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## RECREATIVE ACTIVISM IN ROMANIA

How cultural affiliation and lifestyle yield political engagement<sup>2</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes the new culture of protest in Romania, a type of engagement we define as *recreative activism*. During the past years, young and culturally-inclined citizens started demanding more and more to have a share in the political process. To explain the novelty of this phenomenon, we argue that patterns of cultural consumption in the *scene* contributed to the spiral of ever-increasing participation in protests throughout the past six years, mainly drawing on in-depth interviews with activists and adherents of the Romanian *alternative scene*. This data was further supplemented by inferences derived from participative observation and content analysis. Three main protest waves were analyzed and critically put in context: the Rosia Montana (2013), Colectiv (2015), and OUG 13 (2017) protests.

Our main findings are that *recreative activism* has its roots in the concomitance of cultural consumption and noninstitutionalized political participation, as well as in a certain disenchantment of protest participants with post-communist politics. Further, *recreative activism* is characteristic for nonconventional political involvement, which requires less commitment than classic activism and is less influenced by ideologies.

**Keywords:** recreative activism, new culture of protests, cultural dimensions of collective action, Romania, Eastern Europe.

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## RECREATIVE ACTIVISM IN ROMANIA

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### How cultural affiliation and lifestyle yield political engagement

#### INTRODUCTION

At the end of January 2017, mass protests against a government ordinance (OUG13) emerged in Romania and soon became the biggest protest wave the country had seen in over 25 years. Stirred by a generalized sense of dissatisfaction with post-communist politics and its main actors, these protests highlighted a trend of discontent also observable in other Central and Eastern European countries. Starting all the way back in 2011, Romania saw the beginning of a series of protests that culminated in the events of 2017, where young, educated people were the driving force and constituted the critical mass of the protests (Chiş et al. 2017). The first social movement to appear in this period, during the winter of 2011/2012, was widely seen in international media as being triggered by austerity measures (Gubernat–Rammelt 2012) and as the moment of sudden politicization of a new group of protesters. An environmental campaign against the ‘Rosia Montana’ mining project, which made headlines in 2013, generated a feeling of “togetherness” and highlighted the different expectations from politics of participants to the protests, as opposed to the political establishment. It also marked the moment when the collective identity of this group was shaped, a collective identity further strengthened during the protests of November 2015, following a fire that killed 64 people and destroyed the Bucharest alternative concert venue ‘Colectiv’. These events also underlined the perceived distance of this social group from both traditional political actors and mainstream society. This succession of protests shows an escalation, both in numbers and temporal density of rallies, as well as in the nature of participants’ claims.

The mobilization mechanisms, properties and frames we observe for the Romanian case seem to be common for a number of protest waves in Eastern Europe in recent years: the ‘Gorilla’ protests in Slovakia in 2012; the anti-corruption protests in Slovenia in 2012; the Bulgarian protest wave in 2014 or the student protests of the past years in Macedonia. These protests are, for the most part, non-violent and online mobilization plays a key role in them, while offline participation often takes artistic forms. At least for Romania, we hypothesize that recruitment for unconventional political participation takes place through affiliation to an *urban alternative scene*.

As social movement research in Europe remains a quintessentially Western European network (Diani–Cisař 2014), as mechanisms of mobilization are subject to constant change, and as the conditions for unconventional political involvement in Eastern Europe differ from those in Western democracies, the usefulness of concepts, classic and newer, derived from the latter region, is still not demonstrated. In this regard, it was already suggested by Grzegorz and Kubik (1998) to pursue a research agenda that draws on multiple concepts, rather

than relying on a single theoretical framework. Underlining the novelty of the recent protests in Romania and the conceptual challenges arising from it, we believe that it is necessary to comprehend the mechanisms and properties of mobilizations in recent years in this country in other terms than classic activism. Drawing on new conceptual developments within the discipline of social movement studies, we try to build a bridge between considerations on spaces, participation, leisure and classic approaches, in order to explain the recent spiral of mobilization in Romania, where the development of a new culture of protest is observable (Rammelt 2017). Hurd–Anderson (2011:10) define recreation as “an activity that people engage in during their free time, that people enjoy, and that people recognize as having socially redeeming values” and recreational activities “must contribute to society in a way that society deems acceptable”. Since this type of Romanian activism requires less commitment than classic activism, relies on social bonds established and maintained outside the sphere of political involvement and is perceived as an enjoyable activity even though, by its very nature, it is considered tantamount to political change, we propose to define this type of engagement as *recreative activism*.

Similar to the political culture of social movements in other Eastern European countries, which are mainly non-violent and non-confrontational (Jacobsson–Saxonberg 2013: 257), the new culture of protest in Romania is not very conflictual. It also makes use of very up-to-date repertoires of dissent. The discovery of politics and protests as the preferred channel to engage with the political sphere in recent years coincides with current technological developments, enabling leaderless, spontaneous, and all-inclusive cycles of contention. Given the traditionally lower levels of political involvement than in Western European countries, recent forms of collective action in Romania indicate yet another type of engagement: protests are usually taking place outside working hours, require only irregular physical presence, and are profoundly reliant on online mobilization.

We argue that three interdependent elements of *recreative activism* contributed to the spiral of protests and their ever-increasing participant numbers:

1. the accumulation of relational and cognitive social capital during protest participation,
2. the new possibilities of online mobilization provided by Social Networking Services (SNS),
3. patterns of cultural consumption and the role of scenes.

