RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE VERSUS CORRUPTION
The Paradoxical Nexus of Protest and Adaptation

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ABSTRACT: Corruption has been widely perceived as one of the main obstacles to Romania's successful transformation from socialism to democracy (and capitalism). Still, in the ensuing years after the 1989 transition, it did not directly stimulate mobilization and protest from below. However, more recently, the country has been undergoing a civic awakening. This article focuses on the interplay between the Romanian government and citizens to identify the dynamics of the growing anti-corruption protests in Romania since 2012. Four episodes of grass-roots mobilization (Austerity-2012, Rosia Montana-2013, Colectiv-2015 and OUG13/#rezist-2017) are systematically examined, taking into account the political opportunity structures and developing dynamics of contention. While these protests have been quite successful in achieving articulated demands, they have not yet transformed into sustained social movements with a wider political agenda of social change.

KEYWORDS: Corruption, Romania, nonviolent, collective action, mobilization, protest, accountability

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1. Introduction

Since 2012, corruption has become a central issue around which people are mobilizing and engaging in various forms of political participation, after a long period of limited action. We examine four distinct protest episodes of grass-roots mobilization (Austerity-2012, Rosia Montana-2013, Colectiv-2015 and OUG13/#rezist-2017) that stand out in terms of the large number of participants and effects on political institutions. Our research question is: How did the articulation of widely shared grievances combined with nonviolent collective action on the one hand, and elite responses to these grievances and pressure on the other hand, give rise to a new understanding and self-awareness of citizenry in post-socialist Romania?

Theories of democracy differ in terms of the set and extent of functions democracies are supposed to fulfil. But they all maintain that participation is essential for the legitimacy of political decision-making (see Teorell 2006). Moreover, deliberative or participatory concepts of democracy stress public discourse as a key mechanism for political decision-making. This approach relates to a key focus point of social movement studies as it examines (potential) power shifts where marginalized groups exert pressure over established political actors in order to address injustice and strive for social change. It is not clear if this successive wave of Romanian mobilizations will develop into an organized, sustained social movement. Nonetheless, what is evident thus far is that they have profoundly impacted Romanian society.

2. Theory and analytical frame

Our paper draws on the vast literature of political process theory in social movements, in which political opportunities play a central role. We focus on the interplay of citizens with their socio-political environment. Thus, we are not looking exclusively at political opportunities that open up and provide a possibility for resource mobilization and collective action. Rather, we examine the power dynamics of collective action, and the interplay between this collective action and elite responses in the context of political opportunities (Tarrow 1998; McAdam et al. 2001). According to McAdam, four main dimensions of political opportunity have been emphasized in the literature: "(1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; (2) the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; (3) the presence or absence of elite allies; and (4) the state's capacity and propensity for repression" (Giugni 2009, 361). Tarrow presents a narrower definition. Political opportu-

nities are "consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements" (1996, 54). Either way, political opportunities are seen as a (structural or simply perceived) window of opportunity for collective action. Other research on political process and political opportunity structures focus on cross-national comparisons and the identification of factors that contribute to or hinder the formation and persistence of specific types of social movements (Kriesi et al. 1992).

In contrast, we focus on the dynamics of collective action and the interaction between challengers (citizens) and members of the political system (elites) in one context – Romania – over four waves of mobilization and protest. We stress the relevance of agency: "Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations" (McAdam 1982, 48). We use the political process approach as part of the analytic framework to examine the interplay between challengers and elites. The original theory was criticized for being too static, even by the author himself, which led to examining the "dynamics of contention" (McAdam et al. 2001) or cycles of contention (Tarrow 1998) by highlighting "mechanisms that link structure and agency" (McAdam, Tarrow 2011, 4). Even though there is some tension between these two approaches, the underlying concepts help to set the analytic framework for the case studies on the Romanian protest events.

According to the political process approach, three dimensions are relevant. First is political opportunity, whereby events or broad socioeconomic developments undermine the political establishment and/or pave the way for challengers, namely people previously excluded from political decision-making. This process does not necessarily lead to political instability. It can result in a strengthening of the challenger, which McAdam defines as "a net increase in the political leverage exercised by the insurgent group" while the possibility of repression diminishes (1982, 43). (2) The second dimension highlights the organizational capacity of challengers. McAdam stresses the "infrastructure that can be used to link members of the aggrieved population into an organized campaign of mass political action" (1982, 44). (3) The third is "cognitive liberation." It consists of citizens' subjective evaluations and perceptions of their situation. Here he elaborates on the idea of cognitive liberation as a process whereby citizens transform from bystanders to challengers as they perceive that the political system is losing legitimacy, a sense of collective injustice is developing, and they experience collective efficacy vis-à-vis elites (48f).

This latter notion has been challenged and modified by many scholars (e.g. Nepstad 1997; Gamson 2011) whereby cognitive liberation is combined with "frames and framing." The concept of framing highlights the (conscious) process by social movements to

"assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in a way that mobilizes potential activists and creates support within the population for movement goals" (Nepstad 1997, 471, for an in-depth discussion of different framing processes see Benford, Snow 2000). According to McAdam, cognitive liberation and framing are not mutually exclusive but rather successive processes: only after citizens experience cognitive liberation and become challengers can they engage in (strategic) framing (McAdam 2013). Framing also paved the way for an in-depth discussion among social movement scholars on the formation and role of collective identities (Simon et al. 1998, Snow 2013). In tandem, similar concepts underpin community organizing and strategic nonviolent action theory and practice. Scholar and activist Marshall Ganz emphasizes the importance of public narrative, which "links the three elements of self, us, and now: why I am called, why we are called, and why we are called to act now" (2011, 274).

In this article, we do not view cognitive liberation, framing and collective identities as mutually exclusive or consecutive processes. These processes can overlap, interact, and operate in parallel across different waves of contention. They are also influenced by other actors, such as the media, international NGOs, and external governments.

