1989 DECEMBER REVOLUTION URBAN LEGENDS

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Abstract:
The urban legends about terrorists that emerged during the revolution of December 1989 represent a special category. They are closely connected to the manipulation and diversion techniques and are typical of the period in which they were launched. The consequences they entailed were dramatic, even tragic: civilian and military casualties, destruction and appropriation of valuable goods that were part of the national patrimony, the ridicule of military actions in those days, meant to counterattack the omnipresent invisible terrorists' 'imminent' assaults. These legends clearly show how entire masses can be manipulated, instilling feelings of terror into people's minds, playing upon their fear of repression, cruelty, death.

Key-words:
Urban legend, manipulation, diversion, Romanian National Television, terrorist.

The rumours and legends launched during the events of December 1989 hold a special place in Romania's recent history. We are referring to those provocative, aggressive urban legends that emerged and were persuasively disseminated, starting with the afternoon of December 22nd 1989, by the national television and radio channels and later by the written press all over Romania and abroad. They spread over an extremely wide geographical area, even beyond the Romanian borders, being favoured by their transmission through national media channels; nonetheless, they have been little analysed historically and sociologically, although

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the specialised literature extensively approached these events from various angles and perspectives[1].

This can be explained by the *particular nature of their content*, which is typical of the military specialised (espionage and counterespionage) institutions that conceived them, a content related to diversion, disinformation and manipulation, by the *context* in which they emerged (revolution, protest movements, local armed conflicts, etc.), as well as by the harmful *consequences* they entailed: civilian and military casualties, destruction and appropriation of valuable goods that were part of the national cultural and historical patrimony, the ridicule of military actions in those days, meant to counterattack the omnipresent invisible terrorists' 'imminent' assaults. Typically, such legends have a *time-limited duration*, are conceived and launched during social, political crises, civil wars, armed conflicts and produce effects mainly in the short term, but also in the long run, depending on the purpose pursued by their sources.

All the legends launched in December 1989 had a direct and immediate emotional impact on the mentality of large social and professional categories of our country, being designed to disinform, manipulate and negatively influence the masses; the inducement of feelings of anxiety, fear, physical insecurity, terror ultimately created a background of chaos that thousands of people fell victim to (both civilians and militaries were either killed or wounded).

The effects of these legends were immediate: several activists from the second and third echelons of the former Communist Party established themselves as the political leaders of Romania; an important institution of the national security system, the Securitate as a whole, was denounced and later dissolved; the entire Army was blamed for the direct involvement in

[1] More than 500 volumes have been published. Based on these legends, they approach the events from different points of view, namely from the perspectives of the various institutions involved, such as the Army, the former Securitate and Police officers, or of the various personalities directly engaged in those events, such as Ion Iliescu, Gelu Voican Voiculescu, General Victor Atanasie Stănculescu, etc.

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the repression of riots in Timişoara and Bucharest (until December 22nd, 1989); the individual disparagement of several superiors from the Ministry of National Defence, that of Internal Affairs and from the Department of State Security who did not execute Nicolae Ceauşescu's orders to shoot the demonstrators, etc.

Furthermore, at a later stage, these legends were designed to prompt the withdrawal from the streets of protesters, whose large-scale, out-of-control movements the newly established political leadership from Bucharest feared. Ultimately, these legends, even with all the tragic consequences they triggered, accelerated the fall of the totalitarian communist regime and its replacement with a modern democratic system.

Of the numerous diversionist legends which emerged in December 1989 and which entered the "black" history of that period, there were some defined by such phrases as: "foreign tourists *have invaded* Romania", "terrorist-Securitate", "poisoned water", "blood infestation"; "fanatic orphans" raised to blindly obey Ceauşescu; "ammunition and guns carried to the church in the kollyva basket or hidden under the skirts of terrorists disguised as old women".

