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Romania and the Hungarian Revolution

The exposure of Stalin's crime through the 'secret report' presented by Nikita Khrushchev during the last day of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Union's Communist Party in February 1956 was a hard blow for the leaderships of East-European communist parties. Following de-Stalinisation there was a possibility to challenge these leaderships which had until recently benefited from the endorsement of the former Kremlin leader, both within their own parties and at the social level.

In countries in which party leaderships were disunited, weak and compromised, such as in Poland or Hungary, they could not control party and society challenges, which evolved and united into mass movement and took a revolutionary turn. If in Poland there was ultimately a compromise around a reformist and nationalist policy represented by the group led by Wladislaw Gomulka, in Hungary, starting with the great demonstrations of 23 October 1956, events took a revolutionary path aimed at removing the communist government and leaving the Warsaw Treaty.



Within the Romanian Workers' Party (PMR) there was also an attempt to oust the leader in power, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. In April 1956, he was accused by two other leadership members, Miron Constantinescu and Iosif Chisinevski, of having played the role of a local Stalin during the previous years. The two, who had also been promoters of Stalinism, did not manage to get support from other leadership members and were defeated. The failure of the two contestants, corroborated with measures taken by authorities in order to control the de-Stalinisation process, increased the stability of the Bucharest regime and avoided any real threats against it during the Autumn of 1956. Despite this, the influence of events in Poland and especially in Hungary was also felt in Romania.

The most visible impact was the appearance of movements among students from Timisoara, Cluj, Brasov, Iasi and Bucharest. Within these university centres demonstrations were organised or attempts made to organise such rallies. In some places statements were made demanding not only an improvement of the students' situation but also protesting social, economic and political issues. In a statement by students in Timisoara on 30 October 1956 demands were made regarding the following issues: elimination of the cult of personality; ensuring the possibility that each working person could give his or her opinion of the country's internal problems without endangering personal integrity; immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops stationed in Romania; elimination of compulsory Russian language learning

or as an option; making scholarships available to peasant students, irrespective of their material wealth; media and speech freedom. During 30 and 31 October, which were the peak days of the Timisoara protests, 868 students were arrested. Only twenty-eight students and a university assistant were sent to trial, of which three were acquitted and the rest were sentenced to prison.

In Bucharest, thirty-nine students were arrested, members of six initiative groups. One of them was Paul Goma, the future writer and dissident. Goma, who was studying Philology, first tried to provoke a solidarity strike with his colleagues who had been arrested on 23 October. He did not succeed; therefore he chose a new form of protest: he wrote a literary fragment entitled 'Alone' and used the main character to voice the discontents he had wanted to express; then he read the text in public to students on 15 November 1956. He was arrested and convicted to two years in prison.

Although there were no mass protests apart from the student movements, in October–November 1956 the population expressed its own discontent with the political regime in various ways.. Some of this dissent was openly expressed, through statements or within sessions by party organisations. Others were expressed in private conversations or took illegal forms. In information notes taken by the Securitate it was mentioned that in Bucharest, for example, on Grivita Road a manifesto was found, entitled 'Let's fight to escape from enslavement!' At the Operetta and Ballet Theatre the text 'Down with the communists!' was found and at the Semanatoarea factory the text 'We want raise of salaries, if not we are making a strike!' was discovered. In Ramnicu Valcea inscriptions appeared such as: 'Down with the communist terror!,' 'Long live Titel Petrescu [former leader of the independent Social Democratic Party],', 'We want bread!,' and among teachers in Oltenita some 'hostile behaviour' was reported. There was even resistance within the army: 644 soldiers and civilian employees were sent to the Military Prosecutor's Office or put into the reserves. Lieutenant Teodor Margineanu, who had created a 'Revolutionary Committee' together with fourteen regular soldiers, was sentenced to death and executed.

In order to keep situation under control and prevent an extension of revolutionary events in Romania, the Bucharest authorities began taking measures as early as 24 October 1956, the day after the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution. On one hand, it was envisaged that there was a need to avoid Romanian-Hungarian contact among the population and so border and institutional security was increased. On the other hand, more attention was paid to improving food supplies for the population (bread, meat, oil, fats, etc.) and especially within great industrial centres. Salaries were raised, as well as child quotas and small pensions. Measures were taken to cancel the collection of compulsory quotas from peasants and to immediately pay agricultural products purchased from them through cooperatives. In order not to needlessly irritate the population, arrests were made only where these were considered absolutely necessary.

In the context of the increasingly serious situation in Hungary and of increasing unrest in Romania, on 30 October 1956 the PMR leadership decided to create a General Command led by Emil Bodnaras and made up of Leontin Salajan, Nicolae Ceaușescu and Alexandru Draghici, the leaders of the Army and of the Ministry of Interior. This Command was given extraordinary powers: it had the right to take any necessary measures to maintain order, including the give the order to open fire; it could declare emergency situations in certain areas or suspend courses in universities; it coordinated armed groups that ensured the safety of party and state institutions, as well as the border security at the border with Hungary.

On 1 November Nikita Khrushchev came to Bucharest to announce to PMR leaders that he had decided to use force in order to end the Hungarian revolution. The Bucharest leadership agreed with this decision and even offered to contribute troops together with the Soviets. Khrushchev did not accept the offer; instead, he accepted the later proposal made by Gheorghiu-Dej that former Prime Minister Imre Nagy and the other members of the Hungarian revolutionary government be brought to Romania. They lived in Snagov under house arrest until April 1957. Then Imre Nagy was brought back to Budapest and the Kadar government sentenced him to death and executed him on 16 June 1958.

The reaction of the PMR leadership during the Autumn of 1956, its capacity to keep control of the internal situation and loyalty towards the USSR were a few of the reasons which contributed to Khrushchev's decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Romania in the summer of 1958.

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