

**ROMANIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT:  
BETWEEN REPOLITICIZATION AND REINFORCEMENT  
OF THE STATUS-QUO (2012-2017)**

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**Abstract**

*The article states that the social movement that emerged in Romania in 2012 is part of the global anti-austerity movement. It proposes the movement's analysis in the key of Karl Polanyi's theory of double movement, portraying it as a counter-movement opposing the third way of marketization, which involves commodification through dispossession of access to water, land, air and other free public goods. The article shows how the movement, which started as an anti-system protest articulated a series of claims that contested the post-communist consensus and revealed some fundamental conflicts of the society, obscured and mystified by the dominant power structures. It demonstrates that the social movement's anti-system agenda had a powerful repoliticization potential and announced a new discursive regime challenging the hegemonic discourse, which uses depoliticization tactics for maintaining the existing power structures. The article describes how in parallel to the anti-system discourse the social movement accommodated an anti-governmental narrative that became dominant in the most recent protests of 2017, diminishing the repoliticization and, thus, the emancipatory potential of the movement.*

**Keywords:** social movements, austerity, depoliticization, anti-system discourse, emancipation

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## Introduction

Starting with 2012, Romania experienced a wave of protests, combined with civic activism in-between the protest periods. This context enables some researchers to speak about the emergence of a social movement<sup>1</sup>.

Since 2012, when people went out to protest against a draft law that aimed to privatize the health care system, different political events have triggered repeated street demonstrations: in 2013, the draft law giving green light to cyanide exploitation of country's gold resources, in 2014 the poor organization of the presidential elections, in 2015 the refusal of the President to promulgate a law that would limit the illegal logging, in 2016 a fire incident in a Bucharest night club and, finally, in 2017 an emergency ordinance issued by the Government that would soften the anti-corruption legislation. Despite the variety of the issues that triggered the civic unrest, the protests have in common a number of characteristics that create continuity between them: heterogeneous ideological composition, horizontal structure and absence of leaders, informal and diffuse networks for mobilization (#UnitiSalvam, #CoruptiaUcide, #Rezist). These characteristics can be found in all the protests that took place in Romania starting with 2012; however, one can also distinguish important differences between the protests, evolving over the time.

Our hypothesis is that the social movement that emerged in Romania starting with 2012 began as an anti-system protest, but over the years has abandoned its anti-system character and turned into an anti-government protest. By anti-system and anti-governmental character we understand not only a set of claims, but complex ideological constructions, that determine the manner in which the public discontent is formulated. We also state that the anti-system character had a much higher potential of repoliticizing the political sphere than the anti-governmental protest has.

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<sup>1</sup> Clara Volintiru, *Romania's Recent Protests Have Become a Social Movement Calling for the Dignity of the People in the Face of an Unaccountable Government*, 20 March, 2012; Michael Burawoy, "Times of Turmoil: Emerging Visions from Three Years of *Global Dialogue*", Paper presented at the Third ISA Conference of the Council of National Associations, May 13-16, 2013 at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, [<http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Global%20Sociology/Times%20of%20Turmoil.pdf>], accessed June 2017 .

The aim of this article is to analyze the way in which the ideological dimension of the protest was articulated and its impact on the emancipatory potential of the social movement.

### **Romanian social movement as part of the global anti-austerity movement**

There are two dominant theoretical approaches in the social movements' literature, each emphasizing different characteristics of the collective action. The first approach is enrooted in Charles Tilly theory of resource mobilization that describes the social movements as being the rational behavior of collective actors which aim to consolidate their position at the political level by mobilizing different resources, including violence, if needed.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the social movements are formed by rational actors, engaging in strategic political battles and using for that organizational, informational, financial, social resources. The absence of these resources blocks the collective action and makes it irrelevant, if not impossible.

A second theoretical approach, whose main exponent is Alain Touraine, understands the social movements as actions undertaken by dominated actors, who challenge the existing order in an attempt to appropriate the 'historicity' control<sup>3</sup>. The social movement is the action through which dominated, protesting actors define their identity (on whose behalf they are mobilizing), recognize the social nature of the opponent (who is both dominant and in power) and claims to manage or monitor the major orientations of collective life – this is what Touraine calls the historicity of society. What is essential to the social movements is the idea that by aiming at the control of historicity, the social movement, through its conflictual action, produces the whole of society, transforms it and structures it<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Tilly and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century: 1830-1930*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society*, New York: Random House, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Wieviorka, "Alain Touraine and the Concept of Social Movement", Intervention at *ISA World Congress of Sociology*, Yokohama, July 2014, [<https://wieviorka.hypotheses.org/318>], accessed July 2017.

