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**Mass protests in Romania and France: a comparison of
contemporary anti-establishment movements**

Master's thesis

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Study programme: European Studies

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Year of the defence: 2023

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree with my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on May 1st, 2023

Kristina Boudová

References

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Abstract

This thesis examines the divergence and convergence of two populist social movements: The Yellow Vests in France and #rezist in Romania, both of which emerged in response to political and economic grievances. The movements converge in their critique of elites, corruption, and social inequality while defining said elites differently. Through a comparative analysis of the movements' origins, goals, strategies, and outcomes, this research identified similarities and differences between the two movements in terms of their populist features. The findings shed light on the complex nature of populism as a political phenomenon that can take different forms in different regions and contexts.

Abstrakt

Tato práce porovnává dvě populistická společenská hnutí: Žluté vesty ve Francii a hnutí #rezist v Rumunsku, která vznikla jako reakce na politickou a ekonomickou nespokojenost. Hnutí se podobají ve své kritice elit, korupce a sociální nerovnosti, přičemž zmíněné elity definují odlišně. Prostřednictvím komparativní analýzy původu, cílů, strategií a výsledků těchto hnutí byly identifikovány podobnosti a rozdíly mezi oběma hnutími co se jejich populistických rysů týče. Zjištění vycházejí z komplexní povahy populismu jakožto politického fenoménu, který může v různých regionech a kontextech nabývat různé podoby.

Keywords

Populism, anti-establishment, social movements, protests, France, Romania

Klíčová slova

Populismus, anti-establishment, sociální hnutí, protest, Francie, Rumunsko

Název práce

Masové protesty v Rumunsku a Francii: srovnání současných antiestablishmentových hnutí

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Introduction

On the 10th of August 2018, Romania experienced one of the largest and most violent protests in its post-Communist history. Tens of thousands gathered at Bucharest's Victory Square (Piața Victoriei), and some clashed with the police forces that were only supposed to supervise this protest against corruption. Romania has regularly experienced waves of mass mobilisations since 2011: from demonstrations against the privatisation of the emergency services to protests against mining in Roșia Montană; in 2015, after the tragic fire at the Colectiv nightclub; and in 2017 against OUG 13, the Romanian government's attempt to loosen anti-corruption and abuse of power legislation. However, the 10th August 2018 protest organised by the #rezist movement and the Romanian diaspora returning for the summer holidays was the first to turn violent. In addition to being one of the most significant and violent in Romania's contemporary history, this protest highlighted the trend of increasing radicalisation of part of the protest movement for the first time. This small group of radical protesters has gradually joined the newly formed AUR (Alliance of Romanian Unity), a populist, extreme right-wing party that won 9% of the vote in the 2020 elections.

The French Yellow Vests movement organised its first protest on the 17th of November, 2018. Although the French protest culture is more developed than the Romanian one, the Yellow Vests movement differed significantly from others. It arguably set a new trend regarding how mass mobilisations are organised and viewed. The Yellow Vests movement is the longest-running protest movement in France since World War II and has surprised France with its endurance, militancy and focus; it was also, according to some, the most violent protest in France since May 1968. Around 3 million people were involved in the protests of the Yellow Vests movement. The movement, formed against a proposal to increase fuel taxation, quickly highlighted the general discontent and worsening conditions of a fraction of French society and the opposition to the reform agenda of President Emmanuel Macron.

At first glance, these movements may seem to have little in common. Nevertheless, they have in common their firm rejection of ruling elites, which led to their characterization as “anti-establishment”. This label is claimed by protesters as a political identity and used by external observers and analysts (media, academia) to describe the ideological nature of these movements.

Through exploring the meaning of this notion of “anti-establishment” in different regional settings and protest cultures, the thesis explores how a shared ethos of radical opposition to the political status quo connects these seemingly disparate movements. The research into regional variants of populism attempts to shed light on its ideological diversity, sometimes obscured by the recourse to a general label such as “anti-establishment” or “populist”. Far from being a monolithic attitude, the rejection of the political elites has its own “variable geometry”, which is influenced by regional/national factors and the particular protest culture on which these movements draw.

In order to do so, the thesis looks at what makes these movements truly anti-establishment. The first chapters establish common populist themes and focus on existing theories of populism, identifying whether populism is a uniform phenomenon relevant only to the far-right spectrum or typical for the whole political spectrum. A comparative approach is taken to underline what these movements have in common by conceptualising the movements and the events, their repertoire, tools and outcomes. A particular focus is given to how the movements seized their momentum and translated themselves into a coherent political force.

Reasons for this detailed comparison of two countries that seemingly do not have much in common besides their shared membership in the European Union are plentiful. Besides the author's motivation and the capability to access sources both in Romanian and French, the main reason is the potential to enrich the underexplored tradition in Romania when studying social movements. Romanian research on social movements has often been conducted in isolation or exclusively from a regional perspective; therefore, there is a dearth of comparative analysis with their Western counterparts. The Rezișt movement, in particular, with its resolutely Western-looking orientation, remarkable durability, and significant political influence, is an excellent vantage point for such a comparative study.

The French case was an obvious pick due to a series of reasons. First, the movements are close enough chronologically to share a similar broad European and global political context, marked by the rise of anti-establishment resentment following the 2008 financial crisis, the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election. Secondly, the Yellow Vests represent, in the selected timeframe (roughly 2017-2020), the most significant European protest movement, which mobilized for months on end a significant portion of society: like the Rezișt movement, the Yellow Vests articulate sweeping, holistic demands for reform and mobilize across social and political divisions. Thirdly, they both have been labelled “anti-establishment” and “anti-elitist”.

Research question and hypothesis

The thesis focuses on the emergence of anti-establishment movements in Romania and France (commonly identified as #rezist and Yellow Vests), the course of the protests and their aftermath. The goal is to compare these two protest movements and their definitions of the establishment. Based on a significant body of literature, we understand populism as a diverse movement with regional varieties which answer to context-specific political demands. The notion of the “establishment” can be an empty signifier if analysed in a vacuum: therefore, we take a constructivist approach and consider how each protest movement tends to define the “elites”. As a result of these regional or national variations in conceptualizing the opposition to the “elite”, populism can produce vastly different ideological and political outcomes. Are protest movements in democratic Western settings more likely to exhibit a distinct anti-capitalist and anti-liberal orientation because the liberal elites (political, economic and cultural) are responsible for social dysfunctions?

On the contrary, in developing or post-authoritarian countries, is the political contestation targeting the traditional elite’s perceived insufficient commitment to Westernisation and modernisation? In the former case, is the political outcome of protest episodes favourable to Eurosceptic, extremist parties, while in the latter pro-European centrist parties get an electoral boost? The case studies of France and Romania can put this hypothesis to the test through the comparative analysis of an established Western liberal democracy with a post-communist Eastern European country which completed relatively recently its Euro-Atlantic integration process.

Exploring the relationship between the definition of an anti-establishment movement and its results offers an answer to **what connects these anti-establishment protest movements and how were the movements that dominated them able to seize political momentum. How do the political capital and outcomes achieved by these movements differ?** The thesis will therefore focus on how the potential populism of these movements determines the movement mechanisms itself and what consequences these movements have achieved, and whether or not these outcomes are similar at the core, starting from the premise that the notion of anti-establishment may relate more to a process rather than just content. Although the word has connotations of a certain Euroscepticism or radical right, the opposite may be true.

1 State of the Art, theoretical framework and methodology

1.1 State of the Art

This state of the art does not map out a complete theoretical framework, which will be built mainly on social movement theory and political culture. The aim is to map out the existing research on populism, anti-establishment and their relationship, focusing on concrete social movements in France and Romania.

The theoretical framework, which focuses on the social movements and their relation to the national politics of each state, is based mainly on the work of Charles Tilly. Tilly focused on collective action and social structures in historical space in time. In his article “Social Movements and national politics”, he describes the concept and context of the term “social movement” in a historical setting while pointing out its misconceptions and its need to be understood as an *interaction* rather than a group setting:

To be specific, I want to argue the following points: It is a mistake to conceive of a social movement as a group, somehow parallel to (but also opposed to) a party. Indeed, it is a mistake to think of a social movement as a group of any kind. Instead, the term "social movement" applies most usefully to a sustained interaction between a specific set of authorities and various spokespersons for a given challenge to those authorities.¹

In his article “Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action”, James Jasper offered thrilling insights into new collective actions, dismantling the grand theories of social movements. New theories of social movements, which re-evaluate the grand theories, are building up more empirically building from the bottom up. Therefore, new social movements serve as a framework for this thesis.²

This framework is built mainly on Steven Buechler’s article “New Social Movement Theories”, where he offers a comprehensive overview of the new social movement theories while proposing his typological distinctions.

The thesis explores, in particular, the complex interaction between protest movements and the notion of anti-establishment. For that, an in-depth analysis of the movements in France and Romania has been crucial. The notion of anti-establishment movements has been based on the

¹ Charles Tilly, “Social movements and national politics,” *Social Organization*, Center for Research on - Working Paper Series (CRSO), no. 197 (1979): 12, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/50971>.

² James M. Jasper, “Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?” *Sociology Compass* 4. no. 11 (2010): 965-969, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00329.x>.

academic works of Florian Hartleb and Peter Učeň, who provided, based on the classic theories of Cas Mudde and Chantal Mouffe, a run-down on anti-establishment parties in Europe.

Florian Hartleb, in his article “Here to stay: anti-establishment parties in Europe”, rightly points out that focus on the far-right populism is misleading, as the new wave of anti-establishment parties is left or centrist.³ This thesis is built upon this proposition, exploring further these new anti-establishment sentiments in Romania, based on the research of Peter Učeň in his “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe”.⁴ Through the lens of Western populism, he discovers that populism in this regional mutation is based on the post-communist experience of political and moral misconduct of the elites in charge of democratic transition.⁵

The Central and Eastern European variant of populism is developed in the scholarship of Sarah Engler. In “Centrist anti-establishment parties and their protest voters: more than a superficial romance?” she develops the ideology of the new “centrist anti-establishment parties” and their electorate.⁶ She focuses on the notion of political trust, which is a crucial phenomenon driving the protesters in social movements. In “Assessing the diversity of anti-establishment and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe”, co-authored with Pytlas and Deegan-Krause, the authors focus on the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia when exploring the relationship between anti-establishment and political positions. They conclude that anti-establishment combines many (but not all) elements of populism⁷ – findings also salient in the case of Romania.

As Laura Nistor points out, the scholarly literature concerning social movements in Romania is uneven and divided. According to her, no tradition exists in research on collective behaviour (social action, social movement) or social psychology. As the communist regime did not allow for social movements (nor their research), the civil society was apathetic, and its engagement

³ Florian Hartleb, “Here to stay: anti-establishment parties in Europe,” *European View* 14, no. 1 (2015): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-015-0348-4>.

⁴ Peter Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2007): 49, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212485/summary>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sarah Engler, “Centrist anti-establishment parties and their protest voters: more than a superficial romance?” *European Political Science Review* 12, no. 3 (2020): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000132>.

⁷ Sarah Engler, Bartek Pytlas, Kevin Deegan-Krause, “Assessing the diversity of anti-establishment and populist politics in Central and Eastern Europe,” *West European Politics* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596696>.

was low.⁸ These studies, however, rarely connect with theories about Western social movements – which is the ambition of this thesis.

Contextualisation of protest movements in Romania in this thesis happens on the backdrop of the concept of anti-corruption populism. This concept is developed based on the research of Tamás Kiss and István Székely, who analysed the drivers behind the anti-corruption narrative and its position in the anti-establishment sentiments. The chapters on Romania build upon the premise that anti-corruption discourse is rarely associated with populism because of its “progressivism”.⁹ Kiss and Székely based their conclusions on Mungiu-Pippidi’s article, “Romania’s Italian-Style Anticorruption Populism”, which researches Romania’s path of politicization of anti-corruption discourse.¹⁰ Her article from 2018 has been visionary, as only months after its publication, Romania has seen an upsurge of yet another anti-corruption anti-establishment party– the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).

Dragoş Dragoman’s findings are consistent when researching the electoral success of the centrist “Save Romania” Union Party (USR) with the adaptation of populist anti-corruption themes in an anti-elitist manner while not slipping into the far-right territory.¹¹ His research is essential for understanding the political transformation of protest movements in Romania into a cohesive political force. Tina Olteanu and Shaazka Beyerle focus on “the interplay between the Romanian government and citizens” while focusing on the mobilisations and their anti-corruption narrative.¹²

Victoria Stoiciu explores the protests in Romania in the framework of post-politics (or parapolitics). Stanciu borrows Slavoj Žižek’s concept of post-politic to describe the evacuation of antagonism and conflict from social debates and a search for technocratic (rather than political) solutions to the issues faced by society Focusing on the primary impulse of the movements – a desire for good governance – Stoiciu claims the social movements missed their potential for

⁸ Laura Nistor, “Social Movements in Pre- and Post-December 1989 in Romania,” in *Social Movements Studies in Europe. The State of the Art*, ed. Olivier Fillieule, Guya Accornero (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016): 419, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvgs0c35>.

⁹ Tamás Kiss, István G. Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery: Some Considerations for Understanding the Anti-Corruption Discourse in Romania,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no. 6 (2022): 514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1869907>.

¹⁰ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, “Romania’s Italian-Style Anticorruption Populism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 104, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0048>.

¹¹ Dragoş Dragoman, ““Save Romania” Union and the Persistent Populism in Romania,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 68, no. 4 (2021): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1781540>.

¹² Tina Olteanu, Shaazka Beyerle, “The Romanian people versus corruption. The Paradoxical Nexus of Protest and Adaptation,” *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 10, no. 3 (2018): 805, <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v10i3p797>.

repoliticisation of the Romanian societal debate. The author argues that the abandonment of a more radical agenda of systemic change led to a much narrower focus on the corrupt practices of the ruling parties.¹³

Academic research has been abundant concerning the conceptualisation of protest movements in France. The first contemporary movements in France must be considered in the context of European anti-austerity movements after the global financial crisis. In that aspect, the research of Cristina Flesher Fominaya has been the most consistent in explaining the interpretative frameworks of the collective identities of these movements on the European continent – in her research articles¹⁴ or collective books on European social movements.¹⁵

The chapter on the conceptualisation of the *Gilets jaunes* (the Yellow Vests movement in France) relies heavily on the research of Winnie Lem. In “Notes on militant populism in Contemporary France: contextualizing the *gilets jaunes*”, he offers objective insights into the movement, focusing on historical antecedents, the representative capacity of the movement and their objectives.¹⁶ Gérard Noiriel’s book *Les Gilets jaunes à la lumière de l’histoire* has been instrumental in understanding the movement on a deeper level, its place in French history and crisis of representative democracy.¹⁷

Patrick Chamorel dives deep into the relationship between President Macron and the Yellow Vests. He explains precisely the concept of “deep France” – the social injustice and high taxes that drive them to the far-right of Marine Le Pen. A probe into the polarised ideological cleavage has been the leading framework upon which the French movement chapters have been built.¹⁸

¹³ Victoria Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées des protestations roumaines. Bonne gouvernance et antisystème,” *Synergies Roumanie* 14 (2019): 127-128, <http://www.gerflint.fr/Base/Roumanie14/stoiciu.pdf>.

¹⁴ Cristina Flesher Fominaya, “European anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests in the wake of the global financial crisis,” *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 1 (2017): 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1256193>.

¹⁵ Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Ramon Feenstra, *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary European Social Movements: Protest in Turbulent Times*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020): 238.

¹⁶ Winnie Lem, “Notes on militant populism in contemporary France: contextualizing the *gilets jaunes*,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 44, no. 4 (2020): 399-400, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F1354068817741287>.

¹⁷ Gérard Noiriel, *Les Gilets jaunes à la lumière de l’histoire* (La Tour d’Aigues: Le Monde/Éditions de l’Aube, 2019).

¹⁸ Patrick Chamorel, “Macron versus the Yellow Vests,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 48-61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0068>.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The new social movement theories and the theory of political culture have gained significant attention in social sciences. The new social movement theories emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and they focus on the collective action of social movements that are not primarily concerned with economic issues but rather with social, cultural, and political issues. On the other hand, the theory of political culture emphasizes the role of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes in shaping political behaviour and decision-making. This chapter will discuss these theories' key concepts and principles and how they relate to the research topic and hypothesis. Both of these theories provide a framework for understanding how social and political movements develop, how they shape public opinion and political behaviour, and how they can lead to changes in political outcomes.

1.2.1 Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory is a theoretical framework that posits that social movements emerge when individuals, groups, or organizations come together around a shared grievance and attempt to bring about change through collective action. It consists of several actors (individuals, informal groups or organisations) who elaborate a shared definition of themselves as part of the same side in a social conflict, doing so through joint action and communication-based shared collective identity.¹⁹

The theory of social movements has constantly been evolving, with various approaches and sub-theories being developed. The 'Collective Behaviour' perspective, initially proposed by Turner and Killian, defines social movements as a peculiar kind of collective behaviour, contrasting to 'organizational' and 'institutional' behaviour. Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) focuses more on the role of organizational factors within social movements. Zald and McCarthy defined social movements as opinions and beliefs representing preferences for changing some elements of a society's social structure and reward distribution.²⁰

The 'Political Process Theory' (PPT), proposed by Tilly, relates the emergence of social movements to a broader 'political process,' where excluded interests try to access the established

¹⁹ Mario Diani, "The concept of social movement," *The Sociological review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1992.tb02943.x>

²⁰ Idem, 5.

polity.²¹ In contrast to McCarthy and Zald, Tilly emphasises the dynamics determining social unrest and its characteristics rather than social movements as specifically organised actors. His definition of social movements can be summarised as a challenge implying a shared identity among participants:

A social movement is sustained series of interactions between national power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly-visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.²²

Political process theory outlines five important components determining whether a social movement will succeed. These components include political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles, and contentious repertoires.²³

Political opportunities are crucial because they provide opportunities for change within the existing political system. These opportunities arise when there is a crisis of legitimacy within the system by “changing the degree of power inequality between the challenging group and the target.”²⁴ Mobilizing structures are existing organizations that help mobilize and organize the movement. Movement leaders use framing processes to persuade others of the need for change and how to achieve it, defined as “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action”. Protest cycles are prolonged periods that help strengthen the movement and raise awareness of its issues. Finally, contentious repertoires refer to the means the movement uses to make claims, such as strikes, demonstrations, and petitions.

PPT suggests that if all of these components are present, a social movement can successfully bring the desired changes within the political system. As Caren puts it, “In addition to explaining the rise and decline of social movements, they are also used to explain the form that protest takes and the outcomes that result.”²⁵

²¹ Diani, “The concept of social movement,” 5.

²² Tilly, “Social movements,” 12.

²³ Neal Caren, “Political Process Theory,” *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2007): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosp041>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Idem, 3.

RMT and the PPT approach analyse the question of 'how' the social movements emerge rather than 'why' they choose to do so.²⁶ The study of social movements, resistance, and collective action has evolved. In the 1960s, research was primarily influenced by Marxist theories that were macro-sociological. These theories included resource mobilization, interaction with the state, and focusing on the historical stage of a programmed or post-industrial society and its characteristic conflict. However, by the start of the new millennium, these paradigms had reached their limits due to historical changes and the partiality of the approaches' central metaphors.²⁷

The phrase "new social movements" encompasses various collective actions believed to have replaced the old social movement centred around the proletarian revolution linked with classical Marxism.²⁸ New social movement theory emerged in response to the inadequacies of classical Marxism for analysing collective action. Its theorists criticize classical Marxism for reductionism that prevents it from fully understanding modern forms of collective action: a) economic reductionism, which assumes that all politically relevant social action arises from the fundamental economic logic of capitalist production, while other social logics have little impact; b) class reductionism, which assumes that the essential social actors are defined by their class relationships in the process of production and that all other social identities are secondary to this in shaping collective actors.²⁹

New social movement theory draws on continental European social theory and political philosophy traditions and looks to other logics of action based on politics, ideology, and culture as the root of much collective action. It also emphasizes the socially constructed nature of grievances and ideology and the importance of other sources of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as the definers of collective identity.³⁰

As described by Buechler in his overview of social movement concepts, according to Alain Touraine, as traditional guarantees of social order disappear, society is seen as the result of conscious social action.³¹ This is made possible by social actors' ability to create knowledge and

²⁶ Tilly, "Social movements," 12.

²⁷ Jasper, "Social Movement Theory Today," 965.

²⁸ Steven M. Buechler, "New Social Movement Theories," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1995): 442, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4120774>.

²⁹ *Idem*, 441-442.

³⁰ *Idem*, 444.

³¹ *Ibid*.

tools to intervene in their functioning, which Touraine calls historicity: “The social movement is the organised collective behaviour of a class actor struggling against his class adversary for the social control of historicity in a concrete community.”³² In a post-industrial society, control of historicity is a battleground for classes defined by relations of domination, which take the form of social movements. The major social classes in post-industrial society are consumers/clients and managers/technocrats, and culture is the primary field of conflict. The struggle is over who will control society's growing ability to manage itself. Historicity consists of meaning which is a rule-setter in a given society.³³ As Buechler summarises, “the control of historicity is the object of an ongoing struggle between classes defined by relations of domination, which take the form of social movements as they enter this struggle.”³⁴

Jurgen Habermas proposes a theory of modern social structure that distinguishes between a politico-economic system governed by power and money and a lifeworld governed by normative consensus.³⁵ The system is driven by instrumental logic and detaches media like money and power from responsibility and accountability, while the lifeworld is driven by communicative rationality that requires norms to be justifiable through discussion and debate.³⁶ Habermas argues that modern society's colonization results in the intrusion of system imperatives and logic into the lifeworld. New social movements arise at the seams between the system and the lifeworld. Habermas suggests that they have a defensive character that aims to sustain the role of normative consensus rooted in communicative rationality. These movements engage in conflicts that are less about material reproduction and more about cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization.³⁷ However, Habermas offers little evidence that new social movements can contribute to broader social transformation.³⁸

Melucci's approach to social movements emphasizes that they are not identical to visible political conflicts, as they can be disengaged but still an active part of cultural production.³⁹ Social movements have become crucial in expressing opposing tendencies and modalities in a society where information and signs shape our lives. New social movements focus on personal,

³² Diani, “The concept of social movement,” 5.

³³ Buechler, “New Social Movement Theories,” 444-445.

³⁴ *Idem*, 444.

³⁵ *Idem*, 445.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Idem*, 445-446.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Diani, “The concept of social movement,” 5.

spiritual, and expressive aspects of modern life and reject the instrumental rationality of the dominant society. Melucci highlights the significance of unoccupied areas between political authority and daily existence, where individuals can solidify their shared identities through representation and active involvement.⁴⁰ He suggests that the speed of transformations, the multiplicity of affiliations, and the profusion of information undermine conventional sources of identity, leading to a sense of displacement, which he calls “homelessness” of personal identity.⁴¹ This means people's propensity to become involved in collective action is tied to their capacity to define an identity. The social construction of collective identity is a significant prerequisite and accomplishment of new social movements. Melucci believes new social movements should be seen as ongoing social constructions rather than unitary empirical objects or historical personages acting on a stage. He proposes that a significant portion of group actions are situated within concealed networks, which sometimes come together to form self-referential organizations for resistance. However, these organizations tend to be short-lived. Thus, it may be more precise to refer to movement networks or zones to account for the fleeting character of current mobilization.⁴²

According to Diani, the definitions of social movement dynamics can be synthesised as several aspects of social movement's dynamics: networks of informal interaction, shared beliefs and solidarity, collective action on conflictual issues, and action that displays mainly outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life.⁴³

Russell J. Dalton, Manfred Kuechler, and Wilhelm Burklin assert that modern social movements push for a new social framework that challenges the prevalent goal system of Western societies, promoting post-materialist, anti-growth, libertarian, and populist principles. Moreover, these movements adopt a political approach that deliberately shuns or opposes institutionalized politics and established political parties, setting them apart from other movements.⁴⁴

The discussion surrounding these movements encompasses multiple perspectives. According to Habermasian strands, these movements are defensive responses to the influence of states and

⁴⁰ Buechler, “New Social Movement Theories,” 446.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Diani, “The concept of social movement,” 7.

