

# **“Original democracy”: A rhetorical analysis of Romanian post-revolutionary political discourse and the University Square protests of June 1990**



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**ABSTRACT:** In the aftermath of the contested Romanian anti-communist revolution of December 1989, the National Salvation Front (NSF), led by Ion Iliescu, emerged as the country’s provisional government. Amidst increasing suspicions of the revolution having been a strategic coup d’état orchestrated by the neo-communist NSF, in June 1990, protesters gathered in Bucharest’s University Square demanding the removal of the NSF government. To maintain the narrative rationality of the story of an authentic revolution, and to thus legitimize his claim to power, Iliescu employed a set of rhetorical tactics meant to reaffirm his commitment to democracy and to antagonize the emergent sphere of civic activism, while simultaneously reigniting deeply-entrenched class struggles. Through his political discourse, Iliescu managed to shift public perceptions of democracy, legality, and moral purity, by reframing unconstitutional measures, employing the redemptive rhetoric of revolutionary heroism, and strategically using the familiarity of communist rhetoric to ensure the public’s continued allegiance.

**KEYWORDS:** Romania, revolution, rhetoric, Iliescu, University Square protests



## **INTRODUCTION**

For 52 consecutive days in the spring and summer of 1990, thousands of demonstrators gathered in Bucharest’s University Square to protest against the new government led by Ion Iliescu and the National Salvation Front (NSF), who had risen to power during the Romanian anti-communist revolution of December 1989. The demonstrators challenged the NSF’s neo-communist political orientation and their dubious role in the revolution believed by many skeptics to have been a strategic coup d’état while protesting against the party’s right to run in the national elections of May 1990. Seeing that the demonstration did not cease after the much-disputed elections, the newly elected President Iliescu decided to call in the coal miners of the Jiu Valley in order to violently repress the protests in University Square. The

resulting confrontation left 900 people injured and 67 dead. In a memorable speech delivered on the train platform as he saw the miners off on their return trip back to their homes, President Ion Iliescu thanked them for helping him quell “the fascist attempt to create a coup d’état,” praising their “civic consciousness” and “democratic zeal” (Ilieşiu & Rus, 2010).

The casualties resulting from this intervention, and President Iliescu’s utterly undemocratic manner of handling the popular opposition, have stained Romania’s modern history and hindered the national impetus to consolidate the fragile democracy that the country had fought so hard to establish less than six months earlier. More importantly, though, the way that the government overtly stifled the first public attempts at democratization represented an ominous indication of the NSF’s compromised approach to democracy building, as reflected in policy and rhetoric throughout their provisional governance.

This paper investigates Iliescu’s rhetoric in the aftermath of the December 1989 revolution, culminating with the events in University Square in June 1990. It seeks to explain how it functioned to legitimize his party’s claim to power and to simultaneously antagonize the budding civic sphere of democratic activism, as represented by the student demonstrators. Specifically, Ion Iliescu used populist political rhetoric to shift public perceptions of moral purity, legality and commitment to democratic values, in order to strengthen his claim to leadership in the new post-revolutionary political context. At the same time, he manipulated public views regarding the nature of the anti-NSF manifestations in University Square a turning point in Romanian politics, and now considered the authentic revolution of the Romanian people (Cesereanu, 2003) by presenting them as a threat to democracy and to the institutions of the state.

## **CEAUSCESCU’S TOTALITARIAN REGIME AND THE DISPUTED REVOLUTION OF 1989**

In order to understand the roots and implications of the NSF’s post-revolutionary rhetoric, it is necessary to begin with a brief historical survey of the developments leading up to the protests in University Square. This survey must clearly include the anti-communist revolution immediately preceding the demonstrations, but in fact it must stretch back much further in time, to discuss some defining characteristics of the Romanian communist regime. As Linz and Stepan (1996) perceptively point out, it is the exceptional traits of Nicolae Ceausescu’s rule in Romania that have shaped both its transition to democracy and the national spectrum of dissidence whose frailty allowed for the NSF’s insidious success.

