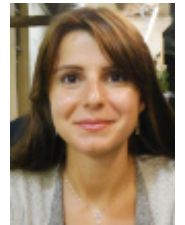


Mrs Lucretia's protest: A story of identity and politics on the streets of Bucharest

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Protests have continued in Romania despite the government agreeing to withdraw a controversial piece of legislation that would have weakened the country's anti-corruption laws. [Diana Popescu](#) writes that while media coverage has tended to portray the protests as a popular show of unity against the government, the situation is more complex in reality. She highlights the story of one protester, 'Mrs Lucretia', whose efforts to try and heal the divisions in Romanian society have resonated with many of the public.



After an ordinance aimed at weakening anti-corruption legislation was reversed in Romania following [street protests](#) across the country, familiar narratives of the 'people vs power', 'honest folk vs corrupt politicians', and 'the will of the many vs that of the few' have become commonplace, [making headlines](#) both nationally and internationally. From the political and institutional implications of the protests, to street-level views of [gendarmes with flowers in their hands](#), [private companies handing out free drinks and food](#) or [installing extra mobile phone towers](#) to handle data traffic, the story of a collective and hard-fought battle radiates from every detail. It all points to a story of a country united against all odds, divisions, and expectations, and an effort met with such resounding success that the case should serve as inspiration for others.

Yet, 'the people' rarely means 'all' people. Most often it [refers](#) to "the most numerous or the most active part of the people." And the most active part of the Romanian people is made up of urban, relatively young, creative individuals, who have been over-represented in the coverage of the Victoriei Square protests. Less than 2 miles away, in front of the Cotroceni Presidential Palace, citizens who do not – for the most part – share these characteristics have organised counter-protests.

Their demands include [the resignation of the President](#), an outspoken critic of the government's emergency ordinance, whom they accuse of [dividing the country](#) and (together with multinational corporations) brainwashing their children. Their discontent also targets the Victoriei Square protesters, who, they point out, wish to strip them of their voting rights despite a hypocritical discourse of unity and tolerance. Though significantly fewer in number than the Victoriei Square protesters (a maximum of [4,000](#) compared to a maximum of [300,000](#) people), they might be speaking for at least some of "the most numerous part of the people" ([46% of voters](#)) who supported the governing PSD in elections in December and might silently continue their support despite the emergency order.

It is from these relatively voiceless corners that [an unlikely protester](#) made her way to Bucharest from a little town 300 km away. In timeless, impeccable national dress from head to toe, Mrs Lucretia diverges from the image of the idyllic-to-the-point-of-non-existent "Romanian Woman" only through her black male boots (borrowed from her husband as they were warmer) and a beach umbrella used to hoist her home-made flag. The flag features a cross in Romania's national colours, sewed on a fine white fabric that was once part of her daughter's (now a migrant in the UK) wedding dress. The cross matches an icon of The Healing Fountain she is holding to her chest, and the message together with her costume and reason for choosing it make the human installation that is Mrs Lucretia hold a much deeper meaning than the wittiest banner in the square – and the competition was fierce.

While protesters and most journalists see the virtual unity behind the cause, Mrs Lucretia sees the political divide permeating not just society but many families across the country, possibly including hers. Taking the story of a woman having daily rows with her protester son as a cautionary tale about how political disagreements can tear families apart, she became concerned a similar conflict might affect her and her children. Due to the current climate, her task of caring for the household now extends to tackling wider political divisions, prompting her to take a trip to

the epicentre of political unrest as its rippling effects risk affecting her private family life 300 km away.

Lucretia's story of the political becoming personal is not a singular one, nor is it restricted to Romania's protests. Around Christmas, liberal news outlets were inventing a [new genre of self-help articles](#) for handling imminent political conflicts at family dinners. Another recently discovered trend, the [near anthropological fascination for the Trump voter](#), reveals the shared feeling of being left behind and not having your values recognised as the one voiced by the Cotroceni protesters. While both of these sides are not at all reluctant when it comes to organising publicly and taking action privately in defending their views, they are all but willing to make the first step when it comes to overcoming the stalemate of our political discord. Lucretia proposes, through her presence and beliefs more than her words, a way of bridging the divide.

For Mrs Lucretia, the link from the political to the personal does not exhaust the full implications of her participation in the protests. Taking her identity as a source of value in a manner worthy of the profoundest humanism, she meant her identity as a modest rural woman to (paradoxically) give an image-boost to the Victoriei protests. Her striking appearance was meant to "[change the face of the Square](#)" reaching out to those who believe it is only urban elites who are protesting.



Mrs Lucretia hitting the protests. Credits: [Romania Journal](#) (reposted with permission)

Her way of doing this was reaching from the personal to the political: her flag was less of an object carrying a public message than a personal memory from a defining moment in her life, held with pride and longing which need to be seen, not with anger that needs to be expressed. The relationship with her husband, which she mentions often in the interview, gives legitimacy from the private sphere to her plan for the public domain: their household is politically divided, each having voted differently and each watching separate TV channels, but they nonetheless get along out of a common interest in tending to the household, a model she thinks could be applied to the public sphere as well.

It is this concern for divisions that makes Lucretia unique even beyond her striking appearance and surreal contrast to the run-of-the mill protester. In Bucharest she plans to show how different factions can work together by attending both the anti-corruption and the anti-Presidential protest – the latter reluctantly, but as she says “I have no choice”. Claiming she hates discord, she is protesting in effect not for one side or the other, but against social divisions and their corrosive effects. Her very presence in Victoriei Square is a protest within a protest, a reaction against the stereotypical image of the anti-government protester used to corrode the appearance of unity in some parts of the country.

Her presence at Cotroceni is a personal example of tolerance, an effort made not for their cause but for hers. Within the wider struggle against corruption, Mrs Lucretia is waging her own struggle with prejudice and for toleration between political factions that seem to trace socio-demographic divides: rural, elderly, disconnected *versus* urban, young, tech-savvy. Her answer when asked how she plans to calm tensions between factions is telling for both her view that the political divide traces an inter-generational one, and for her belief that the solution comes from applying models of toleration ensuring harmony in the private sphere to the political domain: “[us, elderly people, have to bite our tongue sometimes, but so do you young folks.](#)”

Mrs Lucretia came to the capital because “[Romania needs her](#)” and brought as much of herself as she could to the protests, with the secret belief that the deepest parts of her identity – wife, mother, religious person, and Romanian woman – will foster toleration despite profound disagreement. There is, indeed, a lot to be said for the power of finding common ground and building on such shared identities to overcome political disagreements. However, this is far from a panacea for political discord, but rather points to its deeper source: the once all-important identities of parents or religious persons are no longer universally shared in an age where public identities permeate private ones, and when social media leads us to place more and more value on ourselves as public personae.

The deeper problem is that, for many, political preferences have become part of their identities, both publically and privately. What makes family dinners so painful is the near impossibility of seeing hatred of racists in general and love of a racist relative as separate issues because they pertain, in theory, to separate domains. Mrs Lucretia’s lesson, beyond her actual recommendations, is one of vulnerability, toleration and goodwill that make her actual political preferences secondary to her interactions, no matter how important political beliefs may be to her personally. Indeed, the interview never mentioned what Mrs Lucretia’s view of that damn ordinance actually was.

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