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Recent Romanian cycles of mass protest and their activists' motives and demands

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List of abbreviations

AUR	*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, Alliance for the Union of Romanians
CEE	Central Eastern Europe
CeSIP	*Centrul de Studii în Idei Politice, CeSIP* Center for the Study of Political Ideas
CFSN	*Consiliul Frontului Salvării Naționale*, Council of the National Salvation Front
CSO	civil society organization
DSU	*Departamentul pentru Situații de Urgență*, Department for Urgent Situations
EU	European Union
FDSC	*Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile*, Foundation for the Development of Civil Society
FDSN	*Frontul Democratic al Salvării Naționale*, Democratic Front of National Salvation
FSN	*Frontul Salvării Naționale*, National Salvation Front
ISPRI	*Institutul de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale Ion Brațianu*, Ion Brațianu Institute for Political Science and International Relations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
OAP	o altă poveste, a different story/ another story
OUG	*Ordonanță de Urgență*, urgent governmental order
PCR	Partidul Comunist Român, Romanian Communist Party
PD	*Partidul Democrat*, Democrat Party
PD-L	*Partidul Democrat Liberal*, Democrat Liberal Party
PLUS	*Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate*, Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party
PNL	*Partidul Național Liberal*, National Liberal Party
PSD	*Partidul Social Democrat*, Social Democrat Party
RMGC	Roșia Montană Gold Mining Corporation
SAR	*Societatea Academică din România*, Romanian Academic Society
SENS	*Sănătate Educație Natură Sustenabilitate*, Party for Health, Education, Nature, and Sustainability
SMO	social movement organization
SMURD	*Serviciul Mobil de Urgență, Reanimare și Descarcerare*, Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication
SNSPA	*Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative*, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
TFL	*tineri frumoși liberi*, young, beautiful, and free
TNB	*Teatrul Național București*, Bucharest Național Theatre
UDMR	*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*, Party of Hungarians in Romania
USA	United States of America
USR	Uniunea Salvați România, Save Romania Union

Introduction

1. A CIVIC AWAKENING

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In autumn 2013, I coincidentally witnessed one of the first large cycles of self-organized protest in Romania since the early 90s. I was visiting some friends of mine, acquainted through my student exchange year in Bucharest, in 2007/08. Back then, I remember, whenever I had asked anybody about politics, about their opinion, I wouldn't get any answer. "Let's talk about something else," "let's not ruin the day with this shit," or even "especially as a girl, you should keep out of politics, read your books at home, but in public, better shut your mouth" were the replies I got. So in autumn 2013, passing by the National Theater, close to Bucharest's history-laden University Square, I was more than surprised when a lady, maybe in her 50s, agitatedly approached me. She stepped out of a group of around 20 people, mostly her age, standing on the square in front of the theater, waving large Romanian flags, some of them with a cut-out circle in the middle. Handing me several densely printed flyers, she asked me whether I wasn't also enraged. I looked on the flyers, but the letters were so small I couldn't directly grasp the topic, and meanwhile the lady was talking to me fastly, using lots of curse and slang words – something about politicians and how they had wronged "us all" – and I didn't know what was happening and how to react.

Something must have changed, that was what I understood, and I came back several times during my visit, to find that each and every day demonstrations were being held at University Square. The people in front of the theater seemed to be there always, day- and nighttime, I always saw the waving flags when I passed by. On the opposite part of the square, close to Bucharest University's history department, around a fountain, on some days younger people gathered, shaking plastic bottles filled with coins or small stones to make noise. One evening, there also was a demonstration close to the statues of famous historical Romanians, with someone holding a speech in front of an assembly. Again the bottles, again the flags, some beggars standing behind, with a little distance to the rest of the public, listening interestedly.

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In recent years, Romania has seen several large cycles of mass public protests. Series of mass demonstrations – lasting several days or weeks each – shook the larger Romanian cities in winter 2012, autumn 2013, autumn 2015, peaked with an astonishing estimated 500.000 participants in winter 2017 (the largest protests at least since the revolution!), and went on with smaller, but still notable, mobilizations in summer 2018 and 2019.[1] Scholars who have researched the phenomenon speak of a "civic awakening," and a parallel reconfiguration of civil society.

1 A chronicle of the protests unfolding until 2017 can be found here: https://www.documentaria.ro/content/album. Osteuropa: 6-8/2019, p.105ff. gives an overview over important politics events from 1989-2019, with a focus on institutional politics though. An overview over "the" protests, in activist language use, was elaborated in the second research paper of this dissertation, see Paper 2, especially Figure 2.

The protests can be periodicized around peaks in timely density and participation. The first larger outbreaks of street protest in January 2012 are often seen as opposing the harsh austerity measures taken by the presidency of Traian Băsescu (and the privatization of emergency healthcare in particular), while in reality they featured high thematic and demographic diversity. From autumn 2012 on – peaking in 2013 – tens of thousands of protesters repeatedly marched through the country's larger cities, demanding the preservation of Roșia Montană, a montane region with large gold deposits in the northwest of Romania. In 2014, protests broke out in the centers of Romanian diaspora all over the world, decrying the deficient organization of presidential elections in Romanian embassies and consulates, depriving many non-resident Romanians of their right to vote. On 30 October 2015, a fire broke out during a concert in Bucharest's night club *Colectiv*, killing 64 young people and injuring over 160. Hours after the incident, thousands of people took the streets, mourning the victims and condemning corruption (with regard to the lack of fire protection measures and questionable control practices) and the dysfunctional medical emergency system. From 18 January 2017 on,[2] protests broke out against the planned decree OUG13, 2017,[3] which was meant to exempt from punishment, among other crimes, acts of abuse of office and corruption up to a damage sum of 44,000 €. On 10 August 2018, a diaspora protest in Bucharest escalated violently. The police use of tear gas against demonstrators was followed by a series of demonstrations condemning police violence and politicians' disrespect of citizens more generally. Before the European parliamentary elections in May 2019 – and a simultaneously held referendum on constitution modification – protests around voting rights, the justice system, and Romania's position in the European Union (EU), accompanied by large voting mobilization campaigns, were organized. Protests came to a halt with the Covid19-pandemic, with only a few restrictions- and vaccination-related protests occurring in the following years. Recently, the readiness of Romanians to protest seems to be again on the rise – be it in teachers' strikes, Pride parades, farmers' convoys, or other occasions.

The mobilizations of the 2010s brought about some remarkable policy and polity changes. At least two governments resigned because of them, the Roșia Montană site is now a Unesco World Heritage site, the Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication (*Serviciul Mobil de Urgență, Reanimare și Descarcerare*, SMURD) is operating until today, and the practice of bypassing parliament by governmental decrees has been severely challenged.[4] Romania has seen an aston-

2 On 6th of January, president Klaus Iohannis publicly declared that some "political games" would be played considering the planned amnesty for minor criminal offenses, see *https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1228045160616066&extid=NS-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&ref=sharing* (07.10.24).

3 Ordonanță de Urgență nr. 13 (urgent governmental order nr. 13, as of 31 January 2017)

4 The above mentioned referendum of 2019 was projected by president Klaus Iohannis to limit the possibility of governmental decree in the judiciary and law enforcement sector, following from the OUG 13 case, see https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/decret-semnat-de-presedintele-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis-pentru-organizarea-unui-referendum-national (07.10.2024). The referendum passed, with a voter turnout of 41,28%,

ishing number of 15 governments in the 12 years since the first protest outbreaks, and the country's party spectrum has been broadened by formations founded throughout the protests.[5]

At the same time, arguably in reaction to the mass protests, protest restrictions have increased, security forces' authority has broadened, and a monolithic grand coalition government was built in 2021.[6] Furthermore, contentious networks within and beyond the borders of the country have broadened and deepened, new organizations have been founded, and many people got involved, learned about and discussed politics, formed an opinion, formed alliances, or brought about new discourses, infrastructure, and media.[7]

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In February 2017, when Bucharest and Romania faced the largest street protests in their history, I was spending most of my time in Trier's university library, writing up my master's thesis in political theory. It was about the role of modernization theory, in so-called post-socialist transformation studies, comparing its two big paradigms – "catch-up modernization" and the "problems of simultaneity," both following a largely overlapping set of, in my view questionable, theoretical assumptions. And both dismissing largely the political, agentic role of civil societies in post-socialist transformation processes.[8]

And this was when the cut-out flags on Victoria Square, and the huge gathering of people around them entered international news coverage.

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For a long time after 1989, Romania was considered a showcase example of post-socialist political apathy (Tătar, 2022), and was even referred to as "the country without protest" (Cirtita-Buzoianu &

over 80% of which confirmed its demands https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/referendum-pe-justitie-rezultate-provizorii-vot-covarsitor-pentru-da-la-ambele-intrebari-1138419 (07.10.2024). However, the respective constitutional changes have not been implemented until to date.

5 For example, the liberal USR (*Uniunea Salvați România*, Save Romania Union) won some local administrations and entered the Romanian parliament in the same year it was founded, in 2016. Along with Dacian Cioloș's PLUS (*Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate*, Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party) group, it ran for the European and national elections in 2020, formed a government coalition with PNL (*Partidul Național Liberal*, National Liberal Party) from 2020 to autumn 2021, and has been represented in the European parliament ever since. USR's current candidate for presidency, Elena Lasconi, averages around 15% in opinion polls. (while poll data is varying widely among polling organizations, see a compilation here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2024_Romanian_presidential_election (17.09. 2024)). The far- right populist party AUR (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, Alliance for the Union of Romanians), founded in 2019, entered a few local administrations and the national parliament in 2020, attracting especially high percentages of votes among members of the Romanian diaspora. In 2024, it entered the European parliament, and its presidential candidate and party leader George Simion averages around 15% in polls (ibid.). Other new party formations include the left-wing party platform Demos, which ran for the European parliament and several local elections in 2019, and the green platform SENS (*Partidul Sănătate Educație Natură Sustenabilitate*, Health, Education, Nature, and Sustainability), which succeeded in getting its independent candidate Nicolae Ștefănuță into the European Parliament in 2024.

6 President Klaus Iohannis decided against holding new elections in autumn 2021, and instead accepted the formation of a grand coalition between the once opposed PSD and PNL (together with the representatives of ethnic minorities and the Party of Hungarians in Romania, *Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*, UDMR).

7 Volintiru points to the fact that it was especially the younger civil society organizations, i.e. those founded after 2011, which could consolidate their financial status most efficiently during recent years (Volintiru, 2021).

8 My master's thesis, titled *Two Sides of the Same Coin? The Catch-Up Modernization Paradigm and the "Simultaneity Problem" in Transformation Studies*, can be accessed here (in German language): 10.13140/RG.2.2.13720.93443 (09.10.2024).

Daba-Buzoianu, 2013, p. 234; Nistor, 2016). After the 1989 revolution, and after a "romantic period" of citizens' involvement in politics directly following it (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017, p. 802), high hopes for a more participative political system had been harshly broken down to a broad disillusionment of many politically active people after the violent mineriads,[9] and a perceived political cynicism and broad personal continuity (Stoica, 2012) on part of the new political elite under president Ion Iliescu.[10]

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, protest mobilizations were only organized by institutionalized actors – i.e., social movement organizations, (SMOs) – such as unions or student organizations, community clubs, small radical collectives, football fan groups, etc. However, these were never able to gain traction for more self-sustained mobilizations, beyond the particular cause at question and beyond the members of the organizing bodies (Volintiru & Buzaşu, 2020).

Indeed, even the protests of 2012 were not especially large in relation to public protests in Romania before.[11] However, in early 2012 something fundamentally changed in Romania's (contentious) political public. The 2012 protests were the first long-term protests that developed without institutionalized mobilization, organization, and communication. This would become standard for the subsequent protests too. But how can one explain this shift in a "country without protest"?

An initial line of inquiry pursued by many scholars consisted in investigating the preconditions for the rupture: the historical and political context factors providing the grounds for political discontent within the Romanian population, the opportunities for public attention and policy impact, and the means for effective organization and communication.

Around 2010, the lingering frustrations of the 1990s and early 2000s only multiplied with the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath – social hardships, austerity, and an emerging global protest movement for economic justice (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019a; Tătar, 2022). Public dissatisfaction was high.[12] President Traian Băsescu, who had earlier been criticized for his authoritarian governing

9 The term mineriads sums up a course of events from 1990 on, in which mine workers of Jiu Valley came to Bucharest to violently suppress protests against the newly formed government of Iliescu's FSN (*Frontul Salvării Naționale*, National Salvation Front). The mine workers, having been the first to protest against Ceauşescu already in 1977, with their own brutal repression as a result, believed they were called to fight terrorist activities countering the successful revolution (Dâncu, 2015; Nistor, 2016). Ion Iliescu currently stands trial for crimes against humanity in this regard.

10 The period between 1989 and 1992 is sometimes summed up under the term "theft revolution," see (Gabanyi, 1998).

11 This is shown plastically in the protest chronicle in Documentaria: "Protest. Scurtă Istorie Vizuală a Mişcărilor de Stradă din România ultimilor 10 Ani," see https://www.documentaria.ro/content/album (see also above).

12 In 2011, 79 percent of respondents in a nationwide representative survey stated they believed Romania developed in a wrong direction, and 40 percent of respondents viewed the country's economic situation worse than before 1989. At the same, time, a majority of respondents showed optimism towards possible changes in the future, and put hopes in the new generation (IRES, 2011) . On the historical frustration after the 1989 "revolution" and the mineriads, see (Dâncu, 2015; Gabanyi, 1998; Stoica, 2012). On Romania's perceivedly stagnant position in the European periphery (or global semi-periphery), see (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023; Nicolescu, 2023).

style, adopted one of the harshest austerity programs in the European Union, eventually sparking a conflict over an existential issue prevalent in people's everyday lives – accessible medical emergency care. His contrahent in the dispute, moreover, was one of the most popular political figures of that time, the founder of SMURD, Raed Arafat (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017; Tătar, 2022, p. 183ff.). Romania's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and to the EU in 2007 had altered its position on the transnational level, increasing pressure for national governmental, financial, and legal compliance, and opening paths for mass emigration and intensified international trade and political networking. Especially EU accession also led to a shift of foreign civil society financiation, from US-American to EU donor organizations (Volintiru, 2021). These intensified connections also seem to have had an effect on international collaboration in contentious politics, with, for example, west European embassies sustaining the first Pride-marches in Bucharest from 2007 on,[13] or the combining of efforts of Europe-wide activist groups to mobilize against the NATO-summit in Bucharest, 2008.[14] Simultaneously, Romania went through the first generational change after the revolution, altering public expectations towards the political institutions, while at the same time cementing the status of a simultaneously rich and well-networked post-revolutionary elite (Stoica, 2012). Moreover, out of a constitutionally advantaged institutional constellation (see Dimova, 2019) – namely the conflicting, ambivalent power distribution between Băsescu's presidency and the government led by Victor Ponta, intensified against the background of upcoming elections – different political parties had high interest in gaining public attention for their position in the conflict. Consequently, the first small self-organized protests against the demission of Arafat and the austerity measures were bolstered by a high and direct mediatization (Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013).

The means for managing the mobilization came about with the global platformization, i.e., the mediation of protest organization and communication through widely accessible, non-hierarchic digital "social media" platforms (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 139; see also Bebawi & Bossio, 2014). Formal civil society organizations (CSOs) were not anymore necessary for mediating protest mobilization and organization. In Romania, this prescribed a greater interconnectedness of protest movements all over the world (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019), as well as new practices and organization modes (Mercea, 2014, 2016), transcending the border between digital and physical spaces (see Mosca, 2014). Thus, there had been a momentum at place for public contention to gain visibility and mobilize intensely, spilling over to a disruptive political moment.

13 See https://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2007/06/070608_gay_fest_parteneriat_civil.shtml (09.10.2024)

14 See http://web.archive.org/web/20080404043629/https://www.mediafax.ro/social/militanti-anti-nato-ridicati-de-mascati-din-zona-timpuri-noi.html?1688;2509126, https://www.webphoto.ro/events/anti-nato-protests-in-bucharest.html (both accessed on 09.10.2024)

This overall situation provided an extraordinarily fertile ground for contentious mobilization in Romania. The more I read and thought about my issue, however, a further question arose: What does that shift mean? Or, more fully, which kinds of processes were unfolding behind the notable changes in Romanian (contentious) political culture?

I now turn to introduce the state of the current research on the subject, to subsequently spell out this question more explicitly and propose the kind of answer this dissertation seeks in Section 3.

2. Literature review: The recent repeating waves of mass protest in Romania

At a scholarly level, the mass protests in Romania, and the connected changes in the country's civil society landscape, did not attract much attention, especially from international researchers. Many scholars who did research on the case and who are cited in the following, have a personal connection in Romania, and many of them were even implicated in or participated in the protests directly. Romanian academic journals did not pay much attention to the issue.[15]

There is a large corpus of grey literature on the issue – media articles written and interviews given by Romanian academics to public media outlets and professional journals, on actuality during the course of events.[16] Also among the grey documentation, some academics, journalists, and/or activists released more or less professionally produced documentary films about the protests.[17] Moreover, I found the numerous activist documents, reports, and commentary publications on the protests a fascinating source of information. Beyond the vast field of social network sites and groups, video playlists with daily video documentary, and personal blogs, there are also some more

15 For example, the "Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review," published by Bucharest University Press, until to date hasn't published a single article about the protests, happening literally in front of their door, the same goes for the "Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale," published by Romanian Academy ISPRI institute. The "Romanian Journal of Society and Politics," based at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration Bucharest (*Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative*, SNSPA; which is said to be an incubator especially for activist academics) didn't release any issues between 2012 and 2017.

16 Some pertinent publications are, for example, the political journals "Revista 22," "Dilema Veche," or "Critic Atac," or the online platform of the Romanian Academic Society (SAR) thinktank, "România Curată." The "Green European Journal" repeatedly consulted Romanian academics on the ecology protests connected to the Roșia Montană case.

17 See for example: "Ich bin DUBIST - Amintiri din dubă" (I am „dubist" (someone arrested in a police van during protests) – memories from the police van, by Vlad Ioachimescu (2012); accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsoR0I5nMpI; the daily documentary series "Proteste Rosia Montana 2013" by Sergiu Brega, see https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgEeL9uWT1AXBjFcX_dqc-FfBwysR5xok; the cinema documentary about the Colectiv incident and the political path of minister of health, Vlad Voiculescu, "Colectiv. Ne privește pe toți" (Colectiv. It concerns all of us), by Alexander Nanau (2019); or the cinema documentary "Portavoce" (megaphone) on the developments of Romanian protest culture, by Ruxandra Gubernat, Henry Rammelt, and Marcel Schreiter, accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eV01j2XpyYM (all accessed on 27 August 2024).

coordinated efforts: For the “Protest”[18] and “#Rezist”[19] albums, journalists, participants and observers combined efforts to obtain support by press agencies, publishers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for publishing some material both digitally and physically. The project “lozinci.ro”[20] collects slogans used at particular protest dates. Some involved people also published their personal memories about the protests as books.[21]

Having a look upon the academic literature, what is common to those studies providing originary data collections, as well as the anthologies delivering multiple perspectives on their issue, is that they focus on *one* of the waves of protest at a time.[22] Overall, the studies are based on a broad range of methods, however most focus on standard quantifiable approaches.

Especially with regard to the 2012 protests, but true with other waves of protest, some authors seek the context factors of the outbreaks, i.e. the aspects of abovementioned *momentum* that made the protests possible (Dimova, 2019; Margarit, 2016a, 2016b; Stoica, 2012; Stoica & Mihăilescu, 2012; Țăranu, 2012; Tătar, 2015, 2022).

Some authors investigate the unfolding of contention with regard to external actors and institutions: Branea (2013), for example, investigates the strategy of the Roșia Montană Gold Mining Corporation (RMGC) in connection with the protests. Crișan (2018) studies activist communication strategies from the 2017 protests in relation to the sector of professional political PR.

In the rather rare works that deal with the multiple waves of protest between 2012 and 2017 in ensemble, (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2017; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017; Volintiru & Buzaşu, 2020) most authors assess how the protests affected Romanian (contentious)

18 Documentaria: “Protest. Scurtă Istorie Vizuală a Mișcărilor de Stradă din România ultimilor 10 Ani” (Protest. A brief visual history of the Romanian protests from the last 10 years), which can be virtually leafed through here: https://www.documentaria.ro/content/album

19 “#Rezist. Proteste Împotriva OUG 13/2017,” (#Resist. Protests against the urgent governmental order nr.13/2017), accessible online here: https://archive.org/details/coll-rezist-proteste-impotriva-oug-13-2017.-curtea-veche-2017-compressed/page/n5/mode/2up

20 https://www.lozinci.ro/

21 For example, journalists Grigore Cartianu and Laurențiu Ciocăzanu compiled eyewitness reports, interviews, and opinions related to the protests in three volumes, covering the diaspora protests related to 2014 presidential elections, the 2017 anti-corruption protests, and the diaspora gathering in Bucharest escalating violently on 10 August 2018. See Cartianu, G. & Ciocăzanu, L. (2015), “Miracolul din Noiembrie. Uimitoarea poveste a zilei în care Diaspora și Facebook au obținut o victorie eroică” (The november miracle. The fascinating story of the day on which diaspora and Facebook obtained a heroic victory) Adevărul Holding; Cartianu, G. & Ciocăzanu, L. (2017): “600.000”. Self-published; Cartianu, G. & Ciocăzanu, L. (2019): “10 August.” Self-published. Adi Dohotaru gives an anthropologically informed, hence subjective, report of his protest activities in his 2012 book, Dohotaru, A. (2012), “Protestatarul: O istorie participativă” (The protester. A participative history), Tracus Arte. Mihai Goțiu presents an extensive activist research on the contexts and background of the Roșia Montană gold mining protests in Goțiu, Mihai (2013), “Afacerea Roșia Montană.” (The Roșia Montană enterprise), Tact. Cristian Cațan discloses his year-long personal journal as an implicated football ultra, see Cațan, C. (n.d.), “Jurnal de ultras” (Ultra’s journal), Self-published.

22 For example, the anthology edited by Adi & Lilleker (Adi & Lilleker, 2017) includes journalistic, academic, and activist perspectives upon the outbreak, as well as the communication dynamics and outlooks of the 2017 anti-corruption protests. The anthology edited by (Stoica & Mihăilescu, 2012) gives mostly sociological perspectives, many written by eyewitnesses, of the 2012 protest outbreaks in different cities of Romania.

political culture. Numbers from quantitative studies point towards a diversification of civic engagement at large in Romania: while participation in institutionalized NGOs did rise especially before the protest outbreaks (FDSC, 2024), a new cohort of organizations[23] was founded during the protests, and has taken on central roles in contentious mobilization, public communication, advocacy, and even within the institutional party landscape. Simultaneously, participation in informal activism and self-organized mutual help networks rose and has been rising ever since (Volintiru, 2021). Arguing along similar lines, Gubernat and Rammelt (2020) emphasize the role of liminality – a condition constituted especially through the spontaneous, short-term combination of diverse people, which provides space for experimentation and for the building of new activist "scene" cores, especially in urban centers of the country (see also Sava, 2016).

Furthermore, the platformization of protest communication/organization seems to have played a decisive role in shifting the functioning of Romania's contentious landscape (Mercea, 2016; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017), also indicating a connection to globally observed phenomena of that blur the edges between digital and analogous spaces, local and global claims and communities, flipping around the well-worn dynamics of protest mobilization, documentation and reporting (Mercea, 2016, 2018, 2022), and bolstering the emergence of global movements and activist networks (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Nicolescu, 2012).

Apart from that, some authors indicate a more processual, and interpenetrating, connection between the outbreaks of the protests and the development of the Romanian civil society landscape. Abăseacă and Pleyers (2019) focus upon the shifts in activist group formations, classifying four "activist cultures"[24] in their state before, after, and throughout the protest mobilizations; Gubernat and Rammelt (2017), focus on the emergence of an "activism as lifestyle" phenomenon differentiating the post-2012 protests and civil society activity from earlier modes of protest mobilization and participation (see also Margarit & Rammelt, 2020). Volintiru and Buzașu (2020) investigate the organizational and thematic shifts before and after the 2012 protests, using statistical data. Olteanu and Beyerle (2017) find a more general shift in Romanians' conception of citizenship, which they label as a "collective cognitive liberation." They are not the only ones identifying this fundamental break in the country's political culture, labeling it also a "civic awakening" (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013), or a "breaking of peace" (Stoiciu, 2021).

While many of the studies take a rather neutral or supportive stance towards the protests, there are also more critical analyses, focusing, for example, on the streamlining of protest issues and de-

23 Which I will refer to, in this work, as *originary civil society*, see below.

24 They classify progressive alter-activists, the democratic right, expert activists, and nationalists; see (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019, p. 160).

mands (Stoiciu, 2021), or the exclusion and discrimination against certain societal groups from the protests (e.g. Dumitrica, 2021). Deoancă (2017) analyzes observations from 2017 protests using a decolonial perspective, criticizing the programmatic "whiteness" of the big anti-corruption protests.

In terms of methodological approaches, one can find research largely based on statistical and survey data, as well as a couple of media analyses. Aggregated reports also cover Romanian civil society but more generally, only mentioning the protests (FDSC, 2017, 2024; Gog et al., 2021; Nimu et al., 2016; Tătar, 2022)[25] or frame the Romanian case comparatively (Volintiru, 2021).

While the diversity of issues, participants, places etc. is well documented in the grey literature (see above), there is only scarce scientifical data on the demographical composition of the protests at hand. Burean, for example, investigates student protest participation and youth attitudes (Burean, 2019), and the "newness" of protests since 2012 with a focus upon participation factors (Burean & Badescu, 2014). The Center for the Study of Political Ideas (*Centrul de Studii în Idei Politice*, CeSIP) (2018) conducted two on-site surveys investigating the demographics of Bucharest anti-corruption protest participants in early 2017.

Multiple studies have investigated the array of public protest *representations*, in media outlets and in public spaces (Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013; Grădinaru et al., 2016; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2012, 2021; Rammelt, 2022; Teodorescu & Chiribuca, 2018). At the same time, only a few on-site ethnographic or anthropological works give insights in a more situated, and oftentimes activist-science manner, on very particular activist settings.[26] What is still underinvestigated – especially with regard to the abovementioned alterations of protest communication brought about by platformized, and digital media – is how public, mediated representations of protest and the lived experience of involved activists relate to one another.

Summarizingly, the existing case-related literature gives information about the momentum of protest outbreaks, its public representations, and some of its effects (while of course the more long-term effects of it remain to be studied as they are unfolding in the future). What is less represented in the literature are outside perspectives, i.e., studies done by researchers who are not themselves

25 Tătar, (Tătar, 2022), looks at the development of (mainly official) civic participation in Romania using European comparative statistics and survey data up until 2005, also providing an analysis of the political "momentum" for protest outbreaks in 2012.

26 For example, the volume "Pata" (Dohotaru et al., 2016) or the community science project "Jurnal din Vulturilor 50" (Vișan & FCDL, 2019) give voice to housing rights activism and related protests largely by Romani activists fighting eviction and replacement in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest. Guțu (2012) gives an auto-ethnographic account of the football-ultra scene and their (potentially) insurrectional practices. Some academics published transcripts of their interlocutor's statements originally. For example, Stanici (2017) provides a set of interviews with network node activists in 2012 protests; and Momoc et al. (2019) compile on-site interviews with elderly participants, done by students, at pro- and anti-governmental protests in Bucharest 2017. I want to mention that, while Stanici gives an introduction of the overall project, providing information on his methods, case selection, and further publications, Momoc et.al. unfortunately leave the interviews, the interviewers, and the context of the study fully up to the readers' interpretation.

implicated directly in the events unfolding. Moreover, there is a still rather small body of literature systematically generating genuine data, especially with regard to qualitative, on-site accounts, and particularly with the scope of viewing the subsequent cycles of protest, and the interconnected changes in Romanian contentious politics in ensemble. Especially the latter aspect deserves, in my opinion, more scholarly attention, as the disruption taking place seemingly doesn't follow the mechanisms established by former social movement studies research. The empirical data at hand needs to be set in perspective towards the severely changed landscape of protest organization/communication.

The dissertation draws on multiple fields of academic literature. Foremost, and perhaps most obviously, it is positioned within the fields of East European studies and social movement studies. It thus takes up on their interdisciplinary, subject-oriented methodological approaches. My literature review in this regard draws upon works investigating protests, civil societies, and social movements —or, more generally, contentious politics—especially in recent post-socialist spaces. Moreover, connected to the methodological and theoretical scopes of the project (more below), theories of political difference are reviewed. And last but not least, I look at some scholarship in interpretive methodology, political ethnography, and post-structuralist and ontological conceptualization for working out the particular methods for this project, my research interests, and the resources at hand for carrying it out. In the previous section, I concentrated on the case-related literature, dealing with recent mass protest and civil society reconfiguration in Romania. I will come back to the other mentioned fields of literature in the subsequent sections, elaborating the theoretical and methodological framework of this dissertation.

3. Research questions and scope

This dissertation aims to contribute to academic knowledge by offering answers to two leading questions. First, stemming from the case-related interest formulated above:

How do activists in Romania's current reconfiguration of civil society make sense of their own political environment?

That includes to find out about how Romanian activists explain their political discontent, where their motivation for political action stems from and what their own political demands and future visions are.

This investigation, however, necessitates some genuine methodological work. Interpretivist methodologies and ethnographic methods, directed at studying the live-worlds and original mean-

ing-makings of interlocutors, are only rarely employed for politically focused research. Thus, the second question I tackle with this study is:

How to study contentious politics dynamics with a sensibility toward situatedness, meaning-making, and political difference?

The analytical framework of this work is principally concerned with social science research under post-modern conditions. As Bauman argues, the post-modern condition is constituted in a simultaneity of old, "solid", modern logics – i.e., those that are clear-cut and binary, based on identity differentiation, hierarchical organization, and deterministic, unidirectional ideas of social development – and the process-oriented, diverse, multi-directional and fluid logics of "liquid" modernity (Bauman, 2000; Lee, 2005). A leading assumption of this research is that, under conditions of increasing complexity, the scope of social science research shifts from a (modernist) quest for reducing complexity – for finding representative, generalizable causal relations (or mechanisms), and making prognoses – toward finding trustworthy ways of navigating it, and finding reality-grounded patterns and concepts, for describing and understanding reality in its complexity. To study processes and dynamics of change though requires shifting the focus from comparing states of "before" and "after" (implying a rather straight line between the two to explain the process) toward focusing on the present, dynamic progression of a field.

This philosophical, or epistemological, shift is clearly rooted in a eurocentric construction of what is supposed to be modern (Degele & Dries, 2005). The Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida, in an essayistic dialogue with western modernist logics, formulates an epistemology starting with investigation beginning with tension and contradiction of space and time:

> „The world of reality is a world where things are acting on things. The form and figure of reality are to be thought as a mutual relationship of things, as a result of acting and counteracting. But this mutual acting of things means that things deny themselves, and the thing-character is lost. […] But when things are thought as parts of one whole, it means that the concept of acting things is lost, that the world becomes static […]. That is why I call the world of reality ‚absolute contradictory self-identity'" (Nishida, 1958, p. 83)

> „Creation is not […] a directed process which could not return to the past, even for the length of a moment; creation is essentially a genesis of things out of the contradictory confrontation of infinite past and infinite future." (Nishida, 1958, p. 91)

Investigating processes, following Nishida, consists in making sense of the present progression of creation, forming an always renewing momentary identity of the principally contradictory elements of spacial and timely reality.[27]

27 I argue that only the inevitable confrontation of the constructions of western modernity with different realities and ways of knowing the world because of ongoing globalization makes the post-modern „turns" of western social science necessary – or at least normatively called for – an act of confronting oneself also with the brutal realities of (epistemological) colonialism (Kluczewska, 2018; Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007).

The focus of this work thus lies in investigating an open-ended, self-referential, and agentic transformation of a contentious polity, under conditions of post-socialism and platformization (see below). It acknowledges the people directly implicated in those processes as the guiding instance for that investigation, and strives to conceptualize their meaning-makings and constitutional causalities theoretically, that is, to make at least a part of these ongoing processes intelligible and describable. Consequently, I use an interpretivist, ontologically-turned, methodology and research design, and (political) ethnographic methods (these are going to be elaborated below).

While the dissertation is positioned in the field of social movement studies, many of its terms and methodological conventions do not easily fit my case of interest. While social movement studies promotes methods diversity (della Porta, 2014c), the rapid changes in organizational and communicative structures of post-modern contentious politics, together with the trajectories of a traditionally very limited field of investigation, have seemed to overwhelm its methodological conventions. This becomes apparent when reviewing the dispersed and dynamic debate around investigating the "new" instances of social movements, civil society, and protest (Edwards, 2014, p. 7; Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023).[28] This dissertation strives to contribute to the debate, and to find ways through those troubled waters.

4. Key terms: Talking about political discontent

When I first started working on the present project, I would have called the phenomenon of repeating mass protests in Romania a "movement". Actually, the phenomenon fits a very broad definition of *social movement*, as proposed, for example, by (Edwards, 2014). She defines social movements as "collective, organized efforts at social change," existing "over a period of time," with its members sharing a "collective identity" directed against a "powerful opponent," and employing public protest to demonstrate their demands (Edwards, 2014, p. 4f.). Despite some differences in the identity aspect (which Edwards addresses herself, see 2014, p. 245f.), I would say, the case at hand fulfills these criteria.

However, a large part of the literature I found uses a more narrow definition of the term, provided by Tilly and Tarrow (and McAdam), in their influential work, calling social movements a "historical – and not a universal – category" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 8, see also McAdam et al., 2001). From the historical cases they classify as social movements, they derive four definitional criteria for social movements: 1) "sustained campaigns of claim making," 2) a rather fixed "array of

28 Ironically, it seems there is still some terminological confusion around the issue of "new social movements," as this was already how the students' protest upheavals in western countries, of the 960s and 70s, were labeled at that time (Accornero & Filleule, 2016).

public performances," 3) "repeated public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment" – by which they mean especially shared symbols, clothing, and slogans etc., and 4) "social movement bases" – i.e., "the organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities." (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 8). Tilly and Tarrow deliberately state that this definition mirrors a western tradition, which "is still rare or nonexistent through much of the contemporary world" (ibid.). However, many authors studying Eastern European cases of protest and contention cite their conceptual work (Císař, 2013; Erpyleva, 2023; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021; Mercea, 2016) critically (Baća, 2022), which is could also be because their definitions are so widely used across the field of research in general.[29] In my analysis of the Romanian case, I came to think that it indeed included features of social movements fitting Tilly's, Tarrow's, and McAdam's description – for example, the ecology movement, or green movement, with its organizational base and sustained campaigns, played an important role in mobilization and brokerage especially through the 2013 wave of protests, while an anti-corruption movement base has seemed to be evolving ever since the protest outbreaks, and intensely so since the Colectiv incident in 2015.

However, the larger phenomenon studied, the repeated cycles of mass protest do not feature any unified base, nor a sustained campaign, nor single claim for that matter. Moreover, the disruption they posed is closely intertwined with civil society activities that do not necessarily feature public protest (see above). Consequently, I came to refer to "social movements" as those parts of the phenomenon that fit the more narrow definition – also signaling their international or even global interconnectedness across their bases and claims. The larger phenomenon was analyzed in a political difference perspective, seeing it as a disruptive change in the field of political culture, and, more concretely, as a form of *contentious politics*.[30]

I discuss this term in more detail in Paper 3, especially in relation to Tilly's and Tarrow's conceptualization of that term. While I find useful their historical conceptualization of social movements, as a specific, observable form of enacting contentious politics, I do not buy into that kind of approach for the larger conceptual field. This is, first, because Tilly and Tarrow follow an etatistic definition of politics, rendering politics the activities of the state, or even the government alone (see Vollrath, 1989). This is not only a contradiction in terms – defining a kind of outer-institutional pol-

29 For example, social movements are introduced by that definition in (Accornero & Filleule, 2016) and also in (Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023).

30 Mercea similarly argues that the larger disruptions he investigates (global post-financial crises protests) can't be conceptualized as social movements, especially because of the platformized, leaderless organization/communication style they feature (and, thus, the lack of social movement bases). He therefore also proposes to analyze these in the wider context of contentious politics, as defined by Tilly and Tarrow, however (Mercea, 2016, p. 3). As I elaborate a bit more in detail in paper 3, I think investigating and conceptualizing this larger context of societal change, one needs to liberate the definition of its historical trajectory and try to find conceptual, qualitative definitory criteria.

itics in terms of an only governmentally defined politics – it also dismisses the political processes taking place *within* the field of contentious politics.[31] That means that the definition tends to remain stuck with a rather simplified identity concept – a "we" versus "them" binary. This is also mirrored in the definitional focus on rather unified claims or "shared interests and programs" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 4). Second, their definition does not include any power dimension. Contentious politics is contentious, on their view, because it "bears on someone else's interest" (ibid.). This would mean, taken seriously, that party politics too, or even institutional oppression could be rendered contentious.

To enable a power[32]-sensible analysis, I thus propose a definition more in Edward's sense of "misbehavior," including non-public civil society activities however. I understand social movements as *one* observable, ontic expression of the larger realm of contentious politics. Contention, in my use of the term, is a practice of resisting or opposing the hierarchical or hegemonic[33] veiling of political alternatives. It is directed against the interest of *powerful* actors – and not *anyone* else's. Contentious politics in itself, however, includes a vast diversity of alternative ways of enacting it, of policy demands, polity inclusion, and politics structures. Thus, the overall field of contentious politics is one directed "upwards" against a powerful instance of veiling political alternatives, to its outside. But on its inside, it contains a variety of politics dynamics. The term is a relational one then, delimiting one field of politics as being contentious towards another.

I understand *protest* as a punctual practice of contention: a public and addressed demonstration of discontent. While contentious politics may include all forms of everyday resistance, of internal communication, organization, and positioning, with the term protest I refer to a publicly visible act of contention toward a concrete instance of power. This is not bound to specific forms of action – a protest may be enacted in street demonstrations, but also in starting a petition, in holding a vigil, in going on strike, etc. And it is not bound to any institutional categories. Protests may come from organized civil society bodies, from spontaneously gathered citizens, and individuals, and even from official politicians opposing particular decisions, persons, or practices within the governing body of which they are part. This kind of definition implies a close connection of the term to the study of particular *protest events*.

31 Mercea tackles that problem understanding the politics-aspect of contentious politics as the "structural opportunities for group-based attempts to usher social change" (Mercea, 2016, p. 2). This understanding is mirrored in some case-related literature, focusing indeed the political or legal opportunity for the protest outbreak, or the momentum (see literature review). However, it still doesn't provide analytical tools for investigating the inner political processes within civil society.

32 By power, I refer simply to the ability to make an effect.

33 By hierarchy, I mean institutionally fixed orders of power exercise. By hegemony, I mean structurally conditioned distributions of resources and privilege.

Methodologically, in this project I strive foremost to understand the puzzle at hand from the perspective of its agents, of the people implicated in the disruption and the related processes of change. I sometimes refer to these agents with the term *activists*. This is also a difficult term, especially in post-socialist spaces it bears a historical association with the socialist "party activist."[34] Moreover, the common differentiation of activists (i.e., those who organize and "lead" protests and movements) and participants (those who join prescribed contentious actions, without taking on organizational roles in them) is increasingly blurred (Mercea, 2016, p. 73). Both factors contribute to the increase in people who "do activism without self-identifying as activists" (ibid.), complicating the identification of feasible interlocutors for the research further. Also, in the simultaneity of solid and fluid modernity logics in a post-modern surrounding (Lee, 2005), the ascription of activist roles may differ between "old" and "new" activist collectivities.[35] So, again, historical definitions do not help me delimit my field of investigation. I therefore did not differentiate activists and participants. I also did not search beforehand the delineated roles within institutions to find my interlocutors. Instead, I simply conceive of an activist as anyone who does contentious politics. I assume that whoever is implicated in contentious politics has some political reason for it[36], engaging in an activity concerning the organization of collective life, and positioning thereby in a range of other possible alternatives.[37] Consequently, a*ctivism* is understood as the practices of engaging in contentious politics.

The field of contentious politics, as mentioned above, is a self-standing politics field. It makes sense in that regard to assume that it has its own polity – i.e., *political civil society*. Civil society action as a whole has been conceptualized as "a society's effect on itself" (Thaa, 2004). In my interpretation, the term delineates a field of collective action that may be delimited and affected by power structures, but is not constituted in itself by them – as, for example, a a state is. This includes all kinds of cultural, social, or, as focused on in this work, political action that is not constituted as an instance of power, that does not foresee a decision-making role on behalf of the larger collec-

34 Analogous to selling the strictly autocratic party apparatus of real-existing socialism as a "movement of the people" (Accornero & Filleule, 2016)!

35 In the Romanian case, as Abăseacă and Pleyers (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019) show, such roles differ across the four streams of activist cultures they identify, and they may be subject to reformulations brought about by the disruption and its aftermaths.

36 As will be elaborated in the methodology section, the aim of this work is not to find any objective causality in such motivations. Instead, interpretivism assumes that „true" reasons for acting cannot be known by anyone, so the only thing one can reasonably search for in that regard is constitutive causality – the beliefs and perceptions interlocutors have about the world, in which they themselves ground their decisions.

37 What additionally speaks for this kind of conception is that many authors in social movement studies mention a factor of real or perceived deprivation of activists towards the powerful instance they oppose (Edwards, 2014; Guțu, 2012, p. 55).

tive.[38] According the terms defined above, one could also say that the people I conceive of as activists are part of political civil society, or the contentious polity. Political civil society is here not differentiated by an institutional argument – being somehow organized outside the state – but by a theoretically won differentiation of political and unpolitical action, of contentious and a- or anti-political politics tendencies. The deeper implications of this approach are elaborated in the following.

5. Theoretical Framework

The findings of the case-related literature discussed above fit the social movement studies' conception of protest as an expression of some kind of societal *disruption*, or *rupture*. Protest events, in that view, are recognized to be elements in a process, impacting social relations, reshaping discourses, opening up an area of tension between existing social structures and contentious action (della Porta, 2016, p. 49f.; Edwards, 2014, p. 1f.; Lindekile, 2014, p. 198) – thus disrupting, bringing about an intense process of change to, *political culture*. The momentum for that disruption, or the conditions necessary and favorable for the outbreak of mass protest, have been well-covered by the research reviewed above, and studies of the effects, including comparison of the before and after, are ongoing. We know *that* there was a moment of disruption in Romanian political culture and *that* its contentious politics landscape is changing, that civil society tends to be more and more diverse, more and more rooted in its social, historical, and political contexts, that networks of the politically active population are deepening, growing, and renewing generationally, and that the potential for protest mobilization has increased. We also know that the disruption had effects upon official politics in Romania. It broadened the party spectrum, including the reach of civil society towards official representatives, and triggered defensive or strategical behavior by the authorities. The protests brought to attention some underlying problems in Romania's civic culture, its social divides, representational gaps, and the reverberations of the country's history, most prominently the lingering conflicts from the "theft revolution" and its aftermaths.

