

# #REZIST

## ROMANIA'S 2017 ANTI-CORRUPTION PROTESTS: CAUSES, DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLICATIONS



edited by:  
Ana Adi and Darren G. Lilleker



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# #rezist – Romania's 2017 anti-corruption protests: causes, development and implications

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Quadriga Media Berlin GmbH  
Werderscher Markt 13  
D-10117 Berlin

Coordination: Ana Adi  
Design: Jeferson Brito Andrade, Leonie Münch

## CONTACT:

Please contact Ana Adi [ana.ad@quadriga.eu](mailto:ana.ad@quadriga.eu) or Darren G. Lilleker [dlilleker@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:dlilleker@bournemouth.ac.uk) if you are interested in presentations, workshops, interviews, or further analyses of the insights enclosed in this report.

**Quadriga**  
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**CPMR** Centre for  
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# #rezist: Lessons from the Romanian 2017 Protests

Darren G. Lilleker and Ana Adi

Protests occur all the time. Most nations of the world witness periodic protests. Some are dealt with using repressive measures. Some are dismissed as representing minority views. Some lead to political change. Some go largely ignored. The latter is, perhaps, the least likely scenario. It is hard to ignore large, loud crowds acting in unison for common cause. Petitions, the peaceful equivalent, are signed one by one, increasingly online, and delivered to a government quietly. Protests are noisy, vibrant, they are a spectacle. They provide the images that people want to see, they are picked up by media, by passers-by, they are hard to ignore. When facing a protest a government has a choice, send in riot police or troops, attempt to play down the significance in numbers or support, or to listen and act. Acting may be more about amelioration than submission, but a protest can have the power to exact change.

## The #rezist protests in historical perspective

Over the course of the last thirty years protests and protest movements have grown in prominence. French President Francois Mitterand observed, in a speech<sup>1</sup> at the international summit meeting in Paris in November 1990, a meeting including the then leaders of the European Community members who laid the foundations for the Charter of Paris for a New Europe: "for the first time in history we witness a change in the European landscape which is not the outcome of a war or a bloody revolution". He was of course referring to the events that led to the fall of the Soviet Union and the Communist empire. While there are debates regarding the agency which led to the collapse, and the extent that elites' machinations were the key determining factor, a role was played by civil society (Daniels, 2000).

It is easy to overplay the peaceful aspects, as well as the agency of civil society within those revolutions and many subsequent and similar events from Moldova to Georgia, Tunisia to Egypt (McDermott & Stibbe, 2016). However when masses unify with a common aim, and that aim is to provide a visible indication of their desire for change, there is a likelihood that political consequences will follow. The ineptitude of latter days

leaders of Soviet satellite states, the unwillingness of state powers to act against the people, the obvious crumbling of the authority of a state all contribute to a positive outcome. But people have to act.

The fall of the communist regime in Romania is an example of how a simple act of repression can act as a trigger. Ceaușescu's pseudo-fascistic regimes' combination of personality cult, iconography and brutality is well documented (Sweeney, 1991) as well as the extraordinary control he exerted over the nation he ruled (Behr, 1991). Yet it was not a broadly-held feeling of dissatisfaction with his autocratic rule that triggered a revolt. Rather it was his government's attempt to evict a priest, Hungarian László Tókés, part of a state crackdown on the Hungarian minority in Timișoara, that led to protests: firstly to protect the priest, then to call for his reinstatement. Faced with indifference by the evening of 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1989 the mood of the Hungarians grew ugly, this was met with repression by the state and tensions mounted. Defiant protestors sang the pre-communist anthem<sup>2</sup> "Awaken thee, Romanian!". But this was all largely contained within Timișoara, the state media failed to report any of these events. It was only when fireworks or gunfire interrupted a speech by Ceaușescu, an attempt to calm the people of Timișoara which was met by jeers and boos, and the bangs were mistakenly assumed to be troops firing on the crowd that had gathered did the protests spread to other cities. The repression of individual dissidents was a natural state of affairs, firing indiscriminately into crowds while a television audience of millions watched was deemed unacceptable. The repressed seized their moment and the regime collapsed.

## The revolution might be televised... it might be Facebooke

Media provide the crucial oxygen for protest movements. The publicity given that would spark the 1989 revolution was accidental, Ceaușescu attempted to ameliorate the concerns of the people of Timișoara, who proved harder than expected to pacify, someone attempted to quieten the crowd by firing a gun, the crowd reacted in fear and the audience took to the streets. The

squares of the major cities of Romania were occupied, the rest is history. Media was also crucial during the uprising in Tunisia. 2008-2010 saw growing unrest over high unemployment, food prices, corruption, the lack of political freedoms and poor living conditions. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was the trigger. Bouazizi was a 27 year old unemployed man who turned to selling fruit by the curb to survive, he was beaten and had his cart seized for illegal street vending. On release from custody he returned to the curb from where he sold his fruit, doused himself in petrol and set himself alight. His treatment became symbolic of the relationship between the government and its people and the message carried on social media. While it was a public reaction to events witnessed on television that led people to come together in the streets to protest in Romania in December 1989, 21 years later almost to the day Tunisians came together on social media and then came to the streets organised.

The protests collectively referred to as the Arab Spring made the taking of squares fashionable. It was copied extensively by the Occupy movement globally (Costanza-Chock, 2012) as well as being an inspiration for the Spanish Indignados who took to the squares of Spain's major cities in a co-ordinated campaign on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, gaining them the 15M monicker. The latter's undermining of the political elites (Hughes, 2011), leading to the creation of the radical Podemos party and some level of political reform (Orriols & Cordero, 2016). Ainger (2016, p. 37) suggests that these protests resulted from a process of contagion, the model of forming a semi-permanent encampment as a constant visible indication of protest spread across national borders and was adapted for a range of national contexts.

Kalle Lasn, editor of Adbusters, created the #OCCUPYWALLSTREET hashtag on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 2011 and believed he captured in this the mood of a generation of activists. The idea of Occupy was to "somehow change the power balance and make the world into a much more grass-roots, bottom-up kind of a place rather than the top-down Wall Street mega-corporate-driven system we now have" (Yardley, 2011). Occupy thus became a contagious brand, one built around viral online memes. The brand was re-presented and appropriated, each time it was given further meaning; capturing both the spirit of the protests as well as invoking the image of the physical presence of the protesters. The notion of fluidity captured by Occupy, where protesters can come and go or be longstanding members of the community, has had an impact on the concept of a social movement

(Beraldo & Galan-Paez, 2013). Occupy also brought a carnivalesque character to protesting (Tancons, 2011), protesting moved away from violent confrontation to a developing a party atmosphere. But at the heart of the Occupy protests was the notion that protesters should occupy everywhere. As protesters were evicted from one public space they occupied another, at the same time occupying online spaces linking the idea of seizing control of a public space to one of seizing attention from media, supporters and those against whom they protested (Juris, 2012). This thread, a brand of protest and perhaps became a brand of its own, ran from the Arab Spring events to the Indigados and into Occupy (Gerbaudo, 2012). The public display of indignation, and the demand for reform, with people taking to public spaces may have seemed the fashionable act of protest in the summer of 2011 and 2012 but, as we shall see, this precedent already had cultural and political significance in Romania.

### **Occupying the Piață**

Like many of the peoples of the soon to be post-Communist countries, in 1989 Romanians had taken to the streets. At that time Piața Universității was the focal point, due more to the size of the space than its significance. This space was also appropriated for subsequent protests such as the 1990 Minerida protest (Miner's rage) and first anti-corruption protest in 2015 following the fire in the Colectiv nightclub; these events are documented by Ciobanu and Light in this volume. In many ways these protests mirror those which took place as part of the Occupy protests and their precursors. As the Emergency Ordinance (OUG13) was passed that decriminalised many forms of corruption, the people again took to Piața Universității but proved quickly dissatisfied conforming with the traditions of Bucharest protests. The move to Piața Victoriei was symbolic due to it facing the government itself, but also perhaps due to its name. The occupation of a square named Victory Square can be a statement of intention as well as having proximity to those in power. Though its historical position as the heart of power is perhaps its most significant feature, making it particularly attractive to a post-Occupy style protest.

The protests in Romania did not, however, capture global attention in the same manner as did those in Tunisia, Egypt, Madrid or even Occupy New York. A search of Google news suggests that globally only 720 online news articles were generated about the protests from the 28<sup>th</sup> of January to the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, the six

day period from the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011 saw over 1,500 reference protests in Egypt. Yet news attention has been sustained, reaching over 70,000 articles over the five months (February–June 2017). Attention is given most by media based in the European Union, particularly within media with a more global outlook such as the UK's *The Guardian*, France's *Le Monde* and Germany's *Die Welt* although the *New York Times* and even *Fox News* have covered events. The agendas of coverage range from pro-EU anti-corruption perspectives to more reflective pieces on post-communist systems, most supporting the protestors and their aims. *World Politics Review*<sup>3</sup> offer the best historical context calling the protests not only "a victory for people power and civic activism against a corrupt elite" but part of a tradition within Romanian society and another step on the evolution to being a full democracy. The weight of both history and the future is here brought to bear on this protest.

As with its culture and politics Romania bridges old and new traditions. Its politics blends selected aspects of the European accession criteria with a political culture of corruption and clientelism, thus remaining an embarrassment to the European project of which it is part (Gallagher, 2009). Its protest tradition also represents a convergence of cultures. The use of social media by protestors represents the new networked variant Castells (2015) argues are the cornerstone of a reshaping of democracy. Yet the first action was not to tweet, WhatsApp or otherwise communicate via social media, it was to take to the main squares and be visible. It is this intersection of forms of protest, the geography of the protests, the role of media and the individuals that this collection of essays explores. Basically we seek to provide understanding of who took part, why spaces were chosen, how media responded and was utilised and how these fit into the current and historical contexts of politics and society in Romania.

### Understanding #rezist

The contributions to this report offer the thoughts and analysis of more than twenty-five scholars, journalists or activists not to mention the other activists interviewed in the course of the research. The aim of putting this collection of essays together is fourfold.

- **Firstly** we seek to develop a more thorough understanding of the origins of the protest within Romanian politics and society and place this protest within the context of protests since 1989.

- **Secondly** we focus on developing an understanding of the motivations of the protagonists, the trigger that led them to protest and the aims of that movement.
- **Thirdly** we explore the communicational dynamics that both hinder and sustain the protests, and
- **Finally** we look to the impact had by the protests and the future trajectory for Romania and well as situating these protests within a wider comparative perspective.

The first section sets the scene. Antonio Momoc details the party political machinations that provided an environment nurturing disconnect. His analysis is followed by the essay by Borțun and Cheregi which explore the ideological divisions in Romania and their relationship to position taking within this period of unrest. Alistair, Lonean and Soare then follow this with specific detail on Romania's history of corruption and summary of the country's anti-corruption fight and how this might have influenced the birth of a protest movement. The timeframe is narrowed somewhat by Eliza Rogalski, focusing specifically on the seventeen months between the Colectiv fire and the passing of OUG13. The final essay details the legislative context, Ramona Ursu charts the battles between the elected chambers and the independent judiciary surrounding OUG13 and anti-corruption law in Romania.

The second section focuses on the protestors and their strategies. Cosmin Pojoranu talks of the 'citizens cum laude', those willing to take to the streets and places them within a historical context. Ana Adi then offers more in-depth understanding of the individual protesters, what led them to the streets and their vision for a better future. The Decât o Revistă<sup>4</sup> team focuses on the dissemination of information using the rezist hashtag as a means of publicizing the protest and providing material to sustain supporters. Ciobanu and Light follow this focusing on the symbolism of Piața Victoriei, concluding this section with a discussion of how protesters promoted themselves against this symbolic backdrop.

The next section opens with Monica Macovei's analysis of the fight in Brussels and how the relationship between Romania and the EU featured in this conflict. Maria Corina Barbarescu offers a perspective from the government side, showing how fake news was used to undermine the protests. Continuing the media theme,

Rodica Melinda Şuțu focuses on the role television played and how de-legitimisation tactics were employed against the protesters. Yet despite a traditional media environment hostile to the arguments of the protestors, the movement spread. Ana Adi charts the spread within the cities of Romania and the diaspora showing graphically how Romanians united around the themes of #rezist. Alternative media was a key enabler for this contagion. Ionescu and Ciudin explore dissemination through Piața Victoriei TV (recently rebranded as Rezistența TV), and the democratization of information facilitated by social media platforms. This theme recurs in Ruxandra Boicu's essay; she charts the shift from #rezist being a social media movement to being a putative political party. Finally, in this section, Brîndușa Armanca discusses the use of humour and satire, and whether this energises and unites or trivialises. Alexandra Ioan and Monica Boță Moisin finalise this section with the perspective from among the diaspora in Berlin.

The final section is more forward looking, focusing on the impact of the protest. Adriana Ștefănel offers a philosophical take on the populist discourses that emerged with the #rezist movements. Raluca Feher explores the short lived protests by advertisers, who withdrew their revenue from media outlets offering unsupportive accounts of the protests. Pfiszter focuses on the legislative dimension of OUG13 and what legislative or constitutional changes are required going forward to prevent abuses of power. Dinu-Gabriel Munteanu writes about the future of Romania's politics from the perspective of a newly established and rather anti-establishment party. Peter Gross extends this discussion, placing #rezist in historical context in order to caution those that see protests as a pathway to enhanced democracy. Immanuel Wallerstein broadens the discussion further to place #rezist and the current situation in Romania in an international context, discussing both the limits to reform and the limited effects we can expect from protest movements.

### The same yet different

The younger, better educated Romanians with a more global outlook appear to share a desire for change and express it convincingly across social media. There were valuable lessons learned in the past protests which in 2017 are fully and successfully re-enacted. In 2013 the protests united around a hashtag, in 2014 they formulated clear and actionable demands, in 2015 they used those and moved into organizing and coordinating activities. All this while also connecting to the world and Romanians around the world.

A movement is the best way to think about the protests, a movement in opposition to government/state corruption. While leaders do not emerge, key figures who facilitated specific actions can be highlighted. Some of these actions are highlighted here.

As with protests under the Indignados/Occupy movements, those who had communication or organising skills emerged within the protests in order to employ their skills to meet key objectives. Organization and coordination has moved onto Facebook and messenger apps. Meetings and protests became opportunities to communicate visually and symbolically. Facebook groups like *Coruptia Ucide* (Corruption Kills) created after Colectiv, *600000 pentru Romania* (600000 for Romania, now called 600000 for Resistance) and *Rezistența* have joined efforts and at times resources.

But as with the Occupy and similar movements the lack of leadership and a clear vision for the future suggests their impact might be limited. This is also jeopardized by the catchy yet perhaps too generic motto of the protests: #rezist and its associated group Rezistența (Resistance). For the rushed or untrained user, Facebook presents a challenge as there are at least two groups using the name, one associated with the protesters and one with the right-wing populist Frontul Popular Creștin (the Christian Popular Front).

#rezist and its resemblance with the American Resist movement is also problematic. For the socially liberal political program towards which the Romanian #rezist is leading, the hard-left American resist programme of fighting oppression leads opponents and critics of the movement to further question their motives. Issues such as LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, the power of the church and Romania's relationship with the EU remain key points of contestation.

We can thus see these protests as fuelled by long-term dissatisfaction with a corrupt system which involved in the aftermath of the fall of Ceaușescu. The creation of a legal framework operating within a system where cutting corners and taking shortcuts is encouraged and weakened by a reactive and non-interfering EU did nothing to stem corruption, leading to the mobilisation of a new generation of Romanians. Tech-savvy and globalist, they were angered by the Colectiv fire and outraged when those responsible would be exonerated by Grindeanu's Executive Ordinance 13. The long and short-term situation led them to the streets, to deploy their skills to make themselves heard, but with no leadership, no long-term vision beyond a nation free of corruption and divisions on multiple social issues it is hard to see

the movement sustain their challenge to the regime.

The collection of essays thus offers a range of perspectives of the #rezist protests, the personnel, the political and media environments and offers some thoughts regarding the impacts. We raise questions regarding the future, the challenges faced by Romanians seeking greater input into democracy as well as those faced by a government attempting to retain power and legitimacy. On balance the essays recognise the limitations of protests, but also the determination of the protestors and indeed the current elites. It remains still too early to know the long lasting effects on Romanian politics and society. On balance, taking a democrat's perspective, the protests seem to be trying to move the country in a positive direction. Despite the challenges one would hope that this movement has some measure of success in exacting reforms. ●

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# Authors



**Dr. Darren G. Lilleker**

is Head of the Centre for Politics and Media Research and Associate Professor at Bournemouth University. Dr Lilleker's interests are in political communication and its impacts exemplified in recent works *Political Communication and Cognition* (Palgrave, 2014) and *Political Marketing and the 2015 UK General Election* (Palgrave, 2016).

 @DrDGL



**Dr. Ana Adi**

is a Professor of Public Relations/Corporate Communications at Quadriga University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She defines herself as a digital humanist and writes often about the strategic intersections between digital media and communications, and more recently on storytelling and protest PR.

 [www.anaadi.net](http://www.anaadi.net)  
 @ana\_adi

# Partocracy against Democracy

Antonio Momoc

The photo taken by Dan Mihai Balanescu on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2017 in Piața Victoriei with hundreds of thousands of Romanians protesting by lifting the lanterns of their mobile phones towards the sky became the iconic image of the anti-corruption protests. That day, between 250,000-300,000 people gathered in front of the Government building in Bucharest, while hundreds of thousands of others marched in cities across the country. Captured in Balanescu's photo, the protests against the Executive Ordinance 13 (OUG13) from Romania's capital turned into a symbol of the Indignados' Movement and a model for similar protests in the region: first there were the solidarity protests<sup>1</sup> in the Moldavian Republic and in Bulgaria, followed by civil society protests in Serbia and Montenegro<sup>2</sup> (February 2017), then the protests against corruption in Russia<sup>3</sup> (March 2017), Hungary<sup>4</sup> and Slovakia<sup>5</sup> (April 2017).

The Romanians occupied the streets again in early May 2017. The reason was the Pardon Law that, from the protesters' perspective, preserves the spirit of OUG13. The Romanian Senate's Legal Committee – the superior Chamber of the Romanian Parliament – had approved the amendment of a Social Democrat Party (PSD) senator by which also the criminals convicted for peddling influence or for accepting bribes could have been pardoned.

This time, only up to a thousand people went out to protest against the revisions of the Pardon Law, but it was enough for PSD – represented by Prime-Minister Sorin Grindeanu and by the party president, Liviu Dragnea – to withdraw the support of those who planned to revise the Law. Grindeanu's Government announced there is no support for the PSD senator's amendments, but it was unclear whether the members of the coalition leading the country – PSD and ALDE – were endorsing them in the Parliament or not. These events occurred at the same time as Dragnea was handed a two year suspended prison sentence for voting fraud in a referendum and is presently being tried in another case of abuse of power, facts which permanently fueled the public's suspicions that the revisions of the Penal Code via OUG13 or the amendments brought to Pardon Law

might also favor him<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the ALDE president, Calin Popescu Tariceanu, who is also the President of the Senate, is accused by The National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) of perjury and of favoring the offender.

Ever since the beginning of the year, an atmosphere of discord revolved around the Penal Code definition of an abuse of office against public interests as "the deed of a public clerk who, while exerting job-related tasks, does not fulfill an act, or *fulfills it in a faulty manner*, by this damaging the legitimate rights or interests of a physical person or a juridical person, and is punished with 2 up to 7 years in prison and is forbidden the right to serve in a public position".

The protesters accused the government of attempting to modify the Penal Code with the intention to cancel the DNA trials and to cease any investigations into accusations of abuse of office. All this under the pretext that the Constitutional Court (CCR) had forced the Legislative to redefine the crime of abuse of office by replacing the collocation "fulfills an act in a faulty manner" with "by breaking the law". A quarter of the defendants sent to trial by DNA in 2016 were accused of abuse of office, according to the DNA report<sup>7</sup>.

In case OUG13 had not been repealed, it would have decriminalized two crimes from the Penal Code – negligence on duty and conflict of interests – and would have introduced criteria for incriminating the abuse of office: a threshold of 200,000 RON beyond which the material prejudice caused to a physical or juridical person became criminal. Moreover, OUG13 would have removed the abuse of office crime for the case of adopting normative acts.

The protests from mid-January 2017 against amnesty and pardon started as marches. First, they were organized in front of the Ministry of Justice (where the ordinance project for pardoning certain sentences was initiated), the National Council of Audio-visual (CNA) and the People's Attorney (Ombudsman)<sup>8</sup>. These institutions were meant to serve the public interest, but the protesters' perception was that they were politically affiliated, subordinated to the party holding the power. The public's suspicion grew when the CNA decided not

to sanction the television stations presenting news in a biased manner. Moreover, the Ombudsman reaction and contestation of the OUG13 to the Constitutional Court was perceived as delayed. The protests against the attempts of the ones holding power to circumvent the anti-corruption fight were also supporting the National Anticorruption Directorate. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2017, Klaus Iohannis, the President of Romania, joined the 20,000 protesters in Piața Universității<sup>9</sup>. The President's presence in the street at an unauthorized meeting gave the opportunity for television news stations such as Romania TV and Antena 3 to accuse him of "coup d'état attempt", "high treason" and "instigating violence"<sup>10</sup>.

After OUG13 was issued on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2017, the protests moved in front of the Government building in Victoriei Square (Piața Victoriei) and continued even after OUG13 on has been repealed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, actually reaching a peak of attendance<sup>11</sup> in the evening after the ordinance was abrogated.

The same evening when hundreds of thousands of protesters lit up all their phones in Piața Victoriei, they also held a moment of silence remembering the young men and women who died in the Colectiv Club fire on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2015. 64 people died then and the PSD Government led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta resigned after a few days of protests. People went out on the streets in 2015 to protest against the fact that the authorities approved the functioning of a club (among many others) that did not fulfill health and safety regulations, and in particular fire protection regulations. This attitude was considered to be corrupted and negligent by the public opinion.

The PSD Government quit as result of the anti-corruption protests, being replaced by a technocrat government for a year. Nevertheless, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2016 the same PSD party won by far the parliamentary elections, with only 39,5% presence at the poll<sup>12</sup>. According to the Central Electoral Bureau, for the Deputies' Chamber 45,47% voted PSD, 20,04% PNL, 8,87% USR, 6,18% UDMR, 5,62% ALDE, 5,34% PMP<sup>13</sup>. For the Senate, people voted PSD – 45,67%, PNL – 20,41%, USR – 8,92%, UDMR – 6,24%, ALDE – 6%, PMP – 5,65%<sup>14</sup>. The parliamentary majority was formed by forming a coalition between the PSD led by Dragnea and ALDE led by Tariceanu.

Usually the party who wins the parliamentary elections appoints as Prime Minister the head of their party. However, because of Liviu Dragnea's criminal conviction, PSD could not propose him for the Prime Minister position. Article 2 of Law 90/2001 describes

how the Romanian Government has to function and be organized; it stipulates that "only the persons who have solely Romanian citizenship, reside in Romania, and never had criminal convictions can be members of the Government and benefit of the electoral rights"<sup>15</sup>.

Since PSD-ALDE won the elections, the leaders of the two parties were entitled to question the legitimacy of the street protests in January-February 2017. The argument emphasized by the coalition holding power was that the Government has just been voted democratically by a vast majority, by millions of citizens, and it should not be discarded just because this is what a few hundred thousand people in the street ask for, being agitated by the political opposition and by the President. This narrative was supported by a few thousands who protested in front of the Cotroceni Presidential Palace – they were PSD-ALDE sympathizers, responding to the protesters in Piața Victoriei.

Romania is a semi-presidential parliamentary republic in which the President has the most political legitimacy, being chosen directly by the biggest number of citizens in two electoral ballots. The Parliament is chosen by a proportional vote system in which the parties put forward candidates' lists. In the presidential elections, the second ballot allows the opposition parties to group around the candidate with the second chance and to defeat the representative of the biggest party – PSD lost the 2014 presidential elections with a score of 45,56% to 54,43% after its candidate, Victor Ponta, obtained 40,44% of the votes in the first ballot, and the PNL-PDL candidate, Iohannis, gained 30,37%. In the parliamentary elections, the party with the biggest resources, the biggest number of elected mayors or of party members wins most of the mandates, but not necessarily the majority of them.

The fact that PSD won most of the mandates cannot be explained solely based on the proportional electoral system. The electoral message of the PSD targeted broad demographic categories, those neglected by the parties on the right of the political spectrum. The citizens who came out as winners<sup>16</sup> from the post-communist transition period participate less in elections<sup>17</sup>, showing up at the poll in smaller numbers<sup>18</sup> and opting for the actors who endorse liberal policies<sup>19</sup>. However, the citizens who came out as losers from the transition are disciplined when it comes to voter turnout<sup>20</sup> and prefer social, interventionist policies, relevant for the assisted ones.

This is the reason why the PSD is identified with the credible left-wing social-economic message, although it is a party originating directly from the National Salvation Front and the ex-Romanian Communist Party. The economic right-wing is represented by a series of parliamentary parties that fragment the votes of the economic right-wing electors: the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Popular Movement Party (PMP) of the ex-President Traian Băsescu. The current PNL merged with the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL - Băsescu's former party), the same formation that supported the austerity measures affecting the state employees and pensioners when they were governing during the economic crisis period.

The austerity or privatization measures proposed by PMP and applied by PDL-PNL are not attractive for the citizens who did not have anything to win from the transition period. The anti-corruption message of the protesters in Piața Victoriei does not change the mindset of the PSD's loyal supporters, as they are convinced that all parties are corrupt, but only the PSD cares about them. And their perception is enforced by the reality that leaders from all the parties have been detained, arrested or convicted for acts of corruption.

This reality allowed the over-night appearance of a new player conveying anti-corruption and anti-traditional-parties messages: the Union for the Salvation of Romania (USR) led by Nicusor Dan. The success registered by the USR at the parliamentary elections affected the PNL in particular: Liberals dropped from 31,49% in the 2016 local elections to 20,04% in the parliamentary elections.

Ideologically, the USR is a catch-all party that endeavors to be positioned at the center, in the hope of getting votes from all the sides. It is not clear whether USR is progressive or conservative. Its leaders are trying to define their doctrine economically or politically in order to avoid polarization and not to lose the voters attracted by the anti-corruption and anti-traditional-parties messages. USR consists of people who have not been involved politically: technocrats, managers, NGO activists. That is why the party was accepted in Piața Victoriei during the 2017 anti-corruption protests.

A few months after the protests, in June 2017, the PSD President, Liviu Dragnea, forced the resignation of the Grindeanu Government. Dragnea claimed the Government was not applying the party's governmental program and he even offered Prime Minister Grindeanu alternative public positions to persuade him to quit his Government function<sup>21</sup>. To show their ironic spirit, some of the protesters in Piața Victoriei pretended to "solidarize" with Sorin Grindeanu on the social networks, associating his

photo with the notorious #rezist. Some commentators<sup>22</sup> accused the real reason why Grindeanu was pressed to resign was the fact that the Prime Minister did not pass the Law of Amnesty and Pardon, moving the debate of this law in the Romanian Parliament. ●

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11. 600,000 people out in the streets in the entire country, 300,000 of them in Bucharest alone. Source: Digi24, <http://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/legea-gratierii/cel-mai-mare-protest-fata-de-ouă-13-anunțat-pentru-duminica-in-capitala-663703>
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# Author



## Dr. Antonio Momoc

is an Associate Professor at Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, Dept. of Cultural Anthropology and Communication, University of Bucharest and also collaborates with the Faculty of Political Sciences. He is specialist in digital and political communication. He studied the European populist parties and how European populists used the internet to maximize their electoral success. He had an EU post-doctoral research scholarship (within the mobility program at LUISS University in 2012), analyzing the relationship between European neopopulist parties and new media. In 2013 he had a scholarship on Journalism and Media in Athens, at Scripps College of Communication, Ohio University. You can follow him on Twitter @antoniomomoc and read more about his work on [www.antoniomomoc.ro](http://www.antoniomomoc.ro)



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# Ideological Meaning in the 2017 Romanian Protests

## Discourses and Counter-Discourses

Dumitru Borțun and Bianca Cheregi

### Introduction

The idea of a modern or pre-modern Romania is not new, even though it was rejected in the name of national unity, under the external threat of foreign forces that sought to overcome the "territorial break-up of Romania".

After Romania's EU accession in 2007, the cleavage between Romanian society and the objectives of the EU integration has deepened. In the last two years, the groups seeking a complete modernization of the Romanian society began to manifest themselves. The discursive formula revealing their aspirations is "We want a country like the ones abroad" (Vreau o tara ca afara). This slogan was part of the #colectiv protests from November 2015, linked to the fire which occurred in Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest and one of the biggest tragedies that took place in Romania after 1989. Discursively framed as a national tragedy in the media, the #colectiv protests were largely anti-corruption protests aimed at removing political corruption from Romanian society. The acts of corruption in the Mayor's Office from the district where the fire occurred acted as a catalyst and symbol for Romania's wider corruption problems.

In January 2017, the Romanian Government proposed an emergency ordinance to amend the Penal Code, decriminalizing misconduct offences. Hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest against the ordinance and to ask the Government to resign. Conversely, there was a counter-manifestation against the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, in front of Cotroceni Presidential Palace. People supporting the Government were dissatisfied with the President, who they say, wants to divide the country and create rift among Romanians<sup>1</sup> (Digi24.ro, February 7, 2017). The fight against corruption has become a public problem, continuing the fight of the #colectiv protests.

These two opposing perspectives of the same Romanian reality are worth discussing. The slogans they displayed in Piața Victoriei or at Cotroceni Palace reveal how the two Romanias have expressed their identity, values and aspirations.

### Particular ideologies in 2017 Romanian protests

Social movements are "intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford, 1998, p. 198). Put simply, movements are related to the production and maintenance of meaning for protagonists, antagonists, and bystanders. Thus, the constructed meanings are subject to change, as the social context changes.

In the case of the emergency ordinance (OUG13) to amend the Penal Code, the hundreds of thousands of people that protested against it in Piața Victoriei were driven by common values and ideas, rallying against the Grindeanu Government and against corruption. In fact, corruption was again brought to the forefront of politics, in a chilling echo of the Colectiv fire of November 2015. Another fire at Bamboo Bucharest club in January 2017 resulted in 44 people being hospitalised<sup>2</sup> (Digi24.ro, January 21, 2017), so the themes of corruption and responsibility have returned to and were again intensely debated in the media.

The protest against OUG13 was soon followed by a counter-manifestation, starting on the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2017. People protesting in front of Cotroceni Palace were demonstrating against President Klaus Iohannis and against the National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA); they were supporting the Grindeanu Government.

Membership to a certain social group provides the individual a certain place in the structure of social relations. The real basis of his ideology "is not the praxis in its totality, in a given historical moment, but a certain form of the praxis – a determined, and, at the same time, delimited-concrete historical form" (Borțun, 2014, p. 125).

The term ideology is used here in its broadest meaning, that of "assembly of ideas and beliefs, values and symbols, concepts and codes, mental and cognitive styles, representations and rituals by means of which members of a community perceive the world and treat

the information, get to know each other and unite forces for action" (Borțun, 2014, p. 124).

Karl Manheim (2013) believes that there is a distinction between "particular ideologies" (specific to certain groups and referring to a certain domain of reality) and "total ideologies" (specific to a culture and referring to a comprehensive world view – Weltanschauung). In the case of the 2017 Romanian protests, the focus is on the particular ideologies defining two different perspectives of the same reality: old and new Romania. Future research should also consider the relationship between particular and total ideologies in the case of #rezist 2017 protests.

Table 1 shows how the two different ideologies are investigated, considering the two types of publics that were formed during the protests, separated by different ways of interpreting the social reality. On the

one hand, the discursive formula of the messages from Piața Victoriei (Fig. 1) represented the ideology of a "new Romania", revealing an anti-Government position („Down with the thieves!”, „The DNA will get you!”, „Down with the Government”). Messages such as "The day we give in is the day we die" were reinforced from the #colectiv protest in November 2015, being a symbol in the fight against corruption.

On the other hand, counter-protesters rallied in support of the Grindeanu government at Cotroceni Palace, demanding the resignation of President Klaus Iohannis. The messages from Cotroceni Palace (Fig. 2) suggested the ideology of "old Romania", appealing to ethnocentrism: "Down with Iohannis", "Get out, traitor", "We voted, you divided us", "Iohannis and his fellows, traitors to the nation" or "You dishonored us, you are suspended". Furthermore, the messages also appeal to an ethnic identity,

New Romania	Old Romania
Meritocracy (people are promoted and rewarded based on their abilities and achievements)	Clientelism (Eminescu's "pyramid of clientelism")
Contractual morals (predictability)	Transactional morals ("One hand washes the other")
Communitarianism (helping others)	Individualism (every individual is the ruler for himself)
Interest for common good	Selfishness (individualism against others)
Respect for norms and values (rules and laws)	Anomie or respect for a "boss"
Future orientation (legitimation of projects)	Past orientation (legitimation of traditions)
Dialogue	Monologue
Professionalism	Professional imposture
Activism	Contemplative laziness
Strategic and projective thinking	Speculative thinking and short-term improvisation
Critical thinking (a strong cognitive function)	Wishful thinking
Achieving goals, purposes, objectives and respecting deadlines	Interested in social status and establishing connections between people
Realism (objective view of reality)	Idealism (ideological view of reality)
Multiculturalism	Ethnocentrism (source of xenophobia, chauvinism, and racism)
Secular state (separation of church from the state)	Unrecognized complicity between church and state
Citizenship (state membership)	Territorial, ethnic and religious identity
Republican spirit (agent for a political project)	Conservatism spirit (agent of tradition)
Historical optimism ("We can change the world!")	Fatalism ("We cannot change the world!")

**Table 1 – Characteristics of the two Romanias – Old Romania and New Romania**



**Figure 1 – Illustrative sample for the slogans from Piata Victoriei  
(Adevărul.ro, February 7, 2017, danagont.ro, February 7, 2017)**

built on the idea of national belonging, culture/ethnicity, blood relationships and place of birth. The protesters contested the President's German ethnicity, building a gap between "Us" (Romanians) and "Them" (people who do not have a Romanian ethnicity). As we will see further, this is also a source of xenophobia and chauvinism.

The discussion about national identity is easily linked to the concept of a "nation". In this regard, there are two different conceptions of nationhood: the civic and ethnic nation. The civic conception is based on a 'contractual' understanding of the nation, defined as the outcome of the free option of its citizens. France is considered a model of this conception, the model of the nation-state. At the other pole, the ethnic nation is built on the idea of national belonging, culture/ethnicity, blood relationships and place of birth. Germany is considered the model of this conception based on ethnicity.

As Boia (2001, p. 34) argues, in the case of the Romanian nation, "the model which is invoked corresponds to the German formula. The Romanians are defined by a common origin (whether Roman, Dacian or Dacian-Roman), a unitary language, a shared history, and a specific spirituality". Therefore, the "national identity of Romanians, representing 89.5% of the total population, is an *ethnic* one" (Borțun, 2011, p. 119). Compared to "old Romania", national identity

is defined in relation to citizenship in the ideology of "new Romania" (Fig. 1). We can see a civic engaged Romanian protester in both #rezist and #colectiv manifestations, highly involved in political decisions.

A fundamental problem of Romanian society is modernization, usually discussed in relation to the national identity issue. In fact, the theory of *forms without substance* (*forme fără fond*)<sup>2</sup> as developed by Maiorescu (1868) and Eminescu (1870) explains the process of Romanian modernization. In this context, the modernity was based on imitation and import of institutions and laws from developed Western societies. Even though the political class and the intellectual elites adopted a modernity-oriented discourse, a consistent project of development and modernization was still missing. The cause is to be found in the fact that elites distance themselves from the values of modernity in order to achieve their own purposes (Schifirnet, 2012, p. 43). Schifirnet (2009; 2012) proposes the term of *tendential modernity*, referring to a modernity that is merely a tendency, while the transitions are never finished.

Borțun (2011) too insists on the modernization issue, stating that Romanians live in "a disguised feudalism, painted with some stigmas of modernity" (2011, p. 115). In fact, feudalism is still governing the perception, action, thinking and decision making of Romanian people. This



**Figure 2 – Illustrative sample for the slogans from Cotroceni Palace (Vice.com, February 6, 2017)<sup>5</sup>**

is due to the fact that "Romanian communism has been a pre-modern attempt to modernize the country" (*ibidem*).

Old Romania is characterized by a contemplative laziness - "oblomovism"<sup>3</sup>. According to Pleșu (2014, p. 277), Ilia Ilici Oblomov represents, in the same time, the charm and disaster of Eastern European mentality, "a mentality that falls under relativism because of the exaggeration of the Absolut itself". In the novel written by Gonçearov, Oblomov is permanently asking questions about life and existence. Even though he is a misanthrope, he has a clean soul. An ordinary day of his life starts in his room in Sankt Petersburg and continues in the same room. On the other hand, Andrei Stoltz, his best friend, is working hard and travelling to Paris, London and Odessa to broaden his horizons. While Oblomov is an idealist, contemplating his existence, Stoltz is a pragmatist, interested in a better living. In this regard, the main character Oblomov is the symbol of the Eastern European mentality, while Stoltz is the symbol of the Western European mentality.

