

The “Light Revolution” in Romania

When Toppling the Government Isn't Enough

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Throughout February 2017, hundreds of thousands of people flooded the streets of Romania, protesting corruption under nationalist flags and banners. In the following report, our Romanian comrades analyze the discourse that drove the movement, scrutinize the class perspectives of the participants, and explore how they function as an obstacle to liberation.

It seems that the window of opportunity that opened up seven years ago when uprisings and occupation movements began to break out all around the Mediterranean has closed. To the south and east, these uprisings ended with even more neoliberal or fascist governments taking power; in some cases, they led directly to war. Today, the upheavals that once offered anarchists a chance to create new solidarities in the street have become a breeding ground for nationalism.

Some assume that in countries that recently experienced dictatorships or socialism, these protests simply mark a stage on the path to Western democracy. Others consider the protests to be nothing more than a proxy war between elites. However, with much of society polarizing to the right as geopolitical instability and state repression escalate, we have to understand the part that protest movements have played in this process and what we can do to regain the initiative.

Five Years of Unrest

The February 2017 protests in Romania have been dubbed the “Light Revolution” for the images of cell phones brightening the air above rivers of protesters in the streets. No protests have drawn so many people to the streets since the demonstrations of December 1989 that toppled the socialist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. However, these are hardly the first of their kind.

During the 1990s, Romania experienced crony capitalism in its pure form. The old party elite gave way to a new capitalist class that enriched itself on the privatization of the state industries while rendering the old working class more precarious. The IMF and World Bank facilitated this process. Under the Ceaușescu regime, Romania had managed to pay off all of its external debt at the expense of strict austerity measures; after the collapse of state socialism, Romania privatized its industry to gain access to the global capitalist market. One government after another adopted a hardline neoliberal stance that favored foreign capital.

Romania’s painful transformation to capitalism sparked several outbreaks of mass unrest, gaining steam over the past five years. In 2012, outrage about a health reform precipitated violent clashes in the capital city of Bucharest and massive demonstrations in all the major cities. The prime minister resigned in hopes of calming the situation and the protests died out soon afterwards.

During these protests, a new class of politically active young professionals emerged that was comfortable with capitalism and eager to open the country further to foreign business. They took some topics from the left milieu, even from the radical left, while identifying themselves with everything attractive about the West.

Massive unrest broke out again in 2013 against the *Roșia Montană* mining project. Today, Romania is one of the most business-friendly countries in the European Union, welcoming foreign investments and offering cheap labor both inside and outside its borders. *Roșia Montană* was a perfect example of such policies: a huge open-pit project that would destroy five mountains and leave behind Europe’s biggest cyanide lake with most of the profits going to a Canadian company. This catalyzed massive environmentalist protests against mining (in places like Certej) and frack-

ing. Starting on September 1 and continuing for months, there were protests every Sunday and smaller actions during the week.

The 2012 protests had opened some social space for critical thinking. This bore fruit in the 2013 demonstrations. In the beginning, some people seized the opportunity to question the status quo as well as the mining project. Radical politics had broken into the mainstream media for the first time in 2008 with coverage of repression against anti-NATO activists; these ideas made their way into the public sphere again in 2013. There were assemblies, anti-capitalist slogans, and the like. Yet anarchist groups were ultimately ousted from the protests. From October on, nationalists took over the protests, and neo-fascists were allowed into the protests under the slogan “everybody is welcome.”

Two years later, in autumn 2015, the Colectiv protests erupted. These protests were triggered by a fire in Colectiv, a Bucharest nightclub, that killed 64 people and injured more than a hundred. The protesters demanded the resignation of the prime minister, accusing him of fostering the corruption responsible for the disaster. The government eventually cracked under pressure and resigned, along with the local mayor.

Light Revolution: Light Years from Liberation

This year’s protests started in late January, when the Romanian government announced that it would pass a new law allowing a pardon for certain crimes—especially those involving abuse of power. This law would further decriminalize government corruption, enabling politicians to escape prison sentences for taking personal advantage of public funds.

The protests grew every night between February 1 and 5, when the number of protesters around the country exceeded half a million. Some demonstrations ended in clashes with the police.

