

## ORAL HISTORIES AND INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES: PRESERVING THE STORIES OF THE ROMANIAN COMMUNIST PAST

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**Abstract** The Romanian post-totalitarian recount of the communist past embraces various forms: from individual and civic actions to recollect the memories of the past and gather testimonies from the regime's victims, to institutionalized forms of memory and public memory discourse. The research described in this paper focused on the use of oral history as a mechanism to recollect the past and its effects at the level of the Romanian society: the creation of new institutions dedicated to researching the past, agents of memory, public memory discourse, political class reluctance, mass media, and the resulting politics of memory. The paper shows that this remembrance involves a permanent reconstruction of the past in which different agents of memory are involved, all of whom consequently project their own interests, ideas, and in some cases stereotypes onto their perceptions of the past. Identifying different topics and approaches to past narratives, we argue that the permanent dialogue and openness to others' stories can offer valuable insights into the remembrance process, especially when traumatic events are involved.

**Keywords** Oral history, post-communist society, Romania, coming to terms with the past, agents of memory, testimonies.

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## 1. Introduction

Even twenty-five years after the 1989 Romanian regime change, many researchers continue to argue for an open investigation of the past, as “no viable democracy can afford to accept amnesia, forgetting and the truncation of memory”, once more pointing out that the “dialogue and knowledge pre-empt the destructive power of silence and of un-assumed guilt.”<sup>1</sup> The reluctance to deal with the past determines the incapacity of assuming moral responsibility at the intergenerational level and the public practice of the politics of silence. The process of coming to terms with the past includes different levels of collective and, in some cases, institutional recollections of memories, translated into a series of actions involving different agents of memory. Previous studies that focused on the memory process in Romania have identified some major approaches used in the post-totalitarian society: institutional memories, individual and civic actions to recuperate the past despite political reluctance, literary and artistic movements and published testimonies (at the victims-perpetrators level). The results sustain a multi-layered vision of the past, despite the past “politics of amnesia” and despite some researchers’ concern of a “unique reading of the past, detectable in all public representations”, that of the communism as the “darkest epoch in national history.”<sup>2</sup> This view of the past dominated the first twenty years following the 1989 regime change, and it was surpassed through a deeper involvement of various agents of memory in the process of coming to terms with the past and by the newly created public space for the alternative narratives.

The present paper focuses on the use of oral history as a mechanism to recount the past and its effects at the level of the Romanian society: the creation of new institutions dedicated to researching the past, agents of memory, public memory discourse, political class involvement, mass media, and the politics of memory. The aim is to explore the role played by oral history in the process of coming to terms with the past, the institutional frame, and to point out the work of those directly involved, their struggles and narratives, the topics and the relevance of the past research and also the involvement of different agents of memory. During the communist regime, the Romanian scientists were no strangers to oral history, – for example, at the XV Global Congress of History, organized in 1980 in Bucharest, oral history was recognized as a method of accessing the past and it was included in a special session. Nevertheless, oral history remained at the periphery of the Romanian historiography during the communist period, as the recent past that could be explored through it was dominated by traumas and hidden events, and the public knowledge was constrained by the Romanian Communist Party.

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Stan and Vladimir Tismăneanu, “Coming to Terms with the Communist Past: Democracy and Memory in Romania”, in *Post-Communist Romania at Twenty-Five. Linking Past, Present and Future* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2015), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Petrescu and Dragoş Petrescu, “The Canon and Remembering Romanian Communism: From Autobiographical Recollections to Collective Representations”, in *Remembering Communism. Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014), 44.

There was only a pre-established historical narrative of the past written by the Communist Party and no other counter-narrative was permitted. Consequently, oral history strengthened its role as a research method in Romania after the 1989 political regime change; in the past, it was only used as directed by the political regime for recollecting the memories of the communist leaders active during the interwar years. As Cristina and Dragoş Petrescu point out:

“[u]ntil 1989 there were no attempts at collecting and disseminating testimonies that would have conveyed to future generations the history that was not taught in schools. Eyewitness accounts that would contradict the official narrative of the communist period were not preserved (...) the past censored by the party-state remained unknown to the large majority of Romanians until 1989.<sup>3</sup>”

The main factors that influenced the oral history usage were the lack of records of historical events that occurred between 1948 and 1989 in Romania and the political reluctance to assume and publically condemn the crimes of the former communist regime. The social and political insecurity that characterized the Romanian transitional period undermined the efforts of both historians and witnesses of the communist regime to engage in an open and constructive dialogue. The first testimonies and interviews were decisive factors in the attempt to broaden the understanding of the communist era in Romania. Immediately after the 1989 collapse of the Romanian communist regime, the field of historical research and the cultural scene targeting the recent communist past were dominated by testimonies (both oral and written) on the prison experiences during the communist rule. Furthermore, the oral history interviews proved that the trauma inflicted by the totalitarian regime surpasses in brutality the first publically known experiences of the communist prisons. The oral history testimonies offer first-hand insights into the experiences related not only to the horrific abuses suffered by the prisoners in the communist prisons, but also against the anti-communist resistance, the peasants and workers who rebelled, the intellectual elite, and the populations who were deported, among others. As Paul Thompson notes, oral history “provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope.<sup>4</sup>” In the broad context of the process of coming to terms with the past in the former communist country, oral history is the main historical instrument in accessing the memories and past experiences of the common people who have no access to literary and artistic means of expression. It permits a complex understanding of the past, sustaining the multi-layered nature of remembrance. Our research argues that remembrance involves a permanent reconstruction of the past in which different agents of memory are involved, all of whom project their own interests, ideas, and in some cases stereotypes onto their perceptions of the past. The first part focuses on the political

