

ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN ROMANIA. ROȘIA MONTANĂ CASE

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Abstract

Romania, the place where protests never take place, has been facing significant civil disobedience and street demonstrations in the last years. Of them, environmental protests present several particularities and do not convey social problems. The cyanide exploitation in Roșia Montană in Romania has been debated lately due to the fact that the place is part of the Romanian historical heritage and due to the negative environment impact. The project has been delayed several times being subject to political and public environment policies. Moreover, the cyanide exploitation generated protests and street demonstrations against the project. The present study reveals the media coverage of the protest and analyses the way Romanian media referred to the environmental protest related to Roșia Montană through messages. We investigate the media message and implicitly the representation comprised in it. Our analysis includes several predetermined indicators in order to evaluate the media impact regarding the case: environment, economics, and legislative framework, presence of protests, involvement of non-governmental organizations, civil society/community and politicians.

Keywords

environmental protests; Roșia Montană; civil demonstration; public space; online media message

JEL Classification

M31; M37

Protest movement in Romania

After the Revolution in 1989, Romania has been known as a country where protests never take place, due to the social apathy and weak civil demonstrations (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2012; Stoica 2012; Kideckel, 2009). Although organized at a national level, unions' and civil society's protests did not manage to create a significant impact or to generate a social or political change. The low social cohesion and low solidarity between protesting groups in Romania and the formalized union protests (Kideckel, 2009) are considered to be features of the protest movement in the country. Still, starting with 2012, something seems to have changed, as Romania has been facing atypical street demonstrations and civil disobedience. This seemed to a shift in the social movement in Romania, scholars discussing about a significant difference between these protests and former street demonstrations in Romania (Stoica, 2012; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2012). The many years of passivity in Romania seemed to have ended along with the 2012 protests, due to the large array of issues and to the fact that they generated the fall of the government. The 2013 protests against Roșia Montană cyanide exploitation are not only the most significant environmental street

¹ This paper was possible with the financial support of the Sectorial Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134650 with the title "Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowships for young researchers in the fields of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences and Sociology".

demonstrations that Romania has faced, but also are considered to be the largest civic movement in Romania after the fall of the communist regime (Pavelea et al., 2013). For more than 12 weeks protestors in Romania and abroad claimed dismissal of the government's legislative proposal which would have allowed the cyanide exploitation to start. As in most of the protests in Romania, participants also asked for the resignation of the prime minister and the ministers and other officials in charge.

The 2012 Romanian protests and the ones that followed were voluntary civilian resistance movements and have been made visible with the help of offline and online media. Looking back, we see that most of them lacked the force and power to shift the political balance and most of the time lead to a quiet end (Daba-Buzoianu et al., 2013). By examining communication during protests in Romania we see the recurrence of the topic political corruption, as, regardless of the initial topic of the protests, this was the most frequently addressed. The protests conveying topics regarding environmental risks were less frequent and have been less dealt with. Issues like pollution, contamination and environmental disasters have not been found on the public agenda since the fall of the communist regime, although they have been articulated in several discourses and the public debated among the years.

In this respect, the Roșia Montană cyanide exploitation in Romania is a particular case, as it has become both a national and international issue, with significant media coverage and a vivid public debate. From its early beginning in 1997, the project has been criticized by NGOs and several media, due to the negative impact on the historical places in the exploitation area and on the environment. Roșia Montană mine would be the largest mining area in Europe in which it would be used 13 times more quantity of sodium cyanide. The project cannot be completed without a displacement or a reallocation of the community. Roșia Montană is the oldest mining town in Romania, the documentary project advocates for the inclusion in UNESCO heritage list. Alburnus Maior Association established in 2000, is opposed to the mining project appealing to social, environmental, economy arguments and heritage. The Association has initiated and coordinated the *Save Roșia Montană Campaign* that has managed to mobilize 100,000 active supporters. During the period 2002-2007, houses were restored and the opportunity to invest in the future some 70 million dollars in cultural heritage became possible. Basically an attempt was made in order to establish common denominators: sustainable development, tourism development, the growth of cultural heritage. The involvement of RMGC, the company that intended to own the exploitation, in these directions would be achieved only once the mining would start. The campaign "*Save Roșia Montană*" started in 2002 and had as a main goal the cancellation of the project. Among the years, the campaign has won public sympathy and managed to delay the exploitation, although the legal and administrative processes have continued. The protest against the cyanide exploitation in Roșia Montană started in August 2013, when the Romanian Government sent to the Parliament the law entitled *Roșia Montană – a public utility*. This time, Romania has faced a strong public movement and a vivid reaction from the civil society. For about 12 weeks the protestors claimed the Parliament to react and vote against the law. The protest ended in November, succeeded in obtaining a negative vote for the law and stopped the exploitation.