Nicolae Ceausescu rose to power in 1965, as First Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party. After visiting China and North Korea in the early 1970s and witnessing the impressive personality cults of General Mao and Kim II Sung, Ceausescu remodeled his regime to emulate the sultan-like traits that he found so striking (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Over the next two decades, as his regime gradually turned

into a dictatorship, he successfully carved a culture of servility and sycophantism, dominated by fear and repression, and unilaterally centered on his own persona.

Ceausescu's domestic policy was especially adept at obliterating all opportunities for dissidence. Unlike in other Soviet satellite countries, in Romania opposition to the regime was practically non-existent. Typewriters had to be officially registered with the police, and "failure to report a conversation with a foreigner was a criminal offense" (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Informers of the Securitate were abundant, and all major Romanian intellectuals were put under permanent surveillance, with many of them imprisoned and constantly harassed by the government (Deletant, 1995). A study by Radio Free Europe reveals that in 1989, just before the outbreak of the anti-communist revolution, Romania had only two independent movements in operation, as compared to as many as sixty such movements in Poland (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Apart from the general leadership vacuum caused by this lack of dissidence, the extreme mobilization that characterized Ceausescu's regime transformed Romania into "a nation of Dalmatian dogs" where everybody is tainted (Ratesh, 1991); thus, in the wake of the regime collapsing, the problem of recruiting democratic leaders that are both experienced and morally righteous became all the more challenging.

The Ceausescu regime did fall, nevertheless, despite the fact that there was almost no internal dissent. In a brutal uprising in December 1989, Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu were forced to flee, following violent riots that originated in the city of Timisoara. Under these circumstances, the newly-created political organization by the name of the National Salvation Front (NSF), led by Ion Iliescu, managed to shrewdly seize power and "capture" the revolution, self-proclaiming itself, amidst the chaos and confusion of those days in December, as the victor of the transition, and the caretaker of the fragile new regime that was about to be instituted. Many questions still remain in regard to the originators of the uprising, the controversial order to open fire on the protesters, and the hidden agenda behind these seemingly spontaneous popular riots. The Romanian revolution continues to be surrounded to this day by mystery and suspicion, and a national survey taken ten years after the events revealed that 40% of respondents still think it was a revolution, 36% believe it was a coup, and perhaps even more revelatory 19% don't know or cannot answer (Ely & Stoica, 2004).

Found and arrested on December 22, the Ceausescus were summarily executed by a firing squad on Christmas Day, 1989. Although an NSF spokesman had promised a public trial when the Ceausescus were captured on December 22, three days later it announced that Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu had been tried by a secret military tribunal, sentenced to death for genocide, and swiftly executed before the day was over (Calinescu & Tismaneanu, 1992). The quick execution has been since interpreted as a conscious political move by the Front, in their attempt to prevent the dictator from revealing unflattering details about the NSF members' own communist pasts. The proceedings of the tribunal, as well as its actual composition, are

still surrounded by mystery, as the NSF government only released a 50-minute videotape of a 9-hour-long trial, and it is indeed quite difficult to justify such decisions in a moment when transparency and justice were of the utmost significance (Gallagher, 2005; Ratesh, 1991).

The origins and formation of the NSF further supports the view that the revolution was in fact a well-engineered coup d'état. In a video taken during the initial meeting of the NSF on December 22, General Nicolae Militaru is heard saying that the organization had actually been constituted six months earlier, which utterly contradicts the official version that the NSF emerged as a spontaneous revolutionary body after the start of the events in Timisoara (Ely & Stoica, 2004). Moreover, it was a widely known fact that the top NSF leaders, including Iliescu himself, had been former members of the Communist Party and had close ties to the Ceausescu regime: essentially, the NSF was comprised of former party officials, the nomenclatura, the army and the Securitate. The issue of how a supposedly popular and spontaneous revolution could have brought so many former Communists back in power intensified the liberals' criticism of the party, fueling the suspicions that the uprising had in fact been a carefully staged coup d'état (Siani-Davies, 2001).

