



THE VISUAL CREATIVITY OF PROTESTS IN ROMANIA (2016-2019)

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ABSTRACT

After the pictorial turn, it is not surprising that political messages are more and more often presented in a visual form. Today, the battle between great ideas is not only fought via texts, but also through real and virtual images, or, through imagetexts. This paper tackles the image politics of the Romanian post-2016 anti-government popular resistance through some typical cases of imagetext: hashtags, symbols, video mapping, posters, and some cases of visible space-occupation. These examples can present the anonymous (in some cases professional) artistic creativity, which helps the formation of social solidarity and crystallizes the message of the resistance.

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1. Social-political context

Romania has been a member of the EU since 2007, and both the political elite and the majority of the population is committed to European integration. At the same time, the country is still struggling with its historical heritage: economic backwardness, the persistence of communist mentality, and sometimes the unprincipled opportunism of the new political and economic elites. Although the major parties seem to be traditional political formations (e.g., PSD – Social Democratic Party, PNL – National Liberal Party, PC – Conservative Party), the ideological differences between them are hardly visible to the naked eye, and they seem to be organized rather around interests than values (e.g., social justice, liberalism, or conservative values). The National Liberal Party is part of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and not of the liberal group, while the representatives of the conservative party belong to the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament.

It is no wonder, then, that in this chaos, the voters do not really feel the seriousness of the election, and the participation in elections is continuously decreasing (“Prezența la vot a românilor la parlamentarele din ultimii 27 de ani,” 2016).

The PSD got 45% of the votes in 2016, so they could form a government in December. Already at the beginning of January 2017, this new government has prepared a government ordinance that was seen by an important part of the population to be connected to the interests of the party leader, Liviu Dragnea, who was charged and convicted for corruption, as well as to the personal interests of other politicians charged with corruption (the amendments to the Criminal Code were accepted during a single night and published in the official gazette of Romania that very night). In January-February 2017, there were anti-government and anti-corruption protests in the entire country. The largest protest has brought 500 000 people to the streets and was thus the largest protest movement since the fall of Ceaușescu (Roberts & Stan, 2017). The general profile of the protesters

looked like this: “These are the Romanian #rezist protesters: Romanians in spirit, heritage or nationality, generally tech-savvy, with a global focus and understanding, with a checked record of civic engagement but so enraged and disappointed by the current state of affairs in Romanian politics that they are determined to get involved and do more.” (Adi, 2017: p. 55)

The anti-corruption protests went on country-wide throughout the year, although with a somewhat reduced scope. One of the more significant events consisted of the protest of 10 August 2018 (Diaspora at Home), which was organized by Romanians living abroad. This protest had 100 000 participants in Bucharest, and the protesters were against the amendments of the to the Criminal Code, the dismissal of the Prosecutor General of the National Anticorruption Directorate, Laura Codruța Kövesi, the frequent errors of the head of government, Viorica Dăncilă, and the fact that the president of the House of Representatives was still Liviu Dragnea, who was convicted to jail for abuse of office.

In 2019, one of the targets of the protests consisted in the incompetence of the government in constructing a viable infrastructure, or more specifically, in the scandals surrounding the construction of motorways, the non-compliance with the deadlines, and the scandalously low number of motorways that could link Romania to Europe. These protests were initiated by a Moldavian businessman, Ștefan Mandachi, who built 1 meter of the motorway at his own expense and inaugurated his highway on 15 March 2019 at 15:00. As the initiator of the protest movement “România vrea autostrăzi” (Romania want highways), he invited all those who wanted highways to stop their activities on 15 March, at 15:00, for 15 minutes: they had to stop working for 15 minutes if they were working, to stop teaching for 15 minutes if they were teachers, or to stop their car for 15 minutes if they were on the road, thus signaling to the government that the state of the road network is untenable.