Social media has changed the manner in which cognitive liberation and framing take place in societies, as well as the organizing capacity and tactics of social movements. For example, communication networks are also prominent in the virtual world, and social movement scholars debate whether it is just a new tool, another realm of mobilization and struggle (Beyerle 2014), or similarly, "whether new digital technologies are also creating impulses, forces, and purposes" (Polletta et al. 2013, 17). Formal forms of membership and organization have become less relevant as people choose more flexible approaches to participation (de Nève, Olteanu 2013). To some extent, the same holds true for leadership and organizations. In some activist circles, due to the proliferation of "occupy movements," leadership is not seen as vital to collective action, and in fact, is considered an impediment to participatory decision-making. (Sutherland et al. 2014). Gerbaudo (2012, 139) encapsulates these new dynamics: "Contemporary activists could well reverse the statement: we communicate in a certain way and we organise ourselves accordingly. It is communication that organises, rather than organisation that communicates. As a corollary, 'communicators' also automatically become 'organisers', given the influence they can have through their communications on the unfolding of collective action."

We will focus on events in Romania that unfolded since 2012, and trace how citizens started to challenge political actors through contentious politics and how corruption has become the central mobilizing issue in the country. Four protest episodes occurred that were sustained, country-wide in scope, involved mass mobilization, and made

demands on national political actors and institutions. They constitute our cases. The growing literature on protest movements in Romania is often based on single-case studies, media discourses and/or focus primarily on the relevance of social media (Mercea, 2015; Tartu 2015; Vesalon, Cretan 2015; Stoiciu 2016). Margarit (2015) takes a similar approach to ours by focusing on political opportunity in the Rosia Montana case in order to find out the causes of protest. Our paper contributes to the debate by systematically focusing on the *dynamics* of political opportunities and changing frames.

Our theoretical perspective is based on the political process approach; but while it traditionally focuses on structural factors leading to mobilization, we concentrate on the agency of challengers, in other words, citizens. We start with a brief overview of the context, including the 1989 political transformation, corruption, and political participation, in order to analyse the political opportunity structure in post-communist Romania. We will then provide brief accounts of each the four protest events. Finally, we will analyse the cases in terms of: political opportunity; organizational capacity; and cognitive liberation and frames.

(1) Political opportunity: We look at short-term opportunities that open up due to the interplay between challengers and members, those "actors who enjoy a consolidated position in the polity" (della Porta, Diani 2006, 16). Under this definition, the media and corporations can also be understood as relevant (if not political then at least politicizing) actors.

(2) Organizational capacity: We examine the role of social media, leadership, organizations and their campaigns.

(3) Cognitive liberation and frames: We look how challengers evolve and develop, and the meanings and interpretations they assign to events, grievances and their situation, for example, loss of legitimacy, injustice, and citizen efficacy frames.

3. Legacy of Participation

Romania has been considered a latecomer of post-socialist transformation in political as well as economic terms. The country had only a short interval of democratic experience in the interwar period. While this has retrospectively been glorified in collective memory, the deficiencies and weaknesses of the period ultimately led to the establishment of Marshall Antonescu's military dictatorship. During the socialist era, Romania had one of the most closed and authoritarian systems in Central and Eastern Eu-

rope. There was only limited dissidence (such as the 1970s miners' protest) (Deletant 1995). In general, the "Romanian Revolution" resulted from the collapse of eastern European state socialism. It reached Romania in mid-December, 1989, and after two weeks the Ceausescu regime was ousted by a popular uprising. While the majority of the military sided with the demonstrators, over 1000 people were killed when police forces loyal to the regime tried to crush the protests (Siani-Davies 2007).

Overnight, the power void was filled by former nomenklatura and a few dissidents. Out of fear that a profound political change would not be realized, the earliest occupations of University Square in Bucharest took place before and after the first free elections in 1990, where the "National Salvation Front," the nomenklatura-dominated umbrella coalition, emerged as the dominant political force. Sit-ins and demonstrations were organized by opposition parties and students. There were clashes with the police. The state brought miners from the Jiu Valley to Bucharest, who brutally attacked protestors in order to stop the democratization process. In the aftermath, contentious politics and unconventional forms of political participation subsided during the 1990s and 2000 decade.

Figure 1 indicates specific types of unconventional political participation (nonviolent collective action) in Romania, taken from four waves of data collection of the World Values Survey. We present each item with two answers (have done/might do) in order to examine the frequency of use and the general inclination to participate if considered necessary. We picked one relatively low controversy-low threshold action (signing a petition), one moderately controversial-higher threshold action (boycott), and one more controversial-high threshold action (lawful demonstration). All three items show that participation or the willingness to act was highest at the beginning of transition (1993), and then started to decline. However, in 2012, the data show a positive trend.

Voter turnout is the most widely-accepted, low-threshold form of participation. Romania had its first free and fair election in 1990. Since then, voter turnout has been dropping from almost 80 percent in 1990 to below 40 percent (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance n.y.).

Figure 1 Unconventional forms of Participation in Romania
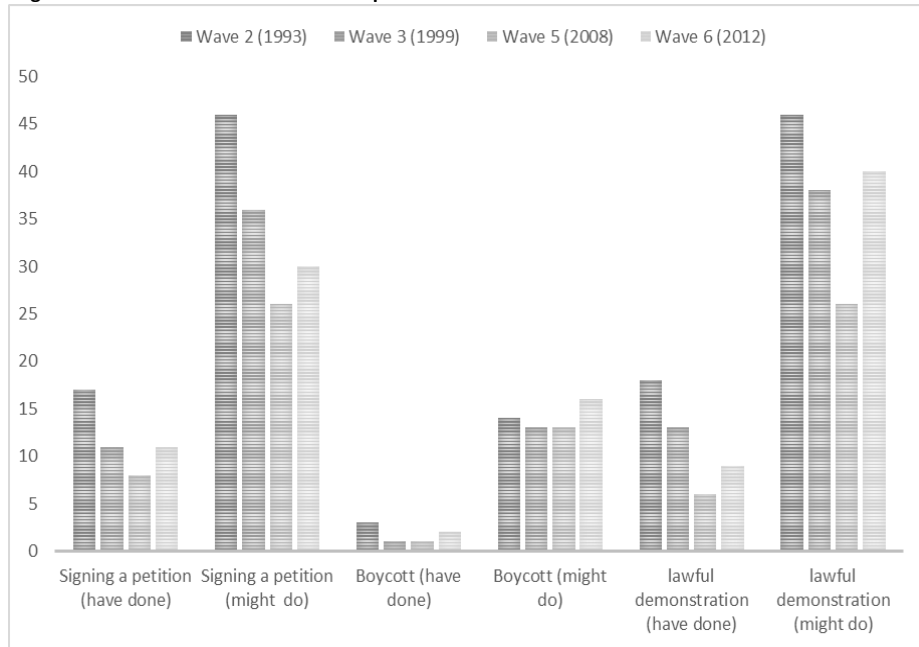
Source: World Values Survey