The accumulation of relational and cognitive social capital within the group which was the most influential in terms of protest events, if we take into account the “effects of eventful protests” (della Porta 2008) or the “unintended consequences of social movements” (Giugni 1999), is the main effect of protest participation on subsequent mobilizations. Starting with the Anti-Austerity protests of 2011/2012, it appears reasonable to interpret the succession of events that followed, with the continuous transformation of sympathizers or supporters into active protesters, as a major effect of protests on future protests and protesters. While being engaged in the new environment of protest networks, a “secondary socialization” takes place, in which participants need to adapt to the rules and to act in accordance to certain roles (Cf. Fillieule–Pudal 2010: 176). New participants need to identify with the stated goals of the groups and to engage with the repertoires of action previously used, while also contributing to the dynamic of existing groups, resulting in frame and repertoire expansions. In what concerns the first dimension of *recreative activism* – the accumulation of relational and cognitive social capital – we consider the following outcomes as being the most influential: a) the creation and

maintenance of networks, via an accumulation of contacts during protest participation; b) the creation and strengthening of a collective identity and internal solidarity; c) the accumulation of protest specific knowledge and Know-How. One major result of the continuous accumulation of cultural, political and social capital during the protests in the past six years has been an increased tendency to take disenchantment with political elites to the streets (Rammelt 2017).

Apart from the fact that modern social movements rely even more strongly than before on a constant flux of communication (Castells 2012: 229), the use of social networking services (SNS) altered mechanisms of political engagement. As such, social networks – both offline and online – give activists access to a larger population, which had initially been less active and less mobilized. Online social networks facilitate, in this context, the dynamics and the enlargement of the movement: they offer a political space in which a collective identity can be built by the mere sharing of ideas and opinions (Bakarjieva 2012) and where the need of social valorization of civic activism can be satisfied by an environment which values militant actions (Park–Kee–Valenzuela 2009). This is the result of the function that Bennet attributes to online media, which is the possibility to communicate with broader “lifestyle publics” by the “simplification of the ideological discourse” (Bennett 2003). In a country like Romania, where the protest culture is still emerging, Facebook and, more broadly, the Internet, constitute, then, an essential support for *recreative activism*.

Third, we will focus on the cultural dimensions of this type of activism, the main hypothesis being that “alternative” lifestyles in Romania enabled a larger trend of social and political involvement of younger segments of society. The aim of this article is to shed light on the political ramifications of the affiliation to a cultural scene and its importance for *recreative activism*. The interdependence between cultural socialization and social mobilization, observed in regard to newly emerging actors mobilizing for protests in Romania, appears to be a very suitable starting point for such an endeavor. Mostly leaving aside external factors – e.g. opportunity structure, media – we focus on properties of the social group predominantly participating in protest events and on internal mechanisms of social movements. Therefore, our inquiries into the dynamics of mobilization in Romania have a more ‘fashion’ and ‘alternative culture’-oriented approach. The increased number of participants in political and civic engagement in Romania can best be explained, in our understanding, by one of the main attributes of *scenes*, as described by Hauns and Leach (2007): “because they offer a lifestyle and, at the same time, as part-time communities, require only a relatively low level of commitment, scenes attract a much larger group of participants than the movement does” (p. 79). The Bucharest urban scene and its relationship to recent protests fit these parameters and suit our purposes as a starting point.

## 2. ACTIVISM IN ROMANIA

Romania is a semi-peripheral country, and its “statehood and modernity were always challenged, leaving deep traces in the collective memory and culture” (Craciun 2017a: 7). This country was, for a long time, considered to be the textbook example of the scarcity of civil society in Eastern Europe (Crowther 2004: 363), having a politically apathetic population (Stan 2010) and a non-participative culture (Voicu–Basina 2005, Uslaner 2004). However, from the years following the regime change until 2002, Romania witnessed relatively strong

mobilizations by labor unions and more industrial conflict than other countries in the region (Varga–Freyberg–Inan 2015: 682). These and other mobilizations continued to take place in the period 2002–2011, but they were mostly limited in scale, sporadic in nature and lacked sustainability. Most protests organized by labor unions during this period were very narrow in their claims, focusing exclusively on the demands of their respective constituencies.

Most recently, in the summer and fall of 2017 Romanian labor unions reclaimed a place in the configuration of actors bringing political pressure to the streets: “Cartel Alfa”, a labor union in the steel and mining sector and several unions active in the health sector, notably “Sindicatul Sanitas” staged protests in front of the Parliament and the Romanian Government, demanding, amongst other things, changes in the pension system, gathering several thousand participants. Arguably, these protests benefited from the mass protests at the beginning of the year, as they contributed to a rapid decline in government legitimacy in broad segments of society. This massive wave of rallies and the associated (international) media coverage plausibly had a stimulating effect on future mobilizations similar to what McAdam called the “*dramatization of a system's vulnerability or illegitimacy*” (McAdam 1996).

However, apart from union activity in the 1990s, since 2012, people aged between 25 and 40, though previously seeming to be discouraged from civic involvement, strongly contributed to the waves of mobilization Romania has witnessed in the past few years (Stoiciu 2012), and new groups of protesters seemed to populate the public sphere (Rammelt 2014).

In a study published soon after the February 2017 protests, Chiş et al. (2017) assess the socio-demographic profile of the protesters, highlighting that they mainly belong to the age cohort 22 to 45 (54%) and that they are highly educated (56% hold a university or a master’s degree). The study also shows the continuity of unconventional political engagement within this group, as more than 70% were previously participating in other protests, notably in the Rosia Montana (2013) and the Colectiv protests (2015).