⁴⁴ Buechler, “New Social Movement Theories,” 448.

markets in modern society.⁴⁵ Another viewpoint examines whether these movements are predominantly political or cultural. Some suggest that group identities fuel the collective action centred around status, race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality, rather than class. Conversely, others claim that the new social movements are rooted in the middle class, contrasting the working-class origins of the old social movements. Despite these divergent perspectives, the prevailing viewpoint in the literature on new social movements is that they are based on social class.⁴⁶ According to the new social movement literature, the general approach asserts that these movements have a social class foundation characterized as middle-class, as opposed to the working-class foundation of earlier social movements.⁴⁷

Social movement scholars have criticized the dominant political process approach to social movements, which focuses on defining and identifying political opportunity and marginalizes some social movements while ignoring the relationship between culture, identity, and structure in movements.⁴⁸ Instead, Armstrong and Bernstein proposed a new approach called the multi-institutional politics approach to social movements, which presents an alternative approach to domination organized around multiple sources of power that are simultaneously material and symbolic.⁴⁹ This approach has implications for studying social movements, including the object of study, who participates, and what strategies and goals are intelligible. The theory of political process presupposes that elites hold the reins of society, while subordinate groups can exert some influence based on “location in various politico-economic structures,”⁵⁰ which is, in their view, a modified Marxist view.⁵¹ However, multi-institutional politics argues that society comprises multiple and often contradictory institutions, and power is distributed in ways beyond the state.⁵² Thus, all collective challenges to constituted authority are political.⁵³ Armstrong and Bernstein argue that the multi-institutional politics approach offers theoretical

⁴⁵ Buechler, “New Social Movement Theories,” 449.

⁴⁶ Idem, 454.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Mary Bernstein, “Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movement,” *Sociological Theory* 26, no. 1 (2008): 75-86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00319.x>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 37, <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/27489/files/4300579/download?wrap=1>.

⁵¹ Armstrong, Bernstein, “Culture, Power, and Institutions,” 75.

⁵² Idem, 87.

⁵³ Ibid.

tools to investigate the shifting nature of domination in governmental and nongovernmental institutions and collective efforts that arise in response to different types of domination.⁵⁴

Overall, the theory of social movements, particularly the theory of new social movements, provides a framework for understanding the emergence of collective action and the factors that drive it. This theory suggests that social movements emerge when people unite around a shared grievance and attempt to bring about change through collective action. By comparing the grievances that motivate anti-establishment movements in France and Romania and how they attempt to bring about change while examining their relationship to populism, we gain insights into the dynamics of social movements in different contexts and adequately test the hypothesis.

1.2.2 Theory of Political Culture

The theory of political culture suggests that the attitudes and values of society towards politics can influence the success of social movements. While researchers are widely debating the theory and its scientific standing,⁵⁵ The effectiveness of the theory lies in its ability to explain how culture mediates the connection between citizens and the functioning of the polity structure, organization, and operation.⁵⁶ Additional research is often influenced by the concept of political culture, even if the term is not explicitly used - e.g. Ronald Inglehart's research on "postmaterialism" as an example of empirical investigation into "values" or Putnam's study of social capital.⁵⁷

Initial political culture theory was established through the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. The theory focuses on the relationship between individuals as citizens and the state as an open polity.⁵⁸ Their research identified three pure types of political culture: parochial, subject, and participant. In a parochial political culture, citizens have little awareness of the central government, while in a subject political culture, citizens see themselves as subjects of the government rather than participants in the political process.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Armstrong, Bernstein, "Culture, Power, and Institutions," 82.

⁵⁵ Stephen Welch, *The Theory of Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199553334.001.0001>.

⁵⁶ Camelia Florela Voinea, Martin Neumann, "Political culture: a theory in search for methodology. An editorial," *Quality & Quantity* 54 (2020): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00942-1>.

⁵⁷ Welch, *The Theory of Political Culture*, 2.

⁵⁸ Florela Voinea, Martin Neumann, "Political culture," 336-337.

⁵⁹ Jürgen R. Winkler, "political culture," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified November 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-culture>.

The concept of civic culture revolves around political participation and political protest, which can take various forms, such as strikes, uprisings, boycotts, or demonstrations. However, several paradoxes are related to the concept of an active society. For instance, some argue that excessive mobilization and dissent can be counterproductive and lead to the erosion of the democratic process.⁶⁰ Additionally, while collective action can benefit a group or organization, individual participants may not always be rational from a rational choice perspective. Some argue that participation is often driven by social control, normative obligations, and the rewards that can be obtained through collective action.⁶¹

Political opportunity structure theory explains the state's role and political strategies in creating opportunities for political participation, but it does not account for differences in participation within similar political systems or societies. This is why social variables such as age, education, gender, and socio-economic status are considered. However, political competence remains an elitist concept that keeps democracy limited to a select group.⁶²

On the other hand, a participant's political culture involves citizens who believe they can contribute to the system and are affected by it.⁶³ According to Voinea and Neumann, the stability of democracy is greatest in societies where there is a combination of subject and parochial attitudes that counterbalance a predominantly participant culture. This mixture of attitudes is known as a civic culture.⁶⁴

The traditional theory of political culture has established a framework for understanding the relationship between individuals and the state. Political culture theory has been applied to two main areas of study: national identity and the nation-state, and the phenomena of democracy, including elections, political leadership, partisanship, and political socialization.⁶⁵ The theory helps explain citizens' role in governance, power, and state dynamics through their attitudes—where the concept of "attitude" encompasses a broad range of subjective orientations, such as sentiments, emotions, values, beliefs, cognitions, knowledge, and behavioural aspects.⁶⁶ In

⁶⁰ Leonardo Morlino, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Bertrand Badie, *Political Science: A Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2017): 162, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714715>.

⁶¹ Morlino, Berg-Schlosser, Badie, *Political Science*, 163.

⁶² Idem, 164.

⁶³ Winkler, "political culture."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Florela Voinea, Neumann, "Political culture," 340.

⁶⁶ Idem, 341.

summary, political culture theory employs cultural means to explain governance dynamics by analysing individual attitudes.⁶⁷

Political culture theory, grounded in Parsonian and Durkheimian traditions, focuses on subjective orientations and attitudes of individuals and masses towards the state. However, a newer adaptation of the theory emphasises values as the driving force behind the formation and change of attitudes, elevating the theory to a more philosophical level.⁶⁸ This adaptation suggests that values, attitudes, and actions play a crucial role in the human development sequence of democracy. While this newer approach shares some of the same goals as the classic political culture theory, such as understanding how democracy functions and how to maintain its stability and efficiency, it differs in that it seeks to explain the underlying mechanisms and processes that shape the dynamics between the citizenry and the democratic polity.⁶⁹

Another approach Florela Voinea and Neumann described is a cultural theory of politics that builds on the structuralist foundation of Douglas' Cultural Theory (CT).⁷⁰ This theory investigates individual actors' rationality, decision-making ability, and relationships with institutions by merging culture, institutions, and political science. Its methodology examines the individual (political culture) and the macro (institutions) levels in cross-cultural settings.⁷¹ This theory adds to the classic political culture theory by connecting it to political power and public policy and explaining subtle governance systems through cultural mechanisms.⁷²

This theory suggests that political culture, or the attitudes and values of society towards politics, can shape the success of social movements. Comparing the political cultures of France and Romania and how they shape the anti-establishment movements in each country provides insights into why these movements have developed and how they may evolve in the future.

To conclude, new social movement theories are helpful in order to understand how the anti-establishment sentiment has emerged and evolved in different regional contexts and progressed into various protest movements. These theories also provide insights into how these movements challenge traditional power structures and promote social and cultural changes.

⁶⁷ Florela Voinea, Neumann, "Political culture," 341.

⁶⁸ *Idem*, 342.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Idem*, 343.

Similarly, the theory of political culture can help us understand how common beliefs and values influence political behaviour and decision-making, including support for anti-establishment movements and populist political agendas. This theory can also shed light on how political cultures vary across different regional contexts and how this influences anti-establishment movements' success and consequences/outcomes.

Through comparative research methods, these theories are applied in order to analyse and compare the anti-establishment movements in different countries and regions, exploring the similarities and differences in their mechanisms and consequences. This may be helpful for a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the success and consequences of these movements and provide insights into how they can be leveraged for achieving political change.

1.3 Methodology

Although the thesis topic discusses a crucial sociological phenomenon of social movements, the methodology is primarily embedded in a political science framework of comparative politics. The International Encyclopedia of Political Science defines comparative politics as “the study of domestic politics within states.”⁷³ As a subfield of political science, comparative politics centres itself around methodologies to compare within or across countries. With its main theories focused on the institutionalist approach, comparative politics comprehensively compares political experiences, behaviour, processes and institutions. The thesis uses comparative methods to analyse the anti-establishment movements and their political outcomes in Romania and France

Comparative methods are one of the most commonly used in political science as they involve the analysis of relationships between variables across countries or systems.⁷⁴ This framework allows for a broad examination of political systems across countries. By examining the political systems in France and Romania, we can identify and compare the characteristics of their political institutions, political actors and the relationship between them, and how they interact with anti-establishment movements. By comparing two different cases, we can identify points of similarity. This involves examining the historical, political, and social contexts in which the

⁷³“Comparative Politics” in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* ed. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Leonardo Morlino (SAGE Publications Inc., 2011): 343, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412994163>.

⁷⁴ Jay Steinmets, *Politics, Power, and Purpose: An Orientation to Political Science* (Hays: Fort Hays State University, 2021): 174, <https://fhsu.pressbooks.pub/orientationpolisci/chapter/chapter-9-public-law-and-pre-law-training/#:~:text=The%20method%20involves%20analyzing%20the,institution%2C%20behavior%2C%20or%20policy>.

movements emerged, the factors that drove their mobilisation, the tactics and strategies used, the actors involved, the outcomes achieved, and the impact on the broader political landscape.

According to the definition of Sonja Drobnič, “comparative research commonly involves the description and explanation of similarities and differences of conditions or outcomes among large-scale social units, usually regions, nations, societies, and cultures.”⁷⁵ This thesis is based upon a mixture of qualitative methods to provide a comparative analysis of contemporary social movements in France and Romania and the impact of populism on the political gains and political capital of these movements. Identifying similarities and differences between the anti-establishment movements in Romania and France allows for identifying patterns and trends across different movements.

The choice of Romania and France as case studies for comparative analysis is strategic. Romania and France have different historical backgrounds, which may have influenced the development of anti-establishment movements in each country. Romania was a totalitarian communist regime until 1989, followed by a transition period marked by economic instability and corruption, influencing the notion of populism there. On the other hand, France has a long history of democratic governance and social movements but has recently faced challenges related to globalization and the rise of far-right populism.

Romania and France have different political cultures, which may affect the mechanism of anti-establishment movements, their perception and their support. Romania has a more recent history of democratic governance and has struggled with corruption and low levels of trust in government institutions. On the other hand, France has a strong tradition of democratic participation and a robust civil society but has also faced challenges related to political polarization and disillusionment with mainstream politics.

Last but not least, populism plays a crucial variable in the hypothesis. As shown further, Romania and France have different levels of populism in their political systems. Romania has seen the rise of so-called centrist populism (anti-corruption reformist populism) and conservationist far-right parties in recent years, while France has experienced a surge of populist sentiment in the wake of economic and social challenges.

⁷⁵ Sonja Drobnič, “Comparative Analysis,” in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, ed. Alex C. Michalos (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_492.

Comparing anti-establishment movements in these countries permits identifying the unique factors that contribute to their success or failure in each context and drawing broader conclusions about the role of political culture, historical context, and populism in shaping these movements. Ultimately, the choice of Romania and France allows for a rich and nuanced analysis of anti-establishment movements in different contexts, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of protest movements and their impact on politics and society.

The analysis is structured based on several key concepts and variables identified in order to test the hypothesis:

- Definition of anti-establishment movements,
- Political culture,
- Populism,
- Historical context,
- Movement mechanisms,
- Political capital,
- Movement outcomes.

The first step is to identify anti-establishment movements, which define how anti-establishment movements are described in Romania and France based on academic research and discourse analysis of sources generated by protesters' self-identification. This study will reveal parallels and contrasts among movements and confirm that they are indeed anti-establishment.

Political culture and populist levels in the two countries are compared to identify parallels and contrasts and to examine the relationship between political culture, populism, and anti-establishment attitude in each country. This is accomplished through qualitative research, in which a qualitative discourse analysis of materials (both textual and visual) explores the definition of anti-establishment movements in Romania and France and how this definition relates to the movements' processes and mechanisms.

This involves adopting a conceptual history perspective that identifies key themes and concepts that define the movements, such as political culture, populism, and anti-establishment sentiment, and analyses how these themes are articulated and mobilized within the movements. It is crucial to develop a diachronic approach that considers the historical context in which anti-

establishment movements emerged in Romania and France and how this context influenced the mechanisms of the movements.

The political outcomes and success of their revendications are analysed through content and qualitative research, focusing on how the movements used their political capital and translated themselves into a coherent political force.

The movements are then compared across the two countries to identify similarities and differences. The relationship between the political capital and movement outcomes in each country is analysed to answer the hypothesis that populism in various regional contexts influences the outcomes of anti-establishment movements. The electoral trajectories of political parties born from these protest movements will stand in the foreground. This part of the research will rely on analyses of national party systems and political cleavages, as well as the quantitative examination of election results

Comparative analysis will conclude the similarities and differences between anti-establishment movements in Romania and France and the factors contributing to their success or failure. Finally, the thesis will discuss the implications for understanding political culture, populism, and anti-establishment sentiment in these countries. Therefore, our methodological approach is complex and multi-layered, building on a variety of methods such as qualitative discourse analysis, political conceptual history, political sociology and party system analysis, all embedded into an overarching comparative framework.

2 Anti-establishment in Romania and France

In 2017-18, Romania experienced some of the most massive protests in its post-communist history. Although the mass protests marked the beginning of the end of all regimes behind the Iron Curtain, the first decade of Romania's democratic transition was characterised by a period of "silence". The efforts of civil society, decimated by the dictatorial regime, were focused mainly on economic restructuring⁷⁶ and eventual accession to the European Union. According to Ondřej Císař, the post-1989 period is marked by liberal consensus. It only started to change after they acceded to the EU, when the "prevailing narrative of returning to Europe, meaning the West, with its market economy, constitutionalism, and democratic governance", started to wane.⁷⁷ The "integration magnet", which created a generally pro-European liberal context, started losing its force once the accession was achieved, divisive lines were revealed, and the milieu became more conservative.⁷⁸

Thus, the participation and level of protests fluctuated until 2012, when the global financial crisis hit. The austerity measures and their impact on ordinary citizens led to a resurgence of protests with greater intensity. In 2017, the Yellow Vest protests emerged in France. Responding to the so-called "Penelopegate"⁷⁹ and inspired by the Romanian demonstrations against corruption,⁸⁰ hundreds of protesters gathered in Place de la République in Paris on the 19th of February. Another series of protests began the same year during the presidential election campaign.⁸¹ They became more prominent after the election of Emmanuel Macron as President when thousands took to the streets to protest against his reform agenda.⁸²

⁷⁶ Remus Crețan, Thomas O'Brien, "Corruption and conflagration: (in)justice and protest in Bucharest after the *Colectiv* fire," *Urban Geography* 41, no.3 (2019): 372, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2019.1664252>.

⁷⁷ Ondřej Císař, "Social movement diffusion in Easter Europe," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary European Social Movements: Protest in Turbulent Times*, ed. Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Ramon Feenstra (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020): 238.

⁷⁸ Idem, 238-240.

⁷⁹ "Paris : des centaines de manifestants «contre la corruption des élus," *Le Parisien*, 19. února 2017, <https://www.leparisien.fr/paris-75/paris-des-centaines-de-manifestants-contre-la-corruption-des-elus-19-02-2017-6693849.php>.

⁸⁰ Raluca Abăseacă, Geoffrey Pleyers, "The reconfiguration of social movements in post-2011 Romania," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1555030>.

⁸¹ Alicia Paulet, "«Ni Le Pen, ni Macron»: lycéens et étudiants parisiens crient leur colère dans la rue," *Le Figaro*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/2017/04/27/35003-20170427ARTFIG00279-ni-le-pen-ni-macron-lyceens-et-etudiants-parisiens-crient-leur-colere-dans-la-rue.php>.

⁸² "Macron's labour reforms spark huge demonstration in Paris," *BBC*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41372844>.

Although the two protests have much in common - from their initial motivation to their culmination simultaneously - they emerge in different contexts and protest cultures. They are characterised by the emergence of anti-establishment movements that dominate these protests. Interestingly, these movements have defined their establishment in very different ways - in France, anti-establishment is directed against the neoliberal, ruling, global elites embodied by President Emmanuel Macron, without a precise political orientation. In Romania, the anti-establishment seems more directed against left-wing politicians of the government of the successor of the Romanian Communist Party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD).

2.1 “Anti-establishment” and populism: relationship, definitions

The concept of populism is ambiguous and complex to anchor. To describe the decline of political parties worldwide, many resorts to terms such as “anti-politics” or populism. These terms are conceptually blurry to grasp public discontent and its manifestations fully.⁸³ The most popular of them, populism, has various definitions, often regionally-specific.⁸⁴ Populism is “a political or economic philosophy, rhetorical style, principle, mentality, or pathology”.⁸⁵ Given the overuse and symbolic overload of the term populism, it is helpful to examine it in specific contexts, particularly in the context of Western liberal democracy.

One of the most used definitions of populism is that of Cas Mudde. According to Mudde, populism is not only a political style of governance but, more importantly, an ideology:

Populism is understood as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “*the pure people*” versus “*the corrupt elite*,” arguing that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people.⁸⁶

Populism, by its narrow focus, connects to much broader political and ideological concepts such as nationalism or socialism.⁸⁷ Populism is based on the opposition of two groups, one of which is the ruling group. Vivien Schmidt defines populism as the “discursive construction of discontent”, using the “us” vs “them” divide to challenge the status quo.⁸⁸ As she specifies,

⁸³ Robert R. Barr, “Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics,” *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 29, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1354068808097890>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 49.

⁸⁶ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23.

⁸⁷ Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 50.

⁸⁸ Vivien Schmidt, “The discursive construction of discontent: varieties of populist anti-system ideas and discursive interactions in Europe,” *Journal of European integration* 44, no. 2 (2022): 165-166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2022.2032019>.

while definitions are many, ranging from the attitude toward elites to governance and political ideology, discourse is the central defining trait:

Their discourse resonates not only because of the style of their discourse or even the psychology behind it. Their ‘messages’ appeal to peoples’ reasons for discontent – economic, social, or political – as much as to their emotions – anger, fear, anxiety. The appeal to emotions may build on issues of class, identity, or sovereignty. The reasons may be socio-economic, for those feeling ‘left behind’ by globalization and Europeanization; socio-cultural, for those worried about loss of status and the changing ‘faces’ of the nation; or political, for those wanting to ‘take back control’.⁸⁹

Kim Salomon, who researched anti-establishment behaviour in the 1980s, argues that popular movements direct their actions towards authorities and politicians who can understand the movement’s goals; quite often, however, these two sides conflict. The authorities represent a kind of ‘established society’, in opposition to which the movement is defined because it considers that traditional policies have ceased to work and, therefore, cannot solve the problems the movement is highlighting. The division in the conflict between the social movements and the establishment points to the competition between different value systems. One is an industrial society focused on production, efficiency, career advancement and power. The other is a post-materialist society, focused on values that oppose the so-called “*derailed* welfare system”,⁹⁰ i.e., values such as participation, solidarity, and the right to self-determination. Although Salomon admits that the definition of “post-material values” is unclear, the anti-establishment behaviour is critical of the value system of established authorities.

Robert Barr also builds his redefinition of populism on anti-establishment as opposition to the elite that holds power. The elite is vaguely defined because, in different contexts, the distinction between economic and political elites is not entirely clear - he points to populism in Latin America in the 1940s, which specifically targeted economic elites. At the same time, anti-elitism is directed mainly against politicians. Both groups have in common that ordinary citizens felt they had lost power.⁹¹ The solution the populists are offering is a replacement of those holding power so that the system better reflects the wishes and interests of ordinary people. The real reason, however, is usually not the lack of control in the hands of ordinary people but rather the differences that exist between them and the elite, which is the basis for the

⁸⁹ Schmidt, “The discursive construction of discontent,” 166.

⁹⁰ Kim Salomon, “The Peace Movement - An Anti-Establishment Movement,” *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 2 (1986): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002234338602300203>.

⁹¹ Barr, “Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics,” 31.

idea of an “us” vs “them” opposition – a concept picked up by other writers, such as Cas Mudde in particular. Diego Muro derives from this definition that the term populism has the connotation of a conflict between the “common people” and the “establishment” - the establishment, he argues, are traditional political parties, as well as elites in the broader sense (i.e. economic, cultural or media).⁹² He also notes that in the European context, populism is often divided into Western and Eastern populism, although the former communist bloc countries have similar dynamics.

Populism is often defined differently (based on whether it is a regime, movement, or style of governance) and regionally specific,⁹³ which complicates its use in research and often delegitimises the use of the term. Another critical division is between left-wing and right-wing populisms, where, he argues, the term is more often used in a right-wing context, even though the left is not immune to populism either.⁹⁴ The division between new establishment and anti-establishment is much stronger than the division between right and left because it allows for the conceptualisation of alliances on different sides of the political spectrum (e.g. the Italian coalition of Lega Nord and the Five Star Movement, or in the Greek case the alliance of the left-wing Syriza party and the right-wing conservative ANEL party). The situation on the European continent concentrates on a radical discourse that focuses on the conflicting logic of the “us” vs “them” divide.

Contemporary research on comparative politics lightly adapts the concept of polarisation. Radical leaders have become the source of the polarisation to which they eventually lead their constituencies. Polarisation does not occur as Sartori argued, i.e. on the right/left axis, but is issue-specific. This aligns with research on new political cleavages forming in Western democracies. Especially relevant in this case is Vincent Tiberj’s research, which focused on the approximation of far-right parties to left-wing voters in France. Tiberj argues that we live in the so-called “New Politics” era, which operates according to ideological currents and opinions. This does not mean, however, that the so-called “Old Politics” (mainly the socio-economic axis that defines the left/right division) do not play a role. The ideology is, however, much more present in voting than ever. The right-left divide is more responsive and inclusive of cultural

⁹² Diego Muro, “Let the people rule! Definitions and theories of populism,” *Populism in Europe: from symptom to alternative*, ed. Eckart Woertz, CIDOB Report No. 1 (January 2017): 10, https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob_report/n1_1/let_the_people_rule_definitions_and_theories_of_populism.

⁹³ Barr, “Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics,” 29.

⁹⁴ Muro, “Let the people rule!” 10-14.

themes and value-based discourse.⁹⁵ Newly emerging political forces are building their agendas on new issues that (in the specific example of Tiberj's research) the French voters are asking for (e.g. environmental issues, migration, LGBT rights, women's rights).⁹⁶

Polarisation is expressed as distance - the distance between voters and elites.⁹⁷ Polarisation is the basis of populism, which transforms a question of opinion into a power struggle, which only deepens polarisation. Chantal Mouffe's agonistic approach to politics or democracy presupposes an antagonism inherent in the plurality of values and natural to human nature. Politics, however, should be a collection of tools, discourses and institutions that create consensus and work with this natural antagonism to achieve coexistence in an otherwise naturally antagonistic environment. Politics, in this conception, aims to create unity in a conflicted context. There will always be a group of 'us' that is defined by the existence of a 'them'. However, democracy seeks ways to maintain a functioning pluralism. It transforms antagonism - a struggle between two opponents, into agonism - a struggle between opponents.⁹⁸ The issue of polarisation and populism is a vicious circle where polarisation leads to the emergence of a populist leadership that leads its constituency more deeply to polarisation. Once these voters radicalise, they legitimise populist leaders and their agenda. Populism thus represents a blueprint for a change in political representation, especially one more responsive to problems.⁹⁹

Populism, according to its definition, also represents a style of political representation that moves closer to society and distances itself from the "establishment" but at the same time rejects the idea of liberal-democratic representation. Populist discourse can be summed up by the phrase "*The people are good, and the elites are corrupt*", as a kind of populist mantra, based on the already established belief that "virtue resides in the simple people who are the majority

⁹⁵ Vincent Tiberj, "La politique des deux axes. Variables sociologiques, valeurs et votes en France (1988-2007)," *Revue française de science politique* 62, no. 1 (2012): 71-74, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-science-politique-2012-1-page-71.htm>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Juan Russo, "Polarization, Radicalization, and Populism: Definitions and Hypotheses," *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 48 (March 2021): 9-10, <https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.48.1>.

⁹⁸ James Martin, *Chantal Mouffe: hegemony, radical democracy, and the political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 201.

⁹⁹ Russo, "Polarisation, Radicalisation, and Populism," 11.

and in their traditions.”¹⁰⁰ The populist parties build on the conflict between the “pure society” and the “corrupt elite,” styling themselves as the only true defenders of their interests.¹⁰¹

2.1.1 Populism in regional contexts: West/East divide and centrist populism of anti-establishment reform parties

According to Vivien Schmidt, populism is “grounded in national politics and polities and therefore draws on context-dependent concerns while being shaped by context-specific institutions, even though there are certainly significant supranational spillovers and transnational influences.”¹⁰² As far as Western populism is concerned, the researchers point to the universality of populism across the left/right divide in politics. Populism manifests itself on all the extremities – equally left and right, even the centre- using issues from both ends of the spectrum.¹⁰³ Although Western Europe is considered much more susceptible to right-wing populist extremism, a 2017 study by Fernández-García and Luengo finds that anti-establishment in Southern European countries comes mainly from parties of the radical left (Podemos, Syriza, Sinn Féin, Five Star Movement). The study also confirms the claim that northern Europe is somewhat threatened by the extreme right (National Front, FPÖ, AfD).