At the same time, the course of events in Romania escapes "classical" terms of social movement studies, as these are largely (in)formed by the study of movements in modern, western democracies. Problems arise especially with the focus of these concepts on *claims*, or single issues, of protests

38 This may of course imply that there are organizations who claim to be part of civil society, but "actually" are part of a powerful structure. This is mirrored I guess in the heated discussions about above-mentioned "NGO-ization" in general (and who is or is not financed by one of George Soros' organizations in particular), and in the debate on especially post-socialist programmatic civil society "non-partizanship" (Kralj, 2021). What underlies both discourses is, I think, an underlying normative conviction about the legitimacy of societal influence: while powerful structures factually are capable of imposing power, by their constitutional functions or other resources and privileges (which is always suspicious for being subject to abuse, on behalf of personal interests), civil society action may have a (morally superior) legitimate impact on collective life because of the intrinsic motivations of its members, for the better life for themselves and for the collective.

and social movements, as well as with the quite static and hierarchical differentiation of organizational roles between social movement organizations, civil society organizations, participants, and the public. Both aspects confront the socio-historical background of Romania's past. The latter is to be generally revisioned due to the appearance of (post-modern!) platformized protest organization/ communication, and documentation. Each protest cycle had its internal diversities and tensions, and over the course of repeating mobilization waves, there was no single issue, no sustained claim of "the" movement to be found. In contrast, the organization, documentation, and communication of these protests were largely mediated on digital platforms and shaped by their inherent logics (including providers' interest and users' skill- and access distribution, i.e., hegemonic structures of power). The collectivities and individuals implicated were not (in)formed by organizational logics and hierarchies.

Thus, the *processes* of change – of what happens and how, around the moment of disruption or liminality – cannot be traced and understood using "classical" vocabulary. Consequently, there is hardly any explanation in the literature about *how* the diverse cycles of protest are connected to each other, while the timely clustering and similarity of practices observed make some form of connection evident. While the interconnectedness of civil society development and protests is repeatedly invoked, the qualities of that interconnectedness remain hard to grasp. And, given the emerging organization/communication structure, established techniques of data gathering and -analysis (especially in the discipline of political science) are increasingly unfit to understand the reality unfolding. The brute diversity of positions, demands, demographics, practices, and media – without any (allegedly) representative movement base at hand to mediate – overwhelms.

I think the Romanian case is very useful for reflecting, revisioning, and reconceptualizing the terms that social movement studies, or the study of contentious politics in general, needs in post-modern times, and especially in post-socialist and/or semi-peripheral environs. Foremostly, this is a methodological task, and I elaborate how I chose to tackle it in detail in the methodology and methods sections. However, before explaining my understanding and practices of "reconceptualization," I need to clarify the concepts I put at the start of this investigation, i.e., to describe the puzzle as I confronted it over the past 5 years of research. This means, first, theoretically examining the conceptualization of protest as disruption in more detail. Second, there are recent developments in protest organization and communication brought about especially by digital platformization. And third, the locatedness of Romania within the post-socialist context needs some closer attention.

5.1. Protest as disruption and political moment

As mentioned above, one starting point for studying the repeated mass protests in Romania has been to look upon them as a rupture, or disruption, and what it represents for the larger context of the Romanian political public, or political culture.

The understanding of protest as disruption is applicable on several levels: For starters, any individual protest event could be characterized as a disruption by the very notion that it questions a status quo, that it demonstrates discontent toward it. What I am talking about in the following, however, takes a much wider view, looking at *multiple* clusters of protests and the way they not only question punctual policies or individual politicians., but transform aspects of political culture at large. In this regard, protests can be seen as not only directed against an outside entity, but affecting the very context in which civil society and contentious politics are situated and find their being. Edwards (2014, pp. 213ff.) describes the outbreak of protest likewise as a disruption or "misbehavior," as a breaking of the expected order of action and response within an institutionalized context, and as opening space for societal construction and innovation.

According to Schuppert (2008), political culture should be thought as a "space of discourse," a "collectivity in constant progression" (p. 32). The elements of political culture, its institutions, contexts, values, traditions, practices, myths, and memories, are thus situated in an ongoing production, reproduction, and reinterpretation. I propose to think of this constant cultural progression like a river, with perpetually changing waters albeit flowing down a relatively defined stream. When a disruption takes place, it disturbs the perpetual "normal" flow. The disruption creates a moment of passage, or liminality (Turner, 2007), [39] in which the progression of political culture is opened to emergent possibilities until the mainstream finds a new bed in which to flow.

Analogously, moments of political disruption are a core interest in the field of political difference theory, especially among the authors who understand politics and the political as a dissociative endeavor. I believe this strand of theory, with its ontological approach towards political conflict and tension, offers a very useful analytical framework for studying protest, although so far, it has only rarely been this way (see de la Cadena, 2010). This may be because its theoretical concepts – to be applicable in empirically interested research – need some methodological translation. This is the main endeavor of Paper 1.

39 Turner describes liminality in a context of traditional cultures and rites of passage. This context prescribes a rather fixed idea of how the "reaggregated" individual or collective should look like. This is arguably not the case for a disruption in institutionalized politics, at least in most cases. However, his concept of disaggregation and reaggregation can also be employed to make sense of a non-determined formation, as in this study.

Very broadly, political difference theory is preoccupied with the investigation of the qualities and interrelations of the ontological condition of *the political*, and its ontic expressions, i.e., *politics*. The guiding idea of this approach is that, in lived reality, only a small portion of the potential possibilities of organizing collective life are and can be enacted. This holds true of the field of policy as well as questions of polity, and politics structures: Put simply, if there weren't so many alternative possible solutions to political questions, so many alternative approaches to whom to include and whom to assign for discussing and making decisions, and so many alternative processes of agenda-setting, discussion, decision-making and legitimization, then there would be no need for politics. Collective life would follow culturally or socially determined flows. But – and this may be one core statement of political difference theory, explaining why its advocates are sometimes denominated "radical democrats" – however unitary, stable, prescribed, without alternatives, etc., a societal structure may appear, the potential of the political – of the undecidable and the vast field of alternative ways of living together – cannot be entirely reduced. This also means assuming that any actual form of politics is, at least to some degree, something that someone has decided for, that there *is* agency and responsibility, that social reality is made by people and not wholly dependent on external conditions or causal, "natural", mechanisms of functioning.

Politics, then, is the branch of *making* decisions. It is not limited to a specific professional or institutional body, e.g., state institutions or economic or media entrepreneurs, but can be enacted in any collective setting. Decisions outside this branch would be differentiated as being *unpolitical*, practices that claim ultimate legitimacy as *apolitical*.[40] *Political politics* (Vollrath, 2003) acknowledges the open potential of the political and strives to include its options into its polity, policy, and politics processes.[41] In contrast, apolitical or anti-political politics strives to exclude, or hide the multiplicity of possibilities.[42]

From this point of view, protests as disruptions, are especially interesting for their *politicization* potential. In contending the usual flow of politics or political culture, protests make visible the potential of numerous alternatives to the existing way of doing things (Laclau, 2005; Rancière, 1999), or, at the very least, they disrupt claims of justification and its having been completed. It is important to attend to the power relations such a move implies: There is a difference between "horizontal," equitable conflict over political issues and a "vertical" conflict, in which one side has more power to impose its decisions than the other. If we understand the imposition of power – the making

40 This can refer to hierarchical arguments, putting particular individuals or groups in an "ultimately legitimized" position to decide, or to structural (hegemonic) impositions of alleged ultimate justification, for example any extreme reference to legal, bureaucratic, or technocratic legitimacy (Vollrath, 2003).

41 Some refer to political systems including such acknowledging, and deliberative features, as *democratic* (Arndt, 2013; Lefort, 1990).

42 I elaborated this differentiation more in detail in Paper 1, p.5f.

of political decisions, despite the principal contingency of the political – as a "veiling" practice[43], protest can be understood as practice trying to tear through the veil, striving for "appearance" (see Lefort, 1990, see also Paper 3). Institutionalized power, on this logic, always contains some apolitical, or hegemonic, *tendencies*, as it principally delimits the space of potential political action (Mouffe, 2011). This can be deemed necessary in complex collectivities, and it can be limited by including mechanisms for preventing a- or anti-political rule, as is done in democratic institutional settings. But the problem of delimitation itself cannot be denied altogether. And the outbreak of protest is, in the theoretical perspective proposed, a demonstration of *contention* to a powerful status quo. It thus contains – questioning the legitimacy of an institutionalized status quo (be it a policy, polity, or politics altogether) – a *political* tendency to make "appear" the impossibility of ultimate justification, oftentimes proposing or demanding an alternative to the status quo, or even decrying the attempt of justification itself. For Rancière (1999), such *political moments* constitute an originary occurrence of the political in its ontological quality.

With Edwards' notion of open-endedness – the breaking of the expected order of action and response – the "awakening" that took place in Romania cannot be viewed as a goal- or destination-oriented endeavor striving to replace the "old" order with an already-formulated "new" construct. But because nothing can long exist in total relativity, in total acknowledgment of contingency and undecidability, something must happen to allow some kind of "reaggregation" (Turner, 2007) after the disruption. One could imagine this "something" in different ways: Besides a targeted reformation or revolution, one could think of the "empire striking back," trying to reestablish the old order or striving to enclose the upheaval on its own terms. Apart from these, the contentious part of the polity could also use the moment of rupture to explore and build new alliances, organizational forms, policy content, and ideological orientations. In the present research, I focused especially on the latter: on the agentic practices of Romanian activists, consciously orienting themselves within and navigating a liminal moment, and forming and positioning new collectivities in the shifted context of Romanian political culture.

Investigating political difference – the difference between politics and the political – means understanding a part of the social world proceeding from its fundamental tensions and alleged incommensurabilities. One of these fundamental tensions of political difference is the simultaneity of contingency and undecidability of the political on the one side and the necessity to make decisions, to act, on the other. Consequently, the political condition prescribes a potential existence of infinite "other ways" of deciding, and the impossibility of legitimating any "ultimate justification", of

43 Even in the most democratic, or political, setting, decisions must be made, power must be imposed, in absence of ultimate justification – this may be understood as a dilemma.

knowing “the” right decision, or “the” right way to make them. At the same time, in real life, political problems need to be solved, at least momentarily, and this exercise of power – the exclusion of numerous alternative ways in favor of the one opted for – needs to be legitimated in one way or another.[44]

While some theorists of political difference focus on the latter – i.e., the creation of institutions that legitimate, politically, the exercizing of power, and make feasible decisions, i.e., political association (Marchart, 2007) – others focus on the fissure lines between conflicting political camps and identities, as well as the power-struggles between governing and governed, or political dissociation see (Bedorf, 2010).[45]

In the case of Romania, both aspects of political life appear to be relevant. As mentioned already, the notion of disruption is evident in the Romanian “civic awakening.” And we could, as many scholars of social movement studies wont to do, approach it as a tension between an institutionalized power structure (typically: the government[46]) and a contentious polity, a civil society or a social movement, questioning the structure’s legitimacy and demanding change. At the same time, doing contentious politics itself calls for some kind of political association, of forming contentious collectivities. Additionally, as both institutionalized and contentious polities are situated within shared frameworks of political culture, association processes also regard the interrelatedness of institutional and contentious politics. And as we talk about a country with a democratic constitution, and about a complex contentious politics landscape, dissociative processes play their part also *within* both of the allegedly opposing instances.

Even this brief glimpse at theory in relation to empirical cases shows that a project targeted on conceptualization can not be reduced to induction nor to deduction alone. And while theories of political difference are used in the present project to develop analytical categories through which to

44 Which inherits the assumption that all human beings are to be treated as equal in their quality as humans – having consciousness, being able to act, and to decide, and being responsible for their actions. One anti-political legitimization of power and rule throughout history has been, and unfortunately until to date still is, depriving particular groups of humans of these qualities (de la Cadena, 2010).

45 It is sometimes difficult to differentiate “association” and “dissociation” from “agreement” and “disagreement.” To associate is not to agree, content-wise, but to create a common space for debate, and to agree on common delimitations and common rules for acting within it. Dissociation is any practice of differentiating the self from the other on the political level. Following Mouffe, we have to distinguish an antagonistic and an agonistic way of dissociation. Antagonistic dissociation, drawing on Schmittian identity concepts, is to negate or leave the associative political space, to disengage from its limitations and rules, while at the same time prescribing an ideal of inner-identitarian homogeneity – which, according to Mouffe, can result in violent conflict and authoritarianism. Agonistic dissociation, for its part, means to remain within the associative political realm, differentiating oneself from the other, but viewing the other as an opponent rather than an enemy (Mouffe, 2011). This differentiation is important in demarcating the limits of “acceptable” political behavior within democracies. I elaborate this differentiation more in detail in my first paper, p.3f.

46 With the scope of the present project, I refer to contentious politics in relation to institutional politics of the nation state, and sometimes (explicitly specified so) to global hegemonic tendencies of the “center”, see especially Paper 2.

see the case anew, the empirics of the Romanian mass protest cycles also gives directions for how to develop the theory further.

In particular, the Romanian case helps us revise two important branches of theories of political difference and their relationship. The first is the dissociative branch of political difference which tends to view *only* moments of break, of rupture, as occurrences of the political. Rancière, for example, calls any institutionalized politics "police" (Rancière, 1999). Laclau defends populism, arguing that by questioning established politics, populist movements engender the only powerful instances of politicization, of making visible the doubtful character of the justification claims institutions make per se (Laclau, 2005). And Mouffe – actually in an attempt to relativize the Schmitt'ian (nazist) absolute understanding of political identity, which in its consequence leads to the "necessary" goal of an identitarian unit eliminating the political "other" with violence – eventually does not question the ultimate differentiation of "we" and "them" herself (Mouffe, 2011). Thus, while the dissociative branch of political difference theory, is very helpful in clarifying the theoretical meaning of protest as disruption, I think that there is a tendency to overestimate the role of *identity*, and a quite exclusivist (modern) concept of identity, among dissociative theorists. Putting it perhaps too simply, dissociative theories of political difference tend to reduce politics to a "we" versus "them" binary (see Volk, 2018, p. 39), and to normatively idealize any attempt of engaging institutional politics.

Other theorists of political difference have focused on the associative aspects of politics, of creating and acting in a shared space of collective discourse and decision-making. Authors of this branch of political difference theory are to a high degree occupied with the setup of democratic institutions, i.e., the institutionalization of political politics, on the level of nation-states (Bedorf, 2010; Lefort, 1990; Ricœur, 2007). As I argued in Paper 1 (p.3ff.), this doesn't leave much room for investigating outer-institutional, or non-state, politics, as well as the dynamic processes of politicization. However, freed from their historically narrowed categories, I think its analytical perspective can be employed to examine associative elements within contentious politics spaces.

Operationalizing the theoretical categories of political difference theory methodologically was the main scope of my first dissertation paper. As mentioned, one problem in studying the Romanian case is that the theoretical categories tend to remain rooted in principles of modern logics, while the reality of the case bears many post-modern features. I think that differentiating politics and the political bears rich methodological potential for studying such cases, and can find support and companionship with post-structuralist methodological approaches.

As discussed above, this dissertation is designed to shed understanding on processes of contentious or activist (re-)aggregation around moments of rupture. Using concepts of political difference to speak about and analyze these processes highlights two contextual aspects of the case. The first is the overall change of organizational and communicative relations within the post-modern condition of platformization, urging social movement studies (and theories of political difference) to revise their categories in this regard. The other is the trajectory of post-socialist societal transformation, and of post-socialist transformation studies, affecting our academic understanding of civil societies and contentious politics in Eastern Europe.

5.2. Protest organization/communication on post-modern platforms

As mentioned above, the Romanian protests have been studied as a case of "new" protest organization/communication, with regard to its highly digitalized and platformized communication and organization structures – largely allowing it to do away with leadership and formalized organization structures. Many of the features of platformized protest organization/communication mirror the more general passage from modern to post-modern logics of societal interaction (Bauman, 2000; Lee, 2005). Seen in this light, platformization is a process characterized by a passage from a solid logics of communication and organization toward a liquid simultaneity of organization/communication – without destroying the "solid" instances of the political public, i.e., mass media, formal NGOs, and political institutions.

Generally, for the vast population of internet users, the production and distribution of, as well as access to, all kinds of information has become feasible in ways never experienced before in the history of humankind. Communication and information have become possible across diverse levels of the digitalized global space. At the same time, the ever-growing mass and variety of data cannot be surveyed, let alone comprehended, in their entirety. With the "explosion of information," the (solid) modernist structures of authority in public discourse are being challenged and the "classical" state and media institutions are no longer exclusively in command of filtering, structuring, and contextualizing what is going on (Gurri, 2018).

Consequently, new regimes for structuring information and communication, germane to the digital sphere and its diffusions with analogous reality, are emerging. Poell et.al. (2019) conceptualize platformization as a combination of "interactive processes that involve a wide variety of actors, but which are also structured by fundamentally unequal power relations" (ibid., p. 6). Platformization includes the broad, user-based, but curated, collection and provisioning of data; the integration of companies and buyers in multi-sided market relations; and the algorithmic and functional shaping of communicative practices in digital surroundings. Some scholars investigating this process stress

its emancipatory potential, opening the production of public discourse to ordinary individuals, and reducing the direct power of hierarchic political and media institutions. Others view the digital space as a transcended form of Empire, or global hegemony, shaped by imbalances in power and resource distribution, reproducing existing inequalities and hegemonic discourses in an intensified, opaque, and less attributable way than was possible in (solid) modernist institutional bodies.[47] Hence, one could say that the changes brought about by digital technology inherit a fundamentally political dimension.[48] Platformization brings about new potentials of political association and dissociation, as well as restructures systems of appearance and veiling.

Yet what does platformization mean for contentious politics and protest? Contentious actors always had to confront questions of building what has been called "alternative public spheres" (Davis et al., 2010), or "counter-histories" (Hajek, 2013) to make their claims, often clashing with the institutions' versions of political and societal reality. Contentious politics actors now find themselves between the potentials that heightened accessibility and diversity representations of social media platforms bring about – for activists, as well as for institutional political actors – and the hardly comprehensible structure and economic interests inscribed in the platforms' structures (Bossio, 2014; Imre & Owen, 2014). The digital sphere offers easier access to activist organization and communication processes for more individuals than classical social movement- and civil society organizations (Mercea, 2016). And they also structurally exclude a portion of people, namely those without access to the internet and the necessary devices, including digital literacy (Imre & Owen, 2014).

Consequently, platformization has brought about a shift in contentious politics' power structures. Since the manifold protest mobilizations following the global financial crisis in 2008/09, scholars have spoken of "communication that organizes, rather than organization that communicates" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 139; see also Bebawi & Bossio, 2014). In this digitalized world, CSOs are no longer necessary for either mediating protest mobilization and -organization, or for shaping contentious identities and their public representations. Instead, and especially in surroundings with relatively weakly organized, unpolitical, civil society structures, protest is now often mediated on social media platforms.

Concepts of leadership within protest organization and representation are questioned and reconfigured more generally among digitally mediated protest movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Platformized activist communication is not only subject to power dynamics outside it – e.g., con-

47 Consider in this regard the more general theoretical discussion about Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's concept of "Empire" and "Multitude" (Hardt & Negri, 2004), critical: (Hein, 2005; Imre & Owen, 2014).

48 This illustrates how protest is not the only possible form of societal disruption – while in the case of digitalization, it was less an intended and addressed demand for appearance that brought it about. Delving into this particular dynamic of aggregation is another interesting and pressing research quest of its own!

fronting politics institutions or corporate interest – but on its inside, too, from the differentiation between "curators" and "users," or publics (Poell et al., 2016). Furthermore, it seems that the possibilities platformized activism offers to contentious politics are subject to ideological interpretation. While, e.g. in the alter-globalist spectrum, it is viewed as a potential for non-hierarchical self-organization, or what Gerbaudo (2017) calls "cyber-autonomism," power-oriented activist groups use these possibilities for populist mobilization (ibid., see also Schwarzenegger, 2023).

Moreover, digitalization facilitates instant, multivocal, and multimedia documentation of contentious action. With the broad availability of smartphones – recording, communication, and publication devices all at once! – data documenting or commenting on political issues can be produced and published individually and permanently (Mattoni, 2017). This brings about a vast, diverse, networked, but incomprehensible, field of material connected to political activism: an ad-hoc assembly of activist accounts; some accessible, others closed groups, some documentary, others commenting, or even misleading in their character; some individually authored, others collectively curated or institutionally planned; some spontaneous, others strategical; some high-end productions, others fabricated by laypeople.

This does not only have broad effects on the representation of contentious activism to the wider public, or media reportage. It also impacts the ways in which contentious actors conceive of themselves. Remembering joint action, making sense of its emergence in hindsight, and contextualizing it within broader historical and political frameworks are all important for the formation and perpetuation of collectivity, polity, and identity (Caswell et al., 2016; Merrill et al., 2020).[49] In solid modern settings, activist communication is mediated by organizations and their leading figures. These organizations compound and distribute mobilization campaigns, give statements to the press, and negotiate with official politics. They are the ones to found and curate "free archives" (Bacia & Wenzel, 2017) in opposition to official historiography. Under the conditions of digital, platformized, liquid modernity, social movement and civil society organizations lose their institutional role. Communication about and documentation of protests become intertwined, collectives are trans-related (and no longer inter-related) to each other. In these liquid conditions, political identifications become visible in their fluidity, diversity, and overlappings.

Association in platformized contexts is thus much more complex and chaotic than under modern conditions, where organizations would mediate the process. Also, in platformized contexts, dissociations of power and of identity cannot be understood as exclusive, clear-cut "we" versus "them" dif-

49 Sometimes, the remembrance of protests sparks new activism, as is to be observed in nowadays negotiations about the memory of the `89 revolutions in Eastern Europe (Craciun, 2014; Ishchenko, 2011; Richardson-Little & Merrill, 2020) or the general pattern of commemorating past repression, or trauma (Hajek, 2013).

ferentiations, but rather need to be seen as processual (associative/dissociative) modes, or tendencies, of collective political action.

When investigating the current Romanian protest movements, it becomes clear quite rapidly that one has to deal with an online as well as offline field, interacting with each other closely. As Mosca observes, there is no strict differentiation anymore between online and offline life (Mosca, 2014, p. 398, see also Elgesem, 2015, p. 15; Lüders, 2015, p. 80). The platform reaches beyond the social media site, so that analogous and digital spaces are interconnected, and cannot be understood apart anymore.

5.3. Unpolitical and political civil society in post-socialist spaces

Civil societies in the post-socialist spaces were, for a long time after 1989, commonly viewed as unpolitical and "weak" (Baća, 2022). Largely, this had to do with the paradigm under which mainstream social science, along with the global institutional body prescribing the policies of Washington Consensus, constructed the "transition" toward democracy after the fall of the Eastern bloc, opting for putting privatization and liberalization first, and democratization second (Elster, 1993; World Bank et al., 1990). The former were not only "socially costly" (Jaitner & Spöri, 2017), they also led to a concentration of political *and* economic power in the hands of a small group of elites, often prolonging privileged statuses already held under state socialism (Stoica, 2012).

The civic apathy and depoliticization observed in post-socialist spaces in the 90s and early 2000s have repeatedly been explained by referring to the so called "socialist legacies" – i.e., a lack of knowledge and experience in democratic organization (Dürrschmidt & Taylor, 2007). More recently, this has been supplemented with factors related to the transition and transformation itself. For example, the need to reorder and secure individual life-worlds and the overwhelm of the fastly happening and oftentimes chaotic changes. Other factors include dealing with social hardships and the loss of jobs and career perspectives which may have kept people in post-socialist countries from investing time and resources in political activism (Jaitner & Spöri, 2017). Additionally, and in need of clearer conceptualization I believe, is the factor of political frustration, an immense and somewhat cyclically repeated factor not only brought about by the unrealistic hopes of the sudden transition, but also by the perpetual state of "multiple crises"(Jaitner & Spöri, 2017; Quelvennec, 2023), and a lack of the qualitative, democratic reform expected to bring about democratic participation and the engendering of institutional representation. Among the politically active people in post-socialist countries, it is a consistent nuclei that repeatedly stress their demands to become an active part of politics in their countries, despite the limits imposed by institutional as well as structural political, economic, and social factors (Sava, 2016). In Romania, one important factor of political dis-

illusionment in the 90s was additionally the mineriads (especially those from 1990-1992) (Dâncu, 2015).

This suggests we need to take a closer look at the setup of post-socialist democracies, especially with regard to the political quality they provide. Some scholars describe a post-socialist "hyper-normalization" (Chelcea, 2023, p. 5), marked by severe delimiting of the actual range of political alternatives by a rather neoliberal, "catch-up"- modernization program (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023; Mouffe, 2011b, p. 31; Slačálek & Šitera, 2022). Neoliberal democratic theory functionalistically conceives of institutions of choice and participation as a means for establishing political legitimacy, and, thus, stability(Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023, p. 138ff.). Modernization theory severely delimits political alternatives to Euro-American modernity by fixing the goal of political development as alignment with the features of "forerunner" or "originary modern societies" (after a very generalized, index-based society model) (Degele & Dries, 2005). From a perspective of political difference theory, we could describe both approaches as *apolitical*, limiting the visibility and feasibility of any political alternatives deviating from their prescribed function or telos.

With regard to post-socialist spaces, some researchers point toward a narrowing of political representation almost across the board, the excluding of left-wing positions from political representation by an anti-communist narrative, and the abovementioned "consensual" transition policies (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023; Stoiciu, 2021). Despite all this, many of the individuals forming the new political elites in some post-socialist countries, Romania included, stemmed from the former communist parties!

Following the conventional theoretical paradigm, the mainstream of post-1989 transformation studies normatively located civil society first and foremost in unpolitical terrain: moderating the social hardships of the economic transition and offering social aid.[50] Second, on this conventional account, civil society was understood to be geared toward educating new aspiring democratic citizens and mediating (formal) political participation according to a neoliberal functionalist model of democratic legitimization (Keane & Merkel, 2015; Tătar, 2022, critically: della Porta, 2016, p. 44). And in broad terms, this is exactly what "NGO-ized" civil society organizations did in the first decade of the post-socialist transformation (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019b, p. 164; Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013). Likewise, the emergence of a *political* civil society was – especially early into the so called transition – viewed as a potential danger to "consensual" economic reform (Elster, 1993).

50 Some see this function linked to the neoliberalization of politics especially impactful in post-89 "transition:" according to that logic, civil society is thought to voluntarily overtake tasks the ideally "lean state" doesn't fulfill anymore (Channell-Justice, 2022; Piotrowski, 2022, p. 189). Greenberg notes that the "anti-political" (→ anti-institutional) character of post-socialist NGOs in Yugoslavia was not only imposed from the outside, neoliberal transition doctrines, but also resonated with the dissident skepticism towards state institutions developed already since the 1970s (Greenberg, 2014, p. 153).

However, an understanding of civil society as in clear opposition to the state and its institutions, and demanding a say in the organization of political life, was the very conception of civil society that arose already before 1989 within state-socialist countries (Thaa, 2004).[51] From this point of view, the role of civil society is not to enable and foster official representation and participation for large fractions of a country's population[52] – that is, actually, thought to be the democratic state's responsibility – but in „generating favorable conditions" (Florez Cubillos, 2015, p. 16) for setting up and sustaining a space for explicitly critical opposition (Piotrowski, 2022, p. 194, on the general discussion, see Foley & Edwards, 1996). What becomes quite clear then when talking about civil societies in post-socialist settings, is the necessary distinction between a *political* (contentious) and an *unpolitical* (functional) civil society (Piotrowski, 2022, p. 189)[53].

Recent protests in the region seem to be commonly dealing with the societal transformations they broadly have in common, decrying the flawed implementation of democracy, civil society representation, and rule of law.[54] Florez Cubillos (Florez Cubillos, 2015) draws a line between different, national, contentious movements from the post-socialist space, interacting with and impacting each other more or less directly, and sometimes leading to chains of similar upheaval in different countries. Jaitner and Spöri (Jaitner & Spöri, 2017) root this apparent "compatibility" of post-socialist contentious actions back to a regionally distinct conglomerate of "multiple crisis," causing an underflow of general, and regionally similar, frustrations (Quelvennec, 2023).[55] These problems, at the same time, are not and could not be tackled credibly, neither by institutional representation, nor

51 Note, e.g., the famous word of "anti-political" or "apolitical" politics coined by Czech dissident Václav Havel, among others (Feinberg, 2022, p. 152; Greenberg, 2014, p. 152f.). To avoid terminological confusion: Havel refers to "politics" as existing state institutions ("anti-politics," then, describing an attitude of radically dissociating state institutional politics, and basing one's decisions on justice, morality, sincerity etc.). Dissidents, shortly after 1989, have been repeatedly criticized for being co-opted too easily with the "new" elites, under the belief that after the revolutions, these didn't have to be opposed anymore, and the new consensus could be followed upon together (Feinberg, 2022). While I think this is a valid point, I put the focus of investigation more to the signs of a profound political frustration that is to be found also, as became evident with my data gathering and analysis, among, e.g., anti-corruption or even anti-communist activists, and it reaches beyond only demanding to replace corrupt individuals from leading positions...

52 That was actually a reality of "activism" in state socialism.

53 Baća speaks similarly of "compliant" and "contentious" civil society practices, and points to the lack of exploration of the latter category, especially in post-socialist countries, in social movement studies (Baća, 2022).

54 The World Protest data base shows a tendency for issues regarding failure of political representation in the region (topping Justice-, Corruption- and "Real Democracy"- related issues), while, in western countries, main issues tend to be more related to economic inequality. Císař, with regard to Czech protest culture between 1993-2005, points out that protest issues were mostly of a post-materialist character, "which challenges our general understanding of post-communist politics" (Císař, 2013, p. 140).

55 The abovementioned crises of social hardship and inequality, post-revolutionary frustration, and representational crisis even added up to the "genuine crisis of liberal democracy" globally occurring during recent decades (Fraser, 2017; Jaitner & Spöri, 2017). The problems of western liberal democracies further weakened the readiness for (supposedly temporary) subordination under the logics of catch-up modernization throughout global periphery and semi-periphery (Florez Cubillos, 2015; Musić, 2013).

by the rather unpolitical, internationally operating NGOs (Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 13; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021).

There are multiple examples of post-socialist civil society organizations stating deliberately that they mean to bring "intensely political activity" (Florez Cubillos, 2015, p. 19) into their respective publics, often connecting this with enhancing the republic's democratic quality.[56] Given such civil society-state relations, contentious civil society actors tend to claim their own space within the public politics culture, questioning the monopolization of politics by institutions of the state. As Piotrowski states: "To sum up, the Polish civil society sector has travelled almost a full circle coming back to its politicized foundation with more and more NGOs and CSOs positioning themselves against the state and its policies and not outside of them" (Piotrowski, 2022, p. 195).[57]

It seems that a potential for such political positioning existed all along in some post-socialist civil societies: Greene notes that newly recruited people in Russian for Fair Election protests were likely not apathetic citizens, but rather came from a population of already politically informed and interested, but not yet actively integrated (Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 32f.; Greene, 2013, p. 41; Mercea, 2016). For Greene, what is crucial in making visible and activating this potential is the enhancement of "weak ties" between existing, dense activist cores, forming a loose, but especially effective network of publicly visible, thematically diverse activist reach (Greene, 2013, p. 46). To achieve this, combined practices of online and offline communication/organization were used, featuring high transparency and openness in deliberation. In Romania, these "new ties" were not so much based upon already popular public personalities, or "civic leaders" as seems to be the case for the Russian for Fair Elections protests.[58] Rather, in the beginning of 2012, a diverse, loose gathering of already active groups[59] met in open, interfusing online/offline spaces to coordinate efforts, and kicking off the multi-annual, multi-thematic cycle of growing waves of mass protest and civil society reconfiguration in Romania.

Moreover, as Císař shows, a decentralized, outspokenly oppositional civil society existed all the time in the Czech Republic since 1989. It made up a "surprisingly high proportion" of protest orga-

56 While one has to be, again, very cautious regarding the use of the term "political," as especially in post-socialist country this term is often used interchangeably with "partizan."

57 Quite some authors decry a "lack of subversive potential" (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2020; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021) in recent mass protest in the post-socialist space, which, at first sight, might contradict my present argument. I think, however, that we mean different things: While said authors seem to refer their diagnosis mainly to the contents of protest claims – i.e., the radicality of protest demands – I refer more to the structurally contentious approach of establishing political spaces outside the state, but inside public political discourse, see also below. That such claims oftentimes are derailed, or tend to repeat hegemonic narratives regarding their content, is on another page of the story.

58 As Dollbaum (2022) stresses, this could be bound to the distinct regime type, constraining public contentious action in Russia arguably to a different degree than is the case with Romania.

59 Even featuring similar thematic branches of activism (environment, rule of law, anti-corruption, but also radical left, far-right, and ultra-groups, see, e.g. (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019)

nizing bodies, but was largely focused on small and local protest events (Císař, 2013, pp. 142, 146).[60] As he documents, most of these self-organized citizens are rather preoccupied with capacity building and most of their claims are of a post-materialist character (Císař, 2013, p. 156). With their rather low ability and/or willingness for mass-mobilization, and their rather uninstitutionalized modes of organization, they may have flown under the radar of the consolidation-measurement of the time.

As mentioned above, the "new", truly disruptive, feature of the Romanian protest outbreaks – and this seems true for other examples reviewed here – did not lie in the number of participating people. Unions and student organizations had organized large demonstrations before 2012; however, these did not become "civic awakenings." Instead, it was their qualitative features – especially their platformized organization character, the absence of professionally mediated organization, communication, and leadership, and their outspokenly oppositional position, that marked these protests as an important shift in Romania's contentious politics culture.

Another feature that the abovementioned protests have in common is a high degree of diversity with regard to the issues they address, as well as with the demographics of the protesters. The attractiveness of contentious action, as Greene notes, increases in the moment in which

> "[…] all these activists [from different thematic, organizatory, and demographic backgrounds] come together and, for a time, stop talking about their particular grievances and shift their focus to the more universal injustice—and then are joined by thousands of people who had never listened to them before." (Greene, 2013, p. 50f.).

It has been observed that participants in post-socialist mass protests largely stemmed from the younger, well-educated, urban, "hip," liberal middle class strata of society (CeSIP, 2018; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021; Sava, 2016). Take a closer look, however, and what becomes visible is a more complex interplay of different generations of activists and their claims and practices.

As I will elaborate below, in the paper-section, I would argue that both modern and post-modern protest cycles have their dynamics of streamlining, of amplifying certain voices and silencing others, especially in the public field. "Classical" social movement studies themselves streamline what they conceive of as movements, asking for their "principal" issues and demands and focusing the description and categorization of protests around them – while maybe being biased by the rather hierarchical organizational bodies of social movement bases, filtering and mediating their representations through their active personnel, as well as formal media sources. With the appearance of plat-

60 Channell-Justice in this regard also points to the socially embedded practices of (local) self-organization in socialism, informed by Marxist ideals of community management (Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 36). With the disappearance of centralized demand and control of these practices, some people in post-socialist locations might have taken this experience, and the concomitant networks and skills, into further directions (Císař, 2013, p. 139, see also Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 30).

formized protests, a greater diversity becomes visible through the more accessible – and less mediated – platforms of communication/organization, which can also develop unforeseen dynamics of their own, that escape control, of the social movement organizations. Yet as I argued above, social media platforms are of course not free from power structures, and "traditional" mass media still plays a decisive role in directing the images of a protest in the political public, which further impacts the emergence of cyclical or clustered protest actions. While social movement organizations could hierarchically, and unifiedly, control their outside appearance from within, on their own, platformized communication is subject to more subtle and intransparent dynamics of access and visibility, and not least so in ways that serve the monetary interests of platform providers (see Imre & Owen, 2014).

I think we should not deem it pure coincidence that the most visible voices in the present case are those of the young, urban, professional class – i.e., those with the proposedly highest digital literacy and access in society. And it is also not to be mistaken for coincidence that especially anti-corruption passed through all the filters of public representation so prominently – an issue repeatedly used by politicians in their own campaigns, attacking individual opponents, or claiming "the easy way out" of all problems in their electoral programs (see, e.g., Medarov, 2022).

When considering the present case, it is important to have a differentiated view upon civil society in the post-socialist space, as the emerging protest culture seems to mirror this political branch, with self-organizations flourishing and an originary sector of CSOs and parties coming out of it.

5.4. Matching the pieces

Starting from the conceptualization of protest as disruption, we can make use of political difference theory's terms to take a closer look at the processes and dynamics at play. Doing so allows us to see the disruption as a moment of appearance of the political, and as an attack upon hegemonic or hierarchical veiling practices. This moment opens a space of potentials, and thus, if it prevails, leads to a state of liminality, in which the usual flows of politics is disrupted and new ways to aggregate need to be found. These are constituted in association/dissociation dynamics, an ongoing struggle around acknowledgment and action, and limited by and negotiating the horizontally and vertically shaped relations between implicated individuals and collectivities.

Because of the platformization of society in general, however, these collectivities, as well as their orders and repertoires of action, cannot be "solidly" differentiated from one another anymore. The identities of the opposing collectivities are diverse, overlapping, and fluid. The representations they produce are diverse, dispersed, vast, and multi- and intermedial. And neither protest organization nor communication are hierarchically mediated, nor is their timely sequence set. The places of ac-

tion are hybrid, both digital and analogous, and often contain the local and the global all at once. However, resources to use the platforms are not distributed equally among the activists. And the platforms themselves are shaped according to the interest of their providers. Platformization is also an ongoing process. Its fluid realities exist simultaneously to the "old" orders of solid modern organizations of the political public – e.g., the legacy media (see Horak & Spitaler, 2002, p. 198).

Features of platformization are especially relevant in Romania, and also other post-socialist countries with large protest outbreaks. This is partly because the "classical" structure of social movements or contentious politics – developed with evidence from modern, western fields – has no originary roots in post-socialist societies, and the emergence of originary political civil society action was (among other factors) especially boosted by the possibilities platformized organization/communication offers.[61] The larger mechanisms by which the global phenomenon of platformization, the regional particularities of the post-socialist space, and the local level of everyday interaction in Romanian contentious circles are related is not the subject matter of this study. As this project takes on a lived reality perspective, it can be said that they are elements in the particular co-constitution (see Clarke et al., 2015, p. 44) of this reality, as overlapping and intertwined factors for navigating the present moment. I will come back to this approach in the methodology section.

The functionalist and teleological logics of post-socialist transformation studies tended to categorize civil society according to its institutional location, locating it as a strictly outer-institutional instance of mediating formal participation and social aid. It assessed normatively civil society's unpolitical (→ functional) or political (→ dangerous) characteristics. Political difference theory, contrarily, places the theoretical differentiation at the political and contentious character of civil society action, this allows one to analyze it independent of its institutional locatedness and organizational constitution.

Political civil society in eastern Europe, it seems, only becomes visible for scholars when its activists happen to organize public protest events. In some of those cases, it seems, the disruption reaches far enough to lead to a re-formation of the self and of the contentious polity – as was the

61 Until recently, digital activism was often examined without paying much attention to the historical and local contexts in which it evolved, as well as to the interplays of digital and analogous practices (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Some social movement studies do investigate the digitalization and platformization of the field (consider, e.g., the broad reference on digitalized conditions in (della Porta, 2014b)), mostly doing so with a focus on protest organization, participation, and mobilization (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2017; Mercea, 2016), or the effects of platformization on public reportage (Bebawi & Bossio, 2014b; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). At the same time, the interest in researching non-western protest environments seems to be increasing (see, e.g., Gajjala, 2021; Pleyers & Sava, 2015), challenged in part by the critiques of methodological research that problematizes conventional, Euro-American theoretical foundations based in the empirics of West European and North American liberal democracies (critically: Rucht, 2016).

case in Romania since 2012.[62] For this, a number of context factors have already been identified to provide favorable momentum, or an opportunity structure for change. Moreover, existing activist structures, in a moment of "spillover," of intensified networking and mobilization, can facilitate the occurrence of mass contention, and these occurrences can lead a mix of "old hands" and "newbies," thrown together in a moment of undecidedness, to (re-)position and reorient their ways of political implication (Erpyleva, 2023). The disruption is not only brought about by an outside event. The process is self-referential, or self-effective. That means that the emergence of civil society – and especially political civil society – and protest need to be thought in their conjunctions. And if these conjunctions do not function according to mechanisms found in other societal contexts, then they need to be conceptualized anew, to understand the "hows" of the interrelatedness.

I cannot aim to fully resolve that puzzle, or to present a complete image of the disruptive shift of contentious politics in Romania. The scope of this work lies more in making sense of that puzzle, in building analytical frameworks for navigating it – or, to remain with the puzzle metaphor, to collect and order some of its pieces. I believe (and I will argue for this position in the following) that this endeavor is most illuminatingly approached following the meaning-makings – the originary navigation strategies and constitutional causalities – of the people directly involved.

6. Methodology

> Methodology is enacted philosophy. It is ‚philosophical' in that it embodies and stands upon ontological and epistemological commitments. It is ‚enacted' in that it is not satisfied with simply thinking these commitments, but endeavors to apply these ontological and epistemological commitments to concrete questions of how research is conducted. Methodological reflection, then, is about designing prosthetics appropriate to the commitments that ground the researcher and her or his research community. (Jackson, 2006, p. 278)

Both methodology and methods are part of what is most commonly referred to as research design: the overall framing of a project, posing a problem, formulating research questions, explaining theoretical framings, conceptualizing key terms, setting an ethical frame, and settling on methods for data gathering, analysis, and writing (della Porta, 2014c, p. 5; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.7/11; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 20ff.).

For me, doing methodology begins with sharing one's philosophical groundings, establishing common ground for understanding and discussing the research presented. Particular methods, de-

62 Apart from those already mentioned, one could name in this regards the post-soviet „maidan revolutions" of Kyrgyztan, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Belarus (Florez Cubillos, 2015; Ishchenko & Zhuravlev, 2021); the for Fair Elections protests in Russia (Greene, 2013); the feminist/traditionalist protests in Poland (Quelvennec, 2023); the anti-austerity protests appearing all over the region in the 2010's; and also large waves of protest on behalf of environmental issues, anti-corruption, human rights and rights to the city, and traditional values, repeatedly occurring especially in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) (Jaitner & Spöri, 2017; Sava, 2016).

rived from this ground, are the particular ways of enacting knowledge generation. With Hawkesworth, I think that these "groundings" and "ways" are neither uncomplicated, value neutral, nor uncontestable (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 28) – and, thus, need to be reflected and made transparent (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.7/20). Research design is thus something *constructed* by the researcher (Milan, 2014, p. 446).

Ironically, this conceptualization of research design and methodology is already in itself a methodological choice. It mirrors the ontological and epistemological departure from methodological positivism by the "interpretive turn" in the social sciences[63] (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 28; Weldes, 2006, p. 178; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006b, p. xii).

