



In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond

Robert D. Kaplan

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author Robert D. Kaplan, named one of the world's Top 100 Global Thinkers by *Foreign Policy* magazine, comes a riveting journey through one of Europe's frontier countries—and a potent examination of the forces that will determine Europe's fate in the postmodern age.

Robert Kaplan first visited Romania in the 1970s, when he was a young journalist and the country was a bleak Communist backwater. It was one of the darkest corners of Europe, but few Westerners were paying attention. What ensued was a lifelong obsession with a critical, often overlooked country—a country that, today, is key to understanding the current threat that Russia poses to Europe. *In Europe's Shadow* is a vivid blend of memoir, travelogue, journalism, and history, a masterly work thirty years in the making—the story of a journalist coming of age, and a country struggling to do the same. Through the lens of one country, Kaplan examines larger questions of geography, imperialism, the role of fate in international relations, the Cold War, the Holocaust, and more.

Here Kaplan illuminates the fusion of the Latin West and the Greek East that created Romania, the country that gave rise to Ion Antonescu, Hitler's chief foreign accomplice during World War II, and the country that was home to the most brutal strain of Communism under Nicolae Ceau?escu. Romania past and present are rendered in cinematic prose: the ashen faces of citizens waiting in bread lines in Cold War-era Bucharest; the B?r?gan Steppe, laid bare by centuries of foreign invasion; the grim labor camps of the Black Sea Canal; the majestic Gothic church spires of Transylvania and Maramure?. Kaplan finds himself in dialogue with the great thinkers of the past, and with the Romanians of today, the philosophers, priests, and politicians—those who struggle to keep the flame of humanism alive in the era of a resurgent Russia.

Upon his return to Romania in 2013 and 2014, Kaplan found the country transformed yet again—now a traveler's destination shaped by Western tastes, yet still emerging from the long shadows of Hitler and Stalin. *In Europe's Shadow* is the story of an ideological and geographic frontier—and the book you must read in order to truly understand the crisis with Russia, and within Europe itself.

Praise for *In Europe's Shadow*

“[A] haunting yet ultimately optimistic examination of the human condition as found in Romania . . . Kaplan's account of the centuries leading up to the most turbulent of all—the twentieth—is both sweeping and replete with alluring detail.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A serious yet impassioned survey of Romania . . . [Kaplan's] method is that of a foreign correspondent, firing off dispatches from the South China Sea to North Yemen to the darkest corners of Eastern Europe. . . . Kaplan is a regional geographer par excellence.”—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Kaplan's work exemplifies rare intellectual, moral and political engagement with the political order—and disorder—of our world.”—*The Huffington Post*

“A masterly work of important history, analysis, and prophecy about the ancient and modern rise of Romania as a roundabout between Russia and Europe . . . I learned something new on every page.”—**Tom Brokaw**

“A favorite of mine for years, Robert D. Kaplan is a thoughtful and insight-driven historian who writes clear and compelling prose, but what I like most about him is his political sophistication. A true pleasure for the reader.”—**Alan Furst**

In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond Details

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Bill says

I have to say that I knew absolutely nothing about Romania before reading this book. That has now been rectified to some extent.

This book is sort of a combination of history combined with a travel memoir. The author sort of skims over the early history of the country, and that is probably the most boring part of the book, as it consists mainly of listing dates and events. By far the greater part of the book is focused on the years since World War II. The author visited the country numerous times but draws mainly on two trips, one in 1981 and one in 2013.

Starting almost immediately after the second world war, Romania was ruled by two successive Communist dictators, both of whom were mini-Stalins, with the attendant executions, repression, loss of religious freedom and the fact that it wasn't good to be an intellectual of any sort. This continued until 1989, when the population finally revolted and executed the extremely brutal Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife.

When the author went to visit Romania in 2013, the country had turned itself almost completely around. There was relative prosperity, tourists in abundance, and the locals wore hip clothing and everyone had a smartphone.

Foreign Policy magazine has twice named the author one of the world's Top 100 Global Thinkers, so it is to his credit that he has managed to write a very readable book that was of great interest to this layman.

So if you are interested in Romania or just want to read a very enjoyable work of history, you might want to give this a try.

Fiona says

3.5 stars. In Europe's Shadow covers much of the ground of Balkan Ghosts in which Kaplan returned to Romania in 1989/90 to witness the changes there and in neighbouring countries since his first visit in the early 1970s. He returns again in 2013/14 for the same reason. Although there is a lot of new material, there is a lot of 'old' material too as he again explains the complex history of the region.

"Time is a moving sea of fog, rent with holes that reveal intense, sacred moments of memory, even as all the rest is dim." That's how I felt about this book. In parts it's very interesting and illuminating, particularly when he demonstrates how Putin now exerts Russia's influence over neighbouring countries by stealth, i.e. by taking over banks and other institutions, buying up land, owning airport rights, creating a dependency on Russian oil and gas, rather than invading with armies, with the unfortunate exception of Ukraine of course. For me, there is too much self indulgent wallowing in his own love of Romania though, with too much tedious detail about past history and architecture. He acknowledges the poverty in the countryside - many farmers still travel on horse and cart and use manual tools rather than modern machinery - but I felt he

ignored the poverty in Bucharest. In 2012, I travelled to and from the Bulgarian border to Bucharest and was appalled at the desolation and poverty in the countryside but was not much less appalled at the living conditions on the outskirts of the city. Housing blocks literally crumbling away, packs of emaciated dogs on the streets, and a poorly dressed population scouring poorly stocked shops, reminiscent of the Communist or Ceausescu eras. Kaplan doesn't mention this because he concentrates on central Bucharest and I feel that creates a false picture of the city as a whole.

