

Case study on the Romanian protests, 2012

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Introduction

Many previous studies showed and explained¹ – to a certain extent – why activism and protest in Romania are exceptional occurrences. For many Romanian public participation practitioners, 2011 ended on a sad note on Romanian activism, concluding that many more years are needed in order to grow a protest culture in the country². Budget cuts and all sorts of austerity driven reforms deprived the people of many of their social rights and diminished their purchasing power, yet no one was in the streets. For less drastic measures, thousands of people took the streets in Greece and Spain. In Romania, voices rose in discontent but the streets were silent. Even though the population was not happy with the situation, the experts concluded that Romanians' lack of protest was in line with their long-time nurtured culture of obedience and fatalism. To their surprise, January 2012 proved them wrong.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Budgetary cuts started in Romania in 2009 when the economic crisis hit, aiming especially civil servants (wages diminished, pensions recalculated etc.) and vulnerable categories: the elderly (also hit by further taxation on their pensions and some health care measures that diminished subsidies for drugs and medical treatments), beneficiaries of social assistance measures, mothers (indemnities diminished), people with disabilities (financial assistance cut) etc. Also, VAT increased from 19% to 24% leading to an overall increase in prices, and more taxation was imposed on the business sector (a new forfeit tax regardless of whether a company had any commercial activity or not). The government at the time – formed by a right-wing coalition supported by the same type of majority in the parliament – motivated such measures by the agreements made with the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission for financial loans. These austerity measures were supposed to diminish the budgetary deficit (by cutting expenses and increasing budget revenues).

These austerity measures were mainly adopted without any prior public dialogue or consultation and a serious amount of legislation was adopted through governmental emergency ordinances (a legal procedure that does not include the parliament in the process) or through engaging governmental responsibility. Therefore, political parties in the opposition (a right-wing party, a left-wing party and a conservative one) were many times left out of the decision-making process and were ineffective in opposing these measures.

In this context, there were some movements and protests – mainly from syndicates or organisations representing the categories affected by the austerity measures – but none of

¹ Cosmina Paul, "The History of Collective Action in Romania", for Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, October 2011; Oana Preda, "New Paths to Activism – an overview on activism in Romania" for Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, October 2011; Oana Preda, "Public Participation Strengthening Processes in Local Decision-Making in Romania" in Learning for Local Democracy – A study of Local Citizen Participation in Europe, ed. Joerg Forbirk, Central and Eastern European Citizens Network, 2011.

² Meeting „New Paths to Activism” organized by the Resource Centre for public participation (CeRe) with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Bucharest, November 2011

them proved successful in the fight with the government. The dialogue with central public authorities became ever more difficult.³

While Romanian TV stations reported more often on social outbursts in the rest of Europe and the world, political analysts concluded this was not going to happen in Romania. However, in September 2011, the ruling coalition tabled a proposal to modify the law on public gatherings which, if adopted, would have made protest very difficult in Romania. A member of the ruling party (the democrat-liberal party, related to the European Popular Party) motivated this change by the need to prevent the violence that happened in other countries in Europe⁴. Opposition from the civil society stopped the project and the Government dropped the proposal.

The year 2012 continued on the same note with the President Basescu proposing and the Government endorsing a new draft aiming to reform the healthcare system, perceived by most as "the privatisation" of the system. The draft was to be adopted through a procedure of engaging governmental responsibility in the Parliament, meaning the majority/coalition could vote for it without any other debate.

On January 9, secretary of state with the Health Ministry Raed Arafat⁵ declared during a TV show that this move will lead to the end of the emergency system. This prompted President Basescu's intervention by telephone, declaring that if one is not happy with the way his own government works, he should resign.

The second day, January 10, Raed Arafat did resign from his position as secretary of state with the Ministry of Health.

This prompted the creation of a multitude of groups and petitions showing solidarity with Raed Arafat, especially on social networks. People were discussing different ways of showing their support for Mr Arafat and their disapproval for the new law on the health care system. The same night, 12 – 15 people gathered in Bucharest at University Square. In Targu Mures, on January 12, more than 1500 people gathered for a march. On January 13, people gathered in Bucharest in front of the Presidential Palace and again at University Square.

The next day, people gathered at University Square in 2 places: in front of the National Theatre and next to the Architecture University, near a fountain⁶. Some people were still protesting in front of the presidential palace. At a certain point, they come join the protesters at University Square. By now, the slogans displayed more than solidarity with the former health secretary of state; people chanted against president Basescu and other party

³ The Resource Centre for public participation (CeRe) in Romania, for example, whose mission is to involve all social actors in the decision making process, could not develop and implement any new project having public authorities as partners in the last 2 years.

⁴ Mr. Mircea Toader, democrat-liberal member of the Parliament, in a debate on the new law on public gathering in the lower chamber in the Parliament, in the aftermath of protests in Spain and Greece and London fires in Tottenham.
http://www.politicaromaneasca.ro/audio_proiectul_legislativ_care_reglementeaza_adunarile_publice_criticat_de_o_pozitie-6147)

⁵ A Palestinian naturalized Romanian doctor, creator of the Romanian medical emergency intervention system, perceived both in the country and abroad as one of the most efficient in the world. The system was first tested in Targu Mures where Raed Arafat worked.

⁶ The space was marked by a fountain, which became a symbol for the protesters and for meetings in the future. The protesters meeting here are called "from the Fountain" or the "Fountain Group". The protesters were forced to use the space this way also because of the central boulevard Magheru that crosses the University Square in between the two spots (National Theatre and the Fountain). This will have important effects on the dynamics of the protest. An initiative to refurbish this space coming in the summer of 2012 from the City Hall met considerable opposition and the fountain was kept in the future urban operation.

members. The gendarmes were now massively present in the streets. This was considered the first day of "serious" protest because hundreds of people were in the streets (the exact numbers are not known, as different sources report different figures).

January 15 was a turning point in the protests development, as violent incidents occurred near the protests arena, with gendarmes and police closing the traffic in this area. The gendarmes used fire guns against "the violent" protesters, with innocent victims caught in the middle (tear gas was also used that night and the nights to come).

The clash between protesters and the armed forces became a focal point in the mass media reports in the next days. Many of the protesters blamed the mass media institutions for over reporting on these incidents as this was considered to discourage other people join the protest; the protesters also started to chant anti-violence slogans, delimitating themselves from the "hooligans" of January 15.

From now on, the gendarmes used the incidents of January 15 as a reason to increase their presence in the streets near University Square and actually start controlling people (identification and bags searching) entering the protest area. Every evening, random arrest occurred⁷. Gendarmes were also present among the protesters (sometimes disguised as civilians). Armed intervention and the intimidating presence of gendarmes in the streets prompted new slogans against state repressive forces.

In the meantime, slogans diversified and it was becoming apparent that the protests were not only about the health care system, solidarity with Raed Arafat and against president Basescu. The protesters displayed varied requests in their chanting: against the budgetary cuts, the lack of respect and lost dignity, corruption of the entire political class and mismanagement of public funds, lack of democracy etc.

The TV stations and mainstream media seemed to be split into two sides: one supporting president Basescu which reported on the illegitimacy of the protest, trying to minimize their importance and highlighting the violence and the anti-austerity side of the protest (and also saying they are not legal or authorised protests). The other side of the mass media supported the protesters (they assumed the protesters supported the opposition parties since they protested against the president and the current government), starting to show an emotional side of the protests and also reporting more on the gendarmes' abuses, also over-reporting the number of people in the University Square. Very few independent or impartial (or perceived as such) sources of information were available.

Up to this point, there was no public reaction from the ruling coalition and president Basescu. The mass media reported on an internal meeting of the liberal-democrats in which president Basescu was advised not to resign in offensive terms for the protesters. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a post on his blog insulting also the protesters. These moves contributed to the protesters feeling even more determined to continue.

However, the same Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited NGOs to "ample consultation" on January 16. NGOs refused, by now having sided with the protesters. President Basescu was still silent, but on January 17 Raed Arafat was made the offer to come back with the

⁷ NGO Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania – the Helsinki Committee (APADOR-CH) received numerous complaints about gendarmes abuses in Bucharest. 17 of these cases are presented on their website, but the real number is much bigger (many of those abused preferred to remain anonymous and a large number of people received counselling over the telephone and e-mail from APADOR-CH).

