

“On Behalf of the People...”

Fake News, Manipulation and Persuasion at the End of the Ceaușescu Spouses

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People gesturing towards a helicopter in which the country's communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu fled the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee headquarters (agerpres.ro).

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National and International Context

DISCONNECTED FROM the information on the evolution of the reforms initiated by the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev under the name of “perestroika” and their effects in the other “fraternal countries,” the Romanians were subjected to a—largely successful—attempt to portray the events of December 1989 as a revolution.

Moreover, the crisis caused by Nicolae Ceaușescu's decision to pay the entire external debt could be seen as the “revolutionary situation” mentioned by Lenin as a prerequisite for revolution. Excessive production and export activities placed a tremendous burden on the whole economy. The introduction of ration cards limiting the availability of basic food products, the measures meant to reduce the consumption of electricity and water, and the reduction of heating in the workplace and in the private space, the de-

mographic control introduced by the prohibition of abortions and of contraceptive means, all affected the primary needs of individuals. The numerous public tasks, the censorship and the ideological control, but especially the discrepancy between the public discourse and the reality of its references severely altered other basic human needs, first of all security and self-esteem. The life of Romanian citizens had become incomparable with the postwar experiences of any other European people, as noted by the French ambassador to Bucharest of that time, Jean-Marie Le Breton.¹

The frustration worsened after Ceaușescu announced the full repayment of the foreign debt, but continued with the policy of restrictions. It escalated even further after November 1989, when the 14th Congress of the Romanian Communist Party decided to intensify export activities and increase the volume and value of large investments to the detriment of the consumer fund, amid new measures to “develop the socialist consciousness.” This was an intensification of the propaganda that glorified the Ceaușescu couple as a “mobilizing example.” All this came in the context of the reformist movements initiated by the neighboring countries of the communist bloc. The events of December 1989 occurred, therefore, against the backdrop of these comparisons and aspirations. In addition to that there were also the planned manipulations and secret missions entrusted to agents of change at the level of the superstate organizations—the Warsaw Treaty and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, or Comecon—to which Romania was also a part.

As Ceaușescu stubbornly opposed the alignment with Gorbachev’s reforms (accepted by all the other member states in keeping with the structure of the communist bloc of the Cold War), the Romanian regime change exhibited these particular aspects of the transfer of power:

1. in Romania alone there was a violent and bloody overthrow of the regime during which 1,166 people died and over 4,000 were injured (according to the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism and the Memory of the Romanian Exile);
2. in order to give legitimacy to the new leadership of the country, the recourse to violence occurred especially after the departure of the Ceaușescus from Bucharest and their (secret) forced stay in Târgoviște;
3. exclusively in Romania, the head of the party and the state was executed;
4. only after the overthrow of the nationalist-communist dictatorship did reformist communists gain access to power.²

The perverse effect of the propaganda of the last years of the regime, which included political rallies, politically correct forms of address, as well as slogans and praises for the Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu couple, cannot be omitted. This ultimately led to their representation as the root of all evil and an impediment

for any sort of change, and the Romanians were easily led to believe that they were locked in a fight to the death against these forces of evil.

“Today in Timișoara, Tomorrow All Over the Country!”

AT THE congress, even the members of the decision-making core, the Political Executive Committee (Politburo), suffered a disappointment, realizing that things would go on as before. A shadow of hope appeared with Ceaușescu’s promise that changes would come in the spring, at the beginning of the new session of the Great National Assembly.³ However, there were only two real alternatives to Nicolae Ceaușescu. The first and most dreaded one was Elena Ceaușescu, officially the second most powerful person in the state; but the inner circle knew that their hierarchy worked according to the logic of the old Romanian saying “the man is the head of the family, but the woman is its neck.” The second alternative, more palatable, was the youngest son, Nicu,⁴ the then leader of the Sibiu county party organization. The direct subordinates thought that under Comrade Elena it would have been even worse than under Comrade Nicolae,⁵ and some even tried to pull strings in favor of Nicu.⁶ However, when contacted during the events of December 1989 by a leader of the Romanian Communist Youth, with the suggestion of a political discussion with his parents, Nicu refused, claiming that it would have been utterly pointless.⁷

The events in Timișoara began on 15 December. Initially, a small group of elderly members of the Reformed Church gathered in front of the Maria Square building which served as a parochial house for the priest László Tőkés.⁸ They silently supported his refusal to obey the order to evacuate and move to another county.⁹ The following day, a Saturday, the number of curious people gathered around these supporters increased. At one point, a tram was stopped and crowds of passengers got off. And all of a sudden, someone shouted “Down with Ceaușescu!”

