurel (postcard, Liliana R.'s personal archive).

Conclusion

The question remains how one turns these personal and subjective experiences into ‘relevant historical realities’. Why do these recollections about holiday postcards matter? Postcards did not just work as propaganda instruments in the Cold War; they also created connections that transcended political and ideological boundaries. In the case of socialist Romania, this was even more important because of the communist regime and the country’s isolation in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Furthermore, as the number of Romanians who travelled to capitalist countries remained low, and permission to travel was contingent on one’s political and economic status, holiday postcards were a way of travelling virtually. At the micro-level, for Liliana and her family, that is, her sister and parents, these postcards recreated their connection with French culture. This was a familiar presence in their lives as they came of age before the communist regime took power, since they had taken classes about French culture and language as part of their general education.⁶² Hence, most of the images depicted on the postcards were well-known to them from art history or travel books. Seeing them on a card sent by their cousin, however, turned these otherwise abstract images into a familiar trope. Those distant places that Aurel Iacobescu visited became theirs through this family affiliation, despite the fact that neither Liliana nor her sister or parents ever set foot in any West European country before or after 1989. Particularly because of that, the holiday postcards they received from their cousin or other friends and relatives functioned as a form of virtual travel. In Ileana N.’s case, postcards helped to preserve ties with people she befriended while working as a translator of French and, hence, to build cross-border personal networks despite the Romanian communist regime’s more autarchic stance in the 1980s.

When examining the exchange of postcards across the Iron Curtain from a more political and global perspective, the transfer of postcards helped to connect capitalist Western Europe with socialist Eastern Europe despite the Cold War divide. While in Romania most of the correspondence from the West was opened, postcards were allowed, since the Securitate, secret police, and the regime considered them rather inoffensive. In the long term, they helped preserve personal networks that went beyond the authority of the state and, most

importantly, served as a reminder of the outside world. To a certain extent, the exchange of postcards facilitated the existence of a personal space for Romanian citizens who otherwise had to cope with blurred boundaries between their private and public lives.⁶³ Furthermore, for Romanians, postcards refreshed and personalized iconic images in the Western countries; they helped them see distant places and engage in armchair travel. For Western citizens, images from socialist Romania epitomized an exotic landscape and a possible tourist destination. In the 1980s, when tourist photography became increasingly sanctioned because of fears of espionage, postcards remained one of the prime ways of remembering a vacation and of connecting with places where friends or family lived.

Besides facilitating a form of communication between the capitalist and socialist blocs and establishing informal relations that went beyond the Cold War division, postcards ultimately helped create a common visual culture. For Romanian citizens who could not, or did not have the means to, travel to the West, postcards provided an up-to-date image of various cultural artefacts that came to be associated with sites in the 'West'. For the citizens of capitalist countries, postcards from socialist Romania worked as glimpses into the 'other world'. Because they displayed officially approved images which conveyed modernism and a cultural heritage that tied either into European civilization or 'Romanian specificity', postcards depicted a favourable image of Romania in the 'West'. That image attracted tourists, and until the 1980s, Western travel magazines furthered this image, despite Romania's location beyond the Iron Curtain and its restrictive domestic policies.

Notes

- 1 An exchange student programme began with France in 1958, with the first group of French students visiting Romania in 1959. In 1973, Romania became the first socialist state to sign a special trade agreement with the EEC. In 1974, trade with capitalist countries exceeded trade with COMECON countries, and in 1976, it received Most Favored Nation (MFN) status from the United States. Among socialist countries only Poland had a similar status. Other examples of its distinctive position include Romania's recognition of West Germany in 1967. See 'Waiver of Trade Restrictions

- Against Romania' in *Serial Set Volume* No. 13109-2, Session Vol. No. 1-2, 1975.
- 2 Diane P. Koenker and Anne E. Gorsuch, *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca, 2006); Anne E. Gorsuch, *All this is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford, 2011); Diane P. Koenker, *Club Red: Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream* (Ithaca, 2013); Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington, IN, 2013); Patrick Hayder Patterson, 'Dangerous Liaisons – Soviet-Bloc Tourists and the Temptations of the Yugoslav Good Life in the 1960s and 1970s' in Philip Scranton and Janet F. Davidson (eds), *The Business of Tourism: Place, Faith, and History* (Philadelphia, 2006) 186–212; Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor, *Yugoslavia's Sunny Side: A History of Tourism in Socialism* (Budapest, 2010).
 - 3 A new body of literature is emerging in this respect. See the workshops 'Crossing the Iron Curtain: Tourism and Travelling in the Cold War' at the University of Amsterdam (7–8 April 2017) and 'Cold War Mobilities and (Im)mobilities: Entangled Histories of Eastern and Southern Europe' at Central European University in Budapest (6 June 2017). See also Oana Adelina Stefan, *Vacationing in the Cold War: Foreign Tourists to Socialist Romania and Franco's Spain, 1960–1970s* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, May 2016).
 - 4 For a transnational view on tourism see Eric G. E. Zuelow, *Tourism Beyond the Nation: A Transnational Approach to European Tourism History* (Surrey, 2011) or Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill, 2004).
 - 5 Zuelow, *Tourism* 7.
 - 6 National Archives of Romania (in Romanian, Arhivele Nationale Istorice Centrale- henceforth ANIC), CC of PCR Chancellery, file no. 150/1966, f. 2.
 - 7 The possession of hard/foreign currencies was forbidden by law in socialist Romania, except for Romanians who worked abroad (mostly in the Middle East and Northern Africa). Otherwise, individual travel to capitalist countries was possible if those Romanian travellers had relatives or friends abroad willing to pay in hard currencies for their trips.
 - 8 Scholars have shown how postcards play an important role in producing and disseminating a certain national image. See Tim Jon Semmerling, *Israeli and Palestinian Postcards* (Austin, 2004) 1–2.

