From “Internet Freedom!” to the “Candle against Time”: Products of Protest and Commemoration in Hungary and Romania
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When I moved to Hungary in 2014 to pursue a master’s degree in history, I had little idea I would end up witnessing a wave of varied protests, demonstrations, and commemorations in the country and its southeastern neighbour, Romania. Many factors coalesced to create an environment rife with political activism in these two countries in 2014 and 2015. The reigning Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán continued along its path of restricting freedom of the press and access to information, introducing a new bill that would heavily tax internet usage. Fuelled by the conflict in Syria and resulting refugee crisis, Orbán used fear to further consolidate his power while activists organised anti-government and pro-refugee demonstrations. Romania meanwhile underwent a contentious presidential election that included allegations of corruption and questions about ethnicity and religion, with one major candidate coming from the Protestant, ethnic German minority of an overwhelmingly Orthodox and ethnic Romanian country. For central and eastern Europe as a whole, 2014 was also a landmark year marking the 25th anniversary of the fall of communism in the region in 1989. In Romania, where Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Communist regime fell after intense bloodshed rather than through non-violent negotiation or revolution, the anniversary of 1989 carried particular significance. Former revolutionaries, concerned citizens, and the youth of a post-revolutionary generation flooded streets and conference halls with commemorative activities, narratives about the revolution, and ideas about where Romania stood 25 years later.

For many of the events I witnessed, protests and commemorations made themselves known on paper as much as in person. Indeed, a veritable paper trail can be traced alongside the timeline of events in Hungary and Romania in 2014-2015. My collection of documents is precisely that paper trail. It shows the various roles paper played in promoting activism. During anti-government demonstrations in Hungary, protesters distributed pamphlets with clear indications of demands alongside easily understandable and reproducible images. One particularly great example is a pamphlet distributed to crowds during a protest of up to 100,000 participants against the Orbán regime’s proposed internet tax, which exclaims “Internet Freedom” above a photograph of Budapest’s Liberty Statue edited to portray the statue wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and holding an ethernet cable in the air (Figure 1). The other side of the pamphlet includes a bullet-point list of demands along with an internet link to an activist group called “Liquid Democracy.” Metaphorically and literally, this and similar protest placards linked paper to online forms of communication and organisation.

Items related to commemoration in the collection tend to focus more on providing information. In some cases, such as one document outlining the timetable for a two-day symposium on the 25th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution of 1989 attended by scholars and several former revolutionaries, these items inform us about what occurred during a given commemorative event and how that event was organised—at the very least, it tells us what the plan was for a given event (Figure 2). I attended this particular symposium, and events did not
proceed as planned in the document handed out in advance. During the symposium’s opening speeches, a man named Gheorghe Cionoiu began handing out manifestos claiming that there was no revolution in Romania, only a political coup engineered internally with the Soviet Union and “the West.” He was confronted by a number of attendees and wound up in a physical altercation, for which the local police was brought in. The symposium itself later degenerated into a walk-out by most of its participants over questions about the history of the revolution and particularly about when it ended (many believed the goals of the revolution had not yet been met and that Romania was therefore still in a revolution). The timetable of the symposium and Cionoiu’s manifesto are both in this collection; together, they tell a story about the clash between competing understandings and narratives of Romania’s revolution.

Historical narrative is indeed a key component for many of the documents in this collection. The Revolution Memorial Association (AMR) in Timișoara, Romania is perhaps the best example of narratives about the revolution furthered through documents. Founded and largely run by former revolutionaries and family members of former revolutionaries, the AMR’s range of activities has expanded since its formation in 1990 to include the erection of monuments commemorating the revolution throughout Timișoara, a museum to the revolution, and, beginning in the 2010s, a small publishing house. Dedicated to promoting the memory of the revolution, the AMR has published or commissioned numerous books and a twice-yearly journal on a variety of topics related to the events and aftermath of 1989. For the 25th anniversary in 2014, the AMR published a book about Timișoara’s hospitals during the revolution alongside a
two-volume encyclopaedia of the revolution. This collection includes nearly all of the AMR’s publications in the 2010s, as well as some published before then. It also includes documents pertaining to the AMR’s other activities, including a pamphlet about the organisation and the English translation of the script for a film the AMR commissioned.