As Florian Hartleb warns:

The classical left-right dichotomy in politics loses much of its relevance in the framework of anti-establishment protest politics. The recent well-organised wave of street protests has involved parties from across the spectrum: from the radical leftist Occupy movement and the Spanish Outraged (Indignados) to the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, Pegida) in Germany.¹⁰⁴

After 2000, not only the number of left-wing protest parties (i.e., the Five Star Movement in Italy, Die Linke in Germany) but also the number of anti-establishment parties in general (both in the established Western democracies and in the “new” democracies of Central and Eastern

¹⁰⁰ Russo, “Polarization, Radicalization, and Populism,” 15.

¹⁰¹ Belén Fernández-García, Óscar Luengo, “Populist Parties in Western Europe. An analysis of the three core elements of populism,” *Communication & Society* 31, no. 3 (2018): 58, <https://dadun.unav.edu/handle/10171/55767>.

¹⁰² Schmidt, “The discursive construction of discontent,” 166.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Hartleb, “Here to stay,” 40.

Europe¹⁰⁵) is increasing. Nevertheless, research on anti-establishmentism still focuses very narrowly on right-wing populism.¹⁰⁶

Finally, Cas Mudde's definition of populism, also widely used here, comes from a bibliography that exclusively examines right-wing populism; some academics claim that radical right-wing populism is only a particular type of populism.¹⁰⁷ Mudde's separation into two antagonistic groups is necessary because right-wing populists often turn to nationalism and xenophobic attitudes¹⁰⁸, which will be important in exploring populism in different regional contexts.

While Eurosceptic parties are not by definition populist, the current wave of populism in Europe is very often linked to Euroscepticism,¹⁰⁹ or so-called Eurorealism (considered to be a "soft Euroscepticism" – pragmatic anti-federalist Europe with a strong principle of subsidiarity, as proposed by the ECR in the European Parliament).¹¹⁰ Euroscepticism is also one of the main anti-elitist themes.¹¹¹ According to Kneuer, "Another intersection between populism and Euroscepticism that can be found is anti-elitism which is a core determinant of populism and also present in Eurosceptic parties."¹¹² This theme also presents a spectrum with differences - in the south of Europe, one can usually observe a tendency towards protests against austerity measures. In contrast, the North tends to gravitate towards anti-immigration policies.¹¹³ However, there is no single characteristic shared by all anti-establishment parties. Although it is possible to generalise and say that these parties attract a section of society that has lost out to globalisation, this is not necessarily the rule.

The Scandinavian countries serve as examples of countries where even a section of the middle class gravitates towards anti-establishmentism. However, the anti-establishment parties have benefited particularly from corruption scandals in Italy and the Czech Republic. Anti-establishment parties thrive in two-party dominated systems that depend on consensus because

¹⁰⁵ Hartleb, "Here to stay," 41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Carlos Meléndez, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Political identities: the missing link in the study of populism," *Party Politics* 25, no. 4 (2017): 521, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F1354068817741287>.

¹⁰⁸ Dragoman, "' Save Romania' Union," 304.

¹⁰⁹ Marianne Kneuer, "The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism: a comparative perspective in the light of the European crises," *Contemporary Social Science* 14, no. 1 (2019): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1426874>.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin Leruth, "Is 'Eurorealism' the new 'Euroscepticism'? Modern conservatism, the European Conservatives and Reformists and European integration," in *Euroscepticism As a Transnational and Pan-European Phenomenon : The Emergence of a New Sphere of Opposition* (Abingdon, Routledge: 2017): 56-60.

¹¹¹ Hartleb, "Here to stay," 42.

¹¹² Kneuer, "The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism," 27.

¹¹³ Hartleb, "Here to stay," 42.

they manage to break that consensus and polarise already established parties to their advantage.¹¹⁴ The primary doctrine of these parties seems to be offering an alternative to the established parties, representative democracy, the European Union or Western democratic values (as seen in parties like Syriza, Jobbik or Front National, where the alternative often means being tied to Russian President Vladimir Putin).¹¹⁵

In Western terms, populism is understood as a threat to, or a change in, an already existing political and social paradigm, quite often espousing radical ideologies. However, the first two decades of the post-communist transition marked the emergence of a new form of populism, particularly specific to Central and Eastern Europe. The so-called “*centrist*”¹¹⁶ populism channels its anti-establishment agenda into platforms that aim for greater transparency and accountability of governments, eclipsing the traditional radical agenda that tends to characterise populist parties. These are non-radical parties elected by an electorate disillusioned by traditional, established parties’ underperformance and moral failings.¹¹⁷

These “new” centrist populist parties, also called centrist anti-establishment parties (CAP),¹¹⁸ were not typically undemocratic, anti-capitalist or anti-Western. As Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause point out, the Central and Eastern European region “is also home to parties that adopt only some of the elements related to populism while leaving others behind, resulting in broad anti-establishment discourse in the region, which includes not only populism but also technocracy, clientelism and other modes of challenging the existing political elite”.¹¹⁹

According to Engler, “they are defined as a type of new party that uses anti-establishment rhetoric extensively – usually attacking the political elite for its purported corruption – but does so without representing the extreme positions of the radical right or the radical left”.¹²⁰ The label of centrist populism is owed to their ideological position in the political mainstream and emphasis on anti-establishment stances.¹²¹

These parties “combine mainstream ideology on economic and socio-cultural issues with fierce anti-establishment rhetoric and demands for political reform, transparency and new ways of

¹¹⁴ Hartleb, “Here to stay,” 42.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Idem, 52-54.

¹¹⁷ Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 51-53.

¹¹⁸ Engler, “Centrist anti-establishment parties,” 308.

¹¹⁹ Engler, Pytlas, Deegan-Krause, “Assessing the diversity,” 1311.

¹²⁰ Engler, “Centrist anti-establishment parties,” 308.

¹²¹ Ibid.

‘doing politics’”.¹²² Their anti-elitism is directed against the incumbent ruling elites in their local context. However, sometimes these parties formed part of these ruling elites¹²³ (e.g., Smer, Alliance of a new citizenry in Slovakia, Res Publica in Estonia, NDSV in Bulgaria or TOP09 in Czechia¹²⁴). As Peter Učeň notes:

Because of transition costs, notorious failures of parties to deliver on promises and policies, and unbridled favoritism and corruption, certain significant groups of voters became attracted to new actors promising an alternative way. Disillusioned with the traditional actors and their conduct, and feeling neglected and betrayed, voters faced a choice between resignation and protest. For those who believed the option of a mainstream protest vote was exhausted, an offer of the *homini nuovi* with their “new politics” came to be seen as a solution.¹²⁵

These parties are moderate populists because their ideology is mainly anti-establishment, blaming it for immoral behaviour and poor governance after the communist takeover.¹²⁶ They are often interested in completing the post-communist transition and aligning themselves with Western countries by raising living standards, ensuring a pro-Western political orientation, stopping radicalisation and fighting corruption - issues in which they believe the existing elites have not been active or successful enough.¹²⁷ According to Učeň, the political opportunities of these parties are defined by the mainstream parties. Anti-communist movements were replaced in the early 2000s by pragmatic liberals (in Slovenia and Latvia), national populists (in Slovakia and Croatia), or alternations between post-communist left and pro-reform right (in Romania, Poland, Lithuania, or Bulgaria).¹²⁸ Their voters, disenchanted with the cost and impact of the democratic transition, the political instability¹²⁹ and unfulfilled political promises of post-revolutionary parties, favouritism and corruption, have thus often faced the choice of either resigning from politics altogether or turning to alternative parties with a new agenda.

These variations in regional populism can be explained by different cultural and economic developments - e.g., the protests against austerity measures across Europe provoked by the rapid rise in unemployment and the decline in quality of life in Western Europe. The shock in post-

¹²² Seán Hanley, Allan Sikk, “Economy, corruption or floating voters? Explaining the breakthroughs of anti-establishment reform parties in eastern Europe,” *Party Politics* 22, no. 4 (2016): 522, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068814550438>.

¹²³ Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 52.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Idem*, 54.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Engler, Pytlas, Deegan-Krause, “Assessing the diversity,” 1311.

communist countries was not as significant, given their history and ongoing economic transformation.¹³⁰ Therefore, anti-establishment in the context of Central and Eastern Europe is not reserved for ideological extremes or one ideology, and according to Hartleb, it can be a trendsetter for Western Europe.¹³¹ An essential factor for this is the anti-communist profile of anti-establishment movements in Central and Eastern Europe: protest culture in the region was decisively shaped by the revolt against the Communist state, and opposition to the communist elites which had retained control through successor parties often fuelled a broader rejection of the cronyism and corruption of the political system.¹³² That created an ambivalence towards the West and its liberal democratic model: while nationalist tendencies exist, the West retained its aura as the ultimate source of anti-communist modernisation on both the economic and political levels. Support for liberal democracy, capitalism and Euro-Atlantic integration is not incompatible with a certain amount of radical anti-establishment sentiment in post-communist Europe.

Research on populism agrees that anti-establishment is a struggle against the ruling elite. By definition, it is not necessarily populist; however, definitions of populism are inextricably linked to it and built directly upon it. As Učeň and others note, regional context is essential, and populism “may or may not be accompanied by demagoguery, just as demagoguery may or may not be accompanied by populist argumentation”.¹³³ Engler, Pytlas and Deegan-Krause also note:

In Central and Eastern Europe, anti-establishment rhetoric can be found across the ideological spectrum (including the centre) and constitutes a predominant discursive building block of these actors’ ‘thin ideological’ supply. At the same time, anti-establishment claims are not necessarily linked to other key elements of populist discourse such as people-centrism or, most notably, the general will.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Engler, Pytlas, Deegan-Krause, “Assessing the diversity,” 1311.

¹³¹ Hartleb, “Here to stay,” 41.

¹³² Andrea Pirro, *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹³³ Učeň, “Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 54.

¹³⁴ Engler, Pytlas, Deegan-Krause, “Assessing the diversity,” 1313.

3 The contextualisation of protest movements in Romania and France after 2010

The second half of the 20th century is characterised by the transformation of social movements, which in the context of historical events (deindustrialisation, the end of the Cold War, globalisation) changed from workers' and trade union movements to global/alter-globalization movements which may also play a role in shaping anti-establishment sentiment. This chapter explores the similarities and differences in the protest movements in Romania and France in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. How were these movements conceptualized by scholars, activists, and the media? How do these conceptualizations shape our understanding of the protests themselves? Through an analysis of critical themes and debates, the chapter aims to shed light on the underlying dynamics of these protests, their significance for the broader political landscape, and the potential implications for future mobilizations.

3.1 Protest movements in Romania - 2010 - 2017

Romania has a long history of protests and social movements, dating back to the communist era when citizens took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the oppressive regime. The post-communist era also created a political mythology surrounding street protests as a symbol of Romanian democracy. The 1989 revolution, which saw the overthrow of communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, was primarily seen as a popular uprising led by brave citizens who risked their lives to demand freedom and democracy. This narrative was reinforced by the subsequent use of street protests as a political expression, with large demonstrations seen as a sign of a healthy and vibrant democracy.

Unlike other socialist countries (where the regime change went smoothly), the Romanian revolution happened in the form of a violent popular revolt, where the reformist wing of the Romanian Communist Party remained in power even from 1989 onwards.¹³⁵ Protests erupted in Romania's major cities and continued throughout 1990, despite Ion Iliescu's victory in the general elections on May 20. The government responded by organizing counter-demonstrations to assert its popular base, including the Jiu Valley miners' unions. The miners' violent actions included ransacking opposition party headquarters and newspapers, beginning with their

¹³⁵ Anemona Constantin, "Roumanie: des minériades à l'intégration européenne," in *Syndicats et dialogue social. Les modèles occidentaux à l'épreuve*, ed. Dominique Andolfatto, Sylvie Contrepois, (Brussels: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2016): 228.

intervention in Bucharest on January 29, 1990. This led to a cycle of miners' strikes, marked by massive material destruction and numerous casualties.¹³⁶

The increasing polarization of Romanian society also challenged the mythology of protest as a symbol of democracy in the post-communist period. Many protests were organized by political parties or interest groups rather than grassroots activists, leading to accusations of manipulation and cynicism. Moreover, the use of violence by some protesters and police repression further complicated the relationship between protests and democracy in Romania.

Romania's mass-scale early post-communist protest, known as the Mineriad, is engraved into the collective consciousness due to the extreme violence the mine workers called in by President Iliescu to repress the protest of students, professors and intellectuals. This brutal repression created a long-lasting trauma for protest movements.

Narrative of stolen revolution

Overall, the post-communist period in Romania was marked by a complex and evolving relationship between protests and democracy, with both positive and negative aspects. The mythology of street protests as a symbol of democracy coexisted with a more nuanced reality of political manipulation, social polarization, and violence. One of the most powerful narratives in the political mythology of protest movements is the narrative of the "stolen revolution",¹³⁷ referring to the idea that the revolution of 1989, which overthrew the communist regime, was betrayed by the political elites who came to power in its aftermath – namely President Iliescu. According to this narrative, the revolution was supposed to usher in a new era of democracy, freedom, and prosperity. However, instead, it was hijacked by former communists and secret police agents who maintained their grip on power.

The narrative of the stolen revolution fits into the broader context of disillusionment with the post-communist transition in Romania. The country suffered from corruption, poverty, and inequality despite adopting a new constitution and introducing market-oriented reforms. Many Romanians felt that the promises of the revolution had not been fulfilled and that the new

¹³⁶ Constantin, "Roumanie: des minériades," 229.

¹³⁷ Chuck Sudetic, "Evolution in Europe; Romanian Protesters Assert Revolution Has Been Stolen," *New York Times*, May 14, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/14/world/evolution-in-europe-romanian-protesters-assert-revolution-has-been-stolen.html>.

political elites were just as corrupt and authoritarian as the old ones, fuelling the metamorphosis from anti-communism to anti-establishment.

However, the post-communist period was marked by a shift in the focus of protests from anti-communist activism to demands for economic and political reforms. In the 1990s, Romania underwent a series of political and economic transformations, including adopting a new constitution and market-oriented reforms. However, these changes were accompanied by widespread corruption and poverty, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment among the population. As a result, protests became an essential means of expressing popular discontent and demanding change.

This disillusionment and betrayal fuelled protests in the 1990s and 2000s, often organized around demands for greater transparency, accountability, and democracy. The narrative of the stolen revolution provided a robust rhetorical framework for these protests, allowing activists to frame their demands as a continuation of the struggle for freedom and democracy that began in 1989. However, the narrative of the stolen revolution is controversial, and its accuracy is questionable. It oversimplifies the complex realities of the post-communist transition and ignores the achievements and challenges of the past three decades. Nevertheless, it remains a powerful symbol in Romanian politics and continues to shape how many Romanians view their country's political history and identity.

3.1.1 The 2012 protests against the reform of the health system

The first protests started in 2012 with the decision to cut state spending and privatise the Medical Emergency Intervention Service (Serviciul Mobil de Urgență, Reanimare și Descarcerare – SMURD), founded by the popular Health Minister Raed Arafat. Criticism of this decision moved President Băsescu to call for his resignation insultingly through a TV intervention, which was one of the igniters of discontent in Romanian society, which decided to protest against elitist arrogance and nepotism.¹³⁸ The protesters' main demands were Băsescu's resignation, a halt to privatisation and early elections. The result was the resignation of Prime Minister Emil Boc and the cancellation of a project aimed at reforming the Romanian health sector.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Olteanu, Shaazka Beyerle, "The Romanian people versus corruption." 805.

¹³⁹ Claudia E. Ionaș, "The rise of social movements in Romania," *Revista de Științe Politice* 66 (2020): 56, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1055489>.

President Băseșcu essentially lost his political power. PSD took advantage of the situation and brokered a deal with PNL to form a coalition, winning the local and parliamentary elections.¹⁴⁰

3.1.2 Roșia Montana (2013) – the revolution of our generation

The history of the controversial Roșia Montana mining project begins in 1995 with a plan to mine gold in the village of Roșia Montana in Transylvania.¹⁴¹ The Romanian government issued a licence to the Canadian company Gabriel Resources in 1999 in an opaque procedure that raised doubts, especially concerning selecting a company with no mining experience.¹⁴² The project was supposed to produce 300 tonnes of gold over 16 years, destroying the tops of four mountains and using highly-toxic cyanide for mining.¹⁴³ In the following months, the plan expanded in the extent of the mining area and included the extraction of silver. Residents were then particularly concerned about cyanide mining, which, although relatively cheap, is highly toxic with potential ecological impacts on the region's landscape. Hungary also expressed concern, having a fresh experience of cyanide poisoning from a Romanian mine in Baia Mare, which caused an environmental disaster on the Tisza River in Hungary in 2000.¹⁴⁴

The main actors in the protests were the local organisation Alburnus Maior (AM), a non-profit organisation that opposed mining, against RMGC (a local subsidiary of the mining company). The project has been running since 1995, mainly with the support of the ruling garrisons. Except for the nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), all political parties have adopted a positive view of the RMGC project and its impacts. Support for the project can be explained firstly by the homogenisation of the government agenda, with the ruling parties preferring to introduce market mechanisms - and the project offering hundreds of jobs. Second, since the early 1990s, the predatory business environment led to their subsequent exploitation of the state, further facilitated and reproduced by the allocation of public resources and the perception that the state is a tool for robbing the many and enriching the few.

¹⁴⁰ Kiss, Székely, "Populism on the Semi-Periphery," 517.

¹⁴¹ Sorina Soare, Claudiu D. Tufiş, "Roșia Montană, the revolution of our generation': from environmental to total activism," *European Politics and Society* 22, no. 2 (2021): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1729052>.

¹⁴² Shaazka Beyerle, Tina Olteanu, "How Romanian People Power Took On Mining and Corruption," *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/17/how-romanian-people-power-took-on-mining-and-corruption-rosia-montana/>.

¹⁴³ "Greens protest Rosia Montana Gold mining project," European Greens, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://europeangreens.eu/news/greens-protest-rosia-montana-gold-mining-project/>.

¹⁴⁴ Beyerle, Olteanu, "How Romanian People Power Took On Mining and Corruption."

Moreover, the project operated without much media coverage, and alternative interpretations did not initially reach the public, partly due to the involvement of Romanian PR and US lobbying agencies by the RMGC.¹⁴⁵ With a few exceptions, mining-related activism in the RM received little media coverage before 2010.¹⁴⁶ Environmental activism, which was marginal until then, started from scratch and was mainly centred in Transylvania and Moldova - the most industrially polluted areas.¹⁴⁷

AM's activism was initially limited mainly because of the toxic support of the nationalist PRM party and the economic attractiveness of the RMGC's plans to create jobs and reimburse residents for relocation and property buyouts. AM has survived mainly due to the support of international environmentalist movements and activists. By framing its protests around the economy, the environment, patrimony and community themes, AM's activism became of interest to activists, academics, experts and even the Hungarian government. In particular, AM was able to successfully lobby the Hungarian Ministry of the Environment in Brussels and academia.¹⁴⁸

The project became politicised, especially after Romania acceded to the EU and with the financial crisis in 2008 when attention turned again to the investment possibilities of the project, and various actors started to act confrontationally (e.g. accusing AM of serving Hungarian interests accusing the activists of terrorism).¹⁴⁹ The then-Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who in 2012 had opposed the mining initiative and shale gas extractions, radically changed his position. In 2013 Ponta's government passed a bill in favour of RMGC. The bill, eventually rejected by the Parliament, catalysed street protests.¹⁵⁰

Activism in the RM case has gradually transformed from an environmental issue into a defence of democracy against state capture. Activists used a multi-layered description of the negative impacts of mining - from environmental and health implications and cultural and archaeological heritage to violations of national and European legislation. The benefits described by RMGC

¹⁴⁵ Soare, Tufiş, "Roşia Montană," 264.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Idem, 255-256.

¹⁴⁹ Idem, 256.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

seemed to serve as a cover for corporate state capture, which activists said needed to be fought against to preserve intergenerational justice and protect national assets.¹⁵¹

In the autumn of 2013, Victor Ponta's cabinet presented a new bill, which led to further protests, with tens of thousands of people protesting across Romania over six weeks. Under pressure from the demonstrations and online mobilisation, Parliament made one last attempt to support the project; however, the new bill was rejected in late 2013. This controversial proposal triggered a snowball effect - a local issue of a mining project became a national complaint of corruption and state capture.¹⁵² However, the RM protests also need to be seen in the context of previous smaller-scale protests against the health legislation reform, when the protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Boc, which was the first sign of the general public's frustration with the corrupt establishment.¹⁵³

Salvam Roşia Montana continued to work with activists under the banner of Together We Save (Uniţi Salvăm).¹⁵⁴ The continuous need to defend democracy, its ideas and values is illustrated by the viral slogan of the 2013 protests "*Roşia Montana - Revolution of our generation*" (see Figure 1).

¹⁵¹ Soare, Tufiş, "Roşia Montană," 256.

¹⁵² Idem, 269.

¹⁵³ Idem, 270.

¹⁵⁴ Idem, 269.



Figure 1: Roșia Montana – the revolution of our generation.
 Vlad Ursulean, *Cu cortul la Intercontinental. Reportaj dintre 5000 de oameni*, September 2, 2013,
<https://casajurnalistului.ro/cu-cortul-la-intercontinental/>.

3.1.3 The 2015 Colectiv fire protests – a defining turn in the radicalisation of the protest movement

Another pivotal moment for the Romanian protest movement was the Colectiv nightclub fire on the 30th of October 2015, when 27 people died in the blaze. Another 37 people died in the following weeks, and almost 200 others were injured. The subsequent wave of commemorative rallies grew into widespread protests across Romania, lasting nine days. The result was the resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta.

The Romanian government assured the public that the hospitals could handle the crisis. However, investigative journalist Cătălin Tolontan and his team from *Gazeta Sporturilor Daily* uncovered that many deaths could have been prevented. The hospitals used diluted disinfectants, causing deaths by bacterial infections in non-life-threatening burns.¹⁵⁵ Combined with the slow response of the Romanian health system, which only took advantage of foreign

¹⁵⁵ “#Colectiv. Medic A.T.I. de la Spitalul de Arși: “I-am salvat dintr-o bombă de foc și au murit într-o bombă cu microbi!”” *Gazeta sporturilor*, 3 December 2015, <https://colectiv.gsp.ro/colectiv-medic-ati-de-la-spitalul-de-arsi-i-am-salvat-dintr-o-bomba-de-foc-si-au-murit-intr-o-bomba-cu-microbi-25475>.

offers to transfer patients with significant delays, and the insufficient capacity of burn units, this led to unnecessary deaths.¹⁵⁶

Like in 2013, the protesters organised themselves mainly through Facebook. This time, the instigator of the protests was a Facebook page called *Corupția Ucide* (Corruption kills)– an activist Facebook page with anti-corruption content, whose name became the main slogan of protests (see Figure 4 on page 48), under whose organisation 25 000 attendees gathered to protest. Prime Minister Victor Ponta stepped down due to the pressure of the protests, President Iohannis, and the indictment of forgery, money laundering and accessory to tax evasion.¹⁵⁷ Former Commissioner Cioloș led the interim technocratic government until elections in December 2016.

3.2 The emergence of the Resist movement (2017-2018)

After PSD’s landslide victory in the 2016 Parliamentary elections, Sorin Grindeanu became the Prime Minister of Romania – after PSD’s first official choice, Sevil Shhaideh, was not nominated by President Iohannis. Sorin Grindeanu accepted the nomination, noting that he would “answer to Liviu Dragnea”. Liviu Dragnea, the influential leader of PSD, would be the obvious choice for the role of Prime Minister if not for his criminal lawsuit for abuse of power.

In January 2017, then-Prime Minister Sorin Grindeanu’s cabinet issued a Governmental Ordinance no. 13 (OUG13). The highly controversial ordinance’s official aim was harmonising Romanian criminal legislation with the EU. However, the public understood it as a tool for Grindeanu to legally offer pardon to Dragnea and exonerate him from being prosecuted.

The ordinance changed the definition of abuse of office, introducing a 200 000 RON threshold for abuse of office (lower damage would not be criminally liable) and allowing convicted civil servants to hold public office. This provision could have removed Liviu Dragnea’s liability for instigating abuse of office in his case,¹⁵⁸ in which the damage amounted to 106,000 RON.

¹⁵⁶ “Statul român nu verifică niciodată în laborator dezinfectanții din spitale. Rețete din fabrica celui mai mare producător arată că antisepticele sunt diluate!” *Gazeta sporturilor*, 25 April 2016, <https://colectiv.gsp.ro/statul-roman-nu-verifica-niciodata-in-laborator-dezinfectantii-din-spitale-retete-din-fabrica-celui-mai-mare-producator-arata-ca-antisepticele-sunt-diluate-27747>.

