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Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca

(editor)

Borders, Barriers and Protest Culture



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INTRODUCTION

On December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, held a televised speech announcing his resignation. The following day the Supreme Soviet would formally validate the fact that the Union ceased to exist. The former communist leader stated the abandonment of the ideological premises that provided the Soviet Union with the status of a global power during the Cold War, emphasizing the critical transformation through which the society passed at that time. He also affirmed categorically the embracing of liberal principles in order to ensure the well-being of people:

“As the economy is being steered toward the market format, it is important to remember that the intention behind this reform is the well-being of man, and during this difficult period everything should be done to provide for social security, which particularly concerns old people and children.

We're now living in a new world. And end has been put to the cold war and to the arms race, as well as to the mad militarization of the country, which has crippled our economy, public attitudes and morals. The threat of nuclear war has been removed.

Once again, I would like to stress that during this transitional period, I did everything that needed to be done to insure that there was reliable control of nuclear weapons. We opened up ourselves to the rest of the world, abandoned the practices of interfering in others' internal affairs and using troops

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outside this country, and we were reciprocated with trust, solidarity, and respect” (Reuters, 1991).

Gorbachev assumed, on behalf of the entire community, the necessity of sacrifice, the presumption of the inferiority of the Soviet institutions in relation to the beneficial ideals of liberalism:

“The change ran up against our intolerance, a low level of political culture and fear of change. That is why we have wasted so much time. The old system fell apart even before the new system began to work. Crisis of society as a result aggravated even further.

I'm aware that there is popular resentment as a result of today's grave situation. I note that authority at all levels, and myself are being subject to harsh criticisms. I would like to stress once again, though, that the cardinal change in so vast a country, given its heritage, could not have been carried out without difficulties, shock and pain”.

However, the imagined wonderful “new world” that required so many sacrifices, which determined huge masses of citizens of the socialist state to mobilize in street demonstrations in 1991, would have involved recognizing and preserving the democratic progress generated by the openness (*glasnost*) policy: “I consider it vitally important to preserve the democratic achievements which have been attained in the last few years. We have paid with all our history and tragic experience for these democratic achievements, and they are not to be abandoned, whatever the circumstances, and whatever the pretexts. Otherwise, all our hopes for the best will be buried. I am telling you all this honestly and straightforwardly because this is my moral duty”.

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Since then, despite the warning above, those hopes and the good intentions on which these were based disappeared without a trace. The transition has occurred, but not according to the terms of the socialist humanism that inspired the politics of openness and reform (*glasnost* and *perestroika*). 25 years after that crucial moment of 1991, the Cold War atmosphere made its presence felt again in the region. Preparing for war is once more considered an essential political priority, adversity and the politics of fear are ubiquitous.

The social history of the citizens of the socialist states, the history of social rights that they regarded as universal, the hopes for the welfare liberalism in which they believed or their confidence in the peaceful progress of mankind are being forgotten as older generations disappear. And the ideological transformation that has taken place in the meantime has had far-reaching political and economic consequences. As Francisco Martinez remarked, the term *post-socialism* was coined in the West in order “to study what followed the break-up of the Soviet Union, namely the privatisation of the means of production and public goods, the discredit of critics of capitalism, the dismantlement of the Cold War geopolitical barriers and the reduction to zero-value of the remnants from the past world. But even if the concept is first of all associated with East-Central Europe, the experience has had several collateral effects on the world as a whole as, for instance, an increase of labour and economic inequality; a growing vulnerability for individuals (discrediting of collective thought); a rise in the transnational circulation of capital; a technological shift which accelerates everyday life; an escalation of production (correlated by one of

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consumption); the in capability to verbalise political alternatives ; and an extensive desynchronisation of temporalities” (2017, 8).

As a result of the fierce competition to attract foreign capital, despite the expectations, neoliberal reforms introduced in Central and Eastern Europe have had a considerable durability and have advanced beyond their foreseeable limits. This trend strengthened the neoliberal paradigm and reinforced the feeling of no alternative, the references to the already ghostly socialist past being used by the “winners of the transition” typically in order to justify inequities, labour discipline, the glorification of the middle class and the dereliction of the social responsibilities of the state (Chelcea and Druja 2016, 525-529). From the perspective of the Romanian transition, if we choose an analytical approach focused on how the memory of socialism was instrumentalised by politicians, post-socialism can be defined as the era in which the ghostly appearance of communism is held alive just as a means to validate the perpetual continuity of neo-liberal political and economic strategies, it is the era of “*zombie socialism*”.

Gradually before 1989, at a rapid pace after, the capitalism with a human face, which preceded the 1979 oil crisis, became increasingly inhospitable transforming itself into its opposite. The neoliberal political order and free market fundamentalism are currently undermining the very social conditions of the existence of political liberalism.

As sad as a coincidence as this is, as if to reinforce the conclusion of this quarter-century, on December 19, 2016, Republican Donald Trump was elected by the Electoral College as President of the United States of America (Jacobs 2016). This happened in the shadow of a conspiracy theory. The election had

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been won, the Democratic Party officials claimed, following Putin regime's occult intervention in favour of its preferred candidate (Buncombe 2018). Simultaneously, conspiracy theories and fake news were pointed out as blamable for the defeat of Hilary Clinton.

At the beginning of the same year, *The Economist* magazine predicted, on the basis of the existing plans, that “Europe will soon have more physical barriers on its national borders than it did during the Cold War” (The Economist 2016). After the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation the period of the Cold War no longer seemed to be a distant recollection. But the process of border fortification is not of recent date, and concerns not just Europe. When Donald Trump claimed, announcing his candidacy, that he would raise a wall at the border with Mexico, he was doing nothing but fitting into an already confirmed global trend. The turn, paradoxical for the era of globalization, could be clearly distinguished since 2012, when the quantitative analysis made by Charles-Philippe David and Élisabeth Vallet indicated the acceleration of the process of construction of physical barriers with the onset of the “War on Terror”. In 2010, there were 45 border fortifications around the world, amounting to more than 29,000 km² (Vallet and David 2012, 112).

President G. W. Bush had initiated a similar project a decade before (Riggins 2017). So it was not a new proposal. Only the eccentric way of translating the general feeling of insecurity in terms of aggressive political rhetoric was new. Not only would the wall “protect” the American society from those who unlawfully dream “the American dream”, but the neighboring state (Mexico) will pay it. The efficiency of ideological devices

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advocating the strict control of access to citizenship, social mobility and freedom of movement (in a world that seems to be designed to ensure the free movement of goods and capital) is also new.

Along with strengthening of the borders, large-scale protest movements and high-intensity political mobilization engagements are the most visible aspects of contemporary politics. Borders and barriers are physical obstacles that reveal deeper social divisions; they are biopolitical devices with differential, ambivalent functions that determine different sets of rights for different social categories (Agnew 2008, Maestri and Hughes 2017). They are represented both as protective devices and as means to enforce constraints. Protest movements also have an ambivalent nature; they can be both unifying and divisive. In 1989 the demonstrations led to the fall of the Berlin Wall; a quarter of a century later, in Dresden, around 25,000 people manifested for a radical policy of closure (Charlton 2015; Dostal 2015; Rucht 2018). Even the most robust techno-optimistic presuppositions regarding the ability of online social networks to provide opportunities for benign political contestation have been proven inaccurate after the instrumental role of digital networks in spreading false news or in enabling the malicious use of private information for political purposes became obvious (Gerbaudo 2018; Reuters 2018).

After 2008, economic recession has been accompanied by large-scale political transformations, conflicts and social movements. The protest movements for democracy and against social inequality (“Los Indignados”, “Occupy Wall Street”, “Arab Spring”, “Euromaidan” etc.) have produced effects far beyond the boundaries of national politics. They have removed

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barriers to participation, have ignored the borders between states. Unfortunately, new barriers have begun to replace the old ones. These are rising much faster in Central and Eastern Europe, where post-socialist transition and the political legacy of the Cold War have added to the already complex multicultural jigsaw puzzle. The „new nationalism“ is increasingly efficient in mobilising the supporters of xenophobic political groups. Intellectual confusion weakens the idea of “shared European values” in its unifying core.

The volume “Borders, Barriers and Protest Culture” explores social cleavages and political conflicts without the understanding of which the new barriers, whether physical or symbolic, at the border of the European Union or between the communities surrounded by them, would be difficult or impossible to explain. The dynamics of the contentious movements and the protest culture are used here as a revealer of the mechanisms of exclusion or segregation, of deep ideological divisions built over a long period of time. The starting point implicit here is that social movements, especially the large protest movements, by the intensity of the social tensions that contribute to the process of political mobilization, have the capacity of indicating the fault lines that structure political antagonism.

Reflecting part of the knowledge produced within the framework of the research project “Borders, Barriers and Protest Culture. The New Politics of the Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe” (which was developed as part of the PATTERNS Lectures international program, through the collaboration between Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi and World University Service Austria), the book intends to

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illustrate not just distinct points of view, but also collaborative-conversational practices, types of discourse, ways of interpreting political reality at the intersection between social sciences, cultural studies and critical theory. It outlines local reflections regarding the tensions of political and economic transition in Central and Eastern Europe, based on the circumstances experienced by Romania and neighboring countries.

The first section of the book provides an analytical perspective on the anti-corruption movement in Romania and the protests that took place in Bucharest at the beginning of last year, exploring their context and the competing narratives that dispute their legitimacy. The second includes a series of interviews designed to capture the mechanics of social and political antagonism, relevant ideological positions or political narratives, drawing from insights provided by contributors who assume multiple roles as sociologists, political scientists, journalists, artists, educators, cultural workers or activists.

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca

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*Protest Movements
and Mobilization Structures
in Romania.
Recent Developments*

ANTI-CORRUPTION PROTESTS AND POLITICAL CRISIS. A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca

Large-scale protests in Bucharest in early 2017 caught the attention of the international public. They gathered a record number of participants (Marinas and Ilie 2017) and sent an unambiguous political message against governmental plans to issue a pardon emergency ordinance and to amend criminal legislation, regulations that could have led to less severe punishment for some of the politicians investigated by the National Anticorruption Directorate. They were not the first anti-corruption demonstrations, though. Their political effects cannot be understood without a contextual analysis that pursues their distinctive features in comparison with the series of protest movements that preceded them, the rival narratives that accompanied them, the relevant transformations in mobilization mechanisms, the crises and the general changes in the structure of the political competition that emerged the last few years. A thicker description of political events from a local perspective also helps avoid simplifying explanations.

The global financial crisis has generated a wave of protests around the world. In some cases these have significantly

influenced the terms of political competition. In Romania, where austerity measures were among the harshest and most profound compared to other EU states (Stoiciu 2012, 2-3, Trif 2013), the relevant protests held in Bucharest against austerity policies were initially carried out as a result of trade union organization and mobilization. In the winter of 2012 there has been a significant change in the dynamics and scale of mobilization. Directed in particular against radical budget restrictions and neo-liberal reforms (which were introduced in the absence of debates, through a special parliamentary procedure), this time they were caused by a particular incident that gave the demonstrations a noticeable anti-authoritarian vocation.

The indignation spontaneously manifested itself against the discretionary attitude of President Traian Basescu and Prime Minister Emil Boc when the government proposed a new public health reform plan that would have granted to private companies a greater role to play. State Secretary Raed Arafat, the founder of the Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication (SMURD), opposed the project publicly, criticizing the possible negative effects of privatization. After the president threatened Raed Arafat with dismissal at the end of December, during a TV show, he left the Ministry of Health on January 10th (Mediafax Newsroom 2012). Two days later, around 50 people were protesting in Cluj with banners saying "Respect Arafat" or "Do not condemn us to death!" On January 13th, in Târgu Mureș, a related demonstration gathered around 1500 to 3000 people. There were similar slogans: "Respect for SMURD", "Do not Take Us the Right to Life!", "Down with Băsecul!", or "Privatization KILLS" (Stoica 2012, 43-44). The protest wave has spread to Bucharest and other cities. The number of protesters has

increased significantly. The intervention of the police forces led to violent clashes and to a political crisis that culminated with the resignation of Prime Minister Emil Boc and the formation of a new government.

It is worth mentioning that the support of the general public and local communities in Târgu-Mureș and Cluj, where the Palestinian doctor worked, is due to his career, which gave him an indisputable symbolic prestige, that he gained through the effort to create a modern mobile emergency service at a time when public health services have entered a long-standing crisis. But this simple fact does not explain the willingness to mobilize of a very large group of protesters. The general frustration with the increase in social inequality shaped through austerity policies discretionarily imposed by the executive was a determining factor. And the fact that the President characterized Raed Arafat as an enemy of privatization has contributed to the sedimentation of the anti-austerity leaning of protests, encouraging left-wing activists to participate enthusiastically (Bran 2012). Occupy mobilization initiatives (Occupy Conti Cluj, Occupy University of Bucharest) were already present and the groups of activists opposing the Roșia Montană mining project have become more and more active.

The social composition of the protests was diverse. From a symbolic point of view, the University Square lost its dominant connotations, continuously constructed since 1990, of a space destined to accommodate the protests of the intellectual elite. The discursive competition for the appropriation of the movement attracted also some partisan groups. But they did not manage to have a significant influence. The main opposition parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National

Liberal Party (PNL) – organized their own rally. The participants in this action were received with hostility by the protesters at the University Square (Mediafax Newsroom 2012a).

The newly appointed Prime Minister, Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu, former Foreign Minister and Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, was considered the leader of a government of technocrats. The need for such a government was also asserted by the opposition, which will take over the governmental functions following the parliamentary crisis of April 2012 (Marinas and Ilie 2012; Deoanca 2012, 199-189). The persistence of the technocratic mythology, which supported the neoliberal consensus during several high-intensity political crises, can be regarded from the perspective of the ethical-political divide that was most frequently invoked to justify the shortcomings of the post-socialist period in Romania and the harshness of the structural reforms: “At this metapolitical level, the technocrat becomes synonymous with, in the absence of a well-established terminology, «the honest professional» or «the successful entrepreneur» and wants to be an engine of societal transformation from the bottom. The transformation to which he aspires is moral. The professional and the entrepreneur present themselves as counterparts to all the negative archetypes of communism and transition: the man who was doing great during communism, the cardboard millionaire of the transition, the sharp dealer, the kleptocrat, the proverbial Dorel – the muddleheaded worker, popularized as a depreciative stereotype of the contemporary proletariat – the corrupt politician, the Securitate guy, the clever boys. Unlike these archetypes, which are supposed to pull the country down, «Romanians who take the country ahead» have studies, possibly abroad, have civic

sense, they are characterized by professional success, which places them within the middle class, they despise politics, have initiative, believe in individual freedom and personal responsibility” (Deoancă 2012, 190)¹.

Retrospectively, the hypothesis according to which the protest movement represented only a temporary postponement of the neoliberal consensus was fully confirmed. Governments that have followed, even when they have made a key political stake in eliminating budget restraints, have focused on strengthening the economic structures grounded in inequality and social polarization (the legislation has not been corrected in order to re-establish the rights previously abolished, the tax cuts advantageous to capital and harmful to employees continued their course).

After the Colectiv fire

The above-mentioned details are of interest in understanding the genealogy of current anti-corruption protests. Although dissatisfaction with corruption was present both

¹ A curious expression of this mythology, which will gain increasingly well-articulated forms during the anti-corruption protests of 2017, was the “Together 2012” movement. Initiated by Bogdan Naumovici, a successful public relations entrepreneur who participated in the advertising campaign advocating for the Roșia Montană mining project, and using extensively the neo-liberal rhetoric, the movement proposed radical messages against the political and economic establishment, called for the moral purification of politics, transparency and minimal state, all these in the name of ^{the} supremacy of the taxpayer's private interest (Deoanca 2012, 191).

during the 2012 events and during those who developed the following year against the Roșia Montană project and the shale gas exploitation by Chevron, the slogan “corruption kills” and the *online* mobilization movement with the same name emerged in the autumn of 2015, when the tragic accident produced at the Colectiv Club in Bucharest shook the public opinion. The fire, in which more than 60 people died, was a new occasion for unrest. Strong emotion made political messages unusually resonant. The commemoration march organized in several cities on November 1st through social network Facebook, had the apolitical connotation of the mourning and simultaneously transmitted the political message of the fight against corruption. The page “Corruption kills people - Bucharest - Commemorating the deceased in the tragedy of last night” created by Florin Bădiță and Alex Cârstea sums up the atmosphere of the moment as follows: “You cannot change the past, but you can influence the future. Tomorrow we unite out of solidarity for the victims' families. Together, we are sending a single message: corruption kills people. (...) Every man comes and lights a candle, puts a flower, we do not talk at all, we let the silence and the banners talk. (...) The governing politicians have noticed that there are places which are functioning using cheaper materials, not entirely legally. Now there will be a witch hunt, they will suddenly become more Catholic than the Pope, they will close thousands of bars or places. BUT did they ask themselves how and why inspectors gave their operating licenses under these conditions?” (Diacu 2015).

In fact, the Colectiv Club operated without a fire safety permit. Moreover, the public opinion discovered with amazement that such licenses were missing for hundreds of

important public and private institutions (Garaiman 2015)². The cost-cutting policies, the decreasing administrative capacity, the lack of control and enforcement capacity, the substitution of public funds with private sponsorship through regulation reforms exhibited effects that went beyond the scope of the individual responsibilities involved: the systematic and persistent failure of public policy. This has become increasingly apparent when the shortcomings and failures of the public health system, deeply affected previously by austerity measures (Jacobsen 2013), have come to light.

In fact, what distinguishes the public discourse generated around the *#colectiv* protests is precisely the image of an opposition between public and private sectors, a clash that eventually led to the symbolic victory of the latter and the denigration of the former. Immediately after the tragedy, rumors came out about the physicians' intention to hide the real number of victims and possible medical errors, or even that Raed Arafat had prevented private ambulances from intervening in order to provide medical help (Neag, Luțac and Tolontan 2015). The technocrat who was defended by protesters in 2012 was now a possible suspect. Previously, even during the protests related to mining projects, dissatisfaction had been channeled especially against those political decisions which were seen as upholding the interests of private companies. Now the dissatisfaction has been directed against the public service and disproportionately less against private companies.

² No matter how striking it sounds, at the moment only 5% of the public schools in Bucharest possess this kind of fire protection authorization (Romanian Insider 2018).

Demonstrations against public authorities refusing to take any responsibility for what happened increased in intensity until the Prime Minister resigned. Most probably it was not a difficult decision to take, considering that Victor Ponta had surprisingly lost the presidential election to an *outsider* and had been sued by the National Anticorruption Directorate for complicity in tax evasion and money laundering (Tran 2015). President Klaus Iohannis did not hesitate to use the opportunity to select a number of “street representatives” with whom he consulted and to propose a new PM. With the approval of the parliament, Dacian Ciolos, a former European Commissioner, formed a new “technocratic” government that offered to several NGO leaders the chance to become ministers. Seen by the urban middle class as a providential non-political leading light, Dacian Ciolos continued the tradition of neoliberal reformist policies.

New political actors

Several institutional changes capable of providing new opportunities for political engagement to non-governmental organizations have preceded the crisis described above. The return to proportional representation (*Law no. 208 of July 20, 2015*), despite the radical nature of this change, has almost gone unnoticed. Perhaps because it captured the tacit agreement on the part of parliamentary parties and civil society regarding the failure of the electoral reform previously introduced in 2008. Starting from an initiative of the Pro Democracy association, which materialized in a draft law that was formulated through the citizens' initiative procedure since 2000, the idea of allowing a closer connection between candidates and voters through a mixed electoral system was enthusiastically received by the

general public. However, the law resulting from the parliamentary negotiations, much different from the initial proposal, stood out mainly by its negative effects. Election campaigns for parliamentary elections have started to resemble more and more those for local elections, the counter-intuitive results in certain constituencies were difficult to justify because of the complicated electoral mechanism and, last but not least, the system has multiplied the number of seats in the parliamentary assembly precisely when the public debate has advanced in the direction of diminishing it. In the 2012 elections, the vote directed against austerity policies led not only to an increase in the number of mandates but also to the rise of an obscure populist party, the People's Party - Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD), the political platform of which was based exclusively on the media popularity of his leader and on the success of his television station (King & Marian 2014). Also, the Social-Liberal Union (USL), the alliance between the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), being formed against any ideological prescriptions just in order to counteract the *de facto* power of President Traian Basescu, obtained an indisputable parliamentary majority which led to a new escalation of the conflict between the parliament and the presidency, the increase of the presidential institution's power and the parliament's reaction to it being a key element in all the major political crises over the last decade (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2013). USL was to fall apart before the 2014 presidential elections, when the two parties competed in a tense atmosphere underpinned by nationalist discourses, hypermobilization and conspiracy theories (Gherasim-Proca 2016, 117-169).

Institutional reform proposals formulated by NGOs have gradually begun to emphasize the need to open up the competition to new political parties, and the “Politics without Barriers” campaign (PfB Campaign 2015) led to a change in the law of political parties (through *Law no. 114 of May 19, 2015*) so that the number of founding members required for the establishment of a political party to be drastically decreased – from 25,000 to only 3³. Another important change introduced the principle of public funding of electoral campaigns. In spite of the enforcement of restrictive conditions for the nomination of candidates, and in spite of the fear that irrelevant parties will flourish (Chiriac 2016), the new electoral reform has encouraged the emergence of several small parties who have succeeded in capitalizing on the public protest and the heroic imagination of the urban middle class. Originally developed locally, parties such as the Save Bucharest Union (USB), the Party for Iasi (PI) or the Free People's Party (POL) formed the Save Romania Union (USR), which, having quite a few civic activists, successful managers and former ministers of the technocratic government on its candidate list, managed to obtain about 9% of the votes in 2016 parliamentary elections. Despite the internal division between the conservative and liberal factions, the cultural capital and the know-how of activists who became members of parliament made USR very relevant during the anti-government mobilization in 2017.