The two orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive: one could state that the first one emphasizes the goal, while the second prioritizes the significance, the meaning. However, the second approach offers richer and more complex possibilities of analysis, contrary to the functionalist approach of resources mobilizations, because it does not focus exclusively on political opportunities and access channels, but also on social and economic context in which the social movement emerges<sup>5</sup>.

It must be noticed that the type of analysis that transcends the framework of the nation state and focuses on the structural characteristics of the intersection between economic, political and social factors, between capitalism and democracy is quasi-absent from the study of social movements. Some attempts in this direction can be identified, however. The new social movements' studies include in the analysis the socio-economic transformations and the transition from the material production of the Fordist economy to the immaterial production of the post-Second World War economies that alleviates the class cleavages and makes possible a new type of demands, different from the socio-economic claims of the past and enrooted in post-materialistic values<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, a trans disciplinary approach that goes beyond the classical social movements study and includes elements of political economy, political theory, political philosophy and political sociology can offer a much richer analysis and a more complex understanding of the social movement.

For investigating the social movement that emerged in Romania after 2012 I propose to start from the Karl Polanyi's works, which offers the framework for a macro-analysis that can be used for social movement study<sup>7</sup>. The key notions proposed by Polanyi when referring to economy and markets is the concept of separation as opposed to embeddedness. Polanyi argues that in pre-capitalist times markets were embedded in social relations, the self-regulating market being nonexistent – the production and distribution of goods were encapsulated in social institutions. The capitalism and the promoters of *laissez faire* have reverted this relationship: the economic relations have not only been released from the "girdle" of

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<sup>5</sup> Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements in Times of Austerity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Touraine, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2001 [1944].

social relations, but they try to subordinate the social norms to the market logic. Faced with this trend that involves the commodification of labor, nature, money (called fictions commodities), the society tends to protect itself – for Polanyi, and the experience of commodification is deeply traumatizing, more profound and immediate than the exploitation. This is how we are arriving to the double movement theory – the counter movement of the society which is defending itself appears as a reaction to the market expansion. The struggle is a central element of Polanyi's theory – not the class struggle, like for Marxists, but the opposition between the forces that support the commodification and those who oppose it, seeking more social protection. Social movements are key actors of this struggle, although the counter movement can rely on a wider spectrum of actors, such as political parties and even the state itself.

The Romanian social movement can be, thus, understood in the larger framework of the anti-austerity movements that emerged in the world following the 2008 economic crisis. Starting from Polanyi's work, the sociologist Michael Burawoy develops the theory of the three marketization waves<sup>8</sup>. What we currently face, starting with 1970 is nothing than the third wave of marketization, commonly known as neoliberalism, which is just another name for the *laissez faire* ideology. If the first wave of marketization (1850-192) commodified the labor and the second (1920-1970) commodified the money, the third wave of marketization (1970 – until now) consists in the commodification of nature and life, putting in danger the existence of entire communities or species. The third way of marketization involves commodification through dispossession of access to land, water, and air as well as to free public education and open public knowledge. It is de-regulation and dispossession -- the conditions of expanded commodification rather than commodification itself -- that generate social movements, according to Burawoy.

Burawoy argues that the first marketization wave is national at its origin and triggers local reactions, such as workers movements, obtaining extensive labor rights; the second wave has international origins (the gold standard and the international trade) and triggered national reactions, with

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Burawoy, "Third-Wave Sociology and the End of Pure Science", in *The American Sociologist*, Fall/Winter 2005, [[http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/TAS1/third\\_wave.pdf](http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/TAS1/third_wave.pdf)], accessed June 2017.

the states trying to protect the society from the devastating effects of the international trade through protectionism and through more social protection (public pension system, social protection, social rights). The third wave of marketization has international origins and triggers global reactions – although the opposition can be organized at local or national level, it must reach the global dimension of the problem in order to be solved. These are what Wieviorka calls global movements – their demands include a global vision, often receive support from transnational networks and open new negotiating areas at the global level, going beyond the national states<sup>9</sup>.

