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## THE ROMANIAN REVOLUTION

More than twenty years after the events that led to the violent fall of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu on 22 December 1989, the Romanian revolution is still something of an enigma and shrouded in mystery and mystification. Although more than four hundred books<sup>1</sup> and innumerable articles have been written on this topic—by the actors involved, contemporary witnesses, as well as by Romanian and foreign historians—there are still profound disagreements between them about the actual events and how to interpret them. A major issue in the debate is whether what occurred in Romania was a revolution at all, and if so, what kind of revolution. Other divisive questions concern how or why violence was used during the various stages of the revolution, the goals pursued by the protagonists of the revolution, and last but not least, the role—if any—played by external actors in the process. A major divide continues to persist between the protagonists of the anti-communist protest movement and the anti-Ceaușescu dissidents who took power after the dictator's fall. The scholarly community examining the topic is split between researchers who question the reliability of Romanian sources and those who are principally not opposed to them.

Today, there is a broad archival basis available in Romania for research on the 1989 revolution. The results of the inquiries into the revolutionary events produced by two special committees of the Romanian Senate between 1990–92 and

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<sup>1</sup> Here is a necessarily incomplete selection of books on the Romanian revolution: Michel Castex, *Un mensonge gros comme le siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990); Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Decembrie '89. Deconstrucția unei revoluții*. (Bucharest: Polirom, 2009); Emil Constantinescu, *Adevărul despre România (1989–2004)* (Bucharest: Editura Universală, 2004); Dennis Deleant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate. Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965–1989* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1995); Daniela Veronica Gușă de Drăgan, *Condamnat la adevăr—General Ștefan Gușă* (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2004); Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution. Rumänien zwischen Diktatur und Demokratie* (Munich: Piper, 1990); idem, *Systemwechsel in Rumänien. Von der Revolution zur Transformation* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998); Radu Portocala, *Autopsie du coup d'état roumain: au pays du mensonge triomphant* (Paris: Kalman Lévy, 1990); Dumitru Preda and Mihai Retegan, *1989. Principiul Dominoului. Prăbușirea regimurilor comuniste europene* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000); Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *Istoria loviturilor de stat în România, vol. 4, Revoluția din decembrie 1989—o tragedie românească* (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2005); Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *Cronologia evenimentelor din decembrie 1989* (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing House, 2009); Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

1992–96 have been published, as have a considerable number of documents from the archives of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Secret Services and the Ministry of Defense. The Institute of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, set up in 2005, is conducting systematic research on the topic.<sup>2</sup>

### Collective memories of previous uprisings

Romania's history under communist rule is not marked by "eruptive" uprisings, but by a sort of societal "magma" involving a fundamental rejection of Marxist-Leninist ideology coupled with a historically based mistrust of the Soviet Union, whose armies had imposed the communist system in the country. Several factors account for this. One is language and culture—Romania is the only country of the former Soviet bloc where a Romanic language is spoken and whose culture is closely connected to the culture of Western Europe. During the first years of Soviet occupation, a partisan movement existed in the mountain areas of Romania; its final defeat came only after the suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956. There is, however, a tradition of socially motivated uprisings in communist Romania. These include the miners' strike of the Jiu Valley in 1977 and the 1987 workers' demonstration in Braşov, both put down without bloodshed. The Braşov demonstration in particular is thought to have served as a kind of dress rehearsal for the Timişoara uprising, which marked the beginning of the 1989 revolution. Whereas in November 1987,<sup>3</sup> the massive workers' protests in Braşov were quelled by the regime through a show of force and subsequent arrests, the Timişoara protests developed into a violent uprising after the first protesters were killed or wounded. And the Romanian collective memory recalls a number of historical coups d'état. Among the best known in a series of conspiracies is the coup that led to the deposition in 1866 of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the architect of the unification of the Romanian principalities, and the coup d'état of 23 August 1944, through which King Michael, supported by several political leaders, overthrew the head of state, Marshall Ion Antonescu.

But interestingly, the protagonists of the 1989 revolutionary coup did not call on this aspect of Romania's political tradition. Instead, they looked even further back, explicitly and insistently referring to the French revolution of 1789 in order to accredit the idea of the Romanian revolution of 1989 as being a classical popular uprising, and to support the political myth of the allegedly spontaneous "emanation" of its leaders from the "chaos" following Ceauşescu's arrest.

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent overview, see Ioan Scurtu, *La Révolution roumaine de 1989, dans le contexte international de l'époque* (Bucharest: Institut de la Révolution Roumaine, 2008), 7–22.

<sup>3</sup> Marius Oprea and Stejărel Olaru, *Ziua care nu se uită. 15 noiembrie 1987, Braşov* (Bukarest: Polirom, 2002), with a list of those taken into custody.

### The structural and long-term causes of the Romanian revolution

The East European revolutions of 1989 were revolutions of a historically new type. Their most exceptional feature was that they did not represent individual national phenomena, but they were links in a chain of processes that revolutionized the Soviet-dominated system in Eastern Europe. The revolution of the Soviet bloc, caused by a general crisis in the communist system, was part and parcel of a geopolitical revolution facilitated by the rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, which had led to substantial changes in the political architecture of the entire world.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a number of common features in the 1989 East European revolutions, their specific course was marked by historically, politically and socially determined differences. Whereas the transition of power in Poland and Hungary was negotiated between representatives of the communist rulers and the opposition in a manner reminiscent of the Spanish model of the so-called Moncloa Pact of 1978, or was a non-violent coup de parti, as in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, the—in the end violent—overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime, which was originally envisaged to follow the non-violent example of the 1974 Portuguese revolution, makes it a singular case.<sup>5</sup> Only in Romania did a violent military coup d'état take place during which the communist head of state was executed.

In more than one respect, the unique mode of the transition of power in Romania was a direct consequence of the “Romanian deviation” in its relations with the Soviet Union, as had been pursued by Romania since the 1960s. The Soviet leadership became increasingly aware of the danger represented by Romania’s autonomous course in economic and foreign policy, not only for the stability of the communist regime within Romania itself, but also for the coherence of the Soviet bloc as a whole. After having successfully negotiated the withdrawal of the Soviet troops in 1958, the Romanian communist leadership, at that time headed by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, began to oppose Soviet pressure for a larger degree of integration and specialization of the CMEA countries, and attempted to create closer economic ties to the developed Western countries. At the same time, Romania also embarked on a more autonomous policy in its foreign and security policy, trying to distance itself from the Soviet imperial power.

In an internal power struggle following the death of Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, the supporters of Romania’s autonomous course headed by Nicolae Ceaușescu gained the upper hand over those who supported a return to the Soviet fold. While

<sup>4</sup> See an excellent detailed analysis of these worldwide changes in: Pierre Grosser, 1989. *L'année où le monde a basculé* (Paris: Perrin, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Alex Mihai Stoenescu, Victor Stănculescu pointed out that “the main scenario was patterned on the Portuguese model: i.e. a short-term military regime followed by a democratic regime supported by the army.” Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *In sfârșit, Adevărul... Generalul Victor Atanasie Stănculescu în dialog cu Alex Mihai Stoenescu* (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2009), 73.

trying to remove his pro-Soviet opponents from powerful party and state positions, Ceaușescu accelerated the independent foreign policy course inaugurated by his predecessor. In order to strengthen his hold on political power, Ceaușescu allowed a certain degree of de-Stalinization and de-Sovietization in the cultural field and liberalized contacts with the West. He also took steps to co-opt the young technocratic and cultural intelligentsia and to reconcile the old national-minded elites who had been imprisoned or discriminated against in the 1950s. With a speech held at a mass rally in Bucharest on 21 August 1968 criticizing the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, in which Romanian troops had not taken part, Ceaușescu achieved a degree of unanimity between the party, intellectuals and the population that was unknown in the other bloc countries, where de-Sovietization started only after 1989.