The last few pages are exemplary Kaplan. His in depth knowledge provides an insightful short essay on the current situation in Europe, the continuing threat that Russia poses, the importance of the EU as a beacon of light to countries trying to shake off a difficult past, the return of Hungary to an authoritarian regime and the dangers that poses to the region as a whole. If only more of the book had been written in the same way, I would have found it a much more rewarding read.

Scott Whitmore says

Robert D. Kaplan is one of my favorite authors and I've read all his books and many of his magazine articles. I especially enjoy the way he examines a region or locale by blending history, current events, politics, and interviews with residents ranging from government officials to clergymen — all the while in the guise of a curious traveler.

In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond marks Kaplan's return to Europe after an extended run of primarily focusing on Asia. In many ways this is a bookend to his breakout *Balkan Ghosts*, as he explains how he came to travel through the region in the first place. I have Romanian in my ancestry, but admit to knowing less about the country than I would like. I greatly enjoyed filling in some of the blanks with Kaplan as my guide.

Other reviewers have noted Kaplan's strong, vocal support of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and expressed the opinion that his stance effectively disqualifies him from serving as any kind of expert on foreign affairs. I'd counter that he has repeatedly acknowledged he was wrong about Iraq and his recent writing, especially this book, demonstrates a determination to identify and inform on emerging trends and locations of potential interest without drawing too many conclusions. In my (obviously biased) opinion, he is too valuable a source to ignore; whether I agree with his views or not, I always learn a lot from him.

NOTE: I don't spend as much time on reviews of traditionally published books as I do for Indie authors.

Margaret Sankey says

In 1981, Kaplan was fresh out of the IDF and looking to cultivate a career in journalism. He headed for Bucharest, to observe the effect of Ceausescu's policies on Romania, seeing the crushing blows of repression, persecution and crony government. In 2013, he returned, and this book is a parallel narrative of the 1980s Cold War, and the current escalation of tensions with Russia with a slowing recovering Romania as a vital but overlooked frontline in this conflict. Notable for Kaplan's explanations of how deep reading in history and memoirs have helped him figure out what was going on, as with Thucydides and Theodore White's observations on the Chinese Civil War.

Sherwood Smith says

Copy provided by NetGalley.

One of the most interesting developments in journalism, or so it appears to me as a reader, is the reintroduction of “I.” Travel memoirs of old were presented up front as such, the better ones full of historical context and observation, with reference to how the ordinary person of a given area sees their world.

At least when I was young, there was this emphasis on being objective. I don’t believe anyone is truly objective. There are degrees of obviousness in the writer’s perception. And trying too hard for a robotic objectivity frequently leads to government-speak (“it was decided” convolutions) and just plain dullness.

Kaplan is very aware of that as he discusses at length his approach for this book—beginning with his own limitations. *You don't grow up gradually. You grow up in short bursts at pivotal moments, by suddenly realizing how ignorant and immature you are. Bucharest, as I rode in from the airport and saw the ashen, moldy faces of the bus driver and other Romanian support, crushed in their overcoats and winter hats with earmuffs and their worries, made be instinctually aware of all the history I had been missing the last half decade.*

The best travel writer since Herodotus to my mind is Patrick Leigh Fermor, whose superlative writing and profound insights and historical awareness are mentioned often enough in this book that I suspect that Kaplan was trying for a similar approach. And that’s no bad goal.

He has this to say about travel writing: *For the real adventure of travel is mental. It is about total immersion in a place, because nobody from any other place can contact you. You are alone. Thus your life is narrowed to what is immediately before your eyes, making the experience of it that much more vivid and life transforming.*

The dilemma, therefore, is how to generalize without going too far, and yet at the same time to describe honestly what one has experienced — and draw conclusions from it — without being intimidated by a moral reprimand. I have failed in this regard in the past, and have struggled for years trying to find the right balance. And I am more and more unsure of myself as I get older, even as I know that there is a vast distance between describing obvious cultural peculiarities and provoking the specter of both racism and essentialism.

He then segues to journalism, and its strengths and pitfalls.

By learning to be a journalist, I do not mean learning the commonplace but crucial mechanics of accurate note-taking, newswriting, or developing sources, which I had been taught in elementary form earlier in college and at a small newspaper. Instead, I refer to understanding the true character of objectivity.

For what is taught in journalism schools is an invaluable craft, whereas properly observing the world is a matter of deliberation and serious reading over decades in the fields of history, philosophy, and political science. Journalism actually is not necessarily, whatever the experts of the profession may claim, a traditional subject in its own right.

Rather, it is a means to explore and better communicate subjects that are, in fact, traditional areas of study:

history and philosophy as I've said, but also government, politics, literature, architecture, art, and so on. I've never altogether trusted what journalists say about themselves. As Robert Musil, the great early twentieth century Austrian novelist, observes: "High-mindedness is the mark of every professional ideology."

The result is partly memoir, history, partly travelogue, partly journalistic reportage, and partly meditation, adding up to an absorbing, never boring, but seldom easy, read. Opinions are upfront: for example, twice Kaplan states that the ultimate purpose of human existence is to appreciate beauty.

The mention of writers such as Fermor, and Elias Canetti, and Mersea Eliade, with sharply observed examinations of the works of the two latter, made me reach for my pen to jot down names and titles of works of which I hadn't heard.

The short summary is this: Kaplan returns to Romania and adjacent regions after visits in the eighties and nineties during tumultuous change. He does linger on some of the more stomach-turning aspects of history, very old ranging to not too long ago. But he veers from sensationalism for its own sake, trying to provide context, with such observations as this, after a tense visit, during which he occupied himself by reading Joseph Conrad: *Because the future lies inside the silences — inside what people are afraid to discuss openly among themselves, or at the dinner table — it is in the guise of fiction that a writer can more easily and relentlessly tell the truth.*

His premier point seems to be that Western indifference and ignorance of areas such as Moldova—tucked up against the Ukraine—could endanger the relative peace of Europe.