In the official headquarters, the surviving documents indicate that the day passed normally.¹⁰

In Timișoara, however, the situation was getting out of hand, and conflicts flared up in several places. Tőkés was forcefully evacuated, but his fate did not seem to concern the protesters who entered the local government headquarters, destroying red flags, books and portraits of Ceaușescu. They sang “Romanians, Awaken!” and chanted “Down with Ceaușescu!” During the night, the authorities arrested ca. 200 protesters. As everything seemed to settle down, Ceaușescu organized a hunting trip on Saturday afternoon, 16 December.¹¹

Only on 17 December, he gathered the Politburo¹² in the famous meeting where he informed them that a “situation” had arisen in Timișoara. It was due to the fact that “both in the East and in the West everyone says that things should change in Romania,” he claimed. He also found the culprits: the heads of the Ministry of the Interior and of the Army, who had not armed the troops, allowing “a handful of hooligans” to “destroy socialism.”¹³ The meeting also had a dramatic moment, left out of the minutes: his “abdication.” “I am no longer your general secretary, choose another,” said he, dissatisfied with their performance and attitude.¹⁴ Who else could they choose, when at the recent congress the four million members of the party had voted for Ceaușescu?! In tears, the women sought to prevent him from leaving the room...

Then he decided that he could go on with the previously planned visit to Iran.¹⁵ The coordination of internal affairs remained with the Permanent Bureau of the Politburo, and he left his wife in charge of all current activities.

In Timișoara, the orders to respond with bullets were carried out. On the morning of 18 December, Ceaușescu was informed that the situation was under control. The bloodshed strengthened the people’s desire to revolt: “Either we win or we die!” replied the people of Timișoara. 63 were killed by gunfire, 227 wounded, and hundreds arrested.¹⁶ The bodies were transported to the morgue of the County Hospital. The people in Timișoara were asking for their dead, but especially for the removal of the Ceaușescus from their position of power.

In the absence of her husband, Elena Ceaușescu assumed all prerogatives of her office. From morning to night she held meetings with various dignitaries.¹⁷ She, over her head and without informing Ceaușescu, decided to solve the matter of the dead bodies of Timișoara. On the night of 18 to 19 December, 44 bodies were removed from the hospital’s morgue. Five of them remained forever unidentified.¹⁸ The bodies were incinerated, in the greatest secrecy, at the “Cenușa” (Ashes) crematorium in the Capital. The families of those turned into ash could only imagine that they had crossed the border and disappeared without a trace.¹⁹

Except for the information directly provided by her, she forbade others to communicate with Ceaușescu in Iran. She and she alone could talk to him through a special telephone, and in his turn he “forgot” to inform his retinue on the events back home.²⁰

When Ceaușescu returned from Iran on the afternoon of 20 December, Timișoara was already a “city free of communism.” In a very short Politburo meeting and during a teleconference with the county leaders, Ceaușescu brought “additional clarifications”: the events in Timișoara were the consequence of an agreement between the Soviets and the Americans; the former were looking after their interests here and the latter sought a regime change in Panama.²¹

Against the “hooligans” of Timișoara, he said, the military and law enforcement had intervened in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the country.

In his televised speech, his references to external threats, foreign agents, patriotism, etc., without any mention of the long and unjustified crisis in the country, seemed to the people another striking proof of Ceaușescu’s senility. The rally organized in Palace Square was different from the others, seemingly the initiative of someone who had “lost his marbles.”²² It started after the typical formula but soon it was interrupted by strange noises.²³ They managed to get a televised rally, but the participants turned into protesters. Additional protests had already erupted in other cities.²⁴

The Last Day in Power

AFTER THE rally, the Ceaușescus did not leave the Central Committee headquarters. Quite determined, they stayed overnight to rest in a room in Cabinet 1.²⁵ They asked for a change of clothes for the next day. They were not prepared to run anywhere.

While the center of Bucharest was bleeding after the intervention of the armed forces, Elena kept vigil all night, paying particular attention to the movements of the dignitaries who, according to their example, had remained in the headquarters. Whatever the outcome, the culprits had to be found. The Ceaușescus had not yet envisaged the possibility of the culprits being none other than themselves.

In the morning of 22 December, after the report of Vasile Milea,²⁶ the Defense minister, Ceaușescu held him responsible for the crimes. The general had a mental breakdown and killed himself. In the Politburo meeting convened for that morning, Ceaușescu announced the culprit: the “traitor” Milea.

The news was devastating. Informed more or less correctly by foreign radio stations, the Romanians had started protest movements in other cities and the country was paralyzed. Large columns of workers were making their way towards the government buildings.²⁷ They had weapons stolen from the Patriotic Guards and had disarmed the military. Ceaușescu once again demanded from his subordinates fidelity to the “cause.” But how to shoot the workers? The army had withdrawn from Palace Square, but the Central Committee headquarters was full of *Securitate* personnel.

The television broadcast about the suicide of the “traitor” Milea was interpreted by the citizens of Romania in the sense that the minister had been killed by Ceaușescu because he had refused to order the troops to fire at the people. Undeservingly, Milea became a national hero. In the county capitals of Transylvania, the protesters had taken over the party headquarters.

Undeterred, Ceaușescu grabbed a megaphone and tried to address the crowd from the balcony, but stones were thrown at him. “Let’s go!” his wife screamed.²⁸ The way out was offered by the new Defense minister, General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu²⁹: to leave the roof of the Central Committee headquarters by helicopter. They narrowly escaped falling into the hands of the rebels who entered the building via doors opened hastily by the Securitate people. At 12:06, the helicopter took off amid the triumphant shouting of the crowd: the “despicable dictator” and his “sinister wife” were fleeing in fear of the people!