¹⁵⁷ Kit Gillet, Palko Karasz, “Victor Ponta, Romania’s Premier, steps down after outcry over corruption,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/05/world/europe/romania-victor-ponta-resigns.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Liviu Dragnea was convicted and charged.

President Iohannis has blocked the first attempt to pass the OUG 13. The government then convoked another meeting and adopted OUG13 on the 31st of January late evening. During the press conference, the first protesters started to assemble at Victory Square and pledged to assemble for another 20 days – as a provision in the ordinance included 20 days before the legislation came into force. Their largest protest on the 5th of February had around 600 000 attendees. On the same day, the Parliament abrogated OUG13.¹⁵⁹

The protests started as marches in front of the Ministry of Justice, which was in charge of the ordinance, National Audiovisual Council (CNA) and the ombudsman's office. According to protesters, these institutions, supposed to serve the public interest, were politically affiliated and biased in favour of PSD. On the 22nd of January, Klaus Iohannis joined the protesters in University Square (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: President Klaus Iohannis joins protesters asking for the abrogation of OUG13. Liviu Florin Albei, *Romanian President Klaus Iohannis waves to protesters gathered at a demonstration against government plans to grant prison pardons and decriminalize some offences through emergency decree, in Bucharest, Romania*, Reuters, January 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-romania-referendum-idUSKBN1572EP>.

The protesters – a loose coalition of civil society organisations, activists, academics, and ordinary citizens - used the hashtag and a private Facebook page #rezist to organise themselves

¹⁵⁹ Camelia Crişan, “Romania’s protest. From stakeholders in waiting to activists’ becoming PR practitioners” in *Protest Public Relations. Communicating dissent and activism*, ed. Ana Adi (New York: Routledge, 2019), 186.

via social media. The slogan #rezist symbolised their resistance to a corrupted government coalition and their determination to stay in the streets despite sub-zero temperatures until the OUG13 abrogation (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: "We don't give in, we resist".
Dragos Bucurenci [@bucurenci], “#neamtrezit #altaintrebare“, Instagram, February 5, 2017, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQIAfYf15WO/>.

The movement, united by the goal of fighting corruption and promoting good governance, asked for the Grindeanu-led government to resign, the resignation of leaders of PSD and ALDE from Parliament and Senate (Liviu Dragnea and Călin Popescu Tăriceanu). The #Rezist movement is characterised by peaceful protests, often involving large-scale demonstrations in cities across Romania. The movement is leaderless and decentralised, and its actions follow a bottom-up, grassroots approach, transforming the protests organised by Corupția ucide into a genuine grassroots movement. The #rezist movement has gained significant support from the Romanians, reflecting widespread anger at government corruption and a sense of

powerlessness. The protesters continued their activity at a lower intensity for months, with #rezist becoming a synonym for anti-corruption protests in the following years.

#rezist protest the 10th of August: unprecedented levels of violence

Against the backdrop of the protests from 2017, Romanians took to the streets in the summer of 2018 again. The Romanian diaspora called for a rally on the 10th of August 2018 to protest against the PSD-led government and its proposals for legal changes and the sacking of a favourite “crusader” and Romania’s symbol of anti-corruption fight – Laura Codruta Kovesi, ex-head of National Anti-corruption Directorate (DNA).¹⁶⁰

Romanian diaspora holds economic and political influence, as it is estimated that nearly 20% of Romanians live abroad¹⁶¹ - as illustrated by their decisive vote in 2014 when their votes became the decisive factor in the presidential elections for Klaus Iohannis.¹⁶² Protesters rallied themselves using online platforms. In addition to Corupția ucide or #Rezistența, they also coordinated themselves and their departures in groups tailor-made for their cities of residence. The lead-up to the protest has been dramatic, with the diaspora coordinating their Facebook posts responding to the accusations of them being “beggars, thieves and prostitutes” - a claim first distributed by a PSD-protégé, Cristian Prescornițoiu and massive media coverage.¹⁶³ Between 80 000 – 100 000 people gathered in the diaspora rally, clashing with the police and gendarmerie, who resorted to using tear gas on the protesters. The intervention and hundreds of injuries sparked outrage, with thousands rallying again in the following days.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Alexandra Radu, “Romania’s anti-corruption protests wither away,” *Aljazeera*, July 12, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2018/7/12/romanas-anti-corruption-protests-wither-away>.

¹⁶¹“Talent Abroad: A Review of Romanian Emigrants,” OECD, July 16, 2019, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bac53150-en/1/2/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/bac53150-en&csp=5911873c6569105028ad0a0066943c9d&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book>.

¹⁶² Andrei Stavila, “How the diaspora vote became the decisive factor in the election of the first non-ethnic Romanian President,” Global Citizenship Observatory, Robert Schuman Centre, November 19, 2014, <https://globalcit.eu/special-eudo-citizenship-news-report-how-the-diaspora-vote-became-the-decisive-factor-in-the-election-of-the-first-non-ethnic-romanian-president/>.

¹⁶³“Un protejat al PSD îi insultă grosolan pe românii din diaspora care vin la protestul din 10 august: Hoți, curve, cerșetor,” *Digi24*, August 1st, 2018, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/un-protejat-al-psd-ii-insulta-grosolan-pe-romanii-din-diaspora-care-vin-la-protestul-din-10-august-hoti-curve-cersetori-973571>.

¹⁶⁴“Romania: second night of protests after 450 injured in clashes,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/11/romania-second-night-of-protests-after-450-injured-in-clashes>.

3.2.1 The changing nature of protest movements in Romania

The academic literature agrees that the Romanian protests share one characteristic: their leitmotif is the feeling that the current political representation is outright wrong and should be replaced.¹⁶⁵ Alex Tolic has not hesitated to call the protests an “anti-establishment revolution,”¹⁶⁶ with the protesters being mainly middle class, motivated by “deep frustration with the entire *political establishment*”. Anti-elitism was expressed mainly by civil society, exemplified by an open letter from 44 NGOs who listed corruption and incompetence in general, arrogance and a lack of transparency on the part of political elites, social inequalities and underfunding of the education system as the main problems.¹⁶⁷ This feeling was palpable after the tragedy at the Colectiv Club in Bucharest. Several NGOs, led by Clean Romania (România Curată), published a communiqué stating they did not want to “be lied to and embarrassed by those who hold political and administrative power”.¹⁶⁸

The new dimension of the Romanian protests can be understood as an attempt to “re-politicise” the political environment. In 2012, when the first massive protests began, Romania was not a leading example of a functioning democracy. There was a contrast in public life between the formal democratisation process and social mores.¹⁶⁹

The process of re-politicisation was described by Stoiciu, who drew on the work of Paul Ricoeur, distinguished between “*le politique*” - politics as a natural relationship between individuals - and “*la politique*”, as a way of gaining power, and Jacques Rancière, who understood the two phenomena as complete opposites. “*La politique*” is a political order embedded institutionally, while “*le politique*” is a disruption of this order, a process of emancipation. In practice, this means that there is a difference between “real” politics and bureaucratic politics.¹⁷⁰ This idea is precisely based on depoliticisation. Stoiciu argues that Romanian post-communist political development builds upon para-politics. Rancière’s idea of

¹⁶⁵ Cristina Buzasu, “After Protest: Pathways Beyond Mass Mobilization in Romania,” *Carnegie Europe*, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://carnegieeuropa.eu/2019/10/24/after-protest-pathways-beyond-mass-mobilization-in-romania-pub-80145>.

¹⁶⁶ Alex Tolic, “Lessons from Romania: How to Start an Anti-Establishment Revolution the “Right Way”,” *The McGill International Review*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.mironline.ca/lessons-romania-start-anti-establishment-revolution-right-way/>.

¹⁶⁷ “Noi, VIERMII - inepti, inculti si ciumpalaci - PROTESTAM!” Petitiononline, published January 18, 2012. https://www.petitiononline.com/noi_viermii_inepti_inculti_si_ciumpalaci_-_protestam.

¹⁶⁸ Olteanu, Beyerle, “The Romanian people versus corruption,” 807.

¹⁶⁹ Idem, 812.

¹⁷⁰ Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées,” 129-130.

para-politics is based on the differences existing in each society, the competition of different currents and political parties, as politics has fragmented among several bureaucratic actors that divide society and dilute the shared identity that emerged from the post-communist transformation. This post-communist transition created a group of people who lagged: the unemployed and the homeless were considered the “losers” of this transition to a more capitalist society due to massive restructuring and privatisation. The state has no time or willingness to care for this part of society, as it has to catch up with Western capitalism. Thus, political discourse has focused on blaming communism for being responsible for their situation and these “deviations”.¹⁷¹

These social problems were thus privatised, and the solutions were provided individually instead of a blanket solution coming from political parties - and these political parties, having given up their agenda, became a kind of agent of economic transition and, therefore, completely apolitical.¹⁷² This “post-communist consensus” focused only on a struggle between political actors, which altogether ceased understanding politics as an instrument that would work for the citizens. Politics became untrustworthy and civil society ceased to be interested in it. This apathy broke down only with the massive protests, which evolved from anti-system to anti-government protests.¹⁷³

The literature on civil society in Eastern Europe generally considers that citizens in this region are more prone to apathy and less likely to contest political authority. Unconventional participation in political life is lower due to the demobilisation and institutionalisation of social movements.¹⁷⁴ Political engagement of citizens has generally been low in the context of a culture of non-participation and weak social capital, also because civil society has functioned very marginally even after the fall of communism.¹⁷⁵

After the fall of communism, it was mainly international and foreign NGOs that developed tools for civil society and its advocacy capacity, even though they were often perceived as instruments of foreign influence.¹⁷⁶ After the start of the EU accession processes, this assistance

¹⁷¹ Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées,” 130-135.

¹⁷² Idem, 130-135.

¹⁷³ Idem, 132.

¹⁷⁴ Ruxandra Gubernat, “‘Vrem o țară ca afară’ How Contention in Romania Redefines State-Building through a Pro-European Discourse,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 35, no.1 (2021): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419897987>.

¹⁷⁵ Soare, Tufiş, “Roşia Montană,” 262.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

ceased. Few organisations have remained and sustained their role, most notably in the role of watchdogs in the fight against corruption.¹⁷⁷

The protests in 2012 were the first protest that signalled an awakening from a kind of post-communist apolitical lethargy, as they loudly identified the problems of Romanian society: dubious privatisations, opaque financial flows of political parties, opaque public investments, and above all, the massively open scissors between social classes, where some benefited from the capitalist transition at the expense of others. This protest was **anti-systemic** as it defined itself against the existing political system and political parties; it also defined itself against the prevailing discourse on the post-communist legacy of the social problems in question and was the first effort to repoliticize politics.¹⁷⁸

Although the protests in 2012 against the health system reform drew inspiration from the anti-capitalist alter-globalisation protests against austerity measures in other countries, which spread across Europe after the 2008 crisis, the anti-systemic character of the protests disappeared relatively soon. In particular, the focus of the Romanian protests was to express dissatisfaction with political institutions and the political system as a whole. Other significant issues that people took to the streets to support, such as ecology or social problems, were seen as the result of a dysfunctional political system and a government directly creating these problems through its actions. Increasingly, the protests evolved into anti-corruption protests, as the participants identified corruption as the main obstacle to the pro-European/pro-Western aspirations of the post-communist transition.¹⁷⁹

Slavoj Žižek argues that a social movement becomes political when it has a specific demand and forms a kind of opposition to “*them*”, i.e., those in power. At the same time, protests transform from precise points and issues into topics with a universal theme. This opposition to “*them*”, in this case, the ruling elite, can be seen in the failure of the opposition to use these protests to organise their own - precisely because society has been sceptical of all political elites.¹⁸⁰

The 2012 protests were the first collective experience of *cognitive liberation*. McAdam introduced the concept of cognitive liberation in his political process theory. It refers to the

¹⁷⁷ Soare, Tufiş, “Roşia Montană,” 262. .

¹⁷⁸ Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées,” 132-133.

¹⁷⁹ Gubernat, “Vrem o țară ca afară,” 255.

¹⁸⁰ Olteanu, Beyerle, “The Romanian people versus corruption,” 806.

process whereby a group finds certain congruent understandings based on which it defines its situation as unjust and needing change through group action.¹⁸¹

In this case, Romanian society shared disgust with the political establishment and a need to fight the “corrupt elites”.¹⁸² The protests gave up trying to be apolitical during 2013 and 2015, especially in 2017. This period was also when the nature of anti-establishment protests changed to protests that were quite clearly defined against certain political parties. The environmental theme of the protests over mining in Roşia Montana, connected with other cultural, historical, and social issues, became a proxy for the main reasons: to address the exploitative tendencies of political elites and to “save democracy”.¹⁸³

In 2013 and 2014, protesters united around one person - President Klaus Iohannis. The protests in Roşia Montană were an opportunity to express “the growing dissatisfaction of citizens with the party system, the government, the mainstream media and corporate practices”.¹⁸⁴ The establishment now includes the media and the private sector, which have begun to lose credibility – but not the newly elected President. Unlike in 2012, when the protests echoed the global anti-austerity movement, the Roşia Montana issue was taken personally as directed “against the nation”. It did not slide overwhelmingly into anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements.¹⁸⁵ This nationalist-oriented discourse was the main reason for the success of the 2013 protests. However, it also served as a breeding ground for nativist developments and political figures who evolved into populist/nationalist anti-EU critics,¹⁸⁶ such as the AUR party.

In 2015, a new wave of protests was launched after the fire at Bucharest’s Colectiv club. The public anger was explicitly directed against the PSD party; their opposition, embodied by President Iohannis, on the other hand, could quite clearly profit from this moment, as they represented the counterpart of the PSD party. Somewhat curiously, President Iohannis himself was perceived as someone who did not form part of the government, as a kind of apolitical actor - despite having been part of politics at the local level for many years as mayor of Sibiu.

¹⁸¹ Doug McAdam, “Cognitive Liberation,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, ed. Donatella della Porta et al. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm030>.

¹⁸² Idem, 807.

¹⁸³ Soare, Tufiş, “Roşia Montană,” 271.

¹⁸⁴ Claudiu Crăciun, “Saving Roşia Montană: Romania's New Face,” *Green European Journal*, published 1 September 2015, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/saving-rosia-montana-romania-new-face/>.

¹⁸⁵ Olteanu, Beyerle, “The Romanian people versus corruption,” 810.

¹⁸⁶ Soare, Tufiş, “Roşia Montană,” 271.

President Iohannis managed to position himself in opposition to the government, designating them as “responsible” in his communication with the public:

The tragedy in Colectiv touched the most sensitive nerve of the nation. Tens of thousands of Romanians protested nationwide in Bucharest and other cities to demand common sense: **the resignations of those responsible**, answers and clarification. I am willing to take the steps that, in the end, will lead to a **different kind of politics in Romania**, a politics for citizens, predictable and transparent. The next government must urgently develop solutions to the problems that have driven people to the streets and not repeat past mistakes.¹⁸⁷

This division deepened even further in 2017 during the biggest protests in Romania’s post-communist history.¹⁸⁸ The repoliticization of the protests failed and ended in 2017. Although a specific issue provoked the protests, they quickly turned into protests that drew attention to issues of a global nature, as is characteristic of post-1990 social movements whose discourse articulates specific demands in a very global way. In 2017, a change in discourse took place, in which, however, the corruption issue became dominant.¹⁸⁹

3.2.2 Anti-corruption as the overarching discourse of protest movements

The anti-system discourse was gradually displaced by the narrative of *good governance*, which drew attention to the structural deficits of post-communist politics. Good governance emphasises achieving specific objectives, mainly transparent and accountable public policy principles. Though the protests in 2012 started with an anti-systemic narrative, the discourse of sound governance principles started to displace the anti-systemic narrative until it completely dominated in 2017, as the anti-establishment discourse was marginal in the media space, mainly used by activist groups and alternative platforms. International organisations, NGOs and academia shared the principles of good governance; thus, they had a privileged position in the media.

Stoiciu points out that there was a kind of competition between the anti-systemic framework and the principles of good governance, and the anti-systemic discourse tried to assert itself more strongly to provoke a kind of collective action and repoliticizing politics. However, between

¹⁸⁷ Klaus Iohannis, “A fost nevoie să moară oameni pentru ca Guvernul să demisioneze. Românii inițial au răbdut, apoi s-au indignat, iar în final s-au revoltat.” [People had to die for the government to resign. Romanians were initially patient, then indignant, and finally revolted], Facebook, November 4, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis/videos/916739028413349>.

¹⁸⁸ Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées,” 134-135.

¹⁸⁹ Idem, 134-136.

2013-2017, the good governance narrative became firmly established as intellectual, financial and media resources were spent on it.¹⁹⁰ Principles of good governance went hand in hand with an intensifying anti-corruption ethos in public discourse.

Politics and protesters have adopted a new dominant discourse - the fight against corruption. Although corruption was (and to some extent still is) structural, politicians described it as a defining feature and something with its own will, independent of the political economy of democratic transition. Corruption and high levels of informality¹⁹¹ were seen as a kind of Romanian specificity caused by the communist past and blamed only on political leaders and leaders. While anti-corruption discourse focuses exclusively on the political class and public administration, rampant corruption in the private sector remains a blind spot. Politics thus became untrustworthy as it was synonymous with corruption.¹⁹² As such, corruption was the catalyst for the protests. Even though corruption has been an integral part of political and social life for years, it has suddenly become the main reason for the protests. The corruption was attributed to the selfishness of the elites who have enriched themselves at the expense of society. The accusation of corruption became instrumentalised in the political struggle.

The fight against corruption mainly started during the EU accession process with the creation of the National Anti/Corruption Prosecutor's Office in 2002 (renamed to National Directorate of Anti-Corruption, DNA),¹⁹³ which assumed the central role of anti-corruption fighter – more so with the appointment of Laura Codruța Kövesi in 2013. However, the transformation of corruption into a metanarrative occurred during President Băsescu's mandates. In cooperation with civil society organisations and academia, he managed to repoliticise the anti-corruption discourse by overlapping it with the anti-communist one.¹⁹⁴

The anti-corruption discourse became the main frame of extra-parliamentary politics in 2012 when President Băsescu lost credibility and sparked the first massive protests. In 2013, the events in Roșia Montană were the first major anti-corruption protests. However, the interpretation was more focused on the state capture by the multinational corporations and less on the mainstream corruption on the public and local levels.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Stoiciu, "Les promesses inachevées," 138-141.

¹⁹¹ Kiss, Székely, "Populism on the Semi-Periphery," 515.

¹⁹² Stoiciu, "Les promesses inachevées," 136.

¹⁹³ Kiss, Székely, "Populism on the Semi-Periphery," 516.

¹⁹⁴ Idem, 516-517.

¹⁹⁵ Idem, 517.

Corruption became the main frame in the protests after the tragedy at the Colectiv Club in 2015, considered the culprit responsible for the lax enforcement of safety and fire regulations and the trivial state of the Romanian healthcare system. Kiss and Székely point out that “anti-corruption rhetoric was far more than an electoral instrument. It became a powerful political metanarrative, a dominant frame of grassroots protest movements and an identity discourse embraced by large segments of the Romanian society.”¹⁹⁶ The perceived role of corruption in the fire featured prominently in the slogans of the protests, such as “*Corruption Kills*” (see Figure 4), alongside demands for system change and the resignation of officials (“*Down with Parliament!*”).¹⁹⁷ Other slogans deplored the dominance and corruption of the Orthodox Patriarchate (“*We want hospitals, not cathedrals*”).¹⁹⁸



Figure 4: Slogan "Corruption kills."
Artur Widak, *Collective responsibility*, November 12, 2015,
<https://www.economist.com/europe/2015/11/12/collective-responsibility>.

Authors like Mihnea Stoica compare the power of the anti-corruption discourse to a revolution, as it has completely transformed the political climate and has become one of the most significant points of criticism. According to him, “the protests show that the topic of **corruption**

¹⁹⁶ Kiss, Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery,” 517.

¹⁹⁷ “Proteste 4 noiembrie 2015,” Uniți Schimbam, published November 5, 2015,
<https://www.unitischimbam.ro/proteste-4-noiembrie-2015/>.

¹⁹⁸ “#Colectiv | Momentul “Vrem spitale, nu catedrale!” Digi24, December 10, 2015,
<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/colectiv-momentul-vrem-spitale-nu-catedrale-466372>.

has developed into one of the main political cleavages which prompt political action - either in the voting booth or on the streets.”¹⁹⁹

The dominant discourse attributed corruption to the communist past. The heir of this communist past was the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the direct successor of the Communist Party of Romania. The PSD represented everything that was ‘wrong with Romania’, a ‘red plague’ that protesters argued was responsible for Romanian society and politics being so prone to ‘disease’ - i.e. corruption. The slogan “PSD - the red plague” was chanted by protesters at several protests²⁰⁰²⁰¹ and became one of the main slogans of the 2017 and 2018 protests. The PSD party was seen as an obstacle to a complete transformation from communism.²⁰²

Again, and again, the protesters united behind the figure of Klaus Iohannis, whom they perceived as an outsider. He and the head of DNA, Laura Codruța Kövesi, became the primary change agents of anti-corruption framing.²⁰³ In 2014, it was the figure of Klaus Iohannis, whose election signalled the rejection of the hitherto dominant system by a part of Romanian society - he was supposed to be an anti-system figure, having defeated Victor Ponta in the presidential election. In 2017, Klaus Iohannis was already part of the same system. He was on the other side of the political spectrum, de facto in opposition to the government, as illustrated by his participation in the protests (see Figure 5). For this reason, the protests and their character have become much more anti-governmental.

¹⁹⁹ Mihnea Stoica, “Survey evidence: why people are protesting in Romania,” London School of Economics, published February 8, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/08/survey-evidence-protests-romania/>.

²⁰⁰ Malin Bot, “PSD, ciuma rosie! Protest REZIST impotriva gratierii in Bucuresti, cu Mălin Bot,” YouTube, published January 29, 2017, footage of protest in Bucharest, https://youtu.be/_xMGCBE8Yfc.

²⁰¹ Alex Manea, “PSD - Ciuma rosie - Piata Victoriei - 3 Februarie 2017,” YouTube, 6 February 2017, footage of protest in Bucharest, <https://youtu.be/oPsRscOF4FM>.

²⁰² Stoiciu, “Les promesses inachevées,” 136.

²⁰³ Kiss, Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery,” 517.



Figure 5: Romanian President Klaus Iohannis takes part in the protests. Cătălin Georgescu, "Klaus Iohannis în Piața Universității" [Klaus Iohannis at University Square], Facebook profile of Klaus Iohannis, November 8, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis/photos/a.632202593533662/918925998194652/>.

The changing symbolism of the venue also indicates the change in the protests. The anti-corruption protests have moved from the legendary University Square (Piața Universității), the main venue for demonstrations since the Romanian Revolution due to its historical significance, to Victory Square (Piața Victoriei), the seat of the government. This change highlights a metamorphosis of their character to one critical of a single party - the ruling one, the PSD.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Stoiciu, "Les promesses inachevées," 137.

Protests against OUG13 in 2017 were the culmination of the government’s efforts to slow down anti-corruption measures. However, some elites had joined the discourse by this point, and the protests had definitively ceased to be anti-establishment. As Olteanu and Beyerle point out, patriotism and belonging to a European identity played a much more significant role here.²⁰⁵ The OUG 13 protest was the first major pro-European and pro-Western protest in post-Brexit Europe, with protesters expressing dissatisfaction not only with the political establishment but especially with how politics is done.²⁰⁶ The discourse that the protesters chose with the slogan “*Vrem o țară ca afară!*” (We want a country like abroad) (see Figure 6) highlights the dichotomy of the mobilising anti-corruption narrative that pits Romania’s local “corrupt elites”, who are “left behind”, against modern Western democracies.²⁰⁷



Figure 6: Protesters with the slogan "We want a country like abroad!"
Nicu Buculei, *Anti-Communist/anti-government protests in Bucharest*, Euractiv, February 2, 2017,
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/commission-quietly-shelves-corruption-report/>.

3.2.3 Government counter-narrative of “parallel state”

Liviu Dragnea and his PSD party have applied right-wing Europhobic populism in response to anti-corruption and anti-establishment protests. Their counter-narrative consisted in positioning

²⁰⁵ Olteanu, Beyerle, “The Romanian people versus corruption,” 816.

