



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Food and Politics: State Food Controls in Totalitarian Regimes

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### Abstract:

This study brings to the forefront a lesser-known aspect of private life under two political regimes at opposite ends of the political spectrum, from different historical periods. It examines the state-imposed restrictions on food supply and consumption under the Fascist regime in Italy and those established by the Communist regime in Romania, which share many points in common despite the numerous ideological differences and the temporal and geographical distance between them.

**Keywords:** *nutrition, autarky, communism, fascism, state food controls, totalitarianism.*

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### Introduction

The procurement of raw materials and the food necessary for nourishment has always played an essential role in the life of every individual and the society to which they belong. Consumer tastes, dietary habits, and the rituals of serving meals have evolved historically, leaving a strong imprint on the community of origin.

In defining gastronomy, we observe a terminological approach of progressive intensity: from the concept of nutrition, which consists of procuring food and satisfying an essential need of the human body, to that of specific cuisine, in which characteristic elements take shape based on local raw materials, the occupations of the local inhabitants, and external influences, culminating in the concept of gastronomy, which is "the art of cooking and eating well" (Kivela & Crotts, 2006: 354-355).

Nutrition differentiated early humans from animals and other entities through the transformation of primary products from nature - initially with the aid of fire, and subsequently through more elaborate methods of cooking and food preservation: "Besides the rules and rituals of conviviality, food itself had played an essential role in establishing human identity." (Flandrin & Montanari, 2011).

Diet represents an important cultural (Montanari, 2018, 10) and identity-related factor which, in conjunction with language, traditions, and beliefs, "creates the feeling of belonging or social differentiation and, together, they transmit the values of society, inserting themselves at the very heart of the process of constructing an identity." (Stano, 2015).

In this study, we will primarily address the political aspect of this topic, highlighting the consequences that may derive on a social level.

Given the recent emergence of a certain nostalgia in Europe for the totalitarian regimes of the past, it may be useful to refresh our memory regarding specific aspects that had direct consequences on the private lives of the population that suffered first-hand the effects of the decisions enacted by the authorities.

As Gianfranco Marrone states in the article published in the volume "Cucina politica. Il linguaggio del cibo fra pratiche sociali e rappresentazioni ideologiche", "the cuisine and the politics are two cultural spheres that rarely converge" and when they do, it concerns policies regarding agricultural production, the presence and distribution of food across the planet, and consumption policies (Marrone, 2020: 190).

The two fields also intersect when figures from public or political life present a novel aspect of their lives by publishing cookbooks set in a specific historical period. Such is the case of Queen Margaret of Romania who, in the volume "Carte regală de bucate" ("The Royal Cookbook"), alternates culinary family recipes with those from the great royal courts of Europe. Even if these seemingly "are presented distinctly from the noble portraits of the personalities who prefer or generate them (personalities who, through textualization, have become literary characters), a discerning reader easily perceives both a strong connection between the respective dish and the narrative pretext-character for whom it serves as a true emblem, as well as the specific Romanian epic layers that seem to depict a direct confrontation between the discourse of art (even culinary art) and that of the unfolding contemporary history." (Casangiu, 2012: 239).

The kitchen-politics binomial can therefore be more cohesive in a specific historical context than anyone might imagine. In the two regimes analysed in the present article, food can simultaneously constitute a weapon for political propaganda and a coercing instrument over the population.

In the preface to the volume "Quando il fascismo dettava la dieta. La propaganda a tavola, tra sovranità alimentare e autarchia", Alberto Grandi and Daniele Soffiati emphasize that, despite the Italian fascist period being one of the most analysed and studied eras, the food and the Italian cuisine of that time are the least scientifically addressed. Paradoxically, elements from remote periods are analysed, such as certain dishes from Antiquity and Middle Ages, while important aspects of the interwar period are glossed over or given marginal space. A rigorous and meticulous research of the editorial production of the era and the press of the time would make an important contribution to the knowledge of Italian cuisine's evolution and would offer new interpretations for the history of Fascism. (Grandi&Soffiati, 2025: 5-6).

