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1989: THE TIMIȘOARA REVOLUTION

Its worthiness for political change vs failure of administrative decisions?

In one of the referential works of contemporary historiography – the lexicon of German socio-political vocabulary – Reinhart Koselleck notices that revolution is a fundamental concept with multiple meanings, uniqueness and repeatability, diachrony and synchrony. With the force of a political shock, including a social context, it can be a sudden change or a longer process. Altogether, revolution sends to a knowing leader and an advisor of action¹. To be a rebel, the researcher writes, has a negative meaning, while being a revolutionary is something positive. ‘In its historical and philosophical meaning, the concept spread during the eighteenth century and referred to change, in general, but a change that alters all aspects of life and should progressively lead to a better future ... this sends to an objective, promising earthly luck and liberation from authority’². The different nuances or particular meanings are distinct to one language or another, to one culture or another. In fact, vocabulary reflects a historical time and legacy, a geographical space, a set of values possibly identified by a community’s mental and behavioural reflexes. Similar to other events in modern era, the Revolution of December 1989 needs to be defined and understood through specific notions, concepts and language.

The spontaneous protests against the dictatorship

The spark that ignited the great protests in Timișoara in December 1989 is connected to the city’s multicultural and multiconfessional physiognomy. There was a political idea that had

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg’ (Revoluție, rebeliune, revoltă, război civil) în Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (editors), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 5, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 2004, pp. 653-788.

² Koselleck, *op. cit.*, p. 653-654. ‘The revolution has become a legitimate title for changes that couldn’t penetrate the sphere of experience. At the same time, the notion of revolution brings formerly immaterial hopes ... With the notion of modern revolution, the luck leads to the political and historical achievable future. It is equivalent to democratic revolution, social revolution and communist revolution, differently expressed in agreement with their aspiration. Similar to the mentioned dominant features, the modern concept of revolutions includes the experiences of uprising and civil war. Initially, revolution meant return (from the Latin word *revolver*, my note), having always the meaning of an analogy, of a correspondence to the change of political perception. Due to this concept – whose stratification is given by its multiple meanings – the Revolution of 1789 has both the interpretable meaning of sickly ideology and of open ideological critique’.

been outlined after the destruction of Transylvanian villages, an idea that spread rapidly to international media. The same idea would play a major role in the offset of anti-communist demonstrations in Timișoara. Pastor László Tőkés's protesting of the eradication of Transylvanian villages was positively received by the parishioners of the Reformed Church, by international political environments, the German and Hungarian press³, and the local population⁴. The pastor's dissidence started during 1981-1982 in the clandestine publication *Ellentpontok* (Counterpoints) and continued with sermons he delivered at the different parishes to which he was forcefully moved. By the late 1980s, Tőkés was pastor of the Reformed Church of Timișoara, where he was embraced by the religious circles and Hungarian intellectuals of Timișoara and the surrounding region⁵. Under house arrest during the first two weeks of December 1989, László Tőkés was going to be evicted from Timișoara by the oppressive apparatus of the national-communist regime. The parishioners' opposition to this action, followed by the solidarity of the citizens on 16 December 1989, was the key moment that sparked the great revolt against Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. The protest of the reformed confessional group was received and assumed by an important segment of the population of the city, one that understood the suffering of Hungarian minority was similar to that of the majority. Among the chanted slogans from 16 December were those that marked the ideology behind the revolt: 'Down with Ceaușescu' and 'Down with the Tyrant'.

From the depictions of the protesters it is clear that in the moment of enforcing the eviction, the citizens of Timișoara unconditionally solidarised with László Tőkés. Militant for the rights of Hungarian minority within Romania, Tőkés was impressed by the affection of the citizens for his cause. Initially represented only by a Hungarian-speaking group, the demonstration of solidarity in front of the priest's home quickly grew to a few thousand people. The plans of Ceaușescu's Securitate to cause a Romanian-Hungarian conflict were thwarted by the protesters, who proved the existence of a *societas civilis*, animated by the ideal of liberating

³ Dennis Deletant, *România sub regimul comunist* (Romania Under Communist Rule), Fundația Academia Civică, Bucharest, 1997.

⁴ Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara 15-21 decembrie 1989* (*Timișoara: 15-21 December 1989*), self-published, Timișoara, 1990, pp. 11-35. According to Idem, 'Today in Timișoara, Tomorrow in All the Country' (Glimpsed from the lived revolution), in the volume *Timișoara. 16-22 decembrie 1989* (*Timișoara: December 16-22, 1989*) – compendium of texts about the events of December 1989 Revolution, Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1990, pp. 45-78.

⁵ Mandics György, 'West of Doja', in the volume *Timișoara. 16-22 decembrie 1989* (*Timișoara: 16-22 December 1989*), pp. 79-84. Regarding the impressive solidarity of the citizens in Timișoara, see Tőkés's testimony in Titus Suci, *Reportaj cu suflul la gură* (*Breathless Chronicle*), Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1990, p. 10-17.

from the oppressive communist regime and not by supporting an outdated historical misunderstanding.