²⁰⁶ Gubernat, “Vrem o țară ca afară,” 248.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 249.

themselves and the governing coalition PSD-ALDE as a resistance against a “parallel state”, hegemonic neo-liberalism.²⁰⁸ According to PSD’s statement published on the 17th of November, 2017, the deep state “disguised under the so-called “anti-corruption fight” has the ultimate goal of harassment and ultimately decapitation of the legitimately elected political power”.²⁰⁹ Liviu Dragnea, however, refused to elaborate on who makes up the deep state. When asked, he only replied with an ominous “Yes.”.²¹⁰ Weeks beforehand, he blamed George Soros for being a threat to Romania: “It is all about Soros, about the harm he wants to do in this country and not only in this country. It is simple.”²¹¹

The question was not who the parallel state is but how. In the days before the statement’s publication, the DNA opened a new case against Liviu Dragnea. Unsurprisingly, the deep state was the anti-corruption campaign against PSD, the anti-corruption agency DNA, and its head Laura Kövesi. The PSD has allegedly fallen victim to an international conspiracy paid by liberal international organisations, claiming that the European Union and NATO “have encouraged and partially even financed this parallel state and this odious system. They have even publicly supported it on several occasions, and they should take responsibility”.²¹²

Unlike similar concepts of the deep state developed by Donald Trump, or Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, the Romanian conspiracy theory of the parallel state was never widely accepted. Claiming that the parallel state is paid for by international organisations and subverting the legitimate government could not efficiently explain internal stability, internal conflicts within the PSD, and weak leadership. The parallel state concept has remained somewhat blurry and never found its place in the mainstream as a credible counter-narrative. It did not correctly appropriate the symbolic fight over the notion of anti-elitism.²¹³

²⁰⁸ Kiss, Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery,” 519.

²⁰⁹“CEX al PSD: Declarație de război “statului paralel și ilegal,” *Digi24*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/cex-al-psd-declaratie-de-razboi-statului-paralel-si-ilegitim-830602>.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹“Dragnea: Totul pleacă de la Soros, de la răul pe care vrea să-l facă României,” *Digi24*, July 9, 2017, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/dragnea-totul-pleaca-de-la-soros-de-la-raul-pe-care-vrea-sa-l-faca-romaniei-757651>.

²¹²“Dragnea: NATO și UE au finanțat statul paralel,” *Digi24*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/dragnea-nato-si-ue-au-finantat-statul-paralel-944886>.

²¹³ Kiss, Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery,” 519.

3.3 Protest movements in contemporary France: Alter-globalisation and anti-austerity repertoire of protest movements

France has a long history of political protest, from the French Revolution to the May 1968 student protests. Political protest is a common political practice in France, which is not “unconventional”. It is a tactic in the repertoire of French political action, an integral part of the democratic process expected and accepted by the government.²¹⁴ While comparative studies have established that protests in France are no more frequent than elsewhere, the contentious “protesting French” has become a stereotype.²¹⁵ Protest is expected as France has created an image of polity characterised by protest, which follows it throughout its history. As Wilson puts it:

Approximately every twenty years or so - usually once in each generation - there are vast collective movements that threaten to or actually do topple the entire regime: May 1968, the Resistance, the 1936 general strike, the Dreyfus affair, Boulangism, the Paris Commune, the 1848 revolts, the 1830 revolt, and the Great Revolution of 1789.²¹⁶

Since the 1990s, French levels of protest activity have been declining, except for two spikes – 1995 public sector strikes and 2006 student protests.²¹⁷ However, protest capacity was not wholly lost, as shown by the unrest of the young population – a 2014 survey depicted a “lost generation” which considers themselves “sacrificing” or losing”.²¹⁸ This tendency has only been further exacerbated. In recent years, France has witnessed numerous protest movements, including the Yellow Vest movement, the protests against labour reforms; Black Lives Matter or anti-same-sex marriage ‘Manif pour tous’ protests. These movements have sparked debates about the continuity or rupture in France’s long tradition of political protest. Some argue that contemporary protest movements reflect a continuity of past struggles for social justice, while others see them as a rupture from traditional forms of political activism.

²¹⁴ Frank Wilson, “Political Demonstrations in France: Protest Politics or Politics of Ritual?” *French Politics and Society* 12, no. 2 (1994): 23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42844408>.

²¹⁵ Idem, 26.

²¹⁶ Idem, 25.

²¹⁷ Didier Chabanet, Frédéric Royall, “The 2011 Indignés/ Occupy Movements in France and Ireland: An Analysis of the Causes of Weak Mobilisation,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 23, no. 3 (2015): 330, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2014.974524>.

²¹⁸ Pascale Krémer, “Frustrée, la jeunesse française rêve d’en découdre,” *Le Monde*, February 25, 2014, https://www.lemonde.fr/emploi/article/2014/02/25/frustree-la-jeunesse-francaise-reve-d-en-decoudre_4372879_1698637.html.

This chapter explores the nature of protest movements in contemporary France, examining their origins, goals, and tactics and considering how they fit into France's broader historical context of political activism and how they relate to the concepts of populism.

3.3.1 Indignés/Occupy movement

Since 2008, the policies of austerity mitigating the economic crisis have been rescaling democratic processes. A radical critique of representative democracy,²¹⁹ occupations of urban spaces such as the Occupy movement, has been prominently featured in the public discourse, ostensibly opposing inequalities and austerity measures.²²⁰ Non-hierarchical, without structure, refusing to link itself to a leader or a spokesperson detached itself from classical activist networks such as trade unions. However, despite French levels of protests, the Occupy movement failed to create a viable opposition to austerity measures and generate mass support for the cause.²²¹

Occupy movement failed to mobilise more significant numbers of protesters in France due to political, economic, and social circumstances. According to Flesher Fominaya, "France was a 'sleeper country' in terms of Occupy-style movements".²²² One of the reasons for this failure was the political calendar and the 2012 presidential election. While there was no shortage of grievances, the Occupy movement started to emerge in the middle of 2011, when most of the attention was given to the presidential election of 2012. As some left-wing political parties got ideologically closer to Occupy, French citizens expressed themselves through the ballot. These parties themselves also preferred to focus on the preparation for the elections.²²³

The labour market and employment situation have been better than in other countries with significant Occupy participation (Spain, Italy). The Occupy protests found themselves in a context of "a strongly politicised society (...) whose expectations would still broadly find an institutional political expression."²²⁴ More importantly, the French welfare state was able to

²¹⁹ Didier Chabanet, Arnaud Lacheret, "The Occupy movement in France. Why Protests have not taken off," 285.

²²⁰ Ida Susser, "Popular Mobilisation. Rescaling as a Consequence of *Nuit Debout/Occupy*," in *The Tumultuous Politics of Scale: Unsettled States, Migrants, Movements in Flux*, ed. Donald M. Nonini, Ida Susser (New York: Routledge, 2020): 237-240.

²²¹ Chabanet, Royall, "The 2011 Indignés/Occupy Movements in France and Ireland," 330.

²²² Flesher Fominaya, "European anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests," 12.

²²³ Chabanet, Arnaud Lacheret, "The Occupy movement in France," 282-285.

²²⁴ Ibid.

soften the blow of social inequalities than other countries where the financial crisis led to the discreditation of the government (e.g., Greece).²²⁵

Occupy failed to rally marginalised populations in the suburbs, did not spread throughout French society and remained isolated and vulnerable to police repression.²²⁶ The tendency in France is a mobilisation of younger but generally educated generation taking over downtowns and main public spaces. However, a whole part of society exists in the isolated, secluded, and suburban areas, and even the Occupy movement could not mobilise. Occupy had little traction until the Nuit debout protests in 2016.²²⁷

3.3.2 Nuit debout protests in 2016

Student and trade unions organised a demonstration on 31 March 2016 to oppose a bill from the Manuel Valls-led government on employment law reform. The El Khomri law (after Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri) was presented to simplify the labour code and improve companies' competitiveness.²²⁸ Their business orientation was opposed by unions, who considered them to undermine their negotiation power²²⁹ and students, who feared the law would affect them in the labour market.²³⁰ Reforms were pushed through without parliamentary approval,²³¹ despite losing the support of the companies due to many cuts and changes to the original proposal.²³²

Protesting all night at Place de République in Paris soon spread to other towns. In this new social movement, the youth was the central actor, making this movement a part of the austerity and precarity movement in the post-2008 era. Their disappointment intensified the youth's unhappiness with François Hollande, a Socialist President, who pledged that young people would be his priority.²³³ While he presented a change from right-wing Nicolas Sarkozy, the

²²⁵ Chabanet, Arnaud Lacheret, "The Occupy movement in France," 283.

²²⁶ Idem, 280.

²²⁷ Flesher Fominaya, "European anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests," 12.

²²⁸ Jon Henley, Phillip Inman, "Why have France's labour reforms proved so contentious?" *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/why-france-labour-reforms-proved-so-contentious>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Sarah Pickard, Judith Bessant, "France's #Nuit Debout Social Movement: Young People Rising up and Moral Emotions", *societies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 1, <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/8/4/100>.

²³¹ By the use of the Article 49.3, which allows a bill to be passed without a vote in the Assemblée nationale. "L'article 49.3 : comment ça marche?", Gouvernement, June 16, 2015, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/actualite/l-article-49-3-comment-ca-marche>.

²³² Henley, Inman, "Why have France's labour reforms proved so contentious?" 4.

²³³ Pickard, Bessant, "France's #Nuit Debout," 3.

situation of the youth significantly worsened, and their living standards declined (see Figure 7).²³⁴

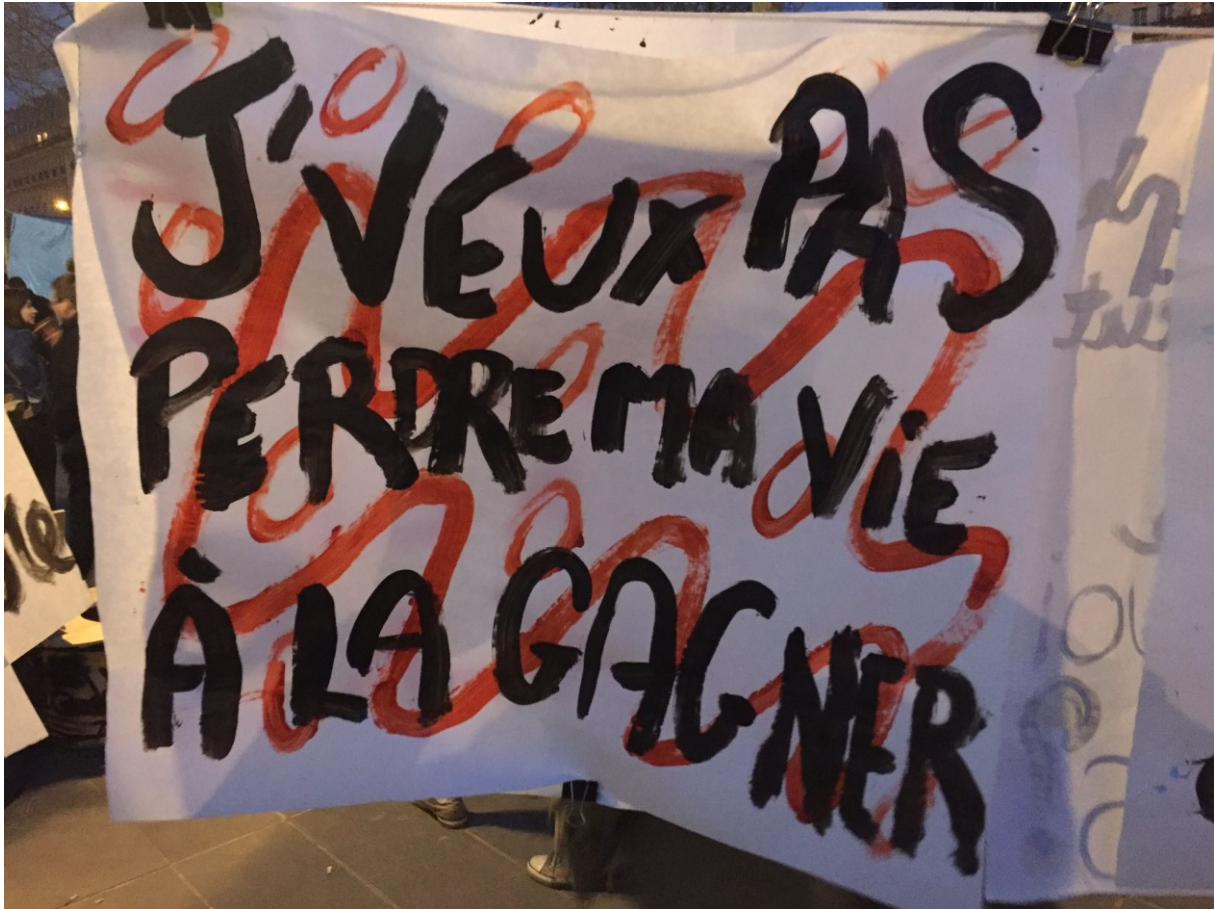


Figure 7: I don't want to lose my life earning it", Nuit debout protest banner.

Thomas Porcher [@PorcherThomas], "Petits messages pour #Valls, #Macron, #ElKhomri de la part de la jeunesse #NuitDebout", [Small messages for #Valls, #Macron, #ElKhomri from the youth #NuitDebout", Twitter, April 5, 2016, <https://twitter.com/PorcherThomas/status/717434585760575489?s=20>.

Nuit debout was coined during a meeting of the Parisian Labour Exchange in February 2016, with the goal of "scaring" the government.²³⁵ Although the movement emerged from traditional protest initiators and participants (student and labour unions), its characteristics differed from previous social actions. The movement was leaderless and horizontal, focusing on participatory democracy and "doing politics differently".²³⁶ Unlike other anti-austerity collective actions (such as Occupy/Indignés), it was primarily young people who were the driving force of the protests, occupying public spaces and using new technologies to communicate, mobilise and

²³⁴ Pickard, Bessant, "France's #Nuit Debout," 3.

²³⁵ Idem, 6.

²³⁶ Idem, 5-6.

recruit.²³⁷ Significant space was given to the idea of “convergence of struggles” to avoid distractions or leadership/faction fights (see Figure 8), creating a “public property” display of direct democratic practice. While “convergence of struggles” has been a theme in previous movements, including the May 68, a strictly leaderless structure without figureheads was uncommon.²³⁸ At its peak, the movement mobilised approximately 400 000 people and created a network of hundreds of Nuit debout groups and committees in France and abroad. Its mobilisation continued until the law passed; its visibility then steadily declined.²³⁹



Figure 8: Nuit debout, the convergence of struggles.

Stephane Lagoutte, “The movement of the Nuit Debout, loosely translated as “Standing Up at Night,” at the Place de la République in Paris, April 4, 2016”, TIME, June 7, 2016, <https://time.com/4324214/france-nightly-protests/>.

3.4 The Yellow Vests movement in 2018

The Yellow Vests movement in France, also known as “Gilets Jaunes”, began in 2018 as a protest against rising fuel prices and the perceived alienation of the political elite from ordinary citizens. The movement ran until 2020 when the engagement dwindled due to COVID-related

²³⁷ Pickard, Bessant, “France’s #Nuit Debout,” 6.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Andrea Felicetti, Donatella Della Porta, “Between deliberation and contestation: the convergence of struggles against austerity and its world in the Nuit Debout movement,” *Social Movement Studies* 17, no. 6 (2018): 658, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1505487>.

restrictions. The movement's roots can be traced to the plans to raise the tax on diesel and petrol. While Emmanuel Macron insisted the move would help the country to transition to greener energy,²⁴⁰ the petition of Priscillia Ludosky, one of the later spokespersons of the movement, “Pour une Baisse des Prix du Carburant à la Pompe !” [For Lower Fuel Prices at the Pump!] contested the move, which would hurt lower-class citizens dependent on fossil fuels for their everyday lives. Gabriel Bristow remarks that the pick of the fluorescent vest as a symbol held many significations:

The potency of this symbol has been much commented upon. Certainly, the yellow vest is most clearly associated with driving in France, therefore evoking the ‘motorist’ identity that first characterised the movement. Yet the yellow vest has other more free-floating significations. Most obviously, it is a matter of visibility: the yellow vest as a means of bringing suffering and injustice out of the private sphere and into the light of day. Then there is the relative political autonomy of the colour yellow in France, which is not used by any of the major parties. And finally, as an object it is both ordinary and urgent – it is widely available and ‘of the people’ and yet it simultaneously signals crisis and emergency.²⁴¹

Participants in the Yellow Vests movement are from heterogeneous classes, including the working (working class with low income) and non-working poor (pensioners, retirees, beneficiaries of social assistance and unemployed) and entrepreneurs. The working class of the participants occupies various positions in the lower-paid end of the labour market and the gig economy.²⁴² The Yellow Vests quickly grew into a broader movement that embodied broader grievances, including social inequalities (see Figure 9), dissatisfaction with the political system, and lack of political representation.²⁴³ Democratic aspirations and Citizen’s initiative referendum (référéndum d’initiative citoyenne, RIC) made way into their requests very quickly, and the movement was no longer only a reaction against a fuel tax.²⁴⁴ RIC was one of the main requests, pointing out the radical direct democracy demand of the protesters.

²⁴⁰ Angelique Chrisafis, “Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want>.

²⁴¹ Gabriel Bristow, “Yellow fever: populist pangs in France. Reflections on the gilets jaunes movement and the nature of its populism,” *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture* 72 (2019): 66, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/730849/summary>.

²⁴² Lem, “Notes on militant populism in contemporary France,” 399-400.

²⁴³ Noiriel, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 14.

²⁴⁴ Stéphanie Abrial, et al. “Control or participate? The Yellow Vests’ democratic aspirations through mixed methods analysis,” *French Politics* 20 (2022): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-022-00185-x>.



Figure 9: A member of the Yellow Vests protesting against perceived social inequality. [Stand up for yourself. Too many taxes. Too many suicides. Too many homeless. Wake up] Guillaume Georges, “Paris, samedi 17 novembre 2018. Des Gilets jaunes manifestent sur les Champs-Élysées,” photograph, *Le Parisien*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.leparisien.fr/economie/baisse-des-taxes-retour-au-90-km-h-ou-referendum-les-revendications-multiples-des-gilets-jaunes-20-11-2018-7947033.php>.

The Yellow Vests movement is characterised by its grassroots, decentralised structure and rejection of traditional political parties and leaders. The Yellow Vest movement is largely self-organised and coordinated through social media, and acts of civil disobedience such as roadblocks and demonstrations often characterise its actions. However, the size of the weekly demonstrations and the creation of protest sites across France contributed to the movement’s success. It compensated for its lack of leadership, as it created pressure on the media that could not turn a blind eye to the grievances of ordinary citizens²⁴⁵

In several aspects, there is a strong resemblance to the Occupy movement. The origin of Yellow Vests lies similarly in lower classes of society feeling left behind, sharing economic problems and relative deprivation while the economy was growing. Yellow Vests and Occupy also shared the strategy of weekly mass demonstrations with permanent occupations of public spaces, remaining decentralised, without political identification and leaders, coordinating primarily via

²⁴⁵ Doron Shultziner, Irit Kornblit, “French Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes): Similarities and Differences With Occupy Movement,” *Sociological Forum* 35, no. 2 (June 2020): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sof.12593>.

social media.²⁴⁶ The collective actions of the movement included two primary forms, both of them being occupations of public spaces: (1) marches (known as Acts), held weekly on Saturdays, (2) occupation of roundabouts at the peripheries of towns and cities, disrupting the traffic and therefore supply chains and the economy.²⁴⁷

The Yellow Vests movement has gained considerable attention and support across French society, reflecting a general frustration with the political establishment reinforced by Emmanuel Macron's fiscal policy.²⁴⁸ The Yellow Vests movement was quite successful, considering its objectives (cancellation of the fuel tax raise, increase of minimum wage, reinstatement of the Solidarity Tax on Wealth, cancellation of cuts on retirement plans). The fuel tax was dropped soon after the first protests.²⁴⁹ President Macron publicly admitted that the anger was "legitimate and just",²⁵⁰ announced an increase in minimum salary (Smic) by 100 euros²⁵¹ and finally, announced his initiative of Grand débat national, a public forum for the citizens to discuss issues on hand.

3.4.1 Ideological ambiguity of populism of the Yellow Vests

The Yellow Vest movement in France reflects deep frustration with the political and economic system and calls for better political representation and accountability. The mobilisations took place against the backdrop of a trend of questioning liberalism and social democracy in many modern democratic societies. However, they also reproduce historical patterns typical of French protest culture: popular uprisings against fiscal or tax policies.²⁵² At the same time, however, the Yellow Vests are very different from other protests.

The Yellow Vests movement differs from other movements in French history in size, scope, and endurance; it is the most extended series of protests in French history. Regarding protesters,

²⁴⁶ Shultziner, Kornblit, "French Yellow Vests," 541-543.

²⁴⁷ Lem, "Notes on militant populism," 399.

²⁴⁸ Noiriél, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 16.

²⁴⁹ "Edouard Philippe confirme l'annulation de la hausse des taxes sur le carburant," *Le Monde*, December 6, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/12/06/edouard-philippe-confirme-l-annulation-de-la-hausse-des-taxes-sur-le-carburant_5393642_823448.html.

²⁵⁰ "La colère des Gilets jaunes est « légitime et juste », estime Macron," *Le Point*, December 13, 2018, https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/la-colere-des-gilets-jaunes-est-legitime-et-juste-estime-macron-13-12-2018-2279089_23.php#11.

²⁵¹ "Emmanuel Macron : "Le salaire d'un travailleur au Smic augmentera de 100 euros par mois dès 2019,"" *Europe1*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/macron-annonce-une-hausse-du-smic-de-100-euros-par-mois-des-2019-3817988>.

²⁵² Pierre C. Boyer et al., "Les déterminants de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes," *Presses de Sciences Po* 71, no. 1 (2020): 110, <https://doi.org/10.3917/reco.711.0109>.

it is a heterogeneous mix that is difficult to categorise - mostly the working and unemployed poor, small entrepreneurs and people with low-paying jobs, or the average middle class. According to Noiriel, the over-representation of small entrepreneurs and the self-employed explains the initial focus of the Yellow Vests on the “fiscal pressure” of the state while accusing civil servants and officials of corruption.²⁵³ The only characteristic that often unites them is their previous lack of participation in collective action - especially among the middle class, who often participated in mass protests for the first time. Another common characteristic is that the participants consider themselves on the socio-political, economic, or geographical periphery.²⁵⁴

The mobilisation of the yellow vests is particularly notable for the lack of a unified ideology or political philosophy to which the protesters subscribe. Despite differences, the movement was driven by a shared sense of injustice. The protesters were convinced their taxes were used to enrich a small ultra-rich group that committed tax evasion using tax havens.²⁵⁵ The fuel price increase was believed to increase the burden on people experiencing poverty. These are more reliant on personal vehicles to drive themselves to work, standing in opposition to the establishment’s impression of work and prosperity being widely accessible (as illustrated, for example, by Emmanuel Macron’s statement of “crossing the street to find a job”²⁵⁶). As Hervé Le Bras explains, the car was a symbol of tacit agreement between depopulating regions and the government, explaining why the movement was more prominent in the region he calls “the regional void”, aka regions with decreasing population density:²⁵⁷

French people living far from the major cities experienced the salvo of measures aimed at curbing car use as a breach of an implicit pact with the state. Yes, services were vanishing; yes, housing costs had forced many out of urban centers and into the suburban hinterlands—but in exchange the state had facilitated mobility by maintaining a high-quality road network that allowed for easy access to services and by encouraging the use of personal vehicles. Then, all of a sudden, this pact was under challenge.²⁵⁸

²⁵³ Noiriel, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 14.

²⁵⁴ Lem, “Notes on militant populism,” 399-400.

²⁵⁵ Noiriel, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 16.

²⁵⁶ “Il y a des tas de métiers, il faut y aller ! Hôtels, cafés, restaurants, je traverse la rue et je vous en trouve,” [There are loads of jobs, you just need to go for it! Hotels, cafes, restaurants, I can cross the street and find you some], Emmanuel Macron, September 17, 2019.

Euronews, “”Je traverse la rue et je vous en trouve,” Macron se mue en conseiller Pôle emploi,” YouTube, September 17, 2019, 00 :38 to 00 :44, <https://youtu.be/FHMy6DhOXrI>.

²⁵⁷ Hervé Le Bras, “Cars, Gilets jaunes, and the Rassemblement national,” *Études* 4 (2019): 34, <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-etudes-2019-4-page-31.htm>.

²⁵⁸ Idem, 34-35.