Once the totalitarian regime was overcome, the dishes may remain the same, but tastes change when, instead of a controlled economy, a market economy based on free trade is established in a developing country. (Capatti, 2014: 3)

Regarding the Communist period in Romania, there are numerous press articles and literary memoirs that describe the hardships suffered by the population in that era. A scientific approach of the phenomenon can be found in the article of researcher Mioara Anton, *Cultura penuriei în anii '80: programul de alimentație științifică a populației (The Culture of Shortage in the 1980s: the Scientific Dietary Program for the Population)*, published in 2015, in *Revista istorică*, while Mihai Trăilă brings a complex and documented contribution, in the volume *În umbra "Epocii de Aur": raționalizare, austeritate și criză în București (1979-1989) (In the Shadow of the 'Golden Age': Rationing, Austerity, and Crisis in Bucharest (1979–1989))*, published in 2025 by Editura Militară, which represents the results of his doctoral studies, focused on the analysis of food and energy rationing policies during Socialist Romania.

### **Research methodology**

The research is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature, from a historical, economic, anthropological, and sociological perspective. The research methodology is based on the comparative analysis of specialised literature, synthesizing and structuring information while emphasising the similarities and differences of the two regimes.

The study is a comparative one, identifying the similarities and the differentiating elements between the two regimes.

### **Contents**

#### **Food restrictions during Mussolini's Fascist regime: historical context**

While much has been written about the Fascist regime in Italy, paradoxically, less has been written about food during that period and its consequences on the evolution of Italian gastronomy. Italian cuisine between the two World Wars is to be found just in certain chapters of larger works or a statistical approach in socio-economic analyses (Grandi&Soffiati, 2025: 5-6).

After Italy invaded Ethiopia (the occupation lasted between 1935 and 1941), League of Nations imposed some sanctions against it, such as: the member states were forbidden to import any type of products from Italy, to grant loans, and to export to it raw materials and other goods of military use. These measures triggered a series of grievances to Mussolini's regime who started an aggressive propaganda against the sanctions he considered unjust. As a primary response, the Fascist regime started the autarky campaign at the General Assembly of the Corporations on March 23, 1936, on which occasion Mussolini declared that Italy's main objective was to achieve economic autonomy in the shortest possible time (Laforgia, 2025: 32-33). From that moment on, Italians' diet, "for

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twenty years, was characterised by a combination of austerity and propaganda. The worse the situation became, the more sacrifices Mussolini demanded from his people in the name of creating a new Roman Empire” (Dickie, 2007: 270). Fascist food and culinary policy were supposed to encourage a return to regional gastronomic traditions and rural cooking; instead, it promoted a Spartan austerity (Meldini, 2013: 81)

This period represented the preparation for what was to follow during the war, when the most frequent word in recipes was “without”. The cuisine of those times is remembered as a cuisine of hunger and scarcity in which people tried to manage with the little they had. (Bertolo, 2017: 28).

### **Food restrictions during Ceaușescu’s Communist regime: historical context**

The economic crisis brought by World War II, the Soviet military occupation, the establishment of the Communist regime, led to a decline in the culinary discourse in the public sphere. During Ceaușescu’s regime, the first dysfunctions in the population’s supply appeared since the end of 1974 when “numerous shortages in basic food products were signalled on the Romanian market, mainly for sugar and oil” (Burakowski, 2011: 259). The darkest period of food shortages, however, starts after the adoption of Law no. 13/1980 on December 19, 1980, regarding the establishment, the distribution and the use of resources by county for supplying the population with meat, milk, vegetables, and fruit. Later, on October 10, 1981, the State Council issued a decree regarding the prevention and combating of speculation. Essentially, the acquisition of basic food products in quantities exceeding a family’s needs for a month was punished with imprisonment ranging from six months to five years. During the same period, in July 1982, the rationing of food products was introduced at the same time with the launch of the Scientific Dietary Program for the population which was in place until the 1989 Revolution. This program, “imposed in a period of economic austerity, did not have the aim to improve the quality of the Romanians’ diet, but rather responded to the regime’s needs of rationing and economizing” (Anton, 2015: 345).