I then began acquiring the habit of separating myself from the journalistic horde, looking for news in obscure locations, that is. For example, on a later trip to Bucharest in 1984, Latham casually told me that Ceausescu was blasting a vast area of the capital into oblivion, with security forces plundering and then blowing up whole neighborhoods of historic Orthodox churches, monasteries, Jewish synagogues, and nineteenth century houses: 10,000 structures and all, many with their own sylvan courtyards. Residents were given hours to clear out with their life possessions before explosive charges were set.

Along the way Kaplan offers vivid word pictures of places and people he met, many of them leaders (it was apparently surprisingly easy for journalists to gain access to powerful people thirty years ago), but there are at least a few some snaps of ordinary folk.

This is where my interest caught the most. When I was young, the map of Europe was dominated by the vast pink swathe of the USSR. Names like Romania and Moldavia belonged only to ancient histories. When I traveled as a student in 1971-2, I couldn't get past the Iron Curtain: everyone said it took money, and in those days I got around by hitchhiking, eating once a day, or less. Ever since then, I've read whatever I could about those mysterious areas so closed off.

And Kaplan takes me there, beginning about the time I was in Europe, for he was a year younger, his reach much farther than mine.

Worked in among the chapters on his travels are historical meditations, ranging from the fourteenth and fifteenth century voivodes up to the crucial work Metternich did at the Congress of Vienna in laying down a pattern for relative balance of power that more or less lasted for the following century.

Metternich, that farsighted reactionary, was a man of peace — contra Napoleon, that endemic progressive,

who was a man of war. Metternich believed in legal states, not in ethnic nations. States are sanctioned by bureaucratic systems governed by the rule of law; ethnic nations are ruled by blood and soil passion, the very enemy of moderation and analysis.

Toward the end of the work he brings us to the present, with an essay about the importance of the region, and of Western awareness of what is going on there. *Group consciousness is all very well and good as long as it defends the rights of the individual — regardless of origin or political tendency. Only with that in mind does nationalism have legitimacy. Though people from time to time still fought vaguely and wistfully, with their eyes half closed, about Greater This or Greater That, their immediate concerns were for the safety and predictability in their own lives.*

There's a lot of food for thought here, as well as a fascinating excursion into an area few of us English-speakers have reached.

Stijn says

Kaplan slaagt er meesterlijk in om de gelaagdheid van een land als Roemenië om te zetten in een uiterst leesbaar werk. Voor het lezen van dit boek was mijn kennis over het land beperkt tot Nicolae Ceau?escu en Vlad Dracula, de 15de eeuwse heerser die de basis vormde voor het meesterwerk van de hand van Bram Stoker. De auteur schildert een soms fraai, vaak beklijvend maar steeds respectvol portret van een land dat we als gemiddelde Europeaan haast niet kennen, maar dat duidelijk toch een belangrijke rol gespeeld heeft (en nog steeds speelt) binnen de geografie en cultuur van het Westen. Het boek houdt het midden tussen een geschiedkundig werk, politieke schets en een reisroman, een oefening die de auteur schijnbaar weinig moeite kost en die daarom ook nergens geforceerd aanvoelt. Ik kan, na het definitief dichtklappen, enkel uitermate veel sympathie en medevoelen koesteren met een volk dat zo divers is, vaak onderschat, maar klaarblijkelijk nooit de leiders heeft gekregen die het verdiende.

Razvan Zamfirescu says

Spicuri din recenzia finala care se gaseste pe blogul meu

.....
Este o adev?rat? pl?cere s? c?l?tore?ti în timp al?turi de Kaplan. Al?turi de el am reu?it, cumva, s?-mi dau seama de cât de mult a evoluat aceast? ?ar?. Ca ?i locuitor al României recunosc c? am observat destul de greu schimb?rile majore prin care am trecut în ultimii dou?zeci ?i cinci de ani, îns? cu ajutorul lui Kaplan am reu?it s?-mi dau seama c? România s-a schimbat ?i s-a schimbat în bine. Poate mai greu decât alte ??ri, poate c? înc? nu am reu?it s? ne dezbat?m în totalitate de mizerabila mo?tenire ruso-comunist? dar am reu?it s? surprindem pozitiv un jurnalist str?in care ne-a vizitat de-a lungul a patru decenii.

În umbra Europei este o combina?ie de jurnal de c?l?torie cu studiu istoric al României, ?i al Balcanilor în genere. Fascinat de arhitectura din urbele române?ti precum ?i de zonele oarecum s?lbatrice din România, Kaplan c?l?tore?te ?i încearc? s? în?eleag? spiritul românesc într-un mod didactic, f?când

apel atât la c?r?ile pe care le-a citit cât ?i la discu?iile pe care le-a avut cu diferite personalit??i. Neagu Djuvara, Horia-Roman Patapievici, Traian B?sescu, Victor Ponta etc. sunt doar câteva exemple dintre numele pe care Kaplan le întâlne?te ?i care-l ajut? în a în?elege România contemporan?.

Leftbanker says

This was completely all over the place, but that's OK because I knew almost nothing about the subject. I probably could have written everything that I knew about this country on the back of a postage stamp. I've never even really heard Romanian spoken. Since I speak Spanish and French I would think that I could at least follow along a little bit.

He starts out way back in the communist era when Romania was a sort of European North Korea. My biggest complaint about the book is that I really get no feel of what the country is like today.

His history and analysis really helps to focus on the current situation that is unfolding between the West and Putin's Russia. We seem to be making the same mistakes—by "we" I mean the USA—as we did at the onset of WWII when we basically did nothing in Eastern Europe so countries had little choice but to lean towards Hitler and fascism.