Prior to the events that occurred after December 16th, 1989, a legend seized the public mentality, namely that of the "invasion" of Romania by *numerous groups of 'foreign tourists'*, generally young men with an athletic physical constitution, who spoke Romanian and Russian and who were driving cars registered in the USSR:

"During the 1989 revolution, tens of thousands of Soviet tourists, most of them from Bessarabia, invaded Romania; they were, in fact, the triggers of the revolution. Supposedly, they were not at all real tourists, but undercover KGB agents".[2]

"I know from a friend that, when the Revolution broke out in Romania, there was an impressive movement of forces on the eastern front.

[2] http://forum.softpedia.com/index.php?showtopic=139880&st=18 (published July 22nd, 2007, accessed on February 23rd, 2012).

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Thousands of KGB agents from the present-day Republic of Moldova had crossed the border a few months earlier and worked pro-revolution, instigating to revolt. Un unknown number of tanks were near the border, ready to cross it in case the revolution had succeeded. The purpose was to establish a regime of anarchy and civil war, and later on the Soviet power would have intervened to 'settle down' the situation. Soviet helicopters wanted to cross the border in the Jassy area. But the Chief of the General Staff of Moldova intervened, stating that he would shoot anything and anyone pushing the border. Such deployments may have occurred in other areas of the country, for example in the west."[3]

Apparently, the legend of the invasion of foreign tourists is not completely out of touch with reality. This is proved by *Raportul SRI privind revoluţia din decembrie 1989* ('The Romanian Intelligence Service Report on the revolution of December 1989), according to which, on December 19th only, 207 cars registered in the USSR passed through Braşov County on the Braşov - Făgăraş – Sibiu route, and on December 21st and 22nd the Soviets occupied the parking lots of several hotels. The Securitate units in charge of monitoring them reported that most of them were Bessarabian and spoke Romanian (Cartianu *et al.*, 2011: 218). In Constanţa County too, in December of 1989, there was a wave of 'tourists' who entered the country through the border crossing points of Vama Veche and Negru Vodă in cars registered in Ukraine, Russia and Bulgaria. The passengers (four or five in each car) were usually robust, short-haired men. Furthermore, *Raportul Comisiei senatoriale privind acţiunile desfăşurate în revoluţia din decembrie 1989*[4] ('The Report of the Senate Commission regarding the events that occurred during the revolution of December 1989') specifies in vol. I, on page 618, that starting with December 9th 1989 the number of Soviet tourists in private cars increased

[3] http://mituriurbane.vira.ro/category/mituri-urbane/conspiratie/page/2/ (published February 21st, 2007, accessed on February 23rd, 2012).

[4] Available at http://posturi.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/schimbarea_vol-i_si-cu-anexe_.pdf (accessed on August 21st,).

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up to 80-100 a day and that, during routine checks carried out on such cars, the traffic officers found that some occupants were actually militaries.

During the bloody events of Timişoara, Bucharest and other areas in the country where casualties were reported, many witnesses signalled the presence of such "tourists" who were discussing in Russian or in Romanian with a pronounced Russian or Bessarabian accent. Some of them were involved in shootouts with Romanian military forces who had set up check points at the main entrances of some cities.

By far, the diversionist "terrorist-securitate" legend, launched aggressively and persuasively first by the national television and then supported by the main international media channels, was that which triggered violent actions with extremely serious consequences, thus leading to numerous victims among the civilians and militaries: officially, 957 deaths were recorded from the 22nd to the 25th of December (of the total number of 1,116 deceased during the events of December 1989).

It should be noted that this particular phrase was first launched and broadcast in the afternoon of December 22nd, when General (res.) Nicolae Militaru, who had been the Chief of the General Staff and vice-minister of the Ministry of Defence in the 1970's[5], appeared in the Romanian Television studios. He justified his presence at the television by stating that he had been a "victim" of Ceauşescu's totalitarian regime and vehemently required the armed forces to *cease the slaughter*[6] at a time when, all over the country, the troops had been ordered to withdraw to the barracks and all the institutions of the defence system, public order and national security (Ministry of National Defence, Ministry of the Interior, Department of State Security) had publicly declared their adhesion to the

[5] He was identified as a Soviet agent and in 1978 he was removed from the command of the General Staff; then, in 1983, he was put in reserve.

