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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND
ACTIVIST NETWORKS IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF ROMANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
the University of Edinburgh for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2023
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where it states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Cristian Luguzan, 2023
LAY SUMMARY

In 2013, Romanian society was taken by surprise by large crowds of people gathering across the country, chanting, “United we save Roșia Montană!” It was the first time there were so many people in the streets since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. An even larger surprise was the fact that this was barely covered in the national media. Many people experienced the events through Facebook, as people shared photos and videos of the protests, debating the events, and discussing the solutions. The social movement came to be called Uniți Salvăm and it aimed to stop the development of a mining project in a village called Roșia Montană, which the protesters said it would have an immense environmental impact. The protest was successful as the mining project was eventually suspended. However, in 2015, after the tragic fire at the Colectiv nightclub, even larger crowds gathered in Bucharest first and then in the other major cities. And then again, in 2017, people were in the streets in record numbers against a legislation that critics said it would decriminalise certain acts of corruption. These events were not common in Romania, which like other countries in Eastern Europe, was characterised as not having a strong civil society. My research sets out to answer what made these events possible. Did Romanian civil society grow in the last two decades? And was it technology that made this possible through social media?

I investigated these three social movements through interviews and through analysis of the Facebook sites that were primarily used by the activists themselves, both to organise and to discuss and deliberate. I paid particular attention to the groups of activists themselves, whether they were the same from movement to movement or some of them dropped off and others joined. There is also the important question of ideology; how are these movements creating a collective understanding of what is happening, who is at fault, and what is the solution. I found that the themes that the protesters engaged with changed from movement to movement in an unexpected way. Initially, the Uniți Salvăm movement tried to be all-encompassing by creating a space where people of distinct political beliefs could protest together for the common good. In the later two movements, the idea of anti-corruption was central. However, critics say that their understanding of what is corrupt and what is pure is political, that they favoured one political side against another and thus were liable to become mere instruments of political elites.
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the trajectory of three distinct yet interconnected social movements and their role in the development of Romanian civil society. The first movement is Uniți Salvăm and in 2013 it inspired a large-scale mobilisation in defence of a community called Roșia Montană against a mining project. The second movement emerged spontaneously after the tragic fire at Bucharest’s nightclub Colectiv, on October 30th, 2015. The third form of collective action was the wave of anti-corruption protests in 2017, called Rezist. In the context of a traditionally weak Romanian civil society (Howard, 2003), the question emerges of how these three movements succeeded in mobilising and galvanising hundreds of thousands of Romanians. I advance the hypothesis that social media played an important part as a third space, facilitating free and horizontal deliberation, as well as allowing online social networks to form and to merge with offline social networks. This would make the three Romanian examples of collective action into networked movements, as conceptualised by Manuel Castells (2012).

Towards this, I employ three research methods: 19 in-depth interviews with key members of the three movements, frame analysis of the main online resources used by the movements, and a digital ethnography of the online third spaces inhabited by movement activists. The data is analysed using frame analysis, paying attention to the framing processes occurring within the social media networks, as well as offline through the interviews.

The data shows that although the movements have distinct framing processes, these are transmitted from movement to movement through the common activist networks. In the case of Uniți Salvăm we find a strong diagnostic frame of environmental risk which is bridged with the theme of neo-colonialism and the prognostic frame of national regeneration. Corruption originates from all political sides in collusion with the media and private capital. However, in the case of the Colectiv movement, the corruption frame is transformed into an essentialist ‘original sin’ of Romanian society. Furthermore, in the case of the 2017 Rezist movement, the themes of corruption and anti-corruption are becoming overtly partisan, with the protests being instrumentalized by the political right and centre-right. The study concludes with a further exploration into the political movements that have been at least partially inspired by the three social movements and their rhetoric on anti-corruption and the regeneration of Romanian civil society.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates three distinct waves of political and social mobilisation, from 2012 to 2017, as well as their consequences on Romanian social and political life. Since the 1989 Revolution, Romania has not experienced large and sustained social movements, particularly ones concerned with post-material values. Collective action did occur at times, but it was limited in time and in scope. The University Square in Bucharest is arguably the most important symbolic public space in Romania, and it had been the site of the Golaniada protests, leading to the Mineriada in 1990, when miners were called by the government to come to the capital and quell the student protests against the regime and contesting the elections. It has since been the site of all major protests, in 2013, 2015, and 2017. The Golaniada (from the word ‘hooligan’) was a series of students protest beginning April 1990 against the former communist leadership which they believed took charge of the recently democratic Romanian state. Although historically important, particularly because of the violent repression by the government, these did not have the scope nor the organisation of the recent social movements. There were also waves of strikes and protests throughout the 1990s in response to rampant inflation, high unemployment, and poor economic prospects, but these collective actions were localised and temporary and did not coagulate into a national social movement. Furthermore, throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s, there were very few examples of grassroots collective action, particularly when such were needed. Political participation was also low and more and more people felt disengaged from public life. This public apathy in the face of high inequality, low standards of living, and endless political scandals, was often discussed in the media of the time as a specifically ‘Romanian personality trait’, often in an Orientalising frame; or it was blamed on a poor understanding of democracy and the rule of law. This is why the massive national (and transnational) protests which emerged in 2013 were surprising to many, including myself. For the generations which reached adulthood during the post-communist transition, examples of public solidarity were not a common occurrence. For myself, it was personally fascinating and sociologically intriguing to see tens or even hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, protesting
against a mining project in a small community of which most Romanians never heard of. For this reason, the Uniți Salvăm movement was the topic of my Master’s Dissertation at the University of Aberdeen in 2015.

This introductory chapter will provide an overview and a contextualisation of the thesis, from its theoretical reasoning and methodology to the analysis of the three social movements and the conclusion.

The second chapter will address the literature review and the theoretical framework. There are three main theoretical frameworks included in this thesis. The first one is the literature on civil society and particularly on the hypothesis that Eastern European post-communist countries have a distinctively weak associational life (Howard, 2003). Some scholars argue that this is a consequence of a lack of trust and eroded social capital inherited from the repressive communist regimes (Latsis, 1989; Pipes, 1998; Shlapentokh and Arutunyan, 2013; Shlapentokh, 2017). For others it was the transition to capitalism and the shock therapy of the 1990s which caused Romanians to retreat from public life and to be sceptical of civil society (Roper, 2004; Pop-Eleches, 2009; Ban, 2016). Towards understanding the Romanian context, I discuss three types of civil society. The first conceptualisation is that of civil society as associational life, as described by Edwards (2004) as containing networks of people situation between individuals and families and the state. This is what Gellner (1995, p. 32) called a necessary social structure that could prevent an authoritarian state from dominating individuals. Civil society could also be a representation of the “good society”, representing the norms and values of liberal-democratic societies. This is often contrasted with post-communist societies in Eastern Europe, where a strong civil society was considered the ideal (Gellner, 1994). The Habermasian understanding of the public sphere will also be considered, as well as whether social media and the opportunities it provides for public deliberation could be part of the public sphere. Similarly, Castells (2008) is advancing the possibility of a global civil society, based on a horizontal network of communication, aided by social media and the internet.

The literature on civil society is relevant to this thesis because it raises the question of the relative lack of social movements and poor participation in the civic life in Romania.
in the 1990s and the 2000s. Which is why the events during the 2013 Uniți Salvăm movement provided an interesting question: what has changed since? One such hypothesis is that by connecting through social media, citizens were able to deliberate and engage politically and civically in public life. This is the concept of ‘networked publics’, of linked groups of citizens who are connected through shared interests, goals, and common interpretations of events (Livingstone, 2005; boyd, 2010). The concept of ‘online third spaces’ (Kendall, 2002; Schuler, 1996; Souk; 2006) is also relevant to this research as it represents a specific space of free interaction and horizontal deliberation, which I will argue was the function of the Facebook sites and groups that were used in the three Romanian social movements.

Related to the discussion on civil society in Eastern Europe is the concept of corruption. It is one of the most salient and at the same time controversial topics in Romanian political discourse. The idea that Romania has a particular type of corruption, one that is endemic, organic, and a harmful inheritance of its communist past was used during Traian Basescu’s successful presidential bid in 2004. His solution was a harsh and uncompromising approach, guaranteeing enhanced powers to the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) to root corruption out of Romanian public life. And while the international community praised his approach, several Romanian critics argued that the power of DNA actually allows for the ruling party to compromise their opposition by initiating very public corruption prosecutions with very little evidence (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018). There is therefore an argument to be made that anti-corruption becomes nothing more than the ideological articulation of anti-state discourse (Dragoman and Ungureanu, 2017; Gherasim-Proca, 2018, p. 35).

The theme of corruption is also found in the three social movements studied in this thesis. Social movements are defined as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared identity” (Diani, 1992, p. 13). One specific type of social movement that is of interest in this research is that of a ‘networked movement’, which is articulated by Manuel Castells (2012). These complex forms of collective action are facilitated by technology and offer the possibility of horizontal organisation and deliberation over vast geographical spaces and across multiple identities. Within these
networked movements, framing is an essential component. Collective action frames are discursive processes within social movements that are shared between the participants towards forming a collective understanding of grievances, as well as a shared identity of the movement (Snow and Benford, 1988; Benford and Snow, 2000). Movement frames can aid mobilisation and participation in the movement, by creating a cohesive narrative of events but they also may form ideological consensus on specific themes, without which mobilisation would not occur (Snow, 2004).

Chapter three will address the research questions and the methodology. In this project I investigated three Romanian movements—Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist—using a research design with three methodological approaches. The first method is in-depth interviews with activists from the three social movements. The second method is a frame analysis of four Facebook groups which have been active and influential during each major wave of protests, in 2013, 2015, and 2017. The data will be interpreted using frame analysis, based on Snow et al. (1986) and Snow and Benford (1988). The third methodological approach is that of digital ethnography, based on principles developed by Pink et al. (2016). This will involve participant observation of the main online spaces used by social movement actors, with particular attention paid to the social networks formed and maintained during the protests.

Social movements can therefore be seen as an expression of civil society and are aided by online activity. The society-wide deliberation on the role of state and of events referring to the power and legitimacy of institutions have the potential to spark outrage and to lead to collective action. Sustained collective action can become a social movement, and social movements can also create and consolidate the associational life necessary for civil society.

One of the main aims of this research was to investigate the role of Facebook in facilitating an emergent civil society in Romania. If this is happening, under which specific conditions, and is Romania more susceptible to it? I will advance the possibility that a civil society—understood as voluntary associations counterbalancing the power of the state—could emerge in Romania through networked social movements. Social media and online third spaces have a dual role in this process: providing tools for tactical and
organizational repertoire; and by encouraging a collective identity which would allow for heterogenous groups to work together, through facilitating the creation and diffusion of shared interpretative frames. Through the case studies of three Romanian social movements (Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist) I investigated the role played by networks created during Uniți Salvăm and the Save Roșia Montană campaign, both online and offline, in inspiring the later series of protests in 2015 and 2017. Towards this, I explored both the action forms, tactics, and strategies of the movements, as well as the collective frames on which they built their identity. I also studied the role of Facebook groups as online third spaces, in providing the infrastructure for deliberation and political engagement, as well as a tactical and strategic tool for the movements to create collective action frames. The possibility of a hybrid third space will be considered, meaning sites which are at the same time online and offline, of overlapping networks. I also explored the idea that the stability of informal networks can be used as an indicator of a strong civil society, and these are also crucial for social movements and contentious politics. By identifying the capacity of social media for building collective identities and facilitating solidarity through online third spaces and networked publics, the potential creation of Romanian civil society will be discussed.

By using this theoretical and methodological framework I aim to contribute to the debate on the theorised weakness or absence of civil society in Eastern European post-socialist societies. I will also investigate the role social media has in enabling social movements, through facilitating frame alignment. I will seek to understand the role of Facebook in facilitating the transformation of the Save Roșia Montană campaign from a local association in 2000 into a country-wide social movement in 2013 and how the identity of the movement changed during this transformation. I will also investigate the online networks formed during the Save Roșia Montană campaign and Uniți Salvăm in 2013 in the subsequent mobilization of large-scale protests in 2015 and 2017. If there was a continuation of networks from movement to movement, I will consider the shift in framing strategies, as well as in the beliefs, ideology, and identity of the movements. I will focus on the Facebook groups which may have facilitated the processes of frame alignment. Furthermore, I will discuss whether these social movements are reflecting the emergence of a new Romanian civil society, and what are the consequences on wider Romanian social and political life.
Towards these aims, my main research question is:

What is the role of social media in enabling social movements in Romania and what are its wider effects on the Romanian civil society?

In chapter four I analyse and discuss the research findings from the Uniți Salvăm movement, which reached its peak in 2013. This was the most successful and popular collective action in Romania at the time, since the 1989 Revolution. It was in the defence of a Romanian north-western village, called Roșia Montană, which fought against a Canadian mining company and its subsidiary Roșia Montană Gold Corporation, who planned to develop a mining project in the area using cyanide mining techniques. I will discuss the origins of the movement, in a local association called Alburnus Maior, founded in 2000 by the local community in Roșia Montană and nearby villages. They resisted the mining project and garnered the attention of environmentalists and other NGOs. At this stage the movement was still local and centred around the community in Roșia Montană, but as the themes of environmental risk and the protection of the cultural and historical heritage became popularised on social media, the movement became national, reaching its peak in 2013. This thesis discusses how disparate networks, both offline and online, coagulated into a national movement called Uniți Salvăm (United we Save), after the chant, “united we save Roșia Montană”. As much of the mainstream news media either ignored or downplayed the movement, experienced activists from previous protests created Facebook sites and pages where they allowed for deliberation and discussion. These spaces were also useful resources for establishing the tactical repertoire, for setting up events, and for mobilisation strategies. However, equally as important they were for establishing common action frames among the movement participants, which allowed the heterogenous groups of activists to reach a common understand of the grievances and the actions that had to be taken. Through analysing the interviews as well as posts and comments from the Uniți Salvăm page, I have identified the main diagnostic frame of environmental danger, which was used as the main grievance against the mining project. The process of frame bridging is also noticeable, as the theme of neo-colonialism, of a foreign entity controlling local resources was associated with the theme of corruption
of Romanian politicians. This shared understanding of events was further enhanced through the process of frame extension, where the ideas of national unity the regeneration of the Romanian civil society became an essential part of the movement’s shared identity, and allowed it to reach a multitude of diverse networks.

Chapter five describes the events following the tragic fire in the Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest, on October 30th, 2015, which led to the death of 64 people and the severe injury of many others. After a night of mourning, tens of thousands of people joined the streets in Bucharest and other large urban centres, to protest the lack of regulation and the corrupt government which permitted unsafe and possibly fraudulent permits to be given to the Colectiv club for their concert and pyrotechnics. I will discuss the importance of mobilizing grievances and the role of emotions in protests, following the works of Klandermans (1997), Jasper (1998), and van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2007; 2013). This chapter also pays attention to the role of pre-existing networks that were formed during the Uniți Salvăm protests—or earlier, as well as the importance of the merging of online and offline networks into a networked movement. The framing processes during the Colectiv protests had the effect of reaching a high number of people who were against the government, but the specific focus on the framing of corruption as the fault of one political side had also cause other activist networks to retreat from the movement. The frame alignment in this movement transitioned from the diagnostic frame of aggrievement in the face of the corruption of the government to the prognostic frame of anti-corruption, conceptualised as personal responsibility, technocracy, and depoliticization. The chapter is also discussing the effects and successes of this movement, which led to the resignation of the Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta, and the nomination of a new technocratic Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș. Another consequence of this coagulation of grassroots collective action together with the third sector and political actors is that it led to the professionalisation of several networks of activists, who became social and civic entrepreneurs and had an important role in the 2017 protests.
In chapter six I depict the 2017 anti-corruption protests, mobilised under the social movement called Rezist. These emerged after the Romanian Parliament attempted to pass a law (OUG13) that would change the criminal code of laws to decriminalise certain acts of corruption, among other provisions. I will discuss how this movement, although distinct from Colectiv, was nevertheless continuing a similar anti-corruption sentiment. Compared to Uniți Salvăm these protests were even less antisystemic and apolitical and clearly favoured the newly emerged centre-right party USR (Save Romania Union) and the technocratic government of Dacian Ciolos. With estimations of 600,000 people at its peak, these series of protests surpassed Colectiv and Uniți Salvăm in size. Its central networks are the ones formed during Colectiv and the Rezist movement built upon those by using the generalised discontent with centre-left PSD (Social Democratic Party) as the initiators of the contested legislation. The framing of anticorruption was similar to that of Colectiv, but it had an even more prominent partisan attitude towards the Romanian right and centre-right. The movement was supported directly by President Iohannis, Dacian Ciolos, as well as other prominent USR or the more conservative PNL (National Liberal Party) members. Furthermore, the anticorruption prognostic frame centred on a regeneration of Romanian civil society through a new political class and the diaspora, who would aid in the toppling down of corrupt elites, represented by PSD. This movement received more critique from a section of civil society than the Colectiv movement did. The groups affiliated with the movement were accused of being too close to the political power and being nothing more than astroturfing for the opposition parties. Another critique was that the Rezist movement was at time dismissing or insulting the older, rural population who supported PSD.

In the final chapter I will draw conclusions from this study and I will advance new directions for future research. The impact of each of the three movements will be assessed, both in terms of their role in reinvigorating the Romanian civil society and in creating new political avenues, born out of the three social movements. While it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the emergence of the movements, the political maturation of a new generation of citizens, and a renewed civil society, I will advance the possibility that the three movements each contributed to the establishment of several networks of civically and politically engaged actors, with experience in organising and mobilising people. Some of these networks transformed into political movements, with
different levels of success, but with distinct ideological identities. I will briefly discuss in this chapter the formation of the centre-right USR, the progressive-left Demos, and the far-right AUR (the Alliance for the Union of Romanians), as three relatively new political parties with ties and origins to the three social movements, but also merging with other networks, such as those from the Romanian diaspora. The role of social media as an online third space is also considered. The online third spaces, of which the Facebook sites I used in this research are examples, do seem to offer the opportunity for deliberation and for challenging the political power. However, their role must not be overstated, as the core of the movements is structured upon interlocking online and offline networks. I will also address some of the critiques that are often levied at the three Romanian movements. One such contestation is that they are little more than entertainment and aesthetic consumption (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2017). Another critique is their political instrumentalization, which is used by savvy political actors. And finally, I will propose future directions of research, particularly on the rise of the new political movements and their interlocking networks.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Romanian communist repression had the effect of stifling the associational life which is the essential condition of a healthy civil society. Multiple possible explanations for this were advanced, whether the highly centralized organisation, its rejection of reformism, or the development of a national ideology (Verdery, 1991). Furthermore, Romania’s transition to democracy and a market economy was slow and harsh, and the local variety of ‘shock therapy’ in the 1990s had the effects to widen inequality and further erode trust and associational life (Pop-Eleches, 2009; Ban, 2016). However, in 2013 record protests erupted in all the major Romanian cities, with estimates of a total of 200,000 people participating. Two more waves of protests followed in 2015 and 2017, each setting a new record of participation of the Romanian population. The central aim of this research project is to attempt an explanation of the conditions and causes which made possible the emergence of the Romanian movements and to explore the possibility of a regeneration of the Romanian civil society.

Towards this goal, I combine three distinct bodies of literature. The first is the literature on civil society. I will use Ernest Gellner’s conceptualization of civil society as voluntary associations which function to counterbalance state power (1994). I will critically engage with the discussion on the role of civil society and whether its presence can have wider implications on the emergence of social movements which can actively participate in contentious politics. The second main body of literature is on computer-mediated communication (CMC). Through the works of danah boyd (2010) and Oldenburg (1999) I will advance the possibility that CMC, through online third spaces and networked publics, can facilitate the emergence of associational life and civil society. The third body of literature is on social movements. I will use Manuel Castells’s (2012) understanding of a new type of social movement, networked movements, based on horizontal networks of communication which are facilitated by CMC. However, since this perspective is rather limited in its emphasis on the role of networks, I will also consider the framing approach to social movements, which looks more closely at how
ideology, meaning, and identity are constructed by movement agents (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988).

2.1 The Post-communist Context

Civic participation in politics in the Central and Eastern European region (CEE) varied greatly in the last third of the 20th century. Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, particularly based on strong labour unions and intellectual movements, were in a different position in 1989 than Romania or Bulgaria, for example. Also, the only revolution that turned violent was that in Romania, in December 1989, when people’s peaceful protests turned into violent resistance against the repressive regime. Other states in the CEE area transitioned relatively peacefully to post-communism (Bunce, 1990, p. 396).

During the transition, most of the region followed ‘the Washington Consensus’, which meant radical reforms designed in the 1980s and 1990s by the IMF, the World Bank, and the United States Treasury. The policies aimed to fundamentally transition the economy from state-planning to free markets through privatisations, severe fiscal austerity, and economic liberalisation, meaning a relaxation of economic regulation. This resulted in a sharp drop in GDP in the area, ranging from 20 to 25 percent, a decrease of up to 50 percent in agricultural production, and a dramatic rise in poverty rates 20 to 30 percent (Berend and Bugaric, 2015, p. 771). One of the consequences of this decrease in living standards was the increased migration of the workforce toward more developed European countries.

Although labour strikes were common during the post-communist transition, as a result of dismantling the industrial and agricultural sectors through privatisation, social and political mobilisation were relatively rare on a large scale. Scholarship on the CEE region discussed whether this was because of a relatively weak civil society, lacking the necessary trust, engagement, and propensity for voluntary (Ely, 1994; Howard, 2003; Roper, 2004), or because Eastern European movements lacked the infrastructure and
resources of their Western counterparts (Tilly, 1999). This was particularly obvious in Romania, where the post-communist transition created a large, disenfranchised population, living below the poverty line, with few if any future prospects beyond emigration. In order to adequately discuss these questions in the next chapters, I will first provide a brief contextual background of Romanian post-communist politics.

In December 1989, one of the harshest communist regimes in Europe had begun to crumble, as ordinary Romanians took to the streets to protest against Ceausescu’s totalitarian rule. The Romanian Revolution had been triggered by the government’s attempt to arrest a Hungarian-Romanian priest in Timisoara on December 16th, 1989, to intimidate the Hungarian minority living in Western Romania (Lilleker and Adi, 2017). There is a debate regarding the role of civil society in the Romanian 1989 Revolution, with critics arguing that rather than being a popular uprising, it was more similar to a coup d’état (Siani-Davies, 1996).

The Romanian post-communist transition was initially led by the FSN (the National Salvation Front), who are the political forerunners of the PSD (the Social Democratic Party). The FSN was the first Romanian party to be constituted politically and win an election on May 20th, 1990, under the leadership of former communist leader Ion Iliescu. The party was constituted as an alliance between former Communist Party members, revolutionaries, and prominent intellectuals, with the aim to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy and market capitalism. The standing of FSN as the main Romanian party was contested by parts of the anti-communist civil society, particularly student organisations, who saw FSN as nothing but the continuation of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR). The protests against FSN and Ion Iliescu represented the first grassroots mobilisation in post-communist Romania as they emerged as early as January 1990. The protesters were often called hooligans (‘Golani’) by the FSN leadership, which is why the anti-communists appropriated the term to refer to the protests as the ‘Golaniada’, a term that occupied an important space in the post-communist discourse of the early 1990s.

Another important term for that era of Romanian history was that of the ‘Mineriade’, which represented the repression of these protests by miners’ unions,
brought to Bucharest from the Jiu Valley for the first time on January 28th, 1990, by President Ion Iliescu. Roughly four to five thousand coal miners dispersed anti-FSN protesters with violence that led to even further contestation (Gheorghe and Huminic, 1999). The context was one of the miners’ deep discontent, who were engaged in nationwide strikes at the time, fuelled by very poor working conditions. The FSN and Ion Iliescu argued that the miners were called to establish peace, and suggested that the protesters were enemies of the state, aiming to destabilise the vulnerable Romanian state (Tismămeanu, 1990). The critics of the ‘Mineriade’ argued that the miners were used by the second-tier Communist Party leaders to hold on to power and to resist the transition to democracy and a free market economy. The opposition to FSN would often label their political adversaries as communists or ‘securitate’ (communist Romania’s secret police) (Verdery, 1993, p. 188).

I would like to note the relevance of this political cleavage in Romanian society between the FSN (and its later iterations, including PSD) and the anti-communists, as it is one that is reflected throughout the social and political sphere, and also emerged as a theme in this thesis. The division is framed as a schism between the old and the new, between authoritarianism and freedom, between socialists and liberals, between corruption and the rule of law. The legitimacy of this framing will be further explored, as well as its possible future relevance to Romanian politics.

FSN would eventually reorganise and rename itself as the Social Democratic Party of Romania (PDSR) and would remain in power in Romanian politics until 1996, when they lost to a coalition of opposing right-leaning parties, called the Romanian Democratic Convention (CDR), under President Emil Constantinescu. In the campaign, they blamed the PDSR for the harsh transition and poor economic prospects of Romanians and promised instead to accelerate the privatisation of state assets and to properly align Romania to the free market. The distinction was again made by the CDR between the modern capitalist West and the backward communist East, emphasising the urgency of finalising the post-communist transition. The victory of CDR meant the first time when the country was not ruled by an iteration of the FSN, as well as the introduction of the harshest ‘shock therapy’ implemented in the CEE region: meaning fiscal conservatism and austerity, radical pro-market reforms, privatisation, and
deregulation (Ban, 2016, p. 85). Even cautious estimates show that these reforms led to massive unemployment, widening inequality, and a shrinking economy (Pop-Eleches, 2009).

PSDR returned in 2000 to power, again under the leadership of Ion Iliescu, on the backdrop of massive unemployment and a dramatic increase in the poverty rate. Although they promised to undo many of CDR’s failings, under the new name of PSD (the Social Democratic Party), the Prime Minister Adrian Năstase called himself a Third Way social democrat, vowing to break away from socialist policies of the past, while continuing many free market reforms. During the Năstase government, Romania began its processes to join NATO and the EU. However, despite the seemingly pro-market reforms, the opposition to PSD grew stronger, and although the party itself broke away ideologically from traditional social democracy, its critics continued to accuse it of being the continuators of Romania’s communist past. Corruption became the largest topic in Romanian electoral discourse, following a few large political corruption scandals among the PSD leadership. The main political opponent to emerge against PSD was the charismatic populist Traian Băsescu, a former Minister of Transportation and at the time, the Mayor of Bucharest. He represented a coalition of right-leaning parties: the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Party (PD).