Chandy John says

This was one helluva big disappointment. I'd been wanting to read this book from when it was available only as a very expensive hardcover. I waited and ended up very disappointed.

The book is more 'very boring travel book' than a lesson in geopolitics/history. Whatever history there is is either terribly boring or rarely interesting. Or maybe its just Romania and the dreary Balkans. I didn't like his earlier book Balkan Ghosts either.

Ana says

As a certified born and bred Romanian, I was very pleased with this work. To me, it seems like Kaplan knows his stuff when it comes to my country. This work also sparked my desire to travel to some places that I haven't seen in years, because Kaplan's descriptions of the rural areas are beautiful.

Peter Tillman says

I read about 20% and it was -- just OK. Travels he made as a young man, in bleak Communist Romania. Then back after the fall of Ceasescu. Along in there, my interest faded, the book went back on the shelf, and there it stayed, until it came due.

I can't say I have any real desire to go on, given the size of my TBR. Abandoned unfinished, and left unrated.

Michael says

This is a highly readable and thoughtful tour of Romanian history, culture, and current situation by a respected journalist who became enthralled with its people and history as a foreign correspondent in Eastern Europe and the Mideast over the decades since the 70s. I hate how ignorant I am of history and geography so I often keep my eyes out for books that can help elucidate the character of people and counties over time (recent examples include works on Greenland and Paraguay). My interest in Romania was already whetted from recent reads on the history of World War 1 (Strachan's "The First World War") and historical fiction that featured events there in World War 2 (Bolano's "2666"; Furst's "Blood of Victory"). As I'd already appreciated Kaplan's mind and methods from his combined travel and historical portrait of the American West, "Empire Wilderness," and could see he has a string of respected volumes on the Middle East, Turkey, the Balkans and North Africa, it was an easy step to take this book in hand.

Kaplan's approach on two extended stays in Romania is to travel from province to province experiencing its geography, architecture, and art while talking to significant cultural, academic, religious, and political figures. In the process, he forges an analysis of the county's past, present, and future in the context of his readings of its history and literature. His method leaves him short of perspectives of ordinary people. Still, his choices of whom he did talk to appear sufficient broad enough for me to trust he has captured some significant truths and paradoxes about the character this country and its peoples.

From the start he makes it clear how much geography is destiny for Romania. It has long been a buffer zone at the intersection of great empires, which in recent centuries means the Russian and Ottoman empires and varying configurations of Hapsburg kingdoms. Like Poland, Romania may be seen to lie clearly on the path from Russia to Western Europe and vice versa. Despite the obvious negative aspect of lying at a dangerous transition zone between great powers, Kaplan's analysis finds that Romania also benefitted from being prized as a buffer, as that led it to be accorded various levels of independence for long periods since the Middle Ages.

Romania's position on the Black Sea and nested position in relation to Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Balkan states on the black sea

His lens for looking backward is from points of visits to the county at times in the 70s and 80s when it was under Soviet hegemony, a point in 1989 soon after the communist dictator Ceaușescu was overthrown through a violent democratic revolution, and a recent interval when their economy was flourishing and they had achieved full membership in the European Union. The flowering of life and culture after nearly 50 years of oppression, first under fascism of Antonescu's regime starting in 1940 and then under communism, is somewhat undermined by the large diaspora of emigration made possible by EU membership and recently by wariness from the specter of Putin's effective annexation of Crimea in the Ukraine.

Coming out from under outside dominance, the people take recourse in their distinctive cultural identity, one that closely relates to its Romance language that binds them to the West and a predominantly Orthodox Christian religion that ties them to the ancient East. The language arose when a tribal people on the Black Sea, the Dacians, were conquered by the Romans. The religion came there through the Byzantine Empire, whose emperor converted to that religion in the 4th century AD. When the Ottoman Empire replaced

Byzantium in the 15th century, the future parts of Romania and Greece, in contrast to the Muslim shift of other Balkan states of like Serbia and Bulgaria, retained enough autonomy to keep their mainly Orthodox faith.

Geographical map, which shows the Transylvanian and Carpathian mountain ranges that contribute to the demarcation of Transylvania from Moldavia and Wallachia. Historical map showing the country's three core provinces at the beginning of World War 1 and the dated additions and subtractions of smaller surrounding regions to yield its current extent, as demarcated in red.

Three big provinces of current Romania emerged from regional leaders into small kingdoms: 1) to the south the largely flat Wallachia on the plains above the Danube and across from Bulgaria, and containing the delta on the Black Sea and the national capital Bucharest; 2) the province of Moldavia to the east, with a rougher and more forested terrain, including the north-south running Carpathian mountains at its west and bounding the Republic of Moldova, once a portion of the same principality but lost in the settlement of the Russo-Turkish in 1812; 3) Transylvania, which contains a large forested valley to the west of the Carpathians and the east-west running range of the Transylvanian Mountains (stunningly beautiful). For much of the Middle Ages, Transylvania was part of the Kingdom of Hungary while Wallachia and Moldavia became frequent allies during many wars with shifting alliances with respect to the Ottoman Empire and Russia. (Stoker, who never visited Romania, made up his fable of Count Dracula based on a warlord of this era known as Vlad the Impaler). In 1600 there was a very brief period of unification between them and Transylvania, a precedent for their union in the independent state of Romania in 1878 at the end of another Russo-Turkish War, for which Romanians fought for the winning Russian side.