After the turn of '89, for more than two decades, mass protests and demonstrations were rare in Romania. The society was rather lethargic and seemed to have accepted the corruption of

its politicians. Voters got active and involved in the presidential elections of 2014, regarding which the 10% increase in voter turnout in the second round can be interpreted as protest participation. Although the social democrats of the PSD have won the 2016 elections, their style of governing the country, their attempts at changing the legal system, and their populist and economically doubtful moves have provoked strong resentments in the population.

One of the characteristics of the protests in Romania consists of their creative expression through images, texts, and imagetexts: “used as intellectual weapons, words and images were given key importance during the protests” (Magyari, 2017: p. 127). According to a statistical survey, the average protesters were young people and adults below 50 years of age, with average (30%) and high (40%) education levels, urban dwellers, working (76%), mainly in the private sector, or students (11%). (Armanca, 2017: p. 104)

This higher education level of the participants may be associated with the creativity of the expression characteristic for the protests: “Higher levels of education can partially account for the creativity and the abundance of positive – though resolutely critical – messages, through long periods of demonstrations in harsh winter conditions.” (Armanca, 2017: p. 104).

Thus, in the following, I would like to examine the imagetext tools used by the participants for expressing their viewpoints.

2. Imagetext

The expression “imagetext” is linked to W.J.T. Mitchell, one of the main gurus of the iconic turn. In an interview he gave in 2000, Mitchell admits that „the idea of image and text working in a collaborative one has always been fascinating to me” (Wiesenthal, Bucknell, & Mitchell, 2000: p. 1).

In fact, already in his book published in 1987, Mitchell recognizes the complementarity of image and text, as well as the fact that “we create much of our world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representations” (Mitchell, 1987: p. 45). The early texts of Mitchell are primarily motivated by the integration of the image into semiotics and by the attempt to demonstrate that the relationship between the

text and the image is not one of exclusivity, but rather a kind of entanglement. The concept of the imagetext “is a way of trying to capture the sense that even the atomic unit of semiotics – the sign – is a heterogeneous representation, a mixed medium” (Wiesenthal et al., 2000: p. 17).

In this essay, I will interpret the concept of the imagetext in a narrower manner, since it seems to me that there is an increasing number of surfaces where the image and the text are inseparable in forming the communicative unit: the text functions as an image, or (less often) the image functions as text.

It is the usage of these mixed media that I will analyze here in the context of the visual politics of the Romanian protests.

2.1. Hashtags

The hashtag is a new communication signal and a characteristic product of the internet age. In the context of our current information overload, it helps to narrow down the searches and to make the contents available for the interested parties, as well as to find those people who are thinking like us and have similar interests. The hashtag is a relatively new phenomenon, and its usage is connected to Chris Messina, who proposed it in 2007, „for groups” (Zappavigna, 2018: p. 5). Since then, the hashtag has conquered the great social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Google+. It fulfills two functions: on the one hand, as metadata, it makes information management easier, and on the other hand, as a generator of meaning, it helps to create social ties. Lately, it is this second function that came to the fore: “This is the first historical period where we see it so closely tied to enacting social relations, having extended its semiotic reach as an informational-organising tool to a social resource for building relationships and communities through the practice of social tagging” (Zappavigna, 2018: p. 3).

The two hashtags that have defined the Romanian protest events are #rezist and #șîeu.

The hashtag #rezist has become the hallmark of the February 2017 demonstrations and is still used as a sign by anti-government and anti-corruption groups. The word “rezist” denotes both resistance as well as the endurance needed

by the protesters to take to the streets for weeks in freezing, sub-zero temperatures, hoping that the government will hear their voice. This hashtag was used by the protesters in Facebook posts and on Instagram, becoming a symbol of the protests when the civil association Declic, and more specifically, graphic artists Luminița Dejeu created the “#rezist visual” and the “civil disobedience kit” at 1 February (“DECLIC,” n.d.). The “visual” has turned the hashtag into an imagetext, with the text handwritten on a yellow background with large, red letters, and this imagetext was printed on placards and used as a profile picture on Facebook by the protesters and their supporters. This is how Luminița Dejeu recounts the birth of the imagetext:

Together with my colleagues from Declic, I have created the #REZIST hashtag and the civil disobedience kit on 1 February 2017, at the very dawn of the largest street protests in Romania since 1989. In a couple of days, #REZIST, the logo I have drawn with my own hand on canvas, has become the image of ‘the revolution of light’” (“Îi lăsăm să fure #REZIST?,” n.d.).