Rather than celebrating a unique form of typography, printing, or binding, the documents in this collection merit interest precisely because they are mundane. They represent a period of popular political activism, wherein manifestos and demands were hastily typed into word processors, printed onto 8.5 by 11-inch paper, and distributed en masse. Produced by individuals and groups and intended for mass consumption during street protests and commemorative activities, these pamphlets sit alongside the small-scale publishing efforts of organisations such as the AMR. The primary purposes of these documents were to disseminate information, further political demands or promote specific narratives of a violent revolution, and invite passersby to read their lines, view their images, and click their links. One may even argue that this collection speaks to the history of the present, translating how we might view the leaflets and literature of historical activism into how such documents look in the present.

This collection tells multiple stories. Historically, it arrives directly from the cacophony of political activism in Hungary and Romania in 2014-2015, offering glimpses into a period of political contention and consolidation, of commemoration and demonstration, all set within the contexts of the refugee crisis and the 25th anniversary of 1989. In doing so, it allows scholars to consider major thematic questions about popular protest and collective memory, both within and outside the geographical limits of central and eastern Europe. The collection is also a story about three cities: the Hungarian capital of Budapest, where frustrated citizens resisted and continue to resist the impulses of Orbán’s “illiberal democracy,” and Timișoara and Bucharest, the two foci of the Romanian Revolution of 1989 and its bloodshed. As the denizens of these cities continue to reckon with their present governments and past history, they produce documents full of arguments, demands, narratives, and commemorations.

Finally, the collection tells a personal story. I chose to pursue a master’s degree at Budapest’s Central European University, an institution currently being forced out of the country by policies enacted by the Orbán government, because I wanted to study Romanian history and living in Hungary would bring me closer to the archives I intended to visit. The protests I witnessed in Budapest combined themselves with the many demonstrations I witnessed in my hometown of Montreal, and greatly affected my understanding of the world. When a colleague of mine suggested visiting Romania with me to conduct field research on commemorations of the 25th anniversary of 1989, I did not expect to find the great variety of activities that we witnessed. To say that the protests and commemorations of 2014-2015 in Hungary and Romania changed the course of my life would not be an overstatement. I wound up writing my master’s thesis on the AMR, and my continued obsession with revolution and protest has brought me to my PhD studies here at Stanford’s Department of History. I have devoted and will continue to devote myself to studying these topics, and I can only assume that my collection of placards, pamphlets, narratives, and manifestos will increase over time.
Bibliography

Note: As Romanian is a Romance language, I have opted not to translate titles into English except in cases where I believe the original may not be understandable by an English-speaking audience. Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language, so I have translated all Hungarian-language organisations and titles. Translations into English are my own, and are included in square brackets alongside the original language. I have also noted instances where I have multiple versions of a document in different languages.

Note 2: The Memorial Revolution Association has existed under many names in its history. For the sake of brevity, I have abbreviated all publications by the organisation as AMR, for its most current Romanian name (Asociaţia Memorialul Revoluţiei). “Editura Memorialul Revoluţiei 1989” refers to the publishing house of the AMR.

„Akkor győztünk…” [Then we won…]. Leaflet distributed by the Közösségi Alkotmányozás [Community Constitution], 2014.


This laminated pamphlet is provided to visitors of the museum and headquarters of the AMR. It outlines some of the monuments erected by the organisation and some of its functions in Timișoara. This collection includes the English-language version of the pamphlet.


The second of a two-part encyclopaedia of the revolution published by the AMR in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of 1989.

Cionoiu, Gheorghe. “Radiografia societăţii româneşti” [Radiography of Romanian Societies]. Leaflet distributed by Cionoiu. No publication date.