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<sup>3</sup> Cristina Petrescu and Dragoş Petrescu, “The Canon and Remembering Romanian Communism”, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the past: oral history”, in *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 24.

agenda and the changes that helped in the advance of the process of coming to terms with the Romanian communist past. The analysis is followed by a chronological presentation of the main agents of memory related to their research activity of exploring and encouraging the testimonies of the past. Some topics were preferred by the oral history researcher, and their evolution is correlated with the public politics of memory and the intergenerational transmission of memory and knowledge. The personal narratives of those who dedicated their life work to addressing the traumatic events of Romanian history and to analysing the long-term effects of the communist system on the Romanian society are considered essential in offering a comprehensive view of the institutional efforts and, more importantly, in connecting the institutional results with the personal endeavours that actively sustained Romania's process of coming to terms with the past.

## 2. The political agenda and oral history research

The efforts of historians and researchers to access and broaden the knowledge of the past by collecting personal stories and shared memories called into question the old political tendency to offer a single, official version of the past. Entire episodes from the past: the forced collectivization, the anti-communist armed resistance, deportations, revolts, political elite, and dissidence were unknown and the fact that the access to the institutional archives was long denied turned the historian's attention to oral history as a method of exploring the past based on personal narratives. In the second phase, these personal stories were correlated with the archive documents. As the political class discourse insisted on the idea of a clear separation from the crimes of the past as the only mechanism of dealing with the past and consequently, as the victims of the communist regime were – in the first years following the 1989 regime change –intentionally kept at the edge of the official political discourse, the alternative and counter-narratives of the past struggled to find their place in public memory. Furthermore, for the academic researchers, the fact that oral history was publically accepted as a method of analysing the recent past was also a challenge. A new type of construction of the past was possible, one in which personal experiences, orally transmitted, became the hallmark of an abusive and traumatic past. The witnesses of this traumatic past became the main agents in the reconstruction of its memory, as they experienced its main events first-hand: “[s]urvivors present us with stark, harrowing images of suffering, harrowing images of suffering. Their memories touch the raw center of evil and pain.<sup>5</sup>” The lack of a public agenda focused on encouraging debates and discussions on the communist past, which would have made room for the alternative narratives of the past, resulted in an isolation of the witnesses, who clearly sensed that their testimonies were not valued. Following the collapse of the communist regime, the Romanian society was clearly not prepared, especially during the transitional years, to sustain an in-depth, collective effort to analyze and reconcile the past. The

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<sup>5</sup> Naomi Rosh White, “Marking absences: Holocaust testimony and history”, in *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 173.

democratic transitional process itself required sustained economic and social efforts, and Romania's process of coming to terms with the past was sacrificed. The memory discourse during these years was mainly concentrated on a weak attempt to restore justice for the victims, but even at this level the results were very poor. With very few exceptions, the civic society's interest in oral history during the '90s contrasted with the political class's apathy and lack of interest in the emerging knowledge of the repressive phenomena that occurred during the communist era. The political class that assumed the positions of power immediately after the 1989 fall of the communist regime and during the transition to the democratic period (under Ion Iliescu's presidencies) moved less in the direction of a clear process of uncovering the past and more towards a partial version of the past by using a memory discourse based on an invented clear separation from the communist past as being the Romanian political reality, or by adopting a "state-sponsored amnesia" with consequences at the level of "the externalization of guilt, and the ethnicization of memory."<sup>6</sup>

Public mass media was the first medium where the role played by oral history in recollecting memories of the past became visible. Parts of the traumatic stories of the past were broadcasted on the national TV channel, thanks to the assiduous efforts of Lucia Hossu-Longin. She was one of the first public figures to fight the political reluctance to address the abuses and traumas of Romania's communist past. In the years following the fall of the communist regime, she conducted a series of interviews with the trauma victims, as well as with some of the perpetrators. The documentary *The Memorial of Suffering* (Memorialul Durerii), first broadcasted nationally in 1991, shocked audiences with the traumatic events emotionally narrated by those interviewed, as very little was known at the time about the extent of the communist repression and resistance. The documentary (around 150 episodes) includes the communist victims' direct testimonies, and also some perpetrators' interviews (a series of episodes were added in 2013), and it is essentially based on thousands of hours of footage with the direct witnesses of the past. The testimonies are correlated with archive documents, historians' comments, and images related to each episode topic – for example, from communist prisons –, increasing the audience's perceptual shock. The Romanian people became, for the first time, part of a public testimony, and many were confronted with the difficulty of attending to the voices of others and assuming the role of the indirect, yet active, listener. The documentary was the first attempt to encourage the public to think about and to empathize with the victims of the totalitarian regime. This kind of approach of the communist past was criticised on the fact that it includes only victims and heroes and consequently it implies "that the entire communist period could be reduced to a story of sufferance and resistance."<sup>7</sup> Incontestably, the Romanian society needs to identify and name the communist perpetrators and to offer extra-space for the victims' narratives, and even if it must be aware

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<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Tismăneanu, "Democracy, Memory and Moral Justice", in *Remembering, History and Justice* (Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2015), 164.