From this perspective, the movement that emerged in Romania in 2012 can be described as part of the global anti-austerity movement<sup>10</sup>. The protest started in January 2012 and was triggered by the Government's intention to privatize the health care system, as part of the anti-austerity measures and structural reforms implemented starting with 2009. A set of crushing austerity measures was applied in 2010 – public-sector wages were cut by 25 percent; social security benefits by 15 percent; and VAT increased from 19 percent to 24 percent. The austerity measures had negative social consequences, including persistently high unemployment, a low employment rate and a low sense of wellbeing among the population<sup>11</sup>. Of all public-sector jobs lost in Europe in 2010, 21 percent were lost in Romania<sup>12</sup>. The protests, as other anti-austerity movements, expressed the dissatisfaction of the population with the commodification that started soon after 1989, being at the core of the economic transition from a planned to a market economy and which reached its pick in the crisis years (2009-2012). In 2009-2012 an unprecedented attack on the social and labor rights took place – the Labor Code was amended and the labor relations

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Wieviorka (ed.), *Un Autre Monde; Contestations, Dérives et Surprises dans l'Anti-mondialisation*, Paris: Balland, 2003b.

<sup>10</sup> Cătălin Augustin Stoica and Vintilă Mihăilescu "2012. Romania's Winter of Discontent", in *Global Dialogue* 3.1.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Stoiciu, "Austerity and Structural Reforms in Romania", in *International Policy Analysis*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Dragan Plavšić, "The Romanian Protests. Why Have Hundreds of Thousands of Romanians Taken to the Streets this Month Against a Nominally Center-Left Government?", in *Jacobin*, 02.22.2017, [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/romania-protests-corruption-psd-iohannis-austerity/>], accessed February 2017.

flexibilized, the social assistance legislation was changed with the state reducing its role in poverty eradication, the trade unions were deprived of their powers. The free market logic penetrated in spheres which were until then protected by a set of social relations whose formal expression was the legal framework. The process was not specific to Romania, but was a global one – similar measures have been undertaken on other countries, like Greece, Italy, Portugal or Spain, triggering similar popular unrest.

The demands of the Romanian protests reveal a similarity in messages and claims with movements like Indignados or Occupy - they denounce the deep injustices of the society, unequal distribution of power, resources, and privileges<sup>13</sup>. Whenever they oppose to the exploitation of gold resources by a multinational corporation, with huge ecological risks, to the privatization of public health care or to the indifference and abuses of authorities that made possible the fire incident, there is always another level of claims that goes beyond these specific demands – it is a criticism towards the system as a whole, a contestation of the very premises of the social contract concluded between ordinary citizens and elites. Hence, the specific issues were subordinated to a wider dissatisfaction with “politics as usual” and with the negative externalities produced by these politics, such as ecological risks, regulatory capture, human rights abuses. These problems are local, they emerge in the specific context of post-communist Romania, but in the same time they have a strong global dimension, being very similar, sometimes identical with problems faced in other places. This is why we see alliances with groups from other countries, such as anti-mining activists from Chile, Greece, or Germany. Moreover, the solutions these problems require are not only local or national – they require European/global regulations, be it in the area of cyanide use or budgetary deficit targets.

Therefore, we state that similarly to other anti-austerity protests, the Romanian demonstrations were not so much about austerity in itself, but about politics in general, being driven by a general distrust in established political institutions and by deep-seated notions of skepticism and

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<sup>13</sup> Victoria Stoiciu, “The Romanian Autumn 2013 and the Return of Politics. Protest Against Mining Projects and Fracking in Romania: Actors and Discourses”, in *Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft*, No. 01/2016.

discomfort at the way political decisions are made<sup>14</sup>. The Romanian protests did not express the dissatisfaction with one particular political party, institution or leader, but a critique towards the political system as such. *All political parties are the same misery* is the a recurring slogan in almost all the protests that took place since 2012, with few exceptions, the most notable being the protest from February 2017, when the anti-system discourse was replaced with the dissatisfaction against one institution and one party – the Government, formed by the Social-Democratic Party (PSD). Further on, we argue that this reflects more than a simple change in the protests’ target – as we will show, it reflects a deep ideological transformation that began already in 2013 demonstrations.

### **From anti-system to anti-government protests – 2012-2017**

The Romanian social movement that emerged in 2012 was characterized from the very beginning by a high ideological heterogeneity. Liberals, leftists, nationalists, ecologists and even extreme right groups stranded together against a political establishment whose outcome was the abuse of power, legislation in favor of a privileged minority and an irresponsible exploitation of country’s (natural) resources<sup>15</sup>. Each group attending the protests articulated the dissatisfaction in its own language, although the triggering factor was the same for everybody – a draft law in favor of a multinational company, allowing the exploitation of gold resources and involving ecological risks in 2013, the poor organization of the vote outside Romania, limiting the right to vote in 2014, the illegal logging and the failure of the political class to stop it in the summer of 2015, the public authorities’ negligence and corruption, leading to a fire incident that ended up with the dead of more than 60 persons in the fall of 2015 and, finally, the abuse of power for protecting some corrupt politicians in February 2017. For the liberals, for example, each of the above mentioned issues represented an abuse against the rule of law principles, a sign of discretionary and corrupt governance. For nationalists, it was the country’s national interest that was always put in danger by “selling the country to the foreigners”. The leftists groups emphasized the structural deficiencies

<sup>14</sup> Mary Kaldor, Sabine Selchow (eds.), *Subterranean Politics in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Stoiciu, “The Romanian Autumn 2013 and the Return of Politics...”.



of the capitalism, leading to disproportionate power of the capital over the citizens and the absence of social justice. For ecologists, at stake was the protection of the environment. Although in some cases the issue that triggered the popular discontent was not necessarily offering the premises for narrating it in nationalist, ecologist or other ideological groups' terms – for example, the protests over the fire incident in November 2015, that had nothing to do with the ecologists' agenda – those groups were still attending the popular gathering, because each time the protest's demands were going beyond their immediate claims and were translated in more general, global requirements. What was at stake in every protest was the opposition against the political establishment as a whole, against the political system in place. This anti-system narrative was not diluting, nor was it diminishing the ideological heterogeneity of the protests, but made the co-existence of different ideological groups possible.

In parallel with this opposition to the entire political system, one could observe already starting with 2013 an alternative narrative of the protests, which tried to frame the protests as being merely anti-governmental and directed against the governing party, PSD. This narrative was present in every protest, cutting across the ideological divides; the anti-system discourse and the anti-governmental one became the social movement's main cleavage. Although the two narratives coexisted in every protest, in some cases the anti-system one was more powerful (2013, 2015) and in others the anti-governmental message dominated (2014). In 2017, this tension ended up with a total elimination of the anti-system discourse. If in previous protests slogans like "All political parties have cut the forests", "The entire political class is guilty" "We went into the street not for changing the government, but for changing the system" coexisted with slogans directed against one single political party or against the government, in 2017 the street was overwhelmingly voicing only messages demanding the resignation of the government and blaming the PSD leaders.

The abandoning of the anti-system narrative in 2017 was also evident from the change of the protest's location – in previous protests, the crowd was gathering in University Square, a place with a strong symbolism. Although no public institution is located in the University Square, the place is symbolizing the past opposition against the communist

regime – thus, not against a specific institution or party, but against the system as a whole. Sometimes, the protesters organized marches throughout the city, stopping in front of different public institutions – Government, Parliament, and Presidential Administration; none of the three state powers was exempted from the contestation of the protesters. However, in February 2017 the protesters only gathered together in Victoriei Square, where the Government’s building is located. Moreover, if in 2012 or 2013 all the political figures who tried to attend the protests have been pushed away and rejected by the crowd, in 2017 the president Iohannis was warmly received amongst the protesters, whom he declared as being “his Romanians”, edifying the alliance between a part of the system and the street.

The abandoning of the anti-system narrative in 2017 might not be the final destination of the Romanian social movement, the history of which is still work in progress. However, the transformation marked a powerful change in the protests’ nature and agenda. I argue here that contrary to the anti-government discourse, the anti-system narrative had the potential of re-politicizing the political space in Romania, bringing more democracy and thus having a higher emancipation potential.

### **The repoliticization potential of the Romanian social movement**

As in many other post-communist countries, the Romanian political sphere was marked by depoliticization – a narrowing of the boundaries of democratic politics, a dislocation of the politics from the political institutions. Depoliticization has been a topic of interest in sociology, political science, and development studies for many decades, hence there is a wide, cross disciplinary literature on depoliticization, starting with Carl Schmitt and Marcuse and ending up with the work of Rancière, Žižek, Burnham, Hay, etc.

