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# THE PROCLAMATION OF TIMISOARA: FROM REFORM PROPOSALS TO THE CIVIC AND MEDIA CONFRONTATION

Editorial

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## Keywords

*Proclamation of Timisoara*  
*Democracy*  
*1989 Revolution*  
*Ceausescu*  
*Point 8*

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## Abstract

*The aim of the current study is to present the circumstances in which the Proclamation of Timisoara emerged as a significant document in the attempts to discard the totalitarian heritage and to impose the principles of democratic government in Romania. The Proclamation of Timisoara was drafted at the beginning of the year 1990 and structured into two main ideas: 1) highlighting the ideals of the 1989 Revolution, including the definitive break-off from the communist regime; 2) outlining a framework for Romania's evolution during the following period. The main element that structured the document was the radical reform of the state, from a political and administrative point of view. In-depth research into the events that took place during the Revolution of Timisoara, and later during the first month of the year 1990, up until the Proclamation of Timisoara, and after its launch into the political sphere, has revealed the fact that the democratic deficit within the Romanian society has a few obvious and explicit causes.*

## FOUNDING IDEAS

The Proclamation of Timisoara was conceived at the beginning of the year 1990 as a mainly future-oriented document, out of the necessity to establish a few reference points during Romania's period of transition towards an open system, based on respecting citizen's rights and liberties, with free elections within a multi-party system and with a functional market economy. The Proclamation gathered and synthesized the demands formulated by the protesters in the streets of Timisoara, between 16 and 22 December 1989. Beginning with 20 December 1989, the city centre was occupied by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, and in the Balcony of the Romanian Opera House a revolutionary committee was assembled, the Romanian Democratic Front, which assumed a double role: a political one of putting together and imposing a reform regarding the governing of the country, by eliminating the communist system, and a second administrative role, by taking the place of official institutions to a great extent. There were two days of tensioned compromise (between 20 and 22 December), up until Nicolae Ceaușescu's surrender of power, Friday, 22 December 1989, at 12,06 pm.

The Proclamation emerged during a confusing time, when a few events determined reactions by the civil society, reinvigorated in Romania during the Revolution. Among the major events of the time was the demonstration in Bucharest, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January, when the legitimacy of the National Salvation Front (the interim state governing body) was disputed. On 13<sup>th</sup> of January, in Timisoara, the unearthing of ten victims of the Revolution began (nine shot by the forces of repression up to 20 December, and one killed on 24 December). These victims had been buried in secret during the night of 27-28<sup>th</sup> of December 1989, in the Heroes' Cemetery, nine in a mass grave, and one in a separate grave – a man wrongly labelled as a terrorist. On 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 1990, a group of young intellectuals from Timisoara took over the editorial office of the *Renașterea bănățeană* newspaper (successor to the former communist paper *Drapelul roșu* – “The Red Flag”), commanding that the publication *Timisoara* be issued. From 26<sup>th</sup> of January, the two publications would run in parallel, the employees of *Renașterea bănățeană* returning to the head office (Szabo, 2014).

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, the National Salvation Front (“Frontul Salvării Naționale”-FSN), the interim governing body in Romania, would register as a political party, determining a wave of protests by the representatives of the historical or newly-founded parties. FSN's legitimacy would be disputed for using the interim power to its own use,

in order to build advantage in future elections, although initially it had claimed that it would not take part in election competition. The new party was, however, also suspected of being tributary to the communist ideology, maintaining practices of the former regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, and not supporting the real democratization of the country (Pop-Eleches, 1999, 2008, Chiru and Gherghina, 2012). On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, the Action Committee for the Democratization of the Army (CADA) began its activity, entering negotiations with the leadership of the Ministry of National Defence, vehemently disputed at the time. On the 18-19<sup>th</sup> of February 1990, the arrival of groups of miners in Bucharest is recorded. Their aim was to defend the interim governing body (FSN) and to free the institutions occupied by demonstrators for democracy.