That’s how the Ceaușescus started their fateful adventure. They stopped at Snagov Palace where he phoned some county officials interested in the local situation. He also called some people in the city of Târgoviște. It seems that he intended to relocate there, in a few hours, the whole leadership of the country.³⁰ From the new capital, he could organize the fight against the “hooligans” and the foreign agents.

But the head of the Securitate, Iulian Vlad, had issued orders to allow the protesters access to the television studios and not to cut the transmission.³¹ Just over half an hour after the departure of Ceaușescu from the Central Committee headquarters, the poet Mircea Dinescu announced on television, “We have won! The dictator has fled!” Then the whole country joined in the “revolution.” Everyone, including the Ceaușescus’ helicopter crew, was listening to the radio. Only the Ceaușescu spouses were unaware that they had lost the war.

Under the pretext that they would be shot down from the ground, the crew landed near the town of Titu. Those accompanying the Ceaușescus sought to commandeer a vehicle.³² After several attempts, the Ceaușescus forced a certain Nicolae Petrișor, an employee of the Plant Protection Center in Târgoviște, to take them in his car.

Nicolae Ceaușescu presently intended to hold a meeting with the workers at the Special Steels Plant in Târgoviște. The first shock was when the driver turned on the radio and they heard the statements of those who had deposed them. Second came the stones that started flying at the car when they were recognized by passers-by. The headquarters of the county party organization to which they were headed was already under the control of the protesters.³³ As was the case everywhere during those hours, Army officers had assumed control over the county administrations.³⁴

Not knowing what else to do, Petrișor took them with him to work. But nobody wanted them anymore. The television broadcast included made-up tales that were getting more and more phantasmagoric, but also a report whereby the fugitives were in the Târgoviște area. A search was mounted. Around 2 pm, on the authority of General Stănculescu, Colonel Andrei Kemenici, the commander of the Târgoviște garrison, received the order to capture them.³⁵ Identical orders were also received by the police. The employees of the Plant Protection Cen-

ter informed the ones in charge of their capture about the whereabouts of the Ceaușescus.³⁶

Two police officers took the couple in their custody, promising them protection. Because of the protesters, they were unable to enter the police building, which also hosted the Securitate headquarters. In their patrol car, the two officers took them to the edge of Rățoaia village. For the next 4 hours all four occupants remained in the police vehicle in a field near the forest, whilst the media was spreading misleading reports. The guards were communicating with the prisoners in a way no one could have imagined possible just a few hours ago. They denied having kept the people in the dark, hungry and cold, they denied the existence of victims in Timișoara.³⁷ They were themselves hungry and cold and it was getting dark. Then a strange thing happened. A fox started circling the car. It seemed not to fear them. Elena Ceaușescu got really scared and said: “Take us wherever you want, because here the wolves will eat us.”³⁸

Under Protection or Arrested?

THEY WERE taken to the police headquarters, which was already in the hands of the protesters. They body searched and interrogated the Ceaușescu couple as if they were prisoners of war. He grew very pale, alarming everyone around with a seemingly fatal collapse.³⁹

In Bucharest the configuration of power seemed uncertain.⁴⁰ Governments were created and dissolved. The ones that made history were acting from the television headquarters: Iliescu,⁴¹ Roman,⁴² Militaru,⁴³ Brucan,⁴⁴ Vlad.⁴⁵ Disconnected from reality, the Ceaușescus reached Târgoviște around 6 pm.⁴⁶ Colonel Andrei Kemenici, the commander of the local army unit, addressed him satisfactorily as “Comrade president.”⁴⁷ An hour and a half later he informed Stănculescu, who gave orders to keep them there at all cost and in the strictest secrecy.⁴⁸ During that evening the colonel was contacted and told by Ion Iliescu to keep them there until he would send someone for them.⁴⁹

According to Kemenici, their arrival at the garrison triggered a radio-electronic diversion: a mysterious army of terrorists who were “fighting for Ceaușescu” suddenly descended upon the country. The new leaders of the country, grouped in the National Salvation Front, knew that both spouses were under lock and key and that no one was fighting for them. But the Romanians were kept in the dark and incited to suspect and kill each other. This ensured the continuation and amplification of the violent actions, which made more victims than the Ceaușescus prior to their “escape.”

In Târgoviște they converted an office in the command building into a three-bed bedroom. The Ceaușescu couple were given rations and the uniforms of post-ed officers.⁵⁰ They brought them dinner—dry bread, cheese and tea. Ceaușescu spat out the sweetened tea. “Don’t you know that the Comrade has diabetes?”—she barked, forgetting that their diseases were kept secret.⁵¹ Dissatisfied that they were not allowed to sleep in the same bed, they asked for the garrison commander to come. “Am I under arrest or under your protection?” Ceaușescu questioned Kemenici authoritatively. “Then let me sleep with my wife!” he ordered.⁵²