In spite the variety of definitions and theories, depoliticization is used to capture a democratic condition in which genuine contestation and conflicting claims about the world are perceived to be no longer apparent. Rancière distinguish between archi-politics, para-politics and meta-politics as specific forms of depoliticization<sup>16</sup>. Žižek adds to this triangle the ultra-

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

politics and the post-politics<sup>17</sup>. For Peter Burnham, depoliticization is a form of statecraft whereby the political character of decision-making is removed from elected government<sup>18</sup>. For Colin Hay, whose work has been perhaps the most influential in this strand of the depoliticization literature, depoliticisation involves moving an issue from the governmental sphere to the public sphere or from the public sphere to the private sphere or from the private sphere to the realm of necessity<sup>19</sup>. Hay argues that issues can be politicized, with increasing intensity, if they are promoted from the realm of necessity to the private sphere, from the private to the public sphere, from the public sphere to the government sphere. Depoliticization operates in analogous fashion - only in reverse. Hay's definition of depoliticization overlaps with Andreas Schedler's description of anti-politics, a term used sometimes for depoliticization and that is the tendency to abolish politics by replacing the politics' rationality with another rationality - replacing collective problems with self-regulating orders (for example market), or contingency with necessity (for example, TINA – there is no alternative) or plurality with uniformity ("the people" of populists)<sup>20</sup>.

For better understanding the depoliticization, an incursion into what politics is necessary, since depoliticization is precisely the reverse of the politics, the evacuation of politics from its *locus*. Many authors, among which Rancière, Mouffe, Laclau etc distinguish between *la politique* and *le politique*, between the institutionalized politics - defined as the state-centered interpretation and representation of political affairs and the real, genuine politics, defined as the sphere of authentic political/democratic engagement between individuals. For Chantal Mouffe, the political is the dimension of antagonism constitutive of human societies, while politics is the set of practices through which an order is created<sup>21</sup>. For Rancière, *le politique* is the disruption of the police order, which is the exercise of power

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Burnham, "New Labour and the Politics of Depoliticisation", in *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, No. 3, pp. 127–149, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Schedler, (ed.), *The End of Politics? Explorations into Modern Antipolitics*, London and New York: Macmillan and St Martin's, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005.

that is depoliticizing by its essence<sup>22</sup>. “Real politics” is not only different, but also opposes and disrupts the police order (*la police*), which encapsulates the institutionalized forms of doing politics and prescribes our reality in the realm of perception itself. *Le politique* introduces a disruption in this order as its essence is the manifestation of dissensus, as the “presence of two worlds in one”<sup>23</sup>. Critical scholars like Hay, Laclau and Mouffe all speak of politicization, and thus conflict, as essential to democratization. The notion of antagonism and conflict seems essential to politics – the politics occurs anywhere or over any issue that does not concern only one single individual and is not determined by fate, natural order or necessity- politics being the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective or social choice<sup>24</sup>.

What happened in Romania and in other post-communist countries after 1989 was a process of depoliticization by which a number of fundamental conflicts, occurring as a result of the economic transition, have been de-politicized. The transition from state socialism to a market economy triggered a series of new cleavages and conflicts, such as the cleavage between rural and urban, between poor and rich, between losers and winners of the transition. The de-industrialization, the privatization and restructuring of the former state companies produced huge numbers of unemployed people, who were left behind by the new economic system and had to migrate to the Western European Union countries in search of a better life or to remain at home, working in agriculture, mostly subsistence agriculture that correlates with high levels of poverty. The result is a poverty rate that is the highest in EU and that affects almost half of the country’s population (40%, according to Eurostat). Others have opted out for the solution of early retirement, encouraged by the state as a solution for preventing the rise in unemployment, which created millions of citizens able to work, but inactive and, as a rule, confronted with poverty, since the pensions’ level is very low. On the other hand, the transition created privileged groups – while about 500,000 people in the country have a pension of 90 euros per month, people who were employees of the army, police, diplomats, judges and prosecutors, all together accounting for about

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”, in *Theory and Event*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

160.000 persons have significantly higher pensions, so called “special” - the average pension for the ex-military is around 700 Euros, and 1400 Euros for the civilians<sup>25</sup>. The inequality is the highest in European Union and has increased even in the years of strong economic growth.