On 17 December 1989, Radio Budapest reported that the Miliția (police in communist Romania) had dispersed the protest supporting of László Tókéš, but ‘it was transformed into a demonstration against Ceaușescu’⁶. The 18 December 1989 edition of the famous German newspaper *Die Welt* informed its readers that 4,000 protesters gathered at the Reformed-Calvinist Church of Timișoara to halt the eviction of László Tókéš. On the same day, *Die Welt* announced that violent clashes took part between citizens and the Miliția, and the protests initially had a ‘Hungarian ethnical character’ and were ‘later transformed in demonstrations against Ceaușescu’, engaging the entire population of the city⁷. At the same time, the United States condemned the brutal repression in Timișoara, intending to consult NATO and the European Commission to adopt a shared stance against the violence by the authorities directed at the peaceful population of Timișoara⁸.

In Brussels, foreign affairs ministers of the European Commission firmly condemned the repression of the anti-totalitarian demonstrations in Timișoara. European and American media widely reported the revolts, signaling the intransigent attitude of László Tókéš for defending the rights of Hungarians in Romania and the maltreatment he faced from the repressive institutions of the national-communist regime. The Western media highlighted the cooperation of citizens for the amplification of the demonstrations, underlining that the spark of the anti-communist revolts started with the pastor. Western diplomats, mainly the British and Americans, were very concerned about the situation of minorities. This explains the keen interest in Tókéš’s case and their visit to Timișoara⁹. They were aware that Ceaușescu’s regime was built on an ethno-national policy and that remained its last resort for preserving control. The Timișoara uprising did not have an ethnic character, but a civic one. On the 19 December, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* drew attention on the fact that Nicolae Ceaușescu’s dictatorship displeases all citizens

⁶ See Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara în Arhivele Europei Libere. 17-20 decembrie 1989 (Timișoara in the Archives of Radio Free Europe; 17-20 December 1989)*, Fundația Academia Civică, Bucharest, 1999, p. 55-56. The telegram sent by Reuters News Agency from Budapest.

⁷ ‘Human Chain Protecting Clergyman Turns into Mass Protest’ in Miodrag Milin (coordinator), *Timișoara în Arhivele ... (Timișoara in the Archives ...)*, pp. 60-61.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 151-152, Intro (News from Romania), pp. 154-155, “White House Condemns Romanian Use of Force”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 151-152.

and not only the minorities¹⁰.

László Tőkés's merits at the time were the following: he engaged his believers toward the idea of freedom of conscience; he openly displayed the reason for Hungarian discontent; in the letters addressed to international political environments and media, he formulated in credible terms the demands of his minority; he turned attention to Timișoara, as a city where the population was determined to overturn the dictatorial regime and conclusively discard the national-communist ideology. The constant provocation by the Romanian secret police for maintaining strained relations with its neighbours, especially Hungary, had blocked the idea of coagulating an opposing political organism. The press agencies were reporting that the border between Romania and Hungary was closed during those days, and also the frontiers with Yugoslavia and USSR – which proved that the revolt from Timișoara was spontaneous and uncontrolled by authorities. Invoking a foreign presence, especially Hungarians from Hungary or Russians from USSR who arrived in Timișoara to stir the population, was one of the diversionary tactics of the secret police.

The citizens of Timișoara didn't answer the provocation, instead supporting László Tőkés's protest and seizing the opportunity to transform it into an argument of anti-totalitarian revolt. The protest did not start anywhere or anyhow, that being the reason why we cannot overlook its place, confession or the minority involved. There, in front of the Reformed Church, the discontent that would lead to massive, spontaneous opposition to the political regime, that is, the Timișoara revolution, had begun¹¹. In the beginning, the support for László Tőkés was essential, and precisely this issue drew the attention of Timișoara residents and international public opinion-makers. The manner in which the protest unfolded, its large number of

¹⁰ 'Flamen in Temeschburg', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 December 1989. See also George Paul Hefty's article, 'Unruhe in einem drangsalierten Land – Das Ceausescu-Regime hat den Rumänen viele Opfer auferlegt', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 19, 1989.

¹¹ Some local intellectuals – the case of Vasile Popovici is not singular – claim that 'the stake was not necessarily Tőkés and the defence of his house ... The protest could start anywhere'. According to Milin Miodrag, *Timișoara în revoluție și după (Timișoara During the Revolution and Afterwards)*, p. 51, the ignorance of the plural legacies of the city, respectively the lack of understanding of local civic spirit – inter-cultural and inter-confessional – shows how strong was the impact of inter-war ethno-nationalism and segregation that the Ceaușescu regime had resumed and cultivated every time the discontent of Hungarian population from Romania was breaking, or articles and books on the subject were being published in Hungary. In the mentioned case, there is a possible explanation of ignorance of the mentioned forms: before 1989, the University of Timișoara (established after the Second World War), where the generation that included Popovici was educated, had no courses of Timișoara and Banat history. As for the history of Romania, it was studied only as ideological tool. Finally, the University of Timișoara did not stand out before 1989 through research or fundamental courses in the disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology and politics.

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participants, the local solidarity and civic spirit were directly connected to the spirit of the city, to the old meaning of religious diversity, of multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism characterising a cross-border town and region. During the peaceful protest in front of the Reformed Church against the forced eviction of pastor László Tóké there is no trace of the historical issue of territorial disputes between Romania and Hungary. The scene in front of the priest's home on 15 December would transform over the next few days into an impressive anti-communist revolt and revolution.