Băsescu won his first mandate as president in 2004, with high praise from the international community and great expectations from his right-leaning electorate. Most of all, Romania’s new liberalizing turn, fulfilled through Băsescu’s ten years as head of state, meant for many intellectuals and members of the emerging civil society a break with its communist past, represented by Iliescu and the PSD (Cernat, 2017, p. 32-33). Major reforms were gleefully expected: fiscal prudency and tax cuts, harsher anti-corruption legislation, and strict deference to US foreign policy strategy for the purpose of courting NATO membership. Policies towards these goals were certainly pursued, on a clear populist wave, with Basescu as champion of a new European Romania (Dragoman and Ungureanu, 2017). President Basescu’s symbolic break from Romania’s communist past had been its official condemnation of communism in 2006. His and his party’s rhetoric had strong populist elements, some of which I will discuss in the future chapters, with the new Romanian liberal-right parties, USR and PLUS (Cernat, 2017, p.
Băsescu held the office of President until 2014, although he was suspended by the Parliament twice in 2007 and in 2012.

The strict austerity measures implemented during the 2010 economic crisis by President Băsescu and Prime Minister Emil Boc led to nation-wide anti-austerity protests. In January 2012, protests were organised throughout the country, demanding the resignation of Băsescu and Boc, who were strong advocates for further austerity measures, particularly with new legislation for public health reform that aimed to liberalise the sector. The protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Emil Boc and the repeal of the contested legislation. Băsescu remained as President and formed a new government. The importance of the 2012 anti-austerity protests will be reflected in this thesis, as a few core activist networks present in the later movements were formed during that time. It could be argued that the relative success of the protests and the usage of Facebook as a mobilising tactic inspired the Uniți Salvăm movement.

Băsescu was the central figure of Romanian politics during his time in office, from 2004 to 2014, and he was and still remains a highly divisive politician, moulding the political discourse of contemporary Romania. Another important politician was Victor Ponta, from PSD, who held the office of Prime Minister from 2012 to 2015, both under Traian Băsescu and his successor, Klaus Iohannis from PNL. He was in power during both the Uniți Salvăm and Colectiv movements, and therefore he was often the main target of criticism during the protests.

Klaus Iohannis succeeded Traian Băsescu in December 2014 as President, nominated from a coalition of right-leaning parties (the Christian Liberal Alliance). He ran against Victor Ponta in a highly polarised election, with enthusiastic support from the diaspora and the Romanian civil society. Iohannis won a second term in 2019, again on a platform of anti-corruption, opposition to PSD, and pro-market reforms. Both of his terms had been marred by political instability and many short-lived governments. What is of note, however, is his wide support from the Colectiv and Rezist protesters.

However, Iohannis was not the only politician that the Romanian social movements enthusiastically endorsed. New political movements and parties emerged during and after the protests, particularly PLUS (the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity
Party) and USR (the Save Romania Union). Dacian Cioloș was the Prime Minister who succeeded after resignation of Victor Ponta in 2015, as a consequence of the Colectiv protests. Cioloș formed a technocratic government, composed of independent experts who previously worked either in the private sector or the third sector and with as few political affiliations as possible. His government meant to represent a renewed political class, that would transcend ideology and the corruption of political elites. As Iohannis, the political figure of Cioloș was central during the Colectiv and Rezist movements, as he was seen as the honest, uncorruptible expert opposing the corruption and politicking of PSD. Dacian Cioloș later founded PLUS, which merged with USR.

On August 26th, 2016, USR emerged as the continuation of the small but successful project that was USB (the Save Bucharest Union), through which Nicușor Dan gained second place in the Bucharest Mayoral race in 2016. Nicușor Dan has been, since October 2020, the General Mayor of Bucharest (although he has since left the party and ran as an independent). Similar to USB, many of its early members had strong roots in the Romanian social movements, particularly in Uniți Salvăm. Both USB and later USR claimed that the new political world needs to renounce old ideologies and focus instead on creating a new class of meritocratically selected technocrats. For USB and USR, it meant recruiting future political actors from NGOs and grassroots movements, such as Uniți Salvăm, Coruptia Ucide, and Rezist, as well as from the private sector. In their future campaigns, USR prided themselves with quality of human capital in their ranks that joined them after working for major corporations and consultancy firms. As in the case of Dacian Cioloș and his political party, the appeal for the voting population was one of a renewed political class, untainted by the corruption of political elites.

Another political party that emerged after the Romanian social movements is AUR (the Alliance for the Union of Romanians). This is a right-wing populist and unionist-nationalist political party that was founded on September 19, 2019. It was founded by Eugen Simion, who was a prominent member of the movement ‘Basarabia e Romania’, which we have also encountered in the Uniți Salvam movement. Although it emerged as a single-issue political movement, advocating for the re-unification of Romania with Moldova, they have since branched towards other populist or nationalist
themes. They are criticising ethnic minorities living in Romania, particularly the Hungarians and the Roma, with the former being accused of undermining national interests. Similarly to USR they claim an absolute rejection of ‘old politics’, which are seen as being tainted by communism and irredeemable corruption. However, diverging from the USR discourse, they are Eurosceptic, as well as being anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine during the Covid epidemic crisis. They have grown to be the third largest political party in the polls in 2023-2024.

The multitude of political movements, parties, shifting alliances, and ideologies over the three decades of Romanian democracy are indeed reflecting political and social instability, yet also a relatively active political sphere. Romania had relatively high levels of political participation in its early years of democracy, indicating a growing civil society.

2.2 Civil Society

The relevance of civil society in Eastern Europe was briefly discussed in the previous contextual subchapter and the concept will be further explored theoretically. Michael Edwards (2004) describes three distinct schools of thought regarding civil society: civil society as associational life, civil society as ‘the good society’, and civil society as the public sphere.

2.2.1 Civil Society as Associational Life

These are the forms of associational life, where civil society is seen as distinct from both the state and the market (Edwards, 2004, p. 20). This is based on de Tocqueville’s admiration of the vitality of 19th century American associational life (1945). This conception of civil society is also called the third sector, and has the role of advancing
common goals and creating avenues for collective action. Edwards elaborates that, “Civil society in this sense contains all associations and networks between the family and the state in which membership and activities are ‘voluntary’—formally registered NGOs of many kinds, labour unions, political parties, churches and other religious groups, professional and business associations, community and self-help groups, social movements and independent media.” (2004, p. 20).

This capacity for association is essential for the analytical model of civil society, but it should be distinguished from pre-modern forms of association. It is about people forging links that are flexible, specific, and instrumental, and not bound by tradition and rigid institutions (Gellner, 1995, p. 41). Michael Walzer points out that civil society is the “space of uncoerced human association” as well as the “sets of relational networks” inhabiting that space (1998, p. 124).

Civil society in this sense is therefore seen as an antidote to authoritarianism, and therefore acts to limit the power of the state. Ernest Gellner writes that, “civil society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent the state from dominating and atomizing the rest of society” (1995, p. 32).

2.2.2 Civil Society as the ‘Good Society’

Associational life does not refer solely to particular social structures, but to norms and values as well, particularly ones which were desirable in post-socialist Eastern Europe, where the concept of ‘civil society’ was seen as an unfulfilled ideal (Gellner 1994). For dissident Eastern European intellectuals, like Vaclav Havel, the idea of a civil society was synonymous with a social order of democracy and freedom (Edwards, 2004, p. 38).

Neo-Toquevilleans such as Robert Putnam (2001) see voluntary associations as naturally virtuous and befitting the good society. From this perspective there is, therefore,
a clear relationship between the forms and the norms of civil society, between the vitality of associational life and a healthy liberal democracy.

However, critics of this perspective argue that the vitality and strength of associations says very little about the values and norms of the society in which they operate. Edwards (2005, p. 42-49) points out that not only do norms vary considerably between associations, but also between different societies and cultures. Voluntary associations and collective action are not always on the side of the 'good society.' Seligman (1992) argues that when associations have different values and norms than those of the society in which they function, they will not represent civil life, but potentially its destruction, undermining the current social order.

This distinction between norms and forms of civil society will be essential in my investigation of the Romanian social movements and civil society. I will not assume that an increasingly active associational life will necessarily lead to specific norms and values.

### 2.2.3 Civil Society as the Public Sphere

Habermas’s conception of public sphere is of a communication network between the state and society (1962; 1996). The public sphere refers to the public use of reason, and is imagined as a space in which individuals can engage in free, unconstrained deliberation of matters regarding public policy and the functioning of the state. This was facilitated at the time by the emergence of the free press as well as of geographical spaces of deliberation, such as coffee houses and salons, and also in cultural institutions, such as universities (Thompson, 2000; Low and Smith, 2006).

By having the bourgeois public sphere engaged in ‘rational-critical debate’ on the role of the state, this had led to pressure for the expansion of expression rights. Habermas (1996) argues that the bourgeois public sphere was eventually ‘re-feudalized’ by commercialization and the appropriation of public opinion by professional discourse-makers, such as political actors and public relation and advertising experts. As this
happened, the horizontal network of communication was replaced by a vertical network, reminiscent of pre-modernity, where messages only circulated from the elites to the masses.

For Habermas, civil society is to be found where the public sphere interacts with the private. Civil society therefore consists of: “… more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere” (1996, p. 367). The assumption is that in a democracy, all citizens, through forms of organization constituted in a civil society, have the ability and opportunity to participate effectively in society. Civil society can therefore be described as ‘self-organised citizenry’ (Emirbayer and Sheller, 1999) and can have a decisive role in consolidating democracy or in challenging the state and the market. For Habermas, this is the concept of ‘communicative power’, the source for democratic legitimacy of state power, coming from discursive practices within public spheres (Habermas, 1984).

Castells further elaborates on Habermas’s concept of ‘communicative power’ and argues that communication technology can aid the emergence of a new public sphere and a global civil society (Castells, 2008). This is based on Habermas’s conception of the public sphere as “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, 1996, p. 360), but differs significantly from the bourgeois public sphere of the 19th century. If we live in a ‘network society,’ (Castells, 1996), based on extensive global networks, then the new public sphere is also global, built from the mass communication of media institutions, as well as through the horizontal communication afforded by the Internet.

However, Habermas’s conception of civil society as the public sphere seems rather restricting and does not fully encapsulate the associational potential of civil society actors. As critics point out, his conception of the system/lifeworld dualism reduces the role of the media to simply a mechanism for transmitting messages, and does not fully explore the role of communication technologies in contributing to broader political participation and democratization (Kellner, 2000). The internet, by itself, as a space for rational deliberation, cannot necessarily be considered part of the public sphere. The role
of computer-mediated communication in establishing a public sphere has been acerbly debated and contested by Jurgen Habermas. In explaining how CMC can lead to the creation or consolidation of civil society, I will use the concepts of ‘online third spaces’ and ‘networked publics’ and a conceptualization of civil society as associational life, based on the works of Gellner (1995) and Walzer (1998).

2.3 Civil Society in Eastern Europe

There is a strong body of literature describing the civil society of Eastern Europe as weak or underdeveloped (Howard, 2003). The proposed causes of this supposed weakness vary. One explanation advanced by Sovietologists in particular is that the lack of trust, both in institutions and in individuals. This mistrust may have developed during times of authoritarian repression, as described by Shlapentokh and Arutunyan (2013), Shlapentokh (2017). Eastern European communist societies actively discouraged free associations between citizens, as they felt they represented potential threats to power and they were sceptical of the usefulness of involving ‘the masses’ in the exercise of ruling (Latsis 1989, p. 113; Pipes, 1998). However, this explanation may be not sufficient to explain the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s which required enhanced trust between people, particularly when faced with state surveillance and severe risk of violent repression.

2.3.1 Civil Society and National Ideology in Communist Romania

While there is a debate regarding whether interwar Romania truly had a democratic regime and civil society institutions, with some saying that pluralistic values were poorly understood and superficially applied (Dogan, 1946), it is less contentious that the repressive communist regime which followed had the role of stifling what little civil society previously existed. Although some cultural and intellectual associations did
emerge in the 1970s, these networks did not evolve into dissident groups as they did in Czechoslovakia, Poland, or the Soviet Union (Stoica, 2013). Although some argue that civil society played a role in the downfall of the Romanian communist regime (Daniels, 2000; McDermott and Stibbe, 2016), others proposed that Romania’s harsh authoritarian regime under Ceaușescu had inhibited the development of a stable civil society (Behr, 1991; Sweeney, 1991).

It could also be argued that the lack of civil society in Romanian communism was due to the promotion of a national ideology, not as a continuation of a Marxist tradition, but as formed and reproduced through the discourse of intellectual elites (Verdery, 1991). As Romania joined the Communist Bloc, its intellectual tradition changed as well. The role of the market and of Western intellectual traditions subsided and the state became the sole sponsor and provider of culture. Even within the region, Romania was unusual with regards to its high centralization (Verdery, 1991, p.100). Although coercive measures became predominant from the 1980s, the symbolic-ideological mode of control was that of nationalism. Ceaușescu’s theses pushed to raise the Romanian’s consciousness to that of a ‘new man’, with emphasis on the idea of the Nation. Because of this, intellectual activity during the Romanian communist period did not compete in the market of ideas, with the exception to that of the Nation (Verdery, 1991, p. 101-102). Another characteristic of communist Romania was that it rejected reformism and technocracy. Forces pushing for decentralization and the creation of a class of specialists, experts, scientists, or managers were feared by the Communist Party elite. This is contrary to what had happened in neighbouring countries, such as Hungary, which were heading towards market socialism (Verdery, 1991, p.107). Romania remained therefore a highly centralized ‘weak state’ (Verdery, 1991).

The environmental disaster in Copșa Mică from the 1970s and 1980s shows weak and unresponsive civil society of Romanian communism. Copșa Mică was a small town in Western Romania which after the industrial production of Zinc became a major industrial hub. Eventually it let to such massive pollution that it was described as Europe’s most polluted town and testing done on the site shows that 96% of the children up the age of 14 had severe health problems and a life expectancy 9 years lower than the national average, caused by the heavy industry in the area, particularly lead poisoning.
Botcheva describes the Romanian public’s response as apathetic and the communist government seemed unconcerned with the health risks (1996, pp.304-305). This lack of public and institutional concern for environmental risk continued in Romania even after the fall of Ceausescu’s regime in December 1989.

2.3.2 Civil Society During the Romanian Post-Communist Transition

Plans for transitioning to democracy and a **free-market** economy had begun as early as May 1990, when price liberalization and austerity measures were used to control the rampant inflation. However, the Romanian transition to a free market economy effectively begins with the anti-communists’ win in 1996, through the implementation of a local variety of “shock therapy,” aimed to reduce the budget deficit and to restructure and privatise the local economy (Roper, 2004).

Furthermore, as part of the process of EU accession in the early 2000s, the IMF and European Union have pressured Romania to transition to a neoliberal free market economy by achieving a series of reforms, such as deregulating labour, adopting a flat income tax of 16% (further reduced in 2018 to 10%), and the increased privatization of public services. However, the conditions for EU accession had been less rigid than the self-imposed penalties promoted by the local intellectual elites (Ban, 2014). The macroeconomic strategies promoted and ultimately adopted by the local elites have led to a radicalization of neoliberal ideas and the creation of a hegemonic consensus which excluded any alternative strategies to the development of Romanian economy and society (Ban, 2016).

The relative failure of transitional reforms to provide increased prosperity and their ill-effects on Romanian society had been blamed on a weakness of civil society (Ely, 1994; Howard, 2003; Roper, 2004). According to this, Romania’s marketization and democratization have been slowed down by a breakdown of social relations which had happened during communism. Monitored by the extended secret police which regulated every-day human interaction, the average Romanian had to learn to not trust
their neighbours or their institutions. This ‘weak civil society hypothesis’ had been advanced to explain why the transition was not as seamless as imagined by IMF analysis and the local intellectual elite. They argued that corruption had replaced meritocracy and political clientelism had substituted democratic process, and this was all because of the Leninist inheritance. This legacy made it difficult to build up the institutions needed for a well-functioning democracy and market economy, as well as reducing political participation among a civicly inert population. Eastern European states transitioning to democracy and a market economy have been shown as still lagging behind their Western counterparts with regards to levels of formal social capital and third sector organizations. It was argued that citizens of post-communist states had low levels of confidence in public institutions and were less likely to join formal organisations (Bădescu, Sum and Uslaner, 2004; Buzogány, 2011; Raiser et al., 2001; Smolar, 1996). Proponents of the ‘weak civil society’ hypothesis have argued that the overarching control of authoritarian communist states has led to the development of several coping strategies among their citizens and this had delayed the creation of ties based on trust between citizens and institutions (Howard, 2003). Furthermore, civil society was inhibited in communist Romania by the focus on a symbolic mode of control based on national ideology, and the discouragement of ‘middle-class’ experts and managers, as well as promoting only intellectual groups which competed in praising the ‘Nation’ (Verdery, 1991). The theorised weakness is affecting the ‘quality’ of democracy in post-communist countries, leading to citizens being alienated from the political process because of their inability to use democratic institutional levers (2011, p. 14). The successful transition to democracy and a market economy has been considered strongly inter-related to an active civil society (Wallace, Bedzir and Chmouliar, 1997).

2.3.3 Corruption in the Romanian Context

Mungiu-Pippidi differentiates between corruption in post-communist countries and corruption in developed countries (2006, p. 86-87). If for developed countries, corruption is departure from the norm of integrity, for post-communist countries, such as Romania,
corruption is a form of ‘particularism’. This means that for these countries the norm is a unequal distribution of power, and corruption is part of the mode of social organisation (2006: 86-87).

Corruption did not first emerge in the Romanian political discourse through the Colectiv protests. Corruption was the major battle in Romanian politics ever since the 2004 campaign of Traian Băsescu. He was representing Romania’s new European future and championing its battle against corrupt politicians (Gaiu, 2019, p. 24). Corruption was widely regarding as Romania’s original sin, and few made that argument more clearly and decisively than its public intellectuals (Cernat, 2017). Writers, artists, and academics from the Romanian intelligentsia proclaimed themselves Romania’s civil society and the bridge between the international community and Romania’s European aspirations. This involved free-market liberalism, a strong pro-NATO stance, and determined anti-corruption policies. Conversely, those who opposed the new civil society forming under Băsescu were often characterised as collectivist, authoritarian, too close to Russia, too Slavic, irredeemably corrupt (Gaiu, 2019, p. 26-27). Towards these aims Romania had its own ‘orange revolution’—the official campaign colour of Băsescu’s newly formed right-leaning electoral alliance, with an emphasis on market reforms and anti-corruption (Pop-Eleches, 2001).

Behind Romania’s struggle against corruption lies the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA). Historically, the DNA rested on providential leadership, upon whom rested a national desire for salvation, in the person of Laura Codruta Kovesi. International media unanimously praised Romania’s anticorruption efforts However, critics stressed that the DNA was not a legitimate force against corruption, but rather often used as a political instrument to delegitimise political opponents (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018). They point out at the cases of illegal wire-tapping, the secret—contested by some as illegal—protocols with the Romanian secret police, and the low standard of evidence required for commencing an investigation, this leading to many investigations who are easily dismissed by the courts. Critics also say that the cases pursued by DNA tend to be against PSD members, not because they are more likely to be corrupt, but because of heavy bias against the left-leaning party. They argue that this is a political strategy, aiming to reduce the credibility of the social democrats, and that the evidence for this is
the relatively low number of cases that get prosecuted, many cases being dismissed for lack of evidence. They also say that the way arrests are made, very publicly and with extensive news media coverage, aims to induce the perception of guilt before trial.

Corruption is seen as further proof of Romania’s status as an outsider among secular and modern European nations (Mărgărit and Rammelt, 2020). Gaiu (2019, p. 26) argues that corruption and an anti-Russian sentiment have been key discursive elements in Romanian civil society.

Through this lens of ideological anti-corruption, the Romanian political class is seen as inherently and fundamentally corrupt. They represent only their own interests and constitute themselves as a class against the interests of average Romanians. Furthermore, anti-corruption discourse sees also the average Romanians as fundamentally cheaters, predisposed to corruption, unable to follow rules, and misunderstanding democracy as anarchy. These characteristics seem to derive from Romania’s self-perceived ‘alterity’ within Europe. Vintila Mihailescu argues that the negative mythology Romanians hold about themselves is nothing but a discourse of Romanian exceptionalism turned into ideology (2017). It is not meant as an evaluation of social reality, but rather a value judgement of one’s own identity (2017, p. 3). Mungiu-Pippidi’s view of Romanian corruption as particularism would fit within this rhetoric of exceptionalism and alterity. Anti-corruption emerges in a way to mean more than the absence of corruption, nor reduced to the struggle to eliminate corruption, but as an ideology, which both attempts to define corruption as the sole cause of poverty and underdevelopment, and also to politicise the struggle against the corrupt and to delegitimise the state (Dragoman and Ungureanu, 2017). Anti-corruption gains therefore a manichaeistic rhetoric, of the honest and pure against the corrupt (Gherasim-Proca, 2018, p. 35). This reflects Cas Mudde’s definition of populism as a battle between the true, pure people against the corrupt elites (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

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2.4 Third Spaces, Networked Publics, Facebook Sites

Oldenburg (1999) discussed the need for a geographical space of informal social interaction, which is not the home nor the workplace; he described it as a ‘third place.’ These have typically been coffee houses, pubs, or literary salons. With the advent of new communication technologies, online spaces accessed through the internet have been described as ‘virtual third places’ (Schuler, 1996; Kendall, 2002; Soukup; 2006). Although no theoretical discussion on the role of online third spaces in the Romanian protests exists, I argue that the Romanian Facebook functions as a third place in the absence of other established third places. Third spaces had been regarded with suspicion by the authoritarian regime who had reason to fear a space of free deliberation.

However, conceptualizing a Facebook group as simply a space does not capture its entire dimension. I argue that a Facebook group is not merely a place where interactions occur, but is, to an extent, the people communicating in it and the sum of those interactions in the form of a shared identity. Towards this understanding, I will also use the concept of ‘networked publics’. Publics can be conceptualized a collection of people with a group identity based on a shared interpretative frames and common goals (Livingstone, 2005). Boyd (2010) describes networked publics as both the spaces which are constructed through computer-mediated communication, as well as the imagined collective emergent through the connectivity of people, technology, and places (2010, p. 1). Similar to online third spaces, networked publics allow people to meet, discuss, and deliberate; however, in addition to third spaces, the dynamics of interaction and the distinct affordances of networked publics can lead to a sense of shared identity, a socially constructed community in a similar way to Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991; Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Barassi, 2013).

My assumption is that online third spaces offer the space for deliberation, which is important for the development of a civil society. Networked publics are the communication networks constituted into an imagined community, and these actors, more or less formally organised, build up an emergent civil society. In the case of Romania, the absence of traditional third spaces leads to the increased role of online spaces, such as
Facebook groups. These groups, through sustained deliberation become networked publics. Both third spaces and networked publics feed into civil society.

In considering Facebook groups as both third spaces and networked publics, they can be conceptualized concomitantly as research sites and as objects of investigation. It is a site because it is an existing place (albeit, virtual) in which interactions can occur. It is an object because a Facebook group is also the sum of networked interactions within it, the people, their shared frames and collective identity. If Facebook groups, which are open and allowing deliberation, can be conceptualized as both third spaces and networked publics, digital ethnography is best suited for a thick description of the spaces, the networks, and the actors within them.

2.5 Social Movements

Social movements are defined as “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared identity” (Diani, 1992, p. 13). The movements are based on “dense social networks and connective structures” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 28-29) which are held together by a sense of shared identity and common cultural frames of interpretation. Not all forms of collective action are social movements, but they become so when they are sustained over a period of time. Social movements are also “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (1998, p. 4). Movements emerge therefore as a response to changing political opportunities or constraints. In the case of the Romanian post-communist movements, these emerged through the opportunities created by the penetration and diffusion of social media among the young urban population. CMC can offer the advantage of an online third space for deliberation and the creation of networked publics, which can eventually lead to what Castells (2012) termed ‘networked social movements’.
According to Castells (2012), networked social movements have distinct characteristics, which differentiate them from traditional social movements. These are “based on horizontal networks of interactive, multidimensional communication.” (2012, p. 249). They use a multimodal form of networking: online, offline, as well as hybrid. Even if they start online, they move offline, into occupying physical space. They are local and global at the same time; networked movements can begin at a local level, transition to a global movement, and inspire other local events. They can be preoccupied with immediate achievements, but they also refer to a horizon of possibility far in time. Networked movements are activated by a sentiment of outrage, but they also rely on hope to build up into a movement. They are viral, they can spread fast through the internet. Because they rely on online networks, they are also deliberative, often leaderless or with soft leadership, self-reflective, and, at least in the beginning, non-violent (Castells, 2012).

However, it could be argued that although useful to explicate the structure of certain social movements, Castells’s conception of networked social movements is rather limited in describing the mechanics of micro-mobilization or the ideas and values underpinning the collective action. Towards this, I will employ the framing perspective in social movements.

The framing perspective in the study of social movements evolved in the 1980s as criticism of the dominant paradigm, the resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), which emphasised incentives and rational choice as explanation for engagement with and participation in protests (Lindekilde, 2015). Early critics of resource mobilization theory paid more attention to how collective grievances are formed, including the role of ideology and consensus-forming strategies (Snow et al., 1986; Gamson, 1988; Snow and Benford, 1988). The success of a mobilization campaign is therefore dependent both on building consensus and inspiring action (Klandermans, 1984).

The concept of frame is derived from Goffman (1974, p. 21), and it represents interpretative schemata which are used to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” the social world. In social movements, these are discursive processes, speech and written communications between activists in relation to the movement (Benford and Snow,
These frames allow the alignment of events so that they fit a pattern of thinking which is shared between participants, but also discussed and re-aligned. The reality of a protest is therefore packaged, categorized, and understood collectively through a shared interpretation of events. This process of collating multiple experiences is essential to the building of a shared identity.