There are multiple causes for the shortages during Ceaușescu’s regime highlighted in the “Final Report” of the Presidential Commission for the study of the Communist dictatorship in Romania. One of these is found within the political and economic system of centralized organisation, which entailed both the accumulation of resources at the centre for redistribution, and the planning of all economic activities within the context of extensive industrialisation. The consequences directly impacted the population through the neglect of its consumption needs (Tismăneanu, 2006: 441).

Other factors mentioned in the quoted report are of exogenous nature and regard the global economic crisis of the 1970’s, following which Romania, wishing to continue its industrialization policy, contracted numerous foreign loans on unfavourable terms thus finding itself caught in the interest rate trap. The investments, undertaken especially with the purpose of developing the heavy industry, entailed an enormous sacrifice for the population that struggled to cope with shortages of food, essential goods and energy. Ceaușescu’s decision to prepay the external debt further intensified the hardships, and implicitly, the discontent of the country’s citizens.

“The rations of the urban residents for bread, meat, sugar, eggs, oil, butter and flour varied from one county to another and from year to year. As for the villagers, their minimal needs were only ensured for sugar and oil, provided they delivered the products contracted with the state” (Betea et al, 2015: 167). As Nicolae Ceaușescu thought that the population’s food problems were not the result of lack of supply on the market but rather

of the bad culinary habits the Romanians had, the series of restrictive measures culminated with the introduction, in 1984, of the Scientific Dietary Program for the population developed by academician Iulian Mincu. During this entire period, despite the numerous shortages, Romanian gastronomy evolved and reinvented itself, new recipes appeared, some ingredients that were hard to find were replaced with others, and a development occurred alongside the official policy.

The citizens of Socialist Romania “who in theory lived in one of the most prosperous and auspicious periods in the country’s history, actually had to go through great lengths to survive. Essential food (bread, sugar, oil, eggs, milk, meat) had become scarce goods, despite the rationing measures imposed by the regime. Imports of consumer goods and other products, such as pharmaceuticals, were drastically reduced” (Tismăneanu, 2006: 445).

### **Similarities between the two totalitarian regimes during food restrictions**

#### **Exogenous factors.**

During both political regimes, certain external circumstances lay at the basis of the food restriction measures, justifying the extreme measures of the authorities on the domestic front.

**It:** After Italy invaded Ethiopia, which was turned into a colony (1935), League of Nations, based in Geneva, imposed economic sanctions against Italy which led to a strong reaction from the fascist leader, using this event as a pretext to start a massive autarkic propaganda campaign and to impose increasingly severe austerity measures.

**Ro:** In the context of the global economic crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank initiated a stricter lending policy, simultaneously conditioning them to restructure the industry with high energy consumption, which Ceaușescu considered to be an interference of these institutions into the domestic affairs of the country. At the end of 1981, he decided to pay off Romania’s foreign debt, with disastrous consequences on the living standard of the Romanians during the last decade of the Communist regime. (Constantin, 2020: 321)

#### **Autarky**

The word “autarky” comes from Greek, *Autarkeia* (*autos* + *arkeus*), and it means to be self-sufficient. In the context of this research, autarky refers to a country capable of producing on the domestic front all that is needed for its economy and consumption, thus becoming independent of foreign sources. (Simonetti, 2019).