These findings challenge the view of consolidation paradigms that citizens need time to adapt to the democratic rules of the game and the consolidation of a civic culture is the last step (Merkel 1998, 40). The data indicates that there was a willingness on the part of citizens to engage at the beginning of transition. Between 1993 and 2008, this diminished, both in terms of conventional and unconventional participation. In 2012, unconventional forms of participation began to rise while voter turnout remained low. Not surprisingly, at the same time, trust in political parties was very low. For example, in 2004, 68 percent of respondents answered that they "tend not to trust" political parties. By 2010, this response climbed to 89 percent. Since then there has been a slight improvement. In 2016, 77 percent of respondents viewed parties negatively (Standard Eurobarometer 62, 74, 86). Given this trust deficit, it's not surprising that Romanian citizens are also concerned with matters of governance and how it impacts their prospects and lives. Data from the World Bank's 2013 and 2016 Romania Country Opinion Survey add another layer to these public assessments. In 2013, 55 percent of respondents believed that the country is headed in the wrong direction, while in 2016, 78 percent concurred with this statement. In 2013, a growing middle class was identified as the greatest contributor to shared prosperity (56 percent), but in 2016, respondents

indicated that public sector governance/reform is the greatest contributor (59 percent). In 2013, education was cited as the most important development priority (44 percent), whereas in 2016, respondents indicated that it is public sector governance/reform (59 percent) (Felzer et al. 2016).

Taken together, the data reveal a problematic relationship between citizens on the one hand, and the political establishment and the state on the other hand. People do not trust political and state actors, and predictably, voter turnout is declining. After the popular uprising ended the Ceausescu regime, citizens played a marginalized role in the new democracy, primarily as voters in a political system perceived as untrustworthy. Finally, until 2012, other forms of conventional or unconventional participation were not widely used. Most researchers on Romania, and Central and Eastern Europe more generally, highlight cultural and economic factors (e.g. legacy of state socialism and the effects of transformation e.g. Ceka 2013; Hooghe, Quintelier 2013) or the weakness of civil society (e.g. Kopecky, Mudde 2003; Howard 2007) to explain these developments. Others surmise that the recent civic awakening is in part a result of the global justice movement (Bejan et al. 2015).

4. Corruption

The second feature essential to examine is corruption. While there is debate among scholars about what is the most pressing issue to be tackled in Romania, we want to highlight its role as a catalyst for social protest.

Corruption is the modus operandi of most authoritarian regimes, which by their nature involve impunity, unaccountability, buying and sustaining loyalties, and neutralizing adversaries (Beyerle 2015). While some argue that the legacy of corruption in Central and Eastern Europe can be explained by post-communist political, economic and social transformation (Karklins, 2005; Kostadinova 2012) others see no special "post-socialist" factor at work (Treisman 2003).

Data on Romania from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators digital platform from 2005 to 2015 show modest improvement in Romania's rankings on control of corruption, rule of law, government effectiveness, and voice and accountability (The World Bank 2017). The country scored 48/100 (rank 57/176) in the 2016 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2016). All-in-all, the data paint a sobering but not altogether bleak picture, as it is not among the most dismal cases around the world, nor are its rankings the worst in the region.

Romanian membership in the European Union involved significant pressure to adopt anti-corruption measures (Kostadinova 2012, Olteanu 2016). However, implementation of reforms has been thwarted by negligible political will. Mungiu-Pippidi concludes, "Romania is the country where generalized corruption and the toughest anticorruption in Europe have been coexisting for the past ten years" (2017, n.p.). Thus, corruption is somewhat an integral element of the political and societal arena for a long period of time. So it is surprising that it has suddenly become one of the driving forces of political protest in Romania, especially as other problems have grave effect on societies such as austerity or inequality. This can be linked to the changing discourse on corruption. Taking into consideration, that the perception and evaluation is socially constructed and connected to societal context (see Tänzler et al. 2012), we can observe in Romania, that the term corruption is discursively very much linked to the political elite's self-enrichment and its instrumentalisation of corruption accusation for political contestation. Resignation dominates the discourse on petty corruption in Romania, as a functional mechanism to get public goods one is entitled to (Olteanu 2012: 201-202).

5. Case 1: Austerity Protests 2012

Political opportunity: The global economic crisis of 2008 was the underlying event that ultimately led to widespread protest in Romania. In the wake of this crisis, the Romanian government launched harsh austerity measures. Trade unions organized demonstrations that culminated in a general strike on 5 October 2009 (Trif 2014). However, these mobilizations were splintered, represented narrow interests and did not lead to unified political pressure. In 2011, new legislation on trade unions essentially abolished the national collective bargaining right (Stoiciu 2016).

The actual trigger of the first, protracted, mass protests in Romania since 1989 was rather surprising. In order to lower the budget deficit and shift costs to citizens, the centre-right government decided to partially privatize the emergency medical service. Raed Arafat, the highly-regarded Deputy Health Minister, publicly criticized the move. As a result, President Traian Basescu forced him to resign (Tatar 2015). The insulting manner in which it was done upset the public. [1] In the face of such policies and perceived callousness, the overall arrogance, cronyism and corruption of political elites became increasingly unpalatable. On January 12, 2012, demonstrations spread from

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[1] During a telephone interview with a TV station, Basescu said: "If you do not find an understanding, maybe you have a different point of view than your minister. Who should leave, the Deputy Health Minister or the Minister? Guess my riddle?!" (Dohotaru 2012, 22)

Bucharest to major cities around the country for three weeks, with some violent confrontations between police and protesters. People united around three key demands: Basescu's resignation, reinstatement of Arafat, and early elections. Five days later, Arafat was reinstated, the privatization plans were dropped, and Prime Minister Emil Boc stepped down in order to "defuse political and social tension" while Basescu stayed in office (The Economist, 2012).