In Târgoviște, during that first night, Nicolae Ceaușescu paced around like a caged lion. In the dark, the soldiers fired over one million cartridges in the direction of the high school building in front of the garrison, mistakenly believing that “terrorists” were hiding there.⁵³ “Calm down, Nicu, it’ll work out in one way or the other.” Elena kept reassuring him. They caressed each other “like newlyweds,” according to the guards’ reports. The latter were living a nightmare: he drove them crazy with his nervous walk, she, numb, looked like a corpse: hands on her belly, mouth open, leathery skin...⁵⁴

Criminal Plans

BY THE crack of dawn the Ceaușescu couple were taken to an armored personnel carrier which then joined the forces deployed around the unit.⁵⁵ The following nights were spent in the APC. “You’re taking us out into the fields to kill us,” he probed the soldiers in the vehicle.⁵⁶

The intention was seemingly their physical elimination, combined with the psychological torture of the soldiers guarding them, concluded one of the guards.⁵⁷ In Bucharest, they really wanted to get rid of them using the tactics of attrition: have them shot under the pretext of an escape attempt. In this regard, pressure was put on Kemenici.⁵⁸

The Ceaușescus had only the clothes on their back. He asked, unsuccessfully, to borrow money to buy a shirt instead of the dirty one. At one point, he rushed to break the camouflaged window. He wanted to go out and talk to the demonstrators who, he believed, were supporting him. Hastily pulled back, he came out bleeding from that altercation. “Help, they are trying to kill the Comrade!” Elena screamed.⁵⁹

They concluded among themselves that the causes of the rebellion must be due to foreign agents. He saw himself as the one protecting the country from dismemberment: the Hungarians wanted Transylvania, and the Russians, Moldavia. The country was betrayed and the people did not know it. He wanted to

go to Mija, Câmpulung, Voinești, Pitești...⁶⁰ Otherwise, the country was facing ruin. “They are mad,” they said to each other.⁶¹

The diversion intensified continuously. The unit seemed to be attacked by unknown forces. In Târgoviște the rumor started to spread that the Ceaușescus were hiding in the city. Kemenici decided to move them to a tent pitched between gun emplacements and soldiers. But Nicolae Ceaușescu was feeling unwell: he was very pale, urinated often, and complained of abdominal pain and dizziness. Notified, Stănculescu almost rejoiced: “No problem, number 1 dies, number 2 remains.”⁶²

Notwithstanding the pressure, on the evening of 24 December Kemenici informed his superiors that he would go to Bucharest, in an armored column, to hand over the prisoners. In a meeting that would be the object of much later discussion, the new self-appointed leaders—Iliescu, Militaru, Brucan, Roman, Voican Voiculescu⁶³—decided the execution of the Ceaușescus.⁶⁴ It later emerged that the decision was taken in a toilet inside the Ministry of National Defense. There they wrote, by hand, the Decision on the establishment of the Exceptional Military Tribunal, signed by Ion Iliescu on behalf of the Council of the National Salvation Front, which was a reinvention of the Romanian Communist Party structures through some changes of names and characters and the abolition of some of the older laws.⁶⁵

In the early hours of 25 December, dressed in military uniforms, the tired Ceaușescus were dozing off in their APC, but still had hope. He kept asking to be allowed to address the people. Stănculescu ordered them to remain under guard, announcing Kemenici that he would arrive to pick them up around 9 am. Over three hours late, two helicopters landed in the courtyard of the garrison. From them descended the members of the court and a group of soldiers from the Boteni paratrooper unit.

Through the viewfinder of the APC in which they had spent the night, Ceaușescu saw General Stănculescu descending from a helicopter. “You can relax, be calm, Stănculescu is here,” he whispered happily to his wife.⁶⁶ But Stănculescu was already looking for the right room for the trial.⁶⁷ “Where do we shoot them?”—he bluntly asked Kemenici, before picking the spot himself. He had already brought with him the necessary body bags. As the preparations unfolded, three other helicopters circled above, increasing the tension.⁶⁸

An hour and a half after the arrival of the helicopters it was all over.

What the People Saw and What Was Concealed

ON CHRISTMAS Day the Romanian television broadcasted a horror movie, for the first time in its history. Also that day the first private business deal was conducted in post-Ceaușescu Romania: the French saw the tape with the Ceaușescu trial before its official release in Romania.⁶⁹

For the Romanian audience, the film director Sergiu Nicolaescu edited the original, eliminating the scenes in which other people except the Ceaușescu could be seen.⁷⁰ It was the proof that the “despicable one” and his “sinister wife” were gone, and also a clear sign that there was a new power in place. The shocking difference between the official image of the dictators and their “exit” in the televised scene led to the suspicion that the recording was fake. Their fallen bodies after the execution, with their hands tied, seemed like props. Shocked by what they had seen and heard, the Romanian people did not even focus on the transfer of power.

The opening scene featured Ceaușescu exiting the APC. Compared to his officially released portraits, he was barely recognizable as the old man with a crooked fur hat covering one eye.

