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Crețan, Remus and O'Brien, Thomas Anthony [orcid.org/0000-0002-5031-736X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5031-736X) (2020)  
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## **Corruption and conflagration: (In)Justice and protest in Bucharest after the *Colectiv* fire**

The fire in the *Colectiv* nightclub in Bucharest, Romania in October 2015 led to sustained, nationwide protests that forced the resignation of the government. These protests drew on deep-seated feelings of injustice due to rampant corruption among the political elite. The capital city location provided an opening for spontaneous actions to present claims to power holders. We aim to identify how the urban space was used to initiate and scale up a meaningful challenge to the governing system by examining the evolution of these protests. Through analysis of interviews with protest participants and nonparticipants resident in Bucharest, we identify factors that mobilized participants and how these built and reinforced the developing movement. The findings emphasize the importance of (capital) cities in incubating social movements, by providing spaces to organize challenges to institutional actors from the local to the national level.

**Keywords:** Protest; Romania; Social Movements; Corruption; City; Spontaneity

### **Introduction**

On October 30 2015, a fire at a rock concert in the *Colectiv* nightclub in Bucharest resulted in the death of 64 people. In the outpouring of anger and grief that followed, memorial gatherings developed into large-scale, nationwide protests lasting 10 days and forcing the Government's resignation. The actions were not centrally organized, instead growing organically over the period as new claims were presented and moving from an initial sense of shock to questioning the legitimacy of the government in a context of widespread corruption.

The spontaneity of the *Colectiv* protests was important, as they took place in an era of eruptive protests rising to prominence with dramatic effects. Such mobilisations have been important in bringing down or challenging incumbent regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa and in a less geographically rooted way through the 'Occupy' movement (see Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Tarrow, 2013; Tripp, 2013; O'Brien, 2015). These protests emerged in response to specific catalytic events, such as state repression, stolen elections or economic crises. However, the apparent spontaneity of the

events derived from deeper structural injustices and grievances. Central to all was an apparent mismatch between the protesters' desired view of society and the lived reality, leading to mobilizations seeking to bring about change. Across the cases, the urban environment was important, reflecting Miller and Nicholls's (2013, 453) argument that cities 'incubate the unfolding of social movements', supporting their growth and creation of spaces for action.

Bucharest has been an important site of contention in post-communist Romania since the protests that saw the end of the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989 (Gledhill, 2011). As the seat of power, and largest city, it has provided a space in which challenges can be presented to the state, demonstrated by recurrent waves of contemporary anti-corruption protests (Mărgărit, 2016; Ciobanu and Light, 2018). The contested nature of the urban space, and its importance in holding power, was demonstrated by the *Mineriade* in 1990, where miners from the Jiu Valley descended on the capital to defend the new regime and attack students and anticommunist protesters occupying key sites (Vasi, 2004). These events demonstrated the perceived importance of the urban space for challengers, as well as those in power. An examination of the spontaneous and relatively temporally constrained *Colectiv* protests offers further understandings of post-communist actors' use of space in pressing their claims.

Bucharest provides a valuable case study given its status as capital city and site of revolutionary challenge to the Communist regime in 1989. Analysis of the protests after the *Colectiv* fire allows a focus on the interaction between deep-rooted, structural concerns and crisis events in facilitating urban movements. The two questions guiding this research are (1) how were the *Colectiv* protests scaled up to challenge the governance of the political system in Romania? And (2) how do seemingly spontaneous protests use the urban space to achieve their goals?

The remainder of the article is divided into six sections. The first section outlines the conceptual framework, introducing the core ideas around the use of space and spontaneity by social movements in urban environments. We introduce the methodological approach in the second section. In the third section we outline patterns of protest in Romania since 1989, identifying the key developments and motivations. In section four draws on official reports

and media sources to trace the events following the *Colectiv* fire, identifying key events over the ten days of protest and the resulting outcomes. In the fifth section we present findings from analysis of interviews with protest participants and non-participants, identifying perceptions, motivations and interpretations of events. We conclude by locating this analysis in a broader context, to consider the possibility for spontaneous urban protests to bring about lasting change

### **Protest, spontaneity and scale**

Decisions to engage in protest are not taken lightly, as they can involve significant costs for participants, ranging from social exclusion and legal prosecution through to physical harm. Protest participants must weigh the chances of success against the likelihood of negative outcomes, both personal and collective. The character of the system in which the participants are acting is significant in this regard. As Tilly (2003) has noted, each regime has a zone of proscribed behavior within which any protest will bring sanction and punishment. Aside from formally proscribed actions, there is a range of tolerated behaviors that are governed by rules and regulations that reflect society's dominant social norms (Tilly & Wood, 2009). Together, the existence of formal and informal expectations and rules do much to shape the extent to which protest will be tolerated. Viewing protest as conflict, it is necessary to recognise 'that *all* conflict resolution is dependent on the existence of an effective enforcement mechanism' (Cooper, 2003, 88). Where these mechanisms are weakened or inadequate, protest has the opportunity to forge new norms and relationships.

Tilly and Tarrow (2007, 58) note that 'most people who engage in contentious politics see themselves as responding to threats they perceive to their interests, their values, or their identities.' Acting in this way, protest participants may signal the failure of established channels of governance and contest dominant perspectives. The tension that exists at the core of such actions, derives from the 'right to picket or occupy a street... a right that exists despite a democratic majority that may view such protests as nuisances, or disturbances' (Attoh, 2011, 677). The conflictual character of such actions requires the drawing of boundaries that reinforce group solidarity and commitment (Demmers, 2017; Halvorsen, 2015), as identities shaping collective action are not static but instead 'are produced and reproduced, negotiated and renegotiated, in the interactions of individuals embedded in

particular sociocultural contexts' (Hunt & Benford, 2004, 447). Social movements must manage these fluid identities to ensure cohesion while not closing off space for new adherents.