³ Remarkably, the removal of the old condition regarding the minimum number of founding members came as a result of a dispute of unconstitutionality introduced by the Pirate Party.

Anti-corruption protests and political crisis

Of course, the anti-corruption message and the new opportunities for participation have been beneficial not only to the parties that were aiming to the governmentalization of civic activism. After a long wait, “The New Right”, one of the oldest and most active ultranationalist movements in Romania, largely known for the virulence of its anti-LGBT militancy, finally managed to register as a political party (Dolana 2015), in order to propose “the stimulation of domestic entrepreneurs and of the Romanian capital through legislative measures and fiscal facilities; the fight with and the eradication of corruption in state administration; confiscation of illicit property” etc. (“Programul Partidului Noua Dreapta”). Another direction, ambiguous in relation with the anti-corruption discourse but promoting the ultraconservative nationalist soberanism, was represented by the United Romania Party (PRU), a party attended by several PSD dissidents.

Emergency Ordinance no. 13. National Anticorruption Directorate and its critics

Florin Iordache's appointment as Minister of Justice on January 4, 2017 brought back to the media's attention the criminal law reform proposals that he had advocated as a member of parliament. The previous proposals aimed at protecting lawyers from wiretapping, amnesty and pardon (Tapalaga 2016). Asked by journalists whether it is possible to resume those projects, the newly appointed minister responded that it would be justified for the parliament to decide (Tutulan 2017). However, things have evolved in a different direction; the changes have been introduced through an emergency ordinance. Initially, an ordinance was proposed providing for pardons.

After the passionate protest reactions, the government waived the idea of the pardon ordinance and proposed one amending the provisions of the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure, the (in)famous “Ordinance 13”.

Reassured of its electoral legitimacy and of the fact that simply observing the formal conditions of public deliberation will suffice (Ziare.com Newsroom 2017), PSD failed to dismiss the suspicions that the proposed changes would have been conceived primarily for the benefit of politicians under investigation by the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA). All the more so since the leader of PSD, Liviu Dragnea, had already been convicted in a trial regarding the mobilization of voters through illegal means during the 2012 impeachment referendum. The mistrust generated by this unexpected reform (especially the inability of the government’s officials to counter it) obscured the reasonable explanations about why such amendments could have been considered necessary, namely that the amended texts had been declared unconstitutional, that there was a new European directive requiring the strengthening the presumption of innocence guarantees and that the situation of the Romanian prisons was very problematic from the point of view of human rights compliance (Nineoclock, 2016, Euractiv and AFP 2017).

The proposals of the Government led to demonstrations that attracted an impressive number of participants. The President has personally attended, joining the crowd and welcoming the protesters cordially. He stressed that the parliamentary majority is trying to undermine the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The USR parliamentary group has launched its own protest actions. In reply, the parties

of the government coalition mobilized a small group of demonstrators in front of the Presidential Administration's head office in Cotroceni.

At the same time, the DNA refused to recognize the legality of the ordinance and the constitutional role of the Government as part of the legislative delegation process, the prosecutors launching an investigation on the allegedly unlawful manner in which the emergency ordinance was adopted. Supporters of the *status quo* in the matter of anti-corruption policies from various judicial institutions and NGOs have called for the withdrawal of the project. Thus, a competition over meaning was added to the political conflict. It revolved around the interpretation of a misfeasance criminal offense assimilated to corruption offenses (Gheorghe 2016). The chief prosecutor of the National Anticorruption Directorate interpreted the limitation of its scope as a tentative to the complete elimination of an essential weapon in the fight corruption. The Minister of Justice argued, without much political credibility, that it was all about improving the text, which was considered too ambiguous, in accordance with the jurisprudence of the constitutional court.

Regarding the social composition of the street demonstrations, a sociological research made at that time in Victoriei plaza (the single one of this kind available), shows a diverse participation, dominated by young people, having university degrees, who had voted in the parliamentary elections, were mostly positioned to the right of the political spectrum and considered that all the parliamentary parties (except for USR) are largely corrupt (Nicolescu and Bujdei-Tebeica 2017).

Taking into account the process of symbolic production, one could easily notice, the anti-corruption protests of 2017 were accompanied by a moralizing discourse that celebrated the virtues of the urban middle class, the ingenuity of the creative class, the civic responsibility of educated people, their apolitical rationality and objectivity, within an “aesthetic order” of undeniable superiority (Deoanca 2017). This pure image of a “White Revolution” was reflected through a truly impressive technological spectacle of light. Protesters used cell phones to signal their collective presence, laser projectors posted messages on surrounding buildings, drones captured overwhelming images. In contrast, the image of the lower class protesters in front of the Cotroceni palace was presented on some occasions as a corporal symbol of political decay. To give only one prominent example among the many possible, the conservative philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, an influential figure of the cultural scene in Bucharest, has published an article entitled “The Romania of toothless mouths”, in which he describes the intellectual and material “grotesque” of the demonstration organized by PSD (Liiceanu 2017).

As Victoria Stoiciu noticed, the #rezist events (the name is borrowed from the movement against the Trump administration in US) marked a moment of rupture in the discursive structure of the series of protests in recent years. If until then an equilibrium between the general anti-*establishment discourse* and the anti-governmental one was in place, in 2017 the anti-governmental message monopolized the entire discursive space, targeting almost exclusively the main party in power (Stoiciu 2017, 185-186).

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Finally, the ordinance was abrogated, with the reform of the judiciary following the parliamentary course. Minister Iordache resigned. His successor, Tudorel Toader, also a “technocrat”, had incomparably higher credibility, coming from the position of rector of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iasi, after a long career as a law professor and after holding the position of judge of the Constitutional Court.

The echoing failure of February led to a serious government crisis. In spite of the resignations of his fellow ministers, Prime Minister Grindeanu opposed the government reshuffle that targeted him, in a noticeable act of insubordination that emphasized the internal frictions within the Social Democratic Party. Former PSD president Victor-Viorel Ponta, now a stark opponent of the Dragnea team, joined him in support. Eventually Grindeanu gave up his personal protest action, and the appointment of a new prime minister was possible.

After the Constitutional Court ruled on the DNA investigation against the government initiated immediately after the adoption of the emergency ordinance, stating that the DNA had exceeded its legal powers, the requests filed by several DNA prosecutors (accusing pressures from the part of the Chief Prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi) determined the beginning of a disciplinary investigation. The enquiry, during which new allegations appeared, led to the initiation of further successive investigations against Laura Kovesi (Colceriu 2018). Also, public accusations surfaced regarding the abusive behavior of some DNA prosecutors, which led to the initiation of a general evaluation on the institution's management that in the end resulted in a proposal of revocation. The President's refusal to

approve the revocation of the Chief Prosecutor of DNA was handed down by the Constitutional Court in a decision favorable to the Ministry of Justice (Associated Press 2018).

All this happened in a highly tensioned atmosphere, amplified by new anti-government demonstrations. However, the public credibility of the DNA has been put into question, especially taking into consideration the fact that, in the meantime, a number of important public figures have received acquittals in the criminal proceedings pursued against them, the most striking case being Victor Ponta, the resigning prime minister from 2015 (Luca 2018a). Such examples have shed doubt on the impartiality of anti-corruption investigations and gave some credibility to allegations of political partisanship coming from the government coalition.

Nevertheless, perhaps the subject that generated the most criticism and controversy was the involvement of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) in the process of conducting criminal investigations. In 2016, the Constitutional Court had already revised the legislation so that the duties of the secret service were narrowed and clearly defined in this area (Romania Insider 2016; Clark 2017), but the subsequent decision that the cooperation protocols between SRI and various judicial institutions be declassified determined new heated debates and public reactions (MEDEL 2018).

Competing populisms?

The propensity of Central and Eastern European states to embrace formulas of political success that depart from the canon of liberal democracy is one of the most urgent issues on the agenda of the European Union. Although Romania is still far

from rivalling with Hungary or Poland on this subject-matter, the successive political crises and the way in which the competition between the main actors articulates indicate a transformation in the same direction. The growing social polarization, specific to the post-communist period, provides a favorable climate for political issues that exploit feelings of frustration, alienation and fear.

By one of its major dimensions, populism is defined as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). According to the populist ideological worldview, the will of the people only makes sense when expressed by the “true people,” the political universe must necessarily be divided between “us” and “them”, and political competition takes the form of the mythical confrontation between “good” and “evil”. Populisms often become ideologies of fear and resentment.

Unfortunately, the entrenched antagonism expressed by Romanian anti-corruption protests closely reproduces the Manichaeian populist pattern. Both sides build exclusionary ideological fortifications and deepen the divide in the society. On the one hand, the advocates of the *status quo* in the field of anti-corruption policies turn to what might be considered a particular type of “penal populism”, one directed towards the real or imaginary profiteers of the post-socialist transition. Penal populism “speaks to the way in which criminals and prisoners are thought to have been favoured at the expense of crime victims in particular and the law-abiding public in general. It

feeds on expressions of anger, disenchantment and disillusionment with the criminal justice establishment. It holds this responsible for what seems to have been the insidious inversion of commonsensical priorities: protecting the well-being and security of law-abiding 'ordinary people', punishing those whose crimes jeopardize this" (Pratt 2007, 12). During the demonstrations against the reform of the judiciary, the fears that criminal legislation will be amended in such a way that dangerous offenders, such as pedophiles, will be favoured and that prosecutors will be compelled to "inform the alleged offenders before they start collecting evidence about them" (Skurtu 2017) were insistently invoked⁴. Also, President Klaus Iohannis used the specific rhetoric of penal populism to accuse his opponents (Luca 2018a), a situation quite common in the Romanian public space. Opinions expressed in the media or in politicians' speeches are often favorable to the idea of exemplary punishment or to the relativization of fundamental rights, if the aim is to "fight corruption".

On the other hand, PSD seeks to ensure broad popular support by enabling the conservative political issues. Propelled to power by an anti-austerity economic program, the government coalition has received harsh criticism regarding the manner in which it implements it. Thus, government crises have been offset by introducing on the agenda an issue as controversial as the reform of the judiciary. In the autumn of 2017, PSD chairman Liviu Dragnea announced his party's

⁴ Needless to say, the 2016 detainees' protests have enjoyed much less international attention than anti-corruption demonstrations (Chiriac 2016a).

support for a referendum that will decide over a change in the text of the Romanian Constitution, one that would exclude the possibility of same-sex marriage (Reuters Staff 2017). The initiative comes from a coalition of NGOs that managed to collect three million signatures in favour of the proposal. Although few Romanian politicians have opposed the intention of the “Coalition for Family” (“Coaliția pentru familie”), it seems that some of the most determined supporters can be found among the PSD representatives. Also, Liviu Dragnea and other PSD leaders are not shy about launching public accusations against NGOs, accusations that resemble the stigmatization campaign of the Open Society Foundation in Hungary. The legitimate concerns of judges regarding the SRI’s influence over the functioning of the judiciary are translated into populist rhetoric with the term “parallel state” (adapting the term “deep state” as it is used by Donald Trump's supporters in the United States). The capitalist rhetoric of economic chauvinism comes into play whenever questions about the alleged selectivity of DNA investigations are raised – selectivity which is, according to the leaders of the government coalition, part of a deliberate strategy of favoring foreign capital against Romanian capital.

The extreme intensity of the conflict between the main political parties leads them to resort to mobilization initiatives that focus mainly on conservative populist issues. First, the fight against corruption, receiving the general support of all those who see in the opulence of the ruling class the root cause of the shortcomings in the society, is clearly associated with a position that tends to remove the principle of humanism from criminal law and the principle according to which the power of state agents should be limited from the basic liberal set of values.

Second, political parties which express criticism about the way in which anti-corruption policies have been implemented so far emphasize the culpability of international institutions and NGOs for the most striking failures of these policies, stimulating nationalist sentiments and resentment towards “the globalist establishment”, accused of not wanting to recognize the popular will stated through vote. These developments, suggesting that political life in Romania progressively structures itself along a fierce competition between two rival but ideologically related types of populism, tend to perpetuate political crises, to continue the process of institutional fragmentation and to amplify political polarization.

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TWO DISCOURSES ON LEGITIMACY. ROMANIAN WINTER IN TURMOIL

Diana Margarit

Protests are intense and vivid episodes in the transformation of all societies. They express disagreement, discontent or rage, different views on future political, social and cultural projects and deepen gaps between groups that compete for the resources and support in order to impose their vision on common goods and values. In heterogenic societies like the democratic ones, political and civil groups involved in the decision-making processes are permanently confronted with struggle for representativity and legitimacy. However, when opposite forces claim these principles to morally support their antagonistic discourses and actions, it is rather difficult to discern the rightfulness of their pursuits. Differently put, when civil groups challenge political authorities to be accountable for their decisions, they seek to determine political changes based on their own perception of justice and legitimacy.

During the most recent protests that occurred in February 2017 in Romania, thousands of people mobilized and marched on the streets of the Romanian cities against a decree passed by the government that would have pardoned high-level corruption acts. They continued even after the Prime-Minister withdrew it,

this time protesters demanding the resignation of the government. They claimed that its credibility had been severely compromised and therefore, it had lost its legitimacy. In response, members of the government and their supporters claimed that the results of general elections (the Social Democrat Party got 45.5% of the votes) were the significant source of legitimacy and that people who voted for the party outnumbered the protesters. Therefore, the tension between protesters and the government transformed the public space into an arena where the contenders built their discourses based on their own understanding of legitimacy. The purpose of this paper consists in analysing the meaning and the instrumentality of legitimacy in the rhetorical confrontation of the two opposite groups. It is divided in two main parts, one concentrated on a theoretical approach of legitimacy and the other on its antagonistic use both by protesters and the government.

Legitimacy, political authority, and protests.

A theoretical approach

Legitimacy is “the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige” (Weber 1964, 382). Therefore, according to the Weberian definition, legitimacy lies on the belief of people that those having the authority are legitimate to have it. Legitimacy comprises not only the perception of people, but also the normative and moral grounds on which power relationships are built and consolidated. Authority has legitimacy when it rightfully and morally demands and imposes obedience, according to a framework of penalties and sanctions. In the case

of disobedience which denies legitimacy, the system of power acts in force, but failing to suppress the rebellion signifies nevertheless the collapse of authority. Authority always faces the danger when it must resort to violence and coercion. Therefore, it is much more profitable in both terms of costs and benefices to be legitimate, thus to rule on grounds such as obedience and cooperation (Beetham 1991, 25-30).

Political authority is considered legitimate based on the individuals' consent to delegate power and evaluate its performances (Estlund 2008; Rawls 2007, 124; Simmons 2001). The relation between individuals and political authorities lies on the agreement that individuals have formal and informal mechanisms to both control them and recognize their rightfully use of coercion (Ripstein 2004). This finding may be disturbing since it apparently leads to the idea that they have the obligation to obey to those exerting legitimately political authority. Or, as Applbaum states, legitimacy does not provide incentives to create an obligation to obey, but rather a liability (Applbaum 2010) to obey. The distinction between liability and obligation lies merely in the existence of a formal framework provided by the rule of law that can prevent an arbitrary government, and a moral one that can prevent unjust decisions.

A social movement raises questions concerning the legitimacy of power and provides new sources of legitimacy (Melucci 1981, 186-187). In this perspective, the stake of all political dynamics consists in deciding both in formal and informal ways who is entitled to do what. Within the democratic frame, there are mechanisms that regulate the reciprocity between entitlements which can be summed up as it follows: political authorities are entitled to make decisions as long as civil

society is entitled to criticize and to amend its errors and deviations. Thus, legitimacy supposes a mutual recognition of the groups/sides because one cannot be legitimate unless the other recognizes it as such and a certification or validation of the status and acts of actors and their relationship to other parties exists (McAdam et al. 2004, 316). Moreover, the dynamics between state and its citizens or population (which can comprise not only citizens, but also temporary inhabitants) are at the same time a domestic affair and an international matter. “The fact that governments have signed international declarations and treaties indicating their support for the values movements advance provides both international and legal legitimacy for activists’ claims as well as political leverage against states that would prefer to maintain reputations of good global citizenship. Although governments may sign treaties with no intention of actually implementing them, no government welcomes—and most actively resist—attempts to bring international attention to their violations of these treaties” (Smith and Fetner 2007, 24). Governments have to face internal pressures from opposition parties and/or civil society and external ones exerted by international and transnational organisms or partnerships that can decisively influence the formers’ evolution on the political scene.

Political legitimacy seen as the right to rule encompasses two dimensions, one related to the procedures and norms that favour the manifestation of authority, and the other one related to the identification of people to the political community that represents them. From a legal point of view, the second dimension might not be a *sine qua non* condition of legitimacy (Raz 2006), but its relevance becomes more obvious as decisions

derived from the expression of political authority have been so often contested in the past recent years. On this ground, the stake consists in understanding that not only the state through political authorities is related to legitimacy, but also groups of civil society. Contentious politics (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2004) express the tension between two types of actors that claim legitimacy: political authorities and social movements as the stakeholders of a democratic political system.

When government acts against the interests of certain groups, social movements criticise the legitimacy of the former and put pressure to determine social and political change. "Their change over time reflects changes in the objects of legitimacy, as well as changes in the patterns of legitimation." (Haunss 2007, 162) By this, legitimacy is always related to volatile and dynamic realities according to different interests and expectations. If state fails to respond them, social movements are meant to recreate the patterns of legitimacy according to which political authority is rightfully exerted. In respect to their grievances, political, historical and geographical context (Tilly 1978, 151-158), people choose from a plethora of collective actions – riots, fights, blockades, marches or occupations – the most efficient ones for achieving immediate and satisfying results. Their perception of political decisions and actions in an injustice frame (Gamson 1992, 31-34) are the main incentives for considering them illegitimate, thus non-representative and abusive. At the same time, they struggle to mobilize support and formulate their demands in a persuasive and decisive manner, the key-ingredients for achieving legitimacy. Protests express the social perception on political system and decisions, their weaknesses and challenges (Jenkins 2005; Stekelenburg and Klandermans

2010). When the revolted and/or marginalized ones raise, and their demands and benefits become collective goods in spite of the long-term uncertainty of the advantages they may have in future, the opportunity of the social movements cannot be denied anymore (Tilly 1978, 98-142), not even by political authorities that keep resisting them.

The dialectics of legitimacy during the Romanian protests

The Romanian protests from February 2017 made no exception as they expressed tensions accumulated during the past recent years between political authorities, on one hand, and civil society, on other hand. The previous contentious episodes, like the antigovernmental riots from 2012, the Roșia Montană and Colectiv protests in the following years, had a common transversal consistency concerning the dominant participation of young people or the mobilization on social media. The events that occurred in February 2017 followed a similar pattern to the previous ones, but at a larger scale. The magnitude of the mobilization and the intensity of its reflection in the international and national outlets that praised the anti-corruption popular struggle transformed them into one of the most memorable episodes in the Romanian recent history after the fall of communism. However, the persistence of the protesters asking the government to resign for more than thirty days in a row had to confront the resistance of political authorities. In the following section, I focus on the rhetorical clash between the two sides, each one of them invoking legitimacy as the ground of its decisions and actions. If the first part consists in an overview of the events, the second one, more consistent than the other,

concentrates on the analysis of legitimacy as reflected in the discursive tension between protesters and their opponents, namely political authorities.

a) February, 2017. An overview

On 31 January 2017, the Romanian government passed an emergency decree that modified the Criminal Code, especially on those matters related to high-level corruption. The official reason for this sudden political decision concerned the precarious conditions in jails, overcrowded cells and revolted prisoners (Business Review 2017). According to the governmental discourse, the decree was a response both to EU regulations that demanded an immediate reform in the jail system and ECHR that had already condemned Romania for the improper detention conditions. That same evening, soon after the government passed the decree, thousands of people spontaneously took the streets and protested it. In their opinion, government was using a sad reality (HRWF 2017) as a Trojan horse to pardon politicians who had already been imprisoned or were facing charges for high-level corruption (Gillet 2017).

The same night, the decree was officially adopted, even though it would have legally produced effects in ten days. The ten-day-term confirmed that the decree was not an immediate necessity and proved that the government completely ignored the voice and the will of people in the streets who had also manifested their disapproval a couple of weeks before its adoption. However, some members of the ruling political parties – the coalition formed by the Social-Democrat Party (PSD) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) – that won the elections in December 2016 were already in jail, while others

were facing charges with criminal offenses and could have been convicted soon. Thus, the reasons for this hasty decision were lying in the terms of those trials and not in the pressure exerted by ECHR to improve prisoners' conditions as it was officially stated (Margarit 2017).

During the first week of daily protests, the civil mobilization reached an unexpected number of participants who took the streets of all the Romanian cities. Even in the smaller ones or in those where PSD had high popular support, people protested against the decision even though at a reduced scale compared to the larger urban spaces. Confronted with an unprecedented and unanticipated wave of civil discontent (Ciobanu 2017; Lyman and Gillet 2017), the Prime-Minister decided in only five days to withdraw the decree. However, protests did not cease; on the contrary, they gathered almost a half a million of people. Their complaints concerned the illegal and onerous affairs of the political class which was perceived as governing according to its private interests. Corruption, bribery, inequality were thus the main allegations the government had to face and, as a consequence, it was asked to resign (Abăseacă 2017).