Interpretivism relativizes claims about "the world out there" to "reality as experienced by the perceiver." All observers, according to this view, are inevitably situated within the reality they observes, and their claims about it are interpretations of that world. Those interpretations are "conditioned by cultural perspective and mediated by symbols and practices" (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 28; Weldes, 2006, p. 178). This standpoint emerged with the reappraisal of the colonial history of many disciplines in "western" social science, most obviously in anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology. Other strong influences were the feminist discourse, reinvigorated in the West with the 1960s and 70s peace movement (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 30), the postmodern and post-structural philosophical discourses of the second half of the twentieth century (ibid. 33), and, with that, the linguistic turn, criticizing the theoretical overestimation and ideological exaltation of rational choice theory and the "homo oeconomicus," leading to the establishment of discourse and frame analysis in social science (Lindekile, 2014, p. 195).

Generally speaking, interpretivists conceive of research as an act of *interpreting* or *making sense* of a *research puzzle*. The meanings of world-perceptions, and with it their implications for action, are thought to be socially constructed, that is, meaning is produced, reproduced, and/or altered by individual and collective agents (and not, e.g., by transcendent beings or by following universal, all-embracing rules). This perspective necessitates the acknowledgment of human agency, the human ability to make decisions, and with that of the contingencies and unpredictability of the social world. And it prescribes a research focus on genuine *meanings* and practices of *meaning-making*, striving to *understand* human action in its *constitutive causality* or *practical reason* (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 52, Clarke, 2015, p. 99; Hawkesworth 2006). On this view, the social context human societies produced through history are thought to have a large impact on individual thinking

63 I have to note here that by "the social sciences" I mean a field often framed like a universal, but actually reflecting my own educational biography, as a political science student from Germany. There are certainly manifold conceptions of science and philosophy out there, out of north-western academic culture. Thus, I' d like my references to "social science" or "science," and also the "turns" referred below, in general to be read as "science, as I know it."

and action, thus, meanings and meaning-makings are situated in a thick social context (Bevir, 2006, p. 287; Jackson, 2006, p. 267; Yanow, 2006, p. 10f.). Also, the researcher herself is viewed as such a situated agent within reality, as it can be perceived by human beings and as it is constructed by them. She[64] cannot escape her situatedness within her field of research, she cannot look at it independently, "from the outside" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 37; Yanow, 2006, p. 10). The possibility of grasping any set, "factual" truth is thereby neglected,[65] moving the measures of research quality toward proving its *reflexivity* and "world-guidedness" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 38). Whether objective truth exists altogether remains a subjective notion of belief. Science can be said to have itself an impact on society, and therefore on the lives of people (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 20). That means that the need for reflexivity does not only apply to the scientificalness of research, but also to research ethics and politics: a researcher's theoretical and methodological positioning is, unavoidably, a *political* act,[66] for which she signs her responsibility.[67]

The interpretivist turn thus marks a general departure from positivist ideals and claims of objectivity, and with that, of definite *explanation*, generalizability and replicability, and prognosis. As discussed, interpretivists mostly see their task in *understanding* the complex constructions of social worlds, investigating the situated meaning-makings of agents, reflexively, intertextually, and trustworthily (Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), assessing the "ontological turn" in anthropology and related disciplines, add to that task of *understanding* the elaboration of concepts, or *conceptualization* (ibid.14ff.): to generate ontologically grounded, world-related concepts in order to make intelligible, speak about, and grasp meaning in a complex reality. This intensifies the interpretivist practice of patterning (see below), as it strives not only to find clusters of evidence, or repeating or similar incidences in the fields of research, but also for higher-level criteria by which to assess the phenomena observed, asking one of the central questions of ontological conceptualization: what could this be?

Referring to the key terms elaborated in Section 4, one could say that the term "social movement," as something discerned through historical observation and sense-making, is a pattern. The

64 I decided using female pronouns when necessary, because most of the time, in this text, they refer to researchers, and implicitly to me as a researcher. I neither wanted to deny my own gender identification nor to puzzle the reader by constantly switching...however, I think this question doesn‘ t have a truly satisfying answer yet.

65 For a more detailed theoretical discussion of the possibility of objectively grasping *failure*, building up on Popper‘ s falsification-criterion, see Hawkesworth 2006: 33ff.

66 Yanow states in that regard that this sensibility, combined with the interpretivist notion that all people, not only scientists, make sense of their surroundings, makes interpretivism a more democratic approach to research than the often functionalist practices of ‚real existing' positivism (Yanow 2006: 22f.).

67 A more detailed elaboration of interpretivism's ontological and epistemological stance is to be found in paper 1, p.7ff.

term “contentious politics,” and its elements “contention” and “politics,” in the form presented above, are concepts. McAdam et.al. (see above) set their hermeneutical approach for classifying the practices, claims, and actors in contentious politics against an alleged “universal” definition of things. However, conceptualization, as I understand it here, strives to find criteria that may lead to a particular clustering of patterns, to perceiving them as a group of things – and with that, to make thinkable and intelligible the multiple alternative realities, the other possible group-members, that (would) fit these criteria. The concepts evolving from that endeavor are, follow the epistemological world-view outlined above – and thus of course are no universal, ultimately true etc. determinations of what the things investigated *are*. Rather, they can serve as analytical tools, helping one to make sense of the part of reality studied, from a reflected and transparent point of view.[68] Or, as Mattoni states, (sensitizing) concepts can be understood to “suggest directions along which to look” (Mattoni, 2014, p. 24).

This approach takes in account the possible – but not yet real – alternatives that become thinkable through ontological conceptualization. For example, just think about the political alternatives contained in the concept of an ontological political condition versus the ontic category of an actual state politics. It can also be a reasonable approach to subvert the epistemic “veilings” present in everyday world-constructions, i.e., through language use, structural inequalities in resource distributions and visibility, powerful norms, traditions, path-dependencies, etc.[69]

Thus, the interpretivist/ontological methodological approach serves the objective of this research to shed light on contentious aspects of politics – tackling hierarchic or hegemonic veiling practices – and the inherent possibilities for (political) innovation. At the same time, the search for alternative ways to conceptualize and speak about the complex reality of recent protests and civil society reconfigurations in Romania is a core interest of this project.

This double-approach takes count of the situatedness of research within the reality it studies: Learning about a subject can, at the same time, be a good occasion to think about the ways of learning about it.

68 For a tangible demonstration of the consequences of applying different metaphorical analytical tools in that sense, see (A Phenomenology Collective, 2020).

69 Which is why interpretivist and ontologically turned methodologies are especially popular in critical, and decolonial research approaches – and the associated disciplines (see above, see also (Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007). Some more concrete exemplifications for such veiling practices of international organizations: Kluczewska 2018: 30f.; of state institutions: Nicholas/Hollowell 2007: 60; of internet companies: Bürger/ Dang-Anh 2014: 297, of research financiation agencies: Allina-Pisano 2009: 61.

6.1. Research quality and reflexivity

Reflexivity is one of the most important features of interpretivist research (Bevir, 2006, p. 289). In an interpretivist approach, the researcher must reflect upon her situatedness as a sense-maker and constructor of the world in which she lives her own life (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.2/15; Mattoni, 2014, p. 25; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 39). This includes the admission that even using methods that set her as close as possible to the people she studies, the concepts and patterns she finds do not magically "emerg[e] from the field." Instead, research "findings"are necessarily interpretations actively *made* by a (scientific) agent (Jackson, 2006, p. 267; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 39).[70]

Schwartz-Shea provides an overview of interpretivist criteria for assessing research quality, identifying four "first order" criteria (thick description[71], triangulation[72], trustworthiness[73], and (self-)reflexivity) and three "second order" criteria (informant feedback/member checking, audit, and negative case analysis) for evaluating interpretive research designs (Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

I want to note that Schwartz-Shea denominates "reflexivity" what I would call self-reflexivity, as she connotates it with "a keen awareness of, and theorizing about, the role of the self in all phases of the research process" (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 102). I derive a broader conception of reflexivity from Oberbauer's philosophical differentiation between procedural knowledge and declarative knowledge: Procedural knowledge is the kind of knowledge one needs to enact and repeat an action (Oberbauer, 1997, p. 218). Procedural knowledge is needed only for the practice of reproducing the constructions of social worlds. Declarative knowledge is, following Oberbauer, a secondary form of knowledge, which is obtained when a subject reflects upon her procedural knowledge, namely questions it to adjust actual procedural knowledge and her belief system to one another (ibid.). This in-

70 Some speak in this regard of the "demystifying" effect interpretivist approaches may have upon the societal representations of science (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.2).

71 Thick description "has come to refer to the presence in the research narrative of sufficient detail of an event, setting, person, or interaction to capture context-specific nuances of meaning" (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 101). As Jackson says: to become truly "thick," the "kaleidoscope-view" (by which he means something very similar to what Schwartz-Shea calls triangulation) has to be complemented with a "grounded study of the situation itself" (Jackson, 2006, p. 276).

72 Triangulation or intertextuality refers to the multifacetedness of an investigation. It can be achieved by including and discussing "multiple data sources (persons, times, places), multiple methods of access [...], multiple researchers […] and even multiple theories or paradigms in a single research project […]." (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 102). This should enrich the perspectives at hands for making sense of the puzzle, and declaredly bring to the forth inconsistencies and conflicting explanations to be found in the field (ibid.: 103; see also DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, Ch.1/12).

73 Trustworthiness is "a way to talk about the many steps that researchers take throughout the research process to ensure that their efforts are self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical – that they are, so to speak, enacting a classically 'scientific attitude' of systematicity while simultaneously allowing the potential revisability of their research results." (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 101); Kozinets refers to a similar quality concept as "verisimilitude" (Kozinets, 2015, p. 267). DeWalt and DeWalt add to this some kind of "honesty" factor, taking into account the "real existing" resources and limits to a project (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.7/14).

cludes contemplating the role of the self, but in general it concerns investigating the space of possibilities outside the already known. Thus, in this dissertation I use the term reflexivity in a broader way, containing all the abovementioned quality criteria.[74]

Reflexivity, in this perspective, must be understood as the overall acknowledgment of indeterminacy and contingency, and following upon that, some form of processing that acknowledgment. That is, first, to make the own positionality, assumptions, and definitions transparent to the audience. Second, the methodological framework of a project must fit its particular interest (Schatz, 2009b, p. 313f.). Third, it must be attentive to the indeterminacies, uncertainties, and contingencies experienced in the field, and meet any attempt to unify interlocutors' meaning-makings with skepticism (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 20; Emerson et al., 2011, p. 4,152; Kozinets, 2015, p. 9; Pachirat, 2009, p. 157).[75] And fourth, it must *experience* the field of its study, to immerse and confront the researcher, to expose the self to a different setting than usual – or, at least, to give the self an unusual role in the setting investigated. The first two principles of reflexivity are addressed in this section. The latter two, because they relate more to the gathering and analysis of data, are addressed in Section 7.

The principle of experience means to focus on the lived experience of the people in the field, whatever general classifications may overlap within it:

> […] historically, research data and analysis were conceptualized as centered on the micro (interpersonal), meso (social/organizational/institutional), and macro (broad historical patterns such as industrialization) levels. […] By and large, post-structural theories have abjured this tripartite framework. They argue that this construct […] does not grasp a fundamental feature – that phenomena are co-constituted – produced through the relations of entities at all levels of organizational complexity. That is, social phenomena are nonfungibly all of the above, and analytic focus (both quantitative and qualitative) should instead be on complexities, relationalities, and ecologies – the study of relations explicitly located in space and time (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 44).

74 This is, I think, also what DeWalt and DeWalt have in mind connotating reliability and validity to some convincing properties of scientific work, stemming from "experience and comparison of the writing of others," providing the means to assess "self-reflexive observers, using several different approaches to a phenomenon" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.7/10).

75 Allina-Pisano, in this regard, brings up the universal wisdom that "[…] persons telling the truth under interrogation reformulate their story each time they tell it, producing slight variations in each repetition. In contrast, persons who are lying (for whatever reason) do not: they tell precisely the same story each time, often using the same words" (Allina-Pisano, 2009, p. 70). Interpretivist research approaches are also specifically sensible to power-relations in that regard. If meaning-making is a contested area, the question who, under which circumstances, why and how is able to impose his or her world-interpretations upon others becomes virulent. Moreover, interpretivists consider relevant those "implicated actors" (Clarke, 2015, p. 94) and "silenced discourses" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006b, p. xx) that aren't expressed on the surface of particular events, but make up an important part of meaning-making and, sometimes, resistance.

This does not only apply to categories as micro, meso, and macro, but also to other "general and coherent 'positions' or 'themes'." (Jackson, 2006, p. 272, see also Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 47, Barad, 2010).[76]

6.2. Iteration and abduction

To put the principles of research quality in motion, this research project follows an overarching logic of *abduction*, and is designed following the model of the *iteration cycle*.

Abduction means "to move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it" (Dey 2004, cited in Clarke, 2015, p. 103), tacking back and forth between different perspectives of the subject of research, most prominently, between field experience and theoretical abstraction (Clarke, 2015, p. 103; della Porta, 2014a, p. 231; Mattoni, 2014, p. 28).[77]

Abductive logic can be supported by a research organizational structure organized within an iteration cycle (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.1/12; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 29f.). Within it, different research activities – e.g., preconcept, access, exposure, analysis, conceptualization, writing, and revision – are organized in a helical manner, instituting a regular reflection and adaptation of the research process. Iteration denotes a principle of research progression, deciding on every next step based on what was learned so far, and is therefore open for conceptual and methodological adjustment.

76 Remember in this regard also the conceptualization of processes this work takes on (see above), grounded in Nishida's concept of time, not being understood as an (imagined) linear progress from past to future, through present, but as „the world becoming one single present" captured in a "dialectic of historical life:" "In the historical present, past and future are facing and contradicting each other; out of this contradiction an always renewed world is born […]" (Nishida 1958: 91).

77 Della Porta notes that this kind of reasoning comes actually close to each and every kind of *human* (not technical!) reasoning, as there is a difference between actual reasoning and the analytically distinct categories philosophy formulates (Della porta, 2014b, p. 231).

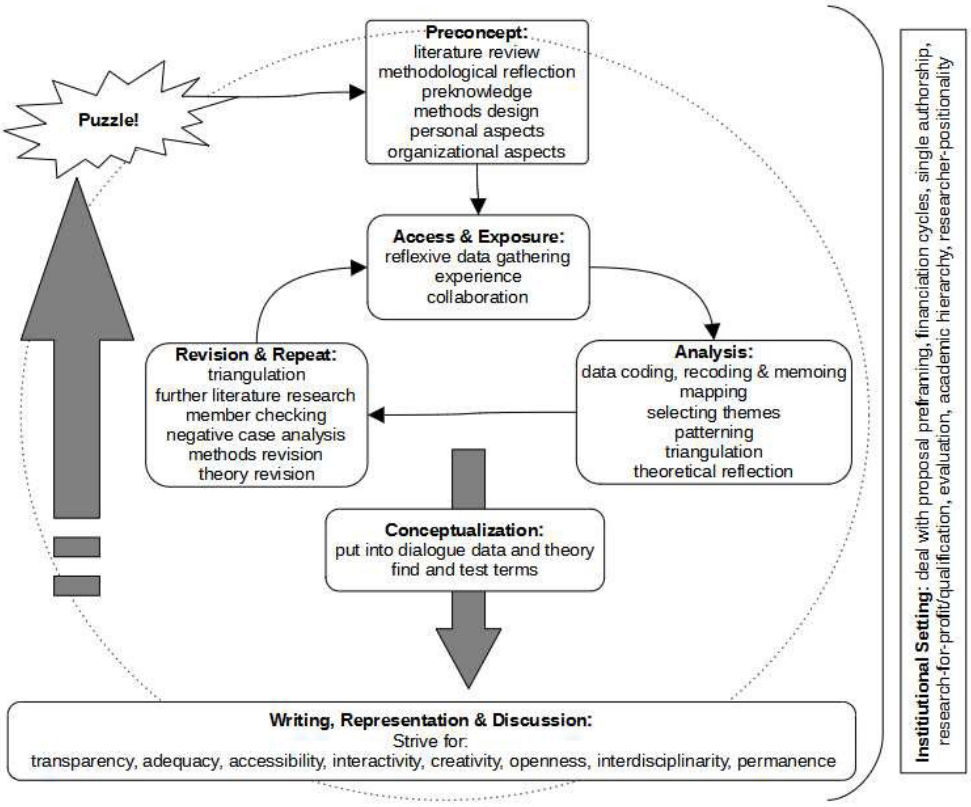

Figure 1: The iteration cycle (own visualization)

I will detail the steps of the cycle in the methods section. However, I want to make one note about "data" here. While the world surrounding us may exist independently from human meaning-making, data does not. Things are only constituted as data by a researcher and a research question (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 79). That means data is not to be conceived of as something laying on the grounds waiting to be *collected* most efficiently. Rather, following interpretivist methodology, data is perceived as a constructed category of entities to be included in a project.[78] With regard to what has been said about triangulation and the co-constitutedness of the lived present, many scholars advise considering a diverse range of things as data (Mattoni, 2014, p. 26f.). Alongside data, the world in which data are embedded becomes "context" only as a consequence of ascribing that characteristic to it by a particular researcher. In this project, I framed as context the "momentum" of disruption and the theoretical quarrels connected to it, as elaborated in Sections 1 and 5. I construed the meaning-makings and meanings my interlocutors ascribed to them as data.

78 Weldes, in this regard, speaks of a "logic of discovery" instead of a "logic of justification" (Weldes, 2006, p. 180).

6.3. Ethics

Referring to the entry of the researcher into the field as “access” and her stay as “exposure” reflects the impact a researcher’s theories and characteristics have upon the field and her scientifical sense-making: What is observed, gathered, and analyzed is a product of interaction between field and researcher (Bosi & Reiter, 2014, p. 117; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 60,71,87).[79]

Followingly, alongside theoretical choices and meeting scientifical quality requirements, reflexive research inevitably has to contain some positioning, regarding the researcher’s and her project’s situatedness. Besides respecting my institution’s criteria for good scientific practice, I reflexively worked on the *ethical* positioning of the dissertation throughout the whole project.

Based on interpretivist, post-structuralist and decolonial methodological literatures, in Paper 1 I developed a fundamental normative criterion for ethical political ethnography research: the striving for *horizontality* between the researcher and the researched, and the researcher and the field (see paper 1, p.14ff.).[80] As the power structures a situated researcher faces are complex, intersectional, and often indissoluble, this practically implies confronting them consciously, taking argumentatively grounded positions toward them, and taking responsibility for these decisions. I will elaborate in the methods section how I implemented this practically.

7. Methods

7.1. Preparing the research

In 2019, when I started my work on this project, three points of entry to the issue interested me. First, the academic literature on the case. The second was my methods training. During my studies in political science, methods courses were largely focused on positivist research approaches and – especially during the work on my master thesis – also upon the hermeneutic methods of (critical) political theory. And while I still did not know *how*, I already knew I wanted to design my doctoral research to be as close as possible to the people I perceived as the real “experts” of my case of interest: the activists implicated in the recent protests in Romania. The third entry point was the activist social media communication/organization I could access from afar. These three elements constituted what I, during my methods training, learned to call a “preconcept”: Compiling a set of things “already known” to (re)iterate further, “front-loading” my project to set up the starting point and methods practices for the investigation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, pp. 56, 101ff.).

79 It is thus something different than what is often referred to as “sampling” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 88): a sample is usually praised for its stability, and for the reproducability of a certain experiment or analysis procedure.

80 There, I also elaborated the concrete aspects to position to, ethically, as found in the literature.

Besides compiling a case-related literature review, which I continued to enrich throughout the whole course of research, I began to follow activist social media accounts, especially on Facebook[81] and blogs, starting with indications from the primary literature review and then "snowballing" to more sites, following paths of shared contents and sites (Eble et al., 2014, p. 130f.; Mosca, 2014, p. 409). At the same time, I took care to find sites unconnected to the initial network, and then followed their paths of sharing and mentioning asf. (Kozinets, 2015, p. 167). Throughout the entire project, I viewed all of the sites occasionally, and documented important or interesting posts on a daily basis.[82] I also broadened the sample spectrum also by following-up on indications from interlocutors, or insights I gained in the field.[83] Ultimately, I used this entry point to find, contact, and keep up with, interlocutors and their collectivities.

Regarding methods training, I delved into the literature on ethnographic (including netnographic[84]) methods (Clarke et al., 2015; Coleman, 2010; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Emerson et al., 2011; Kozinets, 2015; Stiffmann, n.d.), interpretive methodology (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006a), social movement studies (della Porta, 2014b; Filleule & Accornero, 2016; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007), and the field of political ethnography (Horak & Spitaler, 2002; Schatz, 2009a). Additionally, I took practical training attending several methods workshops.[85]

Following this preparation, I adopted a political ethnographic methods approach, including netnographic elements. For the documentation of my research and data analysis I chose to work with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, which is especially adapted to multimedia, ethnographically oriented research.

81 Facebook was, at least until 2017, the most popular platform for Romanian activist communication/organization on social media. Today, it seems a new generation of politically active Romanians is especially active on TikTok – which I did not have the timely resources anymore to follow up on.

82 Which is, due to Facebook's terms and conditions, only possible using the platform's own saving functions, which do not provide any search- and structuring functions however. Also, the algorithmic structure of the platform delimits the visibility of contents so drastically that a whole different methods practice, including an advanced knowledge of the algorithm's functioning, would have been necessary to access and analyze these data systematically (Doerr & Milman, 2014, p. 429). I chose to use the social media field, thus, for orientation, keeping contact with interlocutors, and thickening the data won through direct interaction with them instead (see below).

83 As of October 2024, I follow around 200 individuals with connections to Romanian contentious politics, as well as ~170 public and non-public (upon administrators' consent) activist sites and groups.

84 Netnography is an adaptation of ethnographic methods to digital, or intertwined online/offline spaces (Kozinets, 2015).

85 Concretely, I took part in Janet Salmon's "Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork during COVID 19" NVivo Webinar, on 07.04.2020; Peregrine Schwartz-Shea's and Dvora Yanow's "Interpretive methods clinic" through winter term 2020/2021; the Qualitative content analysis workshop by Margrit Schreier of *Jacobs University Bremen* in January and Feburary 2020; and the "Dependency, Vulnerability and Embodied Fieldwork" program coordinated by Sinah Kloß, *Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies*. I also connected to the "Activist Becomings" research project in political anthropology, led by Judith Beyer at the University of Konstanz, who agreed to act as my mentor in the Plan m mentorship program at the University of Bremen I took part in from 2022-2023, and I became a member of the "Ethnographic Methods in Political Science" DVPW working group in summer 2022.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I developed what I called “manuals” for each research activity. I collected in a table all the aspects relevant to each activity I could find in the literature, including their importance and scope, possible obstacles, and options for enacting and resolving these. Whenever I – through new insights, field experiences, or revisions – changed any of these activities, I updated the respective table, and marked the change with a time stamp – serving the abovementioned quality criterion of audit. Following the same principle, I also set up a preliminary template for my fieldnotes,[86] and, later on, for the collaborative talks held with my interlocutors (see below). I also practiced the data gathering methods I planned to use, especially writing fieldnotes from observation (following Emerson et. al.’s approach (see Emerson et al., 2011)), as well as formal and casual interviewing. For the activities necessitating a stable procedure – e.g., handling the software, anonymizing and pseudonymizing participant data, and also listing the measures to be taken in situations of risk or emergency during fieldwork – I prepared documents I called “how-tos.”[87] I also made a preliminary map[88] displaying the overall field of research and possible directions to take for research when I was elaborating my preconcept (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.5).

It then remained to start reflecting my positionality as a researcher according to its possible impacts on access and exposure, as well as analysis (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.2,6; Shehata, 2006; Yanow, 2009).[89] I conducted systematic reflections of my personal positionality three times throughout the research project: once before my first entry to the field, and another two along the major methods revisions in 2021 and 2022, respectively (see below).[90]

7.2. A disruption: the pandemic and the first methods revision

In early 2020, everything was prepared to start my first field trip to Romania. And this was when, just two weeks before my flight to Bucharest should have departed, the first lockdown of the Covid19-pandemic went into effect. After the initial shock, I decided to use the time to formulate what would have become the methodology chapter of my monographic dissertation. After the presentation of a draft for this chapter to the FSO colloquium in autumn 2020, it became clear that the pandemic would last for a longer, yet unknown, period of time.

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86 Which can also be found in the appendix.

87 A list of manuals, how-tos, and methods logs/revision documents can be found in the appendix.

88 Which can be found in the appendix.

89 I want to note that I included positionality reflection in every fieldnote documentation. In large parts, I had more than one encounter with each interlocutor, thus I did the positionality reflection repeatedly with regard to the same interlocutor. Several authors mention that rapport with interlocutors may change throughout field exposure, and especially with new field entry after longer breaks of exposure (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.3), and I can say that this is true also the other way round, from the perspective of the researcher.

90 I worked out all of these in collaborative situations, two of them at workshops, the other in interaction with my website-project partner, Sergiu Zorger (see below). First products of these were rather prosaic texts, which I then translated upon methods revision to the categories of my manuals and templates.

To be more flexible to the unknown future, I decided to switch to a cumulative style of dissertation and to transform my methodology chapter into a research paper. It was during this time that I discovered how well this theory's terms would fit my purposes if adapted methodologically, and how this could fill a void some political ethnographers have repeatedly decried: a sound political-theoretical grounding for ethnographic methodology (Horak & Spitaler, 2002; Pachirat, 2009). So I took on this quest – to translate the terms of theories of political difference to political ethnography methodology. My first research paper was published in *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* in summer 2022.

During a joint activist venture, I got to know Sergiu Zorger, a documentary filmer from Cluj-Napoca, who in a current film project had interviewed about 60 activists from Romania in the course of 2015 Colectiv protests. Like me, he was interested in a more long-term, in-depth collaboration with his interlocutors, investigating the changes in the countries also with a focus on the lived reality of politically active people. After a couple of brainstorming sessions on the issue, we decided to develop a framework for a "living archive" (see Chidgey, 2020) – an interactive online chronicle of protests in Romania, named "o altă poveste" (another story/ a different story, OAP).[91]

It was only in autumn 2021 that I could – vaccinated, well prepared, and backed by my institution – head for a short stay in Bucharest, mainly to collect some Romanian literature impossible to obtain in Germany.[92] I used this one-week trip for two meetings with interlocutors I had contacted online to test my interviewing and documentation methods and get some preliminary ideas of the data I might obtain from them.

Following up on this, I conducted my first major methods revision. I turned away from the strong "participant observation" style of fieldwork I had initially aimed to follow. Instead, I came to approach the meaning-makings of the interlocutors from their behavior and statements in the real collaborative setting of the OAP project, thus following the ethnographic approach of *fabrication* (Kozinets, 2015).[93]

91 A short project description is to be found in the appendix.

92 Some of the literature mentioned in the literature review section, and especially the products of activist publishing, is published in small local editions, in romanian language. These are sometimes released on paper only, in small quantities. This is also true for quite some Romanian historical and philosophical literature I needed to orient myself regarding the larger context of my research. These books can be obtained only through the Romanian antiquariate catalog, and have to be collected on site.

93 Kozinets refers to fabrication in a double sense, firstly connecting it to the construction of data (see above, Kozinets, 2015, p. 158). What I am referring here to, however, is his concept of fabricating spaces for field interactions, as a very common practice in netnography – e.g., setting up web-platforms or forums to interact with interlocutors, or, as in my case, fabricating a space of collaborative interaction by inviting interlocutors to engage in a joint project (Kozinets, 2015, p. 244ff.).

7.3. Access and exposure

My most direct form of "exposure" was during field stays in Romania where I could talk to activists, observe protests and activist discussion meetings, visit protest sites and civil society locations, and collect activist materials. After my first short stay in Bucharest in November 2021, Sergiu and I went on a field trip together for about two weeks in June 2022. We talked to 12 possible collaboration partners in Bucharest, Timişoara, and Cluj-Napoca, and presented our idea to two activist collectives in Timişoara and Cluj-Napoca. We asked our interlocutors to choose the locations to meet, and met them in cafes, offices, activist spaces, an international activist conference, several discussion meetings, and even beers in a bar. In my third stay, lasting one month between November and December 2022 I had another nine talks, followed up with two interlocutors we had already met in summer, made seven new contacts in Bucharest and Timişoara, and observed one demonstration and a subsequent coordination meeting in Bucharest. In spring 2023, I returned for a three-month research stay, where I conducted an internship program with students from SNSPA Bucharest for our preliminary research for the website, met with five interlocutors in Bucharest and Ploieşti (one new and four follow-up meetings), and observed one demonstration and two public discussion panels[94] in Bucharest. In spring 2024, I returned for another three months to supervise a second group of student interns and to meet most of our interlocutors again for member-checking (see below). In total, over the course oft he project, I documented 30 talks with 21 individual interlocutors.[95] Three talks of these were held digitally, with already known individuals. The talks and their documentation – the recordings and transcripts,[96] fieldnotes, further contact and research indications, as well as the "supplementary materials" – which were used for heading to the interlocutors and preparing the talks, or gifted or recommended to me upon field interactions – build up the core corpus for the analysis of this dissertation.[97]

To access the field – i.e., for fabricating situations of real-life collaboration on our project – we followed a double strategy: first, we used the contacts we already had as consequence to my research and social media activity and Sergiu's work on his documentary. Additionally, based upon our prior

94 I took fieldnotes of these panels, but was not allowed to record. Unfortunately, until today I did not receive the promised official recordings from these events, and they were not published on the organization's website either.

95 I had to cut out four interlocutor cases, four talks respectively, from my data corpus: one because the talk turned out to be a strictly professional interaction (the interlocutor is an academic himself and the talk did not provide any collaborative potential for the website), two because said interlocutors did never reply my request for the member-checking, and one because, after our first encounter, I realized said interlocutor was close to my private circle of friends in Bucharest, which, for me, entailed a conflict of interest.

96 Transcription was not done in a close word-by-word manner. Instead, I marked the overall issues of the talks in the recording file, and came back to these, transcribing them in more detail, after preliminary coding and sorting out the interesting issues for my research.

97 A complete list of the data gathered in this corpus can be found in the appendix.

knowledge about the case, as well as my literature study, we developed criteria to diversify this set of possible conversation partners, to represent a broader range of activist positions for setting up our project and to widen the reach of possible future audiences as well as collaboration partners and users.[98] Throughout the talks, we asked our interlocutors for other people to contact and used our criteria to decide which indications to follow.

Following the "working process" elaborated on our website, the set of communication partners was determined by their resources and readiness for collaboration in the first phase of our project. Consequently, most of our discussion partners came from well-networked, highly implicated backgrounds. It is important to state that this set of data cannot thus be used to understand the public meaning-making of "ordinary2 protesters, but must be analyzed as the (collective) meaning-makings of a special part of Romanian civil society: those implicated political activists with a connection to the protests.

However, even within these delimitations we found a diverse group of people and positions:[99] interlocutors were or still are active in thematic fields as diverse as environmental issues, anti-corruption, legal system issues, feminism, local development, mutual help and self-organization, social science and journalism freedom, education politics, culture politics, health, refugee assistance, minority rights, economic critique, EU-related issues, civil society development, football fandom, and others. Their reach goes from globally networked activism to neighborhood organization. While some founded new parties, others seek to abolish the state and the capitalist economic system per se. We talked to people from their early 20s to their late 60s, from the capital and from smaller towns. Our interlocutors were largely part of the socioeconomic middle class and had higher education.[100] They were also active in the field in protest organization; promotion and mobilization; campaigning; funding coordination; political education; enacting flashmobs, occupations, and activist arts; civic counseling; lobbying; civil society research and administration; IT-development; documentation; self-organization and organization building; networking; and publishing.[101]

98 The criteria can be found in the appendix.

99 A list of interlocutors can be found in the appendix.

100 These are, however, not selection biases, but display a reality of especially long-term activism: being located in urban spaces, and having higher education and a higher income compared to the average, seem to be prerequisites for being capable to engage sustainably in civil society action (Sava, 2016).

101 I could, by now, not talk to the ideological extreme right, or activists of the ultra-traditionalist scene. This is, first, because the access to these kinds of circles, having in mind our positionalities, is hard to obtain. On the other hand-side, in the first stage of our project, we decided to exclude positions from our co-creative endeavor whose representations feature hate speech and/or xenophobia, as we want our project to stay within the limits of basic human rights. On the next stage of our project, for the setup of a documentary historiographical base of materials before launch, we are going to include these scenes, as they make part of a reality we are trying to investigate. Another significant void in our set of contacts by now are members of Roma communities. There were comparedly few paths towards these collectivities, which, upon directly research-oriented purposes, however, I decided not to follow yet. This has to do with the reflection of my positionality, concerning the sensible (or to say it frankly: dreadful) history of German ethnographic research in Roma collectivities especially during the Nazi era. On behalf of the project per

Before first entering the field, Sergiu and I developed a template for the collaborative talks,[102] which we refined individually upon preliminary research about each interlocutor's particular activities and the matching points we saw with our project. We used this to conduct the talk, as well as for documentation and further collaboration. We always asked interlocutors about their own reconstruction of and perspective on the protest cycles, the civil society networks they were situated in, and the networks and groups they perceive as being part of civil society, but outside their own activity context. We always presented to them our project idea and asked for feedback, collaboration interest and opportunities, and agreed to stay in contact. We also always asked who else we should talk to in order to further our project in their opinion. Apart from these topics, we sometimes asked more specific questions based upon our research. The talks lasted between one and five hours. Oftentimes, interlocutors took us to places they found relevant for their work, invited us to group meetings, artistic places and events, or discussions. They also shared online spaces, as group sites, blogs, or digital activist projects with us.

The collaborative talks, other than classical interviews, allowed me to get a very realistic insight into the interlocutors' working processes, their networks, groupings, internal relations, and meaning-makings of the events. The talking situation was a highly interactive one, allowing me to move out of the "interviewer" role, approaching our interlocutors from a position of proposing an idea to them, and seeking feedback, advice, and collaboration instead. We often found ourselves more interviewed by the interlocutors than the other way round and sometimes (heated) debates occurred. The talking situations were highly dependent on our interlocutors' interests and perspectives. This way, we got to know their originary focus of action and their practical relatedness to the protests, and sometimes the talks moved in directions one could have never foreseen.

In all field interactions, interlocutors were informed about my parallel research work from the very beginning, and all of our individual conversation partners agreed to our recording of the talks. The fieldnotes and transcripts were fed into the Nvivo project and anonymized and pseudonomized for further analysis.[103] The templates for anonymization and pseudonymization, as well as the origi-

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se, we are working on establishing that contact. A third void lies at very young activists, organized at schools, in pupil's organizations, and on TikTok, whom we did not find any access to by now, as there seems to be a generational gap in activist networking. This also holds for contentious collectivities in small rural localities, and for people in economically precarious situations. All of the groups mentioned in this footnote are, however good or bad one evaluates that fact, not part of the very network I investigated in this piece of research.

102 Which can be found in the appendix. The collaborative talk template was only fully used in first meetings with interlocutors. When meeting interlocutors repeatedly, I sometimes followed up on some of the question discussed in the first talk, asking for more details or statements on particular aspects of the issue. In these meetings, we also spoke about the conduct of our individual collaborations and gave updates on our works.

103 Besides our direct interlocutors and their collectivities, this was also done for any persons and groups mentioned during our talks. I repealed anonymization, with consent of the respective interlocutors, for two case examples presented in paper 3, as, this way, I could connect my elaborations with publications of theirs regarding the issue of the paper.

nal list of interlocutors, their collectivities and social media accounts, were saved on a password-protected, offline data carrier, which will be destroyed after completion of the publications. After working out my data analysis, and writing up my first versions of my empirical research papers, I returned to my interlocutors for member checking. This included formally confirming informed consent using my institution's informed consent form, adapted and translated to Romanian for this project. For those interlocutors whose statements I directly used in citations, paraphrases, or field vignettes, or whom I cite using their pseudonym to prove particular statements made in my papers, I have compiled a separate sheet with the interpretations as presented, alongside with the direct citations from my transcripts, which I discussed with them, and adapted on their demand. This procedure complies to the abovementioned quality criterion of member-checking. All research papers have been, or will be, published under open access, including this introductory chapter which will be accessible online, via *Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Bremen*.

After my stay in Romania in the spring 2023, I had to end data gathering for the present project and start to turn to my final analysis. Interpretive research puzzles do not have ultimate solutions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 30). However, a researcher has to decide to end the process at some point in time, when she feels that the "categories elaborated during the research are sufficient to gather and analyze more data without the need to modify them any further." (Mattoni, 2014, p. 29). This was the case with the conceptualizations I wanted to elaborate, which became clear after some loops of coding and re-coding samples of my material. Additionally, of course the institutional timeline of my doctoral research also helped make this decision as my funding was limited.

My repeated field entries and interactions with interlocutors in different settings, as well as my collaboration with Sergiu and the multimediality of data gathering and documentation further served the goal of triangulation according to thick description guidelines (see above). The methods revisions, and their documentation, as well as the detailed explanations in the present and previous sections, take account of the criterion of trustworthiness. My personal reflections, the continuous and twice-over systematic contemplation of my researcher role and its impact on my field and my research, were designed to fulfill the criteria of (ethical) self-reflexivity elaborated above.

7.4. The second methods revision

After the joint research stay, Sergiu and I revised the template and processed the further contact and research indications, for use in my further work during my alone stays. We also carefully processed our interlocutor's ideas and feedback regarding the preliminary structure of our website, and worked out a second version of our project structure and presentation. During my second general methods revision, I reflected and adapted my role as a researcher in the field and reflected the re-

stricted field of vision coming from the outside. I also compared my preknowledge before the first field entry with the impressions I got from the two on-site exposures so far. After completing this revision, I refined my practice of positionality reflection by introducing relational categories, corrected some flaws in my first preknowledge compilation, and started reading more about the hegemonic aspects of platform communication as well as media and academic representations of protests.

7.5. Analysis

I started data analysis in the field, collecting, mapping, and patterning ideas in memos (see Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172ff.), which I used for further field exposure, and ultimately included in the extensive analysis process. I also tested several criteria for mapping the protests – timely, thematically, with regard to the particular activist or civil society networks involved – with regard to their core issues or ideological stance, organization styles, movement character, and personal interconnections. These helped guide my fieldwork and carve out my conceptualizations, but they did not bring to light any new insights for feasible civil society mapping per se (apart from the organizational and thematical clusters I had already found present in the literature.)

One insight though was the limits of the network of activists I was studying, as they had very few connections with far-right, roma, and very young (~under 20) activist collectivities (see Footnote 101). There was also a certain difference of density of relatedness between activists of similar versus different ideological orientations (frankly, activists identifying as leftists and those refusing any ideological positioning, see also Paper 2). These insights were useful for orienting my field research, but need to be further verified by studies aimed at providing representativity. Moreover, I patterned the interlocutors' reconstructions of the cycles of protests to provide a chronological overview, which I offer in Paper 2.

I used the iterative style of successive "open," "selective," and "focused" coding loops to narrow the analytical focus, and subsequently thickened the selected themes with supplementary material (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 175ff.; Mattoni, 2014, p. 30ff.).[104] For the two empirical papers, I also tested a "negative case," i.e., the established categories proposed by Tilly and Tarrow, concretely, patterning my material for thematic claims and organizational categorizations. This endeavor, however, resulted in leaving aside the larger part of the data as these categories did not play a major role in my interlocutors' statements (see also Papers 2 and 3).

104 Proposing a very similar procedure, but using a slightly different terminology, see also (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.10).

7.6. Writing and discussion

Reflexivity, as mentioned above, is a ubiquitous and continuous requirement for interpretive research – including the writing up of scientific papers. After my methods revisions, I regularly thought about the positionality of the products of my research and confronted them with the quality and ethics standards elaborated above. The most categorical revision to my initial methods approach in this regard was setting up the website project: an alternative collaborative, non-linear, and flowing way of knowledge creation and publishing. For the website project, I understand my role not as a scholar producing knowledge, but as a scholar using my resources and training to facilitate embedded knowledge creation. In contrast, the papers seek to communicate the findings of my research – mainly the conceptualization of activist meaning-making – to my academic colleagues, contributing to the perpetual enhancement of social science research.[105]

7.7. Methods assessment

With my methods choices elaborated, I strove to put into practice the principles formulated in the research design section. They were arranged according to the iteration cycle, using an abductive style of reasoning. With the multimedia material, in-depth examination, and subsequent complementation of data, thick description was enacted. Repeating and prolonged field stays, combining different entry points, sources, and ways for documentation, collaborating with a colleague on one of the data gathering elements, tacking back and forth between theory and experience multiple times, triangulation, and experience were ensured. I documented all steps of research, defined my key terms, made my basic assumptions and methodological stance transparent, and elaborated in detail the methods practices conducted for providing a trustworthy contribution. Moreover, I routinely, systematically, and self-reflexively reviewed and adapted my methods and my personal position as a researcher. An audit of the research conduct is possible using my traceable documentation of methods practices, in manuals, templates, and how-tos, as well as revision documentations and codebooks. Member-checking was conducted with the individual interlocutors and negative case analysis during the coding process.

The fundamental principle of reflexivity, furthermore, allows one to adapt methods and ethics decisions appropriately to the field and the researcher, while assuring scientifical rigor.[106] The inter-

105 And, this way, to prove my worthiness of being officially introduced into the academic community, obtaining a doctoral degree.

106 For example, with regard to my German origin, some interlocutors welcomed a „western European being interested in what is going on in Romania“, others viewed very skeptical my actual interest in collaborating with them, even confronting me with the fact that their invested time and labor will, at least on short term, foremostly help me and my academic career back home. I reflected this ethical dilemma in my second methods revision (see appendix), positioned towards it, and communicated my position to interlocutors.

pretivist approach enables one to look behind the outward representations of the collectivities studied, enabling a critical analysis of these representations and the power structures behind them. This is especially important with regard to the more opaque, hegemonic structure of platforms and the necessity of revising historically won categorizations in social movement studies.

An interesting phenomenon I observed in some of my interactions with interlocutors was that many tended to say they were disappointed, exhausted, and pessimistic with regard to their activities. In short, that so much effort was made, and so little had changed. When talking about the progression of events in more detail, however,, this often changed. Some interlocutors' faces lightened up, others began enthusiastically telling stories, some even thanked us after the talk for giving them the space to remember the energy of this time and the actual changes it made possible.