<sup>7</sup> Cristina Petrescu and Dragoş Petrescu, "The Canon and Remembering Romanian Communism," 58.

of the peril of transforming this story of suffering and victimization into the dominant metanarrative of the past, it also must recognize the relation victims – perpetrators as an essential aspect of the multi-layered nature of remembrance. Delia Popescu speaks about two master frames used in the *Memorial*: a narrative of recovering the national identity and a call for justice. These two frames were also common for the public memory discourse in the first two decades after the 1989 Romanian collapse of the communist regime. The civic society pushed for legal and moral justice, sustaining the testimonies of the communist victims and their need for justice. The first publication focused on recollecting the past, the journal *Memory - the journal of the arrested mind (Memoria – revista gândirii arestate)*, helped increase the victims' access to the public memory space. The journal is produced by the Cultural Foundation "Memoria", and had a powerful impact on the public opinion through its attempts to expose unknown events of the communist past through oral testimonies. During the '90s, the foundation was very active in disseminating information related to public events targeting past abuses and in attempting to expand research on communist repression. The aim of the journal is clearly that of recollecting the past – in 2017, it celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> issue and it includes testimonies ranging from the traumatic experiences of the communist prisons to the interwar cultural and political public figures' experiences of the communist regime and its horrors. Consequently, it offers a venue for the expression of multi-layered narratives of the past; the personal experiences of those directly affected by the communist regime completing and, in some cases, confronting the official adopted memory discourse. Nevertheless, the political class discourse and even that of an important part of the civic society insisted on a clear political separation from the past and on the communist regime's existence in Romania as externally imposed by the Soviet power – two ideas that were perceived as able to regenerate the Romanian national identity. Consequently, until the 2006 public condemnation of the communist crimes, the main agents of memory mainly sustained the narratives of the externally imposed nature of the communist regime, in a way taking over the main topics of the *Memorial of Suffering* documentary: the anti-communist resistance, the dignity shown by the communist regime victims, their deep religious faith and patriotic feelings, the Romanian peasants' soul purity and great religious beliefs. Even if these topics were also generated by an inherent desire to boost the national dignity, they sustain the creation of a memory discourse centred only on the victims' status and assimilating their narratives to a national narrative of communism.

One of the main public changes related to the communist past was the result of the public condemnation of the past in 2006 by the Romanian president Traian Băsescu who named a commission formed by academic specialists to investigate and document the main institutions and methods used by the Romanian communist regime. As a result, the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Regime, under the coordination of Vladimir Tismăneanu, a political scholar and historian of communism, through its *Final Report*, publicly rejected "the practices of institutional forgetfulness and generated a national debate about long-denied and occulted moments of the communist past (including instances of

collaboration and complicity).<sup>8</sup> The Commission never collected testimonies from “the victims and victimizers of the communist regime”, but it “provided the scholarly evidence” necessary for formulating “conclusions and recommendations.”<sup>9</sup> Its actions stimulated the research in the field, but also used the past research; its members were well-known researchers active in investigating and preserving the stories of the Romanian communist past. Open access to past official documents through the National Archive and to the *Securitate* files (the former Romanian secret police) through the Law 187 of 9 December 1999 – it stipulates that the Romanians have access to their own *Securitate* file and the collaboration with *Securitate* of those who want to access a diplomatic or public career must be publically known (Stan 2002)-, and the Law 293/2008 – which clarifies some aspects in the attempt of unlocking the National Council for Studying the *Securitate* Archives (CNSAS)’ status and activities-, and also the public recognition of historians’ and researchers’ efforts through the public condemnation of the communist past helped move forward the Romanian society’s process of coming to terms with its past.

### 3. Institutions of memory and oral history narratives

Prior to the 2006 public condemnation of the past, several public institutions were involved in researching the communist past, gathering testimonies and offering support to the witnesses of the past to tell their stories, and, consequently, Marius Stan and Valdimir Tismăneanu’s argument of “the institutional forgetfulness” of the communist past can be difficult to sustain. The Romanian civil society was especially involved in maintaining the interest in the communist past on the political agenda and in the public eye, and the main institutions created in this respect were the direct results of their actions. The public condemnation of the crimes of the communist regime in Romania resulted from the extended analysis conducted by the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship. The commission united many researchers (18 members of the commission and 20 experts) who were previously deeply involved in studying the recent past through various oral history projects coordinated by the *Academia Civică Foundation* and the *Oral History Institute* of Cluj-Napoca. The fact that the crimes of the communist regime were publically condemned in 2006 was perceived as adding new force to researchers’ efforts and, indirectly, as a public acknowledgement of these sustained efforts.

Chronologically, one of the first actions in gathering the stories of the past is that of the press agency RADOR that created in 1993 its own oral history centre, which later came to be the Oral History Group (*Grupul de Istorie Orală*, <http://www.rador.ro>). Its initial aim was to sustain the efforts to maintain the accuracy and to follow the deontological code in offering information about the experiences of the people during the communist totalitarian system.

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<sup>8</sup> Marius Stan and Valdimir Tismăneanu, “Coming to Terms with the Communist Past,” 26.

<sup>9</sup> Marius Stan and Valdimir Tismăneanu, “Coming to Terms with the Communist Past,” 27.

The centre collected more than 2,500 interviews dedicated to the memory of life under the communist regime. Its archive includes thematic sections with oral testimonies ranging from interviews with cultural and political public figures to various citizen testimonies of the past events.