The attempt of compromising the peaceful cohabitation of Romanian majority with the German, Hungarian, Serbian and Jewish minorities of Timișoara was perfidious. It was an age-old theme, used for the self-benefit of Romanian authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. The fragmentary community remaining in place, Timișoara's civil society, established on the background of Central-European cultural model, did not respond to the mentioned provocations.

The intellectuals and the masses; the absence of knowing and advising leaders

In numerous interviews, Ioan Lorin Fortuna – one of the main organisers of the revolutionaries and founder of Romanian Democratic Front – stated that the whole protest movement was spontaneous and nobody was prepared to assume the position of leader: 'I was not feeling apt – and I believe nor the others – to bear the whole burden of leading a revolt that we hoped would lead to revolution'¹². Consequently, the people of Timișoara who took part at the protests between 17 and 20 December were organised ad hoc, supporting a number of transitional leaders. It was important that the great majority of the population had acknowledged the necessity of the regime change. During the demonstrations, along with Lorin Fortuna, Claudiu Iordache, Nicolae Bădilescu, Ioan Savu, Ștefan Ivan, Sorin Oprea, Luminița Milutin, Ioan Chiș, Mihaela Munteanu, Ioan Marcu, Maria Trăistaru and others stood out. For many days, they were the organisers and animators of the events: they stood in front of the rows of demonstrators, devised strategies, opposed firearms and held political discourses from the Opera House's balcony. All this, combined with the fact that the main objective was to overthrow the

¹² Ioan Lorin Fortuna, transition leader, president of Romanian Democratic Front that was born on 20 December 1989. According to Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara în revoluție și după (Timișoara in Revolution and Afterwards)*, Marineasa Publishing House, Timișoara, 1997, pp. 115; 110.

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dictatorship while lacking an agenda of changes, resulted from Lorin Fortuna's accounts:

I was thinking that at the time all we could hope was the elimination of the dictator, followed by an intermediate governance, upon which we should exert pressure in order to open it towards democracy. I couldn't sense and neither could dare to hope that we could achieve the complete elimination of communism ... To the end of the moment of recollecting, when we were still searching for a solution (for the future political organization, note by VN) I raised my gaze and I saw the Opera balcony. The thought came to me instantaneously, when we rose to our feet: I had to mobilise people around; I told them we need to break in the Opera, to address the crowd from the balcony and to organise everyone, lest we couldn't succeed¹³.

This is how the organisation of the crowd started and also how a committee of initiative was formed. It mobilised the main industrial enterprises and brought a mass of citizens to the main square. The idea was enacted and extremely successful. Parallel to Opera Square, a similar organization of revolutionaries was established at the County Council. It made possible the discussions with authorities, respectively, with Radu Bălan, Petru Moș, Cornel Pacoste, Constantin Dăscălescu and others. It represented an attempt to negotiate, for example, the meeting at the County Council between representatives of revolutionaries, led by Ioan Savu, and the chief of Romanian communist government, Constantin Dăscălescu. Regarding this moment, there is a memorable remark by Savu that is symptomatic of the events that unfolded at Timișoara in the absence of knowing and advising leaders:

Only there, in front of them (Dăscălescu and his attendants, note by VN) I realised that we were not prepared to talk to them. We had established that committee, or how you want to call it...by chance, we were in the front row, and we had no idea, we didn't know what we should or could demand in order to truly represent the crowds outside¹⁴.

In reality, a distribution of roles didn't function and an essential link in the unfolding of events was missing: one represented by intellectuality. The confusion that followed and the long transition towards democracy are also explained by this absence. It that critical moment, the force of the people was decisive, along with the idea of human solidarity, the spirit of sacrifice and the belief of every person in escaping from communist dictatorship. The crowds proclaimed Timișoara the first free Romanian city. Through their spontaneity and victory, they confirm one of the most important interpretations of historian Fernand Braudel, according to which,

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 106; 109.

¹⁴ Titus Suci, *Reportaj cu sufletul la gură (Breathtaking Report)*, Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1990, p. 216. For the political context see also Silviu Brucan, *De la capitalism la socialism ... (From Capitalism to Socialism ...)*

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sometimes, masses are able to write history. The great anti-communist revolt of December 1989 was the revolution of the masses. The city had not lost its civic culture and neither the culture of authentic workers' movement. In other words, as was profiled at the beginning of the twentieth century, Timișoara did not encourage a visible difference between citizen and worker. The workers' social segment, which the communist regime reckoned faithful and in whose name it pretended and imposed the dictatorship, turned out to be the most discontented and best represented in the rupture.

Unlike Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, Timișoara had not developed a political strategy necessary to overturn the communist dictatorial regime. Similar to other Romanian cities, Timișoara was absent from the great debates of ideas and from the anti-totalitarian attitudes manifested among certain countries of communist Europe. There were no dissident literary circles or samizdat press. Personalities able to coagulate, inform and politically direct civil society were absent. Even if the preoccupation of some intellectuals was somehow bolder than in other Romanian cities, the cultural institutions of Timișoara and Banat did not generate a political crisis and neither a program regarding change. The universities were supervised by the political and repressive apparatus, while the professors were often selected according to the proven loyalty for the communist party. The humanist professors, those who could contribute to an attitudinal change among the students, were living far from Romanian social realities and European cultural-political orientations. With a few notable exceptions, they represented just another link of the ideological propaganda sections of the communist party. The teachers' segment with training in philosophy, history and sociology was practicing within the scientific socialism departments of the Polytechnic Institute of Timișoara.