The demographic characteristics of this social group stimulated a highly energetic debate between analysts and intellectuals in the region. In an interview published by the Budapest Beacon, the Hungarian philosopher G. M. Tamás argues that the 2017 protests in Romania were “*fueled by the contempt of the young liberal middle-class for the poor who are regarded as the electorate of the governing party, the PSD, considered old and decrepit and barbarian*” (Bayer 2017). Romanian analysts assert that the protests have been taken over by the “right-leaning middle-class” (Tichindeleanu 2017), being the culmination of a wave of “middle-class activism” prior to 2017 (Deoancă 2017). This discourse, focusing on the middle-classness of the protests and their participants, is perpetuated by a number of highly visible left-leaning Romanian analysts (Rogozanu 2017, Siulea 2017, Poenaru 2017). In this context, it is plausible to say that the definition of the “middle-class”, describing the social group most visible during the protests, functioned both as a confirmation of their social status and as a labelling mechanism.

Although not as well depicted and discussed, the characteristics of this social group can be retraced for all protest waves that we are analyzing in this article. Abaseaca affirms that both the Colectiv and the Rosia Montana protests “*activated a young generation of urban activists interested in politics*”, which she

calls “the educated pro-west youth, fighting for values and »the moral revolution«” (Abaseaca 2017). Other analysts underline the age component, referring to the protesters as “the young Occidentalists” (Pepine 2013, Ruse 2013), often described as “hipsters” by mainstream media. These descriptions, in terms of age, socio-economic status and education are confirmed by our own long-term observations in the field. In the absence of compelling demographic data, we refrain from describing the protesters as an actual “political generation” (Braungart 2013, Whittier 1997), but we privilege the term “social group”, referring to participants in protest activities.

### 3. CONCEPTUALIZING THE ROMANIAN CULTURE OF PROTESTS

Parallel to the emergence of this social group as an influential actor in protest waves since 2011, a new type of “grassroots driven [activism] inspired by urban movements” can be observed, not only in Romania, but also in other Eastern European countries (Sava 2015). In Romania, the social group described above engages in a new type of collective action, close to how Pleyers described movements that occurred after the financial crisis (Pleyers 2015). A defining characteristic for these mobilizations is that the participants “are mobilizing around specific projects, connected among each other through informal networks and personal affinities” (Pleyers 2016). It is also remarkable that classic leaders of protests, such as intellectuals and classic organizations, lose their importance due to the spontaneous nature of protests promoted by a rather depoliticized civil society (Larzillière - Petric 2013). Given the new properties of recent waves of protest, highlighted above, traditional analytical models within the discipline appear to become less adequate to the study of new types of mobilization (Pleyers–Capitaine 2017). Drawing on Wieviorka’s (2004) concept of *subjectification*, Pleyers therefore proposes to understand these mobilizations as alter-activism (Pleyers 2017). *Alter-activism* highlights the role of “the relationship to the self [*la relation à soi*], the lived experience and the coherence between practices and values of a movement” for this militant culture (Pleyers–Capitaine 2017: 52).

The emergence and the evolution of social movements and of periodic challenges to power have been explained, for a long time, by changes in opportunity structures (McAdam 1996, Kriesi et al. 1992, Tarrow 1998), both political and cultural. Their capacity to maintain pressure on power holders and authorities was often attributed to efficient resource mobilization and movement entrepreneurs (McCarthy–Zald 2001, McCarthy–Zald 1977, Morris–Staggenborg 2001), efficient framing (Snow et al. 1997, Gamson–Meyer 1996) and the interaction with media (Raschke 1985, Gamson 1992). For the latter, it is frequently argued that it is actually an essential element of the opportunity structures, explaining both the conditions for the emergence of social movements and their effect on the political system (Balme–Chabanet 2008). Cultural dimensions of collective action were regularly discussed within the discipline of social movement studies under the umbrella of the concept of *free spaces* that managed to integrate culture in structural approaches by highlighting the cultural aspects of existing networks (Polletta 1999). The discipline of social movement studies has always been characterized by a relative absence of conceptual dogmatism (Fillieule–Agrikoliansky–Sommier 2010) and theory development has always been strongly informed by empirical work (Klandermanns–Staggenborg–Tarrow 2002). Therefore, the changing properties of social and political mobilization over the last decades, notably the impact of online mobilization efforts and virtual repertoires of dissent (Bakardjieva–Svensson–



Skoric 2012, Castells 2012), and the growing discussion on the role of emotions (Goodwin–Jasper 2006, Jasper 2011) and on effects of movement participation on future mobilizations (Willemez 2013, della Porta 2008, Giugni 1999) prompted conceptual innovation. Lifestyle movements (Haenfler–Johnson–Jones 2012) and alter-activism in youth movements (Juris–Pleyers 2009) are such examples that aim at integrating lifestyle or sub-cultural practices in the framework of social movement studies. They underline the importance of emotions, of spaces of socialization, of collective action and of lived experiences for social movements and activism. Recently, proponents of Critical Event Studies (Spracklen–Lamond 2016) formulated a new research program in the study of social movements, suggesting that spaces and activities surrounding social movements are best understood as events, and activism as leisure (Lamond–Spracklen 2015a). The series of protests we are analyzing confirms approaches in the discipline that value the importance of pre-existing networks for social movements (van Stekelenburg– Klandermans 2010, Klandermans–van Stekelenburg–Toorn 2008, Mathieu 2007, Diani– McAdam 2003, Rucht– Neidhard 2001). For these strands, networks, based on pre-existing ties, become quintessential for the recruitment of potential participants (Polletta 1999: 53). Undoubtedly, exhibiting an appropriate level of respect for the role that networks play in mobilization, Haunss and Leach’s (2007) study of the German ‘Autonomen’ movement shows the shortcomings of approaches focused on formal organizations. They emphasize the importance of the *scene* for participation in social movements. Similar to Pleyers’ *spaces of experience* (Pleyers 2010: 39), an essential element of *alter-activism*, the *scene* is understood as “*a network of people who identify as part of a group and share a certain belief system or set of convictions, that is also necessarily centered around a certain location or set of locations where that group is known to congregate*” (Haunss–Leach 2007: 73). As *spaces of experience* are characterized by their distance from capitalist society (Pleyers 2010: 39) and are populated by activists that “intensely live their commitment” (Pleyers 2016: 113) we privilege the *scene*, in its capacity to explain activism in Romania, over *spaces of experience*. Haunss–Leach (2009: 270) argue that the *scene* becomes influential for mobilization because it provides a pool of potential participants.

