

Weathering the Storm, Toppled by the Storm: North Korea's Non-transition Compared with the Transitions of Romania and Albania, 1989–1991*

Balázs Szalontai

The article examines those domestic and external factors which led to the collapse of the Romanian and Albanian Communist regimes in 1989–1990 and which enabled the DPRK to survive the shock effect of the East European transitions and the subsequent economic crisis. It compares the three countries in terms of three dimensions: socio-economic, symbolic, and international. It concludes that North Korea's survival resulted from the combination of multiple factors which distinguished the country from both Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania and Ramiz Alia's Albania (though less so from Enver Hoxha's Albania): the regime's unusually repressive nature; the low cohesion of the underprivileged social groups; the leadership's unwillingness to initiate either a political liberalization or a confrontational austerity program; the scarcity of alternative national symbols that could have been juxtaposed to the state's own symbols; the absence of an earlier, non-Communist nation-state; China's post-1991 support; North Korea's strong military capabilities; the U.S. and South Korean governments' focus on North Korea's denuclearization, rather than democratization; and the North Korean elite's fear of a scenario in which a transition would lead to the DPRK's absorption into the ROK. The article also explains why Romania's transition was more violent than Albania's.

Keywords: North Korea, Romania, Albania, transition, non-transition

*Acknowledgments: When writing this article, I accumulated debts to numerous friends and colleagues who provided invaluable assistance, including Mária Csanádi, Dennis Deletant, Eliza Gheorghe, Ana Lalaj, B.R. Myers, Petre Oprea, Dragoș Petrescu, Yoo Jinil, and the two anonymous reviewers of my manuscript. This work was supported by the Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2019-LAB-1250001).

Balázs Szalontai (aoverl@yahoo.co.uk) is an assistant professor in the Division of Public Sociology and Korean Unification at Korea University, Sejong Campus

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 33, no. 1 (June 2020): 243–277.

© 2020 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies