

TRANSITION IN AN INTERETHNIC CONTEXT. TÂRGU MUREȘ 1990

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the transition to democracy in Târgu Mureș in 1990, focusing on the sociological and historical aspects of this process in a complex interethnic context. The city, characterized by cultural diversity, witnessed an initial sense of unity and common vision during the December 1989 Revolution. However, this unity rapidly deteriorated, culminating in the violent and controversial events of March 1990. The paper explores communist ideological influences and the evolution of national policy in relation to ethnic minorities, highlighting the growing discontent of the Hungarian community and its relationship with the Romanian majority. In addition, the reaction of the authorities and the challenges faced in the post-revolutionary period are analysed. The paper provides a comprehensive perspective on the transition in Târgu Mureș, illustrating the complexity of the process of democratisation in a sensitive interethnic environment.

Keywords: *interethnic relations, Târgu Mureș, transition, the 1989 Revolution, ethnic conflict.*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the transition to democracy was unusual in Târgu Mureș, a multicultural city, county seat in a region with ethnic sensitivities. Although at the time of the December 1989 revolution the city had a population divided almost equally into two halves, Romanians and Hungarians, at least a feeling of unity and a common vision could be observed among the crowd at that time of change. However, the situation degenerated rapidly, so that just three months after these joint demonstrations, in March, Târgu Mureș was to witness violent and extremely controversial events.

As for the Revolution in Târgu Mureș, its epicentre was the IMATEX factory (Textile Machinery Enterprise), from where, on 21 December 1989, a column of

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workers from the enterprises and factories on Gheorghe Doja Street set off towards the city centre. They succeeded in attracting other demonstrators from the city by following the route Vinalcool – IRA – Metalotehnica – CFR railway station – Dâmbu Pietros district – Furnica restaurant – Centre. After overcoming the numerous repressive devices, the column entered the centre and positioned itself in the area of the Grand Hotel, opposite the headquarters of the PCR County Committee (protected by another repressive device), and then increased by joining hundreds of other demonstrators coming from all directions (Novák 2014, 224).

Six men fell heroically that night: Şandor Bodoni, Lajos Hegyi, Adrian Hidoş, Ilie Munteanu, Karoly Pajka and Tamas Ernest. The demonstration took place in a spirit of unity, as the people entered the administrative buildings of the city, following the retreat of the army, they felt that victory was near. Romanians and Hungarians in those moments embraced each other crying and chanting in unison, those present being motivated by a sincere feeling of happiness and desire for change. Among the chants at the time were “Long live brotherhood!; Long live free, democratic Romania!; Never chauvinism! Freedom!” Hungarians and Romanians were exceptionally successful in fighting side by side, in full identity of interests and in full understanding. But this unity was not to last, and the political interests and diverging visions of some leaders led to the sad episode of March 1990.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

In order to better understand the reasons and forms of manifestation of the events of 1990, it is also necessary to take a retrospective look at the evolution and transformations in Târgu Mureş. Although after the end of the Second World War and with the imposition of communist regimes under Soviet pressure, both Romania and Hungary came under the USSR's sphere of influence, the issue of Northern Transylvania, and of Transylvania itself, remained a sensitive chapter in “brotherly” relations. Through Soviet propaganda and communist ideological influences, with the emphasis on internationalism and understanding between peoples, this conflict was pushed to the background, with certain concessions being made, including the emergence of the Hungarian Autonomous Region in 1952, existing in various forms until 1968 (Anton 2012, 378). The changes in approach coincided with changes in the party leadership and also with the reorientation of the national policy of the Romanian Communist Party. Although the Region was abolished, the new counties continued to contain a considerable percentage of ethnic Hungarians. In this context, in the Mureş County, the Romanian population exceeded the Hungarian one in percentage terms, and in the municipality of Mures this was to happen in 2002 (Lupu et al. 1980, 175). Throughout the “national-communist” period, the frustrations and discontent of the Hungarian community

increased, and in 1989 they overlapped with the discontent of the entire population, fuelled by the lack of many facilities and the economic difficulties at the end of the regime.