[6]See Gen. Militaru's address on TVR from December 22nd, 1989, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcBdsubmLcA&feature=related, *Revolutia din 1989 part 4* (publishedon January 1st, 2007, accessed on August 21st, 2014).

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revolution, while, in the afternoon of the same day, the presidential couple had been arrested at Târgovişte.

The irrational, aggressive and persuasive information bombardment, triggered by the (so-called 'Free') Romanian Television by broadcasting contradictory rumours/news and press releases according to which paramilitary groups that were loyal to the former dictator or the Securitate military troops were allegedly attacking the army and other civil institutions, created an atmosphere of extreme nervousness among the participants in the events and those who were watching everything on TV. All the more so as many such "messages" were vehemently supported by several *emanaţi*[7]of the Revolution and the anti-Securitate psychosis instilled into people's minds was to entail numerous abuses and excesses.

In fact, creating a false target towards which all economic, social, political, religious dissatisfactions, historically accumulated in society in a certain period of time, should be directed is a crowd manipulation technique, verified and confirmed throughout history. The people's negative perception, even fear, related to the Securitate was also played upon.

The „Securitate-terrorist" legend was *amplified by the media* and *persuasively sustained* by public persons who, owing to repeated appearances on national radio and television channels, had already penetrated the public consciousness (Ion Iliescu, Silviu Brucan, Petre Roman, Gelu Voican Voiculescu, Mircea Dinescu, Ion Caramitru, Gen. (res.) Nicolae Militaru and so on).

All these allegations were designed to basically trigger the hunting of *any* Securitate employee (espionage, counterintelligence, anti-terrorism units, etc.). This is what can be called a disindividualisation of the "enemy" in which the journalist Bogdan Ficeac identifies a manipulation technique that aims to encourage aggressive behaviour (Ficeac, 1997: 22).

[7] The term *emanat* was frequently used after the 1989 Revolution, usually ironically, and designated a person that had no contribution or merit to the events, but benefited from them.

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The techniques of dehumanising the enemies by describing them as dangerous monsters, by depriving them of any human trait makes it possible for executants (ordinary people, for the most part) to exterminate them without hesitation or remorse (Ficeac, 1997: 22).

In order to sustain the "Securitate-terrorist" diversionist legend, aggressively and persuasively launched on December 22nd mainly on the National Television in Bucharest and several other county capitals in the country, armed units belonging to the Department of State Security, officers or militaries from the Securitate troops, were drawn to conflict areas – an order given even by Army officers – under the pretext of neutralising alleged terrorists; they were to be slain and later presented to the public as "terrorists".

Such a bloodcurdling event occurred on the evening of December 23rd 1989, in front of the Ministry of National Defence head office. Two USLA (Special Counter-terrorism Unit) troops had been called to neutralise the attacks of terrorists "infiltrated" into the buildings around the ministry. An Army subunit, that was also here, opened fire, without warning, against the two USLA vehicles killing eight officers, including their commander, Gheorghe Trosca. On the two armour-clad vehicles someone wrote "terrorists" and the bodies of the fighters were left in the street and desecrated until December 28th. Moreover, the commander was decapitated and his head was placed as a "trophy" in a tyre with a cigarette in his mouth[8]. The next day, the survivors of this massacre and the entire Romanian people learned from radio, TV and the written media that USLA "terrorists" had "attacked the National Defence headquarters" where the new leaders of the country had gathered.

That same night of December 23rd/24th another diversion with similar tragic consequences happened at Otopeni Airport. Students from Câmpina School of Signals of the Security Troops Command had received

[8] See the article "Crimele Revoluţiei: măcelul de la MApN" in *Adevărul* newspaper, available at http://adevarul.ro/news/societate/crimele-revolutiei-macelul-mapn-1_50ad16c87c42d5a6638e7aa3/index.html (published on November 29th, 2009, accessed on August 21st, 2014).

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orders to head for the airport and help the military defence unit there. But, on arrival, the National Defence Ministry unit started to shoot at the Câmpina brigade; the slaughter resulted in 40 dead and 13 injured cadets.

