

# International VIEWPOINT

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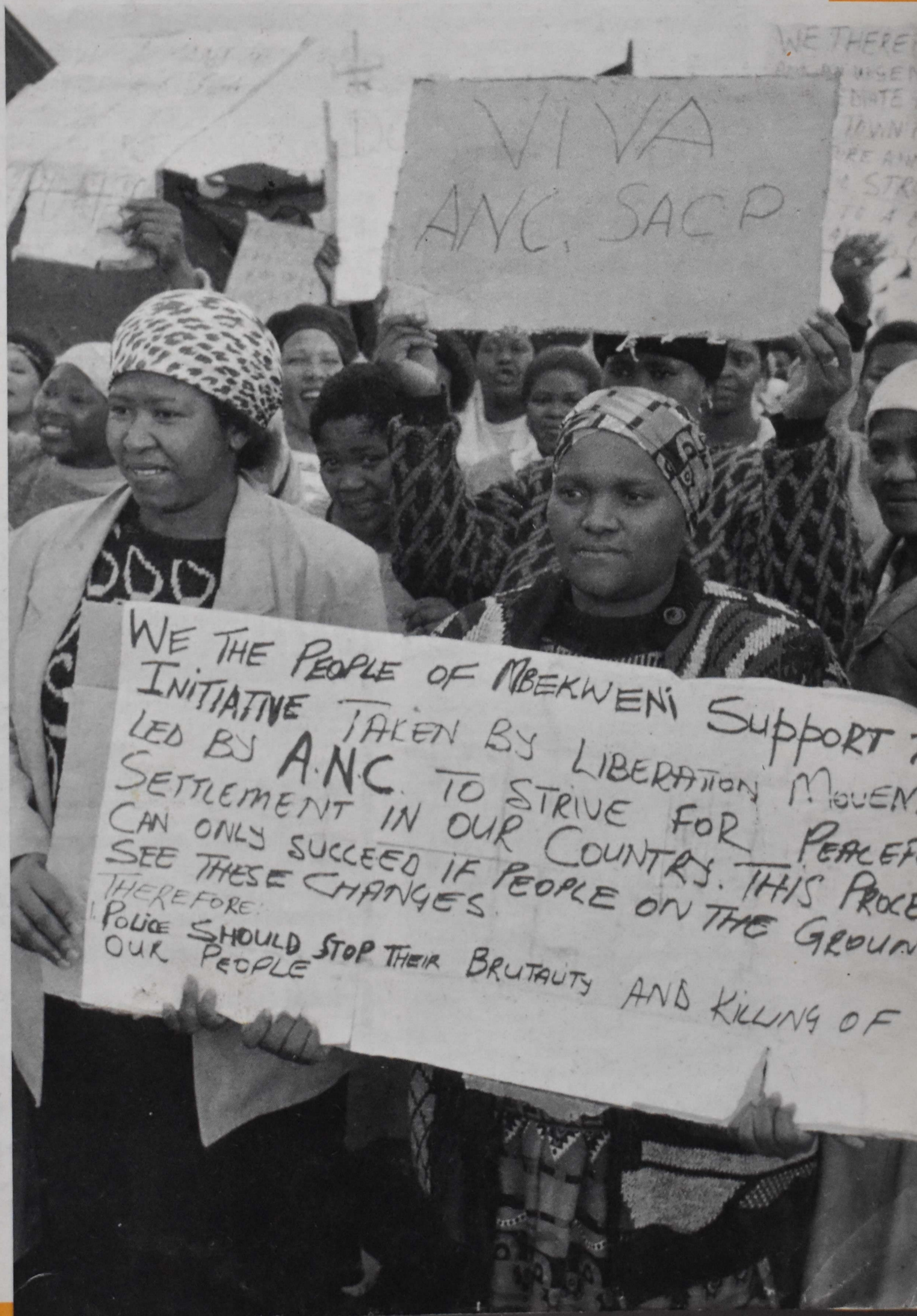
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# Elections prolong uncertainty

**“COMMUNISTS tap well of nostalgia in Romania” ran the headline of the *International Herald Tribune* on September 30, 1992, commenting on the results of that country’s parliamentary and presidential elections the previous Sunday.**

**Incumbent president Ion Iliescu won some 48% in the first round of the presidential elections — well ahead of his Democratic Convention rival Emil Constantinescu with about 30%, while Iliescu’s Democratic National Salvation Front, with 28% is also the biggest party in the new parliament.**

**COLIN MEADE**

**I**LIESCU and his party are widely seen as resting on the remnants of the former Stalinist regime inherited from dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, executed in 1991. Since then Iliescu and former prime minister Petre Roman, the two main figures of the anti-Ceausescu coup that gave rise to the National Salvation Front (NSF), have fallen out; in September 1991 a massive descent on the Romanian capital Bucharest by discontented miners forced Roman out of office. Subsequently the NSF divided into a pro-Roman (the NSF) and pro-Iliescu wing — the Democratic National Salvation Front (DNSF).