### **NARRATIVE RATIONALITY AND ILIESCU'S RHETORICAL CLAIM TO LEADERSHIP, DECEMBER 1989–APRIL 1990**

However, in the immediate aftermath of the events in December 1989, the story of the revolution as a grassroots rebellion of the Romanian people, independent of any political agenda by the NSF, was widely believed among the Romanian public. Indeed, at the time since temporal considerations are critical in this case, and the story has been interpreted differently in retrospect it passed the two tests of narrative rationality, as identified by Fisher (1987). First of all, the story had narrative fidelity, since Romanians really *wanted* to believe that the revolution was authentic and spontaneous. In the public conscience, this made up for more than 30 years of muteness and political passivity under Ceausescu's regime, and, furthermore, was also in line with the developments in the neighboring Eastern Bloc countries, which had all undergone anti-communist revolutions in the previous 2 months. Thus, the snowballing effect of revolutionary action sweeping over Eastern Europe in late 1989 lent additional fidelity to the story of the Romanian revolution.

The case for narrative probability is slightly more complex. Specifically, at the time of its occurrence, and immediately afterwards, the story of the revolution as an authentic and spontaneous uprising was indeed coherent and thus had narrative probability (Fisher, 1987), especially given that the major evidence in favor of a coup d'état would not be unearthed for several years to come. However, the subsequent actions of the NSF in the aftermath of the revolution worked to gradually decrease the plausibility of the official story, and lend further credibility to the theory of a coup. Iliescu's solution to maintaining the much-needed narrative probability was to em-

ploy rhetoric in order to justify their non-democratic actions and their claim to leadership. This was achieved through several rhetorical strategies: primarily, re-framing illegal or unconstitutional political measures, employing the redemptive rhetoric of revolutionary heroism, and strategically using the familiarity of communist rhetoric to ensure the public's continued allegiance. Let us now examine each of these tactics in turn.

First, Iliescu managed to strategically craft his public discourse in order to re-frame his party's non-democratic practices after the revolution as symptoms of political fluidity and flexibility. He was right in sensing that this rhetoric of political flexibility a concept associated with the systemic openness characterizing democratic regimes would be appealing in the wake of Ceausescu's dictatorship, which had been characterized by an extraordinary degree of rigor, exclusivity, and lack of transparency. One of Iliescu's most notorious rhetorical staples in the period immediately following the revolution was his repeated use of the term "original democracy" to describe Romania's new political path, as envisioned by the NSF (Gallagher, 2008; Gussi, 2006). From a linguistic point of view, it is important to specify here that, in the Romanian language, the word "original," as used by Iliescu in this context, is understood in the sense of "creative" or "innovative," and not as "first or "initial."

But perhaps the most significant opportunity to reframe unconstitutional behavior as political flexibility came with the NSF's decision to participate in the national elections. After enlarging their ranks from 39 to 145 members all former members of the Romanian Communist Party (Rady, 1992) on January 23, 1990, the NSF announced its decision to run in the very elections that they were in charge of organizing. Their candidate for presidency was, unsurprisingly, Ion Iliescu, who motivated his party's electoral bid by claiming "pressure from below" (Gallagher, 2005). The NSF's decision to hold elections and compete as a political party so soon after they suspiciously seized power which denied the emerging opposition the adequate time to organize itself and to efficiently campaign was met with great dissent by Romanian intellectuals and members of the opposition. Critics pointed to the unconstitutional and illegal nature of participating in the elections as both a player and a referee; furthermore, this was complicated by the fact that the NSF was not a registered political party, but an interim government association. Moreover, the Front was in complete control of the country's media due to a remnant law from the Ceausescu regime had not been yet repealed so their monopoly over the means of mass information was seen as detrimental to the fairness of the upcoming elections (Gallagher, 2005).

Iliescu responded to these accusations of unconstitutionality by relying on the same concept of political openness, and presenting the situation as an opportunity to break with the rigor of previous political structures. In his speech on January 23, he justified the NSF's right to participate in the elections by referring to its status as a "movement of a democratic character," and not a "political party in the outdated

and historic sense of the word” (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010). Similarly, in another instance, Ion Ratiu a respected Romanian politician forced into exile by Ceausescu accused Iliescu in a televised debate in January 1990 that the NSF’s decision to run in the national elections would be seen as highly undemocratic in the West and could have negative implications for Romania’s external image. In line with his rhetorical strategy, Iliescu responded “Thank you for your advice, but we must have our own criteria to judge things, and we mustn’t rely on criteria imposed by someone else, from the outside. This is a question of democratic choice” (Iliescu, 1995).

