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If somebody tells you “tomorrow”, this means “it can’t be done”

Sorin Minea, businessman, 55 years old
Interview done by Petre Popovăț

I think that the 90s represented the most beautiful and incredible period in my life. They followed immediately after the so-called revolution. I had taken part in it ever since the beginning and people were convinced that we would experience a tremendous transformation – we still couldn’t say much about its nature, but we could swear it wasn’t far –, and we understood democracy as a form of anarchy with meetings in the public square, University Square and all the other activities I participated in.

Well, everybody back then was into politics. Some people, those who were more experienced than me and than most of my countrymen, got into business. They knew what had to be done: they got themselves commercial spaces and land properties – in a nutshell, they were better prepared. And they are still in business nowadays. They made profits of several millions with only a couple of thousand dollars investments. The rest, I included, who had no money to begin with and no connections, didn’t even dare dream of going in business back then. We dreamed of better jobs. I was a veterinarian and I used to dream of a position at a better clinic which I eventually got.

As I was involved in politics, one day I, actually my wife ran into Preda. Preda Mihăilescu, who lived in Switzerland, was a former high school mate of hers and he invited us over for a

party. There I met Toni Uncu and Stelian Tănase, and we began meeting regularly, once a week, to discuss politics.

Preda told me that he had a friend in Switzerland who dealt in meat (I didn’t have a clear idea of what his business was) and who wanted to import sheep from Romania. Wasn’t I interested in going to Switzerland to deliver the sheep to him? I for one told him that I hadn’t the faintest idea where to find that sheep in Romania but, back in the 90s, who on earth would have refused a trip to Switzerland? I was at 2 Mai (*seaside resort*) when I got a phone call from Vintilă [Mihăilescu, Preda’s brother]: “Sorin, we’re leaving for Switzerland the day after tomorrow. Won’t you come along?” I remembered things very clearly: I hadn’t a penny to my name, I left the holiday money on the table for my wife, I arrived in Bucharest with only 10 lei in my pocket and other such details. I had inherited some paintings from my father, which I sold for 200 – 300 lei. That was the worst business initiative I’ve ever had. I could have got at least a couple of thousands for them now. Anyway I used the money to go with Vintilă to Switzerland by car.

The journey there was like a dream, we were all flat broke, we slept in the car, the Swiss wouldn’t let us in, the tires were worn out, it was exactly the period following the miners’ revolt, I had participated in the event in University

Square ... As soon as we stopped at a customs checkpoint we would hear: Romania ... miners ... Ilescu ... bye-bye! And we were stuck there. I remember a severe quarrel we had with the Italian customs officers: we made it clear to them that we weren’t miners. And we got lucky ... They reached the conclusion that Minea could well be an Italian name. And then I said, “Of course it is, my grandfather came to Romania from Italy.” Ha, ha, ha! And they let us pass.

From Switzerland we went back to Italy to buy car tires and then went back to Switzerland where we met my future business partner. He wouldn’t even hear of buying sheep from Romania! He invited me to Switzerland because he wanted to export goods to Romania. As to the prices in Switzerland compared with those in Romania, only God knew the real situation ... But I suggested that we set up a sort of salami and sausages factory. I told him about the way we used to eat and all that, and he said: “Look here, I’ll send a lorry with salami and sausages for free. You sell the merchandise and thus show me that you can run a business.” Before I left he asked, “Do you need more money?” – “I guess so.” – “How much?” I replied that around 20 000 dollars would do. When I found myself actually holding the 20 000 dollars I simply couldn’t believe my eyes. And I came back to Romania with 20 000 dollars in my wallet.

The shipment from Switzerland came right before Christmas and it was all wonderful ... Then I realized for the first time what Romania really represented; I gave a TV interview. I went to the customs checkpoint to receive a food shipment and then to sell the goods. A free shipment, it was. And then I had an idea for a new business ... The Romanian Government gave me that idea, as it had passed a wonderful law: if you sold your merchandise for dollars, the customs tax was zero; if you sold it for lei, they would tax you. So I had to sell the food for American dollars if I wanted to avoid paying taxes. But that was impossible. I think I spent an entire day at customs and made friends with everybody ... Bu-

reaucacy was the God they all revered there.