The period of unity and relative stability all went to hell with World War 1. After joining the side of France and Britain, Romania was invaded by the Austria-Hungary and German and was the staging ground for many battles, losing nearly 750,000 in military and civilian deaths. In the post-war settlement, it gained small Romanian-speaking portions from Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, and Russian. When the third Reich came into power in the 30's, the conservatives in power led them into an alliance, and they became a major resource for agriculture and oil for the war effort. Against the tolerance of large sectors of the population, Antonescu did participate in the Holocaust, one that was concentrated on the portions of Romania taken back from Russia after the previous war, with a death toll exceeding 300,000. Despite the leverage of Nazi dependence on Romania for food and oil, they got tapped for sending close to a million soldiers into the fateful Russia, with a huge cost of lives. When Russia started bouncing back with a vengeance and was on the verge of invasion when Romania's king led a coup and a scramble to join the Allies. Even though they lost over 100,000 men fighting against Hitler, the Soviets were quite punitive to them after the Iron Curtain came down and their puppet put in charge especially brutal.

As Romania look forward to a seemingly bright future, Kaplan expresses fervent hope that they don't go too far down the path of reactionary nationalism based on a mythos and identity tied up ethnicity, religion, and race rather than drawing on a cosmopolitan multiculturalism he sees as a strength for the nation. He faults the cultural philosopher Mircea Eliade for contributing to that danger in a history he published in the 40's which painted Romania as a perpetual outpost of a civilized Hellenic-Roman hybrid people that continually sacrificed themselves as a bulwark against the Slavic and Asian barbarian hordes. The experts Kaplan talks to don't really know the racial origin of the Dacians mentioned in Eliade's weak source of Herodotus and doubt any significant racial distinctions from Slavic peoples could persist over the centuries of life among them. Kaplan understands the value of a combined racial and ethnic identity to keep a unified courage up with a Russian bear liable to wake up hungry again. But he fears limits to Romania's potentials if the current

conflicts in the Middle East revive an old sense of Romanian people being Europe's pitbull in the conflict of Christians against Muslims.

Romania's unique blend of East and West in its art, architecture, and literature, its natural beauty, and dynamic flowering of spirit after emergence from prolonged oppression makes the country an attractive place to visit by reading or perhaps in person someday. Meanwhile, Kaplan helps dispel a lot of awkward gaps in my understanding and helps me appreciate both the accomplishments and unfortunate compromises its leaders have made in history in the face of its challenging geographical context amid contending empires.

This book was loaned by the publisher as an e-book through the Netgalley program.

Emma says

4.5 stars

I read Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* when I was at University studying Eastern European history, and immediately appreciated his vivid style. He provides a totally immersive experience for the reader, no detail is considered irrelevant (Kaplan knows the names of the streets he's walking down, the plaza's he sips coffee in, every river he crosses...), and his gaze flits from one subject to another with equal attention. It was clear that he had a passionate interest in the area, which is again evident in his depiction of Romania throughout this book. We find out that, on leaving the Israeli Defence Force in 1981, his choice to visit Bucharest was due, in parts, to the experiences of a 1973 three month journey through Communist Europe; to a book he found by chance in a secondhand bookstore; to the lack of journalistic endeavour in the region; and to the idea that he could fast-track his career by turning up and submitting his copy to various newspapers. It seems strange now that flashing an American passport and declaring your role as a journalist could enable you to get interviews with important politicians and diplomats, yet that is precisely what Kaplan did. His contacts are manifold, built from that time, and he makes use of these interviews, conversations, opinions to provide localised information.

His writing is evaluative, at times, partial. That is not a criticism. This book is part history, part travelogue, part cultural and political commentary; most of all it is the collected musings and reflections of a man whose writing is fundamentally enhanced by personal experience. Nevertheless, Kaplan's breadth of research is clear, the book is filled with quotes/examples from fiction, history, politics, poetry, and more. It is fascinating to see how he has interwoven such variety into the fabric of his book. One of my favourite aspects of his writing is in the connections he makes between his reading and the weather; the idea that the setting he found himself in directly influenced his choice of reading material and what he took from it. His writing is funny too, with piercing observations and judgements on historical figures: Carol I was 'an anal-retentive Prussian' whose memorial statue looks like 'a mass produced lawn sculpture'.

Kaplan provides a timely consideration of a country that continues to occupy a precarious position in Europe. He offers an alternative picture to that which seems prevalent in some parts of the British media: that of the supposed hordes of benefit scroungers desperate to take advantage of our healthcare and financial support systems. Do a search on 'Romanians' and 'Daily Mail' for some wonderful examples of journalism. Romania's border with Ukraine and proximity to Russia, so significant in WWII and since, remains

problematic. This is not just a book about the past, but one which is relevant to European politics now.

I found it fascinating and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Many thanks to Robert D. Kaplan, Random House, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

niste eroi fara societate says

Cartea lui Kaplan este un fel de Who's Who (geopolitic,ideologic) adus la zi dupa vizita lui din anii 90 ,reia pasaje si "personaje " din La rasarit, spre Tartaria. Calatorii in Balcani, Oriental Mijlociu si Caucaz Polirom, Iasi,2002 dar asta pentru a intelege parcursul dureros de greu al Romaniei spre Europa .Pentru cine nu a citit vreodata articolele lui Brucan de analiza din Libertatea (1991-1993) consideratia fata de acesta a lui Kaplan va contraria pe multi de aceea am ales sa incep cu urmatoarele citate.

"Gradina Cismigiu, decorul bine ingrijit din lucrarea Oliviei Manning din timpul celui de-al Doilea RSzboi Mondial, Trilogia balcanica, era in paragina: caini maidanezi, buruieni, graffiti pe banci cu scanduri lipsa si oamenii care, desi nu erau fara adaptost, hoinareau fara tinta. Silviu Brucan a prezis in 1990 ca va dura o generatie ca Romania sa isi revina dupa dictatura lui Ceausescu. Atunci oamenii au fost socati de pesimismul lui, dar s-a dovedit ca avea dreptate."

