

# The autobiographical archive in post-communist Romania: “True” heroes and collective victimization

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)**Simona Mitroiu** 

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania

**Camelia Gradinaru** 

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania

## Abstract

Considering the emerging field of anti-totalitarian collective memory of communism, this article explores the interplay between the autobiographical archives and the public discourse on memory. It questions the appeal for establishing the “true” history of communism as it is reflected at the autobiographical archive level. Based on Elisabeta Rizea’s relevant case study and using a comprehensive approach addressing the discourse on memory in Romania, the grounding elements of the autobiographical archive are analyzed. Its afterlife is discussed in terms of its reception and through user-generated content specific to online communication platforms. The article argues that while the entanglements between the autobiographical archive and the discourse on memory of the Romanian communist past demonstrate a prevalence of the victimization and heroism narratives, the online engagement indicates both a continuity with these narratives and a (re)working of autobiographical archive in the register of truthfulness and authenticity.

## Keywords

autobiographical archive, discourse on memory, narrative of victimization, online engagements, true heroine, victim-hero

## Introduction

In 2020, the newly elected Mayor of Sector 1 in Bucharest, Clotilde Armand, announced the inauguration of a new park named after Elisabeta Rizea, widely known for her support of the anti-communist resistance during the first decade of the Romanian communist regime. Rizea was tortured and imprisoned twice as punishment for her continuous commitment to the anti-communist fighters and her refusal to betray them. In her 3-minute speech at the park inauguration, Armand

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### Corresponding author:

Simona Mitroiu, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Carol I nr 11, Iași 700506, Romania.

Email: [simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro](mailto:simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro)

described Rizea as “the heroine of the anti-communist fight in Romania,” and as “the true heroine of the Romanian nation.” Armand’s Facebook account entry on 31 December 2020, presenting the events, indicates the need to “re-establish the truth” of the past.

A field of anti-totalitarian collective memory of communism is emerging, fueling the discussion around establishing the “true” history of communism (Dujisin, 2021). The process itself reflecting “first and foremost, a shift in the region’s approach to its past,” driven by the “allegedly pervasive influence of former communist cliques” (Dujisin, 2021: 65), is determined by the general perception of a failed transitional justice, alongside the constancy of the former communist class in positions of power. The victimization and heroization narratives are part of the anti-communist movement in East Central Europe (Behr et al., 2020), while the prevalence of the narrative of victimization at the level of public discourse on memory and its interconnection with the public opinion were also characteristic. For example, in Hungary, the House of Terror’s rhetoric of victimization coincided with the public blame of “the persistence of socialist remains for the failure to enter transition’s promised future” (Nadkarni, 2020: 26), and in Czech Republic, the narrative of “communism as the Other” was interlinked with that of victimization determining the commemorations of the past appealing to “the suffering caused by the communist regime” (Blaive, 2020: 226).

The process of coming to terms with the Romanian communist period engaged with and generated several representations of and attitudes toward the past (Tileagă, 2012: 478–479), determining through “memory socialization” specific “discursive codes” (Tileagă, 2018: 119–120) on past events and well-known historical figures. The construction of a narrative of the communist past based on trauma, general victimization, and heroic resistance was supported by the impressive number of testimonies and tapped into the initial collective need to identify the perpetrators of past abuses, to sketch the “criminal” portrait of the communist regime, and to show proper consideration for the regime’s victims. However, through its long authority in the public discourse on memory and through its general features revolving mainly around communism defined as an externally imposed “criminal” regime, it limited the in-depth discussions of individual and collective responsibility in perpetuating an abusive regime of power. Reinforcing a unilateral approach to the past, increasing nationalist and divisive views, the public reiteration of heroic resistance reframes the discourse on communism as “Other” (Tileagă, 2018) and defines it as a narrative of victimization.

The public discourse on the communist past (re)enforces its legitimacy by using narratives diffused through different media and generating identification and “memory affiliation” (Hirsch, 2012). In this frame, the public figures’ personal narratives, taking the form of autobiographical archives, are read as entanglements of personal and public memories, impacting and being impacted by the collective memory construction. Therefore, questioning the appeal to “re-establish the truth” and the “true” history of communism (Dujisin, 2021), this article explores the interplay between the autobiographical archives and the public discourse on memory, while reflecting on the plasticity of their entanglements and (re)constructions. Are “true” heroes required in order to support and complete the anti-totalitarian collective memory of communism and also to combat the “influence of former communist cliques” (Dujisin, 2021: 65)? In order to reveal the construction of “true” hero representation based on autobiographical archive and its reception (Savolainen, 2021), we focus on Elisabeta Rizea’s case, while reflecting on the discourse on memory in Romania. Having in mind the memory studies’ explicit concern with “the relationship between the past, present and future” and “the role of the past in orienting participants to particular futures” (Keightley, 2010: 62), we address the reception of the archive by questioning the way in which the public engages in online debates related to the narrative of the past.