There are four main elements that led to the downfall of the Ceaușescu regime: the impact of the crisis of Soviet-style communism on Romania, the effects of the world economic crisis, Romania's loss of Western support, and the emergence of domestic opposition.

### *The restructuring of the Soviet bloc*

From the mid-1970s, the communist system, which had been imposed on the peoples of the Soviet Union and exported to the countries in Eastern Europe that had been occupied by the Red Army at the end of World War II, went through a deep crisis. The Soviet and East European economies were clearly unable to keep pace with the technological progress registered in the West. Moreover, they were deeply affected by the worldwide crisis in raw materials and on the financial markets. East European leaders expected the Soviet Union to help them overcome the economic and financial crises, whereby they asked for more deliveries of oil, gas and raw materials in exchange for products they were unable to sell on Western markets. The Soviet Union, however, was no longer able or willing to continue this traditional CMEA policy, and requested its partners to pay for such deliveries in hard currency and on the basis of world market prices. Because of the economic crisis, these regimes could thus no longer live up to their vigorous promises of economic welfare, and failed to honor the social contract that had been tacitly concluded with the populations of their respective countries. The Marxist-Leninist ideology had lost legitimacy and the grasp of the communist parties in power was no longer left unchallenged.

Yurii Andropov, a former KGB chief and CC secretary in charge of relations with the "fraternal" East European parties, who followed Leonid Brezhnev at the helm of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was well aware of the specter of a three-pronged revolt looming in the member countries of the Soviet economic and military bloc: revolts directed against the communist system, against the

respective political regimes, and against the Soviet imperial power. In order to prevent an outbreak of revolts or a systemic breakdown of the communist system in these countries, Andropov and Gorbachev were determined to implement a coordinated policy of restructuring the economies of the Soviet bloc in accordance with Soviet strategies, without, however, doing anything that would endanger the communist system.<sup>6</sup>

After his advent to power in 1985, Gorbachev pursued what was described as the “Gorbachev doctrine”: politically supporting reformist forces in those countries where the communist rulers opposed Moscow’s intra-bloc and domestic policies.<sup>7</sup> According to recently discovered Soviet documents, Gorbachev held a speech at the 6 October 1988 Politburo meeting in which he stated that socialism was in a profound crisis and thus that all the communist regimes had to introduce perestroika-style reforms in order to survive:

A number of countries have followed our example, or even preceded us on the road of deep reforms. Others, such as the GDR, Romania or North Korea, still fail to recognize the need for such reforms—but the reasons for that are rather political, since the present leadership is unwilling to change anything. In reality, all these countries need change. We don’t say this publicly, lest we are accused of an attempt to impose perestroika on friends, but the fact is: there are clear signs of a forthcoming crisis, and thus radical reforms are required all over the socialist world. In this sense, the factor of personalities becomes one of huge significance. [...] Those who stubbornly refuse to follow the call of the times only push the illness deep inside and greatly aggravate its future course. That concerns us very directly. We may have abandoned the rights of the “Big Brother” of the socialist world, but we cannot abandon our role as its leader. Objectively, it shall always belong to the Soviet Union, as the strongest country of socialism and the birthplace of the October Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In a conversation in March 1989 with Károly Grósz, the secretary general of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, the Soviet leader emphasized that “we clearly have to draw boundaries, thinking about others and ourselves at the same time. Democracy is much needed, and interests have to be harmonized. The limit, however, is the safekeeping of socialism and assurance of stability.” See the Report for the members of the Political Committee, 29 March 1989, MOL M-KS-288-11/44580.e., in Csaba Békés, Malcolm Byrne, Melinda Kalmár, Zoltán Ripp, Miklós Vörös, eds., *Political Transition in Hungary, 1989–1990: A Compendium of Declassified Documents and Chronology of Events* (Washington and Budapest: National Security Archive, Cold War History Research Center, and 1956 Institute, 1999), 6.

<sup>7</sup> “Le nouveau leader du Kremlin visait à l’élimination des vieux dirigeants des pays socialistes et à leur remplacement par des personnes jeunes, prêtes à appliquer la perestroika. [...] Le remplacement des leaders conservateurs, souhaité par Gorbachev, a été soutenu par les médias occidentaux.” Ioan Scurtu, *La Révolution roumaine de 1989, dans le contexte international de l’époque* (Bucharest: Institut de la Révolution Roumaine, 2008), 6, 8. See also Anneli Ute Gabanyi, “Gorbačev in Bukarest: Rumänisch-sowjetische Differenzen treten offen zutage,” *Südosteuropa* 36, no. 5 (1987): 267–75; idem, “Rumänien und Gorbačev,” in Walter Althammer, ed., *Südosteuropa in der Ära Gorbačev. Auswirkungen der sowjetischen Reformpolitik auf die südosteuropäischen Länder* (Munich: Sagner, 1987), 75–82.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jamie Glazov, “Symposium: Secrets of Communism’s “Collapse”, 23 September 2010, <http://frontpagemag.com/2010/jamie-glazov/symposium-secrets-of-communism%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Ccollapse%E2%80%9D/> (accessed 12 September 2013).

Two days before Ceaușescu's fall, Radio Moscow broadcast a statement in Romanian made by the Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, stating that "the internal processes in Romania are beginning to bear consequences for interstate relations," bringing the potential of "tarnishing the socialist ideals."<sup>9</sup> On 21 December, the same radio station aired interviews of three deputies of the Soviet Supreme Soviet (in session at the time) charging Ceaușescu of "no longer being a socialist (having shot at his people) and of being an opponent of Soviet perestroika and of the inexorable process of democratization in Eastern Europe."<sup>10</sup> At a press conference during his visit early in January, just a few days after the new leaders had taken power in Bucharest, Shevardnadze referred to past Soviet-Romanian disagreements in the area of foreign policy and the Soviet reform process. Ceaușescu, he said, had isolated Romania from the East-European reform process, and in the end he had resorted to openly criticizing it. However, now that the last non-conformist regime in Eastern Europe had collapsed, Shevardnadze was hopeful "that the reconstruction and modernization of Comecon and the Warsaw Pact could start."