**It:** The fascist regime launched the autarky campaign at the General Assembly of Corporations on March 23, 1936, when Mussolini declared that Italy’s main objective was to achieve economic autonomy in the shortest possible time (Laforgia, 2025: 32-33). The Duce (Mussolini) himself declared for *Domus* magazine, in the issue of June 1, 1940, that all people should have an autarkic mentality, meaning they must give up consuming those goods that were not considered indispensable and which could be replaced with national products to contribute to the country’s trade balance. (Cavallero, 2009: 33)

**Ro:** In Romania the autarkic regime was established through two decrees regarding territorial self-governance and self-supply. Specifically, these were Decree no. 306 of October 9, 1981, regarding the measures to prevent and combat acts that affected the proper supply of the population, and Decree no. 313 of October 17, 1981, concerning measures related to territorial self-governance and self-supply.

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Ceașescu's regime considered autarky a recipe for success for repaying the foreign debt, without considering the disastrous economic and social consequences. (Trăilă, 2025: 51).

The massive exports of goods, though the industrial products were uncompetitive on foreign markets, focused mainly on agricultural products, leading to great domestic imbalances.

### **Propaganda**

**It:** In Fascist Italy, an intense propaganda was launched to support the consumption of domestic foods. Rice, along with potatoes and corn, were meant to replace pasta in the daily diet, mostly of foreign origin, to help reduce import costs (De Grazia, 2023: 230).

Another example of intense propaganda is that of encouraging fish consumption. Despite the obsessive promotion of fish-based diets through newspapers and cookbooks, the Italians living in inland areas were not convinced to eat more fresh fish. Only in the poorer areas was dry hake the most popular holiday dish (Vené, 1988: 77).

**Ro:** In Communist Romania, the obsession with paying off foreign debt led to the massive export of agricultural and food products and, subsequently, to the creation of a shortage on the domestic market. However, certain products were available in excess, such as frozen fish, "which was promoted but not purchased. The Romanian Ocean fishing fleet ranked fourth in the world. Therefore, fish was found in abundance, and anything found in abundance is rejected a priori because you get the feeling that it is being shoved down your throat" (Muzeul țăranului român, 2003: 254).

In the absence of television, represented exclusively by the public channel, which had a broadcasting schedule of only a few hours a day and was monopolized by programs dedicated especially to political news, information was conveyed primarily through newspapers, magazines and publications. Almanacs and magazines presented portraits of extraordinary women who stood out in the workplace, as well as heroine mothers dedicated to large families. The commercial advertising pages from almanacs, such as *Femeia*, *Flacăra* and *Turistic* from the 1970's and 1980's, focused exclusively on the presentation of Romanian products: canned vegetables and fruit, frozen fish and derived products, and pastry products. As early as 1984, Elena Ceaușescu, the dictator's wife, had come to be considered the second-in-command in the state, with the official position of First Deputy Prime Minister. "In her capacity as head of the CC of PCR, President of the National Council for Science and Technology and First Deputy Prime Minister of the Government, Ceaușescu's wife had the other dignitaries subordinated to her" (Betea et al., 2012: 235). She was also responsible for the propaganda and supervised all the programs proposed by the head of the department (idem, 249).

### **The totalitarian regime's preoccupation with a temperate lifestyle**

**It:** Since the beginning of the 1920-1930 decade, the Fascist regime launched the manifesto of change for the new type of man. Mussolini himself spoke during some medical congresses to show his theories regarding diet and lifestyle, from which he excluded pasta and alcohol on the grounds that they slowed down the power of reaction and made Italians less belligerent. The creation of the new man involved several stages, including "procreation, physical and mental health, marriage, education, and therefore also diet" (Grandi & Soffiati, 2025: 9).

In 1935, Mussolini declaimed publicly his dietary principles claiming that his body had become a supervised and controlled engine which worked with absolute

precision, and that he followed exact dietary rules in which meals were frugal (Simonetti, 2019).

The magazine "La Cucina Italiana", the most important gastronomic publication in Italy, also became an instrument for the regime's propaganda, and between 1936 and 1939, adopted the autarkic rules supporting the renunciation of meat consumption twice a week, the adoption of a diet that included raw food, at the same time commending national products such as rice and fish. The magazine also became a supporter of diets and nutritional rules for keeping fit, despite the food shortage and of the numerous necessities. In the pages of the magazine a real campaign was carried out against obesity and excess fat, considered a hazard for health, but also a harmful factor for feminine aesthetics (Simonetti, *ibidem*). The vegetarian movement also progressively became part of the fascist culture, creating a lifestyle model based on the consumption of fruit and vegetables and on outdoor physical activity (Capatti, 2025: 12).