"Oblomovism" is usually associated with laziness, fatalism, and disgust. For this reason, Lenin referred to oblomovism as the central problem keeping Russia from advancing. This might also apply to Romania, if we take into account the fatalist attitude that appeared in the Romanian consciousness after the Communist Revolution. If Marx would have read Gonçearov's novel, he would realise that his doctrine is not suitable for the Eastern European man, who had to assume it (Pleșu, 2014, p. 278). On the other side, new Romania is characterised by a historical optimism ("we can change the world!").

## Conclusion

This report has investigated two types of publics that were formed during 2017 Romanian protests, separated by different ways of interpreting the social reality. Slogans from Victoria Square suggest the ideology of "new Romania", while slogans from Cotroceni Palace reveal the ideology of "old Romania".

The 2017 Romanian protests show a professionalization of the protesters, who are actively involved in the fight against corruption as a public issue. In May 2017, about a thousand persons took to the streets of Bucharest to oppose the amendments to draft bill on prison pardons to include the crimes of influence peddling and bribe taking. Even though the protests were far smaller than those in February, one can notice that the cleavage between the ideology of "new Romania" and that of "old Romania" increases, leading to intense debates over political corruption and responsibility.

Since the focus of this article was to study particular ideologies in the context of emergency protests, future research should also consider the ways in which social movements are connected to comprehensive world views – Weltanschauung. ●

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3. The forms without substance are systems of law and modern institutions mechanically imported by the Romanian elites from Western societies in order to accelerate the process of social modernization, without adapting them to the historical, social, and cultural particularities of the internal context (Schifirnet, 2012: 48). For Titu Maiorescu, the forms without substance defined the simple naturalizing of Western institutions through the enthusiasm of an elite. A profound transformation of Romanian society and mentalities requires much more than this.
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# Authors



**Dr. Dumitru Bortun**

holds a PhD in Philosophy and is a Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA), Bucharest. He teaches courses on Semiotics, Theory of Language, Public Discourse Analysis, Ethics in Communication, Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility.

His research interests include epistemology, semiotics, discourse analysis, corporate social responsibility, and political communication. He is the author of several books, including *The Epistemic Foundations of Communication* (2002, 2013), *Public Relations in the New Society* (2005, 2012), and *Black Tide: Romanian Language under Siege* (2015).

✉ [dumitru.bortun@comunicare.ro](mailto:dumitru.bortun@comunicare.ro)



**Dr. Bianca Cheregi**

holds a PhD in Communication Sciences, with a dissertation entitled *The media construction of nation branding in post-communist Romania. A constructivist-semiotic perspective*. She holds seminars on Semiotics and Ethics in Communication at NUPSPA, Bucharest. Her research interests include nation branding, cultural semiotics, social semiotics, framing, national identity, and discourse analysis. Scientific articles and presentations from international conferences revolve around themes such as: Romania's country image as a public problem, the media discourse on nation branding and interactive media campaigns on Romanian migration.

✉ [bianca.cheregi@comunicare.ro](mailto:bianca.cheregi@comunicare.ro)

RSS [www.biancacheregi.ro](http://www.biancacheregi.ro)

# Romania's Corruption: A Short Overview

Victor Alistar, Irina Lonean and Ruxandra Soare

Romania joined the European Union in January 2007 under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) of the European Union, a transitional measure fixed by the Commission to assist the country in order to get the necessary results in the reforms started in the fields of judiciary and the fight against corruption. The CVM remained in place for over 10 years and, although its effectiveness in ensuring good reforms can be disputed, its longevity is a very good indicator of both (1) the seriousness of the problems regarding corruption in Romania and (2) the complexity of the fight against corruption in the political, administrative and social Romanian environment. This article is covering the first of these two aspects, briefly presenting the problem and its measurements over time. The article also includes the main reforms needed to achieve sustainable public integrity in Romania.

## Perceived presence and measurements of corruption in Romania

After a long and harsh communist regime when informal payments were needed in order to overcome the shortcomings (including the ones in the health system, the education, and daily supplies) and a difficult transition to democracy and the rule of law, the Romanian society suffers still from both systemic and high-level corruption. Romania's place in the Corruption Perception Index<sup>1</sup> ranking evolved from 87 (out of 146 countries) in 2004 to 69 (out of 179 countries) in 2007 and to 57 out (of 176 countries) in 2016<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, there is a long way to evolve and improve the integrity system in order to diminish perception of corruption, but the evolution was constant and decisive over the last decade.

As a result of its poor performance in curbing corruption and ensuring judiciary independence and integrity prior to 2006, when Romania was negotiating its accession to the EU, some of the chapters and files under discussions remained only a promise. This generated a unique mechanism, without precedent in the EU: Romania, along with Bulgaria, became a member state of the European Union under a safeguard clause. The European Commission through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) continues to monitor the

performance of the country concerning the Judiciary chapter, and its main corruption related institutions and mechanism. The benchmarks established by the CVM indicate the main vulnerabilities of the judicial system and anti-corruption reforms at the time:

1. the lack of transparency and efficiency of the judicial process notably the limited capacity and accountability of the Superior Council of Magistrature,
2. the need for an integrity agency with responsibilities for verifying assets, incompatibilities and potential conflicts of interest as unjustified assets (sometimes resulted from corruption), incompatibilities and conflicts of interest were hardly monitored and controlled,
3. high-corruption and low capacity of law enforcement agency to conduct professional, non-partisan investigations into allegations of high-level corruption,
4. corruption present in public administration, in particular in local administration, with very few effective prevention mechanisms to curb it<sup>3</sup>.

According to the latest data of the Global Corruption Barometer<sup>4</sup> and other surveys<sup>5</sup>, corruption in Romania also affects sectors that are not monitored by the CVM: the health system, the education system (schools and universities), the police, the customs, business, the administrative activity of issuing an administrative license, permit or certificate, public procurements, administrative inspections and last but not least the employment of civil servants and other human resources procedures in public institutions<sup>6</sup>.

In 2015 alone, 29% of Romanians admitted they paid a bribe in the last 12 months (Global Corruption Barometer<sup>7</sup> 2016). This data makes Romania the European country (EU member state) with the most wide-spread

petty corruption, a sign of systemic corruption. 54% of Romanians consider that most or all members of the Parliament are corrupt, indicating a high level of the high-corruption perceived by the citizens.

A short review of the National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA – the special Prosecution Office for high-corruption) shows that 1,271 persons have been prosecuted for corruption offences and crimes related to corruption, a third of which (426) have been high officials. Among these are 30 national dignitaries, ministers and MPs with 47 mayors and 5 presidents of County Councils, and the number of persons being sued for corruption offenses increased constantly in the last years (DNA, 2016)<sup>8</sup>.

In the same time (2016), the National Integrity Agency (ANI), the administrative institution in charge with verifying assets, incompatibilities and potential conflicts of interest reported 86 incompatibility cases, 46 conflict of interest cases, and 11 cases of unjustified assets (ANI, 2016)<sup>9</sup>. Although the activity of these institutions can be criticized for several reasons (as showed further in this article), their records are an important measurement on the prevalence of corruption in Romania.

### Moving forward

Romania has registered constant progress in its fight against corruption, visible in all assessment on this issue. Progress has been made in ensuring transparency of public institution and public officials' interests and officials and in prosecuting and sanctioning corruption when discovered.

However, corruption remains an important factor. The lack of efficiency in public policies and investments creates an environment more prone to political corruption. This in turn, affects Romanians' everyday life and their interactions with doctors, teachers, civil servants or policemen enabling corruption to maintain its systemic presence.

As showed by the Global Corruption Barometer, important progress can be made not only in fighting corruption at the level of public administration and political parties and persons, but also at individual level. Preventing corruption by raising awareness on its consequences on the long term, through communication campaigns and civic education projects, or introducing basic human rights, legal and anticorruption concepts in school and high-school curricula can help changing the entire social environment, making corruption an exception, not a rule in people's everyday life. ●

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## Endnotes/Media links

1. The Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is probably the most worldwide used measurement of corruption. It that scores and ranks countries based on how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be. It is a composite index drawing on data sources from independent institutions specializing in governance and business climate analysis, surveys and assessments of corruption.
2. Complete data available on Transparency International's website: <https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview> (last visited: June 9, 2017).
3. All CVM reports and documents are available on the European Commission website: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/effective-justice/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under-cvm/reports-progress-bulgaria-and-romania\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/effective-justice/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under-cvm/reports-progress-bulgaria-and-romania_en) (last visited: June 9, 2017).
4. Latest data referring to corruption prevalence in Romania in different sectors of activity in the Global Corruption Barometer are from 2013. All reports and data from Romania in the Global Corruption Barometer available on Transparency International Romania website: [http://www.transparency.org.ro/politici\\_si\\_studii/indici/bgc/2016/index.html](http://www.transparency.org.ro/politici_si_studii/indici/bgc/2016/index.html) (last visited: June 9, 2017).
5. e.g.: Eurobarometer on corruption, February 2014, available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_397\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_397_en.pdf), Corruption Barometer by INSCOP, commissioned by "Adevărul" (a national Romanian newspaper), available online: <http://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/INSCOP-Coruptie.pdf> (last visited: June 9, 2017).
6. <http://sar.org.ro/english-how-the-media-talks-about-corruption-in-romania-rass-report-for-the-media-corruption-work-package-published/>
7. The full report of the Global Corruption Barometer available on Transparency International's website: [https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/people\\_and\\_corruption\\_europe\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_2016](https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/people_and_corruption_europe_and_central_asia_2016) (last visited: June 9, 2017).
8. DNA Annual Report for 2016 is available online on DNA's website: [http://www.pna.ro/bilant\\_activitate.xhtml?id=38](http://www.pna.ro/bilant_activitate.xhtml?id=38) (last visited: June 9, 2017).
9. ANI Annual Report for 2016 is available online on ANI's website: [https://www.integritate.eu/Files/Files/Rapoarte/086%20Raport\\_Activitate\\_ANI Ian-Mar\\_2016.pdf](https://www.integritate.eu/Files/Files/Rapoarte/086%20Raport_Activitate_ANI Ian-Mar_2016.pdf) (last visited: June 9, 2017).

# Authors



**Dr. Victor Alistar**

is a Reader at the National School of Political and Administrative Science, Faculty of Public Administration and Executive director of Transparency International Romania. Victor Alistar is an expert in anti-corruption, judiciary independence, human rights, social rights, European affairs, administrative law, public administration and management. He is also a member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) acting as a representative of Romanian civil society. Victor Alistar holds a PhD in public administration - public sector management from the National School of Political and Administrative Science since 2009.

✉ [victor.alistar@transparency.org.ro](mailto:victor.alistar@transparency.org.ro)



**Dr. Irina Lonean**

is Associated Lecturer at National School of Political and Administrative Science, Faculty of Public Administration and Project Manager at Transparency International Romania. She is an expert in policy evaluation, civic education, anticorruption in public procurement and public administration, youth policy and civil society organization management. Irina Lonean holds a PhD in political science from the Free University of Brussels and the University of Bucharest since 2013.

✉ [irina.lonean@transparency.org.ro](mailto:irina.lonean@transparency.org.ro)



**Dr. Ruxandra Soare**

is a former researcher at Transparency International Romania. She is an expert in public administration and public management, specialised in the management of judicial institutions and public prosecution offices. Ruxandra Soare holds a PhD in public administration from the National School of Political and Administrative Science since 2014.

# Romania's Anti-corruption Fight: A Brief History

**Victor Alistar, Irina Lonean and Ruxandra Soare**

The fight against corruption has been one of the main priorities of the Romanian Government since the beginning of the negotiations for accession to the European Union. In order to implement all the needed reforms, strategic documents have been adopted, starting in 2005. No strategy has been fully implemented within its proposed time framework, as both governmental and independent assessments indicate (MJ, 2016; MJ and OECD, 2016). However, their partial implementation generated the anti-corruption policies presented in this article.

## Legal provisions on transparency

First steps in corruption prevention have been made early:

- in 1996 the law requesting civil servants and public officials to publicly declare their assets and interests was adopted (Law no. 115/1996).
- the Freedom of Information law was adopted in 2001 (Law no. 544/2001)
- the "Sunshine Law", regulating transparency and consultation for any normative decision, was adopted in 2003 (Law no. 52/2003).

Cumulatively, these laws regulate the access to information on activities and all documents produced by public institutions and publicly owned companies (with generally clear exception on personal data, confidential information and sensitive information concerning public safety); they also regulate the access to information and public participation to decision making and ensure transparency of assets and interests of public officials and civil servants.

## Corruption criminal incrimination

Several other laws have been adopted in order to strengthen the fight against corruption. These include the special law on corruption offences, which complements and circumscribes the provisions of Penal

Code (Law no. 78/2000) and several laws amending both the provisions on corruption offences and regulations regarding assets and declarations of interest/conflict of interest. Amendments have been adopted in order to clarify the provisions and to allow applying the laws to all categories of public officials (not only civil servants). Several of these amendments have been made as a result of the Group of States against Corruption's (GRECO)<sup>1</sup> recommendations.

GRECO's recommendations<sup>2</sup> on party funding for instance, have been implemented only recently, in 2015 and 2016<sup>3</sup> and only 2 elections have been organised according to the new regulations. In the meantime, several politicians have been prosecuted<sup>4</sup> or convicted<sup>5</sup> for using public funds for party funding or for granting important public contracts to businesses that sponsored the political parties in return.

A new Penal Code and a new Penal Procedure Codes have entered into force only in 2014, regulating bribes/bribing and peddling of influence as corruption offences. As a consequence of the 'fast-forward' procedure used for drafting<sup>6</sup> and adopting<sup>7</sup> the codes, several provisions of both codes have been declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Therefore, amendments are necessary and articles with impact on the fight against corruption have to be modified.

The article regulating the abuse of power while in office (art. 297 of the Criminal Code), prosecuted in relation to corruption offences, has been criticized by the Constitutional Court. For this article, the Constitutional Court imposed a particular interpretation of the text<sup>8</sup>. As a result, the texts remain binding after the decision issued in 2016, but under the Constitutional Court recommended interpretation. Therefore, in order to ensure a clear and predictable criminal law, the Romanian legislator has to amend the text<sup>9</sup>.

Another problematic article of the Penal Code is the one regulating and sanctioning the conflict of interest as criminal offence (a service offence, but in close relation with corruption offences). The definition of the conflict of interest prohibits public servants or officials to participate to decisions or activities generating a

patrimonial benefit for themselves, their family, but also for persons from whom they received benefits of any kind. This general wording allows for the prosecution and conviction of a very large number of acts without a clear danger for the social life that will justify the criminal sanction.

Therefore, as there is a need to bring amendments to the legal provisions on criminal offences related to corruption, it is also extremely important not to repeat the same mistakes that generated this need. The legislature shouldn't rush into modifying the text without due public and parliamentary debate and it should listen and consider different opinions on the best ways to regulate these offences.

### The institutional framework

In 2000 the Prosecution office for corruption and organized crime was established (Law 78/2000). The institution was subsequently reorganized and in 2003 the National Anti-corruption Prosecution Office (PNA) has been founded, later reorganized as the National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA). Continuation of the high-corruption prosecution is one of the benchmarks of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM)<sup>10</sup> and therefore the work of DNA has been closely monitored by the European Union. The increasing number of files referred to the court made Romania a European champion on sanctioning political corruption.

Strengthening the institutional framework, an administrative agency for assets and interests (incompatibilities and conflict of interests) control has been founded by the Law no. 144/2007. The National Integrity Agency (ANI) verifies and controls the declaration of assets and interest/conflicts of interest of all public employees and officials. However, regulations establishing anti-corruption agencies have been contested in front of the Constitutional Court<sup>11</sup> and their structure and procedures have been changed, mainly in order to raise their accountability.

Moreover, special anti-corruption and integrity departments have been established by particularly vulnerable institutions:

- the General Anti-corruption Directorate (founded in 2005) is the specialized department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in charge with preventing and fighting against corruption in all institutions subordinated to the Ministry, including the Police;

- the General Directorate of Integrity (founded in 2013) is the specialized department of the National Agency of Fiscal Administration in charge with preventing and fighting against corruption in tax and customs administration.

Although international institutions and the Romanian public acclaim the performance of both DNA and ANI, important problems have to be raised related to selective investigation of corruption offences by DNA and administrative verifications by ANI. As these institutions lack capacity (including human resources) to follow up on the information they have on all wrongdoings and evidence gathered years ago are used in present prosecutions or investigations, one is entitled to suspect that the activity of DNA and ANI can be used for political purposes in order to undermine political opponents.

On the other hand, DNA has been collaborating with intelligence services in order to gather evidence, as the Penal Procedure Code states that electronic surveillance, mainly reserved at first in case of offences against national security, can be used when investigating corruption offenses and offenses assimilated to corruption (art. 139). While these provisions support anti-corruption efforts, the cooperation with intelligence services exposes the DNA and its cases to potential abuses of power by prosecutors.

### Other anti-corruption policies

As part of its anti-corruption efforts, several policy measures and actions started:

- Romania is a member of the Open Government Partnership,
- an ethics counselor is present in all public institutions,
- assets and interest declaration are publicly available and searchable on ANI's website,
- an electronic Interest Transparency Register has been developed in 2016<sup>12</sup>,
- guides for transparency, preventing incompatibilities and conflict of interests have been developed,
- open data generated by public institution are published on a centralized website<sup>13</sup>,

- a website centralizing the jobs in public administration has been supported by the government<sup>14</sup> (after its development as a civil society initiative); and
  - Romania has been one of the first and few European states with a special law on the protection of whistleblowers (Law no. 571/2004)
- The effectiveness of all these policies hasn't been systematically analysed, yet public institutions, NGOs and Think Tanks released reports on some of these initiatives (Romanian Government, 2015; MJ, 2016; MJ and OECD, 2016, IPP, 2017). The general evaluation of the performance of these policies allows the conclusion that, although transparency is guaranteed, shortcomings still exist: not all information is published, not all the institutions are transparent and no sanction can be effectively used in order to determine a better compliance with the legal provisions.
- Continuing the fight against corruption: steps to move forward**
- Corruption remains one of the important themes of the Romanian public and political agenda, as Romania joined the European Union in January 2007 under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, a measure implemented to assist and monitor anti-corruption reforms.
- Therefore, one can easily understand why amendments to the Penal Code and the Penal Procedure Code concerning offences and procedures related to corruption investigations, made after short debates, and adopted unexpectedly, generated the impressive protests in Piața Victoriei in February 2017. The public sensitivity to anti-corruption policies has developed in Romania as a consequence of the priority given to the topic in over 10 years of public policy and public political discourse.
- On the other hand, steps forward can only be made by developing corruption prevention policies:
1. implementing corruption risks assessments in all public institutions, integrity plans including control measures for corruption risks adapted to each institution particularities and regular re-assessments of these risks;
  2. strengthening institutional capacity by developing clear and functional procedures, easy to follow and control, clarifying individual roles and responsibilities in all public authorities and institutions;
  3. strengthening the human capacity by training civil servants against corruption to prevent irregularities and to help them resist to political or managerial pressure for frauds;
  4. increasing the use of digital instruments for the administrative and the databases integration and transparency as open data, easily 'searchable' and 'checkable', and
  5. implementing not only transparency, but also monitoring tools to prevent irregularities in public procurement, as open contracting and Integrity Pacts (a tool allowing a civil society appointed monitor to follow public procurement and contracting procedures in order to allow early warnings of integrity breaches). ●

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1. All GRECO Evaluation Reports and Compliance Reports are available online on GRECO's website: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/evaluations/romania> (accessed on June, 9 2017).
2. Recommendations on party funding were referring to: clarifying the accounting system for parties branches and associated organisations, clarifying financial reporting procedures and enforcing the Permanent Electoral Authority's monitoring, supervision and control role, clarifying the loans management, limiting donations that are not registered in bank accounts (in kind or in cash) etc.
3. Through the Law no. 113/2015 and Law no. 78/2016 amending Law no. 334/2006 on political parties and electoral campaigns funding and the Government Decision no. 10/2016 – the Methodological Norms of the Law no. 334/2006.
4. Among prosecuted politicians: Vasile Blaga, former president of Democratic Liberal and National Liberal Parties and former Minister of Administration and Interior and Elena Udrea, former Minister of Regional Development and Truism, both very close to the former President Traian Băsescu.
5. Among convicted politicians: Monica Iacob Ridzi, former Minister of Youth and Sports.
6. Drafting the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code did not comply with the provisions of the law on decisional transparency no. 52/2003, open debates being avoided by the government in order to speed up the law making process. A civil society initiative: Stop the Codes was initiated in 2009 against these procedures, but, despite civil society opposition, the codes drafted in this manner have been adopted.
7. The Criminal Code was adopted through a special Parliamentary procedure of Government Assumed Responsibility (art. 114), a procedure that don't allow any debate on the legislation proposed by the government. The proposed legislation can be either adopted or rejected, and if rejected the Government is also dismissed.
8. The Decision no. 405/2016 of the Constitutional Court. The decision is highly unusual, as the Constitutional Court have no powers of legislation interpretation, a competence of the High Court of Cassation and Justice.
9. The actual provisions on the abuse of power in office as a criminal offence is not clearly distinctive from any misbehaviour (sanctioned administratively) of the civil servants.
10. The Commission set up the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) as a transitional measure to assist Romania to remedy the shortcomings in the fields of judicial reform and corruption fighting.
11. e.g.: The Decision no. 415/2010 of the Constitutional Court.
12. [www.ruti.gov.ro](http://www.ruti.gov.ro)
13. [zwww.data.gov.ro](http://www.data.gov.ro)
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# Authors



**Dr. Victor Alistar**

is a Reader at the National School of Political and Administrative Science, Faculty of Public Administration and Executive director of Transparency International Romania. Victor Alistar is an expert in anticorruption, judiciary independence, human rights, social rights, European affairs, administrative law, public administration and management. He is also a member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) acting as a representative of Romanian civil society. Victor Alistar holds a PhD in public administration - public sector management from the National School of Political and Administrative Science since 2009.

✉ [victor.alistar@transparency.org.ro](mailto:victor.alistar@transparency.org.ro)



**Dr. Irina Lonean**

is Associated Lecturer at National School of Political and Administrative Science, Faculty of Public Administration and Project Manager at Transparency International Romania. She is an expert in policy evaluation, civic education, anticorruption in public procurement and public administration, youth policy and civil society organization management. Irina Lonean holds a PhD in political science from the Free University of Brussels and the University of Bucharest since 2013.

✉ [irina.lonean@transparency.org.ro](mailto:irina.lonean@transparency.org.ro)



**Dr. Ruxandra Soare**

is a former researcher at Transparency International Romania. She is an expert in public administration and public management, specialised in the management of judicial institutions and public prosecution offices. Ruxandra Soare holds a PhD in public administration from the National School of Political and Administrative Science since 2014.

# The “Revolution of Light” Came from Darkness

Eliza Rogalski

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2015, several hundreds of young people were attending the concert of a rock band in a popular Bucharest club. The last minute of the rock performance transformed not only their lives, but also the entire Romanian society. A dramatic fire, in which 64 young people died and others were severely injured, highlighted Romania’s most unsolved problems in 27 years of transition: corruption and bad public administration. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2015, 30,000 people were protesting in Bucharest asking the PSD Government to resign<sup>1</sup>. Soon after, a new Prime Minister was appointed by Romania’s President and a new, independent government was in place to rule the country until the next year’s elections. They were called “the technocrat Government” as they included only independent specialists, with no connection to any political party.

The technocrat government did not have any political support or ability to manage most of Romania’s systemic problems that were left unsolved by previous generations of politicians. Therefore, the huge public expectation remained unmet, even though members of this Government proved to be transparent and sensitive to the topics that were debated in society.

In December 2016, following democratic elections, PSD came back to power, after it had been forced to resign a year before due to street protests. It has done so with an overwhelming and undisputed 45% of the Romanians’ votes in what experts and analysts called “probably the fairest election process ever”<sup>2</sup>.

The historical election result was attributed by some commenters to a very clear governing program that PSD committed and referred to as the answer to Romania’s most pressing problems. But even before the new government was appointed, some analysts reflected on the possibility that PSD, validated by a strong majority, could abuse the electoral power that their winning vote afforded them in December 2016<sup>3</sup>.

Confronted with a strong governing party, the opposition (Liberal Party – PNL and Union for

the Salvation of Romania – USR) could not offer a coherent voice and continued to focus on their own internal problems. Soon after the new Government was assigned, it was clear that only the civil society could represent a real and credible opposition force, strong enough to monitor and question the decisions of the new Government.

That moment came late in January 2017, when the Government promoted an Emergency Ordinance (OUG13) to soften the anti-corruption legislation, despite strong voices against this idea had been heard during the first week of governing.

Media had reported about this intention two weeks before, when a very influential online newspaper and its chief editorialist – Dan Tapalaga from hotnews.ro – started to cover the topic<sup>4</sup>. They claimed that, according to their sources, the Government - through the Ministry of Justice, prepared a bill to change the definition of corruption crimes. This was supposed to give future suspects in big corruption scandals the possibility to be released earlier, while creating conditions for pardoning and early release of felons already imprisoned for corruption crimes.

The officials claimed that they were only following the decisions of Romania’s Constitutional Court, which previously judged objections raised by suspects and their lawyers regarding some unprecise definitions of the existing criminal law. Following these decisions, the officials claimed they wanted to clarify the existing legislation and therefore drafted a bill that was supposed to redefine the corruption charges. On the other hand, referring to several complaints that the imprisoned criminals filed against Romania at the European Court of Human Rights for very bad detention conditions, PSD politicians claimed that prisons are too crowded. They considered that, in order to improve the detention conditions, the least dangerous convicts – including thus some corruption convicts – should be released earlier. The signal that politicians sent to the whole society was that corruption was not a serious crime

and that created frustration across the society: people started to protest again their argument being that the anti-corruption fight should continue unchanged; the people protesting strongly believed corruption to be a serious crime endangering human life.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, very late at night, the Government announced the passing of Ordinance 13 (OUG13), with the former Minister of Justice organizing a strange press conference to answer journalists' questions immediately after. The press conference was broadcasted live by all news TV stations in Romania, showing a Minister unprepared to convincingly answer the most important question the bill raised: why was this ordinance needed.

He seemed rushed and annoyed, disrespectful and disdainful of the journalists in the room and the people on whose behalf they were asking their questions. His ending every answer with his challenging “another question” (“alta intrebare”) – repeated more than 20 times in what felt like less than a couple of minutes - was all too telling of his unprofessionalism. The only motivation one could assume from this interaction seemed to stem from a contempt and entitlement that PSD felt it had as a result of their winning legitimately the elections: the party had a popular mandate and so any decision they made was therefore legitimate.

The conference revealed that the Justice Minister did not intend to convincingly explain the reasons of the Ordinance or the details about the passing process, raising suspicions and transmitting lack of transparency<sup>5</sup>. His performance was cringe-worthy and it was even more so for me, as a communication professional.

It came to me thus as no surprise that thirty minutes after the press conference, people started to mobilize on Facebook for a spontaneous protest in front of Government. Iordache's attitude was symbolic and so telling for the image the protesters were painting of the corrupt PSD.

By midnight, several thousands of people gathered in Piața Victoriei, announcing a longer and larger protests for the days to follow<sup>6</sup>. A week later, night protests caught the whole country, with people mobilizing better and better on social media.

Considering that people had voiced their concerns and protested at the news of the Ordinance's proposal, the Government's response to proceed with passing the Ordinance at night, ignoring public concerns and avoiding any consultation, is unacceptable under any circumstances<sup>7</sup>.

This fueled even further the people's frustration and deepened their conviction that PSD's mandate was not to the Romanian people but rather to serving their own interests – including widening their immunities and making acts corruption an integral part of their mandate.

The protests to me were a clear sign of a matured civil society, taking a very clear, loud and uncompromising stance towards corruption.

This is how “The Revolution of Light”<sup>8</sup> started. ●

## Endnotes/Media links

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# Author



## Eliza Rogalski

is one of the most appreciated and respected communication specialists in Romania. Founder of Rogalski Damaschin Public Relations and creator of several PR campaigns awarded or nominated at Effie, Cannes, Eurobest, SABRE, IPRA, Romanian PR Awards and European Excellence Awards, leading a team twice awarded „PR Agency of the Year” and IAA Excellence Awards, Eliza Rogalski has a deep understanding of the corporate world, with strong expertise in internal communication, employer branding, crisis communication, media relations, CSR, and reputation management. A former business journalist, Eliza Rogalski graduated Chartered Institute for Public Relations (CIPR London) and Berlin School of Creative Leadership and was the first Romanian to serve as a juror in Cannes Lions, in 2009.



[www.rogalskidiamaschin.ro](http://www.rogalskidiamaschin.ro)

[f eliza.rogalski](https://www.facebook.com/eliza.rogalski)

[in elizarogalski](https://www.linkedin.com/in/elizarogalski)



# In the Name of the Law

Ramona Ursu

Hundreds of thousands of people out in the streets, defending their own country from its rulers. Romania transformed overnight into a field of protests, the likes of which had never before happened in the contemporary history of this people, not even during the Revolution of 1989, when dictator couple Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu were taken down. Dozens of cities, some in which you could previously only watch the protests on the news, were now shaken to the core, for days on end, by the voices of those who took to the streets in the name of democracy.

That was the picture of Romania starting from the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January to the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2017, when the Government, officially led by social-democrat Sorin Grindeanu, enraged millions of people by adopting OUG13. The legislative measure that was to come into effect ten days after being published in the Official Gazette, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, that is, brought a series of changes to the Criminal Code that meant “relaxing” the rule of law. The official reason invoked by the then-Minister of Justice, social-democrat Florin Iordache (widely considered as the father of OUG13), for adopting it was that prisons were overcrowded and that put Romania at risk of being fined by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

This was not true, as OUG13 had but one purpose: to get a series of politicians, friends of politicians and public workers out of trouble. Among the crimes erased partially or totally by OUG13 were: favoring the perpetrator, abuse of office, negligence and conflict of interests. The big winner of OUG13 and the one the public eye knew immediately the law was dedicated to was Liviu Dragnea, the leader of the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and the president of the Chamber of Deputies, the man who leads the Government from the shadows. With a suspended sentence of two years of jail time for corruption and fraud during the 2012 referendum for impeaching the then-President, Traian Băsescu, Dragnea was being prosecuted for a different case of abuse of office.

The partial decriminalization of this offence, by establishing the minimum damages at 200,000 lei, basically enabled the leader of the PSD to walk away

from the new charges, which this time would have meant actual jail time. The way the Government decided, in a first for Romania, to “relax” the laws in favor of criminals, with the obvious goal of saving Liviu Dragnea, without caring about the opposition of the magistrates, of president Klaus Iohannis, scandalized the people and drew them out of their homes.

The enormous public outcry, the ample protests, peaceful but loaded, during which the people cried “At night, like thieves!” (a reference to the moment the Government issued the Ordinance – on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, published around 1 AM on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February), “Resignation!” and “DNA / Come and get them!” (DNA – the National Anticorruption Directorate), was taken over by some legal experts who understood the danger posed by the legislative measure. Among those who demonstrated that the emotions of millions of Romanians were in fact a legal problem were Augustin Lazăr, Romania’s Attorney General, and judge Cristi Dănilă, a former member of the Superior Council of Magistrates (CSM). Due to their quick reactions and clear explanations to the public, the two became the benchmarks for citizens’ arguments during the protests that began mid-January, when the press notified the public about the Executive’s intention to write such a law, and continued and grew throughout February.

In the interviews they gave for my blog, [www.ramonaurusu.ro](http://www.ramonaurusu.ro), the two legal specialists explained in detail the danger posed by OUG13, as well as its traps, and the manipulation undertaken by PSD-ALDE, the parties that came to power after the December 2016 elections to form both a the majority in Parliament and the Government.

## **Attorney general: „The fight against corruption must go on”**

Augustin Lazăr, who as Attorney General of Romania notified on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, the Bucharest Courts of Appeal – Department of Administrative and Fiscal Matters regarding OUG13, demanding its suspension until the case was closed, specified, in the interview he gave me on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 2017:

"Of course I've immediately understood the public outcry to an emergency ordinance adopted in contentious circumstances in respect to transparency and urgency, and with a significant impact on Justice. I knew, however, that the magistrates' mission was precisely to identify, take over and transform the public outcry into cold hard matters to be dealt with promptly, and to restore social balance. Therefore, we analyzed the situation within the CSM (the Attorney General is also a member of CSM), which notified the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), and then the Government intervened by revoking the emergency ordinance, thus restoring the constitutional framework."

In the same interview, prosecutor Lazăr also explained why the Romanian Criminal Code didn't need changing in the way OUG13 tried enforcing:

"The Criminal Code is modern, with moderate sanctions. Of course it needs to be in conformity with the decisions of the Constitutional Court, but strictly within the limits drawn by the Court. Criticism by people who have clashed with the law must be regarded with skepticism. Under no circumstances must we decriminalize acts like conflict of interests, negligence etc., as people tried in their own interest."

One thing Augustin Lazăr did during the days when the country was ravaged by OUG13 was to send a letter to the Ombudsman, asking the leader of this institution, Victor Ciobea, to himself notify the CCR. This initiative of the Attorney General was lauded by civil society, scandalized by the fact that Victor Ciobea had initially firmly refused to address the Constitutional Court<sup>1</sup>. It is for this reason, as well as taking into account a controversial past, that the citizens accused Victor Ciobea of playing along with the powers that be. Following the reactions of Augustin Lazăr, as well as president Klaus Iohannis, forced, at the same time, by the public eye, the Ombudsman notified CCR about OUG13.

Shortly after OUG13 was abrogated, Attorney General Augustin Lazăr was subject to an evaluation from the new Minister of Justice, Tudorel Toader (who replaced Florin Iordache after he resigned due to the backlash against OUG13). As well as Lazăr, the leader of DNA, Laura Codruța Kövesi, came under scrutiny. They were both targeted by the Minister of Justice for

a file opened by the anti-corruption prosecutors after they were notified of illegal acts that took place within the Government in regards to OUG13. Although the PSD-ALDE camp hoped for the strict evaluation by the Minister of Justice to lead to the dismissal of the two attorneys, regarded by the political class as a threat, such a proposal never came. Again after OUG13 was a danger no more, Augustin Lazăr was targeted by some of his CSM colleagues, who suggested, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, for the Judiciary Inspection to verify the way the Attorney General gave information to the public about the same legislative act. This request was denied.

Even after these attempts at intimidation, Attorney General Augustin Lazăr carried on discussing the importance of fighting against corruption. In the same interview he offered me, he added:

"The fight against corruption must go on, and corruption must not be treated with clemency", and that "faith in Justice, in the rule of law, is essential. The Romanian Magistrature has reached maturity as a European Magistrature with integrity, dedication and professionalism. It will be able to solve the legal problems of the Romanian society, restoring balance to emotions and to the rule of law."

#### **Judge Cristi Dănilă: „OUG13 was badly conceived”**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, judge Cristi Dănilă, a former member of CSM and one of the most renowned and admired Romanian magistrates, gave me an interview where we discussed the dangers of OUG13. The judge, who has reacted publicly numerous times, especially on his personal Facebook page and on his blog [www.cristidanile.wordpress.com](http://www.cristidanile.wordpress.com), where he explained the legal problems with this legislative act, added:

"My legal expert's eye said thusly: firstly, the reasoning in the preamble of OUG13 had no correspondent in its text. It said there that this modification to the Criminal Code is necessary in order to respect certain decisions of the Constitutional Court. That's it, but the draft expanded on this. For example, for the crime of abuse of office they set a certain minimum of damages, negligence went out the window, conflict of interests was half eliminated. Secondly, what stupefied me was that a ten-day window for Criminal Code modifications to apply was put in place, something that's never happened

before. An emergency ordinance is issued in exceptional cases, when something absolutely must change to avoid a legal catastrophe. Here, we had a ten-day term, meaning it was an emergency, but not a big one."

The magistrate also explained how

"legally, OUG13 was badly conceived, which led some of us – Attorney General Augustin Lazăr, the High Court of Cassation and Justice's president Cristina Tarcea, even the leader of DNA, Laura Codruța Kövesi – to believe there was a nefarious, immoral goal they were pursuing. We spoke out, then, to explain to the citizens the consequences of this Order. I can't claim the Order was dedicated to X or to Y, although, personally, I'm convinced it was. But as a judge or as a prosecutor, I have a duty to show the public, when such an important legislative measure comes up, its consequences."

Regarding these consequences, the judge explained in the same interview, that

"on the one hand, my job is to prosecute people, if they're guilty; to fight back against corruption, if there is corruption. On the other hand, one of the powers of the state says «Your work was all for nothing. Right now, we're closing files or releasing certain people from prison.» (...) We know the situation in Romania's penitentiaries is not good, but we only send people to prison in extreme cases. We're talking about very dangerous people, hardened offenders. No one who commits a light criminal act, let's say punishable by law with up to five years of detention, and who's on their first strike, will end up in prison. So, people go to prison because they break the law. (...) I wonder, this time as a citizen and as a father, if it's normal to let rapists walk free, to let robbers walk free, to let thieves walk free, maybe even murderers?"