The analysis of the public online engagement with the archives allows a further investigation of the connections between the autobiographical archives and the public discourse on memory, taking into account a bottom-up approach and, therefore, completing the picture of the top-down politics of memory. The impact of social media has grown significantly in the collective memory field (Birkner and Donk, 2020). Social media are, in fact, “conversational technologies” (Söffler, 2010), with an accentuated oral character that urges people to react, respond, or comment. The current participatory culture has increased democratic access to a voice. The Internet is used not only as a convenient tool for private reasons, but also as “a medium of public memory” (Haskins, 2007: 418) where online memorializing takes place in a wider and heterogeneous context. “Ordinary voices” (Burgess, 2006) have to be acknowledged for their contribution to the public sphere and culture, despite certain limitations such as fake news, polarization of opinions, or perpetuation of commonplaces. In this vein, online comments, reviews, and posts are able to challenge official memory practices, questioning their ideology and revitalizing relevant debates. Investigating the individuals’ online engagement based on an analysis of the user-generated content specific to online communication platforms, this article also adds new information in the field of “memory in a mediated world” (Hajek et al., 2016).

## **Narrative of trauma and collective victimization**

A nation’s collective memory is generated by social actors’ interactions under the pressure of societal forces (Halbwachs, 1992). Therefore, collective memory is both developed in the frame of the official politics of memory and imposed on individuals and produced as “a popular memory reflecting the mnemonic performance of ordinary people” (Reifová, 2018: 589). The politics of memory is a set of strategies employed by political actors “to make others remember in certain, specific ways and the effects of such mnemonic manipulations” (Kubik and Bernhard, 2014: 7). Different discourses of memory, which form part of the politics of memory and function as a top-down performance of the collective memory, were adopted in the East Central European post-communist countries, ranging from the denial of the communist past to the moderate preservation of continuity with the communist past, or even to a consolidation of the national identity based on it (Jõesalu, 2020; Kosmos, 2020). In some countries, the researchers observed the absence of “a shared public narrative about the socialist past” (Koleva, 2016), while the rejection and condemnation of the communist past (Reifová, 2018: 589), which forms part of the official memory discourse, was perceived as being in contradiction with the autobiographical accounts of the past, including the nostalgic views (Marin, 2016; Mihelj, 2017).

The first years of the Soviet regime instauration in Romania were marked by the same terror used as a political instrument that governed the East Central European countries dominated by the Soviet power (Deletant, 2019), while the last two decades were characterized by a change of repressive tactics to general surveillance of the Romanian citizens and increasing cult of personality and nationalism. We did an extensive literature review regarding the process of coming to terms with the communist past in order to indicate the main directions of the public discourse on memory in Romania. A split in the memory of communism along an elite-popular line has been observed (Rusu, 2017). On the one hand, the discourse on memory focuses on the trauma of the past and on extending the regime victims’ trauma to the entire Romanian society (Ciobanu, 2020; Petrescu and Petrescu, 2014), while, on the other hand, ordinary people use the language of nostalgia when remembering their lives in communist times, often in connection with generational memory and “the online mnemonic and curatorial practices” (Pohrib, 2019). Traumatic memory discourse, meanwhile, is reflected in the impressive number of testimonies and autobiographical writings centered on past abuses, followed by open access to the communist regime archives and the public

condemnation of communist crimes (2006). However, this public discourse on defining memory of the communist regime (1945–1989) through victimization and trauma leaves aside ordinary people's role in maintaining an abusive structure of power.

Several institutions, such as The Sighet Communist Victims and Resistance Memorial and The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, have been involved in exploring the communist past by gathering and analyzing private narratives and public archives. Many research directions assumed by these institutions advocated the narrative of victimization and heroic resistance. Through their assumed mission, the “memory institutions” (Dujisin, 2021) approved the public discourse on memory constructed around collective victimization and heroic resistance narratives. Their mission from the start was to support victims in remembering and sharing their experiences. The public condemnation of the communist past in the Romanian Parliament in 2006, based on an extensive report on the crimes of the former regime, reinforced the narrative of the communist past. The “Tismăneanu Report,” endorsed by the Romanian president, was the result of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Regime, formed by academic specialists, under the coordination of Vladimir Tismăneanu, a well-known political scholar and historian of communism (Tismăneanu et al., 2007). The report departed from “self-condemnatory” and “self-blaming” attempts to discuss the collective responsibility of the communist past, and focused instead on the illegitimate and criminal features of the regime; it also externalized the memory of communism by insisting on its tangible nature and by de-substantiating its connectedness and processuality with inter-human relationships (Tileagă, 2018: 112–115). However, the conclusion of the Report mirrored the general perception of communism in Romania at that time and it strengthened the narrative of collective victimization and heroic resistance that was extensively adopted in the first post-communist decade.

