

## **AUREA MEDIOCRITAS: HEROES AND FAKE HEROES/ANTIHEROES IN ROMANIAN HODONYMY**

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**ABSTRACT.** *Aurea mediocritas: Heroes and Fake Heroes/Antiheroes in Romanian Hodonymy.* Specialised literature has shown that, regardless of geographical space and historical era, authorities have sought to honour heroes and grant them “immortality” by giving their names to various roadways: streets, boulevards, squares. From a socio- and psycholinguistic viewpoint, there is the issue of associating positive or negative values with the given figures depending on the political regime. Those who are seen as heroes at one point in time can be considered war criminals at a different moment in history. Similarly, the heroes of a certain nation can be the sworn enemies of a neighbouring people. Therefore, a theory of values needs to be advanced, a balance in judgement that should be above the circumstantial interests of those in power. This study analyses Romanian hodonymy from the aforementioned perspective. Since the officialization of street nomenclature, Romanian hodonyms have been subjected to several processes of street-name changes, determined by the unification of the country, the world

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wars, the various stages of the institution of the communist regime, and the establishment of democracy after 1989. Names of streets and squares are eloquent markers of all the onomastic changes that have occurred in Romanian space over different historical periods.

**Keywords:** *hodonymy, landscape changes, heroes/antiheroes/fake heroes, street names.*

**REZUMAT. Aurea mediocritas: eroi/falși eroi/antieroi în hodonimia românească.** Literatura de specialitate a arătat că, indiferent de spațiul geografic și de epoca istorică, autoritățile au căutat să cinstească eroii și să le acorde „nemurirea,” dându-le numele diferitelor drumuri: străzi, bulevarde, piețe. Din punct de vedere socio- și psiholingvistic, se pune problema asocierii valorilor pozitive sau negative cu percepția oamenilor în funcție de regimul politic. Cei care sunt văzuți ca eroi la un moment dat pot fi considerați criminali de război într-un moment diferit al istoriei. În mod similar, eroii unei anumite națiuni pot fi dușmanii declarați ai unui popor vecin. Prin urmare, trebuie avansată o teorie a valorilor, un echilibru în judecată care să fie deasupra intereselor de moment ale celor de la putere. Acest studiu analizează hodonimia românească din perspectiva menționată mai sus. De la oficializarea nomenclaturii stradale, hodonimele românești au fost supuse mai multor procese de schimbare/transformare, determinate de unirea țării, războaiele mondiale, diferitele etape ale instaurării regimului comunist și redobândirea democrației după 1989. Denumirile străzilor și piețelor sunt repere elocvente ale tuturor schimbărilor onomastice care s-au produs în spațiul românesc în diferite perioade istorice.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *hodonimie, schimbări de peisaj urban, eroi/antieroi/falși eroi, nume de străzi.*

## Introduction and Methodological Delineations

The dicta preserved until nowadays prove that the Romans were not only wise, but also pragmatic. These traits enabled them to create an empire that remained a paragon throughout historical eras and the model on which the European Union was built.<sup>2</sup> The Horatian phrase *aurea mediocritas* (*O.*, II, 10,5) needs to be construed as “the golden middle path,” the premise for a peaceful heart and the way to happiness. This fundamental principle of ethical thought can be traced beyond ancient Greece (Pindar, Democritus) and Rome (Syrus,

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<sup>2</sup> “it is certain that Europe was created by the Romans along the exhausting marches of the legions” [“cert este că Europa au creat-o romanii [...] de-a lungul istovitoarelor marșuri ale legiunilor”] (Negrescu 2015, 26). All translations belong to me.

Tacitus), across the ages, in the works of prestigious thinkers (Rousseau) and in folk proverbs in different countries (see Felecan 2018, 39-40). In the context of hodonymy, the above-mentioned Latin dictum can provide the proper judgement, the objective interpretation of one's actions: every judgement of value must be *sine ira et studio* "without anger and bias," objective enough so as to survive political changes, in any geographical space. The positive appraisal of various figures should be supported by clear criteria, so that the hero status could be (almost) irrefutable. There will always be detractors, people who are eager to question unprejudiced decisions, but that must not taint the idea of justice and axiology. "In democratic societies public debates over who is eligible to be commemorated in the public domain articulate a struggle over moral values and ideological orientation" (Azaryahu 2012, 74).

### **Defining the concepts hero/fake hero in agreement with the dichotomy good/evil**

To determine the concept of *hero* we should begin from the definition provided by the *Cambridge Dictionary* (online), according to which the first meaning of the word refers to "a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something great". Thus, our study will only take into consideration hodonyms that evoke military figures, from army leaders to simple soldiers and civilians, who have stood out in wars and revolutions beginning with the twentieth century. Were we to expand this sphere of reference, we would have to include all the historical and mythological figures from the Antiquity, Middle Ages and other eras, which would increase the area of investigation significantly.

From a national perspective, one can consider as heroes the Romanians and foreigners who fought alongside Romania to reach several ideals, such as independence, unity, freedom and democracy. From outside Romanian borders or from the viewpoint of foreign armies, the aforementioned figures are antiheroes, as they fulfilled divergent, antagonistic roles. A delicate topic refers to Romania's position in World War II. In June 1941, Romania joined Germany and its allies opposite the USSR to achieve the country's unification, but in August 1944 Romania turned against the Axis. Changing sides to fight on the side of the United Nations led to a shift in the perception of certain military leaders, who from heroes became antiheroes (Marshal Ion Antonescu). *Mutatis mutandis*, the situation is similar to what is happening nowadays, when we are witnessing a war waged in Europe. Ukrainian soldiers, led by president Zelensky, and the National Guard of Ukraine are the heroes of the country targeted by the aggression of Russia. Thus, the wish to use names related to these Ukrainian

figures to “baptise” roadways has been expressed by many democratic countries that firmly condemn Putin’s imperialistic decision: e.g., the Baltic countries. For the Russians, the Ukrainian patriots, especially the Azov Regiment, are right-wing extremists, “Nazis”. If for the Ukrainians the mercenaries of the Wagner Group and Kadyrov’s Chechens are antiheroes par excellence, immoral hoards ready to commit atrocities and war crimes, for the Russians the heroes might be the generals killed on the battlefield. In other words, the perspective changes 180 degrees the positive/negative perception of fighters on opposite sides, and public space records examples of this kind in urban nomenclature.