In the anti-austerity riots of 2012, the anti-communist liberalism of the aspiring middle class had been confined to the margins. Yet it gained momentum in the 2015 Colectiv mobilizations, and it overwhelmed the protest movement of 2017. In 2012, the anti-austerity position addressed the material results of the transition from capitalism, opposing all existing forms of governance. This year, anti-government only means opposing the *current* government. Protesters in the streets are still demanding representation from the President of Romania, who is seen as someone who can lead the country towards a better future—i.e., a Western one.

Although economically precarious, the protesters of 2017 are seeking to normalize a lifestyle based in Western values, affirming the values of cognitive capitalism, anti-communism, and assimilationist voluntarism. The protesters are a diverse crowd ranging from urban creatives, corporate white-collar workers, and start-up entrepreneurs to students and the urban bohemian precariat, but the first group dominates the ethos of the protests. A survey of the protests in Bucharest reported that most of the people in the streets are between 20 and 40 and possess college degrees. While they lack broader working class consciousness, they are acting according to what they perceive as their class interests as the aspiring petty bourgeoisie of the cognitive economy.

They refer to the social-democrat government as the “Red Plague,” a classic fascist slogan from the 1930s, understanding their civic patriotism as saving “clean” and “beautiful” Romania from

the “dirty,” “backward,” and “primitive” nationalism of the Reds. Many express contempt for the poor and those living in rural areas, referring to them as parasites.

This emerging new class associates state communism with repression and scarcity rather than with a particular political or economic program. For them, communism means backwardness and censorship, as opposed to the alleged prosperity of Western capitalism and the freedom of expression associated with parliamentary democracy. It is difficult to find room for revolutionary politics in these protests when the most allegedly radical voices are simply calling for the end of corruption and the “normalization” of capital.

To see people wearing national flags at these protests is not a paradox, but a continuation of the liberal patriotism championed by the self-proclaimed dissident intelligentsia of the 1980s who saw themselves as the “true” representatives of who and what the nation is. In this climate, the deep-blue flag of the European Union is brought to the square as a symbol of cleansing and a message addressed to EU: “Save us!” The protesters say they support the Jandarmeria—the riot police—because they are “just doing their jobs.”

The ideology articulated in Victoriei Square in Bucharest is supported by a matching technological infrastructure. All mobilization occurs through Facebook. Smart phones are tools of protest—not just for communication, but also for creating light choreographies intended to dispel the darkness left by the uncivilized commies. Projectors beam quirky GIFs on the surrounding buildings to threaten the government; cool protesters wear HD printouts of posters made by graphic designers from the advertising industry. Advertisements shine unchallenged from the unbroken windows of shops surrounding the square.

The sudden politicization of large numbers of people in this atmosphere does not work to the advantage of radical social justice struggles. The discourse is dominated by the right-wing agenda. Everyone wants to be educated European intellectual entrepreneurs. They are dedicated to the ideology of so-called post-politics—the extreme center.¹

Some of the more recognized figures on the Left are regarded with suspicion, while bankers and members of neo-fascist organizations like ProVita can safely join the demonstrations. The reorganization of the political field is comparable to what took place in the Maidan during the Ukrainian revolution: pro-European patriots hoping to save the country from Russian threats open space for hardcore neo-fascists who pass as allies as long as they maintain anti-Russian sentiments. This sort of nationalism is not unusual in a country so marked by racism against Roma people and others.

Historically, nationalism and liberalism (imported from 19th century France by bourgeois youth studying abroad) have been the only ideologies to put down roots in Romania. After state socialism collapsed, these were the only reference points for Romanian political parties, which have been threading the line between these two frameworks ever since. Even within the protest movements that oppose those parties, these two ideologies once again reinvent and perpetuate themselves.

¹ “Extreme center” often denotes a newly formed political party supposedly beyond classic left right divisions—neither liberal nor conservative nor social-democratic. In reality, such parties usually carry out a conservative rule-of-law agenda that produces extreme-right effects. For example, the current parliamentary majority in Slovenia proclaims itself to be a centrist government while implementing plans to wall off the European Union.

Anti-Corruption Started the Movement—and Stunts It

The law that initially brought people into the streets is worth contesting. But the protests have been limited to opposing corruption—an issue that can easily be manipulated by liberals, including those in power under the leadership of the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis.