In just a few days, the amplitude of the turmoil exceeded the national borders. International media coverage, EU institutions and Western embassies were praising the virtues of the Romanian mobilization against unjust politics and decisions (Ilie 2017; Nine O'Clock 2017). The members of the ruling coalition tried several strategies to appease the unrest that dominated the entire Romanian society among which a) the decision to withdraw the decree, b) the attempt to decredibilize the protests through fake news (e.g. Adults, children and dogs

have been paid by Soros to get out in the streets, young people were manipulated by Russian psychotronic devices and so on) (Agence France Presse 2017) and c) the organization of pro-government demonstrations in Bucharest and other several cities (Macdonald 2017).

b) Legitimacy and protest

This most recent contentious episode generated many debates in the Romanian public space, raised questions and deepened cleavages. One relevant issue concerned the use of the term legitimacy both by protesters and the government in their discourses against the opponents and finally its fetishization in the public space. On one hand, protesters claimed that their presence on the streets was legitimate as long as democracy lies on principles such as the will of people and just decisions. Moreover, not only their presence was legitimate, but also their demands. They considered that a government that passed laws to protect particular interests and was prone to make other unjust or illegal decisions had lost its legitimacy. The fact that PSD and ALDE won the general elections offered them the opportunity to create a government, but their legitimacy had a circumstantial character. For civil society, legitimacy derived from its perception that political leaders must represent their interests. Therefore, as soon as the government failed, it automatically lost its legitimacy.

On the other hand, protesters have been accused of having an elitist urban discourse (Mungiu-Pippidi 2017) which ignored the poor and the oppressed ones, the profound issues of the society such as severe poverty, social disparities or unequal access to education and healthcare services, whilst transforming

the anticorruption fight into a witch-hunt (Clark 2017). Their actions and slogans have been interpreted as an attempt to stigmatise PSD (and their voters) through a sterile anti-communist frame and to unconditionally support President Iohannis, the previous technocratic government and the abusive anticorruption agency (the National Anticorruption Directorate) (Poenaru 2017, Țichindeleanu 2017). In other words, those critics addressed questions regarding the representativity of the protesters and their contrast to the entire society. Why and how a minority poses as the spokesperson of the society? Are their claims useful to reform the political system? How would these protests alleviate structural issues such as poverty, inequality or labour force migration? Thus, the illegitimate character of the protests mostly concerned the content of the contention and not the manifestation *per se*. Differently put, protesters were perceived as unable to articulate a discourse that could address the entire society and offer solutions for its endemic problems.

At the same time, conspiracy theories soon emerged on some TV channels like România TV and Antena 3, controlled by convicted or prosecuted politicians. From their perspective, people on the streets were nothing more than puppets manipulated by different actors (the multi-billionaire George Soros, President Klaus Iohannis or the Russian government) in an attempt to orchestrate a Coup d'État meant to destabilize the country (Obae 2017). The anti PSD slogans and the people's rage against the government in spite of all its efforts (the annulation of the decree or the announcement that salaries for some budgetary sectors would increase) made sense only in an evil-minded scenario. According to it, after just two months in the governmental position, the coalition that won the general

elections was illegitimately asked to withdraw its members from the executive. Moreover, the anti-protests camp formed by politicians from the PSD-ALDE coalition and the media supporting them tried to decedibilize the protests. In their opinion, they lacked legitimacy because those involved were a minority whose goals consisted in destabilizing the state and generating chaos. The increasing support within the society for the protesters was perceived as a mere symptom of pure manipulation widespread at several levels, including their own parties. The fact that some PSD members played the dissidence card and declared themselves in favour of protests (Andrei 2017; Zamfirescu 2017) could be understood as reflecting solidarity with the protesters in rejecting a law that favoured some politicians, but more than that, as embodying the symptoms of possible cracks inside PSD that could affect its image as a disciplined and monolithic party. Moreover, after reconfirming its dominant position on the political arena (Gherghina 2016) during the most recent general elections, PSD needed to send the message that it could assume the task of governing the state as it promised during the campaign. When 'undisciplined' members of the party criticised the PSD for adopting the decree, PSD used another strategy, namely pro-governmental marches.

For PSD and ALDE politicians, legitimacy strictly meant popular support from a numerical perspective (Agerpres 2017; Aktual24 2017a). In their opinion, government was more legitimate than protests because people who voted for the coalition (almost 7 million voters out of 19 million people) outnumbered the protesters. Therefore, government had no reason to resign as long as its legitimacy was expressing voters' option. Moreover, people criticising the government on the street

were not representing the voice of the entire society as long as the pro-governmental marches gathered a couple of thousands of supporters. In the discursive context, protesters were recognised the right to protest, but their demands lacked legitimacy.

From the confrontation between two different perspectives on legitimacy, a question arises: Which one of the groups is right?. At first glimpse, both the coalition members and the protesters were right, but in my opinion the former used informal, content related fallacies. First, they used the appeal to majority (even if in reality there was a relative majority) to state that those several thousands of people who criticised the government's decision represented an insignificant minority compared to the number of voters who backed up the coalition. Second, they considered that if a government is legitimate from the point of view of its appointment, then all its decisions are legitimate. This inductive fallacy is also known as association fallacy because it asserts that the qualities of a thing are also the qualities of another. Third, the coalition members and the government supporters used the *onus probandi* fallacy according to which the one who makes a statement considers that he/she does not need to prove it and asks the other to prove its falseness. By affirming that protesters planned to orchestrate a coup d'État, they were asking protesters to prove the contrary and, subsequently to demonstrate that this was not their intention. The same fallacy next to the appeal to ridicule are traceable in the affirmation that protests were not worthy of consideration because the participants were mostly young and easy to manipulate people by president Iohannis and/or by the Russian government through psychotronic devices (Aktual24

2017b). In addition, knowing that coups d'État assume a harsh critique of the government, in their argumentation, all mobilizations including peaceful protests against it could degenerate into similar actions. In other words, they mislead the public opinion through a faulty generalization.

The participants in the February protests mocked the false accusations made by politicians in creative and funny slogans or drawings largely depicted in the squares of all cities. Even so, these uprisings generated many vivid debates between moderate and radicals groups of the civil society that either supported the anti-decree manifestations, but disapproved of the Prime-Minister's resignation or supported both. Some of them attacked discriminatory slogans like 'Teeth are the mirror of the mind' born of the intention to mock PSD President's face, but which soon degenerated into discrimination of poor or socially excluded people. Nevertheless, in my opinion protests were legitimate for three main reasons. First, in a democratic regime all citizens are entitled to criticise the government and publicly manifest its discontent as long as democratic values and principles such as rule of law, human rights, non-discrimination, and tolerance are not threatened. Furthermore, if government fails to make just or legal decisions, citizens have the moral duty to act as guardians of democracy and contest them. Second, in order to avoid tyrannical majorities, the democratic political system has the obligation to protect all types of minorities and listen to their grievances. Treating them as second-order citizens because their views might seem different from others not only delegitimizes the government, but it legitimises the formers to protest against it. Third, general elections results guarantee the winning party the right to point members of the executive body,

but the legitimacy achieved on this occasion has not lifetime warranty. This means that legitimate governments are not only elected, but they essentially make decisions as a result of permanent consultation with civil society and they express consensus between all groups in the name of common good and public interests.

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Questions and Answers*

THE PREMISES OF MOVING BEYOND POST-COMMUNISM

Interview with Emanuel Copilaș

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: Dear Emanuel, you have published several books about Romanian politics, about how it developed during communism and during the post-communist period. How would you characterize the manner in which the subject of memorializing the times of the socialist regime is treated in Romania? How political discourse referring to the socialist regime and to those feeling nostalgia about it evolved?

Emanuel Copilaș: The memory of the previous communist regime still represents a delicate and much debated topic in contemporary Romania, three decades after the collapse of that particular regime. The memorialistic literature regarding the recent past is, in my opinion, highly unequal. We have works published by former communist dignitaries, both memories and interviews, descriptions offered by former political prisoners of the severe privations and humiliations they were subjected to, especially in the 1950s, accounts of several prominent writers, scientists, priests and architects. The memoirs of Suzana Andreiaș, maid of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu for three decades, represent a unique and interesting piece in this context,

but does not go beyond it. All of these approaches are strictly confined to a methodological individualism, to use Max Weber's concept, that systematically fails to take into account the larger social, economic and political framework. Ion Iliescu, Gheorghe Maurer, Alexandru Bârlădeanu, Corneliu Mănescu, Gheorghe Apostol, Nicolae Nicolae – all of these important politicians during the Gheorghiu-Dej and the Ceaușescu regime try to explain their ascension either by seizing individual opportunities or by personally convincing their superiors that they deserved to be placed in higher positions. References to the new context, the new political economy of socialism that entailed a massive social dynamic on an unprecedented scale are mostly absent or scarcely mentioned. At numerous times, the reader has the impression that they acted almost in some kind of void that patiently waited to be molded according to their aspirations.

In the case of writers, their becoming is staked out by similar intrigues, personal alliances and omnipresent treacheries. If understandable to a certain extent in the case of political prisoners, some of them lacking proper education and brutified by the improper conditions in which they lived for whole years, sometimes for decades, this approach is not always justified when it comes to writers. After all, the regime offered consistent prizes and revenues for books, articles and book reviews in order to impose the official political discourse within the cultural field which held so many promising possibilities. This outcome, highly political, cannot be reduced to personal talent and individual merits, however important these last ones might have been.

Regarding priests and religious persons, or inmates that have become religious during the time they have spent in

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prisons, especially under the influence of former members of the Legionary movement, their personal abnegation and impressive ceremonies having a certain influence upon the other inmates – one can certainly understand their visceral aversion towards communism, both political and ideological. The regime that begun in 1948 and which openly declared itself atheistic deeply affected their social and professional lives, even after they were released from prison. But too many times, as William Totok and Elena-Irina Macovei's book (*Între mit și bagatelizare. Despre reconsiderarea critică a trecutului, Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu și rezistența armată anticomunistă din România*, Polirom Publishing House, 2016) points out, the condemnation of communism was not intended as a means in itself, but as a strategy of silently rehabilitating the fascist ideology of the former Legionary movement. Of course, any kind of political authoritarianism can be legitimately criticized from democratic positions; however, the anti-Semitic, xenophobic and violent doctrine that the Legionary movement embraced falls far from this category.

But probably the most problematic aspect of the memorialistic literature centered on the communist period resides in the fact that workers and peasants, two of the most numerous social categories within communist Romania, are not included in it. And this is not only a question of literacy, as some could object: there are numerous books published by sociologists or anthropologists in which workers and/or peasants are interviewed. But, as in the case of memoirs published by intellectuals, writers, politicians and so on, we tend to approach these writings in an isolated, individual manner, rarely taking into account their social distribution. Their class-dimension, to be precise. Dismissed after 1989 as a pure propagandistic

discursive construct, the class is nevertheless highly relevant in understanding the economic and political processes of both communism and post-communism and for socially circumscribing them. Furthermore, the concept of class was uncritically associated with the working class created by the communist regime and stigmatized accordingly, especially after the Bucharest incidents from 1990 and 1991 involving miners who were manipulated by the former Securitate to the benefit of the new political regime ruled by the Front of National Salvation.

But in the context of the new ideology of anti-communism professed by the vast majority of post-communist intellectuals, some of them active collaborators of the former regime, the class as a legitimate and pertinent sociological and political concept was discredited. And so were the voices of peasants and workers, many of them having mixed feelings towards communism and some daring to identify positive traits that emerged in that period: welfare policies, stability of the working place, undeniable progress in fields like education and health and, last but not least, a certain feeling of involvement; the building of huge factories, dams, residential districts, even the compulsory agricultural labor and the festive parades – all of these activities required, under party supervision, the direct contribution of workers and peasants; consequently, these were the palpable results of their work as well, not only of central planning, and they felt a certain pride towards them, as David Kideckel's book about the Romanian working class during the post-communist transition argues, based on solid empirical data (*România postsocialistă. Munca, trupul și cultura clasei muncitoare*, Polirom Publishing House, 2010).

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Even the intense and hugely disruptive collectivization process through which the communist regime ensured a direct control over the prices of agricultural products in order to systematically implement its goal of industrialization/urbanization – was perceived by the poorer peasants as advantageous and rewarding (Gail Kligman, Katherine Verdery, *Țăranii sub asediu. Colectivizarea agriculturii în România (1949-1962)*, Polirom Publishing House, 2015). Clearly, positions like these were not in tone with the dominant anti-communist discourse. Consequently, they were marginalized, ridiculed and most of the time simply ignored. However, after 2000, more and more important books that challenge the anti-communist and neoconservative/neoliberal consensus have appeared. Authors like Cătălin Zamfir, Vladimir Pasti, Cornel Ban, Norbert Petrovici or Florin Poenaru produced important contributions regarding the political economy of Romanian post-communism that rethink the ideological and social implications of the major post-communist discourses, placing them in new and insightful perspectives.

One of the books you have published has the title „The socialist nation. The politics of identity in the Golden Era”, it is a book which appeared with the support of the *The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile*. Could you shortly explain the concept of „pseudo-hegemonic nationalism?” you are using there? How do you see from a theoretical point of view the possibility of existence of the left-wing nationalism?

Pseudo-hegemonic nationalism is a concept designed to make sense of the national-communist ideology active in

Romania between 1965 and 1989. It starts from the curious tenet that a political regime that claimed a direct affiliation to Marxism was constitutively imbued with a form of nationalism specific to fascist regimes. Even so, pseudo-hegemonic nationalism was, due to its internal social commitment and its international solidarity with countries of the Third World, which received hundreds of millions of dollars from Romania during the 1970s – a form of left-wing nationalism, although the radical right-wing ideas it included were not at all simply ornamental.

On the whole, there are two types of theories regarding nationalism. Despite their names – modernist and perennialist – they are both chronologically modern. Modernist theories of nationalism, of liberal and Marxist inspiration, assume the nation as a modern identity created within the turmoil of the French revolution and inextricably linked to concepts like citizenship, representation and emancipation. Liberal theorist like Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson have convincingly described nationalism as a form of political homogenization through which the European states framed and neutralized the huge social and political transformations induced by the rise of capitalism basically through both cultural means (alphabetization and the creation of national identities) and social means (urbanization, proletarianisation and new social stratifications). Marxist theorist, among which Eric Hobsbawm and Tom Nairn are the most prominent, argue that nationalism is basically a bourgeois ideology that strives to create a profitable identity between the rulers and the ruled in order to develop a functional internal market and to become as competitive as possible within a capitalist world-system. This „invented tradition”, as Hobsbawm refers to it, is useful because the upper classes can conveniently

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rely on it with the purpose of eluding major social tensions or deflecting them outside the national borders. In this narrative, foreigners living abroad or inside the country become responsible for its major shortcomings. In this way, structural problems are converted into cultural problems as the responsibility of political elites for the injustices contained within the *status-quo* is diverted towards a fabricated „otherness“ that plays the role of scapegoat, or, in more recent times, numbed by the ideology of consumerism. It is precisely these forms of „false consciousnesses“, as Marx named, that act as ideological barriers in the way of progress and further social emancipation.

Perennialist theories of nationalism are directly opposed to modernist theories. They insist upon the direct historical continuities between medieval and even ancient ethnicities and present-day nations, failing to take into account that ethnicities themselves are also modern identities, born especially out of the observations of anthropologist, geographers, historians and other social scientists. In its exacerbated primordialist form, perennialism has its origins in the Romantic counter-reaction to Enlightenment at the beginning of the 19th century and it directly contributed to contemporary fascist and populist theories of nationalism. Although conservatives were initially circumspect regarding nationalism in general due to its subversiveness in relation to absolutist monarchies, they have gradually adopted the primordialist theories of nationalism out of the need to distance themselves from the newer and more radical political ideologies like liberalism or socialism that developed along the 19th century.

One would expect an ideology that claims Marxist origins to be highly critical with reference to nationalism, not to use it

exactly in the way Marxists denounce it. However, Romanian national-communism behaved exactly in this way, stressing in a striking primordialist manner the historical continuity between ancient Dacians and contemporary Romanians as it became more xenophobic after the end of the 1960s and while imposing a policy of severe austerity during the 1980s, under external and internal constraints alike. Marxism and national-communism were from the start incompatible ideologies, despite the rhetorical and the social leanings of the latter.

After the end of the Ceaușescu regime, the national-communism nurtured in this period could finally achieve ideological maturity and openly develop its anti-Semitic, xenophobic and anti-Hungarian traits in the doctrine of the Greater Romania Party or *Vatra Românească*. It recuperated the protochronist themes of a great historical past and of a hugely influential Dacian „civilization”, the supposed cradle of all important civilizations, while maintaining in the same time a misplaced nostalgia for the patriotism of the Ceaușescu regime and its unquestionable achievements. This is why I consider contemporary left-wing nationalism too far embedded in the old national-communist ideology to become a relevant alternative to right-wing nationalism, for example, and its entire mystique revolving around the Legionary Movement and the „Prison Saints”, most of them nothing more than exalted fascists that have indeed endure a lot of injustices in communist prisons in the first decade after the communist regime took over political power, but need not be transformed, for this particular reason, into martyrs speaking in the name of democracy. Not all forms of anti-communism are democratic. In fact, very few are, if we take into account the case of Romania.

In your opinion, what would be the essential traits of post-communism in Romania? Which social and political cleavages became dominant? Did they change with time? Which of them deepened?

I have partially responded to this question in the comment for the first question, when stressing upon the importance of anti-communism in the politics of memory developed after the 1989 revolution, a process which is still unfolding. But post-communism is a much more comprehensive ideology. It consists, beside anti-communism, which has its own diverse directions, in the unchallenged neoliberal/neoconservative consensus that still represents the dominant political discourse that produced a form of austerity specific to the transition period and highly indifferent to vulnerable social groups, combined with a frivolous depoliticizing consumerism and a naïve and uncritical admiration of the West.

The ample process of privatizations and retrocessions, both in the urban and rural areas, has led to consistent unemployment, migration and a general precariousness of the workforce in Romania. Classes still exist, although they were considerable diminished through a systematic public policy: nowadays, most of the workers and peasants have disappeared. The transition to a free-market society has entailed an overall proletarianisation of the existing workforce. Competitivity, job insecurity and a threatening dismantlement of unions have all produced a vulnerable and diminished workforce, a drawback of social security and even a stagnation of urbanization. Foreign investments were and are still favorized, while the state was

regarded as a danger to economic prosperity. This outcome was mainly the result of „crony capitalism”, where, during the 1990s, entrepreneurs which were put in charge of both public and private enterprises reported all profits in the private sector and channeled all loses towards the public sector. This process led to the creation of a powerful oligarchy and to an unprecedented rise in poverty.

After the 2008 global economic crisis, new social tensions begun to emerge. Fueled by the coalition government in order to divert public attention from the unpopular austerity measures implemented at the suggestion of the International Monetary Fund and of the European Central Bank, these new social tensions divided „diligent Romania”, oriented towards anti-communism and anti-corruption, from „lazy Romania”, a country where a greatly exaggerated number of socially assisted people presumably held back progress and the advancement of European integration. Furthermore, youth was urged to distance itself from old people with a persistent „communist mentality” that tended to vote for the Social-Democratic Party and failed to understand the utmost necessity of the government’s austerity plan, that was drastic even in comparison with the similar measures implemented by other European countries. This aggressive anti-social campaign polarized society to unprecedented levels, while simultaneously paving the way for the ascension of right-wing populism.

Emigration towards other more developed European countries temporized the social tensions form the transition (pre-European) period, preventing them from becoming full blown antagonisms. Even so, Romania has, after Syria, a country devastated by almost ten years of civil war, the second rate of

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emigration in the world. This should be a serious warning for the political elite to invest more in the country's infrastructure, health, education, and to raise the standard of living; instead, the so-called social-democratic government is spending billions of dollars to acquire military technology from American private companies. According to Antonio Gramsci, every country possesses two distinct political cultures: one of the ones who govern, and one of the ones who are governed. The first will always pretend to be the only one and discursively integrate the other until it transforms it into something irrelevant. The smaller the distance between them, the more democratic and less unequal that particular society is, and vice-versa. From my point of view, this distance kept growing after 1989 in Romania, despite a few occasional setbacks, and, at least for now, nothing signals the end of this process.

Considering how often is communism mentioned in the public sphere one would believe that the post-communist era will never end. In your opinion, what conditions would be necessary so that this historical period to be considered at its end?

In Marx's terms, post-communism represented a form of primitive accumulation. It was an era of triumphant capitalism presenting itself as the end of history, as a universal discourse grounded nevertheless in the rapidly expanding privileges of a new elite, the former communist technocracy unable to develop to its full potential before 1989. I have briefly discussed its main features above. In certain ways, post-communism still exists, although in a milder shape than it did during the 1990s.

However, Romania still is one of the European countries with the smallest budget when it comes to social protection. The ideology of undemocratic anti-communism is still alive and well, although it discursively renewed itself in the last decade as anti-corruption. The old social tensions (like that between the working class and the rest of the society, amplified with clear political intensions by the anti-communist discourse during the 1990s, amid the episodes of social unrest that were to be known as the „Mineriade”) coexist now with new social tensions already mentioned: hard-working vs. lazy, socially assisted people, or young and prone to costly reforms vs. old, conservative and nostalgic communists incapable of change.

Only when this unnecessary and fiercely anti-democratic social polarizations will be overcome, when the vulnerable social categories and the old generations will not be accused anymore for the outcomes of certain policies they were not at all responsible for, but on the contrary, they suffered their consequences, when the state will allocate a decent budget to social spending – only then the premises of moving beyond post-communism will be laid.

It seems that what we generically call „civil society” has a formidable political power in Romania. You wrote about the protests of 2012. Can they be compared to those carried out last year? What do they have in common and what differentiates them?

Civil society is a very complex and pretty confusing concept, grounded in the liberal tradition of the 19th century. Intended as a counterweight to political power, and also distinct

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from the sphere of commerce, civil society consisted in the right to privacy of individual citizens and their families, along with their rights to associate in non-governmental organizations in order to pursue civic goals like defending and expanding human rights, for example, in different contexts, but almost always against the threatening expansion of state power. Here lies, as Immanuel Wallerstein pertinently pointed out, an important paradox: how can the civil society simultaneously demand more individual rights and less political power for states, when it is precisely state power the one who guarantees and efficiently protects individual rights? It follows that weak states cannot protect the individual rights of their citizens as strong states can and that human rights exist only to the extent that states are willing to recognize and enforce them. Strong individual rights are in direct connection with strong and efficient states, not with weak and dysfunctional ones.