Created in 1994 by Ana Blandiana and 175 other founding members, the Academia Civică Foundation (*Fundația Academia Civică*) developed various projects directly related to the process of recollecting the past through oral history testimonials. Its role was to promote civic education and research of the recent communist past, despite the prevailing “politics of amnesia”. Romulus Rusan and Ana Blandiana initiated a series of projects dedicated to oral testimonies, also gathering photos, documents, books, and objects related to the victims’ experiences. Efforts were channelled to open a memorial for the communist regime victims at Sighet. After 1948, the communist regime decided to use the Sighet prison for imprisoning the Romanian interwar political, military, economic and cultural elite. The majority died there as a consequence of the abuses and physical punishments. Jose Maria Ballester, then president of the Cultural Patrimony Commission of the European Council, visited the ruins of the former Sighet prison and recommended that the project be implemented by the Academia Civică Foundation, and in 1997, the Sighet Communist Victims and Resistance Memorial (*Memorialul Victimelor Comunismului și Rezistenței*) was inaugurated. The first objective is to sustain the research of the communist era. Its Oral History Department focuses on gathering the memories of the past and sustains the victims of the communist regime to remember and share their experiences. Through various series of actions, it became one of the most active agents in the remembrance of the Romanian communist past; it also supported other institutions of memory, aiding in the development of new projects. Its Oral History Department gathers interviews with former political prisoners and various witnesses of significant events of the communist era ([www.memorialsighet.ro](http://www.memorialsighet.ro)). Between 1994 and 2003, the Memorial initiated a series of national conferences and gatherings dedicated to the remembrance of the communist past, which made the Memorial a leader in maintaining the national interest in the communist past. Since 1998, the Memorial further developed its initiatives through a series of summer schools for youths. Its oral history archive represents one of the essential sources used by historians in researching Romania’s communist past based on the personal narrative and experiences. In the first five years of its existence, the memorial gathered more than 1,600 hours of recordings during almost 2,500 interviews. Describing the Memorial’s approach to oral history testimony, Andreea Cârstea – coordinator of the Oral History Department (*Departamentul de Istorie Orală*) since 2008 –, points out that oral history is a method that permits a variety of discourses. She highlights the difficulties created by the complex relationship between sincerity and subjectivity in oral history, offering glimpses into the researcher’s efforts to correlate oral history with other historical proof.<sup>10</sup> The Sighet Memorial was a pioneer in researching and supporting the communist regime victims’ testimonies in Romanian post-totalitarian society, and it continues to offer the necessary space for

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<sup>10</sup> Andreea Cârstea, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Bucharest, November 11, 2016.



alternative or counter-narratives of the past, encouraging public testimony and the inclusion of these stories in the register of collective memory. Moreover, through its actions, the Memorial nourishes the complex intergenerational transmission of memory and knowledge of the past, enabling the access of younger generations to the previously unknown histories of Romania's communist past.

The Oral History Institute (*Institutul de Istorie Orală*, [www.istoriaorala.ro](http://www.istoriaorala.ro)), under the coordination of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, was the first centre with a clear academic foundation focused on collecting memories of the past, and developing oral history as main tool for gathering personal narratives of the past events. The institute's inauguration in 1997 was described by the historian Doru Radosav as a "scientific conversion"; from his perspective, the main boost of the oral history research was generated by international meetings with researchers from the Bloomington-Indiana University.<sup>11</sup> Financed afterwards by a grant from the World Bank Group, and with scientific support from the international scholarship, Indiana University (David Ranssel and Maria Bucur), and Utrecht University (Albert van Goudoever), the institute developed individual and collective projects to access memories of Romania's communist past.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, important efforts were made to create and expand the institute's oral history archives – in 2004 the archives included more than 1,000 hours of interviews –, including the testimonies obtained during various projects on topics ranging from the anti-communist resistance to forced collectivization, ethnicity, religious minorities, and World War II. At the educational level, the master section dedicated to "History, mentality, and oral history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century" expands the young researchers' options to learn and further specialize in this area.

The Oral History and Cultural Anthropology Group (Grupul de antropologie culturală și istorie orală) from Timișoara (Third Europe Foundation/ Fundația A Treia Europă) was founded in 1998. It might be one of the best examples of an institution that saw the institutional inter-relationships as a mechanism of consolidation for the national politics of memory. Its oral history archives were transferred to the Western University Library in Timișoara to facilitate direct access and the formation of a "virtual memory space".<sup>13</sup> It aims to preserve the personal narratives of the past, focusing on national interest topics, such as the anti-communist resistance, but maintaining the openness for the regional cultural diversity. The oral history was used as main instrument of exploring the multi-layered nature of personal and collective remembrance in the context of the multi-ethnic environment of Transylvania.

The initiatives presented thus far were the results of individual efforts with cultural support, without major involvement of the main political agents of the Romanian state. The president's public condemnation of the actions of the communist government in 2006, and the creation of The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (*Institutul de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului*

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<sup>11</sup> Doru Radosav, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Cluj-Napoca, August 26, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Doru Radosav, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Cluj-Napoca, August 26, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> [www.deportatinbaragan.ro](http://www.deportatinbaragan.ro), [www.memoriaibanatutului.ro](http://www.memoriaibanatutului.ro).