Already in 1983, Romania had been perceived as the weakest link in the Soviet imperial chain. It was the country where social revolt would most likely be directed against the communist system as such; indeed, it seemed possible for the country to leave the Soviet bloc and turn to the West.<sup>11</sup> In February 1989, an investigation under the aegis of the social scientist Oleg Bogomolov painted a pessimistic scenario for Romania. As stated in the report submitted by Gorbachev's advisor, if the financial means set free after the repayment of Romania's debts were not used to raise the living standards of the population, a

social explosion cannot be excluded. At a moment when the renovating processes going on in the other socialist countries have not yet proved the feasibility of the reform policies, there is a danger that there will be a decisive turn toward the West (which also means its leaving the Warsaw Treaty) in this country, whose population has liberated itself from socialist values and been traditionally educated in the spirit of having a common fate with the Latin world.<sup>12</sup>

Even worse from the Soviet point of view, the Bogomolov commission did not exclude the possibility of an anti-Ceaușescu revolt of "the leading class" that would result in "changes from the top," a revolt, one is left to understand, which would lead to the same results.

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<sup>9</sup> Radio Moscow in Romanian, 20 December 1989. Cf. Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Radio Moscow in Romanian, 21 December 1989. Cf. Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> See Oleg Gordiewsky and Christopher Andrew, *KGB. Die Geschichte seiner Auslandsoperationen von Lenin bis Gorbatschow* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1990), 824.

<sup>12</sup> See Dumitru Preda and Mihai Retegan, 1989. *Principiul Dominoului: Prăbușirea regimurilor comuniste europene* (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2000), 18–20.

*The impact of the world economic crisis*

The crisis that rocked the world economy in the 1970s was another determining factor. Under its impact, the three fundamental pillars of Romania's economic and trade policy—avoidance of dependency on the Soviet Union, reliance on raw materials imported from Third World countries and financial support from developed Western countries—collapsed. The Romanian economy, which needed massive imports of crude oil for its oversized refinery capacities that had been built with Western loans, encountered difficulties after deliveries from its main providers stopped as a result of the Iran-Iraq war. The country could not expect to get Soviet support, since it had distanced itself from the CMEA mechanism of energy deliveries at sub-market prices in exchange for non-competitive goods. Last but not least, Romania could no longer consolidate its debts at Western banks, which had panicked as a result of the Polish crisis in 1980. After its Western creditors stopped granting or guaranteeing further loans, and after the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund for further loans had been rejected as unacceptable by the Romanian government, Romania—unlike other East European countries with considerably higher per capita indebtedness such as Hungary or Poland—was forced to repay its foreign debts.

The drastic cuts in crude oil and raw material imports led to a severe reduction of industrial production and hence in energy exports to Western countries. In order to procure the hard currency needed to repay its debt, Romania increased its exports of food to the detriment of domestic consumption, and reduced the imports of consumer goods, policies that severely affected the living standards of the population. The harsh austerity program imposed by the regime included food rationing, radical cuts in the private consumption of energy, and wage reductions. When Ceaușescu triumphantly announced the successful repayment of its hard currency debt in March 1989, the Romanian population had reached a degree of economic need, social misery and depression unknown anywhere else in the bloc. Any earlier support for Ceaușescu was gone, and the Romanian society as a whole wanted a change.

*The loss of Western support*

The Soviet policy of reshaping its relations inside the Soviet bloc and implementing perestroika-style reforms in the East European states was possible only in the context of a redefinition of the relationship between the great powers in the East and the West. After having successfully negotiated a treaty in 1987 with Mikhail Gorbachev that would eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles, the United States signaled willingness to back the new Soviet leader and to respect Moscow's security interests as did other Western states such as Britain and France.

The repercussions of this Western policy change dealt a major blow to the Ceaușescu regime. During the Cold War era, Romania's foreign policy, which had obstructed the deeper integration of the Warsaw Pact, had been attributed a kind of "nuisance value" by the NATO countries. But in the light of Gorbachev's "new political thinking," Ceaușescu's deviations from the political and ideological positions of the Soviet Union were no longer relevant. Instead, Romania was increasingly perceived as a factor that disturbed the process of rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. Western governments and financial institutions were no longer ready to grant Romania the trade privileges it had enjoyed earlier, and the European Community stalled negotiations with Romania on a new trade agreement. In 1989, Romania, once a forerunner in relations between the CMEA countries and the European Community, was now the only European CMEA state that had not yet applied to establish diplomatic relations with this body. Similarly, the US government was no longer ready to extend the Most Favored Nation's Clause to Romania's "repressive regime." In order to preempt the US decision, Romania unilaterally renounced the clause in 1988. Western media turned their focus on the low living standards of the population, the violation of human and nationality rights, and the treatment of regime opponents in the country. In the CSCE and at the United Nations, Romania's human rights and minority record came increasingly under fire from both East and West. The loss of Western support for Ceaușescu's policies dealt another heavy blow to his image at home.

### *The emergence of domestic opposition*

Ceaușescu's nationalist anti-Soviet rhetoric was the main reason why a dissident movement was late in developing in Romania, and also why so many dissident figures were connected to the pro-Soviet communist elites who had been removed from the center of power in the 1960s. Following Romania's 1968 criticism of the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union set in motion all the levers at its disposal to destabilize the restive Romanian leadership internally. In 1969, Moscow initiated the "Operation Dniester," whose goal was to win over Romanian officers to engage in an attempt to topple Ceaușescu, and "in case this coup was not successful by itself, to find a pretext for the Soviets to get involved."<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, the first signs of organized opposition against the Ceaușescu regime appeared in the armed forces. Although Romania had discontinued sending its leading party, military and security officials for training to the Soviet Union in the early 1960s—a common practice that the rest of the Warsaw Pact member states observed until 1990—there were

<sup>13</sup> Ion Mihai Pacepa, a high ranking defector from the Romanian Department of External Information, in a television interview on Hungarian Duna Television. *Jurnalul Național*, 3 March 2004.



still a large number of senior officers in Romania who had studied in the Soviet Union. In order to counteract the perceived threat to the country's foreign policy as well as to his own power, Ceaușescu undertook a thorough restructuring of Romania's defense system. After a first military coup attempt led by General Ioan Șerb had failed in 1971, a new defense law was adopted in 1972. In 1974, the new Romanian Constitution transferred the supreme command over the national armed forces to the newly created position of state president, i.e. to Ceaușescu. A new Romanian military doctrine based on the concept of the people's war marked another step in Romania distancing itself further from the Warsaw Pact. In the course of the army's reorganization, officers detected or suspected of conspiring against Ceaușescu, including those who were of Russian, Jewish or Hungarian origin, who had studied in the Soviet Union, or were married to Soviet wives, were removed from leadership positions in the army. Despite these precautionary measures, military coup attempts are reported to have taken place in 1971, 1976, 1983, 1984 and 1985. All, however, could be prevented. The officers involved in these attempts were removed from active service and dispatched for civil work.

With the onset of the debt crisis in Romania in the early 1980s, opposition to Ceaușescu's policies began to be voiced also by national-minded officers. They were antagonized by the regime's preferential treatment of the state police (*Securitate*) over the military, cuts in defense spending, and reductions in the higher technology needed for the national defense industry, and were against the massive use of army manpower in agriculture and infrastructure construction projects.<sup>14</sup>

Despite their preferential treatment, dissatisfaction was also brewing in the secret services, the external information services in particular. Following the defection to the United States in 1978 of Mihai Pacepa, a Soviet-trained old-standing *Securitate* official and deputy head of the Department for External Information (*Directia de Informatii a Armatei*), this department was reduced to complete disarray from which it never recovered. It is presumed that a considerable number of leading officials in this department were won over by foreign, mainly Western intelligence services. In the final phase of the Ceaușescu regime, when its collapse seemed unavoidable, even members of the internal *Securitate* service, well aware of the surge in dissatisfaction in the country, began distancing themselves from the regime.