What followed were other equally staged scenes. The small room where the Ceaușescu were taken normally served as a classroom for the political and ideological education of soldiers and officers. In an adjoining room, those barely arrived from Bucharest were preparing. Nervous and in a rush, Colonel Gică Popa,⁷¹ the court president, left behind a paper with the outline of the trial.⁷² The others also lacked the necessary documents, but one of them had accidentally left Bucharest with a copy of the Penal Code in his briefcase.⁷³ They had gathered in great secret at the order sent individually to each of them in the name of the National Salvation Front. They were told that they were to judge the terrorists,⁷⁴ people who had allegedly poisoned the drinking water and shot women and children with sophisticated weapons, after having received new clothes and new identities. According to the report published a day before in the communist paper *Scântea* (The Spark), renamed *Scântea poporului* (The Spark of the People), those were the fanatically obedient servants of the former dictator who had set fire to buildings, set explosives, committed unspeakable crimes.⁷⁵ For three days now, they had been fighting the “revolutionaries” and the “good people” from all over the country.⁷⁶ According to some, these murderous ghosts were Ceaușescu’s informers; others spoke about Arabs sent by his Muslim friends; it was also rumored that they were orphans raised and indoctrinated to be stalwart guards for the head of the country...

At 13:20 the magistrates, Stănculescu, and the two civilians representing the Council of the National Salvation Front entered the room where the Ceaușescu were waiting. About Virgil Măgureanu,⁷⁷ a lecturer at Ștefan Gheorghiu Acad-

emy, Ceaușescu knew vaguely in the context of General Ion Ioniță's conspiracy. Comrade Elena remembered him as "the one with the Trabant"⁷⁸ from the Securitate briefings on his meetings with Ion Iliescu and General Nicolae Militaru. In spring, among other "preventive measures" made necessary by the changes in the neighboring countries, they had removed him from their entourage, giving him a position as a museographer in Focșani.⁷⁹ Around Christmas, according to local custom, Măgureanu had gone on a short holiday to take part in the "slaughtering of the pig," a local tradition in his hometown in the north of the country. He did not catch the beginning of the Bucharest protests but responded urgently to the call of the former fellow conspirators. And, there he was, in that room, at Iliescu's recommendation.⁸⁰ The other, the geologist Gelu Voican Voiculescu, a bearded man with an outfit and allure that recalled the early photographs of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, had been nobody until the previous day. With the file on him secreted or destroyed by the special services, in the period that followed he circulated phantasmagoric autobiographical episodes and alluded to arcane spiritual and hereditary affiliations.

The camera started. Exhausted by the events of the previous week, the Ceaușescu's performance shocked the country. These were the dictators?! Is the old man who moved his eyebrows talking nonsense the tyrant? Is the old woman with evil eyes his sinister wife?

"You stand before a people's court," the president warned. Ceaușescu replied, shocked by the loss of power: "I do not recognize any court except the Great National Assembly." This strategy was immediately adopted by both of them. Mobilized by its novelty, they were working together again.

"The Great National Assembly has been abolished. The new organ of power is another," said the judge. "The coup d'état cannot be recognized," Ceaușescu abruptly introduced the issue of authority. The shocked judge retorted: "We are proceeding in keeping with the new law passed by the Council of the National Salvation Front. Please stand up, defendant." The judge did not manage to make them behave as one should before a court of law. They refused to stand up and answer questions. The president pointlessly insisted, invoking "the power and the will of the people," the authority of the Council of the National Salvation Front. He went directly to the charges, without... an act of indictment. With the air of a clever party worker, he improvised on the topic of the last decade lived by Romanians in the cold, in darkness and hunger. Among other things, he scolded Ceaușescu for the 200 grams of salami one was allowed to purchase daily upon the presentation of one's identity card! However, the magistrate, Colonel Gică Popa, had not lived the life of ordinary Romanians! He had no clue that bread, meat, sugar, butter and eggs were rationed, but not salami or cheese. For the lat-

ter and other foodstuffs, the Romanians had to queue for long and humiliating hours. The salami he mentioned would have been an unexpected treat.

Taking his role as prosecutor seriously, Dan Voinea hastily requested the death sentence for both defendants. Their actions, he said, had been incompatible with human dignity and the principles of socialist justice. His argumentation involved references to legislation in a phraseology recalling that of prosecutor Vyshinsky in the Stalinist trials of the 1930s.

“Vicious lies,” Ceaușescu labeled the accusations; the trial, a “masquerade.” The people, he threatened, would fight until the elimination of “this gang of traitors to their country who have colluded with the foreigners who organized the coup.”

He didn’t acknowledge any charges, pledging to answer all questions before the Great National Assembly. And before the people. Gică Popa unleashed a shocking string of concrete accusations and unofficial poetic expressions, talking about the “dawn of freedom” experienced three days earlier by the “ancestral land” destroyed by Ceaușescu. “Don’t let them gather their wits, they’re criminals...!” Voican Voiculescu would later brag about having instructed the panel.⁸¹ Overwhelmed by the dazzling scene, the viewers could not see or suspect the directorial indications, the selection of the cast, or the props employed. Guiding the scenario towards the final decision, Voican Voiculescu sent hastily scribbled notes to the magistrates. “Why did they kill Milea?” read the president; who were the “foreign mercenaries” who were terrorizing the country? What are the foreign accounts in which they kept their money?...⁸² Their daughter Zoia⁸³ used to weigh the meat served to the dogs on a golden scale; in the villa they had found \$ 90,000...⁸⁴ It was utter and complete madness.