Ideologically, we can consider a hero to be anyone who sacrifices their life for freedom and democracy. The situation is different depending on the time frame under investigation. In the interwar period, communist militants, most of whom pertained to an ethnic group different from the Romanians, were seen as antiheroes and treated as such by the state authorities and the people. After the Soviet occupation, they were glorified. In the attempt to account for the change of the political regime and the creation of a “mythology of a new order,” their names were given to roadways. Such examples may be considered to refer to fake heroes, as the glorified deeds were pure inventions, without any objective grounds for honour and homage. The most eloquent proof was that the above-mentioned names did not enjoy a long life in Romanian hodonymy, as most of them were changed during the 1960s. It was believed that the communist regime was already well rooted, and heroic examples “fabricated” in state offices were no longer necessary. To become established, any form of power needs heroes, it needs characters that can be turned into myths to support the new order. Romania was not an exception, so many names of proletarians, labourers (*Vasile Roaită*) and partisans – in reality delinquents, petty criminals (*Max Goldstein*) – were honoured, immortalised in autochthonous hodonymy alongside the names of similar comrades from the Socialist International (*Zoia Kosmodemianskaia*). Upon an objective look, these are instances of fake heroes, aggrandised by means of efficient propaganda promoted by the Soviet press, literature and cinema, as well as the like institutions in satellite states.

Those who did not accept the communist yoke organised themselves in partisan groups and tried to oppose the new foreign regime, which was established by force. From the viewpoint of the regime, the partisans were the antiheroes, the “subversive and antipopular elements” that had to be eliminated by any means. The correct perception of anti-communist fighters was achieved only after the totalitarian regime was eliminated and the names of the insurgents began to appear in street nomenclature (*Elisabeta Rizea*). From antiheroes they became heroes, symbols of human dignity and moral integrity who put the principles of freedom above their life.

All the previous examples prove the variability of the concept of hero and its fluidity depending on political, ideological and social factors, to name but a few. The list of heroes investigated in this paper does not include ancient and medieval voivodes and rulers. Some of them (Decebalus, Mircea cel Bătrân/Mircea the Elder, Ștefan cel Mare/Stephen the Great, Vlad Țepeș/Vlad the Impaler, Mihai Viteazul/Michael the Brave, Constantin Brâncoveanu) are considered national heroes according to history books and appear in street nomenclature in almost every settlement in Romania.<sup>3</sup> There are figures who sacrificed their life in battle or to defend their faith, but medieval values have parameters of investigation that are different from those in the modern era, and Romania can only be considered as a state after it gained its independence (1877).<sup>4</sup> The establishment of a state also relies on the cult of heroes whose valiant deeds were rewarded with the admiration of their descendants. To commemorate one of the officers who lost their lives during the War of Independence (1877-1878), Prince Carol of Romania decided to immortalise captain Valter Mărăcineanu's name in the hodonymy of Bucharest (see Ionescu 2013, 58-59). This is the first historical record in Romanian modern space of the fact that dying on the battlefield, for a noble reason, entails public immortality. The emergence of this kind of hodonyms is arbitrary and honorific, and leads to the loss of certain historically, as well as geographically motivated names: "The carousel of giving streets the names of people and historical or political events begins in Bucharest at the end of the nineteenth century and continues throughout the twentieth century."<sup>5</sup>

### Heroes in Hodonymy – A Diachronic Overview of the Last Century

After World War I and the unification of the country (1918), politicians felt the need to immortalise these events in Romanian street nomenclature either by replacing old names with contemporary ones (*Bulevardul Unirii* 'Union Boulevard',

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<sup>3</sup> "In the context of national rebirth and political changes after 1848, the giving of honorific street names re-emerged, and the first such names were borrowed from rulers: Prince Știrbei Street (1856), Prince Bibescu Street (1856), Charles I Street (1866), Prince Cuza Street (1868)" ["În contextul renașterii naționale și al schimbărilor politice de după 1848, au reapărut atribuirile de nume de străzi cu caracter onorific, primii vizați fiind domnitorii: ulița Știrbei Vodă (1856), ulița Bibescu Vodă (1856), str. Carol I (1866), str. Cuza Vodă (1868)"] (Ionescu 2013, 54).

<sup>4</sup> Romania is an autonomous state through the union of 1859 (with the name Romania since 1862).

<sup>5</sup> "Caruselul atribuirii străzilor de nume de persoane și evenimente cu conținut istoric și politic care începe în București la sfârșitul sec. al XIX-lea va continua în tot secolul XX" (Ionescu 2013, 60).

*Bulevardul Victoriei* ‘Victory Boulevard’), or by giving new thoroughfares the names of military figures who had made a strong impression on the public opinion as a result of their supreme sacrifice or leadership skills in battle. Thus, numerous names of this kind were among the onymic proposals for street nomenclature in the interwar period:

In the 1930s and 1940s, giving the names of military figures who had died in the war of unification was achieved based on a table of proposals advanced by the General Staff with the individuals whose sacrifice was of a special, remarkable nature. From 1916 to 1942, of the more than 80 streets that received names of military figures, a third bore names of soldiers and non-commissioned officers, whereas most hodonyms consisted of names of superior officers.<sup>6</sup>

Although the intention was to find a connection between the heroes and the thoroughfares that were going to bear their names, this relationship was difficult to establish and can rarely be noticed in Romanian public space.

After the communists seized power through the direct intervention of the Red Army, “the baptism of streets using names of military figures changed radically. Until 1958 more than 200 names of military figures were given (130 in 1948 alone), 80 per cent of whom were ‘men-at-arms’ (privates, corporals and non-commissioned officers), and only one was a general – not from the last war,”<sup>7</sup> but from the nineteenth century (*Gheorghe Magheru*). This testifies to the “folk” nature of post-war hodonyms, in agreement with the policy to promote symbols and names of people “meant to legitimate the new power and its connections with the ‘working class’ and to consolidate the ‘unshakeable bonds of friendship’ with the Soviet Union.”<sup>8</sup> The privates and non-commissioned officers’ *heroism* was filtered and censored through the ideological frameworks of the new power. For instance, only the names of those who had fallen on the Western Front (after 23 August 1944, when Romania turned against Nazi Germany) were chosen, to the detriment of the names of those fallen on the Eastern Front

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<sup>6</sup> “În deceniile trei și patru, atribuirile de nume de militari căzuți în războiul de întregire se făceau pe baza unui tabel de propuneri primit de la Marele Stat Major cu cei a căror jertfă a avut un caracter deosebit, memorabil. Între 1916 și 1942, inclusiv, din totalul de peste 80 de străzi care au primit nume de militari, cam o treime au primit nume de soldați și subofițeri, accentul punându-se pe ofițerii superiori” (Ionescu 2013, 75).