The discussion about the protest movement in Romania should also consider a broader context, mainly Europe's series of protests (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2014). The protests within Europe tend to shed a new light on the relation between citizens and political power. Still, political and institutional communication during protests remains reactive and less able to promote dialogue. The general European context shows that we are facing an increase of political contestation actions and that we are dealing with both *old and new protests* (Della Porta 2007; Eising, 2008). Although this increase is obvious, we must notice that protests and street demonstrations are strongly rooted in domestic

problems and, as a consequence, we are facing a retreat behind the national borders (Bârgăoanu, 2011).

Protests and public space

As a visible marker of democracy, the protest is a form of communicating the public disagreement towards the political decisions and is expressing the public's resentment. By facilitating the interaction between social actors and different opinions and interests, public space is inner linked to democracy (Beciu, 2011). As a realm of mediation (Dacheaux, 2008) it has become a space for contradictory debates where protestors claim opinions in order to influence the political decision to act accordingly. Public space conveys controversy and debate which in contemporary society are strongly connected to the media power of spreading out issues that are at matter (Habermas, 1997, 2005). Without the role of online and broadcasted media, it is most probably that the public debate would not address certain general interest issues. At the same time, the significant role that media plays in the public debate is responsible for placing topics on the public agenda. Accordingly, public space can hardly be put aside from the media (Wolton, 2008; Beciu, 2011), as media has become an essential condition for public space (Habermas, 1997; Beciu, 2011). The rise of the online media has significantly changed the role that digital technologies have in public space, due to their role in creating visibility (Thompson, 2005). Scholars talk about new forms of mediated visibility, as internet has

“greatly increased the flow of audio-visual content into the networks of communication and enabled a much wider range of individuals to create and disseminate this content” (*ibid.*, 37-38).

All types of protests that we have found and analyzed are general issues that fail to capture common reactions and are being considered relevant only to certain social classes. The lack of social solidarity is associated with the indifference of politicians against the reactions of civil society helped to discourage these forms of civic manifestations. However, the year 2012 was considered atypical compared with the typology of public space after December, when accumulated social tensions have managed to bring together citizens across the country and contributed to the fall of the Government. The Romanian society has made its presence felt in the public space and captured the media agenda for nearly two months. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has been sporadic, and the civil society has continued to adopt particular behaviors specific to transitional democracies. As a consequence of this phenomenon, media played the role of spokesperson for the civil society. For this reason, the themes of public space are the themes that are visible in media, which leads to a reconfiguration of public space into the exposed public space. This paper analyses this particular environmental protest in Romania and focuses on the media coverage of the Roșia Montană case during the protests in two of the most read online news portals: Ziare.com and Hotnews.ro. The study of the online media coverage of the Roșia Montană (Romania) gold-mining project protests is part of a broader series of research which analyzes communication in the Romanian public space.

Method

The current study is based on a quantitative research, in which I have analyzed the content of the online media message regarding the cyanide exploitation in Roșia Montană during the protests that took place in August-November 2013. The corpus was comprised by the articles submitted by Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com. These news sites were selected due to the fact that they were two of the most important news sites in

Romania, considering the monthly views. Within the framework of the monitoring, I have traced references to five topics: environment, economics, legislative framework, presence of the protests and involvement of NGOs, civil society/community and politicians. Some of the topics describe are strongly rooted in the protest debate, like environment, economics and legislative framework, while others try to analyze the involvement of different actors, like the case of the involvement of NGO's, civil society and politicians. The environment topic refers to the presence of positive or negative environmental effects and to the discussion about clear evidence and steps to follow in terms of impact on environment. In respect to the economics, the study took into consideration the positive, negative or neutral impact on economy, both local and national. The presence of the protests noted whether the street demonstrations were announced, even at the level of intention, and the involvements of non-governmental organizations, civil society/community and politicians referred to these categories. Moreover, while monitoring I have considered the headings of the articles relevant for the study. The headings that have been encountered during the monitoring were politics, current affairs, environment, economics, opinions, and various.

