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MAPPING TRANSNATIONALISM: POLICY REPORT

Transnational responses to global capitalism: The case study of the Roşia Montană campaign

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Introduction

This mapping report uses a transnational lens to portray the United We Save global movement in support of the Roşia Montană campaign. Roşia Montană is Romania's oldest mining settlement, located within the Transylvanian mountains of Apuseni. Despite its remote location, Roşia Montană has gained much public attention in recent years, particularly in 2013, due to local and global uprisings against a proposed open pit gold mining project pursued by Roşia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) – an intermediary of the Canadian-owned Gabriel Resources (GBU). The venture would constitute the largest cyanide opencast mine in Europe (Velicu, 2014).

United We Save gathered large groups of Romanians and migrants of Romanian background from abroad as they mobilized to oppose the project. After months of unrest, the draft bill allowing GBU to start the Roşia Montană development was rejected by the Romanian Senate on 19 November 2013, with amendments to the country's mining law being further voted down by the Parliament on 10 December 2013 and 3 June 2014 (Salvaţi Roşia Montană, 2014).

We are drawing from participant observation and personal reflections on our own involvement within the United We Save campaign in Toronto, Canada, in order to portray the movement and its transnational connections.

The mining project

After the fall of communism in 1989, many industrial areas within Romania, including various mining regions, have been declared economically disadvantaged and subsequently made available for private development (Anghel, 2007). In the name of ready-made western ideas of what poverty and lack of economic growth should not look like in the east, the Romanian Parliament, under pressure from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union, adopted a new mining law in 1998 to easily attract foreign investment (Anghel, 2007). It is within such a policy-making context that the Roşia Montană mining project was proposed under the auspices of RMGC. Based in Canada and sub-incorporated in Romania, RMGC is a transnational entity:

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80.69% of its shares are held by GBU, and 19.31% owned by Minvest Roşia Montană S.A., a Romanian state-owned mining company (Gabriel Resources, 2014). RMGC has been trying for 16 years to exploit the gold deposits of the Apuseni mountains in Romania (Anghel, 2007).

Despite claims of environmentally sensitive and socially responsible mining activities, RMGC pushed for the use of cyanide for its proposed operations. This posed substantial ecological, social, and cultural risks for the region, and resulted in its vehement contestation by Romanian and international public opinion (including the World Bank International Finance Corporation). The project was also widely opposed by academics and civil society representatives, such as the Romanian Academy, the Academy of Economic Sciences, the Romanian Architects Union, The Romanian Institute of Geology, and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Salvaţi Roşia Montană, 2013).

The proposed course of resource extraction is contradictory to the traditional mining practices in Roşia Montană. Mining has been an important presence in the area since the Bronze Age. It developed gradually in Roman times, the Middle Ages, as well as during modernity, and continued through the era of communism and the 1990s. In old Romanian peasant towns, the economy was often subsumed to social relationships (i.e. non monetary based) and traditional mining practices (including state mining during communism) were habitually performed alongside farming activities (Velicu, 2014). The inhabitants of Roşia Montană lived on their own piece of land, which they passed on from generation to generation, and have mainly relied on gardening and farming to provide for their families. Thus, traditional mining (mostly underground) was not perceived as a threat to the overall life of the community (Velicu, 2014). By contrary open pit mining and the use of cyanide were feared in terms of destroying the environment and the surroundings, with subsequent detrimental effects to farming and gardening activities. It is our thinking that the project was opposed by the Roşia Montană peasants mainly because it was threatening their traditional ways of life.

The United We Save campaign(s)

United We Save was a transnational campaign, sustained by global cross-border connections. It involved many diasporic cities and Romanians living abroad. The main struggle opposing the project has been led by Alburnus Maior, a grassroots organization representing the concerns of over 300 villagers in the Roşia Montană area. The United We Save campaign was initiated in 2000 by Alburnus Maior. Yet most major civic protests only gained momentum in September 2013, triggered by a draft law proposing free leeway to the mining project. On 1 September 2013, under what has been quickly publicized by media as the Romanian Autumn, up to 25,000 people took Roşia Montană to the streets to oppose the proposed parliamentary law (Besliu, 2013).