Nobody did any business. Then they suggested store locations in all sort of places ... As a businessman, I used to meet all kinds of people, and everybody had a commercial space to offer me ... the prices were ridiculously low. I didn’t have that kind of money and to be honest I didn’t really know what I was supposed to do. Back then we were all very proud and it all seemed like a game to us.

Businessmen fell into three categories: those who knew exactly what they had to do, and these were former Political Police officers and former Party members, the elite, as well as people who had come from abroad and who had a pretty clear idea of what was to become of Romania, of what would make the value of different goods rise and who knew how to break the existing connections system. That explains why former Party members and Political Police officers were included in this category: they had connections. The second category included people like me, the “poets” of the business world: business was a sort of adventure deep in the Wild West, a source of entertainment for us. And the third category was made up of the rest of the population who had acquired the notion that any Romanian citizen was a virtual general manager of a small stall opened in his or her own flat. There was a real inflation of general managers at the time. The contracts and company statute were standard documents: some sinister pieces of rubbish which you paid for, a guy would give them to you, you never even bothered to read them because you wouldn’t have understood a word – not that I understand a great deal more now ... But that was the ritual to follow in order to set up a firm.

I set up the firm, I rented a store – they robbed me blind – that I had found in Buftea: a disused factory. I rented it and invested in repairing and began the production. I used the 20 000 dollars I had, plus the transport which had cost around a million lei. That was quite a fortune back then (it was the winter of 1991), actu-

ally it was a real fortune. Well, that was the first salami and sausages factory with private capital. Our products sold like hot cakes, but ... nobody paid me for anything. All stores were state-owned and the usual Romanian “double-crosses” had begun. One other thing I love: all the managers of the state-owned stores who “double-crossed” me then are still comfortably seated in their chairs as we speak. One of them is the general manager of a big multinational company, and I still run into him once in a while. His “double-cross” cost me around 40 million in terms of what this money meant back in '91. That was serious money. But life is like that sometimes. Meanwhile, they have turned into businessmen.

The business environment was a completely idiotic one. I said that then I gave my first interview: I was a vet in Brănești and a group of people from the National Television came there and asked ... I had been to the Ministry of Finance to submit the documents for my future firm, you know, and they asked what the deal with business in Romania was. I was cranky that day, so I answered, “Man, something did indeed change in Romania: the bribe is paid in dollars, not in lei anymore.” That was the only change I had noticed. For the smallest problem you had the guy behind the desk would ask for money. That was positively unbearable and unconceivable: whatever I did, I got stuck in the same bureaucratic and connections maze. After the interview I received the visit of an inspector from the Ministry of Agriculture who had come down to give me a fine. He couldn't find me, so he fined a colleague of mine and, still as a consequence of the above-mentioned interview, Olaru – that was the name of the blockhead of a director we had back then – made me quit from the Sanitary-Veterinarian Agency, saying that he was firing me because I had spoken ill of the government. That wasn't the first time I had spoken ill of the government and it certainly wasn't the last.

Well, that's how I started doing business. That was the best period of my life! Nobody knew how we were supposed to pay our employ-

ees, nobody understood a thing of what we were doing and nobody had the faintest idea where we would sell our products. All the people we had employed – with only one exception, namely the guy who robbed me blind – were all novices in the business world. We met in the morning and spent the day talking about how we would do business, but we clearly had no idea what we were saying. It was beautiful, all was absolutely superb ...

Business went on more as a matter of reflex. The market was free, everybody worked as they pleased, and nobody was checking on anybody, nobody was aware of what was going on, yet everybody wanted something to eat. I don't know how to explain this but the atmosphere was very poetic: we would come to work in the morning, we would work day in and day out, our employees didn't ask for anything, poor things, the state was the all mighty master and all business was run having the state as intermediary. Businessmen were a rare species. The businessmen I used to meet with at the time were all at my level of experience, meaning that they were all “poets” playing businessmen. I had started attending meetings with those businessmen who are still in business today and who are very rich. Naming no names, I was offered all sorts of things. It was then that I truly saw how business was done. One of the first proposals I received was to make an association, get about a million and a half from the Swiss guy, then kick him out and set up a firm of our own ... That proposal came from an important businessman who is still active on the market today ... And my response was, “Of course, dear boy, we'll become associates, we kick the Swiss chap out after we've robbed him clean, then you'll suck me dry and I start again from scratch. Thanks but no, thanks.”

