

Liliana Iuga

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Hungary 1956 – Remembered in Romania in 2006

My analysis focuses on the way Romanian media reflected on the commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution. I chose two of the most popular TV channels, the Romanian National TV Channel, TVR 1 and Realitatea TV, a private channel specialized on news. I compared their vision on three aspects: presentation of the history of the event, the protest in Budapest versus the official ceremony organized by the Hungarian authorities and the way events in Budapest 1956 are commemorated and remembered in Romania.

Being neighbors of Hungary and having about 5% of the Hungarian population, Romanians had more intense memories of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. The Hungarian population organized official ceremonies of commemoration in many important cities. Both Romanian and Hungarian journalists wrote enthusiastic articles about class of freedom called October 1956. Hungarian students organized debates and invited personalities to talk about the importance of that moment. Unfortunately, I don't understand Hungarian. So, to get informed, like most of the Romanians, I watched the 7 o'clock news.

The news report of TVR 1, after explaining about the elimination on the obligatory military service, illegal adoptions and a Romanian engineer kidnapped in Nigeria, we finally remembered the importance of the day. We had three reports concerning the topic of the anti-Soviet revolution of Hungary. Surprisingly, they started with the story of the protesters, who surrounded the Kossuth Place, where the official ceremony was taking place. Instead of having a normal ceremony for celebrating such an important event of their history as it was planned, we saw our special reporter talking in the middle of

protesters. And then a Hungarian from Romania said: “If this is democracy, I’m going back to Romania.” The reporter explained that among the protesters there were people who had taken part at the events in 1956 and they said the situation seemed hopeless. Of course, also the Romanian Prime Minister, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu took part at the official ceremony.

So first of all, Romanians saw the protest in Hungary. Not the official ceremony, not the history of the event. Protest, street fights, violence. The second report was the history of October 1956: it started as a peaceful manifestation of the students, transformed in a big protest demanding free elections and the recession on the Soviet troops. Then Imre Nagy came to power and made important announcements at the Radio: “Hungary wants to leave the Warsaw Pact and become neutral”.

The Soviet intervention is logical. Imre Nagy took refuge in the Yugoslavian embassy, than he was taken to Romania. (And now everybody paid more attention, because this was about “us”.) The Romanian leader Gheorghiu-Dej tried to get more information from Imre Nagy, who was killed two years later in Budapest.

This is the official history, very similar with what I have learned about this topic in University: students’ protest, Imre Nagy, tanks of the Soviet Army in Budapest, end of revolution on November 4th.

The 3rd report of the news on TVR 1 was called “Memories from ‘56”. The journalist said it was about an act on Romanian solidarity, but I think it was more like a children’s game that ended tragically. It was the story of a group of 12 years old children from Timisoara who listened to Radio Kossuth and heard that young people were fighting against Soviet tanks on the streets of Budapest. They wrote on their math’s copybooks “No more Russians, no more communism, we want to live freely!”. One of their teachers saw what they had written there and passed it on to the Security (Secret Political Police). Two years later, they got arrested, accused of speaking against the regime and they spent years in the communist prisons. The regime did not think that this game was funny at all.

On the Realitatea TV we had also three different news on the event. The first one was about the history of the event, this time with many other details. They insisted on the protest, fights, people who died, were arrested or deported in the USSR. 200,000

Hungarians tried to leave the country; 18,000 were arrested. And we saw again the story of Imre Nagy and his period of detention in Romania. But the history became more humane: people were dying on the streets, getting arrested. As Romanians, we could understand that. We had our own revolution for freedom, people went to prison for political reasons, some others left illegally the country. Finding those similarities helped us to understand better.

There is only one report about the protesters (which is not very long) and the official commemoration. The central place of Budapest was peaceful thanks to the police forces that stopped the protesters. But when the night came, new protests began. Some of the participants of the 1956 events asked for the resignation of the Hungarian Prime Minister. Budapest was divided: an official commemoration took place, to which politicians from 56 countries were invited and, on the other side, thousands of protesters were in conflict with the police: Politicians in their crystal globe and the crowd fought, once again, for freedom. On the TV screen, we saw a lot of smoke, people manifesting, 5 police officers chasing one protester.

The last reportage was about the commemoration of October 1956 in Romania. At Miercurea Ciuc, 5000 Hungarians walked on a peaceful march, with candles in their hands, from the central place to the Hungarian Consulate. They sang the national anthem of Hungary, listened to speeches and participated at the unveiling of a new monument: “The angel annunciating freedom”.

That should be happening in Budapest: Candles, speeches, monuments. Instead of that, we saw smoke, police forces chasing protesters, violence on the streets. Protest celebrated through protest. And politicians are acting as if nothing unusual was happening.

We have the same equation on both TV channels: protest-history-memories of solidarity in Romania on TVR 1, history-protest-commemoration in Romania on Realitatea TV. Furthermore, there are official history books, insisting on politics on the national TV channel, a more humanized history on a private channel. Children who thought dealing with communism as a sort of game and Hungarians from Romania offering a model of commemoration. But besides all that, TV showed us images of the protest in Budapest. I suppose peaceful manifestations took part in Hungary too.

Interesting stories about people who had participated on the 1956 events could have been told. But we saw only the protest. Those images were more powerful than everything else. And I think, later on, people will remember October 2006 in Budapest not as a commemoration day, but as a day of protest.

Journalists were the first to observe all these paradoxes connected with the commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution. Their reports for the news focused on the unusual and spectacular. The reaction of the public opinion is not difficult to imagine: we assumed the paradox of a protest commemorated through protest. I noticed the passivity proved by most of the Romanians to an event with such an important significance. The Hungarian Revolution is a Hungarian business. We were happy to watch the show.

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