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ROMANIA: Front Rebuffs Opposition Challenge

The ruling National Salvation Front (FSN) has used its organizational muscle to survive its first direct challenge by opposition parties, but it now must also contend with potentially violent ethnic tensions in Transylvania.

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The Front faced another wave of unrest over the weekend despite its attempt to distract the public's attention by broadcasting the opening of the trial of Ceausescu's senior associates. More than 15,000 anti-FSN protesters yesterday defied a government ban on demonstrations, broke through a military cordon around the Front's headquarters in Bucharest, and demanded a new coalition government. The protesters apparently retreated after the Front brought in truckloads of progovernment demonstrators.

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Acting President Iliescu is trying to calm the situation by inviting the 21 newly registered opposition parties to an "open dialogue" to begin Thursday. Nonetheless, at least one of the major parties—the National Peasants' Party—has threatened daily demonstrations until another, more broadly based interim government is formed to rule the country pending the election on 20 May.

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Meanwhile, the FSN's authority is being further undermined by mounting ethnic tensions in Transylvania, homeland of Romania's approximately 2 million ethnic Hungarians. The deputy education minister, an ethnic Hungarian, was fired Saturday for making unauthorized decisions on Hungarian-language instruction. His ouster follows public criticism of Iliescu—by the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the minority's largest organization—for having raised the specter of Hungarian separatism.

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Comment: The Front managed to turn back protesters over the weekend, but its use of orchestrated counterdemonstrations—reminiscent of the Ceausescu era—to intimidate the opposition is likely to fuel growing suspicions that the Front is dominated by crypto-Communists. More political unrest is likely as the opposition parties and radical students regroup. The Front may exploit ethnic tensions to give itself some breathing room, even at the cost of undermining its ethnic Hungarian support.

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TCS 2723/90
29 January 1990