<sup>7</sup> “Maniera de botezare a străzilor cu nume de militari s-a schimbat în mod radical. Până în 1958 s-au atribuit peste 200 de nume de militari (130 numai în 1948), din care peste patru cincimi au fost ‘ostași’ (soldați, gradați și subofițeri), cu un singur general, dar nu din ultimul război” (Ionescu 2013, 75).

<sup>8</sup> “menite să legitimizeze noua putere și legăturile ei cu ‘clasa muncitoare’ și să consolideze ‘prietenia de nezdruccinat’ cu Uniunea Sovietică” (Ionescu 2013, 76).

(between June 1941 and August 1944), who were far more numerous. The politicisation of heroism is also obvious in the association of names of military figures with names of “socialist fighters,” who were “made up” to legitimise the new power. While the latter can be considered fake heroes, the same cannot be stated about Spartacus, the ancient gladiator. His bravery is undeniable, but the association of his name with that of *politruks* (*Ion Şulea*) confirms the ideologization of street nomenclature in Bucharest.

Every administration wanted to promote its values and rewrite history. For instance, after King Charles II of Romania abdicated in September 1940, all the hodonyms consisting of his name were eliminated. After Romania adhered to the Tripartite Pact (November 1940) and the legionnaires were overthrown (January 1941), important squares in the Romanian capital city were given the names of *Adolf Hitler*, *Benito Mussolini* and *Ion Antonescu*, the military leader of Romania during World War II. In the autumn of 1944, it became clear that these names no longer mirrored reality and thus were replaced with *Lenin*, *Generalisimul Stalin* (‘Generalissimo Stalin’), as well as the names of other Soviet leaders and “dozens of names of ‘working-class heroes’, who had fallen for the ‘socialist cause’ in the country or in foreign lands and who were unknown to the public opinion,”<sup>9</sup> but were nonetheless necessary for official propaganda and out of the desire to legitimise the new regime imposed by Moscow as the rightful continuator of “olden-day traditions”. Anthroponymic changes in street landscape are parallel to toponymic modifications: street names like *Londra* (‘London’) and *Washington* reappear, while hodonyms like *Berlin* are eliminated.<sup>10</sup> The new *Regulament pentru numerotarea și nomenclatura străzilor din Municipiul București* [Regulation for the numbering and nomenclature of streets in the municipality of Bucharest] of 1945 sought to “revise names of streets, establishments, public squares etc. which did not agree with the spirit of the age” (Ionescu 2013, 81).<sup>11</sup> The assessment of the Nomenclature Commission was carried out by a delegate appointed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, led by a communist minister. Thus, the process of politicisation becomes more and more pronounced. The biographies of the so-called “fighters for the labourers’ cause” (*Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea*, *Ștefan Gheorghiu*, *Ilie Pintilie*, *I.C. Frimu*, *Alexandru Sahia*, *Elena Pavel*, *Vasile Roaită*, *Haia Lifschitz*, *Donca Simo* and

<sup>9</sup> “zeci de nume de ‘eroi ai clasei muncitoare’, căzuți pentru ‘cauza socialistă’, în țară sau pe meleaguri străine, necunoscuți de opinia publică” (Ionescu 2013, 80).

<sup>10</sup> Along the same lines, there appear the names of the three leaders of the United Nations: *Stalin*, *Churchill*, *Roosevelt*. Nevertheless, names of western figures are ephemeral in Romanian street nomenclature, due to the Iron Curtain which rose after the year 1946.

<sup>11</sup> “revizuirea denumirilor de străzi, localuri, piețe publice etc. care nu concordă cu spiritul vremurilor de azi” (Ionescu 2013, 81).

others) are embellished and underlie the revision of Romanian street names. The supererogation of communist authorities is obvious in the simultaneous use of certain names in several places. The “amendment” was made gradually, as some of the names proved to be disagreeable.

Along with the aforementioned autochthonous fake heroes, the second largest category of names artificially introduced in Romanian public space, and in Bucharest implicitly, refers to Soviet leaders: *Zhdanov*, *Kuybyshev*, *Tolbukhin*, *Kalinin*, *Kirov*. As they were antiheroes,<sup>12</sup> most of them were erased from collective memory/public space in the 50s and 60s (see Ionescu 2013, 82), after the retreat of the Red Army from Romania (1958) and the de-Stalinization of the country.<sup>13</sup> Such names imposed by Moscow replaced the anthroponyms of actual heroes, Romanian or foreign politicians, military figures and philanthropists (*Ion C. Brătianu*, *Titu Maiorescu*, *Tache Ionescu*, *Bonaparte*, *General Berthelot* and others), who did credit to the human condition. The ephemerality of hodonyms related to the names of fake heroes reinforces the conviction that political interference is not beneficial to the accurate appreciation of various figures and their role in ensuring national interest. The commemoration of genuine heroes is commendable in any regime, but the criteria according to which heroes are established are subjective and depend on the political and ideological orientation at a specific time. The most eloquent example is the change of the political regime in 1989. Compromised names are steadily eliminated from public space and leave room for actual personalities in different fields of science and culture. Among these the real heroes of December 1989 are commemorated, individuals who had the courage to rise against the communist regime and contribute to the fall of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. Thus, paying homage to such figures by including their names in street nomenclature after 1990 was a moral obligation of the new national or local authorities.

According to research carried out by the Institute of the Romanian Revolution, “during the events of December 1989, 1,166 people died” in the following cities and towns which were declared *martyr settlements*: Alba Iulia,

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<sup>12</sup> The Red Army stood out due to countless murders, robberies and rapes, recorded by Aurel Sergiu Marinescu (2010) in a historical reference book: *1944-1958, Armata Roșie în România, jafuri, violuri, crime, furturi, tâlhării, confiscări, devastări, rechiziții, secheștrări de persoane* [1944-1958, the Red Army in Romania, pillage, rape, murder, theft, robbery, confiscation, vandalism, requisition, forcible confinement]. Uneducated and disrespectful towards military hierarchy, Soviet soldiers and non-commissioned officers could not be restrained and committed numerous atrocities, especially against private persons, who were defenceless.