During the same period I opened up the place where I work now. At first I had only a piece of land and the skeleton of the building, all worth a million dollars. I asked for money from abroad, I exchanged them at a bank, I bought

the building at an auction and met with one of the ministers at the time who asked me, “And how did you say you got the money?” – “I was sent a million from abroad and I exchanged it.” – “Where did you exchange it?” – “At the bank.” – “You idiot, why didn’t you call me? I would have done that for you and for a better price!” I wasn’t alone at that meeting; my partner was there with me. He gave me a look and then asked, “Man, are you sure the guy is the minister?” I said, “Yeah, man, he is.” – “And how on earth do you do business here, in Romania?” I said, “You seem to have got the hang of it, pal.” Just like that! During his staying here he learnt a word, his first Romanian word: “tomorrow”. And he used to say something like, “If somebody tells you ‘tomorrow’, that means ‘it can’t be done’”.

To this day I can’t say for sure whether at the beginning we were making money or not. I had settled my salary at a hundred dollars per month. That was a real fortune in the 90s, now you would starve with a salary like that. And we had three managers and six employees. That was our grand factory which went on impeccably: we were all “businessmen”, we all drove second-hand cars and we felt ecstatic (other drove trucks), we all discussed business all day long and had business meetings with “important businessmen” and we all went to state-owned firms to beg for something. At the time you went to a state-owned firm hat in hand, you begged and bribed people to send you the raw material you needed. They would always give you a cold shoulder and speak to you on a superior tone, “You’ll never be like us, you poor thing! Just take a look at our huge factories ...” They have all gone bankrupt! All of them! And that is really strange. All those who were once general managers of state-owned companies are now prosperous businessmen and own parasite companies which are slowly destroying the old

ones. And I can’t think of any exceptions! And everybody says that these are truly successful people. Back then they were all FSN members, then they became PDSR¹ members and then members of the Peasants’ Party. That was simply a huge mess: everybody was involved in politics, everybody was a businessman and everybody was rich.

Paradoxically, in Romania you can’t get rich from business, in the sense that you’ll never own a huge bank account. You can raise the value of your investment. Those who own huge bank accounts are generally those involved in more or less legal import-export activities and those who did business during that period, meaning those who “double-crossed” everybody back then. These are the millionaires. And if we take a closer look at them, we’ll see that these people have become politicians: ministers, senators and so on. They’re all filthy rich, they still can’t get enough and they keep asking for more.

So, I negotiated for a space to run our business. I was trying to also get a store or something. But I came face to face with the heads of the various influence networks operating at the time. They were disgusting! They would openly ask for astronomical sums of money ... They wouldn’t seem so impressive now, but back then they were huge. And each of these guys had a bank account with hundreds of thousands of dollars in it. He was a clerk, a politician and a businessman. And they looked down on the likes of me, who were trying to actually do something, as if we were a bunch of half-wits. Funny thing is that now, looking back on things and trying to remember all those that I’ve met and who understood business the way I did, I’m not sure I’d still find 5 % of them still active in the field. And if you don’t count those who enjoy political support, the percentage would drop to 2-3%. Some of them entered politics, and they enjoyed the political support that allowed them to “double-

¹ The Party for Social Democracy in Romania.

cross” their business partners ... You have to be naturally gifted for this. I for one honestly admit that I’m not ... They’ve “double-crossed” everybody and they prospered, but most of them went bankrupt and disappeared from the market. Those who tried to do business legally and who are still in business nowadays can’t represent more than 2 % of the total number. This happens because, from 1990 up to ’94-’95, you would make no profit whatsoever regardless of the nature of the activity you were trying to run legitimately.