A sense of accountability for past wrongs was generally promoted based on the assertion that the collaboration with the Romanian secret police—the Securitate—was the mark that clearly differentiated between “us” and the “others,” that is, between loyal, decent people and traitors willing to betray the trust of their relatives and friends (Ursachi, 2015). In the absence of a lustration law, as well as in the absence of elaborated juridical measures targeting the perpetrators of the communist regime, one of the most debated topics during the first two post-communist decades was the collaboration with the regime.

In summary, the narrative of the past weaved around the externally imposed oppression acted in a twofold manner: (1) it discharged the communist regime of its national weight, and (2) it absolved ordinary people of their responsibility in perpetuating an abusive regime of power through their collaboration or even through their lack of opposition. Despite the debates generated by collaboration and surveillance, the interpretation of the regime through the lens of the traumatic abuses experienced in the first two decades produced a limitative unidimensional approach to the past, in which the Romanian people stood in opposition to communism and saw it as failing to reflect the nation's true values. Significant studies explored everyday life in communism and the common people's narratives (Massino, 2019). However, their impact at the level of the discourse on memory of communism in Romania remains rather modest. Outlining the Romanian narrative of the communist past, four recurring claims ground the public memory discourse and generate public affiliation: the criminal communist regime was externally imposed upon the Romanian people; there is no connection between the regime and the national values and the national self; the traumatic memories of the past are a collective shared asset; a heroic resistance was largely practiced. The main absence from this narrative remains the justice for the victims, as the failure of lustration law and of legal measures to consider the perpetrators accountable for their deeds offered no “closure” about the past and reasserted the “unfinished revolution” (Mark, 2010).

## Elisabeta Rizea: a case study

The autobiographical archive is constructed around personal memories, documents, and memorabilia “stored, revised and curated repeatedly” (Smith and Watson, 2020: 10) and it designates more than the publicly shared life narrative and its subsequent new layers added in different periods of time. The life story is “filtered through other kinds of archives,” circulates “as new reading publics access different versions of it over time,” and acquires its afterlife “that shifts its relationship to archival material and generates other versions of the subject” (Smith and Watson, 2020: 11). The life story is supplemented by the interconnected materiality (photos, drawings, personal and community memorabilia, etc.), as well as by its reception (contextualized engagement with the life story, reinterpretation, and reworkings in different media). Our case study was chosen based on its representativity for the recollection of the first two decades of the communist regime in Romania, largely known through their repressive nature (Deletant, 2019). The identified memory affiliation that this autobiographical archive generated during the post-communist period supports our choice. An ample debate concerns the Romanian resistance in the last two decades of the communist regime, and in many cases, the public reception of the Romanian dissidents was tainted during the first post-communist decade by the political class fighting for power. For instance, both the dissident Doina Cornea (d. 2018) and the poet Ana Blandiana contested the communist regime’s authority and militated for lustration and free elections in the first post-communist decade. Several differences were visible regarding the public affiliation with their outlined portraits. Perceived as a threat by the former communist *nomenklatura*, part of the post-1989 political class, they were targeted by the politically controlled mass media, had little public support, and consequently the general public’s association with their figures diminished in time.

Rizea’s autobiographical archive includes both her life narrative—resulting from recorded interviews and published versions, photos, film images, belongings, and the physical world associated with—and its afterlife—analyzed here in terms of reception, as manifested through various analyses and considerations about her role as a symbol of anti-communist resistance and through online comments. Two embodiments through different media, completing each other and offering an extensive approach of the autobiographical narrative, were chosen for our close reading and narrative analysis. Due to their consistent information content, they are essential parts of Rizea’s autobiographical archive: the 1992 episode from the television documentary *Memorialul Durerii* (The Memorial of Suffering) and its transcript (Hossu-Longin, 2012), and her autobiographical testimonial *Povestea Elisabetei Rizea din Nucșoara* (The Story of Elisabeta Rizea from Nucșoara) published for the first time in 1993. Rizea’s story was published in different newspapers, by mainly repeating fragments and themes from these two narrative episodes. The documentary analysis covers the text alongside its reception by social audiences. Narrative representations of the past “are characterized by particular codes and conventions, which can be identified and examined using narrative analysis,” and this is particularly relevant to both film studies concerned with memory and to oral history “examining processes of remembering” (Keightley, 2010: 64). The analysis of the documentary episode is useful in indicating the role of television in “memory building through empathy” (Gray, 2013: 94). The analysis of memory data was established through processing the texts and working on the initial themes identified through content analysis in order to articulate a more specific thematic structure.