The former member of CSM also touched upon one of the lies and manipulations launched by the politicians who wanted to decriminalize corruption. The manipulation was the fact that the crime of abuse of office, partially decriminalized by OUG13, had actually been inducted into the Criminal Code through this

legislative measure. This was obviously false, as the Romanian Criminal Code already observes this crime, and OUG13, by establishing a minimum of 200,000 lei in damages in order to prosecute, led instead to pardoning criminals and erasing the criminal files of certain people who were being prosecuted or already convicted such as Liviu Dragnea, who was being prosecuted for abuse of office in a file whose damages had been determined to be 108,612 lei. About this lie that was spread in public judge Cristi Dănilă said

"it was a shameless lie. (...) I analyzed the text, explained the Attorney General, but some time had passed and the lie had picked up momentum. It's harder to refute such widespread lies. (...) But there is a problem in Romania, and that is that people don't go to the primary source to check for themselves."

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2017, on the day of the biggest protest against politicians in Romania, which drew out 300,000 people in Bucharest's Piața Victoriei and 300,000 others across the country, the Government adopted the Executive Order 14, through which OUG13 was abrogated. In the streets, however, the citizens held on and carried on for months with the biggest resistance movement in Romania. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of May, when this text was written, the protests, christened #Rezist, celebrated in Bucharest their 103<sup>rd</sup> day. The citizens are asking for the Grindeanu Government's resignation, as well as the resignation from the Romanian Parliament of the leaders of the two governing parties, PSD and ALDE, regarded as guilty of repeated attacks against Justice. The two are Liviu Dragnea, convicted felon and the leader of the Chamber of Deputies, and Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, president of the Senate, also prosecuted for corruption. ●

## Author



### Ramona Ursu

is a journalist and writer. She worked for *Evenimentul Zilei* (a Romanian newspaper with national circulation) during 2006-2008 and moved then on to *Adevarul Holding* where she worked from March 2008 to January 2017. Here she occupied various positions from deputy editor in chief, editor in chief and coordinating editor. She launched *Dosarele Securitatii: Marian Munteanu si Miron Cozma versus Piata Universitatii* (The Securitate Files: Marian Munteany and Miron Cozma vs Piata Universitatii) in November 2016 and *Noaptea, ca hotii!* (In the night, as thieves!) in May 2017, a book about the protests against the Executive Ordinance 13.

## Endnotes/Media links

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# The Unexpected Romanians: Fighting Civic Apathy with Civic Energy

How #rezist came to be

Cosmin Pojoranu

Without even realising, politicians who keep defying their citizens actually end up embittering them to the point that they become "*citizens cum laude*". Defiance works up to a point in a country with a traditionally apathetic civil society as Romania. When the tipping point is passed, black swans<sup>1</sup> are imminent. Indeed, nobody expected that 2017 will begin with the 10-year old EU-member Romania seeing its people calling for an end to corruption cast a ray of light in a darkening post-Brexit Europe. But the country has recently witnessed its biggest protests since the bloody 1989 Revolution.

The aim of this paper is to explain how these protests came to be. When we refer to protests, we are taking into account not only the recent #rezist movement, but also its precursors, over the past five years. We will look at numbers – the demographics and size of the protest crowds, but also at specific qualitative data to understand the movement: how the media reflected the protests, how the riot police handled the crowds, how the protesters chose their themes and, finally, what was the legacy of each protest.

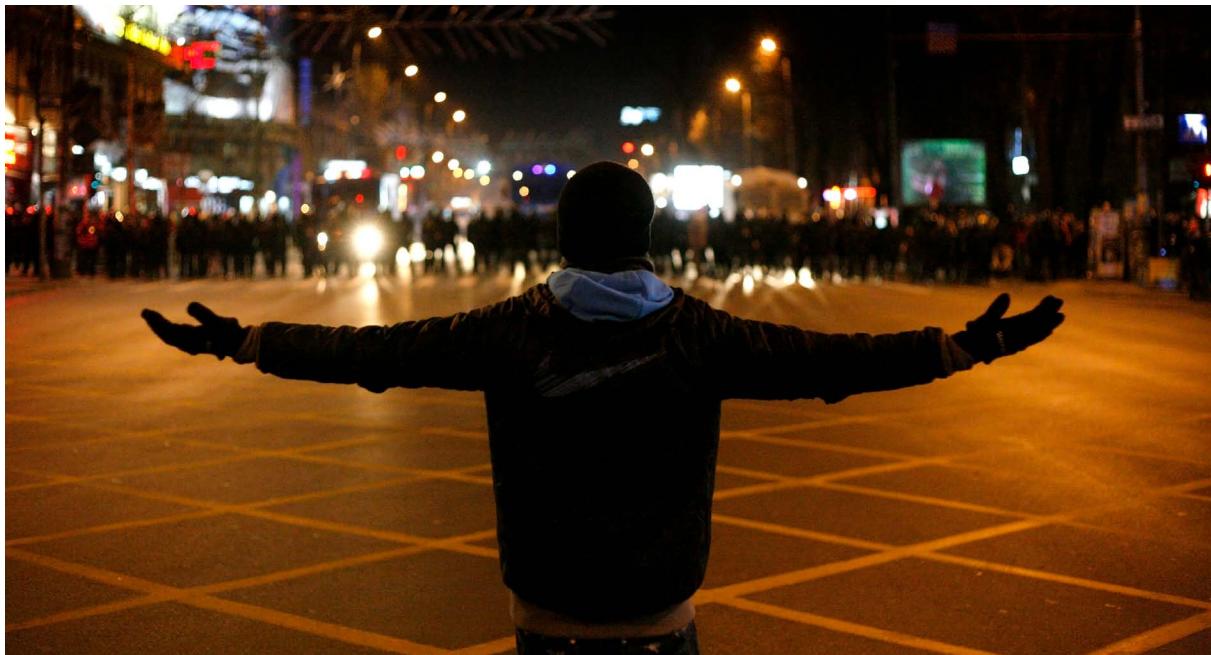
## A run through of the 2012-2017 Romanian protests

January 2012 marked the first authentic, civic protest in Romania for twenty years. Of course, there have been several niche protests, such as the football fans 2007 protest against an unjust law<sup>2</sup> that concerned their interaction with riot police or the fringe 2008 anti-globalist protest during the NATO summit in Bucharest<sup>3</sup> (which was quite brutally broken up by special troops). But the 2012 one was spontaneous (thus disorganized), their demands were not quite articulated, but it was large-scale, with heterogeneous groups coming together in major cities, facing below-zero temperatures to voice their discontent in the wake of austerity measures (post-2008 economic crisis). Triggered by (then president) Traian Băsescu's move to publicly criticize deputy Minister of Health Raed Arafat during a public debate about health

reform legislation, the 2012 protests started with street violence and ended up overthrowing a government. With the help of partisan media, the protests legitimized the coalition that eventually won the parliamentary elections that year.

2013 brought the **Romanian Autumn**, a hybrid, non-homogenous yet more focused movement. The social democrat government headed by Victor Ponta triggered these protest by sending a controversial bill to Parliament. The bill would eventually allow a Canadian company to start the biggest open pit cyanide mine in Europe, in the small 2,000-years old Transylvanian village of Roșia Montană. Anti-capitalists, environmentalists and promoters of the rule of law united with older **Save Roșia Montană** activists (a resistance campaign under way for at least ten years).

The newly created movement was called **#unitisalvam** (literally translated – “united, we save”) and sparked strong debates among Romanian civil society: encouraged by its unexpected early success in increasing numbers, everybody had an opinion on what the movement’s future should be, even if not everybody was out there in the streets. The movement was intense for three months, with protesters eventually marching weekly through major cities, as a way to inform fellow citizens about their demands and thus counter the media blackout<sup>4</sup>. After nine months of protests, in June 2014 the Parliament rejected the bill for good. Today Roșia Montană is on its way to becoming a UNESCO World Heritage<sup>5</sup> site, thanks to its ancient Roman gold mine that has, to some extent, still been preserved. By order of the Ministry of Culture, issued on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, the mining complex was classified as a historic site of national importance<sup>6</sup>. From December 2013 onwards, the *Uniti Salvām* movement tried to be more inclusive and adopt other causes (such as opposing shale gas extractions in parts of the country, or a strong anti-corruption stance in the **Black Tuesday**<sup>7</sup> protest<sup>8</sup>).



Romanian protester facing a chain of riot policemen in Bucharest's main boulevard



Romanian protesters revamping old symbols: showing the “V” victory sign they used in the 1989 anti-communist revolution, occupying Piața Universității, a central square where people died in the violent 1989 Revolution

Photographs by Tudor Vintiloiu ©

These attempts at bringing about nation-wide reform contributed to the dilution of the movement. Some of the hard core of *Uniți Salvăm* even tried to boycott the May 2014 EU Parliamentary elections, a move that caused more political turmoil than expected.

2014 saw further unrest, this time caused by perceived irregularities in electoral processes. Tensions rose due to the Romanian diaspora having to queue up in unprecedented numbers for the opportunity to elect their President<sup>9</sup>. In the first round, many voters were



Cover photo for the Uniti Salvam

Facebook page, June 2014<sup>10</sup>

unable to cast their ballots before polling stations closed, which some saw as a denial of their constitutional right to vote. The Government has the legal duty to organize elections. The head of government at that time, Victor Ponta, was also the presidential candidate for the Social Democrat Party (the PSD held the majority in Parliament after the 2012 elections and were going for a landslide win in the 2016 ones). After the first round of elections, Ponta had a 10% lead. The protests were important because diaspora voters traditionally cast anti-PSD votes. The non-functional manner in which the diaspora's vote was organised in the first round really backfired against Ponta, who would eventually lose in the second round, gathering only 46% of the votes. New laws that reformed the diaspora voting system were in effect for the 2016 parliamentary elections, with little effect, since the bureaucratic process was made complicated and tedious. Moreover, the changes were not communicated to voters in a timely manner.

The 2015 #colectiv protests were the foundation for the 2017 #rezist anti-corruption movement. A tragic fire broke out in late October in the Bucharest-based Colectiv nightclub. The fire was sparked by some fireworks that were part of the show, but as the building did not adhere to fire and safety regulations, the fire has quickly spread. As a result, 64 people died and even more were injured. The protesters thought that the fire could have been prevented had it not been for the endemic corruption that caused fire inspectors to overlook the club's setup. Also, the way in which the health care system handled the patients provoked outrage. "They day we give in is the day that we die" was one of the mottos adopted by the protestors, but also a verse from "Goodbye to gravity" a song by the rock band that was playing that night. Protest was in the air, a new entity was formed under the name of *Coruptia Ucide*, and, like in 2013 with *Uniti Salvām*, its main asset was a Facebook page. The immediate effect of a massive protest attended by 25,000 was the unexpected resignation of Prime Minister Ponta

(runner-up in the 2014 presidential elections) the day after<sup>11</sup>. The resignation was unexpectedly quick, since the 2013 protesters had been asking for Ponta's resignation in vain, for months and months. The Social Democrat Party agreed that the country would be governed by a non-political government (the technocrats) for one year, until the next parliamentary elections (December 2016).

2016 saw only a small protest against poor conditions in hospitals. The trigger was a report by investigative journalists which proved that disinfectants in many big hospitals were being purposely diluted, thus rendering them inefficient when fighting bacteria. The then Minister of Health resigned, and the owner of Hexi Pharma, the company who was supplying the diluted disinfectants, committed suicide<sup>12, 13</sup>. 2016 ended with political turmoil in the aftermath of the December Parliamentary elections, undisputedly won by the Social Democrat Party<sup>14</sup>: Wannabe Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea, the new head of the Social Democrat Party following Victor Ponta's resignation, argued with president Klaus Iohannis over the prime-ministerial nomination. Iohannis refused the first proposal Dragnea made, only to appoint former deputy Sorin Grindeanu, a much less known politician, as a proxy Prime Minister. Having been convicted back in 2015<sup>15</sup> for interfering with a referendum vote, Dragnea would have forced a Constitutional crisis if he decided to nominate himself as the next Prime Minister.

2017 broke record after record in terms of protest attendance. There were three pre-emptive protests<sup>16</sup> against reported attempts to pardon corrupt politicians and decriminalize acts of corruption. The second protest was controversially joined for brief moments by Klaus Iohannis, Romania's president who had previously unexpectedly presided over a Government meeting (it is not usual, but it can happen, according to the Constitution). The 31<sup>st</sup> of January saw a spontaneous crowd of ten thousand Romanians gather in front of the Government building in Bucharest, at midnight, at eight degrees Celsius below zero. They had all recently watched a press conference in which the Minister of Justice announced an emergency ordinance to pardon those convicted of some acts of corruption and decriminalize others. Plain defiance outraged the protesters: this kind of softening approach on corruption was not in the electoral programme that got the social democrats elected in December, plus the public had protested (alongside other institutional actors) against rumours that the government would take this kind of measure. The following day saw an even bigger crowd



**“Fuck all your wicked corruption” placard.**

Photo by Bogdan Dincă ©

turn out in front of the Government after working hours, with clashes breaking out between some protesters and riot police after midnight. It was the only violent day of the protests, which eventually spread out to some 100 other cities (some of them hadn't had street movements since the 1989 Revolution) and led to counter-protests that supported the recently appointed government. The controversial ordinance was repealed in a week's time and the Minister of Justice resigned, but, at the time this text is written, there are plans to pass a similar bill through regular parliamentary procedures.

### Context and factors

The unexpected jail sentences for famous politicians started in 2012, when social-democrat frontman Adrian Năstase (ex-Prime Minister 2000–2004) was convicted and sentenced to two years in jail by the Supreme Court, after being prosecuted by the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) he himself created in 2002 in the context of Romania-EU accession talks. The shock had been so big, that he actually tried to stage his suicide, in a desperate attempt to avoid prison. DNA has been gaining more and more traction, having successfully prosecuted hundreds of high profile politicians, such as media mogul Dan Voiculescu – serving a 10-year sentence for money laundering, or businessman George Copos – serving a five year one for tax evasion<sup>17</sup>. Such stories raised awareness of how endemic corruption was within Romanian politics.

Political opposition to the social-democrats is waning, leaving civil society at large to act as the *de facto* opposition, thus blurring the border between civics and politics. New parties<sup>18</sup> such as Demos or USR have been established. The latter had a good run in the local



**Protesters march under Romania’s tricolour flag on the streets of Sibiu, the hometown of current president Klaus Iohannis.**

Photo by Dumitru Matiu ©

and parliamentary elections of 2016, winning almost 9%<sup>19</sup> of the votes in the latter, based on an anti-corruption fame. Due to extreme differences in capabilities and resources, the clashes between the authorities (of social democrat origin in all instances described above, except 2012) and its opposition – the protesters – have been characterized by an action – reaction loop, namely the protesters have been successful only in their reactive attempts. Proactivity among citizens is thus seen as the key means to combat corruption.

### Grasping the protests – key insight

As far as triggers and themes go, as morbid as it may sound, death is the most common trigger, as Andrei Tiut pointed out in a recent piece<sup>20</sup>. In 2012, the publicly acclaimed head of emergency services was ruthlessly sacked, triggering protests. In 2013, the protesters were against the “cyanide that kills”. 2014 was the exception,

but 2015 and 2016 were also marked by matters of life and death. In 2017, the *Coruptia Ucid* Facebook page created the Facebook events for each protest, but soon the movement grew larger and morphed into something new - #rezist. All of these particular instances converged towards a unifying theme – one against corruption and against what some western-loving Romanians derogatorily call the “Balkan mentality”.

### Who are the protesters?

Generally speaking, the children of the 1989 revolutionaries are today's activists. Still, the crowds differed from one movement to another. Some nuclei from the 2012 movements were dedicated in the 2013 ones. Surely half of the 2013 ones attended the 2014 protests, where they also met new faces. The 2015 brought about fresh forces, but the 2012 & 2013 backbone was still there. 2017 was a mixed bunch.

### What do they stand for?

The demographics may have changed since 1989, but the cause that united hundreds of thousands in the past years is very much linked to the democracy demanded by the 1989 revolutionaries: today's protesters want less corruption and implementation of the rule of law, which is a pillar of democracy. This is visible even in the 2014 protests for the right to vote.

### What the protesters have learned in the five-year span

Since 2012, the protesters matured and learned their lessons gradually.

In 2012 they rediscovered the protest and the fact that - when the going gets tough - they can take to the streets, since Romanian politicians have a deep fear of street protests. Protests are useful for venting frustrations and expressing the emotional mood, but they also have political consequences, even if the long-awaited long-term change takes more time than initially expected.

2013 was the turning point, as the protesters tested their resilience and found out that focus and stamina are key traits of a successful movement, along with creativity, which has been an underused awareness tool (essential when facing a media blockage). Attempts to organize or build upon the 2013 protests failed. The protests were decentralized, as in they lacked central leadership, which is what distinguishes them from protests organized by political parties.

In 2014 the lesson was that change needs to be approached on multiple battlegrounds, one of them being the realm of political parties, but civics and politics need to stay separated. In 2015 trust consolidated among groups in the crowds, the very groups that had formed back in 2012 and 2013.

In 2015 and 2016 “the protester” - as a collective character - worked his civic muscle, refining its techniques and improving their effectiveness.

In 2017 the protesters realized they need to invest in their civic education, because information is a weapon that can quickly be loaded and fired into social media. They also understood that social media is not enough and that live and extensive TV coverage of the protests can easily multiply the number of protesters. Among the lessons learned by protesters is that trusting each other matters, but critical thinking matters most. The trigger of the #rezist protest was quite technical, so the protesters had to educate themselves in very niche areas such as justice and public administration. Political fact-checking and investigative journalism became a well-respected and sought-after genres.

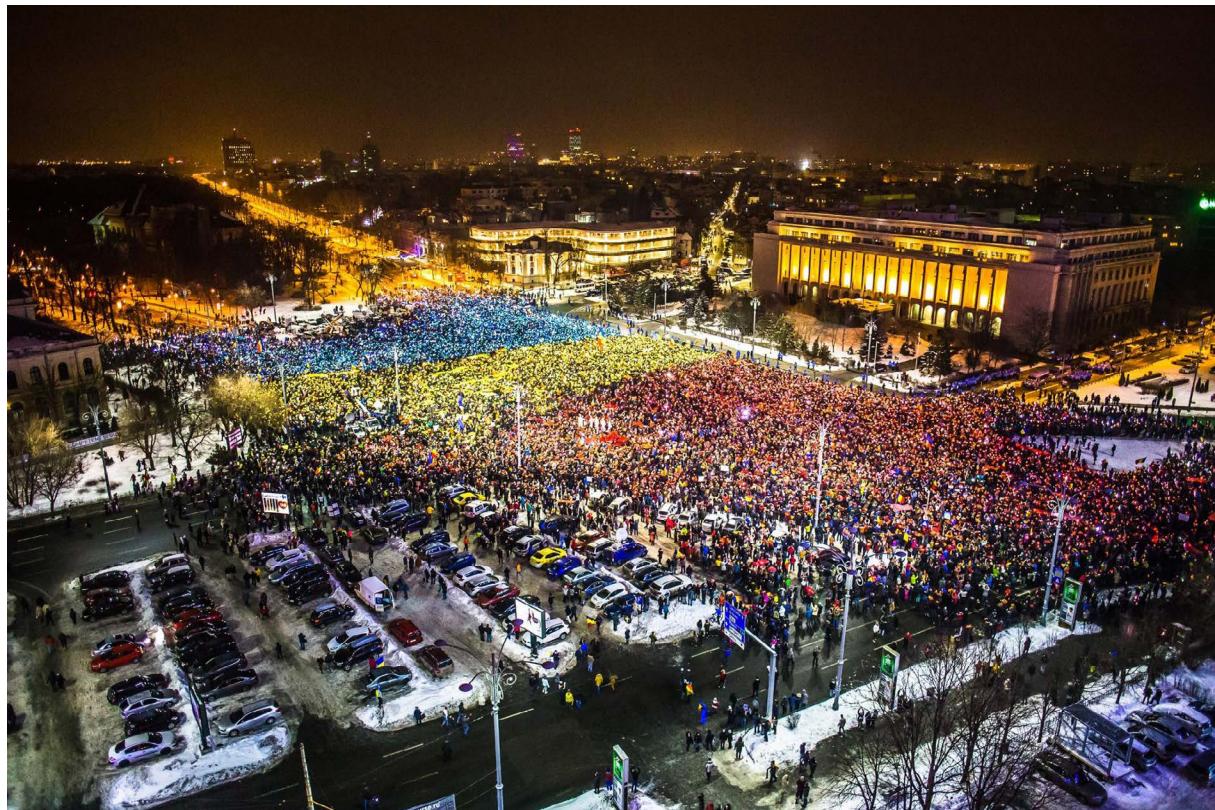
### Contrasting with the 90s protests

Facebook reliance is heavy among protesters nowadays and the media landscape is saturated, which makes the spreading of fake news really easy, but also gives fact-checkers a chance to fight back<sup>21</sup>.

The current protests have no formal leader or hierarchy, the organisations are rather flat and apparently democratic when it comes to decision making, with Facebook being the one-stop-shop for information and mobilisation.

All the big civic protests in the 2012-2017 timespan were illegal according to the Romanian law concerning public gatherings, but the law is randomly enforced, since it is archaic, dating back to 1990, a turbulent period in Romania's street movement history.

Unlike the 90s, today's protesters were engaged in less violent clashes, because they understood that violence scares away potential protesters (so they trained themselves in how to weed out potential troublemakers from their groups). Also, the authorities refrained from instructing the riot police to make use of full force, which was not the case with the infamous Miners' rage (Mineriade<sup>22</sup>) in the 90s. The only violent protests were the 2012 and 2017 ones, but usually the protests have been family friendly.



**Perhaps a symbol in the making for protesters, the Victoriei Square in downtown Bucharest is flooded by protesters who formed a tricolour choreography.**

Photo by Adrian Cătu ©

### How many is enough?

Counting protesters in the street is a common occupation for some, as is counting likes on Facebook. It was a rarely seen event when a couple of thousand people in Piața Universității occupied the main boulevard in Bucharest in 2013 and went on to march for two metro stops, to Piața Victoriei, the centre of the Government. The 2015 #colectiv protests drew crowds ten times bigger, but protesters still felt like they were living in a small bubble, since Bucharest alone has at least two million people within its city limits.

When the 2017 protests drew tens of thousands in smaller cities across the country and hundreds of thousands in Bucharest, some protesters were expecting the crowds to surpass millions. But, as is the case with every fire, it eventually dies out. Hopefully, after more years of civic schooling and dialogue, the protesters will learn that civic involvement need not be limited to the act of protest. ●

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# Author



## Cosmin Pojoranu

Born and raised in Bucharest, Cosmin Pojoranu has a BA in Political Science (University of Bucharest) and a MA in Cognitive Systems and Interactive Media (UPF, Barcelona). He has been involved with the good governance NGO Funky Citizens<sup>23</sup> since its inception, in 2012, contributing his communication skills. He has been actively involved in numerous communities through the years (ranging from graffiti artists to advertising and online entrepreneurs), one of them being the 2013 Uniți Salvăm movement, volunteering for three months as a PR person for the community of protesters<sup>24</sup>.



# Protester Profiles

Ana Adi

The #rezist protests are said to be Romania's biggest post-2000. At their peak, more than 600,000 people are said to have taken to the streets, 300,000 of them in Bucharest alone. That makes roughly 3% of Romania's entire population (currently estimated at 19.2 million) and a good 15% of Bucharest's (currently estimated at 1.9 million). 10,000 of them, Decat o Revista (DoR) says (2017), showed up in the middle of a freezing, sub-zero temperatures night in Bucharest in the first day.

A mixture of anger and sadness is what drove them DoR says in its timely coverage of the first days of protests. And anger is often mentioned by protesters with whom I have been in touch with since the beginning of April.

Andrei Rosu, a 41-year old father of two, was among the first protesters in Bucharest. A former 90s boy-band member turned project manager turned endurance athlete and inspirational speaker describes the moment of hearing the news about OUG13 in physical terms: "My heart rate suddenly jumped from 50 or 60 to 140". He says he tried to calm himself down and avoid posting in the heat of the moment on Facebook but then considering what was happening he concluded that "this is no longer about politics; this is about values (...)" and that he had to get out in the street: "Half an hour after the law was passed, I was in front of the Government with other 1,000 people".

Calin Puia (34), a former actor from Brasov and now Dementia and Enablement specialist living in London has taken part in protests in front of the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), since mid-January but the news of the Emergency Ordinance being passed had escaped him as he had switched off from the Internet to spend the day with his friends. He found out only later, in the middle of the night, that OUG13 has been issued, so angered, betrayed and saddened, he found himself cycling to ICR where he had protested before. He says he went there almost without thinking, so moved by the news, to make a point that the OUG and what it represents was totally unacceptable. So on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February together with another man, who like Calin made his way to ICR, they stood silent, facing the

cold and damp night in Belgravia Square. They even took a smiling selfie with the Romanian and EU flags flying above their heads, saying "now and here, we are protesting alongside with you!". Calin's companion left at 02:45 but Calin stayed on until 06:00 in the morning. He went home exhausted and returned after a brief break to find that hundreds have gathered to protest, without anyone calling them.

Furious, disappointed and upset was Florin Branisteanu, a 37-year old accountant and a hearing impaired entrepreneur living in Bacau, Romania and furious and angry was also Catalin Lazar (46) a Project Marketing Manager from Bucharest now residing in Milan, Italy.

Raluca, "just Raluca" as she wants to be identified (33), a Bucharest born engineer now living in France, who joined the protests in Paris says that in her "outrage at the impertinence of the Government" she too realized that any action, any protest would have to be "to protect our values".

It is this feeling, that values needed protecting from the Government, that Justice and Democracy were seriously and unequivocally threatened, is what many of the protesters I spoke with invoke, so their joining of the protests was a self-driven, personal act.

Ramona Strugariu (37), a policy advisor to a Romanian Member of the European Parliament now living in Brussels, made it her mission to openly oppose the decisions in Bucharest so she willingly took it upon herself to organize the protests in the Belgian capital:

"(...) I wrote some slogans on two pieces of cardboard, I posted on Facebook that since no Romanian organisation or political party in Brussels decided to protest, I would proceed by myself; I went to the esplanade in front of the European Parliament and called on people to join me".

Vlad Lascoi (30) who was working at the time on a cruise ship in the Antarctic "couldn't believe" the news he has just heard. He felt betrayed, he felt that

they [the Government, a.n.] didn't care about what the public believes" which is why he decided that even there, so far away from home, he had to do something.

Vlad saw himself as a spectator to the entire political show in Romania and had protested before only once in his lifetime, during his student times, a protest he says was very small.

Andrei Rosu speaks quite fervently about how he didn't want to have to do anything to do with politics until these protests. With Calin, things are more complicated: he was interested in politics he says however every time he got involved he ended up being deceived, betrayed and with a sense that "the game was rigged from the start". He mentions his work in Brasov as a teen to clean up the city that got the attention for the then launched Alliance for Romania party and the invitation to join them as President of their local youth group just to find out that the party meetings were being held in a strip tease club owned by one of the members. There are other examples too and every time he reiterates his amazement at the level of compromise (the lesser evil) Romanian voters have to accept each time.

Both Loredana Ivanov (39), from Balan, Hargita now running her own cleaning business in London and Raluca from Paris recall the humiliation and struggle of voting abroad for the Presidential Elections in 2014. It is then that Loredana started to pay attention to politics and when Raluca started to get more involved; since 2016 Raluca has picked up volunteering in support of one of the newly formed parties. Others, like Valentina (28), an architect from Satu Mare now living in Vienna, and Cristian (50), an IT specialist originally from Bucharest now living in Toronto, Catalin Lazar from Milan or Ramona from Brussels voted on every occasion and hoped that was enough.

Vlad decided that his protest would be a photo he'd post and share with friends on Facebook. He printed out the message "Antarctica is protesting; PSD = Thievery Shamelessness The Red Plague" and asked one of his colleagues to take the photo. In his uniform, shirt slightly untucked, tie not quite centered, looking rather tired and stern, on the Antarctic background, Vlad's image soon went viral and became a sign of solidarity and resilience. The placards of the other participants had similar messages: the red plague, corruption kills (coruptia ucide) and "at night, like thieves" (noaptea ca hotii) are often mentioned as is the use of the hashtag #rezist which emerged from Facebook.

Facebook, in fact, played a central role in the #rezist protests. This should not come as a surprise:



**Vlad Lascoi. 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2017.**

Reproduced with permission.<sup>3</sup>

after all, more than 93% of Romania's online population has a Facebook account, compared to only 79% in the UK and 68% in Germany (Statista, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

The protesters with whom I spoke mention the network among their top sources of news: whether from friends or media outlets like HotNews, Ziare.com, Digi24, Epoch Times, Republica or Adevarul, but Facebook nonetheless. They also list it as their preferred outlet to connect with other protesters and to get organized.

Loredana from London, says that she initially answered a call to join a protest on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January coming from a guy who had links with the 2013 Rosia Montana protests but then ended up organizing it, that is ensuring that the authorities were informed, health and safety regulations were respected, participating protesters were peaceful and could express freely their opinions but not promote a political party or another.

Andrei Rosu too speaks about the days when he created #REZISTENTA<sup>3</sup>, the biggest closed group associated (currently at more than 55,000 members) with the protests. He created the group in the hope that he would find others to replace him during the time he would be away; from the third day of the protests he had moved his office into Piata Victoriei managing his online business from there, facing the cold wrapped up in his Antarctic gear and responding to queries from his laptop. Within that timeframe he had postponed his holiday twice. While he was hoping that the Government would resign and new elections would be announced, his presence in the Square as he puts it was meant to ensure that there was a constant protest presence in the Square and not only in the evenings and weekends when people would be off work. It was his fourteenth day of continuous protest when he announced to his



### #Rezist Diaspora Banner.

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friends and followers on Facebook (more than 20,000 of them) and posted a link to the group on his blog as well: "in the first hour I had 2,000 people getting in the group and after the first 24 hours there were 20,000", an overwhelming response and testimony that Andrei's outrage was shared and so were his actions.

W. (32), the son of a German-Romanian couple who emigrated to Germany in the 1970s and protested in Munich joined the protests at the call from a friend and kept up with all the developments via a Facebook group and so did his fellow protester, A. As they continued to protest in Munich, the organizing and keeping-up was done online.

Catalin on the other hand wanted to keep up with the news from the diaspora, beyond Milan. So he created the #Rezist Diaspora<sup>4</sup> Facebook page that aggregates and keeps up with #rezist protests wherever they are known. To Catalin's accounts, the Romanian diaspora had organized protests in 81 cities around the world and 36 countries.

The most common theme discussed as the reason for being active and campaigning for change was the profound mistrust in the Government. This led many into getting organized, focus their demands, get active to enact and support change. For Ramona this is a must: a government that commits such a faux pas within days after taking office means that "something goes fundamentally wrong in the way the country is governed by these political parties and that a lot more involvement is needed from the people, if they want things to improve".

For some this is a completely new terrain, so it no surprise that they feel inexperienced but they say they are undeterred.

Andrei Rosu and W. from Munich have never taken part in any form of protest. Florin Branisteanu says that he joined other protests before out of solidarity with his friends, not out of conviction. Loredana started to be more active after the fire in Colectiv, a nightclub in Bucharest, where 64 people attending a concert lost their life and which triggered soon after the demise of the Ponta Government. Calin and Valentina have supported the #unitisalvam protests in 2013 opposing the law that would have enabled the commencement of a gold mining project in Rosia Montana (Angel, 2013) whose environmental and heritage impact could have been disastrous. Ramona from Brussels protested whenever there was a cause worth protesting for, whereas for Catalin his stand has a clear anti-corruption theme (he protested in 2016 against the Parliament's decision to grant immunity to MPs for acts of corruption).



**Andrei Rosu's desk in Piata Victoriei. "Working hours: 9-17 Office, 17 - : Protest. P.S. We seek approval to work during the weekend too! Don't leave us alone!"**

Reproduced with permission.



**Loredana's photo of London's literary #rezist protest in Trafalgar Square. This is a reference to #rezist literary protests organized in Sibiu, Romania.**

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**Catalin Lazar's photo of a #rezist literary protest in Milan on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March.**

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For others, this Government's actions are painfully reminiscent of the 1990s. For Cristian from Toronto in particular, the #rezist protests are a continuation of the anti-communist student protests of the 1990s brutally silenced by the Miners' Actions in which he took part. For him, the Proclamation Romania 2017+ (2017), a document compiled and issued by some of the protesters in the wake of the March 22 visit to Brussels to meet with members of the LIBE Committee (Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) at the EU Parliament (meeting called by the ruling coalition parties SPD and ALDE representatives during a plenary meeting in Strasbourg and approved by all the other political groups represented) has many similarities with the 1989 Timisoara Proclamation: while the 2017 document demands "7. Eliminating parliamentary approval for criminal prosecution of the governors." and "8. No convicted citizen shall hold public service and other statesman positions.", the Timisoara Proclamation sought to exclude from politics any high ranking former Communist Party members or high ranking Securitate members, the Communist much-feared Secret Service.

They also feel that they need to keep up the pressure.

"we must not keep silent, ever again; this is what kleptocracy builds upon: silence and indifference of a deciding majority who keeps swallowing lies, either because it finds it easier than coming out of its comfort zone, or because they strongly believe that "all politicians are the same" and "nothing can be changed, anyway". This is a lame excuse. There's no irreversible state of art for a nation. The question is, at what cost do we fail to ensure refreshment, rotation

and control of political power? The lower the shift, the higher the cost." (Ramona Strugariu)

Now that they know they are not alone, they feel that they should contribute to the others' "awakening" or at least to help them be better informed when making their political choices. Cristian from Toronto describes this as "continuing the Revolution of the Common Sense" while Vlad sees this more in terms of enabling the formation of a national "moral conscience". Interestingly enough, although none of them know each other, Calin too speaks about an awakened consciousness.

Most of them thus continue to protest (some daily after their working hours, others during the weekends) and seek ways in which their protests can be seen (Loredana from London mentions literary protests and Raluca from Paris speaks about flashmobs). Some are also moving on to joining or establishing civic engagement organizations while others are considering (if they haven't done so already) to donate money to various NGOs and independent and investigative journalism initiatives and groups in Romania. They all want to make it clear that this is no longer a "one-time" exercise as Ramona puts it.

Andrei Rosu's #REZISTENTA group has since moved on to identify the skills and expertise available within the group. 15 of the 55,000 thousand have taken an admin role and an extended 200 or so of them have now joined specialist groups, where the PR and legal teams especially, Andrei says, are kept rather busy. Needless to say, their work moved away from Facebook and into Slack. Calin says he has now joined the #REZISTENTA group in an advisory role. This takes a lot of his time and refocused completely his daily activities. The Diaspora Civica Berlin and Nova Romania e.v. from Munich are



**Raluca's image of a protest in Paris. The Balloons are a reference to the protests in Bucharest that created a human Romanian flag in front of the Government building in Piata Victoriei.**

Reproduced with permission.

among the first of such groups formed abroad and word has it that similar ones might soon emerge in other cities.

The #rezist protests started opposing the emergency ordinance OUG13, opposing corruption. Their initial goal was to have the OUG13 revoked and in this sense, the protests were successful. The protests however, fueled by the mistrust in the political establishment and inspired perhaps by the previous protests (2013 - #unitisalvam succeeded in stopping the mining project and the law supporting its commencement and 2014 - #colectiv resulted in the resignation of Victor Ponta and his government and the installment for a period of one year of a technocrat government led by Dacian Ciolos). They have however morphed many times since then, moving their target from singling out politicians like Liviu Dragnea (the President of the Social Democrat Party and since December 2016 the President of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower chamber of the Romanian Parliament) and Calin Popescu-Tariceanu (currently President of the Romanian Senate, the higher chamber of the Romanian Parliament), both accused of embezzling funds, to targeting opposition at an entire party (mainly the Social Democrat Party) (ProTV, 2017), to supporting the National Agency for Anti-Corruption (DNA) and to a wider fight for values and principles of transparency, accountability, meritocracy and rule of law.

The #REZISTENTA group, for instance, Andrei Rosu says that their desire is to become a watchdog of the state and state-related institutions in Romania, and by extension of all actions in the political arena. In order to do so, having control of their messages which could potentially include generating their own news on their

own media channels is an essential step. And, Andrei says, they do not exclude the potential of supporting a political party that presents a viable and trustworthy alternative to the ones currently active in Romania.

Raluca from Paris continues to support the activities of the newly formed party for which she started volunteering in 2016 but most of the protesters I spoke with are hoping that a new party would emerge "from the streets", one whose members are competent and not corrupted, and one that can present a viable and strong political alternative to the parties currently operating. The alternative, Cristian from Toronto says, would be that the former technocrat Prime Minister Dacian Ciolos to get set up his own party.

For the Nova Romania group in Munich of which W. works closely, their main aim become a spokesperson for the Romanian diaspora within their region, liaising with media and political actors. In a similar manner, the Diaspora Civica group in Berlin seeks to enable and increase the German diaspora's political implication and enable the development of a "civic spirit". This means moving away from just reacting to the events unfolding in Romania but rather taking an active role in debating and developing political and governing alternatives.

