

## Twenty Years After Communism

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## Romania Twenty Years after 1989

### The Bizarre Echoes of a Contested Revolution

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### Abstract and Keywords

The official events commemorating the twentieth anniversary organized by the Romanian state and civil society were surprisingly modest. However, the political reverberations of the highly contested events of December 1989 were clearly visible during the presidential election contest that dominated the weeks prior to the anniversary. Therefore this chapter analyzes the electorally motivated mnemonic competition of the 2009 presidential election and particularly the significant reconfiguration of the traditional fault lines of the unresolved debates about the Romanian revolution. The ex-communist successor party, PSD, attempted to reframe the political discourse through an electoral alliance with traditionally anti-communist parties and a large-scale meeting in the symbolically charged Opera Square in Timișoara. However, this strategy ultimately backfired both rhetorically and politically, thereby illustrating the limits to Romania's otherwise rather malleable memory regime.

*Keywords:* Romania, Romanian revolution, 2009 presidential elections, Timișoara

### Introduction

The twentieth anniversary of the dramatic events that led to the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship was commemorated in a somewhat unusual fashion by Romanians. On the one hand, considering the scale of the protests and the human sacrifice in December 1989, the explicit commemorative events organized by both the Romanian state and civil society were surprisingly modest, and were largely limited to a commemorative symposium organized by

the Institute of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 on December 17, a small public march in Bucharest on December 21, a low-key official ceremony honoring the heroes of the revolution on December 22, and a parliamentary session on December 22. On the other hand, the political reverberations of the highly contested events of December 1989 were clearly visible during the presidential election contest that dominated the weeks prior to the twentieth anniversary of the Romanian revolution. In other words, Romania had a lot of electorally motivated mnemonic competition but very little reflective commemoration as it embarked on its third decade of its tumultuous post-communist path. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the interplay between political memory and electoral politics twenty years after December 1989, rather than on the fairly marginal commemorative events themselves.

**(p.86)** If Romanians can agree on anything about the 1989 events, it is probably that many of the crucial details about what happened in those tumultuous days are still not known and may never be brought to light. While in theory one may expect such explicitly acknowledged uncertainty to promote mnemonic pluralism, in practice it has not hindered the politicization of the memory of 1989, nor has it reduced its political salience. Unlike in other ex-communist countries, however, the shortage of facts has blurred the lines of responsibility to the point at which, twenty years later, the symbols of 1989 had become a “free-for-all” resource for the electoral ambitions of politicians of all stripes. As this chapter will show in greater detail, this ambiguity led to the bizarre situation in which all the main political competitors engaged in the November/December 2009 presidential elections painted themselves as the true heirs of the 1989 revolution, while accusing their opponents of continuity with the communist regime. Nonetheless, the political reactions to some of these political maneuvers illustrated the limitations and risks inherent in such efforts to appropriate the memory of 1989. Moreover, the Romanian case highlights the important—but highly politicized, and hence contested—arbiter role of the participants in the 1989 revolution.

This chapter is organized as follows: the second section briefly describes the key commemorative events dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Romanian Revolution. The third section provides a broad historical background for understanding the commemoration of the 1989 revolution, and it briefly discusses the nature of the December 1989 events and the subsequent evolution of the political debates about the meaning and implications of the Romanian revolution. The fourth section focuses on the more immediate political context that framed the mnemonic politics on the twentieth anniversary of the revolution, with a particular emphasis on the 2009 presidential elections and the reverberations of the debates triggered by President Băsescu’s decision to set up the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania in 2006. The fifth section recounts the debates and public statements about the 1989 revolution by the main political parties and leaders in the context

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of the presidential elections. The sixth section discusses the implications of the twentieth anniversary debates for the evolution of mnemonic politics in Romania and their impact on the broader political trajectory of the country. The final section concludes and briefly attempts to place the Romanian experience in a broader theoretical and comparative context.

### Remembering 1989, Twenty Years Later

The commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 revolution included a number of more or less politicized official events, which will be briefly discussed in this section. Chronologically, the first notable event took place on December 17, **(p.87)** 2009: a symposium dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the revolution organized by the Institute of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989 (IRRD).<sup>1</sup> During the session, which included an advance screening of a documentary about the Romanian revolution, the speech of former President Ion Iliescu was interrupted by Dumitru Dincă, a member of the Asociația 21 Decembrie, one of the most prominent revolutionary organizations, who sharply criticized both the film and Iliescu's speech for willfully ignoring the protests in Bucharest on December 21, 1989 (the day before Ceaușescu's departure). While Iliescu tried to dismiss Dincă as crazy, eventually both he and former Prime Minister Petre Roman acknowledged the film's shortcomings and promised that the oversights would be addressed in the final version of the film (*Adevărul* 2009).

The second event was a protest march organized in Bucharest on December 21, 2009, by the members of a civil society group called Noii Golani (the New Hooligans). The march, which had been approved by the local authorities and attracted only about 200 participants, was meant to commemorate the victims who died in Bucharest on December 21 (the day before the fall of the Ceaușescu regime). However, the protesters eventually switched course and started shouting "Romania—a police state," and some of the protesters attacked the police forces (Mediafax.ro 2009).

The last two events were directly organized by Romanian state institutions. One was a ceremony in which several public officials, including Mircea Geoană (as Senate president), with members of the armed forces, placed commemorative wreaths on the monument dedicated to the heroes of the 1989 revolution in Revolution Square in Bucharest on December 22, 2009. Finally, the Romanian Parliament hosted a commemorative session on the same day, which included speeches by several members of parliament who had participated in the 1989 protests (and which will be discussed in greater detail in a later section).