Social movements in Eastern Europe, as Piotrowski (2015) points out, often have strong links to subcultures or downright countercultures. To understand the cultural dynamics animating recent protests in Romania, we will study how the affiliation to a perceived subculture contributed to a lifestyle – understood as a “*lived culture [...] in which individuals actively express their identities but do so in direct relation to their position as regards the dominant culture*” (Miles 2000:26) – in which being different from the mainstream society and becoming politically active became an important feature. Spaces and locales where such culture can be lived are essential to the cultivation of norms of engagement with society and to the development of a collective identity. Scenes can be understood as places “devoted to practices of meaning making through the pleasures of sociable consumption” (Silver–Clark–Navarro Yanez 2010: 2297). In this same way, the “alternative” scene in Bucharest could be described by its aesthetic distinction mechanisms which bring it closer to Hipster culture, often characterized by its attraction towards an exclusive taste and an ambiguous attitude towards consumption (Ikraht 2013: 6). With their potential to renegotiate conflicted social spaces, a close connection with music and arts becomes a means to distinguish oneself from what adherents of the scene understand as mainstream society, further strengthening group identity. If a scene becomes attractive through its adherents’



unique attitude towards music or new media, and by its call to become active instead of passive, its fascination stems from a relative (temporal) autonomy from other spaces of socialization (Großegger–Heinzlmaier 2004: 8f.). What is further intriguing is the fact that Hipsters manifest their needs and expectations of society through their participation in social and political movements (Victoriano 2014). Through its attraction towards alternative lifestyles and non-establishment activities, combined with the use of current technologies, the Romanian “alternative” scene, without possessing the subversive character of countercultures, still develops its interest in active non-institutionalized politics and shapes the recently evolving culture of protest.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

In the present article we placed an emphasis on semi-structured interviews with activists and adherents of the “alternative scene” in Bucharest. This data was further supplemented by inferences derived from participative observation and content analysis. Blee and Taylor (2002) argue that studies on social movements based on semi-structured interviews generally rely on a fairly limited number of interviews. We did not seek to cover the entire population relevant to our research, but rather to generate a globally representative sample in terms of visibility and impact of militant work. The interview guide was in line with theoretical reflections, but it did not fully structure the communication, and some questions were adapted to the interviewees' responses and their concerns as suggested by Meuser and Nagel (1991: 449). The interview incorporated the respondent's reactions in order to give him or her the opportunity to express various potentially relevant perceptions, impressions and subjectivities. Given the close relationship between social networks and the patterns of understanding through which (social movement) actors attribute meaning to their environment, be it through social ties and interactions (Diani 2003) or through the density of daily sociability ties (Simeant 2010: 133), we tried to comprehend the interviewee's larger social environment.

In total, we conducted 22 interviews between December 2015 and February 2017, in Romanian and English, with prominent actors located at the fringes of culture (in visual and performance art, music, festival organizing) and political activism. In order to understand the festive character of protest participation and the culturally-stimulated dynamic behind the evolution of the protests, organizers and highly involved participants of two festivals were interviewed: ‘FânFest’, an annual event accompanying the ‘Rosia Montana’ campaign since 2005, and ‘Street Delivery’, a street festival taking place in Romania's capital since 2006. Both festivals appeared around the same time and attract the same type of public, contributing to the creation and maintenance of the scene. Their organizers and highly involved adherents play a key role in recent mobilizations and protests. Even though we argue that, since 2011, protests in Romania should be characterized as leaderless rather than organized, our interviewees hold a high degree of visibility in the scene, which recommends them as “opinion leaders” with regard to the properties of the scene, and of the recent protests. As the more active part of the scene, their experience creating an impact on the broader pool of mobilizable sympathizers or on experienced protest participants is a potentially valuable research tool. We further supplemented the study with a hermeneutic analysis of self-descriptions of cultural venues, as found on their Facebook ‘About’ sections, and third-party interviews (sometimes dating back to before the timeframe of our specific analysis) with club owners and party organizers.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the following section, we will elaborate on the construction of the Bucharest scene, emphasizing the aspects of socialization through cultural consumption that favored social engagement. The main finding is that affiliation to the scene increases people's propensity to transform from non-involved citizens to protest sympathizers or participants.

### 5.1. The "alternative scene" in Bucharest

The locales that allowed, throughout Bucharest's history of the past decades, the development of "non-mainstream" communities and the emergence of alternative discourses, are not best understood as mere entertainment venues. More than being spaces of sociability characteristic for a consumer society, they became a socialization element, part of a bigger ensemble contributing to the delimitation of critical communities, appropriating and institutionalizing public space as a space for contestation.

Defining the places where one can engage in developing counter-discourses reassures a group of its existence (Polletta 1999: 25). In Communist Romania, in a social environment of repression and censorship, Bucharest simply didn't have the ability to accommodate the entire variety of aesthetic genres and manifestations offered by the local culture. If alternative spaces are placed, symbolically *and* geographically, at the "margins" of a city's life (Chatterton–Hollands 2003: 197), in the case of Bucharest, 'Club A' – an iconic venue during Communism and the 90's – was symbolically placed in the center of the city, but kept its marginal position on the strength of being the sole exponent of such a cultural movement. However, despite its historical importance, 'Club A's' impact on the younger generations decreased in the '90s as a result of the appearance of new, capitalist avenues of consumption. This period was marked by a generalized loss of interest in politics (Pasti–Miroiu–Codita 1997), also due to the fact that the social context of post-Communism wasn't favorable to elaborating "resorts of rebellion", but rather to enhancing consumerist trends.