The importance of #rezist as an imagetext is also demonstrated by the fact that a political party has attempted to copyright it, and the appropriation of the “open-source” and (under the Creative Commons license) freely usable sign was only prevented from being appropriated by a political party through legal action.

Figure 1. #Rezist



Source: Luminita Dejeu, 2017.

The hashtag #șîeu has become the identification marks of the protesters supporting the construction of highways in March 2019. The Romanian syntagma “șîeu” is similar to #metoo in its form but has a completely different content. Its full message is “I also want highways”. An interesting characteristic of this message is that it substitutes the word “și” of standard Romanian language usage with “șî”, as it is used in the region of Moldova. As Moldova is a more

backward region of the country and, according to public opinions, Moldavians are more typically more inclined toward resignation than toward protest, the symbol of the movement humorously alludes to the fact that even the Moldavians have lost their patience. Visually, the #șîeu symbol appears as a circle whose background is a highway and the national tricolor of Romania. Similarly, to the #rezist movement, the protesters consider themselves to be patriots since their objective is the democratization, development, and progress of Romania.

Figure 2. #șîeu



Source: Augustin Ciobanu, 2019.

Additionally, to their usual function of information management and the communication of meaning, the two hashtags have also functioned as visual elements. They have spread on the internet as concrete visual units, or imagetexts, and were used during the protests, not simply as texts, but in a specific graphic display. Hashtags usually take on the form of the surrounding text (fonts, dimensions, etc.). However, in the case of these two hashtags, the visual uniqueness has brought the linguistic sign closer to being an image. Linguistic signs are interchangeable, while an image is unique and irreplaceable. It is precisely for this reason that these two hashtags have contributed more strongly to the construction of the community and the self-definition of the group. If someone uses the word “rezist”, it does not mean much in itself, but if one changes their Facebook profile using Luminița Dejeu’s #rezist imagetext, this clearly signals their identity as a protester.

2.2. Symbols

The protests have also given birth to two common symbols: the symbol of “toți pentru justiție” (“all for justice”) and the “vă vedem” (“we see you”) symbol.

One of the main dissatisfactions of the protesters has to do with the way in which the laws are adopted. The law codes, and especially the Criminal Code, are changed too often, without sufficient social and professional debate, through government ordinances, in order to favour the corrupt political leaders (according to the interpretation of the protesters). Hence, the protesters considered justice itself to be endangered and raised their voices for justice and legality. The “toți pentru justiție” symbol is a quite complicated imagetext. It shows a raised palm, signaling stop, and the slogan is written in black and white on this background. The slogan “all for justice” works as an inspiring text. On the one hand, it mentions a value (righteousness, justice), and on the other hand, it signals the importance and desirability of integrated action. The “toți pentru justiție” imagetext is a great example of the inseparability of image and text: the raised palm conveys the idea that something has to be stopped, while the text-only expresses the idea that we all have to stand up for justice. However, as they are linked in the imagetext, the full meaning comes to be that we will jointly protect righteousness and justice through saying stop to the unprofessional and biased activity of the government which changes the laws at its whim. This imagetext has spread on the internet and was printed on placards and T-shirts as well.

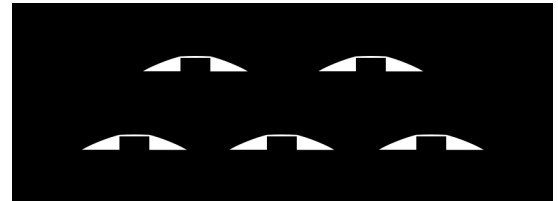
Figure 3. All for justice



Source: Declic, 2017.