There was a period between 1992 and 1993 when business was possible and profits made from our industry were impressive. After that everybody went into the same kind of business, there was a competition going on. It was the first industrial branch where competition became dramatic and where it still is. That had been the situation until ’94 when political influence began to make its presence felt. The second generation of businessmen was “born”. The year 1990 had represented the poetical phase for the likes of me and the prosperous phase for those who knew a thing or two and had begun to learn more. Those were not true businessmen. As I’ve said, they were former officers and former respectable Party members, as well as former representatives of Romania to different organizations. They had the necessary connections, a clear direction to follow and money to spend ... Now I read that I don’t know what chap tells the story of his bread-and-butter beginnings, of how he started by first selling colour TV-sets. These are old wives tales. I know I had a 20 000-dollar capital and I’m not afraid to admit it. The 20 000 dollars were chicken feed, as later on I received a million that I was free to invest. So if some chap comes along and says that he started his empire with an investment of 10 dollars, I’m in stitches. There is no such thing.

After this period, they began implementing political programmes all over the business world. If you wanted to do business, you had to be involved in politics. And they also started granting

exemptions from taxation, from paying the VTA etc. I think I’m the only one to have survived in my field. I can’t speak for others, though. We were the first company to set off, and many others have gone bankrupt along the way.

The company was first called Angst, and then it became Angst SRL. I was free to choose whatever name I pleased. The Swiss guy was called Angst and his Swiss company was also called Angst. He had asked me to give it a name. I wasn’t exactly enthusiastic at the prospect of naming it Sorin Minea. I saw the Angst label and the name sounded cool in Romanian because very few people actually know what it means. I myself was ignorant of its meaning “anxiety”. I found that out years later. In German it means “fear”, “anxiety”, so I told him, “Man, can I name it Angst?” – “Give it whatever name you please.” I set up Angst SRL and then I re-named it Angst SA (Share Company) because it mirrored the contribution to the registered capital.

I was supposed to get equipment for it. Back then you couldn’t buy things on leasing. So I asked for money from Switzerland as a contribution to the registered capital. But because we were a SRL, according to the law, the money contribution had to be bigger than that in assets. Otherwise we had to pay taxes and I couldn’t afford that. Then we turned our SRL into an SA, so that I could have a bigger contribution in assets, meaning the cars that I needed so badly. What on earth was he thinking when he gave us so much money then!!! He made a massive investment then. I think it must have been more than three million dollars. It’s equally true that the three million soon turned into an even more impressive sum, but I still don’t know how important that sum really was to him. To me that was a considerable sum ... I wouldn’t have had to work ever again, if it had been my money. Now, to tell you the truth, I don’t think that three million is such a big deal. A piece of equipment is worth several hundred thousand dollars. But, at that moment, it seemed like a fortune to me. The first million had been transferred straight

into my bank account. I could have taken the money and run to the Maldives with the prospect of leading a blissful life. I hadn’t even thought of doing such a thing.

At the beginning, money meant nothing to me (and I suspect others had similar views). It was all fun and games. Unlike those who had started doing business having a clear idea of what they would do, those who had also had money before, the rest of us were nothing but poor wretches. We lived off a salary which we supplemented with occasional tips. I would go on house calls, castrate a dog or two and thus get money for a pack of cigarettes, for petrol and for an evening out once a week, as the rest of our parties were usually organized at home. The need for clothing, cars or stuff of the kind was not exactly obvious to us. Under the Ceaușescu regime, you were a Rockefeller if you owned a video player and a colour TV-set! You needed nothing else and we didn’t exactly understand the real value money had. We weren’t ready for what they call “market economy”. For that you should have been involved in a certain structure and you should have seen it work. Moreover, you should have been familiar with the world of business. You should have been able to predict that real estate agencies would become extremely prosperous, that commercial spaces would become an excellent source of profit – not on the spot, but in ten years time. You should have had the money for a long-term investment and managed to get a profit 20 times as big. Well, we hadn’t the faintest idea about these things. We did business and lived off our salaries. These salaries got bigger if we managed to quit our jobs in a state-owned company for some private activity. We had the possibility to become our own employers.