Spontaneous actions are driven by a sense of urgency and immediacy, reacting to threats and opportunities in an incompletely defined manner. Rather than a slow build-up, a 'spark' or catalyzing event is required, enabling first movers to act and generate legitimacy among observers and potential participants. Examining the wave of protest in the US following police violence against black citizens, Farbman (2015, 2) argues 'the flashpoint for a national wave of outrage and action was not the moment of violence, but rather the moment when the legal process sanctioned that brutality by refusing to even contemplate punishment' of those responsible. Identifying the character of such spontaneous actions, Snow and Moss (2014, 1127) point to an absence of hierarchy, ambiguous moments, emotional priming and framing, and spatial contexts and constraints as key features. They also suggest that spontaneous and organized actions co-exist to varying degrees and shift over time.

The fluid and uncertain nature of spontaneous actions opens opportunities to consider what enables them to persist and succeed, or fragment and fail. Miller and Nicholls' (2013) concept of cities' incubation of social movements is reinforced by Kopf (2015, 104), arguing 'urban spaces are generated in and through people's experience and social practices which take distinct social forms in cities'. The opportunities afforded by urban spaces are identified by Sbicca and Perdue (2014, 311) when they argue 'Public space...is socially produced through struggle and does not exist as an ideal form.' Protest embodies this struggle, bringing to the fore these contested understandings. Nejad (2016) further argues that the temporal/liminal nature of protest performances means that they involve the recreation of rituals, emphasizing the importance of sites and their connection to past events. Examining protest in Buenos Aires and Seoul, Salmenkari (2009) notes that while historical (and cultural) conventions shape the decisions on where to protest, sites such as government buildings continue to feature prominently.

Urban spaces present an important environment for protest, as proximity facilitates processes of mobilization, represented in the rise of the 'right to the city'. Hansen and

Karpantschhof (2016, 178) highlight the complex and contested nature of this claim, arguing it 'has been turned into a narrow, individual right, reserved for a limited economic and political elite'. This was echoed in Eastern Europe after 1989, whereby uncertainty generated by regime change has led to widespread marketization and privatization (Jacobsson, 2015). Considering the right to the city, Vasudevan (2015, 318) argues it needs to be recast:

as a right that is operative across multiple sites and territories and that is characterized by a *constituent* desire to participate in the production of urban space... [demanding] a recognition that the city encompasses a wide range of political imaginations and that a conceptual architecture is needed that accommodates this diversity.

This aligns with Fraser's (1990, 61) notion of counterpublics, contesting 'the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior', enabling them 'partially to offset... unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups' (Fraser, 1990, 68). Social movements recognize the underlying logics and norms in the use of space and attempt to manipulate these to enable participation, making their claims visible. Spontaneous protests are important in this regard, as they surface conflicting perspectives in unpredictable ways and support the formation of new relationships and boundaries.

To challenge social norms and uses of space, protest actors must also engage with issues of place and associated symbolic meanings. Nicholls et al (2013, 5) reinforce the point made by Vasudevan, noting that social movements create new opportunities, specifically:

Place... helps generate strong relations among activists within a social movement network. These types of relations ultimately lower the uncertainty of high risk mobilizations, helping compel people to contribute their scarce resources.

Places also embody 'intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty and spirituality' (Cheng et al, 2003, 89), enabling their occupation to demonstrate an 'active and contested taking of a space' (Areans, 2014, 438). This moves beyond seeing places as physical structures to recognize that some are perceived to be more valuable by protestors and those in authority. Leitner et al (2008, 161) argue that 'Social movements often seek to strategically manipulate, subvert and resignify places that symbolize priorities and imaginaries that they are contesting'. Identifying the ways this is achieved, Endres and Senda-Cook (2011, 266) point to: '(1) building on a pre-existing meaning of a place, (2) temporarily reconstructing the

meaning of a place, and (3) repeated reconstructions that result in new place meanings'. Engaging in such actions does more than simply impact the place, as 'space and social movements are engaged in a dialectic of space transforming movements and movements transforming space' (Sbicca and Perdue, 2014, 312). This expands the meaning of protest, moving beyond disruption to the constitution of new identities and solidarities embodied in movements.

The politics of space and place are amplified in urban environments and even more so in capital cities, as they represent the seat of national power. This has significance in relation to questions of scale, as Mamadouh et al (2004, 458) argue 'actors frame the problems they want to address, the solutions they propose, the actions of their opponents and their own at specific scales'. It is therefore important to consider how protests can move to higher levels (regional, national, global) and exert influence. Counter pressures are embodied in the way 'powerful social actors... seek to command "higher" scales such as the global and national and strive to disempower... [opponents] by confining them to "lower" scales like the neighbourhood or locality' (MacKinnon, 2011, 24). In urban environments, the ability to contain contention is difficult as people circulate more freely through the space. This issue is emphasised further in the case of capital cities where there are a greater number of symbolically valuable places.