Frames as mental scripts guide the perception and understanding of events in the following ways: they focus attention to a particular scene, or to a particular object, in a way that some elements are emphasised (in frame) and others are ignored (outside the frame); they function as articulation mechanisms, by tying together different elements, so that particular meanings and interpretations are preferred over others; they ultimately transform social reality by altering the meaning of everyday events, or of one’s biography, or transforming routine grievances into injustices, leading to mobilization (Snow, 2004, p. 384).

Although the perspective of frames is applied in other fields, such as media studies or organisational psychology, within the study of social movements framing is focused on the causal relationship between movement participation and mobilization, or more specifically how ideas and ideologies are used deliberately by movement actors towards encouraging mobilization or for discouraging adversaries (Lindekilde, 2015, p. 200). Collective action frames are therefore purposefully simplifying and eliminating ambiguity from social events, so that they are strategically deployed towards encouraging mobilization (2015, p. 201).

Movement actors are therefore ‘signifying agents’, whose role is to define the grievances and goals using cultural and ideological interpretations (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 198). The world, and more narrowly, events related to the movement are understood through these constructed frames of interpretation, which are then used for mobilization. Within a frame analysis perspective on social movements, ideological elements, such as values, beliefs, and meanings are treated analytically, rather than merely descriptive (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 197).

Another perspective on the role of framing in social movements, similar yet broader, comes from Gamson (1992). His focus was not necessarily on the ideas
strategically used for mobilization, but broader, on political discussions in everyday life and their role towards the building up of shared understanding. Frames are deployed according to a ‘resource strategy’, and are organised on a model including three components: (1) injustice, which is the sense of moral indignation that social or political events may stimulate; (2) agency, which reflects the possibility of change through social action; (3) identity, which is the consolidation of collective identity, often against another group. Although this perspective could be useful in everyday life settings, for my research I will use Benford and Snow’s (1986; 1988) framing analysis, which allows for more targeted approach on specific strategies of communication.

Framing is therefore an essential conceptual tool in the investigation of social movements, actors, and identities. An analysis of the framing strategies in all three movements was performed across the online spaces that were part of—or associated with—the Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist movements. The digital ethnography performed on these online spaces was complemented by interviews with key activists. The following chapter will describe in more detail the methodological design employed in this thesis.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

As we saw in chapter 2, social movements can be seen as an expression of civil society and are aided by online activity. The society-wide deliberation on the role of state and of events referring to the power and legitimacy of institutions have the potential to spark outrage and to lead to collective action. Sustained collective action can become a social movement, and social movements can also create and consolidate the associational life necessary for civil society.

One of the main aims of this research was to investigate the role of Facebook in facilitating an emergent civil society in Romania. If this is happening, under which specific conditions, and is Romania more susceptible to it? I will advance the possibility that a civil society—understood as voluntary associations counterbalancing the power of the state—could emerge in Romania through networked social movements. Social media and online third spaces have a dual role in this process: providing tools for tactical and organizational repertoire; and by encouraging a collective identity which would allow for heterogenous groups to work together, through facilitating the creation and diffusion of shared interpretative frames. Through the case studies of three Romanian social movements (Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist) I investigated the role played by networks created during Uniți Salvăm and the Save Roșia Montană campaign, both online and offline, in inspiring the later series of protests in 2015 and 2017. Towards this, I explored both the action forms, tactics, and strategies of the movements, as well as the collective frames on which they built their identity. I also studied the role of Facebook groups as online third spaces, in providing the infrastructure for deliberation and political engagement, as well as a tactical and strategic tool for the movements to create collective action frames. The possibility of a hybrid third space will be considered, meaning sites which are at the same time online and offline, of overlapping networks. I also explored the idea that the stability of informal networks can be used as an indicator.
of a strong civil society, and these are also crucial for social movements and contentious politics. By identifying the capacity of social media for building collective identities and facilitating solidarity, through online third spaces and networked publics, the potential creation of Romanian civil society will be discussed. These subsidiary sociological investigations will be answered by the main research question:

**What is the role of social media in enabling social movements in Romania and what are its wider effects on the Romanian civil society?**

### 3.2 Research Strategy

This chapter outlines and describes the methodology and research strategy of the project. The methodology of this thesis is guided by the need to study three past Romanian social movements, in 2013, 2015, and 2017. This eliminated certain methodological strategies that might have otherwise been employed, such as direct participant observation of the protests. Despite the limitations, the opportunity was that of an already existing vast reservoir of data, in the form of open, public, digital communication between movement actors, who used social media as their main tool for mobilisation and identity building. Towards this goal I identified the most popular Facebook sites that were used in the protests. Some of them I previously studied, others I was already following, or I was made aware of from the interviews with the participants. In this sense there was a constant interaction between my two spaces of research, one being the virtual world of the Romanian Facebook, from which I identified movement leaders or key actors for interviewing; conversely, through the interviews I was able to further understand the role and function of the online third spaces constituted as Facebook sites or groups. The interviews also allowed me to identify themes of interest what I would later explore on the Facebook sites, while the online spaces offered me an overview of the events of the protests, of the tactical repertoire, as well as an in-depth view of the framing processes.

The research also follows a Master’s thesis on the topic of the Uniți Salvăm social movement in 2013. In the previous research, I travelled to Roșia Montană and
interviewed several local community members who were involved in the social movement since early on. I also interviewed movement actors in Bucharest, where the epicentre of the protests was situated. This led to an understanding of how the movement used collective action frames to build up a common identity, which was powerful enough to challenge the Canadian corporation who bought the mining rights as well as the Romanian government and the mass-media supporting them. The previous research also showed a divided community in Roşia Montană, with some wanting to accept the relocation payments offered by the Roşia Montană Gold Corporation, and others willing to fight the mining project using all their energy and resources. In order to not repeat the previous research done in 2015, the focus of this thesis was not merely on Roşia Montană but on the nation-wide network that was constituted as Uniţi Salvăm.

In 2015 a new wave of protests emerged in Romania as a result of the tragic fire in a Bucharest nightclub, called Colectiv. Following closely the events, I noticed that these protests are similar in many ways to those of Uniţi Salvăm, but also distinct in many ways. The protests were vast, perhaps larger than the previous ones in 2013, but they were also more emotionally charged. The protests and the movement which formed during them seemed to have an intensity that was beyond that of Uniţi Salvăm. I also noticed that I recognise some of the people calling for mobilisation from the previous research, but I also noticed that others were not involved, which again sparked a sociological question: why did some activist networks engage with these protests while others did not? I was still following the main movement Facebook pages at the time, even before starting the PhD programme in Edinburgh and although I did not collect data systematically at the time, I did have an academic interest towards the protests. I watched many hours of live videos, read the posts and comments, followed the online debates around the topics of corruption, ideology, who the guilty parties are, or what is the solution to avoid such tragedies. This informed my future research, as I already had a framework of collective action themes that I would need to systematically collect.

Triangulation is “a process of verification that increases validity by incorporating several viewpoints and methods” (Yeasmin and Rahman, 2012, p. 156). By using different methods, data sources, and tools, I intended to overcome the difficulty of collecting reliable data from disparate movements, protests, offline and online spaces, as
well as to overcome any possible bias that might arise through reliance on a single method. This will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of Romanian associational life, consisting of offline and online networks of contention, civil society actors, political movements, and interpretative frames. Another added advantage of using several qualitative methods concomitantly is that the external validity of one method can be tested against each other (Ayoub, Wallace and Zepeda-Millan, 2014). Data from the interviews, as noted above, fed back into the digital ethnography and vice-versa.

The broad objective of the study was to investigate the role of social media in enabling social movements in Romania, and to inquire as to its wider effect on the Romanian civil society. To adequately capture the fluidity and dynamic of social movements and collective actions, a multi-method design is chosen:

a) 19 qualitative in-depth interviews with people having had various levels of involvement in all three movements: Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist. Through these I aimed to answer the questions regarding the role of both online and offline networks, as well as the tactical/strategic repertoire of each movement.

b) Digital ethnography of the online third spaces represented by the Facebook groups which played an important role in all three movements. This will be useful to answer the questions regarding the role of social media and the online networks. Furthermore, through both the interviews and the participant observation I aimed to investigate the potential of an emerging civil society through a renewed associational life.

c) Frame analysis of the main Facebook groups, representing each movement, through which I explored the process of ideological alignment and identity construction between the participants in the movements.
3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Interviews

In-depth interviews are an essential and an often-indispensable tool in social movement research. This is mainly because of the relative inadequacy of other methodological tools in capturing the fluidity of a movement, as well as allowing for meaningful exploration, discovery, and interpretation of events (Blee and Taylor, 2002). They offer the advantage of active data-gathering, where the researcher can elicit responses and guide the conversation in real-time (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002). The interviews were therefore guided towards themes of interest, although allowing for sufficient space for the interviewees to describe their experiences in sufficient detail and with a focus on how the participants interpreted the events themselves. Through in-depth interviews I aimed to reveal both mobilization strategies and the internal dynamics of the movements, as well as the beliefs, emotions, and attitudes of the participants towards the themes of the protests. In-depth interviews can also offer the opportunity for new themes to emerge through guided conversation. Particular attention was devoted to the interpretations participants gave themselves to the events, seeking to reconstruct the micro-dynamics of mobilization and identity-building (della Porta, 2014).

The strategy for selection of participants was based on theoretical consideration, rather than on representativeness. A purposive sampling strategy was preferred, interviewing key players and informal leaders of the protests, but also through snowball sampling with people with different levels of engagement in the movements. Contact with the gatekeepers had previously been established during the pilot study on Uniți Salvăm (Luguzan, 2016) and has been maintained throughout the later development of the protests, allowing this study to take a longitudinal form in some respects.

The interviews lasted between one and four hours, and were spoken in Romanian, of which I am a native speaker. In total there were 19 interviews conducted, all in
Bucharest. Romania’s capital is an essential site for my research, and it is the space where all movements reached their peak size of protests.

I aimed to obtain a sample of interviews which reflected the diversity of the protesters more accurately, considering the gender, age, and ethnicity of the interviewees. I have conducted interviews with key leaders from the three movements, as well as Facebook group administrators or moderators, in order to investigate framing strategies and their selection of themes for the core framing tasks. However, I also interviewed activists that had very little or no decision-making capacity with regards to the tactics or strategy of the movements. This was useful to understand the impact of the core framing tasks, as well as the effects any frame alignment. Why did they join the movement, which frame was more convincing, how did they overcome possible divisions among the protesters? I aimed for half of the interviews to be with key actors and the other half with low-engagement participants in the protests. Also, attention was paid to a drive towards associational life which constitutes civil society. How stable are the networks that they are part of, do they participate in more formalized associations? This is important given the literature pointing to the erosion of civic institutions under communist rule.

Although interviews had been arranged with people central to the Roșia Montană protests, because of the time of the interviews, the discussions drifted more towards the later protests. I had to therefore rely more on social media data collection for the 2013 protests. This had the advantage of avoiding a memory bias of the participants, who might be likely to remember those protests in light of the newer ones. The advantage of using documentation written as Facebook posts in 2013 is that they will reflect accurately the framing at the time.

Please note that although not all participants are quoted in the dissertation, the knowledge collected from each interview aided my understanding of the topic and is reflected in the analysis and conclusions of the thesis. All the interviews were done in Bucharest, which I considered as the epicentre of each of the three movements, with the possible exception of Uniți Salvâm, who also had a strong activist core in Cluj-Napoca, Romania’s second largest city, particularly in the early stages. However, because the later developments of Uniți Salvâm were coordinated from or through the Bucharest
networks, I decided this sampling strategy would fit my framework better, attempting to investigate the activist networks and their interactions.

The interviews below are ordered from the earliest conducted to the latest:

C.C. – He was my gatekeeper for the network of experienced activists. He was a movement leader in the Uniți Salvăm movement and participated in the anti-austerity protests of 2012, as well as during the Colectiv protests. I first interviewed him during my master’s dissertation and we remained in contact ever since. His help and advice were invaluable.

M.B. – He is an experienced activist who had an active presence in all the Romanian movements since 2012. He founded an organisation that trains activist tactics to protesters, as well as organising protest actions.

B.B. - A relatively older interviewee, one that did not belong to any network, although I met him through attending Demos meetings. His perspective was important as a casual observer of the protests, with minimal engagement.

S.S. – A younger participant, active within Demos at the time. His perspective was from the left and he particularly helped me understand how the Romanian left views the concepts of ‘corruption’ and ‘anti-corruption’.

E.G. – He was a PhD student at the time, with a good understand of the events. His participation in the movements was moderate, and the represented a position that was closer to the centre-left, and critical of the anti-corruption movement.
A.G. – She is of the movement leaders in both Colectiv and Rezist. She participated actively not only in the protests but also later in the strategic framing of the events and the selection of tactical repertoire. She described herself a centre-right liberal and she provided an essential perspective on the ideological mapping of the movement.

A.P. – She was an environmental activist who began with Uniți Salvăm and eventually moved to the Colectiv movements. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the way the later movements became politicised, even if she sympathised with the underlying causes of the protests.

A.A. – A younger writer who was loosely associated with USR at the time, from a centre-left perspective. He supported the anti-corruption framing of events and opposed PSD. He was a casual participant in the protests, although he did engage with the discourse online.

S.C. – A middle-aged writer who preferred critical outlook of all political sides. He participated occasionally in the Colectiv and Rezist protests, but not without critique. He was a participant in the protests against FSN in the early 1990s and was very scathing of Ion Iliescu particularly.

V.V. – He is a socialist commentator who had a critical perspective on the protests. He admitted to being a PSD sympathiser in his youth, as opposition to Băsescu and his austerity policies, but became disillusioned since. He was very critical of the anti-corruption framing and doubted the efficacy of the protests.

N.P – She was a keen observer of the events, from a centre-left perspective. She was critical of the politicisation of the movements although she appreciated the protests.
after the Colectiv fire. She was more sceptical of the Rezist movement, which she saw as nothing but an anti-PSD movement.

A.B – She is a middle-aged writer who had a very critical perception of the political class as a whole. She favoured the technocratic government and its political offshoots, PLUS and USR, and is a strong anti-communist.

C.T. – A professional who is very critical of PSD and clearly sides with Iohannis and the centre-right parties. Her contribution was important as she detailed very well the framing of the Colectiv and Rezist movements, in which she was a moderate participant.

R.T. – He had a keen understanding of post-communist Romanian history and his criticism of FSN and later of PSD came from a centre-right liberal position. He participated in Colectiv and Rezist and he was sympathetic to the Uniți Salvăm movement.

M.E. – He was a young student at the time, and participated moderately in the Rezist protests, although he was an enthusiastic supporter. He lamented not having more time to participate and it came from ideological conviction and desire for change.

M.T. – A middle-aged worker who did not participate in the protests, although he did support them online. He was critical of PSD specifically, but also of the rest of the political elites. He hoped for a renewal of the political class.
O.N. – A younger professional, member of a libertarian NGO. He understood the Colectiv and Rezist protests as a much-needed regeneration of the political class and he hoped for further reforms to undo PSD policies. He participated in the protests only casually due to lack of time, but strongly supported them online.

M.B. – A poet and gender activist who had a critical view of the Colectiv and Rezist protests, although he supported Uniți Salvăm. His presence is mostly online but provides a critique of the protesters who he believes are not engaging with the real issues affecting Romania, which are not related to anti-corruption, but rather to poverty and social exclusion.

I.B. – A younger protester, associated with USR. He was very active during Colectiv and Rezist. He helped me understand the perspective of the newer generation of protesters, particularly from a centrist ideological position.

3.3.2 Facebook groups

Early, pre-‘social media’ online research has focused on online communities or ‘e-communities’ (Sade-Beck, 2004). However, I argue that this is more suitable for discussion boards, online gaming, or similarly small, interest-based communities. My focus is on online third spaces and networks, instead of e-communities. Through their vast reach, speed, and connectivity, modern social media (Facebook, Twitter, Youtube), differs significantly from online spaces from the previous decade. A discussion board would have a homogenous base of people having similar interests who had decided to be a part of an e-community (Sade-Beck, 2004). My research starts with the premise that in certain contexts, social media can be much more than that.
Because of this, the online spaces are arguably as relevant as the offline sites. Through preliminary research and based on previous interviews, I have identified key Facebook sites and groups which were active and influential during the Romanian waves of collective action in 2013, 2015, and 2017.

The unit of analysis for both the interview transcripts and the online data will be a discursive unit, a selection of texts that is considered meaningful and categorised into specific framing tasks. Because social movement studies using frame analysis attempts to provide explanations of how a movement managed to build up resonance which led to mobilization, these have typically been medium to large studies, using a large sample size (Lindekilde, 2015, p. 2011). The case selection of the four Facebook groups is based on my existing knowledge of the Romanian field of online activism, as well as on the pilot study done in 2017 (Luguzan, 2016). I initially selected three Facebook pages, each being particularly influential for one of the three waves of protests: The Uniți Salvăm page for the Roșia Montană protests, Corupția Ucide for the Colectiv protests, and Rezistenta for the Rezist protests; I added a fourth page, REZIST, who was in similar size and influence as Rezistenta, although each significantly smaller than Corupția Ucide, in order to capture a relatively similar amount of data. However, the pages that were created earlier were also influential during the latter protests, so they were sampled for the later periods as well.

The Facebook groups selected as case studies are as follows:

a) Uniți Salvăm (United We Save – 50,000+ followers)

Founded on September 3rd, 2013, during an activist workshop on the site of the protest (University Square), it claims to be a trans-ideological civil platform. They had a key role in the 2013 protests, by discussing mobilization strategies, providing the repertoire of contention, whether marches, sit-ins, or flash mobs, as well as organizing weekly workshops and publishing a “guide for the ethical activist”. They have continued their activity during the Colectiv and Rezist events.
b) *Corupția Ucide* (Corruption Kills – 123.000+ followers)

A Facebook group set up by Florin Bădiță on the 1th of November 2015 after the Colectiv fire. The group is named ‘corruption kills’, after a chant during the first night of the protests. They claim to be a group of over 600 activists which have taken up the role of educating and informing citizens. Because of its influence in the Colectiv protests, its creator, Florin Bădiță, was nominated by Forbes in 2018 in their list of influential people in Europe, ‘30 under 30 (Forbes, 2018).’

c) *Rezistența* (The Resistance – 37.000+ followers)

Created by Andrei Rosu on January 31th, 2017, this group, initially called *600.000 pentru Romania* (600.000 for Romania) was one of the groups created for mobilization during the 2017 protests. Its offshoot, *Rezistenta TV*, is a Facebook group which hosts ‘citizen journalism’ live videos from the protests.

d) *Rezist* (33.000+ followers)

This is another Facebook page that was created for the protests in 2017. It was similar sized to the *Rezistenta* Facebook page and it offered similar, but not identical content.

e) *Other*

Although the main data collection focus had been on the four above-mentioned Facebook pages, on more than one occasion, links were posted to other pages, which I investigated if relevant. Also, as the research progressed, and new developments emerged in the Romanian social and political environment, these leads were also followed in the virtual sphere. For example, the emergence of AUR, a populist-nationalist political party, with ties to the social movements, led to my investigation of their Facebook presence.
This was mostly done through the pages of the leadership and main people of the party, but also community pages that were representing them. Some examples of the pages are: George Simion (1.3+ Million followers), Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă- Oficial (450.000+ followers), or Alianța Pentru Unirea Românilor (163.000+ followers). Because this initial research revealed that much of their following comes from the Romanian diaspora, this also led me to investigate popular diaspora Facebook pages, such as DIASPORA (17.000+ followers) or Diaspora Europeană Oficial (458.000+ followers), as well as other smaller ones. The list is not exhaustive and the data collection was not systematic but rather inductive and intuitive. The need for this data collection emerged as the rise of AUR had happened after my initial research from 2017 to 2020 and its relevance could not be ignored, as there was the risk of the thesis findings becoming obsolete as soon as it was submitted.

All posts were selected and categorised from each of the main four Facebook pages in the initial stage of the research. The unit of analysis in frame analysis is relevant excerpts, rather than full texts, as in discourse analysis (Lindekilde, 2015). Also, the Facebook posts are often short, containing one or two sentences on average, while others have links, photos, videos, or events, with very little commentary. These lead to a selection of analysable text, that was categorised by source, date, type of data. The collected material was coded inductively, and as the themes emerged from the sample texts, they were organised according to the framing task they belong to (see below in Frame Analysis section).

3.3.3 Digital ethnography

The participant observation stage of the research was largely exploratory and had several advantages, according to Bernard (2006). It could open new areas of inquiry leading to a wider range of data that was previously not acknowledged. It could aid with developing questions for the interviews, as well as emergent themes and frames. It certainly provided
a better understanding of the data, leading to a deeper and more complex interpretation of the events.

Hine (2013) identifies two phases in digital research: one that can be described as ‘the language of emails’ and one which identifies the digital world as a cultural context, which can be investigated through ethnographic methods. The added value of digital research is that it facilitates a detailed investigation of online and hybrid third spaces. It also permits the understanding of the interaction between online and offline actors as well as the bridging between online and offline networks.

Considering the transformations described by Castells (2012) and the ubiquitous computer-mediated communication, digital ethnography is a way of producing research that is of increasing relevance to the study of social movements. The digital world is not necessarily an object of study in itself, but rather part of the everyday, and therefore it can be explored through ethnographic methods.

Digital ethnography is a holistic approach to the study of the shape and nature of computer-mediated communication, which builds on the techniques of classic ethnographic study (Varis, 2016). It aims to provide a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of everyday life in an online setting. However, as ethnographic activities are transferred to the digital world, the direct, sustained contact of traditional ethnographic methods becomes intermittent and mediated through technology (Pink et al., 2016, p. 2). The setting and the community become virtual and seeing and listening become reading.

Pink et al. discuss five key principles of digital ethnography, were also considered, and reflected upon in my research: “multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy (2016, p. 8).”

\[ a) \text{Multiplicity} \]

Because digital technologies are part of everyday life, digital research cannot be done by excluding the infrastructure which makes online connectivity possible. Exploring the digital world implies an understanding of how it is embedded within, and depending
upon, existing social structures. The initial set-up of the Alburnus Maior resistance in Roșia Montană was made possible because of access to the internet and the coagulation of human capital necessary for the development of an online presence. The presence of smartphones constantly connected to the internet is facilitated by public Wi-Fi and mobile data plans. The existence of online third spaces could not be possible without a very good internet penetration rate in Romania and the lack of traditional third spaces. The potential absence or existence of these factors will have an impact on both the object of study and the research process. The principle of multiplicity implies that there is no singular way of engaging with the digital, and this will be dependent on the specific conditions which are underpinning the existence of a digital world. This highlights the importance of the offline activist networks, and the interviews with the Facebook group administrators were designed to highlight the factors and specific conditions allowing the online spaces to be effective.

b) Non-digital-centric-ness

Online activities also cannot be studied without understanding people’s everyday world and they do not need to be researched exclusively through online methods. Because of this, I have chosen methodological triangulation which will allow me to supplement my online research with offline interviews. This is of particular importance to my research as I intend to elucidate the networking potential of both online and offline protest activities. Focusing solely on the online would ignore the ‘real-life’ activity that people involved in the protests previously had or have made since their activities, which go beyond strategies of online mobilization. By not making the online space the exclusive centre of my digital ethnography, and trying instead to capture the activity of participating in the movement in its comprehensive form, online and offline, I hope to have avoided the bias of technological determinism. An exclusive focus on the online space may create the illusion of it being the main determinant of the social movement.


c) Openness

This refers to the characteristic of digital ethnography of being a process, rather than a set of methods and activities which are bounded and limited in time. My research design therefore retains a flexible and iterative structure. This is further potentiated by my object of study being social movements and ever-shifting and interrelated social networks. The concept of openness also refers to the potential characteristic of computer-mediated communication of being adaptive and based on open-source technologies. The online strategies, spaces, and discourses enabled by the activist networks are permanently reinvented collaboratively. Remaining open to this enabled me to capture subsequent developments and spin-offs that were not part of the initial research plan.

d) Reflexivity

Ethnography is fundamentally a reflexive research practice. More than an awareness of one’s political bias, identity markers, and relative position of power, reflexivity in digital research acknowledges the central aspect that ethnography is a collaborative process between researcher and researched. My engagement with networked publics and activist groups considered and incorporated the importance of quality checks such as respondent feedback. Several of the people approached during my research had the option and the opportunity to provide feedback on my work in progress, clarifying and expanding my interpretation of their words.

e) Unorthodoxy

Investigation of new forms of communication is often exploratory and collaborative, which means that it often requires an innovative approach. In the case of my research project, this may include digital dissemination methods that are collaborative with activists and participants in the research project.
The in-depth interviews and the frame analysis are complemented by the direct observation of the Facebook groups, through digital ethnography. My application of virtual ethnography meant observing online interactions in the respective groups beyond utterances such as posts and comments. I found it often useful to guide my attention towards posts and comments that received a disproportionate number of likes, as that indicated to its popularity and approval from the online community. Also, the number of adversarial comments and interactions was also considered, indicating dissent, debate, or divergent ideological positions. In this, online participant observation follows the same investigative inductive logic as in traditional ethnographic work, in that it requires immersion in order to understand the framework of meaningful interactions in the online third space. These interactions would have been difficult to quantify and analyse even if they are quantifiable per se. A very well-liked post could mean that is there is great consensus around it, but it could also mean that it was written by someone popular in the virtual space, someone followed by a large number of people, or that in that period there were large numbers of people on that particular Facebook page. This is not to say that quantitative analytical work, such as sentiment analysis or other forms of computational linguistics and natural language processing would have not been possible or not wielded useful findings. However, in the context of my research, it was the interactions between the people themselves that I found more informative. What were the multitude of online and offline networks which framed the protests and engaged with the contested themes? Did they change over time or did they remain static? Did they dissipate or did they transfer from movement to movement?

I also carefully assessed the types of online debates people in the comments were having, which often revolved around the ideas of corruption and who is to blame. If a third space is a place for deliberation and discussion, an online space is even more so. I noticed consensus around certain themes and deep division among others, which will be discussed at length in the later chapters.

My usage of participant observation consisted in observing the Facebook sites in order to observe the field relations between actors. This happened over a period of three years, from 2017 to 2020, and from 2022 to 2023, concomitantly with other data
collection tasks and analyses. I had already been following Uniți Salvām since 2013, and followed the others as soon as they were created and reached relative popularity.