An alternative way in which Iliescu and the NSF legitimized their decision to run in the elections and justified their claim to leadership was by employing effective revolutionary rhetoric, and stressing their redemptive role in the December uprisings. On one occasion, losing his temper, Iliescu made this point in a highly straightforward manner: justifying his claim to power in January 1990, he snapped at his political opponents: “I didn’t bake the cake for others to come and eat it!” (Ungureanu, 2010). Furthermore, the NSF adamantly presented itself as the “emanation of the revolution” (Rady, 1992); the use of the word “emanation” was thus meant to reinforce the idea of a natural process whereby the Front emerged as post-revolutionary leaders, in opposition to the accusation of a staged coup d’état. The Front’s insistence on its connection to the revolution worked very well in its favor, since at that time the most significant evidence supporting the theory of a coup d’état had not yet been made public, and the accusations of the NSF as “thief of the revolution” were seen to only circulate among the fervent youth and impassioned intelligentsia in University Square.

Iliescu further capitalized on public perceptions of the revolution to craft a discourse of redemption and political, social and economic salvation. The very name of the NSF (the “National Salvation Front”) is clearly indicative of this rhetorical strategy. In fact, this image of redemption was crafted and sustained as such from the very beginning of its political dominance. On December 22, 1989, announcing the formation of the NSF, Iliescu described its main function as that of “restoring the dignity of the Romanian people” (Iliescu, 1989). This rhetorical strategy worked because a lot of Romanians thought that the NSF’s actions on December 22 were crucial in ensuring the success of the uprising, and further appreciated the party’s decision to abrogate the cruelest laws and decrees of the Ceausescu era right after they took power (Rady, 1992). Immediately after seizing power, the Front filled the empty stores with groceries and alcohol, removed the rationing system used to distribute heat and electricity, shortened the workweek and issued passports on request. In view of Romania’s agonizing communist experience, it is not difficult to understand how these measures meant freedom to a country whose population had been deprived of the barest necessities and where “evil was so personified that the dictator’s disappearance created the instant fantasy of deliverance” (Ratesh, 1991). The third major rhetorical strategy that Iliescu used was perhaps the riskiest one: instead of adamantly breaking away from communist rhetoric, he actually

re-appropriated its key discursive features in order to build a familiar rhetorical platform that managed to appeal to the Romanian public and ensure their support. Even at the time, it was a widely known fact that Iliescu had held high-ranking positions in the Ceausescu administration. He had served as Head of the Propaganda Department, Secretary of the Communist Party Youth Organization, and Minister for Youth-Related Issues, in which capacity he played an active role in organizing the reprisals against student protesters and dissidents. In fact, his involvement with the Communist Central Committee was dubious enough that the NSF decided to not even publish his full biography during the election campaign leading up to May 1990. As Andrei Plesu, a noted Romanian statesman, perceptively observed, Iliescu “could not avoid having the reflexes of a Communist intellectual” (Rady, 1992), and indeed, it should have been a lot more worrisome that his public discourse sounded just like Ceausescu speaking twenty years earlier (Fisher, 1992).

In fact, however, in the eyes of the Romanian people in 1989-1990, this was not worrisome at all. Rather, Iliescu’s re-appropriation of communist rhetoric offered them familiar ground upon which to relate to political leadership, while at the same time Iliescu’s self-presentation as a true democrat dispelled their fear of regime continuity. In his first speech as revolutionary leader of the NSF on December 22, 1989 the day the Ceausescus were captured Iliescu addressed the public as “dear comrades.” In an interview one month after the revolution, he even justified his new leadership position by referencing his “life-long commitment to revolutionary communism” (Rady, 1992). His electoral campaign in the spring of 1990 ran under the quintessentially Ceausescu-like slogan: “When Iliescu comes, the sun rises” (Tismaneanu, 1993). And indeed this strategy worked: Iliescu won the presidential elections not by a small margin, but by receiving a shocking 85% of the votes (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1992).