## FROM TIANANMEN SQUARE TO TIMISOARA

Creating an emotional x-ray image of the revolutionary movements that unfolded in the world in 1989, Ralf Dahrendorf (2005) would note: “Yes, there were tears, bitter tears at the massacre of Tiananmen Square which brutally ended the 'democracy movement' of students and workers and even soldiers in China, tears for the victims of *Securitate* brutality in Timisoara and elsewhere in Romania six months later”. In Timisoara, the demonstrators, armed only with hopes and the will to overthrow the communist regime, overcame the military troops with real weaponry which opened fire on the crowd of people. Timisoara's greatest fear in those days, between 16<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1989, was the recurrence of the Tiananmen Square massacre, which took place in the center of the Chinese capital. However, the cause for concern was not the risk of being killed (72 people were massacred in Timisoara before Ceaușescu's flight), but dying without victory, without shaking the regime, as had happened in Beijing. The 1989 Revolution meant investing enormous hopes in a radical change of the Romanian society. If ever there had been an explicit consensus regarding the implementation of democratic values and of fundamental human rights in a country run down by many decades of authoritarianism and dictatorship (1938-1989), the disputes, sometimes bloody, not just heated, emerged with regard to who would draft the reforms and, particularly, what their extent would be. More than two decades after the 1989 Revolution, Romania is a member of the European Union, and thus, at least formally, part of the select club of states with consolidated institutions, where the principles of law and morals prevail, in an organization in which the democratic values are

respected. The democratic deficit is obvious and constantly pointed out by the European partners. It is an evolution that has something inexorable to it, born from the acknowledgement that some things cannot be changed and that others alter through efforts that are hard to back up. Cynthia M. Horne (2009) would analyse the later debates regarding lustration in Romania and Poland and would remark the failure of this project in Ceaușescu's former homeland. Lustration was one of the fundamental ideas of the Proclamation of Timisoara, recorded in the much-disputed Point 8 of the document. Horne would clearly express an older idea, but which she would support with arguments: Romania's new political class never intended lustration to become reality except a few isolated less influential leaders.

During the last days of 1989, Timisoara represented a landmark. It stood for the tragic fight for freedom and for the reservoir of ideas for the future. In the second half of March, Timisoara was considered a threat to the new Romanian political leaders. Their suspicion, strongly fuelled by the media, against the background of direct political control over radio, television, and a great part of printed publications, isolated the city in attempt to demonize it. The target was the group that had contributed to drafting the Proclamation of Timisoara, a programmatic document with which, at that time, the greater part of the population and a significant number of local institutions identified themselves. The disparagement of Timisoara was also possible due to some strange approaches to the matter concerning the death toll in the city. The lack of exact verifiable data during the first days after Ceaușescu's downfall, lead to confusing approaches and an undeserved sanction by the world public opinion. The approach was carried out with precarious means not only by journalists from important press institutions, but also by specialists, some with a great deal of experience in the field of media manipulation.

### **INCORRECT DEATH COUNT**

The analysis starts with real facts of indisputable authenticity: the presentation by the mass media (television, in particular) of corpses, in a deplorable state, said to be victims of the repression during the 1989 Revolution of Timisoara. Subsequently, the mass media would show that those bodies and mass graves had nothing to do with the repression. Another piece of evidence is the high number of victims (over 4,000 or even 60,000) announced during the first days of the Revolution, which later were determined to have been far lower. However, with all these hesitations displayed by the journalists and other means of information, it is not a simulated reality. The media scandal was enhanced on 22nd of December 1989, after

unearthing the bodies (those that generated great media frenzy) in the Poor People's Cemetery. The subject was also analysed by Jean Baudrillard (1994), who would launch the sensational phrase The Timisoara Syndrome. Obviously, things are more complicated than this, and Baudrillard had mostly been wrong (Szabo, 2013). The same would happen with Géraldine Muhlmann (2008), author more concerned with falsehood in itself and less with the reality in Timisoara. An approach different from Baudrillard's is suggested by Thomas Keenan (1997), who would admit that the 1992 film Videogrammeiner Revolution, by HarunFarocki and Andrei Ujică, offers an image closer to reality (1997).

Directly referring to the Timisoara massacre and the way in which the West was fooled by television, Anthony Gardner (2010) makes his own statement, convincingly underlining the fact that Baudrillard's vision is reductionist. Analysing the Romanian Television's evolution from its founding days and up until approximately 1997, as well as the media market in Romania in a general context, Thomas A. Mollison (1998) would speak of its subordination during the communist period and of technical out datedness. Then he would stop over the (sad) post-revolution evolution and would underline an important aspect: "With the possible exception of economic necessity, television played a more critical role in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc than any other factor" (Mollison, 1998).