All those issues and the societal conflicts lying behind them have been constantly obscured – by excluding them from the public and political agenda they have been depoliticized. In Romania, the depoliticization took several forms. The first manner of depoliticization was the privatization of the problems – the problems lost their collective dimensions and have been transformed into private issues. Poverty, social marginalization, unemployment were not acknowledged as being a collective problem, requiring a collective answer - the individuals have been made the only ones responsible for their success and failure. Instead, collective problems have been replaced with self-regulating orders – the free market laws, which dictate the rules of the game. In the same time, the contingency has been replaced with necessity – the free market and the capitalism were perceived as being the only alternative to the old, planned economy and, hence, justifying all the sacrifices and negative externalities, such as unemployment or social exclusion.

Instead, the political agenda has been populated with pseudo-conflicts, such as the hard inheritance of the communist past, allegedly responsible for the country’s backwardness. By blaming the communist regime, the source of the present problems’ has been evacuated in a past that can only be condemned, and not changed, thus becoming a fatality, a necessity.

Next to the pseudo-problems, the real problems included on the public agenda have been depoliticized by the way they have been framed. A relevant example of this is the corruption problem, which increasingly gained in importance after 2005. The corruption was presented as being the unethical behavior of some politicians or public servants, without being put into connection with post-communist privatizations, society’s structure and capitalist logic. In the same time, the anti-corruption fight focused almost exclusively on corruption in public institutions and neglected the

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<sup>25</sup> Claudiu Crăciun, “Romania’s Second Democratic Transition”, in *International Policy Analysis*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Department for Central and Eastern Europe, January, 2017.

corruption in the private sector, by this inducing the idea that politics is dirty and immoral, and the state is inefficient and corrupt. While corruption represents an endemic problem in Romania, explaining it in purely ethical terms, detached from the political economy of transition is a way of depoliticising the problem. This depoliticization discourse was perfectly consistent with the neoliberal dogma, insistently promoted in post-communist Romania and becoming an all-encompassing discursive and performative doctrine after 1989.

What the social movement's anti-system narrative succeeded was an attempt to depoliticize the political space by challenging the post-communist consensus that obscured the conflicts cutting across the society and by making the social antagonisms visible. In Rancière's terms, the invisible became visible and the unsayable was said loud voice. A long series of problems kept quiet for more than two decades have been expressed in the protests that started in 2012 – the commodification of the environment, the huge social cost of some public policies and public investments, the deficiencies of the development model followed by Romania, the asymmetry between the privileged few and the vast majority. The specific demands – such an opposition to a mining project or to illegal logging – have been absorbed into global demands, challenging the very premises of the post-communist consensus. In each protest, the particular problem that triggered the popular mobilization was only the pretext for articulating a deeper and more general discontent, referring to the social contract of the transition, to the fundamentals of the system as such. As Žižek affirms, a popular uprising starts becoming political when the particular demand “starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of the global (universal) opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand”<sup>26</sup>.

By abandoning the anti-system discourse, the 2017 protests abandoned also the articulation of the discontent in global and in the same time radical terms. The criticism of the protesters was focused on political class corruption, without going further on and questioning the structural conditions that facilitate the corruption or pointing out the social problems associated to it. Rather the opposite, the anticorruption narrative

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<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *op. cit.*

formulated during the protests was consistent with the dominant discourse that depoliticize the corruption issue by detaching it from the political economy of the transition and explaining it by the unethical behavior of the political elite, the country's political culture, the inheritance of the communist past. According to this narrative, PSD that is the successor of the former Communist Party is the most corrupt party due to its link with the past. "PSD, the red plague", a recurrent slogan of the protests, illustrates the central assumptions of this narrative: the communist inheritance (corruption), incarnated by a political party (PSD) is a dangerous disease that spreads inside the political body. The source of the problem is being externalized – it is not a wrong social arrangement or an unfair social contract, to which the injustice is intrinsic and that, such being the case, must be changed, but it is an external factor (the communist ideology, the communist past) that impedes the fulfillment of the post-communist social contract.

The disruptive character of the previous anti-system protests was obscured by the anti-governmental narrative, entangled in the dominant good governance and neoliberal discourse. As a result, none of the latent social conflicts expressed by the previous protests have been made visible, nor did the protest seek new ways of framing the existing problems, by envisaging their collective dimension and their contingency. While the previous anti-system protests created a new democratic dynamic that disclosed some of the fundamental antagonisms of the Romanian society and created a dynamic that disrupted the distribution of the sensible<sup>27</sup>, the anti-governmental protests only has strengthen the dominant discourse.