Doing member-checking, including formalizing informed consent only after data gathering, is a risky and indeed work-intensive task. However, I highly recommend this this order in particular situations. First, especially with more skeptical interlocutors, I would not have had the in-depth talks I did if I confronted them first with a three-page, legal form. A primary function of these forms is to secure the researcher and her institution legally, and especially politically well-informed and critical interlocutors will take offense at this. Moreover, this way, I was able to provide my interlocutors with some degree of control over the published outcomes of the research process – as they gave their consent to a product of our work and not to the alleged credibility of a person they did not know in advance. Also, the final meetings allowed me to offer them my scientific interpretation of their statements, which was welcomed with interest by many of my interlocutors. And, last but not least, the procedure allowed me to correct mistakes I made during transcription[107] or interpretation.[108] Some of the discussions we had at these final meetings were enlightening and opened up paths for further research. And even if I had to remind some interlocutors multiple times to meet, in the end only two of 19 people did not respond to my requests at all.

8. Findings

8.1. Patterns

I argue that thematic and organizational categorizations of contentious action are relevant for clustering protests and civil society collectivities following their public representations – i.e., the organizations they create, the campaigns they conduct, the protests they announce, etc. Sometimes,

107 Recordings were hours of sometimes agitated, overlapping talk in an additional language, sometimes with music playing in the background.

108 For example, sometimes interlocutors asked me to add context to their statement, to ask someone else to verify an information, or to narrow their statement I used in a too general sense in their opinion. Some also made subsequent corrections to memories they had shared – e.g., having researched the exact year of an event after our talks, etc.

when organizational and thematic orientations overlap for a larger group of collectivities and protest events, this can also lead to their reclassification as a movement (see above). However, these categories were not central in my interlocutors' meaning-makings and motivations for action, and they did not capture their often fluid and overlapping political identities, the complex relations and interactions within the field, and the depth of reflexivity my interlocutors showed in handling the tensions of the diversity of alternatives and making decisions within the complex field of political civil society.

One exception to this was the thematic discourse of my interlocutors about anti-corruption. This has already been stated in the literature (Stoiciu, 2021) and underlined by my interlocutors' statements: The thematic focus of public protest representation – latest after the Colectiv incident of 2015 – narrowed down to a strong anti-corruption frame, connected also to anti-communist, and pro-European protest narratives driven by digitally literate and very visible civil society organizations (see also Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021).

However, some of my interlocutors complemented this finding mentioning also exclusionary tendencies on part of some anti-corruption activists (especially toward rural, poor, and colored parts of the population, (see also Deoancă, 2017), as well as institutional interferences and public instrumentalization of the anti-corruption frame by individual politicians or parties. The power dimension inherent to these notions is again not captured well in the purely thematic categorization of the protests. Consequently, after the submission of this thesis, I will elaborate on these power dimensions together with a Romanian colleague. Therein we will combine my findings with her media analysis of the case.

To approach the overall absence of thematic claims and organizational bases in the statements of my interlocutors, I selected codes related to the association/dissociation dimension of political sensibility, as proposed in Paper 1, building a theme for focused coding. This allowed me to identify five political entities toward which my interlocutors commonly positioned themselves when talking about the protests. These included associating/dissociating with the realm of "institutional politics," delimiting the historical framework of "the protests," locating the cultural/political/geographic/economic construct of "Romania," as well as the politics field of "civil society," and differentiating the multitude of subgroups it contains. These patterns grounded my conceptualization of political positioning during the disruptive protests which I propose in Paper 2.

In the second round of coding, I employed the analytical dimension of acknowledging and acting, i.e., the abovementioned tension between the contingency and undecidability of the political condition and the concurrent necessity to make decisions. For this, I selected and arranged the

coded material I found dealing with or signaling openness toward other political positions than their own, internal processes for coming to group decisions, as well as the deeper, reflexive notions many of my interlocutors provided themselves about the undecidabilities, and the often transversal character of contentious political action. Many of my interlocutors stated that they saw discussion, even conflictual ones, as an intrinsic value of activism. Some also mentioned ideas regarding "civic ecosystems," deeming a diverse composition of civil society important for fulfilling its role of being a truly contentious space. I then selected and patterned the practices of my interlocutors enacting (or deliberately denying) this kind of political openness. Thickening these with supplementary material, what showed was a great difference between the unity of public action announcements and a celebration of political discussion in activist spaces. Another pattern in the material was their in-depth reflexivity about the tensions of political action – about when to discuss and when to decide; whom to include and where to set the limits; how to arrange these spaces of politics; how to communicate discontent; when to collaborate with and when to confront more powerful actors; etc. For finding and analyzing these patterns, I proposed the concept of creating political spaces in Paper 3.

8.2. Concepts

In my first research paper, using a methodological interpretation of political difference theory's concepts, I identified three dimensions to be applied in political ethnographic research design. Drawing an analogy with scholarship on fostering an "ethnographic sensibility" (Jourde, 2009), I called this "political sensibility." Its three dimensions include: first, the political association/dissociation dimension, second, the acknowledging/acting dimension, and third, the verticality/horizontality dimension.

My second research paper – currently under review at *Europe-Asia Studies* – examines and thickens the patterns found in the association/dissociation dimension, I proposed the analytical concept of *political positioning.* The term implies a directionality, positioning takes place *toward* something. So, using political positioning as an analytical tool means searching for those common points of reference. This makes possible an understanding of the field according to the particular ways of locating the self toward that entity. This includes the historically frequent positionings toward claims and organizations. With regard to the disruptive character of the protests, many of my interlocutors entered an especially intense phase of positioning. An interesting point of departure for further research would be to ask how these points of reference for political positioning are determined at the collective level. Moreover, what was striking during my analysis was the impossibility of clearly distinguishing association and dissociation from one another in my interlocutors' statements. Instead, both activities interpenetrate one another, somewhat dialectically. For example, some inter-

locutors talked about striving to be acknowledged as a legitimate actor on the stage of institutional politics, while at the same time dissociating from its structure. Or they took part in protests in a somewhat observing function, to react to them with their activist group.[109] To express these interpenetrations, I settled on the form „association/dissociation.“ I think that this finding needs further theoretical and empirical attention. This is also true of the abovementioned tendencies for modernist identity assignments in the theory.

My third research paper is being readied for submission to *Social Movement Studies.* In the paper, I discuss some concrete examples from my acknowledging/acting patterns and set them in perspective with the abovementioned conceptualization of contentious politics by Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam. I identify two concrete voids this conceptualization leaves for interpreting my data: first, their definition does not leave much room for political discussion *within* the field of contentious politics. Second, it cannot display differences in the depth of contention, i.e., the differentiation of contentious politics tackling particular policies or polities, in favor of a predefined other program, from the more general and processual resistance towards powerful practices of veiling (see above). Because of these voids in the conventional conceptualization, I proposed the conceptualization of a practice I named “creating political spaces.” Drawing on the abovementioned differentiation of political and apolitical politics, this practice implies analyzing contentious practices for their position toward the tension between undecidability and necessity to decide, i.e., looking for their practices of acknowledging contingency and making decisions. This could help 1) to refine the delineation of “democratic” versus “antidemocratic” contentious politics, apart from ideology-focused or normative conceptualizations[110] and 2) to adjust the differentiation of “activist” versus “participant” with regard to postmodern platformized organization/communication styles.[111]

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109 Some concrete examples for the dialectic character of association/dissociation: Some interlocutors reported to find themselves being members of collectivities they actually dissociate from, e.g., the Bucharest activist “scene” or “bulă” (bubble): While fitting this space in their demographic characteristics (being part of the upper middle class, having studied, and being middle-aged and based in the capital), being densely networked and having found their activist allies within it, they still strive to depart from it, questioning its rightfulness altogether for its perceived elitism and exclusionary, self-centered constitution. Another example, inversely, is that some interlocutors from camps opposed to the anti-corruption *movement*, on ideological terms, deliberately associate to it on its main claim, anti-corruption. Also, active dissociation can bring collectivities together both in terms of physical space and in terms of exchange of ideas and knowledge, as is the case most obviously when looking at the movements and counter-movements regarding LGBTQI and women’s rights. Moreover, divergent collectivities can be dependent on each other or share resources while acting on behalf of completely different or even preclusive causes.

110 As mentioned above, with its disruptive character, or “misbehavior,” political contention in the first place can always be said to constitute a political moment. There is, however, a difference between collectivities which constitute such moments on behalf of an own, relatively narrow alternative, and those who tackle or resist powerful veiling of alternatives, or exclusion of potential polities, per se. Moreover, the positioning of a collectivity towards political difference can also be mirrored in their internal decision processes (see Paper 3).

111 Drawing upon, e.g., Rancière’s differentiation of “police” and “politics” (Rancière, 1999), one could derive a differentiation of “doing” politics from “acting” politically, in the contentious realm, connecting political agency to an actual navigation of abovementioned tension.

9. Conclusion

Viewed from the perspective of theories of political difference, outbreaks of protest are a disruption of the status quo in (institutionalized) public discourse. In short, what becomes visible is the very possibility of questioning everyday politics and the potential existence of alternatives to the status quo. Such a situation may activate people to not only join in, but also to consciously (re)orient their political position.

Referring to Romania's outer-institutional civil society landscape from a historical perspective, my interlocutors broadly referenced three precursor streams. First, there are what social movement studies would call classical SMOs (Mercea, 2016, p. 101 ff.) that traditionally facilitate the gathering, thematic orientations, mobilization and organization of protest activity. Typical examples are unions, student organizations, local associations, etc. Especially unions and student organizations organized larger protest activities in Romania throughout the 90s; however, they remained relatively punctual and had a limited mobilization reach.

Second, since the revolution and the following violent mineriads, Romanian civil society – especially with regard to the management of financial resources – was largely determined by foreign international NGOs, first from the US and later from mostly EU countries (Tătar, 2022; Volintiru, 2021). Scholars have long considered this part of Romanian civil society exclusively focused on social care (Nistor, 2016), and thus, in the terminology used here, unpolitical.

Third, there have always been traditionally self-organized groups in Romania, some of them bound to international social movements. Some examples are the organized football fan-scene that – beyond the explicit leisure activities – always also had a political agenda (see also Guțu, 2012); the "alter-activist" (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019) and anarchist scenes with strong international and especially regional connections to the Balkans and the historical region of Bucovina; peer groups of the '89 revolutionaries and the artists that kept doing civic activities mostly on the local level; and circles of the historical liberal, monarchist, and far-right (legionary) movements of Romania that regathered after the revolution (Gabanyi, 1998). All of these groups, while not the most visible in the post-2012 massive protests, played a role in triggering, informing, supporting, mobilizing, and criticizing the protests – imprinting their traditions at least partially on the newly evolving field of contentious politics.[112]

112 For example, the first events being perceived as being something "new" were small public activities organized by alter-activist groups (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019). Ultra-groups appeared in my interlocutors' narrations as early "teachers" of the movement. One interlocutor describes how fan-groups came to University Square in 2012 to train the otherwise rather uncoordinated, quiet crowd to chant slogans together – as she put it: "they trained us [sings]: toooo – sing – iiiin – a rhyyythm" (RA). The revolutionary and artists' peer groups I found referenced as nodes of potential local contentious networks, as well as advisors and reference points for newcomer activists. Some of them were also active in local politics or large NGOs, building a contact point to these institutional resources as well. An-

These three streams of contentious collectivities in the recent history of Romanian civil society influenced the "new," originary part of civil society that reaggregated from the disruption of the mass protests. At the same time, the "new" phenomenon transformed the branches of historical civil society too, leading toward a new constellation of actors in the field, and new dynamics in the ever-ongoing process of collective political positioning.

What is "new" about this dynamic is not very easy to grasp. No final examination is possible in an ongoing, complex, societal process like this. However, what is striking is the congruence in describing the phenomenon as a rupture in the academic literature (e.g. Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017; Tătar, 2022) and, importantly, in in my interlocutors'statements (see Paper 2). The communication/organization shift, the active resistance toward picking leaders throughout the protests, and the high priority given to personal agency expressed by my interlocutors, could lead to an understanding of the process going on as the emergence of an originary, self-efficient, and self-sustaining political civil society in Romania. I argue further that the mass protests are simultaneously an expression and a driver of this development, opening up a space of liminality and constituting a phase of intense political reorientation.

The environmental movement used its existing base to facilitate protests and mobilize in the post-2012 era. In this way it broadened its reach and visibility. The anti-corruption movement constituted itself by creating multiple professionalized organizations – momentarily reaching an astonishing mobilizational force, but also being subject to subsequent demobilization, and institutional interferences.[113] Traditionally self-organized groups, while present at the protests and early sparking public attention, have largely since retreated from them. The formerly dispersed far-right has unified, linking the Romanian legionary traditions to a global network of identitarian and alt-right movements. More recently, one can observe the increasing participation and engagement of especially young Romanians in contentious actions over gender rights and feminism, as well as an increase in the readiness of Romanians to strike.[114]

To grasp these open-ended, multi-directional, and complex processes of reaggregation, as experienced and interpreted by the people involved, this dissertation aimed at developing interpretivist

other influence in the protests were members of the monarchist, nationalist, and extreme right branches of Romanian civil society. Their presence was, by my interlocutors, sometimes referenced as a challenge for negotiation, sometimes as an interesting confrontation of ideologies, sometimes a somewhat curious incidence, sometimes as a cause not to attend protests anymore oneself (LA, AI2, AA1).

113 An obvious example of such tactics is the presidential campaign of Klaus Iohannis: Titled "Together for a normal Romania," it clearly took up on the anti-corruption focus of the last bigger wave of mass demonstrations (OUG13 and 10 August), and enforced the personalized blame directed to the PSD and their leading figures, drawing upon lingering anticommunist sentiments.

114 The last two years have seen, for example, a prolonged general strikes of education personnel, several farmers' strikes, and several strikes and campaigns in the logistics and transports branches. A map displaying actual strikes in the country can be viewed here: https://taramunciiieftine.ro/ (15.10.2024).

concepts for a politically-focused methodology appropriate to the lived presents of Romanian activists, which could take into account the platformized style of communication/organization impacting the overall process. All in all, repeating mass protests can lead to a broader disruption in the flow of political culture construction, creating moments of liminality, moments where everything is open and might be constructed anew. Differentiating between what can be seen from the outside of a protest outbreak and what activists experience, and being sensible to the factors constraining visibility, can enhance the study of the actual transformations of contentious politics on the ground.

Studying the meaning-makings of my interlocutors and simultaneously reflecting on how I did this, I translated some theories of political difference into an applicable analytical tool for political ethnography research. These were tested and refined in dialogue with the data gathered, leading to my conceptualization of political positioning and a practice of creating political spaces.

My contribution, responding to the leading questions of this dissertation, can thus be summarized the following: the emergence of the mass protests led many politically interested or engaged Romanians to intensely reflect, discuss, and collectively deliberate their political positions. They do so referring to the historical and geographical locatedness of their country and its institutions; the role of political civil society; and the composition of contentious stances, action modes, and organizations. "The" protests are constructed by them as a common point of reference, according to a set of timely, practice-related, and content-wise characteristics activists associate to them. Moreover, many activists reflect and engage in genuinely *political* contentious action, celebrating and facilitating a diversity of stances, actions, and issues, and enhancing in-depth reflection and political skills. For researching the open-ended, liminal, and complex field such endeavor opens, political difference theory may be employed. Its theoretical dimensions – association/dissociation, acknowledgment/acting, and horizontality/verticality – can be translated methodologically, to what I called "political sensibility." Simultaneously, they can be used as analysis tools for conceptualizing the observed political fields.

The concepts I identified may lead further research – paying more attention to some gaps in commonly used social movement studies' terminology, namely the actual reference points around which political collectivities and positions aggregate apart from organizations and claims; as well as the internal processes of discussion and decision-making within contentious fields of politics. Apart from testing the third analytical dimension worked out in my first research paper, i.e., the horizontal/vertical dimension, the method seems especially suitable for refining, or redefining, the theoretical distinctions between "antidemocratic" and "democratic" contentious politics, as well as between "activists" and "participants" in it. The field of creating political spaces is vast and certainly de-

serves further scholarly attention and political practice. This is underlined by a recently emerging field of scholarship that investigates the phenomena of “democratic innovation” (Fiket et al., 2024) or “subterranean politics” (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013).

Additionally, the overall shifts post-modernity brings about leads to a broad general assessment of the modes and presuppositions of doing social science research. This is an ongoing and ambitious project. Maybe, in a few years, web-platforms or workshop series will be reknown as dissertation theses. Concepts as the living archive and the likes, until then, will be further experimented with, and with OAP I began being part of this development.

The liminal experiences my interlocutors gathered during the recent disruptions through orienting themselves within a complex field and finding their own position within it, could be said to be a fertile ground for acquiring political skills, of conflict and tension tolerance, facing undecidability and contingency, and finding one’s way through it while making decisions together. The post-socialist transformation experience, the openings and closings of the political window in its course, have also triggered thought and practices tackling the role of contentious politics in a functioning democracy – undermining fundamentally the notions of neoliberal democracy theory. At least for part of my interlocutors, these experiences are intensely reflexive. One could come to acknowledge this political consciousness as another post-socialist “legacy” of its own.

Research Papers

Paper 1: Interpreting the Political, Politicizing Interpretation: Doing Politically Sensible Social Science Research

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The article outlines a methodological concept of political sensibility, building upon the political difference theory. Merging the ideas of the associative and dissociative theoretical branches of political difference literature, first, an integrated framework of the political condition is presented. From this, analytical dimensions are derived, namely, the associative/dissociative, the political/apolitical/contentious, the static/processual, and the vertical/horizontal dimensions of the political. Second, the interpretive and ontological turns in social science are conceptualized, according to this framework, as a politicization of science. Taking this motion further, third, ideas to enact a politically sensible science are developed along the methodologically turned dimensions (merging the second and the third to an acknowledging/acting dimension). A political sensibility could deliver analytical categories to look upon political phenomena beyond structurally limited conceptions of "politics." Methodologically, it could ease designing *situated* social science research, that is, research that consciously conceives of itself as part of the social realities it studies.

Keywords: political sensibility, political difference, interpretivism, ontological turn, reflexivity, research ethics, power-reflexivity

As a political scientist being interested in protest and civil society activism, trying to interact directly with interlocutors always seemed quite an intuitive methods approach to me, as movements and mobilization nowadays unfold within peoples' lived experiences and often do not produce any representational and/or official documentation of their own. Thus, I delved into the field of political ethnography. Its authors regard their scholarly activities as approaching politics with a so-called *ethnographic sensibility* (see, for example, Jourde, 2009), putting an emphasis on *experiencing* fields of research and inquiring "lived experiences and meaningmaking practices" of their inhabitants (Fu & Simmons, 2021, p. 12; see also Emerson et al., 2011; Wedeen, 2009). Ethnography, in this view, denominates a certain processual *quality* of doing research, of formulating a research interest, of approaching fields and people, and of representing reality (see Schatz, 2009a, 2009b), rather than a distinct set of methods.

As much as I came to like that approach, starting to reflect a little deeper two things came to puzzle me about it: First, why to do an ethnography as a political scientist, without any of the training

* I reserved to correct spelling mistakes and suchlikes, identified upon recent examination.

and experience ethnologists and anthropologists have? Or: How could my discipline add anything to that project? And second, is political ethnography understood correctly as doing ethnography *on politics* (thoughtfully: Pachirat, 2009, p. 143f.)? If ethnography is not only an ontic endeavor, what could be the quality of the *political* in political ethnography? Is there something like a *political sensibility* to be applied in doing research?

Interpreting the Political

What's the area of responsibility, the "discipline," of political science? The textbook that was used in my master's program says: The "scientifical" (i.e., "distanced" and "objective") study of *politics* (Stykow et al., 2010, p. 15). Most commonly, politics is conceptualized as the entities of the state and its institutions (etatistic concepts), the arts of governing (governmental concepts),[115] or the totality of human action related to the struggle for power[116] and control (power-concepts) (Vollrath, 1989; see also Hawkesworth, 2006). These conceptions are reflected in a disciplinary focus of political science research toward the study of "high data" (Weldes, 2006) or "government documents"—that is, the official manifestations of powerful politics actors—historically rooted in a perpetuated "western" political philosophy (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006a).[117]

This could be said to problematically narrow the field of political science: Evidentially, it marginalizes the study of contentious and non-institutionalized politics.[118] Put differently, it reduces political science research to the study of an ontically clipped subfield of what could be identified, ontologically, as *being political*.

That the term politics does indeed not capture the entirety of what can be denominated as being political is the topic of recent theoretical discussions on the *political difference* (e.g., Arendt, 1994; Arndt, 2013; Mouffe, 2011; Rancière, 1999; Vollrath, 2003).[119] Authors in this field largely agree that politics and the political have to be differentiated and that methodologically, this differentiation can be based upon an ontological consideration of both terms. Thus, they all, contrary to the con-

115 Including institutionalized interest accommodation (pluralist/ liberal concepts), see Hawkesworth (2006, p. 43).

116 I use the word power, here, in the sense of the ability to make an effect. I think it is, on the behalf of the argument presented in the following, important to differentiate carefully between the condition of *having* power (containing hierarchically and authorially determined power positions), the *struggle-for-power* (that many of the above-mentioned power-concepts see as the function of doing politics, see Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 42), and the practices of *exercising* power, imposing one's will directly and intendedly (modes ranging from *deliberation* to *rule*) or indirectly and/or unintendedly reproducing *hegemonic power structures*.

117 This mainstream account reaches as far that the political ethnographer Schatz conceives of the "political" in political science as "a willingness to bracket aspects of what we see, to simplify for analytic coherence, and to seek to produce generalizations. It implies attention to cross-case comparisons, to broadly occurring factors, and to the power of deductive logic." (Schatz, 2009b, p. 306; critically: Mihic et al., 2005)

118 It has been said that none of the common political concepts meaningfully places protest and discontent within the field of politics (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 41; Horak & Spitaler, 2002, p. 192).

119 For an overview of the debate, see Marchart (2007) and Bedorf (2010).

ceptualizations of politics brought up above, search for a particular political quality in social life that would guide the denomination of certain social practices as politics.

Broadly, the political difference branch conceives of every instance as potentially political that (a) addresses the organization of collective life, and (b) necessitates the making of decisions that (c), inherit an impossibility of ultimate justification. This constellation, (d), leads to some form of discourse and/or conflict, with its agents taking on, individually and/or collectively, (e), a positioning and/or group formation and/or institutionalization.

Some authors, proceeding from Arendt's conception of the "associative political" (Marchart, 2007, pp. 38ff.), view the political as a shared sphere of collective freedom, as an instituted place for open discourse, and as a norm by which the real existing politics practices would have to be measured. These practices are imagined as a symbolic foundation of political life, incorporating an ideal of consensus-oriented parliamentary democracy (see Bedorf, 2010; originally: Arendt, 1994; Vollrath, 2003). On the other hand, some authors take Schmitt's early conception of the political as a "dissociative" (Marchart, 2007, pp. 41ff.) condition of antagonistically opposed identities, as the starting point to conceive of the political as a room of identitary distinction, hegemony, disruption, and conflict (Bedorf, 2010; originally: Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2011; Rancière, 1999). Between these two orientations, there are strikingly different underlying beliefs with regard to the question of whether there is any common world, in which all political agents reside together or not (on the concept of "multiple ontologies," see Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 39ff.).[120] While the associative camp repeatedly bases their unified political imagery on Greek philosophy and a grand West-European history narration (Arendt, 1994; Vollrath, 2003; but also Rancière, 1999), advocates of dissociative approaches meet the Western liberal democratic status quo as such in a rather confrontative way, distancing themselves from Schmitt's nazistic ideological standpoint though (see, for example, Arndt, 2013; Mouffe, 2011).

For my conception of political sensibility, I want to bridge both streams of the debate. Association and antagonism, in such a conception, are categories of differentiation of certain politics practices, but either do not constitute the political condition in itself, as outlined above.

I presuppose that collectivity has a quality on its own that looks beyond the sum of its parts, that is, the singular individuals forming a group.[121] Moreover, I maintain that people do have agency,

120 While neither do the ones focusing on the associative character of the political doubt the diversity and potential incommensurability of the possible standpoints debated within the political arena (Arendt, 1994, pp. 42ff.; Vollrath, 2003, pp. 26f.), nor do those who stress distinction and conflict dismiss the necessity of creating some common space for political debate (see, for example, Mouffe's concept of "agonism," in this regard, Mouffe, 2011, pp. 19ff.).

121 Broadly, the entirety of collective political action can be defined as political culture, which is constructed within the context and at the same time reproduces and produces its own frames (Schuppert, 2008; Weldes, 2006). Political communication is the faculty that enables individuals to situate themselves and allows them to act together (Mer-

that is, they are able to make decisions willfully, within the always contingent, complex realm of social life. This means that in a political difference perspective people are to be held responsible for their decisions, as (from this perspective!) there is no greater mechanism, plan, or fate justifying them (or, at least, we could not know about it). This does not forescribe that people themselves act within that same mindset, setting aside, for example, their religious or moral beliefs. Not making that notion, however, I think would just preclude describing reasonably any action as being *political* (and not, for example, theological, rational, moral, etc.). And I think that there are, from a scientifical point of view, some reality-based arguments that speak for considering ultimate justification as impossible within the realm of human collectivity: First, considering the complexity and fundamental indeterminacy of real social life, neither is it possible to access and manage the entirety of information about any particular problem, nor does anybody have the (proven) ability to foresee the future. Another factor is the sometimes inescapable incommensurability and incomparability of personal, ideological, social, cultural (and so on) values and interests (Clarke et al., 2015; de la Cadena, 2010). This necessitates at some point the making of decisions: Whether unconsciously or consciously, whether imposedly or horizontally deliberated, when there is no ultimate "right" way to go, we have to decide which road to take at some point. That moment of making a decision, of opting for one and thereby excluding other options, can indeed be read as a moment of exercising power (see Mouffe, 2011, p. 11). As I would, thus, not subscribe to any universalist notion of deliberate consensus (going with Mouffe here), I take issue with antagonistic identity concepts inspired by the Schmitt'ian friend-foe patterns (e.g., Laclau, 2005; see also Mouffe, 2011, pp. 14ff.). I think the incommensurability of political world(-view)s does not necessarily implicate stubborn selfing and othering dichotomies;[122] contingency could also be acknowledged as a modality of political life per se, opening up the question of processing that contingency to political discourse (see Arndt, 2013).

Politics, thus, consists of much more than the moments of decision: In my conception, it is the whole process of coming to societal decisions—from processing contingency to making up an agenda, over group formation and positioning to decision-making, and finally through evaluation and revision toward new contingent politics subjects. One could say, if *the political* is the ontologi-

cea, 2016, p. 5) or discursively battle over meaning and reality construction with others, in public as well as private, institutionalized as well as informal settings (Bayard de Volo, 2009). Identities in such a conception are fluid and multiple, they are produced, reproduced, dissolved, and positioned toward each other in social and political negotiation processes (Kozinets, 2015, p. 12).

122 Neither should contingency be limited, I think, only to the conflict between some imagery of left and right, as Mouffe proposes (Mouffe, 2011). De la Cadena exemplifies, considering indigenous anti-mining actions in the Andes, how hegemony not only excludes potential political adversaries by rendering them enemies but also naturalistically excludes anybody "who, not withstanding the antagonism, are not even worthy of enemy status" (de la Cadena, 2010, p. 343).

cal condition described above, *politics* is the entirety of processes and practices enacting it. *Polities* are all collectivities and individuals involved in that process.[123] Building upon diverse values, interests, identities, and norms, the different concepts for putting up, viewing, or resolving the political matter under question could be conceived of as *policies* or *programs*. Besides the outward contents of political programs, thus also the loci and modi of doing politics are political questions that do not have ultimately justifiable solutions.[124]

Differentiating between the political as an ontological condition of social life and politics as its real-life enactment makes possible some more analytical differentiations: One is between *political* and *apolitical politics*:[125] A political attitude in politics, I would say, is well captured by the famous quote by Evelyn Beatrice Hall: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Political politics acknowledges contingency and gives room for representing it. On the contrary, claiming ultimate justification upon political decisions, as often done within power structures,[126] obscures the contingent character of social life and thereby de-politicizes politics.[127] Such apolitical politics can be found in autocratic systems, where the political sphere is deprived of its diversity by a ruling individual or group (see Vollrath, 2003), in ideologically laden hegemonic structures, where decisions are submitted to an objectivized logic (Mouffe, 2011),[128] and in bureaucracy and technocracy, where differences between people and positions are legalistically or scientifically pushed out of the public sphere into the individualistic private (A Phenomenology Collective, 2020, Arendt, 1994; Mouffe, 2011). In its extreme form, apolitical politics can become *antipolitical politics*, actively suppressing notions of political contingency. On the other end, protest and *contentious politics* obtain vital importance as *politicizing* processes (Arndt, 2013, pp. 132ff.): They by character bring to the fore the contingency of political decisions considered to be relevant for the

123 Which makes clear the analytical differentiation toward concepts such as "the social," which would include also individuals and collectivities *affected* by politics.

124 Here, again, I take up on Mouffe's argumentation, who criticizes the associative branch of viewing the political sphere as "neutral terrain in which different groups compete to occupy the positions of power" (Mouffe, 2011, p. 21). This, as Mouffe argues, makes them blind to the structural hegemony shaping the political sphere in itself. However, I contend that Mouffe, with her concept of dichotomously shaped identitary agonism, does herself not really take into account the potential openness of enactment of the political, that is, the structuring of its loci and modi.

125 Rancière (1999), and similarly also Laclau (2005), terminologically refer only to what I conceptualize as contentious politics as politics at all. Rancière denominates anything else as *police*, which, in my opinion, mingles political and apolitical associative political accounts a bit.

126 For example, "TINA"- There-Is-No-Alternative-Argumentation (Weldes, 2006, p. 177).

127 While given the ontological status of the political and politics, there still is an—at least potential—political residuum even in an apolitical and/or de-politicized environment. Vollrath, recurring to the Greek polis and Montesquieu's elaborations on it, differentiates between a tyrannis, in which a political public sphere still exists, while violently monopolized by the standpoints of the tyrant, and despotism, in which the public becomes to be seen as the factual private sphere of the despot (Vollrath, 2003, p. 31).

128 I would generalize Mouffe's arguments against the advocates of liberalist universalism here (see Mouffe, 2011), as it holds for other ideologic universalisms, too.

collective and actualize the record of political opportunities (policy, the political, see de la Cadena, 2010; Jackson, 2006; Weldes, 2006). They break the link between direction and response within an institutionalized social surrounding, disclosing and opening up the construction of social order to ordinary individuals (politics, see Edwards, 2014, pp. 213ff.), and forming new polity collectivities (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; de la Cadena, 2010).[129]

With regard to the associative–dissociative argumentative tension, I would say, the associative conception captures a somewhat static account of political politics (which it poses as an ideal state) and views another somewhat static account of apolitical politics as its conditional other. The dissociative approach, on the other hand, seems more suitable to make sense of politicization and depolitization processes, putting a higher emphasis on conflict and hegemony (and idealizing on its part the political struggle and identity conflict). While the first, this way, becomes blind for its own conception's apolitical tendencies,[130] authors of the latter—while providing analytical categories for it— seem to have a blind spot in considering the "not-so-nice" contentious movements of our times (see below).

This is why I want to make another analytical differentiation the political difference perspective allows for: Particular policies and programs can be categorized as *horizontal arguments,* representing and substantiating different stances toward the topic under question,[131] and *vertical* (a- or even antipolitical) *discursive moves,* which are intended to shift an agent's ability to impact decision-making (i.e., their hierarchical power position).[132] While horizontal argumentation, if addressed at collective organization, can always be considered as being political, with the vertical moves, matters stand a bit more complex: Considering inequalities in resource distribution and power, there is a difference to be drawn between bottom-up and top-down vertical moves. And this differentiation is not at all trivial, as it has to tackle the intersectionality of discrimination and privilege as well as the tension between individual and structural power and resources.[133] The act of claiming objectivity within a political sphere could, however, always be contested to be a vertical move, aimed at depoliticizing the debate (see Mouffe, 2011, pp. 56ff.).

129 Which Edwards, interestingly, denominates as political "misbehavior" (Edwards, 2014, p. 215) and de la Cadena as "disturbance" (de la Cadena, 2010, pp. 334f.).

130 Quite hegemonically excluding, for example, the possibility of other political ontologies, or "worlds" (see de la Cadena, 2010) or other-than-nation political identifications (see Mouffe, 2011, p. 59).

131 Political arguments can follow diverse logics, as normative, moralistic, theological, rational, scientific. . .even false or stupid ones. What analytically binds them is their relatedness to the content(s) under discussion.

132 For example, by making use of heuristics and affects, silencing, manipulating, lying, building authority upon unequally distributed resources, or other structural privileges.

133 To make that point clearer: Whether an action is political or not, vertical or horizontal, is not to be mixed up with being good or bad (see, on this behalf, Ricœur, 2007). That goes with what was said above about agency, which does not follow any generalizable mechanism.

Being sensible toward the differentiations explained so far, I argue, could help to have a more thorough view of political phenomena, in political science as well as in other scientifical disciplines. The entirety of these phenomena is not inquirable only deductively assessing official documents and policy outcomes, and institution's experts are not the only viable address to be asked about the sometimes non-public, non-institutionalized, micro-dynamics of politics, understood that way (Horak & Spitaler, 2002; on "infrapolitics," see Bayard de Volo, 2009). Methods and sources for political science research thus have to be diversified. Moreover, the ontological search for the political provides analytical categories, enabling the study of politics beyond the status quo and its real existing power structures (see Hawkesworth, 2006). Thus, it can be said to be "about creating the conditions under which one can 'see' things [. . .] that one would not otherwise have been able to see" (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 4; see also de la Cadena, 2010). Questioning mainstream demarcations of politics means opening up the search for instantiations of the political, which is why it can be viewed as a methodological—and not "only" a metaphysical or theoretical!—intervention to political science research.

Politicizing Interpretation

Political rulers have different terms of claiming and securing their say in societal decision-making, and beyond using rough violence, most of them inherit claiming some form of ultimate justification.[134]

I think there is an interesting parallel to practices of claiming power in institutional politics in some claims for "objectivity" present in social science. Within political sciences, the attempt to make "value-free," "rational," "objective," "valid," and "generalizable" descriptions, explanations, and predictions about the political world is widespread (see Stykow et al., 2010; critical: Hawkesworth, 2006; Mihic et al., 2005, Weldes, 2006). Methods, within such science conceptions, can be chosen "rationally" (see Schatz, 2009a),[135] implicating also a hierarchization of findings: If method and observer are rational, then chaotic, heterogeneous, and indeterminate evidence has to be conceived of as deviance or anomaly (Arendt, 1994, pp. 42f.; Horak & Spitaler, 2002; Jackson, 2006).

134 Deterministic ideologies, for example, convey some unilinear historical narrative, which has to be followed up toward some imagery of collective bliss. Universalistic approaches generalize particular (mostly hegemonic) attributes, values, and/or interests, functionalism by default prioritizes set ends over means, and legalist or bureaucratic approaches secure legitimation through following fixed rules and so on.

135 Most often favoring the general, comparability providing might of numbers over the messiness of qualitative inquiry: "This embrace of statistical approaches was highly selective and typically based on a large-n, variable-oriented, linear, and probabilistic orientation that precluded other statistical approaches" (Schatz, 2009a, p. 21).

However, evidentially researchers can and do—more or less consciously and explicitly—take rather varied perspectives upon ontological and epistemological questions (see, for example, Steinmetz, 2005).[136] Interpretivists conceptualize this methodological indeterminacy: Taking issue with positivist science conceptions, that perspective commends the acknowledgment of human agency[137] and with that of the unpredictabilities of social life, that is, contingency. Causality is understood as a spectrum of human and social reasoning, the ways people have to make sense of their surroundings and orient themselves within it, and make decisions.[138] The interpretivitist researcher conceives of themself as one situated agent within *reality* (see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow, 2006).[139]

The possibility of *grasping* any set, "factual" truth—that is, the researcher's potential ability of ultimate scientifical justification—is neglected by this scientific conception. That could be viewed as contentiously politicizing scientific reasoning, as it opens up a space of possibilities regarding the contents, loci, and modi of scientifical meaning-making (see Jackson, 2006, p. 268). Assuming that only "true" objectivity, as long as one believes in that possibility, would be able to unify methods by reason, embracing the politicalness of science means to acknowledge the self-sustaining methodological interconnectedness of ontology and epistemology, of theory and method, and of methodology and research representation (see Emerson et al., 2011, p. 15; also Barad, 2010).

This frames research design—from the choice of a problem to publication—as a process of decision-making (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006b, p. 210), holding, thus, the researcher responsible for these decisions and disqualifying any objectivity claims in science as vertical moves. Putting that theoretical framework in motion, the branch of political science could become to be seen, methodologically, as *being* a *political science*.

On behalf of the methodological interventions of the ontological turn (see, for example, Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017),[140] I think one could even intensify the implications of interpretivism, in a politically sensible way: Anthropological and science-technological works indicate a deepening of

136 This contradicts any rigid or "naive"‘ form of positivism, which is irreflexive of ongoing discourses in philosophy and the natural sciences, that broadly own up to contingency and unpredictability these days (Clarke et al., 2015, pp. 45f.). Jackson (2006), a social theorist and former mathematician, tells in this regard about the Gödel Undecidability Theorem, the "demonstration that no logical system of finite axioms with sufficient power to capture processes like basic arithmetic could ever be both complete and consistent at the same time" (pp. 264ff.). See also Barad, 2010 for an elaboration on the science-theoretical implications of quantum physics.

137 Clarke goes as far as to annotate agency to "nonhuman actants" as well, saying that objects through their meanings have a part in creating the "seamless web" of meanings (Clarke, 2015, p. 92, see also de la Cadena, 2010).

138 Schwartz-Shea and Yanow refer to that kind of causality as of "constitutive causality" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 52); Hawkesworth approaches it referring to the philosophical concept of phronesis or "practical reason" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 39). Schatzberg distinguishes certain "modes of political causality" (Schatzberg, 2009, p. 184). Clarke refers that notion to the so-called "Thomas‘s theorem": "if situations are perceived as real, they are real in their consequences" (Clarke, 2015, p. 99; see also Kubik, 2009).

139 Reality, in its literal sense, contains the root word "real" and could therefore be misleading in the first place here. I think the German word "Wirklichkeit" actually reflects better the interpretivist imagination of the world: It contains the root word "wirken," which is "to appear," which makes it easier to conceive of it as "the world, as it appears to us."

the interpretivist notion of "epistemic cultures" plurality (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 37),[141] toward ontologically questioning the universality of formations as time/space (Barad, 2010; St. Pierre, 2018), subject/object (Barad, 2010; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; de la Cadena, 2010), cause/ effect (Barad, 2010), construction/deconstruction (Bhattacharya, 2021; St. Pierre, 2018), straight/queer (A Phenomenology Collective, 2020), universe/pluriverse (de la Cadena, 2010; Mouffe, 2011), and so on. This goes, in the political difference language, beyond methodological policy, in uncovering and/or un/learning (Bhattacharya, 2021) and/or criticizing epistemic power structures and opening up the potential polity, as well as the very notion of *being scientifical*. Moreover, deepening the question of interpretative practice, one could state that finding and selecting questions, defining modes, positioning within the discourse, and "keeping its horizon open"[142] (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. ix–x)—*becoming* a *political* scientist, so to say— necessitate positive methodological concepts, too.

Designing Politically Sensible Research

So, how to become a politically sensible researcher, and how to design politically sensible research? Building upon the political difference and ontological interpretation framework introduced above, one could say it is all about finding ways of processing the alterity[143] (see Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 293ff.) of the political and politics within scientifical research. That is, to acknowledge ontologically the political condition, and, interpenetratingly, to act politically and scientifically throughout the research process—which means to make responsible, reflexive decisions, to make these decisions transparent, to argue for them, and revise them if necessary. And this includes questions of what to see, how to approach it, how to represent it, by whom, with whom, and with which intentions and effects upon society.

140 Interestingly, while the methodological idea behind turning politics on its ontological head corresponds perfectly to the anthropological branch of the ontological turn, authors of both seem not to be very aware of one another. While tackling the question of their approaches' politicalness, for example, Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) do not cite a single work of the political difference discourse in their book.

141 The social constructionism many interpretivists subscribe to is, as Holbraad and Pedersen contend, vulnerable to reintegration into positivist conceptions of objective truth: "To speak of social constructions [. . .], is simply to ratify the modern constitution by assuming that the variation of the world must be predicated on its social or cultural representations; construction, in other words, as a matter of perspective" (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 39) St. Pierre on these lines complains about the "formalization" and "positivization" of interpretivism, reminding me of the apolitical tendencies of static politics conceptions mentioned above (St. Pierre, 2018: 1).

142 While the interpretivist concepts of iteration and abduction tackle this aspect of becoming political (see below), I think what is still necessary is a closer look toward the very act of deciding, of taking a position, and of thereby willfully excluding other options of action.

143 The concept of "alterity" tackles the questions of how things can differ from themselves: Political science differs from itself in its static/confrontative; reflexive/positive, and policy/politics dimensions, for example (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 293f.).

A presuppositional statement I want to make plain is that I conceive of science as of a grounded orientation[144] within reality, this being its function and practice at once or its value in itself. This conception aims to liberate research from the rule, as any vertical inequalities stand in the ways of free, content-wise (horizontal) argumentation and thinking.[145] This inherits some form of societal critique, as nowadays reality is evidentially shaped by power structures, and if science is inextricably situated within that social reality, it has to face these structures as obstacles to its very own interest.

Acknowledging/acting

As was said in the previous chapter, (intensified) interpretivist, as well as ontological and deconstructionist methodological approaches, could be viewed as opening up the methodological horizon, contentiously politicizing positivist but also more generally exclusionist (universalist, colonialist, etc.) mainstream approaches to social sciences. These approaches, thus, point to a heightened acknowledgment of methodological as well as social worlds' diversity, contingency, and indeterminacy. They foster what Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) emphasize as the task of "turning" presuppositions, analysis, and evidence: to remain open for all kinds of sources, evidence, and sensemaking and to remain critically conscious toward one's own ways of doing research.

In interpretivism, reflexivity in sensemaking is conceptualized, methodologically, in iteration[146] and abduction[147] (see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), whereas, for example, in post-qualitative approaches, there seems to be an animadversion toward such conceptualization of methods (see, for example, St. Pierre, 2018). However, whether explicated or not, within a politically sensible framework, deconstruction can easily be understood as a concept of its own, one that goes, indeed, beyond the level of arguing about research policies and tackles methodological structures, instead.[148]

144 By orientation I mean a grounded argument upon the diverse perspectives upon our lived worlds. I think that even the question of whether there is or not some "true" world out there is a disputable question. Agnostically, I would state that one could view the attempt to know the answer as a somewhat narcissistic world-conception, believing that one's beliefs will shape truth, and not only reality. . .

145 Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, p. 297), conceive of this as an "analytically anti-authoritarian" character of doing science. I would stress, however, that scientifical authority (of delivering grounded orientations about reality) and objectivity-based rule or epistemic hegemony are two different things.

