

The Romanian Revolution of 1989. Disinformation and Manipulation

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Abstract. This article aims to provide a different perspective of interpretation of the events of December 1989, which led to the overthrow of the communist regime in Romania. Known as the “Romanian Revolution”, these events continue to remain at the centre of political, sociological, journalistic, legal, and historical debates. Based on the analysis of the existing historiography at this moment, this article highlights the main elements of misinformation and manipulation through the narrative offered by the provisional leadership that tried to dimension these events.

Keywords. Romanian Revolution, disinformation, manipulation, Romanian Television.

MOST OF THOSE WHO STUDY THE PAST, KNOW THAT THROUGHOUT HISTORY, some events have been presented to the public opinion as more or less different from reality. Many events have been used with the intention to mislead, to justify political decisions, wars, to denigrate or promote personalities, countries, or peoples. Depending on interests manifested in different periods, some events were made public taken out of the context or not fully described. On the contrary, facts that did not exist were added to them. Thus, many events were used for disinformation and manipulation. Although disinformation and manipulation are strategies quite common in human history, in the twentieth century they were used much more frequently than before by leaders, institutions, and secret services, at the national and international levels. (Breton 2006: 55)

In the case of Romania, during the communist regime, the media had mainly ideological and propaganda functions and the informative programs were censored so that everything that was to be transmitted to the public would not defame the regime. Television, radio, and newspapers were subordinated to the communist authorities. In that situation, the population, in order to be able to obtain information from sources independent of the communist regime, turned its interest in the television programs of the neighbouring countries (which, however, were more accessible only to the inhabitants near the borders), and from the foreign radio stations, especially Free Europe and Voice of

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America. The programs of these two radio stations had remarkably high ratings and credibility. Then, as in many other parts of the world, there were direct interpersonal accounts of participants or witnesses to various events, but this way of informing was done in a small setting, between people who knew each other. However, by transmitting various information orally, from one person to another, gradually, even if unintentionally, the place of true information was taken by less correct information, characterized by exaggerations or omissions.

In the mid-December 1989, when the first protests against the Ceausescu regime broke out in Timisoara, the country's population heard about what happened on the radio stations Free Europe and Voice of America, as well as on the Yugoslav and Hungarian radio and television, which were important sources of information for the Romanian people until December 22. The country's media did not report anything about the popular demonstrations in Timisoara, nor about the brutal reaction of the authorities. Instead, foreign news agencies were full of information and reports about Romania. (Badea 2014: 119)

However, not all information they provided was always correct. Thus, the disinformation and manipulation existing in Romania in the last two weeks of December 1989 cannot be attributed only to the internal media and internal authorities. Right after the fall of the Ceausescu regime, the new free Romanian media took a huge amount of information from foreign news agencies, without always being able to check it. The best-known example is some fake news and images of the atrocities in Timisoara, which had a wide circulation at that time. Regarding this subject, some authors claim that: a) – Radio Free Europe is the one that misinformed the international public opinion and the Romanian one about the situation in Timisoara; b) – the invocation of common pits, massacre and mutilated bodies in Timisoara, is the symbol of the biggest lies in the entire history of television, etc (Badea 2014: 63)

As the revolt in Timisoara spread over several days, and the access to the city and the telephone connection with the inhabitants were blocked, rumours began to be part of everyday life. Fear and insecurity were established throughout the country after Radio Free Europe announced that a genocide had taken place in Timisoara; that there were tens of thousands of dead, mutilated bodies, common pits, etc. The situation has become even more worrying on December 21, when, at the mass meeting organized in Bucharest by Ceausescu, the participants shouted slogans against the Romanian communist leader and refused to leave the central streets, leading the authorities to start repression against them. Then, the authorities began the bloody repression in Bucharest. (Scurtu 2009: 224-225; Pop 2010: 334-340)

The next day (December 22), demonstrations against Ceausescu started in many towns across the country. In Bucharest, after an unsuccessful attempt to have another public speech, Nicolae Ceausescu was forced to leave. At noon, at 12.55 PM, Romanian Television renamed Free Romanian Television, announced the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu, and until the evening, the new leaders of the country appeared on TV. (Duțu 2006: 191-195) It was the moment when the disinformation and manipulation, already present in the case of Timisoara, increased considerably.