Ministry of Health and he accepted. Protests did not diminish afterwards (discussions took place in the University Square among protesters, asking themselves "we're not going to stop now, are we?"). Later on, the president advised on the withdrawal of the law on the health care reform. However, there was no public or official reaction from the President at this point.

On January 18, the Constitutional Court was expected to decide on the constitutionality of holding simultaneously general elections with local elections. The decision was postponed. People in the streets asked for more democracy: they chanted against elections taking place at the same time and requested anticipated elections (presidential elections, especially, as they expected Basescu to resign).

January 19 was a milestone for the protests, as opposition parties organised a rally. This rally joined the protests at University Square, many considering now that the protests "have been politicised". But the protesters continued chanting against the whole political class and the next day protests continued. Each attempt from a politician to join the protests was penalised by the people at University Square. So was the Green Movement representative who, on his own, decided to carry a message from the protesters to the opposition's rally: he was booed out the protests.

On January 23, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the one having insulted protesters on his blog) resigned.

On January 25, president Basescu finally showed up publicly with a declaration on the protests. The most expected announcement did not come: he was not going to resign. On the same day, the bad weather started and from then on, protesters all over the country had to put up with the elements and compete for TV audience with reports on the victims of the snow storms and the cold.

On February 2nd, protesters celebrated the resignation of the news director of the public TV channel, perceived as a professional serving the ruling party and the president.

On February 3rd, the Constitutional Court declared the decision to have local and general elections organised at the same time (in November 2012) as unconstitutional thus giving protesters a new reason to celebrate.

On February 5, the prime-minister Boc resigned together with the entire government. Democrat-liberals claimed this was a move they took into consideration as of last year, trying not to present it as a protests' victory.

Protests continued, not with the same force as before, but there were constantly people protesting on both sides of boulevard Magheru at University Square, even though they were not visible on TV.

On February 9 people gathered specifically to protest against the Anti Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (repeated also on March 10).

A new government was set in place from February 9 until April 2012. The new prime minister was a young career diplomat, a former chief of Romanian external information services (hence his nick name as "chief of spies"). The protests continued, even though the new government was formed of young professionals (many of them with a controversial background). Protesters accused the lack of legitimacy of the current government.

The current situation

Following a non-confidence vote in the Parliament the new democrat-liberal government fell too. The opposition took over, forming a new government on May 7 (prime minister became Victor Ponta from the social democrat party). After another series of moves on behalf of the opposition in the Parliament, sometimes labelled as a coup d'état, president Basescu was suspended until a referendum on June 29. Interim president was Crin Antonescu, from the liberal party. One month later, the Romanian Constitutional Court ruled on its lack of validity and president Basescu returned.

During the last 2 months, the protesters were still in the street: some in favour of president Basescu, some against the president. New protests sparked after the ruling of the Constitutional Court (7.5 million votes against president Basescu were cast in the referendum). The situation is now in a stand still until elections in December 2012.

ANALYSIS

In this paper, we are trying to capture the dynamic of the protests looking at their main aspects:

- triggers and motivations for people going out in the street;
- messages and the issues;
- participants;
- leadership and organisation;
- mass media and social media;
- affiliation to movements such as Occupy and Indignados;
- results and outcome.

It is important for practitioners understand what actually triggered the protests and what happened as it was exceptional for Romania. For the purpose of this research, we gathered data from several sources: a national survey contracted by the Resource Centre for public participation (CeRe) on a representative sample for Romania, 10 in-depth interviews with protesters, online and mass media sources on the protest, and authors' participation in the protests.

For the national poll, the number of sample subjects was 1100 subjects, 18 years old and above, un-institutionalized. The sample data is probabilistic; multi-layered; stratification was made in accordance with residency (urban and rural), historical regions, size of urban locality and type of rural locality. There was random selection of localities, electoral constituencies within localities, households within localities and subjects within households. The probabilistic error is at +/-3.0% with a level of certainty of 95%. Interviewing for the poll was face-to-face, at the premises of the subjects, using a questionnaire elaborated by the Regional and Urban Sociology Centre (CURS) in collaboration with CeRe.

Regarding the literature on the subject, some first attempts were already made at academia level to offer different perspectives on these protests, however even these are considered to be in an exploratory phase and valuable mainly because they give a fresh and descriptive account of what happened⁸.

The trigger and the motivations

⁸ Stoica, Catalin, Mihailescu, Vintila (coordinators), march 2012, "The Winter of Our Discontent", Bucharest, Paideia publishing house, a collection of studies on the protests written by different Romanian academics, using a diverse range of theories on collective action, sociological or anthropological.

It is agreed by now that the intervention of the president during the TV show and bullying the secretary of state – a figure Romanians appreciate as an achiever – constituted the trigger for the street protests. However, the question remains: why now and why was this event a trigger?

Using some of the social movement and collective action theories, some say the protests were somehow predictable (Stoica, 2012). Social deprivation theory would account for a background predisposing for contention. The social indicators for the last year show an increased level of self-perceived poverty, a decline in the purchasing power and an increased level of distrust in public institutions and in the direction the country is going. However, this alone would not explain the protests. Romania had displayed these values for these indicators for a long time now. There had been attempts to coalesce protest before, but they did not materialize in protests of this magnitude.

A cultural perspective on the protests might actually explain better why this event was a trigger. The cultural approach introduces the frames as a coalescing and mobilizing factor in collective action (Snow and Benford, 1988). The framing process allows for the formation of common and shared values and beliefs as part of political culture (and any form of collective action appeals to a certain political culture). According to this theory, people mobilize when they feel their personal values are challenged and when a sense of collective identity has been reached. People are presented with “collective action frames”, which embed rhetoric of social injustice (which implies the pre-existence of structural or social deprivation).

In order to come to a successful framing, to be able to mobilize people, framing efforts go through a series of transformations, a process known as “frame alignment” (Snow 1988), meaning a problem must be presented in a way that resonates with a large number of potential supporters. Collective-action frames diagnose a problem in terms that appeal to potential supporters, propose a solution – again in terms potential fans agree with – and issue a call to action.

So even if in Romania deprivation and discontent of the different social categories were facts recognized and acknowledged by the larger public, this was not enough to get people together in the street. They lacked the shared understanding of their different “issues” and a unifying vision. Up to the moment of “frame alignment”, people did not see a common cause and hence a common fight for solving their problems: retired people were unhappy for certain reasons; civil servants were discontent for different reasons and so on so forth. Therefore, even if discontent was generalized, it did not allow for common claims and action.

Therefore, what was perceived as an attack (privatising) on a public good or service strongly appreciated by a majority of the population – public health care and the emergency intervention system – set the pre-conditions for frame alignment. The intervention of President Basescu against secretary of state Raed Arafat added to these in the sense that it allowed the formation of a way to act: “Framing not only relates to the generalization of a grievance, but defines the “us” and “them” in a movement’s conflict structure.” (Tilly and Tarrow). For the case in question, it meant that the larger public identified President Basescu as “the enemy” and therefore protesting against him was the appropriate way to act.

“I left home (well, I am born a revolutionary!) when Basescu argued with the doctor. Because he said that if you fall in the street, they should check in your pockets first (for health insurance – ed.n.) and only afterwards they would provide you with first aid. And

then I rebelled... come on, we must do something and, of course, there we found ourselves with other problems. That`s why I went.” (Marian Nita, protester)

According to anthropologists, the theme of health is very special in Romanian folklore. Even though the protests diverged from this issue later on, it might explain why this subject had the potential of a trigger⁹ :

“[...] There is a valorization of health, a preoccupation, a concern, the correct term would be concern or worry, which is cultural and which is summarized by the expressions we all know: “may God give us health because with the rest... we’ll see!” or “because it is better than anything else” and so on so forth. So, if health, for Americans, to give you an extreme example, is an individual responsibility, for the Romanian peasant original culture and other neighboring areas, health is not related to my person. It is a permanent risk and then I am always worried. I know money can`t save, it has nothing to do with this. [...] And there`s also the story with the family; in many surveys, family, a certain type of relationship, socialization, an affective relation. These are very important for us. The anecdotic example comes also from University Square and it is not by accident the protests were linked to Raed Arafat and health and what you can call dignity. Not money. It does not mean that people were happy when their income was cut down. People suffered but did not go out in the street. Not even the syndicate whose mission is to protect to minimum guaranteed income. But when they touched the health matters and even more seriously “my dignity as a family person”, the way this was done, with total disdain, it is exactly this emotional side that pushed the people out in the street.”