146 Iteration entails a processual logic of making one step after another, often conceptualized as an iteration cycle.

147 Using the logic of abduction is, briefly put, "to move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it" (Clarke, 2015, p. 103). The researcher "starts with what [they] knows" (SchwartzShea & Yanow, 2012, p. 73), and then tacks back and forth between field experience and its theoretically or hermeneutically won abstractions (Clarke, 2015, p. 103). Emerson et al. refer to a similar concept as "retroductive" reasoning (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 173).

148 For example, the "modern constitution" of science (de la Cadena, 2010, p. 342); uncritical systemic "interiority" and "straightness" (A Phenomenology Collective, 2020, p. 520, 517); or universalistic methodic "rigour" (St. Pierre, 2018).

Thus, I would remark that the somewhat mystical or at least very broad conceptions of the "posts" should not be let off the hook to explain what they are doing, instead of only telling what they are not.[149] Processing alterity means taking scientifical decisions, which means enacting moments of power, which may seem controversial in the first place (see, for example, Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 181), but in my understanding poses the very quality of a political sensibility: Acknowledging contingency as well as the necessity to perpetually limit it, making agentic decisions, I argue that being conscious and sensible toward that area of tension limits decision-making to (inevitable) moments of power and authority while being attentive at apolitical tendencies toward hegemony and/or rule.[150]

To act on behalf of acknowledging contingency, and to acknowledge on behalf of acting within it, can take various forms of enacting *reflexivity* and *responsibility*. The first touches more upon explaining terms, concepts, and presuppositions (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, pp. 51f.) to make the particular meaning(s) ascribed to them transparent to the audience. Also, the methodological framework of a project, with its theories and methods concepts, has to *fit* its particular purposes (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 22)—which also needs to be made as transparent as possible—as again the political difference approach should make us skeptical toward any notion of universal functionality the science system is ascribed to (see Mihic et al., 2005; Schatz, 2009b).

Responsibility can be enacted through experience,[151] confrontation,[152] conceptualization,[153] assemblage,[154] diffraction,[155] and experimentation.[156] It means to represent carefully the indetermina-

149 For example, St. Pierre speaks of "living the theories" or "becoming Foucauldian" (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 604), but doesn't explain how that happens . . .it seems to be like a black box, where you fill in theories, after which research designs itself, and texts write themselves (St. Pierre, 2018, p. 605), without the researcher having to reflect upon their particular ways toward that meaning-making.

150 At the same time, stressing the need to make decisions, to enact these moments to power, reflexively and responsibly, escapes any tendency toward relativism that deconstructionist approaches are repeatedly accused of.

151 Or reflection and experimentation "in contact with the real" (A Phenomenology Collective, 2020, p. 517). This notion stems from an overall modesty following up from realizing that we cannot grasp field realities by assuming (from our own experience), deriving (from general theory), or generalizing (from powerful particularities; with reference to research quality see Rucht, 2016, p. 472).

152 See handling "puzzles" Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 29) and "breakdowns" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 10).

153 A concept, in Holbraad and Pedersen's account, is an ontological assumption providing analytical frameworks through which to reflect upon realities (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 15ff). The political sensibility framework presented in this article, for example, is such an assumption or conceptualization of social reality. It is not, however, the provision of any axiomatic world explanation, as the ontologically turned idea of conceptualization even rejects the idea of a set universe, or any set idea of pluriverse and flux, as axiomatic: These are in themselves conceptualizations, enacting diverse perceptions and intentions toward reality (see also the metaphor of "a knife," in A Phenomenology Collective, 2020, p. 518).

154 See, for example, the metaphorically enacted methodology of A Phenomenology Collective (2020), in this regard.

155 Building upon the idea that reality phenomena are not always to be conceived of as the sums of singularities, but as intraactions, diffraction is a method going beyond the assemblage of evidence in "reading texts through one another" (see Barad, 2010).

156 Experimentation is an open-ended, creative methodological endeavor, including, for example, enactments of nonsense, play, and artistic action (Bhattacharya, 2020), which doesn't prescribe aimlessness, however: "Note the deliberate play here on the double meaning of the verb ‚to experiment' as both rigorous scientific method and open-

cies, uncertainties, and contingencies experienced during the research (Emerson et al., 2011). Taking on scientifical responsibility, of course, means that any representations of research are exposed to argument—and, possibly, to critique and revision. Embracing a potentially controversial discourse, however, I would answer, for example, to Bhattacharya's (2021) qualms, enriches reality-orientation: It forces the researcher to think through and be clear about their own positions, and it diversifies and intensifies collective reflection and is, thus, fervently desirable for political science.[157]

On the layer of "field reality," acknowledging and enacting alterity can take forms of activist science, too. If science is understood as embedded in society, and if knowledge generation is, simultaneously, situated in society, science methodology's closeness to its fields of interest can range from taking a distant, observing, maybe enclosing, stance, to co-creation, collaboration, critical theory, and actual activism. From this perspective, *political* science could, broadening the range of voices heard, indeed also be aimed to serve emancipatory and critical scientifical purposes (see Clarke et al., 2015; Horak & Spitaler, 2002; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).[158]

Association/dissociation

Deriving from the associative/dissociative dimension in the political difference framework, the question here is whether one's research is pointed toward creating or perpetuating common spaces of discourse and decision or whether one is trying to confrontatively differentiate and group distinct stances and/or identities—or even both at a time.

Considering the associative part of doing science, on a theoretical and/or structural level, common spaces are usually built upon disciplinary, field-oriented, or particular theoretical branches. Association is communicated within literature reviews, media of publication, theoretical discourses, educational subjects, and institutional affiliation of researchers. Nowadays real-existing academia this way can build upon common canons of thinking, which, stepping aside from any idealized imaginary of "free science," is structured alongside historically rooted global hegemony and its discriminatory patterns.[159] This is mirrored in Mouffe's critique of liberal theoretical thinking, which

ended exploration." (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 20).

157 And of course, that means that privilege has to be torn down on behalf of establishing such an argument!

158 Pachirat goes as far as to say that the worst thing that could happen to scientifical work would be not to have a societal effect at all, that it would remain within a particular, hermetic academic field (Pachirat, 2009, p. 159). The real-existing branch of political science seems especially bound to institutionalized politics, with political scientists being quite present in news media, and delivering strategy- and policy-papers or political communication counseling for politicians, parties, and institutions. Political scientists may thus have an influential say on the overall image of the political sphere and its characteristics. Interestingly, however, this idea is especially present in anthropology, ethnology, and archeology, tackling a power imbalance for which colonialism has become an umbrella term (Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007; Wedeen, 2009).

159 Bhattacharya exemplifies this impressively, elaborating on her advisor's question about why they didn't read "your people" (Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 179). By such question, they get excluded from their actual academic descent while

she accuses of excluding any deviant approaches by universalist morality and a generalized logic of societal progress, which renders enemies (and not adversaries) anyone not subscribing to the values set by liberalism (Mouffe, 2011).[160] De la Cadena intensifies this notion, stating that this allegedly associative logic of "consensus" even renders some people not even worthy of being enemies because of their ways of thinking, living, and doing politics (de la Cadena, 2010, p. 360). These arguments, I would say, should lead to a careful consideration of associative methodologies, regarding the questions: Whom do I associate with? On which grounds? And: How?

Association, to be clear, does not necessarily mean consent. It can be understood as the practice of joining the discussion and as acknowledging a topic's common importance for the collective—as identifying as polity.[161] Thus, the association can work as an emancipatory matter: One may associate to a discourse, to make their voices heard here (policy), to discuss and widen its ways of doing politics, or to enrich polity.[162] Or one may associate with a collectivity to share resources and empower. Associating could also mean to actively include, that is, to invite outward collectivities to join in an associative space. Acting associatively thus references to certain practices of self-identification, inclusion, and co-creation, as, for example, creating spaces for collaborative working, including interlocutors in research,[163] promoting interdisciplinary work, and engaging in meta-discussions on theories of science and methodology. Associating on behalf of reality-orientation means to let other people and views change oneself's own conceptions of reality, and to do this collectively, responsibly, and reflexively (as does, for example, de la Cadena, 2010).

Dissociation can be practiced on different layers of the political framework: Its logics can serve the grouping and differentiation of stances within a common political space. In its highest intensities, dissociation can mean to leave or deny the association at all or to aim for destroying its grounds. As the intentions of dissociation cannot be evaluated from the outside, they thus have to be made transparent. Dissociative methods can be aimed at disclosing verticality and hegemony, giving

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at the same time being outwardly identified by their ethnicity and being requested to enrich the "inward" academic field by their ethnicized outward knowledge, which they are supposed to know out of their identity (and not by education).

160 I want to make clear that I go with Mouffe's analytical argument, while I do not buy any of her policy solutions. I don't see how a somewhat constructed identity confrontation, between "left and right," and the public agitation of "passion" in politics could come to be seen as a real agonistic solution to nowadays' crises of democracy. . . (see Mouffe, 2011).

161 A friend of mine, who is discriminated in his home country because of his color of skin and surname, implying him being part of a certain "ethnic minority," once told me in a discussion he was proud of his nationality. I was surprised and replied: But how can you be proud of a country that even institutionally keeps discriminating you? He said to me: if he would not identify as being one of them, they would never listen. He would only be an outsider complaining about what the ones in charge do. This touches upon what Rumelili (2004) conceptualizes as the recognition/resistance dimension of identity building.

162 Sensible association is not grasped by any attempts of barely "representing" certain groups in polities—as this, again, poses an outward identification of these peoples alongside hegemonically grown criteria of differentiation.

163 For a discussion of social positioning in research, see below.

voice, and changing social theory (as-practice)[164] and practice (as-theory).[165] They include deconstruction/reconstruction, contentious experimentation,[166] "flight,"[167] "misbehavior,"[168] "resistance,"[169] and countering or confrontation.[170]

The association/dissociation spectrum obviously touches upon sensible topics of identity and privilege. While I can try to dissociate from the "empire" or "western" hegemony, or to associate with its outsides, I cannot escape my situatedness within it, or my descent from it, which is why I should not deny it (see also Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 182). As a politically sensible researcher, this hits me, as it poses a real-world obstacle to doing science. The notion has to be taken seriously and has to be turned into methodology: How to process unequal relations when trying to orient within that reality? And how to act, even when being identified as a part of the globally privileged, to overcome it?

Horizontality

This leads toward considering the horizontal/vertical dimension of political sensibility. If science is, as mentioned above, seen as a valuable practice of its own, then its discourses are, other than is the case within overall politics, normatively limited to horizontal argumentation.[171] That means to put in motion a careful differentiation between legitimate authorization of arguments—here, focusing on the question of scientifical legitimacy—and the practices and heuristics of vertical domination (attempts).

Notions of contingency acknowledgment and politicized interpretation can indeed be abused to claim scientifical credibility, for example, by conspirationists, as well as religious and ideological fanatics, and by economic interest (Allina-Pisano, 2009, p. 53; McIntyre, 2018). Fake news and alternative facts are real, as they do exist and they do impact societal action. However, content-wise, they operate with scientifically non-qualified, and sometimes non-qualifiable, claims of rightfulness. This has to be differentiated when (a) their advocates are trying to vertically claim scientifical authority and (b) when advocates of the objectivity of their own hegemonic approaches are trying to

164 Following the basic approach of critical theory, see Horkheimer (2020 [1937]).
165 Holbraad and Pedersen say: "Pure practice," after all, "exists only in theory; any theory is a mode of practice' [. . .]" (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 284).
166 As "writing [one]selves into existence," "mocking the empire," nonsense, play, or turning on its head conventions of what "counts as science" (see Bhattacharya, 2020, 2021; St. Pierre, 2018).
167 Conceptualized as "fleeing, eluding, flowing, leaking" the mainstream (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 524).
168 For example, opening up interpretation considering "disturbing" views upon polities, bound to different "worldings" of the human/other-than-human differentiation (de la Cadena, 2010; see also Edwards, 2014).
169 Not accepting outward identification, publicly and addressedly (see de la Cadena, 2010; Rumelili, 2004).
170 Asking "what if" questions, taking seriously the "too strange," and turning around "straightness," for example (see A Phenomenology Collective, 2020; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; St. Pierre, 2018).
171 As if science can be said to be political, reversely this does not mean that all politics are or should be scientifically sound, as science is only one possible mode of political causality, among many others (see Schatzberg, 2009).

use such attempts as a knockout argument against politically sensible discussants (as does, for example, McIntyre, 2018, pp. 123ff.).[172] Conspiracy theory, religious, strategical, and ideological narratives have, one might argue, in common that they lack a reality connection of their accounts, as, for example, conspirationist secret circles by definition cannot be trustworthily experienced. Accordingly, most interpretivists would agree that we can scientifically make sense of even a contingently framed reality, as "Theoretical presuppositions structure the perceptions of events," "but they do not create perceptions out of nothing" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 38).

However, abuse of scientifical authority-claiming, as stated above, is not only an outside phenomenon of academia. Any societal decision, also regarding research, does have an effect on general social reality (see Clarke et al., 2015, p. 20; Milan, 2014, p. 446), and many authors point to the heuristic effects that objectivity claims from scientists have in providing means for securing hegemonic power (generally: Kluczewska, 2018; Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007).[173] Thus, associating scientifical means for putting up the horizontal argument, on the one hand, means finding methodological standards to qualify science as science, that is, putting in motion reflexivity and responsibility. On the other hand, it means de/colonizing (and dissociating) the hegemonic body of science, in reality,[174] delving into the field of research ethics:

As mentioned already, politically sensible scientifical research has to contain some positioning regarding the researcher's and their project's situatedness (see Holmes, 2021; Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007, p. 77). Much has been written in this regard about desirable forms of relationships between researcher and researched,[175] while I would note that this distinction has to be seen as an ana-

172 As Hawkesworth puts her answer toward that charge: "That there can be no appeal to neutral, theory-independent facts to adjudicate between competing theoretical interpretations does not mean that there is no rational way of making and warranting critical evaluative judgments concerning alternative views. Indeed, presuppositionist theorists have pointed out that the belief that the absence of independent evidence necessarily entails relativism is itself dependent upon a positivist commitment to the verification criterion of meaning" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 37).

173 For example, by delivering "elaborate systems of classification" (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 46); or by constructing an influential image of "public opinion" through surveys (Walsh, 2009, pp. 165f.); or by reifying political cliches, feeding into the friend-foe patterned policy (Jourde, 2009, p. 215). This, ironically, reproduces even within social movement studies, when analysts from the West tend to focus their research on movements and activist groups that fit into their unified world-perceptions (see Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019, pp. 167f.).

174 While the extractive character of disciplines with a vital colonial history, like anthropology and archeology, is much more obvious in the first place, also political and other social sciences feature colonial practices: This holds for the imposition of (some unified image of) western theories and norms upon the study of non-Western societies, "deviants," "minorities," and women* (Walters et al., 2009). Moreover, functionalist science conceptions subordinate and rank methods with regard to some account of "productivity" (Wedeen, 2009, p. 83; see also Horak & Spitaler, 2002). The narrowing of political science research to studying and representing the powerful (see above) could be viewed as a colonial practice, perpetuating a structural power imbalance (Hawkesworth, 2006). According to Nicholas and Hollowell (2007), the overall notion of having the unlimited right of access to field data and the common practices of transforming these data into profitable publications or qualifications are features of scientific colonialism per se (see also Kluczewska, 2018).

175 The most general statement this literature makes is that research should be designed to not harm the participants (Milan, 2014, p. 455), while this is not as easy as it sounds in the first place, see below. Adding to this, there is a huge corpus of literature on relationships of respect to be established between researcher and researched, including questions of consent (see, for example, Elgesem, 2015; Heise & Schmidt, 2014; Janowitz, 2014; Kozinets, 2015,

lytical one. More generally, there is also some demand to reflect upon the researcher's position in their fields: The situated researcher has to become aware that their personal characteristics may have a significant impact upon field access (Pachirat, 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) and that their presence is going to influence the group constellation being studied (Bayard de Volo, 2009; Horak & Spitaler, 2002). Particularly important for effectuating politically sensible research here is that the researcher's background and the field studied most likely are shaped by patterns of hegemony (see Walsh, 2009; Yanow, 2006; with emphasis on online spaces: Kozinets, 2015, pp. 32ff.; Mercea, 2016, p. 223). They thus need to make efforts to make these power structures visible, position toward them, make choices, and make them transparent.[176] What is mentioned less often in the literature is the ethical stance the researcher takes toward themself, dealing with their own personal and moral limits (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 2) or scientifical scope (Elgesem, 2015), and toward their own academic home, for example, facing the question of how to leave fields for future researchers (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 6), or having to deal with its institutional limitations (see Katz, 2006; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Last but not least, ethical reflections contain some thought about the possible societal impacts of the research project: On the system of knowledge production, the implications for the collectivities that use scientifically authoritative knowledge to make decisions or are impacted by these, and on the repercussions of the research process for society (Kluczewska, 2018, p. 39; Milan, 2014).

There are no universal and neat guidelines to right and wrong here, and ethical considerations often clash: For instance, when the values of the researcher differ from the values of interlocutors (Wing, 1989). Also, the somewhat ethical scope of providing the world with good research may clash with considerations of ethical behavior toward interlocutors (see, for example, Heise & Schmidt, 2014). Another pressing issue is how to position ethic research toward legal requirements (see, for example, Katz, 2006).[177]

pp. 127ff.), collaborational organization (see Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007), ownership of research products, and data (see Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007), the need for researchers' competency, training, and preparation (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 11), and reflections upon the emotional and personal implications of relationships of any kind with people in the field (see DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 6, chap. 11; Walsh, 2009). It is remarkable that ethics is sometimes generally equated with the question of informed consent (e.g., Janowitz, 2014; Kozinets, 2015, pp. 127ff.).

176 One of the crucial choices concerned here are choices about research interests and goals, including who defines them (Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007, p. 65)—is it the researcher only? Is it a supervisor, a financing agency, or a research institution? Or are the interlocutors included in the definition of research scopes, and if yes, how?

177 For example, what if the particular field I study, the particular country, institution or collective, doesn't provide any, or only insufficient rules for me as a researcher (see Katz, 2006)? Or what if these rules restrict my research to a degree that hinders me from producing the knowledge I want to produce ? What if legal requirements favor the interest of powerful actors, as state forces or big corporations over scientifical knowledge production or citizen and consumer rights (on the latter: Kozinets, 2015, p. 134)? Or what if my research is intended to bring light into the shadows of illegal social activity? That is, How to law-abidingly immerse one into a gang of criminals? And how to maintain respect toward and prevent harm from interlocutors if research recordings may be subpoenaed by executive forces (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 9)? On the contrary, until which point could a researcher-citizen claim

I want to remark that "wanting the best" can be ethically the most problematic if this leads to acting paternalistically on the behalf of others or universalizing the own conceptions of that best unreflectedly or simply precluding good outcomes to follow from good intention (Jackson, 2006). Especially, if researchers exhibit features of privilege, these can result in what Pachirat called the "most ironic form of silencing": Of identifying with a made-up view "from below" (Pachirat, 2009, p. 157).[178] This, as well as "trickling down" resources, does not fulfill the above-mentioned criterion of letting oneself be changed by the allegedly other.

Any decision for the overall problem and question I pose, but as well for my theoretical and methodological standpoints, methods, and ways of communication,[179] of course reflects my scientifical, philosophical, and logical convictions. But moreover, it also reflects my very own normative belief, for example, with regard to social equality—that is, ethical decisions are most often inevitably normative and political. This means, also ethically, a researcher has to deal with the concept of responsibility (see Barad, 2010, p. 264) and reflexivity (see above). A neglect of power, within that methodological framework, is unfeasible. This is to be underlined, as neglecting one's own situatedness in existing power structures sometimes serves to evade moral conflicts at all (see Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007, pp. 76f.).

Whenever a decision within a contingent surrounding is made, power is exercised. However, and that is the point, this can be legitimated authoritatively (e.g., by arguments of quality and ethics) or vertically, building upon either violence or (structurally violent) existing hegemony. Thus, striving for horizontality in scientifical argumentation has not much to do with relativism, as it requires processing the above-mentioned tensions between acknowledging indeterminacy and limiting argumentation and between idealized imageries of association and dissociating the real existing power machine.

I think that the political sensibility framework introduced above could deliver a framework for reflecting and enhancing research quality, beyond the existing criteria of good knowledge and training,[180] delineating horizontal, reality-bound accounts of quality. Considering failure, it allows to dif-

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legitimacy to override public law (Wing, 1989)? And which is the moral limit for a researcher to report violations of rights witnessed in the field (see Kozinets, 2015, p. 143)?

178 Multiple authors caution this tendency, for domineering findings with the researcher's own ways of thinking (Kubik, 2009), for essentializing and homogenizing contested fields (Kozinets, 2015, p. 9; Pachirat, 2009), for co-opting subaltern voices for one's own image or other purposes (Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007, p. 74), or for acting paternalistically toward the people in the field (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 11).

179 Which Kluczewska clusters as paradigms (see Kluczewska, 2018, p. 4).

180 Due to the ontological constitution of politicized science, there is no neat, "universal" set of evaluative quality criteria here. Schwartz-Shea (2006) provides a sensible overview of over-interpretivist quality concepts on the grounds of an analysis of recent interpretive methods literature (see also DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 1; Kozinets, 2015, p. 267). She identifies four "first order" (thick description, triangulation, trustworthiness, and reflexivity) and three "second order" elements for evaluating interpretive research designs (informant feedback/member checking, audit, and negative case analysis). Schwartz-Shea entitles "reflexivity" as what I would denominate as self-reflexivity,

ferentiate “falsehood“—to be unemotionally subjected to revision—from “willful ignorance,” and “lying“ (see McIntyre, 2018, pp. 7f.), being disqualified from scientifical discourse.[181] And this, indeed, not by contrasting it to any set criterion of “truth,”[182] but methodologically, by making visible its lack of reflexivity, responsibility, or horizontality.

As may have become clear, quality and ethics mutually define each other: A high-quality research design must incorporate an elaborate account of research ethics throughout the whole research process, and the best ethics concept is pointless without putting an eye on doing valuable scientifical research (see Barad, 2010, p. 265; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010, chap. 11).

Designing politically sensible research means to place oneself tacking back and forth between acknowledgment and action, association and dissociation, to perpetually reflect and take on responsibility, always striving to put up horizontal argumentation.

Toward *Political* Inquiry

Entering the field of political ethnography through the political science door, the first one gets confronted with a set of methods and methodological approaches quite uncommon for their discipline. But making the familiar strange, so to say, and applying ethnographic sensibility and the concepts brought to the fore by the interpretive and ontological turns to it, what became clear to me is that the meanings of too often taken-for-granted terms such as politics or the political are not a “mere” theoretical or philosophical question of definition.

Theories of the political difference can indeed widen one’s potential fields of research and deliver analytical categories to look upon, inquire, describe, and explain political phenomena beyond structurally limited conceptions of “politics.” This is the theoretical part of what political theory thought can add to the field of political ethnography— and, I would state, also to many other fields of qualitative social science research. Moreover, this theoretical argument, using ethnographic, interpretive, or anthropological concepts, can be turned methodologically into what I would call a conceptualized political sensibility.

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which is the means of being aware of the role of the self and its characteristics within field interaction as well as analysis practices (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 102).

181 Interestingly, after putting up this differentiation framework, McIntyre (2018) himself does what he denominates willful ignorance, in blaming post-modernism for the success of post-truth, without ever citing any post-modern work (despite one Guardian interview with Bruno Latour), and without taking into account his own narration of the rise of post-truth, starting in the 1950s in the United States (which is before post-modernism, which even in McIntyre’s own records gained popularity throughout the 1980s).

182 McIntyre contends that outside of academia, there is not so much understanding of how science discourses and theorybuilding work (McIntyre, 2018, p. 20). However, I would say that this rather shows a shortcoming in situated science communication and societal trust than a need to defend any (hegemonically!) normalized (but never explained!) account of “truth,” which McIntyre proposes. . .

Doing politically sensible research means applying the thought of an ontological political condition to social science methodology, or to let this thought shift the ways of doing one's research. And here, I think, political and ethnographic sensibilities can be combined astonishingly fruitful: Acknowledging the contingency of social reality as well as the need to act within it fit well the conception of research as a situated, reflexive endeavor with a focus on meaning-making: Both branches build upon human agency, and both conceive of causality as a function of such agency rather than any objectively determinable mechanism. The principles of situatedness and the political condition, taken together, position research as a political practice of its own, raising questions of ethical responsibility. Viewing research ethics through such a situated-political lens, I would say, deliberates ethical discussions of the accusation to "only" tackle questions of morality: If acting political as a researcher is no longer viewed as an activist stance or even a bias, but as an inescapable condition of social science research, then taking ethical positions becomes a matter of scientifical quality. Reflecting one's own positionalities and confronting it with other views fits the reality-orientation and reflexivity scopes of science as well as notions of contingency and the areas of tension in association/dissociation, acknowledging/acting, process/state, and horizontality/ verticality. It enhances diversifying and decolonizing scientifical meaning-making and at the same time escapes rampant relativism, as political sensibility, besides the notions of diversity, multifacetedness, and the pluriverse, always minds the decision and argumentation dimension within social discourse.

Thus, political ethnography as well as many other politically interested social science endeavors could be understood, methodologically, as *being* deeply political, as enacting a political quality of their own.

If science is limited to research reflecting powerful world-conceptions, categories, and judgments, any (culturally, socially, philosophically, normatively. . .) other perspectives on reality become hard to describe.[183] Moreover, politically irreflexive research cannot reasonably handle the limitations of data and field access within the power structures it refuses to reflect.[184]

Thus, I hope the concept of political sensibility is helpful for anybody who views their research within the political realm and wishes to mirror that belonging methodologically. And I hope this framework helps to integrate ethnographical, anthropological, and other scientifical works with political interest, as quite some authors state a lack of deepened political reflection throughout disci-

183 Think, for example, of the problems categorizing non-democratic systems within comparative politics (see Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011). Quite commonly, this also leads to normatively disregarding views upon that "other," framing it to be less developed, backward, evil, and so on (see, for example, Kluczewska, 2018, p. 12).

184 Powerful actors, by character, are able to channel the flow of information, resulting sometimes in very concrete refusals to data access; for concrete examples see: on international organizations: Kluczewska, 2018, pp. 30f.; on state institutions: Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007, p. 60). Research limitations can also come in a more implicit, structural way (see Allina-Pisano, 2009).

plines (see de la Cadena, 2010; Horak & Spitaler, 2002; Kubik, 2009). Overall, I hope that such sensibility contributes to shifting nowadays real existing hegemony—while I am aware that my concept mirrors my own particular (and, viewed globally, strikingly privileged) descent. I will not give up on the conviction that flattening hegemony can and should happen from all directions—as power structures are complex, as the efforts of overcoming inequality cannot be put solely on the shoulders of those affected by it, and as I know from own experience that solidarity is not a function of material status only.

I think acknowledging social reality in its multifacetedness and diversity is a matter of academic work, of scientifically representing reality in its liveliness.

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Paper 2: When the Political Hits: Mass Protest and Political Positioning in Contentious Romania

Submitted to Europe-Asia Studies

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Abstract

Romanian contentious politics is recently undergoing significant change, marked, most visibly, by repeated cycles of public mass protests. Based on a political etnographic research in Romania, this study aims to understand this process by exploring the diverse meaning-making practices of activists, using the association/dissociation concept from political difference theory. This approach makes visible a dynamic of political (re-)positioning of Romanian activists through: 1) situating the country historically and regionally, 2) clarifying the role of civil society, enhancing an understanding of its adversary political function in the democratic process, and 3) building, differentiating, and recognising various factions within (reconceptualised) civil society.

Keywords: Romania, protest, civil society, political positioning, political difference, contentious politics, liminality, reconfiguration, transformation, political ethnography

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1. Introduction

In Romania, political culture and public discourse have undergone a process of transformation in recent years. Alongside a cycle of widespread and thematically diverse mass protests, starting latest from the beginning of 2012, the country has seen a total of 15 government changes; an—at least temporary—shift in media discourse, with starkly increased attention and diversity of visible actors regarding political conflict and contentious action (Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013); and what some scholars call a 'civil society reconfiguration' (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019). These developments stand in contrast to the former image of the country as one with high elite resilience (Stoica, 2012) and rather low degrees of political participation and contention in terms of civil society and the broader population (Nistor, 2016; Tătar, 2015). With their platformised style of protest communication/organisation and networking (Gerbaudo, 2012), the protests also exemplify recent challenges to social movement theories brought about by the general postmodern condition, and social media in particular, profoundly shifting the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and social movement organisations (SMOs) in mediating protest organisation and mobilisation, network building, and relations with public institutions (Mercea, 2016).

Apart from the observable large-scale shifts in Romanian political culture, there also seems to be a change in the level of individuals and small collectives. Throughout my research in Romania, interlocutors repeatedly reported an intensification of political discussions in their everyday lives. They frequently shared how they found their own political positions, oftentimes in connection with the protests. It seems that the disruptive occurrence of mass protests triggered a broader dynamic of political learning, reflection, and positioning in people, some of whom formed a new activist 'scene' (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2017, 2020).

Some scholars of the phenomenon indicate what seems to be an undercurrent of the observable outcomes and shifts in the culture of contentious politics engendered by the protests. They use terms such as 'civic awakening', 'collective cognitive liberation', or 'reconfigurations in activist culture' (see below). But what does such an awakening or cognitive liberation look like on the ground? How are reconfigurations brought about for the particular political worldviews of the people involved? What lines of meaning-making, reflection, and discussion are triggered by such a process?

Proceeding from the methodological notion of political difference—differentiating an ontic 'politics' level from an ontological condition of 'the political'(Bedorf, 2010) —in this paper, I trace the political entities in relation to and within which my interlocutors position themselves and draw lines of political association and dissociation. I argue that, most generally, the disruption of mass protest was an occassion for many politically active people in Romania not only to increase their degrees of

outward action, but also of introspection and discussion. These changes impact the ways in which the people organise, communicate, and build networks of contentious politics in the country and perceive themselves and others on the political level. In other words, the changes impact how the people configure the (contentious) political spaces within which they are acting. Additionally, I aim to exemplify the theoretical usefulness of the political difference analytical lens for delineating and conceptualising processes of change—in terms of political association/dissociation—especially in the field of contentious politics lifeworlds.[185]

The data for this study derive from a political ethnographic study[186] in Romania carried out through different tiers of online and offline field research between 2018 and 2023.[187] Given the focus of the present paper, I concentrate on the more in-depth elaborations of my interlocutors in individual talks, who often shared their paths of orientation within political activism without me asking about it. All of my interlocutors have been active in contentious political action and are well networked within different branches of the 'scene', most of them also performing organising functions for several years at the time of our talks. I entered the field by contacting people within easy reach and then proceeded to select interlocutors with a combination of snowballing and confrontation methods (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. Ch.10; Mosca, 2014). My interlocutors all have different connections to the protests: some were active even well before the outbreaks, some became active in the course of the protests happening; some are closely connected to the organisation and mobilisation of actual protests, while others are employed at NGOs formed during the protests; and some are enthusiastic, while others are pessimistic, sceptical, or even in clear opposition to the protests. Regardless of their leanings and background, all of my interlocutors acknowledged an effect of the mobilisations on their own modes of political action, thinking, or positioning, as well as on their interpersonal networks of activism.[188]

185 I argue that this focus on lifeworlds is important, especially in settings that do not mirror the 'older' logics of contentious politics where these were mediated mainly by formal CSOs or SMOs. Volintiru (Volintiru, 2021), for example, underlines that statistical data on CSOs only partially reflect the present-day reality of Romanian contentious politics, as the informal sector has notably grown and diversified recently.

186 I subscribe to an interpretive, ethnographically sensible methodological approach (Schatz, 2009; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). I used Holbraad and Pedersens's 'ontologically turned' interpretational method of *conceptualisation* (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 14ff.) for structuring and interpreting the data.

187 An overview over interlocutors and data can be found in the appendix.

188 On the importance of the informal activist 'scene', or, what some of my interlocutors referred to as the 'bubble' (*bula*), see (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2017, 2020); with regard to the role of social network sites, see (Mercea, 2016).

2. Mass protest and recent civil society developments in Romania

Romania has experienced thematically diverse waves of protests in recent years.[189] While the protests have exhibited a vast range of to participants' demographics, demands, and repertoires of action, three major phases of protest are broadly discernible. An early phase of thematic and demographic plurality, occurring mainly in winter 2012, was triggered by widespread opposition to the harsh austerity measures of that time[190] and, relatedly, to the government personnel, the state of public health care, and to salaries in the public sector. Peaking in autumn 2013, this initial activation set fertile ground for broader reception and mobilisation in the case of the green movement, particularly against gold mining plans in the area of Roşia Montană. The protests focused the preservation of natural heritage, and relatedly, the structural factors leading to the ongoing exploitation of resources, including the interests of foreign corporations facilitated by local, supposedly corrupt elites. After a fire in Bucharests' Colectiv venue in October 2015 with numerous victims, the corruption theme was applied in different contextualisations. Following directly upon the incident, in 2015, mobilizations underlined the individual danger that corrupt structures can put people in. In 2017, triggered by an ordonance decriminalising corruption and abuse of office up to a damage sum of 44.000€,[191] the kleptocratic mentalities of the governing class in general and the social democrat party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD) in particular were decried in massive street protests, while emphasizing lingering anti-communist sentiments in society. In 2018, the corrupt and malfunctioning government were set in relation to the massive emigration and a general lack of respect of the 'political class' for its citizens and the diaspora in particular.[192]

The course of events thus far has prompted a shift away from a diverse participant structure, a broad range of protest issues and demands, including more radical system critique and a focus on social agendas and ad hoc settings of protest, towards more professionalised organisation structures,

189 For an overview of the subsequent waves of mobilisation, see (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2020; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017); regarding the political, institutional, and social contexts for protest outbreaks, see (Dimova, 2019; Margarit, 2016; Stoiciu, 2021; Tătar, 2022).

190 Unions had already organised protests against the austerity measures since 2009 but were not able to mobilise beyond their membership and beyond particular interests. Moreover, their room for manoeuvre was restricted extensively during this period (Stoiciu, 2016). One of the main shifts the 'new' protests were able to bring about relates to this issue. For a tangible overview on this issue, see https://www.documentaria.ro/content/album (11.10.2024).

191 Ordonanţă de Urgenţă 13/2017, OUG13.

192 With protests excalating violently on 10th of August, 2018.

anti-communist rhetorics, a more streamlined participation profile,[193] and anti-corruption and judiciary system issues (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017; Stoiciu, 2021).

What differentiates these cycles of protest quite clearly from single-issue protests or from social movements (in the most commonly used sense specified in Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) is that there is no unified claim or a preexisting organisational base. None of my interlocutors—all of whom are highly engaged activists in their respective causes—directly derived the occurrence of the protests from the issues, such as a lack of environmental protection, austerity, or even corruption. The claims of particular protests appear rather as expressions of an underlying general frustration with the status quo of Romanian politics (Grădinaru et al., 2016; Jaitner & Spöri, 2017).

The direct effects of protests on the Romanian public political sphere can be evaluated in two ways. On the one hand, among other direct policy and polity reactions, two governments stepped down following public pressure, the Roşia Montană area was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2021, and governing by decree was intensely disputed in public discourse (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017; Tătar, 2022, p. 191f.). The green movement could effectively enshrine its claims in public conscience, facilitating mobilisation and political learning, especially in the early phases of protests (Mercea, 2016). The anticorruption claim evolved throughout the protests, gaining high media approval and mobilisation potential, and may become a classical movement base, with its activists founding new professional civil society and media organisations and even political parties. Some issues have newly entered the field of awareness of active participants and have steadily gained traction. One example is the struggle for equal rights by sexual and gender minorities and women (e.g., the annual Pride parades have multiplied their attendance in recent years)[194] with its activists having strong organisational connections to the activist 'scene'. Additionally, the far right used public activation for unifying their claims and mobilising, with the 'Alliance for the Union of Romanians' (Alianţă pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR), which was founded in 2019, recently attracting approximately 20% votes in election polls.[195]

193 It is often claimed that participants in anti-corruption protests were mainly male, middle-aged, urban residents with higher education, identifying with right-wing politics (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). However, the study cited in this regard (CeSIP, 2018) conducted a demographic sample study of *two* particular anti-corruption protests in Bucharest in February 2017. My interlocutors also often referenced the streamlining of protests, and I believe it is a real phenomenon, keeping in mind the highly professionalised social media campaign, paired with a favourable media environment supporting the protests, especially in 2017, though its originality may be overestimated.

194 The first Pride march in Bucharest in 2005 had approximately 800 participants. The one in 2022 had approximately 15000, plus another approximately 2000 in simultaneous marches in Cluj-Napoca, Iaşi, and Timişoara. See https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/reportaj-cum-au-sarbatorit-in-strada-15-000-de-oameni-bucharest-pride-un-progres-pe-care-societatea-romaneasca-il-marcheaza-in-2022-4205471.

195 See https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/. AUR managed to unify formerly dispersed far-right groups as diverse as the identitarian movement, neo-legionary groups, and ultraorthodox nationalists/traditionalists, or ethnic activists ('geto-dacians') under its alternative-right campaign. Notably, despite the large turnout in opinion

On the other hand, it has also been argued that institutional actors have learned how to react to large-scale protests: diverse legal projects have restricted the overall space for contentious action, while political parties have used public activations strategically for their campaigns, have spun public discussions sparked by protests in their favour,[196] or have demonstrated their power in implementing their agendas despite public discontent (Dimova, 2019).

The protests have also impacted the culture of contentious politics in Romania. In the literature, it is often stated that protesting has become more socially acceptable, or attractive, to many Romanians (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2020), that they reconfigured and fostered activist networks and included (relative) newcomers in the activist scene (Mercea, 2016), and that they brought a somewhat deeper oppositional character to political activism in Romania (Tătar, 2022). The protests have triggered intense public discussion on political issues, such as corruption, the judiciary system, environmental protection or the country's relationship to the European Union, as well as on other diverse issues, such as the role of the orthodox church in politics and society (Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013; Grădinaru et al., 2016).

Interestingly, however, statistical data on citizen participation and civil society activity do not provide a clear image of contentious activation. For example, voter turnouts in national elections seem not to be bound to the protests—turnouts in parliamentary elections have steadily declined[197] since 1990, from approximately 80% to barely over 30% in 2020. In presidential elections, after decreasing numbers in the 1990s, turnouts evened out at approximately 50-60%. Notably, in elections for the European Parliament, voter turnouts rose from 29.47% after the country's accession in 2007 to 51.20% in 2019—the highest percentage among eastern European member states. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of civil society organisations with a civic scope increased less than other domains of nongovernmental activity in Romania up until (e.g., agricultural or cultural organisations)[198], and the share of the total number of nongovernmental organisations in Romania with a civic focus has slightly decreased. At the same time, reported trust in and rates of voluntary work in nongovernmental organisations and philanthropy increased between 2010 and 2016. According to

polls in its favour, AUR does not mobilise on a larger scale in its protest events, which oftentimes borrow especially from anti-corruption protests' symbolism, location, and rhetorics. Additionally, the regular far-right protests, for example, against Pride parade, celebrating legionary heroes, or protests in favour of the 'traditional family', have not reported increased participation recently. One substantial mobilisation increase that (in large part) favoured far-right claims were the protests against security measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

196 One could, for example, cite the PSD building up on and supporting the anti-austerity protests in 2012 and making oppositional claims towards the right-wing governing coalition, or Klaus Iohannis's support of (and participation in) 2017 anti-corruption protests followed by his 2019 'together for a normal Romania' electoral program.

197 Numbers on voter turnouts are taken from: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database. Voter turnout in the 2012 parliamentary elections were indeed slightly higher than that in the 2008 elections. See also (Tătar, 2022, p. 193).

198 See FDSC, 2017. In an actualized report, what can be seen however is an increase in civic organizations foundations especially shortly before the larger protest outbreaks, see (FDSC, 2024, p. 21).

the World Values Survey, with regard to individual civic activity, the readiness to sign petitions has risen (from 6% of interviewees reporting having signed a petition in 2005 to 13% doing so in 2018) Not surprisingly, however, the number of individuals stating that they have participated in demonstrations has increased.[199]

However, some authors speak of the course of events as a disruption[200] in Romanian political culture or an 'awakening' (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Cirtita-Buzoianu & Daba-Buzoianu, 2013), or 'cognitive liberation' (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017) of its populace, bringing about a 'transitional' or 'liminal' (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2020) space for political (re)orientation and learning. So, what do these claims mean? What happens in an 'awakening' or in a liminal space? What engenders a 'cognitive liberation' on the ground? In the following, I argue that these processes express a qualitative shift in Romanian contentious politics culture, beyond an increase in political knowledge, organisational skills, or network density, namely, a process of political positioning. I propose that a moment of visibility of the political – i.e., the fundamentally undecidedable and contingent character of political decision-making—could generate momentum for conscious political (re)orientation, identifying political questions, deliberating alternatives, and, as one of my interlocutors says, 'finding one's place' (Iulia[201]) in contentious politics.

3. Positioning against institutional politics

Edwards (2014, pp. 213ff.) describes the outbreak of protest as a disruption, or 'misbehaviour,' namely, a disturbance to the expected order of action and response within an institutionalised context, which opens up space for societal (re)construction. I argue that the disruption to the expected order of action and response, i.e., the 'awakening' that took place in Romania, cannot be viewed as a target-oriented endeavour striving to replace the 'old' order with an already-formulated 'new' construct. Thus, challenging the usual flow of politics, the question of alternatives to the existing way of doing things comes to the fore. For Rancière (Rancière, 1999), such moments constitute a rare occurrence of the political in its ontological quality, as a contingent and undecidable multiplicity of possibilities in organising the collective. The disruption creates a moment of passage, or liminality

199 The WVS asks, for whatever reason, about partaking in 'lawful/peaceful demonstrations', which rose from 6% of respondents in 2005 to approximately 9% in 2018, see https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp A Romanian survey from 2017 reports an astonishing 17% of respondents have partaken in 'the street protests occurring lately', see https://issuu.com/cosminpojoranu/docs/sondaj_updated_3.

200 Stoiciu (Stoiciu, 2021) frames this disruption as a sign of 'broken peace'—with the austerity measures reacting to the financial crisis, she argues, the institutions had broken their silent promise to compensate for the social costs of the rather consensually followed path of transition after 1989.

201 The names of interlocutors have been pseudonomised. All citations from interlocutors have been translated from romanian into english by the author.

(Turner, 2007)[202], in which the progression of political culture is opened up, and the urge for political positioning intensifies. According to political difference theory, the (ontic) societal expression of the political condition, or politics, includes processes of association, (see Marchart, 2007) and dissociation (Bedorf, 2010, originally: Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2011) to and from political collectivities and stances.[203]

Most obviously, what one can see in protest politics is its positioning against, in opposition to something.[204] Mostly, this opposition refers to a powerful actor, and as in many other places and protest occurrences, in Romania, the starting point and main frame throughout the cycles of mobilisation was an opposition to institutions and policies of the government. However, emphasizing only this arguably strong dissociative characteristic of the protest event itself, I argue, dismisses the more complex, potentially transformative character it may come to bear: except for the rare case of a revolutionary overthrow, protest practices are situated within a larger realm of political culture, which inherits a complex framework of different official and public institutions and existing instances of contentious politics.