It was in solidarity with these mobilizations that Romanian migrants from the diaspora have started to collectively organize. The United We Save global campaign was grounded within the common (cultural and linguistic) ethnic identity of its members (Vertovec, 2001) – the Romanian nationality. The first protests within the diasporic communities started outside the Romanian embassies and consulates. These continued on a weekly basis between September and December 2013. However, many have also developed into various dissent alternatives, including flash-mobs, street painting, exhibits, and informational campaigns. These took place within most major cities in the world including London, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, Chicago, Montréal, and Toronto (Dale-Harris, 2013; Wong, 2008).

Our field observations mainly come from Toronto. Weekly protests started at the Romanian consulate and then moved to various sites across the city: Toronto City Hall, Yonge-Dundas Square, and the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX). One protest that got much social media attention was a silent Halloween flash mob at the TSX. People wearing miners' costumes and gold skeleton masks (Figure 1) entered the Exchange premises holding banners against the market trading of GBU stocks.

Another key Toronto event that gathered media and community attention was a public art protest at Nuit Blanche. Toronto's Nuit Blanche event replicates the French version and makes high art consumption publically accessible, by showcasing temporary exhibits for a single night. In 2014, Toronto-based Romanians assembled a dadaist-inspired street collage of photos and related texts from previous media coverage on the topic (Figure 2). Four "mountains" were symbolically built from cardboard boxes, in order to draw attention to the environmental destruction posed by the RMGC project (Matyiku, 2013).

A photo exhibit documenting the Toronto campaign was also staged at the University of Toronto – Social Work Art Wall between 10 March and 10 May 2014. The exhibit was conceived as a form of protest and aimed to re-imagine the notions of mobilizing as possible forms of successful citizenry and political engagement. Several photos were printed on canvas via heat transfer sheets and accompanied by a short narration (Figure 3). The main idea was to inform as well as to politicize spectatorship. The exhibit was also displayed at Oldenburg University in Germany in October 2014.

Epoch Times Romania covered the exhibit and published an interview with the curator which was broadly circulated by mainstream Romanian media outlets such as Yahoo, EcoMagazin, and NaşulTv. The Canadian Media Connections (Canadian Hungarian



Figure 1. Silent protest at Toronto Stock Exchange, 31 October 2013.



Figure 2. Toronto Public Art Protest Nuit Blanche, 5 October 2013.

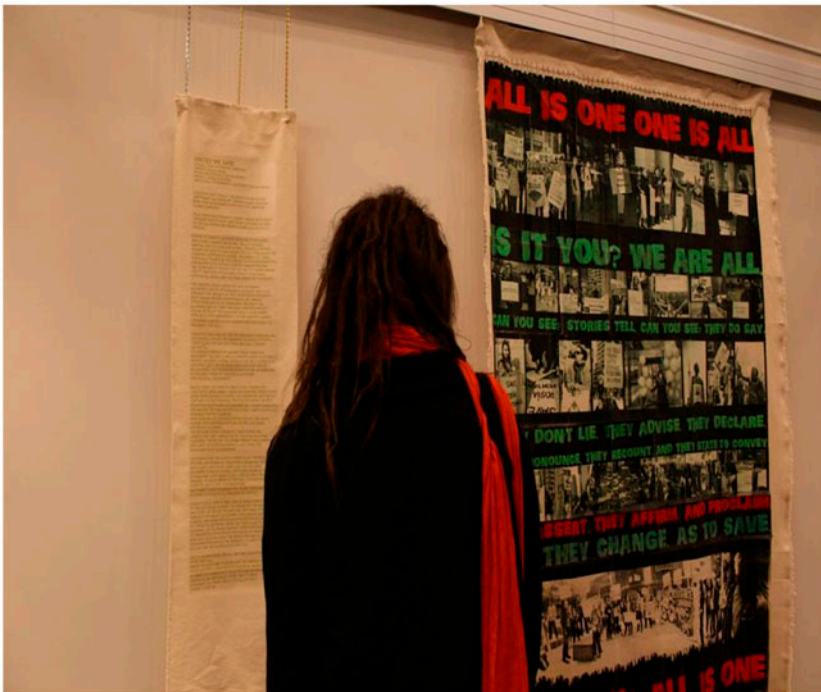


Figure 3. United We Save Exhibit, Faculty of Social Work, 10 March–10 May 2014.

Pictures – Canadian Hungarian Television) also reported on the exhibit as they filmed an interview with a campaign member of Hungarian ethnic background.

