

The break-up of communism – between myths and reality in Romania

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Reviewed Book: "*The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*"

Author: Peter Siani-Davies

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After almost 10 years since the Romanian revolution of December 1989, both the academic community and public opinion of Romania, have still many doubts regarding the nature and the exact unfolding of those events. Peter Siani-Davies, one of the few western researchers involved in the study of the Romanian society, through his excellent work "*The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*", offers a detailed account of the Romanian revolutionary upheaval and of the difficult birth of democracy in Romania, giving at the same time an important contribution on the elucidation of the myths and realities of the Romanian revolution.

Following a linear and chronological structure, the author begins by analysing the causes of the Romanian revolution of December 1989, identifying grounds like the extreme food rationing that kept for years the population to the limit of starvation, the persistent human rights abuses with a particular focus on the restriction of abortions that determined the highest rates of maternal mortality in Europe, the rigidity of command economy, the peculiarities of Ceausescu's neo-Stalinist coercion-based regime, the lack of an organised dissidence correlated to the general popular discontent and the changed international context.

The author emphasises that this hardship of life conditions and the brutality of the communist regime in Romania was not a novelty in 1989, and seeks in-depth explanations of why the country erupted in revolution in December 1989 analysing the mechanisms of revolt and using detailed examples in connection to a solid theoretical foundation.

The following chapters provide the reader with a descriptive, but also analytical perspective of the events of December 1989, dividing it in two phases, prior and post December 22nd, the date of the capture of Nicolae Ceausescu and the establishment of the new leadership. With regard to the first phase, the author pays a particular attention to events like the eruption of the revolution in Timisoara, the escalation of the crisis through the spreading of revolts all over the country and the succession of events in Bucharest, describing it literary

hour by hour. As for the second phase, the author concentrates on the description of the general chaos generated by the fear of the so called "terrorists" and on the active role played by the television in the shaping of the events. The establishment of the new structure of power was based mainly on the removal of the twin pillars of the old regime, namely the Ceausescu family and the *Securitate*, the political police of the communist rule.

A particular emphasis is given by the author, in a separate chapter, to the counter-revolutionary forces who were responsible for the impressive number of victims, for the general confusion during the second part of the revolution and for the violent character of the revolution. As this book brings out, many of the above mentioned terrorists were part of the *Securitate* units, but their importance was generally exacerbated, being manipulated by the new formed government in order to gain legitimacy and to justify the unnecessary victims. Regarding the central argument of the role of the *Securitate* forces in the Romanian Revolution, the author also takes into account the conspiracy theories about certain plotting inside the system against the rule of Ceausescu, but concludes that the importance of such conspiracy prior to the overthrow of the communism should not be over exacerbated.

The book under review also offers a concise and well documented account of the formation of the new state administration under the leadership of Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front (NFS) and examines the matrix of ideas taken up by the Front. Beside giving a detailed picture of the structure and composition of the Council of the National Salvation Front, the author puts forward solid arguments for fact that even though apparently the general platform of the NFS was based on a reformed socialism associated to a socialist model of the market economy, in reality it was a non-ideological party appealing only to the creation of a general consensus and an organic solidarity.

"The Romanian Revolution of December 1989" has an excellent theoretical background, examines the most notorious revolution theories and analyses in-depth the events in 1989 in accordance to them. Moreover, it brings a valuable contribution to the elucidation of the myths and realities of the Romanian revolution, by analysing different perspectives on the events such as "revolution", "coup d'état" and "popular uprising", and by giving space for a fierce polemic over the nature of the revolutionary act.

It is important to notice that even if it takes into consideration the hypothesis of "coup d'état" or "coup de palace", widely debated among the international academic community, the book under review concentrates strictly on the revolutionary perspective of the analysed events, concluding that it was a "*violent and involved mass mobilisation , which led to the storming of the institutions of the old regime, followed by the establishment of revolutionary councils*". Hence, the author provides us with a very prudent conclusion and leaves the debate open. We consider important to point out that, event if the reviewed book is based on excellent sources, it fails to bring into discussion the documents of the communist archives, relying mainly on academic books and on journalistic sources. This is a fundamental aspect considering that the very

truth about the Romanian revolution of December 1989 can be known only when the entire archives will be available to the researches, fact that can only occur when all the ones accountable for the violent events will leave the political scene of Romania.

To conclude, we can certainly argue that many of the unanswered questions on the events of December 1989 can find their response in Peter Siani-Davies's brilliant work about the Romanian revolution.

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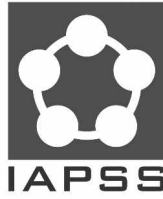
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