Additionally, the extraordinary cult of personality that had characterized Ceausescu’s rule had a significant impact on the way in which Iliescu used this communist rhetoric. In order to ensure the palatability of their own neo-communist approach, Iliescu and the other NSF leaders took advantage of Ceausescu’s overtly personality-centered style of leadership to blame all evils of the former regime on Ceausescu himself, rather than on ideology or the actions of the nomenklatura. Speaking for the first time in front of the liberated crowds, Iliescu denounced Ceausescu and his entourage not for the horrible atrocities and abuses that their regime had caused, but for “proclaiming themselves communists.” “They have nothing to do either with socialism or with the ideology of scientific communism,” Iliescu declared. “They have only defiled the name of the Romanian Communist Party. They have also defiled the memory of those who have sacrificed their lives for the cause of socialism in this country” (Gallagher, 2005). Similarly, in a speech on television the following day, he referenced the country’s torturous communist experience by shouting: “The man guilty for all this is Ceausescu! A man without a heart, without a soul, without

brains, without reason! [...] Who is he to endanger the fate of this country, and to push the Romanian people into misery?!?" (Tatulici, 1990).

Thus, by employing the rhetoric of revolution and salvation, while simultaneously re-appropriating familiar communist discursive practices, and by reframing their unconstitutional actions as signs of democratic political flexibility, Iliescu and the NSF managed to justify their claim to leadership and win the allegiance of the Romanian people. It is also important to note that the efficiency of the NSF rhetoric was further aided by their control over the state-run media, which allowed them to disseminate this rhetoric easily and proficiently, and represented the exclusive information source of the Romanian public, in the absence of private media outlets in the immediate aftermath of the communist regime.

### **THE UNIVERSITY SQUARE DEMONSTRATIONS, APRIL–JUNE 1990**

However, while they might have managed to sway the general electorate, these rhetorical feats were not enough to divert NSF critics' attention from the Front's unconstitutional behavior as provisional government, and their increasingly overt neo-communist orientation. On 22 April 1990, a date chosen specifically to mark exactly four months from the December revolution, demonstrators started gathering in Bucharest's University Square to protest against these less than democratic developments, and to prevent the NSF from running in the May 1990 elections. They declared the University Square "an area free of neo-communism" and, as the days went on, their numbers swelled, reaching more than 100,000 participants, and the riots gained intensity, stretching for 52 consecutive days (Brotea & Beland, 2007). Most of the demonstrators were students. They were joined by professionals, doctors, engineers and other skilled workers whose abilities were likely to be in demand in a new market economy, and by a large part of the intelligentsia including the distinguished dissidents Doina Cornea, Ana Blandiana and Octavian Paler who were fighting for intellectual freedom. Several civic organizations, unaligned to any political party, were also present, most notably the 21 December Group, the People's Alliance and the League of Students (Calinescu & Tismaneanu, 1992).

The rioters' platform, as presented in their official manifesto, consisted of three principal demands. First, they sought lustration and decommunization, by the adoption of the 8th point of the Proclamation of Timisoara (referred to by Iliescu as a "dangerous witch-hunt"), which stipulated that top members of the Communist Party and the Securitate should be banned from every electoral list for three consecutive legislatures. Second, the protesters demanded that the elections be postponed until all competing parties had the funds to properly organize an electoral campaign. Finally, the demonstrators called for equal access to the state-controlled media for all electoral candidates, and not just representing the NSF. The NSF maintained control over the state television under a law passed by the former regime, which granted the government full exercise over the mass media that had not yet

been repealed. Thus, the state television channel, which was the main source of information for the Romanian electorate, gave unfair and extensive airtime to the NSF. This coverage also glorified the Front and presented the opposition in highly unflattering ways, by zooming in on barefooted gypsies at the Liberal Party's rallies or having its newscasters make faces when the names of the other candidates were mentioned (Rady, 1992).