"Mi-am amintit din nou ce-mi spusesese Silviu Brucan inainte sa moara: ca America nu era nicaieri cand Occidentul a abandonat Europa Centrala si de Est la Munchen, in 1938; ca militarii americani n-au aparut in inima Europei pana la Ziua Z."

(,,Voi nu erati nicaieri", imi spunea mai tarziu Silviu Brucan, batranul intelept al comunismului romanesc, referindu-se la faptul ca Statele Unite au fost complet absente din Europa Centrala pana in anul 1944" pag 51.

Flashuri despre Romania comunista si cea postcomunista asa cum apare acum in vizita din 2014 :

Un fost diplomat roman, Ioana Ieronim, mi-a spus in 1998: ,Asa eram si in perioada interbelica, in anii '30. Suntem descurcareti, adaptabili, excesivi, niste emigrant pseudo-cosmopoliti intr-o noua lume globala. Un fel de clone unidimensionale, latin-orientale ale Vestului."

Horia-Roman Patapievici, filozof si eseist, a adaugat: „In momentul in care cumparam calculatoare, CD-uri si imbracaminte, ne insusim consecintele materiale ale Vestului, fara sa intelegem valorile fundamentale care au generat aceste tehnologii." In apartamentul sau ticsit de carti si cu holul scarii plin de maidanezi, Patapievici, imbracat cu blugi si halat de casa, insuma tot ceea ce ma fascina la Romania, o tara ca un film noir senzual si macabru, mereu captivant si uneori chiar stralucit.pag 70

„TOATE SOCIETATILE POSTCOMUNISTE sunt dezradacinate, caci comunismul a dezradacinat traditii, asa ca nimic nu se mai potriveste cu nimic", imi explica Patapievici. Cu 15 ani in urma, cand l-am intalnit ultima data, ma avertizase:

„Sarcina Romaniei este sa consolideze un stil public bazat pe reguli impersonale, caci altfel afacerile si politica vor deveni un cuib de intrigi si mi-e teama ca traditia noastra ortodoxa rasariteana nu ne va ajuta prea mult in acest sens. Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia, Rusia, Grecia - toate natiunile ortodoxe ale Europei - au institutii slabe. Asta din cauza ca ortodoxia este flexibila si contemplativa, fundamentata mai mult pe tradiitiile transmise pe cale orala de tarani decat pe texte scrise. Exista asadar o paradaigma a zvonului, a lipsei de informare, a conspiratiei si a intrigii..."

Astfel definea Patapievici in 1998 politica romaneasca, cum inca se mai practica un deceniu si jumata mai tarziu. Dar, in 2013, a adaugat: „Nimeni nu isi asuma vina pentru ce s-a intamplat in trecut. Biserica n-a facut nici un progres, in pofida sansei enorme de a fi separata de stat de aproape un sfert de secol. Identificarea unei credinte religioase cu un grup etnic-national imi pare o erezie morala." pag 78

Desi deziluzionat, nu era pesimist cu privire la situatia din tara. „S-au facut progrese extraordinare de cand ne-am vazut ultima oara, in 1998. Nu exista criminalitate mafiota ca in Bulgaria, nici jumaliste asasinati precum in Rusia.“ Iar economia nu s-a prabusit ca in Grecia; n-au existat episode de anarhie ca in Bulgaria si Albania in epoca de dupa caderea Zidului Berlinului. Romanii si maghiarii au evitat un razboi civil. Cat despre absenta unor valori filozofice reale printre politicienii de frunte din Romania, acesta era un lucru mai putin romanesc, cat universal. Patapievici mi-a explicat:

„Veti vedea, valorile acestea vor disparea si in tara dum-neavoastra. Pentru a avansa in cariera, politicienii vor afisa tot mai mult convingeri pe care de fapt nu le au. Valorile sunt o reflexie a spiritului. Si, cand spiritul se ofileste, oamenii nu mai au nevoie de valori. Spiritul se ofileste treptat prin inlocuirea imaginatiei cu tehnologia: telefoanele si jucariile inteligente, multimea de electronice din malluri, toate fac in- teligenta spiritului mai putin necesara. Heidegger avea drept- tate, progresul a fost in problemele esentiale lipsit de scop. Homer a inzestrat omenirea cu un spirit bogat. Acum tehnologia a saracit spiritul atat in spatiul public, cat si in politica. In unele privinte", a continuat, „spiritul este inlocuit de obsesia pentru corp. Ati vazut reclamele din revistele de moda in ultima vreme? Tinerii, in special, nu mai au nevoie de spirit, ci doar de senzualitate. Deja tehnologia constru- iese imagini pentru noi. In viitor, tot mai multe functii ale creierului vor fi preluate de tehnologie. Muschii mintii se vor atrofia. Politica va continua sa se degradeze".

Jenant ca dupa un astfel de etalon intelectual trebuie sa alatur un citat din carte in care vorbeste un inchipuit precum Geoana:

“Probabil ca Rusia nu va mai invada niciodata Romania, dar va incerca s-o submineze, daca Romania nu construieste institutii puternice. Adevaratul dusman al Romaniei, sugera Geoana, ar fi mai putin geografia, cat mai degraba „o lipsa de transparenta: o natiune de supravietuitori si descurcatori fara standarde suficiente“ de comportament public si privat. Astfel, Geoana era de acord cu Patapievici.