Observing the interactions on Facebook also allowed me to tentatively interrogate how the framing tasks are perceived and three processes through which they are debated and disseminated through comments.

Through being immersed in the digital setting I observed collective action events, as they happened, watching the live streams, the posted photos and videos, observing the creation of events and calls to action. This active participation in the online field allowed me to observe the hybrid space, where the online networks interact with the offline networks, when contention moves from the social media groups into the street.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Snow and Benford argued that an actor involved in mobilization, in moving people “from the balcony to the barricades,” (1988, p. 200) has three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. The role of these tasks is to achieve ‘frame resonance’, a shared understanding of meanings and events among movement actors. Compared to other types of analysis, frame analysis does not rely on micro-linguistics, such as frequency of words or specific wording, but rather on the constituting building blocks of meaning, which represent different frames, as well as the ways in which these are produced, distributed, and consumed (Lindekilde, 2015, p. 208). What are the main themes or ideas emerging from the analysis? How are they articulated into collective action frames? What are the dynamics of these frames within the processes of frame alignment?

In the first stage of the analysis I identified the core framing elements (diagnosis, prognosis, motivation) for each of the three movements, using the Facebook groups associated with each movement, as well as from the interview transcripts.
a) Diagnostic framing

This refers to identifying problems and attributing blame. Benford and Snow point out that consensus on identifying the problem is easier to achieve that the attribution of blame, or causality (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 200).

b) Prognostic framing

This process suggests solutions, as well as identifying targets, tactics, and strategies. Quite often there is a connection between diagnostic and prognostic framing. The solutions proposed by the prognosis should correspond—although not always—to the problems identified in the diagnosis (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 201).

c) Motivational framing

Because agreeing on the causes and solutions to particular issues does not necessarily lead to collective action, this is the third and necessary step in framing tasks (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 203). The motivational frames are successful when there is a balance between the previous two core tasks. A problem that is diagnosed too hopelessly is less likely to lead to action, as well as if the prognosis implies that the problem may resolve itself in time. Motivational frames rely on a consensus between outrage and hope, by identifying a stringent problem, which can and should be resolved through collective action.

The second stage of the analysis investigated the processes of frame alignment (frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation). According to Snow et al. (1986), frame alignment is the process of linking movement and individual interpretative orientations, so that some sets of activities, goals, values, beliefs, and ideological elements are congruent and complementary (1986, p. 464).
a) Frame bridging refers to the linkage between several frames that are ideologically congruent but not connected structurally. These may be common grievances shared among protesters, which would have no organisational base that would facilitate their collective, nor are they part of the same network. Normally, this would occur through the mass media or through interpersonal networks. In this study I investigated whether the Facebook groups are the tools which allow frame bridging in the case of the Romanian movements.

b) Frame amplification is the clarification of and focus on a particular frame, which elevates the values attached to it to inspire collective action. These may be values or beliefs that, for any number of reasons, did not necessarily lead to previous mobilizations. For example, in the case of the protests surrounding Roșia Montană, the amplification of the environmentalist frame, as the duty of all citizens to protect the resources of the country, did not lead to any serious popular contention from 2000 to 2013, but only after the process of frame amplification (Luguzan, 2016). This process can validate values and beliefs, as well clarifying them, so that they appear more salient than they previously did.

c) Frame extension refers to the process of widening of support for certain themes and causes. The boundaries of an existing frame are extended through adding more points of view so that more actors can join the movement. However, compared to frame bridging, this process is incorporating adjacent ideas, values, and beliefs into the existing main frame, rather than connecting several similar frames.

d) Frame transformation occurs when the frame is not merely changed through the processes above, but adds entirely new values, ideas, or beliefs, or discards others completely. If participants in the movement do not resonate with the existing frames, a
reframing can occur, where values, beliefs, or ideas that are seen as erroneous are discarded and new ones are added. Previous events are now seen as something else completely (Snow et al., 1986, p. 473-474).

In this stage of analysis, I aimed to clarify several issues. Which frames remained constant throughout each of the movements? Which frames have changed? If frame alignment occurred, how exactly did it occur? To what extent are the frames from the interview transcripts the same as the frames from the Facebook groups? I tested the supposition that the Facebook groups, functioning as online third spaces, can facilitate the processes of frame alignment. Particular attention was paid to the timeframe of the posts, relative to the timeline of the mobilization waves. Has there been an increase in posts containing mobilization frames before the protests? In what ways, and how long before mobilization, have the frames aligned?

The qualitative coding analysis was done using Nvivo. Coding elements were drawn from both previous research (Luguzan 2016), using themes that emerged in the frame analysis of Uniți Salvăm, and based on other previous social movement research using frame analysis (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988). The interview transcripts and the Facebook posts were analysed by capturing significant information, relating to both thematic content (e.g. themes relating to nationalism, corruption, or environmentalism), core framing elements (diagnostic frames, prognostic frames, and motivational frames). The information was placed in ‘containers’ (nodes, in Nvivo), and then sorted into ‘parent nodes’, reflecting both the frequency and commonality of themes, as well as the frames which emerged through the splicing of ideologies and ideas, achieving frame resonance or necessitating frame alignment (through frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, or frame transformation).

Furthermore, a timeline of core framing tasks was established from the Facebook groups, by positioning the frequency of specific core framing tasks within in relation to the timeline of collective action. Attention was paid to when different framing tasks or alignments occurred more frequently, and I investigated whether this is related to any change in the movements’ trajectories.
3.5 Ethics and Positionality

Major ethical issues did not arise during this research project and the fieldwork was conducted according to the ethical standards of the School of Social and Political Science, from the University of Edinburgh.

The participant observation was conducted openly on the Facebook sites, which were public and with open access. The online data collection was non-intrusive. Although the issues of identity and authenticity can be of concern in internet-based research (Hine, 2000), in this case, the identity of the people who post on the groups, as administrators or key activists, was already known at the time of data collection. Also, compared to message boards or forums, Facebook mostly relies on the real-life identity of the people in it, not on avatars and nicknames. Although ‘socket accounts’ exist, as well as deception, there was no indication of ‘astroturfing’ or manipulation within these spaces.

Also, the anonymity of the interviewees was safeguarded where possible and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. Participants had the option, stated in the consent form, to have their names anonymised or revealed.

Denzin (1986, p. 12) argued that the biography of the self is a key element in interpretative research. Attention has been paid to my own positionality in this research, as an academic researcher, as a Romanian, as an expat, as a male, and as a politically engaged actor. Constant self-reflection was required both during fieldwork and during analysis and dissemination.

Academic research is never easy and regardless of careful planning and accounting for the unexpected is essential. Through faults of my research design, lack of experience in managing the workload—particularly the accumulation of too much data—and the global crisis represented by the Covid pandemic, this thesis has certain weaknesses that could have been resolved.

If I could redo the thesis, one of the learning experiences was in being careful in managing and organising large quantities of data. The online data I collected from the
Facebook sites built over the years into an unmanageable quantity of text that had to be categorised and analysed according to the methods stated above. This was further made difficult by my branching into other sites, such as the diaspora and the AUR groups, after the events of 2017, stretching until 2022 and 2023. The wide effects of the social movements were unfolding in real time, as I was writing this thesis, and constantly questioned as new social and political events emerged. For example, the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests of the last few years had certain similarities to the movements studied in this research, and it is quite possible that the initiators of these events were inspired by Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, or Rezist. A fault of my project was that I was constantly adding data and emerging themes to the research. A lesson learned was the need to compartmentalise areas of research and answer the smaller questions effectively, rather than searching for the all-encompassing and everchanging answer.

While these setbacks have undoubtedly affected the final submission, I feel that the data collected and presented in this thesis is both rich and insightful and contributes to a deeper of the processes by which social movements emerge and move across space and time.
CHAPTER 4: UNITI SALVAM

4.1 Introduction

‘United We Save Roșia Montană’ is at the same time a slogan calling for popular unity against a common enemy; it is the name of an enduring and successful social movement; it is the laboratory that led to the creation of new political movements and parties. This movement was arguably at the forefront of new Romanian era, marking the end of the post-communist transition. It represented the largest and most successful modern Romanian social movement, and it was also the political and civic maturation of a generation of young people that emerged as adults either at the late stage of Romanian communism or right after its downfall.

4.2 Alburnus Maior

Based on previous research undertaken in 2014-2015 and published as a Master’s dissertation and a paper (Luguzan, 2016), I found two distinct stages of the protests around the Roșia Montană issue. The first one was organised as a NIMBY movement, orchestrated by part of the local community rejecting the mining project. The second stage of the resistance to the mining project became a large national and transnational movement, with wide themes and resonating with an entire generation.

Roșia Montană is a village in north-eastern Romania, in the Apuseni Mountains. It has been a gold mining site ever since Roman times, with preserved mining galleries of immense archaeological importance (Ciugudean, 2012; Ioane and Bedelean, 2010; Ion, 2014; Jarosz, 2015; Olteanu, 2019). The Roșia Montană community had always been reliant on the mining industry, and many of its current inhabitants were linked to it for
generations. A Canadian mining company, Gabriel Resources bought the mining rights in 1995 through its subsidiary the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC). The eventual exploitation would have made Roșia Montană the largest open pit mining project in Europe. However, despite its promise of jobs for the local community and that of an estimated of 4 billion euros in revenue, the RMGC project came under intense scrutiny in Romanian civil society, as well as dividing the local community.

Roșia Montană is the epicentre of the first movement, which began with Alburnus Maior in 2000, set up by the local activists, as well as culminating with Uniți Salvăm in 2013. Through the pilot study (Luguzan, 2016) it has emerged that activists from Cluj-Napoca (the largest city in Western Romania, and relatively close to Roșia Montană), some of them closely associated with Babes-Bolyai University, have had an active role in aiding Alburnus Maior to achieve national attention and were primarily engaged in creating the online presence (Odobescu, 2013), which led to the sustained campaign for saving the Roșia Montană community. It was also an important site for the 2015 and 2017 protests. I previously investigated the role of the local activist networks which emerged during the Alburnus Maior phase towards the later mobilizations.

The main contention to the mining project emerged as a direct battle against the Canadian company and the divisive issues were the preservation of the natural beauty of the area; the environmental risk of cyanide mining; the preservation of the ancient mining site; and the destruction and relocation of the village and its cultural sites. 360 families from Roșia Montană and the surrounding area formed an association in 2001 to resist the mining project.

“Eugen David has been fighting for 14 years. He is fighting with the mental strength of the man who knows he is in the right, who knows what is his and who only has one option: to defend what is his. No one will defend us from abuses, not the abuses of the police, not those of the politicians, not those of the people who choose not to see. To pretend to not see what is happening is an abuse. Come to the Parliament tomorrow
morning! We have to defend ourselves! #UnitiSalvam #RosiaMontana” (Uniți Salvăm, 2013).

This call to mobilisation shows the ways in which the Uniți Salvăm movement centred around the local community represented through Alburnus Maior. Eugen David was the leading figure of the early NIMBY stage of the protests around the mining project and a central node in a network of NGOs and other movement actors. His struggle is presented as a defence of his community and the property of the residents. His representation in the main Uniți Salvăm Facebook page and the incorporation of his fight in the framing of the movement is a link between the first local stage of the movement and the later national-level events. The adversary is clear: it is Prime Minister Ponta and the RMGC. The community is defended by ‘the street’, an element which appears multiple times in the Romanian social movements. It is a representation of grassroots mobilisation, civil society, and the will of the people which sides with the vulnerable against the government and private interest groups. The framing of the movement saw specialists as corrupt officials who offer excuses and provide justifications and are often represented as being in the pocket of corporate interest. This populist conceptualisation of corruption is also one that we will encounter in subsequent Romanian social movements, pitting the ‘corrupt elites’ against a ‘pure people’.

“Ponta needs to get used to the idea that the destruction of Roșia Montană will not take place during the generation that came out in protest. The street will not negotiate and will not legitimate through false dialogue the cyanide project from Roșia Montană. The stage of consulting specialists is over. We will not be accepting made up excuses. We say to all those who are looking for the leaders of the movement or representatives of certain organisations that they will not find new leaders to negotiate the selling and destroying of Roșia Montană.” (Uniți Salvăm, 2013)
This linkage between local and national interests is relevant in the context of future social movements, as it provided the first example of a successful Romanian networked social movement. With the increased popularity of Facebook since the 2010s, more and more Romanians from diverse backgrounds and age brackets participated in the online public sphere that social media provides. This meant not only awareness of global and national issues but also of localised concerns that may not appear in the traditional mass media. This enabled the campaign in Roșia Montană to move beyond local environmentalism and attain national and international significance.

4.3 Uniți Salvăm

The movement to save Roșia Montană reached its peak once the network in Cluj-Napoca branched and joined other activist and civil society networks across the country, particularly in Bucharest. When the Romanian Prime Minister Ponta moved to support the redevelopment of the Roșia Montană mining project under the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC), the localised movement centred around Alburnus Maior and the activists located in Cluj-Napoca felt a renewed sense of urgency. This led to a change in tactics and a concerted effort to attract nation-wide attention to the cause. However, becoming a national movement meant negotiating diverse interests and identities and creating a common action frame and a workable strategy for mobilisation. In the process of merging distinct informal networks across the country and the diaspora, the necessity emerged to create a common identity of the movement that will be able to inspire and mobilise people of different ages and social classes, people with distinct and often contrasting ideologies, activists and non-activists alike.

The creation of common collective action frames was essential and social media—mostly Facebook—was the main tool. This was used strategically by the activists. The use of Facebook was particularly effective because of the apathy or even hostility of mainstream news networks and legacy print media; RMGC having an intensive advertising campaign across Romanian national media. Of the many online resources
used by the movement was the Facebook page Uniți Salvăm, which has been used extensively in this research for data collection.

Facebook was also the tool used in developing tactics and mobilisation strategies. It allowed for the activists to coordinate, to plan their itineraries, to create events, and to decide on common themes of protest. The long-term aim was to create not only resistance to the mining project, as Alburnus Maior did, but also to create a new culture of protest and to regenerate Romanian civil society. Posts on the Uniți Salvăm Facebook page are clear that the aims of the movement extend beyond Roșia Montană, while also drawing attention to the need for tolerance and inclusion:

“The protest events of the last few months proved once again that the civic spirit is reborn in Romania. Citizens everywhere showed their opposition to the Roșia Montană mining project in a creative and peaceful manner. A community of protest was therefore created, one very diverse but also one that subscribes to a few simple principles and demands, including defending fundamental human rights.

We wish that the protest space will be inclusive and safe, a space where citizens can interact with each other, where they can learn and debate freely. That is why we are inviting all participants to the protests to contribute to the construction and the safekeeping of an open, civilised and safe community of protest. A community hosting and treasuring equally all participants, regardless of age, race, ethnic group, gender, education, level of income, religious beliefs, ideological options—as long as these are not impeding on fundamental human rights—or others.

We will not tolerate acts that are threatening human dignity and individual safety. We are all responsible in identifying and sanctioning insults, harassment of any kind and aggressive/violent gestures among participants. To protect the protesters from these acts and only when we really have to we will resort to public safety authorities.
The protest space is a free one but it is not such that constitutional principles and common sense are suspended. We are in the street because the government is violating our fundamental rights. We should not help them but we should provide our society a better example.” (Uniți Salvăm, October 24, 2013)

This passage is quoted at length because it shows the essential role that the core activist network had in negotiating the often-contrasting identities present at the movement. Confirmed by several interviews as well, as the protests grew larger, the ideological diversity was more pronounced. It was not uncommon to have at the same event signs belonging to right-wing nationalist groups, as well as those from the anti-capitalist left, together with environmentalist activists, football supporter groups, student associations, and many more diverse informal networks converging in the same event. Although the messaging was mostly against the government and in support of Roșia Montană, other causes could also be heard, such as those of the pro-union Moldavian and Romanian nationalists “Basarabia e Romania” (Bessarabia is Romania). When discussing the idea of a protest on Romania’s national day on December 1, people drew attention to the need for national unity despite these differences, which are to be accepted as long as Roșia Montană remains the common denominator:

“I think it is a good idea. One static protest, with lots of people, with flags, with noise. And then we can march the streets. And other groups will eventually join, it will become more dynamic, causing some upset, some with the king, some with Bessarabia, but it’s ok, mainly people will be for Roșia Montană.” (Uniți Salvăm, November 3, 2013)

However, not only ideology and political beliefs are divisions that need to be bridged for the common cause, but also the perspectives of different generations. The
older people were seen by protesters as more likely to be swayed by politicians and mass media, many networks having accepted generous advertisements from RMGC.

“Did you tell your grandparents that the politicians are trying to steal not only our future but also our past? Did you tell them that the Roșia Montană project means destroying churches and our history by moving the cemeteries? Did you tell them that they want to make us forget who we are and who we could be? Tell them everything. Their thoughts will make us all stronger. Show them this video. You are closer to them than televisions will ever be. They will believe you, they will understand you.” (Roșia Montană, October 4, 2013)

The calls to action also acknowledged the generational gap and offered advice on how to recruit older people to the cause. This generational gap is also encountered in the future Romanian movements, in 2015 and 2017 and the discussion here is to bridge the differences in opinion by appealing to the traditionalism of the older generation. The Facebook post refers to churches, cemeteries, the past, history, all under threat from the mining project. This appeal to tradition is also an example of frame bridging, whereas the theme of environmental danger is linked with the ideas of tradition, community, and belonging. Environmental danger is therefore not presented as an abstract problem, affecting people in an undefined future, but rather acting in the present and erasing the past. This is bridged into the theme of national unity, the call for everyone, united, to save Roșia Montană, whether concerned about the past, present or future. While this appeal to tradition proved to be effective in mobilising older generations to the cause, framing the protest in this way left the movement open to appropriation from different groups, including nationalist or populist. This was to become an issue in the later mobilisations as described in future chapters.

The core activist group managing the Uniți Salvăm Facebook page felt responsible for managing and negotiating the identity of the wide movement, to ensure sufficient
heterogeneity representing the disparate informal networks, but also to preserve a common identity within the movement.

4.4 The Framing of Uniți Salvăm

Ever since the stage of Alburnus Maior, we can identify four distinctive collective action frames: the environmental frame, the neo-colonial and anti-corruption frame, and the national unity frame. These developed in the Cluj network, before being disseminated through the country-wide networks.

4.4.1 Diagnostic Framing: Environmental Danger

The mining project has been described as being an environmental disaster since its early localised Alburnus Maior era. The perils of cyanide mining have been at the forefront of the diagnostic framing processes. At the basis of the initial contestation of the mining project, there was the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Environmental NGOs contested the EIA as flawed and produced their own assessment to highlight the risks arising from the project (Branea, 2013). The environmental danger frame was evident from the signs and chants during the protest, as most of the symbolism revolved around the metaphor of Snow White accepting the poisoned apple.

Furthermore, despite the wide-ranging ideologies present in the protest, the consensus among activists was that they would not accept opposition politicians using the cause to gain political capital and that they will be equally shunned. The importance of Romania’s clean waters and forests was something transcending petty politics. One comment on the Uniți Salvăm describes how the politicians attempting to participate in the protest should be treated:
“I would like to add that we should gather in groups of tens or hundreds and disperse among the crowd, and whenever they [politicians] appear, boo them, for their state treason, for destroying the forests, for polluting the waters, for the Roșia Montană cyanide, for selling our natural resources. They are all aware they did these things.” (Uniți Salvăm, November 3, 2013)

The populist leanings of the movement and the celebration of the ‘pure’ people safeguarding the country against corrupt politicians are evident here. This narrative was amplified by portraying the politicians and corporations as neo-colonial.

4.4.2 Frame Bridging: Neo-Colonialism as Corruption

The framing of corruption as an element of neo-colonial power projection is one relatively new in Romanian public discourse, although variations existed ever since the 1989 Revolution. The phrase “we are not selling our country” was a popular slogan during the early 1990s during a period of privatising public resources. Of particular interest in this case is how the theme of foreign corporations are draining the resources of Romanians is linked to that of the corruption of local elites.

“For over two weeks, tens of thousands of people are revolting against the Roșia Montană project, against the political class and the servile and manipulative media. Tens of thousands of people want to remain united in the face of authorities who do not want to represent them, but the interests of a private company. Tens of thousands of people want to
save (themselves)—but in the street, not on the television.” (Uniți Salvăm, November 7, 2013)

There was the necessity of continued resistance to the mining project and that could only happen by resisting attempts by the politicians to mitigate the protests. When the government promised that they will ensure a free civil society debate on the mining project and that new legislation will be considered, the Uniți Salvăm movement emphasised the need for continued efforts. The lies of the politicians are emphasised as well as their interest in protecting the RMGC. In the Facebook posts and the comments, politicians are described harshly, as liars, thieves, manipulators and unpatriotic, favouring foreign private interests over the environment and over Romanian interests. We notice an underlying scepticism regarding Romanian political institutions, whether the Parliament, the Government, or the Prime Minister. This association between politics protecting private capital in the detriment of both the environment and the interests of Romanians is the strongest collective action frame noticed in this research for the Uniți Salvăm movement, as the following excerpts illustrate.

“‘We must not stop here! We are continuing the protests until we can get definitive legislation to stop cyanide mining. RMGC needs to leave Romania and Ponta and the Government need to resign, for all their bullshit, for the lies and manipulation. We would all be crazy if we would stop the protests because Ponta said so! We are stopping when there is a definitive law that says clearly that cyanide mining is forbidden. And when we will not be ruled by walking garbage who always get off too easy.’” (Uniți Salvăm, September 9, 2013)

“‘Not just Roșia Montană but SAVE THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE from an ecological disaster. We will all be grateful!’” (Uniți Salvăm, September 9, 2013)
“Please excuse us, we are not intimidated. When they threaten us with lawsuits, we will show them our demands and remind them that we will be in the street until they will be met. One of our demands is to investigate everyone responsible for the case of systemic corruption at Roșia Montană. We are again condemning the irresponsible comments of Victor Ponta [The Romanian Prime Minister] and Daniel Barnu [the Minister of Culture at the time].”

The common theme in the protests explaining the collusion between authorities, the media and the foreign company RMGC was that of corruption. There was the sense that there is an underlying corruption in Romanian society that can only be purged through civil society and civic engagement in the streets. From early on, the prognosis framing of the protests against the mining project had two clear adversaries: the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation and the government. The quotes below shows that the corruption of the political class is intertwined with corporate interests:

“Romanian folk tales written by Canadians: RMGC are as good liars as our politicians. They have been in a campaign of lies for a while and it is our duty to expose them.” (Uniți Salvăm, 2013)

4.4.3 Frame Extension: National Unity and Civil Society Regeneration

A surprising element that I noticed from the Uniți Salvăm protests has been the ubiquitous presence of Romanian flags, the singing of the national anthem. This was linked on the Facebook site to two related themes, those of the need for national unity and for the regeneration of Romanian civil society. The solution to the ills of corruption and neo-
colonialism was seen not only as anti-corruption and democratic processes, but also Romanians coming together towards a common goal. The frame extension process added the idea of a positive type of nationalism, which involved civic participation, the environment as a national good, and the patriotic duty to defend it. I will argue that this framing process explains why the social movement reached a record number of participants to its protests and other events, and why it had the power to challenge a hostile government. It is a frame extension rather than frame bridging because it adds a new dimension to the ideological repertoire of the movement, rather than uniting two existing ones. It was also very effective, as it allowed new networks of nationalists and populists to join the movement and take refuge within the common identity of Uniți Salvăm.

4.4 The Last Stage of Uniți Salvăm

In 2014 the controversy continued as the legislators of the newly elected parliament planned a new draft of the contested Mining Law, with the aim to allow the redevelopment of the Roșia Montană mining project. The Minister of the Economy at the time, Andrei Gerea, claimed in a media interview that the new law will be improved to eliminate any possible corruption:

“The text of the new Mining Law has been considerably improved, so that it will favour those who will wish to invest in the mining sector. Therefore, the new law will shorten the times [needed to apply for projects], ensuring the safeguarding of private property, guaranteeing fair compensation and transparency, and eliminating the parts of the law that allows for favouritism.” (Opinia Timişoarei, 2014)
While this clearly indicates the impact of the movement and the requirement for politicians to address their concerns, speeches alone were insufficient to regain trust. For many in the movement this announcement meant that the government was planning to continue with the mining project at Roșia Montană while trying to appease parts of the civil society with minor improvements to the legislation.

A long-term goal of the Uniți Salvăm movement has been to petition the inclusion of Roșia Montană as a UNESCO heritage site, which happened in 2021. This would have offered additional protection to the area as well as development funding for the community (Reuters, 2021). When this eventually happened in 2021, there was a great wave of enthusiasm within the movement and its supporters. It symbolised at least a temporary victory and a moment of reprieve for the Roșia Montană community. However, there were also dangers on the horizon, as the RMGC threatened to sue the Romanian state for infringing the contract and asking for billions in damages. One of the movement leaders, Mihai Gotiu describes the UNESCO news on the Uniți Salvăm Facebook page in a post worth sharing in full:

“GREAT WAVE OF ENTHUSIASM, on Facebook, after the inclusion of Roșia Montană in UNESCO. It is important to consider what this means, but also why some are not happy about it.

The happiness of including Roșia Montană in UNESCO exploded on social media. From yesterday, I am finding it difficult to follow the chronology and the posts of those who saluted the UNESCO Committee decision. I have seen again, with emotion, photos from the protests, from the FanFest festivals, from Roșia Montană, from Cluj, Bucharest, Timisoara, and from all the surprising corners of the world where the leaf of Roșia Montană reached, but also the way we were looking 10 or even 20 years ago ☺.

The announcement that I made on my own page passed 1.200 comments, 3.200 shares, over 12.000 likes, over 57.000 reactions, and an impact of over 430.000 people. And I am not the President, nor the Prime Minister of Romania. And I
suspect that almost everyone of you had responses that were way over the average.

Such a great impact I have only seen a few times before. The first time when I noticed something similar was during the large protests in the fall of 2013 for Roşia Montană. Same as then, there is a wave of optimism, mobilisation, and enthusiasm, in total contrast with the news articles from the mainstream media, which bombarded us with apocalyptical scenarios, “off the record”, about the billions of dollars that we would end up paying, just because we did not agree to blow up and poison our history, our culture, our mountains and our waters! As if good health, culture, our history and identity could ultimately be quantified in dollars...