Pressure was exerted by the masses of people on the streets, in other words, through the power of numbers. The reaction of political actors differed. Prime Minister Emil Boc took a moderate stance. He tried to justify the harsh austerity measures but also empathized with citizens' grievances, calling for social dialogue at the local and national level (Boc, 15 January 2012). In a press conference on 15 January 2012, while affirming the legitimacy of the protests as long as they remained nonviolent, he identified NGOs and trade unions as the key partners to resolve the situation, essentially ignoring other civil society actors and citizens. In contrast, other parts of the ruling establishment maligned the protestors. For instance, Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi called people "clueless and inept slum dwellers"(Deutsche Welle 2012). His insults backfired and he was forced to resign. The police, as agents of the state, were brought in to contain the demonstrations, which were not always authorized. There were some violent incidents, primarily skirmishes between these security forces and radical soccer fans (Gutu, 2012).

Opposition parties also tried to capitalize on the situation by organizing their own demonstrations. They had limited success because challengers were sceptical of all political elites and did not align with any political faction.

Organizational capacity: The challengers were primarily ordinary people who took the streets in reaction to an injustice that resonated with their lives and brought to the surface accumulated grievances. Behind the scenes, there was some mobilizing infrastructure (in the digital realm) and civil society organizations that catalysed these protests. Street actions were initially organized via Facebook. Existing NGOs and networks then joined the effort. For example, activists from the "Save Rosia Montana" campaign (see the next case study) used their know-how to set up a Facebook event in Cluj (Dohotaru 2012, 227f). The anti-corruption NGO "Clean Romania" published an article entitled, "Civil society sides with the street" (Romania Curata 2012, 18 January). While parts of civil society applied its knowledge and skills to carry out street actions, there was not a joint effort led by civil society organizations. Several organizations and groups nonetheless developed discourse and demands. Moreover, these protests differed from the occupy mobilizations in other countries, where the street was used as a resource to generate common viewpoints and demands.

A group of 44 NGOs published a joint letter with 14 demands, addressing a variety of grievances and problems, including: "corruption and inefficiency in general" (Petitieonline 18 January 2012); "arrogance" and a lack of transparency on the part of political elites; social inequality; and insufficient funding of the educational system. Other demands focused on military reform, as well as environmental issues (also related to corruption, such as the Rosia Montana gold mining project and illegal deforestation). A third set of demands centred on fundamental human rights enshrining nonviolent collective action, such as freedom of speech and assembly. A fringe group from Cluj-Napoca had a different set of demands. The Tinerii maniosi (Angry young people), composed of leftists, anarchists and autonomous activists, proposed reforms of the political establishment (including two terms for elected representatives, and sanctions for parliamentarians not participating in the assembly). They were also opposed to the Rosia Montana gold mining project (CriticAtac 19 January 2012). Thus, this was not a conflict between political camps, where some parts of the political elite could have allied with the protesters. It was a fundamental critique of the entire political establishment.

While the ties were not formalized, these examples illustrate interconnectivity among activists, NGO professionals and regular citizens.

Cognitive liberation and frames: A variety of people in terms of age, social background, and education participated in the demonstrations. After years of relatively subdued discontent, they moved from being bystanders to challengers. For the majority of citizens mobilized on the streets, there was a collective experience of cognitive liberation. The shared grievances were the harsh anti-austerity policies combined with resentment over the venal political establishment (Tatar 2015) and the need to pressure corrupt elites. However, the frames differed from those of anti-austerity protests in other parts of the Global North, which involved a fundamental critique of the capitalist economy (for a debate see Flesher Fominaya, Cox 2013) and a legacy of civic mobilization against injustice. In Romania, the market economy was widely accepted and accredited with efficacy, while injustice, poverty and inequality were seen to be the result of elites stealing from ordinary people, even in times of crisis.

Protesters used a key symbol of the 1989 uprising, the Romanian communist regime flag, with a hole in place of the communist symbol, thereby framing their mobilization as the successor to their democracy struggle. While the trigger (forced resignation of a deputy minister who opposed public health care cuts) may seem to be marginal issue compared to overall austerity measures, challengers framed it as the epitome of elite arrogance, callousness and disrespect for the citizenry. Elite reactions to the protestors, such as President Basescu's contemptuous comments, reinforced this frame. At the same time, injustice was a unifying theme around which people rallied. Activists

and small NGOs latched on to this frame to raise public awareness about other pressing issues, such as the Rosia Montana gold mining project, shale gas exploitation, and last but not least, corruption.

6. Case 2: Save Rosia Montana Movement

Political opportunity: There are two phases to the Save Rosia Montana movement: 2000 – 2012 (sub-national); 2013 – present (national). Phase I began as a desperate grass-roots effort of marginalized citizens to save their land and way of life. Rosia Montana is an area located in the Apuseni Mountains. In 1995, Gabriel Resources, a Canadian-based company, initiated plans to build the largest open-pit gold mine in Europe involving the highly toxic method of cyanide extraction.[2] The estimated 16-year project would result in the destruction of four mountains, three villages, churches, cemeteries, ancient Roman heritage sites and artefacts, and subsistence farming, as well as the creation of a huge cyanide lake. Some villagers did sell their property, willingly or under pressure, but over 100 refused to go. In 1996, Gabriel Resources signed a contract with a Romanian state-owned company Regia Aurului si Cuprului (RAC) Deva to explore the remaining gold reserves in an area of 12 km². One year later, Gabriel Resources formed the Rosia Montana Gold Corporation (RMGG) joint venture with RAC Deva, where the former secured an 80 percent stake and the latter 20 percent. The mining project's trajectory evidenced smooth cooperation between company representatives, politicians, the state administration, such as the National Agency for Natural Resources, the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Culture, and a panoply of government officials down to the local level. It involved a "'who's who' of Romanian politics, journalism and business past and present," including the Prime Minister, successive ministers of commerce and industry, and the minister of finance (Iordache n.y. 1).