The #rezist protests continue. The numbers in the streets may have dwindled but for those I have interviewed their work has just begun (many in fact were back into the streets as the rejected OUG13 found its way into a law project that was approved by the Juridical Commission of the Senate). There is a sense of pride in their discovery that Romanians can be united and work together. There is also a sense of joy in the discovery that their hopes for Romania (with less corruption, strong educational, health and justice systems, with transparent and accountable institutions that prohibit access to public office functions to convicted felons) are shared by others and a definite sense that they want to continue to be involved. There is also a sense that their anti-corruption and pro-democracy messages and pledges might have, in the long-term, effects that span beyond Romania.

These are the Romanian #rezist protesters: Romanians in spirit, heritage or nationality, generally tech-savvy, with a global focus and understanding, with a checkered record of civic engagement but so enraged and disappointed by the current state of affairs in Romanian politics that they are determined to get involved and do more. This is in part in line with the #rezist protester profile in Romania; a recent IRES<sup>5</sup>

survey portrays them as young adults and adults, urban dwellers (76%) working mainly in the private sector and having average to high education levels (70% of the 980 people interviewed). And whatever that “do more” is, remains to be seen. ●

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# Author



## Dr. Ana Adi

is a Professor of Public Relations/Corporate Communications at Quadriga University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She defines herself as a digital humanist and writes often about the strategic intersections between digital media and communications, focusing recently on storytelling and protest PR. She is the co-editor of this report.

 [www.anaadi.net](http://www.anaadi.net)

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# #rezist: February in the Streets

## Snapshots of the Largest-Ever Romanian Protest<sup>1</sup>

By Irina Tacu, Sorana Stănescu, Ioana Burtea, Alexandra Bădescu, Ana Maria Ciobanu, Gabriela Pițurlea, Andreea Vrabie, Carla Lunguți, Medeea Stan, Adina Brăduț, Elena Văduva and Adrian Lungu (DoR Editorial Team). Edited by Georgiana Ilie

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2017 around midnight, 10,000 people in Bucharest went out into Piața Victoriei to protest. At minus 13 degrees, nobody expected to see them there, but rather in their pajamas, in bars, or still at work. No protest had been announced. Still they went out, setting into motion what would culminate into the largest protests Romania has seen since 2000.

While the hashtag during the protests in 2013 was #unitisalvam (together we save), and #colectiv in 2015, now, in the freezing cold, the message coming from the streets was #rezist (resist). It was a civic movement of the masses. But it was also one of the individual, understanding that each one of us takes part in the fight for the country of our dreams. One person can be a protest in itself, and the people having their morning coffee in Piața Victoriei, eyes fixed on the Government building, or the citizens from small, provincial towns gathering in handfuls across all counties and county seats seemed to put this on display, each doing his or her part.

In sight of the protests growing larger and larger, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, the Government issued a new Executive Ordinance, no. 14, to repeal OUG13 before taking effect. That day saw the most protestors: some country-wide estimates reporting 600,000 people. The protests continued, and there were counter protests in front of the Cotroceni Palace as well, but the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> is still the most relevant.

We collected snapshots which piece together a living history of those days. In no way are these accounts objective, nor do they cover the whole spectrum of opinions and experiences from the protests – history will perhaps shed a better light than journalism –, but they tell a story of what we were doing in February 2017, a month of unprecedented public assembly.

Corina Bratu, 30, a strategist at Leo Burnett, was in Piața Victoriei on the first night:

“There were already around 1,000 people when I got there. Half an hour later it was like a concert; I saw a lot of friends, old colleagues, familiar faces (...). I didn't have a sign, so I just started writing 'Josnic' (Despicable) on a drawing pad. Anyways, as best I could, I was there – ski pants on, two jackets, holding signs. I was waving a flag I'd bought at the market for 25 lei, tied to a mop handle and hoping they'd realize their mistake. I think my dad was happy that we weren't just shrugging our shoulders. He was out in the streets in '89.”

Ioan Maxim, 28 years old, PR at the Apollo 111 Theatre, was also there on the first night:

“It was so nice at home that evening. I was just making tea, eating, browsing the internet. I think I'd wrapped myself in a blanket, too. Then the Dragnea Government issued OUG13 and my comfortable evening became the winter of our discontent. I went straight out into the Square, feeling a mix of sadness and rebellion. I went there for an answer, but not just any answer, the answer I would get on board with: the Ordinance wouldn't pass, it wouldn't go into effect, that this is just a ditch effort. But nobody believed it, just the opposite. A friend who worked for the [Dacian] Cioloș Government told me there was no chance it would go my way. My legs were frozen when I got home at 01:30 in the morning. The next days I felt like mourning, like the week after the Colectiv nightclub-fire.”

Adrian Tudorache, 30, was born in the countryside and moved to Italy 13 years ago with his family. He came to Bucharest in the beginning of January to see if and how the city had changed.

"I found another Romania. I made a different sign every night - one with three rats instead of the three PSD roses, I'd written 'Filter politicians' on a carton of Marlboro unfiltered cigarettes. Everyone was looking at the others' signs and talking about them. It was civilized. No one was littering. I would shovel snow, collect any garbage around. I know I'll be coming back once my girl finishes 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I'm hopeful."

Not everyone felt they were represented at the protests, especially activists who've been trying for years to draw public attention to their causes. Tudorina Mihai, an expert in feminist politics, has been attending rallies for years.

"If we can't get past the dominant discourse that only recognizes corruption, if we don't have a progressive liberal agenda that includes the rights of marginalized groups, we won't live in a society we like. (...) If I want prosperity, I have to also care about those who can't go out in the streets and defend their rights, such as children living in extreme poverty."

Vlad Viski, 28 years old, president of the MozaiQ Association and LGBTQIA+ activist, didn't feel comfortable in Piața Victoriei. He didn't identify with the anti-corruption discussion, which seems to dominate the entire public space, leaving no room for other relevant issues such as nationalism, homophobia, or prejudice against the poor. There were homophobic jokes on signs; organizations that rallied against women's rights were leading the march in Cluj; the mothers' march, he says, reinforces the idea that family can only mean heterosexual couples with children; the expression "ciumă roșie" (red plague) which the far right movement of the World War II period would also use when referring to communists; the singing of the anthem and the choreography with the flag, they all made him wonder if there's room for everyone under the flag. He has the feeling that these protests, which are just as legitimate as voting, are underscored by a sense of entitlement, that the country belongs more to the people in the Piața Victoriei than it does to those who vote.

Piața Victoriei was full not just with adults, but with children too, both during the usual nights of the protests and during the weekend, when a "children's march" was organized. The mothers who brought their children to the protests had read commentary

making them out to be irresponsible. Ramona Poiană, an economist, says she would tell her child, now a year and eight months old:

"Son, you were with us there because your father and I felt we couldn't stand by, couldn't let our leaders toy around with us. So you participated, too, more like a handbag, and you saw people, doggies and a plaster giraffe. We all went out together and that's why today we're having this talk in Romania, instead of another country."

Raluca Buzea, 30 years old, PR manager at IRI Forest Management (IKEA Group), believes it was a protest that "reached so many social and age groups (...). I only had a sign one night, saying 'Brothers, parents, grandparents: we need you here.' Many of us come from small towns where industry and manufacturing are dead, where people are grey, bleak and aging. I think there are many of us whose parents have a salary unfit for a life of work, and grandparents with a pension about as large as what we pay at the Carrefour checkout. Does somebody out there think we were born from corporations and advertising?"

Ramona, an entrepreneur, was told by her parents on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, "we voted the way you guys wanted." "Then, on New Year's Eve, my dad shared some 'best wishes' from a questionable character. (...) One night in January, in an almost funny phone conversation, it slipped out in a joking-ironic tone: 'look, you shared some posts from a person in that party. You should sometimes check who you support publicly, haha.' That moment set off a rant like nothing I've ever heard from him—screaming and making these weird statements, just like those on bad television. I was shocked. Then he started to criticize me for spending hours in the cold and voting for that president so-and-so and what's more than that, which... beep beep beep. I hung up. The hate speech being spread by toxic news programs had taken hold of my father, too, and I was stunned. I didn't know how to respond besides just hanging up. We haven't spoken in eight weeks."

On the morning of the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, IT specialist Florin Bădiță, 28 years old, took unpaid leave from his job in Cluj and flew to Bucharest. In 2015, after the Colectiv nightclub fire, Bădiță created a Facebook page, *Coruptia ucide* (Corruption kills)<sup>2</sup>, which today has 60,000 followers. That year, he and others used this account to encourage people to go out in the street and protest. The pressure coming from the streets was essential as,

Bădiță says, “the objective was to get that Government out.” Because there was a lot of work to be done, from coordinating people to responding to messages, Bădiță asked for help. Izabela Lazăr, a student, said she would organize a “human national flag” in Piața Victoriei. They bought around 7,500 sheets of paper in red, yellow and blue. Around 50 volunteers handed them out to people in front of the Government building, grouped into three sections, and collected them afterwards. “A lot of people in the Square already had sheets of paper, as we requested on the event page<sup>3</sup>, because we had no way of buying one for every person.” Izabela says, “we didn’t contract any sponsorships.” Then, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, nearly 70,000 people lit up the Square with their phones in the national colors. Others said it was a nationalist protest but, according to Bădiță, the purpose was to show they’d managed to do something together, that they’d united.

Cătălin Georgescu photographed the protests in the last years and says the ones for Roșia Montană were almost completely invisible in the media.

“Here it’s the exact opposite: everyone is in the Square, everyone has phones, I saw dozens, hundreds of people going live on Facebook and, three years ago, we didn’t have anything like that. We couldn’t even send pictures taken with a camera that well. (...) Now, really, it’s over coverage. Everyone’s on rooftops, there are drones, aerial lifts, television camera cranes. (...) You have live updates on Instagram and Facebook. You have no way of saying you don’t know, only that you don’t want to.”

The Romanian protests became a model of civic involvement for other Europeans, even some you wouldn’t expect. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, Bulgarians protested in Sofia<sup>4</sup> to show their support. “A step back in the fight against corruption in Romania bodes poorly for Bulgaria,” was the reason for the event. A Bulgarian commented on a picture of the little lights shining in unison in Piața Victoriei: “And we’re sleeping...”.

In Budapest, at an NGO’s protest against the Viktor Orban government and the lack of education reforms, as no more than 2,000 people showed up, they started chanting: “Call the Romanians.” On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, there was a Facebook event announcing a protest in Paris “against the corruption of the elected,” and the organizer gave Romania as an example: “We wouldn’t be the only ones making our voices heard;

Romania, among others, is a serious example right now.”

The public square has become a symbol of rebellion in Romania. Raluca Șoaită, a medical architecture specialist, went to the protest every day.

“The square, itself, functions like a little town. There are traffic ways, focal points, knots and landmarks, the elements that define a city. People organically reside there. I was walking through the crowd and there were crossroads, the pillars were meeting landmarks, paths were created. The people that came to the square represent the city well in terms of its composition. We don’t have well-respected urban planning regulations, but what I love is there’s a lot of creativity. Cleaning up at the end was a decision taken that we can live in an organic world, not strictly controlled, because we feel the need to protect one another, to go on living.”

Diana Mărgărit, 33 years old, a political science PhD, notices how the protestor’s profile has changed. Looking back at the protests in 2012–2015, the people’s demands have evolved from specific—mining operations must stop at Roșia Montană, the government or a minister must resign—to more general, like stopping corruption. That being said, the problem of corruption was behind all the protests, because “fundamentally, nothing has changed.” She believes corruption is a phenomenon the West handles with a kind of cynicism and fatalism: corruption is everywhere, there’s nothing we can do, the political class will continue defending their privileges no matter what.

“But the fact that Romania protests in the name of certain ideals, it can show that, in fact, people will work for days, weeks on end in the street to, finally, influence change.”

Towards the end of the protests, Ioan Maxim started to ask himself questions:

“At one point, I could no longer follow the debate. It was too much. I was happy it was repealed. But was it enough? Are we still going to shout ‘Resign?’ What is it we really want? Why are we making a human flag? Are we aware of the extremes? Is there still a small, legal loophole that would allow OUG13 to take effect? What is OUG14? Why are we laughing at the protestors

in Cotroceni? Why aren't we laughing at them? I don't feel the protests had any result yet, but I think I managed to answer the most important question these days: I go out in the street because I want to wake up one morning, turn on the television and be shocked by the news that one of the country's leaders is corrupt. For now, these kind of news stories are the norm. I'm tired of this norm, and I can't wait for our version of normal to come. And I'm willing to keep going out in the streets until then." ●

## Endnotes/Media links

1. COPYRIGHT: A longer version of this article was published in Romanian in DoR (Decât or Revistă) magazine in March 2017, in Bucharest, Romania. The creative commons license of this report does not apply here.
2. <https://www.facebook.com/corruptia.ucide/>
3. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1851149395157311/>
4. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1567967886554592/>



## Author

# DoR

### DoR (Decât or Revistă)

magazine is an independent quarterly that publishes in-depth stories about the realities of the Romanian society. It was established in 2009. The DoR Editorial Team is composed of experienced journalists who frequently cover social, political and cultural issues and tell untold stories about the way the society changes.

 [www.decatorevista.ro](http://www.decatorevista.ro)



# A New Geography of Protest in Bucharest

Cristian Ciobanu and Duncan Light

Public protest (particularly directly against the government and the political elite more broadly) has been commonplace in Bucharest since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. However, there has been a distinct geography to these protests. Before 2017 most public gatherings to express opposition or discontent have taken place at Piața Universității (University Square) which became established as an almost hallowed site of protest. However the 2017 #rezist protests were different in that the protesters gathered in a new location, in front of the government headquarters. Here we analyse the changing geography of protest in Bucharest in 2017 and examine the reasons behind the emergence of a new space of protest.

## Piața Universității as a space of protest.

Piața Universității is an irregular (and partly pedestrianized) space, situated adjacent to the intersection of Bucharest's two major boulevards. As the name suggests it stands alongside a part of the University of Bucharest. It is also bounded on one side by the National Theatre but is not home to any government buildings. The square stands close to the Kilometre 0 monument (the point from which all distances in the country are measured) and for this reason is often considered to be the symbolic centre of Bucharest.

Piața Universității gained its current symbolic importance in December 1989 when crowds gathered there during the Romanian 'Revolution'. It was here that security forces first opened fire on the crowds, resulting in 49 people being killed and 463 wounded (Siani-Davies, 2005). For this reason a part of the square was subsequently renamed Piața 21 Decembrie 1989. However, it was in 1990 that its reputation as a site of protest was cemented. When it became clear that the National Salvation Front (FSN – Frontul Salvării Naționale) which had assumed power after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu was dominated by members of the former Romanian Communist Party, students set up a protest camp in the square which rapidly increased in size. The leaders of the FSN responded with appalling violence: on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1990 thousands of miners (brought to the city by the government on specially

chartered trains) rampaged through Bucharest in an event which became known as the Mineridă (Miners' Rage). The miners savagely attacked the protesters in Piața Universității where, according to official figures, seven people died (although the real figure was suspected to be in the hundreds). This event demonstrated to the population that the post-communist regime was as willing as its predecessor to use violence to maintain order. It also established Piața Universității as an almost 'sacred' site of protest and sacrifice in the heart of the city (Antonovici, 2009).

As a result of events during both the 1989 Revolution and the Mineridă, Piața Universității – and in particular Piața 21 Decembrie 1989 – became the principal site of opposition and protest, especially against the former communists who coalesced in the Social Democratic Party (PSD - Partidul Social Democrat) who were in government for much of the post-communist period. For example, when the centre-right candidate (Emil Constantinescu) won the presidential elections in 1996, it was to Piața Universității that he came to celebrate. In subsequent election campaigns the centre-right parties 'claimed' Piața Universității as their base. When Romania joined the European Union on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2007 the official celebrations took place in Piața Universității (despite its unsuitability for such a large gathering). But the square is also the focus for broader protest against the political class (Jurcan, 2017), as was apparent in 2012 when large crowds gathered to protest against austerity imposed by a right-wing government and corruption among the political elite more broadly<sup>1</sup>, an event which brought down the government of Emil Boc. The following year thousands of young people gathered in the square to protest the government's decision to allow a Canadian company to open an opencast gold mine in Transylvania, forcing the government to abandon the project. And in 2015, thousands of people protested against corruption among the ruling elite following a fire in the 'Colectiv' nightclub in which 64 young people were killed. This resulted in the resignation of the Government and Prime Minister (Victor Ponta).

### The #rezist protests

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2017 following rumours that the government intended to pass a law which would grant an amnesty to officials jailed for corruption, Bucharesters took to the streets in protest. Almost instinctively they gathered (in sub-zero temperatures) at Piața Universității where they were joined by President Klaus Iohannis<sup>2</sup> who expressed his support for the protests. However, the protesters then spontaneously headed towards Piața Victoriei (Victory Square), whose name commemorates the 1878 War of Independence. Located about 2,5 km to the north (see Fig. 1), Piața Victoriei is the site of the Government headquarters and it was clear that the protesters wished to come face to face with the source of their discontent – the governing elite (Mihăilescu, 2017) – rather than restricting their protests to a location which had considerable symbolic importance but where their actions would have limited visibility or impact.

Thereafter Piața Universității would play little role in the #rezist protests (although a small number of protesters used it as a gathering place before marching to Piața Victoriei). Indeed, on the next significant day of protests (Sunday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of January) the majority of protesters headed directly to Piața Victoriei. And again, late in the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, after the government passed its emergency ordinance, around 10,000-15,000 people spontaneously gathered in Piața Victoriei (in freezing temperatures) in protest<sup>3</sup>. Protests continued in Piața Victoriei over the following week until, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, the Ministry of Justice announced that the ordinance would be repealed. Although Piața Universității was no longer the site of protest, it was frequently evoked in terms of the spirit of the protests. For example, protesters at Piața Victoriei held placards stating “We are the children of the golani from Piața Universității” and “Golan 2.0”. Golani means ‘hooligans’ in Romanian and was used by the FSN Government in 1990 to denigrate the student protesters in Piața Universității: it was later adopted as a badge of pride by the protesters themselves. Thus, the 2017 protests in Piața Victoriei were presented as the direct heir of the 1990 protests in Piața Universității.

How can we explain why the main site of public protest in Bucharest suddenly shifted to Piața Victoriei in 2017? The explanation seems to lie in a number of broader social and technological changes in Bucharest over the past decade. In the decade since Romania joined the European Union in 2007 there has been the rapid growth of a well-educated, young professional class. This

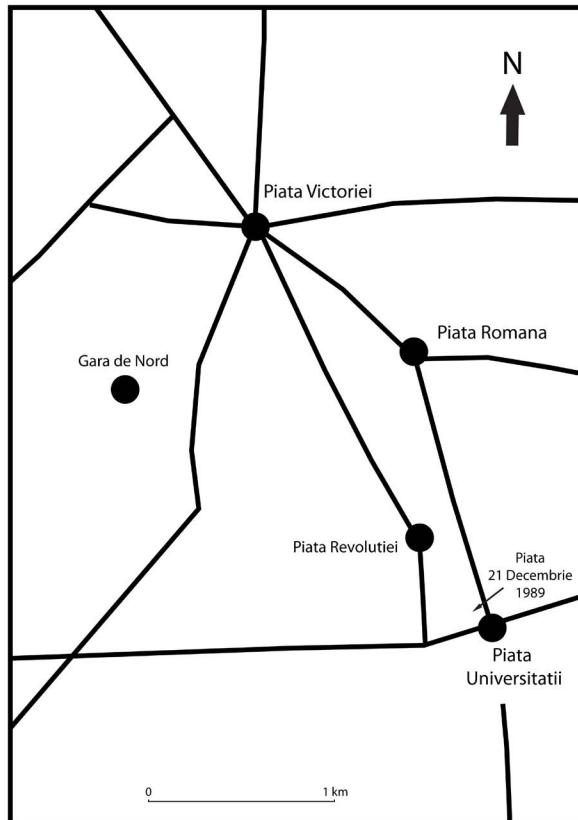


Figure 1. Piața Universității to Piața Victoriei

includes those working in Bucharest for international organisations and companies. It also includes the many young Romanians who have travelled to (and often worked in) other EU countries.

Young Romanians have a greater understanding of how the rule of law works in other countries, along with an awareness of how corruption among the political elite inhibits progress in Romania and damages the country's international reputation. In addition, students, although less active and united as they were 20 years ago, increasingly look to other EU countries as models for Romania to aspire to. It was these groups of young Romanians that formed the core of the #rezist protesters, and this explains why so many of them turned out in January/February 2017 when compared with previous anti-government protests. Their protest was directly against the government and to have maximum effect it needed to take place in front of the government's headquarters. However, it is significant that most of the #rezist protesters were not calling for the overthrow of the elected government, but simply the withdrawal of a piece of legislation which they considered legitimised corruption among the political elite.

Furthermore, this young generation of protesters was much more aware of how to organise their actions so that they would have maximum impact via new media, both domestically and internationally. In particular, they recognised that filling a large space such as Piața Victoriei would have a greater visual impact than would filling the cramped and irregular space of Piața Universității. One of the authors participated in the protests and informally asked other protesters why they had come to Piața Victoriei: the answer was invariably “because it's more suitable”. However, the protesters also recognised that for their protests to have maximum impact, large numbers needed to turn out. For this reason, most of the protests attracted at least 10,000 people, with the largest (on Sunday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of February) attracting up to 300,000 people<sup>4</sup>. The protesters were able to use the large space of Piața Victoriei to make dramatic and very telegenic statements: thus, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, more than 50,000 people formed a giant Romanian flag by holding the torches on their mobile phones underneath pieces of coloured paper. They then repeated the exercise and formed the EU flag. This event received global media coverage, which would simply not have been possible in Piața Universității.

In addition, these young protesters made full use of the potential of social media. In the era before immediate communication through social media and smart phones, Piața Universității was a convenient and obvious location for protest: it was in the centre of the city, all Bucharesters knew its location, and it was already notorious as a site of protest. However, social media created new possibilities and an enhanced ability to organise large numbers of people quickly. Thus, the #rezist protests were very effectively choreographed by social media, enabling all those who wished to protest to find out quickly where and when to gather<sup>5</sup>. This was best illustrated when protesters formed the Romanian flag on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February: each protester knew from Facebook where they needed to stand (and were even advised about an app – Flashlight – they could download which would enable their smartphone screens to display a particular colour).

The 2017 #rezist protests were significant for achieving their intent, and the location of these protests was central to their success. What is clear is that there is a generation of young Romanians who, while respecting the symbolic importance of Piața Universității, do not share the same attachment to it as their parents. They have also demonstrated their ability to organise swiftly for maximum visibility and newsworthiness and in order

to do so have found a new site of protest that was more suitable for their purposes. The lessons of January/February 2017 are obvious and, in the future, public protest in Bucharest is likely to focus increasingly on Piața Victoriei. ●

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## Authors



**Dr. Cristian Ciobanu**

is a graduate in human geography from the University of Bucharest, Romania. His PhD thesis focussed on mental and imaginative geographies of Bucharest and included an analysis of the meaning and significance of space within the city. His book *Geografie mentală în București* is a reference point for the study of imaginative geographies in Romania. He is also a founder member of 'Caleidoscop', an informal and multidisciplinary group dedicated to the study of urban space. Since 2012 he has worked as a heritage manager in the Hațeg UNESCO Geopark and continues to lecture part-time at the University of Bucharest. He was a participant in the protests in Bucharest in early 2017.

[mentalgeo.wordpress.com](http://mentalgeo.wordpress.com)  
 [ciobanu.cristian@yahoo.com](mailto:ciobanu.cristian@yahoo.com)



**Dr. Duncan Light**

is senior lecturer in the Department of Tourism and Hospitality at Bournemouth University, UK. He is a human geographer by background and his research interests centre on the relationships between urban space, power, identity and memory in Romania. In particular, he has spent more than 20 years examining the protracted process of reconfiguring the symbolic urban landscapes of Bucharest that were inherited from the socialist era so that they present messages which are appropriate for a post-socialist state. He is also interested in the cultural politics of tourism, particularly the relationships between tourism and national identity, which he has examined in the context of '*Dracula tourism*' in Romania.

# A Tribute to the People and a Slap to the Politicians who Trade Justice and Romania. People, keep going!

Monica Macovei

Fighting against political corruption is a contradiction in terms, possible only in crucial moments such as pre-accession to EU. The contradiction in terms of the fight against political corruption derives from the exclusive power of the politicians to legislate or adopt anti-corruption measures while knowing that this legislation can turn against themselves. While in other parts of the world, business self-regulation and self-enforcement might be possible, sadly, in Romania's case, especially in the context of the 2017 #rezist protests and their aftermath, the current Government adamantly shows that this is not in their interest nor their desire. Their sustained actions to pass laws aiming to decriminalize the abuse of power, political corruption and embezzlement of funds along with pardoning their politician mates, their funders and the *de-facto* owners of media channels working for them sets a dangerous precedent within the European Union. Not to mention that they are set to destroy everything Romania has worked to achieve since 2005 and after joining the EU in 2007. Moreover, as it currently stands, the European Union's reactive response strategy (no matter how trenchant) is insufficient to discourage such behavior.

As Justice Minister (in December 2004) my mission was to ensure that Romania eliminated the "red flags" that the European Commission has highlighted in the pre-accession documents linked to justice. These included the fight against high level political corruption, reform of the judiciary, and the fight against money laundering. Failing to fulfill any of these would have postponed Romania's accession to the EU. One of the measures taken as part of the judicial reform was the banning of judges and prosecutors who collaborated with the Secret Services both during Communism as well as after. It was at the beginning of my mandate that I had set up in 2005 the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), an independent entity, specifically aimed at fighting medium and high political corruption: that means either acts of corruption undertaken by

someone in a high public function (ministers, members of parliament, mayors, prefects, judges and prosecutors, etc.) or whose resulting damages are very high. DNA was meant to discourage all corruption by investigating and prosecuting those that commit it at the highest levels. Most were convicted. The DNA has been highly successful. In 2016 alone, 879 people have been convicted and another 1,270 have been prosecuted for high and medium corruption leading to an identified prejudice of more than 260 million euros. This includes 3 ministers, 17 members of Parliament, 47 mayors, 16 judges and prosecutors and 21 directors of national companies (DNA, 2016).

Considering these recent figures, the Emergency Ordinance 13 (OUG13) passed on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2017 although it has never been an item of the Government's meeting that day, can be rightly interpreted as a symbol of the Government's attempt to continue its "business as usual" without the threat of prosecution and potentially jail time.

There were signs that the PSD-ALDE Government installed after the December 2016 elections was aiming to dramatically change Romania's laws and do it quickly, and to their advantage. Since their taking office, several executive orders have been passed dismantling previous legislation set in place by the Ciolos's technocrat government. This included suspending for a year the legislation banning mayors to commission expenses beyond their allocated budget or divert investment to other projects (OUG 6 and 9). This also included actions from the People's Advocate (Ombudsman) in favor of Liviu Dragnea's taking office as Prime Minister despite his final conviction for electoral fraud and the ongoing criminal case for embezzlement. The People's Advocate acted basically against the people as he challenged before the Constitutional Court a 2003 law prohibiting a convicted individual to be appointed in the Government, being it minister or Prime Minister. After 5 postponements, the Constitutional Court ruled on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 that it

found the request inadmissible and that it is only for the Parliament to change the 2003 law if it wishes so. We now have to be very vigilant with the Parliament where the majority is in favor of eliminating the conviction condition for taking a seat in the Government for allowing the PSD President, the convicted Liviu Dragnea, to claim the position of Prime Minister.

Coming back to the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2017, I too was surprised when OUG13 was passed. I was shocked, appalled, hurt.

### OUG13 in Brussels: the principles vs EU's reactive stance on national politics

"Dragnea, do you realize what you did to get rid of your pending criminal file? You removed Romania from the map of the democratic countries. (...) Dragnea and Iordache passed these laws for themselves in the middle of the night, as thieves"

I wrote on my Facebook page.

While the streets were slowly getting filled in Bucharest and elsewhere, I was asking for an urgent debate in the plenary of the European Parliament on Romania's rule of law. The debate took place on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February and it was an exchange of information meant to inform the members on the adoption of OUG13 and the reason why it was adopted and its first beneficiary, the chair of PSD, party affiliated to the European Socialist Party. Definitely, it was also a call for support to reestablish the rule of law and I remember saying to those defending PSD and ALDE that they should come to Bucharest and stand by the people, on the streets. Romania is its people not its politicians.

During the debate, Frans Timmermans, First Vice Chancellor of the European Commission, applauded "the force of the Romanian people's will to become a fully fledged European, democratic, open nation" while he called promulgation of the OUG as "worrying":

"The emergency ordinance and the draft legislation pertaining to the fight against corruption cannot be interpreted as anything other than a step back from the progress we have seen in the last decade, and I would urgently call upon the Romanian Government to reconsider what they have done, both with the emergency ordinance and with the draft legislation."

(European Parliament, 2017)

Roberta Metsola (member of the PPE group from Malta) took a strong stance in Romania's favour:

"The EU institutions, and this Parliament in particular, cannot remain silent on political corruption if we are to remain relevant to the people we represent. Let me be clear. This is not about the Romanian nation or the Romanian people: this is about the corrupt few who are working to circumvent the law. Romania's efforts to join the European Union, 10 years ago, were pushed by those who wanted a different way, who believed in Europe and its value system, and who looked to Europe as a way to ensure that a crooked establishment never again gripped the reins of power. Europe cannot and should not abandon those who are reaffirming these ideas in the streets of Bucharest and Timișoara".

For PSD's representatives at the debate like Andi Cristea, Victor Bostianu, Maria Grapini, Norica Nicolai and others, this was a crass attempt at disinformation from our part, a clear attempt to overturn the December 2016 elections and an invitation to the EU to meddle in Romania's internal affairs. Mircea Diaconu (ALDE), former senator and Minister of Culture, prosecuted by DNA but not convicted alluded that "the popular vote is modified, stolen, thrown away through other methods than the democratic ones" and that as long as people can go on to the streets to protest whatever their reason, this should be considered as a clear and enough sign that democracy is working." Basically, Diaconu stated that while protests are allowed, politicians can be blind and deaf to people's demands.

The debate turned, as Timmermans rightly pointed out, into a party-spat but the core of the problem remained: that the urgency of the ordinance was unwarranted and that its promulgation lowered the standards of fighting corruption. At the end of the day however: "The Parliament of Romania is sovereign in its decisions, and it also has to face the consequences of those decisions". One consequence would be the triggering of Article 7 of the EU Treaty for serious violations of the rule of law, leading to sanctions against Romania. There would be diplomatic consequences as well, as this Government cannot be respected and taken seriously in any European or international negotiations, and this is going contrary to the Romanians' interests.

The debate in the EP Plenary led the PSD MEPs to call for an additional meeting with the LIBE

commission. This took place in Brussels on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March where the newly appointed Minister of Justice, Toader Tudorel, Prof Gabriel Liiceanu, journalists Liviu Avram and Attila Biro, Victor Alistar (last one, on behalf of PSD) were invited to speak, designated by some political group, after very tough negotiations. I invited to the LIBE hearing representatives of the protesters from more Romanian cities and also from European Capitals were protests were held. Unfortunately, they were not allowed to ask questions or make any comments. This was something unseen before in a “public” debate. If members of LIBE, including those from the socialist group (where PSD members are) really wanted to know what happened, the first to ask should have been the protesters and listen why they took the streets. It was a humiliation to force them to remain silent while others were speaking about the reasons of the protests. LIBE is chaired by an English member of the Socialist group and he contributed to these rules against the long practice of openness in the public hearings in the European Parliament. Even I, a LIBE full member, was banned to distribute to my MEP colleagues albums with photos from the protests.

The next event, a LIBE mission to Romania, was scheduled for the 26<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> of June this year but the meeting has been postponed to a yet unknown date. This LIBE mission requested and organized by PSD looks to many like a trap. At this mission are expected to participate pro-PSD NGOs and media funded by convicted politicians and media owners (Antena3 is owned by former senator Voiculescu, former Securitate collaborator and, serving a 10 years sentence in prison for money laundering and other crimes) while impartial NGOs and other media are reluctant to attend. Concerns on the fairness of the upcoming mission were raised by the presence of Claude Moraes, the LIBE President, in recent interviews at Antena3; the channel has been for a long time the home of fake news, defamation or lynching those supporting the anticorruption initiatives or judges who convict politicians and oligarchs.

### The fight must go on

OUG13 was repealed by OUG14 on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2017, a few days after the debate in the EP Plenary. However, it was the fear of the protests growing and more and more people taking the streets all over Romania that made the government repeal OUG13 rather than the European views and debates. The Government’s position to defend its convicted felons and their assets over Romania’s interests in Europe and

worldwide fuelled further the distrust the protesters were already harbouring. This is why the protests continued even after OUG13 was repealed with their demands changing to the resignation of the Government. The protesters have seen (in part) their demands met. The first to resign was the Minister for Business, Trade and Entrepreneurship, arguing, *inter alia*, that he could not look into his child’s eyes after the adoption of OUG13!. He was then followed by Minister of Justice, lordache, known for his disastrous post-OUG13 and internet meme “Another question” (*alta intrebare*) press conference.

The debate and the subsequent LIBE Commission meeting did not deter the Government in Bucharest. They might have brought the people a sense of support and strength, and my fellow colleagues a renewed sense that Romania’s democracy was under threat but brought no immediate measures from the EU.

On corruption, the EU is powerful only in the countries which are on the path to accession. After a country becomes an EU member, the situation changes: corruption and anti-corruption are considered a national matter and therefore left to the decision of the member state, based on the principle of subsidiarity. The EU cannot regulate for all its members on matters of corruption, as it can do on the internal market, competition, budget and many other matters.

In fact, the EU is strict with its applicants and, at times, incapable of enforcing its own rules and regulations with its member states. Romania’s red flags might have been removed in the years prior to its accession to the EU but with actions like those taken by the PSD-ALDE Government they are likely to return.

12 years after Romania’s accession to the EU, politicians are fighting back; it is, it seems to me, inconceivable for them to cease carrying out their corruption and thus, in response, they attempt to eliminate the anticorruption laws and institutions instead. In fact, over 90% of the provisions of the repealed OUG13 have now been promoted in the Romanian Parliament as parliamentary initiatives, including the pardoning and the decriminalization of abuse of power but with a much higher limit. These draft laws have made their way up to the second chamber of Parliament where they are currently under discussion, some of which have been submitted even before the first LIBE commission took place. Moreover, the Minister of Justice, Toader Tudorel, announced that he plans to submit to the Government additional draft laws to change the criminal Codes, all this by the end of June 2017.

The current political events in Romania prove that a battle between the clans in PSD has started; the convicted PSD leader Dragnea tabled just days ago an unprecedented motion of non-confidence against PSD's own Government run by a PSD Prime Minister. Grindeanu as response, appointed the former PSD leader Ponta as Secretary General of the Government, although Ponta is a notorious plagiarist and prosecuted by DNA.

Political instability is a crime against Romania and this is being committed at a crucial moment when the EU is recovering on new criteria of power and the strategic partnership with USA has just been reinforced.

For now, the only choice left is for Romanians to continue to protest and for the protesters to get organized and get active. Only by playing the democratic game, can Romania's EU legacy survive and the protesters' hopes for a Romania where the rule of law is respected come true. This is in people's hands and they must be alert and ready to defend Romania, including by taking on to the streets again if it need be. ●

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# Author



## Monica Macovei

is a Romanian member of the *European Parliament* since 2009. She received the “*MEP 2012*” award on justice and liberties. Macovei has been involved in *Costs of Corruption*, freezing and confiscation of criminal assets in EU, investigative journalists, anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering Directives and Regulations.

As Minister of Justice in Romania in 2004-2007, Macovei received international recognition for her anti-corruption accomplishments, which allowed Romania to join the EU.

*Financial Times* (2006) branded her “a hero who presided over Romania’s transformation from one of Europe’s most corrupt corners into a credible candidate to join the European Union” while *Die Welt* (2006) stated that “For Romania, joining the European Union would have been barely possible without Monica Macovei” and “22 million Romanians have why to thank...Macovei”. *Sonntagszeitung* (2012) portrayed Macovei as representing “the other, decent Romania” while *Le Monde* (2013) called her “the «Cerberus» of human rights”.

Previously, Macovei worked with the Council of Europe for promoting judicial reforms and civil rights in about 25 countries.

She has held over 300 speeches, including at MIT, Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, and Hertie School of Governance.

# Fake News Claims: A Communication Strategy

## Towards a Romanian Culture of Protests

Maria Corina Barbaros

Early 2017, international media focused on Romania due to a massive and highly creative protest, the so-called #rezist. For the first time in a long time (probably since the 1989 Revolution), the Romanian citizens and the civic spirit they showed in February 2017 attracted the sympathy and admiration of the international media and gathered a positive image worldwide for Romanian civil society and democracy. However, it is less known that the demonstrations that broke out at the beginning of the year are not a novelty for Romania. This protest was preceded by other anti-system rebellions or supporting specific causes, so we may say that a culture of protests has developed strongly in Romania in the last six years.