The dissemination of Rizea’s autobiographical narratives in digital media proves its memorability and represents a powerful reason for analyzing its online reception. The circulation and construction of memory is based on acts of reception, denoting the measure in which the information selected to be included in the registers of memory was “received”—“seen, heard, used, appropriated, made sense of, taken as an inspiration” (Törnquist-Plewa et al., 2017: 3). The online audience

is heterogeneous at many levels (age, cultural and educational background, political views), including variations between different online social media platforms, with a prevalence of educated audience when discussing Rizea's autobiographical writing; thus, the examination of online comments is meaningful in addressing a collective general perspective of this case. We decided to focus on a time-filtered approach of the patterns of online engagement with Rizea's autobiographical themes. In order to maintain logical correspondence with the main forms of Rizea's autobiographical narrative, three online platforms were selected: the Romanian National Television (TVR) YouTube channel where the documentary *The Memorial of Suffering* was posted; Goodreads, the "world's largest site for readers and book recommendations," for the contemporary reception of *The Story of Elisabeta Rizea from Nucșoara*; and Facebook, the main social media platform and by far the most used one in Romania—compared with other online social networks sites such as Twitter or Instagram (Statista Research Department, 2022).

We argue that while the entanglements between the autobiographical archive and the discourse on memory of the Romanian communist past demonstrate a prevalence of the victimization and heroism narratives, the online engagement indicates both a continuity with these narratives and a (re)working of Rizea's autobiographical archive in terms of contextualization and (re)enforcement of its memory as a response to social and political challenges. Communities and individuals continuously conceptualize their relationships with the past and present (Savolainen, 2022), including "particular future" projections. The article demonstrates that a revalorization of the anti-communist heroes in the forms of authenticity and truthfulness is processed through digital media as a response to the unsuccessful transitional justice and to the failure of the post-communist political class to correspond to people's expectations.

### **The autobiographical archive: setting up the "true history" and constructing the "victim-hero" narrative**

Television is a means through which ordinary people can learn about history (Edgerton and Rollins, 2001) and "a major agent in the production of national and social memory" (Gray, 2013: 79). The television documentary *The Memorial of Suffering* was the first visual exploration of the communist past. It was first nationally broadcast in 1991 and consists of approximately 200 episodes (a new series of episodes was added in 2013) detailing the Romanian communist victims' stories, and even including interviews with several perpetrators. The documentary explored the establishment of the regime and its first decade of existence and was able to gain the audience's approval by responding to the general call for the nation to distance itself from its communist past. In its first episodes it shifted the attention from the last decade of communism to its first decade by looking at the external Soviet forces that oppressed the Romanian people and demonstrating the people's resistance to those forces. Mixing individual memories and historical documents, including historians' interviews, the series identified the memory as being equivalent to history. In doing this, it attempted to reveal the "true history" (Hossu-Longin, 2012) of the communist regime. No other audio-visual production exploring the individual memories of the traumatic past gained this level of approval from the audience in the first post-communist decade.

With some notable exceptions, the representation of women in the interviews and broadcast episodes indicates their role as helpers and anti-communist resistance supporters in a world dominated by male figures. Their suffering is interconnected with those of the male victims of the regime. The *Memorial* portrays these victims as heroines who refused to betray their fathers, husbands, and brothers regardless of the punishment and suffering the regime would threaten them with. The "victim-hero" (Khlevnyuk, 2021) summarizes the narrative framework in which the

documentary and afterward the general public structured Elisabeta Rizea's life and her encounters with the communist regime. The victim-hero is

a hybrid concept that indicates the complex relations between heroes and victims' characters in memory narratives. Claiming victimhood status is beneficial in political debates (. . .) On the other hand, national ideas of greatness do not agree with the view of weak and passive victimhood. (Khlevnyuk, 2021: 2)

This victimhood status is the result of the recounted brutality with which the regime operated against her and, furthermore, is complementary to the claim of external forces acting against the Romanian people. The victim-hero is cherished as a symbol of collective resistance. The victim-heroes are subjected to atrocities and they have "almost no agency to avoid their inevitable fate"; however, "unlike victims, victim-heroes claim their agency under persecution" (Khlevnyuk, 2021: 2).