Support for Ceaușescu was also dwindling within the Romanian Communist Party. Party activists were increasingly upset by reductions in their material privileges and by his policy of cadre rotation, which led to an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of the "Ceaușescu clan," made up of Nicolae, his

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<sup>14</sup> This author analyzed the conflict between Ceaușescu and the military at an early stage. Romanian Situation Report 5, Radio Free Europe research, 17 March 1983, reprinted in Anneli Ute Gabanyi, *The Ceaușescu Cult* (Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, 2000), 391–96.

wife Elena, their son Nicu and a small group of loyalists. As a result, the ranks of the old, pro-Soviet party cadres who had been marginalized by Ceaușescu were strengthened by dissatisfied members of the younger, technocratic party elites. A growing number of intellectuals and creative artists who had been won over by Ceaușescu's anti-Sovietism during the 1960s now raised their voice against the ideological hardening, the recourse to nationalist manipulation, and the excessive personality cult of Ceaușescu designed in the wake of his so-called cultural mini-revolution. A rapprochement took place between frustrated technocratic and cultural elites and disgruntled anti-Ceaușescu party activists, as well as army and secret service officers. Even a member of the CC Political Executive Committee and vice-chairman of the State Council, Gheorghe "Gogu" Rădulescu, supported a group of prominent dissident writers, who met regularly at his country house in Comana, south of Bucharest.<sup>15</sup>

### Chronology of events

The first attempt to begin a popular revolt occurred on 14 December 1989, but it ended in failure. Organized by an underground group called Romanian Popular Front (*Frontul Popular Român*) in the north-eastern city of Iași, its leaders were immediately arrested.

The next day, 15 December, a Reformist pastor belonging to the Hungarian minority, László Tőkés,<sup>16</sup> who had gained quite a bit of notoriety after protesting, in a secret interview granted to a Canadian television station in August 1989, Ceaușescu's policies and plans of razing villages inhabited by mostly Hungarian- and German-speaking citizens, was to be evicted from his home in Timișoara. He called on his parishioners to demonstrate against his eviction on the square in front of his house. In order to defuse the situation, the Timișoara mayor assured Tőkés that the official order for his eviction had been revoked.

The next day, Tőkés tried to calm the people who had gathered in front of his house. However, when the number of persons on the square grew after some young demonstrators blocked a nearby streetcar line, the protests escalated and slogans against Ceaușescu's dictatorship could be heard. First acts of vandalism occurred, culminating in an attack on the county party headquarters.

<sup>15</sup> According to Virgil Măgureanu, the first head of the post-1989 Romanian Information Service, Gogu Rădulescu was a high-ranking KGB spy who had been infiltrated into Romania to assist the so-called cultural dissidence, which supported regime change in Romania. See "Măgureanu și agenții KGB," *Ziua*, 30 October 2006.

<sup>16</sup> László Tőkés, born in 1952 to a family of ethnic Hungarians and a pastor of the Reformed Church, was known from the early 1980s as a dissident in the Ceaușescu regime. In his sermons and in interviews with Western media, he protested the official Romanian program of rural development and planning projects. Cf. Marius Mioc, *Revoluția fără mistere. Începutul revoluției române; cazul László Tőkés* (Timișoara: Editura Almanahul Banatului 2002).

On 17 December, Ceaușescu ordered the local party leaders to proceed with the eviction of Pastor Tőkés, illegally proclaimed a state of emergency in Timișoara, and dispatched the generals Stefan Gușă,<sup>17</sup> from the Ministry of Defense, and Emil Macri, from Securitate, to Timișoara to restore order in the city. On the same day, a meeting of the Political Executive Committee of the Romanian Communist Party took place in Bucharest. Party Secretary General Ceaușescu announced he was going to take over the command of the army himself. He accused Minister of Defense Vasile Milea, Minister of the Interior Tudor Postelnicu, and the commander of the Securitate troops of having disregarded his order to shoot the demonstrators, and threatened to put the three before a firing squad. When several members of the Committee voiced their disagreement with these drastic measures, Ceaușescu offered his resignation (“Elect another secretary general!”), but he was persuaded to stay. In the course of the violent clashes between demonstrators and the army in Timișoara, between 16 and 20 December, 72 persons died in Timișoara and 253 were wounded.<sup>18</sup>

The next day, 18 December, convinced that the situation in Timișoara was under control, Ceaușescu left for an official visit to Iran where he planned to sign an important economic contract on the delivery of a considerable quantity of crude oil to Romania. However, the popular uprising in Timișoara took a new turn, with workers from the large industrial plants<sup>19</sup> joining the protesters. In order to cover up the previous day’s killings, Ceaușescu’s wife Elena, together with Minister of the Interior Postelnicu and Party Secretary Emil Bobu, ordered most corpses to be flown to Bucharest, where they were cremated. Despite the nearly total isolation of Timișoara and the closing of the borders with Hungary and Yugoslavia, there were reports in international media that the clashes had resulted in thousands of victims. In contrast, the Romanian media kept silent about the events.

On 19 December, the protesting workers requested the military to withdraw from Timișoara’s streets. Party officials as well as General Gușă attempted to persuade them to return to work. Confronted with a massive turnout of workers joining the

<sup>17</sup> General lieutenant Stefan Gușă, 1940–94, first deputy minister of defense and chief of the general staff 1986–89. His role in the suppression of the Timișoara uprising is still unclear, although available evidence shows that he tried to prevent bloodshed there and ordered the withdrawal of the army into the barracks. Members of the pro-Soviet coalition suspect him of having tried to stage a countercoup of national-minded officers, which they prevented.

<sup>18</sup> Curtea Supremă de Justiție (Înalta Curte de Casație și Justiție), *Procesele Revoluției din Timișoara (1989) documente istorice, adunate și commentate* de Marius Mioc (Timișoara: ART-PRESS, 1992), 42. More recently, official figures have set the number of dead in Timișoara at 73 and the number of wounded at 296. <http://www.ziare.com/stiri/eveniment/timisoara-primul-oras-liber-sirenele-au-sunat-la-23-de-ani-de-la-revolutie-1208385> (accessed 12 September 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Until 1989, Timișoara was one of Romania’s most important industrial centers, with big plants for machine building, electronics, chemical and petrochemical manufacturing and food industries.

protesters in the streets, on 20 December, Gușă decided to withdraw the army to the barracks. A Democratic Forum was established in this city, which requested the resignation of the government and of Ceaușescu as party secretary, the release of those detained during the uprising, the opening of the borders and freedom of the press. Ceaușescu, who had returned from Iran, addressed the issue publicly for the first time in a speech broadcast live on state television. Far from giving in to the demands of Timișoara's Democratic Forum, he accused so-called terrorist anti-national groups of having joined hands with "reactionary, imperialistic and chauvinistic circles, as well as with secret services from various foreign states," who were waging an attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Romanian state.<sup>20</sup>

Western governments and the leaders of the Soviet Union as well as of the other Warsaw Pact countries, with the exception of the GDR, condemned the violent reprisals. Ceaușescu protested against what he alleged was "an action previously planned in the context of the Warsaw Pact," and charged the Soviet leadership with intending "to intervene militarily in Romania."<sup>21</sup>

Convinced that he could once more appeal to the patriotic feelings of the Romanian people, the next day, 21 December, Ceaușescu decided to hold a meeting on the same Bucharest square where he had protested the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. However, he had hardly started to speak when he was interrupted by loud shouts, clamor and yelling. After a short interruption, during which television broadcasts showed a panicking head of state, Ceaușescu resumed his speech by announcing that measures would be taken to raise the living standards of the population. After a few minutes, another outbreak of noise emerged from the audience, whereupon the meeting was broken off and the participants were dispersed. During that night, savage fighting broke out in Bucharest between demonstrators and the army, the Securitate and militia forces, and the Patriotic Guards, leaving many people dead or injured. Rioting also broke out in other cities in western and central Romania.

