

The role played by mass-media during the Romanian Revolution of 1989

1989 was the year of the greatest social and political changes in Central and Eastern Europe, the year when the communist regimes of the Warsaw Pact member states were falling one by one. Communication, by all channels available at that date has brought a major contribution to those changes. Starting with the means of mass communication (*i.e.* television, radio, written press) to individual communication (personally, by telephone or by mail) the informational war reached its climax in 1989.

In dealing with the communist regimes, the democratic states have engaged in a permanent battle at the mass-media level, using all means available at that time to make sure that the effects of their messages had the expected outcome. Maletzke¹, a German researcher once said that the effects of communication stand for all changes brought about by mass media, at individual and social levels, through the messages it broadcasts. This is the reason why all countries showed a major interest in this informational war. The image of Romania in was as worse as it could possibly be. The Romanian society was effectively suffocated by the dictatorial regime implemented by Ceausescu. And one of the main goals of this regime was to block out, to manipulate and even to obstruct any type of communication. As the regime fostered by Ceausescu became harsher and harsher, starting with the seizure and full control of mass-media, continuing with blacking out every form of communication (mails, phone call conversations), individual surveillances and basically, the control of everything that involved or implied sending and receiving messages, irrespective of their form, and ending up with the implementation of what they called “the small cultural revolution”², in 1971, the ordinary Romanian citizen has been deprived of any chance or possibility to speak freely.

The Romanian mass media, fully controlled by the communist regime, promoted the cult of personality and the communist propaganda through messages constantly broadcasted by radio and television, and well as by the written press. Following a more comprehensive analysis of the Romanian mass-media macro-effects from 1989, we can say that we could identify here both the *agenda setting theory* as well as the *spiral of silence theory* (*Schweigerspirale*). This theory, formulated by the researcher Elisabeth Noelle Neumann³, and perfectly folded over the

¹ The German researcher Gerhard Maletzke defined, in 1963, the notion of mass communication

² „Mica revoluție culturală” (“The Small Cultural Revolution”) was launched by Nicolae Ceausescu after his visit in 1971, in China and North Korea

³ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, manager of the Demoscopic Institute of Allensbach, published the theory in an article called „Spiral of Silence: a Theory of Public Opinion”, in 1974.

Romanian realities of 1989, sounds as follows: a minority group of people could take a dominant stand if their point of view is presented and supported by mass-media and if they talk about it and support it publicly, while the others, which represent in fact the majority, may have a different opinion which they prefer to keep it silent because they are afraid of either being isolated and publically sanctioned or being subject to repression. Undoubtedly, this aggressive activity carried out by the Romanian mass-media ultimately led to a generalized dissonance with the Romanian society. A significant contribution to that effect was also brought by the international mass media which, particularly by means of the several radio stations such as “Free Radio Europe”, “BBC”, “Voice of America” and „Deutsche Welle”, promoted by Noel Bernard and Vlad Georgescu, known for their exceptional comments on the cultural and political issues, showed sympathy and support for the Romanians’ opinions and expectations. These messages supported the hopes of the Romanians in relation to the forthcoming fall of the communist regime.

Even if the Romanian communist regime tried to block any kind of communication from and to outside the country, ending up in isolating the state, categorically refusing to implement the reforms required by Gorbaciov himself, who applied the *perestroika*⁴ in the Soviet Union, the Romanians managed somehow to take notice of all these major changes. The hopes have almost reached their peak when “BBC” and “Radio Free Europe” aired, on March 11th 1989⁵, the *Letter of the Six*, followed by the presentation of the great social and political changes occurred in the member states of the Warsaw Pact. The Hungarian television, particularly the „Duna” channel, broadcasted several documentaries focused chiefly on the Hungarian minority of Romania, and which were leading an important campaign to support the reformed pastor László Tőkés.

Many people wondered why the revolution started in Timișoara because everybody knew that, in that city, the standard of living was higher than in other regions of the country. One of the reasons may be the fact that the inhabitants of Timisoara were better informed, and, as a consequence, the level of expectation of the citizens of Banat was higher. Many inhabitants from Timisoara were watching the Hungarian and Serbian TV channels, and again, everybody

⁴ *Perestroika* was the central element of the politics adopted by Mihail Gorbaciov aimed to reform the Soviet economy and society.

⁵ *Scrisoarea celor șase* (*Letter of the six*) is a document written by a former communist dignitary Gheorghe Apostol and signed by other five significant members of the Romanian Communist Party: Alexandru Bârlădeanu, Silviu Brucan, Corneliu Mănescu, Constantin Pârvulescu and Grigore Răceanu. In this letter Nicolae Ceausescu was accused for his politics which breached the final Agreement of Helsinki, the Constitution of the Romanian Socialist Republic. He was also publicly charge with using the State Security for personal interests and with his harsh economic politics which caused a severe crisis of food.

knew that those channels had already gained more freedom and power in shaping the public opinion. On the other hand, the direct contact through the small-scale cross-border traffic at the Hungarian and the Yugoslavian border opened new horizons of expectations. We should not forget the fact that the Swabians from Banat had a closer relation with the German Federal Republic.