REVOLUTION IN MULTI-ETHNIC SPACES

Unfortunately, against the backdrop of the revolutionary events that took place throughout the country on 22nd – 25th December 1989, reprehensible acts were committed in the Harghita and Covasna counties as well as in areas of Mureş against those who were seen as representatives of the authorities, although in many cases the violence was based on ethnicity, not just the position held. During the events of the 22nd of December 1989, and in the period that followed, these counties witnessed the destruction and desecration of monuments dedicated to the Romanian army, Romanian heroes or Romanian personalities, with schools, churches, cemeteries and state institutions being partially destroyed in places such as Covasna, Baraolt, Zăbala, Odorhei, Frumoasa, Lutiţa and Miercurea Ciuc (Special fund, File 3). Due to the violent actions that took place on militia headquarters in the two counties, 35 headquarters in Harghita and 3 posts in Covasna were almost completely destroyed. The damage caused amounted to more than 10 million lei, at the exchange rate of that period, without being able to recover the damages as in most cases the perpetrators were unknown and not identified.

The main political force in these counties, which had the full support of the Hungarian population, was officially formed. So these grievances materialised and led to the formation of the UDMR (Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania) in the early days of the revolution, on the 25th of December 1989. Although the union claimed that it “fully endorses and supports the programme of the National Salvation Front”, it essentially became an “organisation representing and defending the interests of the Hungarian minority in our country” (Ziarul Cuvântul Liber 1989) . One of the mistakes in the approach from the very first days of its foundation was the refusal to condemn those reprehensible acts in the mentioned localities, and in many other areas where the majority was owned by the Hungarian community. The party coordinated most of the protest activities, but did not take a public stance against the atrocities committed by the majority population in certain areas, limiting itself each time to contesting what had happened. Although the forms of violent demonstration were reduced, especially after Domokos Geza’s statement, the actions were to take a more subtle form.

First of all, one can consider the emergence and expansion of Hungarian actions in localities where this population was the majority. The Romanian nationality was replaced by the Romanian leadership under the accusation of “Ceauşism”; teachers and pupils were expelled from certain schools, in some cases

Romanian families were threatened, the names of localities, institutions and streets were changed abusively, and bilingual writing was used, highlighting the old Hungarian name (Judea 2005, 93). Similar situations were also encountered in localities in Mures county, such as in the spa town of Sovata, where under the pretext of quarrelling with the “Ceaurescu”, houses were set on fire, property was completely destroyed and doctors and service staff in the resort were subjected to pressure and threats. In Târgu Mureș, the county town, the Romanian-Hungarian relations in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, although they appeared to escalate, did not manifest themselves with open violence. On the contrary, there was a phenomenon of mutual isolation, of the disintegration of unity during the revolutionary activity.

In this context, as a group through which elements of the Romanian community expressed themselves, the Vatra Românească Union (UVR) was founded. On 8 February 1990, in the Polivalenta Hall, Vatra Românească was born, “a group of civic and cultural attitude with a pronounced orientation to support the national being and to fight against anti-Romanian manifestations”. It occupied an important position in the context of the power vacuum and the non-functioning of state institutions, in order to “counteract the aggressive actions of some extremist elements in the UDMR, which had destabilised this area of the country”. Vatra Românească thus claimed to form “a defensive wall against the separatist and extremist wave”, being “the rock on which the Hungarian irredentist wave crashed” (Interview Sabău-Pop 2021).