Furthermore, the so-called „civil society“ is not as representative as it is generally perceived: it represents only a minor segment of the middle classes that usually follow their particular interests, even if they are on numerous occasions sincerely preoccupied with the problems of socially disadvantaged groups and try to help them as much as possible. However, any kind of social movement is unavoidable embedded in a particular social context; far from being an accusatory statement, this is just a general observation. Nevertheless, true democratic endeavors come only from attempts to supersede the initial particularity of every beginning into a theory and practice as universalist as possible.

As far as the 2012 and 2017 protests go, there are important parallels between them but also noticeable differences. First, the

protests represent the slow but sustainable configuration of a civil society in Romania, with all the ambiguity still revolving around the term. The advancement of Western democracy would have been inconceivable in the absence of political protests. Political power makes concessions not unsolicited, but only when coerced by society. Therefore, a culture of protest is highly welcomed as a promise of further democratic achievements, as well as means of protecting the individual and collective rights that we sometimes tend to take for granted.

Second, the 2012 protests were directed against austerity, while the 2017 protests were directed against corruption and the attempts to temporize the serious juridical progress recorded in the last years. Anti-austerity protests aside, due to the clarity of their message, despite occasional radical right-wing tendencies, the problematic aspect of the 2017 protests is that corruption is generally perceived through unilateral, anti-communist lens. The structural corruption of international capital, of multinational corporations, is generally ignored or marginalized, while endogenous corruption is equated with the whole phenomenon. Furthermore, it seems that the 2017 protest have absorbed and reproduced the discourse of the new social polarizations: social assistance was associated almost directly with corruption, while old age resembled communism, another form of social assistance that went against meritocracy, therefore another form of corruption.

Few years after the start of the financial crisis in 2008 Europe in its entirety has entered a negative dynamic, in which nationalism, xenophobia and the sense of insecurity have an important word to say. How did we get here? Can this

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tendency, so visible within the European Union, towards the lack of solidarity and towards separation, be opposed?

The rise of right-wing populism in the European Union – left-wing populism is insignificant compared to right-wing populism, and it is not oriented against the European Union *per se*, only against the technocratic and neoliberal shape it has developed during the last decades – can only be understood as a consequence of the austerity policies adopted and implemented as a convenient response to the 2008 global financial crisis and as a tardy and confused reaction against the social mobility provided by the European Union, along with the free movement of goods and that of capital, the most important part of the equation.

This worrisome tendency cannot be truly contained as long as the European Union will keep representing its markets more than it represents its citizens. Xenophobia exists as a latent tendency in almost every community, and it is up to inclusive and open policies to maintain it to a neutral level. But when coupled to a scarcity of resources (including jobs) amplified further by austerity policies that placed the cost of the 2008 economic crisis from the shoulders of banks that have created it on the shoulders of citizens, xenophobia, or what Gáspár Miklós Tamás called „post-fascism”, is almost guaranteed to rise. Even if the austerity policy was recognized as a mistake by the European Commission and even by the International Monetary Fund which fiercely advocated it in the first place, it had enough time to produce undesirable consequences like economic stagnation and high unemployment among youth in most of the European states. The democratic and social deficit of the Union was thus

Interview with Emanuel Copilaş

unnecessary amplified, leaving this unusual and once emancipatory political construction in an uncertain perspective.

In the context of migration towards the European Union and the West in general, due to geopolitical, geoeconomic and ecologic causes, but also for the sheer profit of European capital, along with the rapidly automatization that is already reshaping the global workforce, I am afraid that these un-sympathetic tendencies as you referred to them are here to stay.

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Interview with Vasile Ernu

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: Dear Vasile, during your conference at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași you talked about the way in which various forms of underground culture and counter-culture have participated over time in challenging the political authority in the Soviet space. Are the authorities more prepared today than in the past to fight against these forms of contestation or to avoid them? Do they adapt easier? Do they fight against them more efficiently?

Vasile Ernu: I try to follow the contestation movements, the resistance groups and everything that somehow opposes power, in the broader sense of the word, beginning from right after the Second World War and until today. It helps me to better understand what is happening nowadays if I do this archive work and somehow it also helps me to understand how the nature of power in the former Soviet space, the nature of the protest, has changed and especially how does social anatomy look and how social groups are structured.

It is very clear that the nature of power has been forcedly changed, rather by the nature of the social and economic system, which has in turn led to an important change of the social strata,

of the power and prestige groups etc. Resistance and protest groups have also changed profoundly.

We do not realize, nowadays, how easy it was to build resistance and protest forms in an authoritarian culture like the Soviet one. What type of human resources, infrastructure it made available to the citizens. And, especially, the form of protest also came from the political nature of the regime. In other words, any gesture could become a criticism factor easier because that was the nature of the system: a haircut, a coat, a bottle, a melody could become a very powerful political element. Nowadays it is very difficult to understand this. Even though the regime had more effective control tools, this power and the nature of the regime had many weaknesses related to almost trivial gestures. It's like the joke with the Soviet plumber who was arrested and politically condemned. Do you know what for? When he came to repair the radiator from the Central Committee he noticed that the problem was not with the radiator, but that the "whole system" had to be changed. The chiefs did not understand that it was about the "heating system" and they decided it was a political statement and took action. This is how this relationship was set up. Power held control, but it was often powerless before such trivial things. Hence the paradox of how communism fell: a seemingly very powerful and feared regime was taken down by songs, poems and speeches. A unique case in the history of mankind, I believe, when such a fearful regime falls like this.

In the post-Soviet context, when the nature of the social power and the social anatomy changes, things change radically. Citizens are engaged in a different kind of relationship with power. There are, on the one hand, many valves; there is another political ritual, elections, free media, on the one hand, and a lot

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of precariousness and fragility, on the other hand. People are free to say what they think, but they no longer have the guarantees and the stability they had before. Priorities change. This is mainly related to the changing nature of the economy: the market economy. It imposes another type of social contract, the type of work changes, the type of access to the infrastructure, which becomes private, because the public infrastructure is almost taken out of the real circuit. People, of course, are not afraid to say what they think, but they don't have the tools to help them. The criticisms they bring against the new political regime resemble a show, a big, beautiful, impressive spectacle, but which no longer has political effects. How do you reorganize, how do you build your protest and critique in this new context, so as to produce an expected effect, a change that will help? Here lies the key to the problem.

Yes, somehow it's the other way around than in the joke with the plumber. And I am referring to Romania here, but I think this is a common feature of post-socialist states from the Central and Eastern Europe. Nowadays, when you say something is wrong with the heating system (the rapid increase in the cost of energy for the household consumer, for example), a politician will not think you are referring to the economic and social system in general. Most of the time you have the impression that everyone listens to you, but nobody hears you.

We are somehow in the same situation as in the 19th Century, but in a completely different social, economic and political context. We no longer have factories and plants, where

people were already organized and only a few leaders were needed in order to rearrange everything in a trade union, with a clear and well-targeted content. The type of work has changed. The type of solidarity. The proletariat has changed a lot.

What is actually the Putin Regime? Gleb Pavlovsky, one of the best connoisseurs of Putinism, says the following: "Putin belongs to a stratum that is very wide, but very opaque, unrepresented and unseen by individuals, who, after the '80, in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, sought to get a sort of revenge. Within the elite there were hundreds, thousands of such people, who were not Communists - me, for instance, I have never been a party member. There were people who simply did not like how things were done in 1991. The group consisted of very diverse people, with very different ideas about freedom. Putin was one of those people who had silently waited until the late 1990s to get revenge. By revenge I understand the rebirth of the great state in which he had lived and with which he got used to. We did not want another totalitarian state, of course, but we wanted one that we could respect. It was impossible to respect the one from the 1990s."¹

I often talk with my Russian friends about "The End of Putin". A good friend, a well-known philosopher and editor, Alexandr Ivanov, explained to me a phenomenon called the "Putin Syndrome" in the following manner:

I'm not waiting for Putin's end because this is a false matter. This is not the name representing all the processes that are now taking

¹ Redacția CriticAtac, „Viziunea lui Putin asupra lumii. Interviu cu Gleb Pavlovski”, *Critic Atac*, 12 decembrie 2014, <http://www.criticatac.ro/viziunea-lui-putin-asupra-lumii-interviu-cu-gleb-pavlovski/>.

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place in Russia and in the East. This is a multiplied figure, his symbolic body is broken into small pieces, atoms, molecules that are scattered throughout the political field. It is just a name that signifies a multitude of different practices. "Putin" can be the word that best denotes the complicated situation of the contemporary economic violence.

Let me give you an example. I urgently needed to change my passport, and in the only place where passports are issued they suggested to make me a "no queue" passport, but this would cost 17.000 rubles (around 1500 RON). I needed it urgently, so I didn't have a choice and I accepted. Suddenly a door opened and I got into a "VIP-corridor" with young, cute, well-dressed, smiling people. There was no queue and in a few minutes they filled in again the questionnaires where I made mistakes. The space of the state suddenly turned into business-territory.

Hence, this is a situation I call the "Putin Situation" or the "Putin Syndrome", and in no way the retaliation against those in the Bolotnaya Square. Why? Because we do not realize how violent and tough this "VIP corridor", produced by well-being or lack of personal well-being, can be: you have money - it's OK, you don't have money - goodbye, you can leave. You will stand in endless queues that you don't know where they're going and when they'll be over, you will get the worst service etc. This criterion - whether or not you own valuable goods, material resources, and money - becomes extremely violent and has a managerial-administrative character. Here we have too little socialism; we only have a populist rhetoric that replaces this real socialism. In Russia from nowadays even Putin's toughest critics actually struggle to get into this "VIP-corridor." Some want to replace the others. In other words, the social and political situation is such that nobody wants to retransform the "VIP-corridors" into social spaces.

The protests in Russia from the last 10 years are mainly related to the urban middle class, the “creative class”, as they call it, but who do not want a radical change, a change of a political paradigm, but instead they want a “Putin with a human face”: meaning a tampering of the regime. They want, as my friend says, in the VIP class.

The allegations that he would have interfered for Donald Trump in the US presidential election seem to have strengthened Vladimir Putin's international image of a “strong leader.” At least in the online *subcultures* that support the Tea Party political discourse in the United States, political communication channels populated by many young nonconformist and confused people belonging to the digital generation, the sympathy for Putin and for the criticisms made by Russia Today is obvious. It seems to have grown up after the allegations mentioned above. However, are there any notable vulnerabilities of the regime? Under what conditions do you think the power of Vladimir Putin would drastically decrease?

Apparently, the coming to power of the Trump regime seemed to establish a kind of “Conservative International”. Technically speaking, this is what’s actually happening. We see a strong return of all the central elements of conservatism, totally anti-progressive, where there is not even a place for liberal reflection, not to speak of the socialist, social-democratic, left, or no matter how we want to call it. However, this wright-wing, conservative, hegemonic speech comes in a very different context than in the past centuries. It is a type of restoration

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applied to a certain type of neoliberal economic and social policies that turned the state into dust. That is, if in the last centuries we had a strong state, now we have a weak state made available to or even captured by the great capital, by the interests of large corporations that subdue and use the state in their interest. These mutants appeared: state-corporation, corporate bureaucrats, state jurists-*lobbyists* etc. When you go to Brussels, you don't know if it is the capital of the European Parliament or the headquarters of the *lobby* firms of the corporations. They use a similar jargon and even the uniform clothes are the same. And they are no longer called politicians, but technocrats. Technocracy is the greatest danger of the current politics. Why? Because they say they no longer do politics, but expertise? In other words, they remove politics from the political field, replacing it with a sort of "user guide". They depoliticize the political field. And that's extremely dangerous because it implies that politics has moved elsewhere. It went somewhere up, in an area where the simple citizen has no longer access to information. He has no control anymore. What people forget is that politics is still a space of polemics, debates, negotiations where all forces must participate. Politics is not a machine with a button that says: YES and NO.

Getting back to Putin and Russia... In order to understand the danger, the vulnerability of the Putin regime, we need to understand "what Putin is". Putin is not a person, but a system.

In addition to what I said above, we must understand that Putin is a "necessary product" of a sort of revenge of the anti-liberal groups against the power that dominated the 1990s political scene. The unprecedented economic, social, and political disaster, when the state was "robbed" and "put in the hands of

strangers”, is attributed to Yeltsin's Liberals. It is hard to believe that we will be a part, in the coming period time, of a return of liberal groups to power. And the left, in Russia, only exists in the ultra-marginal areas. Let's not forget, however, that during the first period those who gave wings to Putin were Bush Jr, with his warlike actions everywhere, and the emergence of the US-terrorism conflict. Let's not forget their friendship and the fact that Bush Jr. was in Moscow almost every day. But the EU also, to a lesser extent, but constantly, supported Putin. All that against the background of the increase of the oil and gas price, Putin's main ally. It would be a good idea not to forget.

Putin, in the second part of his mandate, built his discourse on two central pillars: on the nationalist-imperialist conservatism and on the revanchist one against the West, and especially against the US. Putin is a kind of American neoconservative, the Russian version. Simplifying the Putinist creed: Russia lost because of the internal betrayal of liberals who served the geopolitical and economic interests of the West. It's time to “get up off our knees,” says the slogan.

At this moment, Ukraine is just a battlefield through which Putin tries to reconfigure the world based on the model of the “redistribution of imperialism”. It goes like this: there were three of us in Yalta, when we divided the world, now there is one and a half left. We no longer agree with this version of Global Power. We want to come back to the Power formula “of the Three”: US-EU-RU. The monument inaugurated these days at Yalta, which is dedicated to Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt, is emblematic.

On the economic and social plan, Putin uses a national consensus of a corporate type that includes:

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a. "Putin believes we should be bigger and better capitalists than the capitalists themselves, and have a better consolidated state: the state and the business environment should have the closest possible union." (Gleb Pavlovsky)

b. Total privatization at the base (from Health to Education) and monopoly at the top (Resources, Energy, Strategic fields) that help Putin to maintain a controlled welfare,

c. Consensus is based on a "social contract": the "Putin Corporation" has control over strategic resources and allows to provide increased welfare and consumption.

The Russian state, transformed into "Corporation Russia", has a goal: to convert corporate resources and money into real money. How? By transferring them abroad and bringing them into the domestic market already converted. People from the West know this, so they are putting pressure on the financial sector. How is the corporation built?

a. The VIP or *premium* class, which has control and resources;

b. The class of executives that transforms all state institutions into a kind of "executive director" subordinated to the VIP class, and which takes the necessary steps following clear instructions. They are paid in bonuses.

c. The "company staff" class, the rest of the country's population, who has to do what the "executive director" says. They receive remuneration depending on how much loyalty they offer. The "new social contract" provides for the renunciation at political claims in exchange for well-being and insured consumption. The "Corporate staff" must be apolitical.

That's the trend that takes place everywhere: politics and the economy are increasingly concentrated in the hands of

technocrats and of a small elite that no longer represents anyone. The rest of the population must be loyal, docile and apolitical because the power guarantees “the sole and best of the possible worlds.”

Are there any risks after the “Crimean case”? The history of Russia from the last 300 years “suggests” that the harsh sanctions of the West imposed on Russia can seriously aggravate the domestic situation of this country, which in turn can generate three internal political situations:

a. Popular revolt (authentic or staged by various internal-external forces). Hard to believe at this point because Putin has a solid popular support. However, this support can dissolve very easily if the economic crisis continues and affects all the social strata

b. The coup d’état/palace (but who can take Putin’s place?). Usually, in such contexts, it is powered by even more conservative forces. The West knows that.

c. The emergence of a fake-Putin: a political variation that is no longer taking place after the Middle Ages scenario, but which has a tradition in Russia.

The West knows this well. It will probably not press excessively on the acceleration pedal, because:

1. The Putin interface is an interface that (still) speaks their language: pro-bussines & pragmatic. It is true that he has become a bit autonomous and he does not interpret Carl Schmitt as the Westerners want. Schmitt is the Western monopoly: the enemy is only the one defined by the West. In Minsk, however, the EU has shown more tolerance to Putin.

2. Popular revolt is risky because: a) it has the chance to destabilize yet another huge area (how many, nowadays?) that

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would come out of control and this jeopardizes the Great Capital; b) it could create a situation that would bring to power forces that the West fears: the radical anti-Western ones.

3. The best option for the West would be to change Putin with a Fake-Putin. What does this mean? A leadership that mimics “patriotism and values,” fueling the Russian trend (but also global) in order to satisfy the people and an opening that would allow the globalization of the entire Russian capital. I mean a Putin pack, an Eltin's inside. What will happen? Nobody knows. But I think these are the three realistic scenarios. Early elections and variations on the theme: a joke. What's better? I do not know, but in all three versions the West has already defeated Russia.

What will happen?

Prognostic: the time for the Great War has not yet arrived, but only for the slightly controlled ones, which the US adores and Russia mimics more and more in various peripheries; the elites of the Global Power do not want to have a great battle, and that's good. They will eventually get along, but this understanding will be totally at the expense of the citizens of the countries we are discussing about and not only. And this disadvantage will be felt, as usual, especially in the peripheral countries of the world-system. The conflict in Ukraine will be soon resolved, one way or another. What does “soon” mean and how it will be solved... no one yet is in a hurry to offer a safe solution. Probably much to the disadvantage of Ukraine. But it's good to hope that the gunfire will “soon” cease. This good news conceals a truth that should worry us, even if we all condemn the war. And the “Putin regime” is most likely to dissolve from

within. At this point, it is better to be “dissolved” than to take the power by force by its enemies.

You published a book of interviews with artists, theorists, activists from Russia (Russian Intelligentsia Today, Cartier Publishing House, 2012) and repeated the endeavour a few years later, with representatives of the Moldavan intellectual class (Bessarabian Intelligentsia Today, Cartier Publishing House, 2016). If you would compare the two experiences and try a global conclusion that would include both, what would you say? Reformulated from the reader's perspective, why should one read both?

The project on “Russian Intelligentsia” happened somehow by chance. It was a period of time (2007-2011) when I resumed my contact with the Russian intellectual environment, after a pause of many years. They started translating my books, I started writing there and I began to know intellectuals from different fields. Then, somehow, I started a series of discussions with some of them and I realized that the great rift that arose between our cultural and political spaces did not allow us to know each other. I thought this is my way of helping to achieve a better understanding of the Russian space we are neighbouring and have a common history with, though often with many complications. This book came somewhat like a sort of a puzzle book, in which I try to talk with top intellectuals from different fields and on very different subjects. I wanted to try to show how they think, how they engage in polemics, the type of reflection, troubles, fears they have etc. In Romania dominates a sort of “image of Russia” built, on the one hand, on historical *clichés*

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and, on the other hand, on the *mainstream* Anglo-Saxon media production. I don't think that this kind of "understanding" of Russia is very helpful to us. We need our own construction, knowledge and reflection on Russia. That's what I tried.

As for the second volume of the project, "Bessarabian Intelligentsia Today ", it came somehow in continuation of the first one. Here I have noticed the same profound lack of knowledge. However, if things are simpler in the case of Russia, meaning that the "enemy" is well-defined historically, conceptually and clichéistically, in the case of Bessarabia things are somehow the other way around. Bessarabia is a kind of small Russia for Romania, in a positive way. I mean, we all claim to know everything about Bessarabia, "Romanian land", "brothers", "blood", "people" etc. In reality, however, Bessarabia is a sort of Siberia in the collective mind, located "at the back of beyond", for which we use a set of predominantly positive clichés, although when we don't agree with them we call them "Russians" and we end the story.

I try to create a kind of discursive "Moldovan carpet" here, where I wanted to emphasize not only the black and red colours, which dominate the colour of the carpet, but also the other subtle shades. That's why I try to put together people from different generations with different experiences, with different professions, intellectuals belonging to different ethnicities and very different thinking directions. The result, I think, is pretty good. These stories, these long discussions with this mixture can help us overcome our clichés and understand that it is not only "an answer", but a multitude of possible answers. And there the identity problem is much more complicated than we want to understand. What did one of the interviewees tell me: I consider

myself Romanian, my parents consider themselves Moldovans, my grandmother from her father is Russian, from her mother is Ukrainian, so I belong to a typical Bessarabian family. That's about it.

You have been watching the Eastern-European politics, the social movements and transformations in the region for a long time. What recent topics or transformation currently draw your attention? What concerns you the most nowadays in terms of social criticism? Are there things that worry you? How about reasons for optimism?

In the Eastern European space is very obvious this strengthening of the conservative, even ultraconservative flank, in which, on the one hand, nationalism combined with religion and, on the other hand, the blind belief in the power of regulating the market, produce a very dangerous cocktail. It is dangerous because, on the one hand, it becomes a very effective tool in the hand of power and capital, and, on the other hand, it offers shelters for the very poor strata, which have a high potential for protest. This can be seen with the naked eye in Russia or Ukraine, and in Poland or Hungary, as well as in Romania or the Republic of Moldova. Taking into account that these phenomena are supported by superpowers such as the United States, but also by some political waves from the European space, we can say that the eastern flank is an important element in the construction of the new conservative and neoliberal internationale.

However, there are some positive signs. More and more articulate small groups appear, groups that not only bring a

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highly effective and coherent discursive critique to the hegemonic power, but also show signs of being able to bring settings that are likely to build platforms or political parties that would fight more efficiently with today's power in the next period of time. I'm not too optimistic, but I realize that we have been through such situations before. Even if in entirely different historical contexts. Only a deeper crisis could accelerate structural changes. For now it takes time, patience, and lots of work. And most of all, it takes a lot of practical work. The left has never been at fault with the theory, but now it is clear that we have a big problem with the praxis.

Are you worried about the possible transformation of Romania into a non-liberal state, following the Hungarian model? Sometimes I meet people who show this this fear. Do you think it's possible or probable?