Established after the Second World War, the West University of Timișoara didn't include at the time faculties of sociology, philosophy, psychology and political studies. A humble faculty of history-geography was abolished at the start of the 1980s. If there were distinguishable personalities within the field of technical professions, such as medicine, philology or arts, displaying significant aptitudes and results, the political thought of the great majority was ignorant of political ideas. The academics were relatively insensitive to the suffering of their fellow people, benefitting of privileges from the regime: decent salaries, free spacious houses or apartments, scholarships, vacations abroad, quality medical assistance and good pensions. They

had borrowed from the behaviour of the intellectual class from the poorer regions of Romania. Cooperation with workers, in similar fashion to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 or to the Polish trade union movements, was not existent in Romania. Within the whole country, things were similar regarding the orientation of intellectual elites. Andrei Pleșu motivated the ignorance of the intellectuality as follows:

Many of the difficulties of today's transition result – in the absence of a more wealthy Western brother – from the inability of our intellectuality to anticipate and prepare the change since the time of dictatorship. A certain excess of accommodation, a form of vaguely senile wisdom, as well as the self-justifiable rhetoric of 'resistance through culture' made us greet the changes from 1989 with empty hands. I was living under a derisory decisional pressure and now we have to bear the consequences¹⁵.

This is a credible view. It is desirable to understand that no matter how many brothers Romania would have had in the West, the answer to its problems had to be based on the debates and intellectual directions from within. The late Ivan Evseev, one of the most respected and admired professors at West University of Timișoara, admitted that he was shocked by the change occurred in 1989. He witnessed the terrible clashes of the crowd against tanks and water cannons, the open confrontation with the repression force from one of Timișoara's central squares. His evocation is emblematic of the social class to which he belonged:

Starting from the evening of 16 December and until 22 December, for the first and probably the last time of my life, I witnessed the experience of another time and reality, different from the profane, ordinary space, able for a rational moulding¹⁶.

The professor was trying to explain the fracture of his own perception of the world through 'the deep fissure between my time before and after the events'. He could not yet observe the absence of intellectual co-participation in the development of events. Back in 1989, the role of the intellectual elites was minor¹⁷. The revolution owed to the crowds from Timișoara, and

¹⁵ Andrei Pleșu, Foreword to Wolf Lepenies, *The Ascension and the Decline of European Intellectuals* (original title: *Ascesa e declino degli intellettuali in Europa*, Gius. Laterza & Figli, Roma/Bari, 1992), Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 10. For details, see also Victor Neumann, 'National political cultures and regime changes and Eastern and Central Europe', in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, Edited by Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher Monk, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p.228-246.

¹⁶ Ivan Evseev, 'The Revolution of Timișoara as Surpassing the Self', in the volume *Timișoara. 16-22 decembrie 1989... (Timișoara: 16 to 22 December 1989...)*, pp. 26-44. For the quotation, p. 27.

¹⁷ This is one possible explanation of the fact that the leadership and administrative positions of the post-communist state were given to the second echelon of the national-communist class. During the confused, or 'tangled' (to use Nestor Rareș's word) transition from Bucharest, which followed the authentic and spontaneous revolt of Timișoara, only the reformed communists

mostly to workers, who accounted for most of the victims. Melted at the level of its understanding and maintained through the civic action of the small groups (whose ideas and courage must be mentioned), the remembrance of the Central-European model inspired the uprising of Timișoara in December 1989.

Even if the psychological pressure was strong and made visible through the surveillance of all social groups, the absence of clearness, commodity and certain cowardice enveloped a great segment of the writers, artists, journalists, priests and professors from every medium – meaning, the groups of intellectuals who could plan the anti-communist revolts and the peaceful transition from totalitarianism to democracy. The idea of sacrifice did not characterise the thought and actions of the local and national elites. The feeble contestations of the regime between 1960 and 1980 in Timișoara, as well as the actions of the group coordinated by professor Eduard Pamfil, represented by the Marxist writers from *Actionsgruppe Banat*, the musical troupe *Phoenix*, the magazine *Forum Studentesc* or the solitary gestures of poet Petru Ilieșu, failed to transform the city into a vector of anti-communist dissidence¹⁸. The intellectuals were unable to submit a political alternative. Echoing the Hungarian Revolution, the protests of the students from Timișoara in 1956 against the communist regime of Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej, were not resumed in the following decades. Finally, the forced industrialisation and demographic changes that occurred after 1960 triggered some notable differences between the anti-communist revolt of 1956 and the anti-totalitarian revolution of 1989. Among the few who clearly understood the importance of the knowing and/or advising leadership was George Șerban. Graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy of Al. Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Șerban was aware not only of the importance of organising the crowd in Opera Square, but also of the fundamental role of political ideas at the foundation of the transition towards democracy. Thoroughly trained in humanist disciplines and socio-political sciences, he was mindful of the necessity of paradigmatic renewal, even after December 1989, which means the success of the Timișoara