But there was another paradox: when I worked for a state-owned company, the pleasure of playing truant was greater. Once I had started working for my own company, I realized that wasn’t a solution anymore. And the funny part was that my salary was not bigger. At the begin-

ning it couldn’t have been bigger than what a country vet earned in a month. Politics had started to lose its influence, the University Square effect was wearing off, money kept pouring in every month, I had no idea how to monitor a bank account, I understood nothing of the nature of the capital I was investing ... I didn’t understand a thing. It was all a matter of intuition, actually. You jump at a certain opportunity and you stay clean of anything illegal.

The poetical atmosphere of 1990 was indeed wonderful. The tragedy began the moment business started working. Then you realized that you could go bankrupt at any time, that you could lose everything you had achieved in a matter of minutes and that competition could get stronger than you at any minute. Between 1990 and 1992 they couldn’t do anything to you, as the press was weak and control was virtually inexistent. Once in a while you would get a visit from a chap asking for bribe but that was it. I remember that the first inspector from the Ministry of Finance who came by our company checked the files to see if they were bound together and fined me for not having rope-bound files according to a law for the 60s. I had no idea what he wanted for me. The moment we began to make some sense, poetry turned into hard work. You had to find people to work with, you had to decide for one direction and start investing accordingly.

There is also a generation conflict involved. I am 51 and my generation was born during the communist period. Communism educated and shaped our minds. My thinking can’t be different now. I was already too old when the revolution broke out; my reflexes had already been conditioned. That dream we used to dream – getting a pair of blue jeans and a video player ... Well, now I own at least five video players and I have so many pairs of blue jeans that I will never get to wear them all. But I still have the reflex: the “that can be arranged” reflex, the “you have to bribe somebody, you have to grease the wheels a bit” reflex. We had been educated to think like that. You would take a pack of Kent to

the doctor and a pack of coffee to the police officer. You can't just erase these habits from your brain. And it is precisely my generation that runs companies nowadays. Some of the managers have been more deeply influenced by communism than others. Those who have been marked for life by communism are those who are still against our joining the European Union and against free competition, those who are still pulling the ropes and take advantage of their political connections. Nothing has changed for them actually. Back then they managed to get a free TV-set, now they manage to avoid paying taxes.

Then the next generation took over ... They are people born five or six years before the Revolution who have no idea what happened on those days and what had been going on before. The minute they took over they began studying hard. They graduated from different faculties, their language was different – they spoke the economic jargon, the language of commerce which we could barely stammer. To use a political term, they represent the second wave. They are the ones who nowadays know exactly what to do and what direction to follow. Their greatest disadvantage is that they are still taking orders. But they had become European citizens long before we even began dreaming of it. Their idea of work is different and it has been influenced by the American and European mentalities. It's very difficult for us to adjust to their way of thinking and to follow the same paths. They believe that the minute you get in business you have to adopt an extremely tolerant, peaceful and patient attitude. If we had been patient in 1990, we would have gone bankrupt. If we won't be patient now, we will go bankrupt soon. They took over not a moment too soon. Today's successful businessmen, be they communists, former Political Police officers or anything else, are those who were able to make quick decisions, those who had a lot of courage and who were never idle.

So, they are those who never backed down,

who always tried to adjust their plans, to move quickly and at the same time to be quite aggressive. I suppose that must also have been the situation in Europe hundreds of years ago. There were people who had an idea or the intuition for a future plan, who took their chances and who had a lot of talent: they managed to convince others to work for them. That is an advantage for people of my age because it would be very difficult for me to learn how to use a computer now. Let's be serious, I can play computer games and I can read emails but not more. It would also be very difficult for me to learn the economic jargon. It would be downright impossible. And then – and many people don't understand this – I am always careful not to hire people how are dumber than me, lest a smarter one should take my job. It wasn't until quite recently that I finally managed to get it through my head that my employees have to know their respective jobs much better than I do. If they're not a lot smarter, I lose. They have to come up with ideas, my only talent being to apply those ideas and to make them work.