The enthusiasm on Facebook, in total contrast with the alarmist tone, or at least cold and distant, predominant in mainstream media is showing us (if actually necessary still) that the propaganda and the lies spread “off the record” did not catch on. Same as it happened in 2013, despite the tens of millions pumped by Gabriel Resources (through RMGC) in the media and in many (too many) local politicians, people were not easily fooled.

Because the people understood how ridiculous these statements are, that we would end up paying billions of dollars for decisions made from 2017-2021 in an arbitrage process started in 2014, where they asked for damages for decision taken before that year; and that the company blackmailed when trying to block the UNESCO listing, this coming because this international recognition is cancelling their demands; that if we end up paying them a single cent, that is because of the people colluding with the company before 2014.

The aggressive statement (and full of shameless lies) coming from Gabriel Resources or the statements made by the Roşia Montană mayor (yes, the one with his sister connected to the company money), as well as the fantasies (or frustrations) of many opinion makers (some of them with years of suckling at the teat of the cyanide company) were covered mostly in full almost everywhere [in the media]. Here and there the opinions of those who actually fought for the
inclusion of Roșia Montană in UNESCO (lawyers, architects, national patrimony specialists, activists etc.). And often these were not presented in full.

This shows us that it still smells of cyanide in many of the newsrooms in Romania and that the dynamite is still floating around the neurons of many journalists. That there is still a lot of work to get rid of the toxic traces left by this “investments” by the company in buying up consciences and spines. But also that Roșia Montană will be saved truly only when the huge victory of yesterday—the inclusion in UNESCO—will be fully utilised, and the community and the area will develop on the basis of the cultural, historic and natural heritage that it has.

Seeing the great wave of enthusiasm on social media yesterday after the decision of the UNESCO Committee I am optimistic. We are many, a great deal of us, who can’t be manipulated anymore. If we remain together, we will succeed!” (Uniți Salvăm, 2021)

This quote captures many key aspects of the protest framing, including the issues of contention and the subsequent development of the movement. It was written by Mihai Gotiu, one of the early supporters of Roșia Montană from the Cluj network, who later became a Member of Parliament from USR. Although it comes eight years after the initial protests, it shows that the message still reaches thousands of people and maintains the same framing strategies. It appeals to ‘the people’ against the corrupt politicians, the media, and the private foreign corporation, and uses harsh words to describe the adversaries of Roșia Montană. It continues to emphasise the theme of environmental destruction, cultural and historical heritage, in similar ways to how this framing emerged initially in the Alburnus Maior movement. The main difference is the celebration of success, perhaps calculated to sustain enthusiasm and but also caution in the face of future threats.
4.5 The Anti-Fracking Protests

The popular appeal waned after the relative success of the 2013 protests, and after the mining project was suspended, the wider movement entered a stage of demobilization. Many core activists were still engaged, however, both with ensuring that the next government kept its promises and by supporting other causes.

One such new cause was fracking, as lobby and interest groups started to push a pro-fracking agenda in Romanian politics. Chevron, the US megacorporation, struck deals with the Romanian government to explore shale gas in the county of Vaslui in Northern Romania (Besliu, 2013; Dale-Harris and Ursulean, 2013; Jura, 2015). Medium-scale protests were first organised in Barlad in 2012, where over 5000 people demanded the end of shale gas mining (Karasz, 2012; Mediafax, 2012). Another site was in Pungesti, where explorations took place despite the local council voting to ban fracking and against the will of local residents.

Core members of Uniți Salvăm called for wide mobilisation through social media and the already established channels in the Roșia Montană protests. One such call was in the left-wing magazine CriticAtac, whose framing is also present in the social media networks:

“*Our protest will take part in over 60 places in the country and the diaspora. Over 100 NGOs will join the protest. Come with us, organise a protest in your own city, town or village! Because Romania is entirely sold out for the exploitation of unconventional deposits (shale gas and oil), the problem of fracking concerns all of us! ONLY TOGETHER CAN WE STOP THE POISONING OF ROMANIA THROUGH FRACKING!* After less than a year, the situation in the country concerning fracking changed dramatically. Authorities are overtly lobbyists, they break laws with total ease, Pungesti was occupied since December 2nd 2013 by the Gendarmerie, who beat up, under the protection of darkness, old people, women,
children. Izvoarele, in the county of Galati, was transformed into a disaster area, even though the causes are man-made: specifically tied to fracking (gas and oil). The houses are almost falling down, the water has been contaminated, people are developing symptoms similar to those seen in videos from the US, animals are dying. Meanwhile, under the media spin related to Pungesti, we are finding many villages where they installed extractors... When they are caught, they counterattack or they will try to buy out people’s silence. Mass media is completely ignoring the subject. The pressures are coming from Washington, through official avenues and through lobbying, and are becoming more and more powerful. The European Union decided to ignore any prudence and the vote of the European parliament is giving a green light to states that are so unaware that they decide to engage in fracking. [...] In Poland, Great Britain, Canada we are seeing incredible scenes: people hit by police, arrested, 80-year-old ladies handcuffed, bullets shot over protesters in Elsipogtog, New Brunswick, Canada. In Poland, peasants that have been sleeping in the field for 7 months are dragged by Chevron. (CriAtac, 2014)”

The prognosis and diagnosis action frames are very similar to those used in the case of Roșia Montană. We first see the diagnostic frame of environmental danger, reflected through the metaphor of poison. Fracking is poisoning Romania, in the same way that cyanide mining would have poisoned Roșia Montană. The call to action aims to rally civil society and the Romanian population against both authorities and the private companies like Chevron. The article amplifies this frame by describing how in Poland, Canada or the UK Chevron used abusive measures with the complicity of the government and the police forces, harming the local people and forcefully removing them from their homes. The violence is described visually and emphasised as the powerful abusing the vulnerable. The people are described as people being hit, arrested, old ladies being handcuffed, peasants sleeping in the field. If they are unable to succeed through sheer force and direct violence, they would use lawsuits to bankrupt people and local communities. Furthermore, mass media is also framed as an adversary, who not only
failed to cover the abuses of Chevron but also participating in being complicit with the government and the fracking lobbyists. We see again the theme of collusion between private interests and government authorities to undermine democracy and the will of the people:

“The political class gave up to illegitimate interests and is using state institutions to defend illegalities and abuses. The citizens are abandoned in the face of the wave of private companies that wish to exploit the riches of the underground in the most irresponsible way. [...] In Pungesti, Chevron’s operations take part under the protection of the Gendarmerie, the illegalities and dangers of fracking are ignored to the disadvantage of national interest and people’s lives. Come with us to the hardest battle that citizens have to engage in, the battle for survival in the face of a criminal political class that is defending illegitimate interests and is oppressing its own citizens who have the right to defend their lives and their future.”
(CriticAtac, 2014)

In this case we observe another diagnostic frame from the Roșia Montană campaign, that of neo-colonialism. Washington is mentioned, as well as the European Union, as engaged actors pressuring the Romanian government and projecting neo-colonial power. The call to action draws attention to the difficult task of fighting mega-corporations colluding with the government, as well as the absolute necessity in doing so:

“Democracy is failing everywhere where fracking appears. The industry behind it subjugates governments and authorities in similar ways, even identical, in many countries. [...] This is what happened in Romania and in the world in the last 11 months since the national antifracking protest. The battle is harder than ever and everywhere citizens are reaching the conclusion that they are alone against [state] authorities that are not
representing them anymore, authorities that use force to start fracking projects and whose purpose is just to defend those who are stepping on the communities' rights to self-determination, to clean air, water and a liveable future. [...] The authorities are deaf, but they are starting to show that they fear us. Because they are always after us, surveilling us, restricting our constitutional rights and lying when performing their duties. People are more and more angry. That is why, it is our duty, all of us, to unite from large to small and to get to the streets together on April 6th in order to say a definite NO to fracking, to poisoning the waters, the air, the ground and destroying all life on these lands. FRACKING KILLS! Together we will save Romania from the hands of those who want to launch a fracking genocide in Romania! Romanians from the country and the diaspora are saying NO to fracking on April 6th, 2014! Come and stop the madness of fracking once and forever! As soon as possible! Join us!” (CriticAtac, 2014)

Several descriptions stand out from this call to action. The first is the call to “save Romania from fracking genocide”. We understand therefore that Romania and Romanians are under severe existential threat: not only environmental damage but genocide. The environmental frame that is present in both Roșia Montană and Pungesti protests is elevated here to represent an absolute danger. Furthermore, we notice words such as “oppression”, “battle for survival”, “fracking kills”. These are meant to emphasise the terrible danger and the immediacy of the call.

It is important to consider why the Pungesti protests, although still drawing a large crowd, did not make the same impact as the Roșia Montană protests. This is even considering the fact that the protests had been violently repressed. I will advance two explanations for why they did not reach the same level of mass appeal from the Romanian population beyond the core activist groups and civil society organisations.

The first explanation is that of frame fatigue or frame exhaustion. After the relative success of the Roșia Montană protests, utilising the same environmental frame
was not as effective, as the enthusiasm of the first movements dissipated. The environmental frame was still important for NGOs and activists, but less so for the general population, as there were no other successful frame processes of frame bridging of frame extension. Pointing out similarities to events elsewhere in the world may have amplified the cause for activists, while suggesting that ‘this is happening everywhere’ to more casual protesters, perhaps demobilising them.

The second explanation I propose is that of non-resonant frames (Snow and Corrigall-Brown, 2005, p. 223). This is a frame that does not appear to function as it should in a social movement setting, as they elicit very little response from the movement actors. In the case of fracking, many Romanians were not convinced that it is harmful. This elicited more debates on the usefulness of the project within the larger networks than the cyanide mining project at Roșia Montană, which was largely understood as being an environmental disaster. Conversely, the framing of fracking did not appear to provoke the outrage of the general population to the same extent as the case of Roșia Montană. This is perhaps due to the fact that there was very little debate on fracking in the Romanian public space, or that some people would have a pragmatic approach to mining resources for the public good of the country. The movement, in other words, entered a period of abeyance or latency (Taylor, 1989). The themes and issues raised here, however, continued to circulate amongst activist networks, especially online, and provided a wellspring of unrest from which subsequent movements could draw. We see this clearly following the tragedy at the Colectiv nightclub in 2015.
CHAPTER 5: COLECTIV

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the events following the night of October 30th, 2015, at the Colectiv nightclub, close to the centre of Bucharest. There was a rock concert that night, and the organisers planned a small pyrotechnics show. Videos captured on a phone during the concert show one of the support polls catching fire and one of the band members casually asking for an extinguisher. In less than nine seconds, the ceiling caught fire and the panicked concertgoers instantly rushed towards the only available exit. When the second exit door is opened, the oxygen flux causes the fire to spread even more rapidly. In less than three minutes most people still inside had already died or suffered irreversible damage (Digi24, 30 Oct. 2018). The particular horror of the night was amplified by the 24-hour news footage and constant analysis of the events. Televisions as well as YouTube and Facebook were flooded by unedited videos of the victims crying in pain, as well as the grief of the onlookers and the first responders.

The question that emerged in the minds of many of the mourners was who is to blame for such a tragedy? A survey from the week after the fire showed that 38% of respondents believed that the club managers are the most responsible for not complying to fire safety procedures; 35 percent believed that the city hall is responsible for not properly inspecting the club; 12 percent that the blame lies with the political class in general; 7 percent believed that it was the event organisers’ fault for the pyrotechnics show; and another 7 percent blamed the government for not verifying how local authorities function (CSCI, 2015). These questions of blame were discussed during the 24-hour news cycle and shared widely through social media.

The Saturday after the fire, mourners from all over Bucharest gathered in front of the Colectiv club. People brought candles and flowers and set them in front of the entrance to the decommissioned factory where the club used to be. The held a vigil and prayers
and had a quiet march through the city. The mourners returned home, still numb from the events.

Sunday was the first day of protests. Images and videos from the fire continued to circulate on social media, particularly on Facebook. Events had been created and older protestor networks became reactivated. Others created new online sites and Facebook pages related to the fire, trying to organise blood donations for the victims or trying to provide citizen advice helplines for safety protocols in public spaces. People also used Facebook to organise protests. Several Facebook groups and pages had been created, however, for the purpose of this research, I will focus on the most popular and influential of them, Corupția Ucide. If Sunday and Monday the protests had been relatively small, these grew in size and by Tuesday November 3rd, an estimate of 30,000 to 35,000 people had gathered in Bucharest, in Constitution Square (Realitatea TV, Nov 3, 2015; Stirile Pro TV, Nov 4, 2015). The next day, Victor Ponta, the Romanian Prime-Minister resigned, as did Cristian Popescu Piedone, the Mayor of Bucharest’s Sector 4. However, far from waning, the protests grew in size as well as spreading to the rest of the country and in the Romanian diaspora. Friday, November 6th, President Klaus Iohannis met with representatives of the Romanian civil society. A new technocratic government had been formed, with the non-politically affiliated, Dacian Cioloș, as Prime Minister.

On December 2019, Bucharest courts sentenced the guilty: 11 years and 3 months for the three club managers; 9 years and 2 months for the fire inspectors who gave the club authorisation to function despite the severe inadequacies; 8 years and a half for the district mayor, Cristian Popescu Piedone; and 12 years and 8 months for the owner of the pyrotechnic company. All of them appealed the sentences and some trials were still ongoing in 2020. Five years later some changes have been made. The government did increase the number of severe burn ICU beds, and the nosocomial infections are reported more often. Critics of the government said that the promises made after the aftermath of the fire and the protests are still not being kept. The promised burn victims’ hospital was still not built and there are still many clubs and restaurants with inadequate fire safety protocols (Borlea, 2020; Bunea, 2020). Not many things have changed since in the Romanian healthcare provision, nor in its adherence to health and safety regulations. For example, on November 14th, 2020, ten Covid-19 patients had died, and others were
severely injured after a fire broke out in an ICU. Nevertheless, the Colectiv protests produced social and political effects, both in the structure of Romanian society and at an ideological-discursive level.

This chapter will advance the argument that because of the spontaneous character of the initial stage of this movement, it was initially based on emotions of grief, anger, fear and guilt, which built up into a set of shared felt grievances towards the social-democratic government in particular and the political class more generally. These grievances took the form of a revolt against day-to-day corruption, and what was seen as the incompetence, the inefficiency, and the indolence of the governing class. From these grievances, the movement created a diagnostic action frame of corruption and a prognostic frame of a national anti-corruption drive, represented through a depoliticization of governance through technocratic solutions, as well as an increase in civic spirit and personal vigilance. These grievances and frames had been sedimented into an ideology of populist anticorruption, which eventually sprung a political movement, represented through the newly emerged USR and PLUS, and further anticorruption protests in 2017.

5.2 The Colectiv Protests: From Emotion to Ideology

5.2.1 A New Generation of Activists

It is of note that some of the more active Colectiv and Rezist protesters and organisers had not been previously involved in Uniți Salvăm. Some of the experienced activists from 2012 and 2013 were again reactivated in the night after the Colectiv fire, and participated at the protests, both within their existing activist networks, or by themselves. And although we could discuss a cleavage in ideology or in terms of the framing of the events, there was also a generational difference (see previous chapters). We see therefore in the
Corupția Ucide movement both the activation of old activist networks, and the emergence of new ones.

Protesters from the Uniți Salvăm network described the early days of the Colectiv protests as “indescribable chaos”. Although many of them participated in the Colectiv protests, they did not take a leadership role.

“We went to the Colectiv protest by chance, we did not anticipate there will be this type of protest... In the first night of Colectiv, C. said he will not get on the loudspeaker, but there was so much chaos at those protests, an indescribable chaos. So, he took the loudspeaker to try to organise the protest, to make some sense out of that chaos... After, C. could not stay at the protest. I did remain, but the protests were not what we were used to anyway. There were so many vuvuzelas, chaos, particularly after Ponta fell; you could not understand one another there.” (AP)

Some of the emergent Colectiv leadership were protesting for the first time. They became activated by the emotional trauma of the tragic events, rather than by pre-existing political inclinations. The experienced campaigners here, echo the findings of Kriess and Tufekci (2013) who argue that spontaneous, digitally organised protests lack the leadership and organisation that sustained past movements.

“Colectiv was my first serious trigger to act, I mean it is there that I took charge, I went out in the street. Protests should be the last thing you do. You first try a dialogue with the authorities. Here [in Romania] it’s the first thing you do. And I went out into the street, but I was determined by what I was doing. I first noticed the Colectiv tragedy. I saw all sorts of information circulating in my Facebook bubble and I found Corupția Ucide, who proposed to go out into the street.” (AS)
Others engaged politically for the first time and credited the anger they felt after the Colectiv fire to them becoming an activist.

“So, at Colectiv I got really angry at how those people died, and they were dying every day; so, you would look at the TV, and every day, three or four people died. And they [the government] would not do anything, anything, anything! And then was the first time that I did some things myself. I basically became an activist. I made the short film next year, after they won the elections. Before the elections I made an event [Facebook event], Ponta Demisia, and I invited people to ask Ponta to quit his position.” (CT)

The influx of so many first-time activists after Colectiv led to a different movement structure than in the previous 2012 and 2013 protests. There was no longer a reliance on the existing networks of experienced activists, which relied on their offline repertoire experience and knowledge of police tactics. The previous activist groups relate that they felt out of place, and although some of them were active in the Colectiv protests, they did not participate in the framing processes and cultural construction of grievances. Some felt a disconnect between their existing corruption and antisystemic frames and the emerging framing of the Colectiv fire and its implications. There are a few significant differences between corruption as a diagnostic frame in Uniți Salvăm and in Colectiv is that in the former, corruption is seen as the strong influence of the private sphere on the allocation of public resources; in the latter, corruption is about the moral failure and the lack of legitimacy of the political class in general. The antisystemic frame of Uniți Salvăm refers to the renewal of civil society, as a counterbalancing force, between the private and the public spheres; anti-corruption in Colectiv also advocates for a strong civil society, but by going beyond politics, to technocracy and the severe limitation of the power of the political. This inadequacy between collective action frames is what kept the previous activist networks from playing a bigger part in the Colectiv protests, but also what pushed
them towards seeking a more formal political structure to try and infuse some coherence into what they saw as chaotic mobilisation (see future chapters).

5.2.2 Mobilizing Grievances and Emotions

Theories on motivational factors leading to collective contentious action are less popular in recent scholarship, the paradigm having shifted more towards structural explanations, such as the organisation, the political opportunities, or the resources of the movements (Pinard, 2011, p. vii). However, Snow and Soule argue that from the set of conditions necessary for the emergence of a social movement, “deeply felt shared grievances” are the most important (2010, p. 23). Pinard defines ‘felt grievance’ as the experience of injustice or unfairness, one that is attributable to responsible parties (1994: 5). The importance of that felt sense of inequality, moral outrage, and injustice is also stressed by Klandermans (1997). While the ‘political process model’ is still relevant, particularly in terms of explaining the trajectory and significance of a movement, mobilizing grievances are helpful in aiding the understanding of how certain movements emerge, grow, and find an identity (Simmons, 2014). Aggrievement has a central role in the activation and continuation of collective action (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013, p. 92).

However, grievances on their own are not sufficient to explain why some protests start, since there are many grievances that do not spark collective action. So instead of merely looking at the perceived grievance or set of grievances, it is worthwhile to seek the relationship between the grievance and the structures enabling mobilisation, according to the political process approach (Simmons, 2014). How are these perceived injustices used and transformed through mobilisation into a political force? This indicates the need of surpassing simple psychosocial explanations, such as grievances, into a more comprehensive understanding of mobilization, by including the ‘political process model’ (see chapter 2: Theoretical Framework) as well as the role of emotions in social movements.
The grievance theory of mobilisation is a micro-social perspective. So is the one on emotions, which emphasises people’s psychological states as causal factors for mobilisation (Jasper, 1998). A distinction needs to be made between the concept of ‘felt grievance’ and that of ‘emotion’ when both are applied in social movement scholarship. Emotions in social movements can act as accelerators—meaning a faster transition from motives into action—or as amplifiers, which would make the motives stronger (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2007). A grievance can be a deeper feeling, involving both a specific understanding of social order and a rationalisation of it (Pinard, 2011).

Emotions are also tied to our beliefs and our moral values and can emerge after the perceived breach of these values (Jasper, 1998, p. 401). Emotions are part of collective action from beginning to end, being both affective and reactive (1998, p. 403). They can act as mobilizing factors, as well as agents of demobilization. By Jasper’s description of some of the emotions relevant to protests, we can find affective emotions: hatred, hostility, loathing, love, solidarity, loyalty, suspicion, paranoia, trust, respect; reactive emotions: anger, grief, loss, sorrow, outrage, indignation, shame; as well as many in between affective and reactive: compassion, sympathy, pity, cynicism, depression, defiance, enthusiasm, pride, envy, resentment, fear, dread, joy, hope, resignation (1998, p. 406).

An analysis of the data from the interviews and from the Corupția Ucide advances the argument that the primary emotions of tragic events, could be sedimented into a grievance, which may have been a longer feeling of injustice.

A.S. describes the emotional impact the Colectiv fire had on her and how it contributed to her activation:

“I finished my degree in 2010 and after university I was a young person, with an ok-ish salary: parties, holidays in the mountains, at the beach, nothing important. I was, however, the only rebel in my social group. And I was fighting with RATB [The Bucharest Public Transport Company], with Metrorex [The Bucharest Metro], with ANAF [The National Agency for Fiscal Administration] and so on. And I was not doing anything structured,
I was not an activist. And then came Colectiv and I received that gut punch that many, many others also got, which I have not resolved even until now. And it the first time I went to a protest. I was furious, I felt helpless, and I felt most of all guilty. That was... After Colectiv I went out to protest angry and upset for having lost some people the way they died.” [A.S.]

The emotions described in the interview quote are anger, helplessness, and guilt. These are a mix of reactive and affective emotions, as one may expect from witnessing and participating in collective trauma. These feelings are important in the transition to aggrievement and outrage that lead to collective social action. This is an example of mobilizing grievances that are activated by the media (particularly social media) in a similar way to what happened one year earlier during the Ferguson protests in the USA (Kay LeFebvre and Armstrong, 2016). The concept of ‘moral shock’ can be applied here, in the sense used by Jasper and Poulsen (1995, p. 498). This is the case of very public events, which are unexpected and shocking and are likely to outrage people to the extent that they will take action even if they are not part of a network. ‘Moral shock’ could also happen through strategically deployed rhetoric but it does draw on strong emotions, nevertheless. This might explain the new influx of protesters who have never participated in collective action before.

5.3 Framing the Colectiv Protests

5.3.1 Diagnostic Framing: Corruption

After the fire, the search to identify the guilty was natural and expected. The guilt of the government and of city officials were the first to emerge. This relates to the concept of ‘felt grievance’ (Pinard, 1994, p. vii). The protesters felt aggrieved by the injustice of the
political system which allowed the tragedy to happen, either through indolence, incompetence, or inefficiency, or a combination of the above. Della Porta discusses the diagnostic and prognostic framing of corruption and the role of “civil society as anti-corruption actors” (della Porta, 2017, p. 662-674). In the Case of Colectiv too, corruption emerged as a master frame. Data from the interviews and the Corupția Ucide Facebook page also reveals that the corruption master frame also has frame packages (or subframes) of incompetence, indolence and inefficiency which are often used to describe Romanian government workers and the political class.

a) **Indolence** is framed as a complete disregard for procedures and established processes. This includes neglecting health and safety procedures, which can prove to be dangerous. Government workers are therefore portrayed as lazy, too comfortable in their position as they are usually offered jobs through nepotism or bribes. Because they are appointed politically, they cannot be fired easily.

We see in the interview extract below how emotions of grief and loss can feed into a mobilizing grievance. Government workers are accused of criminal malpractice, of indolence, but because it happens every day, being part of the corrupt system, people are used to it or ignorant of it.

“And we felt then that we could coagulate civically after a big emotional hit. And we all had a terrible emotional charge then. But, you know, after a few days I realised that it is very dangerous that we can only get out on the street after a tragedy, a great tragedy. We can’t be moved by anything else. We are not moved by injustice, we are moved by death, by illness. And because the people from Colectiv were many. Because otherwise people die because of malpractice, because of lack of caring. That’s what this is about. It happens every day, only we don’t know them, and if we don’t know them, it doesn’t hurt us.” (A.B.)
We also see in this quote that the diagnostic framing of indolence refers not only to the political class, but to Romanians in general, to a Romanian society that is unable to be moved by anything except great tragedy. Feelings of self-blame are mixed with anger at the indolent government workers who allowed this to happen. This frame is likely aimed at inspiring and mobilising action at a wider level; not just activists or people grieving, but all citizens.

**b) Incompetence** is also framed as an effect of corruption. It is caused by nepotism and a imposture and it is a frame which is applied to much of the political class and government workers. Victor Ponta, the leader of PSD and the Prime Minister at that time, was seen as by the protesters as the epitome of incompetence, imposture, and corruption. He was accused of having plagiarised his PhD thesis and he was represented by protesters, after Colectiv, as the epitome of the corruption of the political class.

A protester describes their feelings of outrage and frustration at the incompetence of the authorities and the political class in the aftermath of the fire:

“*What marked me, after three years from the Colectiv fire, Digi24 had a follow-up to the stories from Colectiv and they brought parents of the victims to talk to them. And these people actually talk about how they were sent to a country [to hospitals specialising in burn victims], and when they arrived there they were told, ‘no, you should not have come here, your child is not here, you need to go to Vienna, he is there’. Very serious organisational errors, I mean outrageous stuff. And I remember how they were lying, how Banicioiu [the Health Minister at the time] came out and said, ‘we do not need anything’. We had a burns victims’ unit that was inaccessible, no one could go in and use it. They had a government meeting with all the people responsible for the organisation and managing the crisis, with everyone very serious and with that self-confidence that their position gave them. And Ponta recognised he lied, he recognised now, three*
years later, he came and said, ‘yes, I lied’. And now, after three years, after hearing all these stories about people who could have lived, people who had a chance to a life, which these bastards, incapable of taking responsibility for their mistakes, I mean to say, ‘no, we can’t take care of these people, we need help.’” (C.T.)