### **Protest in Romania**

The end of the regime of Nicolae Ceauşescu in December 1989 left Romania with a flattened civil society where independent groups struggled to establish themselves (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Discussing the challenges facing civil society in Romania in 2007, an environmental NGO representative argued that 'No one asks the population to become accountable for something; they are just beneficiaries, and they continue to think as beneficiaries' (Quoted in O'Brien, 2009, 151). This statement is significant as it captures the longer-term effects of the post-socialist environment where participation was discouraged in an environment of low trust (see Lagerspetz, 2001). However, successful civil society campaigns have taken place, challenging the idea that civil society is not able to function. This echoes a regional trend that Pleyers and Sava (2015,10) identify where:

Alongside transactional activism, which is still strong, the trend is for new forms of social participation that suggest community orientation in their medium and long term collective actions. Usually, this is a laboratory where new styles, social meanings and cultural critiques are informally exercised and eventually institutionalized.

Examining the campaign against the Roşia Montană gold mine, Parau (2009; see also Jarosz, 2015) has argued that success rested on a local initiative that was able to draw on national and international support. The result is a mixed picture as efforts to rebuild civil society have been slow, but are successful where the connection to a particular community is apparent (O'Brien & Creţan, 2019; Vesalon & Creţan, 2015).

Levels of protest have fluctuated during the post-communist period, with economic concerns featuring as an important mobilizing force. Burean and Badescu (2014) identify three distinct periods of protest in Romania, involving various levels of mobilization, participants and claims. During the early transition period, working-class calls for wages and protection predominated, as this group suffered considerably from economic restructuring. The Minerade was important in this regard, as state actors mobilized miners of the Jiu Valley three times in 1990 in the face of opposition protests. The miners returned to Bucharest in 1991 after their own claims were unresolved, occupying a government building and bringing down the Prime Minister. A further mobilization in 1999 resulted in violence and signalled the end of the Jiu Valley miners' power. Vasi (2004, 134) argues that these actions were significant as 'they all used violence against their opponents, and... they were all organized by the same group of workers'. Despite this, they were in line with the protests during this period in that they involved large-scale, disruptive actions, with a limited range of participants and grievances (Burean and Badescu, 2014).

A period of relative quiet followed the initial transition from 1999, coinciding with Romania's application and accession to the European Union, placing expectations on the Romanian state regarding issues around participation and civil society, but also provided economic support (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008). The period starting in 2012 saw a resurgence of protest across the region as the effects of the global financial crisis reduced economic performance and questioning of EU guidance (Sasse & Beissinger, 2013). Large-scale protests emerged involving a 'higher diversity of participants and grievances... [such as] cleaner environment...



more democracy... animal protection, lowering the price of petrol or taxing pensions' (Burean & Badescu, 2014, 387). The intensity of the cycle of contention that followed was reflected in the sequence of protests from 2012 targeting the government (Abăseacă, 2018), austerity (Mărgărit, 2016), mining, environmental pollution and population displacement (Other & author, 2012; Other & author, 2013; Other & author, 2015), ethics of culling street dogs (Crețan, 2015), shepherd's rights (O'Brien & Crețan, 2019), uncontrolled deforestation, and corruption (Ciobanu & Light, 2018).

In the contemporary wave, protests spread to all major Romanian cities but always saw highest impact in terms of number of participants and repertoire of contention in the central squares of Bucharest. Young et al (2018) show the importance of these places, by considering how Piața Universității [University Square] became a site of nation-building through both communism and post-communism. As Ciobanu and Light (2018, 64; see also Siani-Davies, 2005) have argued

Piața Universității gained its current symbolic importance in December 1989 when crowds gathered there during the Romanian 'Revolution'. It was here that security forces first opened fire on the crowds, resulting in 49 people being killed and 463 wounded.

These places have also evolved, as Piața Victoriei [Victory Square] has become the focus of anti-corruption protests, due to the location of the Government there (Ciobanu & Light, 2018). The existence of such symbolic and practical locations in Bucharest suggests that actions seeking to have a meaningful impact will target them in presenting claims.

Eruption of protests following the fire in the *Colectiv* nightclub, and the form these took, were part of a larger cycle of contention challenging governance from the local to the national level. The protests drew on clearly recognized symbols and places to advance the claims being presented and challenge those in positions of authority. The spontaneous character of the *Colectiv* protests presents an opportunity to examine the ways in which such actions can make use of these signifiers in the absence of organization and hierarchical structures, effectively acting 'on the fly' (Snow & Moss, 2014). Considering the views of protest participants and observers can shed light on the extent shared values and cultural cues shaped action and were recognized in this context.

## **Methodology**

Through case study methodology, we developed an account of the form and character of the protests that followed the *Colectiv* fire. Such an approach potentially limits the generalizability of the findings, as the specifics of the case will not occur in the same way again. The focus on Bucharest also means that we are not able to comment on the form of protest in other cities in Romania. The intensity and temporally focused character of the protests meant a case study approach was best suited to identifying the key features. However, close consideration of the protests in this case means that it is possible to identify potential patterns of behaviour in other protests in Romania and the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe.

### ***Part 1: Qualitative interviews***

We draw on a series of semi-structured interviews with participants and non-participants of the protests that followed the October 2015 fire in the *Colectiv* nightclub in Bucharest. The first author conducted 48 interviews in person with protest participants and 12 telephone interviews with non-participants in March 2016 (see Appendix 1). In person interviews were conducted with protest participants in Bucharest and non-participants were interviewed by phone. All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the project and signed an informed consent form. Interviewees were identified based on a snowball sampling approach, emerging from five key informants. These initial informants were first author's acquaintances and were selected for being included in the sample basing on previous talking about their experiences during the *Colectiv* fire protests. These contacts aided recruitment by suggesting other participants (friends, neighbours, family) with whom they protested. The snowball approach was useful in targeting interviewees who were able to provide rich descriptions of the protest events (see Patton, 2002). A semi-structured format was adopted for the interviews. The interview schedule was kept brief to enable interviewees space to relate their stories with fewer prompts from the interviewer.