These were fair conditions to demand from a provisional government, since it was clear that the NSF, beyond its own legitimacy issues, fell short of fulfilling its role as political caretaker in the transitional period. As Shain and Linz (1995) wrote, "if a genuine transition to democracy is intended, the interim government should annul the rules of the previous order that are incompatible with the freedoms required to conduct competitive elections. It should legalize freedoms of association for parties and of assembly, and provide enough time for campaigning, including fair access to the media."

Nevertheless, in spite of the widespread protests in University Square, the elections did take place on the scheduled date, May 20, and resulted in a landslide win for the NSF, which gained 66.3% of the vote, far ahead of the Hungarian Union, which was runner-up with a mere 7%. Iliescu was elected president with 85% of the vote (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1992).

The riots continued even after the elections, demanding the removal of the newly chosen government. Finally, on June 13, after 52 consecutive days of round-the-clock demonstrations, President Iliescu appeared on National Television, calling all "conscientious and responsible forces" to quell the demonstrations in Bucharest and restore the "democracy that we fought so hard for." Instead of using the legal tools at his command, Iliescu turned to the extralegal help of the coal miners, providing them with transportation to Bucharest in order to save the "besieged democratic regime" and restore order in the capital (Ungureanu, 2005). The government's repeated reliance on the miners as vigilante paratroops, and the miners' willingness to assist the NSF, can be explained by these workers' complete dependence on state subsidies: with the coal industry in sharp decline, the miners required state funds in order to survive, and it was relatively easy to mobilize them, in view of their social isolation and strong sense of group solidarity (Gallagher, 2005).

The miners arrived on the morning of June 14, and were received by NSF and Securitate officials who provided them with maps of the city, addresses of opposition activists and clubs to be used in "teaching a lesson" to the protesters who challenged the NSF's authority (Calinescu & Tismaneanu, 1992). Thus, armed with clubs, iron bars, chains and sledgehammers and many of them visibly intoxicated the miners descended upon Bucharest, brutally and indiscriminately beating up virtually any well-dressed person who found themselves in the city center, ransacking the headquarters of the opposition parties, groups and newspapers, and finishing off their violent spree with a horrendous pogrom in a gypsy neighborhood on the outskirts of Bucharest. After three days of violent clashes between the miners

and the protesters, more than 900 people were injured and 67 died, according to current estimates, in spite of the government's official death count of 4, released after the events (Matrescu, 1998). In an unforgettable speech on the train platform, seeing the miners off to Petrosani, President Ion Iliescu thanked them for helping him quell "the fascist attempt to create a coup d'état." "We know we can rely upon you," the President said in gratitude. "When necessary we will call upon you," (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010).

## **REPERTOIRES OF CONTENTION: THE RHETORICAL MANIPULATION OF UNIVERSITY SQUARE**

In order to mold public perceptions of the anti-NSF demonstrations in University Square, Iliescu again employed divisive rhetorical tactics to antagonize the protesters and to shift the public's understanding of democracy and legal conduct in this context, thus reasserting his own claim to power and justice. First of all, Iliescu used the demonstrations in University Square to reaffirm his supposed commitment to democracy, by framing the protesters as "fascist elements" aiming to "destabilize" the newly earned democracy. He accomplished this rhetorically by his use of polarizing political labels "democracy" versus "fascism" and his repeated references to the demonstrators as "fascists," "extremists," "legionaries," "terrorists" and "anarchists" (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010). These labels not only framed them in the eyes of the public as enemies of democracy, but also implied that the protesters belonged to organized (anti-democratic) political groups with specific agendas, when in fact they were a diverse group of young citizens, unaffiliated with any political party, movement, or ideology.