The second phase of resistance (see also Margarit 2016), can be traced to August 27, 2013, when the Rosia Montana gold mining project became a national political issue. During the 2012 elections, Prime Minister Victor Ponta voiced strong opposition to the project on national television, and promised to transparently reassess the agreement underpinning it, leading opponents of the project to believe they had a political ally. However, in a blatant turnaround, on this day his administration submitted a draft law to Parliament giving RMGC the power to expropriate property for the mining project and forcibly remove residents. Furthermore, the bill required authorities to provide

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[2] For more in-depth information about the project and corruption, see: Beyerle, S. and T. Olteanu (2016).

RMGC all the necessary permits irrespective of other legal provisions. The manoeuvre reverberated among many of the older generation, who remembered the long history of state expropriation during the communist era. Numerous young people were displeased about unchecked power being granted to companies.

In this case, the interplay between challengers and various elites is insightful. RMGC had influence over media elites, as many television outlets had valuable contracts with the company. At first, there was little coverage of the protests. Once it became impossible to ignore them, media efforts went into discrediting the movement (Ivan 2015, 71). The Romanian political establishment was overwhelmed by the sustained collective outrage and pressure wielded by citizens, the largest, ongoing mobilization in Romania's post-communist history. Parliament rejected the RMGC bill. In 2016, Vlad Alexandrescu, the Minister of Culture, designated Rosia Montana a historic site of national interest and put it on the country's UNESCO Heritage Site list, thereby prohibiting all mining on the site. However, Gabriel Resources Ltd. and Gabriel Resources (Jersey) have since submitted a claim of damages against Romania to the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), and in August 2017, the company filed a $4.4 billion compensation claim against the country. Rosia Montana's supporters assert that political elites are once again trying to press ahead with the gold mining project. That same month, Prime Minister Mihai Tudose, announced an effort would be made to withdraw the Rosia Montana application to UNESCO for world heritage status, which would effectively allow the project to resume (Gillet 2017a).

What has changed from the massive 2013 protests is that a new player entered the parliament, altering the interplay between some (new) elites and challengers from antagonistic to synergistic. The Union Save Romania (USR) is composed of challengers entering politics to change the venal political system from the inside. Mihai Gotiu, a USR legislator, exposed the UNESCO plot, forcing Tudose's public statement. Challengers once again mobilized through social media and an online petition was launched (Marica 2017).

Organizational capacity: During Phase I, the initial challengers that spurred collective action in opposition to the mining project was a group of residents from the region. In 2000, they created Alburnus Maior, a community-based organization, and launched the "Save Rosia Montana" (SRM) campaign. It built unity by establishing links with a variety of environmental NGOs. It also garnered support from university students and academics in Cluj and Bucharest, and religious institutions such as the Orthodox Church. SRM carried out a variety of creative, nonviolent tactics, strategically challenged administrative and political decisions in court in order to throw obstacles in RMGC's path, and

provided alternative sources of information to counter RMGC's strong influence over local media.

Phase II, consisting of three months of national and international mobilization, was spurred by a handful of activists, seasoned by the 2012 austerity protests. On August 28, 2013, the day after the Ponta administration submitted the above-mentioned draft law to the Parliament, they chained themselves to a fence surrounding a government building in the capital, Bucharest. Through social media, beginning on September 1, these challengers quickly organized a series of protests. Participation grew in the thousands and once again drew in a wide swathe of society with diverse motivations and ideological convictions, from those concerned with the environment, historical preservation and cultural heritage to nationalists, anti-capitalists and progressives (Craciun 2015). Solidarity actions, including by Diaspora groups, were organized in France, Germany, Greece, the UK, US and beyond. Inspired by the Occupy and Indignados movements, people also created civic forums, drafted policy proposals and set up participatory democracy forums. Core demands included: parliamentary rejection of the RMGC bill; banning cyanide mining and shale gas extraction; applying for Rosia Montana to become a UNESCO World Heritage site; resignation of top officials, including the Ministers of the Environment and Culture; and the resignation of Prime Minister Ponta.

Cognitive liberation and frames: SRM organizers, activists and many thousands of citizens already had recent, first-hand experience of collective action against widely held grievances, and as importantly, a taste of collective victory during the Austerity protests (Margarit 2016). "Rosia Montana became the perfect opportunity to express the increasing dissatisfaction of citizens with the party system, government, mainstream media and corporate practices" (Craciun 2015). As a result, the process of cognitive liberation evolved. In addition to the government, the media and private sector also began to lose legitimacy in the eyes of many Romanian citizens. Rallying cries reflected collective action frames, including, "United, we save Rosia Montana", and "the revolution begins with Rosia Montana." The injustice frame was linked to the close connections among corporations, the media and political elites, epitomized by a key slogan, "corporation doesn't do the legislation." In contrast to the 2012 protests, where citizens collectively experienced the injustice of austerity at the hands of a corrupt political establishment, now the injustice was perceived to be towards the "nation." Although challengers adopted some tactics from occupy mobilizations, the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization frames were not embraced by the majority.

7. Case 3: Colectiv Protests 2015

Political opportunity: The Colectiv protests were triggered by a tragic incident on 30 October 2015, when 64 people died as a result of a fire in the Colectiv night club. The organizers of a rock concert had set off fireworks inside the building, causing a catastrophic blaze. The club's owners were arrested and charged with building code violations. Among the hospitalized victims, some contracted life-threatening bacterial infections that even led to several deaths. Shortly thereafter, approximately 25,000 people took the streets. Protestors demanded the resignation of the government, the mayor of Bucharest, and the district mayor where the nightclub was located – in order to force elites to take responsibility for the catastrophe and to gain accountability.