The episode, which recounts for the first time Rizea's story, is part of a larger project about the Romanian mountain anti-communist fighters who were hunted down by the regime (Ciobanu, 2020). The rural population from these mountain regions was divided between collaboration with the regime and support for the partisans. The episode starts by focusing on Arnăuțoiu's armed resistance group, a group that included the parents of the young violinist women whose image is used as an establishing shot. The medium shot (Collenberg and Gonzalez, 2016: 248) then shows the prison cells, the loneliness, and the cold generated by the black and white images of the sterile and frightening space in which women were imprisoned for years and where many of them lost their lives. The close-up shot then foregrounds Rizea's story and her past experience. Through her narrative, she transcended her initial designated supporting role and thus captured the director's attention and the audience's sympathy. Rizea is honoring the interview event with her presence as she is filmed in her traditional costume, a habit that is kept by some of the Romanian rural population who continue to wear traditional costumes at Sunday church service and during national celebrations. She is expressing herself in a natural way, easily moving from one traumatic experience to another, recounting her years in prison and her efforts to regain her properties, sharing her sorrows, and depicting her capacity to escape the regime's vigilance and to continue to send food to those hiding in the mountains. She repeatedly outlines her refusal to betray their cause or to divulge their hiding places, despite the beatings and torture she experienced and ultimately her condemnation to death, commuted afterward in 25 years of prison. Her steady tone then gives way to weeping, and, almost closing the emotional memory circle, to the anger caused by the memories of one of her torturers and to the rage provoked by the great injustice she experienced over losing her properties. Rizea is not ashamed to show her arthritic hands, symbols of her lost physical powers and of her body's fragility, caused by the inhumane prison conditions she had to endure. Physical objects are then used to complete her story of the regime's abuses. She was deprived of all her material possessions, with the lost lands, furniture, and cutlery being narratively invoked as lost witnesses of her challenging life and of her humiliating dispossession. The images from her house and surroundings resonated with the viewers as her house became, as long as she lived, a place of pilgrimage.

As noted above, following the 1992 documentary interview, Rizea gained broad media attention, with several newspapers publishing her story. Her personality and character were highly praised; reporters and analysts concurred in describing her as honest, courageous, pure, and generous—both a victim and a symbol of resistance. She was named a Romanian heroine, and a Christian saint walking on the communist Golgota (Dobre, 2006). During her last decade of life, she was visited by numerous intellectuals, representatives of civic society, foreign ambassadors, and even by King Michael I of Romania, who was forced by the communist regime to abdicate in 1947.

From this point onward, Rizea's figure was politically instrumentalized by the declared opponents of the former communist *nomenklatura* in order to gain visibility and legitimacy, and in 2000, the first non-communist Romanian president, Emil Constantinescu, visited her in the village of Nucșoara. Her death in 2003 was then largely mediatized, with her resistance again being associated with Christian martyrs and saints and her life being held up as a symbol of traditional Romanian values (Dobre, 2006). Rizea's house has undergone a reconditioning process since 2020, following a private financed effort coordinated by the Elisabeta Rizea Association to transform it into a Memorial House, a "SPACE OF THE ROMANIAN MEMORY."

Several recurring themes structure Rizea's narrative during her interview for the *Memorial* episode; these were then reworked and further explored in a 1993 autobiography—a volume that is based on interviews conducted by the Romanian ethnologist Ioana Nicolau, who decided to transcribe Rizea's stories without any intervention, keeping the grammar, expressions, and narrative untouched. Through close reading and narrative analysis we identified a number of themes structuring the autobiographical archive and we offered several examples detailing their textual presence: the hard work of the family to build a good life; the injustice wrought by the communist regime—a system that shocked her with its lack of respect for human life (including hers) and where those who sacrificed themselves fighting for the country were punished and treated as enemies (as in the case of many partisans that were war heroes returning from World War II and who were condemned to prison or death because of their role on the Eastern front); her husband's efforts and her own role in supplying the armed resistance with food and daily products; the physical abuses inflicted upon her by investigators and officers; her capacity to evade the regime's control and to continue to support the partisans; her life in prison and her adaptability to the harsh prison conditions; the persistent injustice and the continuous efforts to regain her former properties; her loyalty to her husband and to those forced to hide in mountains, including her responsibility for their lives.

In Rizea's account the communists "came" to her village from the outside world; they killed her uncle and instilled fear in the minds of the village wise men; they drove those who openly opposed them to the mountains and cast them out (Nicolau and Nițu, 2021: 51). The former world structure and its social composition grounded in hard work and respect for the village representatives were thus destroyed and reshaped, while, on a more individual level, Rizea recalled that when in prison one of the investigators threatened to shoot her but stopped himself when he decided she did not deserve the price of a bullet. In the same line of communism as being externally imposed and of the communists as being foreigners, she believes that the communists cannot be forgiven and, moreover, that they cannot be called Romanians (Nicolau and Nițu, 2021: 31). She develops the same idea when speaking about partisans (Nicolau and Nițu, 2021: 37).