But there was more. Voinea demanded from Ceaușescu details regarding his personal Swiss account of \$ 400,000. The figure seemed too low to the president of the tribunal and he multiplied it a thousand times. “A disgusting allegation,” commented Elena Ceaușescu. And she asked, inspired, “to see the proof.” Having gotten nowhere, the judges tried something else: at the order of the defendants and of their entourage, fire had been opened at “the people”—64,000 people had been killed. “Really, where did he hear this?,” Elena asked her husband. Those who saw it on television were left with the impression of the revelation of some secret great crimes.

In the shocking dialogues, viewers were only shown the faces of the Ceaușescus. They would witness, without realizing it yet, the functionality of the evil couple. Seated to his right, she quickly rushes in, like she used to do in meetings.⁸⁵ He tempers her, calms her by touching her hand, urging her to keep quiet...⁸⁶ She calls the others present “pigs,” “clowns,” “bastards.”

Those in front of the TVs did not see the military man who entered the room to whisper something to General Stănculescu. Even the Ceaușescus were unaware that on the other side of the door Colonel Andrei Kemenici was eavesdropping.⁸⁷ He had received an order from Stănculescu to keep an eye on the TV set and notify him if something out of the ordinary happened. The colonel delegated this task to a subordinate and put himself in charge of the phone calls with Bucharest. General Nicolae Militaru, the new Defense minister, called directly three times with the order to speed up the trial. It cannot go any faster, Stănculescu said, once replying from the actual courtroom.⁸⁸

Unanimously, both Ceaușescu spouses received the capital punishment, in addition to the total confiscation of assets, for having committed genocide, undermined the state power, for acts of diversion and for undermining the national economy. A fifth accusation was added in the *Official Journal* of the following day: the attempt to flee the country on the basis of funds of over \$ 1 billion deposited with foreign banks.⁸⁹

“A bunch of traitors,” Nicolae Ceaușescu concluded after the sentence was announced. “And we kept them near us, the betrayals come from our entourage,” she agreed.⁹⁰

“Take them, cuff them, and execute them!,” ordered Stănculescu to the paratroopers brought from Boteni.⁹¹ “One at a time,” the Ceaușescus heard. Only then did they become aware of their imminent death.⁹²

The sequences broadcast on television culminated in the “shrew” protesting at being handcuffed. The angry rebuke directed at the soldiers (“I raised you as a mother!”) was interpreted as a sign of utter disrespect. Their dead bodies were transported by helicopter to Ghencea stadium in Bucharest. Rushing to attend the Christmas party organized by the directors of the “Steaua” Club, founded by the man he had just liquidated, Stănculescu left the “packages” under paratrooper guard. They had to wait for an ARO SUV to come and pick up the bodies. Fearing a trap, they left them lying out there in the open, and returned to their unit. After a long search, those who found them the following morning were frightened by their content. There seemed to be two mannequins wrapped in tarpaulin. It looked like a booby trap, witnesses claimed...⁹³

During the days of fighting with the ghostly terrorists (after 22 December), 828 people were killed.

It didn't matter to the new leaders. They had estimated 60,000. Carried away by the strong winds of historical change, they imagined that 22 December 1989 would be what 23 August 1944 had been. Once in power, they would become the revolutionaries capable of rewriting the past and of planning the future. On behalf of the people...



Notes

1. Jean-Marie Le Breton, *Sfârșitul lui Ceaușescu: Istoria unei revoluții*, transl. Ioana Cantacuzino, foreword by Nicolae Manolescu (Bucharest: Cavallioti, 1997), 197.
2. Anely Ute Gabanyi, *Revoluția neîncheiată* (Bucharest, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1999), 280.
3. The author's interview with Ion Coman on 4 December 2008.
4. Nicu Ceaușescu (1951–1996), initial profession: physicist. Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu's firstborn child was trained and introduced to high political positions since 1971. A member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (1979–1989) and of the Politburo (1984–1989). Among the positions held: first secretary of the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth and minister for Youth Issues (1983–1987), first secretary of the Sibiu county party organization (1987–1989). Arrested on 28 December 1989, sentenced in 1990 to 20 years in prison, released for health reasons in 1992.
5. "Comrade" was the title used by Ceaușescu when he addressed or was addressed by his close entourage. "Cabinet 1" and "Cabinet 2" direct subordinates referred to them as "Tovarășul"/"Tovarășa" which roughly translates as "companion."
6. Ștefan Andrei în dialog cu Lavinia Betea: *Stăpânul secretelor lui Ceaușescu: I se spune Machiavelli* (Bucharest: Adevărul, 2011), 271.
7. Ion Traian Ștefănescu, *Întâlniri cu Nicolae Ceaușescu*, foreword by Ion Cristoiu (Bucharest: Mediafax, 2019), 262.
8. László Tőkés (b. 1952), Reformed pastor, bishop of the Reformed Diocese of Piatra Craiului (1990–2009), MEP from 2007.
9. Tőkés had appeared several times on the show "Panorama" of Budapest television criticizing Ceaușescu but compared to the popularity of Doina Cornea, Mircea Dinescu or the signatories of the "Letter of the six," Tőkés was relatively unknown in Romania.
10. Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale (Central Historical National Archives, hereafter cited as ANIC), Fond CC al PCR—Cabinetul 1, file 24/1989.
11. Maria Dobrescu, *La curtea lui Ceaușescu: Dezvăluiri despre viața de familie a cuplului prezidențial* (Bucharest: Amaltea, 2004), 230.
12. ANIC, Fond CC al PCR—Cabinetul 1, file 24/1989. The meeting was held between 16:20 and 17:30 hours, followed immediately by the teleconference with the heads of the county party organizations.
13. "Stenograma ședinței Comitetului Politic Executiv din 17 decembrie 1989," *Scânteia—Jurnalul României 1989—Acum 20 de ani*, suppl. of *Jurnalul național*, 17 December 1989.
14. Dumitru Popescu, *Cronos autodevorându-se... Memorii*, vol. 5, *Reducția celulară* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007), 28.
15. Lavinia Betea, "Enigma vizitei lui Ceaușescu la Teheran," interview with Ion Stoian, http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/enigma-vizitei-lui-Ceaușescu-teheran.
16. Sergiu Nicolaescu, *Lupta pentru putere: Decembrie '89* (Bucharest: All, 2005), 577.
17. ANIC, Fond CC al PCR—Cabinetul 1, file 24/1989.