We purposively sampled participants to achieve a balanced gender mix, resulting in 28 female and 32 male interviewees. Additionally, more than a third of the interviewees were public sector workers or students, with a lower number of participants with less formal education.

All interviews were conducted in Romanian before being translated and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and involved five questions (Appendix 2). The questions were derived from the literature review and covered recollections of the protests, motivations for participation, types of slogans/demands the participants embraced, geographical spread and effectiveness of the protests.

In analysing the data, we commenced by reading and re-reading all interview transcripts. We identified accounts that were related to our research questions and that would allow us to deepen our understanding of the events, and selected illustrative quotes to incorporate in our synthesis of findings.

### ***Part 2: Newspaper and official reports***

We contextualise our qualitative interview findings through analysis of stories reporting on events in three national newspapers – *Adevarul*, *Evenimentul Zilei* and *Gandul* – between 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015 and 15<sup>th</sup> November 2015. We selected these newspapers on the basis of frequency of headlines debating the *Colectiv* fire and protests, and on their broad territorial coverage and potential reach in terms of readers. This enabled our examination of how the protests were represented, as well as giving details on the estimated number of participants. A limitation of this approach is that the stories should be seen as indicative, rather than representative of the whole of the media coverage that developed. Analyzing these stories enabled the identification of key slogans used during the protests. In addition to analysis of media reports, we also examined official reports produced by the National Institute for Research and Development in Mine Safety and Protection to Explosion (NIR) and the Romanian Prosecutor General (TJE) on the cause of the fire and adequacy of safety standards. Together these provided a mechanism with which to track the way in which the focus of the protest evolved over the 10 days, as well as the main actors involved.

### **The *Colectiv* fire and protests**

Over 400 young people gathered for a rock concert in Bucharest's south-east Unirii area, historically known as Tabacarilor ('The Tanners') on 30 October 2015. The concert was in a warehouse of the former communist shoes enterprise *Pionierul* (The Pioneer), used lately as a nightclub - generically named *Colectiv* (Hostiuc, 2015). The fire and explosion in the *Colectiv*

on 30 October killed 27 people and injured 184 others (Marinas, 2015), with the total deaths rising to 64 (Chiric, 2016). The event was considered one of largest post-communist disasters in Romania. Table 1 presents a timeline summarizing the scale and focus of the protests over the period from November 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Table 1: Timeline including Locations and Demands**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Protest Locations and Numbers</b>	<b>Bucharest Protest Locations</b>	<b>Demands</b>
1 November 2015	Bucharest (12000)	<i>Colectiv</i> Sector 4	Mourning Anti-corruption
2 November	Bucharest (12000)	<i>Colectiv</i> Town Hall (Sector 4)	Anti-religious leaders Nationalist Anti-corruption
3 November	Bucharest (25000)	<i>Colectiv</i> Town Hall (Sector 4), Patriarchy, Government, Piața Universității	Anti-governmental Call for Diaspora to come back Justice, not greed
4 November	Bucharest (30000) <i>Timișoara</i> (10000) Craiova (5000) Cluj-Napoca (4500) Constanța (3000) <i>Galați</i> (3000) <i>Buzău</i> (3000) <i>Focșani</i> (1000)	Patriarchy Government Piața Universității	Anti-religious Justice for the victims Anti-corruption Anti-neoliberalism
5 November	Bucharest (12.000) <i>Timișoara</i> (1000) Cluj-Napoca (1000) Constanța (1000) <i>Galați</i> (1000) <i>Iași</i> (500) Craiova (500)	Piața Universității	Loss of ethical regulations Young generation's role in society
6 November	Bucharest (6000) <i>Timișoara</i> (700) Cluj-Napoca(500) Constanța (500) Craiova (500)	Piața Universității	Anti-corruption
7 November	Bucharest (1000)	Piața Universității	Anti-corruption
8 November	Bucharest (1000)	Piața Universității	Anti-prezidential

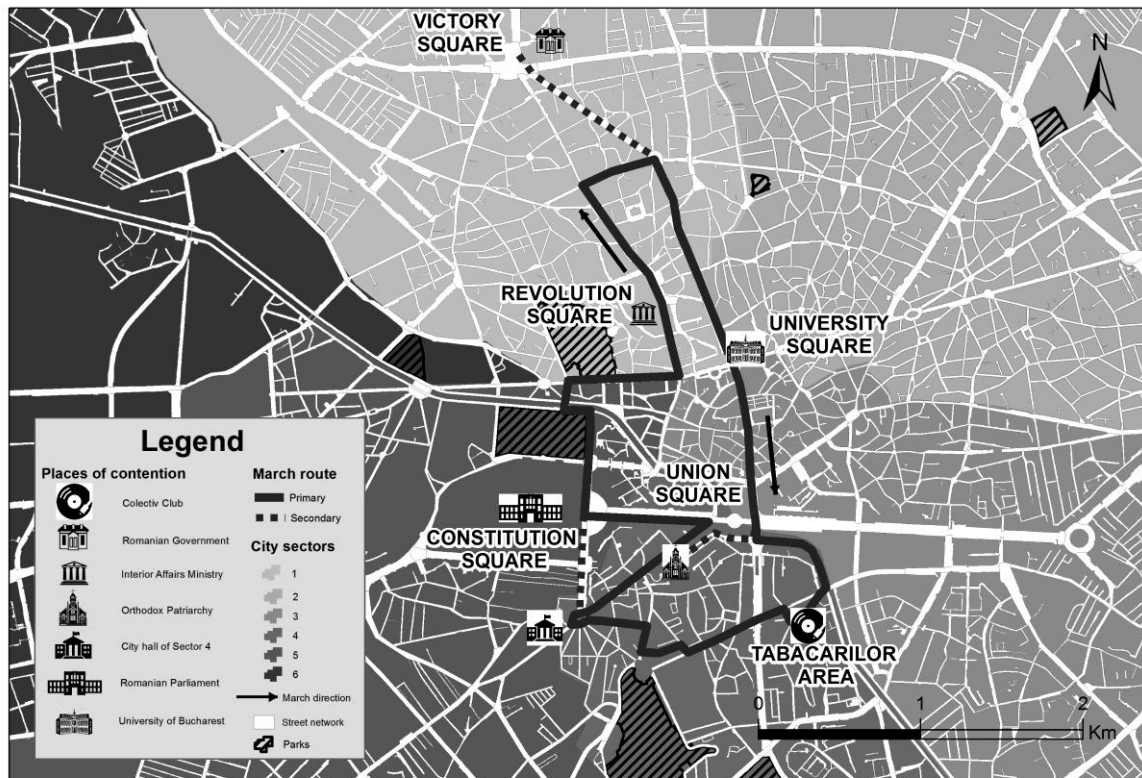
9 November	Bucharest (500)	Piața Universității	Anti-corruption
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Source: Adevarul, Evenimentul Zilei, Gandul– 30 October 2015-15 November 2015