This becomes plastic in some of my interlocutors' narratives of their relatedness to institutions. After engaging mainly in mobilisation for anti-corruption protests, for example, Ioana's organisation identified a need to establish dialogue between institutional actors and civil society organisations. In this course, it organised public meetings with police officers to discuss the role of the police during mass protests. By establishing contact between her organisation and the police—an official institution often viewed as a natural adversary of protestors—and publicly holding it accountable for its constitutional role (of securing the exercise of freedom of expression), they associated to the realm of public politics, formerly identified with mainly institutional actors and their interests.

Simultaneously, civil society organisations take care to distinguish themselves from institutions. They position themselves as adversaries of parties and public administration, on a shared politics

202 Turner describes liminality in a context of traditional cultures and rites of passage. This context prescribes a rather fixed idea of how the 'reaggregated' individual or collective should look like. This understanding of liminality arguably does not correspond to a disruption in institutionalised politics. However, his overall concept of disaggregation and reaggregation can be employed to make sense of a nondetermined formation, viewing reaggregation as an open-ended process.

203 It is sometimes difficult to differentiate 'association' and 'dissociation' from the conceptually close terms 'agreement' and 'disagreement'. To associate is not to agree, contentwise, but to create a common space for debate, and to agree on (and negotiate) common delimitations and common rules for acting within it. Dissociation is a practice of differentiating the self from the other on the political level. Antagonistic dissociation, drawing on Schmittian identity concepts, involves negating or exiting the associative political space, disengaging from its limitations and rules, while simultaneously prescribing an ideal of inner-identitarian homogeneity, which, according to Mouffe, can result in violent conflict and authoritarianism. Agonistic dissociation means to remain within the associative political realm while simultaneously differentiating oneself from the other, thus viewing the other as an opponent rather than an enemy (Mouffe, 2011).

204 Tilly and Tarrow, defining contentious politics, refer to the character of a contentious claim in touching upon an other's interest. See (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

field.[205] In addition to their most visible claims at actual demonstrations, this positioning manifests in an organisational policy that many of my interlocutors mentioned—oftentimes in asides, as something natural—i.e., that one cannot be a member of both a political party and their civil society organisation.[206]

Thus, finding a position in relation to official institutions is a tensionate process. Many interlocutors note that throughout the course of events, especially political parties, but also security services have instrumentalised, coopted, or even 'infiltrated' (Dan, Ruxandra) protests to serve their own interests.[207] This behaviour further increases scepticism towards collaborating with institutions while nonetheless increasing the perceived urge to establish a different mode of civil society representation and participation in politics, for which, one way or another, those in power need to become active.

Associating to the realm of public politics but drawing a line to distinguish one's organisation from institutional politics, highly diverse modes of positionings have come about, with some leaning more towards an ideal of an independent self-organisation while others try to 'enter institutions' in founding parties.

At the most basic level, contentious politics in Romania exhibited collective and visible dissociation from the institutionalised status quo. At the same time, it established itself as an (oppositional) part of public debate. Thus, beyond rising in opposition to an othered, powerful part of politics, the political moment of protest may also spark a process of finding and orienting the political self.

4. Positioning the self

One of my interlocutors describes the process following her first-time activation during the street protests in Bucharest in 2012 as a process of 'finding one's place' in (contentious) politics. Getting to know each other on several occasions during that time, activists began finding groups and acting together based on personal sympathy, practical feasibility, and shared positional ideas. As Iulia states: 'We liked them, they liked us. We had some similar ideas, so we decided to act together.' Some interlocutors describe that phase as one of intensified, cooperative political learning, triggered

205 As Mihaela says regarding many activists' disillusionment with the *Uniunea Salvați România* (Save Romania Union, USR): 'I think this is something natural because a party is one thing, civil society is another thing, and the administration again is something different.'

206 Ioana says that, in her organisation, it is not even possible to become a member if one has been a member of a party in the past. She states: 'Yes, we do politics. However, categorically: people who were or still are in a party—no!' This attitude of civil society 'nonpartisanship' is a phenomenon observed throughout postsocialist Eastern Europe, see (Kralj, 2021).

207 While the first elections after the protest outbreaks in 2012 following the demission of prime minister Emil Boc (*Partidul Democrat-Liberal*, Liberal Democrat Party, PD-L) brought about a PSD-led government under Victor Ponta, all subsequent large protest mobilisations took place in opposition to PSD-led governments. Nonetheless, the PSD clearly won the parliamentary elections in 2016.

by political discussion, organisational needs, or skill sharing in contact with already existing activist groups from within or outside Romania. Being together in this process of getting to know the newly opened up possibilities and activated people, Iulia goes on to explain how people actually strived to find their place within these possibilities in relation to protest topics, modes of action, ideological orientations, and organisational roles by matching their interests, group affiliations, locatedness, values, and resources. This process also involved carving out perspectives towards the overall political unit,[208] situating themselves within the international or even global realm and within history. Moreover, interlocutors locate a concept of civil society within that unit and differentiate their stances within that realm.

4.1. Denominating protests

Discussing the timely progression of public protest in their country, interlocutors use widely similar labels to describe certain waves of mobilisation, despite participating in different ideological, organisational, or local contexts.

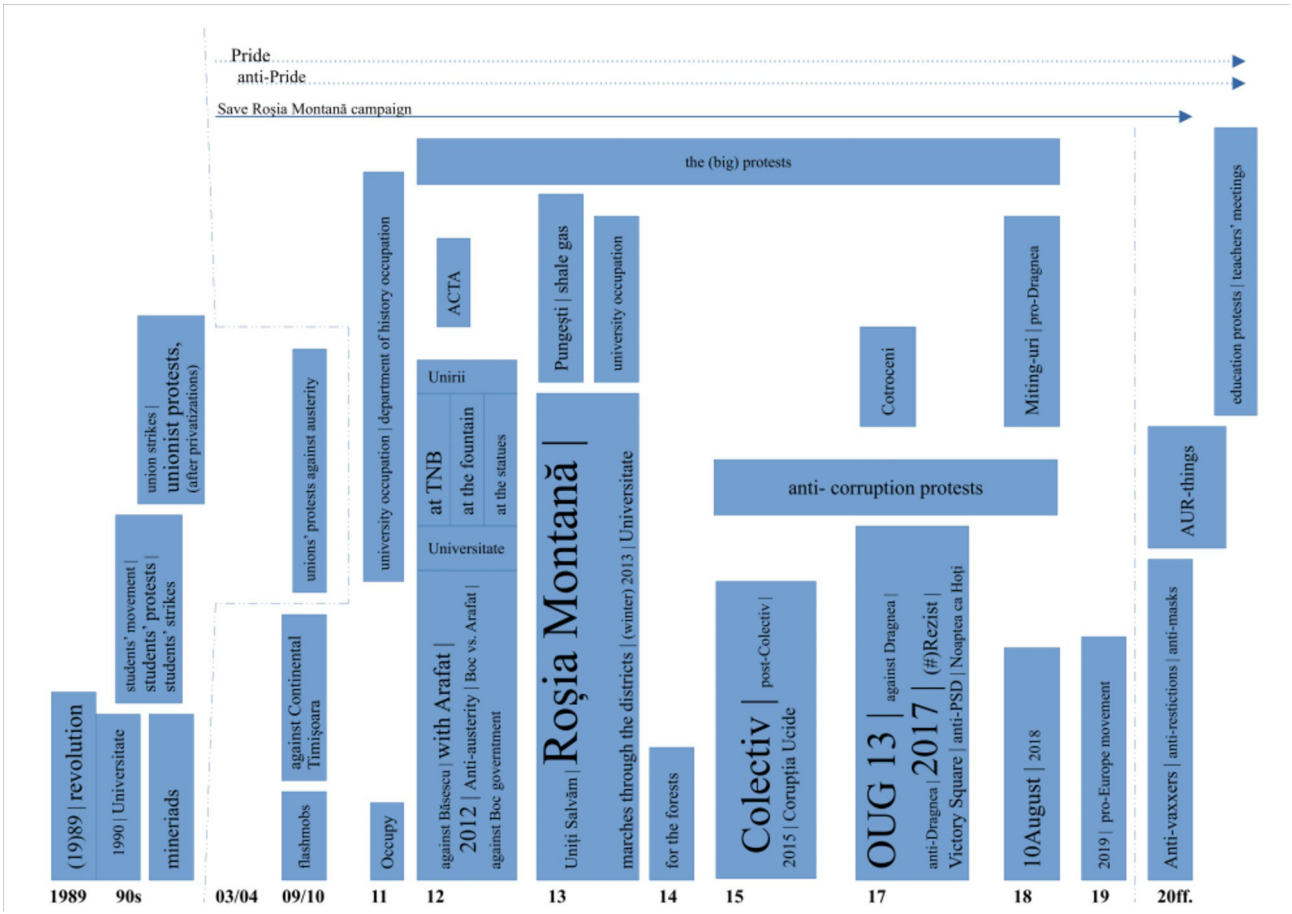

Figure 1: interlocutors' protest denominations between 1989 and 2023 (as mentioned by at least two interlocutors, Romanian expressions translated by the author, except for proper names, detailed explanation see appendix)

208 This unit was mostly referred to as the national state of Romania by interlocutors, but sometimes also as Eastern Europe more generally.

Two observations are intriguing here, considering the media and academic coverage of the protest phenomenon thus far. First, the labels that emerged in direct conversation with people implicated in the movements differ from the labels found in media and academia. Not a single interlocutor speaks about the 'Romanian Autumn', the 'White Revolution' or the 'Light Revolution'[209]. Some denominations, however, are common in public as well as personal narrations of the events. 'Colectiv', for example, stands as a quite stable title for the 2015 wave of protest. In activist circles as well as the accompanying publication landscape, it seems that '2012' and '2017'—marking the first and by far the largest incidence of mass demonstrations, respectively—are becoming timely benchmarks in describing the recent process.

Second, the beginning of 'the protests' in 2012, in the perception of some activists, is not so definite. Some of their journeys had already begun earlier, e.g. with the first Pride marches or particular flashmob actions in Bucharest in the early 2000s (Radu), or the 'Occupy' attempts of 2011 (Dan, Liviu) in their reconstructions. Some (younger) activists say that their 'awakening' took place amid the massive protests in 2017 (Cătălina).

What they all have in common, however, is that they nominally differentiate the 'new' phenomenon from earlier ones. Mobilisations between 1989 and the 'new' protests are nearly always denominated after the organisations or collectives driving them, such as the 'students' movement' or 'student strikes', the 'sindicalist strikes' or even the mineriads, named after the coal miners, who were the perceived major actors. The emerging Pride protests, protests against Continental in Timișoara, Occupy, or ACTA demonstrations, while apparently not in the public mainstream consciousness of the protest phenomenon, are terminologically already included in that narration by some people, as the protests are named contentwise, and they are described as examples of rather self-organised protest. When asked directly whether more recent protests, e.g., the 'anti-vaxxers'' protests during the pandemic, the recent 'teachers' strikes', and others, should be differentiated from the protest formation under study, the interlocutors answered along the lines of 'this is still not clear' and 'there seems to be some connection, but I'm not sure' (Cătălina). However, from the perspective of denomination, the protests are allocated to collectivities outside the self. Protests of professional groups, e.g., taxi-drivers or shepherds, have occurred repeatedly throughout the period of protest formation, but their claims have never been incorporated into the 'scene's' narration of causes and triggers for protest. Interestingly, in the case of other group-related causes for protests, e.g., women's or minority rights (e.g., Pride or Pata Rat protests) and even the respective opposing mo-

209 In one case (Mircea), an interlocutor uses the 'White Revolution' label a means for dissociating from the elitist, 'white' stream of anti-corruption protesters and its perceived condescending attitude towards protestors in favour of the social democrat party and the government in 2017, othering them as 'dirty, old, uneducated, poor, rural, with bad teeth'. See also Deoancă, 2017.

bilisations (e.g., the so-called ‘anti-Pride’ or ‘march for normalcy’), by denomination, these are included in the sphere of debate. This convention hints at the positioning of my interlocutors within a timely, collectivity-related, and thematically delineated associative space of contentious political action.

Another notable characteristic of protest labels is their denomination by location. Spacial labels sometimes mark a distinction between protesters and their attitudes, as in the distinction between Piața Universitate (University Square) in the area in front of the national theatre (Teatrul Național București, TNB) and Fântâna (‘the fountain’), signalling a foremost demographic divide between protestors in 2012, or the contrast between Piața Victoriei (Victory Square, near the parliamentary building) and Cotroceni (in front of the Cotroceni presidential palace) protests, signifying the simultaneous occurrence of anti- and pro-government (and anti-presidential) protests in 2017.

Therefore, by examining the discursive function of topics, trigger events, historical marks, and locations as labels for certain clustered phenomena, we can observe the building of a common vocabulary to talk about events, delineating the common ground and inner borderlines of the protest phenomenon.

4.2. Where is Romania?

The societal transformation after 1989 was often referenced in the mass protests in Romania, and my interlocutors also have a lot to say about this issue. It is widely perceived as a constant source of political tension and frustration. And it is telling how differently my interlocutors reconstructed the transformation and linked it to their own and other protestors’ political contention.

One such reconstruction starts from the chaotic situation after 1989, which is said to have enabled certain people to come to wealth and power. As one interlocutor tells me about a job she had in the 2000s as a legal advisor in a company:

> Her boss had given her a sheet with legal problems, and she had thought that she was to modify his business plans to make them compliant. After reading her comments, he had thrown the papers all over her office, yelling at her that all he had wanted her to do was find ways for him to manoeuvre around all the legislation. As she says: ‘Those who were apt to, did win during that time, while those who weren’t, did not.’ Turning to me, knowing that I grew up in the Eastern part of Germany, she says that she thought the difference between legal transformation in East Germany and Romania was that, in Germany, there was a formulated legal framework at hand, while in Romania, a notable amount of legislation was actually formulated by corrupt networks to serve their interests. (fieldnote excerpt, Manuela)

From a different angle of making sense of the issue, another interlocutor shares the following:

> I told you, about the consensus that all parties followed by then, all with the market economy. So the FSN[210], Iliescu, they also said we do market economy, but in a more gradual way, so that we don't have to fire them all from one day to the next, so that we don't produce social divides. […] And when these other guys came to power, I mean the right, in `96, […], they came up with that shock therapy. So we should accelerate privatisation. They privatised […] approximately 6000 companies, from 1996 to 2000. So it was a disaster, galloping inflation: today the Dollar was 10 Lei, tomorrow 15; it was incredible. (Liviu)

He goes on to say that the social problems that followed this situation could not be credibly represented and processed by institutional politics afterwards, as the PSD could not escape the liability of being the communists' heir organisation. This fact could be viewed as a double burden on the party's credibility, as the PSD not only triggers suspicions about being a predecessor of Romania's brutal communist regime but also of Iliescu's cynical political games in coming to power after the revolution. As Liviu says:

> The PSD is the principal heir of communist structures. When the [communist] party collapsed in December 1989, the new formation that took power, the FSN, constituted itself upon the old communist structures. I mean the seats, the networks of people, of power, the influence, the money etc.. It is pointless how they are trying to say there wouldn't be any connection […]. And the ones on the right, they are making use of this Achilles' heel.

In Liviu's narration, Romania's main problem is a social divide, with a representational void in institutional politics on the left, i.e., the representation of social security. It came about by the (historically justified) delegitimisation of that political direction and was enforced by a global hegemony of economic liberalism.

Manuela would certainly contradict that construction, as she says: 'The leadership back then [in the early 90s], they were serious communists, well educated in Moscow. With a party ideology. Now they are also communists, but of a new style.' She continues:

> And the PNL[211] then was the only historic party[212] to shake hands with the FSN to come to power. […] So to make such a compromise, after the whole intellectuality of your party, all its activities, have died because of the communists, and you just to come to power, […] you don't have any rapport with enhancing democracy in that time?!

Manuela thus depicts the governance problem as one of morality of the governing. While she generally distances from communism quite sharply, she also says:

> So for that, we understand each other right, there have been people who governed with a communist mentality, in villages and towns, who did good things there. One of them, who was afterwards

210 The *Frontul Salvării Naționale* (National Salvation Front, FSN) was the party of Romania's first elected president, Ion Iliescu. After the fourth mineriad, Iliescu split from it in 1992 to join *Frontul Democratic al Salvării Naționale* (Democratic Front of Național Salvation, FDSN), while demissioned prime minister Petre Roman remained with the FSN. The Roman-wing of FSN was later renamed *Partidul Democrat* (Democrat Party, PD), and merged with a splinter from *Partidul Național Liberal* (National Liberal Party, PNL, see below) to PD-L (uniting with PNL again in 2014). After a couple of mergers, the FDSN formed to what is currently the PSD.

211 Currently, the largest parties in Romania are the PSD and PNL.

212 After the revolution, some parties abolished by either the fascist regime in between wars or the communist regime after WWII reconstituted and engaged anew in political activities.

> even excluded from the PSD […] was a Mayor, near Brașov. He accessed the EU funds and redid everything there, including infrastructure, asphalting, and a renovated school. And we, who protested during that time against the thieves from the PSD, we lauded him: 'Why don't you multiply this one? Populate your party with people like him!' Because, for him, you could have nothing but respect, even if he was from the PSD.

In addition to the local context, Liviu's account points to an outwards source of this problem—the hegemonic market consensus (Stoiciu, 2021)—reinforcing the representational problem of the left in the entire postsocialist space. Manuela discussed the regional context by mostly referring to the institutional and cultural body of the European Union, such as building peace, prosperity, and cultural exchange and understanding, as well as protection from Russia. Others also often relate Romania to its western transitionary role models, mostly stating that catching up to them went 'much too slow' (Marius, Ioana). However, they also problematise 'just mimicking' practices developed in western contexts (Marius), as one interlocutor says: 'Only introducing „the right" policies does not bring about the same effects here as they did elsewhere'. (Marius)[213] Moreover, as Marius says with regard to Trump's presidency and Brexit, recently, 'unfortunately we have also lost the role models […]'. However, as he goes on: 'You shouldn't dream anymore that somebody comes, from outside, from the European Union, from NATO, or the government, to change us as people. […] We need a conscious effort, pro-active, planned. No one can do the thing we are not apt to do'.

There seems to be a more recent objection among some activists against that, as some say, illusion of somebody coming from the outside—and actually from the West—to solve Romania's problems.[214] As Mihaela says,

> Yes, and we voted for Iohannis because he is German. I know I read somewhere that the fact we voted an ethnic German for president proves we aren't xenophobic. This is not true. Many have voted for him because they said, as he is a German, he will come and solve our problems. And look how he doesn't resolve them at all; actually it is the opposite. There is no equivalence...they wouldn't have elected as easily an Italian or a Rom. It is not equal.

Therefore, according to the perceptions of my interlocutors, Romania is located in the historically delineated region of Eastern Europe and is set in relation to the global 'West'. It finds itself in a politically unsatisfying situation—which neither the current state institutions nor any external actors are expected to resolve.

213 Asked what 'mimicking' means in Marius's view, he answers: 'We mimic democracy: We have a multiparty system, elections, we have separation of powers—what we lack are the processes; the relations between authority and citizen are not as they are in countries with more advanced democracy. Relations between institutions are not there. Someone who looks from the outside would say that we have [a] participatory democracy […] but we haven't arrived there, qualitatively'.

214 While as Gubernat and Rammelt (2021) elaborate, the theme of longing for, and belonging to, (western) Europe was a main frame for mobilisation especially in the anti-corruption protests. Organising actors also repeatedly addressed their messages directly to the wider European public, and to EU institutional bodies.

In their accounts, interlocutors challenged the hegemonic narrative of, e.g., the democratic revolution and catch-up modernisation (Stoiciu, 2021). Some regarded these imaginaries as having failed and as needing to be enhanced anew (by a self-sustained civic society or politics). Others questioned whether the alleged consensus in following these hegemonic targets (still) holds altogether. What becomes visible here, in the context of public mass contention, is an urge to make sense of its roots and directions, which is arguably a political endeavour of identifying problems, setting agendas, and potentially proposing solutions.

4.3. Where is Civil Society?

Thaa (2004) conceptualised civil society as 'a society's effect on itself' (p. 205). In an ideal democratic system, one could say that state institutions actually fulfil this role, assigning civil society more a mediating function between electorate and elected, for facilitating participation, establishing contacts between the representants and the represented especially on the local level, offering social assistance and politics education—and not so much an instance of contentious, or oppositional politics (Bedorf, 2010; Vollrath, 2003).

As elaborated above, from the perspective of my interlocutors, in practice, state institutions and their personnel do not fulfil the roles assigned to them in theory, nor are foreign democratic institutions expected to take it on.[215] Thus, the urge to act for oneself becomes a qualitatively political endeavour. All of my interlocutors could name a moment they began realising this urge to become politically active and adopt a political position-—and many of these moments do relate to the protests.

An interlocutor who later became well known for her anti-corruption activities says her awakening was in 2015, after the fire in Colectiv. She says: 'In 2015, I was 28 years old, and since I could vote, I never actually went to vote. And now this happened. At this moment, I felt incredibly guilty. I couldn't stand it anymore. […] There were too many like me then, who didn't even vote, and there still are many'. (Ioana)

Some of my interlocutors share that they regret the lack of citizen engagement in their country. They often trace this problem back to the history of post-1989 transformation. As one interlocutor shares: 'In the 90s, after all this chaos, many people built nests and stayed inside. […] Additionally, in communism, voluntary work was forced upon people. Afterwards, many turned cynical and said: „Why should I tidy up here, am I your stupid?"' (Adrian)

Mihaela refers her urge for civil society action especially to the perspective of the youth:

> They hear from their parents, from the grandparents, that everything is miserable here and we are not capable of anything, and they then come to believe they need to leave the country, or to not go

215 Which goes with Mouffe's critique towards an idealised view upon the democratic state, negating the overall hegemonic tendencies of any institutional order (Mouffe, 2011).

> further with their ideas because they wouldn't be capable anyway. […] And they become anxious and depressive because they don't feel well in this country and in this society. I don't say we should become like the Americans, inaugurate the flag and all this—but we should become more constructive, more active, when there is a problem, we should say: Let's solve this together.

How this idea should be achieved differs widely: some would engage in political education, while others would engage in organising protest, founding organisations, building infrastructure, engaging in community initiatives, setting up activist spaces, or organising activist trainings. Some of my interlocutors entered party politics or public administration. Others write books, work in media outlets, perform research and teaching at universities, conduct social work, and allocate funds. Some engage in the arts or satire. What all of them would subscribe to is that they are trying to make an impact on society, in a political[216] way, and that they strive to inspire others to do so, too. As Adrian states: 'Most basically, we all need to engage in introspection: What does it truly mean to do good? Is it inherently good, or is it merely our perception?' And this is a transversal endeavor.

This intensified urge to make an impact, I argue, marks the reconfiguration of Romanian civil society as an intensified process of reflection, positioning, and political discussion and, not least, a change in its personnel. Marius, an elder activist who already worked in civil society organisations in the 1990s, says that he thinks 'old' civil society he worked for had little to do with the protests. He says that from the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, most Romanian civil society organisations became rather technical and less grassroots; being occupied with their organisational sustainability instead of being mission driven. In his opinion, there was not enough political opposition manifested by them, especially when role models, such as the US, began to drift away from former ideal images of liberal democracy. Moreover, the rapport between public administrations and civil society was not satisfactory. He describes the change that took place in approximately 2012 as the individual political engagement momentarily outrunning the organised civil society sector, moving the latter to a counselling role. In parallel, he explains, from 2007 onwards, an 'autochthonous' civil society sector began to emerge: the newly founded organisations were still reliant on foreign financing, but as he observed, 'there is a substantial difference' between external organisations bringing their activities to Romania and organisations having 'grown' within the country.

I argue that this difference could be understood in light of the process of political positioning. To position oneself is a political endeavour, while taking on and acting out a preformulated position is not necessarily. The latter does not prescribe the processes connected to positioning, namely, of (re)constructing the space to which one associates, learning about and orienting within it.

216 As the term *politic*, political, in Romania is often assigned to party politics or ideological conflict, many would, while aligning to the content of my argument, reject my choice of wording here.

The emergence of these ‘new’, original, Romanian civil society organisations was catalysed and spurred by protest mobilisations. Ioana mentions this intertwining when talking about the protests she began organising from 2015 onwards: ‘Actually protesting should be one of the last things to do when you are not okay with what the government is doing. Somehow, we did it the other way around’.

Thus, activists throughout the protests associated, contentiously, filling a perceived void in Romania’s political culture. This void pointed especially to the lacking political positioning and responsibility of existing civil society organisations. It appears that the range of political alternatives these organisations offered was too narrow, and their position towards institutional politics was not spelled out. Thus, in a moment of general frustration, their organisational potential in contentious politics was ‘overrun‘ by the public urge for political contention. Only after opening up the political space again could an original positioning emerge for some engaged individuals and collectives, forming a ‘new’ instance of civil society that was located as an actor within Romanian political culture.

5. Recognising Others

Opening up a political space, fostering the potential for innovation and change, prompts a fundamental question: where to go from here? From a perspective that is sensible to political agency and the condition of the political, we cannot assume any determined directions to be taken after a disruption in an institutionalised order. Instead, what is to be found after the ‘awakening’ of political contention in Romania is a diverse landscape of contentious politics collectivities, attitudes, and action modes.

Of course, I am not able here to give a complete or representational overview of the positions existing in contemporary contentious politics in Romania. From what was elaborated above, one can already identify some directions the internal positioning activists chose during recent years in discursively reconstructing the country’s historical and regional situation, setting their political agenda, relating to government institutions, conceptualising the protests, and delineating the role of political contention and civil society. Throughout the talks with my interlocutors, several dimensions for determining one’s political stance became visible, e.g., regarding the organisational form of con-

tentious action preferred,[217] the identification of societal systems in need of change,[218] the thematic branches for making contentious claims, and the area of group identification.[219]

In addition to the diversity of emerging self-positionings, some controversies arose between different branches of activistss. Within the group of my interlocutors, three lines of dispute are most vividly mentioned: First, the question of how to assess the observable streamlining of protest issues and protestors' demographics throughout the emergence of the different cycles of protest—away from a large diversity of issues and people, away from social demands, and towards a mainstream of corruption-related protests, mainly driven by young, relatively well-situated urban residents with higher education.[220] This is largely mirrored in the societal group engaging in contentious politics in the longer term, i.e., the group of my interlocutors.[221] However, this mainly tells something about the resources necessary to become and stay politically engaged, and gather visibility and attention, rather than about the variety of particular political orientations. Nearly all of my interlocutors mention thematic evolution towards anticorruption issues throughout the cycles of mobilisation, accompanied by an overwhelming rise (and, lately, fall) in protest participation. Some describe this course of events recurring to the topicality of anticorruption, in light of one of the most pressing problems in Romania's political culture, i.e., an immoral political class. As political protest became a feasible and accepted way of acting again in public discourse, for them, anticorruption was the issue that offered the most consensual reasons for mobilisation. Demobilisation, they go further, set in with the Covid-19 pandemic, but beyond that was driven by frustration with only small changes in political personnel throughout the years of protest, as the political class learned to manage protests and unite

217 Ranging from grassroots and self-organisation to founding official parties or aligning with large international NGO bodies

218 Examples include demanding change in individual morality and everyday culture; the legal system; adjusting representational coverage in the party landscape; the emancipation of underprivileged groups; and the overcoming of social and class inequalities, or of some part of the global hegemony.

219 Examples include age groups; local and organisational affiliations; professional groups; national, ethnic, sexual, gender, or class identifications; ideological camps, etc.

220 While this account is certainly valid for the large waves of anti-corruption protests in Romania's bigger cities (especially Bucharest), I would be cautious to generalise it: older people, while not as visible, have played an important role throughout the protests, e.g., picketing persistently central squares in Bucharest and elsewhere (e.g., this participation can be seen in the video documentation of 2012 University Square protests https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5D14248FB7ECDEEA or in the 2017/2018 picture posts on the public Facebook page *Rezistenții din Piața Victoriei*, Resistants of Victoria Square.) While being partially aggressively othered, rural and less well-off and self-denominated 'working class' Romanians have repeatedly partaken in the mobilisations. What sparks my curiosity for further investigation is the role of the very young, reportedly being increasingly out of reach of the newly formed civil society collectivities I talked to, but seemingly showing a high potential and demand for contentious political engagement.

221 The exception is the age structure of my interlocutors, which, apart from largely middle-aged protest participants, ranges from late teenagers to retired persons.

across partisan borders on their interests,[222] and by a lack of cultural change and the ongoing emigration of 'modern' Romanians—i.e., the young, well educated, engaged citizens.

For others, frustration set in much earlier in the protests. Mircea, for example, expresses how certain groups of protestors were excluded socially from the protests early on because they did not fit into said image of 'modern', or, as he and some other interlocutors rather sardonically call it, a 'TFL-ist' (which stands for tineri frumoși liberi, or young, beautiful, and free) Romania. He refers this, amongst others, to ultragroups who had had a prominent presence in the 2012 protests but quite rapidly were disparaged for their vulgar language and partially violent behaviour, and to people with lower incomes and from rural areas. As Liviu relays: 'Some of the hardliners at the rezist demonstrations [2017 anti-corruption protests] accused them, denigrated them, like: look at their faces... You know, poverty has a different face, poverty smells, poverty doesn't have teeth'. Mircea contends that this attitude among a certain segment of protest participants and organisers was connected to their political stances and protest issues:

> You could see that [connection] also in the themes on the placards on the squares... I mean, in 2012, I told you it was extremely variable, ecological topics, save Bucharest, some who went against privatisation. It was like a shawarma with all fillings back then… Later, already in 2013, 2014, all the topics came from this realm of elites' interest. It became more about heritage than ecology […], and beforehand, there was no discussion about…
>
> Me: …corruption?
>
> Mircea: Corruption, also an issue rather...an issue being brought up from a certain perspective, rather of the social, cultural, economic elites...bourgeoisianisms...

These kinds of narrations frame the temporary popularity of anticorruption protests more as an effect of privilege in visiblity and cultural and material resources of the people who had an interest in forging that issue. This was assigned not only to the social group of young urban professionals but also to oppositional politics, media, and business actors, strategically supporting (and recently, stopping to support) the anticorruption claim to deflect from structural political failures and economic inequalities or to use the topic to accuse their competitors.[223]

Some groups also withdrew actively from the protests, after having participated in their early phases. For example, Ruxandra intervenes in the very beginning of our talk: 'Who do you refer to when you say civil society? Many groups don't identify that way.'

> She goes on telling me how one of the leftist groups she knows decided to withdraw from the protests early on, when in organisational meetings of diverse protesting collectivities there was no consensus to clearly exclude far right groups and slogans. She says, this reluctance led to the pro-

222 Manuela, for example, referred here especially to the great coalition of the PNL and PSD, both of which had previously framed their campaigns in an adversarial manner towards each other.

223 This phenomenon would not be specific to Romania, as, e.g., Medarov (2022) elaborates with regard to the institutional instrumentalisation of the anti-corruption theme in Bulgaria.

tests being seized more and more by far right and neoliberal interests in the aftermath, left groups being unable to stand their ground against them. (fieldnote excerpt, Ruxandra)

A second controversy was the question of whom to blame for the problems decried in the protests. Some say that apart from corrupt politicians, it is also the result of cultural apathy (see above), or the easily put-off, 'premodern' (Dan), or toothless face of a part of the Romanian population). Others say that neoliberal politics and rapid privatisation have left a large part of the population without the resources to organise and participate politically (see above). Apart from that, there is a narrative of Romania being 'theft', appropriated by foreign capital, and ruled by western-dominated international organisations, as amplified recently by the far right populist party AUR, taking on protests against Covid-19-related restrictions, frustrations of Romanian migrant workers in western EU countries, and disappointed protest participants who had been hoping for larger and faster changes in their recent years' activities. My interlocutors frequently mention this development, mostly worrying about it and positioning against it. Ioana says: 'We have signed some contracts, we are part of a construct [EU, NATO], no one steals our country'. Others adopt a more cautious stance: 'I mean there are some disproportional power relations between the richest countries of the European Union and the poorer countries. But it's not...between this and slavery, as they are calling it; there is a very big difference still […]'. (Mircea)

The third most discussed conflict I identify in the conversations with my interlocutors was the question of whether or not to consider one's political position ideologically driven and, more generally, how to normatively approach the question of ideology. While some of my interlocutors deliberately state that they were ideologically positioned—mostly claiming to stand on the left—others struggle with the notion of ideology, linking it with partisanship, or strive to avoid or condemn it altogether. For example, in the beginning of our talk, Liviu tells me that he will not say anything objective, as he adopts a leftist stance, and explains that his overall perspective on the development of the events is that it started with some system critical potential and then increasingly moved to the right, liberal wing, or to what he calls, lifting his eyebrows and smirking: 'the centre'. What he means by that ironic notion is a tendency of many larger protest organisations to refer to themselves as 'trans'- or 'non-ideological',[224] as well as their rejection of the 'ideologically driven' party system. As Dan says: 'Everything needs to be depoliticised[225] and professionalised'. Cătălina depicts

224 Most prominently, the movement party USR, stemming from anti-corruption protests of 2015, upon foundation declared its stance as 'trans-ideological'. Some of my interlocutors decried in our talks that it did not keep that promise in the aftermath.

225 Dan clarifies that by depolitization he means especially the body of public administration. For him, making political decisions quite inevitably carries some notion of ideological 'assumptions about the human nature', as he puts it (while he does claim he would welcome decision-making driven more by 'facts, numbers, the reality on the field'). What he demands by the abovementioned notion is a most 'neutral', and most professional, public administration, an abolishment of the practice to staff administrations with decisionmakers' allies.

the omnipresent left/right differentiation as an obstacle to collective action. She says she feels wrongly identified as right-wing from the outside and says that she thinks the left is 'complicated as fuck'—being generally underrepresented and simultaneously characterized by internal quarrels. Alexandru, who identifies as a leftist, says:

> It is actually very hard to identify yourself with the left nowadays. […] From an ideological point of view, I am a Marxist, so, everything in that area, I think, is ok: less identitarian left, more Marxist left...and a little anarchism. […] The identitarian left is not necessarily critical of capitalism and its effects.

He clearly distances himself from real-existing communism in Eastern Europe before 1989 however. As he shares: 'In Romania, you don't have anything to idealise there. There are these two, three strays who cry at Ceaușescu's grave, but…well'. Iulia, who also identifies as a leftist, defines her camp by naming basic values its members subscribe to: 'People who are not racist, who are not homophobic, and who understand that the capitalist system puts us in difficulties…like the ecological ones, exploitation…'

I interpret this tension as follows: on the one hand, a portion of political activists feel a need to conceptually dissociate the idea most generally referred to as the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992), setting the market economy and a theoretically streamlined account of liberal democracy as the unitary goal of societal transition after 1989. Others hold on to a functional conceptualisation of politics as a rather technical process of finding rational solutions for objectively existing problems but acknowledge the practical failure thus far of reaching this scope. Both face the problem of maintaining a distance from both historical and present party confrontations and the related political games and instrumentalizations. As Marius recalls,

> My problem, in this kind of consulting role, was to convince them [the protest organisers] to maintain a neutral tone: okay, it's against Dragnea, it's against the abuses, but that they should not position [themselves] ideologically, for one party or another. […] I am not in favour of positioning because […] parties in Romania—and not only in Romania—they anyway don't stick to their ideological programs anymore. […] For example, social democrats, when getting to govern, adopt liberalism mostly. I am convinced there were also people from the left against Dragnea; you don't have to be a rightist to be against Dragnea.

He states that the 'much more radical, much more political' groups (meaning those using openly anti-communist and anti-leftist symbolics and slogans) became much more visible in the media, which, he says, in hindsight was not a fair depiction of the protests in his town, as the ones without these rhetorics were actually much larger.

Navigating this tension on quite diverse routes, however, I found many of my interlocutors well aware of it. Oftentimes, they take the initiative to mention how they acknowledge other groups' ways of action or positions or even state a need for diverse approaches in contentious politics.

Alexandru, for example, describes how he organised discussion panels on different issues during protest mobilisations, always being cautious to invite discussants 'from all directions'—so that participants would be able to form and reflect their own opinions. Mihaela acknowledges that 'even George Simion, now the leader of AUR, comes from civil society. He was active for many years, and I know he also supported the Roșia Montană cause, but from his agenda concerning „Basarabia"'.[226] She expresses that, being in civil society, one needs to contend with the fact that it incorporates very different, and also problematic or dangerous, elements.

Returning to what was said above about the idea of 'aggregating', positioning or 'finding one's place' in the course of a political disruption, Iulia explains:

> When there was this discussion on anticorruption—as also at Colectiv demonstrations, it was all about corruption, not about anything else; this was the central claim—it is these issues, which affected particular people, from the centre and the right. For them, this [claim] opened up spaces to express their beliefs, their values and desires. […] At the same time, for people from the left, or progressivists, the same happened: there were movements that incorporated their ideas. This year, I was at the Pride march, and I saw thousands of people—20 thousand people–there, when 10 years ago, when I attended the march, there were only 200 people.

6. Conclusions

The phenomenon of cyclical mass protests in Romania, with its impacts on institutional politics and public discourse, goes together with a reconfiguration within the country's contentious politics landscape. This connection does not only refer to an increase in civic activation or organisational formation. The 'cognitive liberation' or 'civic awakening' claimed by some scholars of the protests can be described as a process of political positioning: an intensified activity in identifying points of political reference and relating one's stances and actions to them, as well as to others engaged in the process. Political dissociation and association, in this course, oftentimes are intertwined or mutually dependent in that process.

The proposed perspective that political difference theory offers to analyse such processes allows for doing so in a power-sensitive way and does not necessarily prescribe any normative judgements of the process or its outcomes. It also offers the means to conceptually differentiate civil society identifications, apart from movement 'claims' or '-bases'.

With regard to the group of my interlocutors—long-term implicated activists from different thematic and organisational branches of Romanian civil society—political positioning was delineated in terms of public political contestations of the institutional status quo, relatively independent of established CSOs and SMOs. Common points of reference for their positionings were as follows: 1)

226 One large campaign of the Romanian far right claims that Moldova should be 'reunited' with Romania, based on the interwar legionary slogan *Basarabia e România* – Bessarabia is Romania.

delineating a timely and collectively delimited, joint field of 'the protests', as a starting point for exlaining the own contentious political position; 2) situating, historically and regionally, the Romanian institutional politics body, especially with regard to the transformation of society after 1989, and relating to the institutional and hegemonic entities of the 'west'; 3) spelling out the role of civil society, enhancing the understanding of its adversary political function in the democratic process in terms of self-efficacy and original agency (rather than in terms of citizen participation, mediating, and aid functions); and 4) building, differentiating, and recognising different camps within a political civil society body.

In Romania, it seems that civil society is in a process of building up itself as a political sphere in its own right and quality. The ways in which my interlocutors described the process, accelerated by the temporary visibility of political contingency, are reminiscent of what Arndt (2013) refers to as the democratic potential of political politics. The reconfiguration process is heavily impacted by the internal and external influences of power and hegemony, e.g., by the distribution of resources to engage or by institutional and outward possibilities of support or repression, and whether this process offers a 'better' representation of 'the' population's will as a consequence remains open.

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Appendix

Dataset specifications:

The corpus contains recordings and extended field notes of collaborative talks with 21 individuals and two activist collectives from Bucharest, Timișoara, and Ploiești, conducted during field trips in 2022 and 2023. Collaborative talks are a format of ethnographic data fabrication (Kozinets, 2015, p. 158ff.), in this case I documented activist collaboration meetings with regard to an interactive online chronicle of the prostests, which I set up together with Romanian documentary filmer Sergiu Zorger. Seven individuals were additionally interviewed, following up on these talks. I oriented my research through an extended social media following, since 2017 (by now following about 168 activist pages and groups on Facebook), and enriched patterns for this paper with activist publications from interlocutor groups' and organisations' recommendations, and performed supplementary research on their organisational context and networks, claims and action repertoires.

I talked especially to anti-corruption, education, and environmental activists and to staff of mutual help organisations, most of whom are located in Bucharest or other large cities of Romania. Online research and supplementary material examination also included ultras, far right groups, LGBTQI+ and feminist, pro-government, and elder activists, along with alter-globalist streams of activity. Especially in the case of the far right, however, I do not claim an authentic point of view, as this scene is too far away to gain an adequate understanding from the outside; the same holds for pro-government protests (I spoke to elder activists, ultras, LGBTQI+ and feminist activists and alter-globalists on occasion and had the chance to visit some of their locations). A real void in my study is the stream of ethnic minority-related protests, especially in the section on the Roma minority. Additionally, I could not obtain entry into the 'classical' SMO sector, namely, unions and students' organisations.

List of interlocutors:

All names used in the manuscripts are pseudonyms, chosen by me in agreement with the interlocutors. I carried out individual member-checking meetings with all interlocutors directly cited in the article in spring 2024. Here displayed are ony those cases present in the paper.

pseudonym	location	age	profession	major engagement[227]	collaboration interest
Manuela	București	old 89er	employee	legal issues	Contacts to anti-corruption activists
Ruxandra	București	middle	academic	radical critique	Counselling for project risks
Ioana	București	middle	employee	anti-corruption	Data share, social media promotion
Dan	București	middle	academic	anti-corruption	Research collaboration, contact to movement parties
Mircea	București	middle	academic	football-related	Contacts to ultra-scene, research collaboration
Mihaela	Cluj	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Data share, contact to environment activists
Cătălina	București	young	civil society as career	education	Contact to small town activist groups, counseling in community building and outreach
Adrian	București	middle	civil society as career	local issues	Insight to collaboration with formal institutions, contact to national mutual help networks and many local communities, local promotion
Liviu	București	middle	academic	economic issues	Overview creative protests/flashmobs, data share, research collaboration (historical protests)
Marius	Timișoara	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Insight to 90s originary activist scene, contact to Tm activists
Iulia	Ploiești	middle	employee	environment	Contacts to (international) environment activism network, and to local institutions
Alexandru	București	middle	employee	education	Research collaboration, setting up internship program in Bucharest
Radu	București	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Data share, counseling association setup, contact to large NGOs

List of materials

Pseudonym	Location, date, documents	Supplementary material[228]
Iulia	Online, 07.01.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist youtube-channel • two activist protest documentations • one facebook community site • one journalistic documentary film
	Ploiești, 06.05.2023 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent[229])	

227 Interlocutors for collaborative talks were selected from a larger pool of possible contacts using the diversity dimensions – of course, from an outsider view. Many interlocutors had multiple engagements and organizational affilitations, and were oftentimes identified differently from the outside than by themselves with regard to their group belonging or ideological stance. Therefore, in the table only tangible characteristics of my interlocutors are displayed. The major engagement field is an exception to this, as I wanted to purport at least a broad idea of the fields of actions of my interlocutors.