If the president`s intervention was the spark of the protests and the initial reason for going out in the street, for many people it was just a pretext to go out there for many other reasons, thus reflecting the depth and scope of unheard social and political problems present in the society.

“It was in the air, the moment of going out in the street, I felt the need to do it and I took advantage of this like each of the endurers I found there and with whom I spent months in the street. My goal was very clear, I didn`t go out for Raed Arafat, it was just an excuse, like it was for many others. Against a representative of evil in the purest sense of the word and later on I discovered more was possible.” (Vlad Ioachimescu)

However, in CeRe`s national poll on the protests, the sampled participants in the protest motivate their presence in the street by the low quality of life (24 %) and change and cease of the abuses (18 %). Against the dismissal of Raed Arafat (10 %) and the resignation of president Traian Basescu (8 %) seem to be marginal compared to the values above.

The message(s) and the claims in the street (the issues)

There are several aspects that need mentioning in analyzing the Bucharest protests from the messages` point of view. The first aspect is that of the “issues” - the requests or the claims participants made in the protest. The second aspect is that of the form these messages took as this aspect became a specific characteristic of this protest.

Regarding the claims protesters made (the issues), these were very diverse and at first glance, they could have appeared as not inter-related. Issues ranged from budgetary cuts to very particular or personal requests. The diversity of claims was often discussed in mass

⁹ Vintila Mihailescu, anthropologist, interview from May 31, 2012, The Industry: <http://theindustry.ro/2012/05/vintila-mihailescu-in-media-romaneasca-surdul-intreaba-mutul-raspunde-4/>

media and in the early days of protest, many journalists and analysts stating the protests were not coherent. It was not possible to give an easy or simple answer to the question "what is this protest about?" and looking at the diversity of issues on which people protested, it appeared to lack "unity". This diversity was considered by many as a weakness (hard to mobilize: why do I join? Hard to communicate)

However, this was an indicator of protests dynamics and of actual public agendas. The protests showed "the state of the nation" and pictured protesters' view on making politics and of their political project. Messages were not contradictory but complementary. They showed the scope of discontent and the actual failures in governance in Romania and also of Romanian politics.

If at the beginning the messages were mainly anti-president and pro-Arafat, further on, the public gatherings allowed for direct interaction and thus participants could directly debate, reach a common understanding of the issues and negotiate common frames for action. This explains why protests did not stop after the re-instatement of Raed Arafat with the Ministry of Health and the protests took on other issues revealing a more structural approach to the problems. Message analysis reveals an increasing sophistication and complexity – and thus understanding of the "issue" - of protesters' requests. Each day introduced new themes into the public sphere or new views on the subject. By the end of the protests, the messages were not about separate or individual grievances but about general systemic problems in Romania.

The slogans and banners in the street were also used as a form of communication among protesters. From one day to another, new themes were validated in the street (the themes were also related to the political reaction or scene of the day). Participants validated each other and their presence in the street by the messages they were holding. Framing and frames alignment occurred in the street.

"From a simple "Down with Basescu!" the messages became much more complex and the people with whom I protested proved to me that longer term things have a chance to change in the essence." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

Looking at the messages, they could fit into different categories of issues – such as health care, education, pensions, environment, taxes – but they did not form separate issues as such. They were always linked to a certain perspective on the current political system. These issues were put in relation to corruption at all levels of government, from political parties to public funds management, lack of transparency or democracy.

Public goods and services: The money for culture you spent it on drinking¹⁰ (Banii de cultura/I-ai dat pe bautura); We want hospitals not cathedrals¹¹ (Vrem spitale nu catedrale); A guy of neutral gender destroyed our education¹² (Un baiat de gen neutru a stricat invatamantu); Go and bring back our ship fleet (Du-te dupa ma-ta/ si adu-ne flota).

¹⁰ Aimed at the president, pictured by one part of the mass media as a heavy drinker.

¹¹ A reference to the biggest construction project of the Romanian Orthodox Church of all times, the building of a cathedral near the Palace of Parliament, to which the Government and local budgets contributed millions of euro.

¹² A reference to a grammar mistake on a noun's gender the former minister for education made in a public speech.

Corruption: You took big bribe from Rosia Montana¹³ (V-ati luat spaga barosana de la Rosia Montana); We don't want governments run by corporations anymore (Nu mai vrem guverne conduse de concerne); Please excuse us, we do not produce as much as you steal!

Political parties and politicians: USL – PDL – aceeasi mizerie (the socialists, liberals and democrats – the same filth); I want to vote for a free man! (Vreau sa votez un om liber).

Democracy and change: Fatal error 404: Democracy not found!, Another revolution for the constitution (Inc-o revolutie pentru constitutie), We want earlier elections not elections run at the same time (Vrem anticipate nu comasate!), Those who jump want a change (Cine sare vrea schimbare); Who is sad is a former political police officer (Cine este trist este securist).

Awakening: I am/we are the new civil society; Player civil society¹⁴ (societate civila jucatoare); Thank you, Basescu, for waking me up! (Multumesc, Basescu, ca m-ai trezit!); I came by myself, i was not brought here by bus¹⁵ (Am venit singur, nu m-a adus autocarul).

The public opinion shows also a diverse degree of adherence to the requests the protesters made, as the CeRe's national poll indicates. The requests of the protesters which the respondents agreed with: better financing of the healthcare system (95%), better functioning of the judiciary system (95%), eradication of corruption in Romania, and better financing of the education system (both at 94%). The requests of the protesters which the respondents disagreed with: holding of before-term parliamentary elections (29%), holding the local and parliamentary elections separately (27%), and resignation of Traian Basescu as President (24%).

Irrespective of taking part or not in the protests, the respondents in CeRe's poll consider the better financing of the healthcare system as the most important problem for them in the midst of the protests at the beginning of 2012 (17%, the highest percentage). The resignation of Traian Basescu was important for 13 %, eradication of corruption from Romanian politics for 10%, better financing of the education system for 9 %, reimbursement of illegal taxes collected from pensions for another 9 %, better functioning of the judiciary system was important only for 6%. The rest are split among restoration of the civil servants wages, return of Raed Arafat, reform of the entire political class, stopping medical taxation for retired people. The lowest values are registered for the Boc cabinet resignation (the democrat liberal government in place at the time), elimination on the health care bill, giving up the loans with IMF and EC (only 1%) and the gold mining project (1 %) as well as the elimination of a tax on older vehicles (1%).

Even more particular messages showed up gradually, such as those coming from the royalists, the greens, the ultras or the feminists. However, they are all linked to bad management or bad governance – be it because of lack of efficiency in managing funds or corruption in many forms or ignoring certain social groups. The University Square slowly gathered and welcomed the unheard, the ignored or the abandoned.

¹³ A reference to a controversial private gold mining project fiercely opposed by activists in the last 12 years and who were very present in the University Square. President Basescu publicly expressed his support for this project.

¹⁴ A reference to president Traian Basescu, who said he wanted to be a player; however according to the Constitution, the president should be a mediator.

¹⁵ A reference to public controversy saying many protesters were paid by political parties and brought to the protests with buses.