The technical analysis of the explosion at *Colectiv* by the NIR (2015) found that during the Goodbye to Gravity concert, the organizers in complicity with the stakeholders of *Colectiv* allowed the use of unlicensed fireworks. The fireworks ignited the flammable acoustic foam that covered the wooden pillars and ceiling. The technical document also indicates that the fire spread rapidly and the 400 participants were poisoned by toxic gas released by the foam, while pieces of burning ceiling fell on them. Moreover, the Romanian Prosecutor General's report on the *Colectiv* (TJE, 2016), released in January 2016, indicated the nightclub had no windows, a half-door open during the concert, and only one fire extinguisher. The room had capacity for only 200 persons. The prosecutor identified the owners of the club, the providers of the foam, the Inspectoratul Situatilor de Urgenta (ISU - Inspectorate of Urgency Situations) leaders and the mayor of Sector 4 in Bucharest as being responsible (TJE, 2016).

The tragedy resulted in protests in Bucharest each evening from 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> November, reaching a peak on 4<sup>th</sup> of November, with 30,000 in Bucharest and thousands gathering in other Romanian cities (Timișoara, Craiova, Cluj-Napoca, Constanța) (see Table 1). On the first day of protests people gathered in front of the *Colectiv* building, targeting Primăriei Sectorului 4 București (Townhall of Sector 4 in Bucharest), the Orthodox Patriarchy, the Government on Piața Victoriei (Victory Square) and Piața Universității in the following days (see Figure 1). Each site had significance that resonated with participants and observers. Piața Universității has been recognised as a protest location since the 1989 Revolution (Crețan, 2015). It is not only a symbol of the Revolution but is also the site of important institutions such as the University, the National Theatre and Intercontinental Hotel. In the interview participants' view, Primaria Sectorului 4 and the Government were the main institutions responsible, due to their inability to tackle corruption and ensure law enforcement. The Patriarchy was blamed for building churches and cathedrals instead of helping the poor and investing in hospitals.

**Figure 1 - Routes of Protest Marches - 1-9 November 2015**



Interview participants indicated that besides Romanian private TV companies (Realitatea TV, Antena 3, B1TV) and different national online newspapers, Facebook was the main source of information for the protestors and also provided a tool for organizing. Under the hashtag *#Colectiv* thousands gathered online and then participated in the protests. All parts of society participated, from students, pensioners and political party members to animal rights and environmental groups, showing growing frustration among actors whose voice had been neglected by the state. The perceived role of corruption in the fire meant it featured prominently in slogans ('Down with corruption'), alongside demands for a system change and resignations of officials ('Either small or tall, we make the Parliament members to go!'). Other slogans related to the dominant and greedy social systems of the Orthodox Patriarchy ('We want change, not cathedrals') and Patriarch Daniel's statement that Orthodox priests were forbidden from visiting the *Colectiv* site ('Rock music is not satanist'). Newspapers also reported the use of patriotism in the protests, which was aimed to incite rebellion and awaken the masses about Government failings ('Romania, wake up!', 'Diaspora, come back!'). Additionally, slogans on the human and political rights of the general public were also used ('Please leave us to have the right to opinion!'). Finally, 'Romania is not for sale!' and 'Save

Roşia Montana' referenced key campaigns of the last decade in Romania, while the voice of the young generation was also important ('You can't buy a whole generation').

The protests forced the resignation of the Government on 4 November. After resigning as Prime Minister, Viorel Ponta – a leader of Partidul Social Democrat (Social Democrat Party) stated (Rosu, 2015):

I'm resigning — and implicitly my government too... I am obliged to take note of the legitimate grievances that exist in society. I hope handing in my mandate and my government's mandate will satisfy the demands of protesters.