### Historical Background

#### The Complicated Legacy of the Romanian Revolution

Romania was the only Eastern European country where the fall of communism triggered massive loss of human lives, with over 1,000 dead and many others

wounded during the dramatic events of December 1989. What had started as a small protest among the parishioners of a reformed Hungarian priest, László Tőkés, quickly evolved into large anti-communist protests, which despite significant government repression quickly spread from the western city of Timișoara to several other cities and eventually led to the surprisingly rapid collapse of the Ceaușescu dictatorship. **(p.88)** From the outset, there was widespread confusion about many of the details surrounding the events of December 1989, including the number of victims (which was initially reported to be in the tens of thousands), the involvement of foreign secret services, and the identity of the “terrorists” responsible for the violent fighting, which continued well after Ceaușescu had fled Bucharest. Other than the number of victims, few of the questions were answered conclusively in the months and years after 1989, despite a large (and growing) list of studies published on the subject (e.g., Gabanyi 1990; Călinescu and Tismăneanu 1991; Gallagher, 1995).

What matters for the purpose of the present discussion is not what actually happened in 1989 but how the events were subsequently interpreted and incorporated into the post-communist political discourse. The first important feature, which sets Romania apart from the rest of post-communist Eastern Europe, is the significant and widely acknowledged uncertainty about many of the details of the December 1989 events. Remarkably, this sense of uncertainty was publicly expressed by both sides of the post-communist mnemonic debates, with anti-communist protesters repeatedly asking “cine-a tras în noiîn 16-22” (Who fired at us on [December]16-22), while former President Ion Iliescu reiterated in a recent interview that he still does not know who was responsible for much of the bloodshed during the revolution (România Libera 2009). However, as we will see below, this uncertainty about the facts has not triggered greater pluralism in the interpretations of the 1989 revolution, but may have given mnemonic warriors greater leeway in advancing their own versions of the events.

The second important peculiarity of the Romanian revolution is that it triggered fundamentally different interpretations about the very nature of the political events that occurred in December 1989. Whereas elsewhere in the region the debates center on the relative weight of opposition pressures and regime concessions in driving the democratic changes (e.g., Bruszt 1992), in Romania the main debate centered on the question of whether the December 1989 events that led to the downfall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship represented a revolution or a coup d'état. The reason for this fundamental disagreement is that the power vacuum left behind by Ceaușescu's hasty flight in the face of massive popular protests was rapidly filled by the National Salvation Front (FSN), which, in addition to a few prominent anti-communist dissidents, included a group of former high-ranking communist officials who had been side-lined in the final years of Ceaușescu's rule. While initially conceived as a broad anti-communist organization meant to stabilize the country's chaotic political situation, the Front

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very quickly became the focal point of profound ideological disagreements about the meaning of the revolution and the country's political future.

At the risk of oversimplification, there were two main political camps with two very different political interpretations of the 1989 events. One camp, which coalesced around Ion Iliescu and Petre Roman, regarded the Front as the embodiment of the **(p.89)** Romanian revolution and envisioned the National Salvation Front as the institutional vehicle for representing different political interests in what Iliescu hoped would become the basis of an "original democracy" that would transcend partisan divisions (Iliescu 1995, 61). For the FSN leadership and its many followers, the Romanian revolution had been victorious, and the FSN's overwhelming victory in the May 1990 elections represented the ultimate proof of its democratic legitimacy and the country's break with the communist past.

The second camp started to coalesce in early January 1990 around the recently refounded historical parties and the anti-communist dissidents, such as Mircea Dinescu and Doina Cornea, who quit the National Salvation Front in protest over what they considered the excessive influence of former communist officials. From their perspective, the Romanian revolution had been hijacked by a coup d'état organized by reformist communists, whose goal was to replace Ceaușescu's Stalinist dictatorship with a more reformist—but still inherently communist—regime modeled after Gorbachev's glasnost reforms. While some semantic differences existed within this broad current—with some observers avoiding the term "revolution" altogether and referring to the December 1989 events as a coup d'état, and others calling it a "hijacked revolution"—the general consensus was that the new regime broadly represented a continuation of the communist regime, albeit with a new top leadership.

A third—and closely related—peculiarity of Romania's post-1989 political system was that whereas elsewhere in the region the debates centered on the extent to which the communist successor parties had really experienced genuine transformations toward democratic socialist/social democratic parties, in Romania the main political contenders disagreed about the much more fundamental question about who the successors of the Communist Party were. While the Romanian Communist Party was officially outlawed a few days after the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, the anti-communist opposition viewed the National Salvation Front as the de facto heir of the Communist Party. In addition to the prominent presence of many former high-ranking communists in the Front's leadership, these critics pointed to the fact that prior to its transformation into a political party, the Front had taken over many of the state powers previously exercised by the Communist Party. They also pointed to Iliescu's lukewarm endorsement of multiparty democracy and market reforms, as well as to the new government's repeated reliance on force and intimidation

tactics against its political opponents as symptoms of creeping “neo-communism.”