"No manifestation against the system had taken place in a long time and then it was natural for the University Square to be heterogeneous. It brought at the same table different social groups with different interests." (Mihai Bumbes)

"It was inevitable to have so many voices. Looking for coherence is wrong in this case, diversity did not affect fundamentally the protests' development. It wouldn't have been what it was had it been more coherent." (Claudiu Craciun)

"The multiple voices in University Square were authentic; they reflect the multitude of problems in the society. Getting out in the Square gave hope for solutions proposed by different people." (George Epurescu)

"I think it is good that people protested on different issues. In twenty years, we did not have significant protests of civil society, except those previously organized one way or another, I think it is absolutely natural for people to take out all the evil, to voice all their problems." (Raluca Dan)

"I don't think there should be a unitary voice, because a unitary voice does not do anything but marginalize other voices and other causes. It was beneficial that the Square integrated the diverse agendas of the participants. The University Square was open compared to other types of manifestations." (Oana Baluta)

"I liked it, I thought it was interesting that there were so many voices, that there was such a diversity; it was beneficial as well in the sense that it reflected discontent and the lack of representation of diverse categories by politicians. And also positive was that these voices, so many and so different got used to each other... somehow groups mobilized when they saw there was diversity and they could all stay and protest in the same place." (Marina Popescu)

Besides the public narrative trying to describe the protests as just a gathering of different requests, for some the protests were deeply linked to the economic crisis that hit Romania since 2009. Many considered the protests as the outburst of those affected by the budgetary cuts or of the socially assisted. However, the Romanian protests were not just about the austerity measures, as some over simplified. The anti-austerity message was present, but not in the sense perceived by many.

"It was not austerity that drove us to the Square, humiliation took us to the Square." (George Epurescu)

Many banners read "We didn't make the crisis!", "The problem is corruption not the crisis!", "We want dignity!". Participants in the protest said they could have accepted the budgetary cuts as measures to counter act the economic crisis if they had seen the same level of sacrifice on the politicians' side. Also, for many, the lack of funds was not caused by the crisis but by mismanagement, incompetence and corruption. In addition, in Romania, the public narrative explaining and justifying budgetary cuts vilified the social categories affected by the cuts. The socially assisted and the retired people were always referred to as a burden and not worthy.

The form the messages took in the protests' space became a point of discussion in itself. Beyond the staging of the protests, this was about the language used and their wittiness. Many of these were very smart messages, which prompted a series of articles in the mass media. The first article giving account of these messages was published on January 18 by a

mainstream news agency.¹⁶ This is also one of the few press articles at the time showing a deeper understanding of the protests than the majority of articles on the subject (most of them accuse protests of being about everything and nothing at the same time).

Some of the messages displayed were deeply ironical, some were merely absurd or contained cultural references, which made it difficult for many observers to understand the nature of the protest. A few examples of banners: "Stop the tectonic plates!", "IE9 is dead/sucks!", "Now is the winter of your discontent – Sucker-speare", "To be, not TB" (TB – abbreviation from Traian Basescu, the Romanian president).

Finally, some sociologists and anthropologists considered this kind of messages as the "creative revolt" (Mihailescu, 2012) of a new generation, one gaining political consciousness. These slogans were the result, formulated in a new political language, showing the divide between the current political class and the new generation.¹⁷

"I was amazed that youth got out of the house so late, on the 13th there were few young people. The sign Dislike took from Facebook, nobody understood in the beginning; it was a great joy to discover these young people at the Fountain." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

Later on, one editor concluded that the protests were orchestrated by PR employees because the messages displayed were too smart for ordinary people.¹⁸

The messages were also used to communicate inside the "movement" with protesters in different cities¹⁹.

Participants

The first observation regarding the people coming to protest at the University Square is their diversity: young, old, middle-age, men, women, intellectuals, simple workers, "the hooligans", "the hipsters", poor people, better off people. The diversity in people was similar with the diversity of the messages, both as form (some simple requests, some subtle ironies) and substance. The University Square proved to be welcoming for any category.

The solidarity among groups remained an important feature of the protest in Bucharest until the end. Still, very fast, the people in the Square split in two separate groups: the group at the Fountain and the group at the National Theatre. The two groups protesting on opposite side-walks are very well defined: the group at the Fountain was mostly comprised of young people, intellectuals, protesting for issues like rule of law, anti-corruption, environmental causes, freedom of the internet, while the group at the National Theatre was mostly comprised by people protesting for social causes – pensions, taxation (Bulai 2012). Bulai even called this "the two worlds of the protests in the University Square". Of course, the geographical setting helped this cleavage, as the University Square is crossed by a large Boulevard. Even if they were so different and situated on opposites sidewalks, the two groups protested together until the end. Regularly a group on one side used to chant in

¹⁶<http://www.mediafax.ro/main-story/comentariu-o-alta-romanie-cu-substanta-si-mesaj-a-protestat-marti-noapte-la-piata-universitatii-9153693>: "Another Romania, with substance and message, protested Tuesday night at University Square."

¹⁷ <http://www.criticatac.ro/14039/generaia-revoltei-creative/>

¹⁸ Dan Tapalaga, "What it is not said about these protests", <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-opinii-11283116-nu-prea-zice-despre-aceste-proteste.htm>

¹⁹ The anecdotic side of the messages in the University Square, represented by one protester in Bucharest holding a banner asking "Where are you, Chuck Norris?" and the "answer" he got the second evening from a protester in Timisoara who was holding a banner saying "Chuck Norris is here. Where are you?".

support of the group on the other side ("for the brothers at TNB (the National Theatre)") and the two groups used to "visit" each other.

Among the diversity of the people protesting in January, one could find "the usual activists": NGO activists used to show up to the small protests organized by different NGOs or the environmental activists, the anti-globalists or the feminists. There were also "the old school" protesters: those who participated at the revolution in '89 and at the early '90s movements. But a large part of the protesters were those that had never or rarely participated in a civic protest, younger and older, professionals or not.

One much discussed and blamed group during the protest was the one of the so called "football hooligans". Indeed, there were many football fans in the University Square during the protest. It is most probably that what brought them into streets were the same things that brought other protesters. They were easy to be spotted out as they were well organized and experienced with chanting. Nevertheless, even if they were a well defined group, they blended very well with the rest of the protesters.

The football fans were blamed mostly by gendarmes and by the mainstream media for the violence of the night of January 15. Politicians also used their presence to illegitimate the protest. The truth is they were one of the many other categories of people in the Square protesting just like everybody else. During the protest, for the first time they distinguished themselves as a new voice in the public space. An appreciated freelance journalist (Vlad Ursulean) reported from the ground during the night of January 15. Speaking about those involved in the violent acts he described them as „*the "slumbering generation", the apathetic youth who kill time in clubs and save the world with a "like."* This time, they saved it by waving their fists and throwing chunks of concrete at the police. ... There are about 300 people: hipsters, boys "from the hood" wearing fake Nikes, dubious rockers, the kind of colorful crowd you usually see on Lipscani street. They're the target audience for corporations, the ideal consumers. Only now they've stopped consuming; they're just destroying."²⁰

After they were blamed for being responsible for the violence in the night of January 15, a couple of them released the "Ultras' Manifesto" – a very well articulated document synthesising their claims from the political establishment. And their claims were not so different from those expressed by the society.

While some groups and voices did distinguish themselves very well – the football fans, the environmentalists, the feminists, the anti-ACTA militants – some other groups that could have contributed choose not to show up. The trade union members and the students are two of these groups. Of course some students were there and probably some trade union members as well, but their voices as groups were not present.

The organized civil society and the non-organized civil society

For many NGO members and activists, the protests in January were a lesson given by the un-organized civil society to the organized civil society (NGOs). For years, the NGOs, even sometimes claiming themselves as the voice of the citizens, hadn't had real connections with the citizens. Their agendas were far away from the citizens' concerns. As a result, street manifestations organized by NGOs wouldn't gather any support from the non-associated citizens. In January, the citizens gathered themselves without needing the support of the organized civil society.

²⁰ <http://vlad.ursulean.ro/the-slumbering-youth-is-throwing-rocks-we-are-fucking-angry/>

Few NGO people were in the University Square in the beginning, but soon they started to get organized and came in larger groups. Still they were not many enough according with some of the people we interviewed. At first, most of them went in the University Square as citizens not as NGOs, but while the protest was increasing in intensity, some of the NGOs wanted to gain more space. While appreciating that NGOs members were in the Square as citizens, many of the protesters made clear that they did not want the protest to be a scene for NGOs to take advantage of. The Square was "*grass root democracy, that democracy that bottom-up.*" (Oana Baluta) When the political parties tried to reach out to the protesters through NGOs, the reaction coming from the square was very strong: this protest is not about NGOs, the NGOs do not have the right to represent the University Square.