Ponta had previously been accused of corrupt acts, such as his complicity with Chevron over the allocation of shale gas exploration licenses (see Vesalon & Creţan, 2015). Another actor the protestors targeted was Interior Minister Gabriel Oprea of the center-left Uniunea Nationala pentru Progresul Romaniei (UNPR National Union for Romania's Progress). The protesters claimed that ISU, a national security institution under his mandate, was corrupt. The ISU is responsible for checking security issues (including fireworks permits) in all private and public units (Marinas, 2015). Particular concerns were raised about the lack of inspectors required to check units and the perception of a system of complicity with the owners and directors of firms over (fire) safety standards. The media blamed Bucharest Sector 4 mayor Cristian Popescu Piedone from the UNPR, as he had not coordinated the ISU's Sector 4 leaders. His position was that he assumed moral responsibility for the *Colectiv* events, but that justice had to determine if he was legally responsible (Rosu, 2015; Tran, 2015). The newly elected Romanian President and the US Ambassador were among the actors whom the protestors did not challenge. Their position after the *Colectiv* fire concerned the need to prevent such events by addressing institutional incompetence, leading the investigation to find those responsible.

### **Understandings of Responses to the *Colectiv* fire and protests**

All protest participants (48) and non-participants (12) interviewed in this study recalled images from the event portrayed in the media. Interviewees expressed feelings of anger, shock regarding the incident, sorrow for the deaths, feelings of violation of peoples' rights to life, fear that such an event could happen in their neighborhoods, and discomfort when they remembered the event.. A 45 year old man (technical worker in the public system) (Ro/P27)<sup>1</sup>,

who had a vivid recollection of the event, drew a strong connection to the issue of corruption, arguing:

The *Colectiv* was the most terrible event in Romania in the last decades. I consider that protesters like me are very angry at the long and unsolved problem of security and corruption, especially regarding Bucharest authorities and politicians.... I appreciated very much how the mayor of sector 4 and Ponta resigned. I think the largest number of people gathered after their resignation. People were the same happy as during 1989 Revolution

A number of participants expressed shock regarding the incident and found it difficult to accept. A young woman (19-year-old, student) (Ro/P12) considered events such as burning people alive in a club impossible in the twenty first century, directing her anger towards governance issues. Her feelings were amplified by the loss of an acquaintance in the fire, leading to arrange of complex, interrelated emotions as she asked:

How could an event like this happen in a European country? Do we don't have the same rules as other countries in the EU? Anyway, I got angry when I saw the TV images with the *Colectiv* fire... Certainly, the next day I went directly to the *Colectiv* place to leave a candle for my neighbor's son. I know him and this makes me more sorrow for what happened. The day I was there praying for his soul, a huge mass of participants came there... Then several days I went onto the streets to gather the protesters against corruption. The happiest day of protests was when the Government resigned. I have never seen such a large protest in my life. My mother told me only at the 1989 Revolution she saw something like that. When I saw all corrupted people had resigned I stopped gathering the protesters. But it was the nicest experience in my life.

These narratives indicate that the respondents experienced a myriad of emotions that changed as events unfolded. The events at the *Colectiv* evoked strong emotions because they were a disaster that was perceived to have been avoidable through detailed planning and regulation.

Gradually, following the commemorative march conducted on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, many protestors reported that their anger was transferred to the root cause of the tragedy, corruption and the inaction of the political leaders. Shifting focus in this way was possible, as



the *Colectiv* fire was seen to represent a general political failure, enabling attribution of similarity. A feeling of rebellion unified the protestors, intensifying the protests and leading to demands for the resignation of those responsible at all levels and for the government to take steps to address the problem of corruption. Finally, when the protests ended with a positive outcome participants experienced happiness and contentment regarding their own contribution. The trajectory of memories and emotions indicates the dynamic and complex nature of the experiences and meaning making of the participants.

### ***Motivations for protest participation***

Many interviewees who had participated in the protests identified corruption as their root cause, motivating their engagement. Reflecting this, a 58-year-old male worker in a private company (Ro/P3) stated:

The main motivation of my gathering the protests was to help stop corruption in this country. I'm a small person in this country but I consider I had the obligation to be there on the streets. I was not at the mourning place of *Colectiv* because I cannot see people crying there but I was several days in front of the University with my friends. When I saw the mob passing close to my work place window I could not stay at home. I also phoned my son and my neighbors and they joined too.

Though the protests were triggered by the *Colectiv* fire, the focus of the protests was the failings of the political system in Romania. The agenda of fighting corruption emerged as the protests proceeded and fuelled the need to show support for the cause. This was noted by most of the participant interviewees (46) and was illustrated by a student (18-year-old, female) (Ro/P15), who argued:

I was told of these events by my school colleagues. First I saw on TV that people are gathering to march against the political system, then I entered my Facebook profile and read thousands of messages to unite against corruption.

On closer examination, this narrative reveals the role of additional motivators. In addition to the agenda to unite against corruption, this participant was motivated by the participation of others in her social network, pointing to the significance of social influences in facilitating the protests and generating a shared identity and common cause. The use of patriotic and nationalist slogans to unite against a specific goal has been identified as a tactic in other post-communist protests in Romania (Vesalon & Crețan, 2015).

While the patriotic mentality was a pervasive influence motivating action, some participants cited more personal reasons. A 50 year old man (unemployed) (Ro/P42) living in Sector 4 said:

I cannot say that I went to the protests due to the corruption exclusively. I went there to signal that such events should not happen in the future and innocent people would not die anymore. How could my girl go to such unsecured clubs. Also parents must be more attentive with their children to teach them not to go in obscure places

His narrative shows that, alongside larger causes that these protests addressed, some participants felt that such avoidable accidents could endanger the safety of their family and acquaintances. It is important to note that despite personal motivation, this participant's further narrative revealed that his colleagues informed him about the protests and demonstrated multiple influences that contributed to his motivation to join the protests.

