

@CHAPTER = ROMANIA

Romania was the last of the Warsaw Pact countries to throw off its hard-line leadership. Until the tumultuous events of late December, relations with the United States had reached a new low. The repressive regime of Nicolae Ceausescu was intent on proving that it would not be swayed by protests from either its own people or foreign governments. Citizens who dared to criticize government policies were immediately silenced -- at times with extreme violence -- and protests by foreign governments were ignored. As the abusive practices of the Ceausescu regime led to its growing international isolation, the Bush administration generally availed itself of opportunities to condemn human rights violations in Romania.

The Bush administration's criticisms of Romanian abuses reflect a modification of the Reagan administration's policy of "differentiation" toward Eastern Europe. The Reagan administration rewarded those countries that demonstrated independence from the Soviet Union in their foreign policies. The Bush administration, by contrast, has favored those countries that have made progress toward political and economic reform -- a policy more in keeping with the promotion of human rights in Eastern Europe. The new policy has completely reversed the U.S. stance toward Romania. Since 1975 and throughout the Reagan years, Romania was awarded Most Favored Nation ("MFN") trading status for its maverick foreign policy. In February 1988, faced with increasing U.S. pressure on human rights, the Romanian government renounced its MFN status. With the Bush administration's modification of the "differentiation" policy, Romania became a virtual pariah, with no prospect of normal relations until it undertook a process of reform.

As part of this new policy, the Bush administration responded firmly to news of Romanian government crackdowns:

@BULLET = In February, at the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the U.S. voted in favor of a resolution condemning Romanian rights practices and appointing a special rapporteur to investigate human rights in Romania.

@BULLET = In March, when six former Communist officials in Romania were put under house arrest for writing an open letter criticizing the government, the administration cancelled a high-level meeting with the Romanian government, emphasizing in strong language that the arrests were the reason for the cancellation. State Department spokesman Charles Redman warned that further crackdowns "would be an affront to the international community and would have direct consequences for U.S.-Romanian relations."

@BULLET = In November, in protest over Romania's human rights record, the U.S. joined its NATO allies (except Turkey) in not sending observers to the 14th Romanian Communist Party Congress. The administration explained that "attendance [at] any of the activities would be inconsistent with the depth of U.S. concern over the human rights situation in Romania, for which the Romanian Communist Party bears responsibility."

@BULLET = In December, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater denounced the reported killing of demonstrators in the western Romanian city of Timisoara as "unjustified" and "brutal."

With the downfall of the Ceausescu regime, the administration took an important step in holding the new Romanian government to human rights standards. On December 25, White House spokesman Fitzwater said that "[t]he U.S. Government pledges its support to the new Romanian Government as it struggles to achieve its announced democratic values," but as news emerged that Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, had been executed after a summary military tribunal, Fitzwater said that the U.S. "regretted" the manner of execution.

Under Ceausescu, the U.S. embassy in Bucharest deserved credit for sending

representatives to criminal proceedings against leaders of the Comanesti Baptist Church. The defendants, who were tried on August 10, September 21 and October 5, faced charges relating to the alleged illegal construction of their church, which was demolished by the government on May 31. The presence of U.S. embassy observers at these hearings may have contributed to sentences of "corrective labor" rather than prison.

The U.S. delegations to the Helsinki review conferences in Vienna, London and Paris (part of the process known formally as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe ("CSCE")) deserved credit for forcefully raising human rights concerns with regard to Romania. At the Paris conference on human rights, Romania's record was singled out for particularly harsh condemnation. In his opening statement on May 31, Ambassador Morris Abram, the head of the U.S. delegation, strongly criticized Romania:

@QUOTENOIND = And what do we make of Romania, where conditions continue to deteriorate across the board? Over 20,000 have fled the country in the past 18 months to escape harsh repression and economic desperation. Intellectuals and journalists -- and for the first time, former Party leaders -- have raised their voices to protest these conditions, and consequently suffer harassment, house arrest, imprisonment and, reportedly, even internal exile. In the meantime, the Romanian government -- one of the moving forces behind the CSCE process 14 years ago -- turns its back on the very commitments it made as recently as Vienna.

Such firm, public condemnations of brutal Romanian rights practices were crucial for maintaining pressure on the Ceausescu regime.