

# Bucharest's recent protests show that Romanians are beginning to embrace western styles of civic engagement.

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11/09/2013

*Street protests have taken place in Bucharest since the start of September. [Clara Volintiru](#) writes that while the aims of the protesters have been focused on the fairly narrow issues of Bucharest's stray dog population, and a controversial mining project, the real conflict is between competing identities. Both issues reflect strains between the old values Romanians held during the communist period, and new values such as environmental sustainability. She argues that the fact protesters are taking to the streets to argue in favour of new policies, rather than simply to attack political leaders, suggests Romanians are beginning to adopt western styles of civic engagement.*



Once again, protesters cover the streets of the capital of Romania. The novelty of the situation is that Romanians are demonstrating for something, rather than against something. For the first time in this country's recent history, there is a clear manifestation of civic consciousness and concern over the issues, and not the political leaders. But, in order to understand the issues at hand – [stray dogs](#) and [gold mining](#) – one must dig deeper into the Romanian way of life and institutional failures.

## Stray dogs

Last week, a stray dog killed a four year old boy while he was playing, unsupervised, with his older brother, in a leafy residential neighbourhood in Bucharest. This tragedy sparked a debate concerning the more than 60,000 stray dogs inhabiting the streets of Bucharest, while few people questioned the standard of care provided by a single, old grandmother. To understand this, we must look back.

While the transition to democracy in Romania brought many changes, the lives of children in Bucharest carried on their daily habits with remarkable continuity. These generations, who are now around 30 years old, grew up 'with the keys around their neck' (*generația cu cheia de gât*). During their pre-school years (aged 3-6), or primary cycle (7-11), they would spend most of their days on the streets of their neighborhoods, unsupervised, with the keys to their apartment put on a string around their neck for safeguarding while their parents were at work. In current circumstances, such arrangements are unthinkable for most responsible parents, but it was very much the norm two decades ago.

This situation was the result of the country's educational structure: parents were not obligated to send their kids to pre-school, and the primary cycle only lasted around 4 hours per day. While many children were and still are cared for by their grandparents – a trademark of the family dynamics in Romania – those that didn't have this option would spend their days by themselves, or in the care of older siblings. These challenges persist to this day, with a vastly undersized early educational system. After-hours care is usually a paid option that many families



Image of a dog in Bucharest. Translation – "The city is ours" (Credit: Dimitri dF, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

can't afford, and old grandparents remain the only solution for working parents.

Because many of the residents of Bucharest have been forcibly moved from the countryside, into massive urban housing projects, a yearning from another way of life persisted in the capital of Romania. In the early 1990s, it was common to find vegetable gardens improvised in the apartment buildings' small gardens, and to have dogs cared for by the entire community. Gradually, the community dogs evolved into packs of stray dogs. For years now, attacks have been more and more frequent and the issue has gradually risen to centre stage in the lives of the citizens of Bucharest. While the administrative and legislative solutions for dealing with them have moved back and forth between shelters, castration and euthanasia, their population has reached alarming numbers.

With the recent tragedy, public opinion is massively behind a radical solution, and the political class is weighing in to capitalise on the issue at hand. While the president, Traian Basescu – a former mayor of Bucharest – favoured a governmental decision on the matter, the current mayor of Bucharest, and aspiring president, Sorin Oprescu, supported a local referendum. The most legitimate solution came by way of a new law adopted by the Romanian Parliament on Tuesday, concerning the adoption, processing and eventually, putting down stray dogs.

### **Mining project at Rosia Montana**

The other issue keeping Romanians on the streets of several major cities is the mining project at [Rosia Montana](#). While the current governing political parties had previously opposed the project, a recent legislative proposal would allow the establishment of gold exploitation operations by the Canadian company Gabriel Resources. The issue has been heavily debated over recent years with the main concern being the potential ecological effects of the use of cyanide. It is not surprising that the vast majority of Romanians are opposed to the project, but it is unexpected that so many of them took to the streets to defend their beliefs.

The Rosia Montana issue is more than a problem of economic interests and the accountability of foreign developers: it is a focal point for conflicts between old and new values. A large portion of Romania's welfare was derived from mining activities during the communist period. It was a field of intensive activity that characterised the labour dynamic in that part of the country. After the infamous *mineriade* movements in the early 1990s, and the gradual dismantling of the mining projects, the area slowly but surely deteriorated both economically and socially. Now it is more closely associated with natural beauty and historical landmarks, than with the economic potential of natural resources. This is the significant shift of values from the communist times to the present: income shouldn't be derived at any cost and a mining project today should meet all the criteria of sustainability – social, cultural and ecological.

Both the stray dogs issue in Bucharest and the Rosia Montana mining project in the Apuseni mountains are rooted in deeper struggles of the Romanian population to leave behind the identity symbols of previous lifestyles and to embark on the western style of defending issues through civic involvement. And while these manifestations will probably create the intended legislative consequences, it's a much greater victory for involvement and engagement, which have, up until now, been relatively unfamiliar concepts for the Romanian public.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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### **About the author**

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Clara Volintiru is a PhD candidate in the Government Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She holds an MSc in Comparative Politics, also from the LSE, an MBA from CNAM, and an undergraduate degree in economics. Her thesis is focused on political parties in new democracies, but her research activity has also covered topics from the wider area of political economy as well as conflict studies.



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