18. List provided by Traian Orban, director of the Memorial of the Revolution in Timișoara in 2009.
19. Nicolaescu, 107.
20. Betea, “Enigma vizitei lui Ceaușescu la Teheran.”
21. On 20 December 1989, over 27,000 American soldiers invaded Panama to overthrow and capture the dictator Noriega.
22. “Vinovatul de serviciu: Generalul Iulian Vlad,” *Dosarele Cotidianul* (Bucharest), 2 (2017): 145.
23. According to the subsequent information provided by General Iulian Vlad, the panic and the explosions at the rally were organized by the film director Sergiu Nicolaescu. To achieve that effect he used the props and stunts usually employed in his films. See <http://evz.ro/gral-iulian-vlad-ultimul-sef-al-securitatii-spune-adevarul.html>.
24. After Timișoara, from 21 December onwards, there were disturbances and demonstrations in Arad (workers from the local enterprises occupied the square in front of the City Hall between 7 and 8 in the morning), Buziaș, Sibiu, Cugir (they started between 9 and 11), Târgu-Mureș, Caransebeș, Hunedoara, Reșița, Brașov, Ghimbav and Făgăraș (between 11 and 13 hours). After the popular rally in Bucharest, the protests started in Cluj-Napoca (3 pm), Cîsnădie (6 pm), and Alba Iulia (10 pm).
25. The author’s interview with Andrei Popescu on 5 September 2018.
26. General Vasile Milea (1927–1989), a member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (1979–1989), minister of Defense (1985–1989). His suicide on 22 December 1989 remains a controversial moment in the history of the events that culminated in the execution of Ceaușescu.
27. Arhiva Tribunalului Militar Teritorial București (Bucharest Territorial Military Court Archive), file 126/1990, 232.
28. Grigore Cartianu, *Sfârșitul Ceaușeștilor: Să mori împușcat ca un animal sălbatic*, foreword by Alex Mihai Stoenescu (Bucharest: Adevărul Holding, 2010), 167.
29. General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu (1928–2016), first deputy minister of Endowment (1986–1989) and minister of Defense (1989; 1990–1991). He entered the collective memory as the organizer of the trial and execution of the Ceaușescu spouses on 25 December 1989. Sentenced to prison in 1999, released on parole in 2014.
30. Viorel Domenico, *Ceaușescu la Târgoviște: 22–25 decembrie 1989*, 2nd edition (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2014), 241.
31. “Vinovatul de serviciu: Generalul Iulian Vlad,” 100.
32. Cartianu, 206.
33. Vartan Arachelian, *În fața dumneavoastră: Revoluția și personajele sale*, foreword by Florin Constantiniu (Bucharest: Nemira, 1998), 253.
34. Domenico, 245.
35. *Ibid.*, 24–25.
36. *Ibid.*, 35.
37. Cartianu, 240.
38. Arachelian, 258.
39. Marius Tucă Show, *Ultimele zile ale lui Ceaușescu: Dramă românească în cinci acte cu un prolog și cu un epilog* (Bucharest: Machiavelli, 1999), 282 (“Marius Tucă Show”

on Antena television station on 1 December 1999; guests: General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, Gelu Voican Voiculescu, General Andrei Kemenici, magistrate General Constantin Lucescu, Viorel Domenico, Captain Ionel Boeru, Major Constantin Paisie, analyst Ion Cristoiu).