The gradual introduction of the health aspects took place both in daily cookbooks and in the avant-garde texts and possibly represented a starting point for a "biopolitical" use of food which has its origin in the Fascist period, and it extends, evolving, into the present day (Cervelli, 2019: 24).

**Ro:** In the 1980's, academician Iulian Mincu published numerous papers regarding the diet of the population, underlining the correlation between countless metabolic diseases and an inappropriate consumption of foods. Therefore, in 1978, „*Alimentația rațională a omului sănătos*” (*The Rational Diet of a Healthy Person*) was published, which represented the basis for the Scientific Dietary Program of the population introduced in 1984. This program had as its main motto the fight against obesity, with the reduction of food consumption among the population from 3300 to 2800-3000 calories daily. Theoretically, the planned consumption did not necessarily mean “a drastic decline in the population's living standards”, but no economy was made, in the context in which “procuring food products constituted an increasingly difficult problem for the population” (Burakowski, 2011: 466). Procuring food was becoming increasingly deficient, with queues in front of all stores, situation that continued until the fall of the Communist regime.

### **Food rationing – card-based distribution**

**It:** The ration card for the procurement of certain foods was introduced in Italy in January 1940, first for sugar and coffee (this being later removed from sale), then, since October, also for oil, fat, lard, and for pasta and rice at the end of the year. As of October 1, 1941, bread was also rationed (200 grams per day per person, with an additional allowance for those doing heavy work) (ANPI, 2015: 18-19). The ration cards were distributed by the local authorities every two months for each family member. The main purpose of autarky and the rationing of food products once the ration cards were introduced was pressuring the Italians to consume as many national products as possible (Simonetti, 2019)

**Ro:** The decision to pay off the foreign debt resulted in increased exports, aimed at attracting foreign currency into the country, and a reduction in the import of goods. At the same time, under conditions of economic scarcity, the purchase of basic food products (bread, meat, milk, eggs, oil, flour) was rationed, and for many types of products it was carried out only using ration cards.

Through Decree no. 306 of October 9, 1981, certain measures were implemented with the main objective of combating and preventing acts liable to affect the proper supply

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of the population. Article 1 of the mentioned legislative act defined the offence of speculation, which included the purchase of food products for the purpose of hoarding supplies. Therefore, purchasing quantities that exceeded the monthly household consumption needs was not permitted for: oil, sugar, flour, corn flour, rice, coffee (Trăilă, 2025: 69). Articles 3 and 4 of the decree indirectly introduced the card rationing of basic food products, imposing the local councils to take measures to ensure that these categories of products were sold only to people living or employed in units and institutions within the respective locality. The rationing system based on cards was not identical throughout the country, but it depended largely on the capabilities of the local authorities to distribute the goods to the population.

### **The personality cult**

**It:** The diet of the Italian people became increasingly precarious throughout the twenty years of Fascism, representing a combination of austerity and propaganda. Even though the situation was further deteriorating, Mussolini demanded the people to make ever greater sacrifices, being driven by imperialist ambitions, in the name of establishing a new Roman Empire (Dickie, 2007: 270). In 1932, on the ten-year celebration of the March on Rome, an exhibition of the Fascist Revolution was organised, Mussolini's figure predominating in all the exhibits displayed. He considered himself the undisputed leader, capable of inspiring a new faith able to transform the masses into a "totalitarian organised moral community" that could lead to the unification of the nation. (Focus, October, 2013)

**Ro:** In the 1980's, the personality cult was developed to an unprecedented level, being fuelled also by those in the higher structures of the state political apparatus. On the one hand, this represented "a means by which they attempted to mask Ceaușescu's lack of legitimacy, the failure of the economic policy and the social crisis, and, on the other hand, to channel the energy of the population in order to exclude uncontrolled occurrences" (Constantin, 2020: 327).