#### Fractured Memory Politics in the Early 1990s

These fundamental disagreements about the nature of the 1989 revolution set the stage for a series of political confrontations, which fit squarely into the “us versus **(p.90)** them” logic of the fractured memory regime. Thus, in March 1990 a group of former revolutionaries from Timișoara issued the so-called Proclamation of Timișoara, which notably included a proposal calling for the exclusion from public office for ten years of former high-ranking members of the Communist Party and the Securitate. The proposal, which would have banned the FSN’s presidential candidate, Ion Iliescu, from running in the May 1990 elections, was embraced by the main anti-communist parties, the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the National Peasants’ Party (PNT), and became one of the crucial demands of the anti-communist protests in University Square in Bucharest. The daily protests, which attracted tens of thousands of protesters from April 22 until their violent repression in June 13–15, became the focal point in the zero-sum struggle between two irreconcilable views about the meaning of the Romanian revolution, as well as about the country’s political future. Thus, whereas the protesters declared University Square, which they occupied during the seven weeks of the protests, as the first neo-communism-free area in Romania and frequently chanted that “the only solution is another revolution,” the FSN government painted them as extremist challengers to Romania’s democracy, while President Iliescu famously called them “golani” (hooligans).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the terms of the “debate” did not lend themselves to compromise solutions, given that the core demands of the anti-communist opposition would have effectively excluded much of the FSN’s top leadership from public office. Instead, the crisis was “resolved” in three main steps, which had, however, fairly little to do with deliberative democracy. In the first instance, the FSN leadership used its overwhelming majority in the interim national assembly to block any lustration provisions from being incorporated in the electoral law governing the May 1990 elections. As a second step, the FSN leadership used its clear victory in the May elections as a popular endorsement of the Front’s democratic legitimacy and as further confirmation of the credibility of its version of the history of the Romanian revolution. When the opposition refused to back down, citing widespread electoral irregularities and manipulation, and the University Square protests continued even after the May elections, the new government moved to the third stage of its confrontation with its anti-communist opponents, which resulted in the violent repression of the protests, followed by three days of chaos in Bucharest during which Romanian security forces stood by as miners attacked not only protesters and opposition party offices but anyone suspected of harboring anti-FSN attitudes.

Thus ended the first stage of Romania's mnemonic politics, and its evolution confirms the potentially explosive nature of fractured memory regimes. What is less certain is whether the FSN's victory in this first round of the conflict was due primarily to its effective use of coercion and administrative resources in the fight against a poorly organized and splintered opposition, or because the opposition **(p.91)** overestimated the Romanian public's willingness to reject the entire socioeconomic system of communism rather than its most dramatic aberrations, which had been embodied in Ceaușescu's personal dictatorship.

#### Gradual Rapprochement (1990–2005)

While a detailed analysis of the evolution of Romania's mnemonic regimes in the decade and a half after 1990 is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth mentioning a few broad developments during this time period. Following the electoral defeat in May 1990 and the repression in June 1990, the Romanian opposition was hardly persuaded by its opponent's version of the 1989 revolution—in fact, the events reinforced their fears about the dangers of a return to communist-era political tactics. While some of these fears were assuaged by the split of the National Salvation Front into two factions<sup>2</sup> and by the much cleaner elections of September 1992, the opposition parties maintained their principled resistance against the Iliescu regime, which largely explains their refusal to join a grand coalition with Iliescu's Party of Social Democracy (PDSR) in the aftermath of the 1992 elections. This refusal led Iliescu to seek allies among the more hard-line leftist and nationalist parties—some of which were much more unapologetic in highlighting their continuity with Ceaușescu's legacy—and thereby further delayed efforts to find common ground on dealing either with the communist past or with Romania's troubled transition (Pop-Eleches 1999).

Nonetheless, the intensity of the zero-sum logic of the memory regime was gradually reduced—not because the opposition completely abandoned the lustration efforts, but because its leaders rightly decided to focus their political efforts on issues with greater potential political payoffs, such as the growing economic costs of Romania's gradualist economic policies and the delays in Western integration caused by the slow progress of the country's economic and political reforms. Thus, the 1996 electoral campaign of the anti-communist opposition, which had largely succeeded in uniting under the banner of the Democratic Convention (CDR), focused primarily on the shortcomings of PDSR's post-communist governing record and on the promise of accelerated reforms and European integration, while toning down the earlier emphasis on the communist background of much of the FSN/PDSR leadership.

After narrowly defeating the PDSR in the November 1996 elections, the CDR did not pursue a vigorous anti-communist agenda, despite the fact that the CDR's backbone was the two historical parties (PNT and PNL) that had advocated lustration in 1990. While the Romanian Parliament eventually passed a

lustration law in 1999, it was considerably watered down compared to the early demands of the Proclamation of Timișoara. Thus, even though the law provided access to the files of the Secret (p.92) Police (Securitate) and set up a Council for the Study of Securitate Archives to identify politicians and officials who had collaborated with the Securitate, the law did not require such officials to step down from their office, and it did not target high-ranking Communist Party officials (Stan 2002). Whatever the reasons for this surprisingly soft approach,<sup>3</sup> the CDR's failure to pursue the lustration issue vigorously during its time in office significantly defused the significant tension underlying the politics of memory vis-à-vis the communist period and the 1989 revolution.

After the elections of November 2000, Romania appeared to be set to leave completely behind the contentious memory regime of the early 1990s. Thus, the most consistent promoter of the maximalist anti-communist lustration agenda—the National Peasants' Party (PNȚCD)—failed to win representation in the new legislature, having borne the brunt of voter discontent for the country's protracted economic crisis in the late 1990s. The stunning defeat of the historic anti-communist parties, which was only partially mitigated by the National Liberal Party's (PNL) ability to squeeze into Parliament with 7 percent, effectively ensured that anti-communist lustration efforts were kept to a minimum in the 2000–2004 legislature. Meanwhile, the victorious Social Democratic Party (PSD) of President Iliescu had no interest in reviving the potentially divisive discussions about the communist past: after a campaign in which it had largely avoided earlier appeals to communist nostalgia and nationalism, the PSD tried and largely succeeded to recast itself as a pragmatic, competent, and moderate party, intent on promoting the country's NATO and EU integration efforts. This image makeover may have been facilitated by the contrast to the second-largest party in the new parliament, the Greater Romania Party (PRM), led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, an outspoken apologist of Ceaușescu's nationalist communism. As a result, even though the 2000 elections did not really produce a resolution of the conflicting interpretations of the Romanian revolution, they effectively further reduced the political salience of the issue. This process was arguably reinforced by the fact that President Iliescu, who had been the most important target of the anti-communist lustration efforts, was barred by the Constitution from seeking an additional presidential term in 2004.