*Românesc*, IICCMER, [www.iiccmr.ro](http://www.iiccmr.ro)) in 2009 proved the political class involvement in the process of coming to terms with the past, a process that assumed the viable presence of the legislative frame. For example, the National Council for Studying the *Securitate* Archives (*Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității*, CNSAS) was created with the main purpose of disclosing the actions of the *Securitate*, the Romanian secret police. The initiative of Constantin Ticu Dumitrescu (d. 5 Dec. 2008) – a former political prisoner, one of the most active Romanian senators in furthering the process of coming to terms with the communist past and president of the Association of the Former Political Prisoners –, the CNSAS was in fact thought to focus on the creation of an oral history archive to include the testimonies of those who were targeted and abused by the *Securitate*. The CNSAS ([www.cnsas.ro](http://www.cnsas.ro)) was clearly designed to be an active instrument in helping the public process of coming to terms with the communist past, proving the totalitarian regime's abuses and crimes. However, even though the institution was created in 1999, its activities did not have the necessary political support at the time, and in the absence of a Romanian lustration law, the results were negligible. Based on the fact that its Directory Council was formed by representatives of the political parties, Raluca Grosescu remarks that "the CNSAS functioning reproduced all parliamentary alliances and divergences", consequently many of its verdicts were "politically influenced and the files of the former *Securitate* became potential blackmail material, revealing the power of those controlling the *Securitate* files over the office holders who hid their former relationship with the political police"<sup>14</sup>. On the same line, Lavinia Stan remarks the fact that CNSAS did not succeed in fully assuming its tasks especially during the 2000 and 2004 elections, it not only "failed to unveil the identity of the former spies among the ranks of the public local administration, the state bureaucracy and the political elite", but also the "CNSAS leaders publically sided with political parties".<sup>15</sup> The CNSAS was "reborn"<sup>16</sup> after the 2008 changes of the legal frame (Law 293/2008), and in 2010 an Oral History Centre, named after Constantin Ticu Dumitrescu, was established. It gathers testimonies of those who had been victimized by the communist police and are using the CNSAS in order to consult their files. In 2017, the Centre published a list of 340 persons that were interviewed. Assuming its role in research and education, the CNSAS currently undertakes the task to enable the transfer of knowledge of the communist past to the younger generations.

The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (IICCR)'s existence and activity was also influenced by the political class interests, consequently affecting its

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<sup>14</sup> Raluca Grosescu, "The role of the civil society and anticommunist political actors in the Romanian transitional justice partial failure", in *Lustration and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe* (Zagreb: Political Science Research Center, 2007), 188.

<sup>15</sup> Lavinia Stan, "Neither forgiving nor punishing? Evaluating transitional justice in Romania", in *After Oppression. Transitional Justice in Latin America and Eastern Europe* (United Nations University Press, 2012), 369.

<sup>16</sup> Dragoș Petrescu, "Public Exposure without Lustration", in *Justice, Memory and Redress in Romania: New Insights* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 124-144.

research results and juridical effects, but the official political support as well as its highly regarded status among Romanian institutions offers it a privileged place in the development of major projects in memory recollection. In November 2009, the IICCR and the National Institute for the Memory of the Romanian Exile (INMER) headed by Dinu Zamfirescu merged. The political decision to dismiss Marius Oprea as the institute's chair was seen by many in civic society to reflect the political class's endeavours to reshape the institute's activities and sphere of influence in Romanian post-totalitarian society. IICCR made in 2007 more than 200 penal complaints targeting persons who actively contributed to repressive actions during communist period, but none of these was admitted for further penal investigations. Between 2010 and 2013 the exhumation of the former regime victims was stopped. Vladimir Tismăneanu also resigned from IICCMER Scientific Council when politically dismissed from the presidency of the Scientific Council. Since 2013 new penal complaints were made, and finally Alexandru Vişinescu, the former director of Râmnicu Sărat prison (1956-1963), and Ioan Ficior, the former director of Periprava (1960-1963), were placed under investigation on charges of crimes against humanity. Alexandru Vişinescu was condemned in July 2015 and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Besides the long political disputes that undermined the institute's role in the process of coming to terms with the past, the IICCMER was able to develop collaborative projects with important institutions, such as Bucharest University and the CNSAS, including various aspects related to the memory of the communist era.<sup>17</sup> Different partnerships with Romanian universities made possible the creation of research groups that are focusing on specific topics, as in the case of the Centre for the Study of Communism and Post-Communism at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University ([www.studiulcomunismului.ro](http://www.studiulcomunismului.ro)). The centre, under the direction of the historian Dorin Dobrinu, assumed the task of using oral history as a method of gathering testimonies of the Romanian communist repression.

Efforts regarding the recollection of the past were also materialized through the creation of a digital library to offer public access to the interviews conducted in various research and to works considered representative of recent Romanian history. The project "Memory" (*Memoria*, [www.memoria.ro](http://www.memoria.ro)) started in 2002, coordinated by Lidia Bradley Gheorghiu with support from the Aspera Romanian Educational Foundation from Boston in collaboration with *Aspera Pro Edu* from Braşov. The first interviews and data were gathered in collaboration with The Oral History and Cultural Anthropology Group from Timișoara, University Transylvania from Braşov, and The Romanian Peasant National Museum. The project core is defined by its interest in gathering testimonies from the direct witnesses of the communist past and by the on-line space offered to the personal, individual experiences.

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<sup>17</sup> [www.fenomenuipitesti.ro/](http://www.fenomenuipitesti.ro/); [www.arhivaexilului.ro/](http://www.arhivaexilului.ro/); [www.memorialulramnicusarat.ro/](http://www.memorialulramnicusarat.ro/); [www.politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/](http://www.politicapronatalista.iiccr.ro/).