<sup>13</sup> Between the years 1950 and 1960, Brașov was called *Orașul Stalin* (‘Stalin City’), just like other settlements in Eastern Europe: Varna (Bulgaria), Katowice (Poland), Kuçovë (Albania), Eisenhüttenstadt (GDR), Dunaújváros (Hungary), Donetsk (Ukraine), Volgograd (USSR) (cf. Felecan 2017, 78-80).

Arad, Braşov, Brăila, Bucharest, Buzău, Caransebeş, Cluj-Napoca, Constanţa, Craiova, Cugir, Hunedoara, Lugoj, Reşiţa, Sibiu, Târgovişte, Târgu Mureş, Timişoara. It is interesting to note the distribution of the victims in the pre-Revolutionary period (17-22 December 1989: 271 deaths), in the days following Ceauşescu's flight (22-25 December 1989: 715 deaths) and after the dictator's death (after 25 December 1989: 113 deaths) (see Ghiţă 2014). If we take into consideration the Romanian capital city, only 23 streets bear the names of heroes who sacrificed their life in 1989<sup>14</sup>, although records show 543 were shot during those days. As Aurel Ionescu (2013, 98) points out, "most of these streets are modest, hidden among blocks of flats, just as the heroes were modest, selfless people."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the name-giving was not made in connection with the martyrs' residence or the place where they lost their life. It is worth noting that most names of streets and lanes also include the appellative *erou* ('hero'), the military rank or the profession in addition to the deceased's names: *Astafei Petre, erou*; *Bărbulescu Marius, erou*; *Buteică Marius Emanoil, erou*; *Butiri Florin, erou*; *Calderon Jean Louis, ziarist* ('journalist'); *Cârstea Adrian, sublocotenent* ('second lieutenant'); *Cioran Gabriel*; *Ciungan Florin, erou*; *Creţu Nicolae Florin, căpitan* ('captain'); *Donea Diana Alexandra, erou*; *Durbac Dumitru Răducu, locotenent-colonel* ('lieutenant colonel'); *Fulga Adrian, erou*; *Huwe Danny, ziarist* ('journalist'); *Marcu Mihaela Ruxandra, erou*; *Mateescu Nicolae*; *Mirea Mioara Luiza, erou*; *Mladinovici Dragoş, erou*; *Neagoe Teodor, sublocotenent* ('second lieutenant'); *Orleanu Paul, doctor* ('doctor'); *Pătru Adrian, sublocotenent* ('second lieutenant'); *Radu Dragoş, căpitan* ('captain'); *Stan Bogdan Şerban, erou*; *Stanciu George Cristian*; *Tudor Gheorghe Bogdan, erou*; *Urucu Adrian Dan, erou* (see Ionescu 2014, 186-200). In the cases in which the name appears alone, there is the risk that the connection between the name and the quality of hero of the 1989 Revolution be lost, as collective memory will not be able to restore the link between the two aspects.

Methodologically, the main framework of the paper is the capital city of Romania, because it records the most numerous streets (1,500 of which bear the name of various figures) and offers a complex perspective on present-day Romanian hodonymy. While for Bucharest there are books containing detailed studies of street nomenclature, for the other towns and cities our main research tool consisted of websites. Historical information was obtained from objectively written books and from the internet.

<sup>14</sup> "At the same time, also used were the names of two foreign journalists who had come to Bucharest specifically to report on the events and who died (following 22 December) on the streets of the city" ["De asemenea, s-au mai atribuit numele a doi ziaristi străini, veniţi special la Bucureşti pentru a relata evenimentele şi care au murit (tot după 22 decembrie) pe străzile oraşului"] (Ionescu 2014, 186).

<sup>15</sup> "mai toate sunt străzi modeste, ascunse printre blocuri, așa cum și eroii au fost persoane modeste și dezinteresate".

### **Hodonymic controversies related to (fake) heroes/antiheroes**

The most controversial name linked to the events of the year 1989 is that of general Vasile Milea, a former head of the General Staff of the Romanian Army (1980-1985) and minister of Defence (from 1985 until 22 December 1989). The debate surrounding this name – which extended to public space, in hodonymy – has to do with the bearer’s death: several members of Milea’s family claimed that he was killed on the morning of 22 December on Ceaușescu’s order, but the forensic investigation proved that he had committed suicide. His “heroism” and the immortalisation of his name in street nomenclature in several settlements throughout Romania are based on his execution, as a result of his refusal to respond with a bloody repression of the people’s protest against the communist regime. This led to the use of the general’s name to designate boulevards, streets and squares in cities, towns and communes all over the country (Arad, Bârlad, Brad, Brăila, Câmpulung, Cluj, Constanța, Murfatlar, Petroșani, Pitești, Ploiești, Sibiu, Târgoviște, Vaslui), including in Bucharest (from March 1990 to June 2021). However, after objective investigation into the role he played in the events of December 1989, it was concluded that he had given or confirmed all the orders to repress the Revolution issued between 17 and 22 December (in Timișoara, Sibiu, Bucharest etc.); thus, there existed every reason for him to be considered an antihero. This determined the gradual removal of the name *Vasile Milea* from present-day Romanian street nomenclature. In Bucharest the change occurred in 2021: *Bulevardul Vasile Milea* (‘Vasile Milea boulevard’) was divided in two, and one half received the name *Doina Cornea* (a university professor of Cluj, a symbol of dignity and of the anticommunist fight of the 1980s), whereas the other half was called *Paul Teodorescu* (general and minister of Aviation and Navy in the interwar period, a victim of the post-1945 communist regime) (see Toma 2021). In this way, a moral restoration was achieved in Bucharest hodonymy, as the name of a fake martyr was replaced with names of genuine heroes whose credits could only be acknowledged by a democratic regime which holds meritocracy in high regard. Merits must be clarified and, implicitly, recognised *sine ira et studio*, according to Tacitus’ Latin phrase, by objective historians and, should it be the case, by justice. Politicians are solely meant to apply, to put into practice what unbiased researchers investigate. This is the only way in which one can reach good measure (*aurea mediocritas*), as well as the clarification and accurate apprehension of the part played by the actors of the troubled events of December 1989.