The culture of protesting beginning in 2011 created a framework for public communication in times of crisis which the current Romanian Government had to attempt to ameliorate in February 2017.

### A Communication Strategy Based on Fake News

The #rezist protests have made use of the current tools of communication to maximize their potential, and at the same time have capitalized on the experience already gained in previous protests. Although late, the Government too has also connected itself to the current trends in public communication; we are referring here to the use of fake and post-truth news.

The fake news phenomenon is a topic that is lately intensely analysed and debated by scholars, due to its widespread occurrence and impact. Recent evidence, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p.212) say, indicate that 62% of US adults get news on social media (probably, a large percent of adults get their information on social media in other countries too) and that the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories. More worryingly perhaps is that many people who see the fake news stories report that they actually believe them to be true.

What makes fake news to be so powerful? It is difficult to have a definitive answer, but many researchers argue in their studies that, on the one hand, people have a natural disposition to partisan news (Bullock *et al.* 2015), and on the other hand, it is more difficult to refute fake news because of their lack of rationality (Della Vigna and Gentzkow, 2010). These two reasons might justify why fake news are so present and so intensely used within political communication processes.

There were several strategies designed to discourage protesters and dismantle public demonstrations (one of them which failed consisted in the mobilization of “hardcore” soccer fans to instigate violence within the peaceful protest), but the only consistent strategy was the one built around the generation and dissemination of fake news. So, the Government’s narrative talked about “street war” or even a “coup”. The officials of the coalition holding the power (i.e. the Social Democrat Party and its allies) accused multinational companies of forcing their employees to take part in the demonstrations and the political establishments’ friendly media (e.g. *Romania TV*) claimed that some protesters had received monetary incentives which would have been supplemented if they were accompanied by a pet<sup>1</sup>.

The Government communication topics during the #rezist protests shows a process of making the truth relative. In fact, the fake news strategy was used to substantiate that the protests were fake themselves. The obvious goal was to discredit the protesters, their intentions and the good faith thereof. According to the communication strategy based on fake news about protesters, the audiences of such fake news that claimed fake protests were not primarily those people protesting on the streets of Romania (these people don’t vote for PSD, they are the political opposition’s electorate), but other social categories with lower civic activism and who did not participate in such demonstrations, but they traditionally vote for PSD (e.g. retired, low skilled

workers, people in rural areas, etc). The latter had to be convinced that the protests did not have the claimed extent, and in any case, they were manifestations with a hidden agenda, orchestrated by foreign forces that had interests contrary to the national interest (accidentally or not, the former dictator Ceaușescu had suggested the same about the protests which erupted in the '89 Revolution).

How has this been accomplished?!

By using fake news as tools to achieve the goal outlined above. More specifically, prejudices have been amplified (i.e. xenophobia, the idea that young people are exalted and their grasp of reality is wrong) and negative emotions were fed (fear of social disorder that brings poverty, distrust).

In brief, the Government's communication strategy aimed to create major social cleavages on the Latin principle *divide et impera* (divide and rule) and to achieve this goal it was necessary to discredit the protests by launching fake news – a fashionable tool and proven to be highly effective in other social and political contexts.

#### How it's done

From the plethora of fake news articles launched during the protests, I will review only two, namely the ones with the highest circulation in terms of frequency of mention and that managed to remain high on the public agenda, causing many debates: (1) the multinationals mobilized people to go out for protests; (2) the citizens participating in protests are organized and paid by George Soros (an American billionaire of Hungarian - Jewish descent) who has special interests in Romania.

It was not by chance that these two pieces of news were promoted by the representatives of the political establishment and its friendly media. The first piece of fake news appeals to existing beliefs in the collective mind-set that multinationals exploit Romania's natural and human resources while having interests contrary to the national interest and practicing tax evasion. The second piece of fake news is based on the fear and distrust in others, in brief xenophobia, fuelled by conspiracy theories (according to one of such theories, the fire in the Colectiv club was intentional in order to overthrow the then Social Democrat Government for the benefit of a part of the political establishment supporting and being supported by the current Romania's President Klaus Iohannis).

Building the communication strategy around fake news observed the following scenario: in the first

stage, fake news appears in some obscure (online or mainstream) publications, then the information is reworked and disseminated by the mainstream media that is friendly to the political establishment which cites obscure and unverified sources, and subsequently launches debates upon these subjects, amplifying, in this way, the initial fake news story. In the third stage, the politicians supporting the Government take on their own discourse the information launched on mass media's and eventually add their personal touch on it.

Let us review the route of the fake news mentioned above.

Within a debate held at a PSD friendly TV station, *Romania TV*, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January, a moderator (Denisa Pașcu) argues that her sources (without providing any details to confer them credibility) declared that protesters are paid through the NGOs established in Romania by the Hungarian billionaire Soros. In order to substantiate and provide apparent accuracy to the information, the moderator of the TV broadcast puts forward the amounts that would have been paid to protesters: "Adults were paid RON 100, the children earned RON 50 and for each pet the protesters were paid RON 30"<sup>2</sup>.

Immediately the information is repeated by all the Social Democrats' friendly media outlets, including high-rated media (TV station *Antena3*, news website *DC News*). At the same time, the PSD's communicators, including PSD's President, Liviu Dragnea, took up this topic in their public discourse, resurrecting a theme from the previous electoral campaign related to foreign interference in Romania's internal politics and the hostile interests of George Soros.

The second story is built on the same strategy. In the first phase, the online newspaper *PH-online.ro* presents a story titled "REVOLT at Yazaki! The claim made was that employees were forced to go out into the street to protest against the GOVERNMENT!"<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, Yazaki, an automotive industry components manufacturer located in the city of Ploiești, denied the information on its official Facebook account, but this (small but essential) piece of information was lost in the avalanche of messages invading the mass media those days. The original fake news in the online newspaper is taken up again in the public discourse by the PSD President, Liviu Dragnea. He supports the need for multinationals to be investigated by the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) as the former engage in organizing protests. In a TV show, the PSD leader endorses the fake news by providing an example: the CEO of an important foreign bank, Steven-van-Groningen, as also present at the protests.

The statement of Liviu Dragnea was formulated as follows: "It seemed to me more than incorrectly that the CEO of a foreign bank, a foreign citizen, to protest against the [Romanian] Government. Normally he may be upset about the "*Datio in solutum*" law or for other things we did for Romanians"<sup>4</sup>. Dragnea implied that the simple fact that a foreigner banker was protesting is something wrong and that Steven-van-Groningen was dissatisfied with some laws adopted by the Government aimed to negatively affect the bank's profits.

In the third phase, the news on the newscasts of obscure websites and the political leaders' statements are repeated, debated and additionally backed up by the communicators of the party holding the power and its friendly media.

### Why is This Communication Strategy so Efficient and How Can We Tackle it?

This communication strategy is extremely effective, mainly for two reasons:

- It blends untruths that are hard to disprove with easily accessible, believable and verifiable truths among the public (e.g.: it is hard to prove that multinationals are not involved, because you cannot actually prove something which is absurd, but it is easy to notice the fact that the CEO of a foreign capital bank participated in the protest, regardless if he participated as a simple citizen);
- It is hard to prove the untruthfulness of some absurd / ridiculous situations / facts (e.g. the nonsense to pay for pet participation in protests);
- Last but not least, reason and solid arguments come second in times of crisis, priority being given to emotions which appeal to the collective mind-set imaginary (shaping thus ideas in the long run).

It is worth mentioning that citizens have reacted to the fake news broadcasted by certain TV stations. The Romania's National Audio-visual Council (CNA) received over 1,500 complaints in January and February alone, almost 10 times more compared to the same period last year<sup>5</sup>.

Beyond the counter-action above, the question remains: How do we combat such a strategy? A possible answer is found in McLuhan (1964), even after more than 50 years from its formulating: "The medium is the message". The discussions about and debates upon solutions could start from the role of televisions, the traditional media in general, the journalistic deontology, exposure of the general public to online and mainstream information and arguments, public debates organized within local communities each designed to offer better civic education and media literacy to citizens. The issue of fake news and their influence is a wider topic that affects many societies, hence Romania is part of an international media trend. Same as in other countries, talking about the existence and the impact of fake news and together with the launch of several websites and apps for checking fake news are, in fact, possible solutions for decreasing the impact of fake news. Such Romanian apps and websites are: *Verificasursa.ro*, "De necrezut" App, *Factual.ro*.

Reality has shown us that beyond the long-term cultural change that this generation active in protests has launched, it is hard to guess the outcome for democracy itself. The last six years have shown, however, that protests have been very effective in Romania in bringing about short-term political changes. It is however premature to consider the long-run perspective. ●

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# Author



## Dr. Maria Corina Barbaros

is a senior lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences, International Relations and European Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences ("Al Cuza" University of Iasi, Romania). Her main areas of interest and expertise are deliberative democracy, political communication, political marketing, public opinion and public agenda. Maria Corina Barbaros has been a fellow of Romanian Academy, Open Society Institute, Milan University and Institut für Publizistik-und Kommunikationswissenschaft, Freie Universität. Her latest books are *Political Marketing. Theoretical landmarks and action strategies* (Adenium, 2014) and *Political Communication. Constructing the political spectacle and the public agenda* (Adenium, 2014).

✉ barbaros.corina@gmail.com

🌐 www.corinabarbaros.ro



# #Resist on TV. Three Romanian news channels: two different perspectives on the anti-corruption rallies

## Towards a Romanian Culture of Protests

Rodica Melinda řu  

The internet provided the spark and the fuel for the anti-corruption protests, but television news channels provided insight, explanations and interpretation of the largest demonstrations since the fall of communism in December 1989. In Romania, most of the population uses television as the main source of information, according to the data shown in the last edition of the International Encyclopedia of Media Effects (2017). The audience of 55+, retired or part-time employed, on minimal income, that never travelled abroad or even outside their town village fall into the category of heavy users of a single channel, according to an analysis published by paginademedia.ro (2014)<sup>1</sup>.

The coverage of street protests that took place in late January and early February 2017 against the decree that decriminalized corruption displayed stark differences between Romania's various television channels, perhaps the most striking being between *Digi24*, *Antena3* and *Romania TV*. The research took place during the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January and the 7<sup>th</sup> of February, the programs monitored being the main evening newscast of *Digi24*, presented by Cosmin Prelipceanu, Roxana Lazarescu or Liana Patras, *Antena3*'s main talk show *Sinteza Zilei*, hosted by Mihai Gadea, and the breaking news and special editions moderated by Corina Dragotescu, Cristina Sincai and Victor Ciutacu on *Romania TV*.

The news channel *Digi24* took an early interest in the executive order prepared by the ruling political coalition made up of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Liberal Democrat Alliance (ALDE) to decriminalize several offences, the most obvious being the abuse of power becoming punishable by incarceration only if the sums involved were over 200,000 lei (cca. €44,000). Before OUG13 was adopted, the information was published off the record on the news website hotnews.ro and rapidly spread across social media networks and blogs. The news was ignored by most of the television

channels as Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu, the head of the ruling party Liviu Dragnea and all the relevant officials in the cabinet and the Parliament denied the information. However, independent journalists, activists, political analysts and legal experts were invited as panellists in the evening programs of *Digi24* to explain the consequences of the Ordinance.

"OUG13 "would have stopped all investigations for pending corruption offenses, freed officials imprisoned for corruption, and blocked further investigations related to those offenses from being brought to justice" (Cristian Pantazi, hotnews.ro).

*Digi24* was the only TV station which broadcasted live from the eve of the demonstrations that started in mid-January in Pia   Universit  ii in Bucharest, with dozens of protesters holding hand written signs. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, the cameras showed live shots of President Klaus Iohannis who decided to show his support for the protesters by joining the first major anti-corruption rally. "The problem is that one cannot act the way the government did in a country with the rule of law, which Romania is and wants to remain" was the President's reaction when interviewed at the emergency meeting of the Superior Council of the Magistrates (CSM) (*Digi24*, 01.02.2017). Iohannis' requests that the Government should immediately scrap the measure were broadcast by *Digi24* throughout the day, as well as the statements of Jean-Claude Juncker, the head of the European Commission:

"The fight against corruption needs to be advanced, not undone. We are following the latest developments in Romania with great concern." (*Digi24*, 02.02.2017)



After the OUG13 was adopted by the Government on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, and the protests spread across the whole country, with hundreds of thousands of Romanians marching in the streets, the topic dominated the entire agenda of this news channel: newscasts and live reports Piața Victoriei in Bucharest, as well as major cities such as Sibiu, Iasi, Constanța, Cluj-Napoca. There were aerial shots to show the magnitude of the rallies, live reports from the journalists who followed the events in the streets, and live interviews with the protesters that explained their presence at the demonstrations. “They are thieves. The only way to stop them is to stay in the street until they repeal OUG13”, and “I came here with my son because I don’t want him to grow up in a country led by politicians that make corruption legal” were some of the opinions of the protesters interviewed by *Digi24*.

The manner of reporting was informative and the tone of *Digi24* journalists was neutral, as the emphasis fell on the people in the streets and their voices, without adding the opinions and comments of the guests that are usually invited in the studio. The broadcast of “no comment” pictures such as aerial shots of the hundreds of thousands of people lighting their phones in the dark, forming the Romanian flag with their red, yellow and red clothes, or the natural sound of the voices singing the national anthem simultaneously across the country generated an emotion that spread across online and social media.

In the case of *Antena3*, the emotional outbursts of the moderators of the talk shows and their guests were directed against the protesters, regarded as a source

of chaos and political instability. The political analysts invited in the studio, such as Bogdan Chireac and Mugur Ciuvica, as well as the host Mihai Gadea drew a parallel with the volatile situation in Ukraine, one of Romania’s neighbours. They compared the demonstrators against the decree that decriminalized corruption in January and February 2017 with the miners that beat to death five and injured hundreds during the massive anti-government protests in June 1990<sup>2</sup>.

The moderators of the talk shows on *Antena3*, Mihai Gadea and Mircea Badea, accused the protesters of being verbally aggressive towards one of their reporters and vandalizing their video equipment. The situation of the group of about 300 football fans called *Ultras* that came on one of the nights of the demonstrations and threw fireworks and rocks of ice and solidified snow at the police came as a support of the station’s claims that all the anti-government protesters are violent. *Antena3* argued that the ruling coalition “was entitled to issue any law they please, as the left-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD) won elections in December 2016 with about 45% of the vote” (Bogdan Chireac, political commentator). They gave the example of the former technocrat cabinet of Dacian Ciolos, which passed a few decrees (none of them justice related though) and presented the initiative of the current government as an act of clemency. The host of the main evening program, *Sinteza Zilei*, Mihai Gadea, made an analogy with the pardons American President Barack Obama, granted at the end of his second mandate. The story was illustrated with photos showing Obama at a dinner table with some beneficiaries



of his act. There were close ups and dramatic camera zooming on the American president hugging men and women that had tears of gratitude in their eyes.

The accusations made by the protesters that the immediate beneficiary of the decree would be PSD leader Liviu Dragnea, who faces charges of defrauding the state, led to the Romanian Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu being invited in the studio of Antena3. He explained that "the changes in the legislation were needed to align some laws with the constitution and reduce prison overcrowding" (Antena3, 05.02.2017). Also interviewed by Antena3, Liviu Dragnea called the rallies an attempt at a "coup d'état to threaten the PSD's governing program of wage increases and other reforms aimed at helping the poorest". In Dragnea's view, the "coup" was orchestrated by the country's president Klaus Iohannis, Romania's secret services and the Romania's National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA).

"The organization of these protests and their scale show that this is a political gathering. Who is organizing this? I reproach myself for not having understood that this is a much better organized plan than a simple spontaneous movement" (Antena3, 05.02.2017)

The politicians from the ruling coalition, invited in the studio of Antena3 accused the National Anticorruption Directorate of "being overzealous with its investigations and its prosecutors of being the successors to the feared communist secret police" (Securitate).

The third news channel monitored for this report, *Romania TV*, also presented the protests as the beginning of a coup d'état organized by the president Klaus Iohannis and implemented by the secret services and the DNA. The politicians invited in the studio of *Romania TV* live programs accused the demonstrators of threatening the national security; lawyer Pavel Abraham, former chief of the Romanian police, went as far as urging the authorities "to use guns and war ammunition against the protesters that abusively occupied Piața Victoriei". The moderators of the main evening program claimed that they "know for sure that billionaire George Soros paid the protesters and advanced the sum of 20 euro for people and 10 euro for dogs". Corina Dragutescu, one of the anchors, said, referring to the profile of the protesters:

"They were carefully selected to form a positive image in the international media: young, educated, well dressed, good looking." (*Romania-TV*, 23.01.2017)

Interviewed by the reporters of *Romania TV*, the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, Lia Olguța Vasilescu, and the Mayor of Bucharest, Gabriela Firea, both members of PSD, criticized the Romanians for bringing their children to the demonstrations and called for "an investigation of the parents for putting the children in jeopardy" (25.01.2017). In terms of filming, the shots *Romania TV* cameras took from the rallies in the streets were tight, so that the number of protesters

seemed smaller than in reality, and the selection of the interviewees supported the policy of the government. One interviewee in the street was a former convict that complained that the conditions in prison were despicable and urgent measures are necessary, while another expressed the gratitude to the ruling party for salary and pension raises (RomaniaTV, 22.01.2017).



It is interesting to notice that the owners of the last channels mentioned have been involved in activities related to corruption. Media mogul Dan Voiculescu, the owner of *Antena3*, was sentenced to 10 years in prison, charged with money laundering and fraudulent privatization of the Food Research Institute (ICA), worth about €7.7 million<sup>3</sup>.

The 67-year-old former senator and founder of the Intact Media Group was accused of having used his political influence to cheaply privatize this institute and damaging the state by more than €60 million (stirileprotv.ro). Sebastian Ghita, the owner of *Romania TV*, is a former MP who disappeared in mid-December 2016 and was included on Europol's most wanted list. Ghita is investigated for corruption in a case related to former British PM Tony Blair's visit to Romania in March 2012.

The messages aired on *Romania TV* and *Antena3* played an important role in the mobilization of the counter-protest, the pro-government demonstration in front of the presidential palace, that gathered a couple of hundreds of people during several days. The majority of participants at the rally were senior citizens, asking for Klaus Iohannis's resignation. They denounced him as "traitor", accused him of "dividing the nation" and "preventing the government from working in the benefit of the Romanian citizens".

On the other hand, *Digi24*'s broadcast was more news oriented, showing the amplitude of the anti-corruption rallies, the messages of the protesters and the exact content of OUG13. The attitude and tone of the anchors were neutral, the images reflected the reality in field, and the accounts of the reporters were accurate. *Digi24* targeted a completely different audience than

*Romania TV* or *Antena3*, appealing to a younger public that attended or supported the anti-corruption meetings held in Piața Victoriei in Bucharest or other cities such as Timisoara, Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca or Iasi. This audience was mostly middle class, individuals or families with children, who watched *Digi24* while also getting their information from social media, online newspapers and independent journalists' blogs. ●

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## Author



### Dr. Rodica Melinda Şuțu

is Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, University of Bucharest, where she teaches television and convergent journalism. Şuțu has 20 years of experience in journalism, working as a reporter, editor, presenter and producer with the *Romanian Public Television* and *PROTV*. She did her PhD research in the United States and holds an MA with Distinction in International Journalism from the University of Westminster, London. Şuțu is the author of the first book on media convergence in Romania.

# Here, there and everywhere

## How space and images shaped the Romanian #rezist protests

Ana Adi

Big protests happen in big cities. The more populated a city is, the chances are that any protest it would witness would be proportionate to its population. Equally, a big city would geographically have more space(s) where people could gather in comparison with towns or villages. Moreover, the bigger the city, the more opportunities to identify a building or space that embodies either the spirit of the protest or that represents the institution or idea against which protesters have gathered to voice their opposition and discontent (Price & Sabido, 2016). This is the case of Ukraine's Kiev's relabeled "Euromaidan" (a combination of a reference to being European and the Russian square – maidan), Cairo's Tahrir's Square (Liberty Square) or Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout.

While not all big protests have been in public spaces, many recent ones have.

"Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 toppled President Eduard Shevardnadze from Tbilisi's Freedom Square. Kyrgyz protesters seized Ala-Too Square from police in 2005, then promptly stormed the nearby presidential palace and ousted long-time President Askar Akayev. Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 took place in the same Independence Square where protesters have now engaged in bloody clashes with government forces, wringing promises from President Viktor Yanukovych for early elections and a return to the 2004 constitution" (Ford, 2014).

For big protests to be truly big, they need to appeal beyond capital cities. In order to do so, they need to capture the attention of national and international media and the imagination of local populations. This was the case of #occupy, of the Arab Spring and more recently of Romania's #rezist protests.

The #rezist protests are considered to be Romania's biggest since 1989 but that is not simply because of the number of people gathering on the streets

in Bucharest, but rather due to the number of people protesting elsewhere (in the provinces and abroad) and due to the length of the protests (continuing for more than 100 days at the time of writing, in May 2017).

To fit the cause and reflect the anti-corruption narrative of the protests, the center of the #rezist protests was Piața Victoriei, in front of the Government building and not in Piața Universității, Bucharest a space that had until 2017 been the usual place of protest (see Ciobanu and Light in this report). The counter-protests happened in front of the Cotroceni Presidential Palace. As the anti-corruption protesters focused on a space facing the government, pro-government demonstrators (some hundreds of them compared to the thousands of anti-government protesters<sup>1</sup>) faced their *bête noire* President Klaus Iohannis.

It is in Piața Victoriei that Romanians gathered to send their message to the world, staging their two visually appealing and strategically viral pictures: the flag of lights (on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February) and the EU flag (on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February). Both images aimed to represent the solidarity and unity of the protesters, one emphasized the location and origin (Romania) while the other referenced Romania's place in Europe and the anti-corruption conditions of the nation's membership. These images did capture the imagination of the international press (like the *Guardian*<sup>2</sup>, the *Washington Post*<sup>3</sup> or *Die Welt*<sup>4</sup>), so becoming the emblems of the protests.

As a capital city, Bucharest had the size (of people and spaces, including the opportunity for polarization enabling thus generally peaceful demonstrations) and the spatial (the square, the Government building) and the symbols (the staged images) so that demonstrators could have impact, face their opposition and produce communication from a space that was instantly recognizable and had broader symbolic meaning (Ainger, 2016).

Importantly, other cities and towns in Romania followed suit. At the beginning of February tens of thousands protested in the provinces: 50,000 in Cluj,



**The EU flag made out of lights in Piata Victoriei in Bucharest, Romania; estimates indicate between 5-6,000 people to have contributed to creating the flag.**

Daniel Mihaiescu/AFP via Getty Images

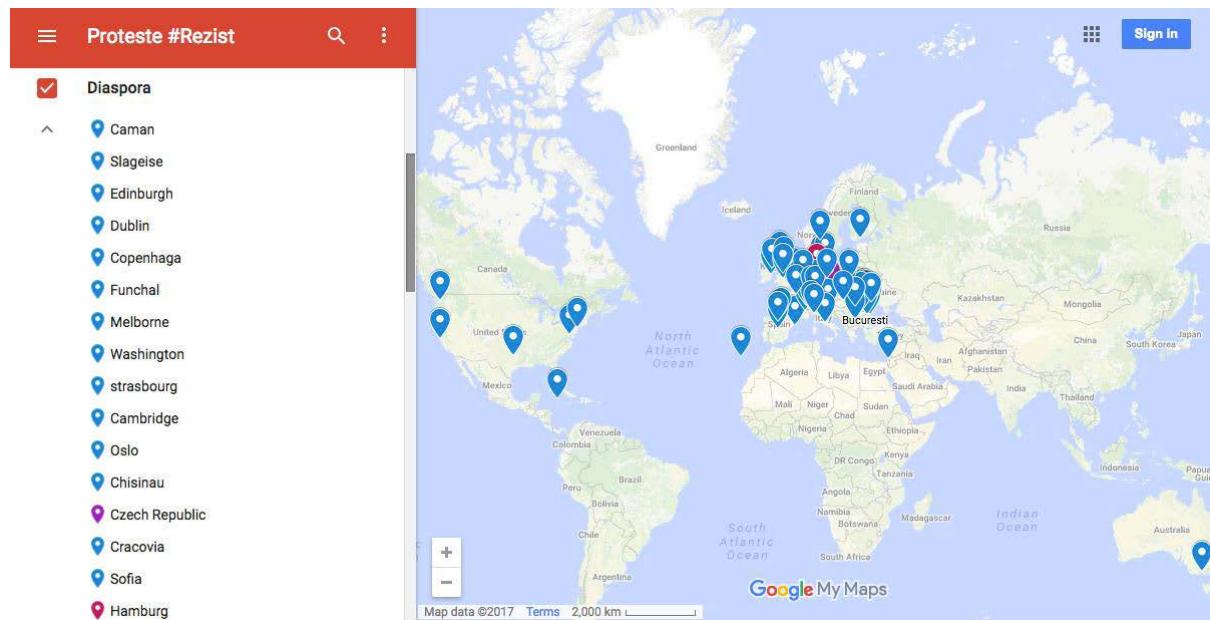
25,000 in Timisoara, 20,000 in Sibiu and 10,000 in Constanta. Later on, as 70,000 protesters in Bucharest were organizing to form and project the image of the Romanian flag, there were 30,000 in the provinces, 10,000 of them in Cluj alone (there were 2,000 protesters in Timisoara, 2,000 in Iasi, 1,500 in Brasov and 350 in Constanta – Ziare.com<sup>5</sup>). There were other cities where smaller crowds gathered, for example in Oradea, Cugir or Tecuci and others where just one person would protest: this was for instance the case of Florin Branisteanu (interviewed by Ana Adi - see "Protester profiles" article this report) in Bacau.

The symbolism of the protest was re-presented into the small city geography where the main city squares became the centers of activity and marches took place passing by (or stopping if possible in front of) the Prefecture buildings (the representations of the Government in the counties). However, the distance that Bucharest afforded for the peaceful polarization of discontent, was at times impossible in the provinces – either physically (as there was no such space) or personally (as the communities were small). This story of being the only one visibly on the “resist team”, is painfully

told by Florin Branisteanu. Branisteanu, a 37-year old accountant and a hearing impaired entrepreneur living in Bacau, used his placards to “shout” every evening in Bacau’s main square. While messages of support were pouring in on Facebook from other cities in Romania and diaspora, at home Branisteanu had become the target of PSD members one of whom in particular had taken it as her mission to discredit him to his family and urge his family members to pressure him into stopping his protest. For a while their tactic worked as Branisteanu stopped going to the city square at the request of his eldest daughter but returned recently as his Facebook posts show.

Branisteanu embodied #rezist and, in Bacau, his hometown, he became the symbol of #rezist. Not only did he adopt the symbols of the protest (the flag, the placard, and his occupation of the main square in his city) but he also started to produce bracelets with the #rezist symbol. Moreover, in such a small community, Branisteanu himself became the symbol of resist through his resilience and perseverance.

The #rezist message also travelled abroad. A Google Map<sup>6</sup> listed 52 cities abroad where anti-corruption



### Romanian anti-corruption protests in diaspora according to a Proteste #Rezist Google Map.

protests took place (side by side with 65 places where protests took place in Romania). The map's source and ownership could not be verified. The #Rezist Diaspora Facebook page<sup>7</sup> records an even higher number: 81 cities across the world in 36 countries including Paris, Milan and London where big Romanian diasporic communities reside as well as more unexpected sites such as Yokohama or French Guyana.

Here, like in the provinces, the Romanians and their supporters gathered in places that either reminded them of Romania (like the Romanian Cultural Institute in London or the Romanian Consulate in Berlin and Munich) or in places with high visibility, increased pedestrian and tourist footfall (like the Dome Plaza in Milan, Trafalgar Square in London, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the European Parliament in Brussels or having the Eiffel Tour in the background in Paris, a market square in the city of Kenitra, Morocco or the famous tour of Seattle). At times, to get the attention of passersby and start a conversation, they resorted to flash mobs and creative interpretations of the Romanian protests. This is how Sibiu's literary protest was re-enacted in London and Paris and the Bucharest flag of lights has its own version with balloons in Paris.

The Rezist Diaspora Facebook page offers a compelling collection of images from around the world which are usually stamped with the rezist hashtag, the country and city name, sometimes also indicating the

date of the protest. The images are generally focused on the people and their placards, most of them handwritten, leaving little to be seen of the environment surrounding them. This is where Vlad Lasco's picture taken while on duty on a cruise ship in Antarctica was reposted and this is where several one-man protests can be identified: the diving protest performed by a man in Mexico, one man and his flag in Sri Lanka or one young man and his handwritten rezist sign on a street in Bangalore.

When it comes to groups, location is either not easy to distinguish or cannot be seen at all. The Melbourne protest image is taken in the dark, focused on the placard alone. In French Guyana it seems to show the living quarters of the five protesters while the other five protesters in Koln are pictured in a park. The San Francisco group is on a beach, the Dublin group could have been on any street or alley in the city and so could the photos taken of big crowds orderly huddled along a sidewalk on a frozen morning in Oslo. The Dallas photograph on a bridge shows some of the cityscape contours. The Italy group from Carapelle (Foggia) are pictured protesting on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February with a green ink placard in hand and patiently yet gloomily looking into the camera is indoors; the space is reminiscent to an airport arrivals hall.

From these images, one could infer that it was the act of protesting and of showing solidarity and support with the protests in Romania that was valuable for the

## #rezist MEXIC



Rezist protester diving in Mexico<sup>8</sup>

## #rezist - ITALIA - Carapelle (Foggia)-5 Feb 2017



Rezist protesters in Carapelle, Italy<sup>10</sup>



Rezist Protest group in French Guyana<sup>9</sup>

## #rezist CONGO - Pointe Noire



The Boys from Congo know as well that Dragnea is a Jerk (see Girls from Sibiu know that Dragnea is a Jerk)<sup>11</sup>

Romanians abroad and that considerations of visibility (especially in smaller cities or further away locations) were not taken into account. This direct connection with what was going on in Romania is perhaps best shown in the image of the crew from Congo.

This mirroring of the Romanian protests has been mentioned in this volume by Moisin and Ioan and also seen in Adi's protester's profiles.

The #rezist protests started out of indignation. Protesters quickly identified both the spaces and the symbols with which to associate their protest, managing thus to capture the imagination of media and people beyond the Romania's capital city of Bucharest. By leveraging powerful symbols with a short and clear message and enabling each participant in the protests to reinterpret these symbols, the protests invited resistance and resilience through creativity. Their message has survived and the lessons learned are now helping some of them get organized. ●

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## Author



### Dr. Ana Adi

is a Professor of Public Relations/Corporate Communications at Quadriga University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. She defines herself as a digital humanist and writes often about the strategic intersections between digital media and communications. More recently, her writing, research and public appearances have focused on storytelling and protest PR. She is the co-editor of this report.

 [www.anaadi.net](http://www.anaadi.net)  
 [@ana\\_adi](https://twitter.com/ana_adi)



# Romanian protests: Piața Victoriei TV, the civil society's voice

Adrian Cristian Ionescu and Diana Carmen Ciudin

It was the 36<sup>th</sup> day of Romanian protests, quietly diminishing as days went by and life resumed its placid rhythm. The number of protesters reduced drastically after the Government repealed the infamous OUG13, with nothing but a “communication error” excuse, and kept decreasing to about 2-3 hundreds during the evenings.

As the mainstream media stopped informing about the protests, everybody started behaving like they had gotten over it, like the protests were old news. But they weren't for us, we were still intrigued, we were still angry, we were still frustrated, or maybe even more so.

You can't just break and enter, steal things, and then, when caught, just get away with the whole thing just because you were forced to give things back. Although, this was exactly what was happening, the government was getting away with it and people looked like they were accepting that.

We were a group of 5-7 people continuing to protest during the day in front of the Government building; ordinary people, with jobs or businesses, family and lots of friends with different interests but who shared common values and a dream that Romania can evolve.

Beatrice gave up all personal projects and became a fully dedicated protester for over 100 days, keeping her eyes on the Government for 8-9 hours a day and transmitting live from various locations and events where the civil society was protesting. She's had all the support of her family during this period.

Cristi is an entrepreneur dealing with fire safety equipment and procedures, and for him it was only natural to protest as a form of protection against abuses of the state; his NGO *Evolutie in Institutie*<sup>1</sup> (Evolution in the Institution) aims to put pressure on public institutions to follow the law and implement existing procedures to the benefit of the citizens. He has made sure the protesters' activities complied with existing laws and thanks to him, there are now a few thousand more Romanians that know Law 60/1991 (law for public assemblies) by heart.

Cristina and Constantin are entrepreneurs; they own a company selling cleaning products and devices and have two beautiful sons educated to be active

and balanced citizens. Constantin is happy to share his life experience and volunteering campaigns for the environment on his personal website<sup>2</sup> and has been our principal reporter and technician although he has no formal training in media/communication.

Adrian is a freelance programmer who has dedicated his last 6 years to developing a platform for participative democracy – *Panoul de bord* (Civic Dashboard)<sup>3</sup>; he dreams that people will one day be actively involved in making the decisions now controlled by the state. He is currently working on a mobile app for sending legal petitions to state institutions on various areas of interest.

Diana works in human resources for a multinational and 2017 was the first time she participated in a collective protest. Very active on her own, challenging public institutions and companies to obey the law and meet their obligations towards the citizens, she is extremely proud to have seen all those Romanians out in the street demanding their right to a normal life in a democratic state.

One day, one of us started broadcasting live on his Facebook account. Then, another one said, “Hey, we should talk with the people that are watching us, let's start a dialogue, let's express our concerns, and let the people know why we are here”. There were all kinds of lies<sup>4</sup> that were being propagated by the party in power through their controlled televisions: that we were Soros's people; that we were being paid to be there by the multinationals; that we were brain controlled with psychotronic waves<sup>5</sup>.

In the beginning, when we were hundreds of thousands in the streets, a lot of people came with dogs, and children, and the propaganda said that even the presence of dogs was paid<sup>6</sup>.

So there were a lot of shameless lies, and we thought that live transmission from the protests is a good way to counter all that, and say to everybody that we were there for justice, for democracy, to defend our rights, and to request the current government to leave because it wasn't eligible anymore and had damaged the credibility of our country to EU and NATO partners.



It wasn't long until we realized that a common Facebook page where we could all transmit live is better as it could aggregate all broadcasts on a single page that people can follow and stay updated. The most relevant name for the page was that of the square in front of the Government where we had been protesting: Piața Victoriei (Victory Square). The name of the square was in consonance with our goals and it fitted perfectly. And so, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March the *Piața Victoriei TV* was born. We started rapidly gaining an audience and reached about 4,000 likes in the first week. We were also sharing our posts (daily video transmissions from the protests, interviews with protesters) on larger groups on Facebook, formed earlier: #REZISTENTA, 600000 pentru Rezistenta, Coruptia ucide, Geeks for Democracy. The day this article was written (the 25<sup>th</sup> of May) *Piața Victoriei TV* had over 8,700 subscribers receiving our content and a post reach of 540,000.

*Piața Victoriei TV* aims to increase awareness about the citizens' constitutional rights but also the obligation to defend the rule of law. And it does this through short live broadcasts trying to inform about our constitutional rights or explaining legal or economic concepts. It is said that we live in a democracy, however 60% of people with a right to vote didn't cast their vote, and many of them don't understand why it would be important to do so. It is said that we live under the rule of law, although, if you ask, probably 9 out of 10 people won't be able to tell you what that means. So I guess that what we are trying to cover with this new kind of media is what was ignored and/or blocked by mainstream media and formal education. We are trying to force and enforce transparency in public institutions, we are disseminating relevant information about civic actions, promoting dialogue, educating, and, most of all, giving a voice to the civil society.

None of us has had prior experience or education in media, communication, public speaking, taking interviews, promoting events, but we were ready to learn and we even bought professional technical equipment from own funds in order to increase the quality of our transmissions; filming in the middle of traffic or after sunset was diminishing the clarity of our videos; after acquiring special microphones, smart selfie sticks and a spotlight, our followers appreciated the improvements.

There are a lot of Romanians living abroad and from other cities in the country that support our protests and have been sharing their thoughts during our live transmissions. Most people from the diaspora have expressed regret for not being able to attend the street movements from Romania; some shared information about their own local protests; many have stated that the reason for leaving the country was corruption which leads to poverty and lack of job opportunities. There were people asking how they can help us; there were ideas about talking to relatives back home who had voted for the coalition parties and opening their eyes; sending letters to EU officials to request support for the Romanians fighting against corruption. We have been contacted by different NGOs or individuals inviting us to promote and broadcast live from events they were organizing (protest for a pedestrian walkway in a very congested neighbourhood of the capital city; cleaning event in Vacaresti Delta or the Bucharest beltway).

Nowadays lots of other groups and individuals transmit live, either from protests, or from different events that bear relevance to the current political turmoil in our country. To maintain our relevance, we have diversified our coverage and started transmitting from civic events and actions; for example, *PVT* has had broadcasts from the European Parliament hearings related to the Romanian protests<sup>7</sup>, discussions against changing anticorruption law; garbage cleaning from different areas; debates on hot topics with opposition political parties; Mr Timmermans' dialogue with Romanians encouraging civic involvement<sup>8</sup>.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, the *Piața Victoriei TV* merged with the largest closed Facebook group created during the protests - #rezistenta and it was renamed *Rezistenta TV*. A series of interviews with public figures from all walks of life (opposition politicians, economists, writers, a judge) was initiated thus opening a dialogue with our followers on relevant topics.