- 9 See Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison WI, 1997). On the way memory works in oral history see Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany NY, 1991) and on the connection between memory and gender see Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-subjectivity* (London, 2006) or Luisa Passerini, Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, 'Bodies Across Borders. Oral and Visual Memory in Europe and Beyond', *Women's History Review* 25:3 (2015) 458–469.
- 10 Postcards have been examined mostly in relation to modernity and as sheer visual artifacts. See David Prochaska, Jordana Mendelson (eds), *Postcards: ephemeral histories of modernity* (University Park, PA, 2010).
- 11 For example, on the Romanian case see Simina Badica, 'Forbidden Images? Visual Memories of Romanian Communism Before and After 1989' in Maria Todorova, Stefan Troebst, Augusta Dimou (eds), *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experiences in Southeast Europe* (Budapest, 2014) 201–217. Similarly, on the arts in socialist and post-socialist regimes see Ales Erjavec (ed.), *Politicized Arts under Late Socialism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003).
- 12 Romanian National Archives (henceforth ANIC), Council of Ministers, file no. 227/1965, f. 59.
- 13 In 1953, youth delegates from both socialist and capitalist countries arrived in Bucharest for the International Student Festival. One year later students from socialist countries but also young people of leftist orientation from France took part in a summer camp in Romania. See *Vacances en Roumanie: le camp international des étudiants a Timis: Juillet 1954* (Bucarest: Editions de l'Institut Roumain pour les Relations Culturelles avec l'Etranger, 1955).
- 14 Norman Moss, 'Tourism is piercing the Iron Curtain' in *The New York Times*, 11 September 1955, p. X29.
- 15 ANIC, Council of Ministers Collection, file no.29/1961, f. 5.
- 16 ANIC, Council of Ministers Collection, file no. 29/1961, f. 6. At the same time, Romania announced its interest to develop international tourism already in 1955, according to an article published in the *The New York Time*. See 'Romania will open doors to tourists' in *The New York Times*, 28 September 1955, 56.
- 17 *Ibid.*, f. 10.

- 18 In the meeting's proceedings the name of the tourist organization in Poland misspelled as URBIS instead of ORBIS.
- 19 *Ibid.*, f. 39.
- 20 *Ibid.*, f. 46.
- 21 On the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast, tourist guides give tourists short historical information on the country and the Black Sea region, followed by a short presentation of the resort and of most important tourist objectives. [...] For tourists who are visiting Mamaia [in Romania] we organize a tour of the local collective farms and we offer a common dinner that takes place in a comradeship environment. *Ibidem*, f. 47.
- 22 'European Tourism on the Rise' in *World Travel*, no. 63, April 1964, p. 13.
- 23 ANIC, CC of PCR Propaganda Section, file no. 21/1963, f. 3.
- 24 *Ibid.*, f. 4.
- 25 Although the year was not mentioned on the postcard, this was printed before 1963 when the spelling of the name of the country Romania, was changed from 'î' to 'â', but not earlier than 1961 as the 'blade razor hotels' Aurora, Meridian, Doina, Flora, and Victoria (built between 1960 and 1961) are shown in the image.
- 26 A 1960 postcard from Austria followed a similar pattern when it put together some iconic references for the country, such as, Johann Strauss's statue and various places where he lived and worked in Vienna.
- 27 ANIC, Council of Ministers Collection, file no. 25/1959, f. 5.
- 28 *Ibid.*, f. 6.
- 29 And this projection was grounded in reality as the hotels' design followed the architectural principles of modernist architects such as, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. The *Arhitectura* Magazine, the most important journal of the Romanian architects, published detailed articles about the work of Gropius and Le Corbusier in the attempt to familiarize the students of architecture with these new tendencies. See *Arhitectura*, no. 5/1967, 41–56.
- 30 Unsurprisingly, the Romanian government took very seriously the Austrian tourist's letter and implemented some of his suggestions. For instance, ethnic restaurants and cuisine became a hallmark of Romanian tourist advertising, ANIC, Council of Ministers, 154/1965, f. 14.
- 31 *Ibid.*, f. 16.
- 32 Henri-Louis Weichselbaum, 'Invitation en Roumanie' in *Auto Touring*, May 1968, p. 34.
- 33 *Touring Club de France*, no. 785, July-August 1967 676. Visas were still required for those travelling on an individual basis. It was, however, easy