In an attempt to figure out the number of protesters through out the country, in the national poll an overwhelming majority of individuals (94%) state they did not take part in the protests, while only 4% took part (either in the locality in which they live, or in other locality). Out of those that took part in the protests at the beginning of 2012, 40% were present only once, while 21% were present daily.

Leadership and organization

In many collective action theories leadership is an important element and in the case of Romanian protests, many attempted to find a leader. It was part of the understanding effort of the protests. This was an expression of the paradigm claiming that someone else – other than the protesters – organized and directed the protests.

However, one of the main features of the Romanian protests was the lack of leadership and internal organization. Even though there have been attempts to search or find the organizers or the people behind the protests – with the aim to dismiss the spontaneous or popular character of the protests - , no one could ever prove there was someone behind the protests. The way the protests unfold in the street had the character of spontaneity – with all its implications: lack of organisation, lack of coordination etc. There were many moments when people in the street started to talk about organizing themselves and actually having a leader. Many of these moments were learning moments: they did not know how to react to political parties` dialogue requests, how to attract more people in the street, how to become more visible in the mass media etc.

Most of the voices said protests were organized by the opposition parties` coalition. Public perception does not agree with this hypothesis as the national poll shows. 71% of the respondents consider the protests were entitled (either certainly agree or agree), taking into account the situation in Romania. 33% of the individuals questioned disagree strongly and 23% disagree with the assertion that the protesters were paid by the opposition parties` coalition to cause country destabilization.

The participants we interviewed were aware of the fact that some people might have been paid by the opposition parties. For them, however, this was not something to diminish the legitimacy of the protest.

"I came precisely because it looked unorganized and for those on Facebook who were involved it was obvious they were on their own and did not belong or were not connected to any organization. I felt the same in the University Square, groups had formed, groups who came for their own cause. But there were no cross-groups behind or for those who actually did not belong to any cause related group" (Marina Popescu)

"Of course the opposition encouraged the protests and used them in the mass media. It is also possible that the opposition stimulated financially some of the participants. But none of the people who gave a certain direction to the protests was a fan of the opposition. There was diversity and in this diversity maybe there were some people paid. But this does not cancel at all the legitimacy of the protest, the message and so on. " (Claudiu Craciun)

"There were people paid to hold some banners, but the majority of the people were there because they wanted so. Public figures were taken out of the Square." (George Epurescu)
The lack of vertical organization became a definitive feature of the Romanian protests. This related to the ideas of equality and participatory democracy the protests embraced and promoted.

"The Square has no leader, there was a horizontal structure." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

"The University Square, unlike other types of public gatherings, had no leader. There were a few persons who stood out however not as a representational form, but as voices of the Square." (Oana Baluta)

There were however a few figures from the crowds who were more vocal and visible in the University Square. But they were never recognized as leaders of the protests and they have never encouraged this approach.

"They (the TV) did not get any leaders, even though some of the protesters went on TV (the citizen with one vote, the revolutionaries). We, in turn, realized that this will not work and despite the fact that TV turned their cameras on the Fountain side after Claudiu`s speech in the European Parliament²¹, we kept saying we had no leaders." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

With protests being spontaneous and perceived by outsiders as incoherent and with participants feeling their protest was manipulated in the mass media, certain groups of protesters tried to organize themselves. Several groups were formed ad hoc in the University Square and after a certain point they started to meet outside the protests. It was a way to try to get the protest going. This was particularly important for a category of people situated by the Fountain side. This group was formed by young professionals, very educated and who cared most about the civic aspect of the protest.

"Many of the important things happened ad hoc in the University Square. People met outside the University Square too, to get to know each other, to try to come to common ideas. They were open meetings, without trying to over organize or structure the protest. There were no hierarchies or institutionalized elements, only initiatives." (Claudiu Craciun)

"In the group at the Fountain we had different meetings for coordination. Things were changing politically and we had to keep up with this dynamic and at the same time to coalesce to promote our message, which implicitly meant the revival of citizens` participation." (Oana Baluta)

"I participated in meetings in small groups, initially, which later became bigger, aiming at a minimal organization. We were trying to get to know us." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

²¹ On January 31st, one of the protesters who became more visible in the mass media as he was the one animating the Fountain Group each night with a megaphone, was invited to a hearing organised by the European socialists in the European Parliament. Later on, he attended many talk shows held on a TV channel supporting the opposition parties, thus sparking discussions, even among protesters, about the „politicisation“ of the protest.

"We started to have small meetings in a bar. We were wondering who else we should be calling to come to the Square, which would be the best methods, how to avoid political affiliations, how to avoid violence." (Raluca Dan)

Another point worth mentioning about the protest's dynamic and organization is the split that occurred among the protesters. It has been mainly explained by the urban design of the University Square with a big boulevard crossing it. This automatically generated two sides of the protests. The TNB (Teatrul National Bucuresti – Bucharest National Theater) side and the Fountain side were, for many, another sign that there was no unity in the protest. However, there were many attempts from the very first days to occupy the boulevard in order to unite the protest. This prompted gendarmes' intervention which blocked protesters on the two sides. During the protest, car traffic was not normally interrupted even though hundreds of people and gendarmes were present on its sidewalks. The boulevard was however twice occupied by the protesters: in the early days when the opposition's rally joined the protests at University Square and later on, the night before the Constitutional Court ruling, when a group of activists interrupted traffic in an act of civic disobedience.

Mass media and social media in the protests

In the traditional social movements, framework alignment and dissemination was achieved through community channels and involved a lot of community organizing - a point where the structuralist approach meets with the cultural one. The framing needs "the dense social networks and connective structures" for it in order to be able to reach alignment and later on lead to resource mobilization and collective action. For the most recent social movements, these traditional connective structures have been replaced by mass media and new media. As shown in the previous research on activism in Romania (Mott, 2011), activists rely heavily on them recently in order to mobilize.

While it is obvious that these new means of communication have increased importance, we still do not know how they influence the dynamics of a movement.

In relation to the Romanian protests of January – February 2012, mass media has been a subject of discussion and discontent even among protesters. Protesters and non-protesters – fans or not – felt some part of the mass media failed to perform. And this is because of what mass media has become in the last 2 decades.

After 1989, the development of Romanian mass media institutions followed the Western model in many ways: aiming for higher rating and audiences, which in the majority of cases means superficial levels of information, a lot of entertainment and a way of informing (even for news channels) reminding tabloids. The former state monopoly on information was dismantled in the 90s and a lot of private TV and radio channels and newspapers entered the scene (so do mass media holdings and trusts and famous or controversial mass media moguls). Some of them developed online content and platforms in the last years, as print press started to decline.²² The Romanian public TV channel TVR entered the same logic in some ways, considering that public money should be spent with high performance meaning higher audiences. However, the public TV channel never equalled the performances of private commercial TV stations in terms of rating and audience.

The news websites and TV channels scoring the highest ratings are those that developed tabloid-like content. TV talk-shows followed the same line. Beside the profit drive, content

²² <http://theindustry.ro/2012/06/romania-fara-ziare/>, June 11, 2012

was also dictated by political agendas. The public is more or less aware of the fact that some TV channels (and their respective websites and newspapers) are associated with certain political formations. It was only normal in this context that mass media institutions reported on the protests according to their agendas and in the way they were used to (looking for the sensational or shocking sides of the street events).

The mass media institutions thus stayed true to their own viewers and political agendas even if this contributed to an overall contradictory image of the protests. In addition, communication on the protests showed a superficial level of understanding of the phenomenon such as the attempts to look for or even "make" leaders in the University Square.