Street sign of *Bulevardul G-ral Vasile Milea* ('General Vasile Milea boulevard') in Sector (district) 6 of Bucharest

The most important sign which marked the end of the commemoration of general Vasile Milea in Romanian public space was given by the capital city of Romania, followed by several important cities (Cluj, Pitești). Worth noting in this respect is the request addressed by the prefect of Argeș county to the mayor's office of the municipality of Pitești:

The current name is considered inappropriate, as it uses the name of a former minister of the communist regime, who was involved in the bloody repression of December 1989. By changing the name to 'Piața Revoluției 22 Decembrie 1989' [Revolution Square 22 December 1989] a strong message will be sent to future generations as well, who must learn about the events that happened 31 years ago and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the cult of the memory of general Milea was not extinguished. A proof in this respect is the unveiling of his bust in his place of birth – Lerești, Argeș county – in the presence of a guard of honour and archbishop Calinic of Argeș and Muscel. The attendance of a hierarch should not come as a surprise, because the Romanian Orthodox Church has always supported the dominant regime and acted so as to obtain the most significant benefits<sup>17</sup> from those in

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<sup>16</sup> "Denumirea actuală este considerată neadecvată, folosindu-se numele unui fost ministru al regimului comunist, implicat în represiunea sângeroasă din decembrie 1989. Prin schimbarea denumirii în 'Piața Revoluției 22 Decembrie 1989' se va transmite un mesaj puternic și pentru generațiile viitoare, care trebuie să cunoască evenimentele din urmă cu 31 de ani și să nu repete greșelile trecutului" (*apud* Ilie, Alexe 2021).

<sup>17</sup> "The interplay between religion, on the one hand, and elections and party politics, on the other, is best illustrated by several interrelated areas [...]:1) the direct involvement of priests and prelates in politics as members of parties and as electoral candidates running for local and/or central governmental office; 2) the support religious leaders and clergy give electoral

power<sup>18</sup>. However, the presence of the guard of honour is debatable, as it tallies with the image promoted in the first years after 1990 by the transition regime: general Milea was a brave officer who opposed Ceaușescu's regime, i.e. he was a hero. The historical reality alters the perspective:

Colonel-General Vasile Milea gave the order which led to the use of war ammunition by the army against the protesters in Timișoara on 17 December, the bloodiest day of the revolution in this city. After the rebellion began in Bucharest on 21 December, Milea had all the soldiers in the military units in Bucharest on the streets, and on the night from 21 to 22 December he personally supervised the destruction of the barricade that had been erected by the protesters in the Intercontinental Hotel area.<sup>19</sup>

Another controversial example in Romanian public space and reflected as such in toponymy is that of Marshal Ion Antonescu, the *de facto* leader of Romania during World War II. The first attempt to "immortalise" his name in Romanian public landscape was made in the autumn of the year 1940. The subjective change of the name of a commune in the vicinity of Bucharest was sought. Thus, the local authorities chose "the illustrious name of general Ion Antonescu," and even issued documents with a header containing the new name, but the general "categorically refused, and the commune received the name of Tudor Vladimirescu 'on historical grounds'."<sup>20</sup> As World War II developed, the fashion of the age was above the leader's will, and in the autumn of the year 1941 there appeared in Bucharest a *bulevard Mareșal Ion Antonescu* ('Marshal Ion Antonescu

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candidates in exchange for promises to support legislation favourable to the church; and 3) the electoral candidates' use of religious symbols to win additional votes." (Stan, Turcescu 2005, 348).

<sup>18</sup> "The Romanian Orthodox Church has always known to negotiate its privileges and has successfully obtained everything it desired, as it has been, by definition, on the side of the political power. The Church is considered the ideal electoral factor due to the influence it has on voters. Thus, no party has stood in its way and, in complicity, the Romanian Orthodox Church consolidated its superior position in democratic Romania" (Felecan 2020, 1). The same situation can be noticed in other eastern churches, and the most telling example is that of the Russian Orthodox Church, which, through patriarch Kirill, blessed and supported the war started by Putin against Ukraine, thereby showing its complete obedience to the "sponsor".

<sup>19</sup> "Generalul-colonel Vasile Milea a dat ordinul prin care s-a trecut la folosirea muniției de război de către armată împotriva manifestanților de la Timișoara pe 17 decembrie, cea mai sângeroasă zi a revoltei din acest oraș. După izbucnirea revoltei la București, pe 21 decembrie, Milea a dispus ca soldații din unitățile militare din București să iasă pe străzi, iar în noaptea de 21 spre 22 decembrie a coordonat personal distrugerea baricadei care fusese ridicată de revoluționari în zona hotelului Intercontinental" (Ilie, Alexe 2021).

<sup>20</sup> "a refuzat categoric, iar comuna a primit pe 'considerente istorice', numele lui Tudor Vladimirescu" (Ionescu 2013, 78).

boulevard', previously known as *Șoseaua Jianu* 'Jianu road' and currently called *Bd. Aviatorilor* 'Aviators' boulevard'), in addition to *Piața Adolf Hitler* ('Adolf Hitler square') and *Piața Benito Mussolini* ('Benito Mussolini square') (see Ionescu 2013, 78-79). The association with the leaders of the Axis was not only political and military – with the professed aim to restore the unity of Romania, a victim of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact –, but also on the level of street nomenclature throughout the country.<sup>21</sup> The commemoration in public space of living leaders had previously been practised especially in connection with members of the royal family, but in the case of Hitler, Mussolini and Antonescu this was a proof of power, of the determinative influence on Romanian urban landscape. *Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi!*