### The Revival of Memory (2006–2010)

Despite the seeming inevitability that the Romanian revolution and its many unanswered questions would be relegated to the domain of historical inquiries, the period of 2006–2010 has marked a significant revival in the political salience of the communist past and the 1989 revolution. While Romania is not unique in the timing of this revival—Poland and Hungary experienced similar trends



around the **(p.93)** same time—the details of this mnemonic revolution bear the bizarre imprints of Romania’s contested revolution and unusual party system.

To make a long story (somewhat) shorter, the main impetus for the revival of mnemonic debates came from a rather unexpected source: President Traian Băsescu. Băsescu hardly had the personal credentials of the earlier champions of the anti-communist cause (many of whom had been former political prisoners or dissidents): a former ship captain and Communist Party member, Băsescu served as a Transportation Minister in successive FSN governments in 1991–1992, and subsequently served two terms as a member of parliament on the lists of the Democratic Party (PD), the party that emerged from the reformist faction of the FSN after the 1992 split. While the PD entered into a governing coalition with the center-right Democratic Convention (CDR) in 1996, the party nevertheless maintained its Social Democratic platform and the party symbol of the former FSN (the Rose). Băsescu, who had managed to oust the former Prime Minister Petre Roman from the PD leadership after the party’s modest performance in the 2000 elections, steered the party toward a coalition with the liberal PNL in the 2004 election. However, Băsescu’s presidential campaign did not contain significant elements of anti-communist rhetoric and instead focused on the weak corruption record of the PSD. Indeed, during a televised debate with PSD’s presidential candidate, Adrian Năstase, Băsescu joked about the bad fortune of Romanians who were forced to choose between two former communists. While this joke may have served primarily as a rhetorical device, at the time it captured the strange reality of Romanian politics whereby the two main presidential candidates came from parties that were both offshoots of the National Salvation Front.

The Romanian party system continued its strange contortions in 2005, when the PD abruptly announced that it would leave the Socialist International and instead join the European People’s Party in a remarkably swift ideological conversion that raised surprisingly few eyebrows both within the party and from outside observers (Pop-Eleches 2008). While the conversion could be dismissed as yet another piece of evidence that ideology is irrelevant in Romanian politics, the subsequent political initiatives of the PD and President Băsescu suggest that the change was not simply cosmetic.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most important for the purpose of the present discussion, President Băsescu decided in 2006 to set up the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, chaired by Vladimir Tismăneanu, which published a 660-page report on the crimes of communism in Romania. This report, which received broad coverage both in Romania and abroad (e.g., King 2007; Tănăsioiu 2007), emphasized the responsibility of several leading FSN members and especially of Ion Iliescu, was presented by President Băsescu to the Romanian Parliament in a ceremony in which he declared that “as Romanian head **(p.94)** of state, I condemn explicitly and categorically the communist system in Romania (...) and

I declare with full responsibility: the communist regime in Romania was illegitimate and criminal.”

While both the report and President Bănescu’s speech were subjected to a number of more or less predictable criticisms,<sup>5</sup> the initiative, combined with the PNL’s surprisingly lukewarm support for the report, established Bănescu and the PD as the main proponents of a renewed drive to revive the debates about the country’s communist past.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in a strange reversal of roles, the traditionally anti-communist Liberal Party (PNL) was overtaken in its anti-communist stance by a party whose institutional origins were rooted in the National Salvation Front, which in turn was widely regarded as a communist successor party.

Over the course of the following three years, the personal conflicts between President Bănescu and the PNL leadership contributed to a deepening rift between the two erstwhile allies from the Orange coalition, ultimately resulting in an unexpected coalition between the PNL and its archenemies from Iliescu’s PSD. While the full details of this unlikely cooperation are beyond the scope of this chapter, they included a joint effort to suspend President Bănescu from office in 2007, the PSD’s parliamentary support for a PNL-led minority government in 2007–2008, and—despite their failure to form a coalition government after the 2008 elections—a remarkably close cooperation in the context of the 2009 presidential elections.

The 2009 presidential elections pitted three main candidates against each other: the incumbent president, Traian Bănescu, supported by the PD-L,<sup>7</sup> against the PSD candidate Mircea Geoană and the PNL candidate Crin Antonescu. Bănescu narrowly managed to outpoll Geoană in the first round (32.4 percent vs. 31.1 percent) but when the third-placed Antonescu (who polled 20 percent) announced that he was backing Geoană in the second round, it seemed all but inevitable that Geoană would win the second round. Despite a remarkably broad anti-Bănescu coalition, which also included the Hungarian Democratic Union (UDMR) and the remnants of the PNȚCD, and a mass media that was clearly favoring Geoană, Bănescu scored an unexpected (and very close) victory in the second round. What matters for the purpose of the present discussion, however, are not the circumstances of Bănescu’s unexpected success but the fact that the electoral campaign and its aftermath provided the immediate political background against which the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 revolution took place.

### Mnemonic Claims and Electoral Competition

While the official commemorative events discussed above offered a glimpse into the mnemonic contests that still dominate public discourse about December 1989, **(p.95)** the most interesting and politically salient aspect was arguably how the memory of communism and its downfall were used in the heated electoral campaign for the Romanian presidency. As mentioned, one of the

crucial moments in the 2009 presidential election campaign occurred when the third-place candidate from the first round, the liberal Crin Antonescu, announced that he would endorse the PSD candidate Mircea Geoană for the second round runoff, despite earlier calls by Băsescu to renew the center-right alliance, which had propelled him to victory five years earlier. Antonescu's endorsement was part of an agreement whereby the PSD, the PNL and the Hungarian minority party UDMR would back Klaus Johannis, the mayor of Sibiu and a member of the tiny German minority party, as the future prime minister.