As subcultures were not sufficiently well-defined and delimited, various forms of "non-mainstream" music – from alternative rock, to urban electro – inhabited the same spaces and often shared a public limited in numbers. In 1996, when 'Web Club' appeared in Bucharest, it was the only club designated for electronic and trash music, seen by the artists performing there as the "cornerstone of urban culture", contributing to consolidate the affectual solidarity of non-conformist parts of society through music: *"We all liked originality and freedom and how arts, and especially music, stimulate critical thinking,"* says the former owner of 'Web Club'. Even though 'Web Club' defined the perimeter and set the standards for what became the urban electronic movement in Bucharest, in its ten years of existence it was a place where the electronic community, the hipster community, but also goa or reggae fans would cross paths.

The opposition between "commercial"/mainstream and "unaccepted" music and places is, for the generation growing up in the years right after the fall of Communism, central to the process of understanding society and one's positioning in it by a constant, however slight, shifting of physical and figurative boundaries. Later on, organizing clandestine parties in private homes, abandoned cinemas or empty factories created the setting – both in terms of atmosphere and clientele – for independent initiatives, awareness, and catalyzed

affinities and behaviors favorable to cultural and political “insubordination”. Venues like ‘Fabrica’, ‘Fire’, ‘B52’, and ‘Control’ – during the 2000s – or ‘Colectiv’ – until the fire of October 2015 – were the new locales where the conversion of urban circles towards an “alternative scene” took place. In an interview with a member of an alternative rock band followed by adherents of this scene, the socially-involved musician emphasizes the special sensitivities of this group: “this active public makes the difference. People who care about the world around them, people who study, people who don’t accept that easily what society gives them”. Cultural consumption within these locales of the alternative scene provided the pool of mobilizable people who are ready to become participants to protests and “newcomers” to civic involvement. Even though the *scene* is both a belief and a lifestyle community (Haunss 2004: 265), affiliation to the Bucharest “alternative scene” seems to depend more on aesthetics than on actual political commitment. Borders of *scenes* are always exclusively determined through “self-identification and mutual recognition” (Haunss–Leach 2009: 259f.) and, in this way, taste becomes an important distinction mechanism. Silver, Clark and Navarro Yanez (2010) described the importance of the aesthetic dimension of belonging to a *scene*: “*What matters are the CDs one listens to [...], the types of foods and restaurants one enjoys [...], the clothes one buys and wears*” (2297). Similarly, the Bucharest scene develops its political potential through the current lifestyle differences between its adherents and mainstream society. Claudiu Craciun sees the changing landscape of the club scene as the result of changing consumption habits within segments of society: “*Quite a few places popped up in Bucharest and other major cities in Romania. Places where you can circulate ideas, where granular, midrange interaction can take place.*”

Given the small proportions of the affiliated communities, strong overlaps of personnel and frames can be observed between Romanian cities. In what concerns the Rosia Montana movement, besides Bucharest, Cluj played a key role in the chain of events due to its geographic proximity to the mining site. In this case, specific locales provided infrastructural support, as one highly involved activist describes it: “*It was a whole different thing. We had a whole network of pubs and clubs helping us. One pub was the space to hold the banners, close to the boulevard where we gathered, we would store them there, another bar held presentations and debates, all bars put banners in front of their doors, others had political theatre evenings, to promote the cause.*”

## 5.2. Self-identity

A large segment of the public associated with this small range of cultural venues assumed itself the responsibility of transferring its cultural capital into political dispositions. This reflects one of the key aspects of *scenes* — that they usually form around specific recognized locations. The identity of a social group is established in such locales where “*one can often become part of a scene simply by being connected to a group or circle of friends that is itself part of that scene*” (Haunss–Leach 2007: 73). *Scenes* also provide the space for the process of structuring grievances, safeguarded by those involved, as underlined by one cultural activist: “*Then you can bring those ideas to the streets, you cannot find them in the supermarket. After a while, society understands there is a need for change, like in the case of Rosia Montana or Colectiv.*” Without a clear subversive character, the socialization of parts of this generation in the scene opened the path for a dynamic of contention that became manifest with the first waves of social mobilization in Bucharest in 2011/12, and has persisted ever since.

Veda Popovici, one prominent visual artist, left-wing activist, and feminist from Bucharest considers the ‘Rosia Montana’ and ‘Colectiv’ movements an integral part of this social group’s emergence, linking the culture of protest to a certain idea of consumption, integrating protests into “a lifestyle of consumption”. In the past five to six years, the evolution of the culture of protests took place at the intersection between artistic, political and civic actions. This group’s identity as “alternative” was, hence, provided by a dominant aspirational component of its discourses and behaviors: *“I am active in this civic field and also in the cultural one, and I think it becomes more and more difficult to separate the two, because networks and groups are overlapping. [...] You could see it in the streets of Bucharest in the last few years, there were tons of protests. So Romanians just took to the streets [...] especially the people that are also culturally and economically active, in their twenties and thirties”*, as argued by Claudiu Craciun, a visible activist and social movement analyst.

The conceptual advantage of the *scene* is that it allows students of social movements and protests to integrate cultural consumption and lifestyle within the framework of collective action (Silver – Clark–Navarro Yanez 2010: 2295). We explain, therefore, the development of this “new” culture of protest in Romania as the emergence of a new generation of post-communist citizens, inhabiting a new social sphere, *consuming* both culture and politics.