228 As not all interlocutors consented to be identifiable personally upon publication of this work, only supplementary material metadata is presented here.

229 'without documentation' means I didn't record the meeting, and didn't write a detailed field journal about it. However, I collected jot notes orienting, e.g., the interpretation of other information given by the interlocutors, or paths for further research. These were destroyed however, after being fed into analytical memos and sampling. The reason for this proceeding lied, most of the times, in the more pragmatic focus of these follow-up meetings, for which full documentation would have stated an unnecessary workload. All final mentions of interlocutors in this paper

Ioana	Online, 11.12.21 (preliminary test) • field journal Online, 24.11.22 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript Bucharest, November 2022 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	• two facebook community sites • one demonstration announcements
Mihaela	Cluj-Napoca, 24.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two activist project pages • two journalistic articles • one facebook community site
Dan	Bucharest, 16.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript Bucharest, 24.11.2022 (follow up interview) • field journal • recording • transcript Bucharest, 31.03.2023 (collaboration follow up and demo preparation) • jot notes • recording	• two grey literature articles • one personal blog • one journalistic article • one facebook community site
Ruxandra	Bucharest, 17.06.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript Bucharest, June 2023 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	• 8 activist brochures • several journalistic articles • three activist books
Mircea	Bucharest, 16.06.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one personal blog • one academic article
Radu	Bucharest, 15.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist brochure • two research reports • one journalistic article • one activist project website • four activist documentation websites
Liviu	Bucharest, 27.11.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript Bucharest, May 2024 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	• one academic book • one activist community website • one facebook community site • one activist podcast • one activist city tour series
Cătălina	Bucharest, 13.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with	• two activist project websites

were member-checked.

	Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one academic article
Manuela	Facebook conversation, from 28.04.2020, (preliminary case orientation) • conversation journal	• two journalistic books • one historical book
	Bucharest, 30.11.2021 (preliminary test) • field journal	
	Bucharest, 13.06.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	
Marius	Timișoara, 03.12.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist community website • one journalistic documentary film • one legislation project
Adrian	Bucharest, 15.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two activist project websites • two personal blogs • one activist infographic • one instititutional infographic
	Bucharest, 03.05.2023 (collaboration follow up) • field journal	
Alexandru	Bucharest, 13.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist community website • one journalistic article
	Bucharest, 05.12.2022 (collaboration follow up) • jot notes	

Detailed explanations for Figure 1:

- Universitate and Unirii refer to the respective squares in Bucharest.
- TNB is an abbreviation for Teatrul Național București, Bucharest's national theatre. It is located on one side of University Square (Universitate) across the Fântâna (the fountain). These places were gathering points for distinct groups of protestors at Universitate.
- Băsescu, Arafat, Boc, and Dragnea are surnames of politicians: Traian Băsescu, then prime minister; Emil Boc, then president; Raed Arafat, then head of the ministry of health; and Liviu Dragnea, then head of the social democrat party PSD.
- Pungești is a village in eastern Romania where shale gas exploitation was planned.
- Uniți Sălvam translates as 'together we save' and was a campaign and slogan for the Roșia Montană cause and subsequently extended to other topics.

- Corupția Ucide translates to ‘corruption kills’. It was the main slogan in the Colectiv protests and is the name of one of the leading organisations mobilising protests against anti-corruption issues in 2017 and today.
- #Rezist is the name of a large anticorruption campaign started by the anticorruption organisation Declic, where ‘rezist‘ means ‘I resist‘.
- Noaptea ca hoții is a Romanian expression for a dubious endeavour or a mumble. Literally translated, it means ‘at night like the thieves‘. As a protest slogan, it related to the irregular character of negotiations for OUG13.
- Miting is a borrowed word (from the word English ‘meeting’). It is not uncommon to call a public demonstration a ‘miting‘ in Romanian. In 2018, however, Liviu Dragnea announced party-staged mass gatherings in his favour as ‘miting-uri’, which impregnated the term ever since.

Paper 3: Creating Political Spaces: A Contentious Politics Practice Spotted in Activist Romania

Ready for submission to Social Movement Studies

Abstract

Categorizing contemporary contentious politics is a complex endeavor. Common frameworks focus on claims, demands, and key actors of contentious politics in general, and oftentimes focus on studying a particular historically determined framework of social movements. Inspired by Holbraad and Pedersen's ontological approach, in this paper I propose a reconceptualization of contentious politics. Using examples from a political ethnographic research, conducted with political activists in Romania, I show some of the voids in Tilly's and Tarrow's influential definition of contentious politics. Distinguishing between "the political" as the tension between competing alternatives and "politics" as the really existing mechanisms addressing these tensions, I identify a practice of *creating political spaces* that transcend the dichotomy between institutional and protest politics. Such spaces are not confined to radical activism but appear across varied civil society efforts. The paper situates these practices within the broader post-socialist and post-modern context, offering insights relevant for understanding the increasingly fragmented and dynamic nature of contentious politics. The analytical concept proposed in this paper opens avenues for theoretically differentiating democratic and anti-democratic dynamics and calls for further research into their diverse strategies and impacts.

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Biographical note

Nina Krienke is a doctoral candidate at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. She has obtained her master's degree in political theory, at the University of Trier. Currently, she works on a political ethnography in the field of Romanian contentious politics, connected to the large outbreaks of protest in the country since 2012. Furthermore, she is engaged

in a “living archive” project on the same issue, together with Romanian documentary filmer Sergiu Zorger.

During my research on recent protest and civil society activities in Romania, quite oftentimes I felt unease at categorizing the things I observed. I couldn’t overlook how little my interlocutors talked to me about their claims, their demands, their issues. Instead, my transcripts are full of historical reconstructions of post-socialist and post-authoritarian transformation, of notions of civic culture, lack of political participation, and flawed institutional representation, of reflections upon ideology and values, the transversality of democracy and community organization, of biographical notions of awakening and reorientation. Moreover, in observing and talking about action repertoires, I found such strikingly different settings of street protests, discussion panels, and mutual help organizations that I struggled to put certain instances into the same action category. Of course, I could search for and identify claims, find key actors and investigate their relations (the processes and mechanisms of brokerage, diffusion, and coordinated action) to describe the recent occurrences of mass protest in Romania and the linked reconfigurations of civil society. This would, however, leave aside the larger part of my data — and, more importantly, undermine the opportunity presented by my categorization struggles for reconceptualizing contentious politics in times in which its configurations seem to be experiencing ever-increasing entropy.

Holbraad and Pedersen (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017) propose for such cases to take a closer look at the ontological level of the subject under study. That is, to ask oneself: what else could the thing I am studying be? This way, they state, sometimes things can become visible that one would have otherwise been unable to see. With regard to contentious politics, that is to ask: What is contention? And what is politics? How is contentious politics contentious, and how is it political? Which characteristics define these qualities? And how do they relate to my field of research?

Political theory has a strand for these questions in *political difference theory*, defining an ontological condition of the political, and differentiating it from its ontic expressions, i.e., politics. In this approach, the political condition pertains to questions of collective organization. It is defined by a tension between the inevitable contingency of alternative solutions, and the necessity of deciding between them. Politics is the concrete ways of choosing the questions to tackle, dealing with the alternatives, and coming to decisions, including the institutional framework, laws, policies, etc. Contention, in this framework, can be understood as a particular practice of countering politics hegemonies – i.e., powerful instances delimiting alternatives – thereby opening up institutionalized politics frameworks.

Analyzing my evidence using this conceptual lens, I was able to identify practices of *creating political spaces*.[230] Instead of striving to impact politics decisions or personnel, these practices build capacities for self-managed politics, transcending institutional, organizational, and action repertoire distinctions common in the study of contentious politics to this point.

In the following, I will provide examples of the creation of political spaces[231] and delimit the concept theoretically, hoping to make a case for further investigations in that direction. Rethinking the concept of contentious politics in terms of political difference theory, for this paper, I deliberately chose examples not coming from the radical sphere of political activism. Radical scenes are known to create dense subcultural, often internationally networked structures, deliberately rejecting institutional politics systems and striving for maximal autonomy and self-organization on their own terms (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Císař, 2013). However, as shown in the article, practices of contentious, trans-institutional capacity building are not limited to the realm of radical system-critique.

Problematizing a Common Definition of Contentious Politics

To understand the problem this paper tackles, one needs to take a closer look at one of the most commonly used concepts for investigating contentious politics.

Tilly and Tarrow, in their foundational work, define contentious politics as the following:

> Contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics. (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 4)

Following up on this point, in their book, based upon manifold examples of contentious action, they compile a list of "features" (p. 27) to look for in describing cases of contentious politics, namely the "processes and mechanisms" (p. xi) that are characteristic of them. In an earlier work delineating the concept of contention, they (along with McAdam) explain their epistemic take:

> As conventional or arbitrary entities, events we call revolutions, social movements, wars and even strikes take shape as retrospective constructions by observers, participants, and analysts. They do not have essences, natural histories, or self-motivating logics. (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 308)

230 With "spaces" I do not refer only to physical locations. What I mean is more related to what in political theory is sometimes referred to as the „locus" of the political, meaning the contexts, occassions, timespans, platforms, positions in agendas or protocols, and *also* physical spaces in which political discourse takes place. A political space can be a physical, virtual, or metaphorical room for discussion, deliberation, and decision-making. Creating a political space is thought of here in a processual way: an aspiration for making space, for opening discussion, for making the political condition (see below) appear, for dealing with its inherent tension of contingency and the necessity of decision-making.

231 The cases I use for this exemplification are taken from my five years of political ethnographic research in Romania's activist scene. Repeated talks with 21 interlocutors from different strands of Romanian society were combined with prolonged field stays between 2021 and 2024, with on-site observations of demonstrations, discussion meetings and public panels in Bucharest, Timişoara, Cluj-Napoca, and Ploieşti, and oriented and supplemented with wide social media following and consultation of activist publication materials.

Put another way, and reinforced by the analogy Tilly and Tarrow draw between their approach and the branch of biological classification (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, p. 29), they collect examples of political contention, dissect them, and then conceptualize them along the lines of the common features they can find amongst the cases. This has the great advantage that they can this way offer a common language for talking about contentious politics cases, and also a guideline to describe them, providing a certain degree of comparability.

However, as with any attempt to conceptualize a complex world, their approach also has its limitations. Most strikingly, the approach tends to reproduce common features of known cases of contentious politics in the form of a definitory "normality." This prescribes a bias, as it is the most studied cases that this way become templates for the whole field of research. Some scholars point to an overly strong presence of western, liberal-democratic cases in the study of social movements, civil society, and contentious politics (Baća, 2022; Rucht, 2016). When features of these cases are accepted as demarcating definitory features of contentious politics per se, a part of the field might become invisible.[232] Moreover, when the classification of an event is marked as a subsequent rationalization, that should not be accepted as an excuse for not critically engaging with the criteria these rationalizations are based upon.

The definition, in its current form, prescribes a need for regular revision, as it is always just a state of the art, an actual account of which common features contentious politics is thought to have in contemporary language use.[233] This becomes plastic when examining more recent developments in the field: Hutter and Weisskirch (2023), in a special issue on recent contentious politics in Germany, for example, speak of "new" contentious politics being at play. Using McAdams and colleagues' delineation of contentious politics, they attest to dramatic shifts in the "classical" features shown in their field of research. Besides a thematic shift, which is well covered by the general definition of claim-making,[234] they see a blurring of boundaries between the prescribed opponents, namely protest- and electoral politics, which are observed to be collaborating increasingly, and in increasingly complex ways – making Tilly's and Tarrow's anyway fuzzy definitory notion of government involvement even more questionable.

They also speak of increasing "organizational hybridity" – i.e., movement bases are not identifiable as delimited actors anymore – as well as of a "politicization of civil society" – blurring the common delineation between social movements and civil society – and an interwovenness of street protests and other forms of contentious action (Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023, p. 409ff.). One could

232 It is telling in that regard that Tilly and Tarrow present the "first" social movement as an invention of the British, in the 18th century….

233 Tilly and Tarrow indeed elaborate on cases across historical periods, and from all parts of the world. However, the classification of these events as "contentious politics" remains grounded in their contemporary language use.

234 However, this also exemplifies the "normality" problem mentioned above in deriving the shifts from the most-studied west-German social movements of the 1960s/70s, without even mentioning that these were, for a large part of today's Germany, no actual point of own experiential reference...

add the widely discussed merging of contentious organization/communication on behalf of the post-modern condition of global/local politics in general, as well as platformization, especially with regard to digital social media (Poell et al., 2019), which itself is producing manifold notions of "new" movements, protests, etc. (Abăseacă & Pleyers, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017).

While "new" contentious politics still fits into the abovementioned definition, what we can see here is that the overall approach of compiling features is able to see changes only in hindsight, and in terms of deviation from previously fixed (and generally speaking Eurocentric and path-dependent) definitory grounds. Thus, it makes sense to examine the overarching principles connecting certain sets of phenomena as contentious politics – that is, to look at contentious politics from an ontological perspective.[235]

Two Demonstrations on Victoria Square

At a street demonstration I attended in winter 2022, against the great coalition between PSD and PNL,[236] I noted in my own field notes: "This is a meeting, not a demonstration." The protest took place on the well-known Victoria Square[237] in Bucharest and was organized by a total of 14 organizations from various Romanian and Italian cities. Amongst them were some of those Bucharest-based organizations that also initiated large parts of the 2015 and 2017 mass protests against corruption on Victoria Square. It was a cold day in November, heavy rain pouring down through the entire event, with around 15 people present in the beginning, then about 50 people at the peak of the event. Most of attendees were over 40 years old, a good part over 60. The majority of people joining this protest did not live in Bucharest. They came from Timişoara, Braşov, Arad, Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca, Piteşti, Rome, Milano, Torino, and Madrid, and perhaps more places. Participants met at 3 pm, reached the peak of participation at around 5 pm, and then marched with around 50 people to

235 Baća (2022), in a similar line of argument, proposes a different approach in using empirical evidence from the post-socialist space to rethink common definitions of contentious politics and civil society. What again remains open in this approach, however, is how this evidence is cased as contentious politics if no underlying principle or quality of the subject is assumed...

236 The Social Democrat Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL), the two biggest parties of Romania, along with the Hungarian minority group UDMR (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania, Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România), formed a grand coalition after a non-confidence vote against then-Prime Minister Florin Cîțu, proposed by PSD, in autumn 2021. Both parties had in their electoral campaigns of 2020 positioned themselves in stark opposition to each other. The grand coalition replaced the center-right coalition between PNL, the (anti-corruption) movement party USR (Union Save Romania, Uniunea Salvați România), and the UDMR. The PNL, as well as PNL-affiliated President Klaus Iohannis, in the years of protest had repeatedly solidarized with the protesters and fueled anti-communist sentiments within them, blaming mainly the PSD for the rampant institutional corruption in the country. Besides the scandal around the PNL and PSD, critique was also directed towards President Iohannis himself, who, in his constitutional function, could have called new elections after the first two failed attempts at building a new government in the 60 days after the non-confidence vote.

237 Victoria Square is a huge intersectional square in the center of Bucharest. The government palace is situated along one of its edges. After first demonstrations taking place on the historical revolutionary site of University Square and a few violent confrontations with the police on Unification Square, the larger part of protest actions moved here, which was interpreted by some observers as a symbolic sign of de-radicalization, and as a shift of addressees (Rammelt, 2022).

the party headquarters of both coalition parties, chanting slogans including “PSD, PNL, same misery,” “thieves!” and “we want hospitals and schools, not special pensions.” Afterwards, a meeting with members of all activist groups present was held in a nearby bistro.

The overall event lasted about six hours. Most of that time was spent in discussions, first in small circles on Victoria Square, with people constantly switching groups, introducing themselves to one another, and switching contact data, but foremostly discussing several political issues. Discussions on the square were heated, oftentimes centering on very specific issues of legislation, juggling statistics and sources, legal projects and their specific effects, and searching for the “real” problems to be tackled in the country.

In the group meeting after the march at the bistro, discussions on concrete demands and ideological stances were completely left out, and sometimes actively cut off by various participants in the circle. Here, it was all about coordinating topics to be dealt with, especially with regard to upcoming elections: how to make the voices of civil society heard through campaigns, and how to activate young Romanians to vote. Checking up on originary documentations of recent street protests in Romania, it shows that this kind of action constitutes a common form of contention in the country: spending long hours on the squares, discussing in small groups, and subsequently holding coordination meetings with group representatives in more private spaces.[238]

A different type of protest I could observe in Spring 2023. It unfolded on the same square, within an associated narrative (to cut off special pensions for state functionaries – both protests’ issues could be linked to a general claim of government accountability). It was organized by a group of five well known anti-corruption organizations, all Bucharest-based, overlapping with the organizational committee of the abovementioned protest. The event gathered about 200 participants.

Already comparing both demonstrations’ announcements[239], one stumbles across a difference: while the abovementioned “demonstration-as-meeting” features a detailed, and knowledgeable summary of political and juridical problems brought about by the coalition government, the second event provides a short description of a preorganized action, for which participants, i.e., helpers, supporters, are needed. Content-wise, the cause – militating against special pensions – is described in

238 For example, some of my interlocutors reported that in 2012, the coordination of protests after a first spontaneous and dispersed mobilization were locally facilitated by a local businessman who joined the protests and offered an empty retail space he owned in Bucharest’s city center for gathering. Simultaneously, social media platforms were used for coordination, communication, and deciding on (via polls and commentary functions, etc.) and documenting protest actions. This is one differentiation criterion for the “new” protest phenomenon, that a large number of people gathered *without* previous coordination and mobilization by a social movement of civil society organizations. People “meeting on the squares to discuss politics” is also a practice that characterized the beginning of the Romanian revolution of 1989.

239 Anouncement first demonstration: https://www.facebook.com/events/689553059261318/; anouncement second demonstration: https://www.facebook.com/events/167298422476670; both accessed on 25th June 2024, publicly available on Facebook.

two sentences, with a link towards a petition one of the organizing groups set off to sign in this regard.[240]

At the event, about half of the about 200 people, most of them in their 30s and 40s, were standing around some large yellow banners, featuring the message of the protest: Taiați pensiile speciale – cut off the special pensions. A man on a tail lift, with a camera, and a young woman with a megaphone on the square were giving instructions when to hold up the banners, how to hold them, when to scandate. The positions were marked on the square with chalk in different colors – people could inscribe online to the action in different color-code groups beforehand. The other half of the people present were standing around the action space, in small groups, saluting each other, holding self-made message boards, reading "Special pensions for everyone!" or "They always said I was special, why don't they give me a pension, too?" At one moment, the woman with the megaphone passed by that group closely, giving a disparaging look at the message boards and telling them harshly to move aside. After the meeting, with a small group of said bystanders, we went again to the same bistro, where people were staying in small groups on different tables, mostly complaining about how people don't come out to protest anymore, and about the movement-party USR, having risen upon the shoulders of once dedicated activists. The event itself lasted for about an hour.

Comparing both events in terms of Tilly and Tarrow's contentious politics mechanisms, what we can see here is, broadly, the following: Both demonstrations make a *claim* upon the *interest* of the *governing*, addressing them directly as a target.[241] They do so *collectively*, publicly, using common slogans and coordinating efforts between a set of anti-corruption movement organizations. They both use *repertoires* of street protest, chanting slogans; the first also features a protest march to the party headquarters, the other being linked to an online petition. The first may be said to feature *brokerage* to a larger degree, as more groups, from more different locations, are involved, and the exchange of contacts and positions is given more space. The second one may be said to be more directed towards *diffusion*, as the action is clearly directed at gaining attention for the issue and promoting the linked petition, while the first one stresses, especially with its after-protest meeting, inter-group coordination.

Two things, however, cannot be feasibly captured through this approach. The first one is the practice of confrontational, lengthy political discussion – which the first demonstration gave a lot of space to, and which was met with an impressive level of motivation on the part of the participants:

240 The petition can be found here: https://facem.declic.ro/campaigns/coronavirus-plafonati-pensiile-speciale?utm_campaign=2023-04-07.560&utm_medium=post&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwY2xjawFCoD1leHRu-A2FlbQIxMAABHcq9bAtVgTBStsddyP7pewtvC52i58S3LYcXOjnKgXNHzGLXCvTI-4GkRg_aem_tDMx-TQSQRHU5ipBwc3ER_A (accessed on 2nd September 2024, the site includes an update from June 2023, stating that, in the meantime, legislation regarding special pensions has been reformed.)

241 The first one decrying the forming of a great coalition, breaking with campaign promises of both big Romanian parties and accusing them of setting their power interests over the common good of democratic representation; the second attacking what demonstrators saw as self-serving pension politics, reinforced through the large parliamentary majority of said coalition.

keep in mind the cold weather, pouring rain, the long journeys necessary, the constant, spontaneous interchanging of circles, the high degree of knowledge, reflection, and readiness for confrontation, and not least the duration of the event. While also present at the second event, this practice was this time actively delimited by members of the initiating group.

One could ask whether, in Tilly's and Tarrow's approach, such public discussion could be classified as contentious politics in the first place – issues discussed varied widely, from tax politics, to legal frameworks for protecting chronically ill persons, to voting preferences and emigration of young Romanians. There was no unitary claim to be identified, and positions on all of the issues discussed differed starkly. Also, the issue of addressing was oftentimes discussed openly – is it the apathetic, hedonist youth, wrongheaded institutional governance, or perhaps companies' hiring and salary practices that should be blamed for mass emigration? Is it legislation or law-enforcement that doesn't work for vulnerable persons? Which party set the cornerstones for this and that malfunctioning?

Of course, discussions oftentimes touched upon the government in some form, but the role it would take in each argument was up to the person arguing for their position. The notion that this practice was a customary one for the location and the political context can, however, classify it as a form of coordinated action, and the fact that participants were not at all satisfied citizens was obvious to any observer. So, the practice was contentious, being related to and about politics – while in itself not fulfilling the abovementioned criteria.

The second aspect going beyond these is the depth of argument and engagement in both actions. The second protest, targeted to a unified outward image and "sustained claim-making," had a clearly delimited, easy-to-understand demand. It drew upon a feeling of personal injustice – politicians being granted a much higher pension for fewer years of work than any ordinary citizen. And the action was very efficiently and professionally planned and equipped – people could sign up for their exact place to stand, were given clear guidance throughout the event, banners were printed and technical equipment organized beforehand. Engagement in this action was readymade, participation was low-threshold. In the first demonstration, by contrast, accessibility was primarily achieved through the march (the route and starting time were made public separately in the announcement) and this element attracted more people than the other two, discussion-oriented (one open, the other semi-closed) action elements.

The problem tackled by the first protest, however, required existing knowledge of recent political processes: problematizing the great coalition only makes sense when remembering the highly confrontational electoral campaigns of the coalition parties following the no-confidence vote against former prime-minister Florin Cîțu, and knowing about the constitutionally prescribed process of forming – or not forming – a new government after such a vote, as well as the role of the president

therein. Furthermore, participating in the first part of the demonstration, the discussion circles, required a much higher level of information, discussion skills, and perseverance – assuming that one doesn't enjoy engaging in fast, complex, detailed, and heated political discussions with strangers for several hours in the November rain.

Rethinking Contentious Politics

When observable features of contentious practices aren't covered by the common definition of contentious politics, it may well be that the definition's grounds need to be reconsidered. This is especially the case with a definition of the type elaborated above, one that is based upon a subsequent rationalisation of language use. For this, Holbraad and Pedersen (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017) propose the path of ontological conceptualization.

Asking for an ontological quality of contentious politics, political difference theory delivers such a possible conceptual perspective: basically, this theory grounds in the differentiation of *politics* – as a really-observable practice (ontic dimension) – and *the political* – the condition that renders possible the existence of the political domain and distinguishes it from other domains of human life (e.g., the moral, economic, social, aesthetic, etc.) (ontological dimension) (Bedorf, 2010). The ontological condition of the political is most commonly defined with regard to the organization of collective life, and the notion of the undecidability of the questions it concerns – i.e., the (potential) existence of numerous alternatives to decide between, with numerous possible and potentially legitimate justifications (interest-based/common-good oriented; with regard to diverse values, beliefs, knowledge, ideological standpoints, etc.). This condition necessitates both the making of decisions and, at the same time, some form of dealing with the impossibility of ultimate justification of these decisions – i.e., politics (Arndt, 2013; Krienke, 2022).

In this perspective, actually observed politics are only one possible expression of the larger ontological space of possibilities of the political. Following up on this notion, political difference theory is able to differentiate apolitical and political politics (Mouffe, 2011; Vollrath, 2003). Apolitical politics uses the frameworks of collective decision making foremostly in a sense of delimiting the space of alternatives, based upon some claim of ultimate justification (Krienke, 2022). Political politics, contrarily, acknowledges consciously the contingency and undecidability of the political condition, and strives to facilitate and perpetuate discussion.

Lefort speaks in this regard of a dynamic of "appearing" [erscheinen] and "veiling" [verbergen] as the basic principle for differentiating the political (Lefort, 1990, p. 284). Democracy, viewed from this angle, can be understood as an attempt at creating a political society, incorporating difference in its very institutional design[242] (Arndt, 2013; Lefort, 1990). Political discontent and protest

242 This attempt, however, remains precarious, as some actors will always try to win over hegemony (Mouffe, 2011). This is why institutions, even if containing principles of incorporating difference and conflict (e.g., a multi-party

can be viewed as a moment of demanding „appearance“ or decrying the “veiling” of political alternatives, opening up a momentarily liminal space for questioning a hegemonial status quo (Edwards, 2014; Laclau, 2005; Rancière, 1999).

Contentious politics is thus always political, at least momentarily, by its very nature of making difference visible. In this view, the line is not necessarily according to an institutional definition, between “government” and “contentious politics organizations,” but rather between principles of hegemony (powerful veiling) and contention (demand for appearance). This makes visible another important “feature” of contentious politics: it makes, by this definition, not only a claim regarding “someone else’s” – i.e., anyone else’s – interest. It makes claims regarding the interest of an institution so powerful that it is capable of hiding political alternatives, and claim singular justification! (And this actor, quite oftentimes, may be the government, but other addressees of such action remain thinkable).[243]

But what might such action for “appearance” look like, beyond moments of “rupture” – i.e., the very outbreak of mass protest, or the emergence of a social movement? Publicly and punctually confronting the authority is perhaps only one way of fostering alternatives.[244] Another one is, as I will describe further below, to create own spaces of political discourse, of resisting the veiling on the ground. And this may look very different from “sustained campaigns of claim-making.”

And here we have a possible conceptualization for the differences between the two protests on Victoria Square: both collectively and publicly made sustained claims against the government, and towards the interest of (even individual) politicians. The first one, however, did so directly with regard to the limitation of political alternatives *within* the supposedly democratic institutions, caused by the formation of the grand coalition, creating a space for discussing openly the agendas, possible problems and solutions connected to this issue. This required some degree of skill and knowledge on the part of the participants. The second protest promoted only one alternative solution to the institutional decision of rising special pensions: eliminating them. It tried to create counter-hegemony in engaging resources most efficiently in terms of public attention and signatures to their petition.

system, separation of powers, etc.), still need outside counterparts to balance their inherent hegemonic tendencies. See e.g. Rancière’s differentiation of “police” and “politics” in this regard (Rancière, 1999).

243 Such as, for example, big economic players (corporations, billionaires, etc.) who use market and financial power to steer politics in their direction. Some policies are only “without alternative” because successful economic indoctrination leads politicians not to consider certain (existing) options as available.

244 Some authors of political difference theory tend to see the appearance of the political as limited to moments of rupture, or even overthrow (Laclau, 2005). I think this idea is questionable, as it would reduce the visibility of alternatives to a set of antagonistic, clearly defined differences, and fails to consider the possibility described in this paper, i.e., creating political spaces (as well as an optimistic vision of political politics and democracy). It needs, in my view, some revision regarding the postmodern condition of political identities – being rather fluid, intersectional, and overlapping.

Furthermore, the space for open discussion at the event was delimited deliberately; participating in this action did not require a high degree of political knowledge or engagement.[245]

In short: the first protest opened a political space, the second one delimited it. The first protest demonstrated a discontent against governmental hegemony, the second made a claim against one particular policy. The first showcased a high degree of qualitative, in-depth *political* engagement and motivation, and translated it into practice. The second one showcased a high potential for efficient, unified, contentious and public claim-making. And this while the min organizatory instances and the general claim remained the same.

While the latter protest action thus provides a more exemplary case for what Tilly and Tarrow describe, some recent studies of contentious politics and protest from the region repeatedly hint at the potentials of the first one, too. There is a field of what some describe as "self-organized civil society" (Císař, 2013, or similarly Florez Cubillos, 2015; Piotrowski, 2022), which, because its activists only seldomly organize public protest (i.e., engage in collective sustained claim-making), oftentimes goes unobserved in studies shaped by Tilly's and Tarrow's categories.

Thus, it seems that certain branches of civil society[246] and the occurrences of "spontaneous" mass protest need to be viewed in their conjunctions. It also seems that scholarship has been lagging behind lived realities in this regard already for some time: paying attention towards these conjunctions, what I found were quite sophisticated ways of creating and perpetuating them, on the part of my interlocutors.

Facilitating Democratic Space and Building Capacities

When asked about the motives for her concrete mode of civic activism one of my interlocutors responded the following:

> You cannot keep thousands and hundreds of thousands of people on the streets for years...it's just not possible. It is exhausting, too. At some point, we can't be firefighters all the time. It may be more reasonable to instead install some sensors and sprinklers. (Laura Burtan)

Laura Burtan[247], a woman in her twenties, attended the mass protests in Bucharest from 2017 on, when she was still a teenager. She states that she became politically active when a friend of hers

245 And beyond the difference in individual practices exemplified above, this difference may also show itself systematically in the orientations of particular contentious groups: have in mind, for example, the clear tendencies of delimiting political and social space present in the agendas of the – ironically denominatedly "alternative" – far right. Check in this regard the category "deny rights/reject equal rights for a group" at https://www.worldprotests.org/explore?secondaryGrievances=%5B%5B4%2C27%5D%5D&timePeriod=%5B2004%2C2023%5D&regionalClassification=%5B8%2C1%2C2%2C3%2C4%2C5%2C6%2C7%5D&fr=secondaryGrievances&sc=true

246 How these would have to be conceptualized more specifically cannot be discussed here in detail. The examples I chose for the section below come from what some of my interlocutors called a "new," "autochthonous" or "originary" branch of civil society organizations in Romania gaining ground since around 2010, and ever more so in course of the waves of mass protest from 2012 on. They arguably are part of what Piotrowski conceptualizes as "political civil society" in the sense that these organizations develop and advocate for own, contentious political stances, taking a position "against the state and its policies and not outside of them" (Piotrowski, 2022, p. 195).

247 Upon their consent, all interlocutors are referenced by their full name in this paper.

started an individual campaign at his local school, providing free school lunch for pupils from poorer families; she first helped in this endeavor out of friendship, but says she then realized the depth of the effects such mutual care could have on the ground. She then started working for a large Bucharest-based NGO founded in 2012. The project she works in set up meetings for politically interested or active citizens in medium and small towns all over Romania, seeking to bring them together, build networks, use synergies, and build local hubs for civic activism. It was prepared and is accompanied by sociological research, evaluating diverse communities for their contentious potential,[248] making a selection of communities to be covered by the project, and analyzing its actions and outcomes. The project is not bound to any specific topics or modes of action or organization. Laura Burtan, and also her organization's webpage, state that their goal is mainly to connect and encourage citizens throughout the country in "taking up their role in democracy."

Concretely, after identifying 21 small towns with presumably high civic potential, Laura Burtan's organization scheduled meetings with representatives from all activist groups they could find in the respective localities, using their project funds to rent a space to help facilitate this endeavor. They also brought sets of their "illustrated constitution" – a book explaining the Romanian constitution for children – to be distributed in local schools.[249] At the meetings, they held open workshops on the local problems, needs, and resources these groups could possibly share.[250] The project was followed up by an initiative to open local chapters of the organization, which sees its role in offering a physical space for deliberation and planning, bolstered with their specific civic expertise – especially support in funding and communication with local authorities, as well as courses in civic education.

So, what we have here is an organization, founded in the course of the first protest outbreaks in Bucharest in 2012, orienting its activities towards a sustained, planned, and professionalized support of local civic communities and building capacities for political implication. It is, somehow, both a social movement organization (SMO) and a civil society organization (CSO). It reaches beyond both categories, however, as it has no delimited thematic agenda; it does not "stand for" any specific social movement, but strives to enable citizens in a rather open manner to become politically active. As the latter notion reaches well beyond any alleged mediating function of civil society, and deliberately reaches beyond enhancing official participation, it points towards having a closer look at the originary political practices of really existing CSOs.

248 The factor surveyed within this study (unfortunately, it has not been published yet) is called, in Romanian, „fervescență civică", and different communes and cities were compared on an index measuring it. The term is, in my opinion, hard to translate directly into English, as it refers at the same time to something like a potential, a lingering energy ready to be activated, and also the frequency of civil society action already present in those places.

249 An effort funded by Brussels Donor Circle and promoted largely on the organization's webpage (the meetings and methodology for identifying locations are not mentioned there). I think one could interpret this as a strategic concession to international donors' narrative of the role(s) of civil society in post-socialist spaces – educating children about the constitution fits the role of a functional civil society, and it serves well the logics of project-based „checkbox-activism" (see below) such donors follow.

250 See https://funky.ong/proiecte/caravana-civica/

The case of another of my interlocutors exemplifies this "going beyond" common institutional or thematic differentiation even more plastically: Mihai Lupu, a man in his 40s, says one of the main scopes of his work is that "people fall in love again with democracy." He stresses that what he means by this is not necessarily the state, that you can't "learn" democracy by adding civic education to school curricula. He says he sees democracy as something "transversal," a principle of action that needs to be present throughout each and every form of collective life. For him, the most notable effect of the large protests was the normalization of political discussion, and also of protest per se through the experience. As he says: "Now, the kids learn that it is normal to take to the streets."

He is sceptical of civic education efforts that "only raise awareness," and says that workshops and courses are not efficient and aren't sustainable, that they don't lead to changing behaviors. He claims they are simply forms of "checkbox-activism" – as he calls the rather top-down organized structure of funding drives and organization sustaining, based on time-limited, preformulated, and often stiff and locally poorly fitted projects. He says that in order to make sustainable changes and to attract "quality people" to civic projects, they need to have full control over their actions, which also includes their modalities of funding. For him, the primary scope of effort is to create and facilitate spaces in which people can interact, discuss, and organize their social lives together.[251]

One of his projects thus engages in restructuring local libraries in Romania and worldwide,[252] places he sees as an existing resource, a space that just needs to be used, to become an institution of its own (especially in rural spaces) beyond the "institutions" of the church, the bar, or the local administration. To this end, his organization brings together actors from all branches of society to equip the libraries – with "quality information," technical devices, furniture, books, cultural events, counseling hours, and many more things. The scope is again to facilitate a (physical and metaphorical) space in which people from the community can come together, realize their ideas, and become active in developing their communities. This effort is deliberately not publicly promoted, as the project website states: "We don't want promotion, because we would have to invest too many resources in that, this would become a job in itself and we would begin to think about how we look, and not about what we are doing. […]"[253]

Either way, the scope of the project is not defined along the lines of impacting political programs contentwise:

> We will not see the impact of [our efforts] in our lifetimes. So what? Those who come after us will see it (and we are convinced that, surely, there will be results), but we will have contributed to a

251 Teodora Borghoff, also an activist in a local initiative for building civic capacities, says that: "What is seen from the outside are some projects...some girls knit together, some guys do something for refugees, some kids meet I don't know where, and this appears sometimes as dispersed, and everyone in their corner. But we design all our programs in such a way as to to map some needs, and to encourage those who want to work on them to potentiate them. […] The projects have to have transformative potential for the community […]."

252 See educab.org; for their understanding of "democratic process", see https://educab.org/democracy-within-all-policies.html

253 Author's translation from https://educab.org/investitia-calitate.html

> healthy process. […]We exit these logics of „community“, carrying a certain smell of the 19th century […]. We could draw the borders of one of our communities in this imagination exercise: we identify all the people, all organizations, which are connected to the community in some way or another, say, Soalia, in Bangladesh (the current inhabitants, the people who were born there and have left, the people who came from somewhere else, etc.), and to point to it all on a map. And now we turn off all the rest of the lights on the planet and we can only see their dots illuminated. There is Soalia. Crângurile [Romanian project location]. Ugera [Tanzanian project location].[254]

At the same time, Mihai Lupu works in the Department for Urgent Situations (DSU), located within Romania's Ministry of the Interior, under Raed Arafat, the popular former head of Romania's Ministry of Health, whose demission in protest over plans to privatize emergency healthcare in 2012 triggered the first large cycle of self-organized mass protests in the country (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). The DSU has established a countrywide continuous dialogue with some hundred non-governmental and governmental organizations on the issue of emergency response – starting with the occasion of the fire in Colectiv in 2015,[255] and continuing with coordinating crisis interventions during the Covid-19 pandemic and, more recently, connected to the war in Ukraine.

The logic he follows in both of his fields of action is very similar, and clearly transcends institutional notions – working within a governmental, national institution to include local, issue- and expertise-driven organizations in its activities, while at the same time fostering local self-management, on a global scale. In both areas, he doesn't directly tackle any powerful institution, make a claim on someone's interest, or strive to create programmatic counter-hegemony – at least not on the policy level. Instead, he strives to create rooms for open discussion, open to as many actors as possible, which is to create spaces that *resist* veiling, as they perpetuate a *potential* for intervention against top-down mechanisms – or, as he says, "everyday democracy." And this is, following the theoretical conceptualization proposed above, both contentious and political.[256]

Lupu sees a challenge of establishing such spaces in a more long-term process of civil society "maturization:" to learn to act together, apart from individual egos, and to face the challenges democratic processes bring about. This, as was mentioned above, is mainly about balancing debate and action. That means, on the one side, to foster the open collection of information, and drafting possible ways forward – which sometimes bears, as he states, the risk of becoming "paralyzed by analysis." On the other side, it thus also means to balance processual open-endedness and discussion with actually getting to act, to decide. As he says: "The process can't be totally inclusive all the time for each and every person: at some point, you need to act."

254 Author's translation from https://educab.org/investitia-calitate.html

255 The fire killed over 60 young people attending a concert at Bucharest's nightclub Colectiv, triggering spontaneous mass demonstrations against corruption under the slogan "rorruption kills," as the dimension of the incident was blamed on dubiously lacking fire protection controls at the venue and the deficient emergency medical response.

256 I want to remark that this is not at all a singular example. I found many similar initiatives, with similar formulations of scope. Also, in a study on the Romanian civil society landscape, the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society (FDSC) lists such initiatives and states that especially informal, local groups are increasingly implicated in offering services for direct citizen participation and community-based self-management (FDSC, 2017, p. 139f.).

So, the idea is not only to create spaces of political "appearance," countering hegemonic tendencies of "veiling." Actually, the creation of political spaces is not defined by any unified thematic claim, but by the acknowledgment, and attempt at dealing with, the definitory tension of the political, always tacking back and forth between its condition of undecidability and the necessity to make decisions. The idea is to create and perpetuate democratic capacities, capable of resisting each institutionalized politics system's inner tendencies of drifting towards hegemonic rule. Or, as Mihai Lupu puts it: "We need to get the motors running."[257]

This kind of action may be viewed as a response to the ineffectiveness of public mass protest, at least in the long term, to reach its goals in shifting politics decisions and decision-making practices. Mass mobilization is not only a costly endeavor, as mentioned above; taking place in the public realm, it is also more easily derailed and divided by powerful public politics actors (Channell-Justice, 2022, p. 10; Florez Cubillos, 2015, p. 22; Jaitner & Spöri, 2017, p. 15; Slačálek & Šitera, 2022).

Conclusion

Repeating cycles of protest mobilization and being denied and delimited by institutional actors, especially when these claim to be democratic, frustrates people. This dissonance of institutional behavior deepens the already low trust in representative bodies of the state,[258] and may pay into the strengthening of anti-democratic forces, perpetuate civic apathy, and retreat.

Maybe this is why "democratic innovations" (Fiket et al., 2024), and the depth of talk and action ascribed to them, are especially vivid in the "hyper-normalized" (Chelcea, 2023) post-socialist space. However, looking at more recent approaches to studying political discontent in general – consider for example the concept of "subterranean politics" (Kaldor & Selchow, 2013) or of "civic ecosystems"[259] – the ideas at play, which I tried to conceptualize in this paper, may well be relevant for other political, historical, and geographical contexts as well.

Creating political spaces, as a category of practice and scope, transverses differentiations of institutional/protest politics, particular action repertoires, and organization modes of civil societies.

I proposed thinking of contentious politics as politics that is contentious in its quality – that is, running against the hegemonic veiling of political alternatives, or, more generally, of the fundamen-

257 The exact Romanian expression he used is: "Să dăm drumul la motoare." This, translates to: We should get the motors running. The Romanian expression for "starting" a motor – a da drumul – has, however, a figurative sense to it that I think exemplifies well the perpetual agency-focused mentality I found present in many of my interlocutors, and may have been a cause for Lupu to choose this exact metaphor. Word-for-word, this means "to give way," and in Romanian it is also used for saying "to set free." So, in this particular turn of phrase, the metaphor conceives of civic activism as something that should start running, that should be given way, and also set free in its development.

258 Note in this regard that the satisfaction with "how democracy works" is especially low in East European member states of the EU. For more, see https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2966.

259 The term "civic ecosystem" was used by some of my interlocutors, without me implying it in any way to them in our talks (Laura Burtan, Teodora Borghoff). However, in the academic literature, I could not find meaningful elaborations of that term...

tal condition of undecidability of political questions. Using this lens, we can differentiate moments of rupture, of appearance, of tackling a hegemonic claim directly, and contentious capacity building. The last of these strives for resisting hegemonic tendencies on the ground, creating, fostering, and sustaining resources for political discourse. These activities are, in the interplays between activist scenes and potentially activatable populations, an important factor in understanding the appearance of the very visible, disruptive, mobilizations for protest observable in many countries.

The creation of *political* spaces, in the proposed perspective, acknowledges and handles the tension of political undecidability AND the urge to make decisions at some point, fostering democratic processes and skills. The scope is to establish this process for its own sake, a democratic process on the terms of, e.g., Lefort, seeking to keep the locus of power empty, to prevent and resist the hegemonialization of political decision-making within and beyond official institutions (Lefort, 1990, p. 293). Creating political spaces can be viewed in light of civic capacity building – of giving space for political orientation and exercising skills for democratic action, thereby building up the resources necessary to resist hegemonic veiling in the longer term.