Now, if the Romanians hadn't been a slightly aggressive nation, we wouldn't have the slightest clue where we are headed. Any decision I make implies taking some risks. A big and rich company can afford to wait. It loses a couple of millions but it then wins due to its tenacity. A new company can't afford to wait because it usually loses a lot. And then decisions must be made in a matter of seconds. But for this you must be a little reckless. If back in the 90s there were no foreign companies, no multinationals ... Oh, the mixed companies of the 90s ... It was like this: you had a friend abroad who came to Romania and you set up a mixed company because that had its advantages (Law 35 and the hell if I know what else). He was a nobody abroad, you were a nobody here, but together you were the proud owners of a mixed company. That was pretty much the story. Nowadays foreign companies investing here are different. They are very powerful, multinationals with capitals of millions of

dollars. And if we join the European Union, the scenario will be the same as in the whole of Europe: small companies will be taken over by big ones and nobody will be able to do a thing about it. You can’t have thousands of companies working in the same field.

Those who have been in business for years and have accumulated loads of experience are truly advantaged. They know the market and they can make decisions in the blink of an eye. In ’92 or ’93 somebody came to me with a business proposition and told me something about a business plan. I burst into laughter and I said, “Sir, I can’t possibly give you a business plan for the next three years. How the hell am I supposed to know what will happen in three years time? I can’t give you anything of the kind!” If mine had been a Western company, I would have had to make a business plan for the next ten years. Here we can’t, at least for now, make a long-term plan – for a year, maybe, but that’s the best we can do.

So, we are given the opportunity to win and the basic idea is the following: in business you work not for yourself, but for the very pleasure of doing something. The minute you make money your goal and you are obsessed with the idea of winning, my honest opinion is that you lose any chance of success. That’s the secret of the 90s. Those of us who started their business back then didn’t think they would get rich. They all saw it as some kind of fun (the 90s kind of fun), something that offered you independence and at the same time kept you busy. Now you start thinking that you might also get some profit out of it. You might not get any, but the minute you start planning your profit and you say to yourself “I invest 1 leu but next year I want a profit of 7 lei” and the business context is similar to the virgin Romanian market of the 90s, you stand no chances of success.

If I were to get in business now, in the 2000s, I would adopt a different strategy. I would make a business plan and decide the sum of money that I would need. At present, when-

ever I discuss buying a store, I first count the money in my wallet. When I bought my first store, I had no idea how much money I had. I had no idea what would sell there either. I remember that I took a walk there, I gave it a look and I said to myself, “Man, I think this will be a smash!” Why did I say that? Beats me. But I gave no thoughts to the rest, to taxes, to anything else for that matter. I made no plans for my money. It was all a matter of “it does” or “it doesn’t”. The decision had to be made in five minutes. I made some wrong decisions and said “no” when maybe I should have said “yes”. But now I’m trying not to think of how much I will make tomorrow or of the profit that I, Sorin Minea, will make from that business decision. And I am convinced that the minute I started thinking of profit, the whole business would go down the drain.

As long as you dedicate your life to the company and you encourage people’s initiatives and you don’t see the company’s activity as mainly an economic one but more like a competition, you stand good chances of succeeding. And you also need a bit of intuition. The minute you start thinking: now I have to organize it so as to ensure a huge profit of which I will have my share in a bank account and I’ll use it to buy a yacht and God knows what else and travel God knows where ... So, the minute you change, your company changes with you. I’ve changed neither my manner of dressing, nor my manners.

I have a pet theory: the communists imitated the “bourgeois – land-lords”. What did they think these bourgeois did all day long? They lived in mansions, had servants, threw parties day in and day out and bribed people around them. That was their picture of the noble people’s lifestyle. And they imitated that lifestyle. What precedents were there for the businessmen of the 90s? The Communist Party was the only role model. And what did Party members do? They had villas, went hunting, owned cars, bribed people, they had the power to order others around, they actually had absolute power. What had they imagined? That the Party model

was the one they were supposed to follow. The moment they became businessmen, they would go to Paris to buy a pair of socks, to London for underwear and so on ... That's rubbish. It's not so much something that they want to do as it is a lifestyle they consider normal. The moment I begin aping something or somebody, I am no longer me. I cannot see the logic in changing your lifestyle and your mentality. Those who were adults during the 90s and felt the need to show that they were indeed businessmen because they owned a yacht and they dressed well, because they had access to people in the government and ordered poor people around, because they could afford to shout and wore Armani suits, all these people made a huge mistake. I occasionally come across such Armani-suits and I notice that some of them can't string up a sentence (and I feel sorry for them), some have no idea how to dress although they have people who could teach them, while others, when trying to speak their mind, fail miserably. And these are the people who dare tell me what to do.