Diasporic sites have also come together and created symbolic spaces for hosting transnational events. One such example is the yearly Roșia Montană's Anniversary. Globally organized yet locally celebrated, Roșia Montană's Anniversary promotes the region's mining cultural heritage and its role in the community's history. The event has been celebrated in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Canada, Belgium, and more than 20 global cities (Alburnus Maior, 2014).

Another example of a transnational mobilizing hub can be illustrated by FânFest, the annual hay festival of Roșia Montană. FânFest opened its doors in 2004. It continues on a yearly basis, gathering people from around the globe interested in sustainable collective struggles against destructive corporate mining. It also serves as a sharing platform for global stories of environmental activism (FânFest, 2014). The festival is set up on one of the peasants' land. Its infrastructure is sustained entirely by volunteers; all artists and staff work on a pro bono basis. Hundreds of activities, exhibitions, guided tours, farmers' markets, workshops, concerts, live theater, and book launches are freely offered.

Scholarly literature has linked migrants' capacity for political organization to the development of new technologies and new forms of communication (Vertovec, 2001). Indeed, the main organizing efforts supporting the United We Save campaign were coordinated via social media networks. Facebook in particular proved to be a useful communication tool. A large transnational group, called "Save Roșia Montană" was initially set up and intended as a platform for communicating information. This was a global cluster which continues to operate with a global membership of almost 14,000 active Facebook members, some based in Romania and some within the ethnic communities living abroad. Major diasporic urban centers have additionally created their own online groups for coordinating activities. Online mobilizing networks were also formed at the national and sub-national levels. For instance, in Canada, people initially created a closed Facebook group called "Romanian Canadians for Roșia Montană." Sub-nationally, Montreal-based Romanians have created the "Montreal for Roșia Montană" group. Regionally, Toronto and Montreal have come together and set up a Facebook page titled "Canada Save Roșia," and also a smaller secret group, Sfătul Bătrânilor (Council of Elders) to serve as a day-to-day platform for hands-on coordination of activities. It is worth mentioning the equal decision-making structure these groups have operated on. For instance, as it relates to the management of the CSR Facebook page, all group members had administrative roles and, therefore, the capacity to post and manage page content. There were no formal leaders, and in terms of prompting protest tactics and activities, everyone proposed ideas and people enacted those that resonated with them the most. Some have supported certain actions and not others, while the majority have attended the weekly Global Solidarity Day events. Other examples of diasporic community clusters include: Save Roșia Montană UK, Vienna Saves Roșia Montană, or Roșia Montană Paris.

There were several other community groups comprising a transnational membership. One such example was the Roșia Montană in UNESCO World Heritage faction, which mainly promoted the inclusion of the Roșia Montană site in the UNESCO patrimony. Another example would be the Save Roșia Montană community, whose activities centered against the use of cyanide mining for the project.

United We Save also encompassed the intersection of transnational state policies alongside multiple bureaucratic and ideological axes. Within the Romanian context, the state had initially supported the project on the false belief of boosting local employment

rates and promoting community investment (Velicu, 2014). Thus, it was largely seen as the sole alternative to development within the region. In the Canadian context, the lack of regulatory oversight for Canadian mining companies gave free leeway to GBU to pursue its profit sharing agenda, without any accountability for detrimental environmental costs. At the international level, GBU has threatened the Romanian state with an arbitration process, seeking to get billions of dollars in corporate “damages” for the stalled mining project (Goțiu, 2015). It is the international treaties, such as the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement Act (CETA) that have enabled corporate transnational policy-making, playing by corporate rules rather than those of public interest.

United We Save: A political profile

The “movement” within social movements has oftentimes been conceptualized as dependent on insurgent consciousness, on certain organizational strength, and on participants’ engagement with contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). It is surprising that United We Save, as an environmental campaign, drew such large numbers of supporters in Romania and abroad. Similar destructive developments led by foreign investment companies (i.e. the Certej mining project; Chevron in Pungești), did not draw the same level of support, although they triggered strong resistance on behalf of the affected local communities. The popularity of the Roșia Montană campaign is even more surprising given the lack of civic engagement and participative culture within post-communist Romanian society. According to a 2004 survey, only 6% of Romanians have ever attended a demonstration and only 5% have ever struck or worked for a political organization (Uslaner, 2004). Yet we believe that Roșia Montană, as an area with a somewhat high level of cultural capital (i.e. its proposition for inclusion in UNESCO as a heritage site), served as a catalyst for Romanian people to take a more active role in contentious politics (Burean & Badescu, 2013).

