

A newspaper on the edge of two eras, December 22, 1989

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Abstract

In this article I analyze how Scînteia, the official newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party, was transformed in just one day into Scînteia Poporului. The analysis will be based on interviews with journalists and the collection of the two publications. The first issue appeared in the early morning hours of December 22, the second in the evening of the same day.

The end of 1989 brought along some major changes in Romanian society, starting from a society state-directed and controlled, and reaching a free society and market economy. The effervescence of the changes that took place in the communist block also engaged Romania at the end of 1989, a moment when Nicolae Ceaușescu together with his wife, Elena, were still trying to keep a dictatorial regime, based on the cult of personality and on a suffocating supervision of the population, by means of the Security Service (Securitate in Romanian language), a body that contained alongside the secret services, domestic and external, also a network of informers that got to involve the entire population.

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In this article, I will present how *Scînteia*, official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, turned into *Scînteia poporului*, Political and Social Daily Newspaper. The first issue appeared in the early morning hours of December 22, the second in the evening of the same day. For drawing up this paper we shall mainly appeal to the study of the two foregoing issues, but we shall also use some interviews with the persons that were members of the editorial staff of *Scînteia/Scînteia Poporului* at that respective date, and here we will mention Mircea Bunea, Sergiu Andon and Ion Marin.

During the communist regime the press, just like other domains, was subject to censure. The shift to a valet journalist raising disputes was among one of the realities that left a mark on the evolution of the post-communist press, especially on its quality. The importance that the communist regime paid to press is evident from a Nicolae Ceaușescu speech, of 1977, in which he mentioned: “the press is an instrument of the party and needs to disseminate the party’s policy in all domains of activity (...) in the domain of press (...) we need to take a number of measures against any liberal spirit (s.n.) that leaves the door open for concepts that do not serve the communist and socialist education.”²

As one can see, the press needs to obey the regime and its ruler. In another article, this time from the year 1988, included in *Presa Noastră* it was said: “Journalists, all workers from the press place in the centre of their attention the study and the firm understanding of the activities of comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, of his profound scientific ideas for creating a new society, having a crucial importance.”³

Analyzing the role of the press under the soviet rule, Denis McQuail reflected the principles that led the mass media in communism ruled:

- “press is under control and serves the interests of the working class;
- press is not owned by private owners;

² Marian Petcu, *Tipologia presei românești*, Iași, Institutul European, 2002, p. 18.

³ *Ibidem*, p.18.

- press serves the positive functions of society: adherence to the desired norms, education, information, motivation, mobilization;
- in their global mission to society, the media must respond to the wishes and needs of their audience;
- the society has the right to use censorship and other legal measures to prevent or punish antisocial publications;
- press should provide a complete and objective look at society and the world in accordance with Leninist Marxist principles;
- press must support progressive moves at home and abroad.”⁴

This is how the Soviet press (including the Romanian press) looked like during the communist regime. There was a harsh censorship, and the “deeds of glory” of the “beloved ruler” were reproduced in detail in the press.

During the communist period, *Scînteia*, being the largest newspaper in Romania, with a circulation estimated at 1.7 million newspapers every day, presented the point of view of the Romanian Communist Party. Given this circulation, *Scînteia* may have been deemed one of the most powerful brands in the world. Although it had such a large circulation this did not mean it was actually read by this many readers. In the last period it mainly contained speeches of Ceaușescu and of the ruling members of the party.

Mircea Bunea, a journalist in those days for *Scînteia*, declared that in such later period the newspaper basically was written on its own, since it was dominated by speeches.⁵ Sergiu Andon, also a journalist for *Scînteia*, claimed that: “difficult and even more and more difficult one could write criticism and there was only a chance for punctually making things right.”⁶ This punctual correction of things meant writing certain articles whereby one could try to bring to the

⁴ For more information, see Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory. An Introduction*, (2nd ed.), Sage Publications, Inc., 1987.

⁵ Interview with Mircea Bunea of May 21, 2007.

⁶ Interview with Sergiu Andon of May 31, 2007.

forefront some mistakes in the system, but it was not the system that was criticized, it was the people that made those mistakes.

In December 1989, the image of Romania reflected a society burdened by hardship, in the middle of winter, being permanently on the move for procuring food supplies, working in inhuman conditions. Thus, on December 15, 1989 the Romanian Revolution breaks out in Timișoara. It began as a protest, of little size, against the attempt to arrest the reverend of Hungarian origin, László Tőkés. This protest engaged the entire city, and in Bucharest the rulers of the party requested some serious measures to be taken for punishing the culprits.