### **PREPARING THE PROCLAMATION OF TIMISOARA**

The Proclamation of Timisoara was conceived by the group of people assembled in the second half of January 1990 to edit the *Timisoara* newspaper. The publication emerged as a counterweight to the former regime's official press (dominated by Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Romanian Communist Party). The former communist newspapers continued to be issued, promoting minor hesitant reforms, while paying attention to the signals given by the new barely reformed leadership of Romania. The first issue of the publication *Timisoara*, that bore, in obvious symbolism, the name of the city, appeared on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1990 (Szabo, 2014). The idea to draft the Proclamation of Timisoara belonged to George Șerban. He made it public on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1990, at the civil society's rally in Timisoara. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, George Șerban provided more details in an article in the *Timisoara* newspaper, plainly entitled "Proposal". It referred to the draw-up of a proclamation addressing the country. It "would serve the purpose of informing the Romanian public opinion with regard to the original ideals of the Revolution of Timisoara, to its authentically European

aspirations” (Şerban, 1990a). The author of the article proposed that “the text of the proclamation be drafted by a group of participants in the Revolution of Timisoara”. It was a gesture of great generosity. In fact, George Şerban would mostly deal with the process of drawing up the Proclamation. He would work long hours at home, but would take in consideration the ideals expressed by several people involved, as well as the drafting suggestions made during the lengthy debates at the head office of the Timisoara Society. The most active people in outlining the Proclamation included: Vasile Popovici, Daniel Vighi, Ion Monoran, Florian Mihalcea, Harald Zimmerman, ViorelMarineasa, IoanCrăciun, Doina Paşca-Harsanyi and Dorel Mihiţ. The document would be presented to the public on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 1990, from the historical balcony of the Romanian Opera House in Timisoara, as thousands of participants gathered in the Victory Square (Piaţa Victoriei), some having travelled a long way, from Bucharest included.

The Proclamation of Timisoara was published for the first time in its final form on 8 March 1990 (Şerban, 2010). An *Appeal* announced that the public assembly for the presentation of the document was established for the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1990. The *Appeal* mentioned that the assembly would take place in the Union Square (Piaţa Unirii) in Timisoara, and in the end hope was expressed that the local authorities would give in and allow the event to unfold in the Opera Square (Victory Square, today). This did in fact happen, as the municipality Local Council was one of the institutions that adhered to the Proclamation of Timisoara. The appeal also expressed the hope that the Romanian Television (the only one at that time in Romania, completely subordinate the new governing body) would broadcast the event live. This did not happen, and in the evening, in the main news bulletin, presented by Cornelius Roşiiianu, news presenter during the communist period, launched a furious assault on the document that had been publicly presented in Timisoara. The moment is described by George Şerban, Vasile Popovici and Daniel Vighi, three representatives of the Timisoara Society, who, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 1990, went to Bucharest to present the Proclamation in its integrity on TVR, and to meet Ion Iliescu, the country’s interim president. This serves as an example for the manner how television manipulated during that time. The bulletin began with a piece of news about the blooming of a rare mountain flower. Then, as Vasile Popovici, president of the Timisoara Society at the time, recalls: “Roşiiianu appeared and presented a few short sequences from the Proclamation read by George Şerban, making a small, not too ill-intended comment. And then the bulletin moved on to another piece of news. That news was interrupted

and the frame remained fixed on Roşiiianu, who was being given numerous slips of paper, Rosiiianu responding with a gesture of refusal and irritation. He took the papers and began to comment on the Proclamation in an absolutely terrifying manner this time” (Popovici, 1992).

