

The dispute over the Rosia Montana mining project represents an opportunity to reshape Romania's sustainable development policy

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Earlier this month, a Romanian Parliamentary Commission rejected the controversial Rosia Montana law, intended to allow the largest gold-mining project in Europe. [Simona Manea](#) argues that the issue represents an important opportunity to push for sustainable development policies in Romania. She also notes that the protest movement that has emerged in response to the mining project has the potential to reform the Romanian political class by placing pressure on state institutions and promoting democratic participation.



On November 12, the special Parliamentary Commission set up to consider the 'Rosia Montana' law, recommended its rejection. The law intended to give the go-ahead to the Canadian company, Gabriel Resources Ltd, to start the largest gold mining project in Europe by allowing for the expropriation of the remaining opposing owners of land on the site. Following the Commission's recommendation, the Romanian Senate also rejected the law on November 19. At the time of writing, the Chamber of Deputies has yet to vote.

The rejection of the law represents a welcome outcome for the tens of thousands of Romanians who have publicly voiced opposition to this project. They have argued that the proposed exploration will wipe out four mountaintops, destroy important archaeological sites and create an open-air pond filled with over 200 million tonnes of hazardous cyanide-tainted water within two decades. Their campaign is an example of what can be achieved through peaceful and resilient citizen pressure upon state institutions. The positive news for Romanian democracy is that politicians are becoming sensitive to such pressures.

However, there are still important concerns among those who want to see a decisive outcome against the mining project. First, the Commission's report does not guarantee the rejection of the project. The Romanian Parliament is working on a new generic mining law, which could amend the original laws the project violates. One of the recently proposed amendments to the mining law is to give mining activities a 'special interest' status, which will allow the expropriation of land from individuals who oppose such projects. Actions of this nature point to a political class that can still misuse state institutions and procedural democracy for short-term political and economic gains.

Moreover, the actions of the Government and Parliament reveal a lack of a multi-faceted and comprehensive vision of development policy, which considers social, economic and environmental costs and benefits. The Parliamentary Commission's [Report](#) may appease some of the dissenting voices by proposing the negotiation of a more profitable partnership for the Romanian state. Yet, as [its recommendations](#) leave open the possibility of a 'modified' project, it



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is far from being a victory for sustainable development.

In spite of the political shenanigans, the protracted dispute over Rosia Montana offers a fundamental reason for optimism. The longer the dispute goes on, the greater the transformational impact it has in Romanian society. Using social media and alternative news outlets, the loosely networked 'Save Rosia Montana' movement has already neutralised one of the most extensive and [expensive PR campaigns](#) in the country that [promoted the case for mining](#). New synergies have already been created, with the movement extending its support to a peasant-led [anti-fracking](#) resistance group in the eastern part of Romania. If one places these developments against the backdrop of the economic crisis, such resilient and sustained mobilisation for environmental causes is truly impressive.

This movement represents a generation's opportunity to shape the discourse on development in a progressive and concrete way. Sustainable development can be accomplished through private, public, foreign and local [partnerships](#). Such working relationships, if managed properly, can have a positive impact on communities. From this perspective, an attack on the project that is based on the investors' origin misses the point. Securing a better financial deal for the Romanian state or Romanian companies in gold-mining projects and in shale gas exploitations does not alter the consequences upon the environment and communities in any way. The projects will still remain unsustainable in the medium and long run.

The movement should remain focused on sustainable development policies and look for positive and concrete initiatives. It can draw support from the existing EU legislative framework on sustainable development, in spite of the [EU's ambivalent stance](#) toward the gold-mining project so far. The protest movement can also be a successful exercise for those who seek the reform of the political class, as long as it continues to steer clear from extremist slogans from the far right and far left of the political spectrum.

Ultimately, even politicians who act on the basis of political opportunism can be brought to make decisions in the best interest of a wider community. Recently, persistent lobbying of the government by environmental organisations proved successful and resulted in the approval of a Forestry Code, which, although not perfect, promotes [more responsible management of forests](#). In the medium and long term, such a message could be the springboard for an entire electoral campaign.

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