I was once at one of the ministries, attending the ceremony for a guy being appointed to a new position, and I told people there, "Sir, there is something I cannot comprehend, namely why do you always have to appoint former businessmen who went bankrupt? If they went bankrupt, how the hell do you think they'll do well in their new positions? That I cannot understand. This guy failed in his business and you want him to be a state secretary? On what grounds? Do you want him because he's incompetent?" - "He speaks well, you see ... " - "He may be good at words but he can't do business. So, we'll never speak the same language". He lost all his money, so now he wants mine. He has all the shortcomings that I can think of. If you get a partner, make sure he's an honest man.

And now we go back to the old Romanian paradox ... We make money but we make it slowly. Others got into politics and got rich in the blink of an eye. So, I reckon politics is a better

source of profit than business. And I start beating myself up on that again. In 1989 I was inside the National Television building too. Why on earth didn't I become a member of the National Salvation Front? Now I would have been a popular political leader and I wouldn't have had to work anymore. The state would have given me a car, the bribe I would have taken myself and I would have lived happily ever after. That's where we part ways. They were trained for political positions and unfortunately people in Romania don't really understand what politics is about. A political position is a position within the party. That's the main idea: the party is everything and everywhere. And it is the party that helps you to make money. You join the party, you get promoted. If you don't join the party, you don't get promoted. And who joins the party and then leaves? Opportunists do. Is the opportunist a fair character? Sorry, but I don't think so! Basically they front all opportunists in the party and then they are amazed that none of the let's say honest party members is visible. We have no intellectual party members, great men are invisible ... Of course they are. They aren't opportunists and they'll never understand why it is necessary to become a party member in order to get a salary.

The whole business is absurd. I did it for forty years and I won't go back to it. You take a look at them and one says to you, "I am a politician". You simply can't be a politician, dear boy. You've had no experience and no education for that. You've been a communist for 30 or 40 years and couldn't have changed over night. You were a Party activist, you agreed with the Party methods or perhaps you didn't, but its ideas stuck with you, and so did its methods. That's it, you can't change your ways anymore. You'll always be the same. That's why I am saying that these people cannot do more than imitate the communist lifestyle and mentality. That is the explanation for the chaos in Romania. That's the reason why our fate could never be completely shared by Poland or Hungary.

Romanian companies and companies with Romanian capital, those companies already on the market, will disappear. We are not united, we don’t have a powerful Romanian community abroad, and we don’t share that drop of poetical spirit and ambition people in the West have. Sometimes it’s better if you decide to sell your company but sometimes you’d better help it grow. If I had made a takeover proposition to anyone in the 90s, they would have laughed to my face. Now everybody would love to buy my business. We have brands now. Now is the time for Romania to show its true potential.

And now I go back to that idiotic slogan the miners had, namely “We won’t sell our country!” We didn’t, we gave it for free. Moreover, we even paid good money for them to take it. The law says that foreign citizens cannot buy land properties here. Well, they’re in for a nasty surprise: all those Romanian citizens who bought hundreds of thousands of hectares of land were backed up by foreign citizens and by Romanians living abroad. Romania is not a fiscal paradise, but there are plenty such places abroad. Everybody is taking their business abroad; off-shore

companies have become a fashion and so on ... Nobody has ever bothered to check. Theft has become an institution. It’s still difficult to do business. And unfortunately, I see what happens with foreign citizens in Romania. They say that Romania is a corrupt country. I don’t think so. They know more about corruption than we do. They are awfully good at buying us out; even better than we are. I don’t know how they learnt that but it’s sure that they did. They learnt how to bribe us, an art we’ve never really mastered, and what working on commission means, at a time when we had no idea what a commission was. That’s how they’ll put us out of business soon.

To me the 90s were a wonderful time when I lived the kind of life I had always wanted to lead during the communist period, a time of great possibilities when I could do whatever I wanted and when I could prove that I was better than all the rest.

Translated by Alina Popescu