Generalised terror was set up by the dissemination of rumours announcing catastrophes, reprisals, attempts, and the use of words with heavy significance: *poison*, *blood*, *terrorist* etc. Here is an example:

"A motorised armour-clad convoy is heading for Piteşti to occupy the atomic point, the refinery, the cyanide reservoirs, the dam from Curtea de Argeş… the city of Piteşti may completely disappear from the map […] we demand that the Army intervene… we demand the people to urgently go there, to intervene… the aviation to intervene, everyone that can do anything to stop the armour-clad convoy…"[9].

Another legend launched on national television, which produced strong emotions and feelings of fear, panic and revolt among those who were watching the Romanian revolution live, was that about the "infestation of the drinking water by the terrorists", namely of water treatment plants and reservoirs that supplied urban communities. Teodor Brateş, the deputy chief editor of the television news department: *"Inimical groups, the Securitate officers, have poisoned the water at Sibiu, Timişoara. Water should be filtered before consumption"*[10].

In order to emphasise *with intensity* (and produce a strong emotional effect in people's minds) that the "terrorists" were capable of any abominable deed to rescue the Communist dictatorship and Nicolae Ceauşescu, another legend was launched on the National Television as well, that of the "infestation of the blood" used for transfusion, which points out that this legend, just like all the others, had all the features of an

[9] See the documentary "Piepturi goale și buzunare pline", produced by Cornel Mihalache, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyDGVjr4-88 (loaded on January 5th, 2013, accesses on August 21st, 2014) - Cazimir Ionescu's address on the Romanian National Television, December 22nd, 1989.

[10] TV address, December 22nd, 1989, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp02KojXhCc (loaded on September 5th, 2010, accessed on August 21st, 2014).

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organised diversionist action. The two TV employees Victor Ionescu and Teodor Brateş, who were actually the main broadcasters of alarmist legends on the national channel, announced on December 22nd in the afternoon that the terrorists had "destroyed the blood deposits in hospitals"[11], which is utterly untrue as are all the other diversionist legends that were meant to generate fear and terror among the population.

Another legend which aimed to call attention to the omnipresence and unlimited military power of the "invisible terrorists" was launched in Studio 5 of the Romanian '*Free*' Television, again in the afternoon of December 21st. The citizens were warned that they could fall victim to terrorists even in churches while attending the service; that the terrorists were carrying munitions and guns in baskets of kollyva or had disguised as old women and hid the weapons under the skirts; that the terrorists were hiding in cemeteries and attacking those who came there: in Sibiu, "*there's shooting coming from the cemetery chapel*" and "*terrorists were seen coming in and out of the chapel with chests full of weapons*"; there was also information that next to the Romanian-Hungarian border, between Crişul Alb and Beba Veche, and in the vicinity of the Romanian-Yugoslavian border, between Beba Veche and the Nera river, groups of terrorists were hiding in the cemeteries of the frontier localities (Sava and Monac, 1999: 325-328).

Other such alarmist rumours were: the infestation with viruses and toxic substances of the great animal farms in Jassy County, hence their products (meat, milk) were harmful to consumers; the terrorists planting bombs under the main bridges of the county or mining the power plant and the oxygen plant of Oţelul Roşu (Sava an Monac, 1999: 323).

Journalist Bogdan Ficeac considers the Romanian revolution to be "*an exceptional factual material for identifying the many manipulation*

[11]See the documentary "Piepturi goale și buzunare pline", produced by Cornel Mihalache, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyDGVjr4-88 (loaded on January 5th, 2013, accesses on August 21st, 2014) and the volume *Revoluţia română în direct* (ed. by Mihai Tatulici), pp. 47-61.

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techniques that functioned perfectly, from the radio-electronic war to the television's decisive role in magnetising the masses" (Ficeac, 1997: 22). According to him, maintaining a permanent state of tension makes it possible to render the individual vulnerable, hence easy to manipulate. The confusion created during the revolution of December 1989, the rout, alongside the rumours about terrorists and tragedies increased the state of tension, inhibiting reason and prompting ordinary people to kill their fellowmen (Ficeac, 1997: 21). The release of the legends and rumours previously discussed aimed to establish a generalised reign of terror by exploiting fear – fear of repression, of cruelty, of death.

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