We notice here how a sense of injustice and anger still lingers several years after the event, suggesting that the Colectiv fire has become a condensing symbol for activists, encapsulating the issues they face. The language is emotional and the description of the events is tragic. The perceived incompetence of the authorities who were supposed to protect and save the victims remains still a powerful motivator.

c) Inefficiency refers to the way government work is construed as needlessly bureaucratic and hindering people rather than aiding them. The state is seen as much inferior to the private sector, as it tends to waste resources, to be overly bureaucratic, to reward incompetence, and ultimately to keep Romania underdeveloped. This was a largely right-libertarian position taken by several of the key protesters both in Uniți Salvăm and in the later Colectiv and Rezist movements. These were supporters of a libertarian anti-corruption political movement in the early 2010s, called M10, led by Monica Macovei. After that party disbanded, many of them joined USR and others PNL. On the Corupția Ucide Facebook page, there were several discussions on the role of the state and its endemic corruption, lack of transparency, and inefficiency. One such call describes the situation:

“We are planning to do something impossible, to find out the real situation of public spending in ALL Romanian public administration.

This is the largest effort towards transparency in the history of Romania. In order to obtain this information 400,000 requests for documents are
necessary. And then to clean the data, to process them and to introduce them in a data base.

We are choosing to do this thing not because it is easy but because it is difficult; we are choosing this challenge because it is one we are willing to accept, one that we do not want to postpone, and it is one which we intend to win in a court of law any time we have to. EVERYTHING that is spent with public money should and must be offered [the information] for free to its citizens.

For the first meeting we would like to explain what the law for accessing public information is about (Law 544/2001) and to share how we will be using it to send requests to every city and ministry in Romania, in order to identify how public money are stolen.

This thing changes the game when we are talking about how we can compare the efficiency or inefficiency within public administration. We are making the first real comparison between all public administrations in Romania based on data requested by the citizens, following the Law 544/2001, through which we will be able to identify theft or incompetence in public administration.

This is in order to answer questions like:

- Which is the place in Romania where every citizen in the county pays 50 times more than the average of all the other counties in order to fix one kilometre of road?

- Which is the public administration that has most people in leadership positions that are placed with no competition?

- Which are the citizens who are considered stupid because they are paying 30 times more on maintaining green areas compared to the rest of Romania?
What this passage amply illustrates is how the protesters sought to combine diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. The Colectiv tragedy, in this account, is symptomatic of a wider malaise that needs to be uncovered using freedom of information requests. The appeal here broadens the mobilisation out from immediate shock and anger to a more systematic attempt to highlight and combat corruption in its diverse forms and its adverse effects across the country. According to these diagnostic frames, the people who soundproofed the club are guilty of incompetence. The managers of the club and the health and safety inspectors are guilty of indolence and corruption, as they are accused of turning a blind eye to the lack of health and safety procedures. One of the first posts by the Corupția Ucide Facebook page asks for advice from the community regarding hazard regulation in public spaces, as well as advising for vigilance with regards to the fire protections in place. Blame is placed on both the Romanian people and their representatives, but more harshly on the political class. The frame packages of indifference, indolence, and incompetence are built up into a master frame of corruption.

“We are making a list with all protection norms that every establishment in Romania needs to have. We are looking for people with expertise in the field to join us in this endeavour. [...] For example, we found out from an architect—we did not find the exact legislation—that any location hosting more than 18 people needs to have exit doors which extend towards outside. Do you remember when you were last time in an establishment, how was the door opening? Or if you have a club with over x hundreds of people, you need to ensure an x number of exit doors. As a citizen, you can enter a bar or an establishment and check for yourself if that place follows all legal regulations. You can count the number of exit doors, or if they have any fire extinguishers etc. Because we are also part of this process. If you are
waiting and expecting that the authorities will solve this thing by themselves, you are lying to yourself.” (Corupția Ucide, Nov 1, 2015)

Not everyone in the movement was persuaded by this call for everyone to become a safety inspector for the government. Indeed, the first comment on this post argues instead that the Corupția Ucide poster should not blame the club owners for the faults of the state. Instead, they should show solidarity with them against government authority.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but are you intending to use the power of the state (to snitch on club owners to the authorities) for what you are perceiving as a fault of the state? The state always existed for one reason only: taxes. Any other programme self-titled ‘for community use’ is there just to distract you from the hand that gets into your wallet every time you are paying for something that is exclusively produced by the private sector. I perfectly understand your sentiment—the Colectiv event was, is and will be a massive tragedy—but we won’t solve anything by snitching on each other to our greedy masters as brothers snitch on each other to their mean parents. In fact, I think that the best thing would be that those who understand how quickly a normal night in the club can turn into a tragedy to be alert and to personally warn the owners if they notice a fire hazard or anything else. Essentially, if they are fined or shut down, the owners could still avoid the legislation, if they wish, with an even smaller budget. If you care for your fellow people, be empathetic, don’t shout for even more destruction!” (Corupția Ucide, Nov 1, 2015)

Captured here is the distrust that activists feel towards the state. The suggestions is that formally reporting a breach of regulations might just allow proprietors to bribe their way out of that situation, thus defeating the purpose of the action. As with Uniți
Salvăm, the Facebook post appeals to the people to act together and to not allow for more division. Further in the thread, another person emphasises the guilt of the political class.

“If the authorities will not get rid of their old ways and we are just getting outraged and nothing else, nothing will change. We will forget in time about this event after the BOSSES from way up will cover it up, as they always do! And we, again we will be affected by feeling the human impulse to help the ones afflicted, and the ones who praise us, the politicians will be content that other people did what they were supposed to do.” (Corupția Ucide, Nov 1, 2015)

Another comment to the same thread also mentions the importance of personal responsibility and vigilance for one’s one safety, as well as blaming the collusion between club owners and government officials. The comment also hints at the necessity of societal change in Romania and at the collective guilt all must bear for not acting more personally responsible.

“Yes, exactly this needs to be done! Every citizen who sees that terrible things are happening should not look away and think that it is someone else’s responsibility. It is our responsibility, all of us, and we can’t otherwise change as a society. The problem is that until now, even with a complaint they would not be in trouble, they would get along somehow.” (Corupția Ucide, Nov 1, 2015)

Furthermore, another comment urges the people to take charge of their own life and their own safety.
“Yes, corruption kills. If we won’t wake up even now, we’ll cry for nothing when another calamity happens. Don’t forget, an earthquake like the one in ’77 will be infinitely more catastrophic and if we won’t take measures even now, to defend our lives, our future will be bleak.” (Corupția Ucide, Nov 1, 2015)

The post and the comments above show how the process of guilt attribution functioned in the case of the Colectiv fire. From both affective and reactive emotions, such as outrage, fear, grief to a mobilizing aggrievement. People feel unsafe, put in danger by lax regulations and public officials who fail to perform their duties. We then see corruption emerging as a dominant diagnostic frame. Of course, the corruption frame did not emerge spontaneously during the protests. Corruption existed for a long time in Romanian society as an explanation for the ill-functioning of Romanian society. The Colectiv fire and the subsequent events provided the occasion for confronting the tragic and traumatic effects of everyday corruption. We see the blame placed on the club managers, on the government, on Romanian society, and even turned inwards, as feelings of guilt for previous apathy. The solutions should therefore be a renewed focus on one’s self to be aware of corruption, the removal of the old political class and its replacement with experts coming from a new generation of Romanians.

5.3.2 Prognostic Framing: Anti-corruption

The master prognostic frame is that of anti-corruption. However, there are different ways in which the battle against corruption is understood, and these reflect the ways in which corruption is framed. The frame packages used in this process are: personal responsibility, which means the understanding of one’s own role in society and increased vigilance against acts of corruption; depoliticization is seen as the reducing of power of the old political class, often with punitive measures such as harsher punishments for corruption; and technocracy refers to the appointing of the right people in power, experts not
politicians, based on meritocratic principles, which will no longer be inefficient, indolent, or incompetent.

a) Personal Responsibility: “We Are the Change.”

One of the first prognostic subframes emerging from the first few weeks of protests is that of civic empowerment. The major guilt is attributed to the government, to endemic Romanian corruption, represented through the inefficiency, indolence, and incompetence of the political class. But another prognostic frame hinted towards the lack of personal responsibility from everyday Romanians. Participants at the Colectiv protests acknowledged their feelings of guilt towards not doing enough to change Romanian society, the guilt of being complicit in corruption, passively or actively. The solution must be, therefore, a change from within. This Corupția Ucide Facebook post is from one month after the fire:

“The most important change, which will not appear in any newspaper article, changes each of us have undergone after the Colectiv tragedy. We’ve changed the way we make decisions, the fact that we no longer observe passively when something is wrong or when corrupt acts are happening: instead, we contribute, either by taking a photo or making a complaint etc. We are the change.” (Corupția Ucide, 30 Nov, 2015)

The implication of this frame package, of taking personal charge of one’s safety and the responsibility people should have for each other, does not exclude the blame placed on corrupt Romanian structures. To echo Crossley’s work on the radical habitus: “They seek social change, in part, through self-change. Their activism entails an ongoing attempt to change their habitual ways of being-in-the-world: that is, ‘habit-busting habits’” (Crossley 2003, p. 53).
b) Depoliticization and technocracy

Overwhelmingly, the blame has been placed on corrupt government officials and on the political class. Calls have been made for the government to resign, or even sent to jail. Old ideas about changing the constitution to reduce the number of MPs are brought again to the fore. The media already started to investigate the public officials in charge of the hospitals where many of the burn victims from Colectiv started to develop infections. Calls are made against publicly appointed state hospital managers or bureaucrats and for free and fair competitions for public managerial jobs. This is linked again with the framing of the Romanian state (and oftens states in general) as incompetent, inefficient, and corrupt. The right libertarian networks within the Corupția Ucide movement are indeed visible in this framing and very little ideological opposition exists. As we will also see in the final chapter, the ideologically driven framing of corruption and the state has led to some of the older networks of activists that were present in Uniți Salvăm and early on in Corupția Ucide to retreat into their own left-leaning political movement. The calls for depoliticization and technocracy were seen as nothing more than political opposition to social democracy and an example of political power confiscating the grassroots movement.

As seen in the earlier chapter, however, the frames of corruption and tradition that were adopted and amplified by the early mobilisations actually paved the way for such political appropriation. The seeds of the libertarian shift were arguably planted at that point, emphasising the significance of how issues are framed. This could be a case of ‘frame appropriation’, as discussed by Joachim and Schneiker (2012). This is a situation where an interested group uses an existing humanitarian or grassroots frame and uses it toward its own goals.
5.3.3 Frame Alignment: From Aggrievement to Anti-Corruption

Gamson (1992) argues that there are three essential elements of framing: *injustice*, meaning the aggrievement felt by participants in collective action; *agency*, referring to the belief that things could change and the will to do it; and *identity*, the constitution of individuals into a unit acting as a whole.

What is the *injustice* component in the Colectiv protests? The element of injustice in framing is closely related to the emotional and grievance aspects of mobilization. This is the process through which reactive emotions of fear, hurt, outrage, and anger are building up into a grievance. After the tragedy of the fire and the deaths that followed people feel even more acutely that the society they live in is unjust. The protesters see an elite class of former communists—or people who profited from relations to communist ‘apparatchiks’—who are lazy, greedy, incompetent, and acting against the public interest when it suits them.

The element of *agency* comes from how the solution is framed as the empowerment of the individual as an actor of change. Romanians are urged to ‘wake up’, to be vigilant against lax rules and corrupt acts, and also to look after each other when elected officials would not. Bringing down the political class will be the first act of agency; the second act will be ensuring that a new generation of people will lead the country, who will not be interested in unearned wealth or meaningless titles. This radical political change will provide even more agency to the individual and hope for a better future.

*Identity* is created in the first instance through the accommodation of differences within the body of protesters towards the common goal. Regardless of who exactly is to be blamed for the Colectiv fire—whether Piedone the mayor, or Prime Minister Ponta, or the club managers who were suspected of paying bribes, or the incompetent and careless pyrotechnic crew, or even the average Romanian for accepting the status quo—the large body of protesters could agree that the widespread generalised corruption in Romanian society is at fault. This is why ‘corruption kills’ became the rallying cry and
preferred chant of the protests. The identity of the movement became the politically engaged, civic-minded Romanians, who understand that corruption is the source of the country’s dysfunction. The movement also gains legitimacy through its praising by President Iohannis, thus further cementing its identity.

I am also advancing and exploring the concept of *frame sedimentation*, by which I understand the gradual accumulation of interpretative frames, and the relevance each of these will have on the others. This concept acknowledges the importance of early framing processes, and their effects on the later ones. For example, in the case of the Colectiv protests, the early frame packages of guilt and personal responsibility are noticed in the early days of protests, within the first week. The period following from one week to week four, we notice an increase in shifting responsibility from the individual to the political class in its entirety. The frame of personal responsibility would not disappear entirely, nor was it merely transformed into a different frame. People still mention the importance of vigilance against corruption, but this is now represented through the importance of voting the right political actors. Although still noticeable within the movement ideology, the idea of personal responsibility became increasingly muted, and the guilt of not looking out for each other became the guilt of not having the right political choice. However, that early frame still exists within the movement.

The other subframes still exist as well, but in time they become sedimented within the movement ideology and identity, as are the emotions. The strong feelings of anger and outrage from the first few days after the fire are now succeeded by hope for a better future, and feelings of community caused by the stronger identity of the movement. However, the early reactive emotions are still there, a memory away. We see from the interviews taken three years after the Colectiv events, that when recollecting the night of the fire or when seeing memorials on television, those early day emotions come back to the surface. This could also explain the relative longevity of the Colectiv protests and the movement which formed around them.

*Frame sedimentation* is therefore the essential process of accumulating successive interpretative frames within the movement ideology, which gives it a clear identity, both understood within the movement networks, and seen from the outside as a
distinct entity. Further on, I will advance the argument that the Colectiv protests and the network of civic actors formed around it created the rhetoric of a distinct ideology of anti-corruption.

5.4 After the Protests

5.4.1 A New Technocratic Government

On November 10, a week after the resignation of Victor Ponta, President Iohannis nominated Dacian Ciolos as Prime Minister. Before being appointed as the head of the new interim government, Dacian Cioloș had previously been an EU Commissioner and a Minister of Agriculture. His mandate was to head a technocratic government for a year, until 2016. His selection of ministers was from business-leaders, entrepreneurs, experts in different fields, and third sector actors. He was praised by the protesters and by the right-leaning electorate. The technocrats seemed to break the stereotype some had of Romanian politics and people in general. In contrast with the corrupt, inefficient, lazy, ignorant, self-interested and mean-spirited PSD politician, the technocrat was seen as educated, specialist in their field, clever, productive, and full of best intentions. The appeal of technocracy is its promise of going beyond the petty squabbles of party politics and ideological trappings into doing what needs to be done in the interest of the country.

Others were less convinced by the merits of such a government. They saw in the technocratic pretensions of the new government nothing more than hostility towards the state and towards public services, ignoring class-based issues and economic inequality, in favour of meaningless anti-corruption reforms (Poenaru, 2017). Furthermore, critics saw the protests themselves as nothing more than a battle against public services, such as the Romanian healthcare system, in favour of private solutions (Gherasim-Proca, 2018). Many of the protesters using the corruption frame saw a salvation in the post-political technocracy.
Some of the previous 2012 and 2013 activists and protesters were also sceptical of the call for civil society leadership. The call of the President for a consultative meeting with the Romanian civil society had left many to wonder what is civil society, who specifically are its representative members? They saw at the meeting with the president representatives of NGOs who were close to power, members of right-wing think-tanks some of whom having been indifferent or even hostile to the previous contentious causes, or celebrities who had very little to do with civil society. Furthermore, although the blame was placed on the political class, left-leaning activists suspected that the blame was almost exclusively placed on the Social Democratic Party (PSD), while the other right-leaning parties, as well as the liberal President Iohannis, were not seen as guilty. Through the process of frame appropriation anti-corruption became therefore not simply a set of reforms aimed at a fairer society, but rather part of a right-leaning discourse aimed at reducing the role of the state.

5.4.2 The Professionalisation of the Activist Class

Another visible consequence of the protests had been the rapid increase in the professionalization of civic actors. This is a process which emerged since 2012-2013, when the anti-austerity protesters started to form a close network of experienced activists, which was seen culminating in the 2013 Roșia Montană protests. However, the renewed focus on the third sector, encouraged by the technocratic government, led to the multiplication of both formal and informal civic groups (Apostol, 2015; Crețan and O’Brien, 2020; Soare and Tufiş, 2021). There is a newly found respect for civic entrepreneurship in Romania society, one that is noticeable in the large urban centres. The Corupția Ucide activists described their trajectory, from setting up the Facebook page, until their drive to become a focal point of a new generation of activists and civic-minded Romanians. However, the two widely different stances on the anti-corruption struggle reveals the largest ideological chasm in Romanian society. This will become even more relevant in the next chapter, on the 2017 ‘Rezist’ protests, and the emergence of USR and
Dacian Cioloș’s PLUS as important political actors championing a distinct style of anti-corruption.

To conclude, The Colectiv protests represented an important transition from civic engagement to political mobilisation. Fuelled by the anger and pain of the early days of protest after the fire, it became, at least partly, a political movement directed against PSD particularly, but also occasionally against the political class in a more general sense. Of course, the protesters were not advocating for anarchy but rather for a replacement of the political class, which they embraced in the form of Cioloș and the technocratic government of experts. Moving to the Rezist movement from the impetus of already established frames and organisational structures built within the Colectiv movement. New activist networks were formed and connected with NGOs or emerging political movements, while other networks broke off from the structure. The events leading to Rezist will see the Colectiv networks active and prepared to remobilise Romanian civil society against its perceived enemies.
CHAPTER 6: REZIST

6.1 The Legacy of Colectiv

The previous chapter was concerned with the wave of protests following the 2015 Colectiv fire and the critical mass achieved by networks of activists, using a variety of resources and the context of a national tragedy to enact long-lasting social and political change. During the Colectiv protests there were activist networks that had roots in previous protests, in 2012 and 2013, however, the main thrust of the civic action followed the creation of new networks, bound by the tragedy of the events and the grief of the nation. The new generation of activists was reflected in a changed movement structure, particularly compared to the Roșia Montană protests: the networks were more decentralised but also more ideologically cohesive than in 2013. They were more obvious about who their enemies and their allies were. They did not claim to be antisystemic and apolitical in the same way, but rather focused sharply on precise political enemies. The tactics also changed by relying more on spontaneous events organised through Facebook by tech-savvy activists, and less on experienced organisers and face-to-face deliberation and strategizing. The collective action frames used during the Uniți Salvăm movement were reused and reimagined during the Colectiv protests. The main diagnostic frame was that of corruption as the source of all ills in Romanian society, seen as the effect of a deeply inefficient, indolent, and incompetent political class. The main prognostic frame was that of harsh anti-corruption, which is to be based on the depoliticization of the government and the transition to a meritocratic system, with the aid of a self-responsible and active citizenry.

The magnitude of the Colectiv protests reverberated throughout Romanian society for several years after the movement subsided. A government fell and another one was put into place. Following the fire, the movement began to diverge into two competing blocks. The older, more left-wing activists who had cut their teeth in the mobilisation around Roșia Montană were displaced by a younger generation with a more libertarian
ideology. For them, President Iohannis emerged as a hero and ally of the movement, as well as the technocrat Dacian Ciolos and the newly emerged (2016) centre-right political party: Save Romania Union (USR). However, even as those deemed personally responsible for the Colectiv fire had been prosecuted or escaped justice abroad, political turmoil continued. The Ciolos government was dissolved on January 4, 2017, and after him followed successive PSD governments, under Grindeanu until 29 June 2017, Tudose until 29 January 2018, and Dancila until 4 November 2019. These successive PSD governments were not easily digested by those who protested in 2015 and sporadically in 2016. Although the impetus and the mobilisation caused by the events of the fire and its aftereffects slowed down, the networks of activists centred around the Corupția Ucide movement and the satellite networks of NGOs, citizen journalists, and civic groups grew in discontent. They saw that their long-term demands were not successful, that the PSD still held most of the power in the state, and they feared that they were no longer heard. And although there was no longer a meaningful mobilisation in the streets of Bucharest or Cluj-Napoca, the online networks formed around the Colectiv protests grew in strength and numbers, until they reached a critical point with the successful attempt of the PSD to pass a legislative reform which would have recategorized certain acts of corruption and changed the mechanisms of state anticorruption. This saw the emergence of the most popular protests to date in Romanian history.

6.2 The Rezist Movement

2017 saw the record-high number of people engaged in collective action in Romania. At their peak, these protests reportedly had more than 600.000 people and 300.000 in Bucharest alone. This happened as a reaction to the government passing a law which aimed to decriminalize certain acts of corruption: traffic of influence, the taking of bribes below 50.000 euro, and to remove some of the powers of the national anti-corruption agency. Within days after the OUG13 was passed, the online activist networks were reactivated, and vast numbers of Romanians were protesting in the streets in all the main cities and in the diaspora.
The outrage caused by this led to an estimated 10,000 people protesting in Bucharest on 31st January 2017. The hashtag #rezist (resist) came after the persistence of the protesters to attend the protest every day, in a below freezing temperature, until the government repeals the contested legislation. This led to the reactivation of activist networks from 2013 and 2015. The same Facebook groups which had been used then were now engaged in the new events, including the group Corupția Ucide (Corruption Kills), which had been instrumental in 2015 (Tacu et al., 2017).

One interviewee (A.S.) recalls how the Rezist movement was both inspired by and modelled after the anti-Trump Resist movement in the US following the 2016 election. The online antecedents of the movement may be seen from the central protest sign and rallying cry: #Rezist. Circulated through social media, and emblazoned on banners, buildings and t-shirts, the simple call mobilised thousands onto the streets. The concept of the slogan was created by a Romanian NGO, called Declic, and they were associated in many ways with the movement itself and with the anti-PSD civil society more widely. The framing of the movement as ‘resistance’ reflects the oppositional nature of the protests, where they take a stance against what they saw was a ‘regressive’, ‘corrupt’, and ‘anti-democratic’ nature of the ruling political party, in the same way that U.S. Democrats opposed Donald Trump.

The Rezist movement built on the existing online and offline networks formed during the Colectiv protests and it was in many ways a continuation of that generalised discontent, albeit more focused against PSD as the initiators of the contested legislation. NGOs and civic groups such as Declic, Rezistenta, 600.000 pentru Romania, Initiativa Romania, Corupția Ucide, among many others, already had the experience, the resources, and the already formed social networks in order to quickly take charge of the new manifestations. It was an interlocking network of past and new activists, as well as media and advertising professionals, young politicians, social media influencers, students, but also people from the large Romanian cities who participated in the previous waves of Colectiv protests. Former Uniți Salvăm members were also active in the first few weeks, although many felt that there was an ideological and overtly politically partisan message in Rezist with which they disagreed, which perspective will be discussed further in this chapter.
Among the broader themes that key activists were concerned with was the debate on the Romanian constitution regarding where exactly should state power primarily reside: with the President or with the Parliament. This had been a major point of political contention since President Basescu, who attempted to modify state legislation to allow more prerogatives for the office of the Presidency and for that he was in turn impeached by the Parliament held by PSD. And in 2017 there was a similar political situation, with President Iohannis coming from PNL-the political right- and the Parliament held in majority by PSD-the political left. The contested legislation of OUG 13, which aimed to reorganise and reform certain provisions in anticorruption legislation was seen by its political opponents as an attempt to favour themselves, by making it easier to revoke anticorruption prosecutors. This idea was also raised by the Rezist activists.

“Anticorruption is the wide theme. And we are trying further to develop punctually different events, such as the modification of Justice Law, in the sanse where it could give them [PSD] an advantage. The President already having limited powers, they now limited them even further. For judges and chief prosecutors, he now must accept them, he can’t refuse their appointment anymore. So, if the Minister of Justice, who is appointed politically, decides to revoke the head anticorruption prosecutor, through the modified legislation the President can’t say, no, I disagree with you. They [PSD] managed to pass this past CCR [Romania’s Constitutional Court]. And these are modifications of Justice Law concerning both the functioning of CSM and of Curtea de Casatie si Justitie [judicial institutions] as well as the status of judges and the powers of the President and more than that.” (A.S.)

As discussed earlier, framing and emotions alone fail to explain the course of protest mobilisation. To fully comprehend the shifts and changes across successive waves of mobilisation in Romania we need to pay attention to the actions of political elites and institutions too. Captured here, we see how the PSD legislation revitalised the
corruption frame and galvanised popular protest, in part because it seemed to be countering the gains won through prior mobilisation.

6.3 Framing the Rezist Movement

The collective action frames used during the Colectiv protests were used in a similar way by the Rezist movement. A major distinction is an emphasis on PSD and its leaders as the main source of corruption, rather than the political class as a whole. Furthermore, the diagnostic frame of the Romanian expat was also a successful imagining of what Romania could and should be; an example of Romanian potential and a real solution to be deployed in the battle against PSD.