Iliescu's public speeches clearly addressed the protests as a threat to democracy, and a malicious destabilizing attempt. "Let's defeat this legionary rebellion and ensure the country's democratic progress!" he urged on public television in June 1990. Reemphasizing the image of the NSF as the savior of the revolution, while also employing the same type of communist rhetoric previously mentioned, he continued: "The truth is that these rightist forces want to derail the Romanian revolution towards the right. [...] We must be vigilant and ready for these attempts to destabilize the situation in the country, and we must maintain a spirit of mobilization amongst all those who want to defend Romanian democracy, the democracy that serves the many, the democracy that serves the people." Furthermore, in a truly populist, communist manner, his discourse directly pitted the demonstrators against the general public, calling their manifestations in University Square as an action against "all the honest people of Romania" (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010).

To further antagonize the protesters, Iliescu made clever use of class struggles deeply entrenched in the Romanian social system. He thus framed the events in University Square as a direct conflict between the "intellectuals" and the "working class," the latter best exemplified by the coal miners, who in Romanian culture

were seen as the quintessential incarnation of the working class. In his public discourse in June 1990, Iliescu called the student protesters “extremists”, “degenerates” or “legionaries,” and referred to the miners as “men of labor and discipline” with a “high civic consciousness” (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010). This positive framing of the working class as dutiful citizens is also reminiscent of the communist rhetoric, which constructs the proletariat as the true embodiment of “the people.” Moreover, Iliescu presented the miners’ violent descent upon Bucharest not as a deliberate and strategic measure orchestrated by the NSF (who called upon their help and paid for their transportation to Bucharest) but as the miners’ own voluntary and highly civic response to the situation, their own desire to stabilize the country, according to their duty as good citizens. Evidently, the use of class struggles to antagonize the protesters succeeded; the miners rolled into University Square shouting “Death to the intellectuals!”, “We work, we don’t think!” and “Students, students, you don’t know what work is!” (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010; Cesereanu, 2003)

Another significant way in which Iliescu used public discourse in the context of the demonstrations was to rhetorically blur the boundaries of legal behavior. He framed the extralegal force of the miners who were not legitimately entitled to use violence against civilians, this right being reserved for the law enforcement authorities as exemplary citizens with “high civic consciousness,” while, on the other hand, he presented the young protesters as delinquents, by referring to them as “hoodlums,” “hooligans,” “terrorists” and “drug addicts.” In a televised speech on June 14, Iliescu explained: “We are not dealing with peaceful protesters who have some quibbles with the government and just shout anti-government slogans; we are dealing with organized groups, fascists elements, many of them under the influence of drugs” (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010). In fact, Iliescu went so far as to claim, in the aftermath of the miners’ violent repression of the protests, that they had found drugs in the headquarters of the rival parties. These drugs were supposedly used by the NSF’s rivals to feed the rebellious frenzy of the protesters, and to keep them out in the Square. In his farewell speech to the miners, Iliescu said: “With your help, we have found in the headquarters of the PNT [National Peasants Party] home-made bombs, drugs, and syringes which were used to inject drugs to the demonstrators in University Square. In the basement of the building we found guns and sacks full of narcotic powders.” Although these objects were shown on national television on the day of the miners’ departure, a subsequent investigation by the State Commission proved these accusations to be false, and the television report to have been manipulated by the NSF (Ilieșiu & Rus, 2010).

However, referring to the protesters as “hoodlums” proved to be a huge rhetorical mistake, since Ceausescu had also called the revolutionaries in Timisoara “hoodlums” in December 1989. Thus, the rioters re-appropriated this label, and deliberately started using the term in self-reference, thus stripping it of its derogatory connotations and reinventing it as a badge of revolutionary activism. The pro-

testers even bestowed the title of “honorary hoodlum” or “academician hoodlum” on distinguished members of the intelligentsia, and draped a banner reading “University of Hoodlums” over the façade of the Architecture School (Brotea & Beland, 2007; Cesereanu, 2003).