The current paper does not investigate whether the public is aware of the details of the subject, but is interested in finding out the key factors in managing the mining operations and the way they are presented in the media, as well as the attitude of the political and social actors on the generated controversy. The paper has monitored the two on-line news sites Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com during August-November 2013 in order to observe whether there is a link between the way themes regarding the Roșia Montană project are discussed, the public reactions and the political decisions taken. The case examines one of the most controversial projects, Roșia Montană, which sparked numerous polemics, both in terms of economics, environmental and legislative issues, and as well stakeholders, local residents, authorities, politicians, NGOs, civil society and local communities directly affected. Although the project generated reactions in the media, the public opinion was not aware of the exact consequences or benefits. For this reason, the paper aimed to observe how the preset indicators have had visibility, during August-November 2013 when took place a series of protests against the Roșia Montană project.

Discussion

It should be noted that in Romania's recent years, protests have focused on domestic issues and have addressed problems like pension and salary cuts and layoffs.

Not only that environmental protests were uncommon in Romania, but environment issues were less addressed in public space and less dealt with in the last years. Moreover, unlike other European countries, the ecological parties in Romania did not manage to gain significant electoral support. Despite all these, the environmental protests referring to the Roșia Montană project managed to gather a significant number of people. Also, these protests have took benefit from online media in order to spread out. The protests referring to the Roșia Montană project manage to articulate the economic and political topic in order to gain visibility. The current study shows that the environmental topics were addressed mostly in connection with the economic growth of the private company and with the wrong political decision of the decision makers.

In a very interesting way, the study underlines a feature of the Romanian protests, more precisely the fact that the initial topic is somehow left behind and less visible (Daba-Buzoianu et al., 2013). As other street demonstrations in Romania, the environmental protests regarding Roșia Montană referred to the topics frequently dealt with in the public space, like politics and economy. Messages regarding the environmental impact are less visible, instead the legislative framework (16.15%) and the politicians (15.12%) are more frequent, while economy has 12.51%. Thus, the visibility of the case

comprises topics that were already on the public agenda and less the environmental topic. Thus, the protests addressing an environmental topic did not manage to promote it by itself, instead used other topics. Moreover, if we were to consider the relation environment-economic-legacy, we see that most of the time the environment impact has been put in relation with the economic outcomes, explaining that the negative impact on the environment is creating a significant economic growth, especially for the company that manages the cyanide exploitation. The legislative dimension is frequently encountered in the media message and is strongly connected with the political dimension, as it seems to be used as an excuse by the politicians. Most of the politicians involved in the case have pointed out that the legislation and the legal issues generated by the former ruling party set up a very difficult framework. In addition, it is worth mentioning the fact that the protestors were claiming the Parliamentary commission to vote against the project of the cyanide exploitation in Roșia Montană. The vivid street demonstrations and the significant number of people attending and supporting the cause finally determined the members of the Parliament not to vote for the project. In this respect, the indicators referring to protests and legislative framework are strongly linked, because the protests had as a goal a negative vote in Parliament.

The monitoring shows that the two news sites covered the environmental protests significantly different in terms of visibility, although in terms of content of the coverage there aren't notable differences. Thus, from the total number of 481 references revealed by the four months monitoring, 369 appeared in Hotnews.ro and 112 in Ziare.com. In terms of visibility, it is obviously that Hotnews.ro (76.71%) had a significant interest to cover the event compared with Ziare.com, which reaches approximately 23%. Still, it is worth mentioning that although the study reveals an importance difference in terms of visibility, the content of the online media coverage shows that there are interesting similarities. The two news sites have written about the Roșia Montană protests in a similar way, by referring to the same topics and by addressing the same events. Moreover, the study shows that the protests regarding Roșia Montană have been considered to be related to the label public interest, as this has been pointed out by the actors that communicated about the events.

Not surprisingly, if we look at the visibility within the four months we see that both of the two news sites have referred significantly to the Roșia Montană case during street demonstrations and have less dealt with it in times with fewer events. The main focus of the articles was to underline the public resentment about the implementation of the Roșia Montană project throughout the street protests all over the country and abroad, as in the case of the protests organized in London, Berlin and Brussels. In this respect, as shown in figure 1, September was the month most visible, mainly due to the significant street demonstrations organized in several cities in Romania and abroad.