On the morning of 22 December, Ceaușescu pronounced a state of emergency in the entire country. Minister of Defense Milea was found dead after Ceaușescu had reprimanded him for not having brought troops to Bucharest from the provinces quickly enough. First Deputy Minister of Defense General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu<sup>22</sup> was then ordered to take over the command of the army. Contrary to Ceaușescu's orders to use force against the demonstrators, Stănculescu ordered the troops that were en route to Bucharest to return to their barracks. General Iulian Vlad, head of the Securitate, later reported to the Senate's investigative commission that early in the morning he had withdrawn the Securitate and militia troops defending the Central Committee building. The Ministry of Defense

<sup>20</sup> Scurtu, *La Révolution*, 188–90.

<sup>21</sup> Preda and Retegan, 1989. *Principiul Dominoului*, 477.

<sup>22</sup> He acknowledged having been in contact prior to 1989 not only with Western, above all British secret services, but also with KGB officers via Hungary.

and the Ministry of the Interior dispatched orders to the troops across the country to stop firing at demonstrators.<sup>23</sup>

When the demonstrators reached the Central Committee building without meeting any resistance, Ceaușescu, his wife and two of their closest aides were persuaded by Stănculescu to leave Bucharest by helicopter. However, their hurried departure did not result in their rescue. They were held in a garrison in the city of Tîrgoviște, northwest of Bucharest.

After Ceaușescu's flight, Romanian television, renamed Free Romanian Television, proclaimed the victory of the revolution. While various political figures from the Ceaușescu party apparatus competed for the scraps of political power, the vacuum of power was filled by actors who had been associated for years in clandestine endeavors to topple Ceaușescu. The preordained political leader of this conspiratorial group was Ion Iliescu,<sup>24</sup> who had won for himself the image of a regime dissident and proponent of Gorbachev-style reforms in Romania. He presented General Nicolae Militaru on television as the future minister of defense.<sup>25</sup> The same day, 22 December, Iliescu also announced the setting up of a new provisional power structure called the Front of National Salvation (*Frontul Salvării Naționale*, FSN) and appointed a Council of the Front to govern the country until democratic elections could be held. The 39 members of the Council were selected from older anti-Ceaușescu groups, including members of the party, the military and the Securitate, as well as younger technocrats whose careers had been blocked during the Ceaușescu era, representatives of the Hungarian minority who had protested the previous regime's nationality policies and, last but not least, a number of intellectuals and writers. Iliescu was appointed chairman of this council.

As soon as demonstrators in Bucharest realized that the new leaders who had presented their program on television were in fact Soviet-loyal dissidents to the Ceaușescu regime and not opponents of the communist system, their attitude turned from anti-Ceaușescu to anti-communist. "Whereas the demonstrators in the street were shouting 'Down with Communism,' Ion Iliescu spoke about the

<sup>23</sup> Șerban Săndulescu, *Decembrie '89. Lovitura de stat a confiscat revoluția română* (Bucharest: Omega Ziua Press, 1996), 195–98; Constantin Sava, Constantin Monac, *Adevăr despre Decembrie 1989. Conspirație, diversiune, revoluție. Documente din Arhivele armatei* (Bucharest: Editura Forum 1999), 114–15.

<sup>24</sup> Born in 1930, Iliescu was an engineer by profession and had studied in Bucharest and Moscow. The son of an illegal communist party member, Iliescu joined the party in 1953 and quickly rose in the party *nomenklatura*, becoming a member of the RCP Central Committee in 1965, then a minister of youth and the head of the CC propaganda department. In 1971, the presumptive heir apparent to Ceaușescu fell from the leader's grace, most probably because of his suspected anti-Ceaușescu position. He was progressively downgraded and released from the Central Committee, finally becoming the director of the Technical Publishing House. In the 1980s, there were rumors that he would become the new Romanian leader in a pro-Gorbachev Romania.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolae Militaru, 1925–94, was an army officer who had studied in Bucharest and Moscow. He was sent into the reserves in 1978 and appointed deputy minister of industrial constructions. He retired in 1986.

‘noble ideas of communism’ in his first speech on television. [...] It is clear and obvious that Iliescu did not then conceive the fall of communism, something that was in flagrant contradiction with the demands of the people in the streets.”<sup>26</sup> In his addresses to the demonstrators on 22 December whom he called “comrades,” Iliescu eschewed the word “revolution,” speaking of “change and transformation” instead.<sup>27</sup> In their “Timișoara Proclamation” issued on 11 March 1990, participants of the Timișoara uprising made it clear that the 1989 revolution “was categorically an anti-communist and not only an anti-Ceaușescu revolution.”<sup>28</sup> They had not risked their lives, they wrote, “to help a group of anti-Ceaușescu dissidents inside the Romanian Communist Party accede to political power.”

### **The particularities of the Romanian revolution**

Three major differences can be seen between the revolutionary course of events in Romania and the peaceful transition of power as it occurred elsewhere in the Warsaw Pact countries:

1. the use of force;
2. the execution of the communist head of party and state;
3. the active involvement of external actors in the process.

#### *The use of force*

It should be noted that the use of force is neither a characteristic of Romanian political culture nor a defining trait in Romania’s historical tradition.

Two questions have not been fully clarified to this day: why the initially peaceful uprising that started on 16 December 1989 in Timișoara and then in Bucharest turned violent and who is responsible for the outbreak of violence after 22 December.

One widespread interpretation claims that violence in the initial stage of the revolution was due exclusively to pro-Ceaușescu forces, whereas the violence that broke out after 22 December was due mainly if not exclusively to forces aiming, first, to suppress the uprising and, later, to liberate the dictator and start a counterrevolution.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Mălin Bot, “Crimele nepedepsite ale lui Iliescu,” *Evenimentul Zilei*, 15 June 2013, <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/crimele-nepedepsite-ale-lui-ion-iliescu-1042664.html> (accessed 13 September 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 109, 112–14.