#### 4. Memories and the post-communist society: generations of research

Many of the institutions presented above were and continue to be involved on specific topics of research and oral history projects: from anti-communist resistance, collectivization, prison experiences to memory of exile and daily life experiences. The Sighet Memorial with its Oral History Centre is a rather special place dedicated to the testimony of the past as, through its openness and predilection for oral history, it reaches many of the Romanian post-communist preferred research topics: communist prisons, the anti-communist armed resistance, the forced collectivization, etc. Romulus Rusan (d. 8 Dec. 2016), one of the founding members of the Academia Civică Foundation and former director of the Sighet Memorial, remembers the Sighet Memorial's efforts in offering the cultural and social space for the victims' testimonials: "There were many old people who did not have the courage to say that they were politically involved with the communist regime and party. Others were afraid of the communist regime returning.<sup>18</sup>" The Memorial offers a space where victim's memories of the communist regime are welcomed and valued. The support of various interview volumes was seen as an attempt to recreate the past and to keep the memory of the dead alive. Many victims of the deportations, former political prisoners, and victims of the forced collectivization, find the space of the Sighet Memorial and the actions of the Academia Civică Foundation to support their need for public testimony of the communist regime's abuses. These efforts support the idea that their personal narratives can and must be included in the collective memory register. For example, the oral history project 'Requiem for the Romanian peasant' results in a detailed analysis of the anti-communist resistance in rural areas based on hundreds of interviews conducted by the Memorial researchers. By 2002, 3,000 hours of interviews were gathered there; the number was doubled in 2016 by reuniting oral testimonies related to the communist prisons, deportations, and political detentions during the communist regime's final dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu. In 2016, the Oral History Department initiated an editorial project for the archived oral sources on the topic of peasants' revolts against forced collectivization.<sup>19</sup> The Oral History Department also gathers testimonies on topics less explored, such as the childhood during the communist regime.

##### 4.1. Communist prison experiences

The brutal regime of the communist prisons was used, especially between the 1949 and 1953, even if the practice continued on a lower level during the entire communist regime, as main mechanism to destroy all kind of oppositions: military, political, economic, etc. For real or imaginary reasons the regime opponents were arrested and condemned – in many cases after

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<sup>18</sup> Romulus Rusan, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Bucharest, November 2, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Andreea Cârstea, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Bucharest, November 11, 2016.

simulacrum processes and based on invented proofs – to years of physical and psychological abuses in the communist prisons; moreover, many of those arrested were executed prior to the process. The regime of prisons was defined by the social-professional status of the prisoners, including their age and gender, but also by the level of torture applied, including the ‘re-education’ of the prisoners for assimilating the communist ideology, and by their conditions of living. Poor hygiene, the lack of proper food, overcrowding spaces, physical torture and permanent humiliations resulted in a very high mortality.

The experiences and memories of those who directly experienced the terror of the communist prisons were one of the main topics of the first public testimonies focused on the Romanian communist past. Both the journal *Memoria* and the documentary *The Memorial of Suffering* offer significant space to the victims’ stories and testimonies, as much as the first testimonials based on oral history revealed the suffering and destructions of the Romanian political and intellectual elite by the communist regime. The main objective of the two initiatives indicated above was to make the knowledge of the personal and historical past accessible to the large public, and this approach was extended and enriched by the direct implication of the oral history researchers, even if the most conclusive works in this direction are the results of written testimonies and memories. Many researchers associated with IICMR’s agenda are directly involved in gathering the memories of those who experienced communist prisons. The past efforts were materialized in a series of volumes – such are those edited by Cosmin Budeancă between 2007 and 2012 –, audio and video interviews (in February 2018 the archive included 450 interviews, from which 190 regard only the communist prisons), and documentaries with the victims of the communist repression, for example the video documentary “Exposing” (*Demascarea*) about the re-education prison victims – “Pitești phenomenon”. The oral history based research recreates the world of the communist prisons, closely following the regime victims’ direct experiences. At the level of intergenerational transmission of memory the relevance of the direct testimonial – passing from specific details related to the regime of prisoners and the prisons organization to the prisoners’ daily life and struggles - is proofed once more by the interest shown by the post-communist society to oral history volumes, such is the case of *Supraviețuitorii. Mărturii din temnițele comuniste ale României* (The survivors: Testimonies from Romanian Communist prisons ), edited by Raul and Anca Ștef and published in 2014 by Humanitas. The interviews published here recreate the direct touch of oral history based on a series of photos with those interviewed, photos that enrich the post-memory of the past events.

#### **4.2. Anti-communist movements**

The Romanian armed resistance (including military officers, professors, peasants, students, etc.) was triggered by the Red Army arrival in 1944 and by the new communist government (March 6, 1945) and was animated by the belief of an external force that would intervene to help overthrow the communist regime. The fight between the partisans and the communist regime was the most radical form of anti-communist resistance, and it involves a mix of

personal and community endeavours, family ties, religious beliefs, nationalistic views, etc. For example, Monica Ciobanu points out the importance of examining “the relationship between individual, family and group memories as an essential part of an ongoing project of incorporating collective memory into a new historical narrative”<sup>20</sup>. The topic was of great interest, as the anti-communist groups were almost entirely destroyed by the communist regime, and the stories of those who survived could naturally disappear without proper documentation.