seemed capable of governing the state. For the political context of the time and interpretation of the political changes that occurred after 1989, see Silviu Brucan, 'De la capitalism la socialism și retur. O biografie între două revoluții' (From Capitalism to Socialism and Back: A Biography between Two Revolutions), Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998. Former editor-in-chief at Scântea, the main communist newspaper, and former Romanian ambassador to the USA, Silviu Brucan was profoundly involved in the replacement of Ceaușescu's regime and seizing of power by Ion Iliescu's group. After 1990, Brucan became a political and socio-economical commentator, hosting a weekly broadcast on ProTV network in Bucharest.

¹⁸ Victor Neumann, 'Die bürgerliche Kultur in Siebenbürgen und im Banat: Die Rolle Temeswars in den politischen Umgestaltungsprozessen vom Dezember 1989', in *Halbjahresschrift für südosteuropäische Geschichte, Literatur und Politik*, no. 1, 1999, pp. 38-51.

revolt depended on another class of advisers other than Silviu Brucan and Ion Iliescu. During those fateful December days, he was banned from speaking from the Opera balcony, which prompted him to reflect with increased attention on the events, especially on the objectives that needed to be formulated to truly liberate Timișoara and Romania from the totalitarian regime.

Over the long run, the paralysis in forming institutions was decisive. No matter how much proof of civic culture could be found in communist Timișoara, it is clear that the democratic opposition was not organised. There is nothing similar to Czechoslovakian *Charta 77*, Polish union *Solidarność* or Hungarian dissident circles. This is the reason why instead of a thoughtful political action, elaborated long before the events of December 1989, we resorted to a spontaneous revolt in Timișoara, which suddenly transformed into a revolution against the totalitarian regime. The revolt was not triggered by well-known leaders who could have coordinated the political changes of the moment. From the later accounts of certain writers regarding the unfolding of the revolution, only the street vibes, skirmishes between protesters and the army, military occupation of the city, but mostly the emotions, fear, grief and anger, stood out. Not political ideas¹⁹. With no program and no well-defined political ideal, the mass of protesters fought empty-handed against Nicolae Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime. In spite of these shortcomings, the great protest from 1989 transformed the city of Timișoara into the main symbol of Romanian revolutionary changes.

*Timișoara During Decades of Transition;
The Proclamation and the Failure of Administrative Decisions*

The Proclamation of Timișoara was a very important document. Made public in March 1990, it has brought sociological-historical explanations regarding the change of political regime. Conjuring causes and re-designing the arguments of the revolutionaries, the Proclamation drew attention through its content and revolutionary expression regarding the instauration of democracy and the rule of law. It is a fundamental document, resulting from the post-December intellectual reflections. Through the Proclamation, as George Șerban – its main author – observed, Timișoara intended to structure the opposition towards the newly established authority

¹⁹ According to Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara în revoluție și după (Timișoara in Revolution and Afterwards)*, Marineasa Publishing House, Timișoara, 1997, pp. 52-53 and 56-57.

from Bucharest. Besides multiple controversies and contestations, during the months that passed between December 1989 and March 1990, Romanian politics had changed through the few former communist leaders having a direction inspired by Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika*. This is the context in which George Șerban drafted the Proclamation, hoping to make up for the revolution's missing political objectives. Due to this document, Timișoara was perceived and appreciated differently by a part of the Romanian nation. For a short time, the whole urban community was enamoured with the idea of a major shift in post-communist Romania. What is worth mentioning is that the Proclamation – brilliant document – had an incredible social and political impact. It was drafted too late, though, explained by the fact that Timișoara lacked an intellectual dissidence during the national-communist regime that could have prepared the paradigmatic shift.

In a memorable dialogue with historian Miodrag Milin about the events and political movements generated by the Proclamation of Timișoara, George Șerban revealed that a segment of Romanian intellectuals resisted fundamental change and this could not be ignored. Its role had to become primordial for the instauration of democracy and for the Europeanisation of Romania. With an open mind and the vocabulary of a humanist intellectual educated in political history, Șerban had participated in negotiations with the temporary authority resuming and supporting the ideas and paths for change. He observed that transition to a new statehood could be achieved with people who were involved in the system created and coordinated by totalitarian institutions. This is the reason why Point 8 of the Proclamation became the main theme of debates from March until May 1990, but mostly the subject of controversies between representatives of the Proclamation and the National Salvation Front. Here is a fragment from Șerban's reflections regarding that most important moment, which opens the possibility of critical and rational understanding of the tensions of the time:

In Bucharest and in the rest of the country the crisis escalated, the conflict was harder and harder to bear, because more and more arrived in University Square – Eugen Ionescu, Emil Cioran; nobody noticed the supporting letter for the claims made in the University Square, including Point 8 against Iliescu, signed by 126 great personalities, people of culture, scientists, Eugen Ionescu, Monica Lovinescu, academicians. The list was publicly recited and published in the press; people were then reckoning the number, judging politically. A person like Claudiu Iordache, vice-president of the National Salvation Front, had his first hesitation towards Iliescu and Romanian perspectives; he continued to be friendly to us; towards Iliescu he couldn't personally state the truth. He had an affection and deep connection with him, extremely strong ... Let us exclude him from Point 8, this was Iordache's solution, which, unfortunately was backed up by Vasile Popovici and Viorel Oancea, the police chief; and they were