### **Differences between the two totalitarian regimes during food restrictions**

#### **The role of the woman**

**It:** During the Fascist regime, the housewife played a central role in adhering to food restrictions, in choosing and preparing the ingredients available on the market. The magazine *Cucina italiana* often contained appeals addressed to the housewives who had to strive to make dishes previously considered unappealing seem tasty. The woman was considered primarily responsible for the destiny of the people (Laforgia, 2025: 39). A real campaign of awareness and mobilisation of the population was launched: in November 1936, the work *Le massaie contro le sanzioni* (in translation "Housewives Against Sanctions") by Lidia Morelli was published (Laforgia, 2025: 81). In 1938, she published *Per voi massaie d'Italia* (in translation "For You, Housewives of Italy"), in which she praised the Duce (Mussolini) for his role as a father who oversaw changes in all fields (Bertolo, 2017, 7). Another author, Ada Bonfiglio Krassich, launched the volume *La cucina italiana in tempo di sanzioni* (in translation "Italian Cuisine During the Sanctions' Period") in 1936, in which she addressed housewives asking them to contribute to the change of culinary culture, in the sense of modifying consumption habits during restrictions. An important figure in the field of culinary publications was Petronilla who offered housewives advice and recipes belonging to an autarkic cuisine that went from "little" to "nothing" (Ceretta, 2010: 10-14).

**Ro:** During the Communist regime in Romania, women gained a considerable position in society, being present and active outside the household. They were considered an important pillar in building modern society, across all sectors of the economy: they were active in industry, in research, in agriculture, the housewife role being a secondary one.

Women “had to adopt the activist model, to get involved in women’s organisations (established at all levels and coordinated centrally)” (Drăghici, 2020: 92) and to simultaneously assume the roles of mothers, wives, workers, citizens. Without giving up their central role in the household, the woman had to ensure the nation’s birth rate, deliver maximum productivity at the workplace, and be civically active.

The role model to follow, supported by the regime’s propaganda, was “world-renowned scientist” Elena Ceaușescu.

### **Cookbooks**

A cookbook is not just a collection of ingredients and instructions necessary for their preparation, but it is the collective history of peoples (Simonetti, 2019).

**It:** During the peak period of Italian Fascism, alongside autarkic cookbooks, a propaganda press gained momentum, based on new publications, magazines, and cookbooks, which aimed to educate housewives in the rational use of the little resources at their disposal (ANPI, 2015: 19)

**Ro:** In Communist Romania, there was a huge discrepancy between the content of cookbooks, which continued to appear with the same type of recipes as before as if nothing had changed, and the social reality in which many of the ingredients necessary to prepare a dish or dessert presented in those publications were not available. From the accounts of those who were adults during that period, we learn that around the holidays people queued for weeks on end to purchase the necessities to put on the Christmas or Easter table. An in-depth analysis of the culinary publications in a political and social context full of restrictions and deprivations is conducted by Adriana Sohodoleanu in the article entitled *Apetitul socialist: ce citim în cărțile românești de bucate dincolo de rețete?* (*Socialist Appetite: What Do We Read in Romanian Cookbooks Beyond the Recipes?*), published online on the editorial platform “Iscoada” in 2021 (Sohodoleanu, 2021).

### **Conclusions**

This study, without claiming to be exhaustive, offers a new research perspective on two political regimes that may have convergence points even though they appear incompatible doctrinally, ideologically, and historically. The analysis of aspects related to food restrictions in the two totalitarian regimes serves to highlight numerous similarities between them. Even though they involve two different historical periods and doctrines at opposite ends, the similarities, through the almost identical repetition of methods for implementing reprehensible measures, show us that one never learns enough from the lessons of history and that history often repeats itself.

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### Legislation

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