### ***Protest slogans***

Our results show that interviewees' demands mostly related directly to the *Colectiv* fire and its organizers; against corruption in Romania; against the ISU leaders; against national and local political leaders; against the Patriarchy; and demands connected to former similar corruption events in Romania (i.e Save Rosia Montana campaign). This framing of the main slogans and claims presented was reflected in the pattern of media reports on the *Colectiv* protests. Considering the protests, a 45-year-old female professor (Ro/P8) stated:

I very much enjoyed many slogans: first, the slogans related to *Colectiv* and young people who died there; second, I shouted together with the others both against the elites from the authority system. But I didn't agree slogans related to the Orthodox patriarch because he was recently elected and had nothing to do with the *Colectiv*.

Most of the participants did not necessarily agree with all the slogans that were used during the protests and had preferences that were in keeping with their motivations for joining the protests or their own beliefs and values. The narrative expressed above reflects the respondents' rejection of a blanket anti-elitist stance, focusing instead on those deemed responsible.

With regard to who was responsible for the incident, we observed some age-related differences. Older respondents (3 men and 2 women) blamed the organizers of the event for

their inability to avert such an ‘accident.’ For instance, a 76-year-old man from Sector 5 (Ro/NP2) reported that ‘not only the politicians are to be blamed but mainly the technical staff of the authorities and the owners of the club for this event’. Thus, most of older respondents (over 65 years – 7 out of total 8 persons) focused on the practical aspects of the event. In contrast, younger interviewees (20-30 years, 6 men and 5 women) expressed strong discontent regarding the political system and politicians. This is evident in the narrative of a 24-year-old female student from Sector 1 (Ro/P45), who stated:

I am not against anyone who shouted bad things about the president, but I consider he is innocent in all this story of *Colectiv*. I shouted against local mayors and the prime minister, against those who directly killed the kids – I mean the owners of the club, the ISU leaders. I made a small banner at home with ‘Down with corruption’, targeting all the leaders who were involved in such corruption for the post-1989 era reaction.

This perspective was supported by a 29-year-old male worker in a public institution, from Sector 1 (Ro/P7), who reported:

I enjoyed slogans such as: ‘Down with Oprea’, ‘Down with Ponta’ and ‘Corruption kills!’ I didn’t have a banner but I joined Dinamo Bucharest fans, as I am a supporter of Dinamo and all shouted slogans from the stadium but adapted to *Colectiv*.

Intergenerational difference is a feature of resistance behavior in Eastern Europe, where elderly who were acquainted with communist rules are more reluctant to support change and protest than younger generations (Light and Young, 2014). Protesters – and the youth in particular – considered that their social contract with the state had been violated by its inaction.

### ***Geographical spread of the protests***

Regarding the geographical spread of the protests, we considered areas in Bucharest the protestors covered through their marches and institutions targeted. As presented in Table 1 and Figure 1, most of the major protest events occurred at the *Colectiv*, the Government, and Piața Universității. As these were major assembly points, the protestors often marched from various areas in the city. A male participant (66 years old, pensioner) (Ro/P33) stated that ‘I was not happy with this situation and marched one evening a long way in Bucharest – from my home to the center but I was tired and came back home by metro.’ Moreover, it was clear

that younger people (12 women and 13 men under 30) were able to be involved for longer marches. For instance, a 28-year-old female (Ro/P41) considered that:

under communism nobody dared to blame corruption but we, the young are free to march. I was only in the first five days at protests, marching from *Colectiv* to the Government and to Piața Universității. The route was almost the same each day.

The high-school students (4 male and 3 female) were involved in a more active protest, occupying and marching over larger distances. For instance, an 18 year-old student (Ro/P37) stated that he participated two days in the protests: each time he went to *Colectiv* and then to Dealul Patriarhiei (Patriarch Hill) and moved to the Government and to Piața Universității. This indicates that, though the protest marches covered long distances such as from the *Colectiv* to central Bucharest, the majority of the protestors, focused their marches in areas where the Government and policy makers could take cognizance of their demands. This recreation of rituals (Nejad, 2016) also reveals an underlying implication that most of them held the Government responsible. As noted in the previous section, the location of the protests in the center of the capital allowed the claims to address local and national targets.

### ***Effects of the protest***

Most interview participants considered that their presence was important in encouraging change. A 33-year-old professor (female) (Ro/P5) responded that she thought her participation was important because her voice could be heard against the current politicians and social system. Similarly, a 48-year-old male worker at a local museum (Ro/P22) expressed pride in having contributed to bringing about a major political revolution twice in his lifetime, stating:

So as in 1989 I was on the streets and I'm happy to change the communist regime, the same happened now – I was a small drop of acid voice that withdrew corruption in Romania, or at least partly erased it.

In general, older interviewees were not so active in the present protest. This lower representation provided other opportunities to be heard and play an active role. As one male pensioner (Ro/P38) noted:

I was an important person in the protests because I represented pensioners. Few pensioners I saw there, because they are afraid the Government will cut their pension. I'm sure through my voice some corruption was eradicated.

Underlying this need is the fact that discontent regarding the ills of the political system in Romania has been a persistent feature of the post-communist period. As in other anti-government protests, participants felt confident that they had the power to bring change through the protests that followed the *Colectiv* fire, giving a voice to the voiceless. In taking part in the protests they were attempting to overcome a form of silencing, bringing long-held concerns to the surface.

## **Discussion**

The protests that erupted following the *Colectiv* fire were spontaneous in the sense that they lacked a central organising force. As Snow and Moss (2014, 1123) have argued, it is not 'that spontaneous actions or events are random and unpredictable, but rather that they are not premeditated or part of a formalized system of action.' Spontaneity can be observed in the *Colectiv* protests in the way in demands evolved and new sites were enrolled in the actions. It was also observed in the individual experiences of those involved, as they reacted in different ways to the unfolding events. Across the protests in Romania since 2012, there has been an underpinning sense of spontaneity, as people respond to perceived injustices. This may be linked to the relative weakness of civil society in the post-communist period and the hollowing out through the adoption of neoliberal urbanism (see Jacobsson, 2015; O'Brien, 2018).