Some of these themes have been retrieved in the public discourse on memory focused on past traumas, victimization, and national heroism: the regime as being externally imposed, the collectively assumed victimization and heroism, with the main absence being justice for the victims. Another major absence from the public discourse on memory is that of individual responsibility. The main narrative theme dominating the clash between Rizea and the communist regime relates to her inner resistance. However, even if it is clearly spelled out, the reason behind Rizea's categorical opposition is not explored through the subsequent readings and interpretations. For example, she recounts an episode when she was once again interrogated and she was praying to God, not to escape with her life, but to be strong enough not to divulge anything during torture (Hossu-Longin, 2012: 279). Why was it so important for her not to betray her allies—so important that it could cost her life? Her loyalty is interlinked with personal responsibility:



Give me strength, God, as You did until now, give me strength, better let me die here. (. . .) how much my conscience would berate me if I decided to divulge them, to know that they were shot because of me (. . .) If they shot them, they shot them, maybe they would shoot me as well, but not let myself be guilty for that. (Nicolau and Nițu, 2021: 61, our translation)

She emphasizes her refusal to submit to the regime's attempts to transform her into a collaborator. Rizea's narrative indicates her understanding of her personal responsibility and of her future accountability. However, this autobiographical element of the archive was overshadowed by the wider political struggle for change and opposition to the former communist class that had repeatedly won elections during the first post-1989 decade.

## Online engagement and (re)workings of truthfulness

As the circulation of memory is based on acts of reception, we chose to focus on the online engagement with Rizea's autobiographical archive and to further investigate its correlations with the narrative of trauma and victimization. Three main corpora were constructed. The first contains online comments (2019–2021), regarding the documentary *The Memorial* posted on the TVR YouTube Channel on 28 June 2019. The second corpus targeted the readers of the book *The Story* and comprises reviews posted on Goodreads (2013–2021). The third corpus is formed of posts and comments on Facebook about the same book and about notable quotes excerpted from it (2010–2021). We made a content analysis of online opinions using the qualitative research tool ATLAS.ti 9 (coding and analysis phases) in order to observe the most reiterative themes and sub-themes that circulate in the digital media, based on their groundedness. We opted for a bottom-up coding precisely to minimize any possible bias, reason for which many times we used in vivo coding, staying very close to the comments, followed by axial coding. The analysis consisted in categorizing the codes into high-level concepts, using group and network functions.

The main interconnected themes identified are as follows: (a) author and life narrative's reception (revealing the (re)working of autobiographical archive in the register of truthfulness and authenticity), (b) (re)iterations of the narrative of collective victimization, and (re)workings of past narrative by projecting possible memory futures. (a) Two types of interactions with Rizea as author of the autobiographical archive were identified: directly, by assigning specific attributes and, indirectly, by general inclusion in a larger category, among other personalities. In the reviews posted on Goodreads, the analysis of the book prevails, while Rizea's characterization is less commonly referred to. Here, she is generally depicted as a "simple, but very brave woman." On the contrary, in the Facebook and YouTube corpora, her direct characterization is highly prevalent, revealing the impact of the *Memorial* episode. She is most frequently portrayed as "heroine" and this is the most representative way in which the users refer to her. Moreover, Rizea is synonymously named "the heroine from Nucșoara," "the heroine from the Carpathians," "the heroine from Muscel" till "a heroine of Romania," "our heroine," "the heroine of the anti-communist struggle in Romania," or "the mother heroine of the Romanian people." For users, she symbolically embodies the heroism per se, giving it a visible face: "What does a hero look like? This is how it looks. Exactly." and "The heroism has Elisabeta Rizea's face." The people expressed a perfect overlap between Rizea and the ideal of heroism and for this reason they felt the need to emphasize this identification by adding epithets. The most used one is "true": "true hero" or "true heroine." The truthfulness and authenticity of Rizea's life and values constitute a special cluster in all three corpora. She is not just the true heroine, but also the "true saint," "true patriot," "true woman," "true human being," "true Romanian," "true fighter for truth, justice, freedom and faith," portraying the "true resistance," and the "true Romanian nation."

Regarding the indirect characterization, in all three corpora she is dialectically perceived as belonging to the categories of heroes (“the true heroes of this nation”) and victims (“the victims of communism”). As for the direct characterization, situating Rizea in the range of authentic national heroes is specially accentuated: she is not just a “convenient” hero, but she belongs to the pantheon of iconic Romanian figures, being placed in the family of “true heroes,” “true symbols,” “true people.” If the communists are seen as “the truest villains,” Rizea’s life represents the appeal to the values and truth:

I think these are the things that currently are unimportant, but which used to be in the hearts of many Romanians: patriotism, truth, respect for work, faith in God and in the true freedom, the one for which it is worthwhile to die.

Rizea is simultaneously seen as a victim of communist regime and a person that had the strength to transcend the atrocities of the regime. The complementarity between the heroine and victim representations is constantly in the fabric of comments. This is a reason why the commentators use the laic, religious, and symbolic registers in order to better comprehend this complex imbrication of levels.

As a general remark, the majority of comments are positive and praiseworthy; only three opinions question Rizea’s probity and label her as an “imperialist agent,” and as a “partisan of the legionary movement.” The possible connection between the anti-communist resistance and the legionary movement in Romania (Clark, 2020) is not furthermore explored in the online comments.