Along with the armed insurrection of 23 August 1944, when Romania joined the United Nations in the fight against the powers of the Axis, the names of the three leaders were removed<sup>22</sup> from public landscape. From a paragon of patriotism, Antonescu became a war criminal and was given the capital punishment in 1946. His name was stigmatised until the fall of communism, since Antonescu was perceived as a negative hero, the one who had driven Romania into battle against the Soviet Union and “had ordered the assassination and deportation to Transnistria of some ten thousand Jews.”<sup>23</sup> It was only after 1989 that the position and role of the Romanian general in World War II were revalued, which resulted in the polarisation of society. On the one hand, he was considered an excellent officer with a meteoric rise to the top of his profession, the perfect patriot who preferred to die than to betray his nation and go back on his word. He defended Romanian traditions and values, “was an honest man [...], loved his country,”<sup>24</sup> and the trial of his condemnation “was conducted in the purest Soviet style,”<sup>25</sup> leading to his martyrial death. On the other hand, “Antonescu initially carried out a bloody racial policy up to a point. In 1941 he seemed determined

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<sup>21</sup> These names were present in all the larger settlements of the country (see Felecan 2015, 232), as well as in other territories/countries under the fascist rule. “The Reichskanzlerplatz in Charlottenburg was renamed Adolf-Hitler-Platz. In September of 1933 the Friedrich-Ebert-Straße was renamed Hermann-Göring-Straße” (Azaryahu 2011, 484). “During the interwar period [...] two more squares and two streets were named after Mussolini. [...] In contrast to the plethora of places named after Horthy, only one street throughout Budapest was named after Adolf Hitler” (Palonen 2018, 105).

<sup>22</sup> Discussions about replacing the name of Benito Mussolini occurred just a month after the fascist dictator's demise, but the authorities' undetermined attitude led to its preservation until the autumn of the year 1944 (see Ionescu 2013, 79-80).

<sup>23</sup> “a ordonat asasinarea și deportarea în Transnistria a zeci de mii de evrei!” ([http://enciclopediaromaniei.ro/wiki/Ion\\_Antonescu](http://enciclopediaromaniei.ro/wiki/Ion_Antonescu)).

<sup>24</sup> “a fost un om cinstit [...], și-a iubit țara” (Cioroianu).

<sup>25</sup> “s-a desfășurat în cel mai pur stil sovietic” (Cioroianu).

to apply the ‘model’ of the final solution” (Cioroianu),<sup>26</sup> although after 1942 his attitude towards Jews and Roma was lenient.<sup>27</sup>

As regards Marshal Antonescu’s ambivalent image, historian Lucian Boia offers an interpretation illustrative of the equivocal condition of Romanian culture, mentalities and outlooks: “Yes, Marshal Antonescu saved Jews, and yes, Marshal Antonescu sent Jews to their death,” that is,

the anti-Semitic measures – applied somewhat chaotically – were not aimed at the extermination of the Jewish population. The Jews were humiliated and spoliated and for many years lived with the threat above their head, but at the same time they were allowed to carry out specific cultural activities and fund educational institutions.<sup>28</sup>

Neagu Djuvara expressed the same opinion:



Between 1942 and 1943, despite the German government’s repeated demands to turn in our Jews, Antonescu always refused to do so, and moreover favoured the rescue of Jews from the West or from Northern Transylvania, which was occupied by the Hungarians. [...] What Antonescu did in 1943 is little known in the West, and even when it is known, it does not erase his behaviour in 1941.<sup>29</sup>

Marshal Antonescu’s statue (Sultănoiu 2002, <https://www.curentul.info/politic/maresalul-dezonorat/>)

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<sup>26</sup> “Antonescu s-a lansat inițial într-o politică rasială până la un moment dat criminală. În 1941, el părea decis să pună în practică ‘modelul’ soluției finale”.

<sup>27</sup> “In Romania the Star of David was not worn” [În România nu s-a purtat steaua lui David] (Cioroianu) and the deportation of Jews to the extermination camps in Poland was not approved ([https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/en/report/romanian/1.9\\_Role\\_of\\_Antonescu\\_revazut\\_gina.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/en/report/romanian/1.9_Role_of_Antonescu_revazut_gina.pdf)). Shimon Peres, former President of Israel, stated that Romania helped save 400,000 Jews during World War II.

<sup>28</sup> “Da, mareșalul Antonescu a salvat evrei, și da, mareșalul Antonescu a trimis evrei la moarte,” adică „măsurile antisemite – aplicate de altfel destul de confuz – n-au vizat exterminarea populației evreiești. Evreii au fost umiliți și spoliați și au stat ani de zile cu amenințarea deasupra capului, dar în același timp li s-a permis să desfășoare activități culturale proprii și să întrețină instituții de învățământ” (2012, 62).

<sup>29</sup> “în anii 1942-1943, cu toate insistențele repetate ale guvernului german de a-i preda pe evreii noștri, a refuzat permanent, ba a și favorizat salvarea unor evrei din Occident sau din Transilvania

These controversies were mirrored in public space both in collective mentality and hodonimically. Several monuments (statues, paintings, busts) dedicated to the marshal were created in different settlements in Romania or in heroes' cemeteries (Lețcani, Iași county). At the opposers' urging, some of these monuments were discreetly taken down (Călărași, Jilava, Lețcani, Piatra Neamț, Sărmaș), others were obscured (Bucharest – the portrait at Victoria Palace) or moved to private spaces (Bucharest,<sup>30</sup> Cluj). Only a few remained (Bacău, Slobozia) in museums or the gardens of certain institutions, away from the public eye. In the year 2012, in urban nomenclature “there were in total 25 streets throughout the country bearing the name of the marshal,”<sup>31</sup> both in Bucharest and in some of the main cities, such as Cluj-Napoca, Craiova, Iași, Sibiu, Târgu Mureș, Timișoara. After the protest of certain Jewish organisations – the Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania –, headed by Elie Wiesel himself, the government issued an ordinance (31/2002) by means of which, “with the exception of museums, it is forbidden to erect or keep in public spaces statues, sculptural groups, commemorative plaques related to individuals guilty of committing genocide crimes against humanity and war crimes” and to give the names of such individuals to “streets, boulevards, squares, markets, parks or other public places”.<sup>32</sup> Certain street names endured until recently (Constanța – 2021) despite the protests of the Elie Wiesel Institute, as “Ion Antonescu enjoys ‘diverse, even contradicting appreciations, polemics and controversies’.”<sup>33</sup> Even nowadays, various websites (<https://moovitapp.com>, <http://orasul.biz>, <https://www.streetdir.online> etc.) mention the marshal's name in the hodonymy of less important settlements (1 Decembrie, Bechet, Brad, Chiajna, Mărășești, Mintia, Râmnicu Sărat, Șiria), with a total of 9 records in the year 2019 (cf. Raețchi 2019 and Zamfirescu 2021). Therefore, the hero/fake hero or antihero status keeps generating controversies, especially in the case of complex personalities such as Marshal Antonescu.