By not accomplishing the politicization potential of the previous protests, the social movement that emerged in Romania in 2012 diminished also its emancipation potential. Despite some differences in understanding the nature of depoliticization, there seems to be a consensus among different authors in understanding it as a tactics deployed by political actors to maintain the status quo of existing power relations. Tactics of depoliticization try "to conceal the contingency of reality, sew the gaps in hegemonic discourses and channel dislocations in such a way that

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<sup>27</sup>Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique*, Paris : La Fabrique-Éditions, 2000.

fundamental social structures remain untouched”<sup>28</sup>. As Wilson and Swyngedouw summarize the positions of Mouffe, Rancière, and Žižek, Mouffe is concerned with the post-political as the repression of antagonism, Rancière with post-democracy as the disavowal of equality, and Žižek with post-politics as the foreclosure. Following these different understandings, different political projects for repoliticization are envisaged - Mouffe pledges for a repoliticization of the division between Left and Right, and a radical democracy of agonistic pluralism; for Rancière the political moment consists above all in the act of revoking the law of birth and wealth and in the attempt to build a common world on the basis of that sole contingency; for Žižek, for whom the depoliticized economy is the “fundamental fantasy” of postmodern politics, a properly political act would necessarily entail the repoliticization of the economy<sup>29</sup>. Whatever the political projects that arise from these definitions are, the re-politicization is recognized as the main and only way towards more equality, more democracy and emancipation. Hence, by abandoning the anti-system character and turning into an anti-governmental protest, the Romanian protests from 2017 missed their repoliticization potential, and diminished their emancipatory character.

### Final remarks

We have shown how the marginalization of the anti-system discourse and prevalence of the anti-governmental narrative in the most recent protests diminished the repoliticization potential and thus, the emancipatory character of the social movement that occurred in Romania in 2012. Instead of promoting an emancipatory agenda, the anti-governmental narrative only reinforces the existing power relations, by articulating the claims and demands of the protesters in the vocabulary of the hegemonic discourse that legitimizes the existing power structures. As Gramsci observed, the hegemony does not exclude resistance – by contrary,

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<sup>28</sup>Benjamin Stephan, Delf Rothe and Chrus Methmann, “Third Side of the Coin: Hegemony and Governmentality in Global Climate Politics”, in Johanes Stripple, Harriet Bulkeley (eds.), *Governing the Climate. New Approaches to Rationality, Power and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Japhy Wilson, Erik Swyngedouw, *The Post-Political and Its Discontents. Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014.



it can incorporate attempts of resistance by depriving them of their force and transforming them into a reinforcement of status-quo<sup>30</sup>.

However, there is no evidence that the prevalence of the anti-governmental discourse over the anti-system discourse is the final outcome of the Romanian social movement. According to Karl Polanyi's theory, which offers the key analytical tools for this article, different types of movements compete to win support from some of the same social groups. Polanyi admits that the counter-movement that opposes the embedding of social relations into market strengthens broad political coalitions mobilized around a particular goal that can be emancipatory or not. Sometimes, the counter-movement can take reactionary and oppressive forms, as it was the case of the fascism in Germany in 1930, which in Polanyi's view is, next to social-democracy, a form by which the society tried to protect itself against the marketization. Despite its incontestable merits of creating an analytical framework that connects the social movements study with a broader economic and political dynamics' analysis, Polanyi's theory does not explain the social movements' ideological orientation, neither their emancipatory or reactionary character. Polanyi only intended to demonstrate the thesis that the origins of the cataclysm of world wars, the Great Depression, and fascism lay in the utopian endeavor of economic liberalism to set up a self-regulating market system. This is the weakness, but also the strength of Polanyi's theory – similarly to Marxist theory, he understands the capitalist crisis as objective phenomena, as macro-structures' and system's failure, but contrary to Marxism he introduces into the analysis elements of inter-subjectivity, in which the individuals play the role of the agent and are not simple tools of dialectical processes. As Burawoy correctly point out referring to the contemporary counter-movements, there is no guarantee that even if they achieve their, they will seek the expansion rather than contraction of freedoms<sup>31</sup>.

The manner in which the social movement's ideology will be articulated depend on some combination of specifically local factors, the relative strength of different actors and their political skills. The history of the Romanian social movement is still on-going, so the movement is open

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<sup>30</sup> Antonio Gramsci (Buttigieg, Joseph A, ed.), *Prison Notebooks*, New York City: Columbia University Press, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Burawoy, "Third-Wave Sociology ...".

to further transformation that will constitute, in its turn, subject for new research and analysis.

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