The expressions of respect for her suffering and injustices indicate the (re)enforcement of Rizea’s memory as a response to current challenges—a reminder of what it means to be a “true” hero: “I respect the memory of a true hero!,” “Respect. A true patriot,” “Yes, truly brave and dignified. The true heroine (. . .),” “Respect! These are the true heroes of the Romanian nation!,” “Thank you for reminding us who our true Romanian Nation is!” These registers are completed by the register of strong emotions: “it’s hard for me to talk,” “my words are lost in tears,” “we should bow our heads,” “I’m ashamed of how small I am.” The expressions of “eternal gratitude” come together with the register of politeness formulas, such as “thank you for reminding us who our true Romanian Nation is!” or “I kiss your hand, Madam.” The semantic universe of communism was intensely debated by users. It is primarily described as a “cancer,” produced by “non-humans,” while the communist leaders are named “other Romanians” or “other people.” The users depict the difficulty of associating the “past atrocity” with their “beloved homelands.” Rizea is seen as representing “the true Romanian nation,” proving the general heroic resistance practiced in the past: “Every Romanian village had people who opposed communism.” The metaphor analysis (Casimir et al., 2022) identified the metaphorical expressions used to depict Rizea as: a “rare bird,” “a lesson of human dignity,” “an exceptional lesson of history and morality.” Moreover, in recognition of her patriotism and sense of national belonging, Rizea is depicted as “Romanian,” as a “patriot,” and as “the brave from Nucșoara.” She is also labeled as personifying “the authentic anti-communism.” Her special place in the collective memory is reflected in words such as “unique,” “giant,” or, directly, as a “lesson of history.”(b) Some users point out that many political representatives of today are the successors of the former communist class; therefore, they have no connection to the pure national self, as idealized in Rizea’s symbol. Building on this point, people believed there exists a continuity of political class whereby past injustices still shape the present: “Because of the communists and their descendants (FSN, PSD), the Romanian people forgot what truth, faith, honesty and honor mean, we came to

respect nothing (. . .).” Thus, the communist regime has caused trauma that is still felt today. This interpretation is more visible in the YouTube comments, where users indicate that the former communist perpetrators were replaced by “their descendants”: “All the torturers have gone unpunished, their grandchildren and great grandchildren are the ones who lead us today.” In this vein, keeping alive the memory of heroes from that time is seen as a form of present-day resistance that helps to claim back the true national self: “These are our true symbols, but we are silent in complicity.” The injustices of communism, in general, and, in particular, when applied to Rizea’s case, are discussed throughout the comments. Users sympathize with the torment she endured and bemoan the lack of justice and compensation she received: “Was she rewarded with a special pension for her suffering? Former activists and prison chiefs have fat pensions and are doing well,” “Unfortunately, her executioners are free and still live unpunished,” “except for a few cases, countable on fingers, there was no liability in Justice.” In the same manner, users lament the “false justice,” and the instrumentalization made by several key figures through politicized public interventions: “What hurts me is that people who didn’t know her have realized that it’s cool to use her for political capital, associating with her values, even though they don’t have them.” The mistreatment she endured in the post-communist regime is denounced, emphasizing her victim condition. Thus, the lack of justice and appropriate compensatory measures is evident at several levels: social, political, educational, and even in terms of the preservation of her memory—“the saddest thing is that few still remember who she was . . .” The contextualization of the memory of Rizea’s autobiographical archive supports her identification as being both the Romanian “true heroine” and the victim of communism regime.

In the light of critical reflections made by users about the present times, the following sub-themes (re)work the autobiographical archive in terms of contextualisation, responding to social and political state of affairs: (1) depiction of the heroic past times compared with the present, including critics of the former and current political class: “then there were real people,” while “today we are witnessing the total destruction of the Romanian’s dignity”; (2) critics of the Romanian people and society: “ungrateful people,” “poor epigones”; and (3) expressions of helplessness, resignation, and skepticism regarding whether the wounds from the past can be healed: “we deserve our fate,” “unfortunately, we will never heal!” A special thread of conversations focuses on Rizea’s own words, which have become an inspirational slogan for many people: “If I live for three more days, I want to know that the world has cleared up.” In response, users have said that the world is not brighter and better than in her times, but, on the contrary, “the world is more and more troubled,” indicating a permanent state of crisis and the continuity of trauma, associated with the communist past.

A clear direction toward changing the future by including the lessons learnt from Rizea is present in the comments. Several users are appealing to the necessity of preserving memory in order to “not repeat the history,” while others propose specific initiatives to be implemented: a larger dissemination of Rizea and other heroes’ biographies; inclusion of her story in history handbooks; new memorial practices, such as organized pilgrimages at her memorial house; the use of the *Memorial* documentary in teaching history, philosophy, and ethics; public acknowledgment of Rizea’s historical involvement in fighting communism through different actions—circulating her image on a banknote, naming more streets after her, raising her a statue. These practical actions are conceived as minimal “reparatory” gestures and are reinforcing the dimension of the perceived truthfulness of Rizea’s life and values. Only an authentic and powerful figure could be chosen as an example for teaching the “true” history in schools or for publicly signaling the real heroes of the country.