"First of all, it was a partisan transmission, in one direction or another, even though there were other mass media initiatives that were objectives. Mass media sent a politicised message because society was like this and a matching message was necessary. The sensational side did not do any good: looking for violence even if the violence was not the most important thing happening there. The protesters were presented as original characters, comical or tragic. The approach at mass media level... not prepared to discuss structural elements of the Romanian society and politics." (Claudiu Craciun)

"The press ruined the image of the Square (University Square referred to as a phenomenon), it reported about it with total despise and in its own interest. The anti-system fight was communicated much better over the internet". (George Epurescu)

"The TV - its sole purpose is rating, they were looking for the fools, the elderly, the disabled, the humiliated retired people, a variegated mix. The TVs were avoiding us to get to those offering circus. Only the 3rd day I was approached for an interview, and it was not a Romanian TV, but CNN and later on Russia Today." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

"[...] I noticed a very big difference between what was presented on TV and what was actually happening at University Square. Sometimes they succeeded in capturing it but other times they were totally unsynchronized. What they did was to over emphasize the violence even if not every where violence was occurring. It was a disservice to participation." (Oana Baluta)

Recognizing the role of media institutions in the making of collective action, protesters launched several chants aiming or involving the mass media. Holding banners for the TV cameras: "Get out of the house/If you care" (Iesiti din casa daca va pasa!) and "Turn off the TV, start the revolution".

Also some of the protesters dropped the less politically correct chants or the ones using "bad words" as they realized the TV cameras won't pick them up.

It is also true that depending on the TV channel involved, some of the banners weren't filmed as they were contradictory to the political agenda of the TV channels.

Besides some commercial TV channels, the Romanian public TV channel (TVR) was the subject of special concern during the protests. TVR started to communicate very late on the protests and only marginally if we are to compare it to private TV channels. Later on, news bulletins and talk shows especially were perceived as favouring the ruling coalition. As a result, the head of the news director resigned on February 2nd. This was considered a success by protesters and celebrated as such.

Nevertheless, from the protesters` point of view, none of the TV channels depicted the reality in the street, even if some of them were trying to show the protests in a positive note. The chant "The Romanian press/Full of lies" (Presa romana/Plina de minciuna) and "Fuck the TV" were present in every evening`s repertoire.

In terms of audience, the protests proved to be good material for TV stations. News about protests made the headlines everyday and as shown by media monitoring, they were most accessed on the main online news platforms (Rogozanu, 2012). Also, the TV channel reporting most on the protests increased its market share in January 2012.²³ This was later on confirmed by studies for the whole first trimester of 2012.²⁴

Mass media lost interest for the protests once a new subject competed for a high profile on the public agenda: the snow storms. People kept protesting despite the freezing temperatures and the snow storms, but TV cameras were no longer present. Many of the protesters at the time, realizing the absence of cameras, expressed their feeling that "now we protest for nothing, nobody can see us".

How did mass media influence the people?

Some of the interviewees admit they actually came to the protests because they did not understand what was going from what was reported on TV.

"I went out on January 13. I saw what was aired on TV and each TV said something else, I did not understand. If mass media chose to be selective then it is time to go and see by myself what is going on." (Oana Baluta)

According to CeRe`s national survey, an overwhelming majority of people used TV channels as their source of information on the protests: a cumulative 88% (either news TV channels – 47%, or not news TV channel – 41%). 46% of the respondents consider they bettered their opinion regarding the protests after getting in touch with information about them, while 6% consider that made it much worse.

Facebook

The same CeRe study revealed only 1% used the internet to get information about the protests and 1% used Facebook as a source of information during the protests.

However, for a certain category of protesters (the group of young and educated at the Architecture University, by the Fountain) the Facebook constituted the main means of communication during the protests. They also used the social network as a means to organize themselves. During the course of the protests, they decided they would keep in touch and using Facebook they organized small group meetings.

Besides this group, new groups and pages related to the protests showed up on Facebook: Piata Universitatii (University Square), Indignatii de Romania (Indignados of Romania) etc. Piata Universitatii was the most popular one, as it gathered on the page people from all over Romania and also from outside the country (the manager of the page was posting about protests that sparked within the Romanian communities abroad).

At the same time, the newcomers in the activism arena discovered soon the limits of using Facebook as a tool to mobilize people. Practice showed the number of people actually

²³ <http://theindustry.ro/2012/02/televiziunile-intact-castiga-market-share-in-ianuarie/>

²⁴ www.theindustry.ro, trimester reports

joining an event (in this case, a march or a public gathering) is massively lower than the ones attending on Facebook. The most famous case at the time was the anti-ACTA protest in February 2012. Thousands of people were expected to join the protests while in the street only about 1500 were present. Again, the protests proved to be a learning experience for many people.

The protests were also the occasion on which new independent free-lancer journalists answered the need for a new kind of information for that 1% using the internet. Dela0.ro and Vlad Ursulean, a young independent journalist, actually became known during protests time, together with other photographers and videographers. Vlad Ursulean increased his profile after reporting on the violence of January 15. He filmed from inside the fights between the protesters and the police. The number of shares and hits of his post on the subject surpassed those of the main two online news platforms combined.²⁵

These free lancer journalists and photographers were in the midst of the protesters every day. Journalists working for corporate media institutions were on the other side of the protesters, protected by the police.

The protests' affiliation to the Occupy/Indignados movements

The protests in Romania in 2012 were mainly caused by internal affairs and policies. But so were the protests everywhere else. However, the social movements of 2012 have some characteristics in common, both in terms of authorities/agents against which the protests were organized and in terms of issues to protest against. Occupy Wall Street in New York and then all over the world, Indignados in Spain, Anonymous globally, anti-austerity protests in Greece are only some of the most salient movements in 2012. They were followed by many others in many countries, all over the world. To what extent can we say that Romania is a pin point on the map of social movements of 2011-2012?

The framework for analysing the degree to which the Romanian protests in 2012 are connected to or influenced by the global social movements in 2011-2012 (Occupy, Indignados, Anonymous etc.) is based on three basic questions related to social movements' theories²⁶: (1) why do people join a movement?; (2) why do they stay in a movement? and (3) why do they leave the movement?. According to the social movements' theories, there are six main factors that should be taken into account when answering the questions above²⁷:

- Rational – self interest;
- Emotional – beliefs;
- Social and normative – historical, cultural and institutional conditions; social networks and communities of practice;
- Behavioural – specific forms of involvement;
- Organizational – structures and resources;
- Leadership – framing for collective action.

Using some of these explanatory factors, we will analyse the underlying motivations to join the movements and the messages and the strategies and organizing tactics.

²⁵<http://citynews.ro/interviu/vlad-ursulean-cel-mai-bun-blogger-jurnalism-romania-este-o-mina-de-aur-pentru-subiecte>

²⁶ Paul Bate, Helen Bevan, Glenn Robert – “Towards a Million Change Agents. A Review of the Social Movements Literature: Implications for Large Scale Change in the NHS”, 2004, p. 2, available here: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1133/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

Besides these theoretical questions, we will analyse the perception of the protesters in Romania regarding the connection of the protests with these global movements. The data for the analysis comes from in depth interviews with people joining the protests.

Short description of the movements

Occupy movement started in September 2011 in New York City as a response to social and economic inequalities in the US. The central claim of Occupy movements is a fair economic world, the occupiers blaming big global corporations for undermining democratic processes by controlling governments and benefiting a minority (the richest 1% of the world, compared to the 99% - the vast majority with less and less access to resources)²⁸. The Occupy movement spread throughout the world quickly, as their global demands encompassed most of the local issues everywhere, given the world recession and budget cuts measures taken by most governments. They were inspired by the Arab Spring movements, especially in Egypt and Tunisia.

The Spanish Indignados, which, like Occupy, was inspired by the Arab Spring, also found sources of inspiration geographically closer: in Greece, Portugal and the Icelandic protests in 2009, as media reported. Unlike Occupy, the Spanish movement legitimated itself from the internal political crisis in Spain, namely the fact that people did not feel represented by the traditional political parties in Spain, but unemployment and economic crises were also top triggers for the "indignados" protests and rallies²⁹. The movement started in January 2011, but the "street heat" began in May 15 2011, one week before the Spanish local elections. Accusing politicians of "kidnapping of democracy, under the excuse of the economic crisis"³⁰, the Spanish movement lasts even today, being organized by various social networks like "Real Democracy Now"³¹, "Take the Square"³² or "Youth without a Future"³³. The Indignados movement mobilized millions in Spain and elsewhere, physically or online.