The “vă vedem” visual symbol is linked to the “vă vedem din Sibiu” movement. This protest group from the Romanian city Sibiu has held demonstrations, flashmobs, and 15-minute sit-in events for over a year in front of the local Social Democratic Party headquarters, signaling their concern for the constitutional state and their European identity (Bălan, 2018). They usually met at noon in front of the party headquarters and arranged themselves in two or three rows, looking in full silence for 15 minutes at the party headquarters and its people. The “vă vedem” message, addressed to those who hold the political power, is that the citizens are watchful and they are following the events, including each step of the governing party. The “vă vedem” symbol is represented by two (or more) eyes arranged as the windows which typically decorate the roofs of the houses of Sibiu. This symbol was made into a banner and painted on hoodies and backpacks. Thus, the watchful eyes of Sibiu have become the visible symbols of belonging to a specific group.

Figure 4. We see you



Source: Vă vedem din Sibiu Facebook cover Photo, 2017

2.3. Videomapping

The protests in January and February were accompanied by the projection of certain texts onto the buildings of the Victoriei and the Universității Square in Bucharest. Some of these projections were provided by the Aural Eye studio, which specialized in video mapping, from a van belonging to a veterinary practice. The projected texts were selected from the proposals sent to an e-mail address that was specially created for this purpose (“De vorba cu tinerii care au facut proiectii video la protestele din Piata Victoriei din ambulanta veterinara,” 2017). Some texts were in Romanian (#rezist, #continuăm [we’ll go on], noaptea ca hoții

[during the night, like thieves], etc.) and the other is English (love, unity, peace, etc.). Private homes were also used for laser projections, with a young protester summoned to the police station for this gesture. (Toma, 2017)

Videomapping is usually based on the characteristics of the building serving as its background, in order to achieve the desired effect through the overlap between the projected image and the building's surface. In this case, however, the emphasis was on the texts. Being projected onto various buildings, the text functioned as an image and stressed the particular character of the space and the time. The projected light needed the solid character of the building in order to take shape. The same text, seen on a screen, merely represents itself; however, when it is projected onto a bank, in front of hundreds of thousands of people, it increased the visibility of the event and furthered their action as a community. Hence, the projected images have appeared as the mystical embodiment of the messages chanted by the protesters.

2.4. Placards

The imagetext character is most obvious in the case of the placards. Several analysts have noted the creativity and humour of the placards used in the Romanian protest movements, and the visual documents of the protest actions were even collected in an album (#Rezist, 2017). Some placards were prepared by artists or non-governmental organizations and put at the disposal of the protesters. The website of the "rezist" movement (<http://rezist.strikingly.com/>) has published an entire set of tools, containing useful tips, placard designs, signature-collecting campaign, Facebook profile-changing frames, and maps with centers supporting the protesters. There were also many placards made by the protesters themselves, with messages written or painted on the cardboard of packaging boxes or canvases. A Facebook page was created for the participants to upload images with the placards used at the (https://www.facebook.com/Pancarte-Rezist-490135474490211/), which were also collected on special blogs (<http://casazicasa.ro/colectie-pancarte-protest/>).

Many imagetexts among these placards could only be decoded in the light of some specific cultural reference. Many of them showed the notorious leader of the PSD, Liviu Dragnea, the convicted politician who, as the president of the House of Representatives and the social-democratic party, was still unquestionably the leader of the government forces. A placard imitating the famous "Obama Hope" representation showed Dragnea's face with the text "NOPE". Obviously, in this case, too, it is only the combination between the image and the text which conveys the message of rejection against Dragnea. Additionally, this placard functions if the viewer is able to associate it with Shepard Fairey's portrayal of Obama. Some placards were linked to famous poems of Romanian literature, while others relied on English language skills, spelling Liviu Dragnea's name as "leave you", or using it in its text as: "We don't be liviu". Still another placard said: "roses r red, violet r blue, prisons r empty waiting for you".