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de Nord ocupată de unguri. [...] Gestul lui Antonescu din 1943 e însă puțin cunoscut în Occident, și, chiar când e cunoscut, nu șterge fapta din 1941” (2013, 330-31).

<sup>30</sup> The monument was erected in the Church of the Holy Sovereigns Constantine and Helen, founded by the Antonescu family between the years 1942 and 1943.

<sup>31</sup> “erau în total 25 de străzi care purtau numele mareșalului în toată țara” (Țene 2012).

<sup>32</sup> “se interzice ridicarea sau menținerea în locuri publice, cu excepția muzeelor, a unor statui, grupuri statuare, plăci comemorative referitoare la persoanele vinovate de săvârșirea infracțiunilor de genocid contra umanității și de crime de război” “unor străzi, bulevarde, scuaruri, piețe, parcuri sau altor locuri publice” (<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/34759>).

<sup>33</sup> “Ion Antonescu are parte de ‘evaluări diverse, chiar contradictorii, polemici și controversate’” (Pecheanu 2021).

The last ambiguous example of heroism to which this study draws attention is that of general Leonard Mociulschi (1889-1979). His name does not occur in the hodonymy of Bucharest, but it appears in the nomenclature of several cities and towns in Romania: Beiuș, Brașov, Călărași, Oradea, Sighetu Marmăției.



Street sign consisting of general Mociulschi's name and a statue depicting the general.  
Source: <https://www.general.mociulschi.ro>

Leonard Mociulschi was of Polish descent. He participated in several wars, and was decorated in both world wars in Romania (by kings Ferdinand and Michael)<sup>34</sup> and abroad (by the French government in World War I, the German army<sup>35</sup> – on several occasions in the period between 1941 and 1944 – and the Marshal of Finland). His bravery and heroism were noticed on the Eastern and Western Fronts alike, where he contributed to the liberation of

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<sup>34</sup> In October 1941 he was awarded the Order of Michael the Brave “for the industriousness and energy with which he led the detachments of the Brigade across the border, in the Vicovul Cindei area, in conquering the region of Storozhynets and especially in the hasty crossing of the Nistru on 17 and 18 July, when facing the baneful attack of the enemy in the blockhouses, he set a personal example and encouraged the efforts of the Brigade” (Royal Decree 1,652 of 7 August 1947 regarding discharges, published in *Monitorul Oficial* (‘the Official Gazette’), year CXV, issue 191 of 20 August 1947, part I, p. 7,499) [“pentru destoinicia și energia cu care a condus detașamentele Brigadei la trecerea frontierei, în zona Vicovul Cindei, la cucerirea regiunii Storojineț și în special la forțarea Nistrului, în zilele de 17 și 18 Iulie, unde sub focul ucigător al inamicului din cazemate a impulsionat prin exemplul personal pe direcția de efort a Brigadei”] (<https://www.general.mociulschi.ro>).

<sup>35</sup> “In 1942, Leonard Mociulschi was elevated to the rank of brigadier general and awarded the German ‘Kriegsorden des Deutschen Kreuzes in Gold’ for his bravery on the battlefield” (<https://www.tracesofwar.com/persons/34674/>).

Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. After the end of the war, he was blamed unjustifiably of being a “reactionary entity, hostile to the People’s Republic of Romania,” so he was arrested and “subjected to a regime of physical and moral extermination (including by means of hard labour on the Danube – Black Sea Canal) until the autumn of the year 1955,”<sup>36</sup> and then he was placed under house arrest. The very communist regime that deemed him a “criminal” and an “enemy of the people” rehabilitated him upon the intervention of President Charles de Gaulle, who made a visit to Romania in 1966. The saga of his being considered a hero – antihero – hero in Romanian public space continued even *post mortem*: thus, in 2007, the year when Romania became a member of the European Union, the 21st Battalion of Army Rangers of Predeal received the honorific name *General Leonard Mociulschi* in the presence of king Michael I of Romania, who decorated general Mociulschi with the highest military order of Romania, *Mihai Viteazul în grad de Cavaler* (‘a knight of the Order of Michael the Brave’), on three occasions. Therefore, the hero/antihero status can even be found in the same geographical space (Romania) and historical era (the age of communist totalitarianism) within the span of a few years. This proves that people need heroes, and their commemoration is a duty of the heart and of honour for the descendants.

### Military Heroes

If the heroic status of certain military leaders was contested, others’ credits did not engender controversy, and as a result, their names occur in Romanian hodonymic landscape. “After World War I, giving the names of fallen heroes was only achieved on the basis of recommendations or investigations made by the General Staff in the Ministry of War”.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Nomenclature Commission was safe from errors and “could choose the bravest of men, whose sacrifice had been decisive of a certain battle or had served as an example to their companion-in-arms”.<sup>38</sup> Officers, especially generals, enjoyed major visibility in battle and issued orders. Therefore, their names were prevalent among the choices for the designation of various roadways. Beginning with the year 1948, under the influence of communist politics and *classist* thought, the

<sup>36</sup> “element reacționar și ostil RPR” “și supus unui regim de exterminare fizică și morală (inclusiv prin muncă silnică la Canalul Dunăre-Marea Neagră), până în toamna anului 1955”.

<sup>37</sup> “După Primul Război Mondial atribuirea de nume de eroi căzuți se făcea pe baza unor recomandări sau verificări trimise de Marele Stat-Major din Ministerul de Război” (Ionescu 2014, 9).