On that date, the press of the time mentions the event where “(...) almost 15,000 people, inhabitants of the municipality of Târgu Mureș and other localities of the county, workers, peasants, intellectuals, participated in a popular assembly organized by the Vatra Românească Union. Young and old, men and women, in the hall and on the platform in front of it, made a covenant for the dignified elevation of Romania among the peoples of the world, for the unity of our Transylvanian nation, which is and must be united, for the fight against any separatist, autonomist attempts, from whomever they may come, for harmony and brotherhood with the neighbouring nationalities. (...) Mr. Ioan Sabău, a judge, opened this manifestation of the soul, thanking those present for making history, writing history (...)” (Ziarul Cuvântul Liber 1990).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND ESCALATING TENSIONS

At the local level, the conflict between the two organisations, although not open and declared, was particularly visible in the two governing bodies at municipal and county level. Whereas the county leadership of the CPUN was dominated by Karol Kiraly, a former communist figure, party member since 1954, first party secretary in Covasna County, from where he was moved to the

Caraş-Severin County for demonstrations and expressions against the state policy regarding the Hungarian minority. After he returned to Târgu Mureş, he was under surveillance by the authorities and ended up being elected “county leader” during the events of December 1989, thanks to his notoriety within the Hungarian community (Kincses 2015, 92). He was even elected vice-president of the CPUN at national level, being considered a person close to President Ion Iliescu, as demonstrated by the numerous meetings and consultations held in Bucharest.

In the meantime, while Kiraly was in Bucharest, the election of the City Council of the FSN Târgu Mureş took place on December 27, whose president became Colonel Engineer Ioan Judea, while the secretary was Judge Ioan Sabau (Kincses 2015, 22). This duality in vision and leadership became more and more evident when we consider the decisions voted by the county authorities, led and coordinated by members of the UDMR, while at the local level the new Romanian leaders, mostly future members of the UVR, opposed them or considered them illegal.

The episodes that led to the escalation of tensions, and ultimately to the violence of 20 March, are those concerning “*pharmacy no. 28 in the Tudor district*”, an incident caused by the change of the display from Romanian to another, either dubbed or exclusively in Hungarian, depending on which side you ask. Then there is an incident in which an ethnic Hungarian hits a considerable number of Romanian pedestrians gathered between blocks, which in that context of maximum tension was also interpreted as an intentional action with a nationalist message. However, the most unfortunate events were those concerning the approach to education in Hungarian. This issue was raised in particular in the case of the “Bolyai Farkas” High School and the University of Medicine and Pharmacy. With regard to the high school, the RMDSZ leaders wanted the immediate separation of the Hungarian language classes from the current school year, thus creating a school exclusively taught in the minority language. This meant the expulsion of classes and teachers from the Romanian section, leading of course to an unfortunate segregation of the younger generation. In the case of the UMF, the intention here was to set up a completely separate institute, in which the entire teaching process would be conducted in Hungarian, the management would also be different from the existing University, and the students would be separated. In both cases it is worth analysing the approach of the Hungarian leaders, as the Bolyai High School was predominantly Hungarian, the director was also Hungarian, and the University has always allocated places for the Hungarian section.

With these demands came mass demonstrations, either by students or by political parties, to push for progress and to force the adoption of decisions in this regard. At the same time, events such as the vandalisation of the statue of Avram Iancu in Târgu Mureş and the knocking down of the bust of Nicolae Bălcescu in Sovata, which also took place in March, can also be mentioned. As for the school separation crisis, it reached its climax after education minister Mihai Şora decided

in a controversial telegram to evict 14 Romanian-language classes from Bolyai High School. Spontaneously, Romanian students gather in the upper courtyard and chant “We are brothers, don’t separate us!”, and “We are children as a nationality!”.

THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE

Thus, around noon on March 20, 1990, a demonstration with a very large number of participants took place in the centre of Târgu Mureș, with about 15–16,000 Hungarians gathered in front of the Prefecture Palace. In this context, the Romanian community perceived this mobilization as a prelude to actions aimed at destabilizing politics and seizing power by Hungarian leaders in various institutions. As such, a much less organized mobilization of only 2–3,000 ethnic Romanians started belatedly (Păcuraru and Bichir 2021, 165). As a result of these mass gatherings of demonstrators in the central area, violence predictably broke out, with the two masses clashing. During that afternoon, violent clashes took place in Târgu-Mureș, resulting in deaths and 263 injured (...), mostly Romanians. “(...) At Ernei, Dumbrăvioara, Sângeorgiu de Mureș, barricades are erected, Romanians are assaulted with pitchforks, shovels, metal bars, stones, etc.” The Hungarian demonstrators also suffered fewer casualties given their obvious numerical superiority. The dramatic events were filmed by Western crews placed to film the confrontations in which Mihăilă Cofar, a peasant from Ibănești, was savagely mistreated by ethnic Hungarians, later presented in foreign television reports as a “Hungarian beaten to death by Romanians” (Ziarul Cuvântul Liber 2014). The comments in the media, falsifying the truth, transformed the Hungarian demonstrators from aggressors into victims.

However, the Hungarian publications and then the writings of some of the main actors of these events themselves convey the idea of a “pogrom”, a “Black March” and premeditated actions. However, the following aspects should be analysed: how did a group of “vătrași” (as the members of the UVR were pejoratively called), together with a few hundred peasants from Hodac and Ibănești (as there were no more than 4–5 buses in which they arrived from that area), manage to cause a pogrom against an opponent ten times more numerous and not at all unarmed? Also, what kind of anti-Hungarian pogrom is it where most of the dead and wounded belong to “Romanian aggressors” and not to “peaceful and surprised unarmed” Hungarian demonstrators? (Millea 2015, 69).

From the events of that fateful day in March, the way the demonstrators were organised is also relevant. The crowd in front of the Prefecture and the “Grand” Hotel, coordinated from loudspeakers by Kincses Elod, Jacobazi Attila, Ilyes Kinga, chanted slogans such as “Now and here! (Itt és Most!)”, “Down with Vatra Românească!”, and the direct confrontation led to the injury of hundreds of

citizens, the vast majority of whom were Romanian. The hotel alone suffered more than 1 million lei in damage, 46 vehicles were damaged, and there were break-ins and thefts in almost all commercial establishments in the central area. The headquarters of parties and parties were damaged to the tune of 284,987 lei at the UVR, 299,067 lei at the UDMR, 7,000 lei at the PNL and the Orthodox church in Valea was set on fire, resulting in damage of 190,000 lei (Z. Dragoș 1995, 76).

This tragic moment in local and Romanian history must become a lesson in the danger of misinformation and out-of-control ethnic incitement. The segregation of communities and their separation led especially in those early days of democracy in Romania to the escalation of historically and culturally based tensions to unimaginable heights, even causing human casualties. The lack of effective intervention by the authorities, both on the part of the institutions of force and at central political level, the Government and the Presidency, made this confrontation possible. In the context of a shaky transition and new political forces, local leaders managed to dominate the landscape and influence large communities of people. In this equation, of course, there is the aspect of local press, also divided along ethnic lines, in our case the local publications dedicated to Romanians “Cuvântul Liber” and Hungarians “Nepujsag”.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion to be drawn from this unfortunate episode is one of prevention and caution. The key to the development of a society in a democratic and modern sense does not lie in ethnic cleavages or community divisions, but in cooperation and dialogue, through constant and honest interaction. Also, the March '90 moment will perhaps need the passage of a sufficient number of years for an analysis as objective and unbiased as possible, since from the Hungarian publications under consideration resorted to a complete blaming of the Romanians and the liberation of the Hungarian ethnicity from any guilt (Judea 2005, 95). Therefore, the study on the part of the Romanian researchers still requires further efforts to present all the details. Reality, however, will show us that the political environment in Romania in the 1990s will lead to the emergence of new violent events, in the form of the mineriads, also resulting in numerous victims, without being elucidated until today from a judicial point of view.

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