The Anonymous movement is, however, a different story. They are a hacktivist (internet activists, hackers, internet freedom fighters, cyber – anarchists, digital Robin Hood – are few of their nicknames) decentralized group formed by online and offline communities, acting in a coordinated manner for certain agreed goals. One of their major fights is against policies that affect the free exchange of information over the internet. As their name states, they are not identifiable, but the symbol of the movement – a mask – appears as a label of Anonymous. They appeared in 2003 and the purpose of comparing such movement with Occupy, Indignados or the Romanian protests is the fact that the Anonymous label appeared in each and every of these movements.

In Romania, the situation was even more specific than in Spain, given the fact that the trigger was a proposed healthcare bill that would have limited the access to medical services for the average Romanian, by making healthcare rather a private service (with very few basic universal medical rights). However, as the protests continued, the topics of banks, international monetary agreements, economic crisis, unemployment, education – they were also part of the Romanian protests.

²⁸ Source: <http://occupywallst.org/about/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

²⁹ Source: <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

³⁰ September 2012 manifesto; source: <http://international.democraciarealya.es/2012/09/27/we-come-back-on-26s/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

³¹ Website: <http://international.democraciarealya.es/category/en/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

³² Website: <http://takethesquare.net/about-us/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

³³ Website: <http://www.juventudsinfuturo.net/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

Why did people join Occupy or Indignados movements? Why did people join street protests in Romania? Comparing motivations and demands (messages)

In the Occupy movement's case, joining the movement can be explained by all three factors. The 99% versus 1% label manufactured an oppressed majority which is legitimate in the eyes of the most, at least emotionally, as very few perceive themselves as part of the 1%. The public story of the Occupy Wall Street created or acknowledged an emotional gap through an economic and wealth one – it would be unacceptable for an average working person to be on the side of the 1%, as they are the ones who oppress the masses. Self-interest and rational behaviour seems to be working rather for the worse off of the occupiers (the unemployed, the lost generation, the homeless and the people in debt or with foreclosure issues etc.). Their self-interest is obvious: they want jobs, healthcare, education. Moreover, given the fail of “the American dream”, in which hard work guarantees a good life, it can also be the case that a fundamental value, equality of opportunity, seemed upside down. This final argument allows for social and cultural interpretation of the movement. As a fundamental value in a society disappears and affects most of the citizens, a new one has to replace it. Occupy movement was successful in spreading in US and around the world and partly because the global economic crises caused a cultural and social void. If consumerism and capitalist value seemed to work for a while and equality of opportunity seemed a true fundamental value of developed democracies, the crises affected the very core of such values, leaving space for revolt, anger, protest. It was not a protest against one person/political party or the other – or at least not in an obvious manner; it was a structural demand on how the world works, therefore giving room for more to join. The solidarity principles stated by the Occupiers³⁴ spoke about universal values and practices: participatory or even direct democracy, education as a human right, free access to knowledge and so on.

For the Spanish Indignados, the explanation is rather one of self-interest. As the trigger was specifically local – the fact that politicians do not represent the voices of the people anymore – most of the motivation keeping the movement alive was based on a major goal: political reform, no corruption, new political parties law etc. The presence of global issues – the crises and austerity measures, unemployment, youth not in education, employment or training, could be seen rather as effects of the political crisis. The Indignados Manifesto³⁵ is not explicitly different from what the Occupy movement stands for. However, it involves some demands at national level, which makes it more local and increases the ownership of the movement.

In Romania, the street protests started with a very specific demand: give up the new healthcare bill and bring the secretary of state who dared to oppose the president back in office. It seemed very local in the beginning. Most people joined based on emotional premises (the secretary of state seen as the hero who opposes the evil president) but also based on self-interest (if this healthcare bill will become a law, the access to medical services will be reduced and low income people will not afford to benefit from it). However, as this main demand was answered, people remained on the streets. The connection with Occupy in terms of messages became more and more clear. People chanted against corporations, banks, the International Monetary Fund. They spoke about austerity measures, unemployment, education, environment, the reform of the entire political class in Romania. However, most voices were against the president Basescu, which makes the Romanian protests differ from the other two movements and also very emotional in terms of

³⁴ Principles of solidarity: <http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/principles-of-solidarity/> last accessed on September 30th 2012.

³⁵ Ibid. 4.

explanatory factors (emotional in terms of identifying president Basescu as the cause of every single thing going wrong in Romania). The variety of causes and demands made the Romanian protests overlap in some topics with the demands of the Indignados and Occupy.

The connection with the Anonymous movement was much clearer. During the protests, the ACTA (Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement) bill was about to be discussed in the European Parliament. Anonymous called people on the streets and two days were dedicated to protesting against ACTA, in more cities in Romania. It was only part of the general protest, however, the number of Anonymous masks and the chants made it clear that those were against ACTA protests.

Comparing the three protests we can speak of degrees of "globalism". If the Occupy movement was very global-oriented from the very beginning, the Spanish Indignados was more local-oriented, but keeping global issues as main movement motivations. In Romania, the local issues were at stake, leaving global issues as rather marginal for the most participants. The Romanian youngsters and the so called "Fountain group" in Bucharest kept the global spirit of the messages; however, it was a matter of cultural distance that kept other protesters reluctant to chant against global powers like International Monetary Fund. In terms of motivations, we can conclude that only few participants in the Romanian protests were motivated by universal values like economic and social justice, participatory democracy or universal education. The emotional factor prevailed for most of the participants, given that the dismissal of the president would have been the great victory of the protests.

Comparing strategies: about leadership and organizing movements

It is common for both Occupy and Indignados movements to declare themselves horizontally organized and without specific leaders. They both used peoples' assemblies and horizontal working groups in order to organize their actions, to write their manifestos and to develop their messages. In Romania, as protests emerged spontaneously, there were no structures to organize the protesters. In this respect, as the protests developed, one part of the protesters got organized in a similar manner as Occupy and Indignados.

In Romania, through social media and especially through Facebook, there were events created, people invited to join and so on. But the Internet mobilization tactics, heavily used in Occupy, Anonymous and Indignados movements, only reached some of the Romanian protesters. It may be the case for the other movements as well. However, the technological gap in Romania determined, in a way, two parallel protests: the protest of those who were culturally and technologically closer to global demands (the ones connected to the Internet, young, rather well educated) and the protest of the socially and economically marginalized people (retired people, unemployed, homeless, socially assisted).

The Romanian protesters merged on the political issues: they were all chanting anti-governmental chants, solidarity and pro-democracy chants. However, the global demands were only present within the younger generation – the creative side of the protests. Following the same pattern of technological gap, the organizing pattern used by Occupy or Indignados was used by the younger protesters. There were groups discussing issues in small assemblies, meetings in pubs in order to organize some creative events in order to keep the people in the streets, the presence of a Master of the Ceremony to keep the crowds entertained in spite of the very cold weather. The protest of the people who did not access technology and Internet was rather unorganized. The Indignados movement was a closer model for University Square, as many of the people interviews by us said. There were some connections with Indignados via emails, exchanges of ideas in order to mobilize more

people and so on. There was even a facebook page called "Romanian Indignities", but even the global side of the protesters claim that it was just a name used for a page and not an affiliation statement. The connection with the Indignados movement increased in the aftermath of the protest, in May 12, when a Romanian group of protesters organized 12M democracy march, an event initiated by the Spanish Indignados throughout Europe.

The Occupy Romania movement was born before these protests in January-February 2012. They started small events and assemblies in the autumn of 2011 and they were present in the University Square. However, they were acknowledged as part of the protest and the label of Occupy Romania was only a label of a rather small group, it did not take over the whole protest. There was also a sit-in in the History faculty of University of Bucharest, connected to the Occupy movement and prior to the protests. It was also a small event and group of people that labelled themselves as occupiers. While Occupy did not manage to entirely "occupy" the Romanian protests, we can say that for some, they meant preparatory action for the bigger protests.

When Anonymous called people out against ACTA, it was a clear message for the young. At the same time, when a huge Anonymous banner was hanged by the Bucharest National Theatre building, only few really knew what it meant. Again, the digital divide created some parallelism within the Romanian protests.