The protest of László Tőkés and his reformed parishioners, from December 14th and 15th 1989, against the intention of the communist authorities to evacuate the pastor, followed by the solidarity of almost the entire city gathered to support the protest, led to the onset of the revolutionary events that followed the 16th day of December 1989.

During the first days of the confrontations between the inhabitants of Timisoara and the repression forces, the Romanian officials made all efforts to reduce to silence the events from Timișoara, seeking to isolate the city from the rest of the country and ending up in closing the country's borders. Initially, the Romanian authorities denied before the foreign chancelleries the existence of a conflict in Timișoara, and the national mass-media totally ignored the events.

Due to this informational blockage caused by the Romanian authorities, the sources of information were very few and almost impossible to verify. The news broadcasted by the international mass-media in relation to the events of Timișoara was contradictory and full of false elements. Here are several headlines of the article published by the German press, describing the events of Timișoara:

„Bild”: „Bayonets against the people, 400 deaths?! Massacre in Romania.”

„Süddeutsche Zeitung”: „Reports on hundreds of deaths during the mass protests from Romania. Army Units surround the cities of Timișoara and Arad.”

„Frankfurter Rundschau”: „Eyewitnesses describe the atrocities from Romania.”

„Bild”: „Romania: blood bath, 2500 deaths. Children were shot. Secret Service burns the bodies.”

„Allgemeine Zeitung”: „The army attacks randomly and brutally. Timișoara devastated. Massacre among the unarmed population. Minorities, abused and persecuted.”

„Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”: „Protest manifestations in several Romanian cities. Obviously, more than 1000 deaths. Reports on numerous incinerations of bodies...” „The exiled Romanian from Budapest reported, on Wednesday, that the population of Timișoara is armed and violent conflicts occurred. According to the information supplied by Taniug Agency, 2000 people would have been killed until Tuesday evening. The news agencies of DDR, AND, reported more than 3000 people killed.”

The Hungarian press agencies sent telegrams regarding the developments from Timișoara starting with December 17th 1989. Basically, the information they transmitted was pretty accurate. However, there was some data which subsequently could not be confirmed.

December 17th:

„The police spread the demonstration organized by tens of thousands of Hungarian ethnics who defended Tőkés. The manifestation turned into an anti-Ceausescu protest. The Hungarian television announces that the Romanian border is closed. The Romanian Ambassador in Hungary refused to send a protest letter to Bucharest against the manner in which László Tőkés was treated.”

December 18th:

Budapest, 09:59 a.m.

„The Hungarian government declares that it will try to gain more detailed information on the confrontations between the demonstrators and the militia. Tens of people gathered before the Romanian Embassy to protest.”

Budapest, 02:48 p.m.

„The militia used water cannons and opened fire on the demonstrators from Timișoara. People have been arrested and wounded, but no further details are known. A West-European diplomat declares that he learned about the wounded and the arrested, but he could not confirm any deaths. Many tourists, who returned from Timișoara, declare that shootings have been heard. Ample anti-Ceausescu demonstrations are organized in Timișoara and Arad. The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declares that he has no knowledge on such events. Pastor László Tőkés was arrested. Sources told us that a woman died during the confrontations.”

Budapest, 11:29 p.m.

„An eyewitness claims that the Romanian Securitate officers have killed tens of people when they opened fire on the demonstrators, on Sunday. The city is devastated, another eyewitness reports. Over 10.000 people attended the demonstrations. The spokesman says that the Ambassador of the United States of America at Bucharest will officially protest against the bloody repression of the demonstrators. The Hungarian Television announces that the cities of Timișoara, Oradea and Arad have been isolated and surrounded by the Army forces.”

Although all news channels around the world broadcasted breaking news on the latest developments from Romania, the Romanian authorities kept quiet. On the evening of December 20th 1989, Nicolae Ceausescu came to the national television channel, where he delivered a speech declaring that foreign secret agents, helped by groups of hooligans were operating in Timișoara. In his opinion, those instigators, through their violent actions, vandalized all public institutions aiming to destabilize the political situation of the country. He also claimed that those actions had been conducted from outside the country by foreign interests which were trying to jeopardize and interfere with the Romanian sovereignty.

The Romanian mass-media started to broadcast information starting with December 22, when Ceausescu left the building of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. The public television became famous through the broadcast of the so called *Revoluții române în direct (Romanian Revolutions live)*. During all this time, all Romanian news channels have been intoxicated with false information which, once broadcasted, fuelled the confusion created from December 22nd to December 25th 1989. During the same period, at the popular manifestations from Timișoara, the following slogan „You deceived the population via television!” was heard for the first time in Romania.

The Romanian Revolution continued in 1990 too. On March 11th 1990, the *Proclamation of Timisoara* was first read publicly.

The Romanian mass-media and particularly the self-styled „The Free Romanian Television continued the process of manipulation and disinformation. The major events from Romania were distorted, starting with the untruthful propaganda concerning the historical parties, the general strike from Timișoara, *The Proclamation of Timisoara* and the „Hooligan Manifestations” and miners’ actions of June 13th to 15th 1990. The few publications who tried to cope with the mass disinformation and manipulation led to an unequal fight for a very long time.

Communication, the main factor in building any type of society, particularly the mass media communication, with its multiple current possibilities, should be approached with maximum attention, maturity and responsibility.

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