<sup>28</sup> For the text of the Proclamation, see: <http://proclamatia.wordpress.com> (accessed 17 Oct. 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ceaușescu’s press secretary Eugen Florescu has reported a conversation he overheard between Nicolae Ceaușescu and his brother Ilie, the head of the Political Council of the army, which took

A second model claims that the outbreak of violence in the initial stages of the uprising was the result of covert operations by the Soviet Union<sup>30</sup> and possibly also other Warsaw Pact countries and Yugoslavia, as well as Romanian expatriates. According to this model, this was done in order to provoke the Romanian army and security forces to become aggressive. Later, a “terrorist diversion” after Ceaușescu’s capture is thought to have been started by pro-Soviet forces centered around General Militaru. By 25 December, when the violence stopped after the execution of the dictator and his wife had been shown on Romanian television, 967 people had died and 2,587 injured.<sup>31</sup>

While there is no doubt that the army and security forces obeying Ceaușescu’s orders tried to suppress the uprising by the use of force, there continues to be disagreement about the responsibility for the second wave of violence that started on 22 December after Ceaușescu had fled from Bucharest, becoming a de facto prisoner of the new leaders. The new leaders used television broadcasts, which they had monopolized, to charge so-called terrorists with attempting to liberate Ceaușescu and to restore the pre-revolutionary regime.<sup>32</sup> According to Stănculescu, 1,015 “terrorists,” most of them Soviet citizens, were arrested by the Romanian army, but they were subsequently released by General Militaru.<sup>33</sup> This was accompanied by “a torrent of destabilizing actions, diversion and electronic war” on the entire territory of Romania, blocking military telecommunication channels and feeding false information into the Romanian army’s radio-electronic reconnaissance systems.<sup>34</sup> The new leaders handed over an unknown number of weapons to civilians, which contributed to the ensuing chaos.

According to the second interpretation model, several goals may have prompted the use of force by the provisional new leadership in the period following Ceaușescu’s imprisonment, the first and foremost being creating a pretext for eliminating Nicolae Ceaușescu.<sup>35</sup> His execution, they declared, was necessary in

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place at 6 a.m. on 22 December in the CC building. Ilie Ceaușescu had drawn Nicolae’s attention to the great number of workers marching towards central Bucharest from industrial sites outside the capital, and Nicolae is quoted as saying: “Come on, there were a million people on Tiananmen Square and they let them have it.” Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *Cronologia evenimentelor din decembrie 1989* (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2009), 162–63.

<sup>30</sup> The model does not provide evidence as to who ordered these operations.

<sup>31</sup> Cartianu, *Cartea Revoluției*, 980.

<sup>32</sup> After he took over as minister of defense, Stănculescu even called what had happened “psychological warfare.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13 February 1990.

<sup>33</sup> For more details, see Gabanyi, *Systemwechsel*, 192–93.

<sup>34</sup> Sergiu Nicolaescu, *Cartea revoluției române decembrie '89* (Bucharest: Editura Ion Cristoiu, 1999), 477–78; Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 73. Cf. Michel Castex, *Un mensonge gros comme le siècle. Roumanie: histoire d'une manipulation* (Paris: Michel Albin, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> “‘Tensions were stirred up at the time to create reason to kill Ceaușescu,’ says former General Stănculescu. By whom? ‘You’d have to ask Iliescu.’” Iliescu admitted that “the widespread chaos in December 1989 was aggravated by made-up reports from the television headquarters controlled by the National Salvation Front leaders—reports that the drinking water had been

order to end the bloody turmoil created by the “terrorists.” The terrorist attacks ended as soon as this goal had been attained on 25 December. As a second motive according to this line of interpretation, the pro-Soviet forces were intent on preventing nationalist minded army generals from taking power.<sup>36</sup> At the time of the revolution, rumors made their way into the Western press reporting that the Timișoara uprising had, in fact, gotten ahead of a revolt of a nationally minded segment of the army, which had planned to depose Ceaușescu due to the damage he had caused in Romania. They did not, however, plan to bring Romania back into the Warsaw Pact fold, but rather were determined to continue the autonomous course of Romania’s foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> As early as 22 December, calls were heard for the “traitor Gușa” to be arrested.<sup>38</sup> On 29 December, Gușa was ousted as chief of staff of the Romanian army on the grounds of alleged incompetence, and was replaced by another pro-Soviet general. Three days before Gușa’s release, the Soviet *Pravda* had pointed out that the regular army was obviously incapable of putting an end to the terrorist attacks.<sup>39</sup> A third goal, according to this interpretation, was to use the chaos and panic within the population as a pretext for calling on the Soviet Union for help in case their plans for takeover were in danger. In the end, it was possible to avert the outbreak of a civil war in Romania because the overwhelming majority of the army (and security) forces did not react to provocations.

### *Ceaușescu’s execution*

The execution of the ruling head of state is perhaps the most striking feature of the Romanian revolution and a singular event in the context of the other former communist East European countries. Whereas elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the decisive military power lay with the (Soviet) commander of the Warsaw Pact in the respective capitals, in Romania was the president the supreme commander of

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poisoned, the army was on its last legs and unknown ‘terrorists’ were in the pay of the counter-revolution.” Walter Mayr, “‘A Mission of Honor’: Key Players Recall Romania’s Bloody Revolution,” *Der Spiegel International*, 20 October 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-mission-of-honor-key-players-recall-romania-s-bloody-revolution-a-655557-2.html> (accessed 5 September 2013).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 167. Western media at the time wrote about a civil war having broken out in Romania between army units loyal to the new provisional leadership on one hand and Securitate fighters together with Arab mercenaries on the other. ARD Tagesschau, 23 December 1989, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcPQIMNX\\_y4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcPQIMNX_y4) (accessed 5 September 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Mircea Dinescu, a Romanian dissident close to Gorbachev, has pointed out that Ion Iliescu was “the only alternative to a military coup” and “the only chance” to prevent it. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 January 1990. See Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 108; and *Systemwechsel*, 183–85.

<sup>38</sup> Radio Bucharest, 22 December 1989.

<sup>39</sup> See: Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 114–15.



the national army and the members of the secret police. And only by having the supreme commander of the Romanian army executed—with the act shown on television—could the organizers of the coup expect loyal Romanian army and Securitate forces to change sides.

The decision to have Ceaușescu executed as soon as possible was made by the inner circle of the Front of National Salvation.<sup>40</sup> Only Iliescu insisted on the need to organize a brief, obviously bogus trial, before actually killing him. The exceptional military court of justice set up in Tîrgoviște organized a sort of revolutionary show tribunal, in which Ceaușescu was deposed politically before being hastily shot on 25 December. A videotape of the execution was broadcast on Romanian television on the evening of 26 December.

After the Front of National Salvation government had been founded,<sup>41</sup> Minister of Defense Militaru recalled eighteen generals who had been removed by Ceaușescu from the active service because of their cooperation with the Soviet secret services. One of these generals, Vasile Ionel, replaced General Gușă, who had as the head of the General Staff only days before refused the entry of Soviet troops into Romania. In addition, the first ordinance adopted by the newly constituted Council of the Front of National Salvation was to abolish the law concerning the functions of the Romanian Defense Council, which had been adopted in 1969 in reaction to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. It was this act that had laid the basis for Romania's political and military autonomy within the Warsaw Pact.<sup>42</sup> And last but not least, Iliescu, the chairman of the council, went to see the Soviet ambassador in Romania to tell him that Romania was planning to remain within the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>43</sup>

### *External involvement*

Another distinctive feature of the Romanian revolution concerns the external support from—and direct involvement of—foreign countries in Romania's process of power transition. The problem with external support is that it cannot be

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<sup>40</sup> Constantin Mitea, Ceaușescu's counselor who participated in the last meeting between Gorbachev and Ceaușescu held in Moscow on 4–5 December in the wake of the Bush–Gorbachev meeting in Malta, reported that Gorbachev took leave from Ceaușescu wishing him happy Christmas and a good New Year, adding the words, “if you live as long as that.” Quoted by Ceaușescu's press secretary Eugen Florescu in Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *Interviuri despre revoluție* (Bucharest: Editura RAO, 2004), 81–82.