While the announcement about Antonescu's endorsement should have propelled Geoană to an easy victory in the second round, the anti-Băsescu coalition decided to make a more dramatic statement by calling a massive public meeting in Timișoara on December 1 to announce the Partnership for Timișoara. Remarkably, this anti-Băsescu alliance brought together the ex-communist PSD and its two traditionally most important anti-communist challengers, the PNL and the PNȚCD, in what Crin Antonescu saw as "the end of the transition, of disorder, of confusion" and the establishment of "real political pluralism and a system in which the great ideological differences can be overcome for the construction of a common project" (*Ziare.com* 2009a).

At first glance, both the nature of the alliance between the main combatants of the mnemonic wars of the early 1990s and Antonescu's words suggest that the debate about the communist and revolutionary past in Romania may have moved in the direction of a pluralist memory regime. In fact, however, the event arguably represented an effort to establish a new interpretation of communism and the 1989 revolution in order to delegitimize the alternative vision of the past and to defeat President Băsescu and his political allies. In other words, Romania still had a fractured memory regime in 2009 but with a different—and much more complicated—fault line than in the early 1990s.

Before turning to the reactions from both Băsescu and third parties, it is worth briefly mentioning a few key elements of the political discourse of the proponents of the Partnership for Timișoara. First, the main meeting took place in Piața Operei, the square where the most important anti-communist protests in December 1989 had taken place. The message linking the two events was further reinforced by a large banner reading "1989–2009, in December, once every 20 years, Timișoara overthrows a tyrant." The banner reiterated one of the key arguments used by anti-Băsescu critics to link the avowedly anti-communist president to the communist past: his alleged authoritarian/dictatorial tendencies. Second, several of the politicians tried to establish the anti-communist credentials of an electoral alliance **(p.96)** meant to elect a candidate from the communist successor party. Not surprisingly, the most important players in this respect were the leaders of the traditionally most intransigent anti-communist party, the PNȚCD, whose surprising endorsement of the alliance should have lent it greater anti-communist credibility, despite the

party's political marginality after its electoral fiasco in the 2000 elections. Thus, Gheorghe Ciuhandu, the PNȚCD mayor of Timișoara, told the meeting participants that "if you see the hammer and the sickle, you should know that on its back is the image of Bănescu and who votes for Bănescu votes for the communists."<sup>8</sup> The leader of the PNȚCD, Radu Sârbu, even went so far as to claim that the unexpected partnership between his party and its erstwhile archrival, the PSD, would have had the blessing of the party's most important post-communist leader, Corneliu Coposu, a long-time political prisoner and well-known anti-communist advocate. Sârbu claimed that this support was justified by Geoană's contribution to the PSD's ideological reorientation toward modern social democracy. A third line of attack linking the 2009 elections to the anti-communist struggles of 1989–1990 was hinted at by the similarity between the "Partnership for Timișoara" banner of the 2009 alliance and the aforementioned "Proclamation of Timișoara" from March 1990. This argument was spelled out much more explicitly by Antonescu, who claimed that if the famous "point 8" lustration provision from the "Proclamation of Timișoara" would be applied to the contestants in the 2009 elections, it would affect neither him nor PSD candidate Mircea Geoană but only President Bănescu. While Antonescu did not spell out the basis for this claim during his speech, he probably alluded to unverified earlier claims that President Bănescu had been a Securitate informer (or even officer) during the communist period and, to a lesser extent, to the fact that Bănescu had been a member of the Communist Party before 1989.

Bănescu's defense and counteroffensive was also based on a number of different arguments. First, he denied any ties to the Securitate, and while he acknowledged his Communist Party membership, which he justified as having been driven by his desire to advance his career as a ship captain in the Romanian navy, he argued that, unlike his opponents, he had at least taken a public stand against the crimes of communism (see fn. 6). Second, he repeatedly emphasized the links of his opponents—particularly Mircea Geoană—to former President Iliescu, the symbol of Romania's stolen revolution in the eyes of most anti-communist critics, and to the "oligarchs," a group of businessmen with often dubious ties to the communist regime who had amassed large fortunes after 1990 and who controlled much of the Romanian mass media. Geoană's ties to one of these oligarchs, Sorin Ovidiu Vîntu,<sup>9</sup> arguably cost Geoană the election when he was forced to admit in the last televised election debate that he had visited Vîntu's house the prior evening. A third argument was Bănescu's reply to the repeated criticisms against his confrontational and divisive political leadership (**p.97**) style. Rather than promising a more conciliatory approach, Bănescu pointed out that similar criticisms had been brought by Ceaușescu against the anti-communist protesters in Timișoara in December 1989.<sup>10</sup> He also explicitly highlighted the contrast between his own combative style and Iliescu's electoral motto in the 1990 elections—"A president for our peace of mind"—a slogan that many Romanians at the time had viewed as an attempt to avoid

genuine debates about the revolution and the communist past. Finally, Băsescu's repeated references to having to fight against "sistemul ticăloșit" (the wicked system), by which he broadly meant the continuity of economic and political power between the communist and the post-communist power, contradicted the claims of the PSD-PNL alliance whereby Romania was ready to overcome the ideological conflicts of the early post-communist period through a newfound sense of national unity.