One of the first projects of the Oral History Institute, financed by the Ministry of National Education between 1997 and 2000, used the oral history method to research the Romanian anti-communist resistance movement. The research used oral history and focused on various topics in order to obtain a comprehensive view of the anti-communist resistance movement: the different resistance groups, aspects related to food consumption, the ways in which goods were obtained, strategies for surviving in the woods, relations with people from the villages, and the punitive measures imposed by the communist regime on the villages located close to the resistance groups (i.e., investigations, conflicts, arrests of those suspected of collaboration with the resistance fighters). Most of the resistance fighters were killed during the armed confrontations, in prisons, or even during the penal investigations. Oral history interviews with the survivors or the resistance fighters’ family members (many of whom were very reluctant to speak about these personal traumatic events) represented the only method to access the history of the anti-communist movement. *The Oral History Yearbook* was the first institutional publication seen as an editorial space for disseminating the research results from the perspective of establishing the general characteristics of the Romanian anti-communist armed resistance and offering a comprehensive monograph of the main resistance groups. The Banat area was researched in relation with the anti-communist resistance groups, for example the last published oral history interviews volume under the Oral History Institute coordination is dedicated to this topic – “Anti-communist resistance in Romania. The mountains of Banat” (2016) (*Mișcarea de rezistență anticomunistă din România. Banatul montan*) –, and the city of Timișoara was included in the anti-communist resistance discourse in relation with the international effects of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

### **4.3. Forced collectivization and deportation**

During the early decades of the communist regime, the Communist Party transferred most properties from private ownership to state ownership mainly through confiscations, nationalization and expropriations. These actions affected more citizens than any other communist regime decision, as in 1948 around 77% of population lived in rural areas. Important oral history research was developed in relation with the forced collectivization, some specific areas were targeted in relation with the specific strategies adopted by the

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<sup>20</sup> Monica Ciobanu, “Reconstructing the History of Early Communism and Armed Resistance in Romania”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66: No. 9 (2016): 1453.

communist regime and their effects, and The Oral History Institute from Cluj-Napoca and the Oral History and Cultural Anthropology Group from Timișoara were deeply involved.

Research on the forced collectivization in Romania was, beside the anti-communist resistance, another priority of the Oral History Institute, as was also “the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional geographical area of Transylvania”<sup>21</sup>. Oral history began to be used as a method of accessing and completing un-researched aspects of the past, including various social, economic, and religious aspects while incorporating personal narratives into the historical discourse. Correlated phenomena and interdependent phenomena, the armed resistance, and the forced collectivization research generated different methodological problems based on their scales, but all emphasized the relation between past events and their personal traumatic effects. Part of the oral history research focuses on the Swabians’ deportation from Satu-Mare to the former USSR. For example, Radosav (1994) works on the deportation topic based on oral history, studying the case of the Swabian population that was deported from Donbas between 1945 and 1949. The project focuses especially on the to the life histories and communist regime experiences, capitalizing on the memories of those who were direct witnesses of past events, but were marginalized both by the communist regime and in the first post-totalitarian attempts of recollecting the past.

Together with other researchers, such as Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu, Smaranda Vultur, member of the Oral History and Cultural Anthropology Group from Timișoara and one of the most assiduous and deeply involved researchers of the ethnicity component of the memory of the communist past, started gathering testimonies, photos, and various documents (from different generations, ethnicities, and religions) to compile an archive dedicated to the memory of Banat ([www.memoriabanatului.ro](http://www.memoriabanatului.ro)). The communist regime program to equalize wealth distribution in one of the richest areas of Romania, as well as the attempt to destroy the various ethnic communities who lived there, made the Banat region an exceptional space for analyzing the memory of the communist past with all its related topics: ethnicity, identity, trauma, responsibility, community and family memory, etc. Different projects extended the initial archive of oral history testimonies, for example the project *Memorial practices in intercultural context: Banat region*, which approached life stories from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to research social constructions and ethnicity identity, and *Memory and family in Banat* (started in 1998), which focused on different generations and their relation to the memory of the past. The groups targeted by these projects included: Romanians, Serbs, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Bulgarians, Croats, and the Roma population. Daily life and the connection between personal histories and historical events were analyzed. The first edited volume includes life stories from the Banat German community and stories related to the traumatic deportation in Bărgan (1951-1956).

The Association of Former Bărgan Deportees (*Asociația Foștilor Deportăți din Bărgan*) also developed projects to recollect the memory of the past through oral history. The deportation of the Serbs on the night of June 18, 1951 was documented by Milin Miodrag and

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<sup>21</sup> Doru Radosav, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Cluj-Napoca, August 26, 2016.

Stepanov Ljubomir using the oral history method. The traumatic experiences of the families deported from Bărăgan (around 40,000 people) were documented through various studies, some of them influencing the mass media and resulting in television documentaries focused on the deportees' life histories. For example, in 2013 the documentary "Stories from Bărăgan. Memories from Romanian Siberia" (*Povestiri din Bărăgan. Amintiri din Siberia românească*) was released; the website [www.memorialuldeportarii.ro](http://www.memorialuldeportarii.ro) is part of the project "Memory of Deportation" (*Memoria deportării*), coordinated by Claudia-Florentina Dobre and Valeriu Antonovici.