to get a tourist visa, which offered a 10% discount for the products bought in the tourist shops. Visas for tourists from the socialist countries that had no bilateral tourist agreement with Romania remained in place. As of 1970, Romania had reached tourist agreements with Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and USSR, but not with Eastern Germany, which only signed an agreement with Romania in 1972.

34 Tord Høivik, *Sun, Sea, and Socialism, A Comparison of Tourism in Six European Countries, 1930–1975* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1975), p. 7.

35 On top of that international context had changed because of the glasnost in the USSR and Ceaușescu's reorientation in the early 1980s from Western countries, which he assiduously courted during the 1960s and the 1970s, to the so-called 'Third World'.

36 Romanian National Archives, CC of PCR, Economic Unit, file no. 165/1981.

37 ANIC, Central Committee Collection, Economic Section, file no. 165/1981, f. 16. This was a sensitive issue for the Romania socialist regime as the revenues brought by Western tourists were higher than those delivered by tourists from socialist countries, despite the overwhelming share of East Europeans. The slow increase in the number of Western tourists throughout the 1970s and their decline in the 1980s hurt the Romanian economy and the socialist officials' plans to use international tourism in order to improve the balance of payments. Whereas in the late 1960s and early 1970s the total income from international tourism in Romania was 6% from the GDP, in 1982 this plummeted to 1.4%, below the world average income of 3.3%. In 1983, a report by *Propaganda și Agitație* (Propaganda and Agitation Section within CC of PCR) section noted that 'in 1982 the number of foreign tourists significantly plummeted compared to the previous years'. See ANIC, Propaganda and *Agitație* Collection, file no. 60/1983, f. 11.

38 The Archive of the former *Securitate* (henceforth ACNSAS), Documentary Collection, Sibiu County, file no. 8663, vol. 21, f. 71.

39 ACNSAS, Documentary Collection, Argeș County, file no. 16628, vol. 2, f. 93.

40 Ibid., f. 94.

41 Ibid., f. 95.

42 ACNSAS, Documentary File Tulcea County, file no. 19661, vol. 1, f. 2.

43 Ibid., f. 3.

44 Ibid., f. 96.

- 45 Ibid., f. 146.
- 46 Nicolae M., camera operator, personal interview, June 2010, Bucharest.
- 47 Virdil Shioparlan, 'Cu privire la activitatea de perspectiva in sectorul de posta' in *Poșta si Telecomunicații*, 17, 1973, no. 7, 352.
- 48 Ibid., p. 352.
- 49 Ileana N., age 57, personal interview, November 2015, Bucharest.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Virgil Schioparlan, 'Organizarea deservirii cu prestatii de posta si telecomunicatii in statiunile balneo-climaterice' in *Posta si Telecomunicatii*, 15, 1971, no. 8, 407.
- 52 Ibid., p. 408.
- 53 Liliana R., age 95, personal interview November 2015, Câmpina, Prahova.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 ANIC, Uniunea Artistilor Plastici Collection, file no. 66/1971, f. 83 (courtesy of Claudiu Oancea).
- 56 Decision of Council of Ministers no. 800/1967.
- 57 ACNSAS, Documentary File, file no. 11750, f. 177.
- 58 Ibid., f. 180.
- 59 Dragoș Petrescu, 'Closely Watched Tourism: The Securitate as the Warden of Transnational Encounters, 1967–1969' in *Journal of Contemporary History* 50:2 (2015) 339.
- 60 Dragoș Petrescu assumes that the high number of Romanian tourists who refused to return was the main reason for this limitation. This hypothesis is supported by a 1968 report of the Committee for Passports and Visas of the Council of Ministers. It reported that 532 people decided to stay abroad (in capitalist countries) while taking a vacation with the NTO-Carpathians.
- 61 ACNSAS, Documentary Collection, file no. 13165, vol. 5. In August 1975 alone, 7218 Romanian tourists travelled to Western countries.
- 62 Liliana R., age 95, personal interview, Câmpina, November 2015.
- 63 For more on 'socialist spaces' see David Crowley, *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (London, 2002).