6.3.1 Diagnostic Framing: Corruption, PSD, and the Red Plague

The radicalization of the protests and generally of Romanian anti-corruption can be seen through the frequent use of the term ‘red plague’ to describe the left-tiling PSD. The history of the term could be traced to early 20th century fascist discourse as a term to describe their political enemies. Although it is unlikely that all who used the term were aware of the full meaning of the expression, its successful deployment against PSD as the main adversary of the movement does indicate an ideological radicalisation. Although corruption remains the main collective action frame, it is fundamentally linked with the frame of the ‘red plague’, that of a dangerous and toxic socialism, which itself breeds corruption, indolence, and incompetence. If in 2013 corruption was linked to supranational corporations and colluding elites, and in 2015 corruption was a trait of the political class in general, in 2017 corruption became a consequence of left-tiling politics. The framing of corruption as a natural side effect of PSD’s ideology is one that gives the 2017 and 2018 protests a radically partisan flavour.
“Continues as discussed: PSD, THE RED PLAGUE! Whomever will lead you, you will remain the same party of ‘securitate’ [Romanian communist secret police] communist Bolsheviks and against whom we will fight until we will eradicate you. You have started us and now you will eat each other like rats, you are no longer fooling anyone, you can’t escape.” (REZIST, 31 August 2018)

The violence of speech here is also observed throughout the protests, in chants and signs and also in other social media or mainstream media communication. Even during the Colectiv protests, where anger was an emotion experienced collectively and publicly, the use of violent language was not as common or as tolerated during the protests. It is unclear whether this indicates a wearier attitude of the protesters, which have lost patience with what they saw as a slowing down of promised anticorruption reforms, or it was more about the ideological leaning of the key movement actors. There are also frequent calls to mobilization, emphasising the corruption of PSD and warning against complacency; democracy itself is under threat. This framing of PSD’s ills is all closely tied with the theme of corruption and nepotism but also the indolence of the average citizens. The author warns against welfare spending as being another act of corruption, a bribe PSD give to people who are too ill-educated to understand that welfare spending is a trap:

“While we resist, we take selfies for fun and we make cute light shows: PSD is placing loyal people in important functions. PSD gives shameless salaries to their loyal ‘red plague’ people. PSD makes up new jobs (see Firea’s companies) [refers to the private enterprises of Gabriela Firea, a prominent PSD leader and mayor of Bucharest at the time] as well as other jobs that no one works at, they just withdraw money on fake wages. People loyal to PSD fire existing staff to replace them with their own family and friends. People loyal to PSD use the power of their position to receive
bribes to ignore the illegalities of private companies: see the National Audio-visual Council, an institution which is not performing as it should, an institution that does not sanction the television channels choking public space with lies. Seeing themselves with money in their pockets, they will start spending money and making promises all around, and people with a poor education will fall in their trap, craving the prosperity of people close to PSD but without knowing the circulation of money and the underlying games. In December 2016 I told you to go out and vote, that it's bad, that it is known what PSD can do with a [parliamentary] majority and they are set to cause trouble. You didn't listen! There are many of you who don't listen even now, after twelve months of constant protesting. Twelve months in which as normal people, with no political implication whatsoever, we ended up discussing more about politics than about our families. Twelve months in which PSD keep provoking us and we just stand in front of the gate. We're told, yes, it's a democracy, it's their right to...

What is the democracy where the criminals make the laws? What is the democracy where the criminals decide how to spend the money? What is the democracy where the greatly corrupt are pardoned of their criminal charges? What is the democracy where the criminals run away to exotic islands but they are not sentenced and their illegal wealth is not confiscated? What is the democracy where companies are invented with 2500 euros as an average wage in a country with 600 euros as an average wage? What is the democracy where you have a prosecution council voting 6 against and 1 for firing Laura Codruța Kovesi [the chief anti-corruption prosecutor] but you, as a minister, you insist, and you continue to lie in order to fire her? What is the democracy where the Bolshevik criminal Iliescu is not punished for his crimes against his own people?

WHAT DEMOCRACY??!?? GROW OUT OF IT!’’ (REZIST, 1 March 2018)
This post vividly illustrates several themes that emerged in the new wave of protest. The first, as noted above, is the increased polarisation of politics. We see through this quote the way in which movement leaders describe two prominent women in Romanian politics: Gabriela Firea and Laura Codruța Kövesi. The first is Gabriela Firea, who was the mayor of Bucharest at the time and before she was a journalist for the Antena 3 TV station, which is often criticised as openly favouring PSD. As Victor Ponta before her, she was heavily targeted by the anti-corruption civil society and the Rezist movement. She won the office of Mayor of Bucharest in 2016 from the centre-left PSD, in an election against Nicușor Dan, from the Save Bucharest Union, a precursor of the centre-right party Union for Saving Romania (USR), and one of the early prominent supporters of the Uniți Salvăm movement. Gabriela Firea is regularly described in the Facebook groups associated with Rezist as deeply corrupt, ineffective as a mayor, and also as a political parvvenu, who used her political connections to climb the Romanian social ladder.

The figure of Gabriela Firea is contrasted in the online spaces associated with Corupția Ucide and Rezist with that of Laura Codruța Kövesi. She is currently (2024) the first Chief European Prosecutor and one of Romania’s most prominent anti-corruption figures. She occupied the functions of Prosecutor General of Romania from 2006 to 2013 and Chief Prosecutor for the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) from 2013 to 2018, when she was dismissed by the PSD government. The Romanian anti-corruption civil society and its associated NGOs and social movements widely regarded her as a hero in her battle against Romanian corruption, represented particularly by PSD. Kövesi has her own critics accusing her of using her office to pursue corruption investigations that were politically and ideologically motivated.

Discursively, the anti-PSD framing of the Romanian anti-corruption figures reached a peak in the Rezist movement. Unlike the earlier waves in which politicians and corporations were regarded as corrupt, here the blame is extended to PSD members and supporters, as well as to those citizens who do not exercise their voting rights. People are accused of being too indolent to care about the harm brought by PSD or too self-interested in electoral bribes offered by those in power. The figure of the PSD supporter is often used in these Facebook mobilisation posts: a Romanian who is often
older, less educated, easily swayed by minor bribes or cheap promises, nostalgic for the communist era, lazy, apathetic, and not very bright.

Through the above quote we see here how the frame of democracy is used and the prognosis shifts from fighting corruption to voting against the PSD. Democracy therefore is described as the tool to oust PSD from power and to usher in the rule of law. PSD as a political party and PSD voters are seen not as constituent elements in the democratic process but an obstacle to it.

6.3.2 Prognostic Framing: Anticorruption Through ‘the New People’ and the Diaspora

For the people in the streets in 2017 and 2018 it was clear that PSD had to go. A popular petition began to circulate, ‘New People in Politics’ (*Oameni Noi in Politica*), asking for legislation barring anyone to run for public office if prosecuted for a crime of corruption. This was initiated by Declic, a civic organisation closely associated with the Colectiv and the Rezist movements. It was also supported by a newly formed political party, USR (Save Romania Union), whose main political platform was anticorruption and the renewal of the political class. The new party was mostly formed of younger members, many of them not previously affiliated with politics but coming from the third sector, the media, academia, and from the private sector. They supported Dacian Ciolos and many of them were previously engaged in the Romanian social movements, from Uniți Salvăm to Colectiv and Rezist. As a result, they were seen as natural allies for the Rezist movement, even though there were also dissenting voices. A post below, from the REZIST Facebook page, shows both the strategic and tactical use of “the new people” towards mobilization:

“**TODAY WE NEED TO ESCAPE OUR BUBBLE!**”

*Please read until the end! We have received today in our inbox a few very good ideas. We, the ‘keyboard warriors’ and the few activists who protested*
daily in the square (whom we are grateful again for their efforts) live in a bubble. The idea is: let's all fall in line with all civic organisations, the NGOs, USR, the supporters of Dacian Ciolos, and the PNL members (that's if you still wish to whitewash their image) and let's make some INFORMATIVE FLYERS that we and our supporters will give out in public spaces in every city and town in Romania. A simple message, 2-3 negative examples of the new legislation. Simple paper; black and white, no pictures, the time and place of the protest in large font. From three A4 sheets of 10 lei [Romanian currency] you can get 100 pieces that you can cut up and pass along in the metro, at the bus stop, waiting for the light in the intersection and so on. Let's make a communication campaign for the average citizen, let's make them understand why we are protesting and let's ask them to join us. Let's bring people to the protest who were not already in our bubble. Please share and tag in comments the people who you think might help us in our endeavours. Let's free Romania from the rule of PSD and ALDE criminal offenders!

@Corupția ucide - @Declic - @Rezisti.TV - @Malin Bot - @Mălin Bot, pagina publică - @Dacian Ciolos - @Comunitatea Uniți Salvăm - @Uniți Salvăm - @Uniunea Sałwați România - USR - @USR București - @USR Cluj - @USR Brașov - @USR Sibiu - USR Timiș - @Partidul Național Liberal - @PNL Bucuresti” (REZIST 15 December 2017)

The hashtags used to sign the post originally show the association that the activists make between these movements and political parties: PNL, USR, Declic, Corupția Ucide, Comunitatea Uniți Salvăm, Rezist TV, and Dacian Ciołoș. The poster clearly sees these movements, organisations, and political actors as congruent in their fight against PSD, even as they may not be as such, as seen in the previous chapters on the Uniți Salvăm and Colectiv movements. The Rezist activists were therefore attempting to subsume all these actors into a wider anti-corruption anti-PSD movement.
The above quote and many others similar calls to action show how Rezist activists considered USR and its local organisations as a resource of the movement and natural allies against PSD. It is an attempt to broaden the movement, not across political or ideological sides, but rather by rallying political organisations and structures that are on their political side against PSD. The author continues underneath the post with a comment illustrating this point:

“ATTENTION! The goal of this communication campaign is not the Antena 3 fan [pro-PSD media], brainwashed for years. Noooo, we are not fighting against the windmills, if the person is praising PSD, and talks about Soros and intelligence agencies... leave him in his stupidity. We need to focus on people who are questioning, who sit at home not understanding what is happening, who either can’t conceive the magnitude of the problem or they are simply too lazy to get out and protest.” (REZIST, 15 Decembrie, 2017)

This indicates that the process of polarisation is complete. PSD and their supporters are viewed not just as tainted, but as beyond salvation and not even worth engaging with. Activists, instead, are urged to mobilise all other sections of society in a broad alliance against PSD and their voters. This is a far cry from the Uniți Salvăm calls for national unity against not only an equally corrupt political class, but also against private corporations. The ideological elements of Rezist seem more akin to national populism than the antisystemic position of Uniți Salvăm. The populism of Rezist and the wider anti-corruption movement in Romania is directed not against economic elites necessarily but against left-leaning political elites and their followers. Redistribution by the PSD government is framed as electoral bribes, as is funding directed towards the less developed regions of Romania. The polarisation is extended towards the economically developed regions of Transylvania, who tend to vote for the right or centre-right, and the less developed regions of the east and north on the country, who often favour PSD. This geographical inequality is again framed through Facebook comments and posts as one between the developed, European, civilised West and the poor, Russophile, corruption-
ridden East. This distinction between the East and West will be further explored in the movement’s relationship with the Romanian diaspora.

6.3.3 Framing the Diaspora: “the Outside”

For many, the 2013 and 2015 movements and the events they reacted to represent a protest against the political class in general. This was the technocratic dream of a renewed Romania, feeding on the imaginary of Western democracies, under the slogan of: “We want a country like the outside.” (Vrem o tara ca afara)

This division between “us” and “the outside” is one that resisted since the experience of closed borders during communism, whereas “the outside” were the developed western countries, to which the vast majority of Romanians would not have access. The imaginary of the western “outside” was constructed through narratives of people who either visited or escaped through the militarised border, or through western cultural products or television received through pirated foreign tv channels. The stories of “the outside” were all inevitably stories of prosperity, freedom, and fairness. Inevitably, the “us”, Romania and the Romanians, were and still are considered corrupt, indolent, and vain.

As more and more countries opened their borders to Romanian immigrants—culminating with Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2014—Romania became a country with a very high percentage of emigration in Europe. This had devastating consequences for many Romanian communities in rural areas and in small towns, which experienced depopulation and an aging population, with far-reaching effects, both social and economic. Although Romanian expats would live abroad for long periods, they would maintain both family ties and civic ties to their communities, in which they would often invest remittances. But it was not just money that was sent home. ‘Social remittances’ in the form of ideas, ideology and networks helped to shape the course of future protests.
Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s the mythology of the Romanian diaspora became entrenched in Romanian political life. Several political campaigns revolved around praising the character of diasporians, their intolerance for corruption, their hard-working character and entrepreneurial spirit. This began with Traian Basescu’s 2004 Justice and Truth Alliance campaign, which won with considerable support from the Romanians living and working abroad. The same strategy followed his 2009 successful Presidential campaign, as he was among the first to reframe corruption as the heaviest obstacle on the path of Romania’s development. And although himself, his family, his close friends and allies have all been accused of corruption or even trialled and prosecuted for various crimes against the state, his political framing of characteristically corrupt Romanians that had to be opposed by ‘new blood’ Romanian diaspora returning home still remains a useful discursive tool. We have therefore seen the 2014 political campaign of Klaus Iohannis, the political successor of Basescu, further deploying the political framing of the diaspora as the saviours of the country, to an even greater extent and a more potent effect, following the events previously described in Chapter 5, mainly the Colectiv protests. Although Iohannis held the function of President, PSD held the Parliament and formed the government under Prime-Minister Ponta. The protesters chanted against the Ponta government, and Iohannis was seen by many as an ally even since days and nights of Colectiv fire, and the subsequent protests, culminating in 2017, were even more directed against PSD, seen as the embodiment of Romanian corruption, backwardness, and incompetence:

“We have lost the old fans of Latrine 3 [Antena 3]. They will vote the same until they die. Let’s not lose those who in their stupidity they can’t see that tomorrow’s welfare is just the consequence of an indebted future. Diaspora, you have an education, a clearer image. Call home! Do something, talk to your friends from back home, explain to them that it is not ok what is happening, tell them to not tolerate this spectacle. Do something!”
(REZIST, 1 March, 2018)
We see here a call to diaspora to call their family back home, their elderly relatives particularly, to raise awareness of the corruption of PSD. This speech also draws attention to the divisions in Romanian society particularly between the young and the old, the well-educated against the poorly educated, reflect a somewhat accurate description of Romanian voting patterns, where the older voters and those with a lower educational achievement were more likely to vote for PSD. These calls for the young—and particularly for those living abroad—to persuade or even pressure their elderly relatives to vote reflects an increasing radicalisation of the Rezist movement as well as the use of the action frame of “the diaspora” as representing the pure, free, and brave Romanians against the corrupt and lazy locals. The post below calls for diaspora mobilization, a few days before the 10 August protest. The instrumentalization of the Romanian diaspora culminated with a protest organised on 10 August 2018, which had been announced on through the social media networks, both those connected to the anti-protest movements, as well as Facebook pages and groups of Romanian expats. The protest was set for 10 August 2018 and their main demand was the demise of the PSD government. It is likely that the date was set to fit within the schedule of Romanian expats returning home for the summer holiday. Nevertheless, many people travelled to Romania specifically to attend the protest, causing queues at the border and receiving vast media coverage. The Rezist page was calling for the diaspora to come back in the country, for a largescale protest, to reactivate and energise the Rezist movement:

“They are a great part of the workforce of this nation. They are the ones you did not give a chance back home. They now contribute to the evolution of other countries. They are the ones you insulted. ENOUGH! BE AFRAID, THE COUNTRY IS RISING!” (Rezist, 8 August, 2018)

Romanian expat groups coagulated into social networks that were eager to activate in Romanian civic and political life. Using social media, through pages such as “Diaspora Europeană” or “Diaspora - Împreună suntem România”, describing themselves on the
Facebook page as: “Romanians from back home and from the diaspora, manipulated by our consciousness: together we are the shield defending the RULE OF LAW!”

They were aware of how the image of the Romanian expat is framed in the country, they attempted to have a direct influence through participating in the social movements, and later even to form political groups with a strong focus on anti-corruption and patriotism, emphasising the duty of the Romanian expats to educate and guide the Romanians ‘left behind’. The political goals of the Romanian diaspora had been well received by the activist networks gravitating around the Rezist and Corupția Ucide movements, as they were seen as necessary and complementary to their struggle to against corruption and PSD.

“I see that there are many voices very critical of the fact that the administrators of the Diaspora Europeana groups started a political party. Even if this was decided after a public vote within the group. Mario Mocan and the people around him came up with two brilliant ideas: voting booths in every Romanian community abroad and the concept of a ‘clean person’, who did not previously belong to any other political party. If they will be supported morally and financially, if they will afford to dedicate themselves, those people will bring 1 MILLION votes from the diaspora. No one, no political party ever looked at the Romanians from the diaspora. Nada. You criticise them for fragmenting the votes of the right. You shouldn’t. Instead of criticising and denigrating them you should support them, stop being blinded by your hatred and pay attention to the fact that if these people can produce those polling booths the right-wing votes will multiply. Right now, the diaspora vote counts for the Presidency and you see what “power” the President has. Why are you attacking the people for trying to change this? You seek perfect people for YOURSELVES, without realising we are different people and your idea of perfect may be different from our perfect. Stop looking for perfect candidates, look instead for those capable, well-intentioned, and honest. Let’s get rid of these parties of
thieves, villains and dummies and after then we can trim the fat. We trust Diaspora Europeana [the Facebook page], we trust Mario Mocan and the people around him and during the elections we will place them in the list of parties deserving our vote, alongside USR and MRI.”

From the above quote we see that the Romania diaspora is not only welcomed and sought after in the movement, but its political coagulation is also seen as a necessary step. There are clear indications that the movement needs to be not in a plane beyond politics, but rather an active electoral agent, to call for people to vote for the parties aligned to their politics, best seen in the appeal to increase right-wing votes. This would not reflect the perspective of everyone in the movement and might explain the rift between core Rezist actors, aligned to a right-lean politics, and others would prefer a broader apolitical, trans-ideological, antisystemic movement.

6.4 Rezist and Its Critics

Calls for the continuation of the protests continued on the main Facebook pages even after the protests peaked. A core of movement actors remained active, engaged in daily protests, and in online mobilisation. They often deplored the passivity and indolence of the general population who were unable to produce real change through the movement. There were several internal divisions forming in the Facebook groups and the core activist groups. Some were blamed for climbing their career ladder through using the protests as props, others were accused of being too passive and retreating from the movement when faced with less excitement from the general public.

“People, maintain your calm and reason! We are also disappointed that there were so few people but there is an explanation. People had learned
what is the trajectory of a legislation, from a project to submitting and its implementation. There are many opinion influencers who can ‘push buttons’ but they are temporarily in waiting because they know that these laws need to be approved by President Iohannis and he will never approve something like this. Let’s not throw insults at each other and let’s focus on the two important and immediate things:

The President’s impeachment which we will never ever approve, and we will respond firmly.

The protest initiated by the diaspora which is booked for 10 August.”

(REZIST, 18 June 2018)

1) One of the main critiques brought to the 2017 Rezist movements particularly, but also retrospectively towards the previous ones, was that of them being nothing more but aesthetic events, forms of entertainment for the urban youth, and not actually seeking social or political change. The colourful and clever signs and posters, the use of music and art during the protests, led to the critics of the movement to call the protesters ‘hipsters’. This was mostly picked up by the Antena media trust, which called them “the beautiful and free youth” (tinerii frumosi si liberi), abbreviated as TFL, after a description from Klaus Iohannis during his presidential campaign speech. This has since been used negatively and often with derision and irony.

The description of the Rezist protesters, at least in its later stages, as overtly middle-class, urban, and well-educated youth points to an underrepresentation in the protests of people from less privileged backgrounds. The validity of this claim is unclear in the absence of non-partisan well-conducted protest surveys, although I have observed this during my research.
2) Another critique that emerged through the interviews was the protests became overtly partisan. Protesters no longer chanted that “all parties are the same garbage” but actually directly supported President Iohannis and the emerging centre-right USR. The protests were therefore seen by left-leaning protesters as defending the political right, rather than pushing for ideological diversity. From the left, the Rezist movement was nothing more than a tool of the right-wing and centre-right parties. This is also contrasted with the 2013 protests, where the chants were directed towards the political class and corruption in general (see chapters 5 and 6).

“I have this theory that there are actually two cycles. There is the pre-Colectiv cycle and the post-Colectiv cycle. The pre-Colectiv cycle is about ideological diversity and agenda diversity, where anticorruption is just an element, not the main one. And the relationship between social movements and political elites is adversarial. While the post-Colectiv, in terms of the agenda, anticorruption became the main thing, it kills the rest. And secondly, the civic movements are tied to the institutional centre of power. And everything happened in five busy days there, where Corupția Ucide appeared and look and see, Klaus Iohannis is inviting to Cotroceni [Presidential Palace] the representatives of civil society and some are going, others are not, I didn’t. [...] And after that, the moment you have a supporter within the system—Iohannis—of your agenda. And not only that, because the anticorruption battle was supported automatically by DNA [the anticorruption institution]. Automatically, the street mobilisations, no matter how creative, they are within the power of some... And that is why no one was surprised anymore when Iohannis would show up to the protests, and when it wasn’t Iohannis it was Ciolos, and when it wasn’t Ciolos it was Barna [president of USR], and when it wasn’t them it was others. And this did not happen in 2012-2013. In 2013 there was no politician there. It’s a big difference. In 2012 they were escorted out. [...] So I say that after 2015 Colectiv we are entering a new area, which forced us [Demos: new left-leaning party] as well to constitute ourselves
politically because in fact we had no stakes there anymore. We had no stakes in the protests. Fighting to defend a progressive paradigm in some protests which were essentially right-wing? No fucking way! Sorry. But no. [...] Sometimes we were not going because we were lazy and we were saying it’s too right-wing. Other times we were there with banners. I remember a protest which was… it was so cold and muddy but there were many people. And we went to Casa Poporului [the Parliament] and we had our banners which we also have on facebook. And we were shouting our own: ‘PSD, PSD leave some money for education’ and things like that. And we had our banner with ‘Solidarity’. People would look at us and would not understand what was happening. They were looking… They were all anti-PSD, pro-justice, anticorruption, and we were there with solidarity. And no, they never acknowledged us, they didn’t even know who we were because it was winter and we were all in winter clothing. So I can say that we were all led to this because we were criticised in social media that the left is dependent and it does not want to fight against PSD. And to quiet these centrist sentiments we made some... not concessions, because the theme is important. The problem is that it is constructed in a very authoritarian way and anyway PSD can’t be defended for what is doing with the justice bill.” (C.C)

What this interview highlights is the dilemma facing left-leaning activists at this point. They felt increasingly alienated from the other protestors and were angered by the shift to the right, but still felt the need to join in to voice their disapproval of PSD actions and legislation. Those who were central to the previous protests, however, were now isolated and ignored by their peers.

c) Quite a few critics pointed out that the way the Rezist movement deepened a divide in Romanian society, accentuating the differences between the older PSD voters and the younger USR or PNL voters; between those who succeeded as immigrants abroad and those who remained in the country; between those from large urban centres such as
Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca or Timisoara, and those from the much poorer rural areas of the south or north-east. It was no longer a movement about the regeneration of Romanian society as a whole, but rather about taking sides and engaging directly in political struggle. Critics particularly point out the way in which the movement became an appendage of a political side and became more a part of electoral campaign than a grassroots expression of popular will. This is related to the professionalisation of the activist class discussed in the previous chapter. There seems to be a deepening division between the experienced and the casual protesters as the movement continued to shift towards the right.

d) The protests were also accused in some of the Facebook comments to be infiltrated by either internal or external groups. On one hand, there were voices claiming that the Romanian intelligence agencies had infiltrated the protests and were directing them towards certain obscure goals. The social media pages coordinating the tactics and mobilisation acknowledges the risk of ‘agent provocateurs’ causing violence in order to discredit the movement:

“Can I tell you a story? At the Colectiv protests we’ve had people infiltrated from the ultras [football supporters thought to have been mobilised against protesters] and the agencies [Romanian intelligence agencies]. Well, we were 15,000 people arriving at Piedone’s house, at the City Hall for Bucharest Sector 4. From the crowd, a group of 7 idiots start throwing bottles towards the police. One bottle hit one lady, another hit one policeman. What would be the most efficient way to react to this?

1. If this happens, every one of us should take out their mobile phone and start filming.

2. Every person should duck, so those idiots/agency people who want to cause a ruckus will be easily visible. When everybody sits down or kneels, every idiot throwing a bottle will be as visible as the Mona Lisa. So, his strategy to cause a ruckus will fail.”
Conversely, there was the theory that the movements were directed either by foreign intelligence agencies or through NGOs and other sources of funding. Although this thesis is not aware of any evidence for these hypotheses, they do indicate a conspiratorial attitude which replaced for some protesters the enthusiastic optimism at the peak of the protests. The past historical trauma of living under an authoritarian police state could affect older movement participants, but also the theme of infiltrators and instigators is a common one in Romanian media. The theme of the ‘agent provocateur’ is one common to social movements (Chase, 2021). This happens for larger movements, or those that receive many new members in short time. The trust built in time disperses and allows the splintering of movement participants into groups, which is also often facilitated by a repressive regime.

In sum, the Rezist protests were both a continuation of a wave of protests and marked their culmination. With the influx of activists and ideas from the diaspora, the core protestors from earlier mobilisations were eased aside. The frame of corruption was still employed, but the disillusionment with politics in general was replaced by a conviction that politics could be re-invented and refreshed through the inclusion of new candidates and parties. This points towards the process of institutionalisation (Offe 1990), but also of populist polarisation, and arguably signals the end of this cycle of protest. In the conclusion that follows, I bring together the three inter-related strands of protest and seek to draw out the lessons to be learned.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1. Research Questions Answered

There is little doubt that the three Romanian social movements, which built upon each other, were impactful and had a lasting effect on Romanian social and political life. They gathered crowds that were previously unseen, in the context of a generalised lack of trust and political disengagement. The events caused visible change, either in legislation, in the political structure of the country, causing high level resignations, falling governments, or even resulting in the trial and imprisonment of important political figures. Whether the movements cause fear, derision, hope, or even adulation, there are very clear ripples across Romanian society. This research aimed to investigate the three Romanian movements and their distinct mobilisations and to address not only their impact, but also what they represent more widely. Are they the representation of a new Romanian era of politics or are they merely political instruments deployed by opposition parties?

In order to draw conclusions from this study I will refer back to my research aims:

(1) What role, if any, did Facebook have in facilitating the transformation of the Save Roșia Montană campaign from a local association in 2000 into a country-wide social movement in 2013?

(2) How has the identity of the movement changed during this transformation?
The answers to questions (1) and (2) is rather straightforward and it emerged clearly from Chapter 4, on Uniți Salvăm. Facebook, as well as other internet tools, had a critical role in coagulating the disparate groups gravitating in the defence of Roșia Montană into a single, vast, and coherent movement. The social media sites, particularly the Facebook group Uniți Salvăm, was essential in providing the space where ideas were discussed and refined. The open and inclusive attitude of the Facebook site administrators towards different identities and ideologies contributed as well to the shared identity of the movement. Through collective action frames, and particularly through the frame bridging of environmental risk with that of national regeneration, the movement was very successful in building up a common identity with wide appeal. The theme of environmental risk coupled with that of neo-colonialism, of foreign interests threatening the livelihood of average Romanians had a national impact because it appealed to the patriotism of citizens who felt disempowered. The opportunity to recapture national dignity from corrupt politicians colluding with foreign capital had an energising effect on otherwise politically disenfranchised Romanians. This is different from the previous identity of the movement, before it reached its country-wide apogee, when it was centred around the local community in Roșia Montană and the nearby villages.

