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ROMANIA: Antiregime Protests

The protests in Timisoara and Arad over the weekend, the largest since the Brasov riots in 1987, are the latest signals that the corrupt and repressive Ceausescu regime cannot indefinitely resist the changes engulfing Eastern Europe. 

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Security has been tightened throughout the country since riot police opened fire on thousands of antigovernment demonstrators in the two cities in ethnically diverse Transylvania. Timisoara was outwardly calm yesterday, despite unconfirmed reports that hundreds of demonstrators were killed and a number arrested by heavily armed security forces. The fate of Laszlo Tokes, the ethnic Hungarian clergyman and civil rights activist whose court-ordered eviction sparked the protests, is unknown. Romania has closed its borders with Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and the USSR. President Ceausescu yesterday proceeded with a scheduled visit to Iran.



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Comment: The brutal response to the demonstrations signals Ceausescu's determination to continue to resist popular demands for change, even at the risk of further international criticism and deeper isolation. His decision not to postpone his trip to Tehran was calculated to project confidence and strength, although privately he has become increasingly alarmed about the impact of Bloc developments on his regime. He has acknowledged, for instance, that reform ideas have infected the party and galvanized forces eager to depose him. He has also decreed that shortages of consumer goods, particularly food, should be eliminated within two years, presumably in an attempt to dampen public unrest over shortages this winter.



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Ceausescu's crackdown indicates that he retains the loyalty of the privileged security forces, at least for now. They fear any relaxation of controls would make them targets for popular rage, but their reliability will be increasingly doubtful as the political and economic crisis deepens. They could eventually support a disaffected individual or group in the party leadership and move against the hardline dictator under the banner of nationalist renewal.



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