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pressuring me. If we make an amendment to Point 8, which will exclude Mr Ion Iliescu only, all nomenclature would not participate with Iliescu's exception. I resisted all the pressure until around the elections on 20 May; in the moment of compromise, I claimed that Point 8 and the Proclamation would become zero, because the principle had to work, not the moment's reckoning. Regarding Claudiu Iordache, I think he came to me on 26 April, a day before the Alliance, to convince me to talk to Iliescu; because Iliescu doesn't speak in University Square ... He was confused by the arrival of that letter of protest; the best of Romanian culture was there. He had realised that Romania cannot go forward with Iliescu; it was obvious that the letter meant that Iliescu would proceed without the support of Romanian intelligentsia. This distressed him and he tried and succeeded to convince us to go there, because Iliescu surely would receive us; go there and attempt a dialogue with Iliescu, convince him to talk in University Square, make peace and somehow abandon his candidature on his own accord. When the committee of representation was formed, two or three days later, I went along with Vasile Popovici to Bucharest and demanded a meeting with Iliescu. Then something happened. We demanded a meeting between the Committee of the National Alliance for the Proclamation of Timișoara and Iliescu, not between Timișoara Society and Iliescu. We wanted to promote this Committee, which meant much more than Timișoara Society. Iliescu accepted²⁰.

The testimony is welcomed in acknowledging George Șerban's profoundly reforming political thought – the scarcity of fundamental reforms in administration, justice and education during the past decades proves it – in order to see which transition leaders managed to articulate and value the popular aspirations and which just pursued their own personal agendas. Claudiu Iordache's effort to understand the time of change was observed and appreciated by George Șerban. The cited testimony is earnest, its author seeking the truth, proving common sense in the relationship with others and attachment for the community good. We acknowledge the colleague who, in December 1989, proved extraordinary courage in bare handedly facing the army. As affirmed by the author of the Proclamation, in spite of an older connection and sympathy for Ion Iliescu, Claudiu Iordache understood what needed to happen in Romania to support the ideals of freedom of the citizens of Timișoara. On the other hand, we observe the type of compromise with the newly minted authority, respectively, the manner in which some participants at the dialogue with Ion Iliescu amalgamated and diluted the revolutionary projects. Can we speak of naivety, of a 'vague senile wisdom' or the abandonment of revolutionary aspirations? Enter the stage the duplicate role of the Byzantine-Balkan world, and the result of the negotiations described by George Șerban proves this zigzagging evolution of events. Consequently, Timișoara was already on the path of abandoning its old Central-European spirit, which triggered

²⁰ George Șerban, 'Regarding the National Alliance for the Proclamation of Timișoara' in Miodrag Milin, *Timișoara în Revoluție și după...* (*Timișoara in Revolution and Afterwards...*), pp. 187-191, cf. pp.190-191. See note 20, pp. 210-213, which includes documentary references. Such testimonials help reconstruct the events from 1989-1990, while their credibility is enhanced by the researched documents and highlighted through Professor Miodrag Milin's commentaries.

the unstoppable desire for freedom in December 1989.

In spite of contributing to overturning the totalitarian regime, the absence of knowledgeable leaders was an enormous shortcoming. Hence the merits of the city and the region were not recognized by the new governors. In similar fashion, the persons who opened fire on Timișoara's population in December 1989 remained unknown or unpunished. Briefly presented and publicly debated only once a year on its commemoration, the Revolution of Timișoara is etched mainly in the memory of the participants. The remembrance of the recent history of the city, the region and Romania is marked by partisanships around the events that took place in 1989 at Timișoara and Bucharest. Asynchronous evolutions of the changes that occurred in both cities, or within other Romanian urban areas, have created different perspectives upon the events and their results. The speculative or provoking manner in which the events were promoted in media, and in many books written about the Revolution (over 600 titles in 30 years), could not overcome the crisis of conscience visible at the whole scale of Romanian population.

Romanian political corruption was and still is acutely experienced by most of Timișoara's citizens. The anger owes to the failure of creating a local political and administrative class. The frustrations of the population, but also of the succeeding mayors and other regional leaders, were triggered by the opposing concerns of the politicians sent from Bucharest. The public institutions that survived from the old regime opposed new reforms. The widening social problems reveal two cultural models, one of the capital and one of the large regional towns of Romania, that were not surpassed through coherent and convergent policies. The polarisation of material wealth is visible everywhere, hence the difficult interpersonal and group communication. The parallel development of the revolutionary actions at Timișoara and Bucharest, the capital's late break into the scene (on the 21 December 1989 compared to 15 December in Timișoara) and the manner in which Ceaușescu's replacement was handled all created divergences in understanding and enforcing political decisions. The main actors in Timișoara were unlike those from Bucharest. George Șerban claimed that the aspirations of Timișoara's citizens included revolutionary ideas meant to lead to the total replacement of the national-communist administration. This did not happen and could not happen in a Romania where the population had lived for decades in isolation with no access to political culture. Many people from Timișoara hardly accepted that their revolt was perceived differently from other Romanian cities and regions. The newly

established state authority never offered the explanations demanded by Timișoara, leading to unfriendly suspicions, invectives and overzealous excesses.