<sup>38</sup> “îi putea alege pe cei mai bravi, pe cei a căror jertfă fusese decisivă pentru soarta unei bătălii sau servise drept pildă camarazilor” (*Ibidem*).

perspective altered, and names of simple soldiers were the most appreciated options. Aurel Ionescu provides compelling data for the hodonymy of Bucharest in a diachronic depiction, using as reference points three distinct years: one at the end of World War II, another during the Stalinist era and the last after democracy was restored:

a) 1946: 17 (privates + corporals + non-commissioned officers) + 128 officers, including 44 generals = 145; b) 1954: 287 (privates + corporals + non-commissioned officers) + 166 officers, including 38 generals = 453; c) 2001: 198 (privates + corporals + non-commissioned officers) + 116 officers, including 36 generals = 314.<sup>39</sup>

Most lost their life in the War of Independence (1877-1878) and in the two world wars. Not only Romanian military figures are commemorated in the hodonyms of the Romanian capital city, but also foreign ones, who fought alongside the Romanians or are remembered for the memorable deeds they achieved for the nation: *Gen. Berthelot*,<sup>40</sup> *Blaremburg Constantin*,<sup>41</sup> *Borroczy*,<sup>42</sup> *Kiseleff*.<sup>43</sup>

Although army life is pursued almost exclusively by men, the hodonymy of Bucharest records several names of heroines. Ecaterina Teodoroiu<sup>44</sup> has a

<sup>39</sup> "a) 1946: 17 (soldați + gradați + subofițeri) + 128 ofițeri, din care 44 generali = 145; b) 1954: 287 (soldați + gradați + subofițeri) + 166 ofițeri, din care 38 generali = 453; c) 2001: 198 (soldați + gradați + subofițeri) + 116 ofițeri, din care 36 generali = 314" (2014, 9).

<sup>40</sup> As the Head of the French Military Mission in Romania during World War I, he played an essential part in the reorganisation of the Romanian army in 1917 and supported the establishment of the unitary national state. His assistance was rewarded superlatively: he was awarded honorary citizenship of Romania (1922), became an honorary member of the Romanian Academy (1926) and received a donation in the form of an estate in Hunedoara County. The village was given his name in 1923, "as a token of gratitude for the contribution of the French army to the liberation of Romania in World War I. After his death (in 1927), the general donated his property to the Romanian Academy" (Felecan 2017, 86).

<sup>41</sup> A colonel of Dutch and Russian origin, "he was an adjutant to prince Al. I. Cuza, then of king Charles I of Romania, on whom he attended during the War of Independence" ["a fost adjutant al domnitorului A.I. Cuza, apoi al regelui Carol I, însoțindu-l în Războiul de Independență"] (Ionescu 2014, 24).

<sup>42</sup> A Russian officer of German descent, he drew the city plan of Bucharest in 1844 and 1852, which was fundamental to the systematisation of the capital.

<sup>43</sup> The oldest road in Bucharest (1843) bears the name of a Russian general, a liberally-minded politician, who adopted many measures for the development of the Romanian principalities (e.g., drawing up the Organic Regulation, the first quasi-constitutional law in the Danubian principalities).

<sup>44</sup> A second lieutenant in the Romanian army, she stood out due to her brave actions and heroic death at only 23 years of age, in 1917. Her name appears in street nomenclature throughout the country, in the names of educational institutions, literary creations and musical pieces, as well as in the name of a film. Numerous "statues of the *Heroine of Jiu* can be found in several cities and towns in the country" ["statui ale *Eroinei de la Jiu* se află în mai multe orașe din țară"] (Ionescu 2014, 151).

homonymous street (since 1920), as well as another one called *Eroina de la Jiu* ('the heroine of Jiu') dating since 1941. Since 1948 a street in Bucharest bears the name *Măriuca*, in the memory of a girl who in 1917 'fell alongside the Romanian soldiers in the battle to defend the country.'<sup>45</sup> There are some heroines from Bucharest who, at an early age, gave their life for freedom on 21 December 1989; they are commemorated in present-day local homonymy: *Diana Alexandra Donea* (student), *Mioara Luiza Mirea* (student), both of whom were shot in the head, and *Ruxandra Mihaela Marcu* (student), who was run over by an amphibious armoured vehicle and received a blow to the head with a buttstock (see Ionescu 2014, 192-95). Heroes do not have a specific age and do not observe any kind of discrimination. Sacrificing for an ideal is worth eternal homage, and the easiest way to do this is not only by means of memorial services, but also by the perpetuation of their names in hodonyms.

## Conclusion

This study uses the capital city of Romania as a reference point, as it contains the most numerous streets and offers a complex image of contemporary Romanian hodonymy. Of the 1,500 thoroughfares that bear the names of various figures, more than 20 per cent commemorate heroes. The importance of paying homage to heroes is not only ideological, but also a testimony of the respect of the society, political decision makers and administrative authorities towards those who have sacrificed their life for the national ideal, for the country and for freedom. There exists a National Office for the Cult of Heroes (<https://www.once.ro>) operating under the Ministry of National Security, and "Queen Marie" National Association for the Cult of Heroes, founded in 1919 (<http://www.cultuleroilor.ro>). However, the most visible way to commemorate heroes, the way which has the best impact on people, is by means of hodonyms. Metaphorically, their sacrifice, on which the Romanian national state and present-day democracy were built, is parallel to that of Christian martyrs in the early centuries, whose blood allowed for the increasingly wider dissemination of Christianity.

From the viewpoint of onomastics, the value of such hodonyms is exclusively historical, as geographical, linguistic or social references are mostly absent. The only linguistic motivation is found in the heroes' birthplaces or in the settlements where they achieved valiant deeds/lost their life. In agreement with the words of Louis-Jean Calvet, "*in vitro* language policy,"<sup>46</sup> names of public

<sup>45</sup> "a căzut alături de ostașii români în luptele pentru apărarea patriei" (Ionescu 2014, 179).

<sup>46</sup> "la politique linguistique *in vitro*" (1994, 175).

squares and roadways are established in the authorities' offices, and the decisions are political.<sup>47</sup> In an authoritarian regime, state ideology is taken into account, whereas in democracy the electoral advantage is borne in mind, by considering the impact of the new names on the public opinion.

Nevertheless, the hero status is worthy of all attention. Psycholinguistically, there arises the matter of positive or negative valorisation of figures depending on the authoritarian or democratic political regime. Those who are seen as heroes in one period, can be recorded as war criminals at another point in time or upon a foreign, biased intervention. Similarly, the heroes of a people can be the sworn enemies of a neighbouring people. Without a balance in judgement (*aurea mediocritas*), which should be above the circumstantial interests of those in power, the hero status cannot be assessed/interpreted correctly.

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<sup>47</sup> "This process of reshaping Romania's political geography of memory in the broader context of postcommunist transformations was generally decided by central governmental structures and implemented accordingly by local authorities" (Rusu, Croitoru 2021, 11-12).

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