

Vladimir Tismaneanu, Professor of Political Sciences at Maryland University (USA) and expert in Romanian Communism, coordinator of the Project on the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania

### "Reinventing Politics: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Legacies"

*The revolutions of 1989 symbolized the demise of Communism as a political religion, a secular gnosis based on a set of illusions pretending to offer a scientific blueprint for revolutionizing the human condition and establish a perfect community. It became clear that Soviet-style regimes, based on the one-party monopoly of truth and power, could not be fundamentally reformed. The solution was not within, but beyond and against the established system. Communism sanctified political violence and social resentment. The revolutions of 1989 rehabilitated fundamental, perennial values linked to human rights, dignity, and civility. They were rooted in a political vision that rejected ideological hubris and teleological salvationism. Leninist dictatorships were challenged by men and women who valued trust over suspicion, truth over duplicity, and tolerance over exclusiveness. In this respect, they reinvented politics as a realm in which freedom, morality, and action are not incompatible.*

Prof. Dr. Alina Mungiu Pippidi  
Democracy Studies Chair, Hertie School of Governance, Berlin,  
President of the Romanian Academic Society

### "When Europeanization Meets Transformation. Lessons from the Unfinished East European Revolutions"

*Twenty years ago and more, the Central and Eastern European countries that have now joined the European Union were the "other Europe." They were bankrupt and famished. Their citizens had to deal with empty store shelves, the lack of any right to a passport, and a formidable communist secret service spying on their private lives. Since the Soviet collapse, however, these nations have reshaped their economies and societies and have gained membership in the EU and NATO. In the textbooks on democratic transition, Central and Eastern Europe provides the model of success. Yet there is no other place in the world where people are more unhappy with politics and complain in polls that democracy does not work for the good of most people. The SEE transformations were therefore part of the nineties larger wave of change in the region, explicitly initiated with the wish to 'catch up' with the transformations and 'return to Europe' of Central Europe. Unlike the Central European postcommunists, who had to dig deep for their skills to reinvent themselves as successful democratic politicians, the Balkan Communist leaders who saw communism falling apart in Central Europe understood that stopping the process was impossible, and tried instead to manage it, by becoming the first democrats. The rest of transition depended on how able the civil society and the opposition were to create a strong alternative to such opportunistic and skillful leaders like Milosevic and Iliescu; this alternative needed to be strong, as to both win elections and also to prevent them from being stolen. The entire democratic transition process benefited from lessons learned from neighbors and furthermore took advantage of the cross-borders regional momentum in order to boost a movement within one's own nation.*

*The crucial difference between SEE and CEE is to be found in this control of the early transition by the Communist power establishment, which set a path for the rest of the transition. While in Central Europe anti-communists won by landslide, in SEE Communists managed to control the change and to initiate a process of 'democratization without decommunization'. This meant advancing on the path of political pluralism while protecting the power establishment from Communist times in nearly every field, most notably in the judiciary, bureaucracy, and secret services. These early leaders favored or lead veritable 'predatory elites' with a political project of 'extraction' (taking advantage of privatization and using administrative resources for their benefit), resorting in high top corruption.*

**Smaranda Vul tur, Associate professor at the History Department of West University Timisoara, Head of the Cultural Anthropology and Oral History Study Group of the "A Treia Europa" / *The 3<sup>d</sup> Europe* Foundation, Presidential Committee for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania**