The countless divergences of opinion generated certain radicalism that was felt not only at the national level, but also locally. More than three decades after the regime shift in 1989, Timișoara's political leaders still do not agree on essential issues regarding economic and environmental strategies, reconstruction of infrastructure, restoration of architectural-historical patrimony, educational reforms or establishment of institutions necessary to properly manage the project of European cultural capital. They have no mid- or long-term strategy. The local political class has disappointed, being incapable of convincing the electorate and representing the city and the region as they should. One reason is their lack of access to Romanian central government or in the management of the most important central institutions.

Similarly to other Romanian cities and regions, Timișoara and Banat are going through difficult moments on the path of adaptation to a market economy and pluralist-democratic policies. It would be natural to think that, after three decades since the aforementioned events, the city would gain a greater share of Romanian economic life, occupy a complementary importance besides the capital and assert itself in an international context. Why did this not happen? Mainly because it failed to shed administrative centralism; also because Timișoara, along with Banat and western Romania, overlooked the important role it should have played in developing relations with the neighboring countries and the rest of Europe. Refusal to assume political decisions regarding structural reforms and the lack of concern for the middle class contributed to the multiplication of the citizens' discontent for their own leaders and the national government. What the central governors could not understand is that the modernisation of a state always starts from its most advanced edge. The openness to Europe could have begun with Timișoara and the Banat region. The functioning of Euro-regions presumes the execution of cross-border economies, respectively, the assurance of useful legislation for a more rapid and efficient development of trade and services.

Resuming the century-old policy of the parties from the Old Kingdom or the one promoted by inter-war political bodies, where control was performed by representatives sent from Bucharest, was counter-productive. The perpetual rebellion by the people of Timișoara and Banat is motivated by the delays in administrative reform, decentralisation and pro-European

direction. Expressed in different forms, the great discontent was directed towards the former communists and the institutions they managed. One of the fundamental documents of the civil society was entitled the *Proclamation of Timișoara*. Drafted and publicly presented in March 1990, the *Proclamation* was the first document legitimising the Romanian post-communist opposition²¹. It was a document influenced by the mass revolution of Timișoara and represented the post-revolutionary politics.

Today's Timișoara is searching for a new social and cultural identity. A large number of the venerable families that conferred an unmistakable identity to Timișoara have migrated. We are referring to engineers, construction workers, mechanics, small craftsmen, but also many intellectual elites. Regardless of the social class, most of the German-speaking population also has left. The migration of the German community and German-speaking Romanians, along with the dissolution of Jewish community and relocation of an important segment of Hungarian-speaking cultural and artistic elite to Budapest, generated widespread changes to the cultural, behavioural, model.

Until 1989, the citizenry comprised a tolerant city, which acknowledged and preserved the inter-cultural legacies of Timișoara and Banat. The reasons for mass migration were not only economical but political. In spite the transformations, the laws supporting private initiatives and private property came too late. The vacuum left behind by the massive departure was suddenly filled by a population coming mainly from Moldavia, Oltenia and Maramureș. Certainly, the creative potential of multi- and inter-cultural Timișoara and Banat was ostensibly diminished. Sociologic studies show that after 1989, Timișoara depleted the necessary resources to assimilate the newcomers, unlike during the inter-war or post-war period. The set of values professed by the average population, one that conferred personality and comfort to the city and region, was dissolved under the pressure of the rapid demographic mutations. Timișoara's enticement during recent decades, besides being the city that initiated the overthrowing of the dictatorship, was due to the fact that quality of life was better here. On the other hand, political pressure for changing

²¹ Victor Neumann, *Between Words and Reality. Studies on the Politics of Recognition and the Changes of Regime in Contemporary Romania*, Translated from the Romanian by Simona Neumann, The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, The Catholic Univ. of America, Washington, D.C., 2001. Idem, *Ideologie și fantasmagorie. Perspective comparative asupra istoriei gândirii politice în Europa est-centrală (Ideology and Phantasmagoria: Comparative Perspectives upon the History of Political Thought in East-Central Europe)*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001, according to the chapter 'Political changes in Romania in 1989: Contradictory aspirations based on the interference of Central, South-East and East European values', pp. 175-197.

the city's social structures also was put into practice.

The 2021 population of Timișoara is different than the one from 1989. The new demographic structure did not create major cultural conflicts, although aggressive behaviour towards public property is evident; but the people arriving are often ignorant of the community's history, architecture and public life; they are simply not interested in the architecture, history or cultural diversity inherited from previous inhabitants. Discontinuities compared with the preceding decades are identifiable through the violation of co-habituating norms, the use of suburban jargon²² and the ostentatious propagation of chauvinist, racist and anti-Semite messages. As for economic and financial competition, it is harsh and often unfair. What does offer a certain social balance is the presence of population coming from Banat, Transylvania and Partium, whose behavioural features are relatively similar to the former citizens of Timișoara – hence the illusion that nothing major has changed, that the basic elements of the city are preserved and only centralism is guilty of social disagreements, inefficient institutions, organisational disorder, absence of projects and relocation of the city on European map.