Everything is possible and, of course, any form of authoritarianism is risky and not at all useful. Nonetheless, the risks that will lash over Romania are related not only to the “non-liberal” elements, but also to the much too “neoliberal” elements that have an effect on the Romanian economy and society. And when these two unite, when neo-liberalism also becomes ultraconservative, then we will really have to be prepared. Everything will be completely destroyed.

This year huge anti-corruption protests took place in Romania. Although the way they were presented in the press leads to a simple and clear narrative, the debates in Romania show that things are actually more complicated. There are

positive things in this amazing protest mobilization this year, but also less positive things. What are your observations regarding this recent protest wave?

Many things took place in the recent years. If, a couple of years ago, we were fighting for concrete abuses such as the “Roşia Montană Affaire”, or against the attempt to privatize the public health system, the protests now turn to a very vague concept of “fight against corruption” that looks more and more like the unifying idea of the first post-communist decade called “fight against communism.”

I think no one can say that we have no corruption in Romania. It exists in various forms, with different functions, on different levels, but from here up to finding the saving solution, a kind of “universal panacea,” it's a long way. I think corruption is just a small piece in a big puzzle and it's just one effect of one long chain of causes. Of course we have to put thieves in jail, but I don't think that this in itself can solve much of the problem. Their reproductive capacity is dizzying because it is related to some systemic causes. And the big thefts, FYI, are performed not in the “corrupt” area, but in the “legal” area. What is the *lobby* that changes legal systems in order to offer tax exemptions and all sorts of facilities to the “strategic investor,” to whom law packages are given by order (see the case of the New Labour Code) etc. So, things are a little more complicated when we talk about our country's priorities. In fact, what do we want? To get out of this systemic poverty, to have a bit of a more stable prosperity and a political system that offers chances to wider social strata. Corruption is a small drop in this ocean of social, political and economic problems.

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I recently wrote that Romania chose the Uzbek way of fighting corruption. Here's a history lesson of anti-corruption, the "Uzbek affair":

"Four - five years ago I bet on something. Unfortunately, I seem to have won the bet. The bet was like that: the way that this "anti-corruption fight" is led and is orchestrated in Romania is going to end like in Uzbekistan. The story resembles a great deal, and the results even more.

The story of Uzbekistan has become a kind of textbook lesson for anyone who wants to understand some parts of what is the big corruption, how it works, and especially what are the risks when you approach this phenomenon hastily, going directly to the effects, and when you believe that the arrest of the guilty ones solves the phenomenon. And especially as anti-corruption becomes a fighting tool between power structures. Corruption is not something that should be treated exceptionally and outside the already existing institutional and legal framework. But that's another story. Let's get back to our story.

The phenomenon of the Uzbek corruption was called the "Cotton Affair" and in the language of the power of those times (the late 70's and 80's) it was called the "Uzbek Affair". Kremlin made it clear that this corruption is specific to the less educated "Uzbek people", willing to give and take bribes, less civilized, and, in a manner of speaking, more Asian in its habits. Sounds familiar, right?

The story began in a simple way. They accidentally discovered in a couple of Uzbek *kishlaks* (villages), in some ordinary *kolkhoz*, some documents that said one thing on paper, but the real data was other different story. Some honest guys started to investigate the case, and when they started digging,

they got scared. The seemingly minor and banal theft, which resembled a conventional theft from the Soviet space, would lead to an iceberg that involved colossal amounts of money and connections that led from the kishlak to Tashkent, the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, and from there to Moscow, that is directly to Kremlin. For those who don't know, Uzbekistan was the republic specialized in the growing and cultivation of cotton, being the main resource of the country at that time.

And this is how the anti-corruption fight began. How? Instead of looking for the causes of the phenomenon and finding solutions, anti-corruption was transformed into a political fight that took place between four major institutions: the Party, the KGB, the Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor's Office. A life or death fight. In the perestroika years, the story entered the public space and the media, playing a huge role in this fight. The press made information available on sources, and we were staring as if we were at the theatre.

Then this business was so spectacular that people just could not believe it. Televised arrests of personalities from the first line of power, live on TV. The televisions presented their fortunes: huge houses, loads of money and gold etc. For the simple individual the impact was huge.

The story is long and fascinating. The result: the state institutions turned to dust. The Services (KGB) have suffered the least. I could say that the KGB was even a winner. Instead, the Party, the Internal Affairs, the Prosecutor's Office and the administrative system looked really bad after this fight. And the cotton industry, needless to say. What could I possibly say about the simple people who worked? And Uzbekistan, instead of

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solving a big problem, was thrown into total chaos: all the way back. However, the final collapse had multiple causes.

What do we know about the “Cotton Affair” today? We know that the “anti-corruption fight” that was so loud, broadcasted live, so everybody could see the handcuffs, the money, and who promised “justice and truth” was in fact a great show for the crowd and a great fight between the institutions. We also know that the majority of those arrested and sentenced were just “important sacrificial pieces” and “victims” in the fight between the four institutions. Was there corruption? Oh yes, a great deal. Were those people guilty? Oh yes. But they went down not because they were corrupt, but because they were part of an institution, they went down selectively and randomly: the institutions violated all the possible rules in their fights. Today we know how the machine worked. The anti-corruption fight was like the fight for peace, old style: we will fight for peace until everything is destroyed.

You’ll tell me – ok, spare us with these stories, it was communism after all. I can only tell you this: the institutions were somewhat more stable back then (painfully stable). It’s just something I noticed. Back then a very powerful institution didn’t exist, the institution that today makes the law: the private capital, which is one of the most active and efficient parts in the development of the phenomenon called “high-level corruption”. There was the state capital, but it was infinitely weaker than the private one today. The difference between then and today is that back then corruption was divided into four institutions and today it is divided into five institutions. And the division, or rather the profit, is never proportionate. Today we know very well who lost and who won in the Uzbek affaire.

My riddle? Guess who holds the biggest piece from this phenomenon today? I give you a clue: the high-level corruption is nothing but a struggle for monopoly on resources, by other means than the legal ones. (However, corruption tends to legalize after a while: only the first million is not legal ... the rest will be legal).

So, Romania has chosen the Uzbek way with similar results: institutions turned into dust (only one of them is somehow winning, we shall see which), a weak state, a devastated economy, discredited and weakened political structures etc. In the "Uzbek Affair" the "technocratic & apolitical" institution KGB won by far. But wow! What a show we saw! Basically we don't have an anti-corruption fight, but just a fight for the monopoly over corruption.

Ah, and I forgot to tell you: the anti-corruption fight in the Uzbek style has amplified the phenomenon of corruption."

I have read with great interest these observations, even since you posted them on Facebook, where you make your views known quite frequently. And the anecdotal comparisons presented by writers sometimes say more than the rigorous analyses, all the more so as the latter are quite hard to find. An ample public debate about the situation of the institutions which have a punitive role and the way in which they gain public sympathy, one that is not organized by the competition between the big parties, has not yet taken place. It is probably not even possible under the current circumstances. The spectacle of exemplary punishment of some of the newly enriched of the transition is very popular. Related to the comparison between the two eras, there is a perception that

what is happening today with regard to corruption is closely linked to the socialist regime, that a special inclination to corruption was formed during the socialist regime. On the opposite side, it is said that the illegalities the policing institutions are accused of have the same origin. In your opinion, are these interpretations reliable or are they merely superficial simplifications of the problem?

No, of course. No one denies the rather developed level of corruption during the Soviet (or Communist) era in our country, but the level that this phenomenon has reached in “transition”, that is, in capitalism, seems to make the great corrupt from communism to look like petty-thieves. See what fortunes the first echelon of the Communist Party had. By comparison, we see very clearly that the phenomenon of corruption itself is much more fertile in certain types of regime. You see the same phenomenon in the “golden inter-war” period. Oh, what huge robberies were done with the protection of the power in the interest of a *comprador*-style elite! Corruption, in essence, is an effect of economic and social mechanisms. And unfortunately it cannot be solved by extending the number of arrests and criminal proceedings, because it reproduces infinitely if you don’t go to the cause.

This year's protests were strikingly creative. The crowd organized to create a light tricolour flag in Bucharest (we also had a smaller one in Iași). The imaging of the messages displayed during the protests even led to the publication of a photo album. How do you think this explosion of protest creativity can be explained?

The Russians, for instance, have called this urban class, who made a name for itself in our case – “TFL”², “Tefeliști” – the “creative class”. It’s a good label. It’s not really *hipster*. In other words, we are talking about an urban class working in the area of “immaterial labour”, with a high level of education and an income over the average. This class is now looking for a meaning. And it suddenly found that it needed a political meaning. It’s only natural, because they live in the urban environment, in the city, and they don’t want to be politically “idiots”. Just that the “apolitical” pause in which they were appeased was too long, and now they want, or feel the need, maybe even without realizing, to become politicized. In other words, to get a political consciousness. But this class is very confused because it lacks self-consciousness; it lacks the ideological value horizon and especially the political practice. It is very difficult for this class to define its “enemy”. It visibly confuses the “sources of power”. Hence, it becomes easy to manipulate. How does it feel to shout “Down with Communism” 27 years after its fall? “Communism”, who died 27 years ago, can no longer be the source of power and repression. It is much more difficult to see as a source of repressive power a Bank or a Corporation because you have been ideologically processed for almost 30 years in order to be convinced that it is the source of pleasure, income etc. The creative part somehow

² Abbreviation from Romanian “young beautiful and free” (“tineri frumoși și liberi”, in Romanian), expression frequently used to refer to the allegedly politically naïve (but very active) middle class youth. The particle “-ism” (“tefelism”, in Romanian) is added to the abbreviation in order to denote that the opinions of this group represent a political ideology.

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comes on this thread. On one hand, it is part of the work of this social stratum, they know how to do this because for 27 years they all dreamt of becoming professionals in advertising, marketing, PR, communication, IT etc. And on the other hand they believe that political praxis is done using these means. Can you produce “political praxis” with such means? Yes, you can. But it's not enough. Anyway, you have to start from somewhere...

THE TWO ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

Interview with Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca¹

Nebojša Milikić: Can you elaborate on your thesis posted on Facebook, that there are two elephants in the room of capitalist injustice: corruption and anti-corruption.

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: On the 18th of January 2017, before the protests, the President of Romania unexpectedly showed up at the government meeting about which there had been rumors in the previous evening, suggesting that the government was intending to pass two urgency ordinances secretly: one regarding the pardon of certain criminal offences, the other regarding the revision of some Penal Code articles.² Klaus

¹ Translation from Romanian by Alexandru Țirdea. An earlier version of the interview (without footnotes) appeared on the LeftEast online platform (<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/2-elephants/>).

² From a technical point of view, the issue at stake was primarily a change in the description of the „abuse of power” criminal offence, which falls under the category of „criminal offences assimilated with corruption” under Romanian law. Previously, the Constitutional Court decided that its definition is too broad and must be interpreted in a more rigorous manner so that it would not incentivize the prosecutors to use it too easily, putting at risk the guarantees of fundamental constitutional rights. Even then the advocates of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) fueled

Iohannis used then the metaphor of the elephant in the room, suggesting that the Social Democratic Party's (PSD) intent to pass the two normative acts was embarrassing, the two documents being both invisible and obvious for everyone. It seemed to me that the metaphor of the two elephants is very suitable to describe the frustrating way in which, amid the heat of the very intense partisan conflict, the entire debate avoids any direct, sincere and therapeutic facing of the general feeling of injustice that mobilized huge manifestations of protest in Romania since the winter of 2012.

The age of austerity has left deep wounds here. Increasing inequalities, wage cuts in the public sector and increasing social polarization were all accompanied by great political crises. The alteration of the laws without any debate, under the pretext of an urgent need of reform, but systematically aiming to diminish the employees' rights and to eliminate the protection against various

fears that this particular infraction will be decriminalized, considering the fact that „abuse of power” charges are by far the most frequent among those pursued by the institution (Newsroom, „CCR upholds claim of unconstitutionality of article defining abuse of power in Criminal Code”, *Business Review*, 15 June 2016, <http://www.business-review.eu/news/ccr-upholds-claim-of-unconstitutionality-of-article-defining-abuse-of-power-in-criminal-code-109260>; Reuters Staff, „Romania top court keeps abuse of power as criminal offence”, *Reuters*, 15 June 2016, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-romania-corruption-idUKKCN0Z11OW>). From a political point of view, the fact that the leader of the governing alliance was at the time subject to similar charges diminished drastically the credibility of the Government's allegedly legitimate reformist intent.

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forms of exploitation, was accompanied by the development of a real cult for criminal justice. The political front of the big parties has been divided, often artificially, along the most profitable populist lines, without changing the general tendency to abandon the state's responsibility towards its citizens. The center-right parties emphasized the populist discourse of the "fight against corruption", unconditionally supporting the National Anti-Corruption Directorate's (DNA) actions, which has gradually amassed an exceptional power, intervening in key moments of the political conflict with investigations and communication campaigns. From the disciplinary institutions' perspective, the source of all evils in society is corruption. Corruption should be suppressed by all means necessary. However, the initial moral high ground of the "fight against corruption" was gradually blurred after public complaints regarding some controversial judicial actions, the regulations that offer special power to anti-corruption prosecutors, the Constitutional Court's accusations³ and the judges' protests regarding the extralegal collaboration between the Prosecutor's

³ Anca Simina, Cristian Delcea, and Mihai Voinea, "INTERVIU Daniel Morar, Judecător CCR: „Amenințările SRI la adresa Curții Constituționale au depășit cadrul legal. Așa ceva nu se întâmplă într-o țară civilizată” [INTERVIEW with Daniel Morar, Judge of the Constitutional Court: 'The treathenings waged by SRI against the Constitutional Court exceeded legal limits. Something like that doesn't happen in a civilized country']", *Adevarul.ro*, 4 iunie 2015, http://adevarul.ro/news/societate/interviu-daniel-morar-judecator-ccr-amenintarile-sri-adresa-curtii-constitutionale-depasit-cadrul-legal-asa-e-neacceptat-intr-o-tara-civilizata-1_556f20d3cfbe376e35e4060f/index.html.

Office and the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI).⁴ On the other hand, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the party most affected by DNA's interventions, sought to gain political support through an ambiguous policy of fiscal relaxation and a gradual increase of social benefits, all being accompanied by an attempt to draw the support of the Orthodox Church – which is a very popular organization, religion becoming the most accessible form of psychotherapy during the financial crisis. Nevertheless, they did almost nothing in order to rectify the Labor Code, to decrease the major social inequalities, to afford more safeties to the workers or to sustain coherent social policies.

The daily sense of injustice grew despite the intense competition between the main political parties on a market of surrogates for criminal and social justice. This happens because there is a common drive that describes every major political option: the subordination of the public interest to the private interests, inequality, corruption, the preferential treatment of capital in relation to labor, the expropriation of the commons. There are two elephants in the room of capitalist injustice: corruption and anti-corruption policies. Both the injustice engendered by illegitimate or illegal relations between investors and the state and those generated by the turbulent, arbitrary and superficial nature of the “fight against corruption” are manifestations of the same unequal economic system, hostile towards the public service. Corruption is ubiquitous, but the

⁴ Nine O'Clock, “National Union of Judges of Romania: Most of the Courts Have Decided to Postpone Protests | Nine O'Clock,” *Nine O'Clock*, September 15, 2016, <http://www.nineoclock.ro/national-union-of-judges-of-romania-most-of-the-courts-have-decided-to-postpone-protests/>.

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anti-corruption measures do not change a thing. They leave an impression of insufficiency and selectiveness. The equality before the law that is claimed by the supporters of the anti-corruption policies, referring to criminal justice, does not lower the inequalities within the society. These facts are noticeable and they generate indignation. But nobody seems to have the courage to bring this issue into the official discussions, possibly at a government session, and place them in their relevant context: the injustice of a social system based on the privileges granted through the possession of capital.

In this Guardian article, „Romania’s Corruption Fight Is a Smokescreen to Weaken Its Democracy”⁵, a short analysis indicates that anti-corruption struggle waged by the secret services (backed and supported by international political community, mostly EU bodies) endangers democracy itself. Without entering the question of what is seen as “democracy” in such analysis can you explain the contradiction between the clear majority of PSD in recent elections and the massiveness of the actual street protests?

The clear electoral victory of the PSD was due to many factors. They proposed a policy program based on economic issues, clearly oriented against the budgetary discipline constantly reminded by the technocratic government (which was mostly consisting of EU officials, private sector managers and

⁵ David Clark, “Romania’s Corruption Fight Is a Smokescreen to Weaken Its Democracy,” *The Guardian*, January 10, 2017, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/romania-corruption-fight-is-a-smokescreen-to-weaken-its-democracy>.

NGO leaders). The National Liberal Party (PNL) and the newly formed civic party Save Romania Union (USR) focused their entire program on corruption allegations against the Social Democratic Party and on the unconditional support to the Prime Minister in office, Dacian Cioloș. The latter was describing himself both as an apolitical technocrat and as a supporter of both of these parties. The lack of clear programmatic proposals and the feeling that the elections were nothing more than a plebiscite for the status quo have demobilized parts of the middle-class electorate that usually takes part in the large protests. The same effect was probably created by the emergence of serious doubts regarding the anti-corruption idealism (for instance, the cover up by the technocratic government of a plagiarism scandal that had substantially affected the credibility of DNA's chief prosecutor). Within the social groups that are mobilized by liberal civic devotion and anticommunist discourse it began to emerge a reluctance regarding the traditional marginalization of the lower-class voters, the PSD often being described, in the electoral context, as a party supported by uneducated, poor people from the rural areas, people afflicted by vices, incapable to inform themselves and to vote. Despite a steadier orientation towards the middle-class interests and the urban, young electorate, the PSD is unable to meet the expectations of this category in a convincing way, being rather an old-school *parti de masse* passing through a very long identity crisis (hierarchical, inflexible, paternalist and not well-adjusted to *online* political communication).

What happened after the elections?

The post-electoral period began with a lot of noise, with the unexpected refusal of the President to appoint Sevil Shhaideh as prime-minister (she would have become both the first woman and the first Muslim to serve as PM in post-socialist Romania). Then, the President's decision to preside over a government session for the first time during his mandate was seen as an astonishing political victory after the serious defeat of his party (PNL). Ever since the appointment of the Grindeanu government, The National Liberal Party had insisted that PSD needed to disclose its position regarding these issues, constantly accusing the government party's intent to pardon politicians that had been condemned for corruption or to issue an amnesty for corruption offenses. After the protests began, the President did not hesitate to descend among the protesters and express his indignation. The mobilization track record of USR's activists (now part of the opposition) was also a contributing factor. Thus, the alignments that are detrimental for the PSD were revived and the effect of personalized power was created, the salvationist and emotional context which had lacked during the campaign for the legislative elections, but which guaranteed Klaus Iohannis' unexpected victory in 2014. The patronizing attitude of the Justice Minister, who insisted impassively to go on with the public consultations and the adoption of the normative acts despite the protests, the atmosphere of suspicions and the obscure debates, have infuriated even some of the PSD's voters.

It all sounds like very clear reason for the protest but also as too much confused reasoning about its political and

ideological background and goals. Did you notice some protest pattern of that type during your research for your course “Borders, Barriers and protest culture - the new politics of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe”?

Generally, large protests tend to focus on a range of dissatisfactions which cannot be clearly articulated. Nevertheless, their interpretation and the engendered effects depend on the analysis of the context, of the partisan stakes, symbols, ideological assumptions, discourse and (social) media communication trends. This is precisely why these aspects interest me more than the mechanics of mobilization; my particular interest is to observe the protest culture, the representations of the protests and the social transformations that accompany them. Something very interesting is happening in Romania in this recent sequence of large protest movements. Since the anti-austerity protests (2011-2012) and those against the controversial mining projects (2013) there was a gradual shift to increasingly unclear ideological motivations, generally inclining towards the right-wing partisan discourse. For example, in 2013, the presence of nationalist groups was more easily recognizable. Since then the Romanian flags, the nationalist and anticommunist paraphernalia have become customary for the large manifestations. The protests have also become easier to be capitalized in the partisan race, directly or indirectly, by the big political parties, which are structurally oligarchic and opportunistic in character. For instance, the Social Democratic Party's victory in 2016 can also be interpreted as a reaction against the way in which President Iohannis capitalized the 2015 protests, which enabled him to appoint a right-wing government

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without securing a substantial legitimacy within the society. Simultaneously, the anti-corruption discourse has started to include increasingly authoritarian elements, in a context in which civic movements are becoming more and more ideologically unaware, which is not a promising development at all. Conspiracy theories and hate speech are replacing the civic deliberation more often than not, while the social issues are constantly oversimplified as punitive representations or by stigmatizing the socially disadvantaged groups.

In fact, I think that this year's protests are very similar with the ones that took place in 2015. The latter emerged as a huge emotional reaction after an accident. A Bucharest night club caught fire and the consequences were tragic because of the lack of fire and emergency evacuation measures. A large number of people took to the streets spontaneously as a sign of mourning, but the mourning turned into an anti-corruption protest. The social democrat Prime-Minister resigned, and the President appointed a new PM. The prevailing slogan then was "Corruption kills" and a great number of conspiracy theories emerged, regarding the way in which the public emergency services allegedly blocked the access for the private ambulances which could have saved the victims. Certainly, corruption can be invoked in order to explain everything, because it's ubiquitous, but the structural fundamental issue is the reduction of the administrative apparatus and the neoliberal reforms that imposed increasingly softer rules in order to facilitate business. Only the independent left, a small minority, tried to bring into discussion this larger issue which constantly puts the lives of many at risk. Without much success. The safety rules and the more drastic checks initially enforced by the resigning

government were criticized, and the new technocratic government extended the deadlines for obtaining the necessary permits through an emergency ordinance.