This kind of action is not captured in Tilly and Tarrow's definition of contentious politics – at least not in the sense they present it. Moving away from their focus on claims, organizations, and action repertoires, in this article I proposed a perspective on contentious politics that defines it according to its qualities: being political in its scope and processes, and contentious in its position towards hegemonic actors; incorporating democratic principles in their own organizational contexts and locations (transcending thematic and institutional categories), and/or striving to build counter-hegemonies. From the data I collected in activist Romania, it seems that these qualities are of high practical importance for agents of contentious politics in a post-socialist, post-modern context.

The analytical perspective proposed in this article thus also makes it possible to view more sensibly the widely discussed appearance of anti-democratic contentious politics. Being political in the very moment of attacking the status quo, when examining their practices of long-term capacity building, one will find totally different strategies to the ones described in the present paper… but this must be left to further investigations.

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Appendix

APP. 1: DATA CORPUS

Table 1: List of interlocutors

nr[260]/ code	location	age	profession	major engagement[261]	first contact	collaboration interest
1/AA	București	old 89er	employee	legal issues	Portavoce film screening (online)	Contacts to anti-corruption activists
2/AA1	București	middle	academic	radical critique	Film contact Sergiu	Counselling for project risks
4/AI	București	middle	employee	anti-corruption	Forwarded by AA	Data share, social media promotion
5/AI1	București	middle	academic	anti-corruption	Forwarded by colleague	Research collaboration, contact to movement parties
6/AI2	București	middle	academic	football-related	Forwarded through CeE1c (RȘs collectivity)	Contacts to ultra-scene, research collaboration
14/BN	București	middle	journalist	civil society per se	Forwarded by colleague	Data share, journalist network, technical counseling
16/BoF	Timișoara	old 89er	civil society as career	local issues	Cold call Sergiu	Local promotion, contacts to small town/rural activists
29/DeU	Cluj	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Cold call Sergiu	Data share, contact to environment activists
33/DU	București	middle	employee	football-related	Cold call Nina	Contact to ultra-scene
36/FN1	Timișoara	old 89er	artist	environment	Forwarded by BoF	Data share, contact to artist scene and older environmental activist circles
42/LA	București	young	civil society as career	education	Film contact Sergiu	Contact to small town activist groups, counseling in community building and outreach
51/MI1	București	middle	civil society as career	local issues	Cold call Sergiu	Insight to collaboration with formal institutions, contact to national mutual help networks and many local communities, local promotion
52/MI2	București	middle	academic	economic issues	Forwarded by Tm collective	Overview creative protests/flashmobs, data share, research collaboration (historical protests)

260 In total, I listed 107 people with whom I interacted on some field occasion, or who were named by interlocutors. Collaborative talks were held with 21 individuals and two activist collectives. The collectives did not give consent to document our interactions for systematic analysis. Two interlocutors could not be reached anymore for finalizing the member-checking procedure, two were excluded from the data corpus because of conflict of interest. Contact research indications from the excluded interactions were documented in anonymous jotnotes and used for orienting further research, but did not enter the data corpus for systematic analysis, the interactions themselves were not documented.

261 Interlocutors for collaborative talks were selected from a larger pool of possible contacts using the diversity dimensions – of course, from an outsider view. Many interlocutors had multiple engagements and organizational affilitations, and were oftentimes identified differently from the outside than by themselves with regard to their group belonging or ideological stance. Therefore, in the table only tangible characteristics of my interlocutors are displayed. The major engagement field is an exception to this, as I wanted to purport at least a broad idea of the fields of actions of my interlocutors.

55/ MIO	Timișoara	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Forwarded by MI1	Insight to 90s originary activist scene, contact to Tm activists
74/RA	Ploiești	middle	employee	environment	Forwarded by friend	Contacts to (international) environment activism network, and to local institutions
77/RȘ	București	middle	employee	education	Cold call Nina	Research collaboration, setting up internship program in Bucharest
100/ VD	București	old 89er	civil society as career	civil society per se	Cold call Sergiu	Data share, counseling association setup, contact to large NGOs

Table 2: Interlocutor interactions

Code	**Location, date, documents**	**Supplementary material**[262]
AA	Facebook conversation, from 28.04.2020, (preliminary case orientation) • conversation journal	• two journalistic books • one historical book
	Bucharest, 30.11.2021 (preliminary test) • field journal	
	Bucharest, 13.06.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	
	Bucharest, 05/2024[263] (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
AA1	Bucharest, 17.06.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript • joint reflection recording (with Sergiu) • methods reflection	• 8 activist brochures • several journalistic articles • three activist books
	Bucharest, June 2023 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	
	Bucharest, 07/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form	

262 As not all interlocutors consented to be identifiable personally upon publication of this work, only supplementary material metadata is presented here.

263 As informed consent forms were signed with the interlocutor's full names, these would be identifiable upon giving the exact date, which is why for member-checking meetings, only the month is provided. Individual excerpts were only provided to interlocutors I included in focused coding themes.

	• individual excerpt and comments	
AI	Online, 11.12.21 (preliminary test) • field journal	• two facebook community sites • one demonstration announcements
	Online, 24.11.22 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	
	Bucharest, November 2022 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	
	Bucharest, 06/24 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
AI1	Bucharest, 16.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two grey literature articles • one personal blog • one journalistic article • one facebook community site
	Bucharest, 24.11.2022 (follow up interview) • field journal • recording • transcript	
	Bucharest, 31.03.2023 (collaboration follow up and demo preparation) • jot notes • recording	
	Bucharest, 06/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
AI2	Bucharest, 16.06.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one personal blog • one academic article
	Bucharest, 05/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
BN	Bucharest, 06.12.2022 (collaborative talk) • recording and notes of preliminary talk, coducted by Sergiu in June 2022	• one activist book • one journalist photo platform

	• field journal • recording • transcript	
	Online conversation, 06/2024 (member checking) • mail documentation • informed consent form	
BoF	Online, 20.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist brochure • two activist project websites
	Stanciova, 06/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
DeU	Cluj-Napoca, 24.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two activist project pages • two journalistic articles • one facebook community site
	Online conversation, 07/2024 (member checking) • mail documentation • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
DU	Bucharest, 29.11.2022 (preliminary test) • field journal • methods reflection	• two academic books • one activist book • one activist newspaper • one journalistic documentary film
	Bucharest, 06/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form	
FN1	Timișoara, 03.12.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist book • two activist brochures • one (political) artist brochure
	Timișoara, 06/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
LA	Bucharest, 13.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two activist project websites • one academic article
	Online conversation, 08/2024 (member checking)	

	• mail documentation • informed consent form • individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
MI1	Bucharest, 15.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• two activist project websites • two personal blogs • one activist infographic • one instititutional infographic
	Bucharest, 03.05.2023 (collaboration follow up) • field journal	
	Bucharest, 07/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
MI2	Bucharest, 27.11.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one academic book • one activist community website • one facebook community site • one activist podcast • one activist city tour series
	Bucharest, May 2024 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	
	Bucharest, 05/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
MIO	Timișoara, 03.12.2022 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist community website • one journalistic documentary film • one legislation project
	Timișoara, 06/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt and comments	
RA	Online, 07.01.2023 (collaborative talk) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist youtube-channel • two activist protest documentations • one facebook community site • one journalistic documentary film
	Ploiești, 06.05.2023 (collaboration follow up, without documentation upon consent)	
	Online conversation, 08/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form	

	• individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
RȘ	Bucharest, 13.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist community website • one journalistic article
	Bucharest, 05.12.2022 (collaboration follow up) • jot notes • method note	
	Bucharest, 05/2024 (member checking) • informed consent form • individual excerpt (no additional comments)	
VD	Bucharest, 15.06.2022 (collaborative talk, with Sergiu) • field journal • recording • transcript	• one activist brochure • two research reports • one journalistic article • one activist project website • four activist documentation web-sites
	Online-conversation, 06/2024 (member checking) • mail documentation • informed consent form	

Table 3: Observations

Event	**Location, date, documents**	**Supplementary material**
Demonstration „USL la un an de guvernare“ (+ subsequent activist meeting, without documentation upon consent[264])	Bucharest, 20.11.2022 • real-time field protocol • three voice memos • field journal • discussion jot notes	• demonstration announcement (facebook) • 14 facebook community sites • three legislation projects • seven journalistic articles • eight on-site photographies
Public discussion „Mai avem nevoie de presa?“	Bucharest, 04.04.2023 • field journal	• event series brochure • three facebook community sites • two activist media outlets

264 I want to note that I attended several non- or semi-public activist meetings during my field stays, in Bucharest, Timişoara, and Cluj-Napoca. However, I decided not to keep documentation of these, even if partial consent may have been given at some points in time. This was because I could never assure full consent by all participants in these settings – as people oftentimes came and left during my attendance, or I didn't catch full attention by all participants for my request. The times both limits were not given, the group didn't reach a consensus about their consent with my research. I made jot notes during these encounters, for orienting further research, but didn't document these in my NVivo project, and destroyed them after processing. The abovementioned after-demonstration meeting was the only of these which took place at a fully public place (a bistro), and all participating groups are highly present on public social media outlets, the composition of groups on this particular evening is public in the demonstration announcement. Therefore, in this case, I dared keeping my notes for documentation.

Public discussion „Muncă, migrație, și gig-economy”	Bucharest, 05.04.2023 • field journal	• event series brochure • one academic article
Demonstration „Taiați pensiile speciale!”	Bucharest, 07.04.2023 • field journal • jot notes preparation meeting (AI1)	• demonstration announcement (facebook) • four facebook community sites • petition website • one legislation project

Templates:

- 201110[265] Fieldnote Template
- 201123 Manual concept
- 211102 Personal attributes inventory checklist
- 220613 Collaborative talks

Manuals:

- 210311 Preknowledge
- 210921 Risk management: harrassment and sexualization in the field
- 210921 Crisis sheet risky situations
- 210921 Crisis sheet culture shock
- 210921 Analysis in general
- 210922 Analysis perspectives
- 210922 Display techniques
- 210929 Ethical concerns
- 211001 Writing, using, and revising manuals
- 211001 Rapport and immersion
- 211001 Fieldnotes
- 211001 In-field mapping
- 211001 Iterating and stopping exposure
- 211001 Indexing and Coding
- 211001 Technology use
- 211005 Reading, writing, and publishing
- 211006 Revision and repeat
- 211102 Starting points/ field entry
- 211102 Preconcept: personal attributes inventory
- 211102 Collaborative talks
- 211116 Behaving professionally on social media
- 220610 Reacting to online assaults
- 220616 Team coordonation during collaborative talks
- 220622 Historiography workshop draft
- 230104 How to handle Facebook posts → supplementary material

How-tos

- 200311 Saving files
- 200311 NVivo classification levels
- 200408 Text queries

265 This number is a timestamp for the creation of the document: yymmdd.

- 200429 Anonymization
- 210906 Compiling cases
- 211108 Data protection
- 220524 Test Datasheets Facebook Posts

Methods logs

- 190712 Preliminary map
- 210311 Resource inventory
- 210601 Facebook posts
- 210619 Methods draft participant observation
- 211102 Personal values reflection
- 211102 Scientifical values refection
- 211102 Personal attributes inventory
- 211103 Summary first methods revision
- 211129 Log first test session
- 211201 Scheduling fieldnote writing
- 211216 Test sessions
- 220618 Position towards interlocutors
- 220621 Position towards interlocutors – discussion with Sergiu
- 220622 Workshop feedback IeAc
- 220718 Collaborative talks versus interviews
- 220718 Position towards interlocutors summary
- 220718 Adapting positionality reflection
- 220822 Second methods revision summary
- 221109 Protocol follow-ups for second field trip
- 230104 Proceeding with Facebook

APP. 3: FIELDNOTE TEMPLATE, REVISED VERSION

Numbers 1 to 3 were always completed before entering interaction, the preknowledge part was usually completed following the preliminary research for collaborative talks. Number 1 describes first contact to the interlocutor(s) involved. Number 4 was completed directly before entering, numbers 5-8 after the encounter. The boxes show usual reference points of reflection, as established in templates and manuals.

1. Brief situation outline:
2. Preknowledge:
3. Personal aspects:

Excerpt from template 211102 Personal attributes inventory checklist:

- unchageable attributes that may shape interactions at the field
  - being a German
  - having a history with
    - unionists
    - anarchists
    - in Eastern Germany
    - ...
  - being a woman
  - being an academic
  - having faced psychological issues
  - ...
- personal abilities, qualifications, biographical aspects that may shape interactions in the field
  - being and insider/ outsider
  - access
  - trust
  - expectations of knowledge/ awareness
  - language/ codes
  - own attention/ prejudgments
  - power-position (respect/suspicion, privilege, resources...)
  - emotional position /appropriateness
  - political position
  - my perceived interest to partake in the situation
  - ...

---

4. Situation snapshot (before entering):

5. Record:
6. [220616]: Notes and Todos:

- to check:
- follow-up:
- to contact:

7. General impressions:
8. [220718]: positionality notes:

Excerpt from methods log 220718 Adapting positionality reflection

- *about-within*
- *introduce - fabricate - take resources - [give resources]*
- *control - let change*
- *plan - be spontaneous*
- *read in advance - let knowledge evolve - confront*
- *act on behalf of anybody - try to act neutral - act on behalf of myself*
- *work alone - collaborate*
- *use institutionalized resources - let self-organization spring*
- *align to academic tradition - invent sth. new - acknowledge (and enact?) local knowledge and methods →*
- *power position, socialization, ideological stance, resources*
- *dissociation/association*
- *acknowledging/acting*
- *horizontality*

App. 4: Collaborational talks template (revised version after joint fieldstay, June 2022)

All talks were held in Romanian language. English translations are given in italic.

I want to mention that, oftentimes, interlocutors did not wait for us to “end the monologue,” but took control of the talks right away, following up on our conversations preceding the meetings. We always asked interlocutors about their own reconstruction of and perspective upon the protest cycles, and the civil society networks they are situated in, and about networks and groups they perceive as being part of civil society, but outside their own activity context. We always presented to them our project idea, and asked for feedback, collaboration interest and -opportunities, and agreed upon terms to stay in contact. We also always asked who else we should talk to on behalf of our project in their opinion. The individual preparations of the talks were inluded in the fieldnotes, under the “preknowledge” heading.

Preparation:

- what do we know about the interlocutor?
- How did we come to contact them?
- Individual questions/ collaboration requests:
- (in case the talk is done with Sergiu: team roles):
- schedule:

The talk:

_____

1. introduction

- • putem recorda?
  Can we record?
- • cine suntem (scurtă introducere!)
  who we are (short introduction!)
  ◦ Sergiu: filmăr, lucrează la documentariu despre protestele din 2015
  Sergiu: filmmaker, working on a documentary about the 2015 protests
  ◦ Nina: la doctorat pe politologie în Bremen, investigheze protestele recente din România
  Nina: PhD candidate in political science in Bremen, investigating recent protests in Romania
  ◦ ne cunoştim prin activismul comun în Germania
  we know each other through joint activism in Germany
  ◦ colaborare din interesul comun
  collaboration out of common interest

- • ideea:
  the idea:
  ◦ istoriografie colectivă
  collective historiography
  ◦ platformă online
  online platform
    ▪ prima parte: cronică a activismului romanesc recent (adică după 89), în formă unei cronologii, a unui timeline vizual
    first part: a chronicle of recent Romanian activism (after '89), in the form of a timeline, a visual chronology
    ▪ e interactivă, useri pot adăuga content
    it's interactive; users can add content
    ▪ si nu e doar online, vrem să luam legatură cu diferite grupuri civice, si să-i incurajăm să se scrie ca si parte din istoria noastră colectivă [221116: cut: si astfel sa creem o rețea, care să pună oamenii in dialog.]
    and it's not just online; we want to connect with different civic groups and encourage them to become part of our collective history [221116: cut: and thus create a network that puts people in dialogue.]
    ▪ arâtăm [221116: mockup Dea]:
    we show [221116: Dea's mockup]:

  • e vorba și de proteste mari sau campanii de advocacy care or fost, dar și evenimente de context importante pentru societatea civilă (când a fost dată o lege, sau Roșia Montană Patrimoniu Unesco), formarea unui ONG, de exemplu ONG-ul vostru
  it's about major protests or advocacy campaigns that have happened, but also important contextual events for civil society (when a law was passed, or Rosia Montana became UNESCO heritage), the formation of an NGO, for example, your NGO

  • se pot adăuga informații de când a fost format, care au fost cele mai importante evenimente, ce câștiguri ați avut, sau unde ați dat fail serios și de ce. Și materiale și poze și linkuri de acolo
  you can add information about when it was formed, what the most important events were, what successes you had, or where you failed seriously and why, and materials, pictures, and links.

- • Ce am făcut pana acuma:
  What we've done so far:
  ◦ am gândit și regândit diversele funcții ale site-ului, arhitectura informațională
  we have thought through and rethought the various functions of the site, the information architecture
  ◦ am găsit programatori pe wordpress și java, [221116: si designer]
  we found programmers for WordPress and Java, [221116: and a designer]
  ◦ Am făcut rost de niște finanțare, cât să putem duce proiectul până la o fază de mvp [221116: și de design și testare]
  we secured some funding, enough to take the project to an MVP stage [221116: and for design and testing]
  ◦ Am găsit o avocată care ne-a facut consiliere legală și ne-a scris politicile publice si chestiile de copyright
  we found a lawyer who provided legal advice and wrote our public policies and copyright matters
  ◦ [221116: am fundat Asociația pentru Procese Politice Perpetue]
  [221116: we founded the Association for Perpetual Political Processes]
  ◦ ne am informat inițial de evenimente, grupuri, contextul și acțiuni
  we initially informed ourselves about events, groups, the context, and actions
  ◦ Programatorii au programat aproape tot back-end-ul și baza de date
  The programmers have coded almost all the back-end and the database

◦ acuma ne intindem antenele să vedem daca cineva face proiecte similare, pentru colaborare şi network, şi să facem câteva teste de workshop-uri in care incercam câteva funcţii ale site-ului în offline în tehnici de workshop pentru a afla despre povestiile lor
now we're reaching out to see if anyone is doing similar projects, for collaboration and networking, and to conduct some workshop tests where we try some site functions offline, using workshop techniques to learn about their stories
◦ in general, vrem să cream o arhivă colectivă, diversă, interactivă pentru oameni implicaţi în activismul civic din România
in general, we want to create a collective, diverse, interactive archive for people involved in civic activism in Romania

2. conversation

- gata monolog, vedem ce vor ceilalti sa spună/intrebe-
- end of monologue, let's see what others want to say/ask-
- despre protestele: povestește ne...

  tell us about the protests...
- • info-block:
  info-block:
  ◦ cu cine mai colaboraţi? acum, înainte? cum s-a dezvoltat networkul? care grupuri mai cunoaşteţi? cu cine să mai vorbim? cine ar putea fi potrivit pentru ateliere?
  who else are you collaborating with? now, before? how has the network developed? what other groups do you know? who else should we talk to? who could be suitable for the workshops?
  ◦ care sunt diferențe între grupuri și activiști? Cum e relație între ong-uri de dinafara? Sau cu ong-uri structurate de dinafara (spre exemplu UE)
  what are the differences between groups and activists? How is the relationship with NGOs from outside the country? Or with structured NGOs from abroad (e.g., EU)?
  ◦ [dupa interviu cu LA, 220613] Cum ai dori să fie colaborarea cu alţi membri din grupuri civice? Poţi formula acolo, un cum ar fi fain să fie sau ce ar fi necesar ca să meargă treaba strună?
  [after interview with LA, 220613] How would you like the collaboration with other members of civic groups to be? Can you describe how you think it should work or what would be necessary for things to run smoothly?
- • întrebare: ce ar fi necesar să se schimbă chestia pe care o vreți schimbă, ca să se implin-ească scopul vostru în activitate politică?
  question: what needs to change in what you aim to change for your political activity goal to be achieved?

3. collaboration:

- • posibilităţi de colaborare:
  possibilities for collaboration:
  ◦ = trebuie pregătite individual!
  = need to be prepared individually!
  ◦ spre exemplu: networking, promovare, suport tehnic, imparţăşit resurse şi materiale, face parte în workshop-uri, indicaţii de finanțare, partnership, combinat proiecte similare, im-parţăşit ştințe
  For example: networking, promotion, technical support, sharing resources and materials, participating in workshops, funding guidance, partnerships, combining similar projects, knowledge exchange
  ◦ idee, despre care noi incă nu ne am gândit?

Any ideas that we haven't yet considered?

◦ [dupa interviu cu LA, 220613] cu ce va putem ajuta voua cu proiectul nostru?

[After the interview with LA, 220613] How can we assist you with our project?

- • todo:

  to-do:

  ◦ spre exemplu: cum ținem contact, când mai vorbim, ce ne trimitem etc.

  For example: how do we keep in touch, when do we talk again, what do we exchange, etc.

- • opțional:

  optional:

  ◦ convorbire informală

  informal conversation

  ◦ dacă e: recordarea unei povești

  if applicable: recording a story

4. in case they ask...

- • de ce facem asta? (și de ce vrem să vă motivăm să vă alăturați de noi :)

  why are we doing this? (and why do we want to motivate you to join us :)

  ◦ platformă e gândită să

  the platform is designed to

    ▪ face posibil un vid general deasupră dezvoltării

    fill a general void in terms of development

    ▪ arâta marimea mișcării

    show the scale of the movement

    ▪ fie o sursă fezabilă de informații despre protest în România

    be a reliable source of information on protests in Romania

    ▪ permită userilor să-și creeaze o imagine a evenimentelor, să-și dea seamă de legături și emergențe, și de învățari din experiențele

    allow users to create a picture of events, to realize connections and emergences, and to learn from experiences

    ▪ să dea un sens de comunitate, să pună în dialog oameni implicați despre experiențele lor

    give a sense of community, connecting people involved to discuss their experiences

    ▪ să imputerniceze skill-sharing și învățare politică

    empower skill-sharing and political learning

    ▪ să valoreze experiențele trăite a userilor

    value the lived experiences of users

    ▪ să dea o platformă și pentru evenimente și experiențe mai necunoscute, nediscutate în medii etc.

    offer a platform for less known or discussed events and experiences in the media

    ▪ să se bucura și să se dea o ocazie de reflexiune oameni despre memoriile lor

    allow people to celebrate and reflect on their memories

    ▪ fie un loc pentru isoriografie directă, colectivă, comună

    be a place for direct, collective, common historiography

    ▪ să fie o sursă de informații cât și de inspirații și de networking

    serve as a source of information as well as inspiration and networking

    ▪ să face mai cunoscut în publicul Român dar și internațional evenimentele recente

legate de activitate civică din România

make recent civic activities in Romania known to the Romanian public and internationally

▪ să dea opțiunea de a planui activități în viitor

provide an option for planning future activities

- • societatea civilă pentru noi este un efect colectiv unei societăți pe sine însuși: ceea ce facem în momentul de față, direct schimbă lumea trăită a noastra, deci procesele actuale, de față, sunt minimum la fel de important pentru viață noastră ca scopurile de viitor

  civil society for us is a collective effect of a society on itself: what we do in the present directly changes our lived world, so the current processes are at least as important for our lives as future goals

---

Processing*:*

- merge jot notes
- collect and prioritize checklist, follow ups, and to dos
- (team flashlight)
- team update
- Nina: documentation

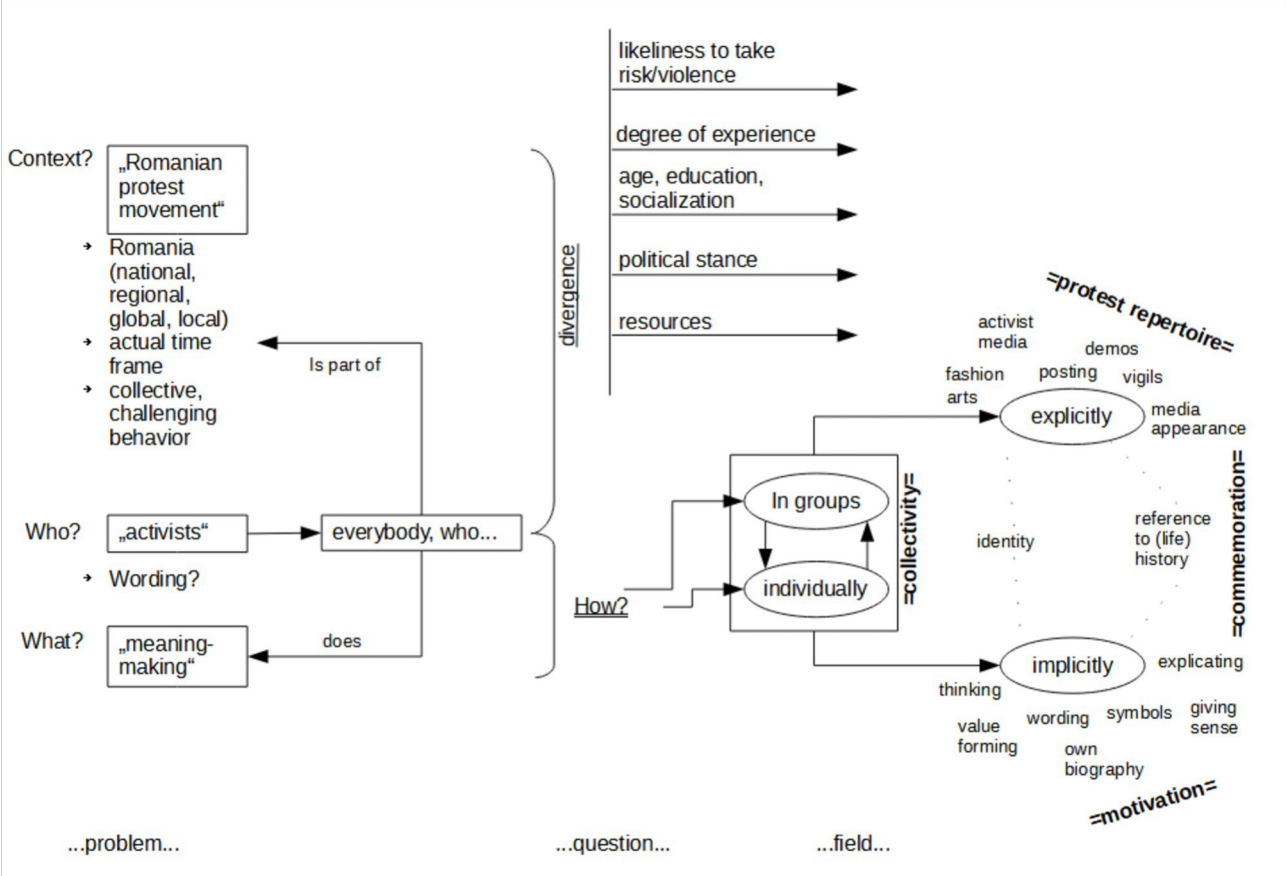

Figure 3: preliminary research map

APP. 6: DIVERSITY DIMENSIONS (AS OF 29.03.23)

- locations:
    - Bucharest
    - other bigger cities
    - smaller cities
    - rural areas
    - online
    - worldwide
- radicality: confronting institutionalized policy, polity, politics, political sphere
- thematic reach: global/regional linkage – national reach – local reach
- topics content:
    - environment
    - anticorruption
    - local issues
    - radical critique
    - civil society per se
    - LGBTQI
    - education
    - economic issues
    - austerity
    - EU
    - historical justice/ commemoration
    - football-related
    - legal issues
- collective identities:
    - students
    - LGBTQI
    - women*
    - workers
    - entrepreneurs
    - middle-class „ordinary“ citizens
    - ultras
    - ideological identities: left/center/right/non/outside
    - intellectuals
    - established NGOs
    - originary CSOs
    - peer groups
    - subcultures
    - ethnic identities
- organisation structure:
    - self-organization
    - institutionalization
    - hierarchic
    - non-hierarchic
- action mode:
    - mass demonstration
    - vigil
    - static manifestation/ march
    - flashmobs
    - creative protest

        - individual protest
        - direct action
        - campaigning
        - strike
        - occupation
        - festival
        - public discussion
        - physical violence
        - public mourning
        - facilitation
        - organization
- age:
    - old 89er
    - middle (~30-50)
    - young (~20-30)

App.7: Project description “o altă poveste”

Nina Krienke and Sergiu Zorger
contact: krienke@uni-bremen.de

O altă poveste (a different story/ another story) is an interactive historiographic online platform comitted to the ideas of civil society collaboration and collective political learning. It is dedicated to the recent developments in the formation of Romanian civil society, namely the civic awakening occuring throughout the last 10 years as a clustered, progressing course of mass mobilizations, diverse protest actions, group forming and discourse shifts, leading to severe changes within the country's political culture. Offering a moderated, interactive platform for the people implicated in these changes, as well as for the interested public, the project aims to facilitate collective political learning, to make the changes underway tangible and comprehensible, to empower civil society action, to spark dialogue and collaboration, to enable the sharing of resources with and among the platform users, creating a space of valuing and respecting each other. With to date no comprehensible overview over this piece of recent history available, the platform provides new ways of historiographic sensemaking, and a structured and searchable data collection based upon multimedia generic activist as well as professionalized public materials, in an up-to-date online environment.

O altă poveste aggregates actions, events, and series of events of importance for the ongoing development in a visually appealing timeline, enabling users to get an overview, browse details, and share themselves their knowledge, materials, and memories related to it. Dynamics of formation will be displayed in singular case-related group historiographies. Discussed topics, protest-related symbolic patterns and specific terms and protest tactics will be retraced in a consecutive blog/vlog-series.

The idea was developed throughout the last three years in close, ongoing consultation with different groups of political activists in and related to Romania. We have gathered a starting budget, set up a detailed project plan and technical specifications for the development of the site, obtained legal advice and contracted developers. The technical infrastructure for the platform is in its final testing phase to date, by August 2024.

Some first entries into the different branches of Romanian activist landscape could be provided building upon Sergiu’s consecutive work on a documentary film on Romanian activists’ theories of political change, for which he has interviewed very diverse politically implicated people throughout the country since 2016. This network, combined with insights obtained in Nina’s doctoral research –

containing extended literature study, protest related social media following, and a series of scientifically prepared, repeated and member-checked collaborative talks with at the time being about 30 activists in Romania (effectuated by the two of us/ Nina respectively throughout three stays in Romania in June and November/December 2022, March to June 2023, and May to July 2024) – and with the help of to date seven student interns and two volunteers from *SNSPA Bucharest*, builds our basis for setting up a curated primary set of multimedia contents for the timeline, which will be provided before launching the website for the general public, anticipatedly in Summer 2025.

The project covers a recent transformation in Romanian political culture, often reflecting the country's political and cultural transformation from the 1989 „stolen revolution" on. Latest from 2012 on, Romanian civil society is gaining momentum, forming new collectivities, sparking political discourse on a wide array of topics, ranging from day-to-day policy to more structural and even systemic questions, and mobilizing a larger public to take part in this discourse, to educate themselves, to take position, and to take action.

Our methodological approach is inspired by both of our professions – on Nina's side, by interpretative and poststructural social science methodologies and political ethnography techniques, especially collaborative methods, ontological conceptualization, and ons-ite field research; on Sergiu's side, by participatory non-fiction filmmaking, with a background in serial storytelling and a focus to bring concepts from metamodernism and second order cybernetics into filmmaking practice. We both understand our work as embedded societal and also political endeavors, daring to create knowledge, facilitate reflection, and empower political learning and agency-building from within the field we are trying to understand. Our project will enable individual reflection and participation in recent history writing, and at the same time give an ensemble view of the individual, collective, and professionalized (media, scientific, artistic) representations and understandings of the changes under way in Romanian (contentious) political culture.

Figure 4: homepage with zoomable protest timeline, filterbar (on the left), and main function buttons

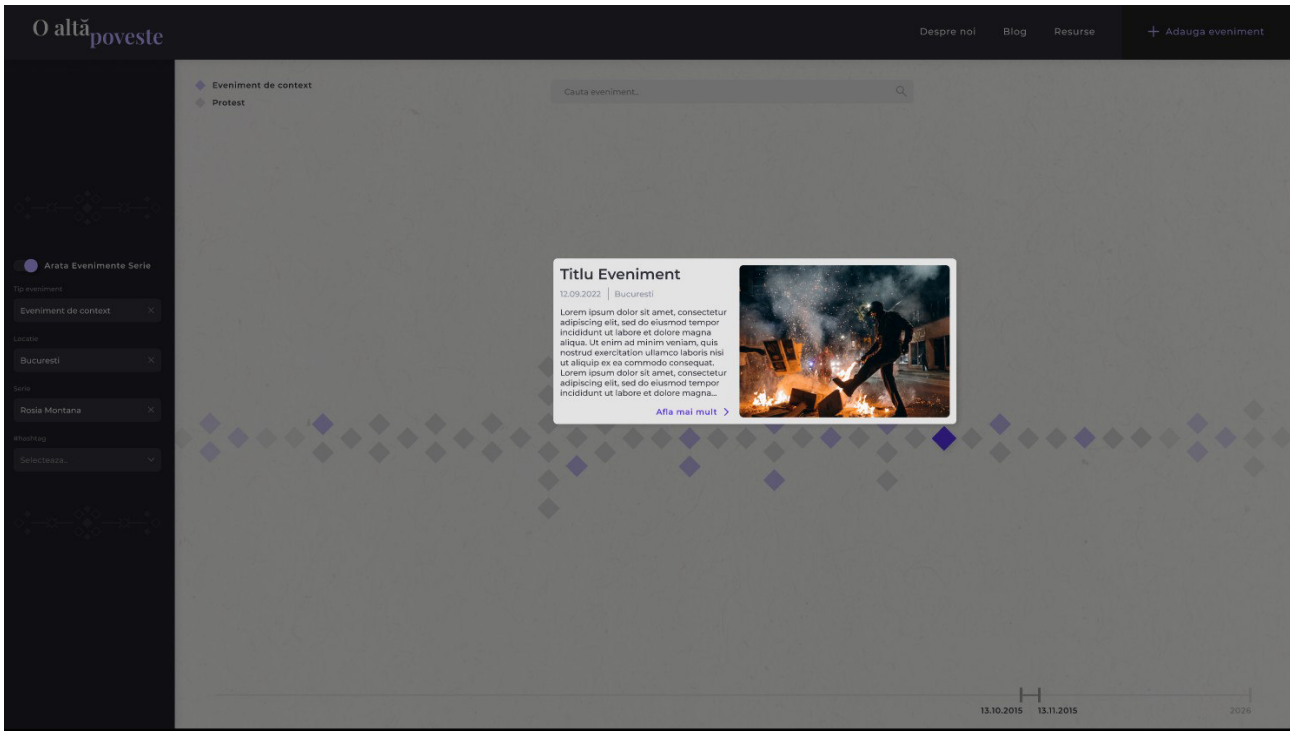

Figure 5: event summary thumbnail, appears when hovering over an individual event bullet in the timeline

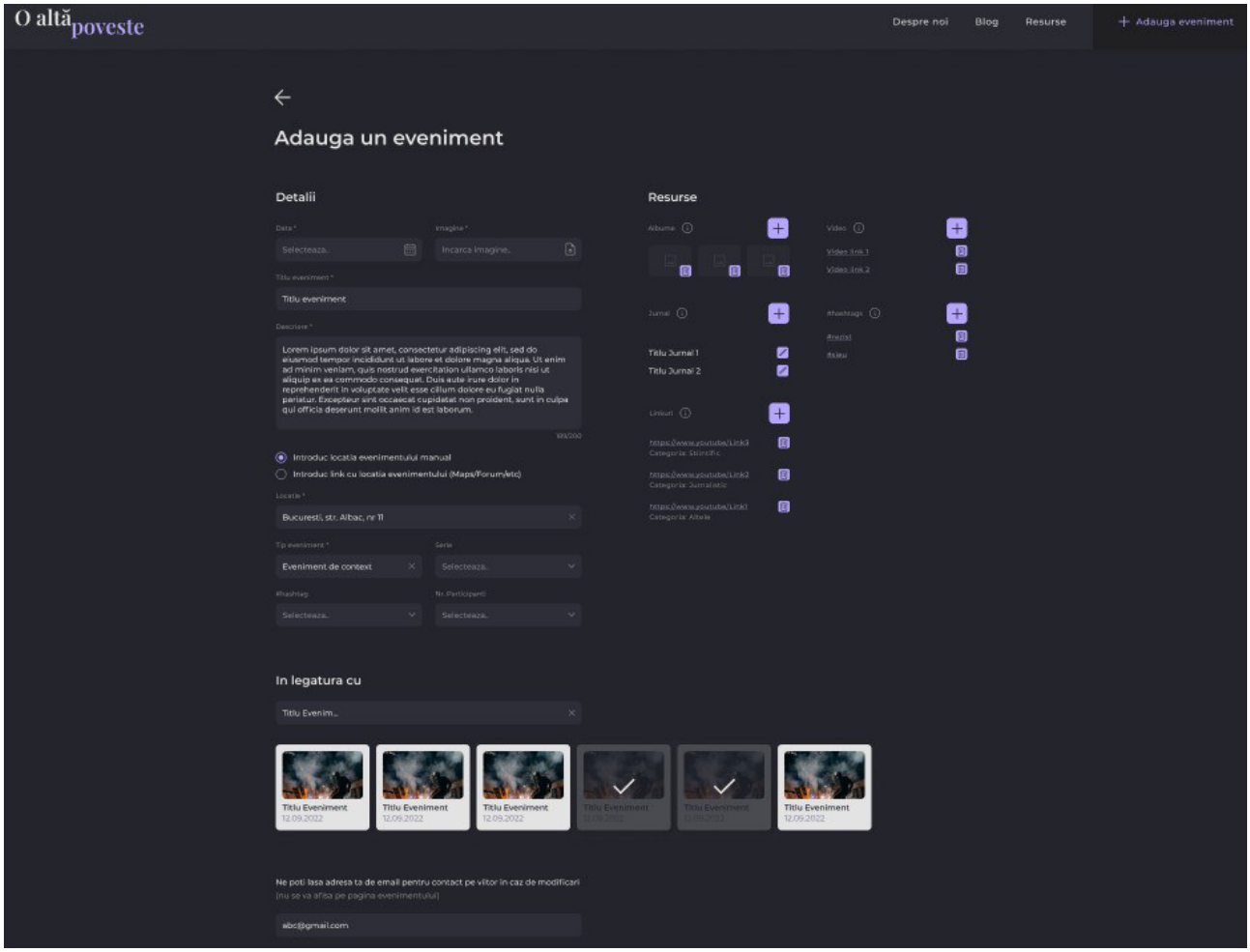

Figure 6: event upload form. Here, users can add protest events to the timeline, give them a title, a description, and hashtags, upload images and personal impressions of the event, add links, and indicate connections of the respective events to others in the timeline.

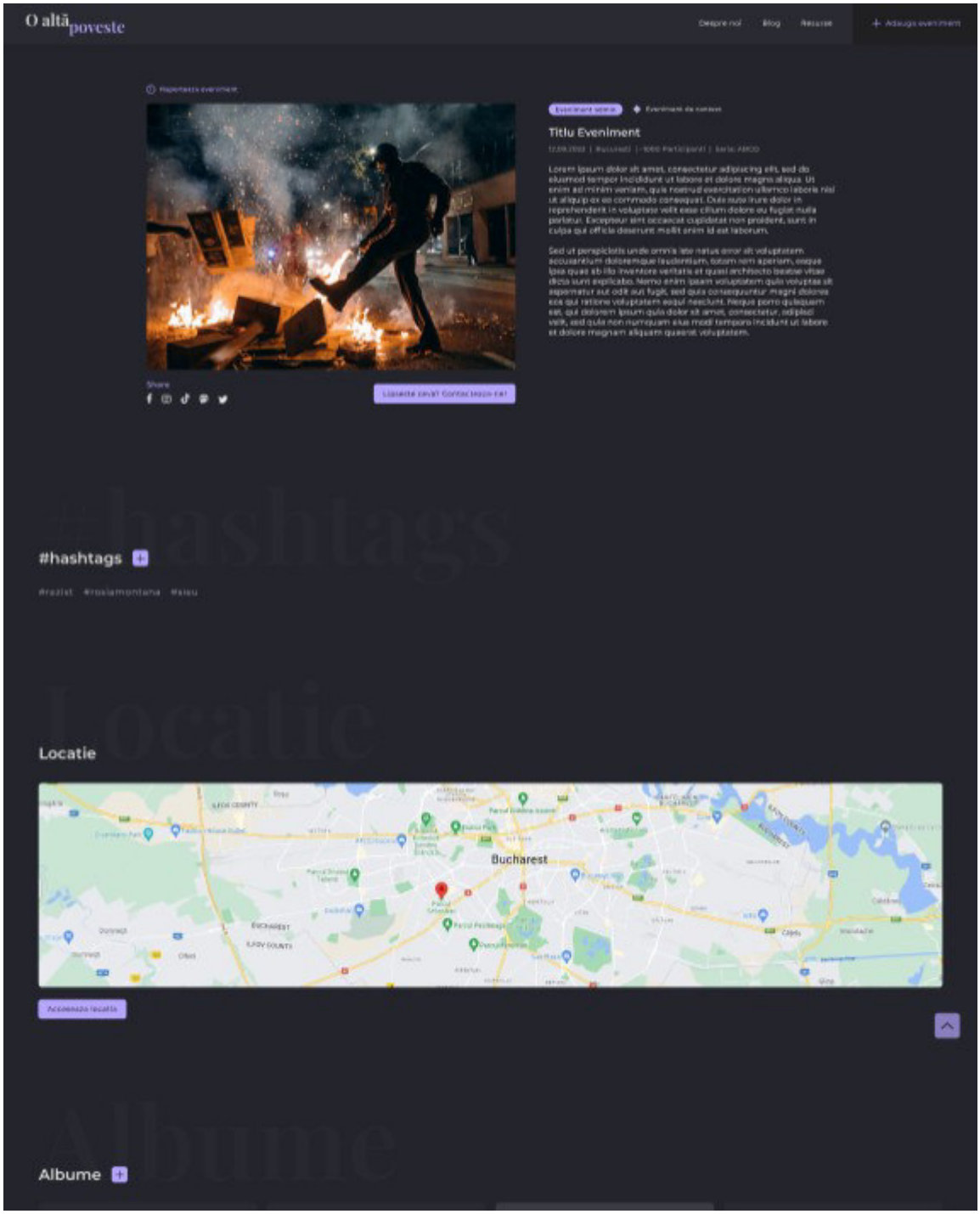

Figure 7: upper part of detailed event view, with title image, title, key data, short description, hashtags, location, sharing and reporting functions, and album view (scrolling down, the video- and link section as well as the section for personal accounts and the impressum become visible)

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Erklärung

Ich erkläre hiermit, dass die vorliegende Arbeit von mir ohne unerlaubte Hilfe angefertigt wurde.

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Eine Überprüfung der Dissertation mit qualifizierter Software ist im Rahmen der Untersuchung von Plagiatsvorwürfen gestattet.

Bremen, den _____

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Unterschrift