O analiza foarte buna a lui Kaplan despre ratacirile lui Eliade:

Un text de capatai pentru a intelege sistemul cu care intelectualii romani au operat pana tarziu in secolul XX este lucrarea lui Mircea Eliade Romanii: O scurta istorie. Este o carte relativ putin cunoscuta si nu foarte mare, de numai 62 de pagini in editia mea ieftina, in traducere engleza. Este un produs al perioadei imature a lui Eliade, o lucrare scrisa pe la 35 de ani, inainte ca el sa devina marele filozof universal de mai tarziu. Eliade a publicat carticica in 1943, in Spania dictatorului de dreapta Francisco Franco, pe cand se afla in Portugalia dictatorului Antonio Salazar ca atasat cultural al Romaniei regimului fascist al Garzii de Fier si al lui Antonescu. Eliade fusese trimis ca diplomat in Marea Britanie, dar la izbucnirea celui de-al Doilea Razboi Mondial, cand alti diplomati romani de la Londra au trecut de partea Aliatilor, Eliade a luat decizia de a pleca in Portugalia dictatoriala, ideologic apropiata, unde putea reprezenta in siguranta interesele

Romaniei pronaziste. Dupa razboi, Eliade a trait la Paris si in 1956 s-a stabilit la Chicago, unde a devenit profesor de istoria religiilor." Pag 106

Iata si un citat bun:

"Desi unele parti ale istoriei lui Eliade au fost criticate pentru naivitatea lor (de exemplu, afirmatia potrivit careia Zalmoxis, zeul pagan al antichitatii romanesti, ar fi favorizat drumul catre monoteism), cartea sa, pe alocuri bizară, este esențială pentru cine vrea să inteleaga de ce românii s-au considerat un popor aparte, eroic și oprimat."

Prezumtia cartii este parcursul Romaniei spre Europa ca o întoarcere la izvorul Iluminismului de aceea Kaplan vorbeste fără echivoc de Antonescu, „Pogromul de la Iași și toată aceasta mostenire dureroasă a regimului Antonescu pentru a o exorciza cu o călătorie în Transilavania unde el explică de ce aici este Europa și cum a fost clădită de Imperiul Austro-Ungar:

Traversand Carpatii spre nord, spre Europa Centrală, voi am foarte mult să ma gandesc la cel care s-a opus, practic și filozofic, monștri- lor istorici cu care a trebuit să ma confrunt la sud și la est de Carpati. Si astfel m-am gândit la Metternich, omul de stat austriac care a stiut să apere fragilul statu-quo de conducători revoluționari care voiau să-1 răstoarne; aceasta era, în fond, cea mai bună metodă de a proteja minoritatile slave.

Vizionarul revoluționar Metternich era pacifist, spre deosebire de Napoleon, militar și progresist înnașcut. Metternich credea în statele constitutionale, nu în națiunile formate pe criterii etnice. Statele sunt sisteme birocratice legitime, guvernante de suprematia legii; națiunile constituite pe criterii etnice sunt manate de patimă sangelui și a pamantului, inamicul suprem al moderării și al analizei. Metternich nu a fost un mare erou precum Churchill. Constituția lui a fost mai puțin spectaculoasă, dar într-un fel mai necesară, a reprezentat ceva la care ar trebui să aspire birocratii de top care se străduiesc să mențină viabilitatea Uniunii Europene: protecția neobosită a ordinii pancontinentale existente, bazată pe compromis. Data fiind situația actuală a Europei, cu partidele naționaliste de dreapta batând cu putere la poarta unei Uniuni Europene fragile, eforturile lui Metternich de a conserva statu-quot sunt cu atât mai relevante.

In poemul The Age of Bronze (Epoca Bronzului) (1823), lordul Byron l-a denigrat pe Metternich, numindu-l „parazitul de frunte al puterii”. Ceea ce Byron nu putea să stă exact faptul că, exercitându-și astfel puterea, Metternich avea să apere, dintr-o perspectivă istorică mai tarzie, ca facând mai mult decât oricare alt om de stat pentru a oferi Europei următorului secol o perioadă de pace. Profesorul Kann, care a predat la Rutgers University și la Universitatea din Viena, consideră că Austria lui Metternich a repurtat un succes „de mare rasunet și de două ori mai impresionant, având în vedere că să-ă inceput acțiunile în 1809 din postura unui stat invins”. Tanărul Kissinger scrie: „Iluminismul să-a pastrat pana tarziu în secolul al XIX-lea ultimul apărător, care judeca acțiunile după criteriul adevărului, și nu după cel al succesului- lui, un susținător al răiunii într-o epocă de materialism filozofic, care n-a renunțat niciodată la convingerea că moralitatea poate fi cunoscută și că virtutea poate fi predată.”

Metternich înțăruia principiul, elaborat mai tarziu de geograful și strategul britanic Halford Mackinder, conform căruia o lume guvernată de o putere echilibrată are mai multe sanse de a fi pasnică. Iar pentru a păstra acest echilibru, Metternich credea că discreția era cea mai puternică armă a diplomației. El a înțeles că negocierile dificile de care de- pind pacea și evitarea tragediilor le impuneau oamenilor de stat să poarte cele mai directe dialoguri fără a fi expuși privirilor publicului - și ridicolului public. Metternich susținea „primatul conversațiilor confidentiale” în fața atenției din partea presei. În zilele noastre, presa, care își are pro-priile interese, face apel la zgomotul transparentă, deși totuși mai aceasta deschide ocupă din spațiul de lucru aflat la dispozitia diplomatilor.

Metternich credea în ordine, nu în romanticism. Pentru el, emoția era dusmanul capacitatii de analiza. În vreme ce romanticismul poate duce la haos, ordinea duce la predictibilitate (sa ne amintim că Hitler a fost numit de

Kissinger un „nihilist romantic“). Oamenii simpli au nevoie de predictibilitate ca să traiască în liniste. În zilele noastre, ordinea are o conotație negativă, din cauza asocierii cu fascismul și comunismul, ale caror urmări dezastruoase sunt, la nivel istoric, încă prezente. Dar trebuie să stim că totii ca ordinea, în forma sa normală, comună în democratice și în sistemele autocratice moderate, este preferabilă riscantelor experimentelor populiste. Metternich a vazut îndeaproape, student fund, ororile Revoluției Franceze. Pentru a putea prospera și a deveni un stat normal, România are nevoie de acea ordine continentală pe care a girat-o cindva Metternich.