A pamphlet distributed by Gheorghe Cionoiu during a national symposium on the 25th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution held in Timișoara on 19 December 2014. The pamphlet argues that there was no revolution in Romania in 1989, only an internal coup engineered by the secret police, the army, the Soviet Union, and “the West.” Cionoiu’s distribution of this pamphlet precipitated his physical altercation between him and the symposium’s attendees. I managed to grab a copy of his manifesto before the symposium itself broke down.
A full-size map published by the AMR. It indicates the location of sixteen monuments commissioned by the organisation in the city of Timișoara, along with photographs of the monuments and some information about general tourist attractions.


At the end of 2013, the Orbán government revealed a new statue to be placed in Budapest’s Freedom Square depicting an eagle attacking an angel holding a symbolic representation of Hungary. Meant to represent Nazi Germany attacking Hungary, the text above the statue read “A német megzállás áldozatainak
emlékműve” [Monument to the Victims of the German Occupation]. The statue angered a number of Hungarians, particularly within the country’s Jewish population, as it erased the fact that Hungary in fact collaborated with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and that the German “occupation” was really more of a military manoeuvre. Those against the new statues protested by creating an organisation called Eleven Emlékmű (Living Memory), which created a “counter-memorial” in front of the new monument consisting of old photographs and testimonies by the families of victims of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Along with the counter-memorial, Eleven Emlékmű also hosted a number of protests, roundtable discussions, and even open-air concerts up into the present day. This document is a timetable I obtained for Eleven Emlékmű’s events in the week of 20 October 2014, which was also the week of the 25th anniversary of 1989 in Hungary.


On 19 January 2015, the refugee solidarity group Migráns Szolidaritás Csoport organised a demonstration in central Budapest opposing the anti-refugee statements and policies of Viktor Orbán. Consisting largely of university students, the organisation distributed a number of pamphlets to demonstrators in Hungarian and English.

“Hungary is for Everyone!” Leaflet distributed by the Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary. English and Hungarian versions in collection. No publication date.

“In Memoriam.” Translated script for the documentary film *In Memoriam*. Documentation by Olivian Dulea and Adina Hornea. Translated by Simona Mocioalcă. No publication date.

Commissioned by the AMR, *In Memoriam* was designed as a short documentary film about the Romanian Revolution of 1989 to be shown to visitors to the organisation’s museum. During my research on the AMR, Simona Mocioalcă provided me with a copy of the English translation for the film’s script. This translation was used when creating subtitles for the film.

“Internet Szabadság” [Internet Freedom]. Leaflet distributed by the group Likvid Demokrácia [Liquid Democracy]. No publication date.

After the Orbán government announced its intention to introduce a tax on individual internet usage, protests against the bill swelled in Budapest from 27 October until at least 31 October. While very early protests were characterised by actions such as protesters throwing old computer parts at government buildings, the demonstration on 28 October was doubtlessly the best attended. Roughly 100,000 protesters marched through the city, with some distributing leaflets for new forms of democracy. “Liquid Democracy,” the group distributing this pamphlet, called for reforming Hungary’s government into a more direct
democracy that used the internet to facilitate clearer communication and demands between citizens and politicians.


“Joga van tudni róla” [You have a right to know about it]. Leaflet distributed by the group Egységfront Egyesület [Unity Front Association] and Egységfront Mozgalom [Unity Front Movement].

“Kiáltvány!” [Manifesto!] Leaflet distributed by the Ország Gyűlése Mozgalom [Movement for an Assembly of Citizens].


Though the Orbán government decided against implementing the proposed internet tax following the mass protests of late October, demonstrations against the government did not subside. A number of anti-Orbán protests in Budapest took place in mid-November, including a popular “közfelháborodás napja” [day of national outrage] on 17 November 2014. Some pamphlets, including those distributed by the Ország Gyűlése Mozgalom [Movement for an Assembly of Citizens], were obtained during the mid-November protests.