(3) What was the role, if any, of the online networks formed during Save Roșia Montană campaign and Uniți Salvăm in 2013 in the subsequent mobilization of large-scale protests in 2015 and 2017?

(4) If there is a continuation of networks from movement to movement, which frames changed and which remained the same?

(5) How did the beliefs, ideology, and identity of the movements change, and what was the role of the Facebook groups towards this?

(6) Are the Facebook groups facilitating the processes of frame alignment?
The answers to questions (3), (4), (5) and (6) can be grouped together. The first activist network that is directly relevant for this research emerged in 2012 as an anti-austerity protest against President Basescu. It was there that a group of students, academics, and professionals in the creative arts gained experience both in the tactical repertoire of contentious action and in using slogans and speech for mobilisation of the general population. This was primarily an offline network of key activists, mostly from Bucharest and Cluj. This key network became re-activated in the case of Roșia Montană and set up an online presence to aid the local community. Through the Facebooks sites related to the protest, as well as through personal online connections, a wider interlocking network was formed, leading to what Manuel Castells would call a ‘networked movement’ (Castells, 2012). It was successful during Uniți Salvăm and entered a period of abeyance from 2014 until the night of the Colectiv fire. Initially the vast online network, formed from disparate online and offline groups which were ideologically diverse, was almost completely reactivated and the previous Uniți Salvăm supporters found themselves in the streets chanting “corruption kills!”. The experience of the activists, together with the already existing network, and by using the same tactical repertoire, ensured that the early Colectiv protests were as high if not higher than the ones during Uniți Salvăm. This process of frame alignment was facilitated by social media.

Firstly, networks were formed within the movements, which formed the basis of future associational life, whether directly engaged in political action, or continuing extrapoliitical action. Such associations, whether formally constituted as NGOs or not, are still functioning, active, and relevant to Romanian social and political life. Other networks formed were diaspora associations that were formed during the protests and through social media. Data shows that in some cases these events led to families of Romanians abroad forming long-lasting relationships after socialising online on the Facebook pages or after meeting at protest events.

It is also important to consider the fact that although Romanian civil society is formed by interlocking networks, these disparate groups are not always in communication with each other. It is therefore difficult to consider Romanian civil society as having a consistent ideology or being monolithic. The associations centred around the populist-nationalist or Eurosceptic discourse of political movements like AUR (The Alliance for
the Union of Romanians) or the entrenched PSD would not be at all compatible with the socially progressive voices of activist networks. This is not to say that there is no overlap between them, as we find strong environmentalist themes in the AUR discourse, as well as having Eurosceptic concerns among socially progressive activists. While this is normal for a healthy civil society, political actors often attempt to appropriate ‘civil society’ as an ideologically aligned entity to mean that they have the support of the population. It would be difficult to conceptualise civil society in such a way, even if we can find common concerns among the disparate networks.

In the case of Colectiv it is important to note that although the previous networks were reactivated, new ones emerged as well, which ended up dominating much of the movement. Centred around the Corupția Ucide page and the NGOs supporting them, a new hybrid network (online and offline) was formed. They used the experience of some activists and the enthusiasm of new recruits, which joined the movement driven by the anguish and rage caused by the terrible tragedy of the fire. When interviewing activists from Corupția Ucide I was impressed with their level of engagement and with their entrepreneurial spirit. At that stage they had already established activist classes with teenagers and young adults and had a clear goal of founding an active civil society in order to be able to resist the actions of what they considered an irredeemably corrupt government.

The importance of the framing processes within the movements could not be overstated. However, several collective action frames were used from movement to movement, either strategically by key activists, or organically by the people in the street. An important framing process which occurred from movement to movement was the motivational framing (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 203). After the first successful movement in 2013, the subsequent movements were inspired and motivated by it. As Castells (2008) describes it, there is a need for both feelings of outrage and hope in order to have a successful mobilisation. The motivational framing transmitted from one successful movement to another was necessary for the 2015 and 2017 movements. In the case of motivational framing, it is important there is a balance between the diagnostic framing—what is wrong—and the prognostic framing—how to solve it. Another framing process that was common within and between the movements was that of frame bridging,
where different frames are being connected. This was the case in Roșia Montană of bridging the diagnostic frames of environmental risk and neo-colonialism with the prognostic frame of the need for a new civil society, represented as the Romanian nation. This form of nationalism is also transmitted to the other two movements, in 2015 and in 2017.

In 2015 we see a process of frame extension, where the theme of corruption, was previously understood as the complicity between the foreign corporation and the Romanian government and the Romanian media. In 2015 the idea of corruption is extended to the whole Romanian society, where it was not just certain elites that abused power for private interest, but is instead a societal ill, one representative of Eastern European societies. Corruption is often represented as a consequence of ineffectual socialist economic policies. In Romania’s case, a clear and direct consequence of its communist past. Anti-corruption is therefore often seen as a battle for survival against communism.

The prognostic frame also changed in this case because it does not require just a regenerated civil society, but political change as well. The protests have been in large part against one political side, while favouring another, compared to Uniți Salvăm where their protests were directed against both political power and private corporate interests.

(7) Are the Facebook groups functioning as online third spaces?

(8) Are these series of movements reflecting the emergence of a new Romanian civil society?

(9) To what extent is social media facilitating collective action and the emergence of civil society in Romania?

The answers to the questions (7), (8), and (9) are addressing the relationship between social media, online third spaces, and Romanian civil society.
Another finding from this research is the essential role of social media, particularly of Facebook as a ‘third space’, which allowed for the creation and maintenance of these social networks. I will argue that the Romanian civil society would have been considerably weaker without the presence of social media. Data from both the interviews and the social media analysis shows that there was a combination of both offline and online networks that participated in the movements. In the case of offline networks in the Uniți Salvăm movement we have the local community in Roșia Montană, which constituted itself as an organisation and movement, Alburns Maior. There are also environmentalist groups, academic communities, particularly from Cluj and Bucharest. Once these networks linked up with others online, through Facebook, these offline networks became interlinked with other groups from around the country. This allowed them to join together into the vast movement that was Uniți Salvăm.

These online networks persisted even after Uniți Salvăm lost its impetus after 2014 and re-emerged with the Colectiv fire. This movement was much more spontaneous as people were driven by anger and grief and joined the crowds in the streets without having been previously engaged in any activism at all. However, they did not necessarily join the protests alone; they brought friends, family, co-workers, in a mixture of online and offline mobilisation. There they linked-up with other small groups and developed closer ties with them. And they all met online on the Facebook pages and sites where they expressed their outrage at the authorities or they encouraged each other to not lose hope. The formation of these ties can be seen in the Corupția Ucide Facebook page, where many of the key figures met at the protests or linked up online into one of the most efficient activist networks. What we also notice in the Colectiv protests is that some of the core activists from the Uniți Salvăm networks were not as central in Colectiv. They were present and mobilised their own groups but the left-leaning Uniți Salvăm members felt they were not entirely represented by the anticorruption action frame that was entirely directed at PSD, while accepting praise and support from President Iohannis.

Based on these findings I will argue that the third spaces offered by social media had been essential in the regeneration of Romanian civil society. No other space would have allowed for the merging of so many small disparate networks into large, relatively cohesive webs of people and groups, as we noticed during the protests. And to the extent
that the structure of these networks remained relatively stable, they also allowed for future political manifestations, as we have seen with the rise of the new political movements. All of these had been made possible through the opportunity of participating in social media third spaces.

The findings also show that the weak civil society thesis is partially true. The relative success of the movements is made possible on the basis of a stronger civil society, one that was rebuilt in the last 20 years. The case with which different associations joined others within the context of a common goal shows that there is at least the minimum level of trust that allows people to challenge authority together. However, it is unclear whether the three social movements: Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist were made possible by a vigorous civil society or they helped create or reinvigorate it. Based on the data collected and analysed in this research I would conclude that the Romanian civil society had been substantially boosted by the exercise of these three popular social movements.

There remains a critique of this analysis that must be discussed. With the exception of Roșia Montană, Pungesti, or other rural communities directly affected, the online networks involved in the protests remained mostly urban. This is particularly of note because Romania is one of the least urbanised countries in the EU, with almost half of its population living in rural areas (World Bank, 2021). This could be explained because of the general inequality between urban and rural communities in Romania or because of the digital divide between rural and urban (Stoica and Ilas, 2013). It is clear that rural communities either have no desire to participate more actively in the Romanian civil society or do not possess the resources for it; this is in contrast with large urbas centres, which are favoured by a high-density population and a well-motivated population (Beissinger, 2022). Another explanation could be the age of rural residents and the depopulation that happened through emigration. In the context of very poor economic prospects in rural Romania, many young and middle-aged people decided to emigrate to developed EU countries, forming one of the largest diasporas in Europe, while leaving behind a predominantly older population. In this case, we could explain the poor participation in the movements from rural areas through the increased mobilisation of social networks from the diaspora. This would indicate that far from abandoning their communities, Romanian emigrants feel they can contribute from their host countries,
attempting to import some of the values they believe Romania is lacking: transparency, rule of law, accountability. Of course, one must be sceptical of the orientalising narrative of the free and fair West compared to the retrograde and corrupt East, but that particular collective action frame has been used in the Romanian social movements and is therefore a core belief of many Romanians abroad. Further research will be needed to investigate why the mobilisation does not occur to the same extent in Romania’s rural communities as it did in the large urban centres, even when dealing with immediate concerns for the rural areas, such as deforestation, environmental threat, or lack of support from the government. It is unclear to what extent the above concerns could be used to mobilise a politically disengaged, older, rural population.

(10) What were the consequences of the three social movements on Romanian political and social life?

One major consequence of the Romanian social movements has been the growth of new political movements in a landscape previously dominated by the entrenched political establishment with roots in the early post-communism. After 2012, more and more people took to the streets to participate in grassroots organisation, which provided essential experience of a new generation of politicians and third sector actors. Of these, three distinct political movements emerged: USR, Demos, and AUR. These new political movements do reflect a changing civil society landscape in Romania, where an emergent public sphere allows for more complex and nuanced discussions, far beyond the ossified political structure of the 1990s and early 2000s.

a) USR

Nicusor Dan was a relatively successful social entrepreneur and activist before entering politics. In 2006 he established an NGO called “Save Bucharest”, which aimed to protect the architectural patrimony of Bucharest against poorly regulated urban
developers. He participated in the 2013 and 2014 protests, although his role is contested; in one of the interviews it was mentioned that Nicusor Dan’s participation in the protests was not central and was often overstated for political capital. Nevertheless, Nicusor Dan established the Save Bucharest Union as a political party on July 1th, 2015, based partly on his previous NGO The Save Bucharest Association but also drawing from the “United we Save Roșia Montană” slogan. In that sense, at least symbolically, his political movement was seen by some and promoted by himself and his party as the continuation of the Uniți Salvăm movement. In an interview for the news platform HotNews, Nicusor Dan claimed that:

“We are addressing an entire category of people who are disappointed in how politics was previously done so far, and particularly in Bucharest, we are addressing those groups if citizens who started to fight for their rights. We will continue our battle with the Bucharest public administration. We will always contest the aberrant spending of public funds, the illegalities, the living comfort, or lack thereof. Meantime we will come with our vision and project for Bucharest. We are not ideologically delineated. What we want is very simple, there are some problems, which we want to solve. This city has no vision, we are here to create one. We did not choose by accident the background here—DNA [The National Anticorruption Agency]. We are the continuation of this effort that DNA is making to clean Bucharest’s public administration. We are talking about an administration that is profoundly corrupt and incompetent. If DNA is cleaning it, we are compelled to replace it with something and our objective is to bring in public administration competent people, moral people, good professionals who know the problems of Bucharest and are able to propose solutions” (Hotnews, 2015).

Already in his 2015 Save Bucharest Union political campaign, we can see Nicusor Dan raising the same themes as the Rezist movement did in 2017. First is the idea of an
endemic and incurable corruption that relates to ‘old politics’. This necessitates the emergence of a new generation of politicians who are unaffected by the ‘bad habits of old apparatchiks’.

The second theme is that of ideological neutrality. This follows a political tradition of ‘principled centrist’ where ideology is nothing but harmful indoctrination, more closely associated with fascism and communism than with modern politics. The claim that Nicusor Dan and other prominent USR members had consistently made is that problems do not need ideological solutions, which are likely tainted by blind beliefs, but rather pragmatic, analytic choices, made by apolitical experts.

Criticism of USR was noticed on the Facebook sites used in this research (Uniți Salvăm, Corupția Ucide, Rezist). One coming from the left is that their long-held principle of ideological neutrality is highly contested, as many of its critics pointed out that this merely hides minimal state liberalism, favouring tight fiscal policies, austerity, and deregulation. They had also been accused of capitalising of the Colectiv tragedy to gain political capital and to use it in their anticorruption campaign. USR has also governed in coalition with PNL since

In their use of anticorruption and by adopting an inflammatory discourse against political elites they had also been accused of populism (Dragoman, 2020).

b) Demos

Demos was also a political project that had its origins in the Romanian social movements of the 2010s. It was established by a group of Romanian academics, activists, and professionals who considered that the Romanian political map is lacking a left-wing voice. Much smaller since its inception on September 1st, 2018, when compared to USR, it nevertheless reflected a rather weak popularity of socially progressive and economically egalitarian politics among Romanian voters. From its inception it meant to represent a left-leaning alternative to USR but also a clean and modern alternative to PSD. The party was named ‘Demos’, both after the Greek word and after their Spanish counterparts ‘Podemos’, which was a clear inspiration for the founders.

Following interviews with Demos members and founders as part on my research on social movements, it emerged that the party wanted to contest both PSD—framed as
the corrupt, inefficient, and inauthentic left—and PNL and USR for their right-leaning policies which are set on tearing down the already weak Romanian welfare state. Discursively this was a difficult act to balance, particularly since the party was still small and not very visible in the public space. This dual contestation also led to inner divisions between those who perhaps favoured a closer relationship with either PSD or USR.

The structure of the party was inspired by the grassroots movements that many of the early Demos members were part of, often in key positions. It favoured deliberation, internal voting, and a horizontal decision structure, similar to the organisation within the 2012 anti-austerity protests and the 2013-2014 Uniți Salvăm movement. Negotiating the theme of anticorruption was a difficult and divisive area in Demos, as some felt that anticorruption is merely a dogwhistle for austerity and libertarian-inspired policies. Others felt that by ignoring the topic of corruption, this will alienate many potential young voters, who will likely gravitate instead towards the more dynamic USR—which still claimed that it accepts members from the left, the centre, and the right. Another topic of contention within the party was the use of socially progressive discourse when addressing the public on social media. More traditionalist members felt that Romania is too conservative for social justice themes and this would alienate working class, rural, or older voters; while others felt that a left-wing party should be aligned to modern social justice movements and solidary with marginalised peoples and communities should not be negotiated despite the potential loss of political capital.

Demos gained a reasonable notoriety and following on social media and participated in relatively successful social campaigns such as ‘Romania, the country of cheap labour’, which emphasised a neo-colonial frame of exploitation from international corporations, or drawing attention to the need for a living wage, or signalling other environmental or social risks. Despite these, Demos did not achieve the success that either USR or AUR did. Further research could elucidate the reasons why their growth stagnates (at the time writing this work in 2023). One explanation could be the internal divisions, which under a soft leadership and deliberative structure would lead to lengthy debates and possibly animosity among its members. A very plausible explanation is that Demos lacked the material resources that USR had—which collaborated closely with and received donations from its members and from the private sector. Compared to many USR
founders and members who entered politics from successful careers in the private sector, many Demos members were academics, artists, schoolteachers, or from other lower middle-class professions. Some may also argue that the Romanian voters are not fully ready to accept a socially progressive platform, or one that at times calls itself openly left-wing. Regardless of the reasons, Demos did not succeed in successfully garnering sufficient support to participate in the Parliamentary elections so far.

c) *AUR*

A more controversial political outcome that I will argue is related to—if not directly inspired by—the Romanian social movements is the rise of AUR (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians).

The mode of organisation of AUR and their meteoric rise is one of particular academic interest for me. Based on continuous social media monitoring of the main Facebook pages and sites related to Romanian civil society and the social movements, AUR became a more and more discussed alternative to the mainstream political parties. However, this emerged mostly in the diaspora networks and they remained relatively unknown in the large urban centres of Romania. The diaspora networks also funded AUR’s rise in Romanian politics through online donations which allowed media-savvy Eugen Simion to create and maintain larger and more consistent networks. He is also the first and most impactful Romanian politician to create a very popular account on Tik Tok, where he actively engages with his audience.

Although this topic is under researched, from preliminary data that I collected on the diaspora Facebook groups and Eugen Simion’s online presence, there is a distinct connection between the USR networks established outside of Romania and those of AUR. Much of USR support, particularly in the beginning, was from the Romania diaspora for whom anticorruption was the key electoral issue. Data from the Facebook pages such as Diaspora Europeană (a page promoting USR in the diaspora) shows that some felt disillusioned with USR, particularly during their time in the coalition government, and felt they in their promises to replace and punish the corrupt political elites. Others feel
that USR are only addressing the concerns of highly educated urban elites, and not those of working-class voters. Furthermore, there are also comments reflecting on the fact that USR are not truly interested in helping the Romanian diaspora but are only visiting and talking to them during political campaigns. By utilising these concerns, AUR managed to gain support from previous USR supporters, by having an even harsher anticorruption discourse and through a nationalist discourse reminiscent of the far-right party Romania Mare, which was popular in the 1990s and early 2000s but has since been largely irrelevant. It could be argued that the networks and framing strategies created by USR in the Romanian diaspora were more widely and efficiently used by AUR.

The growth of AUR could also be attributed by capitalising on vaccine scepticism during the Covid pandemic. Being a parliamentary party at the time, they used political leverage and support from several televisions and print media to oppose any anti-Covid measures, which garnered them support from Romanian voters. They first opposed masks and argued against their mandatory use in public spaces; they contested the lockdowns and claimed they are illegitimate and criminal; they also denied the Covid deaths, arguing that the medics are paid bribes to declare normal deaths as Covid deaths; they also engaged in conspiratorial discourse regarding ‘the strategic deployment of Covid to harm Romania’s economy’. This stance they had on Covid provided them with a massive boost, reaching over 20% in intention to vote in an INSCOP survey in 2022, propelling them to the second most popular party at the time, after PSD (Digi24, 2022).

It is possible that USR, AUR, or Demos would have existed in some form or another without the protests of the last decade. However, I will argue that all three were heavily influenced by them. Firstly, the founding members and other important members have all participated in relatively key positions in the three social movements discussed in this thesis. This meant not only that they gained the knowledge and experience of how to devise a mobilisation strategy or a collective action frame, but also gave them the confidence of communicating with large numbers of people.

Secondly, the networks that were created during the movements were also used for the political parties. The NGO networks and young professionals networks created during Uniți Salvăm, Colectiv, and Rezist can be found in USR. Many prominent activists
from those movements did in fact join USR as members or ran for public office from USR. Many of the early members of Demos came from academia and environmental activism and they had been crucial in the 2012 anti-austerity protests and the Uniți Salvăm movement. Their relative lack of success could be also explained by the limited range of these networks, compared to the other parties. AUR members involved in the Uniți Salvăm protests mostly came from nationalist or pro-Moldovan unionist network of activism. They were also closely associated with football supporter groups. Later, in the Colectiv and Rezist movements, the networks AUR utilised were the diaspora groups that were very active during the protests, organising mass events in many European and North American cities. Although the relationship between social movement and political actors and the disparate groups that formed the networked movements did emerge during this thesis, through the social media data collected as well as from the interviews, further research would be needed, using network analysis as a complementary method, to properly assess the shape and strength of this web of engaged actors.

Thirdly, all three parties are also following the impetus of the movements and followed one of their main demands closely: the need for a new political class. All three parties have attempted to create a new political class through their own party. For USR that meant highly educated technocrats with close ties to the private sector. For Demos that meant horizontal organisation, social justice, and the redistribution of wealth. For AUR it meant nationalist populism, taking power from foreign and domestic enemies and giving it to the Romanian people. Based on the data analysed so far, I would argue that the future success and growth of these political movements is related to their ability to tap into the regenerated civil society, which is formed by these disparate networks discussed above.

7.2 A Short Critique of the Romanian Social Movements

There are several ways in which the three Romanian movements studied in this thesis research can be criticised. Uniți Salvăm was harshly contested by the mass media and
seldom received any support. They were accused—mostly by the mainstream media and politicians—of being against progress, of stopping a hugely beneficial mining project that would bring jobs to a suffering community, of being against free-market capitalism (Nechita and Anghel, 2008; Velicu, 2012; Velicu, 2015). Other criticism of the movements was that they are too easily appropriated by political structures and that they fail to represent true grassroots voices. They are also questioned with regards to the culture of protest that they developed, particularly in the later stages, which seems to critics disengaged from actual ideology and political contestation and veering into recreational activism (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2017).

7.2.1 Political Instrumentalization

One of the legitimate critiques of the Romanian social movements is the question of whether they actually caused any lasting change or if they were tolerated or encouraged because they served political interests. We have seen that at least in the Colectiv and Rezist movements, the protests were praised and used for political capital by the centre-right and right-wing parties and against PSD. Left-wing critics of the movements are pointing out that some of the movement activists were too close to the political right and their framing of both the problems and the solutions fits perfectly within a lean-state, fiscally conservative, neoliberal ideology, as well as attacking any idea of socialism (Poenaru, 2017). Furthermore, it is clear from both the social movement data and the interviews that PSD are the least represented in the protests. Most chants were directed against PSD and their leaders, such as “Muie Ponta!” (Fuck you, Ponta!) or PSD Ciuma Rosie (PSD The Red Plague). Iohannis, the Romanian President from PNL (The National Liberal Party) also supported the later Romanian social movements as he rightly felt that the people in the streets supported him in his electoral campaign. Both USR and PNL MPs would frequently attend the protests and posted them on their social media pages. They defended the protests on TV talk shows and in the print media. They claimed they drew their legitimacy from ‘the streets’ and promised to follow through with harsh anticorruption policies.
Another problematic instrumentalization of the protests has been reflected in the rise to power of the nationalist-populist AUR. Although as previously discussed, many of their prominent members were part of the social movements in different ways and at different times, their relationship with the movements was contentious. They often derided the progressivism of some of the protesters while often agreeing with some of the diagnostic framing, particularly those relating to the corruption of the established political class. Their political discourse mirrored at times that found in the Rezist movement, or that of USR. During the Covid pandemic they organised protests themselves.

7.2.2 The Protest as Entertainment

Further criticism of the Romanian social movements is that they were purely aesthetic and providing to no real contestation of political power. The media hostile to the movements called them ‘hipsters’ and ‘tefelisti’, which is a play on the words ‘the free and beautiful youth’ used by president Iohannis to praise the protesters. In Roșia Montană, FanFest was a festival developed by Alburnus Maior activists which offered activist training camps, discussions on environmental or political issues, but also concerts, traditional cooking lessons, arts and crafts, or sporting events (GreenReport, 2010). During the first few days of the Colectiv and Rezist protests the atmosphere was more sombre and emotionally charged, but during the later months of each wave of mobilisation, the core activist groups found creative ways of protesting, including singing, graffiti, or flashmobs. Data collected from social media shows that several participants were unhappy with the ‘alternative’ or ‘artistic’ activities happening during later protests. Gubernat and Rammelt (2017) argue that the aesthetic or recreational component of the Romanian movements is in fact a pattern of cultural consumption in the context of political disenchantment. The Romanian culture of protest is therefore representing a retreat of ideology and is a social capital-seeking activity, which relies on self-gratification and aesthetic consumption (2017, p. 158). However, taking all of this into consideration, I will argue that regardless of the very plausible aesthetic or
recreational component of the three major waves of protest, these had a profound impact on Romanian social and political life.

7.3 Future Research

The topics of the political developments that followed the three Romanian social movements are likely to warrant future research. Each of the three political movements which emerged in the aftermath of the Romanian social movements of the 2010s is influenced in more than one way by them. Each of the three main political seems to occupy a distinct ideological space. USR represents the centre-right liberalism—albeit less socially liberal than traditional Western liberalism—with strong libertarian influences. Demos tried to emulate the new type of left-wing political movements such as Podemos, favouring representative democracy, a strong welfare state, and an emphasis on social justice. AUR represents the far right: deeply nationalist, populist, Eurosceptic, and with harsh law and order policies.

Out of these three parties, the rise of AUR merits a lengthier research. Their use of pre-existing social networks, created during the Romanian anticorruption movements and by USR is of particular interest. A deeper social media ethnography of these online spaces, many on diaspora Facebook pages and groups, and a frame analysis on the online content provided by the AUR leaders would likely be useful to show both the framing processes deployed strategically by AUR and how these are disseminated and transformed within the online social networks. AUR also created astroturfing mobilisation for Covid-related issues, either against masks in public places or against the vaccines. These would be useful occasions to further investigate the tactics and strategies deployed by AUR leaders, as well as to attempt explanations for the intense Covid scepticism in Romania.

USR has already become an established political power in Romania and the element which would necessitate further study is its relationship with civil society; meaning the extent to which it is the political party which has a symbiotic relationship
with parts of the newly emerged civil society, NGO networks, and private capital. Their rise represents a new political wave of centrist technocracy, which could have implications for the political structure of Romania.

Demos has been studied extensively during this doctoral thesis, having performed interviews with members, as well as participating to many live events, and following their online presence. An ethnographic study of the origins, growth, and struggles of this political movement be useful to political sociology scholars. I would argue that in many ways, the failures of Demos represent the weaknesses of left-wing parties and movements across Europe and North America.

In conclusion, having charted the development of three broad movements across three distinct moments in modern Romanian history, I will argue that their impact is likely long-lasting and to a large extent unpredictable, even for the most skilled social scientists. Social networks were formed, online and offline; a new generation of young activists emerged, whether leaning left, right, or sitting in the centre; new political movements are shaking the establishment; and Romania has a newly invigorated civil society with a loud voice, whether we agree with it or not.
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