This time, the main topics were the collective pardon and the revision of the Penal Code. Some of the proposed measures would act for the benefit of the members of the coalition in power, but they would have rectified some articles in the Penal Code, which had been previously criticized by the Constitutional Court and which, because of their conceptual stretching, give to the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) a great deal of power, for instance the possibility to initiate a criminal investigation around the issuing of national laws and governmental decrees. The entire debate revolved around the unconditional support lent to the prosecutors and around the government's decision to modify those legal arrangements. The political parties advanced their positions strategically. The President demanded a referendum regarding the continuation of the fight against corruption (for which the only possible answer is yes, of course), suggesting that the Social Democratic Party seeks to put an end to it, while the leader of the PSD invoked a concurrent referendum regarding an amendment to the constitutional definition of family (which would have brought him substantial popular support, but at the same time would have brought the homophobic religious authoritarianism on the agenda, next to the anti-corruption punitive authoritarianism). The structural issues regarding the overcrowded prisons and the penal law's basic humanism, which prompted prisoners' protests last year, were overshadowed, as was also the case with the debate around the anti-corruption prosecutors' ability to shape the legislative agenda through *ad hoc* criminal investigations. Or

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the fact that a great number of Penal Code articles were declared partially unconstitutional. The prosecutors set in motion a criminal investigation of the emergency ordinance, even though they do not have the constitutional right to have a say in matters such as the necessity or the legal content of the legislative act. The spirit of the protest was dominated by punitive anger, while the moderate calls were blurred.

Let's assume that the messages related to the mentioned "punitive anger" have been reduced, simplified and focused for a good reason. The protesters show a variety of messages, some of which include sophisticated accusations of and imputations on the regime: for being the heritage of "communism", corrupted by default, popular and in power thanks to the support by less literate and educated people etc. Could we think about the underlying socio-economic structure of the dominant employed "symbols, ideological assumptions, discourse and (social) media communication trends"?

The strongest impression is that the various dissatisfactions within the society can be captured more and more easily by the dominant political actors, through a process of authoritarian deliberation in which the partisan political groups amplify their power and their ability to fight against each other, while the legitimate interests, weakly represented, have even fewer ways of expression. Both sides pretend to represent "the nation", but none of them represent the society. As far as that goes, thinking to the possibility that the protests could bring real democracy now... this is discouraging to say the least.

Regarding the discursive means used by the two largest confronting sides, the strongest impression is that they are both framed in the same post-truth paradigm, often invoked in order to construe Donald Trump's victory. Emotions are decisive. Also the energy of the partisan messages conveyed online, the consolidation of the beliefs within the community, but outside any relation with the factual reality, which gradually becomes irrelevant. Generating an inverted "anti-system" discourse in which the media symbols of capitalist success compete for popularity, post-truth is the most efficient way to obscure the class-domination background. Nevertheless, it enables us to observe the class character of the production of symbols and images. And from this point on we can go further towards larger questions, so rarely asked in this day and age.

For some people, it's hard to understand how it is possible for individuals with middle-class education to be so confident about their position even when they spread sophisticated conspiracy theories that upset concrete evidence or progressive interpretations, creating precisely the confusion they are presuming in the case of the disadvantaged groups of the society. I think the answer points precisely to the central role played by middle-class actors when it comes to the production of dominant points of view. These conspiracy theories are produced in the same middle-class information-making creative circles. Concretely, all parliamentary parties (but also the Constitutional Court and the National Anti-Corruption Directorate or the various press institutions) represent, first and foremost, the interests and lifestyles of the privileged groups, and the political conflict is about who exactly will have the task of representing them by using the state power. Actually, the

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entire symbolism reflects the tensions within the petty bourgeois imaginary.

For example, when one side invokes a conspiracy theory to point out the funding of the opposing NGOs, reiterating themes of petty-bourgeois anti-monopolism and “anti-colonialism” from the interwar period, they add the fact that the local petty bourgeoisie is under the threat of the big international corporations. Thus, they also translate the conflict between the small and the big owners of capital for the voters that belong to socially disadvantaged groups (pensioners, underpaid employees and other “losers” of the post-communist transition). They are doing this by using the emotional language of nationalism. They also signal the abuses of the anti-corruption institutions against local entrepreneurs, who get punished, while the big corporations involved in corruption affairs would not get the same treatment. In going this, in fact, they are demanding more impartial relations within the mechanism of the unregulated market – where, let’s not forget, the state constantly interferes mostly in the interests of capital owners. On the other side, right-wing populists and civic activists who claim a liberal respectability legitimize themselves through the middle-class urban culture itself, pointing out the fact that they are the sole driving force of social change, that an entire country depends on them, that they are the only ones who can save it, and that they represent the “true values” of the nation. The nationalist discourse is also present in this instance, especially via the expats’ interventions, who maintain strong affective and political links with their home country.

When it is about linguistic and propaganda levels, it seems that there is (not mere a stylistic) conflict that somehow resembles the underlying class composition of the current and previous conflicts. The PSD uses harsh and even brutal language of power, accusing the protesters of being supported by foreign interests and agencies. The protesters have more or less obvious support by private business and financial sectors, but they in fact also talk through the mouth of the president and of more than a few top EU officials and instances.

Belated anticommunism (deprived of its object) has the function of a discursive apparatus that wipes gradually the memory of the egalitarian stages of social and economic development navigated by the past generations during the socialist past. To some extent, an intergenerational divide is involved here, but not only along demographic lines. It's rather a gap in the social memory. The PSD is still electorally linked with the social categories that still possess this memory, people generally stigmatized as uncivilized or incapable to choose. This is the reason why they are bizarrely identified as a communist party by their rivals, even though PSD is nothing more than a center-left oligarchic party like many others, probably situated closer to the right than many similar parties in Europe. In addition, sometimes the tone is very inappropriate. This year protesters frequently shouted "PSD, the red plague", a slogan to closely resembling those of the far-right.

It seems that the described ideological confusion somehow fits all sides in the parliamentary politics. But it also seems that we tend to forget that political confusion is often

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conceptualized produced and nurtured. It also needs some reliable tools of its generation and distribution. Could we recognize or even deconstruct the origins of this type of confusion, which gradually prevails in many countries of the today's - supposedly rational and democratic - capitalist world? Or maybe its specific origins in the East-European domain?

Understanding an existing situation always depends on the concrete political and social circumstances. But the ideological confusion seems to be a global trend that produces the clearest actual political results. The new digital economy of attention and behavior is only a vehicle for larger historical trends that could offer an explanation for the crisis of the liberal democracies and for the illiberal turn globally. We also need to acknowledge the ingredients of the new transformations brought about with the large protest movements of 2011. Donald Trump's victory (Donald Trump is a self-proclaimed anti-corruption warrior himself) points out the success of the Tea Party-type movements in the United States and the failure of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The "Arab Spring" ended with no major positive consequences. The same thing can be said about Euromaidan, which actually reinforced the authoritarian political attitudes both in the Ukraine and in Russia. In the Republic of Moldova, the 2016 protests that brought accusations against oligarchic corruption and a massive banking fraud have materialized into an electoral debate that lacked credibility and which led to the victory of a candidate who holds hostile views towards the European Union. The failures of the European Union referendums and the generalization of the anti-immigrationist discourse overlap on the successive electoral

victories on the European People's Party and on the tendencies of the authoritarian government parties from Hungary and Poland. Last year's large manifestations in France did not increase the chances for the emergence of a political turn that could match the expectations. In addition, the far-right movements are gaining ground and are able to mobilize manifestations such as the one that took place in Dresden in 2015, where nearly 18 000 people participated. Last year, Austria hardly managed to avoid the election of a president who shares radical right-wing ideas. Syriza did not succeed in determining the change of economic philosophy that many hoped to see after the large protests in Greece. The nationalist-technocratic trends are strongly discernible in India (Modi) and in Japan (Abe). Against the same background of redeeming simulacra, the politics of fear and suspicion established itself durably in Israel (Netanyahu) and the Philippines (Duerte). New borders and barriers are erected everywhere, while the social gaps are not disappearing, but on the contrary, they are deepening. Every time the state of exception becomes the basis of legal decisions and legitimacy, which not only proves the profound crisis of the liberal democracies, but also the complete inability of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas) to regenerate itself or to accomplish its deliberative mission.

Just like the unregulated markets that do not self-regulate and do not regenerate themselves after great financial shocks, we can notice that the self-regulation and self-regeneration powers of the public sphere are more and more illusory. The mobilization to protest does not change the shallowness of the decision monopoly of the great political actors, both in the domestic politics and internationally. The same thing seems to

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happen in Romania, where the anti-corruption prosecutors are accused of political partisanship, the social gaps are widening and the confronting sides bring in their support either the act of voting or the online mobilization. Last year's political situation in Brazil just came to my mind, Romania's case being in some respects comparable to it.

There are more and more similar situations around, seems almost like a global trend, where the fractions of urban middle classes and petty bourgeois (so far seeing themselves as either realistic or illusionary "beneficiaries of the global transition"), insist on the values and purity of the system? But to the local and global "losers of transition" the protest appears also as a sort of reclaiming the share of spoils?

Protesting within the limits of your own self-contradictory system of values can release some of the tensions between hopes and results. On the other hand, the ideological confusion is one of the major causes of the relative irrelevance of the liberal civic mobilization.

From a historical perspective, taking the Eastern European experience into account, the global neoliberal consensus and the political left's identity crisis during the last 30 years look like a temporal bridge between two moments of utmost utilization of the ideological weapons of the Cold War – with the difference that now one of the two rivals, the Soviet Communism, is missing. Another important distinction would be that the simulacra are increasingly easier to produce in the age of "virtual reality". The imaginary of social progress is reduced to a

neoliberal utopia in which the immediate reality resembles more and more an imperfect dystopia evolving indefinitely.

After 1989, an extensive process of active forgetting started, denying the realities of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. In the absence of an elucidation of our relation with this past, which is systematically presented one-sidedly, in a simplistic and self-deprecatory manner, there can be no answer for the current challenges. Anything can be superficially linked with the hazy past, but nothing can be attached to the future. There cannot be any big political debate, or at least a conceivable future that everybody could hope for by virtue of the principle of political equality – the foundation for any democratic society.

These days, one very influential Romanian journalist, Cristian Tudor Popescu, wrote that the 2017 protests mirror the 1989 ones (under the title „The second fall of Ceausescu”⁶). Of course, the approach is ridiculously hyperbolic and misdirected. However, it says something about the incapacity I mentioned before. Few days ago, another influential investigation journalist wrote about the „fact” that in the proximity of the place where the protesters gathered, at the National Geology Museum, he discovered radioactivity levels 100 times higher than those recorded at Cernobîl...⁷. The article was pointing to concrete

⁶ Cristian Popescu, “Romania: The Second Fall of Ceausescu,” *Al Jazeera*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/02/romania-2017-protests-1989-ceausescu-170216114655475.html>.

⁷ Magda Prelipceanu, “Radiații de 200.000 de ori mai mari decât dozele admise au fost măsurate la 100 de metri de mulțimea din Piața Victoriei! (Gazeta Sporturilor) [Radiation 200 000 times above the safety limits measured near the crout of Victoria Square! (Gazeta

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policy problems regarding regulations of dangerous materials. Of course, no one could believe the enormous exaggeration. The author erroneously interpreted the official reports. Apologies followed. But what about the article about the second fall of Ceaușescu? Do we have the lucidity to see the big picture? Can we think in realistic terms about the enormous challenges of the present time, without fantasizing spectacularly about a past we are not even capable to explain accurately anymore?

sporturilor)],” *RFI România*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.rfi.ro/presa-romaneasca-93076-radiatii-mari-piata-victoriei-gazeta-sporturilor>.

THE POSSIBILITY TO SAY „NO”

Interview with the group h.arta

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: From November 11th to December 15th, 2017, you exhibited in the contemporary art space tranzit.ro/Iași under the title “A Country Like Abroad”¹. This title reproduces a *cliché* aspiration very often met in the political media in Romania, “we want a country like abroad”. It also expresses profound discontent related to the realities in Romania compared to the countries in Western Europe. The expression is part of a type of discourse where what is “abroad” is perceived as superior to “inside”, “there” is preferred to “here”. How did you come to this title? How did the idea of the project emerged?

h.arta: The idea of the project came in connection with the anti-corruption protests from January-February 2017 and the way the anti-corruption and anti-PSD acts of speech and attitudes were the catalyst for what was always there in the ideas and attitudes of the middle class, more or less hidden under the thin layer of neoliberal “tolerance”. The middle class felt

¹ The exhibition „O țară ca afară” has been produced as part of the project „ The Glitter(y) and Misery: Reflection on the Question of the Middle Class”, a project organized by tranzit.ro/Iași (curators: Nebojša Milikić, Livia Pancu and Florin Bobu).

unrepresented after the elections in December 2016 and those blamed for the results of the elections were those who were promised social welfare measures, measures absolutely necessary otherwise, but translated by the middle class as being part of a populist discourse. The protests radicalized a discourse against social protection and against the state, a discourse which has always accompanied the middle class, with all its fantasies about the West and about the way “democracy” and “civilisation” are equalized with neoliberalism. Throughout the protests and up to the present, it was extremely visible how absolutely valid discontent towards the present regime become the frame for discourses against social protection, for discourses about the idealization of privatizing policy fields such as health and education, for all these attitudes of eroding the solidarity of the middle class towards everything that could be common and egalitarian. Also, in a close connection with the self-colonizing which always accompanies such attitudes, the protests and all the subsequent reactions and attitudes of those involved in the protests (and of the middle class, in general) made very clear how anti-communist stances show a distorted image of the socialist era, brought down to terror, bureaucracy and corruption, while all its emancipating potential is erased.

In this context, the present corruption, instead of being seen as a direct result of capitalism, is exclusively seen as a “communist legacy” in the same self-colonizing direction, in which the countries in the ex-socialist block are seen as inferior compared to a “West” imagined as completely lacking corruption. We read and we keep reading with great concern from the media, from the social media, when discussing with acquaintances and colleagues how these attitudes of idealizing

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the “West” and capitalism shape an extreme-right discourse, although it is not always assumed as such, but it is always there as a real threat.

The text accompanying the images we saw at the exhibition underlines a series of stereotypes and contradictions present in the public discourse within the protest framework, it is a criticism of them. Which ones have especially drawn your attention?

The clearest contradiction was that between the self-colonizing discourse (with all its appeals to an imaginary “Europe” which should save us from corruption and from the “communist legacy”) and the nationalist impulses. EU flags, the slogans reading “S.O.S. Europe” or the omnipresent “We want a country like abroad”, all these coexisted with the obsessive chanting of the Romanian anthem, waving the Romanian tricolour flag and with creating human tricolours (without the ridiculousness of the resemblance of the latter with the pre-89 nationalism being taken into consideration by the protesters which otherwise had a profound anti-communist attitude). This anti-communist attitude was another defining character of the protests, reiterated in multiple slogans referring to the revolution in 1989 and to the fact that these protests are a new revolution, as well as the phrase “red plague” very widely used, without any concern for its Nazi origin. During these protests, as well as during the past few years in general, the real danger of the fact that the extreme right becomes more and more visible and strong worldwide is overlooked by the middle class in Romania, which

continues to perpetuate the weary and stereotypical discourse of the communist “danger”.

During the conference you held at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, you mentioned a series of impressions and observations related to the initiative of the public manifestations from 2008, in Bucharest, which were ment to send a critical message to the officials reunited within the NATO Summit, the first of this kind organized in Romania. A long time has passed since then. Which were the most powerful impressions back then? How do you see that moment starting from the current politic experiences and realities?

The moment of the NATO Summit in Bucharest and the way we were involved in the attempts to protest against this summit and what it represented was a turning point for us. A few months before, in the autumn of 2007, we had been working in the project *Spațiul Public București | Public Art Bucharest 2007*, where we conceptualized and put into practice the programme for a project space called *Project space*, a space where we had collaborated with numerous organisations and informal groups which had an attitude and activity dedicated to social change, some of which had an open anti-capitalist position. This project was an important occasion for us to come into contact with so many ideas, attitudes and people who were creating an image full of hope with respect to how much potential and how many possibilities are present in the interstices which form within the apparently monolithic capitalism. At that moment, even if we were working from the center of capitalism, in a large-scale project, financed with the money of the Capital, it seemed that

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art and culture can create a space of freedom where you could express your opinions and create strategies, you could meet people with the same beliefs as yours and you could make plans for the future. For a short period of time, art seemed to be a privileged territory, a place of opportunity where you could start changing something.

In April 2008, at the same time as the NATO *Summit*, a self-organized group rented a former industrial building in Bucharest as a place for discussions, film projections, workshops and, in the opinion of some of the participants, a possible starting point for a peaceful and quiet march through the city, taking into consideration that any public manifestation, no matter how peaceful, was completely forbidden during the *Summit*. The context within which these events were planned was that of a state of emergency, a state of control that had already begun several weeks before the beginning of the *Summit*. This state was concretized in the media campaign which shaped the image of “dangerous anarchists” coming to wreck the city and ruin the image of our country, in harassing those involved and their families and friends, in tapping their phones and monitoring their internet activity based on a law especially issued for this occasion etc. During the first day of the *Summit* and the anti-*Summit* activities, special gendarme troops entered the rented space, assaulted some of the participants and picked up all the people they found in that space. Later, the police had to release the detained, under pressure from the associations for the human rights and under pressure from the people who picketed the police precincts. But although the detained were released, the continuous surveillance and threats from the police did not cease throughout the *Summit* and afterwards.

Part of the people and groups I worked with in *Project space* were involved in organizing the anti-NATO events. Some preliminary discussions for organizing the anti-NATO events took place, informally, in the building where *Project space* was carried out. Afterwards, during the hallucinating days during the NATO *Summit*, we found out that these meetings had been infiltrated by Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) agents, some of them playing an important role in organizing the events. During all that time I considered that art is the safe place where you can speak from, where you can act from, but in fact our words and gestures were carefully monitored. We spent those days and the following period in a surrealistic atmosphere, where the fact that we were tailed on the street, our phones were tapped etc. were visible realities, used as means of intimidation. But these surveillance and control practices, visible during the state of emergency, are always there, in the background, are an integral part of life in capitalism. Art and culture are a safe place only as long as they are not a danger for the *status quo*. The safety offered by art and culture proves to be delusional and temporary, abolished when the state of emergency, the defining state of capitalism, occurs.

In comparison, the large-scale protest movements from 2017 and 2015, both gravitating around the moral revolt against the corruption phenomenon, lacked police exaggerations. We cannot say the same thing, it's true, about those preceding them, against the austerity policies and subsoil resources exploration or exploitation projects in Roșia Montană and Pungești. Nevertheless, isn't this a good sign? Doesn't it reflect an improvement in the conditions favorable to participation

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and contestation, which are essential in democratic politics? Western public opinion regarded recent protests as a symbolic victory of the democratic participation over the oligarchic tendencies of the political class.

There were very clear differences between these protests and those related to other matters during the past few years (such as those related to the mining in Roşia Montană and Certej, shale gas extraction in Pungeşti, all the ecologic disasters they would have caused, protests related to deforestation, related to killing the stray dogs etc., subjects which are at least as important, as urgent and, unfortunately, still present, just like the subject of anti-corruption). But all these protests did not manage to gather the crowds of people the subject of anti-corruption (with its anti-communist, pro-privatisation and against social protection nuances) has managed to gather. These protests, this “revolution” of the middle class, did not have to suffer from the interventions of the police forces for this reason, as well: these were the protests of those having legitimacy and power in the society, the protests of the “civilized” people, of those who are like “abroad”. Obviously, an important part of the way these “mainstream” protests were treated by the law enforcement had also to do with the clash between the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Presidency and with the fact that these protests actually supported a faction of the power. Also, media played an important part in the way protests were organized and perpetuated, as they were intensely presented in the media (while environmental protests or those against dog killing were ignored, depicted with a strong bias or ridiculed by a large part of the media). For all these reasons, although the

protests had in part a democratic component (with respect to showing firm attitude against the abusive intentions of the governing party), although for some of the participants these protests represented some kind of civic awakening which, in the future, could signify participation in other fights as well, we cannot ignore, however, the fact that these protests fully reiterated the pro-capitalist, completely unquestioned attitude of the middle class, a desolidarisation and double standard attitude (for instance the attitude towards the people “living on welfare” versus the attitude towards tax exemption of those working in the IT business etc.), an attitude which does only support the power, in its broader sense.

You are concerned with education and you have experience in this field. Which do you think are the most stringent current necessities for the public education work? Not only inside the classroom, but also outside it. What do we need?

Our work in the field of art was always accompanied by the pedagogic activity, from the beginning of our group working as teachers and continuing to do so, with some interruptions, until the present moment. Thus, our artistic projects naturally had this pedagogic weight oftentimes, be it explicitly (when we conceptualized materials that one could use in practical terms, when working in the classroom), be it in an indirect way, through the implicit pedagogic dimension we often wanted to give to our projects.

Over the years, we worked as Art and Visual Education teachers in various schools and colleges. We saw how the

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approaches and possibilities changed over the years, from the beginning of the 2000s to the present. As a result of the changes in public discourses, which at a purely declarative level had to assume the neoliberal “tolerance” and “diversity”, the possibilities of working in the school have also widened. Under the neoliberal pressure of “success” and “efficiency”, schools need to prove they undertake a multitude of activities and line up with contemporary issues. Often these activities, this approach to subjects such as non-discrimination, diversity etc., remain at a purely formal level. Nevertheless, the fact that approaching anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-speciesist subjects became possible in schools (something which was very hard to imagine at the beginning of the 2000s), opens a territory where one can act. At this point, during the class activities, as well as in extra-curricular activities, we approach subjects we are interested in and we integrate them into the matters we have to teach, without any pressure from the institution.