On December 18, Ceaușescu left for Iran for a visit. Also as of this date, the order forces were patrolling the streets of Timișoara, the city was actually in need.⁷ On December 20, the revolution engaged the entire city. On the same day Ceaușescu returned from Iran three hours earlier. He requested some emergency measures to be taken in Timișoara, taking the army out in the streets; the army had orders to shoot the crowd if things did not improve.

In the evening of December 20, Ceaușescu held a speech on TV, whereby he strongly disagreed with the actions taking place in Timișoara. After the speech, throughout the country there were gatherings of workers from plants and factories in order to disagree with the events from Timișoara and in order to reconfirm the support towards the communist regime.

For the next day, December 21, it was established to organize a large meeting in Bucharest in order to show that the regime was largely supported. On December 21, workers from all plants and factories from Bucharest were brought to Palatului Square, currently Revoluției Square, in front of the headquarters of the Party Central Committee, in order to listen to the speech held by Ceaușescu. He wanted to reject the manifestations of protest taking place in Timișoara and to announce the increase of wages and pensions.⁸

⁷ For more details, see Peter Siani-Davies, *Revoluția română din decembrie 1989*, București, Humanitas, 2006.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

Several minutes after Ceaușescu's speech began there were sharp cries heard in the square and the crowd began to overcrowd. Soon the live TV and radio transmissions were cut, but not before the surprised face of Ceaușescu was seen by the entire nation. Several minutes thereafter order was reinstated, and Ceaușescu proceeded with his speech.

After the manifestation was over, the people started gathering in three central areas of Bucharest: Universității Square, Romană Square and Unirii Square. Most were in Universității Square, where street fights began between order forces and demonstrators, who had created a barricade. This was defeated, and in the morning of December 22, all had been cleaned up and it seemed as nothing had happened. Ever since morning, people started to gather in front of the headquarters of the Central Committee. Ceaușescu came out on the balcony in order to approach this crowd. To no avail, he was interrupted by loud clamors⁹. Seeing that the situation was getting out of control, together with Elena Ceaușescu and other two communist leaders he escaped with a helicopter, which moment was caught on camera. In the evening of the same night he had been captured near Târgoviște.

Under these circumstances, *Scînteia* was issued on December 22, reflecting on the first page "the support manifestation" of December 21. As one could see from the image posted on the first page of *Scînteia* newspaper from December 22, the main title of the edition was the following: "The great gathering of the working people from the Capital provided an expression of the determination to act for the DEFENCE OF THE SOCIALIST ACHIEVEMENTS, OF THE INDEPENDENCE AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF ROMANIA,"¹⁰ followed by a speech held by Nicolae Ceaușescu. In a red bolded box the following was written: "THE SIGNIFICANT LIABILITY FOR THE CALM OF THE COUNTRY, FOR THE FULL UNITY OF THE ENTIRE NATION AROUND

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Scînteia*, December 22, 1989, p.1.

THE PARTY, THE DETERMINED POSITION FOR DEFENDING THE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE, FOR THE UNAFFECTED UNFOLDING OF THE SOCIALIST ACHIEVEMENTS IN OUR COUNTRY,”¹¹ being followed by a reference to the second page where the following messages “of working people” from the gatherings from factories and plants in the support of the regime were to be found.

In an article from page three it was demanded that a “fighting detachment” be created in order to defend the regime and the “wealth of the people”. There are very many encouragements to national unity, to the “defence” of identity and independence of the socialist regime. All such encouragements were formulated given the awareness of the seriousness of the matter with which the regime was confronted. It was a last, desperate attempt to maintain Ceaușescu and the entire regime. Along with the encouragement to work, it was attempted to manipulate the readers by “great” achievements. It was in this way that the overachievements of economic tasks were presented and optimistic forecasts were made regarding the overachievement of the plans for the year 1990, which year was solidly prepared, especially in the field of agriculture. All were just a means of poisoning, attempts to manipulate the people, given the fact that Romanian agriculture in 1989 was in a critical standing, being one of the last in Europe with regards to agricultural production. It was also in this issue, but related to international matters, that the aggression of the USA against the state of Panama was reprobated. Such aggression, in the view of the communist leaders, was also intended to be directed against Romania, and by such articles they tried to mobilize the people to support the regime.