In line with political theories of social movements, the University Square events further demonstrate the re-appropriation of “repertoires of contention” by insurgent groups (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001), which was clearly evident in the protesters’ recycling of the symbols and popular rhetoric of the December revolution for a new political purpose. Thus, the contentious repertoires of the revolution were re-appropriated and rechanneled in the songs, slogans and discourses of the riot: “Down with the Communists!” became “Down with the Neo-Communists!” and University Square was filled with banners that simply said “NSF=RCP” (Brotea & Beland, 2007), thus equating the Front with the former Romanian Communist Party and stressing the continuity between the December revolution and the protests four months later. The construction of University Square as the authentic, grassroots revolution of the Romanian people was one of the main themes underlying the rhetoric of the protesters. Some of the most popular slogans were: “The only solution: another revolution!”, “Ceausescu don’t be sad, Iliescu is a communist too!”, “A revolution is won, not stolen!” (Ilieşiu & Rus, 2010). Interestingly enough, just as the protesters tried to craft a discourse of moral and psychological association with the true revolutionaries of December 1989, so did Iliescu try to discredit this connection. In a public speech in June 1990, he stated that the demonstrators were not representative of the martyrs in December and he called them “counter-revolutionaries” (Cesereanu, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The role of interim governments in the immediate aftermath of a transition is of critical importance to a country’s process of democratization, and gains an even further significance in the weakened political climate typical of post-sultanistic states, where “the clientelistic system may continue to hold the polity hostage” throughout the first stages of democracy building. Furthermore, the provisional government is responsible for deciding the degree of political openness in the new post-totalitarian climate, including respect for human rights and a willingness to break with the injustices of the past (Shain & Linz, 1995).

The NSF’s political behavior as an interim government, and their unscrupulous willingness to use extralegal force to quell popular demands of democratization cast serious doubt on the future of democracy and rule of law in Romania, and gravely hindered Romania’s process of democratization throughout the decade in more ways than are readily apparent. Furthermore, it had catastrophic consequences for the country’s international image, at a time when it most needed the

West's assistance and good favors. Indeed, the events of June 1990 made Romania appear as "a strange country" in Western eyes (Cioflanca, 2000). Economic assistance from the West was immediately frozen, and Romania's request to join the Visegrad group of former Warsaw Pact countries, was promptly rejected (Gallagher, 2005).

The ease with which Iliescu managed to justify his claim to leadership and to win the allegiance of the Romanian people through strategic political rhetoric further lends support to the claim that the challenge of dealing with "dangerous democrats" such as Iliescu is similar to that of the "friendly tyrants" of the Cold War era (Calinescu & Tismaneanu, 1992). Furthermore, it makes one wonder whether patrimonialism, as evidenced by the gullible loyalty of the Romanian public towards Ion Iliescu, could in fact be understood as an inescapable political legacy that intrinsically affects post-communist states (Sellin, 2004).

The divisive rhetorical strategy that Iliescu used in the context of the University Square protests to take advantage of class struggles and pit the working class against the intelligentsia, continues to affect the cohesion of the Romanian social system. More than 20 years later, the country remains divided along class lines, and this state of social fragmentation has further hindered its prospects of unity and democratization.

Looking back on the protests of April-June 1990, the protesters' eagerness to sacrifice themselves in University Square has been interpreted as their attempt to redeem themselves after decades of civic passivity and moral compromise under the communist regime (Rady, 1992). The December revolution could have been the perfect opportunity for this ethical deliverance, but increasing rumors of conspiracies and the "capture" of the revolution rendered their fighting morally meaningless. Thus, the reiterated resort to street protests, and the protesters' common interpretation of the revolution, which facilitated a spirit of cohesiveness amongst participants, provided a new occasion for civic action and social unity, much welcomed by a segment of the population that felt robbed and fooled and bitter, but also spineless and ashamed.

University Square has now become a site of cultural memory. Its symbolism continues to act as a catalyst for civic action and social unity to this day, and the square has become the natural and undisputed setting for all political protests that have occurred in Bucharest ever since. Professor Emil Constantinescu's victory in the presidential elections of 1996, which marked the end of almost 7 years of the NSF's neo-communist rule, was celebrated at midnight on November 17 precisely in University Square. In his speech that night, the president-elect emphasized the symbolism of the plaza: "In this square we conquered liberty," he declared from the same historical balcony where he stood, as "academician hoodlum" seven years earlier. "This square is kilometre zero for democracy in Romania" (Chiriac, 1997).

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## Romanian post-revolutionary political discourse and the University Square protests

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