While corruption was one of the driving issues in the previous mobilizations, it now took centre stage. Malfeasance was linked to the disaster on two counts: (i) suspicions of lax enforcement of safety and fire hazard regulations; (2) conditions in the public health care sector as a Romanian pharmaceutical company supplied over 350 hospitals with heavily diluted disinfectants at marked-up prices. Underpinning these concerns was growing disgust with the government; it had already lost credibility over the Rosia Montana mining project and one month before the fire, Prime Minister Ponta was indicted on corruption charges.

On 4 November 2015, Prime Minister Ponta, his entire government, and the district mayor resigned. Ponta stated, "I am obliged to take note of the legitimate grievances which exist in society. I hope my and my government's mandate will satisfy the demands of protesters" (Tran 2015). A technocratic government took over, led by the Prime Minister Dacian Ciolos. It was generally perceived it to be more efficient, less corrupt, and better equipped to bring forth reforms.

In this case, there was no political decision-making process that caused the demonstrations, but the accumulated effects of collective voice and power on the political institutions were profound, having come in the wake of the Save Rosia Montana movement. Prime Minister Ponta had already lost public backing when he shifted his electoral position on the gold mining project, which in turn led to a loss of support within his own party. President Klaus Iohannis backed the challengers. On Facebook, he wrote that the country's political leaders "cannot ignore this feeling of revolt" (Agence France Presse 2015). Pledging to take the views of civil society groups into consideration, he invited "the civil society" to participate in a roundtable discussion. It was a clear opening towards the activists on the streets though not welcomed by all because the selection process was not entirely transparent or legitimized by a broader consultative process. The President was looking for a partner or interlocutor, either ignoring or not

grasping the fact that the challengers had diverse aims and opposed clear leadership. Consequently, the meeting thwarted the whole established logic of the challengers for a leaderless protest. In the end, each participant in these consultations represented his/her own organization and point of view, while others preferred not to participate at all. Finally, as compared to previous protests, the majority of the media reported about the demonstrations and their claims (Gradinarul et al. 2016).

Organizational capacity: In the case of the Colectiv tragedy, the initial challengers were a number of NGOs. They organized a Facebook event that both called for demonstrations and articulated demands. Once again, those civic entities that had been actively involved in the previous protests used their loose networks and infrastructure to organize. While victims of the tragedy belonged largely to the young generation adept with social media, the highly emotional calamity also mobilized other age groups and people who had not participated in previous mobilizations (see figure 3 below). Thousands took part in protests in Bucharest and other major cities around the country (McLaughlin 2015).

Cognitive liberation and frames: Coming in the wake of the Rosia Montana victory, a growing number of citizens collectively felt empowered. "They have awoken our sleeping giant called conscience, and you can see them scared of it roaring in every city," declared a challenger from the eastern part of the country (The Economist 2015). Predominant frames revolved around elite abuse of power and contempt of citizens, shared responsibility to counter corruption, popular resistance as the continuation of Romania's 1989 struggle, and justice. "We don't want to be lied at and humiliated by those who have the political and administrative power," ended a communique on Facebook by several NGOS (Romania Curata 2015). A banner in University Square – a key rallying site during the 1989 revolution laden with symbolism and history – said: "In 1989 we fought for liberty, today we fight for justice" (The Economist 2015). People in the protests reportedly called out to others to participate with such entreaties as: "Get out of your homes if you care!"; and "Don't be afraid, the country is rising up!" (Deutsche Welle 2015). Finally, as with the 2012 austerity protests, challengers were again observed waving flags with holes.

8. Case 4: The OUG13/#rezist protests 2017

Political opportunity: The parliamentary elections of December 2016 ended the technocratic government set up after the Colectiv tragedy and political resignations. The Social Democratic party (PSD), whose government was ousted from power in the

wake of the mass mobilizations, was overwhelmingly voted back into office with 45.5 percent of the votes (BEC 2016). PSD's success is in part the result of a lack of alternative political options within established parties. For example, conservative parties are still seen as the major driver of austerity measures. The aforementioned Union Save Romania party, which put corruption and good governance on the political agenda, gained support in larger cities. On 18 January 2017, just two weeks after the new government's instalment, the Ministry of Justice proposed an emergency decree (ordonanta de urgenta – OUG13) that would severely weaken anti-corruption efforts. This frequently-used tool speeds up the legislative process by bypassing the Romanian parliament. First, the law on pardon and amnesty (Proiectul Ordonantei 2017) would enable far-reaching pardons for convicts with sentences up to five years, including for corruption. Speculation quickly arose that PSD head Liviu Dragnea, who had been charged with abuse of power, would be spared and ultimately be named Prime Minister. Second, the revision of the penal code would have decriminalized abuse of power and conflict of interest up to a sum of approximately 44,000 Euros. The setback of anti-corruption efforts, flagrant disregard of official procedure, and use of the emergency decree stunned the public. The first protests began that same day and continued every Sunday the rest of the month. The initial demand was not to pass the decree. Nevertheless, OUG13 was furtively published in the official gazette (thereby rendering it law) the evening of 31 January 2017.

The news broke quickly and within an hour over 10,000 people took to the streets in Bucharest and other cities (The Economist 2017). The #rezist protests continued every night around the country, with estimates of approximately 150,000 to 200,000 citizens gathering daily (Mungiu-Pippidi 2017). In total, #rezist spread to 81 cities in 36 countries (Adi, Lilleker 2017). They were the largest, sustained, nation-wide mobilisations in the post-1989 democratic era. Their demands multiplied to repealing OUG13, and the resignations of the prime minister, minister of justice and the head of the Social Democratic Party. Shaken by the intensity, longevity, and geographical spread of the protests, the government partially acquiesced. On 5 February 2017, it introduced a new emergency decree repealing OUG13. However, public outrage continued. That evening, Romania witnessed the biggest mobilization in its history. Between 500,000 and 600,000 people demonstrated throughout the country (Libertatea Online 05.02.2017). On 9 February, Justice Minister Florin Iordache resigned. The fight is not over. Officially, the #rezist protest is still demanding the government to resign, even though the numbers at protests have greatly diminished.