Anti-corruption discourse has been the common denominator of countless upheavals in former socialist countries. In some cases, such as the uprisings in Slovenia and Bosnia, this discourse has mingled with anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, and directly-democratic ideas. In other cases, the focus on corruption has limited movements to seeking regime change in the name of conservative, nationalist, and even fascist values. In Romania, anti-corruption discourse has served to rally people to coordinate their own colonization and exploitation by Western capitalists under the banner of anti-communism.

The architecture of this discourse is based on two axes: the internalized idea that Romanian society is backward and uncivilized and the anti-communist narrative that socialist and communist regimes have “kidnapped” Romania from its European destiny and created a “void” in local history. The problem is always framed as an individual or a specific party, never the structure itself. In fact, corruption is an integral aspect of the state apparatus, which serves the ruling class and their interest systematically as well as in instances of abuse and illegal activity.

One of the problems with building a social movement on opposing corruption is that in the absence of any political alternative, this directly empowers the state repressive apparatus, in this case the DNA and National Security Services, which are then used as political weapons to remove political adversaries. When one side of a conflict over corruption manages to cement its hold on the state, a wave of repression is sure to follow. The people in the streets are pawns in a power struggle between a populist conservative party, the so-called social-democrat PSD, and the neoliberal opposition spearheaded by the president.

At the same time that it reduces politics to parliamentarism, anti-corruption discourse enforces the neoliberal dogma of the free market. This is a disturbing trend in Romania, legitimizing a new form of technocratic rule without the slightest political responsibility.² The technocratic government instated after the Colectiv fire was very popular among the aspiring middle class. Even though its policies weren't effective, the Ciolos cabinet gained a lot of sympathy by promoting the extreme center ideology of the EU.

The Role of Anarchists

In the wake of the alter-globalization movement, anarchists in Romania shifted from prioritizing direct action and lifestyle to local organizing and community building. Today, the anarchist movement is diffused into hybrid collectives that run social centers and cooperatives, engage in political art, edit zines, and participate in grassroots organizations addressing housing, evictions, borders, workers' rights, and intersectional feminist issues. This focus on solidarity and cross-class organization stands out in a context otherwise characterized by NGO-dominated activism.

² Technocratic governments, also known as technical governments, were very popular after the 2008 crisis in Europe. Such a government is not ostensibly aligned with any political parties, usually consisting of academics, economists, and other “experts” who are supposedly beyond the classic left/right division. In reality, in peripheral states, for the most part such governments blindly carried out the agenda of the European Union to reconstruct the market and bank systems with austerity laws.

Although there are some NGOs that work towards emancipatory ends, NGOization has taken a tremendous toll in Romania, defining how people understand grassroots self-organized resistance. The worst aspect of this is that it has promoted a self-centered vision of activism in which liberal methods developed by the NGO industry are the only valid means of organizing. NGOs have absorbed most of the people interested in political work, contributing to the isolation of the radical movement. Confrontational tactics are seen as romantic and childish.

Anarchists were heavily involved in the 2012 anti-austerity protests, the 2013 *Roșia Montană* mobilization, and the 2015 Colectiv protests. We foregrounded our anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and radical ecological messages, organizing occupations and direct actions. At the same time, we were confronting the rising affirmation of the middle class center-right ethos, which intensified through the 2015 Colectiv protests to reach its peak in the 2017 anti-corruption protests.

There have been attempts to open up space for discussion, but tactics that were successful in the past have failed miserably in recent years, only succeeding in engaging a marginal “leftist” minority. In these current demonstrations, it has been impossible to be heard in the overwhelming conflict between two competing ideological apparatuses that have a far wider capacity to mobilize resources and people than a handful of anarchists. On one side, we are talking about the biggest populist party in Romania, with half a million members; on the other, an aspiring young middle class that has the material resources and backing of much of the mainstream media and the President as well. The scene for radical politics is often divided; while there is a somewhat growing interest in leftist politics, it is usually mobilized around diluted social-democratic issues or organizations championed by leftist intellectuals and NGOs.

One of the most damaging aspects of the 2017 anti-corruption movement is the affirmation of nonviolence as the foundation of legitimate protest. Any discussion about self-defense or how violence is defined in the first place is labeled as an attempt to discredit the movement. Meanwhile, nonviolence is normalized in flowery graphic design, in the idea of protest as a fun activity characterized by live music, dancing, and so on.