As a conclusion, we can clearly state that the Romanian protests as a whole were not affiliated to any of the Occupy or Indignados movements. At the same time, we can state that some of the groups of protesters were part of the larger movements, which is an indicator of the fact that Romania was part of the global movements of 2012.

Protesters' perception: this is our protest!

The perception analyses is based on the in depth interviews with participants in the protests. Regardless of their belonging to the Internet generation or not, all interviewees clearly believe in the local ownership of the Romanian protests. Given the digital divide used within the analyses, the answers match the divide.

People with less access to Internet claim that Indignados or Occupy had very little influence on the Romanian protests, if any at all. One interviewee declares that there was a snowball effect starting with the healthcare bill issue and only afterwards the passionate people came with the signs in English: "*don't bother coming with signs written in English in the square... the true revolutionary does not understand!*". Another interviewee in the same category says she knows that there were some youngsters trying to organize something, but they did not convince people. She also states that if there would have been an influence of Occupy or Indignados, there would have been much more people in the streets. These answers are indicators of how the average Romanian, less connected to technology and global newsfeeds feels about the influence of global movements on the Romanian protests.

There are more variations in opinions about the connection with the global movements within the category consisting of the young, the educated and technologically connected protesters. For example, one interviewee specifically distinguishes between the Occupy movement and their call for direct democracy and their demands and the Romanian protests, which, in his view, were rather anti-system protests, aiming for participatory democracy. For most of the interviewees it is important to state the local ownership of the protests. One feminist respondent claims that University Square in Bucharest is even more than an Indignados movement, because it not only reached some global issues like

unemployment or education, but also very domestic and specific issues like the need of kindergartens or diminishing the economic primacy.

Most respondents state that the connections were rather in terms of inspiration regarding ideas of keeping the crowds in the street (creative events) or the horizontal patterns of organizing groups. However, the chants regarding global and universal issues were present, which shows that some groups were aware of the global movements: *"There is some connection... but not for the entire protest. This is our thing. Within the global context, many of the issues that get people out in the streets are the same. [...] Economic and political measures have to be looked at globally. Generally, the movements are made by young people. Here in Romania, there are more elderly in the streets, as they were much more affected by austerity measures [...]"*. One other interviewee states that the protests of 2012 are similar to those in 1968, which makes these protests a bigger phenomenon at global level.

As a general conclusion, we can state that there were common messages (against global finances institutions, against corporations, against economic and social inequalities, anti-poverty, for social justice, for universal education and health etc.) and common strategies (rather horizontal structures and without leaders) for Romanian protests and Indignados or Occupy movements. Romanian protests however, were much more locally connected in terms of demands and messages, being connected to both the global crisis and the Romanian political crisis. The local ownership of the movement is even more important, if we consider the lack of participatory culture of the Romanians in the context of the communist legacy.

Results and outcomes

The immediate results are obviously more visible (the re-instatement of Raed Arafat and withdrawal of the health care law, the resignation of some ministers, of the Government, of the head of the news director etc.) but what is more relevant to look at are the results in terms of democratisation and the phenomena of activism.

In the aftermath of the protests of January and February 2012 in Romania, from then on until May, new actors entered the activism scene or became more visible. This is the case with football hooligans (who managed to change their public perception), the feminists, the environmentalists and the anti-globalists. Even though in other countries these activist or social categories have been present for a while in the public arena, in Romania they are new arrivals. All these groups met in University Square. Many other groups formed in the University Square.

A series of other protests sparked in Bucharest and in other parts of Romania following the University Square. They were aimed against ACTA (the Anti Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), shale gas exploration and fracking, etc. They were more or less successful, but they were directly inspired and/or motivated by the University Square protests or linked to them.

New groups of activists concerned with democracy and more systemic issues seem to have emerged. For them, a new agenda crystallized following the protest experience: changing the Constitution, the elections legislation, the political parties` legislation and so on. These are directly linked to democratizing politics and making it more accessible for citizens to access political institutions. They are also involved in forming or promoting new political formations.

This is a continuation of the awakening theme present in the chants and banners during the protest. Directly in the University Square, during the protests, one of the most significant debates occurred in the civic arena in the last 20 years in Romania: what is politics, what is political and what is not, and should people get involved in politics or anything political. One of the realisations people made was that it got to this point because "honest people like me and you did not get into politics or involved". People had already started to question the possibility of ordinary citizens to run in the elections while contesting all current political parties as corrupt and illegitimate.³⁶

In the local elections in Bucharest, the president of the NGO Save Bucharest ran as an independent and this was possible only because of the mobilization around him³⁷. New candidates (some of them coming from protesters groups) ran in the local elections also in Cluj and other cities around Romania.³⁸

Another indicator that things are changing was a higher turn out in June's local elections: 56,39% (in 2008, this was 49,38%, so an increase of 7%). In Bucharest, the turn out was 44,26% compared to 31,05% in 2008 (an increase of over 13%)³⁹.

"We are facing the same question: who are you going to put in place (in case Basescu is no longer president)? We did not get out to offer solutions, we got out to protest against an imminent evil and then solutions will come. And not necessarily from the street, but from everyone of us. What I discovered in the street was a sort of exit from Matrix and we took responsibility for this in the longer term. Changes will not happen overnight in a society in a latent, vegetative state. The politicians are interested in maintaining this state." (Vlad Ioachimescu)

"Two governments changed, ultimately this is a result of the University Square. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one member of the parliament, the decision of the court on the elections, Raed Arafat. It was very good because this had not happened in a long time, this exercise was needed and then again you cannot say there is a prescription for something like this. Maybe more was needed, maybe change political parties` law, the electoral law... but i say this is excellent, everyone did their best with University Square. In my theory, if you want to change something, you need to change the education law." (Mihail Bumbes)

"There were results: the return of Raed Arafat with the Ministry of Health, changing the Boc government. But it is very important that we sent a message to politicians, to political parties that it is time to reform and get closer to citizens because discontent citizens can show up. Respect for citizens, represent citizens and not only formally in public speeches. What should follow next: pressure on politicians: by getting out to vote and by participation pure and simple, people must come out, context, start from their homes, by writing letters to their members of the parliament." (Oana Baluta)

³⁶ Instead of trying to reform, many political parties interpreted the Square`s message as an anti-system one. Also, during the protests and later on, discussions on new political formations began (some of them are actually off-springs of current political parties in an attempt to keep their electorate for the incoming parliamentary elections). One attempt at coalescing a new political party was actually a move on the side of a PR professional but it has been dismissed by the people at University Square as he was advocating for a mining project people protested against.

³⁷ Unlike political parties candidates, he needed a significantly high number of signatures in order to be able to run.

³⁸ The theme of change was picking up and a PR company caught on it and even developed an advertising campaign using some of these themes.

³⁹ http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-alegeri_locale_2012-12486760-prezenta-vot-ora-21-00-inchiderea-urnelor-fost-56-39.htm

When it comes to the general perception on how successful the protests were, 70% of the respondents in CeRe's national survey consider the protest did not attain majority of their goals, while 21% consider they did so.

Almost two thirds of the individuals questioned (63%) acknowledge the situation after the protests as being the same as previously, while only 11% state that following the protests, things changed for the better in Romania.

If we are to assess the willingness to engage in a protest if they were to repeat, only 11% of the respondents would certainly take part in similar protests in the next 12 months, while 43% declare certainly not to take part. However, the percentage of those willing to participate in the protests is higher than the percentage of those having attended them (only 4% according to the same survey).

For the protesters themselves, a better future comes with citizens' participation:

"At macro level, citizens should participate more and understand the political decisions affect a lot their lives. The centre of politics is citizens – this is what political parties and institutions should learn." (Oana Baluta)

"Citizens should expect from democracy more in terms of accountability and representation, meaning their opinions and interest actually count and I think the more general trend in Europe is for a more direct relationship between government, parliament and members of the Parliament and citizens. Others did it and considering how far ways citizens feel they are from politics and the decision making, I don't think there is anything else than more transparency and more consultation better for curing this." (Marina Popescu)

"Protest must start anytime! I want to protest, I get my banner and I'm gone!" (Marian Nita)