## AGAINST THE NEW POWER IN ROMANIA

The Proclamation of Timisoara was carried out in less than three weeks, remaining to this day a fundamental document in the attempt to stimulate Romania’s return to the democratic multi-party system, and to promote citizen’s rights (Kilgour, 2008). It gave rise to stormy debates before as well as after its public presentation, either being enthusiastically supported or vehemently opposed. The context would be analysed by Richard Andrew Hall (2000), who would identify some of the reasons why the citizens of Timisoara are frustrated with the slow evolution towards democracy. 20 December 1989 was a day of outstanding courage, a day on which the city won its freedom, followed by the subsequent inability to promote changes, these occurring too slowly or not at all, also noticed by Jan Aart Scholte (1998). Thus, at mid-March of 1990, when Romania saw itself shaken by a wave of interethnic violence in Transylvania (in Târgu Mureş and its surroundings), Timisoara was in a state of excitement, confusion, and hope. In the Timisoara Trial (begun on 2 March 1990), 24 of the people who took part in the December 1990 reprisals would be on trial. It was, however, clear that many of the guilty were missing, especially those belonging to the Army, responsible for the numerous crimes in various locations in the city. The Proclamation of Timisoara would prove to be much too radical a programme for that period of de-communization of the Romanian society, although it proposed things that are elementary to any democracy. And thus, the democratic deficit would be maintained (Szabo, 2014).

The conclusion regarding the importance of the Proclamation of Timisoara would be underlined by Tom Gallagher (1995): “The Declaration (the translator Simona Ceaşu would constantly refer to the document as declaration instead of proclamation...) of Timisoara has remained the only document of such importance and so clearly formulated created by the national opposition. It placed Timisoara’s interests above the general national interests, which the successors of Ceauşescu’s former communists still interpreted in their own interest.” Lavinia Stan dedicated several studies to this document. The author would note that the ideas included in the Proclamation were put to practice only to a small extent. Ample references would be made to lustration, i.e. the elimination from public life, temporally, of the former communist leaders of Romania. One of the

conclusions is revealing and it accurately expresses the idea of the Proclamation's authors: "Written by a group of intellectuals in Timisoara, the Proclamation rose against the Front's attempts, and Iliescu's, to legitimize their control over the country by unfair elections and by discrediting political adversaries" (Stan, 2010). The analysis is carried out rigorously, following the sinuous route of lustration in Romania. In the end, it would not be carried out. It would come into force in other former communist countries, placing Romania in a paradoxical situation: it had had the first demand for lustration, clear and simple, which hasn't been validated even after 25 years.

### **DIALOGUE WITH ION ILIESCU**

Romania would find it hard to break away from its communist past and impossible to limit the presence of certain people, sitting in the second and third rows of the Romanian Communist Party, in the institutions after the 1989 Revolution and too quickly form a political class adequate for the new democratic realities (Fortin-Rittberger, 2012). The leadership of the Timisoara Society had numerous dialogue initiatives with the political power of that time, in an attempt to determine putting into practice the ideas expressed in the document. Two meetings took place with Ion Iliescu, the country's interim president then, both of which unfolded before the general elections of 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1990. The first one took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 1990, in Bucharest, and was organized by Virgil Măgureanu, the future head of the Romanian Information Service, founded on the structure of the former Securitate, the Ceaușescu regime's political police. As revealed in the official declarations made after this meeting by the Timisoara Society's board, Ion Iliescu guessed the document's innovator character, as well as the danger it posed for him, as he was subject to the well-known Point 8 of the document, and, therefore, in danger of being lustrated. As the representatives of the Society did not accept to alter the Proclamation to make an exception for Ion Iliescu, nor the conditions regarding occupying positions in the administration or in politics, the two parties remained in opposite camps, although there was also common ground.

The second meeting also took place in Bucharest, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1990. This time the aim was very clear, to establish a dialogue between the representatives of the power and the opposition, particularly with the leaders of the protesters in the "communism-free areas", among which the most important was the University Square in Bucharest. However, the conclusions of this meeting would be much more radical, revealing a few things about the media and disinformation tactics employed by the National Salvation Front, exacerbated two

weeks ahead of the elections. The Timisoara delegation restated „the ideals included in the Proclamation” and accused “the non-democratic practices employed by the FSN to maintain power: counter-protests, disinformation, incitement, threats, slander, and cult of personality” (Șerban, 1990b). It was brought to Ion Iliescu's attention that Point 8 of the document targeted him directly, as any other dignitary of the communist regime. Subsequently, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 1990, any other attempted dialogue was interrupted, as Ion Iliescu became the president-elect, and FSN gained absolute majority in the Parliament. Under these circumstances, action was taken to remove the pro-democracy protesters in the University Square in Bucharest, which generated a wave of violence and triggered a new arrival of miners in Bucharest. At this second meeting, the envoys from Timisoara carried out their negotiation not only on behalf of the Timisoara Society, but also on that of the Alliance for the Proclamation of Timisoara. This was a forum of the political and civic pro-democracy organizations in Romania, established on the 28-29<sup>th</sup> of April 1990, in Timisoara (Șerban, 2010).