Starting on December 22, the events followed one another quickly in Romania, and the drama in the images and messages on television was unprecedented. For the first time in Romania's history, the citizens followed their revolution live on television and radio. (Ute Gabanyi 1999: 146) The Romanian people received images and messages that have been inoculated in their collective minds for a long time. As at that time social interactions between people were much more frequent than are today, everything that was broadcast on TV, was amplified by the discussions between people. The rumours were easy to believe, and everything broadcast on TV became certainty: *it was shown on TV, the whole country saw it, it couldn't be otherwise.*

The way in which this tele-revolution took place in front of the public was unique. The broadcast studio No.4 of the Romanian Television became the place where the actions of those days seemed to be coordinated. Together with the representatives of the television staff and the new authorities, well-known writers, artists, athletes, etc, addressed to the public. The representatives of the Army were also present. Generals, officers, even young soldiers, on television, requested for both a ceasefire and the withdrawal of the troops from the streets to the military bases, but at the same time, they asked soldiers to respond to the actions of terrorists. On TV, usually from various piece of paper, were read information and messages; the leaders of the new power structures and their first decisions were presented to the population from all over the country, but there was also misinformation. (Ute Gabanyi 1999: 146-147). Also, studio No.4 was symbolically transformed into a court, and those present there became judges, especially of the relatives of the Ceausescu couple, but also of other his collaborators, or of any other person who was considered a suspect.

From the national television station, but also on the radio and in the press, were presented and transmitted false information, which had as negative heroes the Ceausescu family, the Security forces, and the terrorists. A real psychosis was created, to which the media, fully contributed. (Bucur 2008: 159)

For example: a) – it is said that there were tens of thousands of dead; b) – that fierce fighting between the Army and Security forces took place in different parts of the country; c) – that there were horrible tortures and mass murders; d)

– the blood supply from a hospital in Bucharest was destroyed by terrorists; e) – that the citizens of a rural area transmitted that there is a secret airport where the Ceausescu couple was ready to leave the country; f) – buildings of strategic importance were threatened by terrorist attacks; g) – that drinking water from the public distribution system is poisoned in Bucharest and in other important cities in the country, etc. Regarding the last example, at one point there was an episode that today could be considered amusing: an army officer, present on television in the studio no.4, asked the new authorities that the stores be well supplied with mineral water, beer, and wine, so that the population does not have to drink water from the public system of distribution, because it was believed that water was poisoned. ([Manipularea din decembrie '89 2021](#))

In addition to television, what was written in the newspapers appeared after December 22 was also credible for the population. In the first 24 hours after the fall of Ceausescu, most newspapers changed their name. For example, *Scînteia* (daily official newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party), on December 23 was *Scînteia poporului* (*Scîntenia/Spark of the People*), later rename *Adevărul* (*The Truth*). *Scînteia tineretului*, (*Scînteia/Spark of Youth*) changed its name in *Tineretul Liber* (*Free Youth*); *Informatia Bucurestiului* (*Bucharest information*) became *Libertatea* (*Liberty*), etc. Many false information and diversions were published in the press. The best known were: a) – articles by which Ceausescu was accused of killing 60.000 people, as a result of the repression he ordered; b) – articles which reported the existence of common pits with a large number of bodies of the revolutionaries killed; c) – that terrorists entered in various hospitals, maternity hospitals and shot innocent people, and even newborns (ex: the article “Criminals fighting with the babies”, in *Tineretul Liber*, December 26 – in articles it is mentioned that the babies were shot in the night of December 23, at the Steaua maternity hospital, district Grivita, Bucharest), etc. ([Stoenescu 2006: 25-30](#); [Bucur 2008: 160](#))

Also, there were many hostile articles about the members of the Ceausescu family, especially about his youngest son, Nicu, etc. Most of the news from the newspapers were also transmitted on TV. There was no question of checking who transmitted one information or another, whether it was true or false.

The messages sent to the public through Romanian Television ([1989 Lovitura de stat 2021](#)) and media (in general), aimed to obtain the following results:

- 1) – awareness of the fact that the main enemy of the Romanian people was the couple Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu;
- 2) – exploiting the departure of the Ceaușescu couple from Bucharest, in order to induce in the public opinion feelings of hatred towards the Ceausescu

family, as well as the desire for revenge. Regarding the departure of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu in December 22, in the media (especially on TV) it was said that they left when they had to be judged by the Romanian people,

3)- accusing Security forces as the enemy of the people. Since December 16, until December 22, both foreign radio broadcasts and rumours circulating throughout the country, wrongly indicated that the author of the repression is the Security (Securitatea), although, as later demonstrated, the primary sources of this false information were the news agencies TASS, TANIUG and MTI, which knew that the units involved in the repression in Timișoara, Bucharest and other city, belonged to the Army. (Stoenescu 2006: 26-27)

4) –through television, the Security units and its generals were asked to abandon Ceausescu and other traitors, without specifying exactly who were the others traitors. At the same time, Security was accused of numerous crimes.