The ‘Rosia Montana movement’ of 2013 was a turning point in the aggregation of this group as a self-identified entity. Its characteristics – a high level of education, literacy and political participation within the group; the fact that its members are highly integrated in society and they achieved in-group and inter-group solidarity; their relatively high level of economic comfort –synonymous with their belonging to the “middle class” – are hence at the core of neoliberal society. The self-definition of this group did not occur by its placing itself outside the norms of society, but rather by embracing what they perceive to be its main values and morals.

If, during the ‘Colectiv’ protests, the anti-corruption frame was the most salient, it also was an undercurrent of the ‘Rosia Montana’ campaign, taking the form of claims demanding respect for environmental laws. In the 2017 protests, it became even more visible with its vocal support of anti-corruption efforts and anti-corruption agencies, such as the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), that was able to garner sympathy with a number of high profile arrests among influential politicians and businessmen. The development of this new frame passes through the critical re-interpretation of a culture of conformity, with “corruption – anti-corruption” as the overarching cleavage in recent years (Craciun 2017b). If a tendency towards law and order became the moral compass of the recent waves of protests, it particularly contributed to the mobilization and involvement of those who were not even convinced that political action is the proper approach for dealing with societal issues. At the same time, the adherents stress their autonomy with respect to the general social structure, allowing them to elaborate alternatives to the mainstream agenda, and, as such, to exert social pressure on institutions. The fire in the alternative club ‘Colectiv’ was an external catalyst to the pent-up discontent of broad segments of Romanian society with traditional political actors, but it also had a strong influence on the Romanian alternative scene and its adherents. An important locale of the scene burned down and many of its adherents lost their lives, therefore the ‘Colectiv’ fire left a deep mark on the collective identity and created a demarcation from the mainstream society that represents Romania’s traditional political culture

(partisanship aligned behind traditional political actors, apathetic etc.) and which does not share their patterns of cultural consumption. The feeling of belonging to a critical community became stronger and took a clearer shape during the 'Colectiv' protests. Participants in protests and adherents to the alternative scene reach consciousness of its existence by opposition to negative societal characteristics, consolidating this mobilization frame as the predominant motivation for involvement: *"After Colectiv I got so enraged and I could no longer stay aside. Unfortunately, in Romania, the political power cares only about stealing stuff and the majority society is ignorant about what's happening. So these two negative powers produced this tragedy, where I lost many of my friends and I barely escaped with my life. So I said to myself 'wake up, buddy, you cannot live in your perfect little bubble, with nice people, where everything is ok. No, you live in this society where things are not quite going in the right direction'"*, as the lead singer of an alternative rock band and a 'Colectiv' survivor describes his process of politicization.

The 'Colectiv' fire resulted in a (short-term) heightened mobilization of this group, demanding a more responsive polity, more "appropriate" policies and a more visible representation of its demands in the arena of institutionalized politics. The current situation shows how this social group became critical and autonomous through the gradual construction of a unified vision of "evil" in Romanian society. Similar to Polletta's observations on the absence of vertical ties within *free spaces* (Polletta 1999:10), the socialization of this group in the "alternative scene", and the weakness of intersections with mainstream society and power-holders facilitated the construction of a diagnostic frame directed against political elites.

Piotrowski observes for Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary that *"one of the key issues for subcultures is the preservation of the purity of subcultural groups and their members"* (Piotrowski 2013). The present study suggests a different paradigm for Romania. Even if the 'Colectiv' protests of 2015 were mainly driven by a social group that understood itself as part of a subculture, the affiliation was not made merely with a clearly definable subculture, but rather in contradistinction to what was perceived as mainstream culture. Therefore, these events manifested more a *lifestyle* than a *counter-culture* drive, as seen also in Western Europe and other parts of Eastern Europe.

### 5.3. Festivals

Apart from the locales, festivals also became a key part of the scene. They provided spaces where network connections could be further intensified, in a way similar to Haug's account of *meetings* (Haug 2013). Events that strongly contributed to the expansion of the population willing to take part in protests include festivals such as 'FânFest' and 'Street Delivery', the latter being an event gathering NGOs and independent cultural initiatives on the streets of Bucharest. It was conceived as "a manifesto for reclaiming the streets", as stated by one of its organizers:

*"I might be subjective, organizing this street event over the past 10 years, but I actually think that we created this autonomous zone where ordinary rules don't apply. Where people trust each other, know each other, connect and interact with each other. Public space in its true political meaning. So when people started to protest about that mining project in Rosia Montana, in 2013, they already knew each other from a different social context. I really think we created this social glue that pushed protests forward"*.