The civil society has become the new opposition for the ruling coalition and the new media, like our

*Rezistența TV* is pivotal in keeping informed, educated and involved this new opposition.

We have a long way to go, but we feel that a lot of us woke up and realized that we have to get cívically involved. We hope that we might achieve a true democratic society using the ever advancing technology.

The democratization of information seems to be a big shift in how societies behave and organize. Those in power simply cannot control undesired information from surfacing, because now almost every citizen can be a reporter. This shift is only in its infancy in Romania, but it is already having visible effects. Currently it happens only within groups of people that belong to the younger generations, but it is spreading quickly. No oppressive regime can maintain its position under these conditions. Although we are still a long way from winning the battle against the old system – the corrupt, bureaucratic state, we are confident that we are facing one of the last convulsions of a disappearing beast, the oppressive state. *Piața Victoriei TV/ Rezistența TV* is but one of the many civic initiative examples that will contribute in a small but significant way to reshaping Romania's future. ●



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## Authors



**Adrian Cristian Ionescu**

Owner @ *panouldebord.ro* – An open source, web based, collaborative problem management / decision making platform

RSS [panouldebord.ro/#showEntity/7/1/entity.list.recent.activity](https://panouldebord.ro/#showEntity/7/1/entity.list.recent.activity)

Founder @ *SEGOIA* – A non-governmental organization for developing civil society, promoting democratic values, open society and civic involvement via technology

RSS [segoia.ro](http://segoia.ro)

Graduate Electronics Engineer worked as Java Developer (since 2005) and Analytics Engineer (since 2013) for various multinationals

LinkedIn [adrian-ionescu](https://www.linkedin.com/in/adrian-ionescu)



**Diana Carmen Ciudin**

Founder @ *SEGOIA* – A non-governmental organization for developing civil society, promoting democratic values, open society and civic involvement via technology

RSS [segoia.ro](http://segoia.ro)

Graduate Economist and Master in Human Resources working as Compensation & Benefits Expert since 2006

LinkedIn [diana-ciudin](https://www.linkedin.com/in/diana-ciudin)

# Active Facebook Groups during January – February Movements

Ruxandra Boicu

I propose a critical approach to the process through which two Romanian Facebook (FB) groups evolved from unbiased political positions, consistent with the new media values promoted by the FB creators (see below), to biased political discourse, contrary to the mission statements posted by the FB community leaders themselves soon after the number of users grew in a matter of hours and days, subsequent to the anti-corruption civic protests that burst out in January – February 2017.

The first group under scrutiny is *#Rezist (Romania Rezista)*<sup>1</sup>, a FB community which was set up spontaneously on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2017, to support the street protests in Bucharest, against the PSD Government's sudden issuing of Emergency Ordinance no. 13/2017 (OUG13).

The second FB group, *Coruptia ucide (Corruption kills)*<sup>2</sup>, started its activity much earlier (after the Colectiv fire), and joined the January – February protests consistently contributing to the coherence of the anti-Government movements too.

The street protests were sparked on the 31st of January, soon after 11 PM., when the *National Television [TVR1]* broadcast the press conference of the then Minister of Justice Florin Iordache.

Why was this press conference the reason for which anti-corruption protesters came out into the streets of Bucharest, invading the Square outside the Government headquarters, in the middle of winter, at low temperatures?

First, the announced Ordinance confirmed the public's suspicion that the newly appointed Government led by Sorin Grindeanu as Prime Minister had a secret plan to alter national legislation, so as to annul the Law articles that could concern PSD members who had been charged, and in some cases, imprisoned, because of acts of corruption. First and foremost, the protesters interpreted the effects of OUG13 as the Government's attempt to remove the charges of misconduct in public office against PSD leader, Liviu Dragnea.

The protesters were encouraged by the fact that

President Iohannis himself wrote: "Today is a mourning day for the rule of law"<sup>3</sup> on his Facebook page<sup>4</sup>, precisely during Iordache's conference. Moreover, the intensity of the street movements was enhanced by Iordache's arrogance and unwillingness to answer journalists' questions at the press conference. According to [www.realitatea.net](http://www.realitatea.net)<sup>5</sup>:

"Justice Minister Florin Iordache had an absolutely hilarious performance at the government press conference after the adoption of the Ordinance on criminal codes. To the sharp questions of journalists, Minister Iordache avoided direct answers and always went to "another/next question!"<sup>6</sup>.

*Coruptia ucide* was the most active Facebook page during the protests<sup>7</sup>. This page already had a long history related to anti-corruption protests. It had been launched during the street protests in Piața Universității [University Square] in 2015-2016, following the Colectiv tragedy, which led to the fall of the Victor Ponta Government. Actually, the page discussions about the January – February anti-Government protests were activated again on the very night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, and are still active at the time of writing.

As I mentioned in the introductory paragraph, some Facebook groups, such as *#Rezist* (see home page photo), were born during the first days of February, after the beginning of the January–February street movements and were specifically devoted to them. This page became so popular that many of the people in Piața Victoriei (outside the Government headquarters) and throughout Romania, later on, would carry "#Rezist" banners and shout "#Rezist" slogans. Actually, as reported at that time, the initiative of the hashtag came from:

"Iulian Uță<sup>8</sup> has registered with OSIM the trademark #REZIST [...] The idea came from a Spaniard, member of Podemos" (StareaPresei.ro: Branduidu-vă #Rezist)<sup>9</sup>.



**Coruptia ucide Facebook page header<sup>10</sup>**

### Facebook in Romanian politics

The power of Facebook has been used in Romanian politics for the last 12 years. Its technical, social and inter-relational virtues have made some politicians create personal pages and post visual and verbal messages intensely. Remus Cernea<sup>11</sup>, Victor Ponta<sup>12</sup>, Elena Udrea<sup>13</sup>, Crin Antonescu<sup>14</sup>, Dan Diaconescu<sup>15</sup>, etc. were active FB users even before the 2014 Presidential election which effectively proved how influential social networks may be in politics and in society, in Romania too.

Basically, in the second round of the presidential election, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2014, Klaus Iohannis, supported by some active FB groups, succeeded in turning the first-round results around in his favour and becoming President, in spite of all polls. It was for the first time in Romania when the online environment played a decisive role in an electoral campaign:

“I did not believe at the beginning of the campaign that this new party that appeared in Romania, called the Facebook Party, alongside the other new party in Romania, called the Diaspora Party, would have this force and this determination to turn the result of the vote. The Social Democrat candidate, Prime Minister Victor Ponta, lost in the second round, obtaining 45% of the votes, according to the data, after the counting of 99.07% of the votes. In the first round, he had received 40.44% of the votes, while Iohannis was then elected by 30.37% of those who voted.”<sup>16</sup>

Since that date, Facebook has been respected and feared by Romanian politicians, due to its above-mentioned technical and social possibilities. Technically, it was devised so as to show the profile of its users;

technically and socially, it enables the creation of groups, communities of practice, relying on users' common goals, beliefs, values, etc. Facebook conveys informative messages and invitations to *Events*. This complexity of usages has turned FB into a privileged channel for political communication.

But was Facebook created for political communication?

Its creators considered that between politics and FB, there is a conflict of interests: its initial status forbade political bias and involvement. Coleman & Blumler (2009, p. 175) stated it explicitly: “E-democracy must be supported by civil society, not by the forms of government”<sup>17</sup>. The link between Facebook and politics was controversial at first. The very collaboration between Chris Hughes (Facebook co-founder) and Barack Obama (when Hughes himself became Obama's campaign adviser) led to questions and allegations about the conflict of interests between political action and the nonpartisan status of this social network (Slotnick, 2009, p. 252)<sup>18</sup>.

Keeping this ideological clarification in mind, we have to acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of social networks, in general, by civic, unbiased groups such as *Coruptia ucide* and #Rezist. Their administrators, moderators, or common members posted a kind of manifestos, besides regulations concerning communication rules on the pages of each of these two groups.

### Mission statements vs. biased discourse

In its “mission statement” *Coruptia ucide*, whose founder was Florin Bădiță, emphasizes that his FB community is committed to educating, informing and making citizens responsible regarding their “freedom and rights”, as well as regarding “the less healthy things” that happen on Romania’s political and social stage. More clearly expressed, irrespective of the age or professional differences within the community, its members are united by a shared aspiration to “live in a better Romania ... a Romania which should respect its citizens and their rights.”

Likewise, in a later post on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, under the very name of the FB page, the creator of the group synthesizes the contribution of this group to the anti-corruption protests in January–February<sup>19</sup>, posting that, apart from the first spontaneous protests on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, the “street actions had been announced through Coruptia ucide in conjunction with other groups in Romania or in the diaspora.” Besides specifying the significant role that *Coruptia ucide* played in the protests,



#Rezist/Romania Rezista Facebook group header photo<sup>20</sup>

the group leader supplies some pragmatic information about short- and long-term objectives, as well as a strict plan of concerted events, flashmobs, to be attended by this FB group users or readers.

#### What is the identity of this group?

A team of 350 young people administered this most active page during various protests. The page was created, as stated earlier, by a young and enthusiastic IT specialist from Cluj, Florin Bădiță, in November 2016. The initial goal of the page was to offer space for online debates, and to create events and funny banners/slogans for the protesters. In the meantime, the group has become militant for citizens' rights, in an explicitly democratic way, through editing a joint Proclamation<sup>21</sup>, with the participation in debates of large categories of publics.

As of the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, *Coruptia ucide* has 59,473 members, among them some outstanding intellectuals, reputed university professors, such as Brîndușa Armanca, Mircea Kivu and Mariana Netă, to mention just a few.

#Rezist (*Romania Rezista*), on the other hand, was created as a FB group on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, nine days after the start of the street protests. It has been an anti-corruption group in the making: although, on the home page, three users were announced as moderators, they do not fulfil their role consistently. Maybe, that is why, an undeclared moderator but a very vocal member, Alex Maranda, was recently in search of a genuine moderator of the discussions, as an incipient organizing initiative (Alex Maranda: ““We are looking for moderators throughout the country. We can’t go on

without them<sup>22</sup>; and the answer came from Corneliu Gușă, a new member: “I volunteer”<sup>23</sup>. Corneliu Gușă had only posted a few times before this conversation took place in April 2017. He answered the members’ need of organization and of ideological clarifications.

Unlike *Coruptia ucide*, #Rezist (*Romania Rezista*) is a small group of 3,203 members, including some journalists, such as Marina Constantinoiu and Moise Gurani, artists like Tudor Chirilă, and other public figures from more heterogeneous backgrounds.

On this group’s home page readers are presented with a code of communication that they should accept before becoming members proper; among the rules, candidates find out that they should 99% post personal contributions, under the form of ideas, initiatives and actions. As to the candidates’ values and principles, the three declared group administrators specify that they accept only those who “love Romania”, that is, those for whom the “political colours are red, yellow and blue”; likewise, applicants should be correct and accurate towards political leaders and their statements, should prefer action to passivity (so as to be dignified “in the eyes of their sons and daughters”), and should “feed on ideals and hopes, not on hate and fear”). Netiquette rules are also mentioned here: “refrain from racism, xenophobia, discrimination ... offences, insults, ad hominem attacks ..., incitement to violence” and last, but not least, in my opinion, “avoid biased statements.”

But could the “#Rezist” members live up to these high expectations or lofty ideals?

I found the answer to these questions in the group discussions. For instance, related to insults and

swearing, when a member posts a statement made by former President Ion Iliescu for the media, in which he wonders “who is behind the street protests”, member Roșu Cornelius replies: “Just you see how many of us will be behind your mortuary car to swear at you!”<sup>24</sup>

Concerning the highly stated “love for Romania”, here is an offensive generalization, a negative stereotype about Romanians, posted by member Lucia-Maria Popescu:

“Romanians feel good co-existing with the absurd and with overturning of values ..., they have adapted to theft, lies, and cheating ..., they make friends with any political formation that offers even the slightest material advantages” (posted on 7 May)<sup>25</sup>.

Moreover, can we say that the discussions on #Rezist are unbiased, when moderator Mihaela Condurache posted an explicit reference to her political adversary on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February? She scolds her co-users:

“I thought we'd agreed to check newcomers, hadn't we? There were some suggestions of receiving some people into the group a few seconds ago and by the time I could look at their profiles, they had already been accepted. I've only checked one of them and he had pro PSD posts. Are we going to do this job properly, or not?” (posted on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February)<sup>26</sup>.

Many other posts contain explicit conflictive replies to known or unknown adversaries as well as friendly references to President Iohannis, former Prime-Minister Dacian Cioloș, etc.

At this stage, it is important to mention that, on *Coruptia ucide*, the political stage is not drawn only in black or white (as it was the case of #Rezist), and there is a wider debate and range of references to politicians or events that do not seem to have direct relevance for the January–February street movements, such as Elena Udrea, Traian Băsescu, or the anti-Putin protests in Russia.

What has happened with the a-political orientation of these groups in the meantime?

As a #Rezist opinion leader, Lucia-Maria Popescu states/posts, “We should organize ourselves!<sup>27</sup>, which is the most explicit urge not only to joint protests, but also to political commitment.

In conclusion, both FB groups started their January–February discussions in the true spirit that

reigned when Facebook was created, that is politically unbiased. Moreover, both communities pledged to host values and actions in the interest of all Romanian citizens. Yet, their discursive practices, as demonstrated above, have become ever more partisan; some verbal attacks at some Romanian political actors (more on #Rezist than on *Coruptia ucide*) have marked the adoption of political stands.

In addition to the online use of political discourse, mainly on #Rezist, *Cotidianul*<sup>28</sup> published an article, entitled “#Rezist is becoming a political party”<sup>29</sup> where one could read that #Rezist brand has been registered at the State Office for Inventions and Trade Marks [OSIM]. There are still vivid debates on this FB group and in Romanian society, as a whole, about this controversial issue. ●

## References

- Coleman, S., Blumler, J. G. (2009). The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Slotnick, A. (2009). 'Friend' the President: Facebook and the 2008 Presidential Election. In C. Panagopoulos (Ed.), Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications, (pp. 249-271). NY: Rutgers University Press.

## Endnotes/Media links

1. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista>
2. <https://www.facebook.com/coruptia.ucide/>
3. "Astăzi este o zi de doliu pentru statul de drept"
4. <http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/reactia-presedintelui-iohannis-dupa-ce-a-fost-adoptata-oug-privind-gratirea-este-o-zi-de-doliu-pentru-statul-de-drept-de-azi-misiunea-mea-e-sa-il-restabilesc-16144568/foto>
5. [https://www.realitatea.net/alta-intrebare-prestata-hilara-a-ministrului-florin-iordache-la-conferinta-de-presa-de-la-guvern\\_2028364.html](https://www.realitatea.net/alta-intrebare-prestata-hilara-a-ministrului-florin-iordache-la-conferinta-de-presa-de-la-guvern_2028364.html)
6. Original text: "Ministrul Justiției, Florin Iordache, a avut o prestație absolut hilară la conferința de presă de la Guvern, după adoptarea Ordonanței pe codurile penale. La întrebările tăioase ale jurnaliștilor, ministrul Iordache a evitat răspunsurile directe și a trecut mereu la "altă întrebare!" See more at: [https://www.realitatea.net/alta-intrebare-prestata-hilara-a-ministrului-florin-iordache-la-conferinta-de-presa-de-la-guvern\\_2028364.html#shash.1GHemYgg.dpuf](https://www.realitatea.net/alta-intrebare-prestata-hilara-a-ministrului-florin-iordache-la-conferinta-de-presa-de-la-guvern_2028364.html#shash.1GHemYgg.dpuf)
7. <http://a1.ro/news/social/coruptia-ucide-cea-mai-activa-pagina-de-facebook-din-timpul-protestelor-este-administrata-de-350-de-oameni-cine-sunt-ei-id632055.html>
8. He is a journalist from Argeș County (Romania), the owner of Profit newspaper.
9. Original text: Iulian Uță [care] a înregistrat la OSIM marca #REZIST [...] Ideea a venit de la un spaniol, membru Podemos" <http://www.stareapresei.ro/iulian-uta-marca-rezist/>

10. <https://www.facebook.com/417077815147796/photos/417090051813239/>
11. a member of the Chamber of Deputies and the president of the Green Party
12. former Prime Minister of Romania, a PSD MP and party leader from 2010 to 2015
13. an independent female politician who was a member of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies from 2008 to 2016. In successive Emil Boc cabinets, she served as Tourism Minister from 2008 to 2009 and as Regional Development and Tourism Minister from 2009 to 2012
14. former President of the National Liberal Party (PNL) from 2009 to 2014. He also served as Romania's Acting President after the suspension of Traian Basescu and as the President of Senate
15. a Romanian journalist, politician, presenter, the founder and owner of DDTV and OTV television stations. In 2010, together with OTV show presenters, he formed the People's Party – Dan Diaconescu
16. Original text: "Nu am crezut la inceputul campaniei ca acest nou partid aparut in Romania, care se cheama Partidul Facebook, alaturi de celalalt nou partid aparut in Romania, care se cheama Partidul Diaspora, vor avea aceasta forta si aceasta determinare pentru a intoarce rezultatul votului. Candidatul social-democratilor, premierul Victor Ponta, a pierdut in turul al doilea, obtinand 45% din sufragii, potrivit datelor date publicitatii dupa numararea a 99,07% din voturi. In primul tur, el a primit 40,44% din voturi, in timp ce Iohannis a fost ales atunci de 30,37% dintre cei care au mers la vot ". Available from: [http://www.zaire.com/klaus-johannis/presedinte/rolul-interesant-al-mediului-online-in-alegerile-prezidentiale-de-ce-a-castigat-klaus-iohannis-1334106](http://www.ziare.com/klaus-johannis/presedinte/rolul-interesant-al-mediului-online-in-alegerile-prezidentiale-de-ce-a-castigat-klaus-iohannis-1334106)
17. Coleman, Stephen, Blumler, Jay G. The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy, Cambridge University Press; 2009
18. Slotnick, Alisson. "Friend' the President: Facebook and the 2008 Presidential Election, pp. 249-271 in Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications, edited by Costas Panagopoulos, 2009, Rutgers University Press
19. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/corupC89Bia-ucide/comunicat-de-presC483/585596031629306/>
20. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/>
21. [www.ProclamatiaRomania2017.ro](http://www.ProclamatiaRomania2017.ro)
22. „Țără, țără vrem moderatori în grup, nu facem față.”
23. Original text: "Sunt dispus" <https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/permalink/485529918445263/?match=YWxleCBtYXJhbRhLG1hcm-FuZGEsYWxleCw3D>
24. Original text: "Să vezi ce mulți o să fim noi în spatele dricului tău săti aducem m.m de final! [https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/permalink/485387451792843/?comment\\_id=485687348429520&comment\\_tracking=7B22tn223A22R227D](https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/permalink/485387451792843/?comment_id=485687348429520&comment_tracking=7B22tn223A22R227D)
25. Original text: "Românii se simt bine în conviețuirea cu absurdul și răsturnările valorice ..., s-au adaptat furturilor, minciunilor și înșelătoriei ..., sunt prieteni cu orice formătăjune politică care oferă avantaje materiale, fie ele chiar minimale" [https://www.facebook.com/luciamaria.popescu.3?hc\\_ref=SEARCH&fref=nf](https://www.facebook.com/luciamaria.popescu.3?hc_ref=SEARCH&fref=nf) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/permalink/48553146511775/>

26. Original text: Parcă stabilisem că verificăm pe cine introducem în grup, nu? Au apărut câteva sugestii de introducere în grup acum câteva secunde și până să intru pe profilurile lor, deja se acceptaseră. Unul singur l-am verificat și avea postări pro PSD. Facem treaba asta cum trebuie sau nu?“ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/romaniarezista/permalink/439329186398670/>

27. Original text: NE ORGANIZAM! [https://www.facebook.com/luciamaria.popescu.3?hc\\_ref=SEARCH](https://www.facebook.com/luciamaria.popescu.3?hc_ref=SEARCH)

28. [www.cotidianul.ro/rezist-devine-partid-296759/](http://www.cotidianul.ro/rezist-devine-partid-296759/)

29. Original text: “#Rezist’ devine partid”

# Author



## Dr. Ruxandra Boicu

Associate Professor at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest

Member of SPARTA research center  
(Projects on Diasporas and Borders)

Head of the MA in English “Media, Public Communication and Globalization”

Individual Pages on Facebook, ResearchGate,  
Academia.edu, etc. with the official address:

✉ [ruxandra-ileana.boicu@fjsc.ro](mailto:ruxandra-ileana.boicu@fjsc.ro)

# Humor as a form of symbolic communication during the February 2017 protests in Romania

Brîndușa Armanca

The widespread fame acquired by the January-February 2017 anti-corruption protests that took place in almost sixty Romanian cities has quickly generated Wikipedia pages<sup>1</sup> in Romanian, English and German that offer an outline of the events, and include daily attendance figures.

The quick dissemination and the huge ratings that the Romanian protests attained worldwide are linked to factors that can be analysed from a socio-anthropological, communicational and media perspective. The most influential international media largely reported about the protests: *Reuters*, *AFP*, *DPA*, *Associated Press*, *Deutsche Welle*, *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Euronews*, *Russia Today*, *The New York Times*, *CNN* etc. Even *CCTV* (China) or *Telesur* (Latin American TV network) sent correspondents to Bucharest. The Romanian news channels – *RTV*, *Antena3*, *B1 TV*, *DIGI 24* got the biggest audience ever: at a national level the ratings doubled or tripled (*paganadamedia*, 2017)<sup>2</sup>. The analogy with the massive demonstrations of the 1989 Romanian Revolution also brings out the fundamental differences in communication. Analysis and comments<sup>3</sup> on the #rezist movement have stressed the particularities of the 2017 mediatic context, which prompted different communication strategies.

As sociologist Dan Jurcan (2017, p.52) notes:

“If 1989 was the year of the televised revolution, more recent protests are defined by social media mobilization. Televisions still serve as ‘boomboxes’, amplifying the message”.

Nevertheless, after 28 years, humour is still among the favourite strategies employed by protesters, with notable differences in magnitude: during the Revolution, people ruefully chanted “We want candies for Christmas, not a mad leader”<sup>4</sup>, and stuck a Hitler-moustache on Ceaușescu’s portrait, lampooning dictatorship in all its incarnations. Having become the main target of satire in both slogans and placards, (alongside Florin Iordache, the Minister of Justice, and

Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, President of the Senate and leader of ALDE, a coalition party that barely made it past the 5% parliamentary electoral threshold), Liviu Dragnea got Stalin’s moustache and was cheerfully saluted with ‘Harasho mustache!’<sup>5</sup>, bringing historical allusions closer to home and imbuing them with a particular Eastern feel.



Cool moustache – Harasho, Ordinace!<sup>6</sup>

This is not the first time that humour has been employed to undermine the dominant narrative, but its emergence in political activism is linked to the pervasion of our daily urban lives by the Internet and social media.

Recent sociological studies indicate an increase in street protests that make use of humour to counter aggression and use Facebook or Twitter to send a mobilizing, nonviolent message.

“One encounters here a humorous approach to protesting – one that makes fun of political adversaries, notably PSD president Liviu Dragnea, with funny custom-made posters, video projections on buildings, puppets – as symbolic representations of discontent. This generation’s discovery of politics and protests as the preferred channel to interact with the political system coincides with current technological developments, enabling a leaderless, spontaneous, and all-inclusive movement” (Rammelt, 2017).

An IRES survey<sup>7</sup> of 980 subjects, 18 years of age and older, conducted over three days (6-8 of March 2017) using the CATI method, with a 3.5% margin of error, shows the average protesters to be: young people and adults below 50 years of age, with average (30%) and high (40%) education levels, urban dwellers, working (76%), mainly in the private sector, or students (11%). Higher levels of education can partially account for the creativity and the abundance of positive – though resolutely critical – messages, through long periods of demonstrations in harsh winter conditions.

Unpublished estimates indicate that between 300 and 400 critical messages were posted during the protests, most of them satirical or humorous in nature, in various forms that could be reposted on social networks as pictures or clips: placards, laser projections, puppets, masks, costumes, slogans, and chants. Although the latter were spontaneous productions of a certain kind of enthusiasm fueled by public solidarity, their creators had multiple goals in mind: visibility through mass-media coverage, wide civic involvement and pressure on government officials to withdraw OUG13. Increased coverage by international media brought forth a change in tactics, as placards in English or other international languages (German, French) started to appear in Bucharest and in all major cities. Political or cultural contextual references increased the impact: *Make Romania corrupt again* (Bucharest), #Rezist up to Untold<sup>8</sup> (Cluj-Napoca), *Les Misérables* (Timișoara) etc.

The use of “fair-ground props” – trumpets, vuvuzelas, puppets, drums, masks, music ensembles, etc. – served to further ridicule and undermine governmental authority, as officials lay hidden inside their fortress of power, unwilling to reach out to the street. Most memorable were the five giant handle-operated puppets depicting the five targeted officials (Dragnea, Tăriceanu, Grindeanu, Ponta and lordache) in prisoner uniforms. In a news coverage from Bucharest dating the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, the correspondent of the Associated Press noted the dark humor and sarcasm:

“Theatre was one of the few tools of resistance under the suffocating communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, with metaphors and double-entendres taking the place of overt protests. The country’s post-communist political life at times resembles operetta, so it’s hardly surprising drama has permeated the protests. Protesters have played violins or guitars, danced or staged impromptu plays or dances, in a mélange of

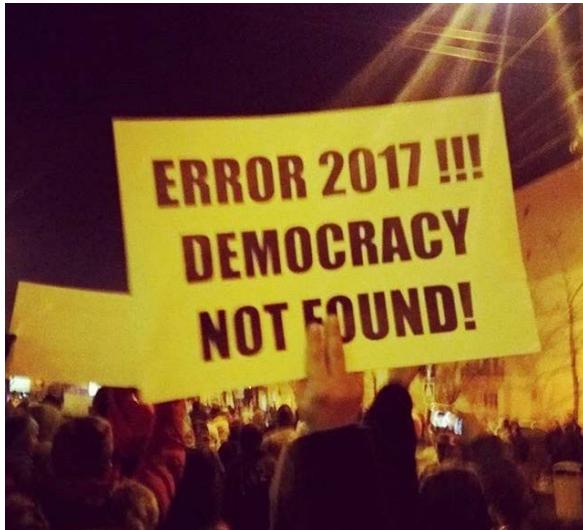
Romanians’ dark humour and witty sarcasm. Life-size cut-outs of politicians from the governing Social Democratic Party-led alliance dressed as convicts have been paraded around Victory Square. Images of 15<sup>th</sup>-century prince Vlad the Impaler, who punished thieves by cutting off their hands, also popped up” (Mutler, 2017).

What stands out is the witty humour, usually rejecting obscenity and profanity in favour of allusion, innuendo, and elegant subversion. One of the subtler placards shows a message for Prime Minister Grindeanu, considered by many to be Liviu Dragnea’s obedient tool. It reads: Sorin, blink twice if you’re in need of rescue.

Some of the more popular slogans that circulated throughout the country are: *Noaptea ca hoții!* (Like thieves, in the night!), *PSD, ciuma rosie* (PSD, the red plague), *DNA să vină să vă ia!* (DNA should come and take you), *Altă întrebare* (Next question – used 47 times by the former Minister of Justice, Florin lordache, during the press conference), *Fax you, Dragnea!, Abrogați și plecați!* (Repeal and leave!), #rezist (resist), #vădem (we see you), #neam trezit (we have awoken/nation awaken) were among the most commonly used hashtags.

One notices the numerous references to literary works (*Les Misérables*, *Tepeș Lord, where hast thou gone?*<sup>9</sup> *Ion Creangă*<sup>10</sup> paid for the stolen cherries), cinema (*No country for old thieves*, *Chuck Norris help us!*, *Batman is here*, *Live long and protest*), ads (*Dragnea – connecting people*, *Enjoying Corruption since 1989*, *No more Victoria's Secrets*, *High Class Fashion with jail uniforms and handcuffs*, *I see smarter Cabinets at IKEA*), IT (*Error 2017!!! Democracy not found*, *Stop-Undo-Delete or Ctrl+Z*) or online games (*Enough is enough*/*Angry birds*). It is also amusing to note how phrases made famous by recent political events were given new meaning, adapted to this particular context or glocalized (to borrow a concept from philosopher Marshal McLuhan and sociologist Roland Robertson), suggesting careful research and an increased interest in the topics of the day on the part of the protesters: *Jesuis Mircea Marian, with the variation We don't be Liviu, Make Dragnea small again, Jos Erdogan de Teleorman!* (Down Erdogan of Teleorman!), *When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty* (Thomas Jefferson).

The presence of children and dogs in public squares, at separate morning events branded as ‘protests of the innocent’, served as a pretext for the authorities to take issue with the demonstrators, and also provided an opportunity to fight back the officials’ attempts to



Placard at #Rezist Protests in Bucharest<sup>11</sup>



Dog at #Rezist protests. "I feel like howling" reads the message on the placard<sup>13</sup>



Dragnea: Connecting people placard, referencing to one of Nokia's memorable campaigns<sup>12</sup>

Dragnea's statement that American billionaire George Soros was funding the protests, including dogs, was met with dry replies, coming from the pets themselves. Placards showing giraffes or cats asking for payment, the picture of a dog displaying the following message: Soros, where is my money? or that of Kumo, the star-puppy from Piața Victoriei, have gathered thousands of likes on Facebook. This spontaneous and satirical communication strategy succeeded in undermining governmental conventions and the dominant narrative, gaining temporary control of the public arena and taking officials by surprise, as a recent study published on realclearworld.com shows:

"What makes movements successful is in fact creativity and the ability to easily shift tactics. In this way, movements stay unpredictable. They become difficult for opponents to break or contain, and they are fun for participants" (Popovic and Sallai, 2017).

In spite of all the insinuations made by the government aligned-media, which tried to discredit the concept of spontaneous humour, most of the placards, slogans, chants and posters are the anonymous creations of the protesters. "Romanians are born poets" was a PRO TV feature in the news program<sup>14</sup> on the wittiest messages and banners. Copyrighters involved with the protests worked in plain view: an offer for professional posters could be found on the Art of Protest website<sup>15</sup>.

mislead public opinion through such politically-driven media outlets as *Antena 3*, *RTV*, *B1 TV*, *DC News*, *Jurnalul Național*. Government officials responded poorly, displaying the very arrogance and lack of transparency they were being accused of, by trying to downplay the number of protesters, urging PSD supporters to set-up counter-protests (which took place in front of Cotroceni Palace, official residence of the President of Romania, deepening social divisions), or accusing foreign enemies such as George Soros, the European Union, multinationals, embassies, etc. of malicious plots against the government.



Les Miserables placard in Bucharest's Piata Victoriei<sup>16</sup>

All these received widespread attention on the Internet. Many images coming from live smartphone streaming went viral on Facebook, and again, the increased pervasion of Romanian life by social media played an important role, as was the case with the Colectiv fire protests.

According to Facebrands<sup>17</sup>, Romania had 9,600,000 Facebook users in January 2017, with 44,44% take-up, most of them under 55 years of age. The previously mentioned IRES study indicates that among those who took part in the 2017 rallies and protests, 78% acquired information from Facebook and TV channels, 52% from Facebook, and 36% from WhatsApp. Most of them (i.e. 76%) used the smartphone as their main technical device. Improved access to high-speed internet, made possible by extended broadband signal, played an important role in the emancipation of urban area populations. The gap between city and village, between urban centre and provincial town, which includes access to information, has widened in recent years despite European development funding, and these differences are reflected in protest attendance. There were towns with only one protester, like Odobeşti<sup>18</sup>, Bârlad<sup>19</sup>, and Oneşti<sup>20</sup>. Nevertheless, the viralisation of certain messages and pictures has expanded the audience well beyond special or geographical limits, confirming the effectiveness of social media in social activism and the efficiency of humour in the way events are perceived:

"Humour can spread virally through the worldwide group in a digitally driven embodiment of laughter itself, cultivated in evolutionary terms to spread like a contagion through a gathering as quickly and efficiently as possible" (Weitz, 2016).

These messages were digitally archived on platforms such as [www.lozinci.ro](http://www.lozinci.ro) or compiled on [www.danagont.ro](http://www.danagont.ro). Soon after the protests ended, Curtea Veche Publishing published a selection of some of the best photographs, placards and written texts produced by the participants. Art critics Pavel Şuşără from Bucharest and Dana Sarmeş from Timișoara have announced an exhibition of placards and protest props." The outstanding inventiveness and creativity of the messages become a cultural construction", argued Şuşără for news.ro<sup>21</sup>.

"Collected in a book, the photos become relevant snapshots for the historical year 2017, showing to the sceptical people that a new generation of citizens could protest in a different way comparatively to the 90ties: without hate, without grim. Next generations need this kind of testimonial, as a reference for a founding event of their history", said Iren Arsene, general manager of the publishing house, for the site<sup>22</sup>.

Although lacking in ideology and leadership, and concerned primarily with pressing the case for moral integrity, the #rezist movement (successfully labelled as such on Twitter by Luminița Dejeu, a resident of Cluj) succeeded in drawing in by contagion a massive number of protesters in a spectacle that circled the globe, in which giant renditions of the Romanian flag (the 12<sup>th</sup> of February) and the EU flag (the 26<sup>th</sup> of February) were created in Piața Victoriei, with the help of the smartphone flashlights. Izabela Lazăr<sup>23</sup> from Bucharest came up with the idea and the technical solutions for this incredible happening. The anti-corruption protests in Romania were impressive in their massive attendance, persistence, the resilience of its participants until OUG13 was withdrawn, and also in its nonviolent and playful nature.

“Humour facilitates outreach, mobilization, a sustainable culture of resistance as well as challenging power by engaging in the discursive guerrilla war with hit-and-run attacks”<sup>25</sup>.

Humour as a basis for civic activism is delightful, but bears certain risks: some people might think that things are not serious or are not taken seriously, or that humour does not have the power to solve important political issues. Here is yet another dilemma posed by a Swedish scholar:

“The final dilemma: the claim that satire might make people disillusioned rather than encourage them to take action” (Sorensen, 2016, p.27).

By “practicing their trade as citizens” as philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu recently said during a speech held at the European Parliament, the symbolical resistance of the Romanian people has turned, during the final stages of the protests, to concrete civic action, through the drafting of Proclamation for Romania 2017+ (Timișoara Civică 2017)<sup>24</sup>, that originated in Timișoara as an addendum to the 1990 Proclamation of Timișoara<sup>25</sup> and was brought to the attention of the governing parties. Article 8 states that ‘no person convicted of criminal offences should hold public office’. This demand has yet to be answered. ●

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8. Untold – the largest annual electronic music festival held in Romania organized usually in the summer.

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## Author



### Dr. Brîndușa Armanca

is a Romanian academic and journalist. Holding a PhD from the University of Bucharest, she is teaching TV journalism and Media Ethics at the State University Aurel Vlaicu of Arad, after another nine years of teaching journalism at the Western University of Timisoara. Author of 9 books and several research projects in journalism and culture, manager of the regional studio TVR Timisoara for six years, former member of the Board of Directors of TVR, former director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Budapest (2006-2012), Armanca is currently Senior Editor for "22" weekly. Before she worked for *Radio Free Europe*, *Express weekly*, *ZIUA* daily in Bucharest as editorial director etc. Member of several international media organizations and member of juries as *Prix Europa Berlin* and *Dialektus Festival* in Hungary, she holds many awards for TV documentaries and journalism and was awarded for cultural journalism by the Romanian Academy and by the Hungarian Ministry of Culture for her contribution to the cultural diplomacy.

- brindusa.armanca@gmail.com
- www.brindusaarmanca.home.ro
- brindusa.armanca

# Romanian civil society abroad: perspectives from Berlin

**Alexandra Ioan and Monica Boța-Moisin**

Romania's #Rezist is not an overnight result but the tip of an iceberg. In the past 5 years the Romanian civil society has been constantly undergoing development: engagement, active citizenship, critical thinking, action. We can identify various engines of change and various manifestations of it, including the involvement of the Romanian diaspora in these civic movements.

## Protests in Berlin – an overview starting in 2012

The protests of the Romanian diaspora in Berlin in January–February 2017 were not the first of their kind. Ever since 2012, the major civic movements in Romania have been supported by similar efforts abroad, including in Germany. The reasons behind the protests were always aligned with the issues raised in Romania: the healthcare reform proposal in 2012, the Roșia Montană gold mining project in 2013, the voting conditions for Romanians living abroad for the presidential elections in 2014, or the tragedy in the Colectiv club in 2015.

The manifestations in Berlin were, just as in the case of the ones in Romania, spontaneous outbursts of dissatisfaction with the way in which the Romanian government operates. While they all had at their core specific demands, the red thread of all manifestations was a general drive towards better governance and an awakening of civic engagement.