Given that much of political debates on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 revolution in Romania consisted of mutual recriminations of ties to the communist past, the obvious question is which one of the claims was ultimately more credible and why. I will answer this question in two different ways: First, I will briefly focus on the role of third parties in adjudicating this contest over historical memory and the political uses of 1989, and then I will present some survey evidence that illustrates how the broader population responded to these competing claims.

In the Romanian context—and especially since the focal event was the Timișoara public rally discussed above—the unofficial role of arbiter fell to the organizations of former revolutionaries and more broadly to the residents of Timișoara. Judging by this standard, the mnemonic contest was clearly won *in absentia* by President Băsescu, or rather it was lost by his opponents. Thus, Timișoara residents reacted negatively to the launch of the Partnership for Timișoara, not so much because they were enthusiastic Băsescu supporters but because they felt that the use of the symbols of the 1989 revolution for electoral purposes was disrespectful, especially since the meeting was in favor of the PSD candidate, Mircea Geoană. In fact, several hundred Timișoara residents formed a counter-demonstration and interrupted the speeches of the official rally, which ended with the main speakers having to be escorted out the back door to avoid clashes with the protesters. While the PSD and PNL charged the local branch of Băsescu's PD-L with organizing the counter-protests, the media coverage of the protesters does not lend credence to this charge. Thus, one of the protesters said, "My father died in the center [in 1989] and now the communists have come here again." Another participant specifically objected to the use of the symbolically charged Piața Operei as the place for the pro-Geoană rally: "It is painful that, 20 years after the Revolution, the communists would gather here in Piața Operei. If they had gone to the Central Park instead, nobody would have minded" (*Monitorul de Cluj* 2009). Over the following days, similar protests against the electoral misuse (**p.98**) of the memory of the 1989 revolution took place in Brasov, Cluj, and Bucharest (three other cities that had witnessed significant protests in December 1989).

The reactions to the Partnership for Timișoara rally also emphasized one of the unique features of the Romanian mnemonic landscape: the crucial role of the organizations of revolutionaries from 1989. Given the large scale of the

December 1989 protests, there were revolution participants among the supporters of all political parties. Nonetheless, such organizations have maintained a certain visibility in Romanian public life, arguably due to the charisma of the courage inherent in participating in the very dangerous anti-communist protests (particularly in the early days of the revolution). Among these “guardians” of the Romanian revolution, the Timișoara rally provoked very similar types of criticism. Thus, Florian Mihalcea, the president of the Timișoara Association, said that “to compare the situation today with back then means to mock what Timișoara residents did during the revolution of December 1989.” Moreover, the Timișoara Association, along with a number of other local civic organizations, sent an open letter to Timișoara’s mayor, Gheorghe Ciuhandu, in which they accused him of selling symbols from the city’s past, such as the Piața Operei and the Timișoara Proclamation, for the purpose of electoral gains (*Ziare.com* 2009). The important role of revolutionaries as arbiters was also highlighted during the debates of the IRRD symposium discussed in the second section of this chapter.

While the revolutionaries’ organizations had traditionally taken a hard-line anti-communist stand, their reactions to the new mnemonic fault line highlighted by the 2009 elections are rather telling. Even though in their public statements the organizations of former revolutionaries did not endorse President Băsescu, they were clearly much more critical of the Geoană camp.<sup>11</sup> The greater dissonance in the mnemonic claims of the anti-Băsescu camp was also evident in the reactions from within the PNȚCD, the most recent addition to Mr. Geoană’s “rainbow coalition.” Thus, the Cluj branch of the PNȚCD criticized the party’s leadership for entering into the Partnership for Timișoara alliance with the PSD and expressed its solidarity with the anti-communist protesters in Timișoara. Perhaps the most poignant reflection of this tension were the words of Ion Caramitru, a long-time prominent PNȚCD leader, who resigned from the party’s leadership in protest against the “suicidal” and unnatural alliance with the PSD: “I don’t believe in the promises, the acts and the origins of these people who are today leading the PSD. They are marked by their communist origins and I don’t believe in the death of communism through communists” (*Revista 22* 2009).

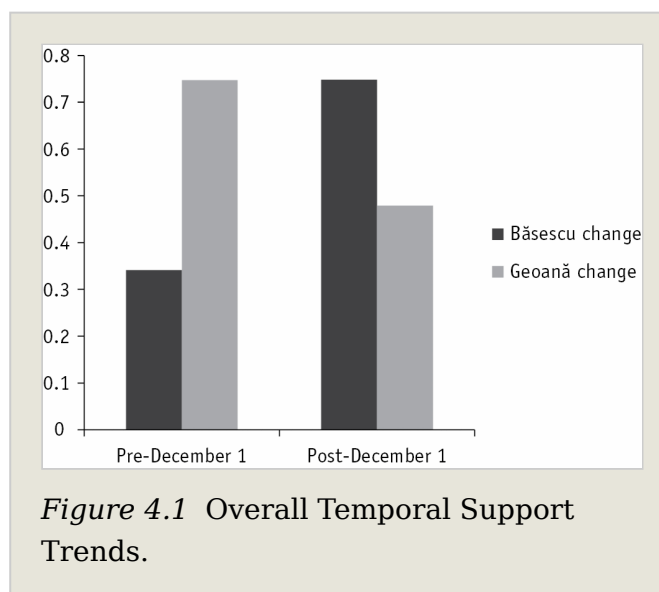
To address the question about the broader reception of the competing mnemonic claims of the two presidential candidates, I will take advantage of the fortuitous timing of a panel public opinion survey, which interviewed respondents both before **(p.99)** the first round (November 11–21, 2009) and between the two rounds of the presidential election (November 28–December 4 2009).<sup>12</sup> Given that the second wave of the panel happened after Antonescu endorsed Geoană and before the crucial TV debate between Băsescu and Geoană on the evening of December 4, I can analyze whether and how the events of December 1 affected the political preferences of average Romanian citizens. While none of the survey questions obviously asked about the Timișoara events (since the survey was already in the field), we can test how the attitudes toward the two main

protagonists changed after December 1. To do so, I calculated the change between the two survey waves in how respondents evaluated the two candidates on a 0-10 barometer scale and then present the results separately for respondents who in the second round were interviewed before versus after the Timișoara events on December 1.