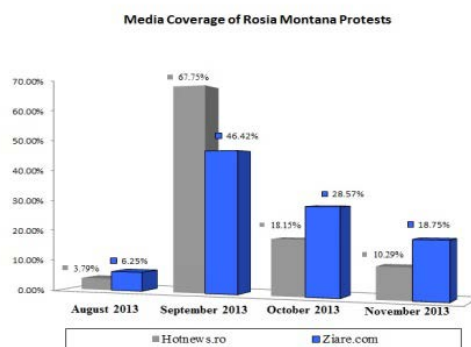


Figure 1 Media Coverage of Roșia Montană Protests

From the point of view of the messages spread out by the protesters, both Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com write about how the slogans used have linked the case with politics: *The Green Revolution in Europe starts with Roșia Montană*; *Stop the largest cyanide mining project*; *Stop the crimes against Romania: the transformation of the Apuseni Mountains in cyanides*; *There is something rotten in Bucharest*. Thus, the messages used by the protestors try to exceed the environment topic and mention other elements. A first category of messages is connected with the intention to broader communication on the topic, more precisely to call for Europe. The messages *the green revolution in Europe starts with Roșia Montană* and *stop the crimes against Romania* intend to transform the issue from a domestic to a European one. The second category of messages try to create a certain social solidarity, somehow constructed against the political class: *out on the streets like in the 1990s*; *we are intelligent people, we are not desperate*.

There aren't many categories of actors communicating during protests, as the study reveals the involvement of local community's representatives, NGOs and politicians. In addition to these categories, there were some other actors, but their involvement was rather low in terms of visibility. Among those, the messages send by the Romanian Academy were mostly commented. Quite interestingly, the messages send by the politicians seem to avoid the topic environment, and rather prefer to address the economic and social impact. The ruling party links the economic messages with the great importance of attracting foreign investors. Thus, the negative vote would be considered by the foreign companies willing to invest in Romania a negative signal in terms of legislative support for assets. The arguments brought up by the ruling party referring to other countries doing cyanide exploitation are being rejected by the protestors, who exclaim *we are defending Romania*. The messages spread out by the actors can be divided into two categories: one that supports the rule of law and implicitly the implementation of the project, as it is based on a contract between the state and the private company, and one that despite the contract and regulations, argues that environment protection and ecology concerns must be considered priority. Quite interestingly, politicians tend to consider Roșia Montană project as a local issue, something that concerns the local community and the two parties of the contract, while the protestors tend to shape communication in a broader way and to address topics that are frequently on the public agenda like political corruption and government's impossibility to solve problems properly.

Also, it is worth mentioning the fact that among politicians, we may find three sub categories according to the way they communicated in respect to the Roșia Montană project. Thus, the data gathered shows that some of them are vividly against the project due to the negative impact on the local community, some are arguing that the project has some benefits worth considering, like the economic and financial ones, and some are in both categories, as they have changed their position throughout time.

Conclusion

The present paper investigated the topics spread in the online media regarding the cyanide exploitation in Roșia Montană, Romania. In relation to this topic, the research emphasized the way in which the main elements defining the problems were visible, as well as the public attitude of the actors implied. Starting from these premises the paper underlined that this controversy has been considered a local problem which has become a matter of national and international interest. Nevertheless, the ambiguous and conflicting information has been reflected in the lack of firm political decisions. The economic factor has been evoked in the majority of cases through a series of advantages brought to the local community (increase employment rate, the raise of the level of living, attracting investments), as well as disadvantages.

At the same time, the paper identified a series of social risks: implementing such a project would have practically led to the disappearance of local community, to the decrease of social cohesion and of social relations at the level of community. The protests have had especially a local character. At the national level, the dissemination of information has been done through authorities and mass media. Thus, the paper identified both communicational and image risks. The division into two categories, supporters and opponents of the mining project, has definitely contributed to the delay of the political decisions. The lack of civic culture and the weak public politics have transformed this project into a significant issue. Even though the media coverage comprised all the relevant aspects such as economic, social, environmental, and political, at the level of public opinion a lot of ambiguities concerning this project have remained and this fact has also reflected in the social actions visible in media.

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