With regards to the demands of the Romanians abroad protesting, these were just as varied as the government actions that triggered them. In 2012 the purpose of the demonstrations was to prevent changes in healthcare legislation regarding privatization of services. In 2013, the protests aimed to block mining work using cyanide in Roșia Montană. In 2014, the protesters demanded a better organization of the second round of the presidential election abroad. In 2015 the protests following the Colectiv club fire were a loud alarm signal against the way in which deeply embedded corruption leads to loss of lives. Lastly, in 2017, the protesters wanted to block abrupt and significant changes in the Penal Code that would absolve high-level officials from corruption charges or sentences, thus massively affecting accountability.

Logistically, the protests in Berlin always took place either in front of the Romanian Embassy or in front of the Brandenburg Gate, two of the most important symbols for the Romanian diaspora in the German capital, sometimes including a march between these two places. Besides the creative banners and flags that people displayed, protesters also produced information flyers in German and English about the issue raised and their demands or they wrote and sang songs about these issues. The main idea behind all these actions was to make their message as appealing as possible to other people as well and thus to raise awareness, gain support and increase the pressure on the Romanian government.

In all of these cases, protests in Berlin followed the manifestations organized in Romania. They were a way of showing support for the protesters back home and at the same time a way of showing continued interest in public matters concerning the future development of Romania. The demonstrations in Berlin were also used as an opportunity to inform the foreign public and draw attention to the issues in Romania, and their relation to German and EU matters. The protests abroad also put media and political pressures on the Romanian government which repeatedly had to take into account the demands of protesters and concede.

## The profiles of protesters and group dynamics

In terms of individuals, in 2017 the group of protesters in Berlin was very diverse. Whilst all social categories were represented, the vast majority of participants were students, higher education graduates, professionals and entrepreneurs. Interestingly enough, it was not only Romanian citizens that were part of the core group of protesters, but also Germans, Moldavians and other foreign citizens who either had a strong emotional connection to Romania or who wanted to show their support as the Romanian events evoked similarities with their own countries. All these individuals were connected emotionally through feelings of frustration, anger, hopelessness, combined with pure fear and concern for the future of the country, especially in the



**Protesters marching in February 2017 to the Brandenburg Gate.**

©Dan Perşa

unfortunate climate of international politics (Trump's presidency in the U.S., Erdogan's unipersonal leadership in Turkey, etc.). Smaller groups also started forming through the connection of people who knew each other from the previous protests, with new comers to Berlin. One could even say that it was an interesting "civic therapy" as in most cases the new comers were driven by emotion, disappointment with the governance in Romania and an instinctual need to act immediately, whilst the Romanians who have lived abroad longer were driven by rationality, a certain degree of scepticism and a need for concreteness in action. The transition from emotional reaction to expression of concrete demands was fast. By their second meeting in January 2017, the demands of the protesting group in Berlin became more homogenous, aligning requests with those presented in Piața Victoriei in Bucharest or in Timișoara. People had done their research, were better informed and the floor was open for debate.

More than ever before social media played an essential role both in disseminating information, in organizing and in connecting Romanian protesters worldwide. This was also the case in Berlin where protesters used primarily Facebook to discuss logistics

and activities for the protests. #Rezist became a mantra, an element of identification, of membership to a group and a reminder that even when the wave of enthusiasm has worn off, the mission of active citizens has not yet been completed.

The profile of the Romanian protester therefore has thus somewhat changed in the past two decades. People are no longer defined by a common desire to simply overturn a system. *Le coup d'état est mort!* Romanians understood that overturning is pointless unless a better replacement exists. The motivation and actions of engaged Romanians stem rather from a desire to build a fair and functional system, to create a new social and political order.

#### **Building upon existing energies**

The 2017 protests in Berlin built upon the previous experience and involvement of Romanians living there and followed the same recipe: consecutive gatherings, alignment with the requests of the thousands protesting in Romania, a call for action.

As with previous occasions, gathering publicly to express outrage in the face of certain governmental measures is a way of feeling that one is not completely

disconnected from the events at home. It is also a way of compensating for the limited possibilities of engagement in Romanian public affairs accessible from abroad, while also providing a sense of belonging, of community, of home away from home.

Although most of the concrete demands of the 2017 protests (as well as of previous ones) were responded to, this does not eliminate a general sense of dissatisfaction and concern among protesters. The main reason for this is an awareness of the fact that deep, sustainable change in Romania has still not been achieved and also, that protests solely are not the way to actually achieve this. The feeling of satisfaction and relief that very acute crisis situations have been overcome is always mixed with a sense of powerlessness in the face of the deeply rooted issues Romania is facing – be it corruption, poverty, inequality, etc.

This realization however also leads to a desire for civic engagement on a constant basis, even if not physically in the country. Whether getting involved with organizations addressing specific issues in Romania or starting new initiatives themselves, locally or internationally, Romanians in Berlin who took part in one way or another in these civic manifestations continue in their engagement.

For instance, the first agreed call to action for the Berlin 2017 protests took the form of a video<sup>1</sup> conveying the idea that protests in Berlin and in Romania are one voice: "Berlinul e cu voi!" ("Berlin is with you") chanted the protesters. In retrospect, this video had a dual function: it was a statement of support and solidarity, a group expression of our belonging and civic engagement and at the same time it was a coagulating factor for the Romanian community in Berlin. Individuals from different backgrounds and with no previous connection to each other joined forces in creating a product of the Romanian diaspora. This successful exercise planted a seed: "if we could do this together, we can do more!".

This seed resulted in *Diaspora Civică Berlin* (the Civic Diaspora Berlin or DCB) – an informal community initiated in February 2017 as a result of the protests - which aims to contribute to the civic and political involvement of the Romanian diaspora in Berlin in current affairs in Romania. Structured on two fundamental pillars, active citizenship and community building, the actions and events organized and promoted by DCB are meant to educate, generate responsible actions and nurture a feeling of mutual support and the pursuit of common well-being among Romanians abroad and not only. The open *sui generis* organizational structure and the focus

on transparency, inclusiveness and team effort as key values are at the basis of the internal organization of DCB. The community now meets on a regular monthly basis and develops various projects, workshops, discussions with and for civically active Romanians in Berlin.

While the energy of the protests echoed in other capital cities like Vienna, Brussels, Paris or London, this overview refers strictly to the protests in Berlin – their background, dynamics and constructive consequences. A particularity for Berlin is that an outcome of the recent protests was the formation of an organized civic informal group committed to raise the civic and political involvement of Romanians in diaspora. It is possible that Berlin is not a singular case.

### The way forward

The 2017 protests were a renewed signal of the awakening of a civic conscience among Romanians that translates into the process of forming a strong and active civil society. 27 years after the fall of communism, Romanians start approaching their government, their representatives and their politicians from the position of a demanding citizen that wants to be taken care of rather than taken advantage of by the public system. Although this mind-set change is still work in progress, and it will take significant time to become institutionalized, it should serve as a signal for politicians and public officials that it is no longer business as usual. The level of scrutiny, critical thinking, transparency and accountability demands coming from Romanians, has definitely changed. Policy-makers and decision-makers should definitely take this into account in their next political moves. Furthermore, the involvement of the diaspora in these developments is a clear statement that leaving the country does not mean a complete disruption from national internal affairs, nor a lack of interest. The energy mobilizing Romanians in the country and abroad is the same and it is the foundation of an active and mature civil society. ●

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# Authors



**Alexandra Ioan**

is a Doctoral Student in the Governance program at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin. Her professional and academic interests include civil society organizations, social entrepreneurship, policy-making and inter-sectoral collaborations that address complex social challenges. Due to her extensive international professional experience in civil society organizations and her policy and governance academic focus, Alexandra contributes to the development of effective civil society organizations and policy-making processes. She has worked with the CODECS Foundation for Leadership, the New Horizons Foundation, the Hertie Foundation and Ashoka. She holds degrees from the Hertie School of Governance, the University of Bucharest and the National School of Public Administration and Political Studies in Bucharest, Romania. She was a Visiting Student Researcher at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, Stanford University.

[Alexandra Ioan](#)



**Monica Boța-Moisin**

is a cultural intellectual property lawyer based in Berlin. She focuses extensively on creating a framework for the protection of traditional cultural expressions and building bridges between local traditional communities and the fashion industry. She is the promoter of a legislative initiative in Romania for the protection of the Romanian Blouse, Romanian designs and traditional cultural expressions and in late 2015 joined La Blouse Roumaine as a pro-bono legal counsel and coordinator of the advocacy group for the legal protection of traditional designs. Author of various legal articles in both Romanian and foreign publications, Monica has pioneered the terms of 'cultural intellectual property' and 'traditional identity design' in Romanian academia. Monica has a long history in active citizenship being a member of the European Youth Parliament, acting as a trainer and debate moderator since 2007. Monica graduated both from the Faculty of Law at the University of Bucharest, Romania and from Collège Juridique Franco-Roumain, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2013 and is a member of the Bucharest Bar Association as a fully qualified lawyer. In 2015 she completed a master's degree at the University of Bucharest with a focus on international arbitration and in the summer of 2012 graduated from the Fordham Law Summer Institute, Fordham University, New York. Currently in Berlin, Monica started a collaboration on textile management in fashion with a local brand.

[Monica Boța Moisin](#)  
[www.monicabotamoisin.ro](http://www.monicabotamoisin.ro)

# Some Populist Discursive Aspects of the #Rezist Movement

Adriana Ștefănel

*"It is not far the moment when this hot outpouring of soul, courage, stubbornness and tenacity in the defence of freedom, justice, and good will snatch the tumour and the evil that the PSD<sup>1</sup> and their acolytes have ill and tortured, for so long, the whole country". (#rezist)*

The most recent manifestations in Romania were caused by the stunning comeback of PSD under the leadership of Liviu Dragnea, as a result of the Parliamentary elections in December 2016. Taking advantage of the incapacity of the right-wing parties to propose a coherent platform<sup>2</sup> and targeting groups that were not in their traditional electoral pool (doctors, professors, students) but attracted by the economic promises, PSD won 45,68% of votes and, after some stumbling caused by Klaus Iohannis' rejection of the PSD's first proposal, Sevil Shhaideh<sup>3</sup>, formed a government with their allies, ALDE (detached from PNL in 2014).

The state of dissatisfaction has increased as PSD opponents have understood that the climb to power of this party would have been stopped by their participation in the electoral process. For example, one image that went viral during the protest portrays a young man holding a placard with the message *I apologize for not voting*. On the other hand, the feeling of returning to old (bad) habits was aggravated by the rush of PSD to implement some electoral promises which target especially the old people but also students. These actions were seen as an attempt at bribery and symbolically sanctioned as such<sup>4</sup>.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg!



**Protester message: I apologize for not voting<sup>5</sup>.**

Protest social movements have been a feature of the Romanian political scene since 2012. The very first protest movement within this category was triggered by the conflict on the health bill between Traian Băsescu<sup>6</sup> and Raed Arafat, at that time, Secretary of State in the Health Ministry, one of *the most respected Romanians*<sup>7</sup>, regardless of his foreign origin. Over 10,000<sup>8</sup> people gathered to support Raed Arafat when he was forced to resign, but remain in the street long after he was reinstated. Heavily supported by the political opposition (USL, formed by PNL and PSD) and by traditional media (especially *Realitatea TV* and *Antena3*, TV stations hostile to Traian Băsescu) but rejecting any conflating of political and civil society agendas. The protesters' demands covered a wide spectrum: from the general request for the resignation of Emil Boc<sup>9</sup> to particular feminist and ecologist causes, as well as to far-right

nationalist ones. Brutally repressed by Gendarmerie, the protests were defeated eventually by the cold weather; the protestors were partially satisfied by Emil Boc's resignation and fuelled USL's triumphant path to power, from the presidential impeachment referendum in July, to the Parliamentary Elections in November.

In 2013, as USL failed to produce the expected change in the Romanian society and their leaders indulged themselves in reproducing the same political patterns used for more than 20 years, the tensions were reappearing. It burst into the *Uniti Salvăm* (*United, we save!*) movement in the autumn of 2013. The main theme - preventing the bill that would have facilitated the gold mining exploitation at Roșia Montană<sup>10</sup> - was just a pretext for the protests, considering the fact that the subject was present in the Romanian public sphere for more than 15 years. Moreover, a statement made by Traian Băsescu in the 2009 election campaign declaring his support for the restoration of mining in the area did not enjoy similar treatment. Shortly after the start of the movement, a range of concurrent themes emerged, some directly derive from the main discontent (the anti-capitalist theme), others indirectly (the nationalist-extremist claims). On this occasion, a new villain was added to the corrupt political system: traditional media, especially television. For the protesters, Facebook became the main source of quality news and the sole guarantor of free speech. After a month of daily protests, the movement diluted into weekly gatherings on Sunday evening and vanished shortly, leaving behind a revolutionary breeze and an incipient political party (*Uniti, salvăm Bucureștiul*; nowadays *Uniunea Salvați România! –USR*).

A seemingly different cause led to the outbreak of protests in November 2015, culminating in the resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta<sup>11</sup>: the tragic death of 64 young people at a rock concert brought tens of thousands of people into the streets under the slogan *#coruptiaucide* (*#corruptionkills*). For the thousands<sup>12</sup> in the street, the mourning soon turned into rage, as the local mayor's<sup>13</sup> lack of interest for the safety norms and his permeability to corruption became obvious.

This was the first time when the hashtag sign (#) appeared in the slogan, directly connecting the online and offline manifestations. While traditional media (especially *Antena3*) were strongly associated with the corrupt political system, new media's importance grew. Besides being a fair and impartial reporter of the events, Facebook was used to build a protest community. Although the protesters demanded early elections,

they settled after the resignation of Victor Ponta and the investiture of a new, technocrat, government led by Dacian Cioloș<sup>14</sup>.

The strong foundation of these movements - or, to be more precise, this long-term movement with explosive moments<sup>15</sup> - is based on citizens', especially, young, educated, urban citizens, discontent with and mistrusting the established political system. Regardless of the trigger, all these movements have as their main reason the endemic corruption in Romania<sup>16</sup> and the feeling that the time for debates and peaceful negotiations has past. With strong cultural reverberations, especially among the right-wing thinkers (Surugiu, 2009, p. 68-69), the populist idea of an overlaid corrupt class that stifle the normal, natural development of *the beautiful people*<sup>17</sup> is their discursive vector.

Following my previous work on populism (Stefanel, 2015), I argue that on the #rezist and #rezistenta<sup>18</sup> Facebook page one might identify characteristics of the people: wonderful, young, energetic people, without any prior political implications, most of them self-employed or in the private sector (mostly big corporations), with higher education and higher expectations. They are the active and the aware part of the community, able to understand that *who sleeps in democracy; wakes up in dictatorship*<sup>19</sup> and willing to fight for all Romanians even for those captive to the PSD and their media allies<sup>20</sup>.



**Protester message: Down with the Antennae from my mother-in-law<sup>21</sup>**

The idea of a people deeply rooted in history, with a past and most of all with a future that oppose a corrupt system that could be set aside is very common among protesters. Not only are ancient rulers<sup>23</sup> called to support the movement, but prominent actors from recent history as well (*We are the children of those fighting at the Revolution/ children of Hooligans*<sup>24</sup>). Also, the future (mostly the future of our children) is



Romanian politicians portrayed as convicts at the #rezist protests<sup>22</sup>

used as an argument for the protests<sup>25</sup>. The corrupt class is perceived to continue the practices rooted in Romania's communist past, without any connection with the people or with its history and future. One must observe that the way „the people” is constructed by the movement is consistent with Mudde's perspective: it is neither real nor all-inclusive<sup>26</sup>, but in fact a mythical constructed subset of the whole population” (2004, p.546). The *heartland* (in Taggart's 1996 sense of the term) is *Romania without them*.

The corrupt political class is trans-party (*PNL* and *PSD*, *the same dirt*) who have been in power for a quarter of century (*You steal from us for a quarter of century*), but is in quintessence is *PSD*, *the red plague*, a *party of thieves* and *country traitors*. Their corruption is not only visible in their actions, but also in their corporal appearance (the broken teeth of Liviu Dragnea is the supreme symbol of his corruption) as well as in their morals (the fifth marriage of Călin Popescu Tăriceanu is a sign of corruption).

The populist solution is radical and easy to be achieved. The soft part of the riots suggests that *all of them* (sometimes the entire political class, sometimes the Parliament, sometimes the parties that support the

Government) should go to jail. The radicals suggest other methods such as hanging or impalement; obviously the abolition of PSD is a must, as well as new elections.

Following the work of Kaltwasser and Mudde (2012, p.16), I do not hurry to sanction these aggressive skirmishes from the democratic discourse, taking into account that the effects produced might be either positive or negative, depending on the strength of democracy. But I cannot fail to wonder how strong Romanian democracy is, how much it could resist falling for a populist discourse and to what extent these populist slogans represent the hard-core of this new political movement. ●

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## Endnotes/Media links

1. PSD: Partidul Social Democrat
2. Both USR (the party that outcome from the 2013 movements) and the new PNL (formed by the unification of PNL and a part of PDL, their old political enemy) were supporting Dacian Ciolos, the former technocrat Prime Minister, although he was not directly affiliated with neither one of these parties and he announced that he will vote with one party at the Chamber of Deputies and with another at the Senate. To complicate the picture, both parties deny any post-elections cooperation with the other in the event of winning the elections.
3. Woman, Muslim and a close collaborator of Liviu Dragnea, three features that made her the Public Enemy number one for a while.
4. For example, students that received free railroad transportation, used this right to come in Bucharest to protest against the Government.
5. [https://www.andreirosu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/IMG\\_9866-1.jpg](https://www.andreirosu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/IMG_9866-1.jpg)
6. President of Romania, at that time
7. Cf. IMAS survey 17-26 February 2012, 76,1% of Romanians trusted Raed Arafat [www.cotidianul.ro](http://www.cotidianul.ro) IMAS survey: Raed Atafat and Mihai, the King of Romania, in trust top. 07.03.2012 (last read in 29th of April 2017)
8. Police estimations
9. the Prime Minister of Romania, close collaborator of Traian Băsescu
10. a village in the traditional Transylvanian area
11. Former president of PSD and challenger of Klaus Iohannis in the Presidential Elections in 2014. After unexpectedly winning the election, Klaus Iohannis was constrained by the Constitution to keep Victor Ponta in office as Prime Minister.
12. More than 35,000 people
13. Cristian Popescu Piedone, the mayor of the 4th District in Bucharest, where the Colectiv Club was located.
14. Former minister of agriculture, former European Commissary of Agriculture
15. 100 days from the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, people are still protesting in front of the Government; additionally, there is a strong online movement which in the meantime turned from #rezist to #insist, continuing to maintain the original claims and demands of the #rezist protests
16. The everyday corruption as well as the heavily mediated top-politics one
17. A placard said: They try to bury us. They didn't know we are seeds (English, in original)
18. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/REZISTAMPANALACAPAT/?ref=ts>
19. English, in original
20. Reference to the 1990 movement against Ion Iliescu and FSN (the nowadays PSD)
21. Down with the Antenae (reference to Antena1 and 3, television stations seen as part of the corrupt system) from my mother-in-law (reference to the fact that old people voted for PSD because of Antena3's discourse)
22. [https://media.dcnnews.ro/image/201702/w670/protest\\_viral\\_imagine\\_ponta\\_tariceanu\\_iordache\\_dragnea\\_50407100.jpg](https://media.dcnnews.ro/image/201702/w670/protest_viral_imagine_ponta_tariceanu_iordache_dragnea_50407100.jpg)

23. Not very democratic ones (Vlad the Impaler, for example, well known for his brief judgments followed by the impaling of the perpetrator)
24. Reference to the 1990s movement against Ion Iliescu and the FSN (the nowadays PSD)
25. The idea of continuity is imbued in the slogan Ce nu au reusit parinții mei pentru mine, reușesc eu pentru copiii mei –What my parents did not succeed for me, I will succeed for my children.
26. Those voting for PSD are part of the corruption.

# Author



## Dr. Adriana Ștefănel

is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in Sociology and is interested in nationalism and populism as styles of political communication, the political imaginary, and discourse analysis. In the last three years, she has become interested in new media and the usage of new technologies in political communication and in electoral campaigns. In 2015, she won a post-doctoral scholarship from ICUB–University of Bucharest Research Institute to conduct research on populism and political discourse. Since 2005, she has published more than 15 articles (single author and co-authored) in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and conferences proceedings and has participated in more than 30 international conferences. Her PhD thesis was published by Institutul European publishing house. In 2016, she coordinated, with Ruxandra Boicu and Silvia Branea, *Political Communication and European Parliamentary Elections in Times of Crisis: Perspectives from Central and South-Eastern Europe*, a book published at Palgrave Macmillan.



# Save Our News (S.O.N) Or Why is Fake News War Everybody's War

Raluca Feher

Romania is one of the most backward states in the EU; around a half of the population is still living in rural areas although the country went through a process of forced urbanisation during the pre-1990s industrialisation boom (Antonescu & Popa, 2012). The gap between the urban and rural areas is widening every year, with income disparities and educational opportunities diminishing drastically for the latter. The country's struggle to recruit primary and secondary teachers for countryside schools is well documented as is its alarming decrease of its gross enrolment ratio (close to its 1989 numbers according to the World Bank) and the appallingly small government expenditure on education (only 3% of GDP, at 4.9% in the rest of Europe – European Commission, 2016). Romania's clan culture where allegiances and loyalties play an important role (see Bortun & Cheregi article here) and strong influence of the church – in my view another factor of corruption in the country – contribute to this widening divide.

A telling reflection of this divide is to be found in the type of media Romanians have access to, consume and trust. Television is still by far the most popular (97% of the population, followed by radio and internet – Zenith Media, 2015) "and it takes the lion share of the advertising pie (about two thirds) amounting to a total of 337 million euro in 2008" (Ulmanu, n.d.). The leader of the segment, *Antena3*, lost recently the crown in favour of *Romania TV* (the latter came second to *Antena1* on New Year's Eve night of 2016 with an audience of nearly 850,000 and a share of voice of 10%).

Romania is also a land of media moguls who

"are not interested in encouraging people to form their own opinion, much less in promoting free, unbiased reporting. On the contrary, in the 1990s they founded their own TV channels and newspapers in order to do politics and business and become rich, powerful and influential" (Eurotopics, 2016).

When the #rezist protests started in Bucharest, the television stations like *Antena3*, *Romania TV* and *B1TV* issued a wave of reports grossly misrepresenting the protests and misinforming their audience. Their headlines made references to an attempted coup d'état and linked the protests with those from #colectiv in 2014. Moreover, they insinuated that the protesters were violent, that their aim was to overturn the Government legitimately installed after the 2016 December elections and that they were paid by George Soros, the Hungarian billionaire, and other enemies of the state (Pantazi, 2017).

The effects are visible: Romania's freedom of the press ranking, at least according to Freedom House, is only partly free and in decline from previous years.

In recent years, many of the media moguls have been sent to prison for corruption (Eurotopics, 2016), including *Antena3*'s Dan Voiculescu who is currently serving a ten-years sentence for money laundering. Sebastian Ghita on the other hand, the owner of *Romania TV*, who is currently being prosecuted "in various proceedings involving money laundering, unauthorised use of confidential information, blackmail, bribes, influence peddling, and driving without a license" disappeared in December 2016 "despite being under judicial control, with a bail of 13 million Euros and a ban on leaving the country" (Giurgeanu, 2017).

And although the oligarchs are behind bars, the advertisers continue to use their stations to promote their clients. They did so all too gladly when the tabloid-style and often ridiculed *OTV* closed<sup>1</sup> and they migrated to *Antena3* and *Romania TV* and they continued to do so when the National Audio-visual Council, a governmental body whose mission is to "ensure that Romania's TV and radio stations operate in an environment of free speech, responsibility and competitiveness" (Consiliul Național al Audientei – CNA) fined *Antena3* and *Romania TV* in excess of 100,000 Euros for disinformation over the years (64,000 euros for *Antena3* for 2015 and 2016 alone – Puisor, 2017).

So we, *Frontline Club Bucharest*<sup>2</sup>, decided to write a petition asking media buyers to stop buying advertising on the TV stations that are deliberately manipulating and lying to the public.

In well-established democracies the people fought for their rights, sometimes blood was shed to gain them. No one gave them nothing just because. Romanians are not used to do this. So, we, at *Frontline Club*, wanted to give an example, to show hope to the people, to show them that there are things one can do, other than going out in the streets and protesting. We felt that going at the root of evil, money, and cutting the funding of these stations and invest it instead into independent media outlets and initiatives such as *Rise Project*, *Dela0.ro*, *Casa Jurnalistului*, *Pressone.ro*, *EuroActiv*, *Rfi Romania*, *Blacksea.eu*, *Centrul de Investigatii Media*, *CRJI*, *Tolo.ro*, *etransmedia.ro*, *VICE*, *Dilema Veche*, *Romania Curata*, *EpochTimes*, *paganademedia.ro* would allow restore the informational balance in the country.

The point we made was that these TV stations were used to push the agenda and interests of corrupt individuals which are entangled with different political parties. By buying advertising on these stations, advertisers, we argued, were endorsing a failed state and with its policies that, instead of working to benefit the development of the country, were pursuing the interests of particular individuals.

The combination of propaganda and manipulation on TV and the policies promoted by the politicians kept the people in Romania poor and uneducated while working against a real and fair market. Financing these institutions, we suggested, should be against the interest of the companies who try to do honest business in Romania. It simply does not make any sense for a company to finance a failed market.

We suggested that advertisers and their clients should fund independent media outlets instead. This would not only harm the stations mentioned but would enable the advertisers themselves to dissociate themselves from the corrupt political class and their subservient television stations. By breaking up ties with these stations, the advertisers would help the Romanian society as a whole.

Among the factors influencing our decision to launch the petition were:

- the lack of response from the CNA in the cases strictly related to the #rezist protests;

- Laura Corina Georgescu's, the head of the CNA, being investigated for several charges of corruption;
- the appointment of the CNA members is political and therefore our belief that they are put under pressure by the party/coalition appointing them; and
- our firm belief that the hate speech promoted by *Antena3* and *Romania TV* in particular was dividing Romania's population and turning people against one another

We sent the petition to journalists on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January<sup>3</sup>, to *iQads.ro*, the most important site for the Romanian advertising community, and to *hotnews.ro*, an independent news portal. *iQads.ro* started a campaign, asking advertisers and advertising experts to talk about ethics in brand communication. *Geeks for Democracy*, *#rezist* and other internet groups organised boycotts of the brands that still paid to advertise on *Antena3* and *Romania TV*.

We also contacted the *International Advertising Association (IAA)*, the *Romanian Association of Advertising Agencies (Uniunea Agentiilor de Publicitate din Romania - UAPR)* and *Art Directors Club (ADC)* proposing a partnership for the initiative. They all refused us insisting that advertising and the media content offered by TV stations have nothing in common.

The petition was met with a lot of enthusiasm by the people in the street; some of them tried to reach us and help promoting our views. At the time of writing this article (the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2017), the petition on our own Facebook page had received 50 comments and 810 shares. While there are certainly more comments, mentions and shares to our petition, they are beyond our own channels and tracking ability. The comments received however showed to us that our readers and followers were paying attention; while some made suggestions to contact institutions in Romania or address the boards of directors and/or shareholders of the companies advertising on the television stations we were targeting others were questioning the idea of an independent media in Romania.

Unlike our online followers, *Antena3* and *Romania TV* on the other hand, targeted us directly, both as a group and myself as an individual. Besides being called names and called out as "members of the Soros army", we were accused to incite others to infringe on their freedom of speech.



Blue Air campaign #Rezist Coruptie din Romania (Resist to Romania's corruption).

Image reproduced from Romania Libera<sup>4</sup>

Catalin Tolontan, a renowned Romanian journalist, opposed our initiative indicating on numerous occasions that boycotting *Antena3* and *Romania TV* and connecting the journalistic content broadcast by the stations with the brands advertising on them was immoral (Baciu, 2017). Even presented with similar actions in other parts of the world (for example in January over 800 brands in US cut theirs advertising budgets at *Breitbart News* – Dumenco, 2017), Tolontan continued to accuse us of aiming to restricting the freedom of speech of the two stations.

In the short term, our petition and appeal were partly successful as many brands withdrew their advertising from the two stations. However, none indicated that the cutting of their budgets was related to *Frontline*'s petition or any other boycott call coming from the protesters directly. Moreover, none of the funds withdrawn were redirected as we suggested to independent media outlets and initiatives.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February, between 70 and 80 brands were not advertising anymore on *Antena3* and *RomaniaTV* (Obae, 2017). The trend continued until almost 70% of brands left those stations.

The success was short-lived as only a month later, at the end of March, the brands that had initially withdrawn were now slowly returning despite the fact that nothing had changed in the way these two televisions were going about doing journalism (Bunea, 2017).

Defeatists said that the advertisers felt in January that more money can be made by playing the #rezist card but none of them were truly ethical in their decision to cut budgets from *Antena3* and *Romania TV*. They might have been right. Recently Blue Air, a low-cost airline operator servicing Romania, launched an advertising campaign branding their airplane with a #rezist message<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, as the protests dwindled, *Vodafone*, *Dedeman*, *Interbrew*, and other big spenders, returned in the commercial breaks at *Antena3* and *Romania TV* (iQads, 2017).

There are a couple of explanations for this behaviour:

- **financial** – brands insisted that the two stations enabled them to reach a target audience of important and relevant to them, that could not be reached otherwise and whose size they could not ignore
- **political** – some of the corporations (or their staff such as Raiffeisen's CEO, Steven van Groeningen) identified to have supported the protests are said to have been side-lined by Romanian state and were pressured to "behave"

- **social pressure** – as the protests in the street dwindled and the attention they received diminished, people were willing to move on and come back to the comfort of the *status quo*.

So, to draw a line, the *Frontline Club* petition only half-worked. The boycott of televisions was the only part appealing to advertisers while the financing of independent media escaped conveniently their “To Do” list. One could argue that having a neutral, balanced, uncorrupted media is not perceived either as important or as a problem that corporations could help solve.

Sadly, boycotts can only work in the short term and can only be used as emergency measures. Enabling and building a clean media environment needs a long-term strategy, resources and commitment.

Three months later, the CNA went back to its dormant stage. *Antena3* and *Romania TV* are back to their January best behaviours (disinformation and misrepresentation that is) and their advertisers are back in full force. Although everyone is talking about fake news in Romania, people either do not know how to fight them efficiently or do not care.

The appeal to ethics is not working. Activism can raise awareness but it appears ill equipped to stop these and other corrupt practices entirely. Romania’s only solution is to have an educated nation regardless of where they live and what media they consume. But for this we need to build institutions, which under current political climate is impossible. So, although activism is powerless, it is for now our only tool. And with it, we will continue seek ways to educate the people and fight the system. ●



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## Endnotes/Media links

1. OTV's programming was often under scrutiny for its tabloid-style and sensationalism and thus often ridiculed and also avoided by the big advertising spenders; Romania TV uses a similar programming strategy however it enjoys a rather steady advertising revenue
2. Frontline Club Bucharest is the Romanian branch of Frontline Club London, one of the most respected institutions in the UK promoting freedom of speech and supporting independent media. Frontline Club Bucharest opened in February 2014.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/FrontlineClubBucharest/photos/a.696122400411279.1073741829.693244644032388/1323180867705426/?type=3&theater>
4. <http://romania-libera.ro/economie/companii/compania-blue-air-isi-face-publicitate-cu-imaginea-unui-avion-pictat-cu-sigla---rezist-448571>
5. <http://romania-libera.ro/economie/companii/compania-blue-air-isi-face-publicitate-cu-imaginea-unui-avion-pictat-cu-sigla---rezist-448571>
6. Raluca Feher's photo is credited to Harper's Bazaar/Alex Galmeanu



## Author



### Raluca Feher<sup>6</sup>

is journalist, copywriter, writer, traveler and founder of *Frontline Club Bucharest*. She has been TV reporter, war correspondent in Yugoslavia, Albania, Macedonia, copywriter, Creative Director and Strategy Director. Raluca is one of the most awarded creatives in Romanian Effie competition. She is the copywriter that won the first Golden Watch for Romania with a campaign created for *Gazeta Sporturilor* newspaper. She is the author of 3 travel books, *America Dezgolita de la Brau in Jos 1 and 2* (2014 and 2015) and *Splendidul Loc al Fericirii Supreme* (2016). She is communication consultant for *Delaco* and Creative Director and Strategy Director at *Cap*, one of the most important Romanian advertising agencies.

# The Story of a Coup d'etat against the Rule of Law

Tiberiu Pfiszter

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2017, the Romanian Government tried to approve two executive orders<sup>1,2,3</sup>:

1. National Collective Pardon Law;
2. Changes to the Criminal Law<sup>4</sup>.

They were in fact meant to release from prison individuals convicted of corruption and would allow further thefts from public funds. Some of the worst effects of these executive orders, if applied, would have been:

## 1. Pardon Law<sup>5</sup>:

- The sentence to be reduced by half for any convicted felon over the age of 60 or parent of a child under the age of 5, no matter the felony: whether murder, rape, child abuse, crimes against humanity or corruption etc.
- The pardon would have also been extended to include even those not currently executing their sentence in prison.

## 2. Changes to the Criminal Law<sup>6</sup>:

- Public servants can perpetrate any abuse in service, if the value is below 200,000 RON (cca. 44,000 EUR) (for each individual act) it is not considered a crime.
- A public servant can be prosecuted only if there is a complaint from the victim. For instance, in the case of an abuse made by a mayor, the victim can be the City Hall which is represented by the mayor, therefore the mayor should make a self-denunciation. Furthermore, the complaint should be made within 6 months thus blocking any criminal investigation prior to that.

- The punishment for such crimes was to be reduced from 2 - 7 years (as initially stipulated) to 6 months - 3 years.

## Abuse of Power with Executive Orders

The Government can approve at any moment Executive Orders (called “ordonanta de urgență”, hereby referred as OUG) that may alter the subject of almost any law. OUGs are, by nature, extraordinary laws adopted in extraordinary situations when regulation cannot be postponed. They enable the Government (the administrative power in Romania) to legislate, an attribute and responsibility constitutionally residing with the Parliament. It is their extraordinary nature that grants OUGs a power equal to any law and they therefore come into effect from the time they are published in the *Official Monitor* (Monitorul Oficial - a public information vehicle detailing all passed legislative changes); even if an executive order were to be featured only for some minutes, its effects would be immediate.

The European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) has already stated that many abuses are made in Romania by using OUGs in situations that do not present nor require any urgency: hundreds of emergency ordinances are approved every year<sup>7</sup>.

One of such cases is OUG 55/28.08.2014 which granted 45 days to any mayor to leave the political party that helped him win the elections and join another party. Of course, the order was declared unconstitutional three months later<sup>8</sup> but while it was in effect many mayors switched parties joining mostly the party in power<sup>9</sup>, thus facing no consequences. And this happened just before the Presidential election campaign in 2014.

With OUG13 and OUG14 (which repealed OUG13), the Government attempted a similar kind of abuse, whose consequences however would have been much more severe.

Year	Number of OUG <sup>10</sup>
2000	297
2001	195
2002	209
2003	127
2004	142
2005	209
2006	136
2007	157
2008	229
2009	111
2010	131
2011	99
2012	95
2013	99
2014	94
2015	66
2016	99

**Table 1. Number of Executive ordinances adopted annually in Romania during 2000–2016**

### Using Obvious Lies as Reasons

The main reason invoked for passing the Pardon Law was that Romania would have to pay 80 million EUR / year following a decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) accusing the Romanian state of bad conditions in prisons. It is obvious that this is a lie because:

- such a decision does not exist and ECHR has declared no intention to issue one;
- pardoning those not executing their sentence in prison has absolutely no effect on prison conditions.

As for the changes proposed to the Criminal Law, the reasoning promoted referred to the requirements of the Constitutional Court, requirements that were much simpler and require fewer changes than the actual project<sup>11</sup>.

### Ignoring other Institutions of the State

There were several official positions and declarations from other institutions that should have banned these two laws:

- On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2017 the President Klaus Werner Iohannis, attended the Government meeting and was promised by the Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu that the OUG would not be approved overnight or without prior notice and debate.
- The Superior Council of Magistrates (CSM) gave negative notices for the OUG<sup>12,13</sup>. In any matter relating to justice and criminal law, it is mandatory to request the opinion of the CSM. It has only consultative value but having it is a must and acting against it must be justified. The fact that the negative notices were given and subsequently ignored demonstrates the opinion of the rule of law among governors.
- The National Anticorruption Directorate made a very comprehensive announcement explaining all the disadvantages for the justice system the OUG<sup>13</sup> could bring, including the amount of money that would be lost should the OUG take effect<sup>14</sup>.

### Ignoring Safeguarding Measures

Any Pardon Law requires active social measures ensure that the released prisoners will not break the law again thus making the pardon useless. Previous collective pardons showed that about 60% of the released prisoners reoffend and will go back to prison within 6 months of their release. But there were no measures taken nor even planned to prevent this. Therefore, one effect of these OUGs would have been to sanction an increase in illegal actions and activities.

### Ignoring Public Opinion

OUG13 was put up for public debate by the Ministry of Justice on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, only after large protests opposing it occurred<sup>15</sup> in all major cities across Romania. During the debate that took place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January most of the people present there asked the Minister of Justice to repeal OUG13 or at least submit it for substantial changes to be made<sup>16</sup> and send it to the Parliament to be voted on as regular law.