“Manifestul Regal.” Alianța Națională pentru Restaurarea Monarhiei. Pamphlet distributed during the commemorative events held on University Square in Bucharest, Romania for the 25th anniversary of the Romanian revolution, 21 December 2014. No publication date.

On 21 December 2014, a number of Romanians in Bucharest celebrated the 25th anniversary of 1989 in the city’s University Square. Activities were varied, including everything from a folk-rock musical performance to a re-enactment of the revolution through barricades made of boxes and a car dressed up to look like a tank. One activist group on University Square, the Alianța Națională pentru Restaurarea Monarhiei [National Alliance for the Restoration of the Monarchy], distributed pamphlets arguing that the abolition of the Romanian monarchy was forced by the postwar Communist government and was therefore illegal. It claimed that Mihai I, the last king of Romania, should return to Romania and reform the monarchy. Since Mihai I’s death in 2017, I am not certain how this organisation’s political platform has changed.

A rare item and a gift given by members of the AMR during my time spent researching the organisation, this booklet was written and published immediately after the revolution of 1989. It attempts to flesh out a timeline of events as best as possible and offers an interesting contemporary perspective on the violence that occurred in Timișoara, the city where the revolution began.


A journal published by the AMR either once or twice yearly with articles about Romanian history (particularly when it pertains to 1989) and information about the AMR’s most recent activities. This collection includes all issues of the journal from 2010 to early 2015.


Written as if it were a pamphlet with files recovered from the Romanian secret police, this document was in fact created and distributed by László Tőkés and the Erdélyi Magyar Nemzeti Tanács [Transylvanian Hungarian National Council] as promotional material for a series of commemorative events held in Timișoara for
the 25th anniversary of 1989. Tókés is an ethnic-Hungarian pastor who served the Protestant community of Timișoara and was a dissident under the Romanian Communist regime and. The state’s attempt to evict Tókés from his home in Timișoara, and the demonstration his congregation started in protest of the eviction, is generally considered to be the spark that started the Romanian Revolution of 1989.


“Regele pe tronul Țării!” Alianța Națională pentru Restaurarea Monarhiei. Pamphlet distributed during the commemorative events held on University Square in Bucharest, Romania for the 25th anniversary of the Romanian revolution, 21 December 2014. No publication date.

“Simpozion: 25 de ani de la proclamarea Timișoarei primul oraș liber din România.” Pamphlet for symposium organised by the Asociația Istoricilor Bănătenci and the Buzeul Banatului Timișoara, held on 20 December 2014. No publication date.

“Simpozionul Național 25 de ani de la revoluția română Timișoara 1989.” Folder and timetable given to participants and attendees of a national symposium about the 25th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution of 1989, held in Timișoara on 19 December 2014.


“Szeretnél te is közvetlen (avagy: részvételi, direkt, bázis, likvid, e-) demokráciában élni?” [Would you also like to live in a direct (or participatory, direct, base, liquid, etc.) democracy?] Leaflet distributed by Likvid Democrácia [Liquid Democracy]. No publication date.


The USE-IT Europe network is a Belgian group that creates tourist maps aimed towards backpackers and travelling students. It is interesting in this collection as a sort of “left-field” item concerning historical narrative and commemoration. This map, which is for Timișoara, includes a brief and sarcastic account of the Romanian Revolution of 1989. It reads, “To give you a taste of the schooling system we went through, here’s how we learned 90’s history in schools: On December 15th, 1989, the anticommunist Romanian Revolution broke out and by December 20th, Timișoara is the first free town in Romania. We pave the way for the removal of the communist dictatorship and the introduction of democratic political structures all over the country. And then, consumerism kicked in with McD and Coca Cola joining the party.”

Țintaru, Angela, Corina-Daniela Untilă and Marius Mioc, eds. Libertate, te iubim! Ori învingem, ori murim! [Liberty, We Love You! We Will Either Overcome or Die!]. Timișoara, RO: Excelsior Art, 2014.