The movement was strictly horizontal - there was no central leader, no defined hierarchy, nor formal support from any organisation, and the traditional actors who often acted as intermediaries - trade unions and political parties - were slow to join the protests.²⁵⁹ The organisation was decentralised to local and regional levels and took place mainly online, a first for France on this scale.²⁶⁰ Physical rallies initially took place mainly around roundabouts, symbols of French car culture.²⁶¹

Lem likens the Yellow Vests movement to the historic Poujadist movement - a populist tax revolt led by Pierre Poujade, a small businessman, in the 1950s.²⁶² Wilkin argues that this view is shared only by the radical left: "Sections of the political left have viewed the movement with suspicion, as a form of Poujadism, or perhaps worse, the harbinger of a far-right grassroots movement."²⁶³ The Poujadist movement started at a very local level and gradually spread across France. This revolt consisted mainly in supporting small entrepreneurs and artisans. The parallels are undeniable on tax issues. The Yellow Vests movement started as a protest against the fuel tax and the tax reforms announced by the French government, which would have adversely affected small entrepreneurs, the working middle class and the low-income section of society who depended on transport to commute to work.²⁶⁴ Didier Fassin points out that labelling the yellow vests as poujadists was mainly an attempt to discredit them. The movement protested a system and a tradition that had relegated them to the periphery and did not understand them. The movement also fought against a royalist president who was already too

²⁵⁹ Boyer et al., "Les déterminants de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes," 110.

²⁶⁰ Gabriel Bristow, "Yellow fever," 66.

²⁶¹ Boyer et al., "Les déterminants de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes," 110.

²⁶² Lem, "Notes on militant populism," 402

²⁶³ Peter Wilkin, "Fear of a Yellow Planet. The Gilets Jaunes and the End of the Modern World-System," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 26, no. 1 (2020): 71, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2020.902>.

²⁶⁴ Lem, "Notes on militant populism," 400-401.

disconnected from his fellow citizens. The parallel with the 1789 Revolution was heavily exploited (see Figure 10).²⁶⁵



Figure 10: Guillotine, the French Revolution parallel with Yellow Vests.

Sebastien Bozon, *A man poses on a pillory with a French flag during a demonstration against rising fuel prices on Nov. 17, 2018 in Dole, France*, photograph, Foreign Policy, December 1, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/01/the-technocratic-king-and-the-guillotine/>.

Many media outlets did not hesitate to label the yellow vests as populist, even though they managed to unite diverse layers of society. Anna Daguerre describes the Yellow Vests as a “grassroots, the anti-tax revolt of ordinary citizens”,²⁶⁶ and in her view, the movement “quickly morphed into a broader anti-establishment movement, with the French president as their main target”.²⁶⁷

As Stéphanie Abrial et al. put it, “the YV are rather similar to ‘populist’ social movements, due to their harsh criticism of the French party system, their strong anti-elite attitudes as well as the

²⁶⁵ Didier Fassin, Anne-Claire Defossez, “An Improbable Movement?” *New Left Review* 115 (2019), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii115/articles/didier-fassin-anne-claire-defossez-an-improbable-movement>.

²⁶⁶ Anna Daguerre, “The gilets jaunes: the good, the bad and the ugly,” London School of Economics, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/01/10/the-gilets-jaunes-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>.

²⁶⁷ Daguerre, “The gilets jaunes.”

pivotal topic of popular sovereignty.”²⁶⁸ However, according to Patrick Chamorel, there were significant differences from other populist movements:

The Yellow Vests displayed similarities to other populist movements that have recently sprung up across Europe and in the United States, but with singularities as well. Like Italy’s Five Star Movement, the Yellow Vests relied heavily on social media and adopted an antiestablishment message that mixed leftist and rightist themes. Yet the fight against political corruption was not their main focus. Like Spain’s Podemos and Greece’s Syriza, the Yellow Vests targeted economic inequalities, but Podemos and Syriza are election-focused political parties led by leftist intellectuals, and the Yellow Vests were neither of those things. They also did not share the anti-Islam focus of Germany’s Pegida.²⁶⁹

There is some conceptual ambiguity in the relationship between the yellow vests and populism, as populism usually represents an ideologically compact and unified monolith that distrusts elites. Similar populist movements usually have one charismatic leader and are often far from extreme ideologies.²⁷⁰ However, the Yellow Vests movement only fulfils the condition of distrust of elites; the yellow vests are closer to the concept of protests and social movements associated with the modern period, as opposed to the contemporary, modern concept of new social movements.²⁷¹ The Yellow Vests often alluded to previous revolutions from French history: the French Revolution or the protests of 1968 (see Figure 11).

²⁶⁸ Abrial, et al. “Control or participate,” 480.

²⁶⁹ Chamorel, “Macron versus the Yellow Vests,” 60.

²⁷⁰ Wilkin, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” 85.

²⁷¹ Ibid.



Figure 11: The Yellow Vests parallels with other French protests (1789, 1968, 2018). Bertrand Guay, *Des gilets jaunes tôt ce matin devant l'Arc de Triomphe, à Paris*, photograph, L'Alsace, December 8, 2018, <https://www.lalsace.fr/actualite/2018/12/08/gilets-jaunes-du-calme-aux-heurts-les-terribles-images-de-l-acte-iv>.

This apparent inconclusiveness caused uncertainty across the political spectrum. The left feared that the movement was a form of poujadism or a radical right-wing movement. The neoliberal elites either expressed sympathy for the protesters or the use of repressive forces; however, even the right wing was not sure how to deal with the movement. Is it better to prioritise maintaining order or using the opportunity to undermine the government's and the President's authority?²⁷² The Yellow Vests movement was challenging to classify on the ideological level, but classifying it as a nationalist or xenophobic movement would be an oversimplification, as it was more of a movement for social and economic justice.²⁷³

The Yellow Vests have a unique relationship with mainstream politics. According to a survey conducted by Guerra et al., 61% do not identify with the right/left political spectrum. 9% said they are “neither left nor right”, and 52% said they “do not belong to categories”, higher than

²⁷² Wilkin, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” 71.

²⁷³ Ibid.

the average in French society.²⁷⁴ However, the movement is not apolitical. Guerra et al. calculated and concluded, based on their survey data, that the movement is an example of “pure” populism that is neither left nor right - similar to the way Emmanuel Macron presented himself during his presidential campaign.²⁷⁵

The Yellow Vests movement responded to systemic problems that centrist liberal elites could not solve. The movement emerged when “the ideology of centrist liberalism has reached a profound crisis, facing challenges from the ethno-nationalist forces of the political right and far-right, as well as from a reconstituted and more fragile political left.”²⁷⁶ . After a decade of austerity measures and globalisation, traditional capitalist tools ceased to work, which affected various sections of French society. The protest protested against the neoliberal elites who historically held positions in representative democracy, as neoliberalism blamed them for accentuating job insecurity.²⁷⁷ The protests also drew on the French syndicalist tradition of handing control to smaller working-class communities and were spurred on by the new media, which partly helped their organisation. The media were also one reason the protest took place in the first place - the media was seen as one more tool of control by the ruling elite²⁷⁸ and were accused of being biased.²⁷⁹

The Yellow Vests are undoubtedly anti-establishment, but their main target was President Emmanuel Macron (see Figure 12). A populist himself with his quickly formed movement *En Marche!*, he positioned himself as a political outsider and reformist. Therefore, the Yellow Vests’ relationship with the elites is more complex than other anti-establishment movements. Emmanuel Macron used his populist position of being an outsider to respond to the workings of the French system while also aligning himself with the elites. In contrast, the Yellow Vests have failed to adopt this narrative of corrupt elites as their own effectively, and many commentators have therefore been hesitant to interpret the movement’s anger.²⁸⁰ Guerra et al. points out that for the Yellow Vests, however, Macron embodies the establishment - only around 3% of the movement supported him. Guerra et al. argues that the Yellow Vests reject

²⁷⁴ Tristan Guerra, Chloé Alexandre, and Frédéric Gonthier, “Populist Attitudes among the French Yellow Vests,” *Populism* 3, no. 1 (2019): 6, https://brill.com/view/journals/popu/3/1/article-p1_1.xml.

²⁷⁵ Guerra, Alexandre, Gonthier, “Populist Attitudes,” 6-8.

²⁷⁶ Wilkin, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” 71.

²⁷⁷ Noiriél, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 16.

²⁷⁸ Wilkin, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” 76-78.

²⁷⁹ Guerra, Alexandre, Gonthier, “Populist Attitudes,” 4.

²⁸⁰ Wilkin, “Fear of a Yellow Planet,” 80.

the ruling class. They note that reportedly 95% of the movement's members think that "elected officials talk too much and take too little action"²⁸¹ and believe that "the political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people".²⁸² They concluded that the distrust of political representation was so strong that it affected the organisation of the movement itself. The Yellow Vests maintained a certain distance from the unions and political parties.



Figure 12: Yellow Vest protest with anti-establishment slogan. [Macron = impeachment, government = resignation, system = abolishment].

Grégoire Lecalot, *Manifestation des "gilets jaunes" à Paris, le 24 novembre 2018*, photograph, Radio France, December 7, 2018, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/histoires-d-info/en-france-le-rejet-des-elites-nest-pas-inedit_3047355.html.

Despite some personalities emerging in the movement, a strictly horizontal structure and shallow hierarchy were maintained. This low hierarchisation makes the movement specific and sets new trends in the study of social and protest movements - it seems that new movements will follow this tendency of movements without leaders and hierarchy, with decision-making based on consensus instead of majority choice.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Guerra, Alexandre, Gonthier, "Populist Attitudes," 4.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Wilkin, "Fear of a Yellow Planet," 87.

Horizontalism suggests certain ideological proximity to feminist and anarchist currents of thought.²⁸⁴ However, it was the reason for its failure to capitalise on the movement's popularity.

According to Patrick Chamorel:

The Yellow Vests failed to capitalize on their huge numbers and high popularity. They lacked shared purpose and direction. The movement's very spontaneity and grassroots character steered it away from speaking with one voice or building a permanent leadership. The gilets jaunes resisted becoming vehicles for political parties and labor unions, but also resisted turning themselves into a political alternative. European and local elections fizzled. Their rudderless movement increasingly fell prey to its own extremists, not to mention the violent outside organizations that used it as cover to sow disorder. Shocking anti-Semitic graffiti and insults were propagated by the far right and left.²⁸⁵

From the very beginning of the protests, the far-right has joined in on the protests (reportedly members of Action française, Bastion social, Génération identitaire, L'Œuvre française or Civitas).²⁸⁶ Their protest activity was accompanied by far-right activism on social networks of far-right influencers such as Alain Soral or Dieudonné, resonating on the so-called "fachosphère",²⁸⁷ trying to create a link between protests and identity-based xenophobic politics. As Jean-Yves Camus has clarified for Franceinfo: "They see themselves as a militant avant-garde that takes to the streets to say to people: 'Your anger is justified, but do not pick the wrong enemy.'"²⁸⁸

Instances of antisemitism were recorded, too, e.g. the verbal attack on the philosopher of Jewish origin, Alain Finkielkraut, who was insulted by the crowd on February 16, 2019, with antisemitic remarks.²⁸⁹ Far-right essayist Alain Soral broadcasted on his Website 'Égalité et Réconciliation' a rap clip, *Gilets jaunes*, infused with antisemitic symbolism.²⁹⁰ In 2019, some of the Yellow Vests protests were accompanied by the "black bloc",²⁹¹ an urban insurrectionary

²⁸⁴ Wilkin, "Fear of a Yellow Planet," 87.

²⁸⁵ Chamorel, "Macron versus the Yellow Vest," 55.

²⁸⁶ Margaux Duguet, Elise Lambert, "Pourquoi l'ultradroite a-t-elle embrassé la cause des "gilets jaunes," *Franceinfo*, December 7, 2018, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/mobilisation-du-17-novembre/enquete-franceinfo-pourquoi-l-ultradroite-a-t-elle-embrasse-la-cause-des-gilets-jaunes_3084163.html.

²⁸⁷ Far-right influence groups active on the internet and social networks.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ AFP, "Alain Finkielkraut insulté à Paris par des "gilets jaunes", YouTube, February 18, 2019, <https://youtu.be/oO2qkUoLfOs>.

²⁹⁰ "Rappel : le clip qui pourrait valoir deux ans de prison ferme à Alain Soral," *Égalité et Réconciliation*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.egaliteetreconciliation.fr/Rappel-le-clip-qui-pourrait-valoir-deux-ans-de-prison-ferme-a-Alain-Soral-55226.html>.

²⁹¹ Kocila Makdeche, "Pourquoi "gilets jaune" et black blocs ont fini par faire cause commune," *Franceinfo*, April 4, 2019, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/enquete-franceinfo-pourquoi-gilets-jaunes-et-black-blocs-ont-fini-par-faire-cause-commune_3272573.html.

tactic used by anti-capitalist left-wing activists dressed in black with masked faces to preserve their anonymity during demonstrations.²⁹² The tactics first appeared in anarchist and autonomous movements in ex-West Germany in the 1980s, disseminated quickly worldwide and became prominent during the Gulf War and more recently during the Arab Spring and social movements in Brazil in 2013.²⁹³ The movement has faced criticism for its violent actions leading to clashes with the police and damage to property, as ultra-right and ultra-left groups periodically conducted acts of violence, vandalism, and burglaries, going as far as vandalising the Arc de Triomphe. Violent altercations with the police resulting in injuries and several deadly accidents, are also linked to the protests.²⁹⁴ While the media adopted a negative approach to violence, the public supported the movement. The literature on this topic attributes this seemingly paradoxical support (despite attacks on the police forces, property damages and vandalism) to the French historical culture of protests and strikes, as “France is the social-movement country par excellence”.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Maxime Broidy, “Le black bloc, terrain visuel du global. Éléments pour une iconologie politique de l’altermondialisme,” *Terrains/Théories* 5 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4000/teth.834>.

²⁹³ Broidy, “Le black bloc.”

²⁹⁴ Shultziner, Kornblit, “French Yellow Vests,” 539.

²⁹⁵ Emiliano Grossman, “France’s Yellow Vests: Symptom of a Chronic Disease,” *Political Insight* 10, no. 1 (2019): 31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041905819838152>.

4 Transformation of post-protest political mobilisations into political force: the challenge of the status quo

The post-protest period is a very challenging time for protest movements. In the case of both Romania and France, the challenge of strategising post-protest political mobilisation has been the need to move beyond simply protesting the status quo to proposing alternative policies and engaging in sustained dialogue with various stakeholders, which requires both internal unity and external outreach, as well as a willingness to compromise and negotiate. The status quo has proven resistant to change in both countries, with entrenched political and economic systems often pushing back against protest movements.

4.1 The trajectory of Romanian anti-corruption discourse post-2018: between hopes for political normalisation and populist disillusionment

In Romania, the 2017 protests forced the government to backtrack on its proposed reforms. However, subsequent attempts to weaken anti-corruption laws and institutionalise corruption have continued to provoke public outrage and mobilisation. The challenge for Romanian protesters has been to sustain momentum and develop effective strategies for pushing back against entrenched political interests.

4.1.1 Capitalising on the populist discourse: the rise and fall of the USR party

The landslide victory of PSD and the rise of USR in the December 2016 Parliamentary elections

One year after Ponta's resignation, the PSD party made a historic comeback in the elections. Exploiting the regions affected by poverty, the rural, aged electorate in the countryside and small cities proved beneficial to PSD, who won with an overwhelming majority – 45,47%, forming a simple majority with ALDE (5,62%) in the Chamber of Deputies.²⁹⁶ PSD managed to win by seizing the moment of the changing European-wide political climate. In 2012, PSD opposed austerity measures and entered an anti-austerity alliance with PNL; this coalition failed

²⁹⁶ "Rezultate finale. PSD – 221 de mandate, PNL – 99 de mandate," *Digi24*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/alegeri-parlamentare-2016/rezultate-finale-psd-221-de-mandate-pnl-99-de-mandate-632969>.

in 2014. Klaus Iohannis managed to associate the Colectiv club tragedy with the fight against corruption and replaced the PSD-led government with a technocratic one. While Cioloș's cabinet was successfully bringing about reforms of the political class, the homogenous anti-austerity electorate saw this change as illegitimate.

PSD's campaign slogan, "Dare to believe in Romania" (Îndrăznește să crezi în România), appealed to the poverty-stricken population through the promise of a rise in wages, retirement pensions, tax reductions and massive public investments,²⁹⁷ coupled with Europe-wide transformation of the austerity/anti-austerity divide into a globalisation/anti-globalisation issue.²⁹⁸ PSD seized the moment to push populist agenda and had a robust campaign, obliterating the corruption message of their opponents. Their anti-globalisation agenda did not rely on primitive yet popular anti-Soros rhetoric as seen elsewhere in Europe or other Romanian anti-globalisation parties (such as their electoral partner United Romania Party - Partidul România Unită). However, they managed to link Cioloș's government with "the Brussels bureaucracy".²⁹⁹

PSD's rival, PNL, initially relied on Cioloș's entry into national politics and wishful thinking of him becoming their member. Cioloș was reluctant to do so. This unsuccessful exchange of sympathies helped push PNL (and Klaus Iohannis) into a pro-globalisation camp. PSD also focused on promoting wage and pension increases and distribution of the economic growth created by the Ciolos-led government, thus becoming a catch-all party for all ages and professions, securing votes of centre to centre-right electorate.³⁰⁰ However, the Save Romania Union did not hesitate to use this ambiguity between PNL and Cioloș to jump in and declare their unconditional support and benefit politically and electorally from the voters stolen from PNL.³⁰¹ This move only led to a fragmentation of their joint right-wing liberal electorate, while PSD's electorate stayed homogenous.³⁰²

²⁹⁷ "Large win for the Social Democratic Party in the parliamentary elections in Romania," Fondation Robert Schuman, December 13, 2016, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/eem/1685-large-win-for-the-social-democratic-party-in-the-parliamentary-elections-in-romania>.

²⁹⁸ Radu Carp, "Alegerile parlamentare din 11 decembrie 2016: clivaje politice vechi, noi și viitoare," *Polis. Revistă de științe politice* 5, no. 1 (December 2016 – February 2017): 123, <http://revistapolis.ro/alegerile-parlamentare-din-11-decembrie-2016-clivaje-politice-vechi-noi-si-viitoare/>.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Idem, 124.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Antonio Momoc, "Populism 2.0, Digital Democracy and the New Enemies of the People," *Communication Today* 9, no. 1 (2018), <https://communicationtoday.sk/populism-2-0-digital-democracy-and-the-new-enemies-of-the-people/>.

The Save Bucharest Union/ Save Romania Union (USB/USR) was another success story of the 2016 Parliamentary election. USR scored an unexpected 8,86% of votes³⁰³ – more unexpected for a party sprouting from the civil society association³⁰⁴ – becoming the third strongest party in the Parliament.

Association Save Bucharest has been active in the civil society of Bucharest since 2006, contesting political illegalities and abuses of power, blocking real estate projects with some successes. In 2012, its leader Dan Nicușor ran as an independent candidate in local elections, attracting volunteers and voters on Facebook with his promise of transparency in public spending and decision-making. His ranking was low but successful enough for an independent running without a support of a party structure. In June 2015, the association became a political party under the name Save Bucharest Union, transforming into Save Romania Union after successful local elections in Bucharest in 2015, which was a signal for the whole country.

A post-rezist *success story*: the rise of USR-Plus in the 2019 European elections to the 2020 Parliamentary elections

In the aftermath of the 2017-2018 protests, the grassroots character of the movement started to wane. Two significant actors established themselves in the anti-corruption narrative – President Klaus Iohannis (and, by extension, PNL) and USR-PLUS. USR-PLUS is a coalition of the USR Party with the new Freedom Unity Solidarity Party (Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate, PLUS) founded in 2018 by Dacian Cioloș. Together they managed to share the message of PSD as a corrupt post-communist heritage.³⁰⁵

In the European elections of 2019, PNL led with 27%, PSD in second place with 22,50%, followed by Coalition Alliance 2020 (USR+PLUS), winning 22,36%.³⁰⁶ With PSD and USR-PLUS coalition scoring almost equally and PSD's coalition partner, ALDE, missing the

³⁰³ Digi24, “Rezultate finale.”

³⁰⁴ Cosmin Dima, “David și Goliat. Analiza genezei și a succesului electoral al Uniunii Salvați România în alegerile locale și parlamentare din 2016,” *Polis. Revistă de științe politice* 1, no. 15 (2017):171-172, <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=800764>.

³⁰⁵ Kiss, Székely, “Populism on the Semi-Periphery,” 518-519.

³⁰⁶ “Rezultate pe partid național: 2019-2024,” *European Parliament*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/ro/rezultate-nationale/romania/2019-2024/>.

threshold completely, the voters sanctioned the government coalition and rewarded the opposition parties.³⁰⁷

These elections have been exceptional by their record participation of 51,20%.³⁰⁸ In the context of recent protests, President Iohannis initiated a consultative referendum about anti-corruption issues (prohibition of amnesties and pardons for corruption offences, abolition of government's right to pass emergency ordinances), held on the very day of European elections further mobilised the voters, who overwhelmingly voted in favour of his proposals.³⁰⁹

In the succession of events of 2019, PSD received several other blows: (1) PSD president Liviu Dragnea was sentenced to three and half years in jail for corruption just hours after the elections,³¹⁰ (2) Klaus Iohannis was reelected in a landslide victory of 63%,³¹¹ (3) the vote took place only several weeks after his opponent, Viorica Dăncilă's (PSD) government, fell in a no-confidence vote.³¹²

The erosion of USR-Plus: the 2021 political crisis and the PNL-USR split

In the aftermath of the 2020 election debacle, the PNL debacle led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Ludovic Orban.³¹³ The then-Minister of Defence, Nicolae Ciucă (PNL), has been nominated as the interim Prime Minister. Finally, the name of the Minister of Finances, Florin Cîțu, has been put forward for the Prime Minister role.³¹⁴ Cîțu formed a multi-party coalition of PNL, USR-PLUS and UDMR/RMDSZ (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania), which governed until September 2021, when a conflict erupted over the so-called Anghel Saligny investment programs. USR-PLUS boycotted these programs because they were allegedly not transparent and potentially misused. PNL has threatened with a motion of censure, to which Prime Minister Cîțu reacted by sacking USR's Justice Minister. PNL submitted the

³⁰⁷ Daniel Buti, Alexandru Radu, "Alegeri europarlamentare în România. Excepția scrutinului din 2019," *Sfera Politicii* 199-200, no. 1-2 (2019): 7, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=850801>.

³⁰⁸ Buti, Radu, "Alegeri europarlamentare în România," 199-200.

³⁰⁹ Kiss, Székely. "Populism on the Semi-Periphery," 519.

³¹⁰ Valerie Hopkins, "Romania's Liviu Dragnea sentenced to jail for corruption," *Financial Times*, May 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/a59499e0-8080-11e9-b592-5fe435b57a3b>.

³¹¹ "Roumanie: le pro-européen Iohannis réélu à la présidence," *RFI*, November 24, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/europe/20191124-roumanie-pro-europeen-iohannis-reelu-presidence>.

³¹² "Dancila's Romanian government falls in no-confidence vote," *BBC*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49998670>.

³¹³ "Ludovic Orban și-a dat demisia din funcția de prim-ministru," *Digi24*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/ludovic-orban-si-a-dat-demisia-din-fruntea-guvernului-1414065>.

³¹⁴ "Nicolae Ciucă a fost numit prim-ministru interimar," *Digi 24*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/nicolae-ciuca-a-fost-numit-prim-ministru-interimar-1414138>.

censure motion in cooperation with AUR; PSD submitted a second motion of no confidence shortly after. The government finally fell in October 2021 through a motion of no-confidence supported by all three parties.³¹⁵

Subsequently, after weeks of negotiations, a grand coalition has been formed with PSD and UDSMR, with a rotating Prime-Ministership (Nicolae Ciucă will eventually hand over to PSD's candidate in 2023).³¹⁶ PNL is now considered the junior partner, despite providing the Prime Minister and PSD assumed the leadership position.

USR has yet to rebuild itself from the opposition position, facing internal reorganisations after its direction changed in 2022.³¹⁷

4.1.2 Case in point in regional populism: USR's recombinant populism

The USR party took a strategic decision of ideological ambiguity, presenting itself as a party free of ideology while staying committed to transparency, anti-corruption, the rule of law, and efficient public expenditures, which helped them to attract leaders without a specific ideology and leaving the doors open to an electorate of all political spectrum.³¹⁸ USR is contesting the status quo imposed by parties who led Romania through the accession process and promotes issues such as the rule of law, constitutional stability and good governance.³¹⁹ USR defines its as an anti-system party which will change the political "standstill":

USR is the new anti-system party, which coagulates the energies of those who want a change and are involved in public life. Thirty years after the Revolution, Romania is at a standstill. Because we, the citizens, have left the responsibility for change to the state, the old parties, the bureaucracy and those who stand to gain from the state of things.³²⁰

The USR played an ambiguous, anti-system card without legitimising extremist nationalist, xenophobic or Eurosceptic sentiment. On the contrary, USR positioned itself as a pro-European country:

Romania's membership in the European Union and NATO are significant achievements we must consolidate. The European Union is an underused factor of modernisation, and

³¹⁵ "Romanian government falls after losing no-confidence vote," *Politico*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romanian-government-falls-in-no-confidence-vote/>.

³¹⁶ Matei Rosca, "Romania's Nicolae Ciucă tapped again to form new government," *Politico*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-nicolae-ciuca-new-government/>.