In spite of significant shortcomings, important natural resources live on and the city and region managed to preserve some traces of multi- and inter-culturalism and multi-confessionalism. The numerous private investments, especially German, French, Austrian and the preference of a group of Italians for the industrial and commercial life of the city and the region, proves the importance of dialogue on the theme of European integration. In order to be a standard – as it was for the inter-war Romania – Timișoara must, in the first place, avoid radical right discourse. The birth of an alternative thought depends on cultural products, idea debates, initiatives and cooperation based on knowledge. Timișoara's advantage to play the administrative and cultural role complementary to Bucharest, Szeged and Novi-Sad could be part of a political ideal that include both the elites and society at large. Based on what is developing

²² This is the case in a segment of public intellectuality. For example, Vasile Popovici reflects the mentioned tendency through slander, assault on the person and public incitement to hatred. Among others, he admonished the Metropolitan (Bishop) of Banat, Ioan Selejan; he berated former Timișoara Mayor Nicolae Robu; he scolded former Minister of Foreign Affairs Teodor Meleșcanu. Between 2018 and 2021, he tried relentlessly to ruin the most important project of the past century in Timișoara, the European Capital of Culture, awarded by an international jury after a strong competition between 13 Romanian cities. He made inexcusable threats to Simona Neumann, executive director of the Timișoara European Capital of Culture Association, demanding not only her resignation, but “elimination” of the Association that won the title. This manner calls to fascist ideas in favour of right radical movements. Regarding inter-war Timișoara and the years of the Second World War, Victor Neumann, ‘Etnonaționalism și segregacionism în România interbelică. Pogromul de la Iași și presa Timișoarei’ (‘Ethno-nationalism and Segregationism in Inter-War Romania: The Pogrom of Iasi and the Timișoara Press’), *Timpul* magazine, July 5, 2021.

now, Timișoara and Banat will not benefit from fecund legacies, the multiple cultural code from preceding centuries, which was for the last time visible during the 1989 revolution²³.

Instead of Conclusions

The European community nowadays needs not only cultural conventions²⁴, but also ability to understanding its regional histories, the regional and Euro regional patrimony. Such a comprehension can ensure ‘the strategy of common destiny’. A historical model akin to that of the Banat of Timișoara offers the advantage to include the continent’s multi-and inter-cultural realities. Re-learning the history of Euro region such as the Banat of Timișoara had deeper meanings than simple knowledge of the facts: replacement of partisan thought with a liberal, open one; assuming a lifestyle in agreement with those established traditions for acknowledging and tolerating diversity.

The capitalisation of social-cultural and political interferences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and during the first half of the twentieth century could have contributed to moulding the population’s reflexes for assuming the values of modernity. The Habsburg experiments and demographic balance of Central Europe owed to Vienna’s mercantile policy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the time, the entire population of Timișoara and Banat embraced those policies²⁵. The recovery and understanding of the past has an important political role. Shortly after the 1989 Revolution, this should have been a *sine qua non* condition of the future projects, an example to inspire intellectual and civic life²⁶. As the conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck has observed, the political objective clarifies through history, and

²³ See also Victor Neumann, ‘Timișoara in the Contemporary Collective Memory: Fragmented Perspectives’, published in the volume *Revoluția Română din decembrie 1989. Istorie și Memorie (The Romanian Revolution of December 1989: History and Memory)*, coordinator Bogdan Murgescu, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2007, pp. 21-44.

²⁴ See Carolina Brossat, ‘Kulturpolitischer kompetenzkonflikt Europarat und Europäische Union’, in *Dokumente, Zeitschrift für den deutsch-französischen Dialog* magazine, no. 4/1995, pp. 306-313.

²⁵ See Virgil Nemoianu, ‘The Case of East-European Ethos’, in *Europa centrală. Nevroze. Dileme. Utopii (Central Europe: Neuroses, Dilemmas, Utopias)*, Anthology by Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 1997, pp. 168-194; Victor Neumann, *Istoria evreilor din Banat. O mărturie a multi-și interculturalității Europei Central-Orientale (The History of Jews from Banat: A Testimony of Central-Eastern European Multi- and Inter-Culturalism)*, Atlas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 97-131.

²⁶ Victor Neumann (Edited by), *Istoria Banatului. Studii privind particularitățile unei regiuni transfrontaliere (The History of Banat: Studies Regarding the Peculiarities of a Cross-Border Region)*, first edition, Romanian Academy Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015; second edition, Bucharest, 2016. See the English edition, Victor Neumann (Edited by) *The Banat of Timișoara: A European Melting Pot*, Scala Arts and Heritage Publishers, London, 2019.

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conversely, the political result contributes to the recovery of history.

That Timișoara designed an exceptional project and was named European Capital of Culture in 2023, should mean – even after three decades – that its citizens understand how to mobilise, recover time since their entrance into modernity and reinvent themselves based on the models that had interfered the local, regional and European cultural-civilisational values.

Timișoara, 28 August 2021