The second problematic principle is the notion that “everyone is welcome, because this is true democracy.” Excluding fascists and nationalists is dismissed as authoritarianism. Meanwhile, messages against neoliberalism and in favor of social justice have repeatedly been excluded from the protests. The general affect of the crowd is rage against the “Red Plague” and scorn for all social issues.

Another characteristic of this wave of protests is the sudden rash of pop-up saviors. Several families in Bucharest were evicted from their homes in a run-down social housing building, prompting an explosion of solidarity. Anarchists and grassroots housing rights organizations had been involved in the struggle against gentrification for a long time, but the eviction brought out a huge number of people trying to help in the spirit of newly awakened civic engagement. We can hardly criticize people bringing in supplies that provide material relief; but if we look deeper, we can see that this approach is not emancipatory for anyone involved in the process. It undercuts the work that long-term activists have put into building community with one of the most targeted populations in the city, while creating a hierarchical dynamic between the evicted community and the people trying to help. Charity does not help people to form relations that could be the basis of political struggles against evictions.

While the short-term interests of the people in the streets may be antagonistic to those of much of the Romanian population, they remain a precarious class with an uncertain future. Multina-

tional corporations were attracted to Romania because of the cheap labor force, but in certain sectors of the economy the wages have been going up for a while now. Obviously, this will not last. In this respect, this mobilization might have some potential for the future, in that now people are used to taking to the streets when something bothers them. However, it is unclear what the ideology behind the next wave of mobilization will be. The most important thing is that anarchists continue to organize locally around issues that can bring together people from different social backgrounds to fight our common enemies.

The general mood within the local left and anti-authoritarians right now is that resistance has to be organized apart from these protests. When thinking through the experiences of the last five years, it seems that the square occupation movements have reached their limits. If mass protests don't contribute to local struggles or grassroots organization, it is hard to be optimistic about them. The question for us, then, is where to focus our energy when mass protests do not accommodate our politics—and how to change that.

Where Do We Meet Next?

Corruption is a crucial concept for the post-Cold War narrative that legitimizes the peripheral position of Romania in a global matrix of colonialism. It pathologizes social behaviors that are deviant by the standards of neoliberal “normality.” By homogenizing class, social, and cultural differences, the discourse of corruption equates precarious workers engaging in sabotage or expropriating resources with the bribing of high-profile politicians by multinational corporations. It effaces class antagonisms, financial exploitation, and resistance of all kinds to institute a hegemonic narrative.

An anarchist perspective from Eastern Europe has to sabotage the discursive mechanisms imposed by assimilationist neocolonialism. In the Romanian context, with a president whose sole platform is his ties with Western Europe and a massive movement mobilized to cure society of its orientalist disease, it is more urgent than ever to accomplish this.

To decode and deconstruct the discourse of corruption, we must look with anarchist eyes at the practices with which poor people express their distrust of governance, no matter the regime. This distrust is what has enabled the social structures of the historically oppressed to survive and reproduce. When these practices are framed as the symptoms of the disease of corruption, this opens the way for new attacks on those already dispossessed by the transition to capitalism.

Locally, we have to build solidarities that disrupt the complicity of the aspiring-to-be-white-and-middle-class of the “beautiful youth” and its celebration of global corporate exploitation. Internationally, we call for the decolonization of our movements, opposing the orientalist narratives propelled by Western media that erase longstanding local struggles.³ Facing both the rise

³ There has been plenty of orientalist projection onto the protests from outside Romania. Liberal media such as Democracy Now, Al Jazeera, and The Young Turks continue to misinterpret or ignore events in the region. When protests like these occur, their coverage is full of orientalist language in which “freedom fighters” are welcomed into the grand family of emancipated Western societies, the masses flooding into the squares are seen as an awakening of society, and anti-corruption passes for authentic resistance. It is precisely the reproduction of such orientalist Othering that prevents people from recognizing that the “freedom fighters” are hardcore nationalists, Romania has a rich history of struggles and resistance preceding this one, and anti-corruption discourse is a playing piece in a rivalry between political factions that paves the way for new authoritarian crackdowns. This kind of coverage feeds the egos

of fascism and the push for a Westernization that will smooth the way for a fascist future, we have to strengthen our ties and develop new strategies.

of the “beautiful free youth” on the streets of Romania, legitimizing their patronizing attitude that there has never been a movement as important or authentic as this one.

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