Organizational capacity: Challengers to OUG13, at least in Bucharest, do not conform to the conventional protester profile. Although research on political participation

has found that the majority of active citizens worldwide lean ideologically to the left of the political spectrum, existing Romanian data from the #rezist protest is quite different (see figure 2). Researchers from the Centre for Studies in Political Ideas (CeSIP) surveyed protesters in Bucharest on 5 February 2017. [3] Of the 174 respondents, 66 percent were men and 34 percent women, most were between the ages of 22 to 45 years old and had a university degree. Eighty-three percent indicated they had voted in the 2016 parliamentary election and 70 percent had previously taken part demonstrations. [4] The respondents rated both the governing parties and the opposition parties to be (very) corrupt. Only the new party, USR, scored better. Less than 10 percent positioned themselves on the left of the political spectrum (see figure 2). [5] Thus, the average protester in the capital city is a male in his late twenties to early thirties with a university degree and a conservative political orientation who previously took part in other mobilisations, such as the Colectiv protests (approx. 35 percent) or Rosia Montana (approx. 17 percent).

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[3] Such surveys can only give an approximate picture of entire demonstrations but this dilemma cannot be overcome. For a discussion on the demonstration survey dilemma see Daphi, P. (2015).

[4] This question bears the traditional social desirability bias as people try to answer as expected by the interviewer or society in general see Cassel, C. A. (2003).

[5] The World Values Survey asks a similar question and is presented here as a base for comparison. Results of the latest survey that took place between 2014-2016 shows that 19 percent of the respondents consider themselves left or rather left in Romania.

Figure 2: Romania: Self-positioning in political scale in 2017: left-right (in percent)
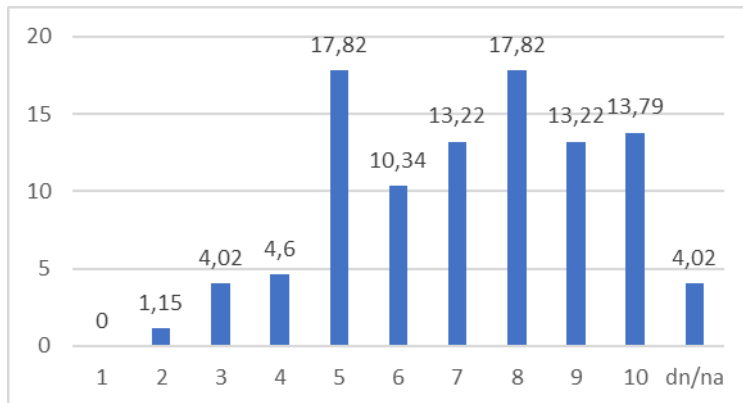
Source: Centrul de studii in idei politice (2017), (1 to 10 present a continuum: 1 means the persons consider themselves to be highly to the political left, 10 means the persons consider themselves to be highly to the political right, dn/na means that the respondent answered "don't know/ no answer).

Figure 3: Prior protest activities
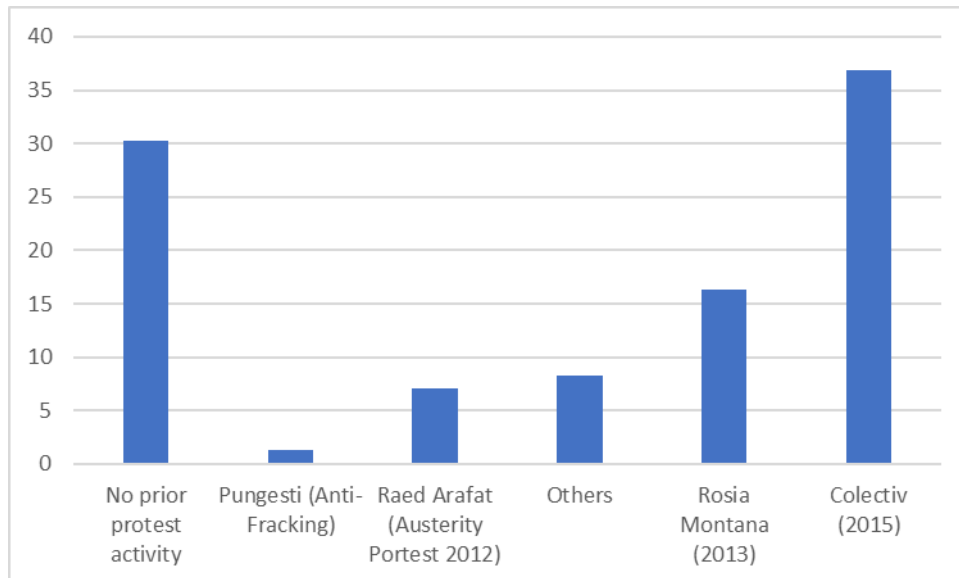
Source: Centrul de studii in idei politice (2017). Percentage of the respondents.

Some elites voiced opposition to OUG13 or essentially sided with #rezist. President Iohannis, the Council of Magistrates, the senior prosecutor, and the head of the Na-

tional Anticorruption Directorate all objected to the law through various channels. When OUG 13 was enacted, President Iohannis stated, "Today is a day of mourning for the rule of law" (Gillet, 2017b). He took part in one demonstration, and Steven van Groningen, Chief Executive Officer of Raiffeisen Bank-Romania, joined with his family on several nights. Some challengers welcomed them, arguing that President Iohannis confirmed that the highest political institution agreed with the citizens. Others wanted a strict separation between the political class and the protestors, fearing that he might try to capitalize on the civic mobilization. There was criticism concerning van Groningen's presence. Opponents tried to discredit the protests by implying that employees of multinational companies were forced to participate. This fuelled speculations of paid demonstrators in the service of international interests.

Initially, the government downplayed the protests and vowed to enact OUG13. It unsuccessfully tried pressuring the General Prosecutor and the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor to resign, but it became evident their opposition to the proposed emergency decree could not be used to remove them from office. In the ensuing months, the forces behind OUG13 have been trying to find an alternative route to achieving their goals.