The terms of the Iliescu/Roman debate were summed up by Roman’s replacement Theodor Stolojan who explained to a Romanian paper (*Adevarul* November 4, 1991, quoted in *Radio Free Europe report*, January 10, 1992) that the so-called benefits of speedy privatization were nothing more than an “imported myth fraught with ideology”.

## Against “speedy privatization”

In fact, even if a proportion of Iliescu’s (still provisional) victory can be attributed to the mobilizing power of inherited networks, he can also count on real support for his promise to defend the peasant and worker masses of Romania from the horrors of “speedy privatization”.

Romanians have already had a sharp taste of what this is all about. In 1991 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 13.5% compared to 1990 and industrial production by 21%; the inflation rate was around 10% a month and real wages were estimated to have lost some 20% of

their value. By the spring of 1992 significant unemployment had made its appearance. Votes were cast for Iliescu and his party in the hope that they would stop the descent.

However, the anti-privatization vote is also a purely defensive vote. Iliescu and his party do not have any alternative perspective to market reforms. In the absence of any programme for revitalizing the Romanian economy, Iliescu will probably end up relying on that old staple, nationalism, and in particular nationalism directed at the country’s Hungarian minority which is concentrated in Transylvania. DNSF election material showed a Romania without Transylvania — “lost” by the opposition, which includes in its ranks the Democratic Union of the Hungarians of Romania. Party propaganda presented Iliescu as the man “who can avoid the dismembering of the country”.

The new parliament is highly fragmented and it will be difficult for Iliescu to form a new government. He has two sources of support for a stable majority: one would be elements of the “democratic” opposition willing to ally with him. The other is the Romanian nationalist parties, the Party of National Unity of Romanians of Gheorghe Funar and Romania Mare (Greater Romania).

The latter alliance is fraught with dangers, including that of conflict with neighbouring Hungary where nationalist forces would inevitably be strengthened by a crackdown on the rights of Hungarians in Transylvania. A sign of the rise of ethnic tensions inside Romania is the significant wave of emigration of the country’s large Gypsy population — given as 409,723 in the 1992 census.

The former Soviet republic of Moldo-

va, whose population is Romanian, presents a particular problem for the regime in Bucharest. So far, Iliescu has resisted the temptation to make political capital out of the issue of reunification with Moldova for a number of reasons. Firstly, in Moldova the majority seems to be in favour of independence rather than fusion with Romania. Secondly (an argument raised by the Romanian nationalists), for Moldova to leave the CIS and join Romania would provide a precedent for Transylvania to leave Romania and join Hungary.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Romania sees Russia as a vital strategic and economic ally — or, more precisely, Iliescu and the forces that support him have much in common with the Moscow based military industrial complex (and, indeed, with the Milosevic regime in Serbia). One possible variant would be for a division of Moldova, with the western part going to Romania and the so-called Transdniestr Republic in the east becoming independent.

Apart from its lack of popular appeal, the “democratic” opposition in Romania cannot count on the same level of political and material support from the West as some of its counterparts elsewhere in Eastern Europe. In the eyes of Western capital, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland form a first division that can be drawn closely into the “European” orbit. Russia merits attention because of its strategic importance for the way things develop throughout Eastern Europe. The rest will have to look after themselves.

## Lifting trade restrictions

Despite the ideologically motivated dismay in the press over the election result, the United States administration has already announced its desire to lift trade restrictions on Romania (at the same time as making clear its opposition to any form of intervention in Bosnia).

Politics in Romania in the near future may be increasingly focussed on the Transylvanian question. Efforts to break the nationalist impetus will only be successful if they can also address the economic concerns that have favoured Iliescu in this election.

Trade union protest against the economic implications of a war economy can play a crucial role in the formation of a new opposition without illusions in the West and the free market. The highly fragmented Romanian trade unions are, it seems, divided over support for Iliescu, for the opposition or for the creation of an independent labour party. It is down such a third way that a better future lies. ★