#### **4.4. Daily life in communism**

Zoltán Rostás is one of the few sociological researchers who used oral history during the '80s to gather stories of urban and social life. During this period, his interviews were mainly determined by his personal research interests, and after 1989, oral history-focused projects initiated under his guidance at the Faculty of Journalism of the University of Bucharest focused on Romanian social and urban life during the communist period, in contrast to the main approach of recollecting past memories of traumatic experiences.<sup>22</sup> Invited by the Romanian Institute for Recent History in 2000, Rostás initiated a new project dedicated to Bucharest's multiculturalism. The resulting printed volume (2002) includes life histories of different people who lived in the Romanian capital during the '80s and who witnessed the urban transformations imposed by the former communist dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu. He interviewed members of different ethnicities, and encouraged his students to use oral history as a reliable method of accessing the past; the 1989 Romanian revolution represented one of the most provoking topics of the post-totalitarian generation (Rostás 2012). The 1989 events were used as a common element for the personal histories of those interviewed, but the testimony itself was structured around professional and daily life events.

Under the guidance of the ethnologist Irina Nicolau, a research group from the Museum of the Romanian Peasant collected oral histories related to the daily life during the communist period, more exactly the 1980s. The published result (2003) focuses on the small details of everyday life in Bucharest, with a clear argument for the necessity to rescue from oblivion the past daily routine. Some private initiatives targeted especially the intellectual elite and their memories of the communist past and were based rather on written testimonies of the past than on oral history. Consequently, the testimonies included in this type of volume are limited to the highly educated subjects, without exploring different social categories and without offering a comprehensive approach of specific memories of the communist past. A different case is the documentary "Das Experiment 770 - Gebären auf Behelf" (2005) that presents the story of the "unwanted children" and their families. The documentary uses testimonies of those directly affected by the natality policy: "from known public figures and

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<sup>22</sup> Zoltan Rostás, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Bucharest, March 31, 2017.



medical personnel to everyday people, including children born due to Decree 770, and also persons who were performing illegal abortions for profit.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Oral history research: endeavors in the long way of coming to terms with the past

Without aiming for an extended and exclusive research literature, as the institutionalized research is enriched in many cases by provoking analyses resulted from the academic and university media, our research offers relevant data about the main oral history topics approached by some of the most active institutions of memory during this extended process of coming to terms with the past, thereby allowing “the multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated”<sup>24</sup>. The recollection of the traumatic communist past in the Romanian post-totalitarian society received its commemorative value through the active engagement of Romanian civic organizations and political class’s public assuming of the process of coming to terms with the past through the creation of the legislative context and by sustaining the institutions involved in this process. Despite political class reluctance and various struggles, each of the main agents of memory presented above helps to gradually develop the oral history as a viable instrument in gathering testimonies of the past and move forward the process of coming to terms with the past, furthermore enabling the intergenerational transmission of memory and knowledge. Romulus Rusan sensed that the past political resistance was demonstrated by a tendency to deny and undermine the researchers’ and victims’ struggles in the process of coming to terms with the past. In many cases, as he remarks, the intervention of European institutions was necessary in order to continue the started actions, even if these interventions were criticized by local politicians as being antinational, and the politically controlled local press was used to manipulate public opinion: ‘The title was “The Sacrilege from Sighet” [the paper was published in the journal *The Voice of Romania* on 22 May 1995]. We were accused of wanting to sell Romanian suffering to the European Council’.<sup>25</sup> Assuming that oral history is a valuable tool for uncovering the past, Doru Radosav also testifies about the difficulties of researching and collecting alternative narratives of the past in a social and political context characterized by its reluctance to come to terms with the past. The results of the research conducted under the guidance of the Oral History Institute offer valuable data for incriminating the past communist regime and for testifying against the institutional involvement in past crimes.<sup>26</sup> Smaranda Vultur also testifies that she encountered the same political resistance in the first years after 1989. The direct confrontation with the old political ideology and extreme nationalism resulted in various persecutions of

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<sup>23</sup> Elena Adam and Simona Mitroiu., “Remembering the past: Representations of women’s trauma in post-1989 Romanian cinema”, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 3: No. 1 (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the past: oral history”, in *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Romulus Rusan, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Bucharest, November 2, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Doru Radosav, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Cluj-Napoca, August 26, 2016.

those who wanted to look further into the communist past and the marginal (counter)-narratives: “we were [catalogued as being] “Soros’s people”, the traitors”.<sup>27</sup> Pointing out the complex relation between memory and forgetting, she considers the interviews as a meeting through which the transfer of knowledge and experience becomes possible. She refers directly to the significant role of the testimonies, in addition to literature, in creating the postmemory of the past for those who did not experience it directly. Consequently, her professional struggle to offer public memory space to the ‘quiet witnesses’ becomes, for them, a medium of expressing their feelings and memories. Many Romanian researchers have pointed out the subjectivity of oral history, but this perceived weakness is offset by its unique and direct access to memories of historical events. The researchers must use their knowledge and methodological norms to move beyond the subjectivity of memory and adapt to the witnesses’ ability to remember and present their narratives. The permanent dialogue and openness for alternative narratives can offer valuable insights, especially when traumatic events are involved. The analyses of the main agents of memory involved in the process of coming to terms with the past in Romanian post-totalitarian society were presented as interconnected with the personal narratives of some of those who were directly involved in recollecting the stories of the communist past and in underling the multi-layered nature of both remembrance and narratives of the past.

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<sup>27</sup> Smaranda Vultur, interview by Marian-Ionuț Hariuc, Timișoara, April 8, 2017.