'Street Delivery', which takes place in the city center of Bucharest, gained an almost iconic status within the scene. Besides concerts and more consumerist approaches to entertainment, it also featured NGOs, urban lifestyle activities such as bicycle repair stations, and also incorporated workshops on civic involvement. The mere fact that the streets were closed to the traffic, and that music was allowed after ten o'clock created for many adherents of the scene the feeling that the days of the festival were isolated from practices of everyday life. This group's appreciation of street festivals and the festive character of the protests they are spearheading appears to be related to free parties in the rave scene. If such free parties are to be understood as temporary autonomous zones and activities located within these zones are a means of escaping a "restricting and controlling society" (Dowson et al. 2015: 192), the organizers of the festivals in question, even though not as close to free parties as they might believe, understood their activities, for quite some time, in just this way. The long-term effects of festival participation and scene affiliation are, hence, to further underline the differences between this social group and mainstream society, and to consolidate a collective identity and the accumulation of social capital. The strong spillover effects (Meyer–Whittier 1994) between the festivals and the protests are observable in the diversification of approaches. Festival goers contributed more creative approaches to protests and less rigid mobilization frames to the dynamic of the recent cycles of dissent, as a highly involved environmental activist points out. In this way, 'FânFest' – an annual mobilization camp supporting the 'Rosia Montana' campaign that takes place in the mountains close to the actual mining site and offers workshops and roundtables on the subject as well as concerts and various fun activities – was able to attract "newcomers" to environmentalism who were previously not engaged in collective action (Mercea 2014). Their contribution to enhancing the protest experience, also for already-involved activists, by means of a whole range of different artistic activities that ultimately coagulated in the Rosia Montana movement, cannot be overestimated. 'FânFest' strongly contributed to increasing the visibility and the appeal of the campaign for sympathizers. By doing so, it spread further ideas about civic and political involvement and created a gratifying environment for such actions. At the same time, it also contributed to overcoming the isolation of radical activists, as such fulfilling one of the key features of the *scene* of providing a space where activists and adherents can cross paths. Activists and organizers emphasize the "alternative" spirit of the festival, where groups of artists and musicians helped popularize the cause within their active public. The absence of a subversive character is to be noticed, though, as many artists and bands try to distance themselves from a clear political stance, mainly due to the negative associations of the term 'politics', pointing to the pervasive corruption of traditional actors. The members of several alternative rock bands highlight this discursively apolitical stance. As such, even though they participated several times in FânFest, they described it as "social engagement", in order to dissociate their involvement from a potential political association, putting aside the "political" impact on their audience. This positioning is perceived as a lack of awareness on the artists' side by Mihnea Blidariu, one of the organizers of FânFest, a highly involved activist and member of an alternative rock band. He describes the political positioning of many bands featured on FânFest over the years as follows: *"But musicians in Romania are [...] either really naïve, or they do not recognize it. They say 'we are not into politics, we do it for the people, we like Rosia Montana, we like the mountains, we don't want them destroyed, but no politics'. [...] If they are asked to play at FânFest, yes, they'll play, because it's nice there, the mountains and so on, but 'no politics, no politics, sorry'"*.



The entertainment component, combined with a feeling of “making the world a better place”, are essential parts of *recreative activism*. Similar to *alter-activism*, politics often occupies a secondary rank, to the benefit of alternative practices and sociability between activists (Pleyers 2017: 22).

#### 5.4. The festive dimension of protesting

The inclusion of non-activist-network affiliates resulted in the renewal and extension of mobilization frames, and to a “creative” combination of existing demands and the emergence of new ones. For the 2012 protests, Mihailescu (2012) termed this development the “generation of creative revolt”. It also brought about a diversification of repertoires of collective action, often very original and entertaining. Observing offline displays of discontent, we could assert that Romanian protests in recent years appear to conform very well to modern forms of interaction. Many of the slogans and signs resemble Facebook status messages or Tweets, a form of mobilization appropriate to communicate with and within *lifestyle publics*. One sees here a humorous approach to protesting: funny, custom-made posters, video projections on buildings, puppets, innovative use of cell phones very close to performance art, placing more of an emphasis on personal networks than on actual ideology. “*Distractie placuta!*” (“Have a good time”) is frequently exchanged between groups of people passing each other by on their way to and from the protests.

In addition to traditional repertoires, the festive and creative aspects were central to the mobilization process, including waltzing on the streets, public singing, video projections and ‘human flags’. One member of the group of artists using new technology in creative ways during the 2017 protests – projecting protest messages on the buildings surrounding the Romanian government – summarizes the aims and objectives of their involvement: “*We realized that we’re not taking part in a revolution, but it’s a culmination moment of a phenomenon that started some time ago. People took to the streets based on the routes of information that already existed. This is the climax of a critical attitude, that is not about Rosia Montana or OUG 13, but it is about a new way of living, our new way of making things in this society: without theft, without lies, without corruption*”.

#### 5.5. The use of social networks

Enhanced by the use of online social networks, innovative repertoires increase the attractiveness of the cause and offer gratification. Especially for newcomers and already involved participants, this aesthetic approach could generate commitment and contribute to the creation/ maintenance of a collective identity that was only moderately reliant on ideology and political convictions. A second factor contributing to the dynamic of protests in Romania seems to be, hence, the use of modern forms of communication, notably social networking services, such as Facebook and Twitter. This trend has been observed for Romanian protests at least since 2013, when the term “Rosia Montana” became the most salient issue on social networking sites (Branea 2013). Facebook became an efficient vehicle for strengthening the collective identity and the main source of information for protest participants at that time (Mercea 2014). Present in the virtual space and almost absent in the traditional media, “Rosia Montana” activists could distinguish their grassroots approach from the approach of their opponent (RMGC), whose campaign was seen to be the dominant discourse in traditional



media. In 2015, the Facebook page “Coruptia Ucide” appeared during the “Colectiv” protests. The group around “Coruptia Ucide”, led by Florin Badita, a 29-year-old activist and data analyst, contributed to organizing protest events throughout the following two years and played a significant role in the mobilization for the 2017 protests. Hence, even though the discussion on advantages and disadvantages of new communication technologies for social movements has often been quite polarized (Mosca–della Porta 2009) and the benefits of the internet for activism are equally hotly debated (Bakardjieva–Svensson–Skoric 2012), our observations suggest that the use of ICT has played an important role in the spiral of protests and mobilization in Romania since 2011.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We have argued that, in settings of large waves of protests, especially when very diverse claims mobilize large numbers of participants, students of social movements need to consider more closely the cultural dimensions of collective action. Even more attention should be paid to the networks and interactions that persist between such waves. In the present article, we have demonstrated that, in Romania, patterns of cultural consumption fostered a collective identity that mainly evolved around an anti-mainstream frame. The social group we described as “newcomers to political activism” developed a lifestyle less influenced by a predefined political spectrum, by social classes or by family background. For such groups, scenes are perfect settings to generate social belonging (Silver–Clark–Navarro Yanez 2010). They could integrate in a cognitive and identity frame that was not overloaded with ideological or philosophical argumentations, one of the reasons why we qualify this type of civic engagement as *recreative activism*.