In addition, many experts gave public statements explaining the disadvantages of OUG13 and their affiliated proposed laws<sup>17</sup> and mass media quoted them. Although there were no reasonable arguments to sustain it, the Government went ahead and issued the Ordinance.

### What happened?

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2017, the Government approved the changes to the Criminal Law via an executive order<sup>18</sup>. The cabinet led by Sorin Grindeanu met to approve the 2017 budget project at 19:40, when they unexpectedly introduced OUG13 on the meeting's agenda and adopted it. The final text of the executive order was made public only after the Government meeting has ended, around 22:00. OUG13 was then published in the Official Monitor at around 01:00 on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. The only caveat included by the Government was the text of the OUG stated that the changes come into effect within ten days.

### The Pardon Law was sent to the Parliament.

As a result we, the citizens of Romania, went out to protest and joined what have now become the largest peaceful protests in Romania<sup>19</sup>, since 1989. At the time of writing (April 2017), the protests have been going on for more than 70 days and are still taking place in 67 cities across Romania. Romanian citizens all over Europe also joined the protests<sup>20</sup>. There was no political involvement in these protests; it was a civic movement to protect justice and the rule of law. The number of people protesting simultaneously reached up to 600,000 on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February. We also made memorable acts like the pictures of Romanian<sup>21</sup> and EU flags<sup>22</sup> formed by tens of thousands of people. The people asked for a set of eight measures – The Proclamation Romania 2017+<sup>23</sup> - to be considered by politicians in order to ensure the safety of the rule of law and democracy.

In the end, OUG13 was repealed. But those members of the Parliament who are supporting the Government are continuing to attempt to issue laws against the Rule of Law<sup>24</sup> or against Democracy. Some even said protesters should be imprisoned<sup>25</sup> or shot<sup>26</sup>.

### What should be done?

As active measures we would suggest Romania should:

- Keep the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Romania until there is no doubt about the good intentions of the Parliament and Government regarding justice.

- The EU should also consult with citizens' representatives when taking any decision regarding Romania. The current Government and their supporting alliance have clearly proven that they cannot be trusted.
- Ask and support Romania in its efforts to change the definition of the executive order, and how it can be used. The European Council should bring the report of the Venice Commission to the next step and ask specific measures to limit the use of executive orders. In addition, a team of international legislative experts can be formed to advise the Romanian Parliament and the Romanian Government on the measures and changes in the legislation that should be taken.
- Ask and support Romania to ban convicted felons from taking public positions in institutions including any state department positions. As long as felons (convicted or accused; Romania's Parliament for instance has several convicted felons including Liviu Dragnea, the President of the Chamber of Deputies) are making the law, the attacks against the Rule of Law will continue. The Rule of Law is a critical principle of any democratic nation. Albania adopted a law, No. 138 / 2015<sup>27</sup>, on this matter as an effort to eliminate corruption as part of the preparations to join the European Union. There are also other states in Europe but also in the world that have such laws<sup>28</sup>. A directive of the European Union on this matter would be an excellent method to ensure the rule of law in all member states.

### European Union's Position

The first statement by the European Parliament was made on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2017, one day after OUG13 was published. Even though there were many voices such as Frans Timmermans' (Vice-President of the European Commission) or Esteban Gonzales Pons' (leader of the European People's Party grouping in the European parliament) accusing the Romanian Government of bad will and acts against the Rule of Law, Josef Weidenholzer asked on behalf of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (to which the Romanian Social Democrat Party - PSD -

belongs), for the debate to be continued in the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and even a fact finding mission to be organized before any conclusion is drawn<sup>29</sup>.

Some of the Romanian Members of the European Parliament decided to plan a people's visit to the European Parliament that would also include the debate at LIBE committee, especially people who took to the streets, as the main actors in the events that took place. They also suggested somebody from the street should speak during the debate.

The general feeling before the debate took place was that the Social Democrat Party - PSD - is trying to cover up their corruption with lies and were supported in this with the help of their colleagues from other countries, especially from S&D group. The feeling became fact when the following happened<sup>30</sup>:

- Protesters were not accepted on the list of speakers.
- During the debate the chairman, Claude Moraes (member of S&D group), allowed people to applaud after the speech of Tudorel Toader - the new Minister of Justice - but tried to ban applauses after other speeches. He also allowed Tudorel Toader to exceed his time by 5 minutes.
- Tudorel Toader said some ridiculous lies, such as that the only reason why people protested was the fact that the law was changed during the night.

The positive aspect of the visit was that we, the protesters, had the chance to talk to some Members of the European Parliament and present them the truth and our demands. And the feedback we had was very positive<sup>31</sup>. A short flashmob was also organized in front of the European Parliament to show once again the solidarity of the Romanian people with the European Union<sup>32</sup>. ●

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# Author



## Tiberiu Pfiszter

I can say I am the perfect example of a simple Romanian citizen. After graduating university I started my career as a software developer and went through several positions in several companies until I got to be co-founder of a small IT company. Even though I had always supported democracy, I was not much of an activist previous to 2017; even more, one month before protests began in Romania I could not see myself as leading a protest. But in the evening of 17<sup>th</sup> of January, when I found out what the actual Romanian government wants to do, there was a break point in my mind and I said I must do something to stop such abuses. Therefore, in the same day I organized an event on Facebook and by the next day there were 300 people protesting in the centre of Timișoara. The number of people protesting increased exponentially, so 18 days later there were more than 30,000 people protesting in Timișoara - the largest protest since December 1989. It was a very hard work that demanded me, and to the organically formed team, to be dedicated 24/7. Protests were not the only action we organized. There were letters sent to politicians, participation in meetings and debates and coordination with other cities in Romania. After this, the Government and the Parliament rejected the infamous OUG13, a law that was supposed to allow

corrupted people to do whatever they want without any significant legal consequence. It was a partial victory, as the people who tried to issue this law are still there and for sure they will try again. So, we will not stop here. But the most important victory was that people in the entire country got to be united for the same purpose, no matter of age, religion, political colour, skin colour, the region where they live or any other aspects which usually tend to divide people.

tiberiu.pfiszter

# Beyond #Rezist: the Surreal Challenges facing Romania's new civic MPs

Dinu-Gabriel Munteanu

“#Rezist! The Poetry”. There are almost 50 contemporary poets who contributed to this volume. Do you understand what this means, esteemed colleagues? [It means] that the events at the beginning of this year, in Government, in Parliament and especially in the [streets and] markets of Romania have already entered into folklore and history, with an unusual speed. [...] When I say you should fear this it is because you need to accept one thing: sooner or later, the truth comes out. Sooner or later, people will know you as you are in reality.” Mihai Goțiu, MP; fragments of a parliamentary address, the 14th of March 2017<sup>1</sup>

“One can hardly describe the derision and the flouting of rules, laws, Opposition members, people in the street, common sense and democracy. Hardly will you ever encounter more self-sufficiency, disproportion, immodesty ... snobbery”. One month after the #rezist crisis, these are the words used by Mihai Goțiu, MP, to describe the first chamber of the Romanian Parliament (of which he is currently Vice President). Longtime investigative journalist, writer and civic activist, Goțiu belongs to a minority of 43 MPs, all of whom won their mandate as candidates of the new, civically-informed *Union for the Salvation of Romania* party (USR) (December 2016).

USR was at the forefront, indeed it was the central and only mouthpiece of official parliamentary protests during the #rezist campaign:

“We have ten days to stop the greatest fraud in the history of Romania. We protest, we boycott, we put forward a no-confidence motion, we petition [various] institutions, we sue the Government” said party founder Nicușor Dan on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February.<sup>2</sup>

USR MPs were even prepared to resign their newly-held positions, as long as “this gesture would force a snap election ... But we need to think long and hard whether there is any shame left in this [PSD] majority”<sup>3</sup>.

What USR did during the crucial days of early February was simple, symbolic and effective. Having joined the protesters on the streets of the country, they returned to Parliament dressed in black (as a sign of mourning) and carried signs reading “SHAME ON YOU!” and “THIEVES!”. They followed their PSD colleagues around the building, eventually leading to boisterously surreal scenes. USR deputy Cristian Ghinea reported ‘live’ on Facebook how

[PSD MP] Șerban Nicolae threatened us, [visibly] nervous. He rose during the BPR committee and said that a number of citizens are behaving reprehensibly... I replied saying that those citizens are in fact MPs and that it was he who behaved like a hooligan. [Senate President] Tăriceanu then lectures us on political culture. [USR President] Nicușor Dan intervenes saying ‘I fully agree with my colleagues, you are all THIEVES’; Tăriceanu hysterical, scandal, PSD members look faint. ‘You’re a scumbag’ is shouted at us. Circus. All civilised pretensions discarded by [these] crooks.<sup>4</sup>

Five days later, under tremendous public pressure and with USR MPs staging a sit-in protest in Parliament, OUG13 was famously repealed. At one moment during the MPs’ ‘occupation’, an exhausted Mihai Goțiu was filmed with his eyes closed by a PSD colleague who immediately made the clip public. Goțiu apologised to the country and donated his week’s salary to a children’s hospital charity, adding that “after having spent five days and fight nights awake to make sure PSD doesn’t pull any other tricks in Parliament, one of them filmed me when I closed my eyes, for a few moments ... If this is the price I have to pay ... I accept”<sup>5</sup>.



**Mihai Gotiu allegedly asleep, screenshot Antena3<sup>6</sup>**

The link between USR and the #rezist phenomenon, and indeed between USR and earlier civic successes, from Roşia Montană's #unitisalvam victory to Iaşi's successful civil society lobbying for the reinstatement of an entire linden tree alignment in the historical city centre of Romania's second largest city (Iaşul Iubeşte Teii Campaign)<sup>7</sup>, runs much deeper than the February crisis. Many figures in the USR are themselves former activists, writers, academics or young professionals, some of whom recently returned from successful careers or education abroad. Having initiated the Iaşi linden tree reinstatement campaign myself while studying for a PhD in Nottingham, I remember how Mihai Goțiu, then writing for the anti-corruption portal *România Curată*, ensured that our struggle received the coverage it needed in order to remain visible on the national media landscape<sup>8</sup>. Sometimes it is hard to reconcile these deeply familiar aspects with the new political language, challenges, and compromises lying ahead.

In an environment where the quality of the political discourse is far from normal — Andrei Pleșu aptly described it as “either hypocritical, either aggressive, either tongue-in-cheek, either lying, either electoral, in any case a discourse that lacks elementary components such as authentic conviction and grammar”<sup>9</sup> — USR’s presence is inherently idiosyncratic. It holds little sway over settling (or indeed blocking) legislative matters or governmental policy, both of which are dominated by the monolithic PSD majority. What USR reflects, or

rather what the noble plight of the USR MPs represents, is the most difficult yet crucial step towards the political crystallization of Romania’s young civic awareness. In the words of USR MP Tudor Benga, a young entrepreneur and former Columbia University student, “the Romania of 2012-2016 allowed me to see all that is good and beautiful in this country, and all that is evil and abject” (Benga, n.d., para. 6).

During USR’s first months of parliamentary service, it became evident that “miserable attacks<sup>10</sup> from adversaries, disappointments, insomnia, black days”<sup>11</sup> will replace the relative security, or at least social familiarity of coming together with like-minded peers and engaging in journalistic, social media or street activism. My own civic campaigns in Iaşi pre-date USR, though it is equally true that our actions received (media, logistic, legal, moral) help and inspiration from people who are now USR members. Yet for many of us, the idea of going into ‘politics’ is deeply disturbing. Too long have national politicians been associated in the minds of ordinary Romanians with corruption, incompetence, nepotism and intellectual or economic fraud. Too many, yet probably not enough senior figures of the establishment, including two former Prime Ministers, as well as cabinet ministers, MPs and dozens of mayors have faced recent public prosecution for corruption, abuse of office and similar offenses<sup>12</sup>.

One of the very reasons our own environmental and heritage protection campaigns in Iaşi were successful was the fact that we were able to explicitly and completely

distance ourselves from any political colouring. While this deprived the Iași movement of a certain long-term 'strategic' sustainability (once we had won our battle, an anti-climactic feeling settled in) and limited our ability to capitalize on our success nationally, it allowed for a complete freedom of speech, including on national television and in the press, as well as a total discursive decentralization and grass-rooted approach to campaigning.

Although non-political in this sense, pre-USR movements such as the one I helped lead in Iași needed to become adept at deflecting and debunking all sorts of politically-informed attacks, fending off propaganda and partisan skulduggery almost every day. At one point, the PSD-controlled municipality attempted to 'infiltrate' one of our 'lașul lubește Teii' rallies in order to direct the public's attention from our demands for legal accountability following the linden tree disaster to the Roșia Montană (#unitisalvam) national controversy, despite the latter being a huge problem for the central PSD government! In fact, the entire media circus born out of these Stalinist theatrics helped our cause considerably, and demonstrated how adept local career politicians are at shooting themselves in the foot when dealing with new 'threats' such as those represented by our civic initiative groups (see also Munteanu, 2015b, pp. 3-4). In essence, the #rezist phenomenon was arguably an exponential increase, or perhaps an explosion of hundreds of such communities, most of them digitally literate, young and experienced in one form or another of online articulated activism.

It is also true that USR is, or at least tried, to position itself as a highly pragmatic party of national (and moral) unity, welcoming adherents of all ideological inclinations amongst its ranks. USR founder Nicușor Dan, a former academic and formidable civic activist, whose legal actions against Bucharest's notorious networks of real estate developers and corrupt public authorities achieved significant results in the last decade, made it clear in his campaign that "both conservatives and progressives" will find a place in his party, whose overall mission is to tackle Romania's fundamental issues around large-scale corruption, public administration reform, education, health, and the economy<sup>13</sup>.

However, the challenges facing these new MPs remain enormous, almost Sisyphean. Despite the largest public demonstrations in post-Revolutionary Romania bolstering their mandate, and despite the forceful repeal of the infamous OUG13, mainstream politicians continue in their efforts to reign in the country's judicial powers,

and are even now aiming to modify individual laws governing pardoning, sentencing, the definition of conflict of interest, etc. In other words, "if it didn't work out with OUG13, they now engage in a piecemeal approach to changing various aspects of the Penal Code"<sup>14</sup>. There exists an almost inexplicable feeling of aloofness and irreversibility to the entire process: "with an amazing serenity, I am told by a PSD senator ... that soon we'll have on our hands another legislative project that (s) he thinks will revolt citizens"<sup>15</sup>.

This is not to say that USR's mission is an impossible one. The very fact that deeply anti-establishment figures such as Mihai Goțiu, or credible members of the Romanian academic and professional diaspora (such as Dr Colette Chichirău, who returned from a position in the US financial industry to win a parliamentary seat in her Iași constituency) were given a public voice in a democratically-representative high-level Romanian political forum is an enormous achievement. However things progress, it seems true that "what USR already achieved is an extraordinary step forward in changing the face of politics, but also of mentalities and of the Romanian society; [it has] proven that the political blockade can be breached; a huge political experience is already accumulated ... with its effect to be noticed in the coming years; we saw how vulnerable in fact the entire system is, and how weak, and cowardly, and unprepared are the people behind it"<sup>16</sup>. ●

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7. The trees, a symbol of the region, had been felled and replaced with Japanese shrubs by the local municipality, who argued, rather incredibly, that the change will attract more tourists. By the time the scandal came to an end, following a public referendum where 93.7% of the votes were in favour of reinstating over 100 limes in the city centre, the topic had shifted from a national dispute into a symbol of civic victory and hope (see Munteanu, 2015a).
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9. Cited in Şușu, 2003, para. 7, <http://www.urr.ro/ro/actiune/int-conf/2003.12-bucuresti/interviu-plesu.shtml>.
10. Interestingly, there are a number of recurring conspiracy theories fermented amongst mainstream governmental PSD circles, aiming on one side to explain the party's apparent lack of public and international traction, and on the other to decredibilize USR. Virtually all of these constructions feature calumnious allegations involving George Soros, USR, the secret services and/or various foreign agencies (for a psycho-social deconstruction of the phenomenon, drawing on Gordon Allport's analysis of 'the psychology of rumour', see Bejan, 2016; for a more investigative piece, see Groșereanu, 2017).
11. See Gotiu, 2017b, <https://www.romaniacurata.ro/blog-de-parlamentar-mihai-gotiu-cateva-ganduri-la-cald-despre-demisia-lui-nicusor-dan/>, para. 7
12. See Gillet, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/woman-leading-war-on-corruption-romania>.

13. It came as a shock to many when Dan resigned from USR in early June 2017, following a dispute within the party ranks sparked by frictions between progressive and conservatory factions. Commenting on the issue, Deutsche Welle reported that Dan was wrong not to define his party ideologically, seeing how an “aseptic political platform, cleansed of all contentious issues” (in this case, LGBT rights), is impossible to build (Pepine, 2017, paras. 5-6) (see also Dumitrescu, 2017).
14. See Dumitrescu, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/am-vorbit-cu-nicusor-dan-despre-homofobie-si-planul-lui-pentru-usr>, para. 47.
15. See Goju, 2017a, <https://www.romaniacurata.ro/blog-de-parlamentar-mihai-gotiu-un-bilant-prestigios-ce-mai-pregateste-psd-pentru-scors-cetatenii-in-strada>, , para. 5.
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# Author



## **Dr. Dinu-Gabriel Munteanu**

is Founder and Managing Director of the Iași Academic Group and member of the Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University, UK. He has a background in psychology and the liberal arts. His recent research focuses on memory, digital curation, imagination and the arts. Dinu's collaborative environmental and heritage protection work in Romania has been awarded the IMPACT Prize and the 2nd Prize for Civic and Public Engagement at the Romanian Civil Society Gala (*Iașul lubește Tei* Campaign) (2015).



# Romania's Ongoing Fight Against Corruption: Growing Civil Society Attempts to Wake up all Romanians

Peter Gross

Romania commemorates its 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence from the Ottoman Empire this year and its tenth anniversary as a member of the European Union.<sup>1</sup> An even more notable coming-of-age moment may merit celebration now that the country's civil society appears to have reached a critical mass, recording what seems to be a game-changing victory and marks its birth as an apparently mature force in the democratization process.

These qualifying words suggest an uncertainty in characterizing the events of the first four months of 2017 and their meaning, and judgments about Romanian society's evolution. This is not because of any inherent cynicism or pessimism on the part of this writer, or his embrace of the general Kantian notion that "Out of the crooked timer of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." Instead, given this beautiful and long-suffering nation's pattern of progress and regression, regression and progress and regression once again, it is highly recommended that assessments be always informed by its history. Make no mistake, the events in question were in no way prosaic. But, they beg the question whether Romania has truly become a full-fledged, lasting liberal democracy or has only gingerly stepped into its vestibule, still subject to being vacuumed out by the ever-strong illiberal and anti-democratic force of a political establishment living in a time warp of retrograde values and attitudes.

## A real civil society, with muscles to prove it?

For almost three weeks in January 2017, hundreds of thousands of young and old protesters from all strata of society nightly crowded city streets, persistently and peacefully yet passionately opposing the anti-anti-corruption emergency law – Emergency Ordinance no. 13 (OUG13) - concocted by the new government of Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu and his puppeteer, Liviu Dragnea, who heads the controlling Social Democratic Party (PSD).

Grindeanu signaled he intended to change the

law only days after he took the oath of office on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, sparking the protests, and announced the new emergency law decriminalizing some corruption offenses 27 days later. He was forced to withdraw it a mere four days following the law's announcement.<sup>2</sup>

Representing the country's legendarily corrupt and regressive political elites – "rats" and "thieves" as Romanian demonstrators labeled the PSD lawmakers and other unscrupulous politicians – the new government demonstrated a perverse rationality. It attempted to decriminalize some acts of corruption in a country where the fight against inveterate venality among the political elites is a test of democratization and liberalization, consistently harped on about by the European Union, and one that has finally made significant if insufficient strides in the last few years? As the successful chief prosecutor of the National Anti-Corruption Department (DNA), Laura Codruța Kövesi, declared the day after the government adopted the new law: it "will render the anti-corruption fight irrelevant".<sup>3</sup>

There are other countries in the region, of course, where politicians formulate self-serving laws, the most recent and glaring examples being Hungary and Serbia. However, there is a particular cynicism, intensity and frequency in Romania. It is no surprise that the country is ranked as the fifth most corrupt in the EU by Transparency International, trailing only Bulgaria, Greece and Italy, and on par with Hungary.<sup>4</sup>

That said, there is an element of brutishness to the political elites' baseness of action, while never admitting political or economic self-interest, adopting what Thomas Mann so elegantly called "pious greediness" in his 1901 book, *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie*. After all, how many democracies attempt to specify abuse of office as the PSD government sought to do with its "under \$48,000" threshold? You are not corrupt unless you steal, embezzle, bribe and so on, a great deal of money; however, if you moderate your dishonest behavior you are sufficiently virtuous to be law abiding. Strictly

speaking, in this formulation of corruption in office, if you cause financial damages under that threshold you are - nearly, perhaps even with some other minor faults - the embodiment of canonized Mother Theresa. The disingenuous claim by the Grindeanu government that the emergency law was intended to ease overcrowding in the prisons obscured the real reason for its creation.

The unspoken justification is to safe-guard the not-so-saintly PSD leader, Dragnea, from indictment. He is being investigated for abuse of office adding up to around \$26,000. The law's announcement was meant to be the first gambit in what many suspected were to be additional attempts to retroactively change the criminal law to ultimately pardon Dragnea who was convicted of fraud in the 2012 parliamentary election and now serves a two-year suspended sentence, thus ineligible by law to hold the prime ministership for which he lusts. The Romanians were not fooled and were determined to proceed with the anti-corruption battles and demanded their democracy adhere to real liberal values. "In a democracy, thieves are in jail," read one of their placards.

### A victory with a cautionary note

Forcing the law's revocation was the biggest victory scored by any of the country's mass protests meant to check abuses of power since the fall of communism in late 1989; the resignation in 2015 of Prime Minister Victor Ponta ranks second. Ponta was indicted for corruption that same year, was more recently found to have plagiarized his Ph.D. dissertation, and is again under DNA investigation for criminal offenses.<sup>5</sup>

What was most impressive was the movement's tenacity and numbers. Hundreds of thousands of Romanians continued to crowd the streets of major cities even after the law was withdrawn, partly in response to Grindeanu's announcement on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2017 that the government would re-word the emergency law and this time send it to Parliament for approval. Protests continued into March 2017, people chanting, "We want justice, not corruption!" and demanding the resignation of the PSD government.

The fact that with their nightly protests Romanians also gave tacit support to government institutions such as the DNA and the President's office is a significant departure from the past. The DNA is trusted for its success in bringing a handful of high-profile politicians and businessmen to justice - those who exerted themselves to match the Mephistophelian achievements of Haiti's François Duvalier and the

Philippines' Ferdinand Marcos. And the presidency is now respected for the rectitude Klaus Iohannis brought to the office when he took his oath in 2015, after defeating Ponta and thus avoiding what some called the Putinization of Romania. These two institutions joined the short list of most trusted government organizations, headed by the consistently respected Army, Church, and Gendarmeries, according to polls taken by the Bucharest-based INSCOP Research firm in the last two years<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, in a rare display of principled behavior, a handful of PSD members and government officials resigned in protest over the emergency law, including the Minister of Justice Florin Iordache<sup>7</sup>. They did so after they witnessed the unprecedented force displayed by civil society, in itself a promising sign of a change in the relationship between it and government. It also kicked off some infighting in the PSD, jockeying for power and other posturing, like Ponta's threatened resignation from the party.

As expected, the PSD government's setback suffered in February did not derail its goal to neuter the anti-corruption system. A PSD-introduced law designed to pardon some who are convicted of corruption (*Legea Gratierii*), including officials, is (at the time of this writing) being considered by Parliament. And the new Minister of Justice Tudorel Toader, a member of the country's Constitutional Court until his elevation to minister at the end of February 2017, promised to formulate a proposal to alter the criminal code and did so in early April<sup>8</sup>. He also ignited a controversy when he signaled his intention to "evaluate" Kövesi's work and that of Romania's Prosecutor General, Augustin Lazar, who like the DNA prosecutor has taken the anti-corruption fight seriously and initiated an investigation into how the emergency law was adopted by the government. This kind of pressure on the prosecutors is suspect in a country where the independence of the judiciary remains aspirational to those who are democracy-minded. To make matters worse, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2017, Romania's Constitutional Court issued a contentious decision that signalled, in part, that there is a constitutional conflict between the prosecutors and the government, which alone "can establish if it's appropriate to adopt an emergency ordinance," that in turn "can only be censored through parliamentary oversight"<sup>9</sup>. Senate President Calin Popescu Tariceanu, head of the PSD partner party, ALDE, was quick to conclude the anti-corruption prosecutors' investigation of the government represented an act of corruption and an abuse of power<sup>10</sup>.

Civil society's initial victory quickly degenerated into a specifically Romanian denouement. What quickly followed the revocation of the emergency was a string of conspiracy theories to explain what happened and why. These theories ranged from multinational companies being the organizers of the protests, to Germany and George Soros encouraging Romanians go into the streets, to the Romanian Information Service (SRI) organizing the protests to damage President Iohannis.<sup>11</sup> Their purposes were to distract Romanians from the crass political muscle flexing by Dragnea and the Grindeanu-led government, and to discredit civil society. There is no evidence the tactic worked. The accusatory finger-pointing and political posturing and manipulation continued throughout March 2017. The war of words that erupted between politicians and against government officials like Kövesi and Lazar intensified, and there were calls for their firing and Dragnea's and Grindeanu's resignation. The PSD-government showed no intention to leave the path it set for itself but it paid the price of creating more internal dissension that reached a certain peak when Justice Minister Toader issued his decision not to fire Kövesi and Lazar.<sup>12</sup>

The indefatigable sniping and guerilla tactics of the PSD and its partner, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) against the DNA continues. In April 2017, for example, Tariceanu accused the DNA of being a "kind of political police"<sup>13</sup>. If we consider the cumulative meaning of the events of the first quarter of 2017, it is clear that civil society's fight is not over.

Here is a cautionary note to those who are inclined to rush to conclusions about civil society's ability to imminently take charge of the country and complete the democratization process begun in 1989. While this civil society includes many more citizens and non-governmental organizations than twenty or even ten years ago, there is a significant part of the public that has not yet joined it. The majority of the roughly 19 million plus Romanian citizens may have either silently cared about the anti-corruption fight, or were entirely disinterested, preoccupied as they are with the daily problems of surviving on some of the lowest wages in the European Union. Many backed the PSD for a variety of reasons, including ignorance, a lack of liberal values, and self-interest. Thus, a very small segment of the public – a few hundred souls – actually openly demonstrated in support of the PSD government.

#### **Time to be a normal rather than a "unique democracy"**

Romanians are tired of living in a "unique

democracy," as former post-1989 President Ion Iliescu (1989-1996, 2000-2004) labeled the country under his administration. A former communist official, Iliescu and the Democratic National Salvation Front, the PSD's progenitor, set up an illiberal and corrupt political machinery. After the European Court of Human Rights in 2014 criticised Romania for failing to prosecute individuals responsible for "crimes against humanity committed against ...civilians in the tortuous transitional period to democracy," Iliescu was indicted in Romania in 2015 for his policies that allegedly killed several people and wounded up to 1,000 during protests in 1990-1992<sup>14</sup>. Reverting to his old communist ways of always blaming "the other guy," Iliescu accused President Klaus Iohannis in early February 2017 of "inciting the street and provoking this anarchy"<sup>15</sup>. Others of the same mindset joined in the verbal combat and blamed or derided the protesters. Ion Tăriac, a tennis superstar in the 1970s, a banker and one of the richest men in Romania, blamed the protesters for causing trouble, saying that if he had to choose between a thief and a stupid person, "I prefer the thief"<sup>16</sup>.

By contrast, Iohannis, elected in 2014 in an early sign of liberal democratic civil society's growing significance, hit the proverbial nail on the head when he said, "People have a right to be outraged as a gang of politicians facing criminal problems want to change the legislation and weaken the rule of law." He labeled the day the government issues its emergency law, "a day of mourning for the rule of law...and for the fight against corruption"<sup>17</sup>.

It was a sentiment shared by the European Union, which warned Romania not to regress in its fight against corruption. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared, "The fight against corruption needs to be advanced, not undone"<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, the European Commission's Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, alerted the European Parliament that his commission is abandoning the publication of a "naming and shaming" report on corruption in the EU in 2016, which had focused on only eight member states, Romania among them. Carl Dolan, Director of Transparency International EU, opined, "The gap between the rhetoric from President Juncker and Vice-President Timmermans and the reality on the ground is striking. Now, more than ever, we need a strong and visible commitment to tackling corruption. Rising populism and the weakening of the rule of law across Europe requires concrete action from the EU on fighting corruption"<sup>19</sup>. Indeed. Romanians know this.

Social responsibility is not native to Romania and

its political elites and, therefore, Dragnea and the PSD are not likely to discard the great dishonorable political motivator that is self-interest. They will continue seeking to keep the country at least just a little bit corrupt. Unlike its progenitor in the immediate post-communist period, the PSD and its leadership now have what appears to be a formidable opponent in the country's galvanized civil society. In the coming years, it will have to grow in size and repeatedly prove that it is sufficiently mature and resolute to resist and continue the battle against corruption and a democracy based on liberal values. That is the hope and promise of the events in the first quarter of 2017 and, therefore, this visionary, democratic civil society merits respect and support. Its success is paramount if Romania is to truly join the democratic world, and important for the unity of a European Union already threatened by illiberalism. It is also consequential to the sustained viability of the country's political and military relationship with the United States, which has military bases in the country, and for the ability of the country and its NATO partners to resist Russian expansionism.

The title of Romania's national anthem - Desătepă-te, române/Wake up, Romanian - written in 1848, before the establishment of a unitary state in 1866, eliminated altogether by the communist regime and then re-adopted after 1989, has more meaning than ever before. The country is free from any foreign subjugation and influence, and in charge of its own destiny and it appears that Romanians are indeed waking up and battling to ensure they leave their children a future that is democratic and informed by a liberal culture, which does not include tolerating a corrupt political elite. ●



## Endnotes/Media links

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8. See Alexandra Stroe, "Ministrul Justiției, Tudorel Toader: Proiectul de modificare a codurilor, trimis la DNA, DIICOT, CSM și PG. Aștept sugestii până joi," Mediafax. 6 April 2017. <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/ministrul-justitiei-tudorel-toader-proiectul-de-modificare-a-codurilor-trimis-la-dna-diicot-csm-si-pg-astept-sugestii-pana-joi-16224190>
9. See <https://www.ccr.ro/noutati/COMUNICAT-DE-PRES-238>
10. Gabriel Pecheanu, "Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, președintele Senatului: Ce a făcut DNA înseamnă corupția puterii," Mediafax.ro, 27 February 2017. <http://www.mediafax.ro/politic/calin-popescu-tariceanu-presedintele-senatului-ce-a-facut-dna-inseamna-coruptia-puterii-16175397>; Tariceanu himself is in legal trouble having been accused of giving false testimony. See Alina Neagu, "Calin Popescu Tariceanu, la instanta suprema in dosarul in care este acuzat de marturie mincinoasa si favorizarea infractorului," HotNews.ro, 8 February 2017. <http://anticoruptie.hotnews.ro/stiri-anticoruptie-21596343-calin-popescu-tariceanu-asteptat-instanta-suprema-dosarul-care-este-acuzat-marturie-mincinoasa-favorizarea-infractorului.htm>

11. See for example, Dan Andronic, "Conspiratia multinationalelor si protestul din Piata. O Istorie Inversa de Dan Andronic," in Evenimentul Zilei, 13 February 2017. [www.evz.ro/conspiratia-multinationalelor-protestul-din-piata.html](http://www.evz.ro/conspiratia-multinationalelor-protestul-din-piata.html); Dora Vulcan, "Autorul articolelor conspirationiste anti-Soros, anti-proteste si promovat de Dughin, dibuit," in Revista 22, 15 February 2017. <http://revista22online.ro/70260450/autorul-articolelor-conspiraioniste-anti-soros-anti-proteste-i-promovat-de-dughin-dibuit.html>
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# Author



## Dr. Peter Gross

served as Director of the UT School of Journalism and Electronic Media from 2006 to 2016 and is now a senior professor in the school. He is the author/co-author of seven scholarly books and two textbooks, and co-editor of two book collections. Gross published scores of book and monograph chapters and articles in American and European academic and professional journals. He is currently a columnist for *Transitions Online*, a Czech-based journal covering politics, economics, society, culture and media in Eastern and Central Europe. In 1996, he was a research fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.



# Resist? Resist! Why and How?<sup>1</sup>

Immanuel Wallerstein

What Resist as a movement needs to keep in mind is the fact that we are in the midst of a historic structural transition from the capitalist world-system in which we have lived for some 500 years to one of two successor systems.

From time immemorial, persons who feel oppressed and/or ignored by the powerful have resisted those in authority. Such resistance often changed things, but only sometimes. Whether one considers the cause of the resisters to be virtuous depends on one's values and one's priorities.

In the United States, over the past half-century, there emerged a latent resistance to what was seen as oppression by "elites" who enacted changes in social practices offensive to certain religious groups and ignored rural populations and persons whose standards of living were declining. At first, resistance took the path of withdrawal from social involvement. Then it took a more political form, finally taking on the name of Tea Party.

The Tea Party began to have some electoral successes. But it was dispersed and without a clear strategy. Donald Trump saw the problem and his opportunity. He offered himself as a unifying leader of this right wing "populism" and catapulted the movement into political power.

What Trump understood is that there was no conflict between leading a movement against the so-called Establishment and seeking power in the state via the Republican Party. On the contrary, the only way he could achieve his maleficent objectives was to combine the two.

The fact that he succeeded in the world's strongest military power heartened like-minded groups all across the world, who proceeded to pursue similar paths with steadily increasing numbers of adherents.

Trump's success is still to this day not understood by the majority of leaders of both U.S. mainstream parties who search for signs that he will become what they call "presidential." That is to say, they want him to abandon his role as the leader of a movement and confine himself to being the president and leader of a political party.

They seize upon any small sign that he will do

this. When he softens his rhetoric for a moment (as he did in his 28<sup>th</sup> of February speech to Congress), they do not understand that this is precisely the deceptive tactic of a movement leader. Instead, they feel encouraged or hopeful. But he will never give up his role as movement leader because the moment that he did this he would lose real power.

In the past year, faced with the reality of Trump's success, a counter-movement has emerged in the United States (and elsewhere) that has taken on the name of Resist. The participants understood that the only thing that can possibly contain and eventually defeat Trumpism is a social movement that stands for different values and different priorities. This is the "why" of Resist. What is more difficult is the "how" of Resist.

The Resist movement has grown with remarkable rapidity into something impressive enough that the mainstream press has begun to report its existence. This is the reason that Trump constantly inveighs against the press. Publicity nourishes a movement, and he is doing what he can do to crush the counter-movement.

The problem with Resist is that it is still at the stage where its many activities are dispersed and without a clear strategy or at least not a strategy they have yet adopted. Nor is there any unifying figure who is able at this point to do what Trump did with the Tea Party.

Resist has engaged in manifold different actions. They have held marches, challenged local congressional representatives in their public meetings, created sanctuaries for persons menaced with state-ordered expulsions, interfered with transport facilities, published denunciations, signed petitions, and created local collectives that meet together both studying and deciding upon further local actions. Resist has been able to turn many ordinary persons into militants for the first time in their lives.

Resist however has a few dangers before it. More and more participants will be arrested and jailed. Being a militant is strenuous and after a while many people tire of it. And they need successes, little or big, to maintain their spirits. No one can guarantee that Resist will not fade away. It took the Tea Party decades before they got to where they are today. It may take Resist equally long.

What Resist as a movement needs to keep in mind is the fact that we are in the midst of a historic structural transition from the capitalist world-system in which we have lived for some 500 years to one of two successor systems — a non-capitalist system that preserves all of the worst features of capitalism (hierarchy, exploitation, and polarization) and its opposite, a system that is relatively democratic and egalitarian. I call this the struggle between the spirit of Davos and the spirit of Porto Alegre.

We are living in the chaotic, confusing situation of transition. This has two implications for our collective strategy. In the short run (say, up to three years), we must remember that we all live in the short run. We all wish to survive. We all need food and shelter. Any movement that hopes to flourish must help people survive by supporting anything that minimizes the pain of those who are suffering.

But in the middle run (say 20-40 years), minimizing the pain changes nothing. We need to concentrate on our struggle with those who represent the spirit of Davos. There is no compromise. There is no “reformed” version of capitalism that can be constructed.

So the “how” of Resist is clear. We need collectively more clarity about what is happening, more decisive moral choice, and more sagacious political strategies. This does not automatically come about. We have to construct the combination. We know that another world is possible, yes, but we must also be aware that it is not inevitable. ●

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rights@agenceglobal.com,  
1.336.686.9002 or 1.212.731.0757



# Author

## Immanuel Wallerstein

is Senior Research Scholar at Yale University  
and the author of *The Decline of American Power:  
The U.S. in a Chaotic World* (New Press).