### **FROM TIMISOARA TO THE UNIVERSITY SQUARE IN BUCHAREST**

The Proclamation of Timisoara had numerous supporters in Banat and Transylvania, as well as in Bucharest and in some of the great cities in the country. The civic movement triggered after the document's release initiated the ample movement that became the University Square phenomenon, an expression coined after the Bucharest location where it took place. However, such "squares" were present in many other cities, including Timisoara. There were attempts to broadcast the document on radio and TV stations (completely controlled by the new political power), but the results were minimal. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1990, the support group of the Proclamation of Timisoara arrived in the capital city, after covering 560 km distance between Timisoara and Bucharest on foot. The leader of the group was an artist, Theodor Mihai Olteanu, whose resolution was decisive in this extremely difficult attempt, which lasted over one month. Having reached Bucharest, the Timisoara delegation went to the University Square, accompanied by thousands of local citizens who had come to welcome them and to state their support of the document drafted in Timisoara. Thus, a communism-free zone emerged in the capital city of Romania, in the area between the University and the National Theatre, a place loaded with significance, as, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1989, it was the scene of confrontations between protesters and the communist forces of repression. The

movement begun on 22<sup>nd</sup> of April was radically anti-communist (Cesereanu, 2008).

Erroneous information about the document and its authors would also be formulated in the context of media exaggerations regarding the death toll in Timisoara, during the December 1989 Revolution. Regarding the reverse mystification, by identifying manipulations in almost everything that had happened, Anna Maeschalk would also be very categorical in her statements regarding the Proclamation of Timisoara. The fact that the document (referred to by the Romanian translator as the Declaration of Timisoara...) was published in the magazine *Report on Eastern Europe*, edited by Radio Free Europe, meant that the authors received support from CIA (USA's foreign information service). The accusations brought against the group that initiated and drafted the document, led by George Șerban, are simply astounding: "The Declaration of Timisoara, drafted by groups that would claim the paternity of the «revolution». A Declaration in which the term 'genocide' is used in abundance" (Maeschalk, 1992). The author does not bring any proof to support her statements.

A controversy also emerged after the publication of the *Final Report of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania*, which claimed that: "The true charter of the December 1989 Revolution was the Proclamation of Timisoara (11 March 1990), which established the anti-communist ideals of the Revolution" (Tismăneanu, Dobrințu, Vasile, 2007). This lapidary statement must be understood strictly according to the text of the Proclamation, which speaks of a revolutionary continuity, synthesizing the ideals of December 1989 and providing an evolutionary framework for the Romanian society. However, Alexandru Oșca (2011) suggests another meaning to the phrase in the *Final report* that considers the Proclamation "the true document of the Romanian Revolution." A. Oșca then launches into fighting this thesis, as the document presented on 11 March 1990.

In July, 1992 the seven-point document entitled Appeal from Timisoara was launched as a continuance to the Proclamation. He makes an x-ray of the two and a half years since the Revolution, noting that since then things had gotten worse and that there was a lack of hope. Almost none of the propositions of the Proclamation had been put into practice, as the country was going through a period of stagnation. In the new document, comments would be made on the manner in which the Proclamation of Timisoara had been received by Ion Iliescu's regime, with the clear statement: "Though we have been cussed at, slandered and even economically boycotted, although we have been attributed intentions we never had, we have stood firm by the Revolution's ideals" (Șerban, 2014). In 2015, 25 years since the

launch of the Proclamation of Timisoara, the document and all the others that followed in its support, prove their present-day nature, also serving as a reference point for what Romania could have been, had the democratic principles been observed and applied and had there been coherent governances.

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