As a first cut, Figure 4.1 shows the overall support trends for the two candidates and reveals a rather clear reversal of fortunes: whereas before December 1 Geoană's favorability rating was growing by roughly twice as much as Băsescu, among respondents interviewed after the Timișoara Partnership events the pattern was almost an exact mirror image, which suggests that the negative reactions to the events had more than neutralized the initial popularity boost that Geoană received following Antonescu's endorsement. While it may be tempting to speculate whether this change affected the overall election outcome,<sup>13</sup> for the purpose of the present discussion, the more interesting question is how Geoană's relative losses were distributed as a function of how respondents viewed the communist past.

Since the survey unfortunately did not include any questions about evaluations of the communist regime, I will here focus on a question that asked respondents to rate the former dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, on the same 0-10 barometer scale

**(p.100)**



mentioned above. Based on responses to this question, I then divided respondents into two broad categories: Ceaușescu opponents, who rated him 5 or lower on this scale (and who make up a surprisingly low 38 percent of the sample) and Ceaușescu supporters/nostalgics, who rated him 6 or higher.

The survey evidence in Figure 4.2 confirms that the Partnership for Timișoara failed to win over the anti-communist voters, which Geoană's campaign was hoping to woo through its alliance with the

traditional anti-communist parties and the symbolic choice of its launch. Instead the maneuver appears to have been highly counterproductive in that it erased Geoană's relative gains in the days following Antonescu's endorsement and instead gave Băsescu a large popularity boost (of 1.5 points on the 11-point scale) among anti-communist voters. Luckily for Geoană, his anti-communist message appears not to have been particularly credible for communist sympathizers: While support among these respondents also shifted away from Geoană toward Băsescu, the magnitude of the change was much smaller.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that the most prominent feature of the mnemonic discourse surrounding the twentieth anniversary of the Romanian revolution was the creation—or at least the consolidation—of a new fault line regarding the interpretations of Romanian communism and its downfall. In doing so, it has arguably reignited some of the mnemonic wars of the early 1990s, albeit with two important **(p.101)** differences. First, it has triggered a significant reorganization of the two warring camps: Whereas in the early 1990s the conflict was between the anti-communist PNL and PNȚCD, on the one hand, and the ex-communist PSD, on the other (with the Roman's PD somewhere in between but arguably closer to the PSD's position), by 2009 the main conflict was between the two offshoots of the National Salvation Front—the PD-L and the PSD—with the two historically anti-communist parties (PNL and PNȚCD) surprisingly siding with their traditional archenemy, the PSD. At the same time, the nature of the debate also shifted considerably: Whereas in the early 1990s the charges of neo-communist subversion against the ideals of the 1989 revolution were levied unidirectionally by the PNL and PNȚCD against the FSN (and later the PSD), by 2009 the two camps were each making competing claims

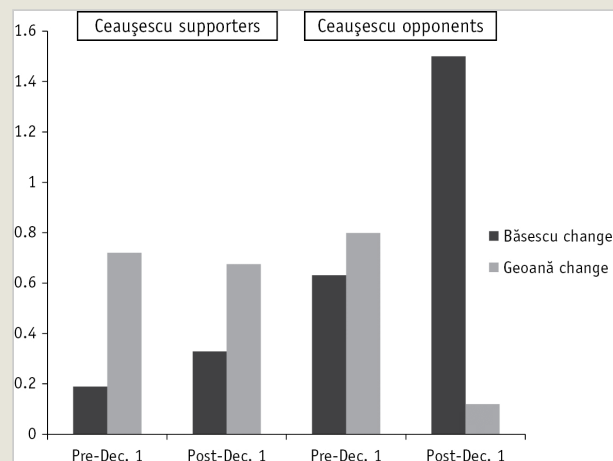


Figure 4.2 Temporal Support Trends (Attitudes toward Communism).



of inheriting the mantle of the anti-communist resistance, while accusing their opponents of complicity and continuity with the communist regime.

At this point it is too early to tell whether this bizarre contest will continue, especially since the first round of this particular debate was arguably won by President Băsescu and the PD-L. While the political developments of the past three years suggest the likely continuation of the anti-Băsescu coalition between the traditionally anti-communist PNL and the ex-communist PSD—and the recent debates surrounding the suspension of President Băsescu by a parliamentary coalition of PSD and PNL have once again featured mutual accusations about ties to the communist past—it is possible that in future electoral contexts the alliance would downplay the question of a political issue that, for the time being, seems to be “owned” by President Băsescu. Some early signals of such an approach were already present during the debates of December 2009. Thus, when Băsescu accused Geoană of his ties to Ion Iliescu and the communist past, Geoană replied that Băsescu seemed intent on fighting with the ghosts of the past, while he “was a man of the future.” If the PSD and its allies decide that they are better off lowering the salience of the communist continuity debate, then we may well see a renewed slide toward the pragmatic amnesia of the 2000–2005 period.