³¹⁷ Ana Fota, "Dacian Cioloş quits as leader of Romanian opposition party," *Politico*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-dacian-ciolos-usr-party-mep/>.

³¹⁸ Dima, "David și Goliat," 177.

³¹⁹ Dragoman, "' Save Romania' Union," 305.

³²⁰ "Ideologia USR," *Uniunea Salvați România*, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://usr.ro/ideologia-usr/>.

it is time to think about Romania's strategic development in line with the opportunities offered by our membership in this select club and with global trends where the EU is the champion.³²¹

Clotilde Armand, a close friend of Nicușor and an incumbent mayor of Bucharest's sector 1, characterised USR in her Facebook appeal ahead of local elections in 2016 as a “party of people of good faith who want to change the political class in Romania. We are anti-system in order to build a normal European country.”³²²

USR positioned itself as an anti-system party that plays by the democratic rules, combining two salient issues of Romanian politics – anti-communism and anti-elitism.³²³ According to Dragoman, USR is an example of recombinant populism. Despite their anti-elitist and anti-establishment stances, the evolution of the party did not follow the Western pattern of becoming far-right political radicalism (combining nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies).³²⁴ Their communication strategy denounced corruption and clientelism and pushed mainstream parties toward more radical attitudes.³²⁵ They became the challenger of the classic party caste, attracting the votes of non-extremist voters who felt mistrust towards classic political parties, which have been rotating in the government in different configurations and coalitions since the 1989 Revolution.³²⁶ This position is illustrated by the choice of their election slogan, “Finally, you have got someone (to vote for)” (see Figure 13).

³²¹ “Ideologia USR.”

³²² USR, “Clotilde Armand despre USR: Uniunea Salvați România este un partid cu oameni de bună credință care vor să schimbe clasa politică din România. [Clotilde Armand on USR: Union Save Romania is a party of people of good faith who want to change the political class in Romania],” Facebook, October 2, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/USRUniuneaSalvatiRomania/videos/1135564599868056>.

³²³ Dragoman, ““ Save Romania” Union,” 304.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Idem, 305.

³²⁶ Dima, “David și Goliat,” 177.



Figure 13: USR's 2016 Parliamentary slogan “Finally, you've got someone (to vote for)”. “We decided to run because we felt the need for an alternative to the current political class.” [Ne-am decis să candidăm pentru că am simțit nevoia unei alternative la clasa politică actuală.], USR Facebook page, December 9, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/USRUniuneaSalvatiRomania/photos/a.1133077476783435/1208766699214512>.

Dragoman notes, “From this perspective, USR is to be seen as a product of the changing pattern of political participation in Romania, with protest and social media activism replacing more traditional forms of participation.”³²⁷

4.1.3 Rise of a new catch-all populist party AUR and the politics of resentment

In September 2019, a new player established itself on the Romanian scene – the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Officially, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians was established on Romanian National Day, the 1st of December 2019, by George Simion (an activist for the Union of Romanian and the Republic of Moldova, also former football *ultra*) and Claudiu Târziu (a journalist with close ties to the Orthodox church).³²⁸

³²⁷ Dragoman, ““ Save Romania” Union,” 304.

³²⁸ Andrada Oana, “Cine e Claudiu Târziu - în CV și în afara lu. “AUR-ul de la parlamentare”” *DCNews*, December 8, 2020, https://www.dcnnews.ro/cine-e-claudiu-tarziu-in-cv-si-in-afara-lui-aur-ul-de-la-parlamentare_789071.html.

The AUR party exercises nationalist, Christian-conservative doctrine.³²⁹ Their first political objective is the unification of Romania and Moldova based on ethnocultural dimensions (union with Bessarabia). Their programme has four pillars: Faith, Nation, Family, and Freedom.³³⁰ The party and their leader, George Simion, favour a strong national economy, are anti-globalisation and are against policies of the European Union. In the party programme, the party claims to be a Euro-realist party:

“AUR is a Eurorealist party and is faithful to the European project, as conceived by its founding fathers, by recognising and affirming the **Christian roots** of all EU Member States. (...) To return to this, AUR believes that the way the European Union acts today needs to be reformed. We believe Romania’s place is in the European Union and the Schengen area, but we favour a **Europe of sovereign nations** and reject the idea of a federalist super-state of the “United States of Europe” type promoted by certain bureaucratic institutions and plutocratic circles.”³³¹

However, AUR represented the opposition to the European Union on the national political scene, as with the arrest of Liviu Dragnea, the Eurosceptic views disappeared from PSD’s repertoire.³³² AUR have seen themselves skyrocketing – in the parliamentary elections of 2020, they became a new political force with 9,17%,³³³ while a few months before, in September 2020, they only scored less than 1% in the local elections.³³⁴ AUR has capitalised on rising crises, including food, electricity, and rising petrol prices. Most importantly, they capitalised during the Covid-19 pandemic by protesting the sanitary and health restrictions and capitalising on the government’s incompetence in handling the Covid-19 crisis. AUR has, for much, presented opposition to inequality that has presented itself during the pandemic, as low-skilled and low-income groups have been affected more than others.³³⁵

The success of AUR in the 2020 Parliamentary elections was surprising because the party was a newcomer. AUR benefited from a meagre turnout (33,3%) due to pandemic restrictions and

³²⁹ Doiciar, Crețan, “Pandemic Populism,” 245.

³³⁰ Stephen McGrath, “How a far-right party came from nowhere to stun Romania in Sunday’s election,” *Euronews*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/12/08/how-a-far-right-party-came-from-nowhere-to-stun-romania-in-sunday-s-election>.

³³¹ “Program – AUR,” AUR, accessed March 4, 2023, <https://partidulaur.ro/program/>.

³³² Mihaela Ilie, “The rise of a nationalist-populist party in Romania – The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR),” *Serbian Political Thought* 78, no. 4 (2022): 154, <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.7842022.9>.

³³³ Claudia Doiciar, Remus Crețan, “Pandemic Populism: COVID-19 and the Rise of the Nationalist AUR Party in Romania,” *Geographica Pannonica* 25, no. 4 (December 2021): 243, <https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0354-8724/2021/0354-87242104243D.pdf>.

³³⁴ Ilie, “The rise of a nationalist-populist party in Romania,” 145.

³³⁵ Doiciar, Crețan, “Pandemic Populism,” 245.

the ongoing erosion of PNL – USR+PLUS has not mobilised their voters enough to vote.³³⁶ Dumitru Sandu states, "AUR support is highest in areas of intermediate socio-economic status and is often strongest in communities situated at significant distances from major cities."³³⁷

Demographic analysis of the election data showed that AUR is scoring well amongst the young electorate, as 40% of the 18-35 age group voted for them (with 60% being men).³³⁸ Unclear on the left-right axis (economically tending to moderate left), on the conservative/progressive axis, the voters positioned themselves very conservatively.³³⁹ The conservative-leaning electorate, not having anyone convincing to represent them, leaned towards AUR as they felt alienated and abandoned by the government. AUR also profited from the Romanian political scene lacking a Christian-nationalist party – values still resonating in some parts of Romanian society.³⁴⁰

This nationalist upheaval was supported by the diaspora, traditionally the sway vote in Romanian elections. Diaspora helped Klaus Iohannis become President and is usually voting for PNL/USR as they tend to be more liberal. In 2020, however, 23% of Romanians abroad voted for AUR.³⁴¹ At first, this might seem surprising, but the diaspora has suffered particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Romanians abroad often represent low-skilled workers in precarious job conditions, for whom the pandemic has been particularly disruptive. AUR opposed the government and imposed restrictions, shifting the focus from public health to anti-establishment stances.³⁴² According to Ilie, the anti-corruption discourse over the last years and the proliferation of populist tendencies have led to AUR's electoral success:

“From the right-wing nationalist populism of PRM and its leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor to the populist rhetoric of former Romanian President Traian Băsescu, to the virulent nationalist populist speeches of PRR politicians such as Dan Diaconescu, leader of People's Party Dan Diaconescu [PPDD] and finally to the populist messages that many mainstream politicians have used to enhance their political gains, **populist tendencies have left an important mark on the Romanian political life** over the past three decades. Moreover, by promoting populist messages, Romanian politicians have

³³⁶ Doiciar, Crețan, “Pandemic Populism,” 246.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Idem, 247.

³³⁹ Ilie, “The rise of a nationalist-populist party in Romania,” 149.

³⁴⁰ Idem, 153.

³⁴¹ “Rezultate parțiale alegeri parlamentare 2020. AUR obține peste 23% în diaspora”, *Digi24*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2020/rezultate-parțiale-alegeri-parlamentare-2020-aur-obține-peste-23-in-diaspora-1413605>.

³⁴² Doiciar, Crețan, “Pandemic Populism,” 250.

cultivated a type of exclusionist attitude that **has encouraged ordinary people to do the same.**"³⁴³

Ordinary Romanians are progressively losing faith in their government, worrying about corruption (84,2%) and the differences between rich and poor (73,7%), with only 12,4% having confidence in the government.³⁴⁴ The anti-establishment mechanism worked once more in the climate of distrust in politicians and discontent with the traditional parties. Similarly to the popularity of USR in the elections of 2016, the anti-establishment message of AUR has been a success. Official content of the party's website calls out, once again, corruption at the highest levels of Romanian politics that "suffocates" the country:

The corruption and incompetence of the public authorities that have characterized Romania since 1989 have allowed, even stimulated, the emergence, development and proliferation of mafia-type clans. (...) Such alliances of interests have reached the highest level of the state; see the case of the brother of a former president of Romania. Crime and politics have joined hands under the table. Political-criminal hands wash each other's hands, but Romania's face remains tarnished; over the last thirty years, a Romanian "la Piovra" has been formed, a tightly knit "family" of gangsters, police, magistrates and politicians. This huge spider web has encompassed the whole of society. It is the invisible mask that prevents us from breathing.³⁴⁵

Anti-establishment is also present on AUR's social media, with numerous references to "the system": "We need a change, and it will not come from politicians controlled by the system."³⁴⁶ and "Do not let the system and its cronies fool you".³⁴⁷ Simion defines the system as "Those who have been destroying Romania for 30 years (...). The system comprises people from the intelligence services who control all the parliamentary parties very well." According to him, PNL and PSD parties are "puppets" controlled by the "services".³⁴⁸

³⁴³ Ilie, "The rise of a nationalist-populist party in Romania," 152.

³⁴⁴ "Sondaj INSCOP. Guvernul și Parlamentul, pe ultimele locuri în topul instituțiilor în care românii au încredere", *Digi24*, May 16, 2019, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/sondaj-inscop-guvernul-si-parlamentul-pe-ultimele-locuri-in-topul-institutiilor-in-care-romanii-au-incredere-1131942>.

³⁴⁵ "Clanurile politico-mafiote sunt masca invizibilă care nu lasă România să respire", *AUR*, June 3, 2021, <https://partidulaur.ro/clanurile-politico-mafiote-sunt-masca-invizibila-care-nu-lasa-romania-sa-respire/>.

³⁴⁶ Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor – AUR, "Am rezolvat, nu se poate! În România, toți cetățenii sunt egali conform Constituției, doar că unii cetățeni sunt mai "speciali"", Facebook, May 12, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/partidulAUR/videos/525370741701789/>.

³⁴⁷ George Simion, "Ignorați trompetele sistemului," Facebook (1:18 – 1:23), October 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/videos/509114713981436>.

³⁴⁸ George Simion, "Fără poliție politică și fără securiști vopsiți", Facebook (0:00 – 0:56), September 17, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/videos/970688796739737>.

AUR is not only in a way a successor to USR's brand of political radicalism but also incorporates part of the Rezist legacy, yet voided of its pro-European, good governance ideology. The political style of early USR and AUR are characterized by disruptive, sometimes aggressive interventions in Parliament. AUR and George Simion use many disruptive techniques, including live recordings, posters and banners in Parliament (see Figure 14), or heckling. Their obstruction of Parliament gained momentum notably during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemics facilitated the transfer of anti-establishment voters from USR to AUR. USR is stagnating and no longer has convincing messages, while AUR is positioned as the main opposition force, managing to attract their votes.



Figure 14: AUR party protesting against Covid-19 vaccination certificates with banner "Freedom without certificates" in the Chamber of Deputies.

Cristian Matei, "Protest în Parlament cu AUR și Șoșoacă. Banner uriaș: "Libertate fără certificate"", *ProTV*, December 12, 2021, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/protest-in-parlament-cu-aur-si-sosoaca-banner-urias-libertate-fara-certificate.html>.

4.2 Yellow Vests' failed transformation into a coherent political force

In France, the Yellow Vest movement struggled to develop a clear political agenda beyond its initial demands, leading to internal divisions and a loss of momentum. The government responded with a mix of concessions and repression, such as suspending the fuel tax increase and increasing police presence to quell violent demonstrations. The movement's long-term impact on French politics remains unclear. As Patrick Chamorel notes: "The Yellow Vest

movement was spontaneous and ephemeral. It built no institutional infrastructure. Other populist uprisings have led to more permanent political organizations and parties.” The Yellow Vests did not manage to become a cohesive political force. According to an Ipsos poll of public opinion, while the Yellow Vest is most likely to be supported by voters of the France Insoumise party (a left-wing populist party created by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 70%); but also by the supporters of Marine Le Pen and the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party,³⁴⁹ 57%.³⁵⁰ This follows a trend found in other Western democracies: the slow disappearance of the right-left division of the political spectrum, so-called ideological cleavage no longer confined to a right/left division (which works primarily on economic and fiscal issues).

4.2.1 Who capitalised on the Yellow Vests’ discontent? A mystery for the traditional Left and Right, an opportunity for the populist Left (LFI) and the radical right (RN)

The Yellow Vests are an unclassifiable movement highlighting many left-wing issues without explicitly identifying them as such. The political translation of this movement that transcends the left/right division is not apparent, and the French left has been divided over their reaction.³⁵¹ On an ideological level, the La France Insoumise (LFI) party was expected to take over the movement due to their close left-wing populist discourse opposing the elite, oligarchy and Emmanuel Macron. However, the personification of the party in the figure of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the organisational structure of the Yellow Vest movement, which refuses any political classes, parties and representative democracy in general, clashed with the verticality of party structures.³⁵²

The radical left parties (the Communist Party, Lutte Ouvrière, and New Anticapitalist Party) were, on the other hand, left in the shadow of la France Insoumise. Despite their relative ideological closeness to Yellow Vests' objectives, they could not take over the political capital during the European elections in May 2019, where the left stayed fragmented.³⁵³ Social democratic parties (Socialist Party, Europe Écologie Les Verts) were sceptical of the populist

³⁴⁹ Formerly known as Front National.

³⁵⁰ “Trois ans après l'apparition des Gilets Jaunes : le regard des Français”, IPSOS, November 22, 2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/trois-ans-apres-lapparition-des-gilets-jaunes-le-regard-des-francais>.

³⁵¹ Jonathan Durand Folco, Thomas Coutrot, “Les Gilets jaunes : échec ou occasion pour la gauche française,” *Relations* 802 (May-June 2019): 12, <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/90551ac>.

³⁵² Folco, Coutrot, “Les Gilets jaunes,” 12.

³⁵³ Ibid.

discourse in the form of citizens' initiative referendum and its potential demagogical instrumentalization in thwarting progressive laws they were in favour of (marriage for all, immigration or minority rights).³⁵⁴

The political landscape in France reflects the shift from the usual left/right divide and the breakdown of a traditional political model. The left/right divide paved the way for new antagonism, clashing over welfare or trust in institutions.³⁵⁵ As Yann Algan, Elizabeth Beasley, Daniel Cohen, Martial Foucault and Madeleine Péron have described for *Le Monde*:

The left-right opposition was based on a conflict of values and distributions, with universalist values on the left and conservative values on the right, giving rise to opposing economic programmes for redistribution. (...) The last presidential election shattered this opposition, replaced by a conflict of subjectivities: "I suffer, and you enjoy; I am alone, you are connected." This new opposition, synthesised by the Macron-Le Pen axis, testifies to the transition from a class society to a mass society with individuals who oppose each other regarding welfare and social integration.

This political landscape manifested in the Yellow Vests movement, discovering their collective suffering and transcending the left/right divide. The left struggled to contain a pure populist movement covering the entire political spectrum, subject to a struggle for the movement's interpretation. Ideas such as an overly direct democracy and populist discourse, France's exit from the European Union and national sovereignty played into Marine Le Pen's (and RN) efforts to recuperate the voters, including the xenophobic and anti-Semitic fringes of the movement.³⁵⁶

4.2.2 The 2019 elections and the resilience of the old party structure

The European elections in 2019 polarised the French political life between Marine Le Pen's party, RN, and Emmanuel Macron's *La République en marche* (LREM). The elections became an extension of the presidential battle between these two, feeding into the idea that European elections were "revenge" for the presidential election (despite Macron nor Le Pen getting a seat in the European Parliament).³⁵⁷ The Yellow Vests saw a decline in popular support. An internal battle was taking place—many grassroots Yellow Vests refused any involvement in politics,

³⁵⁴ Folco, Coutrot, "Les Gilets jaunes," 12.

³⁵⁵ Yann Algan et al. "« Le mouvement des «gilets jaunes» marque la disparition du clivage gauche-droite habituel," *Le Monde*, February 20, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/02/20/le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes-marque-la-disparition-du-clivage-gauche-droite-habituel_5426015_3232.html.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Olivier Costa, "Européennes : mais où sont passés les Gilets jaunes," *The Conversation*, May 31, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/debat-europeennes-mais-ou-sont-passes-les-gilets-jaunes-117905>.

fighting with the political wing, which had disintegrated into many different factions.³⁵⁸ Many criticized the involvement in the European elections for "playing into Macron's hands", fearing that it would benefit the LREM by taking votes from its primary opponents, the RN and LFI, and they were proven correct.³⁵⁹

Francis Lalanne's Alliance jaune obtained 0.54% of the votes. His candidacy raised doubts within the movement, which was divided over whether it should participate in the elections as he was sometimes accused of "claiming" the movement.³⁶⁰ Christophe Chalencón and his Evolution citoyenne list scored 0.01%.³⁶¹ Other Yellow Vests had chosen to join already constituted lists (Jean-François Barnaba joined Florian Philippot and his list Ensemble Patriotes et gilets jaunes, which obtained a score of 0.65%. Benjamin Cauchy joined Nicolas Dupont-Aignan's Debout la France list, which scored 3.51%. To a lesser extent, the UPR (1.17%) and the PCF (2.49%) also used the presence of Yellow Vests.³⁶² The failure of Alliance jaune and Evolution citoyenne confirms this movement's difficulties in finding a political translation of sometimes difficult-to-read demands.³⁶³ Participation in the election created an internal division, with some considering their movement to be profoundly anti-system and others thinking it was necessary to integrate the system to change it.³⁶⁴

However, it is the Rassemblement National list that received the most votes (approx. 38%) among voters "rather close" and "very close" to the "yellow vests" movement, according to a sociological study of the voters.³⁶⁵ The political translation of the movement benefited the far-right Rassemblement National, as almost nobody voted for the genuine Yellow Vest candidates.

³⁵⁸ Adrian Pabst, "The two faces of the gilets jaunes. A choice between protest and power," *New Statesman*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2019/02/two-faces-gilets-jaunes>.

³⁵⁹ "Elections européennes 2019 : après six mois de mobilisation, les listes « gilets jaunes » font moins de 1 %", *Le Monde*, May 26, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/05/26/elections-europeennes-apres-six-mois-de-mobilisation-les-gilets-jaunes-font-un-flop-dans-les-urnes_5467682_3210.html.

³⁶⁰ Fabian Magnenou, "Européennes : pourquoi les listes "gilets jaunes" ont échoué à traduire un mouvement social en vote dans les urnes", *Franceinfo*, May 27, 2019, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/l-echec-des-listes-gilets-jaunes-ou-la-difficile-translation-d-un-mouvement-social-aux-urnes_3462327.html.

³⁶¹ Magnenou, "Européennes : pourquoi les listes "gilets jaunes" ont échoué."

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ *Le Monde*, "Elections européennes 2019."

³⁶⁵ "Européennes 2019 : sociologie des électors", *IPSOS*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/europeennes-2019-sociologie-des-electors>.

4.2.3 A yellow shadow on the 2022 Presidential campaign

The 2019 trend has repeated itself in the 2022 Presidential campaign. The electorate in France is undergoing a right-wing turn on specific issues (racism, Islam, death penalty). However, it does not concern all the economic and social issues, such as social protection.³⁶⁶ While according to public opinion polls, none of the presidential candidates has been considered highly close to the demands of the Yellow Vests, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen have come out on top in supporting the Yellow Vests in the first round.³⁶⁷

The appeal of Marine Le Pen to the Yellow Vests can be explained by, among other things, her opposition to the pass sanitaire (EU Digital Covid Certificate).³⁶⁸ Up to 65% of Yellow Vests supported the anti-pass sanitaire movement.³⁶⁹ The repeal of the certificate presented yet another occasion to show the president's rejection, as the themes and positions of anti-elitism, anti-establishment and anti-system were shared between these two movements. However, the Covid certificate opposition was more right-wing/libertarian in its approach than the initial Yellow Vests movement.³⁷⁰

In the second round, Mélenchon's voters dispersed between Macron and abstention.³⁷¹ In 2017, abstention was 22% in the first round and 25% in the second round.³⁷² In 2022, the abstention was higher than in 2017, reaching 26% in the first round and 28% in the second.³⁷³ This shows a trend of an even greater disengagement from political life and disenchantment with the political class represented by the two candidates.

³⁶⁶ "Présidentielle 2022 : une élection inédite," *IPSOS*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/presidentielle-2022/presidentielle-2022-une-election-inedite>.

³⁶⁷ "Trois ans après l'apparition des Gilets Jaunes : le regard des Français," *IPSOS*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/trois-ans-apres-lapparition-des-gilets-jaunes-le-regard-des-francais>.

³⁶⁸ Clara Bauer-Babef, "Marine Le Pen arrive en tête chez les gilets jaunes," *Euractiv*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/election-presidentielle-2022/news/marine-le-pen-arrive-en-tete-chez-les-gilets-jaunes/>.

³⁶⁹ "Gilets jaunes et anti-pass sanitaire: même combat?" *La Dépêche*, August 1st, 2021, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2021/07/27/gilets-jaunes-et-anti-pass-sanitaire-meme-combat-9697465.php>.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Julie Carriat, "Présidentielle 2022 : au second tour, l'électorat Mélenchon partagé entre le vote Macron et l'abstention," *Le Monde*, Avril 28, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/04/28/presidentielle-2022-au-second-tour-l-electorat-melenchon-partage-entre-le-vote-macron-et-l-abstention_6124054_6059010.html.

³⁷² "Résultats de l'élection présidentielle 2017", *Ministère de l'intérieur et des outre-mer*, May 7, 2017, [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresultat_presidentielle-2017/\(path\)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresultat_presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html).

³⁷³ "Résultats de l'élection présidentielle 2022," *Ministère de l'intérieur et des outre-mer*, April 24, 2022, [https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresultat_presidentielle-2022/\(path\)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html](https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresultat_presidentielle-2022/(path)/presidentielle-2022/FE.html).

5 A comparative approach to the anti-establishment protests in Romania and France

In recent years, anti-establishment movements have emerged in several countries, challenging traditional political parties and institutions. Romania and France have experienced significant anti-establishment protests, with their respective movements sharing similarities and differences in motivations, tactics, and outcomes. This chapter takes a comparative approach to analyze the anti-establishment protests in Romania and France, exploring the factors that contributed to their emergence, the strategies employed by their participants, and the impact they had on the political landscape of each country. By examining these protests through a comparative lens, we can understand the dynamics of anti-establishment movements in different contexts and shed light on their challenges to established political systems.

Table 1 presents the main matrix to illustrate the comparison of the two movements further developed below. The variables were chosen based on their relevance to the hypothesis and the specific context of the two movements. Political culture and social unrest were considered relevant due to their role in shaping the motivations and goals of the movements. The context of the economic crisis was included to account for circumstances contributing to the emergence of the movements. Populist rhetoric and mobilization were included to capture the extent to which the movements could mobilize and appeal to the public. Finally, outcome and electoral success were included to assess the overall impact of the movements on the political system.

Table 1: Comparison of the movements

Case	Political culture		Social unrest	Economic context	Populism		Outcome	Electoral success
	Euro-scepticism	Anti-establishment		Economic crisis Anti-austerity	Rhetoric	Mobilisation		
FR	High	High	High	High	High		Low	Low
RO	Low	Medium	High	Low	High		High	High

Case: The protest movements

Political culture:

Euroscepticism: The movement expresses scepticism or opposition to the European Union or other supranational institutions.

Anti-establishment: The movement is opposed to the political establishment, elites, and traditional political parties.

Social unrest: The level of social unrest associated with the movement, including the extent of protests, strikes, and other forms of disruption.

Economic context: The extent to which the movement is a response to a period of economic crisis or hardship.