Emotions were an important feature of the protests, as expressed by participants and observers, who mentioned feelings of anger, happiness, fear, sadness and pride as the series of events unfolded. These emotions capture the dynamic and complex nature of the experiences and meaning-making involved. Intersections between politics, memory and emotion are significant in the study of social movements, providing the drive to encourage participation (Jasper, 1998). The affective turn has also emphasised the importance of the emotional reward individuals receive from such participation (Ahmed, 2014). This was reflected in our analysis of participants' narratives, demonstrating a shift from emotions of anger and sorrow to happiness and pride, as their actions brought about change, even if not

guaranteed to be sustained. References to the 1989 revolution also demonstrated the way such events can have more lasting impacts on the individual, providing a narrative resource for future mobilisations.

Spatial considerations played an important role in the protests, as elaborated by the participants and observed through reconstruction of the marching routes. As Figure 1 demonstrated, there was a clear route, capturing key sites of significance, expanding over time as the protests continued. It also highlights the clustering of significant sites, according to Walter and Nicholls (2013) claim that cities incubate social movements. The status of Bucharest as capital bequeathed a 'monumental urban form' by Ceaușescu (O'Neill, 2009, 93), facilitated the movement of people around the city along the 'opened up... widened, straightened streets' (O'Neill, 2009, 104). Reflections of participants also demonstrated the importance of these sites and the need to be present, physically embodying the anger and frustration they felt. The inclusion of Piața Victoriei as a secondary site reflects its growing importance (Ciobanu & Light, 2018), as the temporal distance from the 1989 revolution makes Piața Universității less resonant.

Considering the extent to which protests can be expected to lead to lasting change, the resignation of the Prime Minister demonstrates a clear outcome and yet the longer-term effects are less apparent. On a simple level, the protests can be seen as part of the post-2012 wave, as identified by Burean and Badescu (2014; see also Pleyers & Sava, 2015), where people are more ready to mobilize around issues of concern. This suggests some growth in civil society capacity. Whether it is able to overcome processes of neoliberalization and squeezing of public space is less clear. Drawing on Vasudevan's (2015, 317) idea of 'the city as an enduring site of political contestation' it can be argued that the protests were meaningful. As has been noted above, the protests made use of the opportunities afforded by the urban environment and the presence of significant sites to press claims. Participants also reported feelings of solidarity, joining in to contribute to the idea of Romania as a European state. This fits with the argument of Pleyers and Sava (2015) about the evolving nature of activism in the region, as connections are made and institutionalized over time.

Looking beyond the spectacular nature of the protests, it is possible to discern a deeper meaning that may suggest an ability to manage change. Drawing on the idea of resilience in the urban environment, DeVerteuil has argued that it is necessary to look for signs of persistence. At the same time, he notes that 'Inherent in the adaptive approach to resilience is self-organization, anticipation and the ability to reconfigure on the fly' (DeVerteuil, 2015, 28). Viewed in this way, the spontaneous nature of the protests after the *Colectiv* fire could be identified as a reflection of resilience within the community. Participants noted the importance of social ties and connections in encouraging them to take part in the protests. Therefore, while it is important to look beyond the spectacular for signs of community resilience, we need to be careful not to dismiss them out of hand. It may be that the wave of protest events represent an attempt to move beyond what Lagerspetz referred to as the 'time of tribes' (2001, 13).

## **Conclusion**

The spontaneity of the protests that followed the *Colectiv* fire was generated by a collective outpouring of grief over the loss of life. The protests brought people together in a way that enabled action by drawing on the resources of the urban environment to challenge the state. Locating the *Colectiv* protests in the post-1989 context enables us to move beyond the spectacular and suggest a deeper, more sustained transformation: part of a move towards longer-term, programmatic claims (Pleyers and Sava, 2015). Large-scale, spontaneous actions reflect a form of societal resilience, as the community responds to signals from the environment (see DeVerteuil, 2015). These protests therefore represent a challenge to the image of weakness associated with post-communist civil society. Through protest participation, people perceived and made use of the opportunity to challenge rooted issues of corruption and inequality, as well as complicit institutions and elite groups.

We conclude by reiterating the importance of urban space in cultivating social movements. The emotional charge resulting from the *Colectiv* fire was important in generating action, but the impact was amplified by the affordances of the physical space. Of particular significance in this case was the capital city location, enabling the protests to scale vertically, drawing in power holders deemed culpable. It also facilitated the geographical spread, resulting in protests in other cities in support of the claims, as they cascaded from the capital. Spontaneity

was central to these processes, as it allowed a reactive, fluid form of protests to emerge, responding to shifts among the targets of claims and capitalizing on developing opportunities.

Further research on this case could consider the manifestations of protest in other cities in Romania following the *Colectiv* fire, suggesting how such catalytic events may provide an opening, as well as whether the claims presented shifted to reflect local concerns. The lessons can also be developed in the broader Eastern European context, considering how protests following catalytic events are adapted and the strategies utilised to link them to the specific context. Drawing on DeVerteuil's (2015) idea of societal resilience, further work could examine the extent to which pre-existing social networks underpin apparently spontaneous actions. Finally, there is scope for research to consider whether contemporary protests in Eastern Europe reflect a stabilisation of post-Communist civil society.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are identified by whether the interviewee was a participant (P) or non-participant (NP) and interview number.



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