A visual manipulation was also attempted, by publishing on the first page a photograph of the meeting of December 21, in which we are presented with the “working people”, holding boards with the face of the “beloved leaders”

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

and messages in support of the regime and disapproval of the manifestations from Timișoara.¹²

This is how *Scînteia* was issued in the morning hours of December 22. In the evening of the same day, after the Ceaușescu couple fled and the Revolution had overturned the regime, *Scînteia* was issued in a special edition, under a different name, *Scînteia poporului*. One of the questions that was raised was how was it possible that in less than 12 hours as of the above mentioned issue a new version was issued. This question will be answered in the following lines.

After interviewing several members of the editorial staff of *Scînteia*, Sergiu Andon, Mircea Bunea, Ion Marin, they declared to me that in the morning of December 22, being at work, headquartered in Casa Scînteii, groups of people that were heading to the city centre in order to protest, passed by.¹³ In front of *Scînteia* they yelled: "You cowards, join us!" It was at that moment that the secretary general of the editorial staff, Anghel Paraschiv called them in his office and told them: "Go downtown, go to the city centre and come back and share with me what you witnessed."¹⁴ From all the editorial staff 6 to 7 persons walked out, and this is where the three interviewees disagree. But what is certain is that they were among the reporters that were out on the field. Sergiu Andon being asked why he went out he answered it was due to the "reporter instinct."¹⁵

After being out and having returned, the first of them being Ion Marin, who also produced a little article for that issue, has a talk with the editor in chief, Ion Mitrache made him write a statement whereby *Scînteia* joined the revolution and go at the television and read it out loud. In that statement the idea of *Scînteia poporului* already emerged. According to the three, this idea had been previously prepared. The special edition was issued in the evening of December 22,

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Interview with Mircea Bunea of May 21, 2007; Interview with Sergiu Andon of May 31, 2007. Interview with Ion Marin of May 18, 2007.

¹⁴ Interview with Sergiu Andon of May 31, 2007.

¹⁵ Interview with Sergiu Andon of May 31, 2007.

numbering two pages, having as main title: "GLORY TO OUR FREE COUNTRY, TO ITS HERO PEOPLE! THE DICTATORSHIP HAS FALLEN, THE PEOPLE"¹⁶.

WE ARE FREE! VICTORY OF THE TRUTH!" In a box the following was written: "OUR NEWSPAPER IS ISSUED TODAY IN A SPECIAL EDITION, AS A NEW, TRUE AND PATRIOTIC EXPRESSION, AS A NEWSPAPER OF THE PEOPLE."¹⁷

In the programmatic article of the new publication it was mentioned: "we address the people with the solemn reinsurance that *Scînteia* will be a newspaper of the people, of the actual truth, of the truth which sadly and, not seldom, with the inner resentment, we were not always able to utter"

International echoes of the Revolution are also presented and there was also a section with the name "Reporters of *Scînteia poporului* report." Following the model of *Scînteia*, where most of the articles were not signed, none of the articles of *Scînteia poporului* were signed in this first special edition. *Scînteia poporului* continued to be issued also on December 23 and December 24, than changed its name to *Adevărul*.

The communist press of Romania resembled the soviet one, which model was emulated. The changes that began taking place in this part of Europe seemed not to affect the dictatorial regime of Ceaușescu, he even believed himself to be loved by the people.

The break out of the Revolution made all the hatred, accumulated during all those hard years, to overflow and hence maybe the violent side of the occurred events. The post-December press played a significant role in informing the people and has become one of the first profitable businesses in Romania. *Scînteia poporului* and then *Adevărul* played a significant role in presenting the events from that time.

¹⁶ *Scînteia Poporului*, December 22, 1989, p.1.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

After nearly twenty years from those events, Romanian society has changed a lot, going through a hard transition time. The evolution of the press took place in parallel with the change of the entire society. Currently, one may talk about a free press in Romania, one in which opinions may be expressed, but also one whose quality and trust of some people therein are damaged by political interests and, thus providing one reason why the circulation has diminished. Freedom of press is one of the basic elements of democracy, without it we would again be heading towards dictatorship.

Source *Scînteia*, December 22, 1989



Source: *Scînteia Poporului*, December 22, 1989