It is also interesting that Romanian migrants (mostly economic migrants) were involved in this environmental campaign. During the communist dictatorship, the resistance discourse was always the capitalist discourse (and market principles have been somewhat seen as revolutionary ideals). Therefore Romanians from the diaspora (many of whom fled as political refugees before 1989) have continuously supported a neoliberal market-based rhetoric. This was confirmed by the latest cycles of presidential elections in Romania¹). As it relates to the 2014 presidential elections, an overwhelming proportion of diasporic migrant voters (89,73%) expressed their preference for Klaus Iohannis, the candidate of the right-wing Christian Liberal Alliance (Cozmei, 2014). Numbers clearly show that Romanians now living abroad have been voting overwhelmingly for right-wing candidates, who openly adopted, at least at the discursive level, an unambiguous neoliberal stance. Even though the Romanian socialist candidates are also abiding by capitalist principles and are heavily supporting private investments, the votes received for right-wing candidates show that migrants’ preferences were not circumstantial. Rather, they expressed an ideologically marked opposition to communism and socialism.

Within the land whereas socialists are almost as neoliberal as the right, the paradox of the diasporic United We Save campaign is that it represents an ecologist movement (traditionally leftist), sustained by many sympathizers of neo-liberal parties (traditionally rightists), although supporting a community of peasants (Indigenous struggles), whilst at odds with the capitalist ideology expressed by right-wing Romanian parties. In attempting to make sense of these paradoxes, we suggest that participants saw this movement

as a non-political, non-partisan campaign; simply as a form of protest against cross-party corruption. This was done by calling for both the right-center President Traian Băsescu's and left-leaning Prime Minister Victor Ponta's resignations. Moreover, participants seemed to endorse a set of post-materialist values, outside the radical anti-capitalist left or the extreme right positions (Inglehart, 1977): environmental protection, the preservation of cultural and national heritage, and the fight against political corruption. Interestingly enough, Roșia Montană protests were popular among economic migrants, as long as they expressed a set of post-materialistic values.

An ending word

United We Save stands as a case example of a social movement with immediate policy impact (in terms of having the project rejected). Yet if we consider the protests' slogans,² most values foregrounded by the movement belong, on the one hand, to the imaginary of a regulated and moralized capitalism and, on the other hand, to the traditional repertoire of nationalism. Although some of these reclaimed values partially problematize "free-market" notions, they are not representative of anti-capitalist principles, nor do they ideologically oppose the basic tenets of Romanian neo-liberalism. They are largely sustained by the idea of Romanian national identity, seen essentially as a traditional, spiritual, ancestral, and land-based philosophy.

Nevertheless, dismissing such efforts as strictly nationalist in nature would be conceptually limiting. While we do not need to emulate the western rhetoric of what a desired environmental struggle should look like, it is important we keep in mind that this was a movement grounded within a post-Soviet/post-socialist context. Resistance efforts shaped by Second World political circumstances, reflective of their own forms of coloniality, should not be dismissed under the label of nationalism simply because they do not fit a First World mobilizing format. Post-socialist countries, and particularly Balkan countries such as Romania, have always hoped to transcend their societal complexes through the framework of the idealized European nation state. Always juxtaposed to a homogenized Europe, Balkan nationalism was experienced as the only feature through which European-ness could be conferred to such "backward" nations (Todorova, 1997). Of course, while organizing on the basis of symbolic nationalism is problematic in essence, the nationalism that transpired through the United We Save movement was nothing like the type of nationalism which grounds itself within the idea of superiority of one's ethnic identity. Rather it encompassed a combination of nostalgia about a non nonmaterial way of lost Romanianness (in the case of the diaspora) and a defense type community protectionism against a global corporatist agenda. In a context in which the national blends with the ethnic to support a transnational movement, it becomes difficult to conceptualize, analyze, and understand political, social, and cultural processes without submitting them to the very same passé forms of conceptualizing, analyzing, and understanding.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. In the 2009 presidential elections, 78.86% of Romanian migrants voted for the neoliberal president Traian Băsescu. It was precisely these votes that tipped the scales in favor of Băsescu, who became the narrow winner of the race with merely 50.37% of support (Burean, 2011).

2. Some of the most common slogans chanted by protestors included: “The corporation does not make the legislation!” “Romania is not for sale,” “Our country, our say/Take your poison go away!” (Haraga & Vasiliu, 2013).

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