### **"The Memory of the Timisoara Revolution: A Many-folded Memory"**

*As a result of a series of interviews I conducted a few years ago, about the manner in which the inhabitants of Timisoara perceive the city's and their own identity in relation to it, I noticed the important role played by this self-defining process, justified by the fact that the Revolution began in Timisoara. The Revolution – this is the label applied by the citizens of Timisoara to the events of December 1989, on grounds I shall further explain – has become an identity landmark for them, in close connection with the way in which the reality of this historic moment was shaped by various types of memorial discourses. Those which establish it as an event, envisage, on the one hand, the facts, in their chronology and concreteness, as they were perceived by those who witnessed them, with the ambiguities and uncertainties which their retrospective scrutiny attempts at displaying and clearing out. Testifying about what they experienced back then, some inhabitants are careful to offer very accurate spatial and chronological details, as proof of the authenticity of their evidence, as well as for a more solid grounding for the interpretation of those events. This analysis contains a series of doubts and questions, to be found in the very name given to the Revolution ("popular uprising", "revolution", "the events of December 1989", etc.) They are mostly connected to the new perspective offered by the temporal distance between the week of 16 – 20 December and its social-political aftermath. The past is thus redefined by its own future, turned into past, and the present tense of recollection. This three-fold point of view emphasizes the reasons why so many unanswered questions were raised and are still on hold. I would mention, among others: Who shot at the population (the army and/or the secret services)? How was this possible? Was this a spontaneous or a carefully planned coup, was it anti-Ceausescu or anti-communist? When was its anti-communist character postulated? How many victims were there? Is the real figure the same as the officially reported one? What happened to the dead victims who had disappeared from the County Hospital? Were there any real terrorists and, if so, where did they go? Was the Revolution "confiscated" by the newly installed leadership? Who were the genuine "revolutionary" figures? etc.*

*A part of this memory, belonging mostly to the victims (themselves or their families) and the participants directly involved in the events, is focused on the past in order to find and define what really happened, but it also has a vengeful component, pleading for truth and the punishment of the guilty party (a much larger group, obviously, than the Ceausescu couple). The slogans of the Revolution shape quite clearly the emerging meanings of the street actions and the further developments. They anticipate the two-fold phenomenon I was referring to: as the event takes place, develops and becomes meaningful, it is redefined, radicalized and transformed into an antidote for fear, a means of escaping from the circle of terror in which people seemed to be trapped forever.*

*Another memory is parallel to this, framing the events of the Revolution as exempla: sacred and/or heroic patterns (people's tendency to refer to heroes or martyrs rather than to victims, for example), employed to define the city as a whole (Timisoara – martyr city). The annual commemorations, the city's public monuments, as a symbolic map of the main moments and actions that substantiate the Revolution, locating memory and redefining the space of Timisoara, distill a ritualistic time, mourning in the name of those who lost their beloved (these people call the anniversaries of the Revolution "memorial services"), as well as inviting others to take part in this mourning ritual. Death is part of this relationship with the past, but the absurd, tragic, or unclear nature of the events is reshaped in terms of a passage from memory to history, its upgrading to an archetypal status (sacrifice rather than death, heroes and martyrs rather than victims), capitalizing on its exceptional character. It goes without saying that, when referring to these types of memory, I consider them phenomena in progress, mutually empowering: they shape the events of December 1989, looking at them from various angles and questioning the official versions. One may notice here the important part played by words, the names given to happenings and things in the search for a truth which is made up of approximations, which is overcharged with forgetfulness, which is filtered by the often contradictory and confusing criteria of the history of a period dubbed "transition", a term which has yet to be clarified.*

Otmar Lahodynsky, journalist, *Profil*

"Romania 1989/1990 in Western media: Between illusion and disinformation"

Mircea Dinescu, poet, dissident

*If at the end of slavery, nobody took the streets and proclaimed that beginning with the following day the middle-ages would commence, we acted in a play, in which we announced on TV that beginning with midnight, we'd switch from communism to capitalism.*

*However, following a good Romanian tradition, according to which during the 1848 revolution, a revolutionary went on the balcony of the Petersburg hotel in Iasi and informed the small gathered crowd that the revolution would be postponed for the next day due to weather, the real revolution of 1989 got postponed for a couple of years.*

**Radu Filipescu, dissident, President of the Group for Social Dialogue**

*What it felt being arrested, investigated, condemned, imprisoned, freed, followed, arrested again, investigated, tortured, freed again and then followed again, arrested again and finally, somehow surprisingly, freed in December 89, in communist Romania...*

*I was wondering in 1982-83: "What could one do against Ceausescu's absurd communism, after having laughed in college (1974-1979) and later at work at jokes with and about Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu? Could anyone give a critical speech at a party meeting? Not at the radio, TV or in newspapers, because that was out of the question. And then become a victim. Or, talk with a few friends and organize a protest against Ceausescu, and then become a victim again. There were very few chances in 1983 to change anything in Romania by an organized action, no matter how risky that was.*