But the same neoliberal pressure that opened this space where we can act, also opens, in a startling way, the possibilities of private capital intrusion in public schools. A *hypermarket* chain organizes for several years now “learning Olympics” where all schools participate without questioning. Various contests and activities proposed by corporations are welcomed by the schools with great interest. An oil and gas company restores the green areas around the schools following a project contest. There are numerous examples of this kind and all this process accelerated more and more during the past few years. The process of *greenwashing* and private capital intrusion in schools, which often lack funds and are completely vulnerable in sponsorship

negotiations, is absolutely unquestioned realities at the school management, teaching staff and parent level.

Which seems to be, to us, the most stringent need of the education system at the present moment is the awareness with respect to these dangers as well as deconstructing the myth according to which all that is private is “good” and “good quality”, while all that is public is inefficient and corrupt. We believe that, apart from the problems the education system has (outdated curricula, training courses for teachers which are often inefficient and purely formal, the shortage of supplies in schools etc.), the real danger is this diminishing and self-diminishing view on what is public compared to what is private. In public schools, even if many things need changing, there is still room for hope, there is still some kind of freedom which would be unconceivable if the privatisation process (which is still barely visible in micro-processes, but hiding dangers waiting for the occasions to manifest themselves) would be put into practice.

You are interested also in feminism and in the subject of equality between women and men. Your artistic practice reveals it fully. Starting from your factual experiences, how would you describe the social status of the women working in the education system? Are there any concrete conditions which facilitate the fight against discrimination and inequity?

Pre-tertiary education is a feminized field, and obviously most of the teaching staff are women. For this reason, one can often find women in the management structures in schools (as long as decisions are taken by the management board and by the teaching council where the majority is represented by women).

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But apart from this purely numerical aspect, the relations of power between genders, the teacher's room dynamics and the dynamics between he-students and she-students are, naturally, the same as those of the entire society. The same work of awareness-raising, solidarisation, recognition of own privileges, deconstruction of roles which seem to be "natural" etc. is necessary, as well as in any other field, in any other aspect of everyday life. This work is a continuous necessity, when teaching, as well as in the informal relations with the children, parents, colleagues.

In order to underline the fact that gender relationships are the same in this feminized field, as well, the way of addressing considered "grammatically correct" and "polite" during the last years is "Mrs. teacher" and, especially "Mrs. director".

Starting from the social and political realities you reflect upon, what concerns you most in the present and, on the other hand, what makes you hope and motivates you?

We live in a time with an end-of-the-world atmosphere. The mask of "correctness" of neoliberal discourses is often torn apart and we can see the true nature of capitalism underneath, which relies on nationalism, hatred, desolidarisation and complete disdain for life. We live in a time when it is more and more difficult to keep hoping, a time where the unjust foundations our societies are built upon are completely visible. In a way, this visibility of the capitalism fabric itself with its overwhelming injustice makes action difficult, makes so that finding motivation and resources to act be more and more difficult. But, on the other hand, it's precisely this visibility of

capital intrusion in all the aspects of life which gives measure to the urgency of the situation we are in. In the desperate situation mankind and the planet in general is in, we can remain conscious of this despair but, at the same time, we can build hope from the gestures and attitudes we may have in our daily lives. In the friendship and solidarity in our daily lives, in our refusals, in the way we are aware of the privileges and the position we speak from, in the small everyday changes, in the possibility spaces which can be opened in the monolith of the capital, these are the places where motivation and hope can still emerge.

The field we are working in, the field of contemporary art, of the art which undertakes being political, often seems to lack hope. Critical art often legitimizes precisely the realities it criticizes, as long as artists choose to collaborate with an unjust system. In these decisions, so directly connected to the fear of failure, the fear of invisibility, of the solitude and alienation cultivated by capitalism, a lack of hope, of politic imagination, a resignation against a seemingly impossible to change reality becomes very tangible. At this point, for us the true potential of our profession consists of the possibility of saying “no”, a “no” that often is more full of hope and openness than an anxiety filled collaboration with an unjust system.

THE “REFUGEE CRISIS” AND THE POLICIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Interview with Ruxandra Ivan

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: Ruxandra, in your lecture held at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași you have insightfully described the so-called “refugee crisis” and its implications for the policies coordinated at the level of the European Union. I remember perfectly how, as a consequence of the refugee wave of 2015, several Schengen countries (Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden) announced the introduction of temporary but extensive border controls. Maybe this is just a shallow reflection of the changes we could expect on a longer term. Let’s talk about the technical side of the impact the refugee crisis had on the European Union policy process. What policy areas or prominent decision-making processes are involved? In which areas can we anticipate long term consequences?

Ruxandra Ivan: I think that the migrant crisis had an impact upon the European Union on at least two different levels. One the one hand, it is the technical level of policies, that you mentioned, but equally important, on the other hand, the crisis revealed the weaknesses at the very political core of the Union,

that is, European identity. I am thinking here to the classical distinction between *politics* and *policies*, and unfortunately the crisis brought about question marks in what concerns both levels.

Thus, on the technical level, at least four different European policies were (and are) involved in dealing with different aspects of the crisis: first, the space of liberty, security and justice; second, common foreign and security policy (CFSP); third, the European neighborhood policy (ENP) and, finally, enlargement.

Out of these areas, the most integrated – that is, the one in which most decision-making takes place through the qualified majority voting – is the space of liberty, security and justice, dealt with in Title VI of the Lisbon Treaty. However, what is maybe worth mentioning is that all these policies refer to the core of State sovereignty, being some of the areas in which European integration was the slowest to evolve. The so-called “space of liberty, security and justice” is the name given since the Treaty of Amsterdam to the policy area of justice and home affairs (JHA), which includes (among others) immigration, visas and asylum. Intergovernmental cooperation started in this area as late as the middle of the 70's, outside the Treaties, and it remained intergovernmental until 1997. The field became largely communitarian only in 2009, with the Treaty of Lisbon, but the competencies of member States and of the Union are still intertwined, while the full application of the legislation pertains to the member States. Therefore, when States feel that their security is endangered, the principle of European solidarity becomes overshadowed by internal stakes and by invoking the “national interest”.

The „refugee crisis“ and the policies of the European Union

More precisely, in 2015, the European Union was confronted with an unprecedented wave of immigrants from Northern Africa and the Middle East. More than 1.3 million people applied for asylum, the greatest number of asylum-seekers ever recorded in the EU. The existing legal framework in the field is, since 2013, the Dublin III Regulation (604/2013), an act that has as main principle the fact that the country of first entry in the EU has the obligation to register the migrants and to receive their asylum application. Of course, this puts the heaviest burden on Greece, Italy and Hungary, who were the most affected by the 2015 wave of refugees. The principle of solidarity between member States, enshrined in the Treaties, should have prompted an effort to commonly share the burden. When the European Commission proposed, in 2015, a system of quotas for the relocation of 160 000 migrants (*nota bene*: this was a little more than 10% of all the influx), several states (and, notably, the newly entered Eastern European States) strongly opposed to this system. Romania, for example, should have taken in around 6000 migrants, according to the Commission proposal, but the President was quick to assert that Romania could not host more than 1785 of them. And this reaction was softer than that of most of the Eastern states such as Poland or the Czech Republic.

Therefore, from a technical point of view, the legal framework of the EU showed unappropriated for the crisis, while the East-West cleavage pointed towards a difference between the Western states ready to put in practice their human rights discourse and the Eastern states, less eager to share the benefits of their European belonging with the immigrants. Moreover, the agencies set up by the EU for dealing with such crises – FRONTEX, or the European Asylum Support Office,

have few competencies and even lesser resources. This is why another solution had to be found, one that profoundly undermines the capacity of the EU to act as a “normative power” in international politics. The EU signed agreements with the already-authoritarian Turkey in order to stop the wave of refugees before its borders. It thus *externalized* the issue to a country which is not at all famous for its human rights record.

Another policy area put under question by the migrant crisis is the common foreign and security policy, with its sub-field concerning the neighborhood policy. This is another sensitive policy area, where member States, jealous of their sovereignty, still act under the strict rule of unanimity voting. The most effective way to prevent and solve the 2015 migrant crisis would have been to act upstream, that is, contribute to the stabilization and prosperity of the regions from where the refugees are fleeing. The top three countries of origin of the migrants are Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – that is, the countries that have been through bloody wars during the last few years. While several member states – such as France or Germany – have tried to oppose the American intervention in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan, the EU as a whole was not very effective in taking a coherent stance on any of these matters, not least because member-states could not agree on a common position. One of the most famous episodes of the *saga* of the attempts to attain a common position is the 2003 American intervention in Iraq. At that moment, a group of Central and Eastern European states (the so-called “Vilnius Group”) signed a letter of support to the USA, despite the fact that EU countries such as France or Germany opposed the intervention. After an emergency meeting of the European Council, Jacques Chirac, the acting President of

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France, said that Romania and Bulgaria, who were among the signatories, “missed a good opportunity to shut up” – a very undiplomatic declaration which actually showed the rage of Chirac. The problem is that this was only a hypostasis of the deeper cleavage between the so-called “New Europe” and “Old Europe”, which is a problem for the EU decision-making process also in the case of the migrant crisis.

Syria can be considered another failure of a EU policy: the ENP. In fact, the problem here is that the EU has put in practice a whole series of different, often overlapping and often contradicting policies in what concerns its neighborhood areas. There are, only for the Mediterranean, the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean, plus the bi-lateral agreements signed with Middle Eastern and Northern African states separately. Despite conditionality often put in practice through these agreements, the EU did not succeed in imposing democratic reforms throughout this area, and could not stabilize these countries in order to create incentives for citizens to remain in their home countries.

What about the perspective of enlargement? What changes and how?

In fact, the whole process of EU enlargement is in a stalemate. This concerns mainly the Western Balkan region, where the prospects of enlargement were quite bright before the crisis. But today, besides issues of democratic consolidation and human rights in these countries, their prospects are diminished even more by the fact that the Western Balkans is one of the three main routes of immigration into the EU. Control of the

external frontiers being one of the most salient issues for the EU in this context, the Western Balkans don't seem to offer a credible capacity to enact this type of policy. However, in the Strategy of the European Commission on the Western Balkans issued this year, the Commission points rather to the failures of these countries to implement democratic reforms, while stressing the need for further cooperation in the field of securing borders¹. Thus, the EU has a kind of a hypocritical discourse since on the one hand it does not offer to these countries a clear perspective for accession, but still uses conditionality in order to obtain guarantees for border security (and this is somewhat similar to the type of strategy it had in the case of Ukraine).

Therefore, the perspective of further enlargement is quite distant. The refugee crisis is not the only impediment to foreseeing such a prospect; other issues are also contributing to the reluctance of the EU to continue the enlargement process. One of the most important is the fact that it didn't manage to properly absorb the previous wave of enlargement (2004/2007). The gap between the newly entered member states and the older member states is not only economic, but also political, concerning foreign policy issues, but also the record of the implementation of the rule of law. The EU is not really ready to accept other states with issues of democratic consolidation, which is quite often the case of the Western Balkans countries. And last, but not least, the eagerness of these countries – that is,

¹ “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions*, 6.02.2018.

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at the level of their public opinions – to become EU members is not at all confirmed.

You mentioned the principle of solidarity between the member states. It seems that the refugee crisis revealed profound trans-national cleavages...

Unfortunately, I would say, not only the principle of solidarity between member states was put under question lately. Differences of opinion have begun to appear between „old“ and „new“ member states as early as 2003, when the American intervention in Iraq was supported by Eastern European states and criticized by Western Europe. A whole array of international issues are perceived differently by Western European and Eastern European states – such as the position towards Russia, or towards the Middle East peace process. The wave of what is now called “illiberal democracies” has affected Eastern Europe to a larger extent. Different forms of cultural conservatism – the rejection of minorities, for example, be they religious or sexual – are much stronger in Eastern Europe than in the West.

You have analyzed Romania’s official position on the matter of sharing the responsibility towards asylum seekers. Where was Romania in the European Union’s decision-making equation?

Ironically, the refugee issue was, from what I know, the first issue on which Romania has shown open opposition to a request from the European Commission. Of course, there are other cases in which Romania acted against the European

recommendations (I remember, for example, the fact that Romania signed bilateral agreements with the USA for the exemption of the American citizens from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, but this was, I would say, rather an innocent mistake). In this case, the President asserted in the European Council the refusal to accept immigrant quotas imposed at EU level. Of course, Romania was not the only country to do so, but one cannot miss the sensation that the first firm assertion of a Romanian position going against that of Western European member states would have deserved a better cause.

Romania argued that it does not have the technical capacity to host more than 1785 migrants. Or, this might seem quite strange if you think of the fact that Romania's population is more than 20 millions. Of course, this was a political declaration – that is, *politics*, not *policies*.

Is European Union losing its moral higher ground on the international arena? What could be done to compensate for this effect?

The EU has lost its moral higher ground on several fronts, as a consequence of the crisis. It has not been able to act as a *civilian power*, least as a *normative power*, during the Syrian war.

Ever since the 70s, in the middle of the Cold War, the European Communities tried to distance themselves from the militaristic approach to international politics of the two superpowers. The EU has presented itself as a *civilian power*, as opposed to a *military power*, trying to emphasize the peaceful nature of the Communities based on values and its propensity to

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act diplomatically and avoid military interventions². The main pillars of such a power would be multilateralism, the non-use of force, the promotion of international institutions and international law. The whole philosophy of the CFSP is based on civilian intervention – the Petersberg missions, the Helsinki Headline goal and all the discussions about setting up a European military force during late 90s were all aimed at humanitarian intervention, rescue mission and post-conflict reconstruction. However, all these attempts failed. The 2003 *European Security Strategy* – or the “Solana Paper”, as it is known among policy-makers, still uses the term “global civilian power” to designate the EU³.

Another concept was proposed by Ian Manners in 1992 in order to define the nature of the EU as an international actor: that of *normative power*⁴. The Union was supposed to act as a “force for good”, able to convince the world of the justness of its values. This model is inspired by a cosmopolitan conception of the nature and identity of the Union, founded upon principles,

² The concept belongs to Jean-François Duchêne, “Europe’s Role in World Peace”, in Richard Mayne (Ed.), *Europe Tomorrow. Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, Fontana Collins, London, 1972.

³ “A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy”, Document proposed by Javier Solana and adopted by the European Council on 12 December 2003.

⁴ Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?”, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2/2002, pp. 235-258.

values and norms considered to be universal, which it promotes globally⁵.

Or, the moment when the EU is not capable of offering a policy response to the hundreds of deaths in the Mediterranean and to the suffering of women and children fleeing war zones, this of course is a challenge for the position of the EU as a civilian or normative power. In any case, this is the only position available for the EU on the international arena, given that it cannot compete with the USA or even Russia for the status of military power, and it seems it has already lost the economic competition with China. The EU cannot hold in the absence of its values, since it emerged, historically, as such an improbable political construction. Unfortunately, the migrant crisis was a moment in which the EU suspended its allegiance to those values, which is a fundamental *political* act, in order to solve a *policy* issue.

⁵ Richard G. Whitman, "The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorizing EU's International Presence", in *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 48, no. 2/2013, pp. 171-193.

HARD(ISH) ANSWERS TO EAS(IL)Y ASKED QUESTIONS

*Tadej Kurepa, Nebojša Milikić, Ana Vilenica*¹

Before you stands a guide of sorts, to help you with thinking through and understanding some, more or less current, questions that are being put forth in the local, regional and European public after it came face to face with the fact of increasing migration of people from Middle East and Africa towards European destinations. Most questions being asked are consistently present - and they could be said to be acute - in media, in politics or ideology, and the answers to them come as the result of global activist work and experience, numerous theoretical considerations as well as activities at the "Man on the road 1" and "Man on the road 2" seminars (held in 2014 and 2015 in Rex Cultural Center in Belgrade). We believe that this text can facilitate better navigation through geo-political circumstances caused by this complex, and let us not forget, permanent and irreversible processes, the likes of which all peoples of the so-called developed world have gone through in recent or ancient history.

It is also important to note the sheer impossibility of being absolutely current while bringing the production process to its

¹ The wallpaper „Man on the Road 3: Hardi(sh) Answers to Eas(il)y Asked Questions “ has been produced by KC REX/Fund B92 as part of the regional platform „Urban Humm“ supported by *Kultura nova* Foundation.

conclusion. The situation has been changing, in part or even drastically, from week to week. In our attempts to cover all important events and developments, we have constantly been delaying the publication date. Thus, production has been finished before the deportation deal and the trade-off of migrants between Turkey and EU, in the aftermath of which many people remained stranded in Serbia, some of them settling at the No Border Hostel in Savamala, but all the occupants were just recently forcefully evicted as a part of the government's efforts to clear the space for the Belgrade Waterfront project, which is incidentally backed by UAE investors.

As news from both the past and the future of Fortress Europa, the questions and answers from this publication inexorably remain in the public space, whether or not we choose to see them as recently published papers, wallpapers or just crumpled up old papers.

Why are they camping in our city?

They did not walk several thousand kilometers because they wanted to sleep in our parks. They are forced to sleep out in the open, because the police does not want to issue them papers they require to be considered “asylum applicants”, which they need in order to get accommodations at a hotel or a hostel. Additionally, they sleep out in the open because there is no possibility of getting this document again after a person has been deported or simply because they have no money to pay for accommodations. So, we are not talking about camping or leisure time in nature, like Belgrade local authorities tried to convince us by setting up “No camping” signs in the park across the bus station – this is an example of existential coercion on a route that spans thousands of kilometers.

They are all healthy, young men, why don't they stay at home and defend their country instead of coming here?

In most of the countries they are coming from, war has been going on for a really long time, there are multiple sides involved in the conflict (often more than three) and it is very difficult to understand which ones are actually fighting for “their country” and which ones only for some other types of interests. Many of those coming here do not have a country anymore, at least not the one in which they were born and raised. A lot of them were forced to flee while they were still children. After years spent in refugee camps, they have no remaining ties to their home country, and certainly no ties to the country they are entering from. In order to understand them better, it is enough to remember the number of young folks, women, children and others that were forced to flee the war, poverty and hopelessness in then-Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and think of all those who are even now trying to leave Serbia in search of a better life.

There are no jobs here even for us in Serbia. Why would we welcome them?

It is not their fault that there is no employment in our country, nor have they come here to do us harm. To begin with, we need to understand that there are no jobs in our country mainly because of the same global reasons that have caused wars and general destruction in their countries. That is why solidarity and understanding are imperative for everyone who wishes good both for themselves and for the refugees.

Why is the term “refugees” used, when most of them do not come from war-afflicted areas?

There are many ways to wage war today and only a few of these rely on use of firearms. There is economic war, where states from the capitalist centers exploit the entire periphery of the world capitalist system, there is psychological and propaganda war delivered daily through TV shows, press releases, advertisements as well as omnipresent class war in every country and every company, war of the global North against the global South, war through climate change and all those things affecting the ecosystem etc. For years, the masses have been undergoing a systematic stripping of hope and the right to any sort of future, so that a negligible minority of global population which by chance was born in rich countries or as members of the ruling elite could live in disgraceful luxury and opulence. This war has affected all of us in one way or another and we can presume that those who have decided to pack their things and head out on a journey several thousand miles long were caught in the worst of it.

Who is to blame for the wars?

The majority of wars are the doing of the global dominant political-societal groups and individuals that have monopolized and occupied the main levers and resources of the global economy. Crises and wars in the Middle East, the Maghreb, Central and Eastern Africa, are all complex and diverse. There are many factors that cause them and facilitate them, but all indicators show that austerity measures beginning in 2008,

undertaken in order to uphold the capitalist system throughout and after the global financial crisis, have made living conditions drastically worse in most of these countries. If we would want to simplify and uncover this matter, we could quote one of the migrants interviewed by a British TV crew in Calais: “We are here because of your imperialism.”

Why are new walls being erected in Europe while we do nothing about it?

Well, what should we be doing? Should we erect a wall, too? Or tear down those around Europe? Do you think that new walls being erected in Europe is in fact a good or a bad thing?

Regarding Serbia, we have no walls because there was no political necessity or need for that, in the sense of the current political elite maintaining its grip on power. There is a large number of reasons why the Serbian elite has succeeded in not completely conforming to the general trend of European racist and fortification policies, which does not mean that they will not succumb to them eventually. On the contrary – one of the latent stipulations for EU integrations is that such trends be adopted as ideas and objectively applied. In fact, the role of Serbia as a transitional country, just a part of the route of this huge migrations, needs to be understood. The biggest concern for local authorities is how to see off all those who enter via Macedonia or Bulgaria, in the shortest possible time – for a while towards Hungary, now towards Croatia, where they will continue with their journey towards Western Europe. They just see to it that as few of them as possible remain in Serbia.

Why are Serbian authorities and police treating them kindly when everybody else seems to be mistreating them?

Many migrants feel better in Serbia than in most other countries they travelled through. They frequently arrive here robbed or harassed, from Bulgaria, Macedonia or Greece. According to the testimonies of multiple migrants, until about a year ago, Serbian police have often been taking their money, mistreating them, closing them up and deporting them. However, when the number of migrants began growing to more than several thousand a day, the situation changed. The authorities point to our “traditional Serbian hospitality” and police in principle treat them decently and humanely, like they were some sort of a strange breed of tourist.

If we take into account the amount of money spent by migrants in Serbia on accommodation, food, clothing, new mobile phones (because their old ones were taken from them at the Bulgarian or some other border), as well as the transfer of money itself, and if we understand that those who benefit from this kind of spending the most are banks and various companies, it will be easier to see why the ruling political elites have taken so kindly to the refugees. But even though the authorities and elites enjoy passing themselves off as humanitarians while reaping profits from “refugee tourism”, the police continues to stuff migrants onto trains and deliver them to Croatia. Besides, the Minister of Interior Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, has fully embraced the signing of the memorandum on cooperation with Macedonian, Austrian and Hungarian police. The European Union has been pressuring the ruling elites to stop the migration at frontier states and on its periphery, so keeping refugees in

Serbia is an arrangement that suits them and its strategic policy leads towards limiting the freedom of movement and an increase of police repression.