40. *Ibid.*, 47.
41. Ion Iliescu (b. 1930), initial profession: engineer. First secretary of the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth (1967–1971) and member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (1969–1984), during which time he served as secretary in charge of propaganda of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, secretary for propaganda in the county of Timiș, first secretary at the Iași county party organization, president of the National Water Council. Later he was appointed director of the Technical Publishing House (1984–1989). During the events of December 1989, he was appointed as the president of the Council of the National Salvation Front. He was the president of Romania (1990–1996, 2000–2004).
42. Petre Roman (b. 1946), engineer, prime minister of Romania (26 December 1989–October 1991), deputy and senator in the Romanian Parliament representing various political formations since 1990.
43. Nicolae Militaru (1925–1996), army general, alternate member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party (1974–1984), minister of the National Defense (1989–1990).
44. Silviu Brucan (Saul Bruckner, 1916–2006). Secretary-general of the editorial board of the newspaper *Scântea* (1944–1952), Romania’s ambassador to the United Nations (1959–1962). Signatory of the “Letter of the six” (1989).
45. Iulian Vlad (1931–2017), colonel-general, after 1987 state secretary in the Ministry of the Interior and head of the Department of State Security.
46. Domenico, 221.
47. Marius Tucă Show, 73.
48. *Ibid.*, 81.
49. Domenico, 35.
50. *Ibid.*, 101.
51. Marius Tucă Show, 286.
52. Domenico, 105.
53. Marius Tucă Show, 288.
54. Domenico, 265.
55. *Ibid.*, 51.
56. *Ibid.*, 234.
57. Marius Tucă Show, 289.
58. Domenico, 128.
59. *Ibid.*, 106–107.
60. *Ibid.*, 208.
61. *Ibid.*, 214.
62. *Ibid.*, 121.
63. Gelu Voican Voiculescu (b. 1941), by profession a geologist. In unclear circumstances, together with Victor Atanasie Stănculescu and Virgil Măgureanu, he be-

came a delegate to the trial of Ceaușescu on 25 December. He became deputy prime minister in the first post–Ceaușescu provisional government and was also responsible for the control of the secret services (28 December 1989–28 June 1990). Senator (1990–1992), then ambassador to Tunisia and Morocco. After 2018, director general of the Institute of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989.

64. *Vinovatul de serviciu*. “Generalul Iulian Vlad,” 103, 113.
65. Alex Mihai Stoenescu, “Triumful democrației și judecarea lui Ceaușescu,” *Jurnalul național* (Bucharest), 17 December 2017.
66. Domenico, 270.
67. *Ibid.*, 156.
68. *Ibid.*, 148.
69. The unedited tape with the Ceaușescu trial was watched in Romania only at the end of April 1990.
70. Marius Tucă Show, 203.
71. Colonel Gică Popa, military judge in 1989. In the summer of 1989 he presided over the court that sentenced the diplomat Mircea Răceanu to death for espionage. He committed suicide on 1 March 1990.
72. Domenico, 160.
73. Marius Tucă Show, 149–150.
74. *Ibid.*, 135.
75. *Scânteaia poporului* (Bucharest), 24 December 1989.
76. *Ibid.*
77. Virgil Măgureanu (b. 1941), lecturer at Ștefan Gheorghiu Academy (1969–1989), director of the Romanian Intelligence Service (1990–1997).
78. “Vinovatul de serviciu: Generalul Iulian Vlad,” 151.
79. Aurel I. Rogoian, “Evenimentele din decembrie 1989, între speranțele unora și dezi-luziile altora, III,” *Cotidianul* (Bucharest), 25 December 2013.
80. Marius Tucă Show, 147.
81. Domenico, 288.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Zoia Ceaușescu (1949–2006), daughter of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, mathematician. On 24 December 1989 she was arrested on charges of undermining the national economy. Released on 18 August 1990.
84. The possession of foreign currency by the citizens of Romania was considered a criminal act under the communist regime.
85. Her interventions and attempts to intervene until the judges withdrew for deliberation are 96 in number.
86. Until the withdrawal of the judges for deliberation we can count 24 instances, during an hour, in which Ceaușescu tried to calm down his wife.
87. Domenico, 162.
88. *Ibid.*, 163.
89. *Monitorul Oficial al României* 1, 3 (26 December 1989).
90. Marius Tucă Show, 262.
91. *Ibid.*, 183.

92. Ibid., 191.

93. Ibid., 205.

Abstract

“On Behalf of the People...”: Fake News, Manipulation and Persuasion at the End of the Ceaușescu Spouses

On 25 December 1989, the spouses Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were executed following the last Stalinist trial in the history of communism, “On behalf of the people” and under allegations just as unfounded as those of the prosecutions patented in the 1930s by the prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky. The “people” on whose behalf they were liquidated were experiencing disturbing events, later interpreted as the successful experiments of the “terrorists business” and as “the revolution, live on television.” As for the Ceaușescu spouses, they had spent their last three days, under guard and in secret, in the barracks of the garrison in Târgoviște, in utter confusion. Although their detention came with the agreement and amid a continuous exchange of information with the new decision-making group, given the confusion created by the fight against the “terrorists” who defended Ceaușescu, the victims were significantly more numerous than during the repression of the demonstrators against their dictatorship. The behaviors and statements of the Ceaușescu spouses during the trial broadcast on television and the realities that have emerged over the years still fuel the collective trauma of an unprecedented cognitive dissonance in Romanian history.

Keywords

Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, Romanian Politburo, Timișoara, terrorists, December 1989