5) – the presence and threat of terrorist has always been invoked, but terrorists have never been shown. The expression *terrorist diversion* was used a lot. It is interesting that Security was replaced by terrorists after December 22. Terrorist were described as being more dangerous than security troops. The terrorists were presented as either fanatical Romanians (willing to commit the worst crimes to bring Ceausescu back to power), or Arabs (especially Libyans), who had trained in Romania and were devoted to Nicolae Ceausescu. (Bucur, 2008: 159-160)

6) – the presentation of the chaos created by the fall of the Ceausescu regime, wanting to induce the feeling of panic in the collective mentality.

The main topics on the speech of those who appeared on TV to address the population were:

1) – blaming the former leader and his family. Nicolae Ceausescu was presented as: a) – guilty of horrible crimes against the Romanian people; b) – a man without heart and without soul; c) – a fanatic; d) – a country traitor, etc.

2) – presentation and amplification the conflict between the terrorists, Army, and civilians.

3) – the appeal to the national feelings of the Romanians, and the need to establish and defend democracy and public order.

4) – glorification of the Romanian Army.

In those days, soldiers were considered heroes because, at one point, they sided with the people protesting against Nicolae Ceausescu. *The Army is with us*, was for a few days one of the most popular slogans in the whole country. TV messages of the Army's representatives were considered true, although over time they were also proved fake and manipulators. (*Manipularea din decembrie '89* 2021);In fact, the misleading created confusion and panic among the

soldiers, and there were situations when, following disinformation, the soldiers opened fire on the false targets, with tragic results. For example: b) – the drama at Otopeni (Henri Coanda) airport is known throughout the country, where 37 young soldiers were killed by other soldiers at the airport because were confused with the terrorists; c) – armed attack on some cultural institutions (ex: Central University Library from Bucharest, the National Museum of Art, etc), based on the fake information that there were terrorists in those institutions. After Army's attack, heritage work were destroyed and, of course, there were no terrorists. And the examples could go on.

The language used especially on TV was an important factor in the success of disinformation and manipulation. For example, the most frequent expressions in December 22 were:

- 1) - Ceausescu's clique pushed us into chaos and disorder.
- 2) – during this day we will form a national salvation committee to start putting everything in order (those present in the Nr.4 TV studio began to clap).
- 3) – the citizens of this country live exceptional moments.
- 4) – we must organize ourselves into a national salvation committee.
- 5) – to organize ourselves on a democratic basis, etc. ([Revoluția română 2021](#))

Interesting and justifiable at the same time is the fact that in the speeches on television and radio, but also in newspaper articles, there were also addressing formulas specific to the communist regime. The most common expressions were *comrade*, *dear comrades*, formulas that in December 1989 did not bother too much the large mass of the population. But such expressions have been condemned since January 1990, with the entry into the political life of the old inter-war political elites, and the beginning of their conflicts with National Salvation Front and Ion Iliescu.

Looking back, any researcher was able to realize that the images transmitted through the media, primarily through television, formed the picture of the Romanian revolution. A simple picture, but full of drama and emotions, which still exists in the memory of the contemporaries of those events. A picture in which there are two types of images: *revolutionaries* and *enemy*.

Disinformation and manipulation did not stop with the withdrawal of the population and the soldiers from the streets. As it formed, the political opposition, in turn, was author of some opinions about events of December 1989 and which, together with the numerous video recording made those days, were sometimes used by the new political class for needs dictated by various political interests. ([Ute Gabanyi 1999: 147](#)) On the other hand, due to the role played by

television, radio, and press in December 1989, and especially the audience and credibility of the media recorded then, in the 1990 presidential and parliamentary elections, Ion Iliescu and National Salvation Front were able to benefit from the popularity of the *tele-revolution* of December 1989, which almost 100% of the country's population watched on TV, listened on the radio or read in the newspapers. (Ute Gabanyi 1999: 144)

And perhaps not coincidentally, in 1990, but not only, the phrase most often used against those who took power in December 1989 was *you lied to the people with the television*.

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