Metternich a fost un mare european - un uneltitor. Era pregătit să se alăture altor state europene contra lui Napoleon, dar nu avea nici o intenție, după cum afirma biograful Alan Palmer, să devină un instrument" al politicii rusești sau prusace. Uneltirile lui nu urmău să fie dezvaluite în co-municate de presă prietenoase. Nu urmăreau să apere „binele“ de „rau“, nici să obtină o victorie incontestabilă. Mai degrabă aveau în vedere recunoașterea limitelor de natură geografică, economică și demografică ale unui stat și, ca urmare, obținerea unui rezultat favorabil pe cai ocolite. Unel-tirea este subtilă pentru că astăzi este și geopolitică. Citirea corectă a unei harti nu duce la judecăți în alb și negru, întrucătă geografia celor mai multe state oferă atât avantaje, cât și dezavantaje. Uneltirea prețuiește mai mult echilibrul decât dominiația."Un tur de forță intelectual cum numai Robert Kaplan poate produce.

Incheiere:

„În cele din urmă, institutiile putemice ne vor proteja de agresori. Dar aderarea la Uniunea Europeană a fost numai un succes parțial. Guvernele care s-au succedat de-a lungul anilor nu au interiorizat niciodată procesul reformei. Au considerat că avem o alianță cu Uniunea Europeană, ceea ce nu este adevărat. Am devenit parte din Uniunea Europeană și trebuie să ne ridicăm la nivelul acesteia. Au considerat că fondurile pentru dezvoltare de la UE sunt un ajutor financiar și nu o investiție pentru a realiza reforma instituțională. Banii primiti de la UE ar fi trebuit investiți, nu cheltuiți. Pentru că toate partidele și grupările au gresit, trebuie precizat că de vina este cultura noastră politică în general, care nu este tocmai occidentală și nu este mai bună acum decât era în perioada interbelică, excludându-se, însă, ororile din politica externă a acelei perioade.“

Vasile Puscas, titular al catedrei Jean Monnet Ad Personam și profesor de relații internaționale la Universitatea Babes-Bolyai.

Liviu says

Partly travel memoir (while the book is mainly based on the author's visits to Romania in 2013-4, his earlier visits in the 1980's and 1990 are integrated well in the narrative), partly history, partly meditation on the role and responsibilities of the outside observer, partly a look at how one's views change as he ages (the young and unknown journalist-to-be Robert Kaplan of 1981, just released from a stint in the IDF, using Israel's ties to Romania - unique at the time with a Warsaw Pact country but still fraught with difficulties and uncertainties - to go there and then reverting to his US passport so he could access the considerable US diplomatic resources there at the time as well as travel to other East European countries, and then becoming really, really interested in the country contrary to his expectations of just using Romania as a springboard into the Iron Curtain world, and the Robert Kaplan of today, acclaimed journalist consulted by the US

government and with immediate access to all the important Romanian politicians and other public figures are quite different, but the trajectory and the thoughts of the two are very clearly seen) this is an excellent book that should be read not only by people interested in Romania, but as a general template on how to write about the topics above.

A few notes - as a Romanian (living abroad for 25 years now but still keeping in touch and visiting last in the same period of the author), I found the Romanian essence of the book excellent; maybe a bit too skewed on talking with important people rather than with the "regular" person, but accurate and to the point, while the history is impeccably presented with lots of material from quite a few recent academic books (some which i also read); the generally hopeful vision about the country (compared with the dark 1981 and even the after the fall of communism 1990, the changes are tremendous) is accurate in my opinion too (though the book caveats apply - if a general economic crisis in Europe which is still a possibility happens or a political one as today's headlines may lead to, all bets are off, while the anxieties of the large majority of the population as the treadmill of modern capitalism and competition doesn't admit let-up though it led to the massive progress in well being that one can see visiting pretty much any part of the country, are not touched upon too much due to the talking with the important persons aspect)

- the general stuff (meditations on this and that as above) is excellent and raise this book above a simple "book about a less well known country" genre and into a more elevated level which is more common from European writers than US ones (Claudio Magris' Danube is a book like that recently read by me, while others such appear in the text)
- while the 1981 (and the later 1980's visits to Romania before he was banned for writing about the brutal demolitions in Bucharest and the countryside to make way for Ceausescu's megalomaniac constructions) belong more to his earlier travel books, they are generally accurate and avoid the sensationalist Western reporting trap about the Ceausescu's era which so annoys me, though they still err a bit on the dark side - not that it wasn't bad but it wasn't the Stalin era (there were no mass arrests, executions, public humiliations with very few anti-regime activities, mostly from people somewhat protected by having relatives abroad, while most everyone who could just voted with their feet and got out, so the regime's relations with the Federal Republic and Israel being mainly a means for Ceausescu to sell ethnic German and Jewish Romanians for hard cash and good public relations in the west at least for a while) or the fall of Berlin and ruins under bombardment either; just a suffocating atmosphere in which immediate survival was the priority and where nobody really cared or believed in communism or the "Leaders" - including the infamous securitate or secret police or the party activists for that matter - only formal obedience being required and the "they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work' principle in effect
- the book is a real page turner that kept me up till very late to finish it
- there is travel to Moldova (the former Soviet republic, once the Eastern half of the Romanian province of Moldavia) and the complexities of history and current situation are superbly presented though the outlook there is quite bleaker, while a little of Hungary is presented too at the end
- overall excellent stuff, highly, highly recommended