If (as is likely) this change in strategy is accompanied by the victory of the anti-Basescu coalition in the 2014 presidential elections (following their decisive victory in the November 2012 parliamentary elections), then Romania may well approach an (albeit perverted) version of mnemonic pluralism. A glimpse of what such a future may look like was offered by the speeches in the Romanian Parliament on the twentieth anniversary of the 1989 Revolution. Thus, Victor Socaciu, a well-known folk singer and PSD member of parliament, eulogized the long history of anti-communist resistance; while his list included a number of genuine dissidents like Ana Blandiana and Doinea Cornea, who were later vocal critics of the FSN, he also included Adrian Păunescu, a former court poet of Ceaușescu and later PSD **(p.102)** senator, for his alleged dissident writings. Similarly, he praised a number of prominent politicians who emerged from the Romanian revolution, but singled out the early FSN leadership (Roman and Iliescu) along with two PNL leaders (Câmpeanu and Quintus). While Socaciu’s speech is a step in the direction of a pluralist vision of the Romanian revolution by acknowledging the contributions of politicians from a broad spectrum of political backgrounds, it also illustrates the limitations of such pluralism: First, his speech included a glowing eulogy to former President Iliescu, whom he called a prominent and providential figure and whose alleged communist ties he brushed aside as much less important than the construction of Romania’s democratic institutions under Iliescu’s leadership; second, his inclusion on the same dissident list of Ceaușescu critics and former apologists reflects a significant degree of moral relativism; and, finally, his speech marks the continued use of the revolutionary past for partisan purposes, as is evident in

both the choices and the omissions on the list of notable post-communist politicians.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the political (mis)use of the memory of Romanian revolution of December 1989 after twenty years suggests a few potentially interesting conclusions. First, the unexpected reconfiguration of the entire political discourse about the communist past and its downfall after 2005 illustrates the extent to which the public memory of symbolically important historical episodes can be shaped by the short-term electoral priorities of political elites. Second, the “creative” reinterpretations of the past are underlined in the Romanian case by the bizarre situation in which both main protagonists in the debate were accusing each other of representing the dark sides of the communist past, while painting themselves as the solution to the country’s unfinished communist legacy. Finally, however, the political blowback of the failed Partnership for Timișoara initiative suggests that, despite ambiguity surrounding many crucial aspects of the Romanian revolution, there still exist binding credibility constraints on efforts to rewrite historical memory (Kubik 1994; Müller 2002), and that those who transgress against certain “sacred” political symbols can end up paying a steep political price.

Notes:

(1) . The Institute was founded by President Iliescu during the final days of his last presidential term in December 2004 and its leadership, which Iliescu named, was composed largely from revolutionary participants who were close to Iliescu, whom they unanimously elected IRRD president (Wikipedia 2012).

(2) . Following months of personal and ideological conflicts between former Prime Minister Petre Roman (who had been deposed after yet another miners’ riot in September 1991) and President Ion Iliescu, the Front split into a more reformist faction under Roman’s leadership (which eventually changed its name to Partidul Democrat PD) and a more hard-line leftist faction under Iliescu, which changed its name to PDSR and eventually to Partidul Social Democrat PSD.

(3) . Possible reasons include the much greater urgency of jump-starting economic reforms to deal with the country’s looming crisis in 1997, the CDR’s dependence on the PD (the reformist faction of the FSN) for achieving the parliamentary majority, as well as the fact that in line with Nalepa’s (2010) analysis of lustration, the CDR may have had a few skeletons in the closet (i.e., MPs who may have been affected by tough lustration laws).

(4) . It is, of course, quite possible that the maneuver simply represented a brilliant tactical move to fill the political vacuum left by the virtual demise of the PNȚCD, but this question is beyond the scope of this chapter.

(5) . Thus, MPs from the extreme nationalist PRM repeatedly interrupted Băsescu’s parliamentary speech, while former President Iliescu criticized the report for downplaying the importance of the 1989 revolution and derided Băsescu for condemning communism in a context where “it no longer exists and no longer poses any threats” (cited in *Hotnews*, 2009).

(6) . This issue came up during one of the presidential campaign debates when Antonescu reminded Băsescu that he had been in both the Communist Party and the National Salvation Front with Iliescu. Băsescu replied that at least he had had the courage to condemn the crimes of communism, while Antonescu was laughing at him in Parliament together with Iliescu and Vadim Tudor.

(7) . In 2007 the PD changed names yet again to become the Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L), after merging with a breakaway faction of the PNL under the leadership of former PM Theodor Stolojan.

(8) . Cited on *Ziare.com*, 2009b.

(9) . Vîntu, who was convicted for his role in one of Romania’s Ponzi schemes from the late 1990s, had been a Securitate agent before 1989 (*România Liberă*, 2010).

(10) . Geoană’s uninspired reply to that remark was that he did not remember, since he was too young at the time.

(11) . Indeed, in one of the commemorative speeches in Parliament on the twentieth anniversary of Ceausescu’s fall, the PNL MP, Raymond Luca, decried the fact that in the recent electoral campaign many of the revolutionary organizations had become electoral allies and tools of various political candidates, and even though he did not mention any names, the implications of the remark were fairly clear.

(12) . See Romanian Presidential Election Study (2009). I want to thank the authors for sharing their survey data.

(13) . Given Băsescu’s razor-thin margin in the second round, and the fact that the magnitude of the change in Figure 4.1 was slightly larger than Geoană’s initial popularity advantage, it is plausible that the Timișoara misstep could have cost Geoană the election.

(14) . I found similar patterns when using respondent’s self-placement on a Left-Right ideological scale, but for that measure Geoană sustained significant losses compared to his rival among both Left and Right-leaning respondents, which suggests that his strategy may have succeeded in triggering bipartisan alienation.

(15) . Thus, except for members from the parties of the PSD-PNL alliance (Iliescu, Câmpeanu, and Quintus), Socaciu only mentions Petre Roman, Băsescu's predecessor and rival in the PD leadership, and he notably glosses over the more vigorously anti-communist PNȚCD leadership, especially Corneliu Coposu.

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