The strong participation of the youth came as a surprise because theirs was the most passive age-group in the elections during the last few years. Some placards stated the situation of this youth quite bluntly: "We could have produced a grandchild for my dad this evening, but here we are". Since February is the month of exams at most universities, many placards hinted at the fact that the protester is a university student, who participates at the meeting instead of preparing for their exam, due to their concern for the fate of the country "I have exams coming up, / but I could not forget about the thieves"; "I know, Mom, it's exam season, but can't you see they're stealing our country?". There were also placards addressed by the youth to the older generation, considered to be typical of the voters of the social-democrats (due to lack of information, habit, or in the hope of higher pensions). Some young people chose to convey reassuring messages to their parents and grandparents through the placards, stating that they are okay, not cold, and dressed well for the winter. There was a message worded in rhyme, which represents a phone conversation between a grandmother and the grandchild: "Hello, grandma? Yes, I'm fine. I have come out to protest for you as well". These kinds of placards

were especially effective because they hinted at the fact that, due to the economic and political situation in Romania, many young people are looking for a better livelihood abroad, so that the families are torn apart, and close relatives are only keeping in touch through phone or Skype. The protesters considered that is partly also the fault of the government, because, due to the amateurism and the falsity of the government, young people are not motivated anymore to work for the development of Romanian society.

3. Visible space-occupation

Since nowadays it is not only traditional television broadcasting that has the ability to transmit live event, but there is also the possibility of “private broadcasting” (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or videos uploaded to YouTube, etc.), civil society protests sometimes also use tools which increase the visibility of the movement, generating images which may become viral in the media or on the internet. At the 2017 protests, one such moment consisted of the simultaneous lighting up of the mobile phones on 5 February, 21:00. The photos that have captured this moment were published throughout the world. The sublime image of the lights simultaneously expressed the magnitude of the masses, the unity of the movement, and the hope and faith invested in a brighter future.

Specific forms of space-occupation are also linked to the “Romania want highways” movement, since the 15-minutes pause inactivity has also manifested itself in many spectacular forms. The car drivers, who were especially interested in this movement, have joined the call in large numbers and stopped their vehicles wherever they were at 15:00. This paralyzed the traffic in the cities, but strangely enough, the drivers did not get upset but cheerfully saluted each other. Another spectacular moment was due to pedestrians continuously crossing and returning on a crosswalk, hindering the cars in their way forward.

The road, as an especially functional part of public space, has become the space of a spectacular civilian protest for 15 minutes.

4. Conclusion

A significant part of Romanian society feels that the promises of the revolution in 1989 have not been fulfilled, which is due primarily to the corruption of the political class. Hence, when it seemed that the current government attempted to relax the anti-corruption regulations, an important part of society got mobilized and started to protest. These protests were peaceful, and they also used many creative tools. There were obviously many young people well-versed in social media among the protesters. This fact also showed itself in the process of the organization of the protests, which were usually based on Facebook events, Facebook groups, blogs, and chatroom discussions among the organizers, who discussed their strategies on these platforms. Social media – primarily Facebook – forums were filled with live transmissions and photos, as the participants made full use of the possibilities provided by these networks: they logged in from the protests sites, tagged in their friends, posted selfies, and “liked” the posts of others.

The protesters have employed tools that are quite suitable for the environment of the netizens: hashtags, imagetext-shaped symbols, video mapping, placards, and spectacular visual forms of spatial occupation and usage. Their protests did not primarily express primitive hate, but brought varied and often creative forms of criticism to the foreground. Ruxandra Gubernat, the film director who made a movie about the events, emphasizes that protests are usually less violent in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western countries: “These are, usually, nonviolent protests, with a strong aesthetic character” (Stănescu, 2018).

The artefacts used at the protests are well worthy of being collected and documented as the traces of anonymous creativity which are similar to other cultural phenomena of our times, such as street art, video blogging, and the creation of memes.

In the culture of protest that has evolved in this way, the point was not only who or what you are protesting against, but also the relationships between the protesters and the feeling of community that linked the participants together.

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