<sup>41</sup> Militaru was presented on TV as the future minister of defense as early as 23 December, and the high command of the Soviet army was informed about Militaru's “nomination” the same day. Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 322.

<sup>42</sup> See Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 117–18.

<sup>43</sup> Alex Mihai Stoenescu, *Din culisele luptei pentru putere. Prima guvernare Petre Roman* (Bucharest: Editura RAO, 2006), 547, Annex 1.

precisely quantified due to the secret nature of many operations. Moreover, after events have occurred, external support is often denied both by those who granted it and those who received it. This is for reasons of political respectability on one side, and of legitimacy on the other.

The question of a Romanian call for Soviet and/or Warsaw Pact military aid to the provisional leadership and the Soviet response to this call is still one of the most controversial issues of the Romanian 1989 events. To this day, Ion Iliescu insists that he never called for Soviet help and that he contacted the Soviets no earlier than on 27 December.<sup>44</sup> However, according to Cornel Dinu, Iliescu's bodyguard, in the night from 22 to 23 December Iliescu spoke with a representative of the Soviet embassy and asked for the intervention of Soviet troops. The embassy official is quoted as having told Iliescu that the Soviets were not ready to use the OMON troops that had already landed in Romania.<sup>45</sup> By that time, Soviet ground troops stood at the Romanian-Soviet border ready to cross the frontier.<sup>46</sup> In a recently declassified message from the Polish embassy in Bucharest to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, a Soviet diplomat is quoted as having said that Ion Iliescu and Silviu Brucan had asked for military aid and been promised any kind of support other than a military invasion. In the meantime, the Front of National Salvation announced on TV that the embassy had promised military aid.<sup>47</sup>

Talks between the new leadership and the Soviet military were confirmed in a report of the chief of the Special Office of the General Staff in the Operations Directorate given to the members of the parliamentary commission investigating the 1989 events. According to Dumitru Mircea, on 22 December, a message was received by the Romanian military leadership from Mikhail Moiseyev, head of the Soviet General Staff, and from the deputy chief of staff of the Warsaw Pact forces. They were "ready to grant support in any area."<sup>48</sup> This was confirmed by Romanian radio and TV on 23 December.<sup>49</sup>

By noon of 23 December, Mircea was ordered by the deputy chief of the Romanian General Staff, Nicolae Eftimescu, to call General Moiseyev to ask him "wheth-

<sup>44</sup> Adam Burakowski, "O intervenție armată ar fi fost un dezastru," *Adevărul*, 7 March 2010, [http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/adam-burakowski-o-interventie-armata-fost-dezastru-1\\_50ad20fe7c42d5a6638f3561/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/adam-burakowski-o-interventie-armata-fost-dezastru-1_50ad20fe7c42d5a6638f3561/index.html) (accessed 13 September 2013).

<sup>45</sup> "Cornel Dinu, Discuțiile purtate cu consilierul sovietic au avut loc în biroul de la etajul 11 al Televiziunii Române, în noaptea zilei de 22 spre 23 decembrie 1989, undeva în jurul orelor 3–4. El a spus că în încăpere se aflau mai multe persoane, dintre care i-a enumerat pe Petre Roman, Ion Iliescu, Silviu Brucan, Mihai Bujor, Petre Constantin (directorul Televiziunii la acel moment) și Nina Iliescu 'Iliescu a cerut intervenția rușilor.' Și-un tanc pentru Nina," <http://stirea.wordpress.com/tag/cornel-dinu/> (accessed 9 September 2013). See also: Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution*, 186.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 327.

<sup>47</sup> Adam Burakowski, "În Decembrie 1989, Iliescu și Brucan au cerut ajutor militar de la sovietici," *Revista 22*, 21 February 2013, <http://www.revista22.ro/n-decembrie-1989-iliescu-si-brucan-au-cerut-ajutor-militar-de-la-sovietici-7557.html> (accessed 9 September 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 321.

<sup>49</sup> Reuters, 23 December 1989. See also: Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 123–24.

er it would be possible to count on Soviet military aid against the terrorists.” Moiseyev referred him to the governmental level.<sup>50</sup> After the death of the minister of defense and in the absence of the head of state, the chief of staff of the Romanian army, General Ștefan Gușă, was the only person legally entitled to launch a call for foreign aid. When he arrived at the Ministry of Defense, he vetoed this initiative and ordered Romanian border guards not to permit the entry of Soviet army units into Romanian territory. He called his Soviet counterpart to tell him that “we did not ask for Soviet military aid and we will not ask for it.”<sup>51</sup> The attitude of the Soviet Union was marked by ambivalence. On one hand, Gorbachev insisted that the Brezhnev Doctrine was no longer applicable. On the other hand, there is evidence that the Soviet military was prepared to send ground or airborne troops to Romania. While it is understandable that Gorbachev did not want to be seen as supporting an open Soviet military intervention in Romania, it is, however, quite improbable that he was not informed about such actions. Talking to the Congress of the People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union on 23 December, Gorbachev confirmed that a call for help had been dispatched to Moscow by the Romanian Front of National Salvation. The Romanian chief of staff had, however, rejected help. Gorbachev announced that the Soviet leadership was going to get in contact with other Warsaw Pact member states “to cooperate and coordinate activities to support the Romanian people.”<sup>52</sup> One of the measures he proposed was to set up a group of Warsaw Pact observers to monitor the events in Romania. The creation of this group was confirmed by Hungary’s foreign minister Gyula Horn on Hungarian television. Although strong Warsaw Pact troops were in place on Hungarian territory close to the Romanian border, the Hungarian defense minister, Ferenc Kárpáti, ruled out an “immediate” intervention in the neighboring county.<sup>53</sup> Soviet commentators made it clear, however, that the decision to desist from an intervention in Romania was only provisional. If the page turned in favor of the Ceaușescu-friendly forces, “the Warsaw Pact could not and should not” desist from intervening. They even favored a military intervention that went beyond the Warsaw Pact, also including forces from other countries. In a meeting with the Soviet ambassador, Evgenii Tyazhelnikov, on 27 December, Iliescu said that an agreement had been made with Gorbachev that “this was not necessary because there would be unwanted interpretations that would coincide with Ceaușescu’s statement at his trial that this was a coup d’état with foreign military support.”<sup>54</sup>

The United States had signaled to the Soviet Union that it would not object to a Warsaw Pact or other intervention “if it becomes necessary to put down heavy

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 317.

<sup>51</sup> Săndulescu, *Decembrie*, 317–18. See also: Gușă de Drăgan, *Condamnat*, 62–63; 350.