Belonging or affiliation to the group is essentially based on individual affinities, cultural or social, rather than on articulate, thought-out political considerations. The festive dimension of action, the modes of cultural consumption associated with the protests as well as their very moderate ideology, allowed for the emergence of this lifestyle oriented mode of political engagement. Besides the stimulating or sometimes even amplifying role of online social networks, street-level socialization and similar patterns of cultural consumption contributed to the development of a feeling of togetherness and to the adherents’ perception that they are different from – or even opposed to – mainstream society, often associated with traditional political actors, specific political parties, and the main population subgroups who traditionally vote for them.

It stands to reason that the scene we have described for Romania and, in particular, for Bucharest, is very much different from Haunss’ cases of the ‘Autonomen’ and the gay movement in Germany as regards ideological settings, repertoires of contention, and commitment frames. The Romanian alternative scene’s contribution to the dynamic of protests is compatible, however, with Haunss’ analytical framework. As scenes provide an environment in which one can engage in interactions focused around specific topics without structuring the totality of a participant’s everyday life (Haunss–Leach 2007: 72f.), the impact of the alternative scene, not only in Bucharest, although especially there, on the politicization of young, formerly politically inactive newcomers to civic engagement is remarkable. This becomes a factor of particular importance since the individual commitment of *recreative activists* is not proportionate to classic activism.

What we have observed regarding the influence of this scene on the current evolution of a Romanian culture of protest seems to be closely related to Victoriano's analysis of hipsters: "*hipsters are often recognized not for their activism, but for the clothes they wear and the lifestyle choices they make. And yet, we should not discount the fact that these ostensibly apolitical acts can still affect the mainstream in unexpected ways*" (Victoriano 2014). Especially for the social group that has been participating and even critically contributing to protests in Romania at least since 2013, a setting less-overcharged with ideology, but concentrated around music and lifestyle has allowed this group's collective identity to grow. At festivals such as 'FânFest', activists and adherents of the scene were able to intersect. Around locales that tried to defy mainstream taste and lifestyle, the feeling of being different from this mainstream also stimulated the collective identity that defied mainstream approaches to political involvement. Opposed to a society often described as politically passive and low on unconventional political participation, protests became attractive for adherents of the scene by lowering thresholds for involvement. Participation in social mobilization depends on the value society attributes to it (Fillieule–Pudal 2010), mainly because "*collective identities require a sort of ratification or affirmation from outside parties*" (Amenta–Young 1999: 35). The scene, together with social networking services, notably Facebook, provides a social environment that gratifies protest participation. Accumulating cognitive and relational social capital by sharing protest experiences online with the peer group and being part of a group that goes to party in the same clubs stimulates commitment and contributes to a collective identity in which protests became part of the lifestyle. Further, the *scene* provides a sanctuary or a retreat in times of low mobilization (Haunss 2004: 265). Activists and protest participants were able to stay connected and to keep alive their vision of how politics in Romania should be in the periods between big mobilization waves (2011/12, 2013, 2015, 2017).

We characterized the social group as less committed than classic activists, less coherent in their worldviews, and less influenced by ideologies. Further, they rely on gratification within their peer group, have a very aesthetic approach to political involvement, and perceive it as both a duty and a hobby. This type of engagement is close to Pleyers' *alter-activism*, but the weakness of political convictions, the moderate importance of ideology, and the market-capitalist leanings of the participants mark the particularities of the type of activism one can observe in Romania and other countries of the region. If Pleyers (2017) observes that *alter-activism* is a means of resisting the neoliberal invasion of people's lives, quite the contrary seems to hold true for recreative activists in Eastern Europe. Even though the Romanian "alternative" scene perceives itself as being opposed to mainstream society, they embrace guiding principles belonging to this very society. As argued, the cultural dynamic is prior to the political, and, based on interactions and collective identities created in the scene, it gives momentum to the cycles of protest.

In Romania *recreative activism* has its roots in the concomitance of cultural consumption and noninstitutionalized political participation, as well as in a certain disenchantment with post-Communist politics. On a micro and mezzo level, it seems that this type of engagement becomes a way to deal with accumulated frustrations with post-communism, a form of "social therapy". It is mostly non-violent, heterogeneous in its demands, very creative in repertoires of dissent, and is reinforced by online networks. Street festivals, mobilization camps, and non-mainstream cultural consumption within the alternative scene in Romania keep a

lifestyle awake that increases its adherents' propensity towards participating in protests as they gain momentum. Thus, social and political activism become a form of "serious leisure" (Lamond–Spracklen 2015b: 255) and protests become social events.

As most political activism is provoked by external events, the case of Romania suggests that *recreative activism* is exclusively triggered by such events: by the Austerity measures of the Boc government in 2011/12, by attempted ratifications of abusive environmental laws, by controversial government orders relating to the abuse of office, or by the failure of the emergency response system in the case of 'Colectiv'. The capacity to mobilize from within the group of participants and adherents of the scene itself appears limited for the time being.

The effectiveness of this kind of activism, especially long-term, is still unclear. More research on recent protests in Romania (and Eastern Europe) is needed and more creative approaches within the discipline of social movement studies should be deployed to understand the particularities of contemporary collective action in the region.

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