Have there been instances of police violence towards migrants in Serbia?

During the last few years, activists have repeatedly pointed to cases of police violence towards migrants, and media have covered it on several occasions. When the migrant crisis came into focus in the summer of 2015, the authorities pushed stories about policemen being arrested for taking money from migrants, and there were stories about taxi drivers taking hundreds of EUR for driving them to the border. However, during the last few weeks, Serbia has been implementing a forced segregation policy, by supporting the “new rules of migrant profiling” which entail filtering those who do not originate from desirable nations. On one hand, they are prohibited from entering the country and on the other, their deportation from neighboring countries is enabled.

What are the problems of humanitarian activism?

A strictly humanitarian approach reduces political subjects to nothing more than victims whose lives it aims to control, but in its essence it represents a substitution of failed politics with morals. The problem of activism limited to humanitarian acts is that it does not question the primary causes of a bad or critical “humanitarian situation”, but focuses exclusively on dealing

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with the consequences (<http://blog.b92.net/text/26037/Proganja-nas-strah-da-svi-postajemo-izbeglice/>).

How long will this last?

While there is inequality and disempowerment in the modern world.

Who will stop this, how and when?

This can be stopped by only by some factor interested in facing the main causes of war throughout the Middle East and Africa.

Who is paying for all this aid and why is there none for those who need it here?

Humanitarian aid is usually paid for by international organizations, who have been tasked with that mission by the United Nations, the European Union, the national governments, various humanitarian foundations etc. This help is usually available to endangered people all over the world, but it is not always delivered in adequate numbers nor is it visible, i.e. prominent in the media, as is the case with aid going to migrants. Still, this type of organized aid is easily subjected to manipulations by various interests – there have been situations in which aid does not arrive where it is needed the most. In such cases, aid has usually been secured by self-organized volunteers and humanitarian groups (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/nikonijeilegalan/?fref=ts>).

Even if we were the most hospitable people on the planet, they are still different from us and cannot fit in.

Even if it had not been widely known that a negligible number of migrants has expressed the desire of staying in Serbia or other neighboring countries, we need to understand that accentuating the stereotypes regarding cultural and civilizational differences is a propaganda tool of those very structures that cause wars and profit from them. All of us, that is, the global population of today, share the good and the bad, seeing that we all are a part of a single, more or less homogeneous global system. Exploitation, precarious existence, fear, joy, desire, all these are the same all over the world, except in a few quarantines or oases, depending on which side of the fence you are looking at the divide and interpreting it. When asked are there migrants in his kindergarten, a small boy in Germany answered: “No, only kids.” (<http://gerusija.com/tag/gabor-balaz/>)

Are there radical Islamist hiding among them?

This is a thesis that has been exploited by right-wing and other pro-governmental circles in Europe and around the world. After the terrorist attacks in Paris, this sort of fear mongering propaganda was reinforced and redoubled. Firstly, most migrants are trying to escape those very extremist organizations operating in their countries, so it would be bizarre if their persecutors would be tagging along. Of course, exceptions are always possible – among the hundreds of thousands of people undergoing this ordeal, there will always be a few susceptible to

radicalization of their dissatisfaction. But before we engage in any sort of calculation, we need to think through the origins of previous perpetrators of terror attacks or notable extremist fighters and whether they were exclusively citizens of Middle-eastern countries. Is it not true that the majority of them grow up in the very West, in forgotten suburbs of Paris, London, Strasbourg, Stuttgart, Brussels or any of the numerous colonial metropolises?

They do not look like poor people in need of aid...

Well, what do you think that people who have dared to cross thousands of kilometers in search of a better life should look like? Yes, they are able-bodied and in many ways self-reliant people who have found themselves in the situation that they do not have a clean t-shirt or a piece of bread. When thinking about who needs help and who does not, we should ask ourselves questions about the world in which such able and daring people have found themselves in such a situation. This whole great wave of migrations can be seen as an extremely cruel and efficient “brain drain” project taking place in Third world countries, where candidates undergo not only general selection based upon competitiveness and affinity towards risk, but also “natural selection”, since only those who survive this barbaric way of travelling and the harsh conditions during the trip will get to their final destination. They will arrive at their destination devoid of faith in people and the world around them. Then they will receive “aid” from the system which will in return expect their eternal dependence and submission. That is why every self-organized refugee aid is also aid in battling this

sort of system which supposedly helps, but actually exposes us to principles of social Darwinism while living parasitically off all of us.

But they all support those who are responsible for war in their own countries, yet complain about local regimes...

The fact that migrants are moving towards rich countries that shape world politics does not mean that they actually support what is going on in the world or in their countries. Most of them did not wish to leave their cities or their jobs until just a few years ago. Almost nothing remains of these cities today. On the other hand, the prerequisite for being granted asylum is that they complain about regimes in their homelands and praise Western regimes. The migrant which was interviewed by the British TV crews in Calais and said “we are here because of your imperialism” has shocked the British public. Oppression, censorship and blackmail the migrants are exposed to are so forceful that no migrant before him had dared to utter something similar, which is no wonder, really – by doing something like that, they would radically diminish their chances of being granted asylum. On top of that, they have many reasons to complain about local regimes, but please have in mind that all of them, or to be more precise, all of us, when suddenly surrounded by cameras and strangers, have a tendency to say things that are expected from us.

Did they undergo medical examinations? They may be carriers of infectious diseases.

Almost a million migrants have passed through many countries and so far no diseases have been registered, so it is quite obvious that they are not carrying any diseases. The best example of unfounded panic spread for a while by authorities and the media alike is a statement by a Slovenian functionary in which he implies that bodily fluids of migrants present a hazard for agriculture, livestock and residents of Slovenia.

Should a burka-wearing woman enter Europe without a burka?

As soon as we answer the question whether colonial Europe should have entered their countries with weapons or without them, with plans for subjugating and exploiting them - carried out over centuries under the guise of spreading "civilization" and "modernization" - or without them, we can begin thinking about an answer to this question, which is no simple matter at all.

Human traffickers are a huge problem which is not really discussed!

Human traffickers are just one of the symptoms of asylum policy in the EU, which transforms travelling people into "illegals". These "guides", as a rule, work closely with the local police and are only a single link in the chain of organized and extremely profitable "smuggling" of migrants. It has been estimated that migrants have spent up to 250 million euros only

for this “service”, paying for their life on the market of illegalized migration. This is a vicious circle in which trafficking is an excuse for introducing new repressive measures that make migrants even more vulnerable, because they must acquiesce to even worse conditions of travel and the ever-increasing prices imposed by the traffickers. Additional confusion is created by current laws, whose provisions make it possible to charge anyone who helps migrants in their travels with being an accomplice in human trafficking! The traffickers are an integral part of migration due to a breach of the right to free movement created by “Fortress Europe” and any attempt to present them as a separate problem mostly harm migrants and not the traffickers.

Can wire fences stop illegal migrants?

Razor wire does not stop migration, but makes the migrants journey much more dangerous and risky. Barbed wire fences have been sprouting on all sides, and their goal is not to stop the flow of people, but to reroute them to other transit points. In most cases, countries use their southern neighbors to secure control of their own borders. It would be prudent to examine and follow the connections between wire manufacturers and political elites which purchase those wires with public money. The entire system of European fortifications has become a very lucrative and promising business.

Refugees are refugees, but “migrants” are those who do not have it so hard, right?

The separation of refugees from migrants is based upon the refusal to acknowledge the possibility of economic refugees

as opposed to war refugees. Not recognizing the status of an economic refugee is a consequence of the wrong attitude that poverty represents a personal choice and not a systemic problem.

Why are some migrant nationalities desirable and some are not?

November 2015 saw new rules introduced on the Balkan route, where migrants are separated and discriminated based upon their nationality. Those with Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan documents are the desirable ones, while all others have been classified as undesirable and are being held at the document checkpoint. The process of determining the nationality includes UNHCR translators. Based on the person's dialect, they decide upon the identity that will be attached to the traveler. Separating people based on their nationality is closely related to efforts intended to control the flow of people by giving preferential treatment to those who are categorized as war refugees. Filtering people takes place on several levels, which means that this type of segregation is only one of the possible ways.

It is important to have in mind the fact that this long journey, e.g. the Balkan route, is not undertaken by those lacking money, since trafficker prices as well as state tariffs are well-known. This money usually comes from family savings scraped together over the course of many years or is obtained by selling everything – a house or a store worth tens of thousands of euros is often sold for several thousand. (<http://isj.org.uk/fortress-europe-the-war-against-migrants/>)

You have seen what happened in Cologne on New Year's eve. "They are coming to assault our women!"

The events in Cologne, to the extent in which they are true, are certainly objectionable, just like any such event. However, it is a fact that thousands of cases of sexualized violence towards women, not in any way connected to migrants, pass under the radar of media and institutions. These events were instrumentalized to encourage an atmosphere of fear and hate, which serves to justify the huge amounts of money invested into fortifying the borders, as well as to promote the "internal enemy" that will be used in the coming years to draw attention away from true causes of societal problems. The media have been perpetuating the construct of the migrant as a danger to "our" women even before New Year's Eve. It is being suggested that, besides "our" territory and property, the European male must now defend the female, which, in their opinion, indisputably belongs to him. The construct of Muslim man which threatens women's rights is nothing new – it has been in development by European colonizers for hundreds of years. Delegating violence and oppression towards women exclusively to ethnic and religious groups, manipulating race, sexual preference and "cultural maladjustment" create and consolidate the neocolonial class system, which lies at the root of all societal inequality.

If EU countries close their borders, Serbia will become a collection center for migrants!

Ivica Dačić, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in February 2016 that Serbia is ready to close down its borders for

migrants, if Austria does the same - as it has announced it would do - because Serbia, in his words, will not be a collection center nor a “parking space for migrants.” Greece faces a much larger “threat”, because EU countries consider Macedonia to be the “last line of defense”, where they intend to stop the entrance of migrants. Core European countries in all likelihood plan to unload their problems on Greece, which is in the throes of recession, with 25% unemployment and under pressure by the very same European institutions and European creditors to implement austerity measures which cause an increasing number of people to live in extreme poverty. In this situation, Serbia will continue as before, be that popular or not, following German lead regarding these issues and behaving as its faithful (semi)peripheral colony.

What is to be done and where are we headed now?

An inevitable conclusion to this discussion is that we as individuals and as a society are exposed to this system of police-political checks, social-Darwinist selection, discrimination and degradation just as much as any of these migrants. The fact that we were by chance born in a country towards which a lighter regimen of fortification is currently applied should not fool us – this regimen is prone to quick changes and adaptation according to the interest of global capital. In colonial metropolises, masses of disempowered and declassed people await a new day filled with anxiety. To begin with, it is enough that we do not allow such segregation, profiteering and warmongering policies of European elites and their media lapdogs to lead us into confrontation with people whom we should feel solidarity with.

“THERE WERE NO LEADERLESS PROTESTS IN MOLDOVA”

Interview with Vitalie Sprînceană

Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca: Vitalie, you are a close observer of social and political events in the Republic of Moldova. You can see what happens through the eyes of the social scientist, but you are also very present as activist and journalist. In your opinion, what are the most important social cleavages that influence or structure Moldavian politics today?

Vitalie Sprînceană: I would say that class is the deepest cleavage now in the Moldovan society. It is not class according to professions, since the whole labor market is very fragmented and volatile. It is class according to revenues, sources of revenues, control of means of production (or, better, means of control of circulation of production, since there is not much production in the country but there is control over the flows of imports and exports). In the absence of any meaningful research on class in Moldova we can only speculate about the class structure of the Moldovan society. We can call this division: haves and have-not, we can call it otherwise but it is there. So far Moldovan society has solved this issue by migration, internal (to Chisinau) and external (to other countries). But this involves other costs and traumas.

The other cleavage is based on locality. The country is hyper-centralized, in terms of politics and economics, but also in terms of cultural, professional, educational and other opportunities. There is Chisinau and there is everybody else. In this sense, apart from the money, it matters in the Moldovan society where you are born and, for some time, people born in less privileged areas tend to have fewer chances to have a decent life and to benefit from all the opportunities.

In my view, “traditional” cleavages such as language and ethnicity don't play the role people pretend. Poverty, immigration, lack of opportunities - all these phenomena hurt groups regardless of their ethnicity or the language they talk at home.

In 2015 and 2016 protesters took the streets of Chișinău in large numbers. Could you describe the main causes of the demonstrations and the primary claims articulated by the protesters?

Formally the protests exploded when news of an immense scandal, the stealing of a huge amount of money from three banks, including a state-owned one, started to emerge. In the context of poverty, dispossession, work related migration, lack of opportunities and perspective, the news that political elites conspired together to extract more than one billion US dollars from the banking system became a national scandal. Moreover, it became clear, also during those days, that the government transferred public money in secrecy (the equivalent of the stolen money) in order to cover the hole and prevent (this was the official explanation) the banking system from collapse. The

“There were no leaderless protests in Moldova”

public was angry not only because the money were stolen (under the nose of all state institutions), but that the stealing was covered (and paid) by public money.

So it is not surprising that when a small group of people started to call the public, in the spring of 2015, to gather in the Great Assembly Square, the main public space in the country, several thousands people came. Gradually the movement grew and in September it installed a small tent city in the square, which lasted till the summer of 2016.

The main demands of the protests can be grouped as follows:

- political: the dismissal of the government, the president, the head of the Central Election Commission, the head of the Broadcasting Coordinating Council of Moldova, the head of the National Bank and all state authorities involved in the scandal of the stolen billion; snap elections;

- economical: the return of the stolen money back to where it belongs;

- legal: the prosecution of all the people involved in the stolen billion scandal.

The demands were quite topical, related to the issue of the stolen money and its recovery, and lacked a larger vision of a political alternative for the country. I was one of the few people to ask the organizers of the protest right in the beginning: what is your political and economic alternative? But they dismissed such questions as being “dishonest”. I still think that if the movement had larger aspirations, capable of gluing people and issues together in a larger vision that could address structural problems of the country, it could have been more successful. To many people demands about the return of the money where quite

abstract (take also in consideration that very few people know how the banking system works in general) while potential solutions about social policies, economic measures to help the local producers, health and education issues would have been more concrete and of more interest.

What happened afterwards in terms of consequences?

There are two main consequences (and we can guess to what extent they are related or not). On the one hand, the protests had as their main goal to recover the “stolen billion”, to put all the “guilty” persons in jail and to provoke snap elections. This, of course didn't happen. On the other hand, the protests gave birth to a new political party – The Political Party Dignity and Truth that emerged directly out of the protests (the so-called Committee of the Square, a self-appointed coordinating body of the protests constituted the backbone of the Party when it was registered later).

As I said, we can only speculate (or guess) if these two consequences are related in any way. One possible interpretation, advanced by many disappointed participants in the protests, affirms that the protests were ignited and maintained by a group of people that wanted to create a political party out of the popular mobilization and discontent. Another interpretation affirms that these two evolutions are unrelated: the protest had its logic, its energy (that got lost when it became clear that the demands are hard to accomplish) and the party, in turn, had its own logic. It seems however unreasonable (at least to me) to claim that the Dignity and Truth Party is the party of the protests, or the political voice of the protests. The Party is

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rather a political by-product of the protest and probably not the best one.

It is clear now that the protests did not change in any way the march to oligarchy of the Moldovan political system. In fact, they might have accelerated it – mainly by gathering a huge crowd of people, motivated and mobilized by anger and discontent, occupying the central square of the country and then...writing petitions, articulating impossible demands (the dismissal of the government and the president etc.), postponing any meaningful action and reducing the whole political energy into a process of party building. There weren't any massive protests since then and it is fair to expect that, with the integration of the protest into the political system as a regular, systemic political party, there will not be more large-scale protests in Chisinau very soon. (The association of the Dignity and Truth Party with a rival oligarch doesn't help at all to advance its anti-oligarchic agenda, while its lack of a vision of an alternative for Moldova aggravates the situation).

Other participants to the protest – the Party of Socialists (Igor Dodon) were also successfully integrated into the political system. Igor Dodon got the mostly decorative function of presidency and is now part of the governance (many observers suspect a secret agreement between Igor Dodon and the main oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc).

To summarize: the protest is gone and its participants are fully integrated in the political system (while their radicality was radically reduced or completely annihilated). To a large extent, the energy is gone while the investigation launched by the authorities to track and recover the “stolen billion” appears to be

more an attempt to conceal the money than an effort to really find it.

On the other, optimistic side, the protests provided for a lot of young, unexperienced people, a sort of political education in self-organization, solidarity, democratic discussion, resistance in a very hostile media environment etc. This direct experience might be more precious for the future mobilizations in the country than hundreds of seminars and workshops on democracy and democratic values.

The fact that the Party of Socialists – which seems to capitalize on the fragmentation of the “pro-western” political forces and their incapacity to implement convincing welfare and economic policies – controls the Presidency has been generally regarded as an increase in the influence of Russia in the region. Is this evaluation accurate? How would you characterize the attitudes towards Russia and the magnitude of its influence after the so- called “Ukrainian crisis”?

There has always been, in Moldova, a large segment of people that have generally expressed sympathy with Russia (in the same way, there has always been another segment that had a strong sympathy for Romania). These segments, politically, behaved in a similar way: they voted for platforms and parties that pretended to take into account their sympathies. In a sense, these segments were faithful not to specific political leaders but to specific political programs. Politicians have tried, of course, to court these groups and to claim that they are their best representatives.

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To return to the question of the Socialist Party: it has, in a way inherited this pro-Russian segment of the electorate after the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, a longtime “advocate and best friend” of pro-Russians, collapsed in 2012-2014. The socialists emerged as the replacement (the same happened on the pro-Romanian wing, where the Popular Christian-Democratic Party of Iurie Rosca, the main unionist figure in the 2000s, was replaced by the Liberal Party of Mihai Ghimpu which, in turn, is about to be replaced by the Party of National Unity, a new political force that includes also Traian Basescu, the former president of Romania). So, one big pillar of support for the Socialist Party of Moldova is this pro-Russian segment. The so-called “Ukrainian crisis” has not done much to grow the pro-Russian political forces (or their enemies). The only thing it achieved, in my opinion, is a certain radicalization within already existing rival groups.

The other is, of course, the failures and discontents caused by successive pro-European governments that have fed a lot of protest attitudes and, in the absence of other political venues, they went to Igor Dodon as the main critic of the pro-European oligarchy.

But Dodon is far from being any real and meaningful opposition. In fact, he was integrated into the system and, according to various sources and developments – the common vote for the change of the electoral system, the deal to hold the advertising market – Dodon is now part of the oligarchic system already.

Nationalism is very present in the post-communist history of bilateral relations between Romania and Republic of

Moldova. Even if we don't take into account the aspirations of unification, quite often cited by politicians, both countries are complex multiethnic political communities and anyone should expect strong nationalist movements to be present. Are the far-right nationalists publicly visible in Moldova? Do they pose a threat? Are there public mobilization efforts inciting to racism, xenophobia, antisemitism?

Moldovan nationalism makes a quite strange figure. To begin with, it is eclectic and divided across several camps. There are several Moldovan nationalisms because there are several ways of understanding politically "the nation". There is, of course, a pro-Romanian Moldovan nationalism – the so-called unionists. They argue for a reunification with Romania, they are anti-Russian and so on. But there is another Moldovan nationalism, a pro-Russian one, that argues for closer relationships with Russia, which avoids and fears the West (Romania included etc.). Of course, we can find also many commonalities between them – for example their emphasis on Christianity as the basis for the nation. But, the paradox is that various kinds of Moldovan nationalists are more divided by their geopolitical preferences and less united by their common cultural values. To briefly summarize: there is no single Moldovan nationalism that makes the far-right nationalists (and here we include the so-called "Moldovan left" – statalists and moldovenists who, despite claiming to be rivals of the pro-Romanian, de facto are on the same position on the political spectrum).

These movements do not pose a threat so far, mainly because of their mutual rivalry and enmity (one can hear often

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the joke that the unionist, for example, must first learn how to unite among themselves – there are up to 10 “unionist” political parties – and then to try to unite the nation). But they can become, at time, instruments in the hands of other political forces. For example, the New Right (Noua Dreapta), a radical right-wing movement, has been used several times in political battles – on April 7, 2009. Unionism and unionist talk is being used by other politicians for political mobilization, protest diffusion (a group of unionists left the protests in 2015 because they supposedly did not wanted to appear near rival organizations). In the same way, radical pro-Russian “nationalists” are sometimes being used to solve other political “issues”. Thus, I think, the main danger comes not from the strength of the nationalist movements but from their instrumental and cynical use to achieve various political goals.

Finally, if you would have to describe the particularities of the Moldavian protest culture what would you say?

It is hard, of course, to talk about such a complex issue. I do not think that there is a specific Moldovan protest culture. On the contrary, protesters were very eager to adopt various forms and means to be found in the global repertoire of protests: occupation, live broadcasting, deliberative democratic bodies, posters in English designed for a foreign audience etc. In this sense, the protests in Moldova are part of the global protest movement. On the other hand, there is, of course, a specific local context that gives a certain flavor to the protests in 2015-2016. One of them is a certain rigidity of protests: to a large extent all protests in Moldova attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to

resemble the Great National Assembly of 1989. In this sense, they use to repeat the structure of that protest: huge gatherings, pathetic speeches accompanied by patriotic music (mostly unchanged since 1989), virulent diatribes about internal and external enemies, mandatory reference to geopolitical neighbors (EU, Romania, Russia), revival or appeal to some historical figures (more often Ștefan cel Mare but also Vlad Tepes) etc. This structure gets imposed to almost any political protest, be it against the falsification of elections or for European Integration.

The other feature is the constant need for a leader, for a messianic figure that supposedly will bring salvation. There were no leaderless protests in Moldova!

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