Cognitive liberation and framing: OUG13 was seen by hundreds of thousands of citizens, as well as by some political elites, as an effort to roll-back anti-corruption progress, subvert justice, and facilitate impunity. Once again, there was a collective sense of being affronted by corrupt elites, but now there was the new fear that they will become even more emboldened to abuse their power. The overall frame was collective action coupled with patriotism and a European identity, as evidenced by the hashtag #rezist and the prolific use of symbols, such as the 1989 Romanian revolution flag and the European Union flag. Protesters also used the lights on the mobile phones to create dramatic crowd-based visuals of the Romanian flag.

9. Conclusion

These four protest events reflect the incremental empowerment of people in Romania. After a long period of relative inactivity following the 1989 revolution, when unconventional forms of participation were regarded as inappropriate and collective action was localized, a change began in 2012. We have demonstrated, using political process theory as the organizing framework, how these four protest events have constructed a new understanding and self-awareness of citizenry in post-socialist Romania.

Three of these events were triggered by political decision-making that ran counter to the expectations of citizens and displayed an ignorance on the part of elites to react

responsively and accountably (Austerity protests-2012, Save Rosia Montana-2013 and OUG 13/#rezist-2017). Although the economic decline during the 1990s transformation period did not result in major protests, the global financial crisis and downturn did. In contrast to the austerity protests and global justice movements in (Western) countries, there was not a leftist critique of capitalism, but rather, a reminder of the promise of the 1989 "revolutions" to bring forth flourishing market economies. The (political and economic) elites were seen as responsible for the failures not the economic system as such. Therefore, challengers did not have any real elite allies with whom to join forces. Nor were deliberations triggered by a vision of an alternative future as we often find in Western protest movements.

The interplay between citizens and elites has proven to be dynamic. Overall, political institutions have manifested ambivalence to citizens as democratic actors beyond casting votes in elections. The four cases clearly show that people power pressure impacted the Romanian political establishment. First, two governments stepped down (Austerity 2012, Colectiv 2015). Second, sustained mobilizations stopped the Rosia Montana gold mining project and prevented OUG13 from enactment. Third, the 2012 Austerity and 2017 OUG13 protests have shown that challengers supported the independence and efforts of elite reformers and state institutions when their interests coincided. This made it harder for the corrupt political establishment to control or thwart them (for example, the general prosecutor, the anti-corruption prosecutor and the anti-corruption agency opposition to OUG13). Though a somewhat controversial ally, President Iohannis legitimized the protests and sided with the challengers. Fourth, challengers to the corrupt political establishment are becoming institutionalized through the USR political party. The USR opted for a technocratic programme reflecting the challengers' anti-corruption discourse.

However, we do observe a learning effect on the part of political actors. They are becoming inured to large-scale demonstrations, indicating that challengers must diversify their nonviolent tactics. In 2012, the Austerity protests so severely rattled elites that the prime minister resigned. In contrast, in spite of the intensity, longevity, and geographical spread of the OUG13/#rezist demonstrations, the government did not meet all demands and it is now trying to push parts of the legislation through parliament. Elites are also adapting their strategies to maintain the corrupt status quo in the face of people power. They have learned that resignations and even criminal charges and prison do not permanently bring down political careers or parties. In the heat of the protests, they make some concessions, but then regroup and chart out alternative routes to gain their ends.

The Colectiv tragedy (2015) drew attention to the dysfunctional and corrupt political establishment. Initially, corruption was not the central grievance of people or single issue-driven (Austerity, Save Rosia Montana). It was rather a broad criticism of the unresponsive political elite where corruption was one issue among others. "Colectiv" changed the discourse. It was not only associated with the self-enrichment of a few, but tangible, fatal consequences for ordinary citizens. What we can observe is a societal shift in terms of the perception of corruption – from a necessary evil to an unacceptable elite practice that must be reined in when it becomes too odious or harmful. Thus far, this growing societal intolerance to malfeasance and impunity has not developed into a social movement for systemic change, be it for accountable governance, the quality and practice of democracy, or inequality and marginalisation.

Over the course of the four protest events, a large group of loosely connected Romanian activists and NGOs incrementally built up an organizational infrastructure to mobilize citizens, initially online but increasingly offline. Alburnus Maior, the local civil society organization opposing the Rosia Montana gold mining project, allied and overlapped with activists for the Austerity protests. But this less formalized infrastructure has some inherent limitations. While to its credit, it has time and again rallied many hundreds of thousands of people in nonviolent action both online via Facebook and Twitter hashtags and on the ground, it has not sparked a general societal discourse about the overall drivers of corruption and how citizens' own attitudes and behaviour contribute to the problem. The public does not necessarily see bribe-giving as graft, whereas the term corruption is used quite frequently to describe elite abuse of power for gain (Olteanu 2012). With the exception of public health care (Austerity and Colective protests) and safety codes (Colective protests), it has not illuminated how malfeasance is linked to the hardships in people's daily lives. Thus far, this informal collective action infrastructure remains to some degree an urban bubble, disconnected to other parts of society. It is tied together by antipathy for the venal political establishment, and activism is focused on controlling the government at points when it behaves most egregiously. While this resonates with the Romanian public and has resulted in striking people power victories, it is not a long-term strategy for proactive systemic change built on a sustained social movement.

These four cases profoundly altered Romanian society. Quite astonishingly, small circles of activists managed to tap and channel public outrage into peaceful nonviolent action that brought forth notable victories. As a result, a civic awakening is under way in the country. A large swathe of citizens recognize they have the right to voice their objections to elites, make demands, and wield pressure on them. In other words, people are collectively experiencing cognitive liberation, including participants at protests,

allies, and sympathizers. Moreover, the frames noted by social movement scholars are at play across these four protest waves, namely: loss of legitimacy of elites; a shared sense of injustice; and the experience of efficacy. Third, the challengers frame themselves as the real people in contrast to political elites. Corruption of the political elite has become the uniting issue of a heterogeneous mass.

Social change is not linear. It is a process involving active empowerment, progress and setbacks, learning and adaptation. A part of the Romanian citizenry is re-claiming the state and democracy, asserting collective voice, making demands and exercising a degree of control on political elites that had largely been unresponsive for many years. Yet, challengers may now be at a crossroads.

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