Populism

rhetoric: The movement employs populist language or messaging in its communication strategies, such as using appeals to the "people" against the "elite" or making promises of radical change.

mobilization: The movement is able to mobilize support from the broader population, particularly those who may not have been politically active before.

Outcome: The overall impact or success of the movement, considering factors such as changes in policy, public opinion, and other measurable outcomes.

Electoral success: The extent to which the movement was able to translate its momentum into success in elections, such as by forming new political parties or winning seats in parliament.

5.1 Elements of convergence

5.1.1 Populism

To fully understand the revindication of the Yellow Vests, an understanding of their relationship with Emmanuel Macron is essential. In the presidential election of 2017, Emmanuel Macron was a protest vote, positioning himself as the anti-establishment candidate, despite his privileged background and serving under President Hollande.³⁷⁴ French leaders and parties alternating in power could not resolve problems such as slow growth, unemployment levels, bloated public sector, crime, integration of immigrants and the distrust that has permeated the society.³⁷⁵ Running on a centrist platform, a fiscally neoliberal and socially progressive reformist programme, Macron positioned himself as a revolution in the system of traditional parties, where none of the traditional parties' candidates has qualified for the run-off. His

³⁷⁴ Michel Rose, "Macron - Banking whizz-kid is anti-establishment presidential favourite," *Reuters*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-france-election-manifesto-macron-idUKKBN17G1A0>.

³⁷⁵ Chamorel, "Macron versus the Yellow Vests," 49.

victory must be understood in the broader context of the collapse of the Socialist Party, where the far-left spearheaded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and high support for Marine le Pen drew an unprecedented number of votes.³⁷⁶ The elections have perfectly illustrated voters' frustration with the mainstream politics of the traditional parties. Emmanuel Macron emerged as the winner only by uniting everyone else's votes against Marine Le Pen as the lesser of two evils. However, he was not their first choice.

Emmanuel Macron's position has been fragile. In the first round of the presidential elections of 2017, he scored only 24% - the lowest since the electoral system reform in 2002, which marks the downward trend of the popularity of French presidents. 2002 was also the first time Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for a run-off with Jacques Chirac.³⁷⁷ A fifth of voters abstained in the first round and a quart in the second round.

With a mobilisation of voters against Marine Le Pen (66.10% for Emmanuel Macron) in the second round, 8.59% of invalid votes, including the fact that the 2017 election had the lowest voter turnout (65.79%),³⁷⁸ it is noticeable that Emmanuel Macron has by no means been the president of the majority. The French were dissatisfied with the President before his term began. In addition to Macron's style of governing, described as *jupitérien*,³⁷⁹ in terms of being very regal with authority coming from the top,³⁸⁰ low communication with media, labour unions or interest groups and set of scandals with Alexandre Benalla, Macron's provocative statements and reforms were perceived as jabs to economically fragile part of society.³⁸¹ The Yellow Vests, representing the lower-income, lower-educated, geographically outlying areas, perceived Macron as "unfairly targeting the most economically fragile individuals (...) cut off from the daily economic hardship of ordinary citizens in "la France profonde."³⁸²

However, the Yellow vests did not act as a cohesive force. As Jérôme Fourquet puts it:

If Emmanuel Macron has succeeded in maintaining the blurring of the traditional left-right divide by durably aggregating around him a vast central bloc amalgamating former voters from the left, the right and the centre, the end of the first year of his mandate is

³⁷⁶ Chamorel, "Macron versus the Yellow Vests," 49.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ministère de l'Intérieur et des outre-mer, "Résultats de l'élection présidentielle 2017."

³⁷⁹ Céline Hussonnois-Alaya, "Macron: ce que signifie le président "jupitérien," BFMTV, May 18, 2017, https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elysee/ce-que-signifie-le-president-jupiterien-que-souhaite-incarner-macron_AN-201705180028.html.

³⁸⁰ Chamorel, "Macron versus the Yellow Vests," 49-50.

³⁸¹ Idem, 49-51.

³⁸² Idem, 51.

also marked by the return in force of another divide, the class divide, which some believed to be totally outdated.³⁸³

In the case of the Romanian protests, populism is also a potentially fruitful framework for understanding the grievances of the Rezișt movement. Nevertheless, populism in post-communist Europe exhibits a specific ideological morphology, shaped by the historical experiences of dictatorship, shock therapy (large-spread privatisation of the economy) and subsequently of the Euro-Atlantic integration.

Considering these aspects, Stuart Shields establishes the concept of recombinant populism in the international context of differentiated development of capitalism in the Central and Eastern European economies: “With the restructuring of property relations in transition, we are witnessing a form of recombinant populism.”³⁸⁴ Recombinant populism is based on “the ability of populists to redefine and recombine existing and novel political and social resources.”³⁸⁵ Building on traditional populist associations, populist parties reproduce old political patterns and elite manipulation of class vulnerabilities with the new neoliberal economics.³⁸⁶ Years of post-communist transformation have transformed these countries into liberal ones, now turning towards a new version of authoritarian politics. Zielonka and Rupnik call this tendency a “counter-revolution” of populists, from which Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński are the most prominent.³⁸⁷ This counter-revolution undermines the European institutions (the same ones they put effort into integrating into).

Romanian case has been described through a recombinant populism lens, which is based on “the ability of populists to redefine and recombine existing and novel political and social resources.”³⁸⁸ Stuart Shields establishes the recombinant populism in the international context of differentiated development of capitalism in the Central and Eastern European economies, with the restructuring of property relations in transition.³⁸⁹ Building on traditional populist associations, populist parties reproduce old political patterns and elite manipulation of class

³⁸³ Jérôme Fourquet, *L'archipel français. Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 389.

³⁸⁴ Stuart Shields, “Neoliberalism Redux: Poland’s Recombinant Populism and its Alternatives”, *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 4-5 (2015): 660, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0896920513501349>.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Stuart Shields, “Neoliberalism Redux,” 661.

³⁸⁷ Jan Zielonka, Jacques Rupnik, “From Revolution to ‘Counter-Revolution’: Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe 30 Years On,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 6 (2020): 1074, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1784394>.

³⁸⁸ Zielonka, Jacques Rupnik, “From Revolution to ‘Counter-Revolution’,” 1074.

³⁸⁹ Stuart Shields, “Neoliberalism Redux,” 660.

vulnerabilities with the new neoliberal economics.³⁹⁰ Years of post-communist transformation have transformed these countries into liberal ones, now turning towards a new version of authoritarian politics. Zielonka and Rupnik call this tendency a “counter-revolution” of populists, from which Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński are the most prominent.³⁹¹ This counter-revolution undermines the European institutions (the same ones they put effort into integrating into).

Compared to Central European countries, Romania had a more complicated starting position to achieve democratic transition; due to its oppressive dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu and practically non-existent civil society. After Ceaușescu’s execution, Ion Iliescu, a long-serving president with authoritarian tendencies, took over the reins.³⁹² Despite that, Romania made consistent efforts on the rule of law issue. The EU closely monitored the most significant point of contention during its accession to the EU in 2007, the corruption and independent judiciary. While significant progress has been made in establishing the National anticorruption directorate (DNA) under Monica Macovei and Laura Codruta Kövesi, the protests against the corrupt government eclipsed other dominant issues of welfare, health or education. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi noted in 2018 that Romania was on a path to its anti-corruption populism, as “the gradual politicization of anticorruption has arrested most other electoral and political developments.”³⁹³ As has been established, that was embodied in USR and AUR parties.

In the Romanian case, the USR party is seen “as the vehicle for recombinant populism”³⁹⁴ due to their anti-elitist approach fuelled by a combination of anti-communist and anti-corruption discourse, including fluidity on the left/right spectrum. As Dragoman notes:

By doing this, they address two of the most sensitive issues in Romanian politics, the first being the very significant political cleavage from the early 1990s around the issue of partisan orientations regarding transitional justice, while the second issue is a powerful political weapon in the positioning against the governing elites. The fight against corrupt elites in power is an opportunity to embrace a more anti-establishment attitude, which bears on USR’s anti-elitism. In its recombinant strategy, an anti-corruption orientation against elites in power and some elitist approaches and attitudes are not incompatible.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁰ Stuart Shields, “Neoliberalism Redux,” 661.

³⁹¹ Zielonka, Rupnik, “From Revolution to ‘Counter-Revolution’” 1074.

³⁹² Mungiu-Pippidi, “Romania’s Italian-Style Anticorruption Populism,” 104.

³⁹³ *Idem*, 106.

³⁹⁴ Dragoman, ““Save Romania” Union,” 304.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

The same applies to the AUR party, which approaches the widely present form of right-wing populism while strengthening its ties with classic conservative populist parties such as the Polish PiS Party or Spanish VOX.

5.2 Elements of divergence

5.2.1 Definition of establishment and relationship to Europe

In **Romania**, the initial protests were triggered by a young generation that did not experience communism first and grew up with ideas close to Western democracies. However, this generation perceives a particular disappointment in their democratic hopes. Unlike their counterparts in the West, they are not protesting against austerity but against the ideological legacy of communism and the persistent attachment to communist elites.

For this reason, the Romanian protests, unlike the French ones, were initially anti-communist, pro-capitalist, technocratic and distinctly pro-European, as illustrated, for example, by the protest of the 27th of February 2017, when protesters in Bucharest created a European Union flag (see Figure 15).



Figure 15: Protesters in Bucharest forming the European flag.
Octav Ganea, *Thousands of Romanians form EU flag at anti-government rally*, Reuters, February 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/thousands-of-romanians-form-eu-flag-at-a-idUSKBN1650WU>.

Alter-activist movements in Western Europe tended to criticise the inadequacy of liberal democracy, which they saw as “democracy without choice”. At the same time, Romanian protesters, on the other hand, demanded Western-style democracy, as illustrated by choice of slogans such as “Vrem o țară ca afară” (see Figure 6). The young, initially apolitical generation supporting liberal democratic values is creating a new discourse based on values and belonging to the “European family”. However, the pro-European opposition lost its momentum in Romania. With a Euro-realist discourse, AUR partially took over some of the protesters who radicalised during the Covid-19 pandemic, following a similar trajectory to Front National.

There are some contrasts in comparing the relationship to the European Union between activists from different parts of Europe. Western activists often fight against ‘the power of Brussels’ and its “imposed” neoliberal policies while either aiming to establish a counter-power of national states to counteract the European Commission or leave the EU altogether. Their counterparts from the East also underline the need for counter-democracy, which, for them, represents a power capable of curbing their government's cronyism and authoritarian tendencies.³⁹⁶ Therefore, the Yellow Vests movement had a very different relationship with the European Union than their Romanian early-stage counterparts. Gyukovikj notes that “the Yellow Vests movement represents the anti-EU and anti-establishment feeling that has engulfed Europe in recent years” (Figure 16).³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Abăseacă, Pleyers, “The reconfiguration of social movements,” 168.

³⁹⁷ Danilo Gjukovikj, “Protests in France Unite Left and Right, Urban and Rural,” University of Colorado, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.colorado.edu/polisci/2019/02/05/protests-france-unite-left-and-right-urban-and-rural>.



Figure 16: A Yellow Vest protester with anti-EU sentiment, [EU dictatorship, Macron imposture]. Kamil Zihnioglu, *Theo*, 27, *Engineer*, photograph, AP, February 8, 2019, <https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2019/2/8/the-varied-faces-of-frances-yellow-vest-movement>.

5.2.2 Participants

A prominent feature of protest behaviour in Eastern Europe is an intergenerational difference. Older people (with the communist experience) are more reluctant to support change and protest.³⁹⁸ An intergenerational difference has also been noticed by Maria Grasso and Marco Giugni, who noticed that during anti-austerity movements, participants were often found to be young, highly educated and most likely left-leaning.³⁹⁹ Romanian protests were mostly frequented and sparked by the younger generation – the first one without a direct experience with communism. This confirms Inglehart and Catterberg’s argument of intergenerational

³⁹⁸ Crețan, O’Brien, “Corruption and conflagration in justice,” 380-381.

³⁹⁹ Maria T. Grasso, Marco Giugni, “Do Issues Matter? Anti-Austerity Protests’ Composition, Values, and Action Repertoires Compare,” in *Protest, Social Movements and Global Democracy since 2011: New Perspectives*, vol. 39, ed. Thomas Davies, Holly Eva Ryan, and Alejandro Milciades Peña (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016): 41-47, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X2016000039001>.

population change: “A major change is taking place, characterized not by a trend toward civic inertness but by an intergenerational shift from elite-directed participation toward elite-challenging participation. As younger, better-educated, and more-postmaterialist cohorts replace older ones in the adult population, intergenerational population replacement is shifting toward increasingly self-assertive and expressive publics.”⁴⁰⁰

The current wave of protest movements in Romania is part of a global wave of protests that has been spreading worldwide since 2011. Romanian political scientist Raluca Abăseacă and Belgian sociologist Geoffrey Pleyers have established five activist cultures in Romania. Their demands, repertoire of actions, decentralisation and distrust of political elites resonate with protests and occupations on every continent: progressive alter-activists, the democratic right (free market supporters or ‘liberal entrepreneurs’), expert activists (including NGOs and supporters of traditional political organizations), and nationalists. These models are based on models we know from protests around the world. However, most of the major protests that have taken place in Romania - especially the 2017 anti-corruption protests - point to a more complex tendency, where different cultures of activism and political orientations with different demands and ideologies meet in mass protest.⁴⁰¹

The sociological composition differs in both countries. The working class spearheaded the protests in France, with a strong representation of rural and peri-urban populations; in Romania, it was mainly highly educated, urban middle classes. Compared with anti-austerity movement tendencies, where participants are often younger and better educated, the Yellow Vests differ by socio-demographic background and composite political orientations.⁴⁰² According to Stéphanie Abrial et al.:

It consisted, for the most part, of middle age members of the working and lower middle class unified by a shared experience of social insecurity and a common rejection of party politics, but the movement also mingled a large number of first time protesters with more politically experienced activists.⁴⁰³

As Nicolas Truong puts it, the movement was “an intellectual convergence that overlaps, from blocked tolls to tagged walls, certain alliances of circumstance of a protest that has extended to other fiscal (such as the taxation of paraffin or the re-establishment of the wealth tax), social

⁴⁰⁰ Ronald Inglehart, Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy. The Human Development Sequence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 118.

⁴⁰¹ Abăseacă, Pleyers, “The reconfiguration of social movements,” 167-168.

⁴⁰² Abrial, et al. “Control or participate,” 480.

⁴⁰³ Ibid

(increase in the minimum wage) and political demands (a citizens' initiative referendum and the resignation of Emmanuel Macron)."⁴⁰⁴

5.2.3 Democratic dynamics

“Recent mobilizations in Romania suggest a convergence of democratic dynamics in the East and the West, notably on the rising importance of protest and ‘monitory democracy’ even though the ‘West’ remains as much an object of idealization as of dissent.”⁴⁰⁵ Romanians renegotiated their relationship with their politicians and created new political forces.⁴⁰⁶

What set the Yellow Vests movement apart was the echo it received. It has been fuelled by the systematic use of telegenic violence against people and property and the constant refusal to respect the legal forms of civic mobilisation. It was fuelled by the spirit of revenge on the defeated candidates of the 2017 Presidential election, whose only explanation for their failure was Emmanuel Macron.

“It was over-interpreted by intellectuals in search of a proletarian revolution that the presidential style bristled at.” The movement has, however, never achieved the scope that some journalists, commentators and politicians were hoping for.⁴⁰⁷ Since May 1968, a clear dynamic with political legibility has been taking place, where protest movements are triggered by the trade unions/the political parties, or they are spontaneous but quickly taken over by them. Historically, trade unions represent the interests of the workers, and the political parties transform concrete political proposals. What set the Yellow Vests apart was that it initially did not follow this dynamic and started as a grass-roots movement. However, instead of capitalising on the momentum independent of the unions and traditional establishment, it did not remain a cohesive force that would set on a path to transform and let itself get dominated by the most potent self-proclaimed anti-establishment forces on the left (LFI) and right (RN).

⁴⁰⁴ Noiriel, *Les Gilets jaunes*, 7.

⁴⁰⁵ Abăseacă, Pleyers, “The reconfiguratrion of social movements,” 168.

⁴⁰⁶ Raluca Besliu, “The Romanian Protest Wave: A Path to a New Political Era,” *Green European Journal*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-romanian-protest-wave-a-path-to-a-new-political-era/>.

⁴⁰⁷ Costa, “Européennes.”

Both in Romania and France, the borders between left and right have become blurry, as is the case in many post-2011 protests, “even if ideological tensions were not absent, in a scenario that echoes recent protests in Ukraine and Hong Kong.”⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸ Abăseacă, Pleyers, “The reconfiguration of social movements,” 168.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis explored the similarities and differences between the anti-establishment movements of #rezist in Romania and the Yellow Vests in France. A comparative analysis of these two movements found they share a common populist sentiment of rejecting the political elites. This, in turn, functions as a driver of political mobilisation in different regional contexts. The analysis focused on the meaning of the term anti-establishment, its impact on the political landscape, and how these movements could translate their momentum into political outcomes.

The anti-establishment protest movements in Romania and France show similar features despite the different contexts and historical backgrounds in which they emerged. Both movements reflect widespread dissatisfaction with political systems and a desire for better political representation and accountability.

In Romania, the anti-establishment sentiment was triggered by widespread corruption and a lack of trust in the political establishment. The country saw mass protests in 2017 and 2018, with thousands of people taking to the streets demanding an end to corruption and better governance. These protests were fuelled by anger over corruption in the government and a sense of powerlessness.

In France, the anti-establishment movement is embodied by the Yellow Vests protests formed in 2018 in response to rising fuel prices and the perceived disconnect between the political elite and ordinary citizens. Since then, the movement has evolved to encompass a broader range of grievances, including economic inequality, lack of political representation, and dissatisfaction with the political system.

Grassroot, decentralised organisation structures and rejection of the traditional political parties and leaders characterise both movements. In Romania, the protests were led by a loose coalition of civil society organisations, while in France, the Yellow Vests were largely self-organised, decentralised and coordinated through social media. This research shows that anti-establishment movements can transform political landscapes and create new political forces. The movements in Romania and France had different trajectories. However, they did share the common anti-elitist sentiment, and the opposition to the establishment was a driving force behind both movements.

This research also sheds light on the importance of understanding the regional and national factors that influence the formation and trajectory of social movements. By looking at the similarities and differences between these two movements, this thesis demonstrates the importance of context-specific analyses and the potential for comparative studies to enrich the understanding of social movements.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on anti-establishment movements and populism by highlighting the importance of understanding the diverse ideological underpinnings of these movements. The findings of this research show that anti-establishment sentiment is a common factor that connects seemingly disparate protest movements and can serve as a mechanism for political change. By exploring the case of #rezist in Romania and the Yellow Vests in France, this research offers insights into how anti-establishment sentiment can be harnessed to create political momentum and achieve different political outcomes.

The #rezist movement transformed first into a populist, albeit centrist, reformist political party. When this party stagnated and got tangled into political life as a coalition party, it could no longer turn its reform potential into tangible action. Another player could swoon some protesters using resistance to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. The AUR party, a nationalist right-wing party, capitalised on similar narratives as their USR counterparts, with a more pronounced anti-system flavour. The Yellow Vests, on the other hand, while managing to maintain their momentum for a while, failed to become a significant force in French politics – not from a lack of trying. While they did not achieve the same level of success in the political arena, part of their sympathisers found representation through the populist left and right – in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s LFI or Marine Le Pen’s RN.

Many other crucial differences have been identified in the research. For example, the Romanian protests focused more on corruption and governance issues, while the French movement focused more on economic issues and political representation. The notion of the elites, against whom the struggle has been led, has been very different. In France, the elites were embodied by President Macron, while the protesters seemed to be quite content to vote for another established force on the political playground. The Romanian president was, however, one of the prominent figures of the protest movement – until the movement lost its uniformity, further exacerbated by different approaches to Covid-19 restrictions.

The protest movements in Romania and France reflect similar frustrations with the political establishment but differ in the specific demands and intensity of their actions. Both movements, however, stress the need for better political representation and accountability and demonstrate the power of grassroots organising and decentralised structures in bringing about social change. While the movements differed in many aspects, they shed light on the democratic processes and tendencies of both countries. Romanians were now more comfortable protesting in the streets, which was not always the case. French, on the other hand, are, at the moment of writing this thesis, catching second breath, protesting against the pension reform of Emmanuel Macron. The ideological cleavage between left and right is here to stay, and protest movements seem to be able to transcend it. It is more than likely that the tendencies set by #rezist and the Yellow Vests are not only here to stay but to accelerate.

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Master's Thesis Summary

ZÁVĚREČNÉ TEZE MAGISTERSKÉ PRÁCE NMTS
Závěrečné teze student odevzdává ke konci Diplomního semináře III jako součást magisterské práce a tyto teze jsou spolu s odevzdáním magisterské práce do SIS předpokladem udělení zápočtu za tento seminář.
Jméno: Kristina Boudová
E-mail: 83932001@fsv.cuni.cz
Specializace (uved'te zkratkou)*: ES
Semestr a školní rok zahájení práce: LS 2021
Semestr a školní rok ukončení práce: LS 2023
Vedoucí diplomového semináře: DS I: Mgr. Jan Váška, Ph.D DS II, III: prof. JUDr. PhDr. Ivo Šlosarčík, Ph.D., LL.M.
Vedoucí práce: Dr. Paul Bauer
Název práce: Mass protests in Romania and France: a comparison of contemporary anti-establishment movements
Charakteristika tématu práce (max 10 řádek): Romanian protest culture underwent a turbulent evolution since 2013, when the first anti-corruption protests broke out, resulting in the formation of the movement #rezist in 2017, representing the fatigue of Romanian society after the Colectiv tragedy in 2015 and massive protests against OUG 13. Later, in 2018, France saw a rise in protests linked to the Gilets jaunes movement. Although the French tradition of protesting is relatively developed, the Yellow Vests represented a change as they created the most significant protest movements in post-World War 2 history in their regularity and regionality. Both actions represent, to some extent, a similar feeling – the desire to change the current order and exhaustion with the current political establishment in both countries. At the same time, both movements are very different, representing different classes of society and forming under different circumstances. The thesis focused on determining whether the protests' anti-establishment aspect can be operationalized and comparing two movements in different populist cultures.

Vývoj tématu od zadání projektu do odevzdání práce (max. 10 řádek):

Definice tématu od zadání projektu zůstala stejná, nicméně od původního zkoumání vzniku protestních hnutí se práce zaměřila spíše na jejich komparaci. Sociologický rámec tak ustoupil rámci politickovědnímu, kdy se práce zaobírá spíše politickým systémem a definicí politického establishmentu.

Struktura práce (hlavní kapitoly obsahu):

- 1 Anti-establishment in Romania and France
- 2 The contextualisation of protest movements in Romania and France after 2010
- 3 Transformation of post-protest political mobilisations into political force: the challenge of the status quo
- 4 A comparative approach to the anti-establishment protests in Romania and France

Hlavní výsledky práce (max. 10 řádek):

Tato práce srovnává anti-establishmentová hnutí #rezist v Rumunsku a Žlutých vest ve Francii a pozoruje, že mají sdílený sentiment odmítání politických elit, který je hnací silou politické mobilizace. Obě hnutí odráží nespokojenost s politickým systémem a touhu po lepším/rozdílném politickém zastoupení. Obě hnutí jsou tzv. grass-roots, organizačně decentralizované a odmítají tradiční politické strany a vůdce. Tato práce zkoumá demokratické procesy a tendence v obou zemích, přestože se tato hnutí v mnoha ohledech liší. Práce pomáhá pochopit různé ideologické základy těchto hnutí a potenciál, který tato anti-establishmentová hnutí transformovala do populistického politického impulsu, i přesto, že obě hnutí s tímto impulsem naložila velmi rozdílně.

Prameny a literatura (výběr nejpodstatnějších):

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Etika výzkumu:**		
Jazyk práce: Angličtina		
Podpis studenta a datum 28. dubna 2023,		
Schváleno	Datum	Podpis
Vedoucí práce		
Vedoucí diplomového semináře		
Vedoucí specializace		
Garant programu		

* BAS – Balkánská a středoevropská studia; ES – Evropská studia; NRS – Německá a rakouská studia; RES – Ruská a eurasijská studia; SAS – Severoamerická studia; ZES – Západoevropská studia.

** Pokud je to relevantní, tj. vyžaduje to charakter výzkumu (nebo jeho zadavatel), data, s nimiž pracujete, nebo osobní bezpečnost vaše či dalších účastníků výzkumu, vysvětlete, jak zajistíte dodržení, resp. splnění těchto etických aspektů výzkumu: 1) informovaný souhlas s účastí na výzkumu, 2) dobrovolná účast na výzkumu, 3) důvěrnost a anonymita zdrojů, 4) bezpečný výzkum (nikomu nevznikne újma).