<sup>52</sup> TASS, 23 December 1989. Cf. Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> *The Independent*, 24 December 1989. Cf. Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> See the full text of the discussion with Tyazhelnikov <http://stirea.wordpress.com/2010/03/09/ion-iliescu-catre-evgheni-tiazhelnikov-noi-ne-am-bucurat-de-simpatia-acestor-mase-n-a-fost-o-campanie-anticomunista-avem-nevoie-de-sprijin-ca-aceasta-este-cea-mai-importanta-problema-acum/> (accessed 9 September 2013).

fighting by Romanian security troops still loyal [to Ceaușescu].”<sup>55</sup> France declared its readiness to join such an operation, either in conjunction with the Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces, or in the form of an international brigade.

There is only scanty evidence, and even less solid documentary proof, about covert actions undertaken by the West in the revolutionary process. However, a number of now-retired officials from France and the United States have acknowledged involvement in disinformation activities, the establishment of contacts with Ceaușescu opponents, the selection of and support for dissidents, as well as the training of refugees from Romania who, after their return, were used as *agents provocateurs*.<sup>56</sup>

More than the other East European revolutions of 1989, the Romanian revolution is difficult to imagine without the support of electronic media in the form of Western radio stations broadcasting to Romania, above all Radio Free Europe located in Munich. RFE broadcasts were extremely popular in Romania and were decisive in the anti-regime mobilization of the population, the de-legitimizing of the Ceaușescu leadership, and for “accrediting” and popularizing regime dissidents in the 1980s. From the mid-1980s, Radio Free Europe began to include former party and Securitate activists with questionable democratic credentials among their list of praiseworthy dissidents. In addition, with the broadcasting time of the local radio and TV stations sharply reduced due to electricity shortages, Romanian listeners and viewers increasingly turned to radio and TV stations located in the Soviet Union and in other neighboring communist countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Immediately after the departure of Ceaușescu on 22 December from Bucharest, the national television station took over the role of Western broadcasting and became the stage for a “tele-revolution” that was unique in the history of the medium.<sup>57</sup>

### **The transformation: The long-term consequences of the revolution**

The Romanian revolution took a heavy toll of human lives. In total, 1,116 people—civilians, officers and army conscripts—were killed and 4,069 injured. Whereas the popular uprising against Ceaușescu had cost the lives of 159 people

<sup>55</sup> *The Washington Post*, 25 December 1989. Cf. Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 129. See also Thomas Blanton, “When did the Cold War End?” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 10 (1998): 183–91, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHPBulletin10\\_p5.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHPBulletin10_p5.pdf) (accessed 9 September 2013); Thomas L. Friedman, “US would favor use of Soviet troops in Romania, Baker says,” *New York Times*, 25 December 1989. Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott have explained the attitude of the US administration as being guided by its desire to secure Soviet support for the intervention that the United States had just started in Panama to depose leader Manuel Antonio Noriega. Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 240.

<sup>56</sup> See the interviews in the documentary film *Schachmatt—Strategie einer Revolution* by Susanne Brandstätter, first shown on German and Austrian state television in 2003.

<sup>57</sup> See Gabanyi, *Die unvollendete Revolution*, 7–11.

and caused injuries to another 1,502, a much higher number of victims (957 dead and 2,587 injured) were recorded after December 22, the day Ceaușescu was flown out of Bucharest and arrested.<sup>58</sup> There is the widespread belief among Romanians that these victims died in vain, because the anti-communist uprising of the people had been “stolen” and “diverted.” This has left a deep imprint on the Romanian collective memory and is considered “the original sin” of the Romanian transition. It continues to impact the country’s course of political, social and economic transformation to this day. Moreover, it is felt that those who seized power in 1989 did everything they could to obstruct the criminal investigation, prosecution and condemnation of the true culprits for the bloodshed.

After December 1989, more than 5,000 people were investigated with regard to their responsibility for the crimes committed both before and after the fall of Ceaușescu. In total, 245 persons were put on trial, of them 18 generals from the armed forces and the Securitate troops, as well as 24 members of the highest party *nomenklatura*.<sup>59</sup> Most of those investigated were released at the beginning of 1990 or pardoned. However, due to the fact that the group around Iliescu, which had seized power in the military coup d’état following the popular uprising in Timișoara, succeeded in staying in power for so long, most of those who are thought responsible for the bloodshed have escaped condemnation. Despite the fact that organizations representing the victims of the revolution have pressured that they be prosecuted, the judiciary, acting on political orders, has done everything it can to delay prosecution in high-level cases. Documents have been confiscated (such as the files on the Ceaușescu trial), destroyed, forged, or are still being withheld by military or civilian prosecutors offices.

Investigations have also been hampered by the fact that many of the key figures from the Ceaușescu family, the military, the secret services, counter-espionage and the militia who were involved in the events committed suicide or died under mysterious circumstances, some of them in prison.<sup>60</sup> Together with General Mihai Chițac, in 1989, the head of the chemical arms division, General Stănculescu was the only major figure of the revolution to be tried and sentenced after 1989. Stănculescu is also the only major actor of the coup who still remains, in prison in 2013, where he has been held since October 2008 with a sentence of 15 years on charges of having executed Ceaușescu’s repressive orders against the participants in the Timișoara uprising. This is why Stănculescu is the only high-level revolutionary figure who has chosen to break the ominous silence about some if not all of the riddles surrounding the still mysterious 1989 events,

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<sup>58</sup> Cartianu, *Cartea Revoluției*, 980.

<sup>59</sup> “Greii dosarului ‘Revoluției’, protejați de neglijența lui Voinea,” *Evenimentul Zilei*, 21 December 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Teodor Marieș, “Generalul Puiu. Salvați-mă că ăștia vor să mă omoare,” *Evenimentul Zilei*, 11 December 2005.

especially concerning the roles played by other top players as well as foreign involvement—both Eastern and Western—in the process.

In contrast to Stănculescu, Iliescu had a formidable political career in post-revolutionary Romania, despite being the target of persistent criticism. Some of the post-1989 electorate was won over by the populist measures he introduced immediately after the fall of Ceaușescu, and thus he was voted into presidential office in 1990, followed by reelection for two full terms, 1992–96 and 2000–04. However, another part of the population would like to see him put on trial, not only for the role he played during the revolution, but also during the incidents of violence by miners Iliescu had allegedly sent against anti-communist demonstrators in Bucharest in 1990, the so-called “*mineriads*.” Iliescu is also seen as the main culprit for the misguided policy course followed in Romania in the early 1990s, which obstructed the genuine democratization of the society, the introduction of market-type reforms, as well as the country’s progress toward membership in NATO and the EU. Only after Emil Constantinescu, a representative of the civil society, was elected president in 1996 was the country’s foreign policy toward the West vigorously redirected and real, albeit painful, economic reforms were launched. Iliescu continued this path during his final term from 2000 to 2004. During these years Romania became a member of NATO and concluded accession negotiations with the EU.

Due to its violent character and the human lives lost in the process, the 1989 revolution left distinct traces on the collective memory as well as the mentality of the Romanians. The society is still strongly divided on the question of whether what happened in 1989 was a revolution or coup d’état, and whether the events were home-grown or engineered by forces from abroad. Despite the generational shift that has occurred over the past twenty years, demands for the criminal prosecution of the crimes committed in 1989 and the lustration of former regime activists are still high in the public interests.