## Conclusion

The public discourse on memory reflects the thematic narratives included in the autobiographical archive, while the subject of justice for victims of the communist regime—underdeveloped in the public discourse on memory—prevails at the level of autobiographical archive and online comments. On the other hand, the main absence both from the public discourse on memory and the online engagement with autobiographical archives is the subject of ordinary people's responsibility and accountability. Rizea's approach of committing herself to the protection of others' lives remains weakly explored in terms of individual accountability and feelings of shame and guilt about past collaboration with the regime, whatever its form. The access to Securitate's files and the public debates related to collaboration and its advantages opened up possibilities for a more inclusive narrative of the communist past, covering both individual and collective responsibility. However, public debates have failed to extend the understanding of the phenomenon by supporting an internalization of the memory of communism. The online reflections on Rizea's autobiographical archive reveal the persistence of the narrative of communism being different from the "national self" and as being restricted to the political class.

The general public's engagement with the autobiographical archive of key historical figures, as demonstrated by Rizea's case, mirrors the theoretical discussion around the "true" history of communism (Dujisin, 2021), and indicates (re)working and contextualization in terms of "true" heroes. The online comments (re)assert the "otherness" of communism as an externally imposed regime. Most of the narrative themes of the autobiographical archive are revitalized and widely explored by the online discussions across all of the three platforms that we analyzed. The injustice wrought by the communist regime is a semantic nucleus that records various facts and incriminations of activities done by Securitate and the communist party.

The "victim-hero" corresponds to the way in which Rizea's autobiographical archive was publicly received and this narrative of collective victimization and heroism was continuously reinforced in different media. However, the online engagement with her archive indicates a revalorization of her memory in the register of "true heroine" opposing the general deception generated by the post-communist public figures, especially in relation with the communist legacy. A failed transitional justice, a continuity of the former *nomenklatura* in positions of power, and a recurrent resurface of information proving various public figures' collaboration with the Securitate, concurred in supporting the long time distrust in the political class. They also perpetuate a state of impossible separation between collaborators with the communist regime and those considered untainted by the regime's practices, and even opposing the regime. In this frame, the concept of "true heroine" denotes a contextualization of the autobiographical archive responding to the current state of affairs, in terms of general disappointment with the political class and feeling of injustice. A visible change is present in validating the memory of "true" historical figures and projecting future actions to maintain and circulate their memory, increasing their autobiographical archives' reception. Preserving the memory of the past, especially of Rizea's life and example, establishes important concerns that emerge from all the corpora, with several accompanying concrete suggestions. The users' conversations indicate an understanding of the past and present as being overlapping in nature, alongside a general degree of victimization and discontent about the contemporary political class, especially in the absence of key heroic and dignified figures.

The study has its limitations: the known fragilities of the qualitative methodologies, the discussion of a single case—despite its highly representative nature, and the Romanian-based corpora. Further studies are necessary to consider comparative and longitudinal approaches, as well as the extension of the corpora, the introduction of other forms of media (such as newspapers, for instance), or possible use of complementary analysis methods. Despite its general risks, such as the

possibility of polarized opinions, aggressive speech, or echo chambers, online media represents a space in which people can support or challenge the official ideology, question the promoted narratives, and produce their own connected stories and explanations. Re-situated in the online framework, the autobiographical archive has provoked multifarious hermeneutic levels of understanding, reactions, (re)interpretations, and empathy from various users.

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## ORCID iDs

Simona Mitroiu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7600-3484>

Camelia Gradinaru  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3019-3056>

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### Author biographies

**Simona Mitroiu** is senior researcher at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania. Her research interests include memory, life writing, alternative narratives, cultural expressions, and post-socialist re-interpretations of the past in East Central Europe. Her last book *Women’s Life Writing in Post-Communist Romania* is due out with De Gruyter in 2022 in the series Media and Cultural Memory. She is also the editor of two volumes: *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), *Women’s Narratives and Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). Her interdisciplinary research has been published in a wide variety of journals, including *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, *Nationalities Papers*, and *European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms*.

**Camelia Gradinaru** is a lecturer PhD at the Department of Communication Sciences and Public Relations, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Romania. Previously, she was a researcher at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research of the same university. Her last book is: *New Media and Philosophy: Crossroads Studies* (2020). She authored book chapters, and articles on the philosophy of communication, new media, digital humanities, and co-edited volumes on digital culture and interdisciplinarity. Her research interests include virtual communities, digital storytelling, the online mediation, and mediatization of lifeworld and culture.